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Wales, 1988-2011**

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From Defeat to Catastrophe: The Labor Party in Rural New South Wales, 1988-2011

Bradley Bowden*

While Labor's defeat in the 2011 New South Wales (NSW) election has received much comment an overlooked outcome is the 'ghettoisation' of its vote. Labor did not capture a single rural booth outside of the seat of Monaro. This article argues that this outcome stemmed not from recent organisational and policy failings but rather from trends now decades old. After 1988 few country people voted Labor. For almost 20 years, however, Labor's plight was disguised by the Coalition's discomfiture in the face of Independents and minor parties. Nevertheless, by 2007 NSW Labor's alienation from rural voters was clearly contributing to the party's problems.

In nineteenth century Australia rural voters were often called upon to return absentee land barons. In the 2011 election, New South Wales (NSW) Labor asked electors in Ballina, Barwon and Northern Tablelands to support absentee law students. On election-day the youngest of these Sydney neophytes secured just 3.4 percent of the count in Northern Tablelands. Her student compatriots in Ballina and Barwon fared little better.¹ Across the whole of rural NSW, Labor and its offshoot, Country Labor, won the primary count in only nine booths. All were adjacent to Canberra in the seat of Monaro. Even in the township of Broken Hill, where citizens had remained loyal even in the terrible drubbing of 1988, the Nationals outpolled Labor by three to two.² What produced this catastrophic result and, perhaps more to the point, what can yet another study usefully add to the voluminous opinion pieces already published in the wake of both the 2010 federal election and the NSW result? There is, after all, general agreement that Labor's ill-fortune reflects a combination of factors – the loss of a clear sense of purpose, declining union density and a membership desertion brought about by the ascendancy of a new 'political class' of 'apparatchiks' and 'spin doctors'.³ A consideration of Labor's performance in rural NSW, however, highlights a factor that has largely escaped attention – Labor's steady geographic 'ghettoisation'.⁴ For the purposes of the present study, 'rural NSW' is defined as the area outside the urban conurbation that stretches from the lower Hunter to the Shoalhaven in the south and the Blue Mountains in the west, including the current seat of Goulburn but excluding Wollondilly.

Historically, as Clune observed in 1984, NSW Labor's rural support was 'consistently strong', with the party usually winning 'half to one third' of country seats.⁵ And whereas Labor still commanded almost 40 percent of the rural vote in 1984 it has, since then, never obtained the support of more than 29 percent of the country electorate. In 2011, only 16 percent of country people voted Labor. Despite such results, a number of factors have curtailed an appreciation of the extent of Labor's alienation from the rural electorate. For decades, Labor offset the decline in its primary vote in regional NSW by courting Green preferences and rural Independents. Labor's strategy of building its two-party preferred vote through preference flows was, admittedly, more successful at the federal level, where preferential voting was

mandated, than in state politics where it was not. In August 2010, for example, federal Labor won both of the electorates covering NSW's Northern Rivers – Richmond and Page – as well as Eden-Monaro on the back of Green preferences. At the 2007 and 2011 NSW state elections, by contrast, less than half of Green voters in the Northern Rivers' seats of Tweed and Ballina gave a preference to Labor.⁶ Nevertheless, even at the state level it was long held that history, driven by demographic shifts, favoured Labor in rural NSW. In introducing the second volume of *People and Politics in Regional New South Wales*, the late Jim Hagan observed that 'the big growth' in 'white collar occupations' had offset the votes lost due to job losses 'in primary industry and transport'. This meant, Hagan continued, that: 'Even if Labor could not win itself, some tactful and tactical support for an Independent could prevent its principal opponent from taking the seat'.⁷ Hagan's view that structural change favoured Labor was echoed by Duncan, who concluded that 'once the agricultural workforce falls below 10% of the total ... a [Nationals'] rural electorate is in danger of falling to either the Labor or Liberal party',⁸ by which estimation the Nationals should have eight NSW state seats rather than the current eighteen.

Labor's long alienation from NSW's rural voters, this study contends, has many causes. As Labor's support base among shearers, timber workers, sugar cutters and railway employees shrank the party did not react – as the Nationals did when confronted with similar problems – by committing organisational resources to threatened electorates. Political capital was invested instead in rural Independents. Rural voters were also alienated by policies directed towards Green preferences at the expense of forestry and agricultural jobs. Labor's association with the Greens was also unpopular with Catholics and other religiously-committed rural voters who had once voted Labor. Of the ten NSW electorates with the highest percentage of professed Christians, eight were found in the state's rural interior.⁹ Labor's service-delivery failings also appear to have had an even more adverse effect in rural electorates than they did in the metropolis. Partly this reflected the age and health care concerns of the country electorate, particularly in coastal 'sea-change' locations. When ranked according to the percentage of residents aged over 65 years, six coastal electorates (Port Macquarie, Tweed, Myall Lakes, South Coast, Bega and Clarence) were in the top ten in 2006. Oxley was eleventh.¹⁰ But the strength of feeling about hospitals, schools and government administration also reflected the growing importance of these areas as sources of employment. As jobs were lost elsewhere, these sectors provided many country areas with their only sources of well-paid work.

Conceptualising Labor's Decline

NSW Labor's crushing defeat at the 2011 election has provoked much soul-searching. Pointing to the closure of 130 branches, a quarter of the total, since 1995, Luke Foley (NSW Labor's former Assistant Secretary) suggests that the party's decline is 'anything but cyclical'.¹¹ Such opinion lends support to Labor's most erudite internal critic, Rodney Cavalier. To Cavalier, everything points to 'terminal decline' with NSW Labor's membership falling from a peak of 92,000 in 1911 to 15,389 in 2009, and a 'whispered' 8,500 in 2011.¹² In the view of friend and foe alike, Labor at both the federal and state level is seen to be suffering from an identity crisis that has left it with 'no idea of what it stands for'.¹³ By common consent, this existential problem stems from Labor's embrace of pro-market policies under Hawke and Keating;

policies associated with a decline in Labor's unionised base and an abandonment of the belief that state intervention in the economy was socially desirable.¹⁴ If there is agreement as to the cause of Labor's identity crisis, however, there is little consensus as to the principles that should now guide Labor governments. Paul Kelly suggests that Labor must 'attempt a new synthesis' between its historic 'ethos' and 'market economics'.¹⁵ Lindsay Tanner believes that 'modern Labor can build its program' on 'a single word: Trust'.¹⁶ Soutphommasane advocates reconstruction around a 'social justice' program.¹⁷

Although opinion is divided as to the principles that should guide Labor, few disagree with Cavalier's view that Labor is today in the thrall of a 'political class' of university-educated 'apparatchiks'. Factions now exist, according to Cavalier, only to parcel out benefits 'to a tiny coterie based on family and connections'.¹⁸ Dyrenfurth and Soutphommasane similarly conclude that the 'ruthless culture of NSW Labor ... can be apportioned most of the blame for its collapse in support'.¹⁹ While Labor's current domination by this 'political class' is obvious, there are two problems in ascribing Labor's decline primarily to this factor. In the first instance, a correlation needs to be established between the ascendancy of the 'political class' and Labor's loss of support. So when did this 'political class' begin to have an adverse effect on NSW Labor? In his most recent study, Cavalier observes that 'none' of Labor's current internal problems 'seemed likely in 1995' and that the 'destruction of [internal Labor] democracy was incremental until 2002-03'.²⁰ But a perusal of voting trends clearly indicates that voter disenchantment with Labor began in the Wran era. Between 1981 and 1988 Labor's state-wide primary vote fell from 55.7 to 38.5 percent. This latter result was then only modestly bettered in three subsequent general elections – 1991 (39 percent), 1995 (41.3 percent) and 1999 (42.2 percent). Voter disquiet about NSW Labor was most marked in rural electorates where the 1988 low-point frequently became a new high-water mark that was never again exceeded.

If a marked decline in NSW Labor's primary vote predated the observed rise of the 'political class' we also need to be careful in ascribing a clear causal relationship between voting trends and undemocratic internal machinations. As V.G. Childe noted in 1923, even in its youth Labor was never democratic; a point restated by Hogan in his study of Glebe Labor where he observes that 'from the beginning ... the organisation of the Labor Party was elitist ... There was never any likelihood that the rank-and-file in the trade unions or in the local Leagues would be encouraged or allowed to impose their will'.²¹ Greater democracy would also almost certainly exacerbate internal divisions. As Hogan insightfully observes, if Labor had in recent years 'been a party genuinely based on its local branches ... then almost certainly it would have adopted a strong conservationist' platform. However, Hogan adds, pro-development rural branches 'would have fiercely resisted' this.²²

In looking for factors to explain Labor's woes Nick Dyrenfurth – building on the earlier work of Scates, Beilharz, Bongiorno and Rickard – has highlighted the fact that Labor's ascendancy was as much a cultural as an organisational endeavour.²³ Labor's early success, Dyrenfurth observes, was due to a 'highly creative cultural project' in which 'words and images were as important as Labor's rules and platform'.²⁴ A Labor revival, Dyrenfurth therefore argues, requires a new 'all-out cultural war'.²⁵ Certainly, the NSW countryside would appear more fertile ground for a Labor 'cultural war' than in the past given the demise of the sense of 'countrymindedness'

that long underpinned Nationals' support.²⁶ In many ways rural residents have become, in recent decades, more like city folk. Few now work in agriculture. Most are concentrated in a small number of large towns. More work in retail than anything else. Nevertheless, the profile of rural voters in NSW increasingly fits that ascribed by Stimson, Chhetri and Shyy to the 'typical' Nationals' supporter. While asset rich through home or farm ownership, country voters are generally income poor. Many rely on welfare. Country districts are typically monocultural, dominated by religiously-minded people of Anglo-Celtic stock.²⁷ In contrast to city Labor and Green voters, country people are also poorly educated. In short, a new divide based on ethnicity, culture, and education has in many ways replaced the old occupational country-city divides. It is a divide that NSW Labor has struggled to bridge.

NSW Rural Politics, 1988-95

While the circumstances in which people in rural NSW lived were always varied, the economic and demographic trajectory of inland districts has increasingly diverged from those along the coast. As Table 1 indicates, population in inland districts grew only modestly between 1986 and 1996, before going into reverse in the ensuing decade. Population decline was most marked in the Far West (including Broken Hill), the North West (the area to the north and west of Dubbo) and in Northern NSW (centred on the New England Tableland). Everywhere people were increasingly concentrated in a small number of large towns. By 1988 the biggest of these – Albury, Bathurst, Dubbo, Orange, Tamworth and Wagga Wagga – each boasted electorates that bore their name. Such changes, which saw the number of inland seats fall from 18 in 1988 to 14 in 2007-11, were a problem for Labor as well as the Nationals. Under McKell's leadership in the 1940s, Labor had targeted the wheat farmers and rural workers on the western slopes. And outside New England, these western electorates voted Labor more often than not between 1941 and 1984. In 1981 seven of Labor's eight rural seats were still west of the Divide.²⁸ Labor's western support had become brittle by 1980, however, as its shrinking base became fixated about job security. In Bathurst, for example, the Railway Workshops' Combined Unions Committee actively campaigned in favour of the Country Party's Clive Osborne during the late 1960s and 1970s, impressed by his commitment to defend railway jobs. Osborne held Bathurst from 1967 until 1981.²⁹

Things for a time looked more promising in the Northern Rivers (Richmond-Tweed), the Midnorth Coast and the South Coast. (For simplicity's sake these regions will be collectively referred to as 'the coast'.) In coastal electorates, Labor had long commanded a vote that rarely fell below 30 percent and often exceeded 40 percent. The bedrock of this vote came from railroad towns such as Taree and Casino, the timber-getters and saw-millers who resided in places like Eden, Wauchope and Kyogle, and the meat workers, whale-catchers and dairy factory workers who found work in Byron Bay, Bega and the like. The Northern Rivers' vote was bolstered by large numbers of cane-cutters. Despite this support, however, Labor rarely won coastal electorates. Prior to the 1990s its only victories in single-member electorates were obtained in Lismore (1959-65) and the lower Clarence (Casino 1971-81; Clarence, 1981-84). The strength of the dairy industry, which provided work to few employees but many small farmers who fretted about government restrictions on child employment, does much to explain Labor's failure.³⁰ The allegiances of most

South Coast voters were, nevertheless, different from those that characterised their northern counterparts. Whereas the latter historically voted for Country Party (Nationals) candidates the former generally returned Liberals. South Coast residents were also more inclined to support Independents and between 1973 and 1995 they voted in the anti-corruption Independent, John Hatton. Foreshadowing things to come, Hatton's initial victory hinged on Labor's decision to support his candidacy rather than field a local representative; a decision that angered local party members.³¹

Table 1: Rural NSW: Population of Inland and Coastal Districts, 1986-2006

	1986	1996	2006
Inland			
Central West	161,597	168,571	170,022
Far West	29,162	25,085	22,400
Northern	177,309	175,221	173,329
North Western	110,581	116,403	112,270
Murray	103,110	108,979	111,043
Murrumbidgee	140,520	145,799	147,595
Southern Tablelands*	110,833	129,010	131,871
Total Inland	833,112	869,068	868,530
Coastal			
Midnorth Coast	208,654	262,985	287,592
Richmond-Tweed	153,009	202,635	224,862
South Coast	45,277	59,292	63,661
Total Coastal	406,940	524,912	576,115

* Including Queanbeyan

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census Data for 1986, 1996, 2006,
<http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/historicaldata>

The influx of sea-changers, which saw the coast's population rise markedly after 1986 (see Table 1), appeared for a while to offset the political effects of declining employment in those industries which had long voted Labor – notably timber, sugar and the railways. Many new arrivals were former Labor voters from western Sydney and, so Hagan and Castle observe, 'enough of them transferred or joined [Labor] to keep the branches alive'.³² As the coast's population grew so too did its political importance. Between 1984 and 1988 the number of coastal electorates grew from seven to ten; a figure that then remained constant even as the total number of rural seats declined. If the 'sea-changers' differed from established residents in that they were less likely to automatically vote for the Nationals, there were nevertheless a number of factors that produced a conservative mindset. As noted in the introduction, a disproportionate number were elderly. By 2006, 23.8 percent of Port Macquarie's residents were aged over 65 years, giving it the oldest age profile of any state seat. The percentage of those past retirement age was only marginally less in most other coastal electorates.³³ In their new abodes a fear of crime tended to reinforce the natural conservatising effects of age. But the defining characteristic of the sea-change areas was their poverty. By 2006 coastal electorates had both an unusually small number of high income households and a disproportionately large number of households earning less than \$500 per week.³⁴ Perhaps the most important effect of this poverty

was that it reinforced concerns about the provision of government-provided health and hospital care. Not only were coastal voters more likely, given their age, to call upon their local health services, they also typically had little or no capacity to seek private-sector alternatives, even if they were available.

For Labor, the opportunities and perils wrought by demographic change were both evident when, between 1978 and 1984, Wran Labor broke from the traditions laid down in the 'McKell model', which held that the party's interests were best served by fostering conservative-looking, pro-development candidates in the bush.³⁵ As the leading historians of the environmental movement observe: 'By taking up the cause of nature conservation ... Wran set the pattern for Labor – both state and federal – to secure at least the preference votes of the Green constituency and keep Labor in office'.³⁶ In 1979, Wran passed the *Environmental Protection Act*, restricting the clearing of native vegetation. In the following six years large areas of forest in the Northern Rivers, Midnorth Coast and Southern Highlands were proclaimed as National Parks. While such measures provided Labor with a city benefit their rural impact was disastrous. In the Midnorth Coast timber town of Wauchope, an historic Labor stronghold, 600 jobs were lost in 1982 alone. In Tumut Shire, where timber workers had long provided the Sheahan dynasty with majorities sufficiently large to ensure their victory in Burrinjuck, Labor's primary vote fell from 69 percent in 1978 to 39 percent in 1988, costing Labor the seat.³⁷ It was not, however, simply job losses that cost Labor rural votes. Labor was also increasingly portrayed as a party in the thrall of – to cite the 1988 accusation by the Nationals' Dubbo Member, Gerry Peacocke – 'way-out Greenies',³⁸ this in an electorate that had few 'Greenies' and was little affected by Wran's environmental policies. The view that Labor was out of tune with country voters was confirmed for many when the NSW Government, now under Barrie Unsworth's leadership, banned gun ownership in 1987. In Wauchope, Labor's entire branch executive resigned in protest. In other districts where Labor had once polled well – Orange, Forbes and the upper Hunter to name a few – the anti-gun laws have also been identified as a major factor in the collapse of Labor's vote in 1988.³⁹

The extent of Labor's alienation from rural voters was evidenced in both inland and coastal elections between 1988 and 1995. As Table 2 indicates, even in 1984 Labor's primary vote exceeded one-third in every inland electorate bar one (Murray), while in six it achieved absolute majorities. By contrast, in 1988 its primary vote surpassed one-third in only five of the 18 inland seats (Albury, Bathurst, Broken Hill, Burrinjuck and Monaro). Given the Greiner Government's cutback of rural services between 1991 and 1995, a significant Labor recovery could have been expected. But this failed to eventuate. Only in Bathurst, Wagga Wagga and Murrumbidgee did Labor regain its 1984 support levels in either 1991 or 1995. The only other significant rebound occurred in the new electorate of Southern Highlands, where the Labor vote benefited from the transfer of Goulburn City and its many pro-Labor booths. Here Labor achieved 38 percent of the primary vote in 1991, an outcome bettered in only three country electorates in either the interior or the coast. While Labor could take some slight satisfaction from its Southern Highlands' results, its overall primary vote in the interior fell from 42 percent in 1984 to 30 percent in 1988, a percentage that has, since 1988, never been surpassed.

Table 2: Labor Primary Vote in Inland NSW Electorates, 1984-95*

	1984	1988	1991	1995
Albury	51	35	33	28
Barwon	33	23	25	25
Bathurst	53	41	53	45
Broken Hill	69	53	47	53
Burrinjuck	53	43	41	40
Castlereagh**	41	26		
Dubbo	35	29	30	30
Goulburn**	45	31		
Lachlan	34	26	28	25
Monaro	55	42	32	27
Murray	23	23	16	22
Murrumbidgee	39	32	29	40
Northern Tablelands	52	27	32	24
Orange	42	27	16	30
Southern Highlands		24	38	33
Tamworth	33	22	16	14
Upper Hunter	40	32	32	31
Wagga Wagga	34	27	34	35
Combined Inland	42	30	29	30

* Percentages rounded to nearest whole number

** Abolished in 1991

Source: <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/resources/nswelectionsanalysis/HomePage.htm>

Along the coast things, while better, were still bad. In Table 3 we can track the general deterioration in Labor's post-1984 coastal vote. In 1988 the party began its election campaign without any coastal seats, having lost Clarence in 1984. And whereas in 1984 its candidates had obtained at least 38 percent of the primary count in four of the seven electorates then in existence, in 1988 Labor's vote exceeded one-third in only two of the ten seats on offer, Murwillumbah and Clarence. Again there was only a modest recovery in either 1991 or 1995. In the electorates of Coffs Harbour, Clarence, Lismore, Murwillumbah and Port Macquarie, Labor actually received a smaller share of the vote when it regained office in 1995 than it had obtained when evicted from power seven years before. Admittedly, the fall in Labor's coastal vote between 1984 and 1988 was, in percentage terms, less than that suffered in the interior (21 percent against 29 percent). Nevertheless, Labor's 1988 low-water mark, when only 29 percent voted for the party along the coast, was never exceeded in any subsequent election. In consequence there has, since 1999, been little difference between Labor's coastal and inland vote, both settling around the 28-29 percent mark between 1999 and 2003, before falling sharply thereafter (see Tables 4, 5, 6, 7).⁴⁰

Table 3: Labor Primary Vote in Coastal NSW electorates, 1984-95*

	1984	1988	1991	1995
Ballina		28	25	23
Byron**	42			
Bega		21	30	28
Clarence	43	35	29	34
Coffs Harbour	39	24	36	30
Gloucester**	38			
Lismore	22	26	28	25
Manning***		26		
Murwillumbah		36	30	28
Myall Lakes		23	27	26
Oxley**	29		34	30
Port Macquarie		31	23	30
South Coast	20	19	17	29
Combined Coastal	33	26	26	27

* Percentages rounded to nearest whole number

** Abolished in 1988

*** Abolished in 1991

Source: <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/resources/nswelectionsanalysis/HomePage.htm>

Table 4: Labor Total Primary Vote in Inland and Coastal NSW, 1984-95*

	1984	1988	1991	1995
Total Inland Vote	527,738	577,787	553,458	574,089
Total Inland Labor Vote	223,427	173,340	159,218	170,897
Percent	42%	30%	29%	30%

Total Coastal Vote	247,732	312,067	332,495	368,995
Total Coastal Labor Vote	81,068	81,609	87,371	100,306
Percent	33%	26%	26%	27%

Total NSW Country Vote	775,470	889,854	885,953	943,084
Total NSW Country Labor	304,495	254,949	246,589	271,203
Percent	39%	29%	28%	29%

* Percentages rounded to nearest whole number

Source: <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/resources/nswelectionsanalysis/HomePage.htm>

Why was Labor so unsuccessful in restoring its position in rural NSW between 1988 and 1995, despite Nationals 'members openly complaining', so the historian of the NSW Nationals records, 'that the party was no longer delivering'?⁴¹ An insight can be found in the events that unfolded in the Tamworth and Northern Tablelands electorates between 1991 and 1995. Despite convincing wins in 1988, the Nationals believed both were vulnerable. By 1996, as primary industry employment declined, there were as many workers engaged in education, social services and health in NSW's Northern Region as in agriculture and forestry.⁴² In consequence, the Nationals feared that their northern seats might be captured by either Labor or

the Liberals, the latter having won the inland seats of Albury, Burrinjuck, Bathurst, Goulburn and Wagga Wagga in 1988. When the sitting Member in Tamworth announced his retirement in 1991 the Nationals, therefore, preselected David Briggs, the Chief Executive of the Tamworth Base Hospital. The Tamworth press applauded, noting that Briggs looked 'more like a small-l liberal' than a Nationals politician.⁴³ Tamworth's one thousand card-carrying Nationals' members, however, preferred a local farmer, Tony Windsor. While on election-day Windsor, who ran as an Independent, managed barely one-third of the vote he was nevertheless elected on Labor preferences. In 1995 a similar course of events threatened the Nationals in Northern Tablelands. Again the threat came from an Independent – Armidale's Mayor, Joe Harrold. While Harrold won only 21.2 percent of the vote, a small increase in Harrold's vote, and a decrease in the Nationals', would have seen Harrold win on Labor preferences.⁴⁴

Important political lessons were drawn from the events that transpired in NSW's Northern region in 1991-95, some more spurious than others. Windsor, experiencing grandiose visions, concluded that he could oust the Nationals from their position of primacy in the bush, and in 1999 he fielded what was effectively a new party, the Country Summit Alliance. However, while Windsor was returned at the 1999 poll, the Alliance candidates generally attracted few votes. Labor, for its part, concluded that it was easier to unseat Nationals by sponsoring Independents than by persuading country people to vote for it. In Northern Tablelands, Harrold's Deputy, Richard Torbay, resigned from Labor and, well in advance of the 1999 election, began campaigning as an Independent; a campaign that the Nationals alleged was mentored by Labor's Eddie Obeid.⁴⁵

For Bob Carr's Labor, which won office in 1995, such arrangements appeared clever politics. It could court Green preferences through the pursuit of environment-friendly policies while simultaneously helping rural Independents who denounced these very same policies. Thus, in the 1999 poll, Torbay lambasted Labor policy, condemning 'the much-hated, top down approach found in legislation such as the Native Vegetation Act'.⁴⁶ The only downside to this mutually beneficial arrangement was the damage done to Labor's rural branches, and this seemed a matter of no great consequence. The damage, nevertheless, was real enough. In Northern Tablelands, where Labor's vote rebounded by five percent to 32 percent between 1988 and 1991, it fell to an historic low of nine percent when Torbay ran with Labor's blessing in 1999. In Tamworth, Christine Robertson, Labor's candidate in both 1991 and 1995, lamented that she did not get 'much in the way of assistance from the party organisation, especially not funds to meet the expenses of campaigning'. What little money she did get she obtained through 'raffles' and 'begging letters'.⁴⁷ Labor's primary vote in Tamworth, which stood at 33 percent in 1984, fell to 14 percent in 1995.

Spoiling Tactics, 1995-2011

From 1995 onwards, Labor's tactics in rural NSW were, as Tamworth's press observed, 'committed to a spoiling campaign designed to keep the Nationals out – not their own candidate in'.⁴⁸ Only where unusual circumstances prevailed did Labor try to win seats in its own right. Fortuitously, opportunities presented themselves early in the Carr Government's period in office. Historically, Labor had sought to offset the Country Party/Nationals' superior organisational resources in country

areas by selecting well-known identities whose profile resembled conservative candidates.⁴⁹ As Labor's country vote declined, however, the unearthing of such candidates became ever more difficult. Where suitable candidates were discovered they generally found their prospects better at the federal level, where preference allocations were compulsory, than in state politics. Reflecting such realities, Harry Woods and Neville Newell entered the Carr caucus as the Members for Clarence and Tweed respectively by a circuitous route. Prior to the Keating Government's defeat in March 1996, both held office in the corresponding federal seats of Page and Richmond, where they benefited from the traditionally strong Labor vote in the Northern Rivers and Green preferences. While both were defeated in 1996, their federal success gave them a standing that made state victories possible. The first to succeed was Woods, who had been part-owner and publican at Yamba's Pacific Hotel before entering politics. Within months of losing Page to the former Nationals Member for Clarence, Woods was himself elected in a by-election as the new Member for Clarence. Newell had to wait for the 1999 general election for the opportunity to join his former federal colleague in the NSW Parliament; an election that saw Woods returned for a second term.⁵⁰

While benefiting from the election of Woods and Newell from the Northern Rivers, elsewhere Labor's spoiling tactics reaped a rich reward in 1999 due to the emergence of Pauline Hanson's One Nation (PHON), a party whose anti-immigration message appealed to Anglo-Celtic communities confronting the loss of traditional rural jobs. The Nationals bore the brunt of PHON's attack. PHON's NSW campaign manager, Phil Goldrick, estimated that '75% of our membership' was made up of ex-Nationals with 'the rest from Labor'.⁵¹ On polling day, PHON's vote exceeded ten percent in every coastal electorate, belying a popular perception that 'sea-changers' were universally 'liberal' in outlook. In the interior, however, PHON's performance was patchy. While it failed to pass the ten percent mark in Albury, Wagga Wagga, Monaro, Murrumbidgee or Northern Tablelands, PHON obtained more than 18 percent of the vote in Barwon and Dubbo. Both of the latter electorates were characterised by unusually large Aboriginal populations and simmering racial tensions. In Dubbo, the failure of many PHON voters to allocate a preference resulted in yet another Independent, Tony McGrady, being narrowly elected, joining Torbay and Windsor on the cross-benches. Although the latter's accession to the Commonwealth Parliament in 2001 saw Tamworth return to the Nationals, by 2003 it was again in Independent hands as Peter Draper won it with Windsor's backing. Another unexpected outcome of the 1999 poll was Labor's capture of South Coast. As Hagan and Mitchell note, Labor's margin of 375 rested on the unique circumstances created by PHON's intervention.⁵² Less surprisingly, Labor also won Murray-Darling in 1999, a seat created by the merger of Murray and Broken Hill. Labor thus entered the new Parliament in 1999 with five country seats (Bathurst, lost in 1988, had been regained in 1991), only one fewer than it had held prior to its 1988 debacle. What's more, the number of sympathetic rural Independents on the cross-benches grew to four in 2002 when Port Macquarie's Rob Oakeshott resigned from the Nationals to sit on the cross-benches.

Following its 1999 successes, Labor flagged a renewed interest in country politics when it registered Country Labor as a separate party in October 2000. Country branches, however, still complained that Sussex Street starved them of money and

resources. This was particularly the case in seats where Labor 'ran dead' in order to further the prospects of Independents deemed favourable to its interests, most notably Oakeshott in Port Macquarie, McGrady in Dubbo, Torbay in Northern Tablelands and Draper in Tamworth. As the editorial of Port Macquarie's newspaper observed in 2003: 'Many of the local faithful were unhappy at the decision not to fund a serious campaign in Port [against Oakeshott]'.⁵³ Nor did Country Labor give all rural members a shared sense that they had a stronger voice in policy development. In 2011, for example, one Dubbo member wrote that Country Labor existed 'for no other reason than to ensure a constant flow of right minded people to state conferences'.⁵⁴ By 2011 so few locals were prepared to stand under Labor's country umbrella that it was forced, in the words of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'to field a litter of twentysomething candidates'. Most resided in Sydney.⁵⁵

Labor's approach stands in contrast to that pursued by the Nationals. Where Nationals seats were lost, every effort was made to win them back through the selection of well-known candidates and well-funded campaigns, the single exception occurring in 1995 when – to the chagrin of its local branches – it decided not to run a candidate against Windsor. The recapture of Tamworth was thereafter made a priority. In 2007 it persuaded a local television personality, Kevin Anderson, to run on its behalf. When this campaign failed to unseat Draper, the Nationals ran Australia's first 'primary' election, giving voters the decisive say in selecting their candidate. More than 4,300 voters participated, with Anderson once again endorsed.⁵⁶ Admittedly, the Nationals had far more resources to call upon in their campaigns to recapture rural seats than did Labor. Even though the Nationals state membership declined sharply from 48,500 in 1984 to 15,000 in 2005, its strength at this latter date was similar to Labor's.⁵⁷ Membership was, moreover, rurally concentrated. The Nationals could also draw strength from their historic domination of the institutions of rural civil society – the Country Women's Association, Rotary, the Lions Clubs and the like. But if rural electoral contests were weighted against NSW Labor its failure to allocate substantial resources to such battles merely ensured that, over time, they became ever more lopsided.

The strategy of fostering rural Independents was one that entailed both costs and benefits. Among the latter must rank the endorsement of the Gillard Government by Windsor and Oakeshott in the wake of the August 2010 federal election. If NSW Labor had not previously fostered their political survival at the state level it is almost certain that Tony Abbott would have assumed the Prime Ministership in 2010. Nevertheless, the minuses on the ledger are significant. The most obvious costs were found in Labor's diminished vote in those seats where Independents were successful. When, for example, Labor campaigned against Oakeshott in Port Macquarie in 1999, when he belonged to the Nationals, it received 27 percent of the vote. In the ensuing poll, when Labor 'ran dead' to foster Oakeshott's chances as an Independent, it obtained eight percent. What received less attention, however, was the collapse of Labor's vote in the numerous unsuccessful attempts to bump Independents into parliament. In 1999, for example, Labor secured 31 percent of the vote in Coffs Harbour, a seven percent improvement over its 1988 result. In 2003, however, so Hagan and Castle observe, 'the Labor Party ran dead' to foster the chances of Coffs Harbour's Deputy Mayor, Jan Strom, who ran as Independent. While Strom finished ahead of Labor, and harvested its preferences, she failed to win the seat. Labor's vote fell to an historic

low of 19 percent.⁵⁸ In 1999 and 2003, Labor pursued the same strategy in Liberal-held Albury, giving *de facto* support to an anti-freeway campaigner, Claire Douglas. While Douglas failed to capture Albury on either occasion, Labor's vote fell to 17.6 percent in 1999 and a dismal 12.3 percent in 2003. Previously Labor's vote had seldom fallen below one third in this urbanised electorate.⁵⁹

One of the problems with Labor's sponsorship of Independents was that it often sought, and obtained, little credit for its own achievements which, in the area of health care, saw the government increase overall expenditure by 17 percent in real terms between 2003-04 and 2008-09.⁶⁰ In Coffs Harbour, for example, Labor delivered a major expansion of the local Base Hospital, which included the provision for the first time of a radiotherapy unit. But, seemingly by design, the accolades went to Strom, the erstwhile Independent.⁶¹ All four rural Independents – Draper in Tamworth, Torbay in Northern Tablelands, McGrady in Dubbo and Oakeshott in Port Macquarie – boasted endlessly that they obtained more for their electorates than Labor Members did. In short, Independents often got much of the credit for Labor's achievements while the government alone received the blame for its failings. Where money was allocated to Labor electorates it was, in the absence of input from Ministers with rural experience, often ill-spent. When, for example, Labor's 2011 candidate for Bathurst pointed to the \$98 million spent on the local hospital he was derided by ex-patients 'telling him that the new hospital didn't work, it didn't have as many beds as the old one'.⁶² Rural sensitivity about service delivery also reflected the fact that education, social assistance and health care were the fastest growing areas of country employment. Whereas, in the interior, employment in agriculture and forestry fell from 57,756 to 46,007 between 1996 and 2006, the number of jobs in education, health and social assistance grew from 55,417 to 71,322. Along the coast these latter fields of endeavour provided 45,489 jobs in 2006 compared to 28,207 in 1996. By contrast, coastal employment in farming, forestry and fishing declined from 14,282 to 11,572.⁶³

While, in terms of seats won, the 1999 result heralded almost a full restoration of Labor's pre-1988 situation in the bush, this occurred without a significant improvement in its primary vote. In 1999, only 29 percent of rural voters supported Labor, compared to 28 percent in 1988. Moreover, a renewed emphasis on environmental protection, driven partly by the need for Green preferences in Sydney, curtailed the rural recovery. At the start of the 2003 campaign, Carr announced the creation of 15 new National Parks to protect vast forest reserves. The Government also declared 75 percent of the immense Pilliga forest on the northwest slopes – abutting the Dubbo, Northern Tablelands, Tamworth and Barwon electorates – off-limits. The timber industry was outraged while meat workers feared for the effects of lost grazing land. On the western slopes the Pilliga Land Users' Group was established to fight Labor, warning voters that Carr's policies would mean 'the demise of timber-dependent communities and the 120-year old Cyprus industry'.⁶⁴ In the Clarence Valley the Mayors of McLean, Grafton and Copmanhurst denounced Labor, declaring that its policies would 'cripple the local economy'; a declaration that virtually ensured Woods' loss of Clarence to the Nationals.⁶⁵

As Labor's support collapsed along the coast the Greens' vote increased, particularly in the Ballina and Lismore electorates where centres such as Byron Bay, Nimbin and The Channon had long served as strongholds for militant

environmentalists. In 2003, Labor suffered the ignominy of being forced into third place in a number of Ballina and Lismore booths. In Ballina the Greens' vote reached 21 percent, only seven percent behind Labor's total. While such outcomes, and the loss of Clarence and South Coast in 2003, were partly offset by the gain of Monaro with its Queanbeyan-based booths, Labor's steady geographic 'ghettoisation' was nevertheless evident. Labor was left in 2003 with only four rural seats – Murray-Darling, Bathurst, Monaro and Tweed – where the vote in its favour was effectively confined to four atypical urban centres, these being, respectively, Broken Hill, Bathurst, Queanbeyan and Tweed Heads. Elsewhere few now supported Labor.

In the next two elections – 2007 and 2011 – Labor was pilloried for its record in education and, above all, health. In both elections, the latter issue dominated the pages of the country press. In Tamworth it was reported that the town's Base Hospital, which treated critically ill patients from across the whole Northern Region, treated more emergency patients each month than did Sydney's Prince of Wales – yet had significantly fewer staff.⁶⁶ In 2011, Lismore residents read how a 38-year old local, Glenn Rubbo, had died from a stroke at the local hospital after remaining untreated at the emergency waiting area.⁶⁷ Port Macquarie's citizens were informed that a Labor supporter became a Nationals' voter after staying in the town's Base Hospital, the facilities of which he likened to those of 'a third world country'.⁶⁸ It was, however, not just the state of the hospitals that country voters grumbled about. In Bathurst, a *Western Daily Advocate* editorial complained that, despite loyally voting Labor in every election since 1991, the town had never received a promised 24-hour fire station.⁶⁹

In 2007, both Murray-Darling (based on Broken Hill) and Tweed were lost to the Nationals, leaving Labor with just Bathurst and Monaro. In terms of seats held, this result was almost as bad as 1988. In terms of Labor's share of the rural vote, the performance was even worse. Only 26 percent voted Labor. Such outcomes were clearly bad news for Labor. But a careful perusal of the results would have revealed even more worrying trends. Labor's absolute vote was falling faster than its share of the formal vote. This trend was most apparent in the interior where the total number who voted in 2007 was 40,134 down on 2003. The fact that Labor's inland vote fell by 28,819 suggests that dissatisfied Labor supporters made up the bulk of those opting not to cast a ballot. An analysis of individual seats supports this view. In Murray-Darling, 10.5 percent of the electorate did not vote. In Tweed, the other seat lost by Labor, 9.7 percent abstained. In adjacent Ballina, with its large 'progressive' vote, the corresponding figure was 10.1 percent. Even in Monaro, which Labor retained, the turnout was abnormally low with 9.6 percent abstaining. This suggests that even here patience with Labor was wearing thin. To add to Labor's woes, the rural Independents in both Dubbo and Tamworth witnessed sharp rebounds in the Nationals vote in 2007. In Dubbo, Dawn Fardell, who had replaced McGrady on his death in 2004, saw her margin reduced to less than one percent. In Tamworth, the Nationals secured 45.2 percent of the preferred vote. Ebbing support for the rural Independents was confirmed when Peter Besseling, Oakeshott's former electoral officer, contested a by-election for Port Macquarie in 2008 after his former boss secured the federal seat of Lyne. In 2007, Oakeshott had won 78 percent of the preferred vote. But Besseling's margin was only five percent.

In the 2011 election the Labor Party's association with the Greens again rebounded on it when, on election eve, a pastoral letter signed by Cardinal Pell and

nine other NSW Catholic Bishops was read to the faithful instructing them to vote against the Greens, whose policies were declared to be anti-Christian.⁷⁰ While the impact of such pastoral messages is difficult to ascertain, Catholics were found in greatest numbers in four inland electorates – Bathurst, Burrinjuck, Murrumbidgee and Wagga Wagga.⁷¹ Significantly, in three of these – Bathurst, Burrinjuck and Murrumbidgee – Labor’s post-1988 vote was consistently above the country average. However, even in these electorates Labor’s vote in 2011 was down by one-third in Murrumbidgee, one-half in Bathurst and two-thirds in Burrinjuck when compared to its 1988 result. Much of what remained of Catholic Labor in the bush was evidently alienated by 2011.

The circumstances surrounding Labor’s declining vote in Burrinjuck and in the adjacent seat of Goulburn provide a microcosm of its rural failings. For generations, Burrinjuck and Goulburn were Labor fiefdoms. From 1941 until 1988, Burrinjuck was represented first by Billy Sheahan, then by his son, Terry. Goulburn was Tully country. John captured the seat in 1925, bequeathing it in 1946 to his son, Laurie, who held it until its loss in 1965. As Catholics, the Sheahans and Tullys both laid claim to the loyalty of their numerous co-religionists. But whereas the Sheahans relied heavily on the Slopes’ shearers and timber workers, the Tullys’ vote was largely confined to Goulburn’s railway and factory workers. Hagan and Mitchell attribute Labor’s loss of these strongholds to population decline in Goulburn and the alienation of Burrinjuck’s timber workers in the search for Green preferences.⁷² Despite such travails, and the absorption of Goulburn into Liberal-held Southern Highlands after 1988, Labor nevertheless generally did better on the Southern Slopes than in most other rural areas (see Tables 2 and 5). Partly this reflected the continued importance of agricultural and forestry employment in Burrinjuck. In 2004 such work still provided a quarter of all jobs. Labor also benefited in Burrinjuck from the growing number of Canberra professionals who drove to work from towns such as Yass. By 2004, professionals represented one third of the electorate.⁷³ The reallocation of Goulburn city to Burrinjuck between 1999 and 2003 also inflated the Labor vote (from 1991 to 1995 it belonged to Southern Highlands). When, prior to the 2007 poll, the pro-Labor areas in Burrinjuck and Southern Highlands were concentrated into a single seat with Goulburn’s reformation, electoral success loomed. Based on 2003 booth results, Labor voters made up 45.5 percent of the new seat’s total.⁷⁴ In 2007, however, Labor ran a low key campaign, evidently hoping that Goulburn’s Independent Mayor, Paul Stephenson, would capture the seat from the Liberals on Labor preferences. This stratagem nearly succeeded as Stephenson won almost 49 percent of the preferred vote.⁷⁵ But Labor’s vote fell to 23 percent. In Goulburn city’s booths, Labor attracted 26.6 percent of the vote. Four years before Labor had obtained 51.4 percent from the city’s booths. Encouraged to vote for someone other than Labor in 2007, Goulburn’s voters did so with even greater gusto in 2011. Only 15 percent supported the party. In Goulburn city, Labor won a mere 18.3 percent of the primary vote.

By 2011 the effects of Labor’s misjudgements were evident throughout rural NSW. The extent of Labor’s fall can be gauged in Tables 5, 6 and 7, which track Labor’s vote from 1999 to 2011 against 1988 results. Whereas in 1988 Labor’s worst inland result saw it obtain 22 percent in Tamworth, in 2011 this result was exceeded only in Monaro. Labor’s most pitiful inland performances were found in electorates held by

rural Independents (of whom Torbay alone was returned in 2011), where only three to six percent voted Labor. Even the solace provided by Torbay's survival proved short-lived. Acutely aware of the rebound in the Nationals' fortunes in the interior, in June 2012 Torbay announced that he too was joining the Nationals. This apostasy left NSW Labor with little to show from its long courtship of rural Independents.⁷⁶ Overall, Labor obtained only 102,814 primary ballots in the interior – 70,526 fewer it secured 23 years before when there were far fewer country voters – amounting to a mere 16 percent of the total.

Table 5: Labor Primary Vote in Inland NSW Electorates, 1988 and 1999-2011*

	1988	1999	2003	2007	2011
Albury	35	18	12	27	15
Barwon	23	24	25	19	12
Bathurst	41	51	55	53	21
Burrinjuck	43	36	41	29	15
Dubbo	29	20	15	11	6
Goulburn				23	15
Lachlan	26	27	25		
Monaro	42	32	45	48	41
Murray-Darling**		44	50	37	20
Murrumbidgee	32	33	30	32	20
Northern Tablelands	27	9	5	4	3
Orange	27	32	33	21	15
Southern Highlands	24	34	35		
Tamworth	22	12	12	9	5
Upper Hunter	32	32	32	31	18
Wagga Wagga	27	26	31	33	10
Total	30	28	29	26	16

* Percentages rounded to nearest whole number

** Merger of Murray and Broken Hill, 1999

Source: <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/resources/nswelectionsanalysis/HomePage.htm>

Along the coast Labor's overall primary vote fell to a dismal 15 percent in 2011. In total, only 61,106 voted Labor – 20,503 fewer than the number that had supported the party in 1988 when the size of the coastal electorate was almost one quarter less. Again, the worst result was found in a seat, Port Macquarie, where Labor had sponsored Independents to the detriment of its own candidates. Here only 5.6 percent voted Labor. While in the interior the lost Labor vote went almost wholly to the Coalition, along the coast a proportion went to the Greens whose primary vote surpassed Labor's for the first time in the electorates of Ballina, Lismore and Oxley. Everywhere along the coast, however, the combined Labor-Green vote was a fraction of the total. In Port Macquarie, it amounted to 8.3 percent. In Clarence (Labor-held prior to 2003), it was 17.1 percent. The figures for Myall Lakes and Oxley were 19.5 percent and 24.8 percent respectively. Even in the Green 'strongholds' of Ballina and Lismore the combined Labor-Green vote was only one-third of the total. If 1988 was a resounding defeat, then 2011 was a catastrophic rural rout for not only Labor but also its erstwhile ally to its Left.

Table 6: Labor Primary Vote in Coastal NSW Electorates, 1988 and 1999-2011*

	1988	1999	2003	2007	2011
Ballina	28	28	26	23	12
Bega	21	31	31	35	22
Clarence	35	36	39	30	10
Coffs Harbour	24	31	19	29	14
Lismore	26	28	25	26	13
Myall Lakes	23	29	23	33	13
Oxley**	26	24	33	25	12
Port Macquarie	31	27	8	9	6
South Coast	19	40	34	33	30
Tweed***	36	44	44	39	21
Total Coastal	26	29	28	26	15

* Percentages rounded to nearest whole number

** Formerly Manning *** Formerly Murwillumbah

Source: <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/resources/nswelectionsanalysis/HomePage.htm>

Table 7: Labor Total Primary Vote in Inland and Coastal NSW, 1988 and 1999-2011*

	1988	1999	2003	2007	2011
Total Inland Vote	577,787	602,803	652,767	612,633	633,389
Total Inland Labor Vote	173,340	170,568	189,626	160,807	102,814
Percent	30%	28%	29%	26%	16%

Total Coastal Vote	312,067	404,576	428,360	433,031	413,804
Total Coastal Labor Vote	81,609	118,853	118,950	110,606	61,106
Percent	26%	29%	28%	26%	15%

Total Country Vote	889,854	1,007,379	1,081,127	1,045,664	1,047,193
Total Country Labor Vote	254,949	289,421	308,576	271,413	163,920
Percent	29%	29%	29%	26%	16%

* Percentages rounded to nearest whole number

Source: <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/resources/nswelectionsanalysis/HomePage.htm>

Conclusion

The alienation of the Labor Party from NSW's rural electorate is one of the great political tragedies of the last quarter-century. Under the so-called McKell model, Labor had long fostered support among country voters, delivering needed services and bolstering economic growth and employment. While jobs in industries such as sheep-raising, sugar, meat processing and timber-getting declined markedly after 1970, such trends should have been offset by other factors. Structural changes in the economy hastened urbanisation, and by the 1990s most country electorates rested on a small number of large towns. Rural areas also contained a disproportionate share of the state's poor and disadvantaged citizens, be they Aboriginal or Caucasian. Despite such factors, rural voters were, in large part, alienated during the Wran era and never won back.

In explaining Labor's current woes many observers, of whom Rodney Cavalier has been the most prominent, have suggested that its problems stem from the party's domination by a 'political class' of professional apparatchiks. It is certainly the case that 'smart' politics has, as in other areas, now replaced sound policy as the principal driver of Labor's rural electoral strategy. But whereas Cavalier suggests that evidence of the political class's ascendancy was slight before 1995,⁷⁷ this study indicates that a reliance on Sussex-street manoeuvres has long been practiced in the bush. Under Carr's leadership, first in opposition and then later in Government, the response to Labor's rural decline was largely tactical, as the party sought to alleviate its position by sponsoring or at least tacitly supporting country Independents. As the Nationals were discomfited, NSW Labor congratulated itself for its cleverness. In 2003, Carr advised the regional press that he had 'no problems' with the rural Independents' success, observing that complaints about their having better access to Ministers than his own backbenchers were 'probably true'.⁷⁸ In circumstances where a Labor Premier could see little benefit in country electorates returning a Labor Member it is hardly a matter of wonder that this opinion also gained credence among the party's rural supporters. And whereas the benefits of the strategy of fostering rural Independents were clearly evident on the cross-benches of the NSW and, later, Commonwealth parliament, the costs were generally underappreciated. The latter include not only the cannibalisation of Labor's primary vote in those seats where Independents were successful but also the numerous instances in which Labor witnessed the defeat of its preferred Independent as well as a fall in its own vote. Many country voters were also alienated by Labor's pursuit of Green preferences; a tactic that upset not only those whose jobs were threatened by environmental protection but also the large number of religiously-inclined country voters. A poor record in service-delivery – and in the political 'sale' of those services that were provided – added to the party's difficulties. The results of such missteps are profound, confining Labor to a ghetto of its own making. In NSW today, voting Labor is a pastime effectively confined to Sydney, Queanbeyan, the Illawarra and, to a lesser degree, the lower Hunter. And even in these areas Labor voters are currently no more than a significant minority.

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Endnotes

- * The author would like to thank the two anonymous referees of *Labour History* for their comments and suggestions.
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4. NSW Labor's rural decline is highlighted in the author's chapter, Bradley Bowden, 'The Nationals', in Clune and Smith (eds), *Carr to Keneally*, pp. 27-38. However, the primary focus of that study was the Nationals, not Labor.
5. David Clune, 'The State Labor Party's Electoral Record in Rural New South Wales, 1904-1981', *Labour History*, no. 47, November 1984, p. 91.
6. As Labor came third in Ballina in 2011, the Green preference flows were only nominal.
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10. *NSW State Electoral Districts Ranked by 2006 Census Characteristics*, p. 24.
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16. Tanner, 'Trust in Politics', p. 200.
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18. Cavalier, 'PM Fiddles', p. 12. Also Cavalier, *Power Crisis*, pp. 49-58; Cavalier, 'Could Chifley Win', pp. 57-65.
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