Farewell to the 80s

For many on the left it was the bleak decade. But how did we manage to lose our way? David Burchell ruminates...

It's tempting to think of the 'eighties as the decade of anticlimax. Indeed, for many of those tutored in the wildly optimistic politics of the early 'seventies ('the anti-Vietnam RSL', as Paddy McGuinness would have it), it has seemed a gloomy decade of faded hopes, of defeat and disillusion.

Politically it could be seen as a decade dominated by the newfound 'sexiness' of big business and corporate values, by the startling populism of the radical right, by the host of altered assumptions about polity and economy which goes by the shorthand term 'economic rationalism', and by the defence of many gains long assumed to be permanent in the socialist world, as has by now become painfully apparent, the decade has seen the eclipse of almost any remaining self-confidence in the traditional socialist vision, and - among the more open leaderships, at least - a weary return to the more humdrum dreams of Western social democracy.

Culturally the great artefacts of the 'eighties have been the rehashed musical emblems of the 'fifties, 'sixties and 'seventies, from Motown to Merseyside and back again. Intellectually, it most characteristic currents have described themselves ubiquitously as Post- this or that, suggesting a loss of identity paralleling that of retro-music and the splintered profusion of 'lifestyles'.

It would be easy to view the decade exclusively in this way - with the foresight of the 'seventies, as it were, rather than the hindsight of the 'nineties. But that would be too easy, too explicit in the tendency only too apparent on the Left to wish that some of the genuine new realities established in the 'eighties would somehow just go away, or to pretend that they'd never happened at all.

Indeed, with hindsight the 'eighties may well come to be seen as a watershed decade in modern life. This is most obvious in the international sphere, where the frozen compromise known as the 'post-war world' for more than forty years now has been dramatically split apart by the rise of Gorbachev and disarmament, by the decline of the USSR and the socialist world, and by the decline of American leadership in the West. We are now in a post-'post-war' world, and it is a measure of our loss of intellectual direction that we have no idea what to call it.

But in the individual nations of the (at least materially) 'advanced' world it has been equally significant. On the one hand it has seen the completion of the vast social transformation of the capitalist democracies over the 1950s-1970s, from societies of mass deprivation to societies where (again, at least material) deprivation and oppression has become the preserve of outcasts and minorities. On the other hand it has seen the embedding of changes in political life in the last few decades: the fall of the old mass movements of the Left, as movements (in the sense that the trade union movement once was); the dissolution of the political significance of 'the working class' as a unitary collective entity; the fragmentation of the subject of the old socialist vision into the much more complex set of identities by which people nowadays make sense of their lives. All of these things were apparent tendencies over the thirty years of postwar history up to 1980: at the end of the decade they can mostly be viewed as accomplished fact.

Even the one guarantor of the traditional socialist vision, the world of 'actually existing socialism', has ceased to provide succour to that myth. Who knows but that there may be more voters of the Left in 1990 in Western Europe than in its Eastern neighbours? Conversely, one sign of the times (at once immensely refreshing and disturbing) is that there are actually fewer subjects off-bounds to the Left in Hungary or Poland today than in many, if not most, parts of the Western socialist movement. Now that the spectre of 'actually existing socialism' has been laid, the last figleaf for the pretence that 'social ownership + egalitarian rhetoric = the good society has been blown away.

Standing at the vantage point of 1990, the milepost of 1940 conclusively seems an epoch away. To watch 'thirties films on TV now is to watch a different world. Listen to the memories of the generation now in their seventies: the taboos, icons, social stereotypes and expectations of several generations have become unhinged, and all in the course of thirty or so years. Certainly there is no shortage of racism, sexism or reaction in our lives today; and the urge towards egalitarianism may well be
weaker than fifty years ago. Yet the whole complex of assumptions which sustained a rigid and impoverished physical and emotional life for the mass of the population fifty years ago has splintered. Few people of today could be moved to other than mild hilarity by the social and military propaganda associated with the 1940s. Indeed, the foreign policy of the US in the 1980s has been dominated by the realisation that the myth of the nobility of dying for one's country, once the summit of social 'belongingness', has almost entirely vanished in our times. Now the only wars the US can practically fight are those which solely kill other countries' citizens.

None of these trends have been lessened by the perceived 'conservative backlash' of the 'eighties: on the contrary, they have accelerated. Cynicism about socialism has been paralleled by heightened cynicism about capitalism's claims to moral virtue. Advertising companies, for instance, now genuinely worry that consumers are becoming too sceptical to believe anything told them by advertising methods. And while much excitement has been generated about the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, there has been noticeably little flag-waving for the moral superiority of its erstwhile rival.

Nor have the 'new social issues' nurtured in the fertile climate of the early 'seventies retreated in the 'eighties - even if the movements associated with them have not always prospered. We are about to enter an election campaign featuring manifestoes based, however opportunistically, around Green issues (Labor) and childcare (the Coalition). What was once the stuff of youth rebellion now nestles in the middle-aged suburbs, as well as the inner-city 'ghettoes'. The spread of 'subcultures' has become another postmodernist playground: rather than delineating 'outsiders', as they did in the Beat and hippie eras, they have splintered to the extent that few sixteen year-olds nowadays actually realise the specific cultural origins of their particular (to use a revived 'sixties' word) 'scene'. Rap, one of the few 'new' musical subcultures of the 'eighties, is a transparent combination of reggae, funk, heavy metal, even punk, along with an ethos which variously summons up 'sixties idealism, 'seventies hedonism and 'eighties cynicism. The 'vocal minorities' of society, the various 'lifestyle' misfits whom the cultural homogeneity of the 'forties and 'fifties stigmatised as weirdos and oddballs, may today collectively constitute something approaching a majority. Not even Middle Australia is safe...

The left has made a mess of the 'eighties. Historically it has had a tendency to move in generational waves: the last decades of the nineteenth century sustained the culture of the early twentieth; the 1930s and 1940s sustained left culture, more or less adequately, for the following thirty years. Likewise the rite of the late 'sixties and early 'seventies have dominated much of the twenty years thereafter. But this last has been a less socially cohesive, more fragmented culture, and one associated in the body politic with more 'marginal' causes. And without the myth of the Soviet Union to sustain it, it has been perilously vague on its preferred utopia. Like its predecessors it has slowly exhausted itself: it has seemed steadily less able over the 'eighties to comprehend the shifting mood of the times. Its countercultural roots have been pushed aside by new moralities, new political realities, and the evacuation from the field of politics generally of the transcendental One Big Cause, whichever particular cause that may have been.

Yet, paradoxically, the legacy of the 'seventies Left is still 'ahead of its times'. Only recently has environmental politics become a mass concern, but when it has the effect has been dramatic. And while the feminist movement itself may not have prospered in the 'eighties, its focus on the fabric of women's personal lives has been echoed by the increasing self-confidence and assertiveness of a new generation of girls and young women. Indeed, the
very fabric of political life itself has shifted from parties and towards movements, as the Left predicted. Yet the Left has not prospered from its foresight. And as a result it has become a culture more than ever out of sympathy with its times, and with little empathy for the worldview of young people outside its own ranks.

Why is this? One potent symbol of the 'eighties is the word 'yuppie' - a word originally coined in the early years of the decade in the US to describe the explosion of the professions and the ranks of tertiary educated from the 'seventies. In fact in this original, broader meaning it probably covers most of the 'seventies Left itself. Yet the word was very quickly taken up by journalists and others as a generalised swear-word against people ultimately very similar to themselves. And in the latter part of the decade it has been further reduced to a term of abuse directed against the profitiers of the decade - the young money men, stockbrokers and ad quacks who've acquired their BMWs before the age of twenty five. The key to this evolution of the word 'yuppie' is that it was used overwhelmingly by people who fitted its original description. It was a self-distancing device. Thirtysomething Lefties in tastefully designed homes with all the contemporary knick knacks could use the word to keep a distance between themselves and the despised 'new materialism', the fruits of which they were very likely enjoying. This urge to put oneself somehow 'outside' the social and material trends of the day was one telltale sign of the Left's loss of grip on the tenor of the times.

Another was attitudes towards the ALP, and particularly the federal government. Who has not at least once used the word 'yuppie' to keep a distance now from the voices of Eastern Europe that any social transformation, however rapid or slow, must be measured first and foremost by its effect on civil society. It is no longer enough to talk airily of 'dramatically extending democracy', 'increasing workers control' and all the rest as if such things could ever be enacted by legislation alone. The problems of the socialist world at present are very largely those of the nineteenth century dream of rational progress: the dream of creating an orderly world.

Socialists will never make people feel free: as conservatives (for once rightly) argue, that kind of experienced freedom is largely a negative effect of the absence of control. Socialism of the old style can engineer technical miracles, can generate economic growth (for a while at least), can increase social services (up to a point). But it suffers badly in comparison with the wealthier societies which, however unequal and unjust their social mechanisms, give people a feel sense of autonomy in their daily lives. The economist Geoff Hodgson once spoke of the 'messiness principle' in economic organisation: meaning that the economic building blocks of society should not be designed according to some pre-arranged 'public', 'private', 'co-operative', etc, proportions. We need a similar 'messiness principle' in our visions of civil society.

These are all questions which find echoes in the forms and styles adopted by the Western Left, or at least parts of it, since the 'seventies. What is chastening is that we have really got no further down that road in the last decade - at least partly because of our unease with the rites and rituals of our own civil society, particularly as it has exhibited itself in the 'eighties. Meanwhile some of our own questions are being answered for us at present in the socialist world - and the answers are often bleak. The grand task for the Left in the 'nineties is perhaps to conceive of a socialism so liberal, in the best sense of the word, that even Eastern Europeans would want it.