

## CHAPTER 10

### The Usefulness of a ‘Well-Timed Rat’

In August 1996 Labor Senator Mal Colston accepted the role of deputy president of the Senate from the recently elected Howard government. His defection from the ALP gave the coalition a majority in the Senate, allowing it to pass highly contentious legislation—the bills allowing the sale of Telstra and the introduction of a goods and services tax (GST). In return the coalition tried unsuccessfully to protect Colston from prosecution for his obsessive travel roting. Colston’s betrayal and the bitter recriminations that ensued played out on national television as the media relentlessly pursued the traitor. Portrayed as greedy and self-interested, Colston entered the ranks of the ALP’s most infamous rats, taking his place in the folklore of the party alongside traitors such as Billy Hughes and Joe Lyons. The story of Mal Colston raises many of the themes that emerged in this study: the duchessing of a parliamentary representative by the spoils of power; the gradual drift to the right; the vilification of the traitor by former colleagues; and the entry of his story as a cautionary tale into the folklore of the ALP.

Traitors such as Colston, though seemingly destructive, play an important role in facilitating change and reinforcing solidarity. Their stories enter Labor/Labour folklore for a variety of reasons: to aid the expansion of democratic processes, to spotlight changes in policy

direction, to explain setbacks and failures, and to highlight the perfidy of the political opposition and the solidarity of those the rat has left behind. Accusations against the traitors helped to facilitate changes in organisational style and policy, and to reinforce solidarity by drawing attention to the shared ideas, ideals, and objectives that bound the remaining group. The removal of those who disagreed with adjustments in policy, aims, or objectives has sometimes signalled the modernisation of the organisation to a changing constituency. Just as an 'Other' is necessary for national/ethnic identity to define who the national/ethnic group is by defining who they are not, the process of alterity—constructing the traitor as an 'Other'—offered a means of defining or redefining the radical organisation. Identities become unusually fluid at moments of betrayal, and this can open up pathways for rethinking the nature of the organisation and facilitate attempts to fix a revised shared identity for the remaining members. Leaders like Trenwith and Burns were able to draw on the reservoirs of trust that they had accumulated through years of reliable behaviour; a leader like Trenwith could be both trusted and distrusted at the same time, and members had different expectations of him in different areas of his public life. Multiple identities could weaken collective trust, as, for example, when H. H. Champion asserted his identity as a British gentleman over his socialist-collectivist identity, or when Trenwith asserted his identity as a self-improver over his identity as a worker.

The move towards closure—from being a fellowship to a clan—can simultaneously build and threaten solidarity; the formation of political labour in Britain proved to be a revealing example of this phenomenon. The emerging organisation moved towards structural closure through the foundation of the ILP, the formation of the LRC, the Labour Party and the PLP. This attempt to absorb and control affiliated groups by developing hierarchies, rules and controls on members led to ambivalence amongst some members including the leadership, which was expressed through resistance to a formal constitution, the fluid allegiances of members of the group and repeated threats of schism, splits and individual exits.

Structural closure was accompanied by symbolic closure, which moved to define all workers as male. The labour press adopted a masculine rhetoric that became crucial in constructing a unified identity for workers in differentiation to capitalist employers. While

supporting male workers' solidarity, this masculine rhetoric excluded women, and some men, from organised labour, in theory if not in practice. Underpinning this exclusion was a masculine code of honour inherited from bourgeois ideas of ideal male behaviour, which excluded women from subjective political lives at the same time as it bound representatives to behave in the interests of the party. This rhetoric was also employed in Australia, but was adapted to suit Australian circumstances, especially Australian workers' fear of being undercut by cheap foreign labour and their consequent commitment to protection. Women remain under-represented today, both in parliament and in the ranks of the rats.

During its move to closure, Australian Labor acted more definitively than British Labour to control representatives' behaviour by introducing solidarity pledges. This drew attention to the inherent paradox in the shift of the labour movement into representational politics: the collectivist ideal was vulnerable to the individualistic and pragmatic nature of political life. The ambiguous position and payment of the new members compromised trust between the movement and its parliamentary representatives, and the adoption of solidarity pledges represented an attempt by modern democratic parties to control the behaviour of its representatives. The pledge allowed discipline but remained dependent on a pre-existing masculine and increasingly racialised code of honour and, as such, it could only ever be as reliable as the members' adherence to that code. Indeed, the introduction of such a pledge might even have worked against unity by drawing unambiguous attention to the tension between the collective ideal and the indirect nature of representational politics entrenching, perhaps, the gap between the movement and its representatives. Some representatives resisted the pledge, convinced that the prevailing white male code of honour was sufficient to ensure the representatives acted upon the best interests of their constituency in parliament. Most Labor members, however, recognised that their expectations for the ability of the new party to remodel society demanded a new level of commitment from its representatives, a new level of solidarity, and they insisted on the pledge. Neither George Black's belief in the honest man nor the more modern insight that the swearing of a pledge was needed to bind the representatives of the new party were definitive. Labor's many rats are sufficient evidence of

this. But underpinning both of these hopes was a heavily racialised code of honour, one that had evolved as previous candidates for the role of the dishonourable in society were absorbed into honourable citizenship.

At the heart of this racialised code of honour were the ideas of the white man and the white man's code. It is tempting to assume that the white man's code produced an allegiance that transcended the workers' allegiance, which was based on opposition to capital. But, in fact, this code was a discourse which could be used in various ways by all classes rather than a fixed, unchanging allegiance. The definition of what it meant to be 'white' was highly flexible, the definition of what it meant to be a man, less so. The labour press used this discourse in the first decades of the twentieth century to criticise the behaviour of capital. Implicit in this was, of course, a real distrust of the unorganised 'black man', who could not be relied upon to maintain hard won 'white' wages and conditions. But the targets of these articles were always the representatives of capitalist interests. Racist discourse in the *Worker* rarely appeared without a criticism of a politician perceived to be working for capitalist interests, or of a capitalist himself. In the hands of the *Worker*, then, the white man's code became a form of code itself—for organised labour. White men were superior in this discourse, in as far as they were prepared to put individual needs aside and act collectively against their real opponent—capital. White men were honest, hardworking, brave and strong—unless they were capitalists. When 'rats' like Billy Hughes or William Holman betrayed the workers by switching allegiance to a capitalist party, they broke only the workers' version of this White Man's Code—the code of organised labour. To their new friends, they remained true 'white men'.

The shifting fusions of class, gender, and race represented in a discourse like the White Man's Code meant solidarity was not a fixed entity but had to be repeatedly renegotiated and remade, and accusations of betrayal played an important role in this process. As the labour movements in Britain and Australia moved to direct representation, questions arose concerning who was now suitable to lead political labour, and some leaders were deemed no longer suitable. Behind these questions lay emerging ideas of the appropriate demeanour and behaviour of a labour representative, and, especially an expectation of solidarity.

This study has presented a snapshot of the role that accusations of betrayal have played in the making and remaking of solidarity in the labour movements of Britain and Australia. There have been many other traitors over the years (both alleged and proven), some famous, some less so, and there are likely to be many more. In September 2005, the ALP suffered one of its most public betrayals since that by Mal Colston, with the publication of the diaries of the former leader, Mark Latham. Many have presented as the most heinous betrayal his bitter criticism of his former colleagues and the party factions and his public despair for the future of the ALP. This episode has yet to prompt a thorough re-examination of policy and direction, at least publicly, and it seems unlikely that it will, as Latham has been dismissed by many as an unbalanced maverick who is not worth listening to. There was evidence of increased solidarity, if just for a moment, as the various factions came together to decry Latham's betrayal, and to deny the veracity of his criticisms.

The tag 'rat' continues its infiltration into broader political terminology. His recent defection to the Liberal Party earned Julian McGauran, a National Party senator, the epithet 'rat' from some of his former colleagues and the media. McGauren's betrayal seems to have been prompted by personal ambition; he argues that the National Party is becoming increasingly irrelevant, and some suspect that the Liberal Party promised him a ministerial position in return for his defection. This situation is still playing out but McGauran's defection has drawn attention to significant problems for the National Party, forcing it to examine critically the future of its coalition with the Liberal Party.

Political betrayal, then, had and continues to have, its uses. It has certainly ensured that the ALP enjoys a rich and popular folk history, and it occasionally provides the grateful media with many columns of sensational copy. Political betrayal has also had its victims. H. H. Champion never recovered his reputation in the British labour movement, and only barely in the Victorian labour movement—and that after years of public vilification. The victims of such allegations are the victims of fear. Members of radical groups and organisations feared (and fear) government spies, middle-class infiltration, and, perhaps most of all, the seduction of their leaders and representatives by 'the high life'. These fears are intrinsic to such groups: the result of the oppositional nature of radicalism itself.