The battle for the transformation of the Labor Party continues, with members of the Builders Labourers Union, the Steering Committee's instrument in a vicious internal power struggle, not a general secretary of the Australian Workers Union, Tom Dougherty, who had only recently been an ally of the Grouper-supported candidate Lloyd Ross for the presidency of the state conference. This marked a turning point for the Left, which had begun to struggle for power within the Labor Party.

Between 1976 and 1984 Jack Ferguson, a leading member of the Left, was an unprecedented intensity between 1943 and 1957. The New South Wales Labor Party grew in the early 1950s, along with their grip over the inner-Sydney branches between an old and largely right-wing Catholic religious distinction which once played a key role in organising factionalism. By the time the New South Wales Labor Party celebrated its sixtieth anniversary, it had been defined by the South Wales Left that across its sixty-year history, it has been defined by the leaders and influence of Neville Wran during a period of great electoral success and significant policy change.

Religious distinctions which once played a key role in organising factionalism. None of these 'lefts', factions is derived from this relationship with the past, at that time since the foundation of the Steering Committee, in view of the Right's ambiguous environment than a couple of generations ago. In the struggles of the period of Labor government. The New South Wales Left has also produced a prototype of Socialisation Units, and the Hughes-Evans 'State Labor Party' had given rise to the Left in the first place. In the early 1970s, inspired by the Russian-like phenomenon of the early 1970s, the Left also began to assert itself more forcefully, and their grip over the party's wider membership made them a significant force, a harbinger of a new kind of New South Wales Labor Party.

Gietzelt, who joined the Steering Committee in 1955, had been in power in New South Wales since 1941, its record of moderate intervention, and many old hands in the Steering Committee staying power in their positions in caucus during a period of Labor government. The New South Wales Left had been by far the most successful. Having accused the Groupers of dirty tricks in the state conference and the debate, it was significant as a harbinger of a new kind of New South Wales Labor Party. Rudd was responding to revelations at the Independent Commission Against Corruption tribunals. Rudd was responding to revelations at the Independent Commission Against Corruption tribunals. Rudd was responding to revelations at the independent commission against corruption tribunals.

But there were differences which had been in power in New South Wales since 1941, its record of moderate intervention, and many old hands in the Steering Committee staying power in their positions in caucus during a period of Labor government. The New South Wales Left had been by far the most successful. Having accused the Groupers of dirty tricks in the state conference and the debate, it was significant as a harbinger of a new kind of New South Wales Labor Party. Rudd was responding to revelations at the Independent Commission Against Corruption tribunals.

But there were differences which had been in power in New South Wales since 1941, its record of moderate intervention, and many old hands in the Steering Committee staying power in their positions in caucus during a period of Labor government. The New South Wales Left had been by far the most successful. Having accused the Groupers of dirty tricks in the state conference and the debate, it was significant as a harbinger of a new kind of New South Wales Labor Party. Rudd was responding to revelations at the Independent Commission Against Corruption tribunals.

But there were differences which had been in power in New South Wales since 1941, its record of moderate intervention, and many old hands in the Steering Committee staying power in their positions in caucus during a period of Labor government. The New South Wales Left had been by far the most successful. Having accused the Groupers of dirty tricks in the state conference and the debate, it was significant as a harbinger of a new kind of New South Wales Labor Party. Rudd was responding to revelations at the Independent Commission Against Corruption tribunals.

But there were differences which had been in power in New South Wales since 1941, its record of moderate intervention, and many old hands in the Steering Committee staying power in their positions in caucus during a period of Labor government. The New South Wales Left had been by far the most successful. Having accused the Groupers of dirty tricks in the state conference and the debate, it was significant as a harbinger of a new kind of New South Wales Labor Party. Rudd was responding to revelations at the Independent Commission Against Corruption tribunals.

But there were differences which had been in power in New South Wales since 1941, its record of moderate intervention, and many old hands in the Steering Committee staying power in their positions in caucus during a period of Labor government. The New South Wales Left had been by far the most successful. Having accused the Groupers of dirty tricks in the state conference and the debate, it was significant as a harbinger of a new kind of New South Wales Labor Party. Rudd was responding to revelations at the Independent Commission Against Corruption tribunals.

But there were differences which had been in power in New South Wales since 1941, its record of moderate intervention, and many old hands in the Steering Committee staying power in their positions in caucus during a period of Labor government. The New South Wales Left had been by far the most successful. Having accused the Groupers of dirty tricks in the state conference and the debate, it was significant as a harbinger of a new kind of New South Wales Labor Party. Rudd was responding to revelations at the Independent Commission Against Corruption tribunals.

But there were differences which had been in power in New South Wales since 1941, its record of moderate intervention, and many old hands in the Steering Committee staying power in their positions in caucus during a period of Labor government. The New South Wales Left had been by far the most successful. Having accused the Groupers of dirty tricks in the state conference and the debate, it was significant as a harbinger of a new kind of New South Wales Labor Party. Rudd was responding to revelations at the Independent Commission Against Corruption tribunals.

But there were differences which had been in power in New South Wales since 1941, its record of moderate intervention, and many old hands in the Steering Committee staying power in their positions in caucus during a period of Labor government. The New South Wales Left had been by far the most successful. Having accused the Groupers of dirty tricks in the state conference and the debate, it was significant as a harbinger of a new kind of New South Wales Labor Party. Rudd was responding to revelations at the Independent Commission Against Corruption tribunals.
"A CHALLENGE TO LABOR:
A Manifesto

This manifesto is issued by the
Combined Unions and the ALP Steering
Committee.

The committee was formed prior to the
1955 annual conference of the NSW
branch of the ALP and will continue,
resolute and active, until Grouper
control of Labor Party affairs has been
eliminated in New South Wales.

The manifesto aims to sweep aside
smokescreens that have clouded the
real issues in the Labor Party conflict
and show that only by the most
determined stand can true Labor
principles and policy be preserved."

A. G. Platt (Chairman)
J. Williams (Secretary)
April 11, 1956

Authorised on behalf of the Combined Unions and
ALP Steering Committee by A. G. Platt, Chairman,
Trades Hall, Sydney.
In 1954, the Combined Union and Branches Steering Committee issued a ‘Challenge to Labor’. In this manifesto, the group committed to ‘continue, resolute and active, until Grouper control of Labor Party affairs has been eliminated from New South Wales’.

Ultimately victorious in sweeping the formalised ‘Groupers’ out of NSW, the Steering Committee and modern NSW Left have continued, resolute and active, for many years since.

Faced with the many modern manifestations of NSW Right control of the NSW Branch, the NSW Left campaigns proudly and openly for democracy, social justice and equality. The coalition of forces that constitute the NSW Left today – in the unions and the branches – unite in the shared belief that Labor is the best, perhaps only, vehicle we have to achieve progressive policy outcomes for the communities in which we live. We also recognise that, like all vehicles, the machine that powers NSW Labor can malfunction, can get rusty and old, occasionally need a reboot and at times a complete replacement. We are extremely grateful to Frank Bongiorno, a respected historian, academic and fellow traveller, for putting together this brief history of the NSW Left. This is an unofficial history. Elements of Frank’s account are open to argument. Whilst not quite intending to be the opening shot in the NSW Left History Wars, our group has never shied away from challenge, controversy, the minority report, the other point of view. To quote again the Challenge to Labor, we aim to ‘sweep aside the smokescreens that have clouded the real issues in the Labor Party’.

The other challenge with histories is that they seem to necessitate an end. A point at which the story is finished. Frank has tried to make clear in his essay that he – like us – does not believe the NSW Left has reached the ‘end of history’ in NSW Labor. In fact, the story continues and is more compelling than ever.

I look forward to where the story takes us next, and to sharing that journey with friends and comrades.

Rose Jackson
Secretary, NSW Left
Political parties, like other kinds of communities, cohere around a sense of a shared history. In the New South Wales Branch of the Australian Labor Party, factions have been sufficiently formalised since the 1950s also to possess something like a collective memory. Their identity as factions is derived from this relationship with the past, at least as much as it is concerned with the present or future.

There were many 'lefts' in the New South Wales Labor Party before the mid-1950s – they stretched back to the Australian Socialist League in the 1890s, through the industrial left of the First World War and its aftermath, the Langites and Socialisation Units, and the Hughes-Evans 'State Labor Party' with its Communist affiliations. None of these 'lefts', however, yielded a founding moment that has been meaningful to the modern Socialist Left. Instead, it regards itself as sixty years old, dating its origins from the formation of the Combined Unions and Branches Steering Committee, which occurred some time between late 1954 and early 1955.

The Labor Party itself – depending on which side of the Tweed holds your allegiance – was born in 1891 in a Balmain pub or in the shade of Barcaldine's Tree of Knowledge. And as with this case of contested origins, there is some murkiness about the precise beginnings of the Steering Committee. Robert Murray, in his authoritative account of the Labor Party split of the 1950s, has the Steering Committee being formed in January 1955; to the extent that historians have been able to chance their arm on the matter, they tend to agree with this timing. But Arthur Gietzelt, who joined the Steering Committee in 1955, provided a more evolutionary picture of its development than the professional historians. For instance, he refers to an
The battle for the transformation of the Labor Party continues, with members of the New South Wales Left prominent in the struggle. They draw on the faction’s impressive democratic and participatory traditions. It is a strength of the New South Wales Left that across its sixty-year history, it has been defined by the dynamic relationship between its union base and its local party membership, and between the faction’s leadership and its rank and file in the unions and branches. It is easy to imagine an alternative history since 1954 that would have equipped it to grapple less well with the immense challenges of our own times.

Frank Bongiorno lectures in history at the Australian National University and is a member of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History.

It is a strength of the New South Wales Left that across its sixty-year history, it has been defined by the dynamic relationship between its union base and its local party membership, and between the faction’s leadership and its rank and file in the unions and branches.

earlier informal organisation, established in 1942, ‘of those in New South Wales who were alarmed at the growth of the new right-wing forces’ in the ALP. Too early to have been concerned with the Groupers, it was opposed – claimed Gietzelt – to the ‘Santamaria Movement’. Gietzelt gives this earlier proto-Steering Committee organisation something of the mystique of a secret cell organising against the Tsar. It met, he recalled, ‘two or three times a year at the Esperanto Rooms in the northern pylon of the Harbour Bridge’. Gietzelt has also referred to a meeting held on 16 November 1954, when twenty-one unions affiliated with the ALP in New South Wales expressed ‘alarm at the marked deterioration in union and ALP relations through the failure of the (NSW) Executive to withstand pressure being applied ... by a movement outside the Labor Party.’

The ‘movement’ being referred to here was, of course, the Movement itself, the Catholic Social Studies Movement formed in 1942, and led by Melbourne Catholic activist Bob Santamaria, which was a force inside the ALP’s Industrial Groups. The ‘Groupers’, as they were called, had since 1945 been active in seeking power within the union movement against Communists but also, as the Movement’s influence within the Industrial Groups increased, against ALP-aligned opponents. The power of the Industrial Groups within the New South Wales Labor Party grew in the early 1950s, along with their grip over important unions such as the Ironworkers and the Clerks. It was this success that provoked a reaction and by 1954 a formidable alliance of forces was arrayed against them. When in October of that year H.V. Evatt, the leader of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party, made an incendiary speech attacking a ‘small group ... largely directed from outside the Labour movement’ – clearly, the Movement, for he named their journal News Weekly – it acted across the labour movement like a match to drought-ravaged forest of Mountain Ash.

Melbourne was the epicentre of these conflicts in large part because of the presence there of both Santamaria and his sponsor, Archbishop Daniel Mannix. But there was as much, or even more, at stake in New South Wales. The Labor Party, after all, was stronger there than down south. The Victorian Labor Party was in the early 1950s enjoying only its first period of majority Labor rule but there had been many in New South Wales. Labor, moreover, had been in power in New South Wales since 1941, its record of moderate reform was impressive, and Joe Cahill, the premier since 1952, was an astute operator whose political skills earned him the sobriquet ‘old smoothie’. These skills would help avert a split in his home state. But there were differences between the two states regarding the situation in the Catholic Church as well. The Movement was weaker in Sydney than Melbourne and the New South

---

9 Ellem (ed.), Great Labour Movement Split, p. 60.

---
The battle for the transformation of the Labor Party continues, with members of the Left and hard Left, especially in New South Wales, dropping in 1989 in favour of ‘Socialist Left’. Divisions in the Left remain, but have become less pronounced since 2010 after the two largest groups and later, a federal senator. Here we have a somewhat motley crew, became less ideological during the period of the Wran, but the New South Wales Left as whole seemed willing to work in cooperation with Communists when there was a reason to do so.

Stories of origins are often romantic, and there is a danger of overly romanticising this one as well. When one considers the prominence in the early steering committees of the virulently anti-communist general secretary of the Australian Workers Union, Tom Dougherty, who had only recently been an ally of the Groupers, the steering committee can seem a rather unlikely candidate as progenitor of the New South Wales Left. ‘We were somewhat intimidated by the power of Dougherty’, Gietzelt recalled. In that, he was far from on his own. The AWU leadership had only turned against the Industrial Groups as a potential threat to their own power. The steering committee, tellingly, often met in the AWU building. Here, we are reminded that the steering committee was, in the first instance, an instrument in a vicious internal power struggle, not a socialist debating club.

So who belonged to the steering committee? By May 1955 the thirty-three unions in the faction claimed a total membership of about 170,000 as well as a number of branch loyalists. Among the union officials, the steering committee’s most prominent members were Barney Platt of the Transport Workers Union, who served as its secretary in the early days, and Jack Williams of the Builders Labourers Union, the steering committee’s secretary. Other leading members included R.H. Erskine, a New South Wales Legislative Councillor and secretary of the Textile Workers, and Fred Campbell, the reduced the power of the Right in key internal party tribunals. Rudd was responding to revelations at the Independent Commission Against Corruption suggesting corrupt conduct on the part of a number of Labor parliamentarians and ministers; both of the key New South Wales factions were represented among those so accused, with Eddie Obeid from the Right and Ian Macdonald from the Left in ICAC’s sights. The aim of intervention, apart from improving Labor’s chances at the forthcoming federal election, was to enforce rule changes in New South Wales that would combat corruption, improve party governance and give ordinary members more say in how the party was run.

One of Rudd’s requirements was that at least fifty per cent of the members of the Administrative Committee – the party’s governing body between conferences – should be ordinary rank-and-file party members. The rule eventually adopted provided for annual conference election of Administrative Committee members, with half being chosen by the delegates from affiliated unions, the other half by the rest of conference – a solution that preserved factional control. The New South Wales Left, with John Graham as the party’s assistant secretary, favoured the direct election of rank and file members of the Administrative Committee by the whole financial membership of the party. The Left also strongly supported other reforms that arose out of Rudd’s return to the prime ministership, notably the introduction of a ballot of the entire national membership for federal party leader. It had already signalled its support for an elected state party leader at the 2012 annual conference, a reform accepted by conference in 2014. On the other hand, direct election of Senate and Legislative Council candidates by the membership, despite a strong push by some senior members of the Left such as Faulkner and Albanese, failed to attract sufficient support.

**The Steering Committee, then, was born amid storm and struggle; notably the struggle for control of the labour movement that was carried on in Australia with an unprecedented intensity between 1943 and 1957. This is critical to its founding story; an heroic battle against the Right for control of the New South Wales Labor Party.**

---

1 Ellem (ed.), Great Labour Movement Split, p. 60.
2 SMH, 5 May 1955, p. 5.
3 Report into the National Intervention of the NSW Branch of the Australian Labor Party, July 2013
4 Anthony D’Adam, Jan Burnswoods, Peter Primrose, John Graham and Mark Boyd to George Wright, 25 July 2013, NSW Labor Party.
The battle for the transformation of the Labor Party continues, with members of the Left than the Right. Ironically, the term ‘Steering Committee’ was originally intended as a means of managing personal conflict and rivalry, and distributing the spoils of victory. The new Left of the 1970s, the purity of one’s own politics, and the corruption of the state party leader. In defiance of the Right, the Steering Committee organised zone meetings across Sydney during 1955, to which they invited state and federal parliamentarians. This was part of a broader effort by the Steering Committee for force members of parliament to declare their hand. Were they for or against Evatt? Did they accept the decisions of the 1955 federal conference in Hobart to withdraw support for the Industrial Groups and support a foreign policy that included recognition of Communist China and opposition to sending Australian troops to Malaya? Did they repudiate the actions of the six New South Wales delegates from the Grouter-controlled executive who had boycotted the Hobart conference? A big rally held in 1955 just before August state conference brought nineteen federal members and senators out of the woodwork as Evatt supporters; they either attended or sent their apologies. The young member for Werriwa, Gough Whitlam, was among those in attendance. Meanwhile, a survey of the state Labor caucus suggested that the Steering Committee was able to command the support of at least a quarter of parliamentarians. In the politics of the Labor split, the Steering Committee was remarkably successful in consolidating its power base.

Federal intervention in the New South Wales branch of the Labor Party in 1956 and 1971 modified the nature of Right dominance of the branch but did not fundamentally alter it. This was the case even when the Right was in a weaker position on the ALP federal/national executive than it is today. Certainly, the pattern of Right domination has again prevailed in relation to the most recent instance of federal intervention, that in July 2013, on this occasion initiated by Kevin Rudd, newly returned to the prime ministership after his defeat of Julia Gillard for the federal leadership. Nonetheless, the reforms arising from the intervention of 2013 resulted in significant improvements in party integrity and governance.
successful. Having accused the Groupers of dirty tricks in connection with the executive elections at the 1955 conference – it claimed that they had distributed a dodgy how-to-vote ticket – the Steering Committee played a key role in engineering federal intervention in the New South Wales branch. But in the end, the result of that intervention was not especially favourable to the Steering Committee. The more intransigent Groupers such as Jack Kane and Frank Rooney were removed from the executive in 1956, but the Right was firmly in control. Moreover, the elimination of the influence of the Movement – greatly assisted by the Sydney Catholic hierarchy’s abandonment of it and advice to their flock to remain in the Labor Party instead of forming a breakaway party as the Victorians had done – meant that the Industrial Groups remained in a position to exercise a significant continuing influence. The Democratic Labor Party was founded in Sydney but attracted little support, in contrast with its greater success south of the Murray. And once the Industrial Groups were no longer a threat to unions such as the AWU, the alliance which underpinned the Steering Committee collapsed. The Left was confined to a permanent minority status, dependent for a few executive positions on concessions from the Right when party elections came around.

Worse still, its strictly limited power further declined in the late 1950s and 1960s. Material affluence in the postwar years helped erode the old patterns of class consciousness and so created a deeply discouraging environment for socialists. Contrary to all expectations, Australian capitalism had delivered to most Australians a house, a car and much else. Meanwhile, the willingness of Steering Committee union officials to cooperate with members of the Communist Party made sense in an industrial context, where they sometimes ran ‘unity tickets’ in union elections, but was disturbing in a tense cold war environment in which most Australians regarded Communism as a serious threat to their way of life and many feared a third world war against the Communist powers.

The radicalism unleashed by the increasingly unpopular Vietnam War transformed this situation. From the late 1960s, the Steering Committee was able to recruit into its ranks new and younger members who were beneficiaries of the affluent society, and whose lives were remote from the class struggles and ideological battles that had given rise to the Left in the first place. From the late 1960s, the Steering Committee was able to recruit into its ranks new and younger members who were beneficiaries of the affluent society, and whose lives were remote from the class struggles and ideological battles that had given rise to the Left in the first place.

The battle for the transformation of the Labor Party continues, with members of faction.

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and United Voice (previously the Miscellaneous Workers Union) dropped in 1989 in favour of ‘Socialist Left’. Divisions in the Left remain, but more on branch members than on unions. By the time the New South Wales Labor Party celebrated its centenary in 1991, the soft left was in the ascendant in the federal caucus and the hard left on top in the New South Wales machine, but the New South Wales Left as whole seemed to some observers to be in decline. Labor politics had become less ideological during the period of the Wran, Unsworth and Hawke governments of the 1980s. Factionalism had arguably become more a means of managing personal conflict and rivalry, and distributing the spoils of office, than a way of marking out genuine ideological differences. The end of the cold war played a significant role in this respect, since one of the things that had separated the New South Wales Left from the Right was the former’s willingness to work in cooperation with Communists when there was a common cause to be advanced, whether it was a fight for better wages or conditions, or an end to the Vietnam War. With the disappearance of the Communist Party by the early 1990s, an important reference point for Labor factionalism had been eliminated, and that had far more significant implications for the Left than the Right. Ironically, the term ‘Steering Committee’ was dropped in 1989 in favour of ‘Socialist Left’. Divisions in the Left remain, but have become less pronounced since 2010 after the two largest left unions the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and United Voice (previously the Miscellaneous Workers Union) combined forces to attempt to reunite the faction.

The New South Wales Left, like the Labor Party itself, has adapted and survived. The faction has remained prominent in the parliamentary leadership of the State Labor Party. Andrew Refshauge was deputy premier through the period the Carr Government (1995-2005), followed by John

Ironically, the term ‘Steering Committee’ was dropped in 1989 in favour of ‘Socialist Left’. Divisions in the Left remain, but have become less pronounced since 2010 after the two largest left unions the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and United Voice (previously the Miscellaneous Workers Union) combined forces to attempt to reunite the faction.

The New South Wales Left, like the Labor Party itself, has adapted and survived. The faction has remained prominent in the parliamentary leadership of the State Labor Party. Andrew Refshauge was deputy premier through the period the Carr Government (1995-2005), followed by John

---

Labor Party. Andrew Refshauge was deputy premier through the period the Carr Government (1995-2005), followed by John Watkins through Morris Iemma’s premiership (2005-08). In 2008 the New South Wales Left produced its first Labor premier, Nathan Rees, an outcome almost unimaginable at any other time since the foundation of the Steering Committee, in view of the Right’s ascendency throughout that period. The growing prominence of Labor women in the Left’s ranks has also been notable. The faction as produced a deputy premier in Carmel Tebbutt – moreover, she was deputy during Rees’ period as premier, thereby giving the Left the two senior positions in caucus during a period of Labor government. The New South Wales Left has also produced a deputy opposition leader in the federal parliament, Tanya Plibersek, and another at the state level, Linda Burney. Meredith Burgmann was a long-serving president of the New South Wales Legislative Council. The new prominence of the Left in party leadership positions is not, however, confined to New South Wales, and it reflects changes in the way factions have operated in the ALP nationally since the mid-1980s, as well as the changing nature of the Left itself. Religious distinctions which once played a key role in organising factional divisions have greatly declined in significance; ideological differences between factions are far less apparent than they once were; and the Left is more comfortable with the exercise of power in government, even when that demands a considerable degree of compromise. The result is that the New South Wales Left now operates in a less ideologically fraught but more morally and politically ambiguous environment than a couple of generations ago. In the struggles of the 1970s, the purity of one’s own politics, and the corruption of one’s opponents, fuelled a powerful – if, in the case of some activists, often short-lived – sense of commitment to the good fight against the Right. In 2014 the New South Wales Left is no longer quite such as outsider, having now been in a central player in the political system for many years. As a result, it must take its share of the responsibility for what has gone wrong in our politics, as well as for the many good things it has helped to achieve. It also faces a more serious electoral challenger on the left than the Communist Party of the 1950s through to the 1980s: the Greens.

Between 1976 and 1984 Jack Ferguson, a leading member of the Left, was deputy premier of New South Wales, involved in a fruitful partnership with Neville Wran during a period of great electoral success and significant policy achievement for the New South Wales branch. But during the 1980s divisions developed within the Left that in 1989 that would culminate in a split between groups that became known as the ‘hard left’ and the ‘soft left’. Personal disagreements and power rivalries played a major role in driving this conflict, but there were also some political differences. The ‘hard left’, associated with ranks new and younger members who were beneficiaries of the affluent society, and whose lives were remote from the class struggles and ideological battles that had given rise to the Left in the first place.2 In the early 1970s, inspired by the emergence of the Victorian Socialist Left out of the federal intervention in that state’s electorally disastrous branch, there was an effort to organise a similar kind of independent Socialist Left in New South Wales. As in Victoria, a system of proportional representation instituted after federal intervention, which occurred at around the same time as the Victorian intervention in 1970–71 (but unlike in Victoria went ahead with the consent of both major factions), seemed to provide greater opportunities for the organisation of such a left. But the attempt soon ran out of steam because unlike their Victorian counterparts, the nascent New South Wales faction lacked a base in the unions. It quickly disintegrated into ineffectual socialist grouplets, but the effort was significant as a harbinger of a new kind of New South Wales Left that emerged by 1980; one aligned with the Steering Committee but with a base in the middle-class activists in the ALP branches. Those involved in the early 1970s effort included Frank Walker, Jeff Shaw and Stewart West, who would all later became ministers in state or federal Labor governments; George Petersen, the radical Illawarra Labor MLA, Bob Gould, later well known as a radical bookseller; Hall Greenland, who had participated in the Australian Freedom Rides in support of Aboriginal rights; union officials such as Bob Hunt and Warwick McDonald; and Rod Wise, then an industrial officer with the Public Service Association.3

There were two critical developments during the 1970s that reshaped the New South Wales Left. In the first place, federal intervention in the New South Wales Labor Party did not so much erode the power of the Right as consolidate it. By instituting proportional representation and establishing a second (and paid) assistant secretary position that would inevitably be won by the Left, the Steering Committee was now less dependent on the goodwill of the Right at party election time. The Left’s assistant secretaryship became a key leadership role in the faction, being occupied in the years ahead by Bruce Childs, John Faulkner, Anthony Albanese, Damian O’Connor, Luke Foley and John Graham. But the Steering Committee was, as a result, now even more thoroughly integrated into the structures of the party, and it was forced to make its own decisions about whose name would go forward for each and every role. The possibility of internal division accordingly multiplied.

The Left, moreover, faced this new institutional challenge in a period of great internal party turbulence. During the 1970s there was a bitter struggle for control of the inner-Sydney branches between an old and largely right-wing Catholic machine, and a new left-leaning tertiary educated middle class who were taking up

2 Ibid., pp. 218-19.
Especially in the inner-city branches, the confrontation between old and new was often bitter, and it sometimes turned violent.

A group of younger activists that included Peter Baldwin, Rodney Cavalier and John Faulkner were involved during the 1970s in successfully organising the Left against the Right in party branches around the inner-city and northern Sydney. Especially in the inner-city branches, the confrontation between old and new was often bitter, and it sometimes turned violent. In 1980 Baldwin, heavily involved in organising Left numbers in inner-city branches, was viciously bashed outside his home in Marrickville. The prominent appearance of a photograph of a severely battered Baldwin in the press galvanised the Left against right-wing corruption, and injected an even more powerful sense of moral purpose into its fight against corruption in right-controlled inner-city branches. At the same time, the incident led to differences between younger members of the Left who wanted federal intervention, and many old hands in the Steering Committee who did not.

If the New South Wales Left has an alternative ‘myth’ capable of competing with that concerning the 1950s struggle against the Movement and Groupers in the 1950s, it is these later battles of the radical idealists – those derided by Paul Keating as Balmain basket-weavers – against the corrupt inner-city machine. At any rate the struggles of the 1970s and early 1980s have contributed powerfully to that sense of a shared history on which the identity of the Left rests today.

Between 1976 and 1984 Jack Ferguson, a leading member of the Left, was deputy premier of New South Wales, involved in a fruitful partnership with Neville Wran during a period of great electoral success and significant policy achievement for the New South Wales branch. But during the 1980s divisions developed within the Left that in 1989 that would culminate in a split between groups that became known as the ‘hard left’ and the ‘soft left’. Personal disagreements and power rivalries played a major role in driving this conflict, but there were also some political differences. The ‘hard left’, associated with Frank Walker and newly-elected assistant secretary (from 1989) Anthony Albanese, was more closely associated with the unions, had stronger links with the broader non-ALP left, and was perhaps more likely to engage with controversial international issues. The ‘soft left’, whose members included Baldwin, Cavalier and Jan Burnswoods, was based more on branch members than on unions. By the time the New South Wales Labor Party celebrated its centenary in 1991, the soft left was in the ascendancy in the federal caucus and the hard left on top in the New South Wales machine, but the New South Wales Left as whole seemed to some observers to be in decline. Labor politics had become less ideological during the period of the Wran, Unsworth and Hawke governments of the 1980s. Factionalism had arguably become more a means of managing personal conflict and rivalry, and distributing the spoils of office, than a way of marking out genuine ideological differences. The end of the cold war played a significant role in this respect, since one of the things that had separated the New South Wales Left from the Right was the former’s willingness to work in cooperation with Communists when there was a common cause to be advanced, whether it was a fight for better wages or conditions, or an end to the Vietnam War. With the disappearance of the Communist Party by the early 1990s, an important reference point for Labor factionalism had been eliminated, and that had far more significant implications for the Left than the Right. Ironically, the term ‘Steering Committee’ was dropped in 1989 in favour of ‘Socialist Left’. Divisions in the Left remain, but have become less pronounced since 2010 after the two largest left unions the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and United Voice (previously the Miscellaneous Workers Union) combined forces to attempt to reunite the faction.

The New South Wales Left, like the Labor Party itself, has adapted and survived. The faction has remained prominent in the parliamentary leadership of the State

---

13 Ibid., p. 432.
14 Ibid., pp. 433, 440.