When Mikhail Gorbachev claims to be a socialist in the mould of Willy Brandt and the Swedish SAP (ALR 133, October), we really know Communism is dead. Not that we ought to take Gorbachev's miraculous conversion on the road from the Crimea too seriously in itself; after thirty years or more as a member of the CPSU, his sudden (re)discovery of Western social democracy seemed a little forced.

But Gorbachev's statement does at least accurately reflect one important reality. Like many former socialists in the formerly Eastern European satellites, he realises the game is up, not just for Communism, but also for the formerly Eastern European satellite reality. Like many former socialists in this region, he realises the game is up, not just for Western social democracy, but also for the old-style Russian atavistic nationalism.

At the moment in the ex-Soviet Union the main political and ideological struggle is between a loose coalition of the first three against an unholy alliance of the fourth — old-style primordial Russian nationalism — and the remnants of hardline Soviet Communism.

Over the next few months and year, one suspects, as Communism fades from view, the parameters of political debate will be reshaped closer to the European model - where the major dividing line at present is between those who want a more rapid, and those who (for various reasons) want a slower transition to the market. Even this, though, will not clearly replicate the Western ideal of a 'spectrum', with calibrated 'Left' and 'Right' arms, because the forces on either side will remain disparate and fluid. On the 'slower transition' side— at present the losers — will be found both social democrats and nationalist reactionaries, old-style Communists acting in defence of the old order and new-style trade unionists acting in defence of living standards.

One response from the western Left to these seismic political shifts is to argue that it all doesn't really matter to 'us', anyway; 'we' gave up on Soviet-style socialism years ago: and it's all just a matter of the collapse of 'stalinism', rather than socialism, anyway. However, there is something a little hollow about this sort of disclaimer. After all, regardless of subsequent disclaimers, the tradition of 1917 has had a seminal influence on the character of the Western political lexicon over the last three quarters of a century. Indeed, the very conception of the 'political spectrum' in Western politics is itself the product of the two epoch-making events of modern European history: the French Revolution (which coined the vocabulary of 'Left' and 'Right') and the Soviet Revolution (which created the divisions within the left-of-centre spectrum which we take for granted today, and more particularly the conception of calibrations of 'leftness' defined by proximity to, or distance from, the revolutionary absolute).

Most people on the Western Left would probably now concede that the identification of 'Left' and 'Right' with 'progress' and 'reaction' respectively (the tradition founded in 1789), no longer makes much sense — regardless of whether or not one subscribes to any of the various gospels of postmodernism. And few would presumably still use the 'revolutionary'/'social democrat' polarity as ideal end points for the graph line of left-of-centre politics. Yet still, curiously, we nearly all still talk as if these were, in fact, the most meaningful definitions in democratic politics. We still habitually describe the Right of the political spectrum as 'conservatism' - even though, as Paul Keating is fond of pointing out, the Left nowadays spends more time defending the status quo than does the Right. And it seems clear that the Cold War divisions in the Australian labour movement are going to long outlive the withering of the international blocs around which they were organised.

This lends a strange sense of schizophrenia to much contemporary debate on the left side of politics. At one level it is freely admitted that the self-definition of left and labour politics is in crisis, and that the collapse of the old Soviet model is not without consequence for our own vision of the good society. In the very next breath, though, conversation usually proceeds as if this crisis had been resolved, and resolved decisively in favour of the old verities.

Perhaps it is this schizophrenia which explains the mood of defensiveness and 'return to fundamentals' which seems currently to be abroad in leftist politics. After a decade of pragmatism and compromise, it's asserted, now is the time for the Left to return to its traditional role of conscience of the labour movement and guardian of maximalist rectitude. On the face of it, one might have thought the times demanded something radically different: a comprehensive rethinking of the 'boundaries' of politics and of the instincts and assumptions underlying them, for instance. But what if it is precisely the fear of the loss of identity which this process might create which causes otherwise well-intentioned people to fall back on the eternal truths?

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