

COMMENT

The December 10 election result poses several problems which must be squarely faced by the left. Some of them are:

- * To analyse the reasons for Fraser's victory
- * To develop a much deeper understanding of Australian society, in particular the ideology and aspirations of the workers, so as to both understand the vote for Fraser and assist the left to develop the concrete long-term strategy for an 'Australian road to socialism'.
- * To devise policies, strategy and tactics to meet the inevitable increase in anti-worker, authoritarian and repressive initiatives

The election merely confirmed in its own way a long-observed fact about the working class, in Australia and all capitalist societies: not all the working class, or even a majority of it, will always act in its own best short-term or long-term interests. The working class condition under capitalism can lead it to believe and follow the political representatives of the class which exploits it; to be taken in by the system and its myths and to reject the real solutions to its problems. This often has been, and is, true of some of the most oppressed and exploited workers. All the more, then, can it be true of a working class which, on average, enjoys living standards and conditions better than virtually any other subordinate class in history, with the possible exception of the contemporary north American working class.

The meaning of the result itself should be neither ignored nor exaggerated. On the one hand, it is clear that large numbers of workers voted either for Fraser or

Australian Democrats rather than for Labor. On the other hand, Labor still has a very solid base of support - not very much less, in fact, than other big social-democratic parties in advanced capitalist societies and still bigger than many such parties.

It is important to look at votes rather than seats. The L/NCP vote dropped from 52.6 per cent in 1975 to 48 per cent, yet even without the distribution of Democrat preferences, the coalition has a majority similar to that of '75. (Labor with a 52 per cent vote in '72 had a majority of 11 seats.) Labor with 40 per cent of the vote got 30 per cent of the seats; the NCP with 9.6 per cent has 15 per cent of the seats; the Democrats with 9.3 per cent got no seats in the Reps. As almost always, the single member constituency electoral method, almost unique to English-speaking countries (most other democracies have some version of proportional representation) tells against Labor.

But, accepting the fact that a substantial section of workers voted Liberal, there are both immediate and underlying causes. The immediate ones include:

- * Fear of change and the unknown;
- * fear of a return to what is seen as upheaval and mismanagement under the Whitlam government;
- * a belief that Labor was/is a poor economic manager;
- * doubt that Labor could do anything to overcome the crisis and improve things;
- * a belief that the L-NCP coalition are the "natural rulers" and can get the best out of the system.

The underlying causes involve more long-term processes and factors at work in Australian society. These have to do with both the objective circumstances of life here for many working people and with the traditions and culture of the working class, derived from Britain and developing in Australian conditions. The main tradition of the British working class has always been reformist and so it has been in Australia. In Britain this tradition was sustained by the crumbs which the ruling class could afford from its well-stocked imperialist table. In Australia, during many militant struggles, workers have been able to win very good conditions relative to those of workers in other countries. (We are speaking here of an average - many unskilled, migrant and women workers work and live in poverty-line conditions.) None of this has been due to the benevolence or cleverness of Australian capitalists - rather to what the system could concede to working class militancy.

In some senses, reformism has succeeded for many workers over the long boom period. This is especially so in terms of the aims many workers set themselves during this period: to substantially improve their living conditions and achieve personal security after the insecurity of the Depression and war years. It is not to ignore the poverty and hardship of many to note the fact that the real living standards of most workers rose substantially during the boom period. Many workers associate these improvements with Liberal-Country Party government. In 1977, as in 1975, one component of the vote for Fraser was a mistaken yearning for the boom period of the 'fifties, associated with Menzies and the Liberals.

In Australia as in few other capitalist countries, it was possible for some workers to find individual solutions and personal advancement. This section provides the base of 'working class conservatism' although Liberal-voting workers can also be found among unskilled and poorer workers.

It was reasonable to expect that the onset of a long period of economic decline and stagnation would lead to a new radicalisation of the working class and a renewed interest in socialist solutions. To a certain extent this has happened, especially in countries with a strong Communist Party and/or left-leaning Socialist Party, where

socialist consciousness is already high. But it is observable that in most advanced capitalist countries, working class support for reformist and even conservative parties has not swung dramatically away and towards the left. Indeed, in some places, it has swung right, although usually this is where the 'left' alternative has been a reformist party incapable of providing credible solutions to the crisis. A small section of workers has even been attracted to racist and reactionary groups like the National Front in Britain.

All this merely reinforces the historical lesson that a period of capitalist crisis does not necessarily throw up the social forces which have the vision, organisation and active spirit necessary for a basic social transformation in the direction of socialism. To take just the most obvious example: the Great Depression, one of the most traumatic events in the history of capitalism, did not lead to one socialist revolution. In Germany, it not only led to fascism but to the wiping out of the German Communist Party as a mass force (speaking, of course, of West Germany). This cannot be blamed only on the mistakes of leaders and parties, although these abounded.

These experiences, and today's realities, raise very sharply the question of ruling class hegemony - the hold of the system's ideas, values and culture over the mass of the people. This hold is a feature of all class societies and is what, together with the use of force and coercion, has made oppressed classes and groups throughout history accept, for long periods, their oppression as inevitable or even right.

Modern capitalist society is characterised by great sophistication of capitalist ideas, by vastly improved methods of inculcating and reinforcing them (via the mass media and the education system) and by objective circumstances (the long boom) which give added weight to them. Australian capitalism has had both favorable objective circumstances and the absence of a revolutionary and socialist tradition in the working class to assist this process of ideological hegemony.

A concrete example illustrates the point and drives home the fact that glaring examples of ills of the system do not in

themselves necessarily move workers to outrage or protest. When the scandal about Utah's repatriation of huge profits to America was headline news, it was related to me by a friend how workers on his job said: 'Good luck to them. If they can get away with it they deserve the rewards'. The only explanation for such attitudes, when even the media felt constrained to criticise Utah, is that capitalist views and ethics are very deeply ingrained in some sections of workers. They accept the myths of private enterprise and 'get what you can when you can'. Also, some workers express such views because they are reasonably satisfied with their own lot or have inflated ideas of their prospects.

A more exact indication of working class views was given in a survey of AMWU members in 1976. Conducted by students in Sydney University's Government Department, the survey sought workers' attitudes to a number of issues concerned with their workplace and the union. The AMWU membership is one of the most advanced sections of workers. Yet the survey showed that, depending on the issue, anything from one-quarter to one-half of the membership was conservative in their views. For instance, 29 per cent thought unions put too many restrictions on employers; 63 per cent **disagreed** that unions should have more power; 41 per cent thought unions strike too often; 23.5 per cent thought the government should have more control over unions, 21 per cent **disagreed** that everyone in the factory should be in the union; 63 per cent **agreed** they were satisfied with working conditions on their job; 53 per cent **agreed** they were paid what their work was worth; 41 per cent thought that 'if we start letting the workers make more decisions then the company will go broke'; 53 per cent thought that most workers are not capable of making important factory decisions; 69 per cent **agreed** that 'workers would fight too much between themselves if allowed to make their own decisions about who to hire and fire'; asked whether it should be the company or the union which sets up a system which lets workers help make factory decisions, 13 per cent said the union, 38 per cent the company, and 42 per cent both.

As with any survey of opinion these results may be open to challenge and to different interpretations but, in general, they are probably a fair reflection of workers'

attitudes. They do need to be balanced by the answers of the section who showed more class consciousness and advanced views. Equally, the contradictory nature of the attitudes should be recognised. For instance, while 53 per cent thought most workers were not capable of making important factory decisions, 73 per cent **agreed** that 'I would work better if decisions on things like how my work is organised were made by both the workers and the bosses'. 80 per cent thought most workers will accept more responsibility if they are more involved in factory decisions, and 61 per cent would like a chance to make more decisions about how things are run in the factory.

The many indications of conservatism among large sections of workers should not blind us to the positive features of the Australian working class. On some counts, Australian workers have shown a radicalism not seen elsewhere. It was militant struggles which gained Australian workers their high living standards; sections like the wharfies and seamen have an impressive record of internationalism; the Green Bans were a unique phenomenon, way in advance of similar workers' actions elsewhere; it is not often that other working classes have taken actions similar to the 1969 Penal Clauses strike during the jailing of Clarrie O'Shea; the mass movement against uranium mining is amazingly strong when it is realised that Australia does not have nuclear power itself so that to be opposed to mining requires more than a direct personal threat. In general, there is a better 'integration' of the workers' movement with the new social movements than in other countries.

Then, too, it must be considered that conservative and reformist ideas may be changed very suddenly by circumstances: such a process has occurred in most revolutions. Which is not to say that policies and political methods can be based solely on the **possibility** such a thing will happen some time in the future, since this might be next year or next century. But it is to say that the hold of ideas is not fixed and permanent but relies very much on social circumstances and is open to contestation by the proponents of different ideas. The fact that working class conservatism and reformism are often inconsistent and contradictory shows too the possibilities of change in the right circumstances.

None of the problems of conservatism mean that the left should become pessimistic and abandon the struggle for socialism in Australia as hopeless. But a socialist strategy must, in the first place, be based on an objective analysis of society and social development. Analysis of social structures, and the underlying dynamics and contradictions of a given society are essential. But, so too, is the accurate appraisal of the balance of political forces, of mass opinion, degree of class consciousness and organisation and the aims and aspirations of workers and others who must provide the mass base for socialism.

The Political Level

It is often easy for marxists to forget about this last aspect and concentrate on laying bare the objective 'skeleton' of capitalist society: its structures, contradictions and tendencies of development. But the political level of society has its own relative autonomy from, as well as connection with, the levels of structures and inner dynamics. Experience and history show conclusively that even when the objective realities of capitalism manifest themselves most obviously, as in inflation, unemployment, poverty and oppression, those who suffer most do not necessarily see the real causes, nor support socialist solutions, nor even organise themselves to fight for their own conditions and rights.

It is this gap between reality and consciousness which Marx was referring to when he distinguished between a 'class in itself' and a 'class for itself'. Speaking of the French peasantry he pointed that insofar as they shared a common social situation and objective relation to other classes they formed a class. But insofar as they did or did not perceive a common situation and common interests and develop organisation to collectively fight for their interests, they did or did not form a class. So, for Marx, class consciousness is not only important, it enters the very definition of class, which has a contradictory tension, both in fact and in concept, between objective and subjective factors.

Since it is at the **political** level of society that a party and movement operate, it follows that socialists in Australia must,

among other things, think long and hard about how, and in what conditions, the prevailing working class commitment to reformist and conservative ideas might be changed. Such thinking cannot be done in ivory towers or armchairs but only in the course of practical struggles from which conclusions and lessons are drawn which enrich theory and provide a factual basis for strategies and policies. Too much the marxist practitioners in the armchairs and ivory towers want to make the facts fit the theory, preferring to ignore those facts and realities which might upset the picture.

Labor Debate

As after any major defeat for the ALP, there is now a major debate on the party's future course, policies and strategy. The election for the party parliamentary leadership showed a turn to the right and to 'moderation'. And so far it has been the right of the party which has been most vocal in advocating solutions to the party's problems.

Broadly speaking, the line is that Labor must show itself to be a better 'economic manager' than the L-NCP coalition and introduce only such reforms as are made possible by 'economic realities'. As Mr. Hayden put it at the press conference after his election as leader: the Labor Party wants change to the extent this is 'responsible'. At the same conference he said he believes there is "a very strong case for reward for initiative and risk in a mixed economy". He qualified this by saying there is also a need to make sure that people are not disadvantaged and perpetuated in that disadvantage. Writing in the *Financial Review* under the heading 'Hayden does a Fraser', Brian Toohey commented on the similarity of this to Fraser's stated 'concern for the disadvantaged within an economy based upon reward for initiative'.

But what risks and initiatives are taken by the really big profit-making corporations in Australia which could not have been taken by public sector enterprises? The story of the Holden is well known - how the Chifley government underwrote all the risks of the US car giant GM which then showed its gratitude by taking over all Australian interests when the company was well

established and making huge profits. Even more glaring is the way that vast natural resources are now being handed over to multinational corporations who are or will be raking in fabulous profits by ripping out the resources in a way which maximises their profits but minimises the benefits to ordinary Australians, not to mention the environmental destruction and hazards from woodchipping, uranium mining, and so on.

It is said in favor of such policies that only big multinationals have the money and know-how to develop our resources. Yet a public enterprise backed by the full resources of government and tapping the know-how of Australian workers and technicians could match these. In any case, know-how can be bought and hired and capital borrowed if needed. It was revealed recently that Utah's huge profits from the Bowen Basin coal deposits derive from an initial investment of \$25 million. This is a piddling sum for a government and would by now have been returned many times over, providing capital for development of other natural resources. As advocated by the CPA's **A New Course for Australia**, the income from a planned and publicly-owned natural resources development could in turn fund an expansion of public sector manufacturing industry under democratic worker and community control to avoid the bureaucratic inefficiencies of traditional nationalised industries.

Mr. Hayden's view of the relation between the Labor Party and its mass base is that any organisation which seeks to serve the Australian public must 'evolve along with that community'. There is no doubt that a mass party must listen to the masses. But equally it can only fulfill its responsibilities to them if it presents the facts and an analysis of what is happening. To its credit, the Labor Party did this on the issue of Viet Nam, despite the waverings of many of its leaders including Whitlam, and was in the end vindicated in its stand. As admitted by defeated prime minister McMahan, revulsion against the Viet Nam war played a part in Labor's 1972 victory.

The key fact ignored by the Hayden argument is that the economic problems are the products of the very system he proposes to manage better and more 'responsibly'

than the Liberals. In particular, the crisis of Australian manufacturing industry has as one major cause the diversion of investment capital into the much more profitable resources area. Because the mining sector is more capital intensive than manufacturing (by a factor of at least 10) this diversion of capital creates more unemployment, with little prospect of improvement so long as such investment priorities remain.

If this analysis is even only partly correct, there is no way that a private profit system based on 'reward for initiative' will ever build a healthy manufacturing industry and restore full employment. Naturally, if reward for initiative is the guiding philosophy, then capital and human efforts will be directed to gaining the greatest reward for the least initiative, i.e. by ripping out natural resources as fast as possible, in the process running down all but the most profitable manufacturing industry.

The only way private enterprise will rebuild manufacturing is with the aid of government hand-outs and incentives, such as the existing scheme whereby businesses are paid \$63 per week to give young unemployed a job. Naturally, business does not reject such 'creeping socialism' which serves its interests. But the labor movement ought to ask itself whether such government hand-outs should be given with no strings attached. Should they not be used as a lever to gain democratic public say in the enterprises so assisted? Or could the money be better spent establishing new manufacturing industries, such as a solar heater industry, publicly owned and democratically controlled?

What might be called the conscious and ideological right of the Labor Party has got in quick for its chop. In articles in **The Australian** and **The Sydney Morning Herald**, two leading members from the NSW Labor Party, Bob Carr and Joe Thompson, have pushed the so-called 'moderate' line. This is that the Labor Party nationally must adopt the policies of the Wran, Dunstan and Lowe state governments and learn from the example of the German Social-Democrats. According to Joe Thompson, NSW secretary and Federal president of the Vehicle Builders' Union:

"The State Labor administrators have bent over backwards to co-operate with

business and they've appealed to the country voter. But they've also been successful with their programs of reform But there has not been a rush to do everything in three years or to go further than the middle ground of politics would allow." (The Australian, 7.2.78.)

But a good example of just how far 'bending over backwards' will get you (no, it's not up your own) was the deal announced by Wran for Ford to build a new car plant near Campbelltown. He billed it as a good example of co-operation between his government and business and of how the government was attracting business. A few weeks later Ford announced it was not going ahead with the plans. So the essential powerlessness of government in the face of self-interested private enterprise was again demonstrated. Mr. Thompson's own members suffered from the failure to expand Ford's operations.

It is ironic that the Labor right should now be suggesting that Mr. Whitlam went too far, too fast. When he succeeded Mr. Calwell in 1967 as leader, the same wing of the party saw him as the person who could modernise the party, take away its rough and radical image and win the middle ground. To a large degree, Whitlam did many of these things but in retrospect, it can be seen that he was more committed to reforms in areas like education, social welfare, urban renewal, and health care than many of his colleagues. In any case, these reforms were hardly radical. Now it is Mr. Hayden who will play Whitlam to Whitlam's Calwell!

What is ignored by these commentators is that it was not the reforms themselves which people voted against in 1975 and 1977 but the inability of Labor to solve the economic crisis. This inability was a liability on its own but it also assisted the media campaign which portrayed social reforms and economic recovery as incompatible. Within the logic of the system there was a certain truth in this. But had Labor been prepared to begin to tackle the basic causes of the crisis instead of succumbing to the logic of the system, it could have retained support for itself and its reform program. This would have required tackling the power over economic decision making of large local and multinational firms. Of course, it was

precisely this that Labor was neither willing nor prepared to do so it bogged down in a contradictory mire of indecision and division.

Labor did not have to 'introduce socialism' but rather begin to put enough key economic levers in its own hands both to be in a position to tackle the problems and to prevent the sort of economic undermining engaged in by private enterprise. Further, if Labor is going to give up significant reform programs and compete with the Liberals in economic management in capitalist terms, why should its own base vote for it at all?

Another assumption of the Labor right's argument is that the middle ground can only be won by watering down Labor's policies and proceeding more cautiously. Yet there are many issues where the middle ground supports policies more radical than those of Labor's right. Uranium is a good example. Carr warns that the Australian Democrats will pick up the middle ground permanently unless Labor is careful. Yet one of the bases of Democrat support among the previously Liberal middle ground was its anti-uranium mining stance - precisely the policy which the Labor right opposed for the ALP!

Of course, it is not expected that any of this will convince Labor's right which long ago gave up any socialist perspective, if it ever had one, and who believe that talk of socialism, even of steps like nationalisation, is 'fundamentalist' and old hat. Time will tell whether their solutions achieve anything, even the much longed-for stable electoral majority. It is to be hoped, though, that the Labor left will develop a much more coherent ideology and policy than hitherto so as to more effectively combat the attempts to take the party even further to the right. Many Labor members and supporters do not want a rightward shift but they need a coherent policy and line to support.

The left outside the Labor Party, including the Communist Party, cannot rely on the development of a more coherent Labor left which, in any case, is more likely the stronger the extra-ALP left and its mass influence become. Nor can the left ignore developments inside the Labor Party since the latter still has the overwhelming support of the working class which even through many disappointments looks to Labor for solutions to its problems.

PERSPECTIVES FOR THE LEFT

What, then, should be the perspectives and strategy of the extra-ALP left in the post-election situation? In the first place, while seeking to grapple with the political realities behind the election result, we should not lose sight of the fact that the contradictions of capitalism, both old and new, remain. Among others, they manifest themselves in these ways:

- * Inability to permanently solve economic problems and develop a stable economy based on social needs and free from unemployment and inflation.
- * Inability, despite a huge absolute growth of production, to achieve any significant redistribution of wealth to level up the continuing glaring social inequalities.
- * Inability to take full and rational advantage of the 'great leap forward' of the productive forces in the postwar boom - in particular, failure to utilise anything like the full liberatory potential of science and technology which are made the servants of profit.
- * Disregard for and inability to solve the worsening environmental crisis which, if anything, is more ignored these days with the economic troubles used as an excuse not to take the necessary actions.
- * Inability to basically tackle the oppression of women and the whole crisis of human relationships, problems which are also swept under the mat of the economic crisis.

These and other contradictions and problems are not abolished by Fraser's victory; rather they are likely to be sharpened by it. They can, and will, lead to renewed upsurges of mass activity and struggle, though naturally no timetable can be put on this. These objective facts provide the basis for the left's work. But, in turn, this work will only bring out the maximum political manifestation of the objective contradictions to the extent that it develops a strategy and method of work based on a deep understanding of existing political realities and the possibilities contained within them. In the first place, that means finding out where working people are at, what they feel and want, what they will support and what they won't. In particular, can we identify

what are the barriers, in workers' minds, social situation and experiences, to their shifting from reformism to socialism, or a program which would be a transition in the direction of socialism?

In the second place, the strategy and policies can only be developed in a long process of dialogue and discussion with the working people. This means putting things in their language, being concrete and putting forward, in addition to long-term goals, transitional programs which are seen to be realistic and capable of being fought for. To do this means being prepared to learn from practical experiences which should not only be guided by theory but also change and modify theory. A theory with such a relation to practice is truly a **theory of politics** (or a politicised theory) as opposed to an academicised, rarefied and doctrinised theory.

The main task of the left, therefore, is to get out into the community and the workforce so as to maintain and extend the difficult daily work of convincing people, assisting them in their struggles and in setting up or improving organisations which can counter the powers they are up against.

If this is done two dangers in the present period will be avoided:

- * Succumbing to pessimism and hopelessness, leading to a loss of will and activity
- * 'Standing on our digs' in the belief that we are still right and don't need to change anything as a result of the election but continue as before until the workers are forced to see the truth by the objective circumstances. This could only lead to objective sterility and isolation

The aim of the left should be, in practice, policy and publicity, to lower the obstacles to Australian workers opting for real solutions. Immediate and transitional programs can do this by assisting people to take the first steps, both in thought and action, down the path to socialism. The Communist Party's proposal **A New Course for Australia** is a public discussion document of this type. ALR readers who have not yet seen it are invited to write to their nearest CPA office for a copy and to submit their comments, criticisms and suggestions to the CPA.