COMRADES AND CITIZENS

Between Labor's "pragmatism" and the rantings of the fundamentalist left, is there a third way? Can the left be smart and likeable, as well as ideologically sound? Colin Mercer ponders these and other burning issues.

Who do we think we are talking to? This is surely one of the fundamental issues which confronts any consideration of left renewal. Whether we are dealing with a new party of the left or with a more general reorientation of left politics - let's call this a democratic modernisation - the issue of actual and potential political constituency is crucial. So, who we are talking to, how we are addressing them and what we are addressing them about are urgent questions. This is certainly a question of the "style" of politics but not in any superficial sense. What is at issue here is a whole political culture of the left and also, therefore, the key components of its political logic. These are the issues I want to address by drawing on recent contributions from both Australia and the UK.

A central question must be: what are the conditions which would enable the left to produce what John Mathews calls a Culture of Power in his recent booklet of the same name. The ability to think achievable and sustainable political goals and avoid the pitfalls of both a tradition of vanguardism and minoritarian politics and the top-down managerialism of social democracy is good advice but enormously difficult to achieve. How, in fact, is it possible to combine the minimum requirements of expertise in techniques of government, policy formation and administration and, at the same time, sufficient levels of popular acceptability. How, in other words, to be expert and popular, smart and likeable and to do this strategically and not just by an opportunistic modification of tactics?

This is not a facile question: it is at the very heart of current moves towards new political formations and agendas in Australia and elsewhere. It is a question which, if not answered by the left will certainly be answered by the New Right which demands a new political logic. This logic will have to thread its way between a competent but "statist" social democracy with a dwindling traditional social base and a right-populist championing of the market and the interests of "ordinary people". At the same time it will need to recognise that, given significant changes in class composition and the nature of the national and international economies, there is no easy or necessarily effective resort to tried and trusted formulae of a "socialism of the grand plan", whether that be Soviet, Swedish or Chinese in inspiration.

The general problem might be characterised as one of, on the one hand, a Labor government which has "expertise" but which is in severe danger of losing its popular acceptability and, on the other hand, a left which is able to mobilise, say, 100,000 people in the streets for a peace demonstration and yet have minimal input into, say, the Dibb Report.

More central, on a day-to-day basis, and as a key factor in swinging political fortunes, is the area of economic management. How is it possible to develop expertise in areas such as economic management and, at the same time, maintain a certain level of popular interest and participation in the notoriously grey areas of the "dismal science". One way of dealing with this is to realise that, in their day-to-day existence, most people do not confront the abstraction of the economy but the much more tangible and readily recognisable form of the market. Economists will need to forgive me here for inappropriate comparisons but it seems to me that this is a politically powerful image that the New Right recognised a
good while ago: that it is much easier to talk about the market - for goods, for labour, for services, health and welfare - in terms of can afford and can’t afford - than it is to talk about the more abstract laws and tendencies of the economy.

This is why Margaret Thatcher has been able to exploit so successfully the metaphors of the "housewife’s purse" or the "family budget" in her rationalisations of economic strategy in the UK. Housewives’ purses do not usually have to account for such things as invisible earnings, trade balances or foreign debts run up by people who are not members of the household. This, however, is what economies and their managers have to do. This is also why talk about the market flows more easily, in the political sphere, from the right than it does from the left. The economy, that is, is condensed into the image of the market and, as the logic flows, the market sets in motion the key features of choice, competition and efficiency. These are features which are then automatically associated with political conservatism while the left is pitched against the market and its meanings. Perhaps it is time to divert this strategy: for the Left to pay heed to the concept and the reality of the market in its own political logic and culture?

Jeffrey Minson touched on this in ALR 107 ("The New Romantics") where he remarks the over-emphasis in Mathews’ work on "production culture" at the expense of due attention to "economic consumption and its culture" with its associated features of lifestyle, popular culture and the uses of leisure. What people consume, how they consume it, how such forms of consumption determine their lifestyles and array of cultural identities are matters which are no longer - if they ever were - peripheral to the politics of strategic economic calculation. There is, in other words, a particular solidity to "consumer capitalism" which, as the blurb says of Marilyn French’s novel The Women's Room, "changes lives". The next question to pose, then, is: what are the mechanisms which would enable the left to address effectively issues of consumption and choice not only in the private sector but also, crucially, within the public sector as the recipients of health and welfare services etc.?

A long time ago Gramsci noted how the new production processes of Fordism and Taylorism had established a fundamentally new relationship between work and lifestyle supported by high wages, psychoanalysis, rotary clubs and new sexual and social codes: "the new methods of work are inseparable from a specific mode of living and of thinking and feeling life". These issues have been addressed in the pages of ALR and elsewhere, but they are still largely determined by a logic which categorises them as "cultural" and therefore to be dealt with under Any Other Business.

What I would want to argue for here is some serious rethinking of this inherited notion of the "cultural". What I mean by "the cultural" here is the capacity to recognise the "lifestyle" aspects of political constituencies in order to respond efficiently to the sorts of political issues they put on the agenda. Culture in this sense is about the entire range of dispositions, tastes, habits and preferences of people. This concept of culture is concerned with areas of consumption, choice and identity and how these are affected by our relationship to the market. It is about how people actually use the resources at their disposal in order to elaborate a lifestyle. In turn, lifestyle itself needs much more attention from any political agenda since it is the framework in which, as individuals, members of families or communities, people actually choose to live their lives within, of course, economic constraints.

Lifestyle, choice, taste: these may be terms which we would more readily associate with the political appeals of the New Right or with a general ethos of yuppieism, but we need to ask if there is a necessary reason for this. Should we not recognise that, as Stuart Hall has pointed out, consumer capitalism did rework, reshape social relations and cultural attitudes quite widely and irrevocably, and that it did this as more than an "icing on the cake" of raw economic relations. The transformation of western economies from the "Fordism" of the post-war era has experienced as a fundamental reorganisation of our relationship to the market and is manifested in massively changed patterns of consumption. In this context it has become possible to manipulate the purchase of goods and services much more in order to fashion an identity and lifestyle for the majority of people.

This is not a defance of "consumer capitalism" as such, nor is it written in ignorance of the still severe discrepancies in access to the market which exist: it is simply to underscore the basic reality of the market as the first thing in the economy that most people actually meet and its importance therefore as the starting point for elaborating a strategy which addresses "economic" and "cultural" issues simultaneously which would have a chance of being listened to and understood.

In a British Fabian Society pamphlet, The Politics of Prosperity, Charlie Leadbeater argues for the mobilisation of a concept of social citizenship in order to meet the realities of Thatcherite transformations of the political and economic domains and, as he says, to enable some clear strategic thinking on the part of the left "...on the role of the private sector, the market, competition and individual initiative, as well as the state, collective finance and public provision in contributing to equity, security, efficiency and choice". The different components of this strategy must fit together, he insists, and must be "...built up from the foundations of the cultural identities and lifestyles it sanctions..." Above all, this means moving away from that logic so successfully installed by Thatcherism that the private sector is the domain of choice and efficiency and the public sector the domain of planning, lack of choice, alienated service provision and "grey collectivities". Social citizenship, he argues, provides a way of refuting this logic by enlarging the traditional category of citizenship (possessing a minimum set of rights) to enable it to encompass "rights to the resources which are needed to play a full role in the normal life of a community". These resources, he adds, "should clearly include income, health, education, housing, transport, but also possibly consumer durables, a capital stake and holidays. But whatever the bundle of goods or resources, social citizenship should also include the right to choose over how these rights are delivered.

While the argument relates most urgently to Britain and to the Thatcherist colonisation of the prerogatives of
choice and the market and to the overwhelmingly conservative image of the yuppie consumer, the sort of political logic that the argument entails is certainly also applicable to current debates and conditions in Australia. As Minson points out in his article, there is also a case - recognising not only the rights of citizens but also their responsibilities - for establishing a category such as a "corporate citizen" implementing responsibilities in the areas of environmental protection and race and gender issues in the workforce. Equally, such a concept of social citizenship could be fruitfully applied to social policy and the social wage which would not restrict these prerogatives to the agencies of government and the trade unions and hence to a top-down social-democratic managerialism which, for all its good intentions, nobody may get to hear about outside of those agencies. It would therefore help to address the central problem of the popular acceptability and understanding of an arrangement like the Accord and, for that matter, other social advances in the areas of human rights, equal opportunities, multiculturalism and so on.

To return to the point about who we think we are speaking to, what our constituency is and what their concerns are, it is clear that a concept of citizenship has a potential to which traditional appeals to collectivities of class, race and gender cannot lay claim. It may enable us to formulate ways of thinking about the "new social forces" as integral to the political process rather than as somehow ancillary to the mainstream movement. This is because it provides a way of thinking about diverse social, ethnic and cultural identities and lifestyles as necessary components of social citizenship and which would therefore be enabled to lay claim to full rights of social participation rather than as something to be "added and stirred" either to society as a whole or to the labour movement.

It is worth registering that a country like Australia with a dominant Anglo-Celtic culture, an indigenous population and a wide range of other ethnic identities is, for all the problems generated by these relationships, uniquely situated to formulate a more "disposed" concept of citizenship than the one we have inherited from the more "unified" model of the European nation state. In areas of multiculturalism, language policy, immigration policy, the legal and institutional recognition of such diversity requires a new and democratic concept of citizenship.

In the area of political strategy it is worth considering what forms of appeal and identity would be involved in elaborating an effective program around issues as diverse as Aboriginal deaths in custody, economic management, human and civil rights, legal reform, child care and the environment. It would certainly be much easier to elaborate a unified and coherent strategy around these issues via an expanded concept of citizenship than it would through trying to hold together the already politically saturated identities of class, race, gender, parenthood and "greenness". This is because there is a fair chance that many people, not just those on the left, already share bits and pieces of each of these identities without necessarily staking their claim.
One objection to this, of course, is that political struggles in these areas are best treated independently as "single issues" and by movements rather than parties and that coherent overall strategies are not necessary anyway. In some areas there have been outstanding successes based on precisely this logic but the problem is that these remain precisely isolated political successes and their implications for government and the polity as a whole do not usually or, more frequently, are not allowed to flow on.

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Jeff Minson pointed out in his article that it is precisely because the women's movement and the environmental movement have well-organised feet in the door of government that their campaigns have had significant successes in combination with other extra-parliamentary forms of activity. This brings us again to the issue of forming a new political logic which involves emphasising a particular aspect of "identity" which is crucial to modern forms of government. These movements have recognised that they have a role to play as individual or collective citizens "within the state" and not from a position somewhere outside of it. We are all, as citizens, somehow inside the state whether we acknowledge it or not. As tax and rate payers, pension recipients, students receiving grants or other benefits, families receiving child allowance, as holders of government bonds (i.e. most people who have insurance policies) as registered unemployed, receivers of medical benefits or whatever, our relationship to the state is indelible.

The older political logic, whether leninist, trotskyist, anarchist or just plain oppositional, which always positioned its troops somewhere outside the walls of the state, all the better prepared to storm it one day, and which gave the labour movement its initial program and logic for revolution is now definitively dead in western politics (and probably has been since about the 1850s). Increasingly, since the 1920s, we have been positioned as citizens rather than subjects and therefore in a new sort of contractual relationship to the structure of government. Taking this reality seriously is a key component of political logic rather than a hymn of praise to the state and to statism.

In his last political statement before his death, the Greek marxist Nicos Poulantzas defined the state as a "material" condensation of a relation of forces. By this he meant that the state is neither a neutral apparatus (as social democracy frequently believes) nor the "executive committee of the ruling class" as classical marxism would have it. It is, rather, a set of institutions, procedures and techniques of government which are a nationally specific result of historical struggles and negotiations between government and political and economic agencies which have laid their claim and achieved representation within the state. The Australian state has, as part of its fabric, an arbitration system which no other state has. The British state has (but may not retain) a fully comprehensive National Health Service, free at the point of delivery. The Swedish state has agencies and mechanisms for the productive direction of investment in which unions have a major role. These forms did not arrive by accident: they did not drop from the sky, but flowed on. Now, access to the structures of the state is, surely, what it is all about, unless you subscribe to a "permanent ginger group" mentality.

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He argues for a confident move from a "culture of protest" to a "culture of power".