

# ALR

## MARGINS

### *The Burden of History*

History is the key to liberation. History is an insufferable burden. Which one do you choose? That has been the essential choice facing the Labor movement since the election of the Hawke government eight years ago. The fabric of the Labor Party has been stretched in every direction as its parliamentarians have headed off this way, while the rank-and-file has gone another. Business and respectability have beckoned; ordinary suburban and provincial workers have appealed, but less so.

At the centre of the torment has been the uncertainty about what the Labor Party should stand for when it is in office, and this has been the nature of the debate within the Left from the mid-80s onwards. But it is possible that the real question the ALP needs to ask itself is one that confronts deeper, darker concerns, matters that go to the very *raison d'être* of the party. Is it relevant at all?

There seems to be some evidence that the Labor Party has steadily lost its relevance to our broader society during the past 15 years. One of the most potent examples of this is the urban infrastructure issue: first, the difficulty with which the Left, and more particularly Brian Howe, has been faced in trying to make urban infrastructure a key Labor issue; and, second, Labor's self-delusion in thinking that the adoption of the issue

now is proof that it is in touch with what is actually going on out there.

The chronic problems of the outer suburbs have plagued our cities—and for 'our cities' read the people who live there, the welfare system that must service the place, the industries that do and don't establish themselves there—for up to 30 years. The suburban sprawl is an integral part of our post-war culture. Whitlam recognised this in the late 60s, launched the 1972 election campaign at Blacktown and implemented policies aimed at providing services in developing metropolitan areas. But when Kerr sacked him, the ALP lost interest in this fundamental issue and it took 15 years to rediscover it. Why?

How could such a thing go missing in a party that purports—wrongly—to be mass-based? Should the ordinary working men and women, with their new families and their massive mortgages and their fear of unemployment, have formed a lobby group and paid a bunch of suits to make representations to the nabobs of the ALP on their behalf?

The modern Australian society sits very uncomfortably with the institutions that underpin the Labor movement: the trade unions and the various state branches of the ALP. Organisationally, the movement still reflects a post-colonial society that took refuge in suburbanisation after many grim decades as a social and economic frontier. The Labor Party and the unions are founded on notions of struggle and self-improvement, notions that suited that early 20th century framework. They were established as vanguards of action by and for ordinary people; the key to their success was that people had to not only get involved but want to get involved.

Those fundamental suppositions are not native to the great mass of modern Australians. In the information age, there is very much a 'fee for service' attitude towards political action. Australians expect direct, tangible benefits for their efforts. Many important aspects of life nowadays dis-

courage enfranchisement; physical, emotional and spiritual disconnection is a strong feature of the suburban lifestyle.

The example of consumer goods helps to make the point. For the average suburban working family, an important goal is the acquisition of a substantial quantity and variety of sound and video equipment and whitegoods. In the past 15 years, these (mostly imported) goods have become inexpensive, in relative terms, and are within reach of most income earners.

The ALP and the ACTU have concentrated their efforts—although many critics say, with not enough vigour—on enabling people to have enough income to obtain these goods. But that is all, and it is only half of the task. Labor has paid little regard to how such consumerism and the messages and stimuli contained in the newly-established home entertainment centres have been gradually transforming the Australian people and their ideas of social responsibility.

This is a society of watchers, not doers. Labor Party and union membership has fallen because out beyond the freeway's outer reaches you feel like you've been done over by political institutions that don't feel for you any more. If you're going to join something, make it something you'll enjoy, like the footy club, or something that can produce results you can see, like a local conservation group.

For the Labor Party, the way ahead is not a matter of marketing or reorganisation. It is a matter of its activists and parliamentarians watching what people watch, reading what people read, waiting for the bus route and the child-care centre to come to their neighbourhood, being frightened of the things that frighten them. A proud history of struggle is all very well but it's no help when you're stuck in the peak-hour traffic every morning.

SHAUN CARNEY is a columnist for *The Age*.