LABORING UNDER ILLUSIONS

'Traditional Labor voters' and 'traditional Labor values' have become panaceas on the left and in the media, particularly after the NSW election debacle. David McKnight argues that their significance may in fact be more conservative than radical.

When the Unsworth government crashed to defeat in the March 19 New South Wales state elections, the culprit nominated by all and sundry was "the traditional Labor voter", who defected, it was said, because the government had deserted "traditional Labor values".

These phrases were repeated endlessly in the mainstream media. Not surprisingly the left took some comfort from this analysis. After all, hadn’t we been saying similar things since the 1984 election when a large protest vote had moved from Labor to the Nuclear Disarmament Party? But just who ‘traditional Labor voters’ are, and which ‘traditional Labor values’ are being referred to is not clear.

The scale of the NSW defeat was devastating, with Labor’s statewide vote dropping to less than 40 per cent. But so were the kind of seats lost, including Penrith, in Sydney’s outer west, and several traditional (that word again!) Labor strongholds near Wollongong and Newcastle.

The left can fairly claim that the image and substance of Labor as the party which projects economic justice has been severely damaged, particularly by the Hawke-Keating federal leadership.

An uncomfortable ex-Premier Barrie Unsworth said: "If they see their leadership dressed in black tie, smoking cigars, hobnobbing with the representatives of capitalism, they might question where the party’s going." While such statements may gladden the hearts of the left, the discontent with Labor is far more complex than this kind of "class analysis" allows.

Apart from shifting blame to the federal Labor Party, this kind of thinking perpetuates the idea that a pristine "working class" exists which is inherently anti-capitalist.

The NSW election began with a veritable symbol of all that is wrong with the Labor machine, tainted as it is with corruption: the Harris-Daishowa affair. Electoral laws designed by Labor to expose the big business backers of the Liberal party were evaded by their own drafters in order to hide Labor’s own business backers. The same backers, incidentally, were logging forests which Labor had pledged to save from the chainsaw.

Then there was the matter of gun controls which should have been a winner but which Labor fumbled. Likewise hospitals and health services, where the great Labor reform of the 1970s — free health care for all, removing health care from the hands of doctors — became an albatross. Few of these explanations for Labor’s defeat, however, depend on the assumption of class conscious workers feeling betrayed by Labor. Rather, they depend on seeing people in terms of categories such as consumers, environmentalists, commuters, women and so on, rather than in their abstract role as ‘the working class’. The gun control issue, for instance, saw rural workers acting in defence of a rural lifestyle (along with graziers and small business people) rather than in their alleged "class interests". Urban workers voted at least partly as "health consumers", while a sizeable proportion of union members voted Liberal or National.

In some ways it’s not surprising that the Labor Right employs a form of class analysis since increasingly the blue collar workers they are actually talking about are more often conservative than radical.

In the recriminations which followed NSW Labor’s defeat, Dick Klugman MP openly blamed Labor’s attachment to “greenies” as a reason why traditional Labor voters such as, in this case, timberworkers — deserted the ALP. Many others hinted at the same thing less openly. Senator Graham Richardson, leader of the Right, responded that conservationists were themselves part of the category “traditional Labor supporters”.

At stake here is a very important issue. Does Labor continue on its conservative course adjusting to the increasingly conservative (and shrinking) blue collar working class? Or does it work for an alliance of constituencies (including blue collar workers) around a progressive program? On Dick Klugman’s
interpretation, the theory that Labor must get back to its blue collar base may in fact result in increasing conservatism.

So who are "traditional Labor voters"? And what are "traditional Labor values"? One telling clue to the riddle involves one of Labor's new found allies: John Singleton, the advertising guru. In the late seventies a battle arose in the NSW Labor Council over the future of 2KY, the Council-owned radio station, which was losing money. The TLC leadership appointed one of its mates, Singleton, to pull the station back from the brink.

With the memory of Singleton's propaganda campaign against the Whitlam government (the so-called 'Workers Party') fresh in their mind, the left loudly protested at the appointment.

Then TLC Secretary Unsworth was convinced 'Singo' could turn the station around — and he was right. Using 2KY's base among a traditional blue collar audience who followed its comprehensive race calling, Singleton added country and western music and a gutsy talkback program where the accents were all Anglo "working class".

The left, to my knowledge, drew no wider lessons from this success and what it revealed about the state of working class culture and politics. Nor is anyone on the left asking now about talkback radio star Ron Casey's audience on 2KY — while rightly denouncing Casey's racism (as exhibited in several slurs on Australia's Asian communities).

Other changes in Labor's blue collar base are evident if you examine the key notion of "mateship" as part of this ethos. Today we hear about Hawke's 'mates' in big business; Mick Young is a 'mate' who must be 'looked after' with a cushy job in the public sector; and favours for "mates" of all kinds which, when greased with money, are known as corruption.

The use of the term mateship is a nice throwaway line by Canberra commentators but it also inadvertently identifies the historical fate of a style of Labor politics which is coming to an end. In the 1890s mateship was seen as the human basis for socialism. It meant sticking together against ruthless employers; it meant helping those in need; it meant egalitarianism. A whole Labor tradition was built up on a style of mateship seen as an essentially Australian quality. Labor represented the "real Australians".

Always a male quality 'mateship' is now becoming more a basis for conformism and distrust of the outsider. And often the outsider is a woman, a 'greenie', an Asian or some similar 'outside' social category.

Culturally, the mateship ethos has been represented in a long line of male characters typifying the battler — from Chips Rafferty to Paul Hogan. And a large part of Australian cultural revival in films is based on reworking the characters and lives of "the working class". But increasingly such activity creates a myth of blue collar working class Australia which is picturesque but unreal.

Some on the left and right of the labour movement similarly invoke mythological representations of Labor's supposed inherently radical blue collar base. The political consequences of this are rather more dangerous.

Today radicalism in the Labor Party, as in the wider left, originates less often among blue collar workers than among women, white collar workers, students and environmentalists. The classic institutions of a radical working class culture are either long gone or dying.

To a large extent the effects of this decline have been muted in the last few years because the top levels of the left-wing blue collar unions and the ACTU have restrained the worst excesses of Hawke-Keating conservatism.

But at election times, as in NSW on March 19, this grassroots conservatism among Labor's 'traditional' base, is beginning to make itself felt.

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