

PHEW!

Labor's record fourth win was a cliffhanger. Dennis Altman argues that it underlines Labor's considerable resilience as a political force. David Burchell takes issue with the explanations of electoral disenchantment. And Queensland ALP campaign manager Wayne Swan is interviewed on the significance of a complex poll.



With **TEETH** *intact*

*The election was 'a kick in the teeth' for Labor. Or was it?
Dennis Altman argues that it demonstrates Labor's
success in adapting to a changing political universe.*

In Steven Eldred Grigg's novel *Oracles and Miracles*, set in New Zealand in the 'thirties, one character says: "We didn't expect much from the Labour government and of course our expectations were richly fulfilled." But her family voted Labour nonetheless.

That might summarise the attitude of most of us who filled in our ballots for Labor this time. The government won because of its ability to hold together two crucial

groups: the traditional Labor working class and the new middle class, that fairly well educated, largely salaried section of the population who make up an increasing segment of the Australian population. The rise of this middle class, as against the self-employed and small business people who are so important in the Liberal Party is one of the reasons for the success of Labor over the past ten years.

As the election campaign wound up, old class loyalties seemed to surface in ways that we had been told are long out of date. The Prime Minister invoked traditional images

THE REALITY IS ...

... THERE IS NO REALITY

Graphic: Alan Moir/Sydney Morning Herald



of the Labor Party as the party of fairness and equality as against the conservative bastions of privilege, and Liberal preoccupation with the capital gains tax gave some credibility to this distinction.

As the Democrats sought to position themselves on the Left, despite their refusal to follow the logic of this in their distribution of preferences, Hawke and Keating stressed that the old divisions between the parties of capital and labour were still relevant. This election the Prime Minister put himself forward, not as the friend of Abeles, Murdoch and 'Bondy', but as the true leader of 'the people', with a continuing concern for equity and social justice.

The great success of the Hawke government - a success unmatched in our history, and indeed in the history of all but a few northern European countries - is to have established a party based on the trade unions and the moderate Left as the dominant political force in Australia. To do this required the jettisoning of a great deal of old Labor myths and shibboleths. But in a period when new right conservatism seemed dominant in many other western countries this was by no means an unimportant achievement.

The Labor Party of Hawke and Keating is different from that of Curtin and Chifley, even from that of Whitlam and Cairns, but so too is Australia. Those who bemoan the collapse of Labor traditions ignore the ways in which our society has changed: the impact of massive immigration, women's assertion, environmental issues, the economic boom in the Eastern Pacific, have introduced new restraints and new possibilities. There are many reasons to

be critical of much of what this government has done, but there would be even more had they not recognised the very different environment in which they need operate.

The very success of seven years of deregulation and restructuring perhaps allowed for a new rhetoric of compassion, just as George Bush promised to make Reagan's American a gentler, kinder nation. The party which had deregulated much of the economy now promised to stand fast against the deregulation and privatisation of Peacock, Howard and Stone, even though the Liberals promised to take the economy further and faster along the Keating track.

A cynical view would say that the ALP was, again, misleading the public and hiding the reality that a Labor government would do nothing to reverse existing inequalities. This is the 'Tweedledum and Tweedledee' theory of Australian parties (ironically one of the authors of that description, Bob Catley, was the Labor candidate for Adelaide). A variation holds that the major difference between the two parties is their attitude to the union movement, a choice, if not an inconsiderable one, between co-option and confrontation.

Labor ministers would take considerable exception to these views, and in a sense they would be right. Despite their determination to restructure the economy, a surprising number of the Hawke government's policies have, in fact, been about equity, even when the government has seemed callous and uncaring, as in their treatment of the young unemployed.

I don't buy the media line that the solutions of free market economics are the only responsible possibility for Australia. Had we regulated foreign exchange dealings more severely, for example, the national deficit might currently be much less of a problem. Nonetheless, it is difficult to cling to the idea, which seems to fascinate the Democrats at the moment, that a small and dependent economy such as ours can insulate itself from the workings of the global market-place. The Accord, the introduction of Medicare, expanded school places, some support for women's issues and at least some of the welfare reforms of the Hawke government have meant that most Australians have been better protected from the vagaries of international capitalism than is true in many other countries.

This seems a prescription for a very limited sort of politics: can we expect no more from our governments than a few band-aids for those who are dumped by cyclones? Is Labor bound to do more than preside over the adjustment of Australia to the needs of international capitalism?

A romantic Left has increasingly come to argue that social democracy is irrelevant to the modern world, that the assumptions about economic growth and development which make expanded welfare possible, are themselves what need to be questioned. I strongly agree with the latter part of this statement. But I would argue that in the years to come we will need social democratic solutions more, rather than less. That is, we need to encourage collective solutions rather than individual ones if we are to deal with the implications of ecological decline.

In an era when the planned economies of Eastern Europe lie shattered and the media triumphs the final victory of the market it may seem difficult to develop policies which seek to use the regulatory powers of the state. Yet in practical, as distinct from ideological, terms there is evidence that the demand for new government initiatives is growing. In both Britain and the United States one sees a growing resistance to cuts in government services in health and welfare, and a new commitment to public transport as necessary to curb the excesses of the motor car. Even in Australia there is a growing realisation that the dream of every family owning their own house and garden means expanding urban areas and stretching public services in ways that have considerable social costs.

We should not underestimate the effects on domestic politics of the democratic revolutions - in Eastern Europe, Chile, South Africa - which have shaken old alignments, and opened up possibilities unimaginable even a year ago. The end of the Cold war can unfreeze many of the fixed assumptions of post-war politics, and allow for a period of political innovation. Far from the fall of the Berlin wall meaning the end of ideology, it means in fact the opening up of new areas for political debate in which the me-first individualism of Reagan and Thatcher comes to seem as irrelevant as the tyrannies of East Germany and Romania.

Unlike the 1980's this decade promises to be a good one for the Left: internationally the rapid move to detente can only help the forces of change, while domestically the conservative parties will go through a long period of soul

searching and realignment. The electoral support for the Democrats and the Greens suggests there is a larger constituency for radical change than seemed true several years ago.

The challenge for the next Labor government is whether they can combine economic realism with sufficient imagination to embark on the sort of genuine reconstruction which would go beyond the stress on productivity and exports of the past seven years. Increased productivity is important, but it seems to have become a new cargo cult, without sufficient questions being asked as to the costs and benefits of immediate economic growth. I suspect that increasingly Australians are willing to demand more change - and to pay the price this demands - than the politicians recognise. The government is starting to recognise this in environmental concerns. Its attitude to urban planning, to education (where Dawkins has pursued both commendable aims of greater access and extraordinarily reactionary programs of centralisation and bureaucratisation), to Aborigines (all but ignored in the campaign) will all test its ability to look beyond the balance sheet.

The temptation for those on the Left to give up on the Labor Party has been considerable over the past seven years. For reasons I've argued elsewhere this seems to me to be a mistake; an electorally successful Labor Party is a prerequisite but not a sufficient condition for real change. The challenge for an intelligent Left is to convince enough of the electorate of the justice of its demands for the ALP to find it politically attractive to implement them. Not since the period leading up to Whitlam's election in 1972, referred to by Donald Home as "the time of hope", has the Left enjoyed such an opportunity to influence the long term political agenda.

DENIS ALTMAN is director at the Institute for Social Justice and Human Rights at La Trobe University, Melbourne.

COMING-UP IN ALR

- ☆ *Eastern Europe and us - a roundtable discussion.*
- ☆ *Yoshio Sugimoto on the Japanese model.*
- ☆ *Living standards and Labor's record.*
- ☆ *Whose babies? - the US legal battles over reproductive technology.*
- ☆ *Post-Fordism - miracle or mirage?*