The March 5 election marked a significant shift in the terrain of Australian politics, a shift which provides new possibilities for progressive advance, and for the left. But for these possibilities to be realised, the left must develop a strategic response based on a careful analysis of the trends revealed by the vote, and of the objective possibilities opened up by Labor's victory.

The main results of March 5 were: a decisive defeat for hardline conservatism; a clear mandate for Labor's program of economic revival and social reform; and, with Labor governments federally and in four states, the opening up of Labor's best chance for 40 years to carry out its reform policies and strategies in both the federal and state arenas. All this means that the coming period will see the best test for decades of both the possibilities and the limitations of Labor's policies and approaches for tackling basic social problems.

Other important trends included the election of several new ALP women including in marginal seats; the mandate for Labor to stop the Franklin dam; and the strong vote for Aboriginal candidate Neville Bonner in Australia's most racist state, Queensland. The election of several new women MPs is a further step to destroying the myth that women can’t win difficult seats. It also reflects the growing importance of women as an independent electoral force prepared to swing in large numbers to parties which offer them a better deal in job opportunities, child care and social rights.

The election result was, above all, a stinging defeat for the hardline conservatism preached (though not always practised) by Fraser and Howard. Not only was their government soundly defeated but the hardliners of all were savagely dealt with. West Australian voters wiped out the WA Liberal “dries”, who thought Fraser was too wishy-washy in his support for the “free market” and the “right” of the wealthy to avoid tax. And Queensland Liberal voters swung heavily to Aboriginal and ex-Liberal Senator Neville Bonner, whom Queensland Liberal hardliners had dropped from number one on their ticket, thus prompting him to stand as an independent.

The Fraser government was the first conservative government in an advanced Western democracy to apply the hardline monetarist policies of Milton Friedman as a pro-capitalist solution to the recession of the mid-1970s. This economic policy was accompanied by a conservative offensive aimed at making workers and the poor pay for the crisis, at dismantling some of the welfare state, and at aggressively promoting conservative values of “free enterprise”, individual self-interest, “the market”, and conservative versions of “the family” and “the nation”, as the main principles on which to base an economic and social recovery. (In fact, the left should be concerned that part of the reason for the failure of anti-communist and anti-socialist scaremongering is that many people believe the socialist left is no longer a relevant force in Australia.)

Public opinion polls show that many people believe that unions are more to blame for our economic problems than big business or governments. The consistent anti-union campaign by all conservative politicians and the media has had a lasting impact which unions can ignore only at their peril. Unions should seek to turn this feeling round and direct it at the real causes of the capitalist crisis by more actively and more imaginatively promoting themselves and their policies.

And while individual unions must firstly look after their own members, they should overcome the traditional tendency to interpret these interests in narrow, sectional ways which so often make them appear as no more than sectional groups scrabbling for their own interests first, last and always. Decarication disputes between unions have done great damage in this respect. The ACTU/ALP accord on economic policy provides considerable opportunities for widening the horizons of the whole union movement. The left should take up this challenge, especially among rank-and-file union members who constitute the only force which can ensure the accord’s full implementation, and its extension in progressive directions.
The defeat of hardline conservatism, and the present severe crisis of the conservative parties (especially the Liberals), does not rule out another swing of the political pendulum back to conservatism in the next three to seven years, as happened in West Germany on March 6. If Labor does not deliver the goods, if it gets crushed and snowed by the crisis of the system, then a swing back to the right, rather than further left, is the most likely result.

It will not be easy to prevent this happening and, given the present limited clout of the left, we should not underestimate the objective possibilities for preventing it. However, the left can try to develop a strategy which has the best chance of building independent progressive mass movements and expanding the influence of socialist ideas in the new situation opened up by Labor's victory.

Such a strategy should centre around active intervention by the labor and progressive social movements to ensure the implementation and extension of Labor's reform policies, rather than sitting back and leaving it all to Labor government, or just criticising from the sidelines.

The movements should mobilise to defend Labor's progressive policies against conservative attack and undermining, as may soon happen over the Franklin dam. They should also push for the earliest possible implementing of Labor's promises and campaign for Labor to extend and improve its policies in progressive directions.

The building of movements around these aims would in itself shift the political balance to the left, and would also increase the possibilities of developing mass understanding of the need for more basic changes than the Labor government currently stands for. Such a movement, broad masses of people will only develop through their experiences of how well or otherwise Labor's policies work — and how convincing or otherwise they find the left's arguments for a more radical approach.

The left's arguments should be convincing at two levels. Firstly, in suggesting immediate policies and intermediate strategies for dealing with the current crisis. (This includes an alternative economic strategy.) Secondly, in projecting an alternative "vision of the future" — an outline of the sort of society we want, its aims and its ideas and values.

This cannot be done in abstraction, but only in connection with the various mass movements, each of which have thrown up their own "visions of the future" based on their particular concerns. Equally, the various movements need an overall social vision to enable them to form an alliance to achieve a radical social change in all their interests.

The central issue for the moment is the economy which, of course, is connected with other vital issues in ways that are not enough talked about.

Labor has inherited an economic mess, of which the projected $9.6 billion deficit for 1983/4, and GMH's claimed $130 million loss and plans to retrace 1,400 workers are two obvious examples in Labor's first week. It would have been difficult anyway for Labor to carry out its promises, but now Prime Minister Hawke and Treasurer Keating are indicating that many policies cannot be delivered, at least for now, and that Fraser's wage freeze may have to be extended.

The outflow of $2,500 million in the week before the election, and Labor's 10 percent devaluation three days after the election (nobody the speculators $250 million), shows how Labor can be pressured by the owners of private capital. BHP, Australia's largest corporation, early this year also shifted $2,500 million around the globe — to buy up Utah. This move will double BHP's capitalisation, but will not create one new job.

How to control capital in the social interest, and how to make the owners of private capital accountable to society from which they profit, is the big issue for Labor in its attempts to tackle the problems of the depression.

The most pressing need for some control over capital is to direct it into creating new industries. The financial institutions are awash with surplus money looking for the most profitable investments, yet unemployment is still soaring for lack of a policy to develop new industries — and for lack of social control over the huge amounts of capital that are now available.

Bob Hawke's policy speech correctly said that the "first and foremost" issue is "the right of every Australian to a job". Yet even Labor's difficult aim of creating 500,000 jobs in three years will only lower unemployment "by a couple of percent", leaving it at 8% in three years' time, assuming no further economic decline. It is most unlikely that the right to a job can be achieved if the "free market" is left unchecked and uncontrolled.

No one expects the Hawke Labor government to adopt socialist solutions — that is neither its platform nor its mandate. But it should be expected to adopt the necessary measures to control capital to the extent necessary to implement its election promises. And Labor's "socialisation aim" still does say: "The Australian Labor Party is a democratic socialist party and has the objective of the democratic socialisation of industry, production, distribution and exchange, to the extent necessary to eliminate exploitation and other anti-social features in these fields."

— Brian Aarons, 15.3.83.
However, the accord guarantees none of this. And, confronted with the harsh economic realities of 1983, the agreement's greatest attraction for many will be its promise of wage restraint and inhibited industrial action. Unless the labor movement intervenes decisively in the discussions that will forge Hawke's new consensus, the ACTU accord will be interpreted in a way that stresses its integrative features and its potential for reducing the political activity and economic well-being of the working class.

The fate of the agreement will largely rest on how Labor under Hawke responds to the pressures exerted by the deepest recession in a generation and the depth of Labor's commitment to the principles espoused in the ALP/ACTU accord.

However, a simple reading of the accord shows that the actual details of operation are, at best, sketchy, with many vague promises, qualifications and modifications. The document has more than a whiff of a policy speech about it.

In exchange for a guarantee that unions will not pursue claims in addition to CPI increases, both the ALP and the ACTU agreed that wage maintenance is seen as an objective. But: "It is recognised that in a period of economic crisis as now applying, that this will be an objective over time".

This is not a strict guarantee of wage maintenance and most likely this qualification will be the undoing of the accord.

The Australian Teachers' Federation delegated to the special federal unions conference, called to ratify the accord, disagrees with Hawke's interpretation of the agreement despite substantial misgivings — in the inevitable hot-house atmosphere of an election campaign.

Other vague areas concern the timing of various reforms. For example, while the ALP commits itself to increasing unemployment benefits and pensions to the basic rate of 25 percent of average male earners, there is no time scale suggested.

Similarly, sections of the accord dealing with education specified that, under a Labor government, funding for non-government schools would be determined on a "needs" basis. But this point was watered down during the election campaign in the face of a very deliberate campaign by the Catholic Church. It appears that other sections of the accord, such as the issue of doctors' fees, are still "open to negotiation" after the ACTU has accepted them.

Overseas experiences with similar arrangements show that they can easily degenerate into little more than vehicles for wage restraint. It's vital, therefore, that unions ensure that negotiations over wage increases and social wage spending are balanced and in the long-term interests of their members and the working class.

By far the section of the agreement which holds the greatest potential for the labor movement concerns industry development and planning. "Both the ACTU and the ALP support as a priority the institution of a planning structure which will determine the way in which the national economy will generate growth on a sustained basis," the accord says.

It is this section which opens the greatest potential for labor movement intervention in the context of an economic policy which sees its prime goal as full employment.

"Consultation is a key factor in bringing about changes in industry. This consultation will be extended to industry, company and workplace level," the accord says.

While the potential for intervention is clear, such a plan is also a clear challenge to the labor movement.

To operate effectively in such a system of consultation, the labor movement at all levels must have access to information from company accounts; it must be able to intervene, if necessary, independently of the company accountants; there must be provision for a delegate system rather than the token "worker representative".

This last point is crucial otherwise workers on such bodies are tied up with secrecy provisions, divided loyalties and are effectively isolated from those whose interests they are supposed to represent.

It is a great challenge — and a substantial breakthrough — for the labor movement if it is able to escape the limitations traditionally imposed by Australian industrial relations institutions which were specifically designed to defuse mass participation and demobilise the working class (see "Arbitration").

It will be no less a breakthrough if a Hawke government can convince companies like BHP, CSR and the AMP to sit down and openly discuss their financial positions and corporate strategies. BHP directors didn't even tell the Fraser government of their plans to buy Utah until after the deal was clinched. (They also didn't tell the local management of Utah until after they'd told Fraser.)

In the smaller levels of the capitalist economy it also seems unlikely that competitors in a depressed economy will "come clean" to their unions and their opposition who have a wary eye out for likely mergers or takeovers.

It is difficult, for example, to see how International Harvester —facing global collapse— would sit down and work with its workforce and government and disgorge its parlous economic position.

It's not clear what Hawke will do if private enterprise refuses to come to the party. The Confederation of Australian Unions has already rejected the agreement outright. In the section on "Mechanics of Implementation", the agreement says the Labor government will encourage companies and public enterprises to "make available the relevant unions substantial details of their financial position, their assessment of future profitability and their investment and employment plans". Here again, even if companies agreed to it, unionists would need help with the material that the company's books. Slick accountants can hoodwink even the most diligent union official.

However, despite these obvious problems and contradictions confronting the establishment of such a consultative system, Australian unions have decided to risk it.

If effective consultation is to be achieved, workers must become involved. The potential for such rank-and-file participation is wide open. But it would be necessary, firstly, for the unions to ensure rank-and-file workers were involved and, secondly, to ensure such involvement is effective by giving whatever technical and expert assistance is necessary to ensure the workers understand and intervene in the processes. Allowing a worker or two on a planning council can be an empty gesture if the worker or union official is not trained to understand the way the company works.

Unfortunately, the low level of participation by rank-and-file workers in the formulation of the agreement does not give rise to optimism that workers will be involved in the agreement's operation.
To reject such an agreement on purely ideological grounds would have meant an impotent isolation for those unions.

However, as the recent statements from the Prime Minister have indicated, the agreement is open to very little value will be decided upon. The unions. Minister have indicated, the To reject such an agreement anticipated, this admittedly depression has been far more fact that, while the mass and political methods. campaign, its organisation and dedication of many individuals to the particular issue. However, the issue has also succeeded in mobilising very large numbers of people (particularly young people) who have had little previous political involvement and would not identify themselves as "politically-motivated".

It is all the more remarkable, then, that the extremely volatile Franklin issue emerged despite Labor's emphasis on conciliation and consensus and its deliberate efforts to avoid "divisive" issues and polarising confrontations. While many on the left have criticised the Franklin campaign as a "middle class" or "trendy" issue — or point to the "class composition" of its supporters and their relatively weak links with progressive labor movement organisations, it is also undeniable that the campaign has largely succeeded while many more "politically correct" causes have not.

As such, the left has a direct interest in studying the campaign, its organisation and political methods. Equally importantly, the left should also not ignore the fact that, while the mass response to the crisis and depression has been far more muted than we might have anticipated, this admittedly remote and singular issue has succeeded in mobilising a large movement of young people — many for the first time.

Certainly there are indications that the issue has provided a watershed for the Australian conservation movement. This election saw a major national campaign waged by a national coalition of environmental organisations in which — for the first time — the movement's leading and most respected organisations intervened directly in support of particular parties and policies.

The fact that these organisations can boast a total membership in excess of 400,000 people provides them with considerable political clout. But, far more significantly, the decision to direct their activities to key marginal seats played a crucial role in influencing the outcome of the poll. However, this both the campaign and its influence in the election indicate a growing support for environmental issues that might not normally be expected in conditions of economic crisis.

For example, veteran conservationist Milo Dunphy, standing in John Howard's blue-ribbon Liberal seat of Bennelong, polled 13.4 percent of the vote on a strong No dams campaign.

For some, this could be excused as "further evidence" of the bourgeois nature of the No dams issue. However, Dunphy's campaign, while based solidly on environmental and ecological concern, was certainly not limited in its scope or its political radius. Asked why he was standing against the Treasurer, Dunphy replied that he, and a growing number of environmentalists, were coming to recognise that a bad environmental policy and a bad economic policy were two sides of the one coin. Dunphy's campaign touched on ascore of "values questions", "social issues" call them what you like — that have traditionally been the concern of the left and the socialist minority in the labor movement.

For example, he raised the issue of tax avoidance, urging that, while personal tax liabilities should be strictly enforced, the real tax fraud surrounded the dealings of corporations like those in the aluminium industry where transfer pricing and tax concessions allow them to escape taxes while raping the environment and trampling on national independence and land rights.

Such a campaign can hardly be described as a "single issue" campaign. Rather, I believe it indicates and shifting consciousness in the environment movement in which direct political action and a more thorough and consistent campaign against environmental philosophy are the most salient features.

While the national decision not to stand candidates in the recent poll meant that it is difficult to gain a clear idea of the impact of the Franklin campaign, the evidence of an emerging political cohesion within the conservation movement would indicate that the process precedes the Franklin issue and will hopefully continue to mature after the issue is resolved.

Recent debates within the Australian Conservation Foundation on questions of uranium mining and nuclear weapons, unemployment, economic policy and ascore of other issues have extended the horizons of environmental concerns and indicate a clarification of broader political alues within the movement.

While it's very true that the movement will adopt positions on these issues with which the left may differ (for example: supporting the Democrats in the Senate over the Franklin issue), the real significance for me lies in the fact that such decisions are being taken at all. However, it would be foolish and unwarranted to try to interpret the embryonic changes as an "emerging coalition" or anything like it. In fact, I believe that a critical appraisal of such concepts is long overdue, particularly in the light of the experiences with the Franklin campaign which has been a textbook case of a mass movement.

Certainly, the left must reassess its role in relation to such movements and how it can best assist such campaigns to win their limited immediate objectives.

Undoubtedly there will be new tensions and pressures arising from the development of a more politically sophisticated and independent environment movement. However, it indicates some very exciting potentials in a creative expressions of popular concern.

— Peter Ormonde