IDEAS ON HOLD
Parliamentarians leading the public debate?
Hugh Emy is not entirely convinced.


It is certainly welcome to see MPs seeking to lead intellectual debate in Australia, as this book claims. Only the indefatigable Barry Jones, however, makes any real attempt to either ask or answer the questions raised by the title. Several of the authors do not mention the key term, socialism, at all. Others use it only for rhetorical effect. The title is, therefore, annoyingly misleading. It is really a collection of small set-piece essays discussing particular Labor policies in the possible aftermath of economic rationalism.

As such, it has a place. It is instructive to find a number of Labor MPs declaring that the “leadership no longer believes in the neo-classical...baggage of the 1980s” and even that Mr Keating opposes “narrow” economic rationalism. By and large, all the contributors are unhappy with the direction taken by the government in the 1980s and wish to modify or reverse the trend (although Brian Howe is suitably ministerial and much prefers social justice to socialism). Nick Bolkus wants to put regulation back on the agenda. Others, including Peter Baldwin, want a more dispassionate, less ideological approach to public enterprise and government intervention in the economy. There are coy calls for some kind of industry policy; stronger calls for a progressive tax system, for enlightened education, rights and environmental policies.

The tone is progressive, reformist but cautious, and rather short of ideas, especially where ‘socialism’ is concerned. Only Jones seems to have a strong sense of the real nature and implications of the current intellectual vacuum on the left, and what must be done to address it. Duncan Kerr writes (and Jones agrees) that “Labor’s main chance is to rediscover its ideological distinctiveness”, but how? While all the writers would welcome an ideological alternative to the free market, none really have much idea where it might come from. This book also illustrates, if unwittingly, the gap left by the eclipse of socialism. Jones is bold enough to imply that it is time to look again at the Platform and Objectives in the light of the intellectual revolution which has occurred since 1981. It is almost certainly time to start rethinking the language of “democratic socialisation”. If the market is here to stay, and there seems to be a fairly strong case for that, then it is time to take a more discriminating attitude towards property rights. The question will be what rights private property owners can reasonably claim in a free market society where there are already strong groups, Aboriginal and environmental, who wish to qualify and redefine property rights in new ways. Labor has to think more creatively about the property issue.

This book is really about the deficiencies of existing policies. It is, mostly, an early call to swing the pendulum back. Many of the points the writers make would find a place in a new conceptual framework for the Left. However, the gulf between these writers is now and where they would like to be is a large one. How to bridge it, how to develop a new ideology which would synthesise Labor’s traditional values with the kind of policies which will be electorally attractive in the next ten years? These essays provide some clues.

Labor has to rethink its position on the proper relationship between state and market. This is crucial to debates about welfarism, interventionism or industry policy. It has to distance itself from the confining language of ‘market failure’ and assert clearly that while the market may be a necessary component of complex,
industrial societies, there is no guarantee that the market will work or evolve in a manner compatible with the nation’s long-term interests and security. The state must retain a significant residual responsibility to steer the process of economic development, to ensure that productive (or strategic) investment occurs as and where the nation requires it, cope with the impact of technological change upon society, and compensate (or retrain) those adversely affected by structural change.

Redefining the state’s role should go together with reasserting the principle of collective social responsibility. Society is not just an aggregate of individuals. Wealth is produced by social co-operation as well as individual effort. Society is fully entitled to appropriate some portion of this wealth (or surplus)—by means of a graduated income tax or by taxes on wealth (or inheritance)—to spend on infrastructure, the social wage, or the less fortunate. Labor should stress the complementarity of state and market (on the model of non-anglo-saxon market societies); the superiority of communitarian value-systems to individualistic; and it should affirm the importance of social equality as a counter to the current stress on freedom, although it may have to shift the emphasis to equality of life chances (or to Mr Whitlam’s “positive equality”) from equality of outcomes. It should press for a fully democratic constitution with basic rights, including now the right to withdraw one’s labour.

Overall, Labor should not make the mistake of looking backwards, of trying to “reinvent socialism” too literally: substantial parts of the socialist program really have gone. It should try instead to develop a more critical and informed approach to the market, which means especially constructing a more balanced and selective view of the state’s role in contemporary society. There is plenty of literature available, critical of the neoclassical paradigm, to develop a supporting communitarian perspective in which many of the ethical concerns of socialists would find a home.

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crimes of violence: australian responses to rape and child sexual assault, jan breckenridge and moira carmody (eds). (sydney, allen and unwin, 1992.)

sexual violence is on the public agenda. Not so long ago only feminists, and radical ones at that, spoke out publicly about the prevalence of male violence. Issues concerning male sexual practices which were previously shrouded in secrecy are now part of mediaspeak and government policy. Jan breckenridge and rosemary berreen note: judith allen’s comment that ‘domestic violence’ is “a practice without a history”. Writing on incest they suggest that “the effectiveness of an incest taboo is not evidenced in a capacity to prohibit the occurrence of incest. Rather its effectiveness is best witnessed in the capacity to inhibit public discussion and acknowledgment of the nature and extent of the problem”. Feminists have achieved what previously seemed impossible: public discussion of men’s sexual violence against women and children in the home.

’speak-outs’ by feminists are, on the whole, now a thing of the past. Non-funded crisis phones run from private homes and voluntary services in ill-equipped and overcrowded conditions have been replaced in most Australian states by funded (albeit underfunded) public services. In many instances these services are run by feminist professionals with a focus on efficient service provision and therapeutic healing processes. The general feeling is that a battle has been won. But have feminists been too hasty? Have we really dealt once and for all with the question of hoe, and if, to use the state (government funding, policy, legislation, policing and so forth) to bring an end to male violence? And can we keep male sexual violence on the agenda, other than as aberrant behaviour? For despite the statistics now available, and despite feminist challenges to widely held notions of rape and incest, sexual violence is still understood as the pathological behaviour of a few rather than as the actions of many ordinary men known and sometimes loved by their victims. ‘Normal’ male heterosexual practices have yet to come under public scrutiny.

The contributors to Crimes of Violence are sexual assault workers, researchers and policy makers involved in the area of sexual violence. The collection is, generally speaking, addressed to workers and various professionals who, in the course of their work, come into contact with sexual violence.

And, like many edited collections, it tends to be a mixed bag. Its importance for sympathetic professionals unfamiliar with feminism is indisputable. The debunking of patriarchal myths of rape and incest, the critique of the family and of mother-blame, the importance of believing women’s and children’s stories and giving positive feedback on responses and survival techniques, are familiar to femi-