

The New ROMANTICS

Parties, movements, coalitions — the left's realignment continues. And the catchcry is out for a new politics. But Jeffrey Minson argues that the new trends in the left can't succeed without a grip on political realism as well as a new vision.

It is a good bet that, within a year, at least one new radical political organisation will formally get off the ground in Australia.

If current tendencies in the Rainbow Alliance, the New Left Party Charter group, or even within the Communist Party of Australia are anything to go by, it (or they) will differ markedly from the traditional left parties, with a much stronger base in the social movements. It will not have much to do with insurrectionist marxist traditions of political analysis, rhetoric and party organisations, especially leninist, stalinist or trotskyist ones.

Nevertheless, reservations about the tag aside, one of its leading edges will be unmistakably socialist. A majority in all the above groups agree on the need for an extensive program of economic "socialisation" as a major precondition for social and environmental changes. Deep ecologists no less than trotskyists need not apply.

So advances have been made during this spate of new (non-insurrectionist) party-forming activity. If the trust and common ground built up so far can be sustained; if efforts to build norms of political conduct originating in the social movements into new organisational structures are successful; and if the interest in policy-formation is further developed, then the prospects for such a political organisation are, in many respects, quite bright. It should attract a far bigger membership than existing left parties. The old left's destructive centrifugal tendencies might be checked. The Australian

Democrats might have a serious rival.

Yet there is still reason to doubt whether a social-movement-based party by itself could have more than nuisance value in the contemporary Australian political scene. These reasons will be stated shortly. But rather than justify this reservation at length, my main concern is to examine what I take to be a watershed in Australian progressive politics — one which, were we to learn from it, might prove that reservation unfounded.

This watershed is signalled by the publication this year of John Mathews' pamphlet *A Culture of Power*¹. Its interest lies first in its attempt to make the current ACTU strategy for industrial reconstruction the cornerstone of a broader social-democratic reformation. Second, in its attempt to marry Accord-style recipes for industrial democracy to a broader form of political democracy based on institutional recognition of pluralism. Third, in its attempt to wean leftists away from a purely oppositionalist ethos (a "culture of protest"). A framework is developed according to which policy is both informed by progressive principles and long-term goals while also being "grounded in the responsible exercise of power". A "culture of power" is envisaged that would be, one might say, pragmatic on principle.

But is this seeming reconciliation of opposites an organisational possibility or merely a philosophical one? The virtues and limitations of this kind of perspective can best be appreciated in the first instance by examining two characteristics of current left orthodoxy: an endemic

utopianism and a related incapacity to be serious about pluralism.

The Culture of Protest

All political parties need values. Any progressive one needs a "vision": some set of principled, long-term objectives. If party-political practice is seen as the art of the possible, then commitments to currently unattainable goals are bound to look utopian in the simple sense of being idealistic. So utopianism is not a problem as such. The problems arise over the *place* of values in a progressive party's program, the *choice* of values, and the *sort* of utopianism to which it is committed. The brunt of my criticism is directed against the Romantic utopian stripe in left literature, conferences and meetings. Romantic philosophy treats politics not as the art of the possible, but as a vehicle for creative social or self-perfection. It is the elevation of magic to the status of a political art form.

Political Romanticism is apparent in a powerful tendency to view the social movements as the locus of all political virtue. The problem here is not the attempt to build on the social movements as such, but rather the tendency to identify them with their most radical, "communitarian" protest dimensions. Or, more precisely, with elements of those dimensions which seem most in keeping with Romantic ideals of creative self-activity and communal wholeness, such as "brainstorming" rituals. As if there were not less Romantic ways of fostering the confidence, capacities



Graphic: Michael Fitzjames

and interest required for participating actively in meetings and conferences, such as the standing orders and charring procedures evolved in the women's movement or aspects of the communist tradition of cadre education.

Romanticising the social movements veils their failures and successes alike. Has the women's movement, for instance, always evaded the snares of self-marginalisation associated with the "old" left: preaching to the converted, sectarianism, and allowing itself to be identified with a restricted "lifestyle"? The power-base and appeal of feminism has not been uniformly so restricted. Countless women — and men — who are unidentified with feminism as a political movement have incorporated feminist norms and expectations into their lives. Countless improvements in women's circumstances have depended on feminists' historical willingness to involve themselves, in an "official" capacity, in legal, trade union, business, health, media and other institutions.

Utopianism is also manifest in the privileged *place* of values in determining the longer-term vision of left political organisation. *New Economic Directions for Australia*, a recent discussion paper circulated by the Rainbow Alliance, perfectly exemplifies the widespread conviction that the first step for a new left party is to draw up a vision of an alternative society — a "non-capitalist, democratic, just and environmentally sustainable economy" — solely on the basis of a combination of labour and social movement ideals. Here Romanticism is not the only problem; nor is the paper's encouraging commitment to detailed policy construction a sufficient counterweight.

Reading through the program's "guesstimates" on the number of full-time jobs per annum to be created (p.20) or the cost of its Guaranteed Adequate Income Scheme (pp.23-4) it is hard not to be reminded of Engels' observation in the *Anti-Duhring* on the classical utopian socialists' programs: "The more

completely they were worked out in detail, the more they could not avoid drifting into pure fantasies". David Burchell's report on *New Economic Directions* (ALR 106) attributes what he, too, sees as its "eerie otherworldliness" to its failure to frame its vision with a political strategy. One factor contributing to this failure can be traced to an implication of this standard new left practice of elaborating its political vision on a solely ethical basis.

In the spirit of the "utopian socialists" Owen, Fourier and Saint-Simon, the need for a radical new order is based on an unqualified rejection of contemporary institutions: "existing planning and administrative structures are either positively hostile ... or lack the intellectual and organisational resources" to realise such an order (p. 46). The counterpart to making ethics the sole foundation and

Romanticising the social movements veils their failures and successes alike

measure of a new order is the absence of any reference to established yet (potentially) progressive institutions which might serve as springboards from which a left alternative might take off. Consequently, the "realistic" division of the proposed program into "short" and "medium term" ingredients means little. How are even the "short-term" proposals in the blueprint supposed to get off the drawing board?

To this perennial question the non-insurrectionist left has a set answer: the election of a left government backed by an extra-parliamentary alliance of "popular" forces, with the capacity to legislate and implement the desired programmatic changes. Support for this position is almost inseparable from an uneasiness about powerful institutions and organised interests which are not amenable to democratic or legislative pressures. But what if this scenario and, consequently, *New Economic Directions*, were open to a quite different objection?

The conundrum about implementing a socialist "vision" arose from its utopian derivation from a purely ethical foundation. Apart from the institutional vacuum in which this places the program it also makes it incapable of acknowledging the *pluralistic* structure of modern liberal states. Not all the innumerable, overlapping, conflicting variety of public/private divisions characteristic of such societies are reducible to capitalist economic organisation. Many of the individual and associational freedoms associated with these divisions are highly desirable. Others simply have to be lived with. Among these can be included incommensurable differences in values and life-styles. This diversity is reflected in the multiplicity of reasons for which individuals support a given political party. In turn, this means that no elected party can assume to itself a mandate to implement its entire program. Electoral majorities are cobbled together on a patchwork basis quite incompatible with programmatic ambitions to transform society from top to bottom on the basis of a unitary ethos.

Taking pluralism seriously also means abandoning the left's favourite contrast between co-operation and competition as *general* principles of social organisation. A pluralistic socialist state may require not only political competition but also certain (regulated) forms of economic competition. Broadening its value-base might enable the left to canvass support among a broader constituency than the small band of left labour and social movement activists to whom this document is principally addressed.

None of these criticisms detracts from the interest of many of *New Economic Directions'* individual policy proposals themselves. But can this utopian style of political program (hardly unique to the Rainbow Alliance) be abandoned and pluralism embraced without capitulating to powermongering pragmatism? It is partly on the

supposition that these (idealist, pragmatist) alternatives are not in fact exhaustive that *A Culture of Power* is staked.

Associative democracy

Mathews describes his proposal as "a new paradigm of democratisation". By "paradigm" Mathews means "a framework for conceptual and practical work" which is "sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems ... for practitioners to resolve" yet which "should provide us with a means of choosing between different strategic and tactical options for reaching quite different strategic goals" i.e. as capable of generating a coherent policy-package. Policy should be based not only — as in *New Economic Directions* — on ideals but also on a strategic understanding of the constraints and opportunities of "the current situation". This both requires and limits the "open-endedness" of the framework, which insists on a (strategically justified) leading role for labour movement organisations. Yet determining the content of "Labour Movement Goals in the Eighties" (as the pamphlet is subtitled) cannot be the prerogative of the labour movement alone; whence the pluralistic orientation of his paradigm towards "the activities of autonomous associations of workers and citizens".

For Mathews, the primary political fact is the existence of a third-term Labor government which, having proven itself capable of "responsible" economic management, is in a position to initiate a politically acceptable reform program. The second ingredient of the current situation is the persistence, indeed the exacerbation under the Hawke government, of a deterioration in Australia's manufacturing performance (reflected in its balance of payments deficit). The third factor is the continuing presence of the New Right and its free-market and anti-union solutions to every economic problem.

Mathews concedes that, to an extent, some New Right views have become internalised within the ALP

itself. So why should it countenance economic and social democratisation? Here the Accord enters the picture; on any account a major contributor to the ALP's success as an "economic manager". However many labour movement hopes it may have disappointed, the Accord both locks the government into meeting some "social wage" demands and makes available a series of formal and informal footholds for trade union (consultative) participation in macro-economic decision-making beyond the issues of living standards.



The Accord provides the labour movement with the institutional leverage with which to constitute itself as this country's "leading force for social transformation". The ACTU's formal adoption of *Australia Reconstructed* at its 1987 Congress marks a significant shift on the union movement's part away from being a traditional locus of defensive protest.

Within the "culture of power" into which, according to Mathews, the labour movement is settling, democratisation of economic organisation has to be justified both on principle and on the grounds of its offering meaningful and practical solutions to currently intractable problems, notably Australia's declining international competitiveness and industrial investment levels. The paradigm of democratisation is thus required to serve two masters. It

must make sense in mainstream (big business) economic terms. But it must also persuade left labour and social movement activists formed within a culture of protest that enough of their aspirations can be met by participating in a culture of power.

For this broad mobilisation of support to occur a long-term vision is required. This vision must also make sense in mainstream political and ethical terms. Above all, disaffection with centralised government administration coming from the left, right and centre of the political spectrum must be addressed. Only through the intervention of policies which don't require bureaucratic overseeing, high personal taxation and the sorts of centralised planning which are inimical to local initiatives, can the ethical-political ground be cut away from the New Right critique of all government economic interventions. Mathews' paradigm is accordingly geared to a "socialisation" of industry which is not predicated on its becoming a state monopoly.

Accordingly, three main targets are singled out for democratisation: work organisation, capital investment, and social security provision for unemployment.

How does the proposal on democratising work incorporate traditional labour movement goals into political "business-like" solutions to current economic problems? A hallmark of leading manufacturing sectors in many of the recently most successful national economies has been the displacement of an authoritarian "Fordist" management style by strategies of "flexible specialisation". As Ewer, Higgins and Stephens have argued in their *Trade Unions and the Future of Australian Manufacturing*, part of the key to competitive advantage in manufacturing lies not in state-of-the-art technology as such but in the quality of its "applied technique". What makes the competitive difference is an accumulation of refinements required to integrate the technology into a given production process. The "good business" side of the case for industrial democratis-

ation rests on the premium which the successful application of advanced technology places on fostering the skills, initiative and commitment of the workforce and the consequent need for a democratic reorganisation of work.

The democratisation of capital extends this argument. It would not require "bigger" government or high taxes; and would seek to go beyond influencing corporate behaviour from without by democratising the levels of internal corporate power. A wide range of policy instruments are canvassed: from changes to company law affecting director accountability, employee or trade union controlled investment funds, and worker directors to planning agreements embracing "good corporate citizen" guidelines on environmental, race and gender issues.

No matter how it is achieved, industrial restructuring will entail a net loss of jobs and of the expectation of full-time life-long employment for the whole adult population. The main thrust of Mathews' "social policy" recommendations is to make welfare no longer a marginal cost incurred for "non-economic" reasons such as equity, which can be represented as only a "luxury" financed from resources "otherwise" available for economic development or private consumption. Instead, it is to become integral to national economic development. From workers' point of view redundancy in the interest of economic "progress" is less unacceptable if they are financially cushioned from the effects of restructuring, retrained for new work and not stigmatised for not being in paid employment. It is in this new economic restructuring context that Mathews puts forward his version of a Guaranteed Minimum Income Scheme. The "democratic" dimension of this social policy presumably lies in its use of welfare to foster rather than to curtail workers' statuses and capacities as "industrial citizens".

At this juncture the proposals for industrial democratisation and related social policies are placed within the broader context of an

"associative democracy". This is derived from Paul Hirst's revival of the early twentieth century associational socialist tradition. Originally, for example in G.D.H. Cole's *Guild Socialism Restated* (1920), associationalism aimed at the displacement of "the state" by a society of *producer's* associations. On the assumption of an underlying identity of (working class) interests, these associations could be left to manage themselves spontaneously. In Hirst's version, the basic idea of a plurality of socially owned, democratically managed bodies with their own aims and ways of doing things is extended from factories to non-industrial associations.

Graham Richardson's famous conversion to the environmental cause on the road to Kakadu

Moreover, associational democracy requires *state* interventions, e.g. public agencies to supervise associations backed by a constitutional "legal order". The associationalist socialist state, however, "builds on — rather than negates — the plurality and diversity of western civil society, it enhances the powers of voluntary associations and communities". Presumably, this entails styles of state regulation and "action at a distance" which work neither by "rolling back the state" nor by excessive "nannying". Pluralism requires the state to "build associations into its own order through representative and consultative mechanisms" to decentralise authority within the limits set by the need for a legal monopoly of force.

How does Mathews build this pluralistic view of socialist political objectives into his paradigm? Unfortunately the pamphlet mostly provides only the patchiest of indications. Firstly, unlike traditional left programs, Mathews is not committed to *identifying* the labour and social movements. The political logic of "associative democracy" requires both respecting

the autonomy of workers' and citizens' associations and regulating them. Alliances between the various movements must accordingly be "constructed" with respect to limited issues and occasions, such as environmental policy on the timber industry or electoral pacts. Trade unions would, of course, be one such regulated "association" among others. The terms of the current Accord, Mathews suggests, could be widened to bring in social movement interests.

Secondly, associative democracy permits a principled but flexible attitude to the question of privatisation, on which a more developed case is made against blanket opposition and in favour of certain sorts of privatisation which don't entail deregulation and which foster worker initiatives.

Thirdly, the associative paradigm requires political parties to accept pluralism to the point of giving up "the illusion of rule". For reasons already discussed, party manifestos must rather be seen as ambit claims on the basis of which a government committed to pluralism plays a brokerage, orchestrating role, *bargaining* for co-operation in implementing its policies on the part of diverse or even opposing interests.

The ghost in the paradigm

Together with its advocacy of a culture of power, Mathews' proposal for a progressive development of an Accord politics provides a measure of the distance the left has to travel in order to arrive at a vision of an *achievable* future. Mathews' attempt to construct a new basis for an ALP, labour and social movement alliance by appropriating the associational model of democracy represents one of the few attempts on the Australian left to come to grips with the realities of pluralism.

However, it cannot be said that the innovative components of Mathews' "vision" are always consistently sustained or developed. Many of the problems coalesce in the shades of the "old left" which hover over his attempt to broaden out the accord with a view to constructing

"an exceedingly broad coalition that will command support from a majority of the population, condemning the right to marginality".

The vehicle imagined by Mathews for the hoped-for political settlement between the labour and social movements consists of a renegotiated Accord between the Labor Party, the ACTU and the social movements. Even if these social movements possessed integral organisational structures, the fact remains that such an expansion of parties to the Accord would place an impossible burden on it. How would the parties to it be determined? And what would be the consequences for the labour movement's capacity to present a united front to employers in the relevant areas of industry policy, price-monitoring, superannuation, to say nothing of wage negotiations and so on, if these organisations are confronted not with the ACTU alone but a host of diverse bodies and interests?

The proposal for an expanded Accord is absurd for other reasons too. John Mathews is no different from many other left-thinking people in tacitly identifying the social movements entirely with "the culture of protest". Environmentalists, for example, are said to be better at drawing attention to symptoms than to causes and cures and therefore need Labor to show them the way. As if environmentalism, no less than feminism — as pointed out earlier — did not already have a well-organised foot in the governmental door. As if Graham Richardson's famous conversion to the cause on the road to Kakadu did not mark A.L.P. recognition of the environment as a significant electoral issue. The "mansion" of government has many rooms, not to say states, ministries, commissions and tribunals. Why, then, privilege federal economic policy as the social movements' sole point of entry? The answer possibly lies in unreconstructed elements of Mathews' Labor-left inheritance.

The proposal to lock the social movements and the labour movement into an all-embracing electoral and policy alliance with the

A.L.P. via an economic Accord is all too reminiscent of the "old left" fantasy of subsuming the social movements under an allegedly more fundamental socialist program. It is assumed that socialism is both consistent with all their values and objectives and provides all the material conditions for their realisation.



Claims that a socialist political program can address social movement demands might be more sympathetically received by the latter were they accompanied by recognition of the limitations of an Accord politics and its dependence on social movement support. The more ambitious policy aims of *Australia Reconstructed* reveal several such points of dependency for their realisation on a more diffuse cultural mobilisation of support and practical involvement. National economic regeneration depends on generating "a production culture and consciousness".

This accent on the need to generate a productionist culture is not empty rhetoric. Flexibility in the face of technical restructuring, commitment to localised improvements, quality control, prompt delivery and workers' capacity to engage in an informed way in industrial codetermination processes will remain a chimera, argues the document, if retraining is limited to technical on-the-job matters. Whence, for instance, the demand for paid leave for some employees for the purpose not only of retraining but of a more general social and civil education as well as general literacy and numeracy training, special

courses for migrants and other disadvantaged groups.

Here is a clear point of entry for the women's movement, for example, to argue (as Pat Randal and Caroline King argued in *ALR* 105) that more union attention is required to the particular locations and skill-structure of women's employment, e.g. to the non-vocational components of retraining.

The fact that the latter lies predominantly in the service sector in turn draws attention to the limits of seeking the galvanisation of popular commitment to a *production* culture. While there is a strong strategic case for placing industrial restructuring (and its social policy concomitants) at the forefront of socialist renewal, there is a further possibility which chimes in with recent leftist attention to issues of popular culture and "lifestyle", namely the socialisation not of production as such but of economic consumption and its culture. While this cannot be pursued here, it points to yet another instance of the dependence of labour movement "strategic unionism" on other forces.

No doubt Mathews' pamphlet will provoke numerous other objections. For example, to its under-estimation of both the depth of cynicism about the Accord among trade unionists, and the grip of political Romanticism on the left. One objection which, however, merely increases its relevance for a new left party is the incongruity of proposing a distinctly leftist program to a Labor party which is and always will be *itself* a coalition of left and right opinion. But then, part of the value of Mathews' pamphlet is precisely its provocativeness, and nowhere more so than in the corrosive implications for political romanticism of its biting the bullet of pluralism. A pluralist socialism must be pragmatic on principle.

NOTE

1. J. Mathews, *A Culture of Power: Labour Movement Goals in the Eighties*. (Sydney, Pluto Press, 1988.)

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