

The State, Markets and Civil Society

Contribution by George Wright, National Secretary of the ALP

John Cain Foundation inaugural conference

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Thanks to the John Cain Foundation for organising today's discussion and inviting me to participate.

Thanks especially to Yvette Nash who I worked in the 2013 Election campaign and whose involvement in the Cain Foundation is probably the reason I have been invited today – so thanks Yvette.

As National Secretary of the Labor Party I want to acknowledge the effort put into establishing the Cain Foundation as an important addition to Australia's progressive think-tanks.

Our party needs more organisations like this.

We need people to step up and contribute to generating ideas and arguing for them to our members, supporters and the community.

Ideas and policies are the lifeblood of politics.

But I agree with Maurice - they are not everything.

We also have to think about how we communicate, organise, campaign and give the communities we aspire to represent the voice they need to win.

This is why I am so pleased to be here today and why I think The Cain Foundation is on the right track with this event.

But besides that, John Cain is one of my political heroes.

A forceful but always thoughtful, fair and honest leader.

Even to the 15 year-old I was when he became Premier, John Cain always communicated a fundamental human decency and gentleness.

John Cain is the exemplar of the every-day citizen leader.

He is the founding father of a highly successful model of Victorian Labor Leadership.

It is also an honour to share a platform with Maurice, but also a little bit daunting.

Maurice is a hard act to follow.

His ideas are exciting.

His oratory energetic and engaging and I am pleased to be here just to have heard him speak.

He is also sometimes a lightning rod for controversy.

This is a good thing.

Because his work highlights a major problem with the way we have sometimes done our politics.

And if we don't think about these things we risk allowing our mission to ossify and risk becoming irrelevant.

In this, Maurice is on to something.

He has seen this problem in his own country—and believes it responsible for developments like the rise of UKIP.

He rightly feels dismayed that even in the midst of Tory austerity, his own Party struggles to develop an authentic political connection with many everyday people.

His appearance here today should encourage us to think about the challenges we face in Australia.

And that's what I want to talk about.

I love ideas and I love the Labor Party, but unlike Maurice I am not a politician or a published political theorist.

I am a practitioner.

A practitioner in the dark art of campaigns and, now also, the obscure discipline of political party administration.

In my current job I am responsible for the federal administration of an organisation whose origins go back 125 years in this country and whose idea is older still.

The great Australian Labor Party.

A Party, I believe, is the greatest and most successful Labor Party in the world.

And it's from this perspective and from my own experience that I come at Maurice's ideas.

So I am not going to try to compete with Maurice for the big idea space.

What I want to do is tell you a little about my experience of organising, campaigning, Labor and politics.

How I have come to understand it, how this influences me in my current job and where I think the future lies for Australian Labor.

I think Maurice noted earlier that in his experience of Westminster "*there is so much talk of principle and policy and so little of politics and winning.*"

I like that.

Because it was principles and ideas that drew me to political activism – nurtured by my parents whose passions were Whitlamite Laborism and Catholic Social Justice.

But it is *politics and winning* that have been the intellectual and emotional fuel of my now 25 odd years of work in the labour movement.

My journey to my current job was maybe an odd one.

But it has influenced how I see our Party, its challenges and its possibilities.

I joined the Labor Party for the first time as a 16 or 17 year old.

But I was not active in the Party, beyond the manual labour of letter-boxing and handing out how-to-votes, until a bit later in my life.

I did study politics in my final year at high school but did so by correspondence – as the outer suburban school I attended didn't offer the subject.

I never joined the Labor Club, Young Labor or any other political group at University.

What I have learnt about politics and the way people think about it is not so much from books or tutorials or even Carlton's coffee shops and bars.

But I was always intensely interested in listening to what my workmates thought about politics as I worked on building sites during my years of study.

I was always keen to provoke and participate in political discussions at the suburban football club I spent much of my time around as a boy and young adult.

Politics for me has never been about the politicians - it's always been about people.

People, not just as individuals but Capital P people – the collective and the many - and the power they can have when they join together in mutual support and common interest.

Maybe it's the time I spent around football – where no matter how brilliant the output of any individual player – nothing hums like a team.

Nothing for one or for all can be achieved without working as a team.

That is how you succeed – that is how you win.

And it may be why I gave up a Scholarship to complete a Masters Degree in History to take a job as a trainee union recruiter and organizer in the ACTUs Organizing Works program.

That program, which Bill Shorten was also part of, provided formal training and experience to young union organizers – in the science and art of activating and organizing groups of un-organized workers.

I loved it and learnt so much.

At first I thought my job was just to recruit workers into the union – to sign them up – to make sure their dues came in.

But what I soon learned was that as important as this was it wasn't enough and ultimately did not work.

I learned that my real job was to build relationships.

To help individual workers conceptualize themselves as a group, to build trust, to help that group form and organize itself, to find its way of relating, communicating and ultimately acting.

This is how I learnt the relationships Maurice has spoken of.

And it remains the most satisfying thing I have experienced in my working life.

To go on a journey with a group of workers as they form a group, build trust in each other, and with that trust, the demand for respect and the power to influence things that impact on their lives.

To do, as Maurice put it, politics and winning.

I saw it too when I worked at the ACTU and 16,000 Ansett workers lost their jobs overnight and then stood up, acted collectively, and in an unprecedented move sacked a company appointed insolvency administrator and appointed one who would work with them to secure the entitlements they were due.

I saw it in the campaign to ensure James Hardie paid fair compensation to the victims of its asbestos products.

And I saw it in the *Your Rights at Work Campaign* – a campaign that wasn't led by politicians in Canberra, but by workers.

Workers in unions and workers not in unions.

Workers who cared and campaigned and voted to make sure they and their families' rights and material well-being were protected.

That their demand to be treated as people and not just economic commodities was heard and respected.

It was this union of mutual self-interest that saw the end of *WorkChoices* - this is why it worked.

This is the journey in politics and power that I have taken to arrive in my current job in the Labor Party.

This is what influences me when I think about how we build the Labor Party we need for the future.

Later this year the ALP will hold it's National Conference.

Policy will be on the agenda as will Party reform.

And it should be – changes need to be made.

If we are serious about being a mass participation Party then we must continue to expand the franchise of our democratic processes.

The most dramatic change in this area in recent years is the move to give ALP members a direct vote on who will lead the Labor Party.

A change members are telling us is on the right track.

When we balloted members for the first time ever on the labor leadership in October 2013 they responded in force.

Almost 90% of members voted in the ballot.

Members are telling us the type of reform they want.

More direct say on the things they care about – and we should continue down the path of the democratization of our party's structures, processes and culture.

But again, I don't think this will be enough.

Because there are some fundamental changes going on in business, communications, organizations, relationships and politics we can't ignore.

The way people relate to organization and to each other is changing.

How people find and form the groups of mutual benefit in which they want to participate – often across the regional, occupational and even class connections Maurice speaks of - is changing.

It is too simple to say it's all about the internet – and I don't claim for a minute to understand all of what's going on in the online world – only that it is disrupting almost everything.

We would be foolish to ignore it.

I heard on the radio just this morning that small and medium businesses who have a strong on-line presence are growing at twice the rate of those that aren't. Why should politics be any different?

Like successful businesses, successful political movements, successful unions of and for mutual benefit have always adopted and colonized the most effective technology, tools and techniques available to them.

And the technology available has always had an influence on who and how people have come together to find their voice and pursue their collective interests.

Consider our current party structures and – until recently – our way of organizing.

When you join the ALP, you join a local branch that meets in the local hall.

That branch delegates members upwards to the FEA and to the State Conference, which in turn to the State Executive and the National Conference. These then delegate people onto the National Executive and so forth.

This is modeled on the same structure as a Welsh mining lodge.

It's a model with a long and glorious history. And it was based on the leading technologies of its day. The horse and cart, the railway, the telegraph.

But there's nothing sacred, unmovable, or unchangeable about this way of organizing ourselves. It must continue to evolve if we are to remain effective.

From the lodge meeting, to the town hall, to the printing press, to radio, broadcast TV, the telephone, the fax, and now the internet – how people relate to politics and organize around it is always changing.

And I would argue it has often changed faster than the formal structures, rules, power arrangements and dominant cultures within our Party.

And I think this is happening again today.

Because what practitioners like me are grappling with, what campaign directors like Noah Carroll in Victorian Labor and Luke Hilakari at Victorian Trades Hall are thinking about, is how do we do effective political communication and campaigning in a post-broadcast era.

And like Maurice, one of the things we are doing – to make sure we take our movement forward, is also looking back.

Before broadcast, ideas were shared across cultures and centuries through stories.

The best stories, those which most deeply appealed to our shared values, were shared over and over, slightly changed at each telling to add something of each story teller, and those which failed to connect were not told again.

The strongest ideas won out, and stories across the world shared common threads about the human condition.

When the broadcast era began a good story was no longer an essential part of communication.

The spread of ideas could be purchased.

Audiences were seen as passive consumers who had little role in spreading a story or adding to it.

But as the curtain starts to close on broadcast and the power of the digital media grows, the power of the story and the role of the audience, is returning to the fore.

Word of mouth is now more powerful and faster than ever before.

To succeed in the era of digital storytelling, organizations must be willing to let their audiences play their role.

Whether customers, members or shareholders, audiences are demanding a say.

Critically, the most effective stories in this environment are not about the product or the brand - they are about the consumer, the member, the shareholder, the supporter, the mother, the father, the student, the patient, the family members, the woman, the worker the voter.

The challenge for Labor in this environment is to allow our supporters to write us into their stories.

Because if we don't they will write us out.

There is no better example of this than what the Victorian Branch of our Party, and the Victorian Trades Hall did in the most recent state election.

Party and Union resources previously dedicated to print communications and broadcast advertising were moved out of the TV airways and letterbox and invested in people.

People to organize and activate the community on the issues that they care about on the ground and on-line.

In the 18 months leading up to the last Victorian election progressive interests in Victoria built one of the biggest local campaigning machines we have seen for some time.

They activated thousands of volunteers and workers and citizens and allowed them to write themselves into the Labor story on the issues that mattered to them.

They caught their Conservative opponents and their outdated and distant campaign techniques off-guard and flat-footed – and they won.

This is enormously exciting and fundamental to the future success of our movement.

Because what we are seeing today is people not just looking to political parties or organizations to make the change they want – they are looking to each other.

They are forming their OWN groups of mutual interest.

They are not necessarily embracing the idea and commitment of membership organizations like the Labor Party has believed they are built on.

They are not necessarily embracing the whole grand narrative or all the policies of a political party like ours.

But they are contributing to politics often in significant and to them satisfying ways – contributing to the ISSUES they are interested in, in WAYS that works for them.

And if we want to encourage and nurture the formation of the groups of mutual interest that Maurice talks of, and that I have seen in workplaces and in politics, then we must be part of this.

In 2010 federal Labor had an on-line network of 30,000 people.

Mostly Labor members and the seriously engaged who directly contributed about \$70,000 to Labor's 2010 election campaign.

After investing in the right technologies, skills, resources and strategies, by the 2013 election that network had grown to 250,000 people who collectively contributed \$1m.

Taken together, these small contributors were the biggest single financial contributor to Labor's election campaign.

More than any single union.

More than any single company.

Think about that and the disruptive potential of it.

Today that network is 400,000 people and we are on track to raise \$3m plus from small on-line, donors by the next election.

This is powerful. It is also powerfully democratic.

This has the potential to change our party and politics in more significant ways than anything we will resolve around our rules at the National Conference.

The political parties that are successful in the future will not be the ones with the right rules – they will be the ones who are in the right space – who are connected and reflective of where people are at.

Who are capable of being a vehicle for the formation of mutual interest, activism and voice.

These 400,000 people on Labor's on-line network are not a single group – they don't act like one and they won't allow themselves to be treated like one.

They have different interests, different passions, different ways they want to communicate, contribute and participate – on different issues, with each other and with Labor.

Like they do when they relate to their friends and colleagues, with businesses and other institutions they want to manage and influence their relationship with Labor.

They are not interested in restrictive rules that say you must attend this number of meetings, or join this organization, or participate in only this way – this is not the way successful organizations operate anymore.

Our job is not to corral their participation, to restrict it, to raise the hurdle they must jump to achieve the belonging they want.

Like a young organizer in an un-organized workplace our job is to find ways to build the connections and relationships.

To facilitate the contributions our supporters and communities want to make – individually or together - and encourage them to find the voice they want to have in politics and in our party.

To identify the change they want to make.

That is where I believe Labor must be.

In 2011 federal Labor had a digital team on 1 – it's now 7 and will build to 15 and beyond by the election.

In 2010 federal Labor had 3 national organizers - at the next election we will have 40 – placed in the communities we need to win, working with those communities and candidates and volunteers and supporters to grow effective, relevant and LOCAL campaigns.

I acknowledge that none of this is as romantic as having a hungry-looking Labor candidate or organizer ride into town on a bicycle or horse reading passages from Shelley or Henry Lawson, as our founders did in the 1890s.

But if they were young today, I imagine that the sort of people who founded our movement and party—people like Tom Mann and Billy Hughes—would be cutting-edge community-based campaigners.

Making authentic, purposeful contact, building relationships and capacity - driven by moral priorities and the community ethic, joining with people and finding new leaders among them.

These are the things that worked then and still work today.

They are the things Maurice reminds us are the really important things in progressive politics.

“There is so much talk of principle and policy and so little of politics and winning.”

Maurice is right.

Today we need to talk not just about principle and policy but also about politics and winning and do this on a scale and with the sophistication necessary for our contemporary society.