

# Rural Retreat

**Who would vote for the Nationals? Certainly not members of the Left, who tend to consider the party to be at best a quaint anachronism, at worst a collection of vicious anti-intellectuals whose red-necked arrogance hides corruption and greed.**

Environmentalists are unimpressed and consider the party to be out of touch with green concerns for forests, conservation and agricultural sustainability. Urban workers believe the Nationals' main interest is in protecting the privileges of wealthy, privately-schooled farmers, while the rich in Toorak and Vaucluse only laugh at the pettiness and parochialism of the 'hayseeds'. The urban middle classes are too concerned with marriages, maternity and mortgages to be seduced by a party preoccupied with the state of rural roads.

So, who does vote for the Nationals? Most farmers do. So, too, do small business people and many professionals in rural Australia - they form part of a provincial elite which hangs its hat on the future growth and development of medium-sized towns and regional centres in rural areas. Many members of the rural working class - workers who are often themselves off farms or who provide services to the farm sector - feel well-disposed towards the Nationals. The social cement that binds these groups is an overwhelming belief that rural Australia must have a voice and gain political power if it is to capture its fair share of economic resources.

There is said to exist in rural Australia a pervasive 'country mindedness', an ideology which reflects an entrenched conservative attitude to life (and, with this the highest respect for God, Queen and Nation). In its raw form it pits the rural 'battlers' against the city 'bludgers'. This ideology helps to shape political

debates in the bush and it is thus often suggested that if the Nationals ceased to exist a new party would appear to fill the vacuum, a party which would give weight to the farmers' claims about the moral superiority of tilling the soil and the virtues of country living.

Despite their attempts to rekindle this pro-rural ideology, the Nationals today are a beleaguered party. Corruption in Queensland, the hearings of the Independent Commission Against Corruption in NSW, continued in-fighting over policies and leadership at state level and the call, both inside and outside the party, for amalgamation with the Liberals have served as destabilising factors. Once a party with clear intentions in economic and social matters, the Nationals in the era of Bjelke-Petersen, Sparkes, Sinclair and Murray have lost direction and have forfeited the claims to moral superiority which their supporters might have had.

In blindly following the Liberals toward a free-market philosophy, the Nationals have abandoned those interventionist policies (in particular, policies of decentralisation and farm subsidisation) which had previously advantaged their constituents. In the March federal election the Nationals performed dismally, losing former leader Charles Blunt's seat of Richmond, as well as the seats of Page and Kennedy, to Labor. To add to the debacle, John Stone managed to lose the seat of Fairfax to the Liberals. Those who wish for the Nationals' political resurgence are aware that the party's problems are not merely the result of a 'poor image'. Demography is working against them. Today, Australia has half the number of farms it had in the mid-1950s and, as a group, farmers comprise less than 5% of the workforce. While the cities have grown through overseas migration, little of this growth has spilled over into inland Australia. Those who are moving to regional centres tend not to

be National voters: when they vote conservatively they vote Liberal. The Nationals, it seems, are incapable of appealing to city voters; demographic trends thus condemn them to a continuing loss of their own numbers.

The second factor working against the Nationals concerns the altered social consciousness of voters in Australia. In a decade of landcare the Nationals still seem to be mining the soil and bulldozing trees - supporting dubious land development projects and endorsing policies which turn the palest green red with rage.

Third, both the Liberal and Labor parties have rural platforms which appeal to many voters. Farmers, often grudgingly, admit that John Kerin has been one of Australia's best Primary Industry ministers and have appreciated a good many of the macro and micro economic changes which Labor has implemented.

And, given the Nationals' subservience in recent years to the Liberal agenda, many country voters are asking whether there is anything distinctive about National policies if they are no longer specifically tapered to the rural voter. Indeed, following March 24, the Liberals actually hold more 'rural' seats than do the Nationals!

A fourth factor in the Nationals' decline concerns the peculiar position of the farmers' own 'union', the National Farmers Federation. The NFF has abandoned the traditional concerns of the farm lobby in the spheres of protection and regulation.

Its free market ideologues argue that removal of 'market distortions' (such as subsidies, tariffs and statutory marketing legislation), as well as the removal of what they believe to be clumsy regulations, is the key to success for Australian agriculture in the 1990s. In this model the least efficient producers must be sacrificed for the benefit of those

remaining (namely, the richer, bigger, technologically sophisticated farmers).

The NFF's economic arguments are implicitly opposed to support for the rural poor and needy (regardless of how this group is defined). Farmers have been receiving a strong message from the NFF that the days of special concessions and support are over: yet farmers' support for the Nationals has been based on the understanding that the latter would, through cunning and blackmail if necessary, manage to deliver the concessions and support so needed by the farmers. The NFF is telling farmers, rather bluntly, that they should abandon the Nationals until the party accepts the NFF's anti-interventionist line. In the eyes of the farmers' union, then, the farmers' party is an anachronism. The Nationals remain one of only a handful of rural-based parties in the Western world. According to many observers, their days as an effective political entity are numbered.

For those who would wish to rejoice in the apparent demise of the Nationals, however, there are a number of sobering points which must be borne in mind. First, with a current paid-up membership of some 130,000, the Nationals can claim the biggest support base of any political party in Australia. And, importantly, they have access to more power and wealth than these numbers alone would imply. Second, the Nationals, unlike the Democrats or Greens, are a traditional party within the Australian political system, not some unknown quantity. With 14 members in the House of Representatives, they remain well poised to form part of a

viable alternative Coalition government at subsequent elections.

Finally, the Nationals have a new leader whose political career should be watched with great interest. Despite having served two decades in state and federal politics, Tim Fischer is not well known beyond the farm gate. He is a farmer who believes strongly in the Church (he's a practising Catholic), bushwalking, the Flag, Anzacs (he is, as well, a Vietnam veteran), war memorials, decentralisation and trains. He's a bachelor of 43 going on 63. But he is energetic and dedicated. Indeed, he can be so dedicated to causes that his concerns at times seem a little bizarre



*The wombat's friend: new Nationals leader Tim Fischer*

- such as the time he car-phoned a Sydney newspaper to report the number of dead wombats he was passing on one NSW highway, or when he crusaded for Pope John Paul II to climb Mt Kosciusko as a gesture of Australian-Polish solidarity. He has assumed leadership at a time when

rural Australia is undergoing quite significant structural change - a great deal of which is seen to be socially harmful. Australian rural communities have suffered throughout the 'seventies and 'eighties as a result of cost-price pressures in farming, of corporate rationalisations orchestrated by agribusiness and of progressive reduction in the level of government services. On basically all issues of social equity - unemployment, poverty, health, welfare and education - rural people are more disadvantaged than their urban counterparts.

Fischer is capable of providing strong conservative leadership at a

time when the Nationals must rebuild their links with provincial Australia. He may just be capable of forging a new identity for the ailing Nationals if he can abandon the old recipe of pork-barrelling and replace this with a new rural vision which encompasses a non-polluting agriculture, support for family farmers and the creation of viable rural towns. He will need, in the process, to extend his obvious concern for native fauna to concerns for forests, soils and people.

Ironically, it may be that in future driest-of-dry debates between a Hewson-led Liberal Party and a Keating-led Labor Party, Fischer and his Nationals may provide the only real

relief. Whether this will be comic relief depends largely on Fischer's ability to develop policies which will lead to rural revitalisation.

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# Crisis as usual

*It's not only the Soviet Union which is breaking up. Yugoslavia too is threatened with dismemberment. ABC Radio's Pierre Vicary recently interviewed Leo Kreft, a member of the Central Committee of the Slovene Communist Party and Director of the official Scientific and Publicity Centre.*

*On the opposite page he talks to Aleksandr Broz, son of the late Marshal Tito and a member of the Central Committee of the Croatian Communist Party (now renamed the Party of Democratic Change).*

Yugoslavia at present seems to be going in a strange direction. Slovenia and Croatia have recently gone to the polls in multi-party elections and the ruling parties have ceded power to opposition coalitions. In the south of the country, on the other hand, you still have the unreconstructed communist party running the country on its own, and the federal party hasn't changed at all. How can a country function like that?

**KREFT:** I am sure that the process of change going on in Croatia and Slovenia at present is going on also in other parts of the country. In Macedonia, and even in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia, the idea of political pluralism is growing in strength. It's quite certain that everywhere in Yugoslavia the same thing will happen sooner or later. I believe towards the end of this year everybody will have had multi-party elections, and that will mark the beginning of a kind of more earnest dialogue about the future of Yugoslavia.

But in Serbia what seems to have happened is the communist party has simply transformed itself into some form of national party.

That's right. But they don't want to

have elections. That I believe is a big mistake. They could get something from elections now. In six or seven months time, however, they will be a party with much less credibility, and their failure to hold elections earlier will be held against them. So I think that in Serbia in the near future the deconstruction of communism will be sharper and more dramatic than in Slovenia where we went step by step.

How do you feel as a socialist, having watched Eastern Europe over the last few months, where socialism seems to have been tossed out of the window. Can something still be saved?

I think so. We tried to begin with a totally new ideology of socialism in our country after 1948 and we did not succeed. We went back into a kind of 'actually existing socialism'. So we have to start again from the very beginning. And this process will go on in Eastern Europe as well.

Let's talk about the comparisons being made with Lithuania. Slovenia, too, is a small country with a tradition of wanting to be independent without, of course, the same long term history. Is it fair to see Slovenia as a sort of little Lithuania?

I don't like these comparisons - not least because we still don't know what will happen to Lithuania! My own preference is for a kind of confederal position of Slovenia in Yugoslavia. Secession is a very dangerous idea for Slovenia because we don't have a historical tradition, we don't have a legal tradition, and our borders aren't secured by international settlement because everything was settled upon the Yugoslav state. Yugoslavia began its life as a unitary state, and then became a federal state, so it's not a matter of independent states having come together. And we believe also that this confederal process can in time lead to a kind of autonomy in a future Yugoslav state. So we believe in an integrative process - not based on a

one-party system or ideology, of course, but on the market system.

Do you see the dangers of civil war? Could it come to that?

Certainly there is that danger at present. There are parties, especially in Croatia and Serbia, which have built their political program for elections on the level of fervent nationalism. It's quite obvious in Croatia that people would like to have some national idea, perhaps of the 19th century kind, because nations in this region didn't have the opportunity to go through that kind of nationalism. We will go through a very dangerous period, but I don't believe it will end in civil war.

And yet many of the noises being made now are very similar to the noises being made in 1848. We seem to have gone back 150 years in terms of national aspirations.

New parties tend to begin their life at the point at which their ancestors stopped theirs. So in this country we have right wing parties which have to begin as if their own tradition stopped somewhere in 1939 or 1940. We in our own way are going back to 1914, before communism, trying to understand the splits in the Left between communism and social democracy in new terms and to find a way to rethink the 20th century. So everybody is in a way going back to rethink their own history.

You've still got a picture of Tito on your wall. A few hundred kilometres to the south they put him on trial for counterrevolution. What will happen to the Tito memory?

Tito's memory will go through a period of demythologisation. And that demythologisation will have to be as strong as mythologisation once was. Of course it's not very easy to be a Titoist today, but everybody has to find their own way to understand their own past. As for me personally I don't think that Tito's image in the

# Tito-a-tete

**What are the major problems that Croatia faces after the election?**

**BROZ:** Major problems, my God. There are so many of them that it's hard to say, but I think the question of 'social property' is fundamental. I don't think that state ownership is a substitute for that because that hasn't worked in east or west. Maybe a combination of privatisation and giving the worker the chance to be a shareholder will make industry more efficient. Only with more efficient industry can we survive all these changes now.

**They say people work about 2 or 3 hours a day. Is that true?**

As much as that? Well, I would not say that people work 2 or 3 hours a day. On the other hand, if you look at the individual productivity of the worker, I think it's higher than West Germany, but the quality of the productivity is two or three times lower.

The problem is really bureaucracy. If you look at our people who are  
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*Fallen Idol: Tito's funeral in 1980*

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future will be as bad as it seems today. Even if you agree that he was a dictator they were 30 very peaceful years in Yugoslavia.

I feel rather sorry for the older people, the people who were young when World War Two began, who fought to build a socialism, who watched this Yugoslavia grow and now are watching their world fall apart.

Yes, it's quite hard for them. And it's even harder because a lot of political argument today in Slovenia and elsewhere, is built upon the idea that the partisans and of course communists have been responsible for nothing but evil these last 50 years. It's

very hard for these people to find that they have become criminals at the end of their life.

**It's obviously the first time you've had this sort of election in your lifetime. It must be a new experience for people like yourself to actually have to go out and sell yourselves. Have you enjoyed going out and meeting people, and talking in front of large crowds?**

Some of us of course have always been in a kind of opposition within the party, and we've always been working through the media. The older communist politicians don't like the media. The media shows up their mistakes, embarrassments and so on. If you are sure about your own policy you like the media. If you are not, you don't like them. So, yes, I've been

travelling around a lot. We staged a lot of popular events in towns, went to popular meeting places, and so on. It is nice to be able to assure yourself as a communist that you can speak with people who don't like you; that you can discuss things on a normal level with people of opposing views.

**It seems to me that a lot of people have voted against the communists simply because they've been in power for so long.**

When we began this process, when we began our fight inside the party, we knew that in this first election we would be paying for all of the bad feelings about the communism of the past. It's the price which we have to pay for real democracy. And we are aware of that and will pay it with a smile.

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working abroad, they are among the best workers. When they come back they don't get the same results. So it's not a question of the worker, it's a question of the organisation of the job.

#### How stable is this country?

Nationalism is always an easy thing to sell, but its consequences are another matter. I don't think that the people in Yugoslavia are prepared to have a war among themselves. You have to remember that, constitutionally, each republic entered Yugoslavia freely and this means that they can also leave freely. And because everybody knows that, that is the guarantee for me that they are not going to do so. So the talk in Croatia and Slovenia about absolute independence was just election advertising. I don't think they really believe that they would be able to do it.

Nationalism is not solving the problem, it's only making things more complicated. Don't forget that the younger generation did not experience the influence of nationalism during the war. That is one of the problems that we face today, that the people and the parties are talking about nationalism without knowing what it means.

#### What is the future for the Croatian Communist Party?

I think that it is much better that we as communists change our own world than that somebody else does it for us. I think that we have selected the right way because here political pluralism and a multi-party system are not being brought about by demonstrations, but by the Communist Party and I think that this is the guarantee for all the others that we have a flexible view.

The Communist Party has a big ad-

vantage, and that is that we have the best trained and skilled people, best management, and we have certain results behind us - a security of social living, a social standard. It's much easier from opposition to try to destroy something than to build it up. So the new government are going to have very hard times because they have to produce results. They are promising to double monthly salaries, without saying how they will do so.

At the same time, their radical proposals might make unemployment 20-30% higher. When you give these election promises it's better to be careful, because tomorrow is going to be more expensive. I think that the next elections will be the really important ones because then the people are going to have the experience of the opposition parties in power as well. They may see their interests differently then.

## Zapping Czechs

*One event which escaped media coverage of the Eastern European revolutions is the appointment of rock musician and composer Frank Zappa as emissary for culture for the Czechoslovak government. The following is an edited version of an interview with Zappa, by David Corn, for the US weekly, The Nation (19.3.90).*

#### How did you make your first contact with President Vaclav Havel?

I called Michael Kicab, who is both a famous Czechoslovak rock-and-roll musician and - now here's progress - a member of parliament. We had met in Los Angeles last year, and now all of a sudden he's in the middle of a democratic revolution. "Could I possibly have an interview with Havel?" I asked. No problem, he said.

Thousands of fans greeted me when I arrived in Prague with my video crew. For twenty years, my albums have been smuggled into the country. The President told me he especially likes my early records with the Mothers of Invention and the

Bongo Fury album I made with Captain Beefheart.

#### But you were there to discuss business as well.

Right. I started to talk to him on behalf of Financial News Network. Then at a small lunch with Havel, his wife, Olga, Richard Wagner, Vice Minister and adviser for economy and ecology, and Valtr Komarek, a deputy prime minister and leader of their new economic team, we discussed how the country could increase its income, and the conversation continued later that day at dinner.

At my request, Milan Lukes, the Czech Minister of Culture, was present. Havel and his ministers know they need some Western investment, but they don't want all the ugliness that often invades a country with Western investment. The easiest way to keep the lid on that is to have someone involved whose primary concern is culture, who can reject or modify a project if it is going to have a negative impact on society. Hence my request

for the involvement of the Minister of Culture.

After dinner, Lukes went on television and announced that I would be representing Czechoslovakia on trade, tourism and cultural matters.

#### So what's the plan for Czechoslovakia?

What they don't want can be summed up by the comment urgently made by one of the many kids who trailed me throughout my visit: "Frankie, Frankie, please don't bring me Las Vegas." There is a direction in which they want to head. Look at Austria, which does \$10 billion a year in tourism. Austria has managed to convert its culture - its concert halls, museums and architecture - into a consumable commodity and at the same time preserve its heritage. Czechoslovakia, with its musical, theatrical and artistic legacy, has the potential for the same. All I knew about Czechoslovakia before I got there was what I had seen on Cable

**News Network:** people walking around in dingy, gray streets and having a revolution. I had no idea how pretty and quiet it is. Prague is clean and comfortable, and the food is good. The airport is not a hellhole like Sheremetyevo in Moscow. This is a very pleasant country, and it's in good shape. They need to create a tourism infrastructure that makes it more accessible to the West.

According to Vice President Vladimir Dlouhy, the total amount of hard-currency trade between Czechoslovakia and all Western countries is \$4 billion annually. If they can increase it by only \$1 billion, that would represent a 25% boost in the overall standard of living. I doubt whether any other Eastern European nation could do so well in the short term.

**But what about hard industry? General Motors is setting up a factory in Hungary. Will we see the same in Czechoslovakia?**

Havel and his advisers do want industry, but they do not want to import businesses that will exacerbate the ecological problems left behind by the communists.

Since Czechoslovakia still burns a lot of coal, I suggested that the government explore magneto-hydrodynamics (MHD). This is a process in which low-grade coal is burned but the emissions are cleaned, put through a loop and used to increase the electricity output - like a turbocharge.

Just about every telephone company on the planet has been to Prague offering to fix the country's inefficient telephone system. And, no surprise, the price tag is enormous. Not one of these companies had suggested to the Czechoslovak government, as I did, that it go cellular. This will make unnecessary the stringing of wires through ancient buildings with nine centuries of history.

Better ways of burning coal, a new phone system, tourism - this was our dinner conversation. This is a brand new government made up of artists, writers and musicians. They know they are making over society. That's their mission. But they realise they will ultimately be judged on whether they - an artistic, humane group - can run an economy.

**And what makes Frank Zappa the right person to advise a nation on its trade and economic development?**

Do I need to be an expert in international finance to do this job, to help writers, musicians and intellectuals achieve their vision? It's just like making a piece of music. You start with the theme. Then, what's the melody? How do you develop the harmony? What's the rhythm below it? You don't have to know about international financing. You just have to know about composition.

## Walshed!

May was the month of Peter Walsh. With all the subtlety of a Mallee bull, the former Finance Minister stormed through the record of the federal government, the immigration debate, the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody - and of course the PM's backbone.

Among the chief targets: Graham Richardson, former Minister for the Environment and earlier still numero uno headkicker for the NSW ALP Right. Among the recipients of his praise: new Finance Minister Ralph Willis and Employment Minister John Dawkins, both, like Walsh, members of the Centre Left. The parliamentary Left, it seemed, didn't rate a guernsey on either team.

When the dust subsided and the sound of hooves faded, bystanders were left to ask themselves, what did it all mean? The former Finance Minister goading his own right-wing col-

leagues for their timidity on micro-economic reform and their nefarious role in the government's third term 'lost chances'? Certainly the game of pinning the factional tail on the ministerial donkey has become more complex in recent years. Yet the sight of Centre-Left heavyweights preaching the strait gate of financial austerity to their allegedly profligate right-wing flock still looks rather odd.

Peter Walsh, it should be said, is a political one-off, even coming from a ministry conducive to fanatical economy-mindedness. At the same time, it would be difficult to plausibly brand Walsh's foray as an attack on the government from its right flank. What, for instance, about his suggestions to extend the capital gains tax to family homes, and to reintroduce death duties - both usually considered unelectably 'left-wing'? Rather, it served to indicate the fragmentation of ideological worldviews within the ALP and on the broader Left which has gathered speed over the last seven

years. Peter Walsh was a fanatical defender of the government's purse strings - in the jargon of the era, an 'economic rationalist': but he is also a single-minded egalitarian (after his own lights) and a sworn enemy of the ALP Right. Graham Richardson is a powerbroker on the Right: yet his behaviour in the environment portfolio smacked of anything but 'economic rationalism'. Perhaps if the furore suggested anything it was that the term 'economic rationalist', as it is now used in popular parlance, could do with a rest.

It makes little sense in the political firmament today to describe with this pejorative label anyone who is concerned with the budget figures or the state of government finances. In an earlier incarnation 'economic rationalism' at least meant the identifiable canon of neoclassical and monetarist economics, along with their (in the West, at least) generally right-wing proponents. Nowadays it's become little more than a term of political abuse. But as the likes of Walsh attest, the economic debate has become both too important and too complex to let swearwords suffice.

*David Burchell*