Bill Clinton is the Bob Hawke of American politics. Like Hawke, as president he will create opportunities for others to radically overhaul America’s economy and society.

Gough Whitlam has recently pointed to the dangers of supporting politicians for the sake of winning elections. But for all the matters of principle for which men like Whitlam and Evatt fought, to the lasting benefit of all Australians, we should never forget the consequences of staying out of government. It is better to fight and win as a member of a broad-based winning coalition than to fight and lose as part of an ideologically pure elite.

After 12 years of Reagan and Bush much of the American Left is isolated from federal politics. The question of working in a coalition with Democrats like Clinton is hardly comprehensible. There is a great deal of idealistic talk about a new American Labor party, but despite the organising efforts of people like Tony Mazziochi of the Oil and Chemical Workers, it is generally a forlorn effort. The most impressive work being done by the American Left, from which we have much to learn, is confined to local and municipal levels. But for most local American lefties a federal victory is seen as pie in the sky, or irrelevant, or too much to hope for, or all of the above.

On top of this, Bill Clinton is frequently derided by the American Left on matters of principle, character and ethics. The most substantial criticisms concern Clinton's advocacy of the death sentence, his failure to support unionism and to prosecute delinquent employers in Arkansas. Despite these genuine shortcomings, however, the Clinton cause is appealing because something must be done to combat the utter depravity of American society.

In some ways Clinton is a more impressive character than Hawke because he is a mover and shaker and not just a consensus builder-cum-negotiator. Clinton has achieved minor miracles over ten years under extreme, adverse conditions in Arkansas, the second poorest US state. And the Democratic centre group that surrounds Clinton is a more impressive intellectual force than Australian Labor’s right and centre.

An impressive, intellectually open, centrist political leader is worth supporting in a period of economic turmoil. In 1991 I travelled through 42 cities in the United States, talking about the Accord and the Australian health care system. Almost everywhere I went Americans were waking up from a nightmare. They were even prepared to examine and compare the experiences of foreigners with their own. The Australian Accord, for example, was hailed as a triumph. Even Lane Kirkland’s assistant secretary at the peak union body, the AFL-CIO, Ken Young, sanguinely recalled that there had been an opportunity to forge a similar agreement with Jimmy Carter just before he left office. 100 million Americans have inadequate access to health care, so our national health care system was not just envied, it was seen as the crowning glory of civilisation down under.

Most Australians could hardly conceive of the scale and scope of the deindustrialisation of America. The quality of life in many of America’s deindustrialised cities is worse than that in many Third World economies. In Australia in the 1980s a tripartite agreement saved the major industrial bases of Wollongong and Newcastle; in America, whole cities like Pittsburgh, Detroit, Buffalo and a myriad of others were utterly destroyed.

Despite our continued, ludicrous commitment to tariff reductions in the middle of a recession, we have had relatively rational debates within the labour movement about our ability to sustain manufacturing industries such as textile, clothing and footwear (TCF). In America the winds of the market blew and now in New York City in the TCF industry there is a return to Dickensian child labour.

While we did, however inadequately, retrain workers, create jobs and encourage industry to modernise, in the United States millions were thrown into oblivion. It was left to the Taylorsmith cretins in executive boardrooms as to whether or not they should modernise their technology and upgrade their workers’ skills.

While our federal government moved to rationalise the responsibilities of state and federal governments in order to provide for secure, more responsible and accountable public services and infrastructure, the US federal government irresponsibly borrowed for non-productive spending and buckpassed their responsibilities, resulting in a fiscal crisis for over 20 states and countless municipal authorities.

I would be the last to deny the mistakes and problems of Labor in government in Australia under Hawke and Keating. But to have a Labor government in power in the 1980s made a difference—in an international sea of conservatism—just as Bill Clinton will now make a difference in the United States.

PETER BOTSMAN is the executive director of the Evatt Foundation.