

# REVIEWS

**SEEDS FOR CHANGE: Creatively confronting the energy future** by Deborah White, Philip Sutton, Alan Pears, Chris Mardon, John Dick and Maurie Crow, Patchwork Press/Conservation Council of Victoria, 540 pp. Review by Hugh Saddler.

Most writing on energy policy can, unfortunately, be allocated to one of two categories. On the one hand are the smug "leave it to us, the experts" pronouncements of spokesmen (never women) of the oil, coal, gas and electricity industries and associates in the public service and academia. We all know why this stuff is no good.

Much of the remaining writing, while sharply critical of these establishment views, falls into the trap of what might be termed energy fundamentalism. The arrangements society makes about energy are important, because energy is such an important determinant of the quality of individual life and of the way we relate to each other as individuals. But this does not make energy important, in political terms, in itself. The basic political issues are how to build a new society in which everyone is entitled to a just share in the material wealth of the society and can participate fully and equally in making decisions about their society. Energy fundamentalism makes the mistake of forgetting that these are the basic issues, and instead, in advocating all sorts of political, social and economic changes, gives the reduction of energy use as the sole or principal reason.

Unfortunately, *Seeds for change* is permeated by energy fundamentalist thinking, which detracts and distracts from the really important things it has to say. Although the authors do not allow themselves to acknowledge it, the book is really about how to transform the quality of life in Australia's major cities, focussing on Melbourne as a specific example. In their words, it is about how to create "convivial community". They advocate a radical reorganisation of the spatial distribution of activities in the metropolitan area, focussing all activities where people interact outside the family unit in a hierarchy of neighbourhood, local and district nodes, linked by a fast, frequent and comprehensive public transport system.

I found their account an exciting blueprint for liveable cities. But I was not a little surprised to find that the only reference to the hideous toll of

death or injury which our present car based transport system exacts was in the context of the energy used by ambulance, hospital and legal services. Death and injury on the roads are alone reason enough to change the system. That they result in extra energy consumption is, to my mind, irrelevant. This is an example of what I mean by energy fundamentalism.

To be fair to the authors, they do explain why they place such great emphasis on energy use and how to reduce it. In essence, their argument is that Australia, and specifically Victoria, is going to run out of all fossil fuels within, at most, a few decades. In other words, they foresee an energy crisis that is far more severe and far more imminent than is generally thought.

Let me explain. For oil, the argument is fairly obvious. Everyone agrees that the Bass Strait reserves are limited, that production has now reached a plateau level, and that domestic supplies (nearly all from Bass Strait) will form a decreasing proportion of total consumption in years to come unless growth in oil consumption ceases. All the natural gas used in Victoria comes from Bass Strait, which supplies no other market. If growth in consumption continues at the rates projected by such authorities as the Gas and Fuel Corporation, then supply problems may be expected before 1990. However, a look at the basis of these projections shows that they assume a continuance of rates of growth that have been experienced in the years since 1970, a period during which gas has become established in Victoria at the expense of oil, and has, moreover, been ridiculously cheap — so cheap that even the most modest conservation expenditure by consumers has been uneconomic. The high growth rates also depend on the wasteful use of gas to generate electricity in the Newport and Jeeralang power stations. If, by contrast, gas consumption grows at more moderate rates, say 1 or 2% per annum, then the shortfall would not appear for at least 30 years.

The argument with respect to brown coal is somewhat similar. They say that at consumption growth rates of zero or 1% per annum, the reserves in the Latrobe Valley will last a very long time, certainly more than a century. But if one takes the very high growth projections (hopes?) for electricity consumption put forward by the SECV, and adds to it the extravagant demands for brown coal that vast liquefaction (to replace imported oil) and gasification (to replace exhausted Bass Strait gas) projects would impose, then the lifetime of Victorian brown coal is indeed drastically reduced. Now it is true that such proposals have been made by so-called energy planners in the Victorian bureaucracy. But the existence of the proposals does not prove that Victoria faces an imminent fuel crisis on all fronts. Rather it proves how idiotic official energy plans are.

In my opinion, sensible energy planning for

Victoria would involve, with respect to natural gas, scrapping Newport and Jeeralang, and raising the price to industrial consumers so that it was just less than the price of competing petroleum fuels on an equivalent energy basis. For brown coal, any plans for conversion to liquid or gaseous fuels should be thrown in the waste paper basket. Having done that, crisis problems on the energy front would recede, and one could set about planning for progressively greater energy conservation and the gradual transfer to a renewable energy economy. Such energy policies would be one item on a whole slate of changes that would accompany the transformation to a socialist society. Changes in urban structure and transport systems of the type described in this book would, in all probability, be another item on the agenda. But one would want such changes in their own right, not because they reduced energy consumption, though that would be an additional benefit.

I may appear to have been labouring the arguments. If so, it is because I think the vision contained in *Seeds for change* is powerful and important and I fear that the energy fundamentalist context in which it is placed will discourage many readers. Two other aspects make this a difficult book to read. One is its length, much of which, unfortunately is the result of repetition and excessive detail. Reduced to about two thirds, the book would have lost none of its message and gained greatly in impact and readability.

Another characteristic, which I found somewhat irritating, was its parochialism. It is an excellent idea to take a particular city, Melbourne, as the basis for elaborating a blueprint. But to analyse the energy supply and demand pattern purely in terms of "Victoria's energy prospects" is another matter. One of the greatest obstacles to achieving sensible energy policies is the federal constitution which gives almost all powers over energy to the States. It is State powers which are responsible for the present absurdly low price of gas in Victoria, which constitutes perhaps the greatest single energy policy anomaly in Australia today. And it is state powers which enable Court and Bjelke-Petersen to flog off Australian resources at giveaway prices and to compete with each other and with the Victorian government to sell energy to the international aluminium cartel companies at the lowest possible prices. In discussing the greater use of liquid petroleum gas, the authors appear to believe that it is the Victorian government which allows Esso-BHP to sell most of what they produce to Japan, whereas, of course, the export control power is one of the very few useful levers that the Australian government has on energy policy.

My complaints may seem carping, but I think such parochialism is poor political tactics. Speaking of Bass Strait oil, the authors concede that "it is only reasonable that Victoria should

export oil to other States". But it is not impossible to envisage a reactionary, Canberra-hating State government in years to come having different views.

What else does the book contain? Apart from the chapters on urban form and transport which, as I have already indicated, are excellent, there are two very good chapters on energy efficient buildings and urban design. The chapter on urban water supply, drainage and sewerage is also good if you can ignore the energy context into which, in keeping with the book's whole approach, it is illogically forced. The final chapter, entitled "The seeds are there" describes a number of projects in Melbourne where people are "creating community". It shows the task of transforming our cities can and should start from the bottom. This is the closest the book gets to questions of political strategy. I am sure that the authors would be the first to acknowledge that the task of transformation must be carried out at all levels and that Esso-BHP and the SECV cannot, unfortunately, be simply by-passed and left to wither away.

*Seeds for Change* should not be criticised for avoiding these political problems. The authors see the book as "a first step towards widespread discussion of the technical, social, economic and political issues related to energy". As a contribution to the energy debate its good points are marred by some factual errors and misleading arguments. But as a contribution towards the task of transforming our cities and hence the lives of the majority of Australians it is a splendid start.

### **The Second Slump: A Marxist Analysis of Recession in the Seventies**, by Ernest Mandel. *New Left Books, London, 1978.*

In his major study *Late Capitalism*, Ernest Mandel undertook the task begun by Marx in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* of providing an integrated historical and theoretical analysis of the development of the capitalist mode of production. This work with its rigorous usage of marxian economic categories (which avoided both monocausal reductionist explanations and the abstract utilisation of Marx's reproduction schemas) constituted the first systematic marxist account of what may be termed the three fundamental conjunctures of 20th century capitalism: (1) the transition from competitive to monopoly capitalism (1890-1935); (2) the consolidation of monopoly capitalism (1936-1965); (3) the coming crisis of monopoly capitalism (1966-...).

With the publication of *The Second Slump* Mandel has attempted to deepen the analysis developed in his earlier work through a detailed account of the circumstances precipitating the