

AFTER

Politics

It's not just the Left, or Labor, or politicians, which are on the nose. Politics itself is in disrepute. Peter Beilharz mounts a spirited defence of the political.

Lost, awash in the heaving oceans, they see from afar what looks like a mirage, the ship which will save them. It approaches, their hopes escalate; it is real. It comes closer yet, and they clamour to board it. But its captain is a corpse, dressed in a red cap, and the ship sails on and by, without regard for their plight. It is the ship of death. The story line is Edgar Allan Poe's, but William Morris and Ernest Belford Bax chose to use it to open their century-old work, *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*. The ship of death, for socialists, they say, represents capitalist civilisation. It cannot, will not save us. A striking image, if one that is singularly devoid of practical advice. Who knows, it may be better to ride on the ship of

death than to sink without trace at sea; but these are garden-variety facts which revolutionaries typically see fit to ignore.

Revolutionaries have never been much concerned with politics, notwithstanding the overly politicised personas which they all too frequently strike up. Saint-Simon imagined the future society as stateless: a legacy which Marxism, with characteristic misfortune, carelessly managed to embrace. Marx took on this view, in essence; politics was to do with class societies, therefore the end of class societies would also mean the end of politics. Of course, there are ambivalences in Marx's views of politics; like Morris, he also implied (in *The Civil War in France*) that politics would continue, but in a new form: not in the bourgeois talking-shop called parliament but in proletarian councils. Morris, whose disdain for bourgeois politics probably equalled Marx's, wrote only half-humorously in *News from Nowhere* that in the socialist society of the future the Houses of



Parliament would be put to good use for the distribution of vegetables and the storage of manure. Witty lot, the revolutionaries.

But in all this the various representatives of the revolutionary tradition were also conforming to a far broader trend. Opposition to parliament, even to democracy, became a major current after the Great War and into the 1930s, with the rise of syndicalism, factory council experiences and factory occupations throughout Germany, Hungary and Italy as well as Russia, the black cat of sabotage of the Wobblies in Australia and America, and so on. Syndicalists, fascists, even Fabians such as George Bernard Shaw viewed bourgeois democracy, and even representative democracy itself, as a major obstacle to the progress of humanity. It was as though the captain of the ship of the dead was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, revitalised to do a dramatic return performance. But what's the difference between contempt for 'bourgeois' politics and contempt for politics? Can we really take claims to direct democracy seriously? Wouldn't it take too many evenings, and produce too much heartburn?

We all know that politics doesn't stop at the heavy doors of parliament house; no score for making that point. But at the same time we live in a culture—local and global—in which politics is widely discredited. Again, none of this is new; socialist critics such as Vere Gordon Childe were making these claims in his *How Labour Governs* in 1923, as were carping conservatives such as Anthony St. Ledger in *Australian Socialism*, close to the turn of Morris' century. Corruption and self-seeking are two well-established complaints about the conduct of political life in Australia, and

the stories seem only to become more lurid with the passing of time.

But now there's more; a sense, which some enthusiasts would call postmodern, that politics is dead because it is modern, constructed by grand and obsolete metanarratives of reform (Left) or consolidation (Right). The certainties, such as they were, seem to have evaporated. Labor governments can no longer be predicted to follow certain historically claimed patterns; indeed, in some cases they cannot even be expected to conduct the affairs of state with a modicum of ordinary competence. They have neither the policies nor the capacities to enact them, while the opposition has few apparent capacities and a few more wild ideas to which they cling in order to appear different.

Is this all there is? It's difficult to say. Some senior figures in the Victorian labour movement expect the ALP to spend at least 20 years in the desert, though the recent behaviour of Mr Kennett may serve to take a few years off that sentence. On the other hand, the uncertainties go either way, as the results of the NSW election suggest. Socialism may be rather largely discredited, but capitalism, now alone on the stage of world history, is tripping up with unsurprising regularity. The gloss has worn off capitalism for at least half of Germany, and the attraction of the Liberal Party is already somewhat tarnished around large parts of New South Wales.

At the same time, it does seem reasonably clear that the ALP, if not itself a ship of death, is at least without purpose, without direction. When the wailing comes to such matters as the balance of payments, we are treated to the same, passive, decade-old observations that industry needs to be restructured. Everybody knows this, and everybody knows it isn't happening. Thus the widely shared sense of impotence and melancholy, and the reinforced sense that politics sucks. The reform process keeps going wrong, even when it's tried; this seems to be one moral of the experience of the Cain/Kirner government. And then there are those who inhabit higher terrain, who offer us Accord Mark 42 as salvation while wilfully inducing recession and extending the dole-for-trying-to-get work queues.

The prospect of a period of Labor opposition thus seems somewhat less depressing than it may have in the past. This is not, of course, to counsel the defeatist culture for which Labor's real vocation is negation. What's more of a worry is what Labor will return as, when the time comes. If it returns as the party seeking power at all costs, then very little will have been won. Nor can it simply be presumed that Labor will benefit from some sort of generational fix, à la Messrs Kroger and Costello. Young Labor radicals imaginably are a bigger part of this problem than has ever been recognised, not least of all given the historic trend in Australia as elsewhere, to the juridicalisation of politics across the 20th century. The image of the ship of death here threatens to be replaced by the picture of aspirant hordes scrambling onto Laurie Connell's sinking yacht (blue caps).

If we return to thinking not only about previous periods of Labor hegemony, but also to the earlier century, themes of

treachery and hijack may perhaps become less constricting. A century ago, while Morris was still active, attempting in his own commodified way to beautify life as well as to radicalise politics, the ALP was of course in the making. But there were also other forms of radical organisation, such as the Victorian Socialist Party and the Social Questions Committee, where people chose to seek influence over local culture. Feminists and socialists were already setting precedents for working outside independently of the parties, attempting to form a new civic culture. Politics was not yet viewed as the property of parties in the debilitating way in which it now is. The mass party, exemplified by the German Social Democratic Party, had barely yet come to dominance, and it in any case had a vital internal and local life as well as a bureaucratic mass structure.

Politics, in any case, was not completely identified with the winning of state power (and here, again, bolshevism has to take its share of the blame for the transition from 'workers' power' to the seizure of 'state power'). In our own case, alongside this warmer stream, there was also a cooler current in which politics in its Australian inflexion concerned roads and bridges, bread and circuses, where localism never really took off in the way in which it did in German socialist or British radical and Fabian life.

Fabianism itself, a century ago, was in fact a profoundly local and municipal movement. Contrary to widespread radical commonsense, it only became statist later, during the interwar years, when everyone was falling over themselves about planning. By the 30s, in a sense, the ideology of politics had already become dominated by the idea of the state, a process which our local forebears proudly pioneered. Statism was, in some ways, made in Australia, and exported without much value added.

But none of this is to reject the state, to buy into that axiom of the illustrious Lennon (non-Bolshevik) that 'everything

the state touches turns to shit'. In this, libertarian, tradition, the state is fetishised, turned into a thing which it is not. For there is always the local state, and beyond it, the panoply of various, muddling institutions which we need in order to organise health and education and the rest. The point may rather be that just as politics has become excessively juridicalised, so has it become too much enmeshed with notions of state power. The outcome ought not be to deinstitutionalise politics so much as to rethink and reclaim it from the state.

William Morris and Ernest Belford Bax were still remarkably Victorian thinkers. The book which they opened with the ship-of-death nevertheless had a happy ending, though like *Blue Velvet* the reader is left uncomfortably uncertain as to which story really wins out. Like Kautsky, like Marx, like the Webbs and Ramsay MacDonald they nevertheless themselves believed history's tide still to be running in their direction. Again, of course, there were countervailing moments. Thus Morris wrote in plaintive inspiration in *A Dream of John Ball* that history was a process where people fought and lost the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and others then have to fight for what they meant under another name...

What follows socialism is as yet unknown to us. But socialism, or something like it, will remain one voice in modernity, the alter ego of capitalism, on which we must draw. Amid all the morbid symptoms, signs of political life will still need to be found. The end of the Labor Decade must also be—in a post-triumphal sense—a new beginning.

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