

ments and their tenacity is testimony to the fact that class is becoming a less significant binding force than it once was, and that people don't simply define themselves by their class any more.

The attitude of the Left has often been to try to colonise the social movements, and they've managed to wreck a few in the process. The other approach, of course, the more 'enlightened' one, is to say that we should form some sort of alliance with them. We'll add their concerns on to ours in a shopping-list, and out of that we'll come up with a new manifesto. That's a more commendable approach, but it's still problematic, because most of the people in those movements and campaigns don't see themselves in that way, and refuse to so neatly be put into the Left-Right spectrum. Indeed, many of them would tell you that the Left, the labour movement and social democrats are really part of the problem, and can't be part of the solution.



# A Sterile Debate

*Michael Easson contends that the fundamental task remains to 'civilise capitalism'.*

**O**ne can define the Left as the non-conservative forces in society; one can also define it more narrowly as the Left traditions within the labour movement. It is apparent that there are various traditions that make up the Left of the labour movement in this country. Various of those traditions are alive, and some, I think, are dead. Yet on the various problems and challenges facing the labour movement today, it seems to me disturbingly evident, as someone active both in the Labor Party and the trade union movement, that there is hardly any debate going on.

Indeed, a lot of the debate that does take place seems to me to be fairly sterile and mindless. For example, the debate about whether or not Australian Airlines should be privatised largely turned on one's attitude to the traditional goal of public ownership. The shibboleth of public ownership for its own sake became a key issue among many of us, rather than asking the important questions, such as: what should be the role of government, what are the prin-

So, in conclusion, I think we need a renovation of our theory and our sense of identity. But I think it's unlikely that out of this or any other process we'll get a blueprint for change. On the Left we've always been looking for blueprints for change, we've always been coming up with new manifestos because the old one didn't work. I don't think it's possible to proceed in that manner any more; the problems have become far too complex. Instead, we'll probably have a very messy process of reconstruction. New issues will arise, and it won't be quite clear how traditional Left categories can respond to them. If the Left is to be effective in this kind of environment, if it's to be vibrant and a leader in trying to respond to new challenges, then it's very important that we create structures and practices which enable more free-thinking and interaction. And that's a far cry from our structures and practices at the moment.

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ciples that we should be seeking to have achieved through the labour movement, and does Australian Airlines play a role in that?

What kind of forum is there to debate issues within the labour movement? Most Labor Party branches are mindless events. There is very little debate about policy, and no-one seems to be greatly interested in changing that.

The trade union movement has similar problems. Here we have to confront the prospect of a change of government. One of the facts facing the trade union movement this decade is that Dr Hewson or another conservative leader will become prime minister. If it isn't the next election, or the election after that, one day the conservatives will win. And when they do, they will be more vicious and determined in their approach to the trade union movement than ever before.

Of course, we are attempting to answer that problem by award restructuring, by the amalgamations strategy and the like. Yet it seems to me we ought to have a number of reservations about that strategy. I worry, for instance, that we are creating a more bureaucratic trade union organisa-

tion, one which won't be responsive to many of the wishes of rank and file activists. That applies whether the amalgamated union is supposedly rightwing or leftwing. It will apply when ADSTE merges with the metalworkers union and 40% of the ADSTE members no longer choose to join the union. It will apply when the Australasian Society of Engineers joins with the ironworkers to form FINE, and 30-35% of the ASE's members just disappear. And I worry that we do not debate many of these issues in a serious way within the trade union movement.

Finally, there's often a tendency for those of us involved in labour politics and the trade union movement to demonise one's opponents, and to eulogise the kind of traditions which you see yourself as belonging to.

Yet a labour movement worth its salt is a labour movement that is tolerant of various traditions, and tolerant of the various ideas which are part of that tradition. A person I've often regarded as a central figure within the labour movement is Dr Lloyd Ross, after whom the Lloyd Ross Forum was named. Lloyd Ross was a communist; he wrote the book on William Lane and Lane's trip to Paraguay. Later he became active in the Workers Educational Association; later again he became the secretary of the Railwayworkers Union, in which he worked with Ben Chifley and John Curtin. He came back to the union after leaving the Communist Party during World War II, and later became a Grouper. At the end of his career he argued that the best

person to succeed him as secretary of the Railways Union was a man who happened to be a member of the Communist Party. Ross was a person who no-one in the labour movement could quite understand. He's someone with whom I have a lot of sympathy.

It seems to me that what Ross represented was the belief that the labour movement has a multitude of traditions, and many individuals with strengths and weaknesses, and that the important thing within the labour movement is to try to nurture that, and to try to encourage debate and understanding of the many issues with which we have to grapple. There are no definitive answers to the problems we face. If I were to sum up what I believe in, I would find it very hard to put it in terms which would label me a leftwinger or a rightwinger. In different respects I am a social democrat, a liberal, a conservative, in the various issues I confront. I think in that I'm part of the tradition of the labour movement and its principles. To me our historic role, whether as part of the Left of the labour movement, however that might be defined, or as part of the movement's Centre or Right, is to civilise capitalism. I think that is an important task; it's sometimes been an heroic task for many of our forebears. It's a never-ending task, and one which I think we have a duty to share.

MICHAEL EASSON is the secretary of the NSW Labor Council.



## A Culture of Honesty

*Peter Baldwin argues that, in order to reconstruct itself, the Left needs to develop a new culture of debate.*

**I**s the Left braindead? My short answer to that question is 'no', but it's getting perilously close to a situation where you would have to give an affirmative answer to that question. It is becoming increasingly clear that the Left is facing a serious crisis. I've never experienced a time when there's been such a lack of direction. And I think there's a need to try to open up a fundamental debate about where the Left is going, and to try to pose some questions which traditionally have been considered out of bounds for people on the Left.

I recently returned from eastern Europe; I was struck by the extent of the transformation that's occurring there. I represented the Treasurer at a conference of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, a financial institution set up in order to finance the reconstruction of the economies of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. It's interesting to see the extent to which any notion of a 'third way' has collapsed in those countries.

At present just about every major political force is thinking about how to bring about the most rapid transition to capitalism. This was epitomised for me by the Czech finance minister, Dr Klaus. Even our own Treasury officials were somewhat taken aback by his views.