

Bitter row over move to dump Kim Carr from ALP frontbench

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

A brawl over Labor's frontbench reshuffle deepened on Wednesday night when the Victorian Socialist Left executive dug in behind embattled senator Kim Carr.

The executive at a specially convened meeting accused the left within the federal parliamentary party of repudiating the principle of proportional representation in deciding its frontbench members and adopting a "winner-take-all" approach.

The federal parliamentary left is set to dump Carr, who has been spokesman on higher education and industry and a long-time left stalwart.

Dropping Carr would facilitate the elevation of Linda Burney, the first Aboriginal woman to be elected to the House of Representatives. A former member of the NSW parliament, Burney won the Sydney seat of Barton at the election.

The Socialist Left executive motion, moved by Ros Spence, state member for Yuroke, and Richard Duffy, state secretary of the Australian Services Union's Victorian branch, expressed support for all the existing Victorian left representatives on the frontbench including Carr. Some of the 32-member executive boycotted the meeting, although there were different estimates of how many.

Socialist Left sources said that following last night's discussion it would be made clear to the caucus left that the Victorian Socialist Left would leave the national left – which is a loose alliance of left factions across the country – if Carr was dumped.

But federal sources said the Socialist Left executive's pressure would have no effect, adding that the dropping of Carr is being spoken of within caucus as a done deal.

The only thing that could save his position would be intervention by Bill Shorten, they said.

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While caucus – which means the factions – chooses the members of the frontbench, the leader can exert influence in particular cases. The leader also allocates portfolios.

Some sources said Shorten has told colleagues that while he would like Carr to remain on the frontbench he would not fight for him.

Carr was widely reported to have bucked the left and voted for Shorten in the 2013 leadership ballot, taking a couple of supporters with him. The left generally backed Anthony Albanese, who won the party rank-and-file vote but lost the caucus vote. Those who support Carr see the move against him as revenge.

Other sources say that while that might be one element, it is also driven by the need for new faces and resentment against Carr arising from the last ALP national conference. Carr infuriated deputy leader Tanya Plibersek when he suggested she had been two-faced over boat turnbacks.

Caucus meets on Friday.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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