

Martin Ferguson: voice of reason tells it how it is for Labor

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It often takes a former member of a club to tell us about the weaknesses of that club and the tricks the members get up to. And so it is with Martin Ferguson, former minister in the Labor government and, before that, president of the ACTU.

Ferguson has devoted his entire professional life to the labour movement. He still cares deeply about the plight of ordinary workers whose fate he sees as inextricably linked to what happens in the economy, particularly in terms of jobs. He is a man with old-fashioned values who has little time for modern, inner-city obsessions, but lots of time for allowing working men and women to get ahead.

Once upon a time, trade unions in Australia were essentially industrial organisations. Their principal concern was the welfare of the members. These days, trade unions in Australia are essentially political organisations whose principal function is to enrich officials and pave the way for ambitious officials to become parliamentarians. In their spare time, they may seek to influence government policy — more spending in preferred areas, environmental policies that suit the union-dominated industry superannuation funds and the like.

But providing services to members and waging industrial campaigns are simply regarded as passe by many union officials.

We can gauge the influence of the union movement in Australia by noting that nearly 100 per cent of newly elected Labor parliamentarians, at both the state and federal level, now profusely thank unions in their maiden speeches — a marked change from the past. In Britain, by contrast, less than a quarter of new Labour parliamentarians mention a union.

At the state level, there are CFMEU parliamentarians, Shoppies parliamentarians, etc. And, increasingly, these parliamentarians seek the advice of their sponsors prior to making any decisions. In turn, the unions protect incompetent ministers from demotion or the sack.

According to Ferguson, “the caucus are almost as if they’re prisoners of the union movement. There’s no independence, to some extent, among too many caucus members at the moment; they wait for the phone call from the trade union heavy to tell them what to do.”

Ferguson is quite right to be belling the cat on this. Only 17 per cent of workers belong to trade unions, a dramatically lower percentage than 30 years ago. The ratio is higher in the public sector, but this is partly because of the insidious impact of these unions on management — promotion is often granted only to union members, for example.

The unions’ hysterical reaction to the Royal Commission on Trade Union Governance and Corruption is indicative of an inward-looking union movement with a lot to hide. “I just don’t see the royal commission as a political play thing,” Ferguson has said. “I actually think it’s potentially going to be very important in reforming the trade union movement and the Labor Party and I will not damn it.”

I just won’t be holding my breath that the union movement will take Ferguson’s advice.