CHAPTER 19
Australian Labor Party,
New South Wales Branch
Unity Conference, 26–27 August 1939

Report in The Sydney Morning Herald, 28 August 1939

After the fiasco of the 1938 election the split between Lang’s party and the Industrialists intensified. MA Davidson (Cobar) and EM Horsington (Sturt) rejoined the Heffron party that they had been associated with before the 1938 election. In March 1939 Clive Evatt won Hurstville for Industrial Labor from the UAP in a by-election, and in April Clarrie Martin did the same in Waverley. Both contests saw Lang’s party easily out-voted. In June, F Burke (Newtown) defected from Lang to Heffron. Given what appeared to be the growing electoral impotence of Lang, the Federal Executive acceded to the request of the Heffron group and decided to intervene in the NSW Labor Party. The Unity Conference of August, convened and controlled by the Federal Executive, was the result. With the return of delegates from most of the disaffected unions, and the loss of control by the Inner Group, the result was never in doubt. Clearly, the 1927 rules of the party, and the issue of whether Caucus or Conference should elect the Leader, were central to debate.

Although the Caucus was once again in control of its own destiny and could elect and dismiss its leader, there was still chaos in the extra-parliamentary machine. Federal intervention was needed in 1940 to get rid of the Communist-dominated Hughes-Evans State Executive, while Lang once more tried to go his own way. As the 1941 State election approached there were three groups claiming to represent the true Labor Party in NSW. Only after the victory of McKell in that election was Lang effectively pushed to the sidelines as a mere irritant to the party.
Unity Conference of NSW ALP, 1939

(The Sydney Morning Herald, 28 August 1939)

Days 1-2, Saturday-Sunday, 26-27 August 1939

Lang Forces Defeated. Demand for New Leader.
Conference Vote.

The New South Wales Labour Party will be called upon to elect a new leader as the result of the defeat of the Lang faction at the Labour unity conference held at Newtown during the weekend.

The consensus of opinion among delegates is that if Mr Lang is defeated he will be succeeded by Mr W McKell, MLA, who was Minister of Justice in the last Lang Administration. Other names mentioned for the leadership include Messrs W Dunn, J McGirr, and J Baddeley, MLAs.

The conference resulted in a sweeping victory for the Heffron Party which will now become the official Labour Party in New South Wales.

The conference decided that within a fortnight the Parliamentary Labour caucus at a secret ballot should meet to elect the new leader. The ballot will be under the control of the new ALP executive, the majority of whom are expected to be pledged supporters of Mr Heffron.

After a heated debate the conference also decided to elect the executive and officials of the party. Members of Mr Lang’s inner group – which has been in charge of the administration of the party since 1927 – were decisively defeated. The ballot resulted in the election of the following officers: President, Mr J Cranwell, vice-presidents, Messrs J Hughes and J McNeill, secretary Mr W Lyons, organiser, Mr F Graham.

Mr Lang Will Fight

Mr Lang, however, is expected to fight to the last to retain the leadership. Union officials fear that if he is defeated in the caucus election the Lang faction will continue to regard him as their leader and will run candidates for all seats at the next elections.

There were many exciting scenes at the conference when the vital vote was taken. A Lang Party proposal that the conference and not the caucus should continue to elect the leader was defeated by 204 votes to 186.

Mr Lang has been leader of the Labour Party for the last 17 years. He was originally elected leader at a caucus election, but since the Red rules were introduced in 1927 he has been re-elected leader at annual conferences without opposition.
Labour Unity. Conference is Opened. Mr Lang Faces Defeat.

Nearly 400 delegates attended the Labour unity conference which sat throughout the weekend at the Majestic Theatre, Newtown. Heffron and Lang Party delegates attended.

Interstate Labour leaders of the ALP were in charge of proceedings. The Federal president, Mr C Fallon of Queensland presided. Mr Lang attended all sessions. He sat in a rear seat of the public gallery.

“There should be no personalities and side issues”, said Mr Fallon in opening the conference. “New South Wales is the soundest Labour State. The rank and file are solid.”

A voice: “And so is our leader too.”

Mr Fallon: “Whenever there has been unity Labour has won in New South Wales. The eyes of the Labour movement in all States were on the Unity conference.”

Mr Fallon read messages of goodwill from the Federal Labour leader, Mr Curtin, and the Labour Premiers of Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania. Mr Fallon appealed to delegates to forget factional differences. He appealed to the “mercy of delegates” on behalf of the growing army of unemployed.

“If you fail to secure unity you will stand condemned in the eyes of the people”, said Mr Fallon. The public will turn against you. They will turn to Fascism, Communism or some other -ism.”

The first business was a motion pledging loyalty to the Australian Labour Party and pledging the conference to strive for unity. The motion also set out that the conference represented the official branch of the ALP in New South Wales.

In Wilderness Too Long

Mr J Cranwell (Amalgamated Engineers), in moving the motion, said that the Labour Party in New South Wales had been in the political wilderness too long. The majority decision of the conference must prevail.

Amidst cheers the motion was carried unanimously.

Mr McSweeney (Ironworkers) moved that the State executive should be elected by secret ballot. He said that a secret ballot would prevent intimidation. There was a rowdy scene when the State president of the Lang Party, Mr P Keller, attempted to address the conference. A point of order was taken that Mr Keller was not a delegate. The chairman ruled that Mr Keller was not a delegate and was ineligible to speak. Mr Keller had to resume his seat amidst uproar.

Mr S Guhl (Bondi) then moved a further amendment that the officials and executive should be elected under the rules and constitution of the Lang Party. Mr Guhl said that unless they accepted the rules of the Lang Party there would never be unity.
Mr McSweeney at this stage withdrew his motion in favour of an amendment by Mr J Hughes that all officials as well as the executive should be elected by the conference, and that such officers should hold office until the next Labour conference.

“The End of Lang”

Mr Guhl’s amendment urging that the election should be held under the Lang Party’s rules was taken first. On a division the amendment was defeated by 216 votes to 169.

The vote disclosed that the Heffron Labour Party and the Lang Party rebels combined to defeat the official Lang faction.

While the vote was being taken the crowded public gallery caused much confusion by shouting comments at the delegates. There were cheers for ‘Jack Lang’, and counter cheers for ‘Democracy’.

“The end of Lang” a delegate cried when the vote was taken.

The motion authorising the conference to elect officials and the executive was then carried by 221 votes to 153. [numbers indistinct]

A long discussion took place on a motion that the basis of unity should be the Victorian rules, which could be amended by the conference if carried.

“Jack Lang would sweep the polls tomorrow”, said Mr Balgan (Tramways) in opposing the motion. “The conference should not go to Victoria for its rules. The Victorian Labour Party has joined forces with the Country Party.”

Mr Guhl (Bondi) declared that if the Victorian rules were adopted Mr Lang would be politically assassinated.

Mr Carney (Lakemba) declared amidst uproar that the Lang party rules should go. “Mr Lang has been in opposition for seven years”, said Mr Carney. “It is about time he took a tumble and got out.”

If speeches by delegates on the New South Wales Trades and Labour Council were broadcast half the delegates would be in Long Bay”, said Mr Thorby Johnson (Coal Lumpers) in the course of an attack on the Labour Council because of its opposition to Mr Lang.

The motion for the adoption of the Victorian rules and an amendment for the acceptance of the Lang Party rules were both defeated. On a division, a further amendment by Mr W McNamara for the appointment of a committee of seven to investigate the rules was carried by 188 votes to 182.

A free fight developed in the public gallery while the vote was being taken. Until it stopped proceedings were held up.

The Vital Vote

Amid stormy scenes the conference spent most of yesterday’s session in debating the question of the leadership and the future control of the ALP.
The final decision of the conference was that the leader, the deputy-leader, and officers of the New South Wales Parliamentary Labour Party should be elected at a caucus meeting of all members of that party at its first meeting after the next State election, and that it should be an instruction to the Parliamentary party that it should meeting within two weeks of the rising of the conference to elect a leader and party officials to carry on in office until the first caucus meeting after the next general election. It was also decided that the meeting should be called by the executive, and that the right to elect Ministers should be vested in the caucus and the portfolios allotted by the leader of the party. The proposal was carried on a division by 205 to 166.

Before the commencement of the debate Mr J Ormonde unsuccessfully moved for the suspension of standing orders to discuss the international situation.

There was uproar when he suggested that the Labour Party should carry a resolution expressing abhorrence “with the onward march of Fascism”, and viewing with disgust the signing of the German-Russian pact.

Speaking in support of the election of the leader by caucus, Mr Lazzarini, amid much noise, declared that Mr Lang had secured his dictatorship through the decision of a packed conference. Caucus members were never consulted by Mr Lang. They were merely told that “the big fellow” wanted them to vote “this way or that way”. Mr Lang enjoyed too much power. Caucus members were merely sycophants under his rule.

“The only way to keep politicians in their places is to make them answerable to the annual conference”, said Mr L Leece (Leichhardt).

Mr Moloney (Boot Employees) declared, during cheers and jeers, that Mr Lang was led by men who did not belong to the Labour Party. Mr Lang had wrecked every Labour Government with which he was associated, including the Scullin Government. (Uproar.)

It was reported last night that the Heffron party would have a majority on the new executive which will govern the Labour party until the next Easter conference.

The conference concluded yesterday afternoon.

Lang Party Charges. Ballot Papers Missing

Late last night the Lang Party announced that it intended to protest to the Interstate Labour Executive against the alleged disappearance of 31 ballot papers during the counting of the poll for official party positions.

“The days of the ‘sliding panel’ are apparently not over”, said Mr JB Martin, MLC, organising secretary of the Lang Party.