



- <sup>12</sup> 1991 Census Data, CD ROM, Commonwealth Electoral Division by Birthplace, and Commonwealth Electoral Division by Language in the Home.
- <sup>13</sup> *The Age*, 11 August 1995
- <sup>14</sup> A. Jakubowicz, 'Equality and the Objective', In B. O'Meagher (ed), *The Socialist Objective: Labor and Socialism*, Hale and

- Iremonger, Sydney, 1983
- <sup>15</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>16</sup> *The Australian*, 19 July 1995
- <sup>17</sup> Ferguson, Channel 10 News, 11 August 1995
- <sup>18</sup> *The Age*, 12 August 1995
- <sup>19</sup> *The Australian*, 14 August 1995, p. 1

**'SAM BENSON FOR BATMAN AND AUSTRALIA' - LABOR PRE-SELECTION PROBLEMS, THE ETHNIC VOTE AND THE GHOST OF BENSON**

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*The 1995 battle for Batman has held the public's attention for some months. Two local candidates for ALP pre-selection have been disappointed and, thanks to support by Canberra-based members of the Party, an outsider - Martin Ferguson - has won. This struggle can be seen as an odd echo from the 1960s when the ALP Victorian Central Executive twice intervened in pre-selections in Batman. Ethnicity was an issue then as now, but the context was very different.*

In July 1995 Peter Thompson, Radio National's breakfast presenter described Martin Ferguson as a candidate too good for Labor to lose.<sup>1</sup> (He was referring to the Australian Labor Party - ALP - pre-selection contest for the House of Representatives electorate of Batman.) Ferguson, as President of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, has a high national profile. His knowledge of industrial relations and dispute resolution would be invaluable in the federal parliament for the party, as well as for the nation. Batman is currently held by the high-profile and respected Deputy Prime Minister Brian Howe, who will retire at the expiry or dissolution of the current parliament. Much of the debate about candidate pre-selection is about the quality of candidates. Ferguson is, in essence, regarded as a fine replacement for Brian Howe in one of Australia's safest ALP electorates.

The ALP has drawn on its experiences from two previous Batman pre-selections, in 1962 and 1966, in its selection of Ferguson. The ethnic factor was relevant on both occasions. The response by some ALP members, and even by the party itself, in those years was not worthy of a party seeking mass electoral backing. The Ferguson pre-selection, while involving some acrimony, has been handled by the party in a way that will minimise ethnic tensions, and will not, in the long term, result in the loss of substantial ethnic support for the ALP.

Thirty-three years ago, in 1962, the ALP's Victorian Central Executive (VCE)

pre-selected Sam Benson, a sea-captain, as the party's candidate at a by-election for the same federal electorate. The seat became vacant after the death of the sitting ALP Member, Alan Bird. Batman then was regarded, wrongly, as a safe Labor seat. In 1962 it included several very strong Liberal areas which in reality made the seat marginal. The VCE wanted a person of Ministerial calibre rather than a 'hack' for the seat. Benson, while not of the same stature as Ferguson, was regarded as a person likely to bring attributes of great value to the party in the national parliament. In Benson's case this was his likely contribution to defence and shipping issues. The political ghost of Sam Benson, who died in July 1995 when the Batman pre-selection contest was possibly at its hottest point, appears to have influenced the outcome. The parallels between 1962 and 1995 are startling. Certainly there are differences, but the principal issue involved is identical. Benson and Ferguson were outsiders. Both lived outside the electorate.

Benson lived in Williamstown, an older suburb of Melbourne with a port and a naval base. Williamstown then had a working class character. In 1962 local government activists were among the front running 'resident' candidates. Ferguson comes originally from New South Wales. Although he has a very working-class background he now lives in the 'toffy' Melbourne suburb of Surrey Hills. In 1995 Ferguson's opponents were also active in local politics. One, Theo Theophanous, represents the area in the Victorian

Legislative Council and the other, Jenny Mikakos, is a former Northcote Councillor. (Northcote comprises a large part of the Batman electorate, as do Preston and Reservoir. In the past it has also included parts of Heidelberg.) Perhaps the major difference between 1962 and 1995 is the fact that in 1995 both 'local' candidates were Greek, who have replaced Anglos as the majority ethnic group in Batman's ALP branches.

In 1962 Keith Brush, a painter (not a pun) employed by the Northcote Council, moved a motion in the Northcote ALP branch condemning Benson's pre-selection. R.W. Holt, the Victorian President of the ALP, attended a subsequent meeting of the Northcote branch and called George Turner, the branch secretary and a supporter of the Brush motion, a sanctimonious hypocrite! Keith Brush later moved to Western Australia where his son Len and daughter-in-law Brenda achieved some notoriety after being appointed to high positions by Premier Brian Burke.<sup>2</sup>

The 1962 pre-selection had only a marginal ethnic content. It was a contest between Anglos. But, though the Irish-ethnic base of Victorian Labor had been largely eroded by the split of 1955, there was some religious-ethnic bigotry still present at the local level. Benson was promoted heavily by Irish-Catholic Senator Patrick Kennelly, the Victorian ALP's 'kingmaker'. Kennelly's support for Benson was known locally in Batman and used in argument by some supporters of the Brush motion, but not by Keith Brush himself. Brush, normally a VCE supporter, merely wanted a 'local'. To argue against Benson on religious grounds was ridiculous and unfair because Benson was not a Catholic but an Anglican.

Benson's pre-selection was accepted by party members in Batman and, in fact, led to acceptance of 'outsiders' later. No Labor candidate pre-selected since Alan Bird in 1949 has lived in the electorate. These included J.W. Andersen in 1966, Horrie Garrick in 1969, Brian Howe in 1977 and Martin Ferguson in 1995. Benson's pre-selection indirectly also contributed to a growing acceptance in the Batman ALP branches of non-Anglo-ethnics, who in 1962 were almost unrepresented among the party membership in the electorate. This came about as a consequence of the anti-migrant views expressed by Northcote's Anglo Coun-

cillors - some of whom thought they were more deserving of pre-selection than Benson.

Graziella D'Amico,<sup>3</sup> an ALP member in Northcote in the early 1960s, referred to one such Councillor, the Mayor of Northcote and a candidate for pre-selection in Batman in 1962. The Mayor supported the actions of Northcote's City Librarian in refusing to allow residents under the age of fourteen years use of the local library under a false interpretation of Council Library Regulations. D'Amico considered his reasoning bizarre. The Mayor said, 'Only dagoes, commos and poofers read books. And if they want to read books there are plenty of Noddy and Enid Blyton books in the children's library.' Elisabetta D'Amore<sup>4</sup> referred to the Mayor's comments in a paper presented at an academic conference as evidence of prejudice against Italian immigrants. It was. Frank Wilkes, local Member of the Victorian Legislative Assembly for Northcote and also a Northcote Councillor was clearly embarrassed by the Mayor's remarks. Ignorant and condescending local Councillors did not deserve pre-selection for national political office. The fact that they were passed over helped make the party more attractive to many migrants of non-Anglo background.

Both Benson and Ferguson were, in a sense, imposed on the electorate. Benson was selected by vote of the VCE with minimal local involvement. It is likely, nevertheless, that one of the two local representatives who voted with the VCE in the 1962 pre-selection voted for Benson. Gary Gray, the ALP's National Secretary, promoted Ferguson from outside in 1995 and warned that whatever local support other candidates might have Ferguson would be pre-selected for Batman, whatever it took. In fact Ferguson had the numbers on the ALP's National Executive but, fortunately for the party, both remaining candidates for pre-selection in Batman withdrew their nominations, leaving Ferguson to be pre-selected unopposed. Federal intervention by National Executive would have been the worst possible outcome, with acrimonious local consequences.

The parliamentary career of Sam Benson resulted in a subsequent pre-selection by the VCE in 1966. Once in parliament Benson proved to be intensely patriotic on defence issues. This stance was not consistent with a VCE that was supposedly left-wing and, in the eye of Labor's opponents, pro-Communist.

Despite his military background he seemed much too much a nice and decent person, probably a liability for anyone seeking high political office. He was expelled from the ALP in 1966 after refusing to resign from a right-wing fringe group, the 'Defend Australia Committee', which the party had proscribed. This may have been the reason for his expulsion. But it is more likely that he was expelled because he voted for a 'spill' of leadership positions in the federal ALP Caucus. Had a 'spill' occurred, Gough Whitlam would have opposed Arthur Calwell for the party Leadership. Whitlam was then an opponent of the VCE which in 1966 had moved sharply to the left under State Secretary Bill Hartley.

Though the 1966 election saw the VCE take the lead again in pre-selecting the ALP candidate for Batman, Benson stood again as an independent, and won. He campaigned under the slogan 'Sam Benson for Batman and Australia'. This was the election fought on the issue of conscription for the Vietnam War. Prime Minister Harold Holt's slogan, 'all the way with LBJ' (LBJ being United States President Lyndon Baines Johnson), helped the Liberal-Country Party Coalition win a landslide victory. If Benson had not won the seat, it is unlikely any other Labor candidate would have won against the Liberal opposition – harness racing commentator Bruce Skeggs.

The 1966 VCE pre-selection proved a monumental blunder for the party. Arthur Calwell, then federal Leader, wanted J.W. Andersen, then Mayor of the suburb of Heidelberg. The local ALP branches wanted Giuseppe Di Salvo, like Benson a sea captain, but also an Italian with a distinguished record of service in World War II. Andersen defeated Di Salvo in the VCE ballot by just one vote, largely thanks to Calwell's lobbying. Calwell had ignored both geography and demography. A Heidelberg Councillor was unacceptable to electors in much of Batman. In a poll just four years previously the most marginal part of Batman, the area of Fairfield and Alphington, voted by almost nine to one to leave the Heidelberg municipality. Whatever Andersen's personal worth his association with a poorly regarded Council was an electoral liability. Calwell also ignored the growing number of Italians in the electorate. D'Amore<sup>5</sup> points out that many Italians resented the treatment Di Salvo received. In particular the Italian-Australian Labor Council, which Di

Salvo founded, collapsed after the 1966 Batman pre-selection. The ALP had lost its chance to recruit Italians in large numbers. Thanks to Calwell it would never do so.

Some Greeks have argued that 1995 is a re-run of 1966, that Greeks are unacceptable to many in the ALP. They point to negative remarks by Gary Gray about 'Bill the Greek' (Bill Kardamitsis) who lost the Wills by-election to independent Phil Clarey in 1992 after the retirement from federal parliament of former Prime Minister Bob Hawke. Some Anglos, on the other hand, have claimed that the Greeks are as ethnocentric as the former Northcote Anglo Councillors who also thought they had a divine right to the seat of Batman. There is really no comparison with the situation of Di Salvo in the 1960s. Greeks have substantial numbers in the Victorian ALP, both as members of parliament and in the party generally. The fact that a Greek was not selected for Batman means nothing. The party wanted to find a seat for Martin Ferguson and Batman was the first available which was safe. It is unfortunate that this would be at the expense of Greek representation, but it does not mean the end of Greek membership. At the time of the unsuccessful Di Salvo pre-selection Italians had every right to feel they were being discriminated against. No Italians then held office in the Victorian ALP.

It is with 1962, not 1966, that the Batman pre-selection of 1995 can best be compared. Only the characters and the principal ethnic group have changed. While Martin Ferguson would not share Benson's views on defence, he is a mainstream ALP member who holds views in keeping with contemporary party thinking. His pre-selection, nevertheless, resulted in similar responses among the Batman ALP membership to that of 1962. In 1962 it was dissatisfied local Anglos. In 1995 it is dissatisfied Greeks. The pre-selection of Martin Ferguson demonstrates that the ghost of Benson is very much alive.

#### References

- <sup>1</sup> Interview with writer, Radio National, 13 July 1995
- <sup>2</sup> See Brian A. Peachey, *The Burkes of Western Australia*, Perth 1992, p.143, and Trevor Sykes, *The Bold Riders*, Sydney 1994, p. 609.
- <sup>3</sup> Graziella D'Amico, 'Dealing With Disputes', *Batman Links*, (newsletter of Brian Howe, MP), July 1994
- <sup>4</sup> Elisabetta D'Amore, 'The Political Role of Italians in Australia 1950-1994', unpublished Conference paper, Victoria University of Technology, September 1994
- <sup>5</sup> *ibid.*