


 BRIEFINGS

## Election Time

**W**hatever the result of the July 11 federal election, its outcome will be significant. If Labor wins it will be an historic event for a party deprived of office for much of its existence.

If John Howard wins, the effects will be far more profound. The Liberal leader and the forces behind him plan not just to proceed with new policies but to change the very terrain of politics itself.

A Howard government will attempt to roll back the unspoken consensus which grew from the postwar period — a consensus which (grudgingly) legitimised trade unions, assumed an extensive state intervention over industry, and provided a social wage in public services and a welfare safety net. Deep structural changes to this compromise,

including privatisation, will be the order of the day.

Howard's determination to "hit the ground running" if elected is a reflection of a new spirit abroad in conservatism which is determined not to repeat the "pragmatism" of the Fraser government.

In this sense they are aiming for significant changes and the label (and image) of traditional conservatism inadequately describes them. The New Right's self projection as a radical and liberating force is something which needs to be taken seriously by the left and its allies.

The outcome of the election, then, *will* actually make a difference — something many of us disillusioned by Labor's performance tend to underrate. Many of Labor's supporters are angered by Labor's deregulatory policies, its toying with privatisation, its uranium sales to France, its cosy relationship with Murdoch — but if Howard wins, they'll find they haven't seen anything yet.

While Labor looked headed for defeat in 1985 and '86, this year has seen a growth in support for the government. How deep seated this support is, considering that some of its has been won by outdoing conservatism, is certainly open to question. This strategy has brought gains to Labor — and may even result in its third term — but at a far deeper shift in the political spectrum and mood of Australia.

For many, the emergence and popularity of Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen symbolises just how far things have drifted. Yet in terms of his larger project of creating a new conservative force using the raw material of the Nationals, the wheels have fallen off Joh's bandwagon. Unfortunately, the Labor leadership and many commentators have seen this only as a setback and have ignored the deeper process during the three month's of Joh-madness: with hindsight, this episode may well prove to be a clearing of the decks for the New Right, rather than a big setback.

Joh failed for two major reasons. The first is that he proved unable to unite the two major components of the New Right, the social conservatives where his own roots are, and the free marketeers — the latter being suspicious that his own practice showed he was not ideologically sound (as well as being ga-ga at times). Secondly, his narrow base in Queensland — won at the price of destroying the Liberals — forced him to do severe damage to the federal coalition if he was to get anywhere. Hawke's election timing made maximum use of the dangers inherent in this attempt to re-order anti Labor politics.

If Labor wins, Joh's call for a new, radical conservative party could well re-emerge, though because of the first reason mentioned above it will still be unlikely to become dominant. Howard would probably be a casualty of a Labor victory, to be replaced by either Elliott or Peacock, with Joh taking Sinclair's position.

Another, more peripheral aspect of the election result, will be its effect on the process of renewal now under way on the Left. If Howard wins, Hawke and Keating will almost certainly disappear,

## IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF ALR

- David Brown and Wendy Bacon debate the Lionel Murphy affair and the role of the media
- Colin Mercer argues for tackling the Bicentennial from within
- Hester Eisenstein and others discuss socialist feminism in the '80s

plus more features, Time Out, Briefings and reviews ...

and their strategy of appeasing big business and conservative values will be modified or even substantially changed. But the upshot would be that Labor in opposition, after a period of recrimination and soul searching, would probably regain some of its crumbling grassroots support on its radical and labour movement flank. Thus the attractiveness of a new left party or movement would be diminished — a minor spinoff considering the destruction Howard will wreak, but a significant one in the longer attempt to reverse the tide of conservatism.

In a curious way, if Labor loses, it will be a victim of its own "success" in tailoring its policies to business and conservatism.

Two current examples further emphasise the oft repeated charge that Labor is actively consenting to pushing the political agenda further to the right. In the May economic statement, Treasurer Keating listed first among his spending cuts the abolition of the dole for 16 and 17 year olds.

But as Ross Gittins pointed out in the *Sydney Morning Herald* this is more apparent than real. "The truth is that the youth dole has not been abolished. It's merely had its name changed and been subject to a parental income test. The maximum rate for the new job search allowance is the same as the youth dole: \$50 a week. But depending on the parents' income, it may be reduced to a minimum of \$25 a week. Changing the name of the youth dole will save the princely sum of \$3m next financial year. Imposing a test on parental income will save \$12m. Big bikkies to be listed as the first of the 'main spending cuts', eh?" Gittins later points out that the mini budget increased spending on training schemes by \$33m (and \$63m the year after).

Keating deliberately crows about abolishing the youth dole, and Howard is happy to congratulate him on pinching a Liberal policy. But the more profound point is that Keating's



Tribune

words, if not his action, have confirmed and encouraged all the conservative, mean prejudices which exist across the spectrum but which have been fuelled by the New Right. This announcement delivered a body blow to those disparate forces (like NSW Young Labor) who just a few months before had plastered Sydney with posters denouncing Howard's pledge to abolish the youth dole.

A similar effect can be seen in the government's actions toward the Industrial Relations Reform Bill which emerged from the Hancock committee. Not only was the Bill postponed when the election was called, but two key provisions were later ditched: a ban on employers' use of common law for damages in favour of statutory fines; and the transfer of the secondary boycott provisions of the *Trade Practices Act* (45D and 45E) to the new Labour court.

Again, in the short term, it got the Confederation of Australian Industry off the government's back (it was threatening a multimillion dollar campaign against the Bill during the election). And it put the Liberals on the back foot for a while.

But the price has been another big ideological concession which has helped to confirm widespread

anti union prejudice. Moreover, it surrenders an opportunity to disarm employers of the dangerous weapon of civil damages — a decision which may have ramifications for decades.

\* \* \*

At the same time, having been caught up very largely in the political culture of "betrayal", the left has tended to ignore the significance of the Hawke government's broader political strategy — and its effects on the structure of politics as a whole. The "pragmatism" of Hawke and Keating is not just electoral opportunism: it constitutes a very significant shift in the nature of the ALP as a party "representing" its electorate, in tune with the present dramatic shakedown of the party system as a whole.

Broadly speaking, the evolution of the ALP under the Hawke government fits the phenomenon often known overseas as "Eurosocialism" — a politics based upon non-ideological appeals to modernisation and efficiency, to national unity, to the workers in the "new industries"; and upon looser (or no) ties with union movements. This is the course which has been followed

more or less closely by the Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and French socialist parties over the last decade — and to some extent by Pasok in Greece as well. Older style “labourist” parties, such as British Labour, which have resisted this trend (represented in Britain by the SDP), have tended to be crowded out of the political mainstream and portrayed as “extremist”.

But where the “Eurosocialist” parties have generally had only qualified success in this transition from class and constituency-based parties to parties of “national unity”, the ALP has been rather more successful. In large part this can be explained by its continued close ties with a single central trade union body — a relationship which, in recent years, has actually become a closer one, but which has, at the same time, been renegotiated very much in the government’s favour. Without the continued credibility of its claim to a special relationship with the unions, promising to the more moderate employers industrial peace in tandem with “wage restraint”, the ALP would undoubtedly be entering the present election campaign as a non-starter.

To this extent, the evolution of the ALP in government has been a simple one: a renewed and reordered contract with the unions, coupled with a loosening of ties both with its “traditional constituencies” and the newer constituencies consolidated during the Whitlam era. In a sense, this has been less of a political realignment as such than a reordering of the relationship between party and supporters.

In an era when traditional political loyalties are weaker than they once were, and where electoral volatility is demonstrably high, the Hawke-Keating strategy of recasting the ALP in the role of national saviour clearly makes sense in its own terms. And certainly the success of this supremely apolitical strategy has further highlighted the problems of a left (and left ideas) very largely confined to the margins of political debate. Yet it bears saying that the creation of a popular consensus around a new progressive

“commonsense” is a task which seems entirely beyond the political horizons of this kind of project. Thus, in a sense, the parliamentary ALP’s abdication of much of its traditional role has placed an even greater responsibility upon the project for a stronger, reformed left outside it.

Yet it is, of course, nonsense to say (as it is fashionable in some parts of the left to say) that because of this there is little or no difference between the parties. Indeed, it is precisely that kind of political vertigo which so discredits the left in the popular mind. We have little choice but to hope (and vote) for an ALP victory on July 11 — and for the re-emergence of some kind of serious left opposition within it, as well as outside.

— *David McKnight  
and David Burchell.*

## Laws Unto Themselves

**I**n April, the Queensland government introduced two pieces of legislation into parliament which affect all union members in the state. Amendments to the Industrial (Commercial Practices) Act were rushed through parliament in around two hours without prior public notice; these are now law. Amendments to the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act to introduce “voluntary employment agreements” or contracts were tabled and it is the government’s intention to have them passed in August. The changes are the most radical restructuring of industrial relations in the state since the introduction of conciliation and arbitration in 1916. The anti-strike provisions of the Commercial Practices legislation are some of the most severe of any western

democracy. The contract provisions are likely to reduce the employment conditions of private and public sector workers and undermine existing union organisation.

## Changes to the Industrial (Commercial Practices) Act

This act was introduced in 1984 and subsequently amended in 1985. Initially, it was a state version of the secondary boycott provisions of sections 45D and 45E of the Commonwealth Trade Practices Act. In 1985, during the SEQEB dispute, the legislation was changed far beyond the original intention. Penalties were applied to “primary disputes” between a union and employer which involved superannuation, union membership or demarcation. Moreover, unions and workers became responsible for any dispute for which seven days’ notice was not given. Cases were heard in the Supreme Court, not the Industrial Court, the process of granting injunctions and suing for damages was simplified, with maximum penalties of \$250,000 for unions and \$50,000 for individuals.

This year’s amendments further increase the severity of the legislation. First, the liability of unions and workers for disputes involving superannuation, union preference and membership has been tightened. Second, disputes concerning “trade or commerce” and “research or development” are now liable to penalty. Trade or commerce definitely includes interstate and overseas transactions; it is possible that the provision could cover any trading within the state. The definition of “research and development” is also exceptionally broad and includes acquiring, increasing, using, providing and disseminating information or knowledge as well as introducing or changing machinery or technology. Effectively, any “knowledge” or communication activity is encompassed, and all but the most trivial change in organisation or equipment.