A Thinner Blue Line

Ever since the declaration of a State of Emergency for the Springbok Tour of 1971, the political strategies of Joh Bjelke-Petersen have been intimately connected to the issue of law and order. He has scarcely been alone in this in Australia. But the heady success of the Petersen machine is illustrated by the memory of some of the lesser conservative figures who sought political advantage in the same way — Askin in NSW, Bolte in Victoria, Court in Western Australia. Law and order politics does not explain Petersen's survival, but it has been indispensable to his projection of himself as the embodiment of all that is good for Queensland and the intractable opponent of enemies within the state and beyond.

For this reason, the Fitzgerald Inquiry into the relation between police and criminal activities has the potential to affect considerably more than simply the future administration of the Queensland Police Force. Opportunities for contesting the links between the National Party government and the “fight against crime” are now presented daily. Doubtless the National Party will, during the rest of the inquiry and in its aftermath, be placing a high priority on reconstructing these links. It seems all the more important than that the implications of the inquiry and its resolution be widely understood.

What has the inquiry revealed so far? Commentaries like this are not bound by the extraordinary rulings in the Queensland Parliament — and which enhance that institution's reputation for political irrelevance — which prohibit questions or comment on any aspect of the inquiry. What public debate there is at the moment is largely being conducted by journalists and editorial writers, with a handful of letter writers adding their queries about policing priorities in Queensland. Briefly, though, the Fitzgerald Inquiry has so far heard three bodies of evidence.

First, there was opening evidence from the state's senior police officers on police administration and police-government relations. Although the inquiry is examining a broad range of criminal matters, the focus of attention was on prostitution. Senior police agreed that policy in relation to prostitution was one of management rather than suppression of brothels and massage parlours. That policy was long-standing and, according to the Police Commiss-
wrong in most areas of government and public administration. Corruption inquiries here, as elsewhere in Australia, have been characterised more by painstaking and often speculative gathering of evidence. The current Queensland Inquiry has certainly had its share of painstaking investigation, but seems rapidly to be establishing an air of moral authority inducing confessions on the part of the corrupt.

It is difficult at present to tell why the fortunes of the inquiry are going so well. The explanation may be simply that Queensland is now so badly administered that the secrecy and lack of accountability which have characterised police affairs and those of government departments alike have generated their own conditions of destruction. The incapacity to remedy government or administrative abuses or bad decisions produces a lot of cynicism in Queensland, but it also produces a lot of anger when those abuses become intolerable. Policing is not the only area where incompetent or corrupt and abusive administration has produced widespread dissatisfaction leading to reversal of government decisions and undermining credibility.

On the day before the resignation of Assistant Commissioner Parker, formerly of the licensing branch and more recently in charge of crime control, the Premier officiated at a police social event. The occasion produced the standard Petersen speech of confidence in the police force — which is, he says, "the thin blue line between anarchy and us". For Petersen, the face of anarchy in Queensland has many forms. In the light of the inquiry evidence so far, it is worth recalling some other policing functions and their relation to the political agenda in Queensland.

Public order policing was, for many years, a central feature of the Petersen political strategy, from Viet Nam through the Springbok Tour to the street march campaign of the late 1970s. Changing political contexts have made it less central in recent years — now National Party Senators march against the Australia Card. But in 1985, the sacking of the SEQEB electricity workers was bolstered by anti-picketing legislation which the police were directed by the government to use.

Public order policing has been regarded as the chief example of the politicisation of the Queensland police force, but political direction of policing priorities has been evident in areas closer to the subject of the current inquiry. The Greenslopes abortion clinic raid in 1986 and the recent removal of condom vending machines in Brisbane's two universities were both carried out at the behest of a government which equates permissiveness with anarchy. Hence, not the least important result of the Fitzgerald Inquiry will be its
comments on evidence of government condonement of prostitution.

Other areas of policing in Queensland are less overtly marked by politicisation but are nevertheless a continual source of grievance. The policing of juveniles and Blacks is all too frequently marked by practices of intimidation, harassment and violence. Since 1982, a Police Complaints Tribunal has been in operation. Ironically, it was set up principally in response to earlier complaints of police corruption. Its almost exclusive business, however, has been inquiring, not into corruption, but into the steadily rising number of complaints of police abuses. The Tribunal has felt the need to emphasise its "independence" in recent times, but the secrecy of its hearings and the close connections of its personnel to the criminal justice administration in the state have undermined its effectiveness. Recently, the Tribunal has initiated its own inquiries into incidents involving politicians but in the aftermath of the widely publicised police raid on Blacks at a dance in Rosalie in 1986, the Tribunal did not feel impelled to follow up in the absence of a specific complaint.

Police interrogation and investigative practices are another area requiring legal and administrative reform and oversight. Queensland's last public inquiry into the police — the Lucas Inquiry in 1977 — detailed the practice of verbalising, but its suggestions regarding the practice of tape-recording interrogations have been ignored. Reforms in this area of course require a degree of commitment to equity in criminal justice administration. This is scarcely a high priority for a "law and order" government.

The Police Department in Queensland is always crying poor, arguing that it has (as it does) the lowest proportion of police per capita of all Australian states. Yet there never seems to be a shortage of police to attend demonstrations, picket lines, Blacks' parties, or the Rodney Rude show. There is also no shortage of money to spend on elaborate public relations and a glossy Annual Report with three-dimensional graphics and extensive photographic display. The police bureaucracy and the police unions are adept at creating a widespread impression of under-policing. But reported crime (except for fraud !) in Queensland is low relative to most other states, particularly NSW and Victoria. The Fitzgeral Inquiry raises the possibility that the perennial claims for more police and more powers will be stripped of their veneer of legitimacy. If so, then the future questions about policing in Queensland may become those of political and social accountability, and of setting priorities which genuinely meet the community need for protection against violent and anti-social crime. It must be admitted, of course, that such developments seem inconceivable under a regime which has seen policing always in terms of advantage to its own political fortunes.

Mark Finnane

A (Not So) Distant Mirror

"Market euphoria greets poll" trumpeted Wellington's evening paper following the New Zealand Labour Party's victory of August 15. Labour's victory led to a surge on the stock exchange and in the value of the NZ dollar. The election results are instructive about changing class attitudes and Labour's policies since 1984. There are lessons, too, for the Australian labour movement.

Side-by-side with Labour's commitment to a nuclear-free New Zealand and South Pacific has been a radical "restructuring" of the economy, based on deregulation of the finance sector, a 10% goods and services tax, and the ending of subsidies to the farming and manufacturing sectors. Justified as an unavoidable response to NZ's indebtedness, these measures have led to greater socio-economic polarisation, inflation levels of 19%, rising unemployment, and first mortgage rates of 21.5%.

The essentially "as-you-were" election result, with Labour increasing its majority, by four to 19, in the 97 seat single house, disguises some important features. Voting is not compulsory in NZ, and ministers most identified with Labour's economic policies (Lange, Palmer, Prebble, Douglas, Tizard) saw a 25% fall in their vote in their safe seats. On the other hand, Labour failed by just four hundred votes to take the wealthiest seat in the country: the equivalent would be the ALP winning Andrew Peacock's seat of Kooyong.

In a revealing pre-election analysis of voting intentions by socio-economic status, it was shown that professional people intended to vote Labour by 56% to 24% and managers and business people by 47% to 33%. At the other end of the scale, the semi-skilled intended to vote National by 36% to 35% and the unskilled by 35% to 31%. The latter groups, historically (and in 1984) Labour's back-bone, feel betrayed, and some ministers are now insisting that Labour's new priorities must be education and social welfare. Among the new MPs, too, are several experienced women trade unionists (about one-quarter of Labour's caucus is now female). Lange, on the other hand, was more delighted with
Labour’s inroads into wealthy areas and dismissed the slump in the working-class vote with the quip that “these people would vote for us even if we machine-gunned them”. Well, many working-class people do feel under attack and voted, or abstained, accordingly.

The decline in Labour’s votes in sale seats was, of course, paralleled, to a lesser degree, in Australia, and is one key lesson from NZ for the ALP. The other is NZ’s experience of the privatisation, now put firmly on the political agenda by Messrs.

Hawke, Button and Dawkins NZ shows clearly the socio-economic impact of “restructuring”.

Lange, like Hawke, despises the left and is “good mates” with financiers and speculators. At the same time, in NZ as here, the 1980s have seen the expansion of a large “under-class” of people abandoned by Labour governments and neglected by most trade unions: in particular, the unemployed, welfare recipients and the young. The issue in both countries is whether a left coalition can be moulded from these groups and others which are committed to peace, social justice and genuine equality of opportunity for all ethnic groups.

Peter McPhee

IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF ALR
- The ALP’s new face
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STOP PRESS!
AFTER THE GREAT CRASH

No smugness is intended in recording that the worst has happened in the weeks since the analysis of the world financial markets in my article “Sale of the Century” (see pages 8-16 of this issue) was written. Or maybe the worst is yet to come, as the dominoes from the Wall Street crash continue to fall.

Reactions are interesting. President Reagan says that “the system is working”. Yes indeed: if he means by that that crashes as well as booms are an integral part of a system of free markets.

Others have argued that the crash is the way the markets tell the US administration that it must cut its deficit. Surely there must be a better way! And why, in that case, did the markets continue to soar throughout the period when the deficit was blowing out?

The first important requirement is that the process of deregulation of major aspects of our economic life must end. There probably will be some deregulation. The issue will be rather what kind — for there are more economic ways than one to serve the interests of the wealthy.

On the political side, Mike Steketee observes of the Federal Opposition that behind the calm exterior “lies a repressed elation at the course of events” (Sydney Morning Herald, Oct 30). The left should reject such a disgraceful and cynical reaction: on the one hand because it will be the working people who will bear the burden of yet another bout of “restructuring” directed from the right, though a few millionaires might bite the dust (or spatter the pavement). And, on the other hand, because economic crisis does not necessarily engender a swing of fortunes to the left, as the busting of the long postwar boom in 1974 proved.

It is still too early to predict what edifices will be brought down by the continuing rumblings from the crash, or to formulate a concrete left program. But if the only hope of avoiding another 1929 is of an enlightened, co-ordinated policy on the part of the political, financial and industrial leaders of the West, that, in the current circumstances, is a slim hope indeed.

What is required is an informed, powerful left intervention, both practically and ideologically. For the economists of the right will undoubtedly switch their attack to serve the interests of the wealthy in these new conditions without a qualm about dumping some of the nostrums they have only recently been proclaiming to be eternal truths.

— Eric Aarons.
If Angela Carter believed in her characters, believed them to be "real", she says they would become Fevvers, the outlandish circus heroine of her most recent novel *Nights at the Circus*. Over six foot tall in her stockinged feet, bosomy and irrepresibly selfconfident, Fevvers is what Carter isn't.

Monstrous fiction that she is, Fevvers defies gravity with the aid of gargantuan purple red wings which may or may not really sprout from her bird-woman body. Her slogan shouts: "Is she fact or is she fiction?" Fevvers lives by making a spectacle of herself. She makes a fiction of her life, and her life out of fiction.

Carter, too, makes her living out of fiction. She is one of those few writers able to live on the money she earns from scribbling. Since the birth of her young son, however, she hasn't scribbled much. *Nights at the Circus* came out in 1984 and *Black Venus*, a collection of short stories penned in the early 'eighties, in 1985.

Being the breadwinner of the family, and therefore pricked by necessity, Carter has embarked on other projects that pay. She enjoyed scripting the screenplay for *The Magic Toyshop*, for instance, a recent film adaptation of her 20-year collection of short stories penned in the baggy nineteenth century novel, taking an unholy glee in whisking virgin Melanie out of her stolid bourgeois existence and into the grimy and incestuous underworld of her uncle's magical shop. These days, too, Carter feels more sympathy with her heroines as women, perhaps because she's become more conscious of sexual politics.

In *Heroes and Villains*, written shortly after *The Magic Toyshop*, the heroine finds herself in a situation that's just as frightening, and even more violent. Marianne is confined to her academic father's ivory tower and invents a "noble savage" out of her furious virgin nights. In the enclosed fairy tale worlds of Carter's earlier novels, desire rubs electric against the boundaries imposed on it. All her characters are, Carter says, intellectual propositions. Like the savage Jewel, who is nothing more than the romantic image of the barbarian as constructed by the eighteenth century's age of reason. But what happens when you try to live with him? Marianne, to her chagrin, finds out.

Fevvers is an altogether different proposition. The situations and the choices confronting her — and that's what Carter would have us identify with — are part and parcel of the baggy nineteenth century novel, the rambling and discursive fictions of a society obsessed with the freakish and bizarre (witness the career of the Elephant Man) and fearful of female sexuality. Cue for Fevvers: is she freak or woman?

It's tempting to liken Carter, who digresses easily from one subject to another, to one of these nineteenth century fictions spreading its limbs and relaxing. Perhaps she's mellowing.

In her own *sotto voce*, nothing like Fevvers' voice that clangs like dustbin lids, Carter warns against taking the parallels too far. Trying new forms is just part of a writer's craft (she'd bore herself otherwise), and the fact that *Nights at the Circus* is written in the comic mode doesn't necessarily mean she is any happier nowadays. Not that she minds being happy. It can make her nervous, however, as she doesn't expect it to last.

Thinking of the writers whose scribbling she admires, she's appalled by the lives they led. Riddled with syphilis and near the end of his days, Baudelaire would bow as if to a stranger when he passed a mirror. And what of Dostoyevsky who, although quite good on the woman question, was unforgivably anti-Semitic.

But Carter believes that Christina Stead was content. Fame found her relatively late, by which time her moral fibre was far too strong to succumb. Nor was she too wealthy. While Fevvers' eyes may narrow to $$ signs at the sight of a diamond necklace, Carter wants nothing more than to be comfortable.

For all that Carter respects precise, intellectual writing, the adjectives keep dripping from her pen, she says. Like the diamonds hanging from Fevvers' ears, perhaps, they are multiple mirrors turning. Like Fevvers herself, and the novel she inhabits, they are always writable large.

Lyndell Fairleigh