BROAD LEFT, NARROW LEFT

Len Fox’s latest book, *Broad Left, Narrow Left*, marks his 50 years in the progressive movement. As an anecdotal autobiography of that period it offers a great deal to the uninitiated reader of socialist history. But to those who seek solutions to the present state of the left in Australia, the book whets the appetite, but ultimately disappoints.

Fox himself encourages perhaps unfair expectations by the reader when he writes in the foreword:

*What is difficult is to write a balanced account in which the Left is seen as it actually was — a group of fallible human beings who at times did the right thing and at times the wrong thing, who scored up some successes and some failures. This involves taking a critical and self-critical attitude to events in which one was personally involved — and if criticism is difficult, the self criticism is even more so. But the task needs to be done, because the Left has played an important role in Australian life in the past fifty years, and will continue to do so in different ways — in the future. And it will be better if we base our future not on myths, but on facts.*

Certainly Fox does seek to provide a balanced account — a task in which he is remarkably successful. But somehow it falls short of doing much more than presenting the facts. The how and why of this breadth and narrowness is left unelaborated.

*Broad Left, Narrow Left* starts in Viet Nam with Len Fox and Mona Brand teaching English to the Vietnamese shortly after the 1954 revolution. The title is aptly captured by the description of the way the Vietnamese dealt with broad social forces. This is contrasted with the way the Communist Party of Australia leadership at the same time handled Khrushchev’s secret speech at the 20th CPSU Congress.

Growing up in the depression, the Egon Kisch affair, Dimitrov’s United Front, the fight against fascism, Spain, the phoney war, Thomas and Ratliff, the CPA under fire from Menzies, the Red Army enters the war, the NSW Labor Party, writing for the revolution, the Cold War, Mary Gilmore, Paul Robeson, Stalin and Khrushchev — all these and much more come under attention.

And it is a lucid, attractive tale that he has to tell. One which is accessible to and will provide the opening to a rich labor history for the uninitiated. A tale which records the many good and not so good achievements of a brave band of sincere, even if, at times, naive fighters for social change, justice and peace. People such as Ralph and Dorothy Gibson, Bill Wood, Jack Blake, Nettie Palmer, Arthur Howells, Maurice Blackburn, Stan and Vera Deacon, to name but a few. Throughout the book, Fox gives little pen portraits of personalities, large and small, which record for all time something of the flavor of the movement over fifty years.

While Fox paints glowing pictures of socialists like unionist Jim Healy, poet Bart Adamson, and Domain speaker Paddy Drew, he also writes of such people as “Redbeard” whose “very personality, individualistic and intolerant and dogmatic, is the reverse of socialist principles”.

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The left movement in Australia has produced a number of biographical works in recent years. They include John Sendy's *Comrades Come Rally*, Ralph Gibson's *One Woman's Life*, Stan Moran's autobiography, Edgar Ross' book *Of Storm and Struggle*, the *Tribune* series of 1980 on fifty years of struggle, and the two volumes of the *Communist and Labour Movement Conference Journal*. These are, of course, all different in their perspectives and of varying quality. But they all start from the biographical standpoint and the emphasis is on events, people, colour, activity and movement rather than seeking to develop an analysis of the overall state of the left in the post-1917 period.

Sendy's book and, subsequently, his small pamphlet *The Communist Party of Australia — History, Thoughts and Questions* do attempt in their latter stages to make such an analysis and to suggest some possibilities for the future. But, having been written shortly after the events they analyse and which led to Sendy's withdrawal from the CPA leadership, the book and the pamphlet have been unfairly treated. Some left bookshops resisted carrying the book for political reasons. Accordingly, it produced a more limited discussion on the direction of the Australian left than Sendy had hoped for.

Broad Left, Narrow Left should not face such opposition, and also comes at a time when the Communist left is very open to discussion about its future.

In academic circles, various articles and several books have been written which seek to analyse the left. But, generally, these examine the past with neither a feel for the movements themselves, nor with an eye to the future. As Roger Coates wrote in *ALR* No. 82: "The lack of a solid history of the Australian labor movement constitutes a great gap in the intellectual herewithal of the political left in Australia. And until somebody comes up with something more comprehensive and complete, Hagan's *The History of the ACTU* may be default serve the purpose."

When Fox's book arrived, I grabbed it and read it in one sitting. Here was a participant of long experience who had a friendly but critical view of the traditional left organisations and was seeking to examine the essential questions of Australian politics: how the left could relate to the mass, how left parties such as the CPA could relate to the mass working-class party, the ALP, how to form a broad alliance, how to avoid sectarianism, etc. These are the very questions which are confronting the CPA and the left movement today. As economic recession deepens and the Fraser government continues its relentless restructuring of wealth and power, the labor movement's need for a united response becomes more and more urgent. Moreover, it also becomes clear that the lack of a united and broad perspective throughout the whole period of the Whitlam years and the early Fraser years, i.e. from 1969 onwards, has placed the labor movement in greater difficulty in facing the deepening crisis of 1983.

For the traditional left party, the CPA, its two splinter groups (the CPA-ML and the SPA), and even for the tiny trotskyist groupings, 1983 is, or should be, a period of reflection and challenge. In recent years, one has seen the SPA seek a level of united action with the CPA only to split asunder with the clash between practitioners and narrow-minded ideologues. Similarly, the CPA-ML split into many parts as the impact of domestic Chinese policies was felt in its internal ideological debate. Recently, the remnants of the CPA-ML — the Hill grouping — also sought talks on united action with the CPA. Even among the tiny trotskyist groupings there have been splits in recent times between dogmatism and a search for a greater unity.

Throughout the left, genuine people are searching for a direction which can lead to a stronger movement for social change precisely at the time and because of the existence of conditions domestically and internationally which force people to take a stand. Narrow ideological positions may appeal to some sections of the left — particularly to those who count the growth of the left movement in ones and tens. But it is increasingly being said that the left needs to find the means to relate and communicate to the thousands and millions of people who do not see socialism as contributing to a better life.

Events in Australia among the three sections of the once united CPA have led Fox to comment "I find it difficult to be enthused by these Party (CPA) members of reflection and challenge seem to be restricting it to unity of socialist groups only, who appear to be looking back to restoring such unity as once existed with people committed to narrow Moscow or Peking lines."

It is, however, clear from the emerging internal discussion in the CPA that some people at least have much broader conceptions of reformation of the left — reformation not realignment, or regroupment.
The left's re-examination of sixty years of activity since the 1917 revolution is not confined to Australia. In Italy, Spain, France, Holland, England, Japan, Mexico and elsewhere, this examination has been going on apace in recent years — particularly since the events of Afghanistan and Poland.

The Italian Communist Party wrote, after the imposition of martial law in Poland:

One must therefore take account that the phase of development of socialism which was initiated by the October Revolution has exhausted its driving force, just as the phase which saw the birth and development of the socialist parties and trade union movements of the Second International became exhausted.

British socialist literature has been full of examination and debate on the role of the party, its future and its relationships to the broad alliance. The Socialist Register, Silver Lingings and Marxism Today have all dealt with these issues at length.

Recent attempts of the New American Movement and the Democratic Socialist Organising Committee to merge are another reflection of the same phenomenon — the left seeking to come to terms with the realities of the 1980s.

For the English-speaking left — Australia, New Zealand, England, Canada and the United States — that means overwhelmingly conservative governments with a large degree of mass support, a small organised left largely split, and in a very defensive ideological position.

Eric Aarons writes elsewhere in this edition of ALR about this question. Indeed, a lively debate is beginning within the CPA about the prospects of socialist growth in Australia and the CPA's role within those prospects.

Bob Connell took up some of the issues facing the left in Australia when he published his pamphlet Socialism and Labor, An Australian Strategy in late 1978. Since then, two issues of Labor Essays have dealt with some of these issues and the CPA has, of course, published its own strategic program Towards Socialism in Australia, as well as other publications such as A New Course for Australia.

Alongside these writings have been important political initiatives of which the AMWSU social wage campaign and the Save the Industry campaign of the Victorian branch of the Australian Railways Union have not been the least important in developing a new strategic orientation for the left. These practical initiatives have much to do with the activity of communists and seek to find new ways to attack and overcome the ideological barriers that encircle the left movement.
But nevertheless, one should note that Connell was able to write a pamphlet about the future of socialist activity in Australia without specific reference to the CPA. This could reveal that Connell is a sectarian, blinkered supporter of the ALP left. On the other hand, it could reveal that Connell, an influential member of the ALP left in this country, believes that socialist activity must increasingly relate to the mainstream of Australian life and that the CPA and, presumably, the rest of the traditional left, is increasingly trapped by objective and subjective conditions outside that mainstream.

Throughout his book, Len Fox makes small forays into deeper discussion of these questions only to stop and recommence the descriptive narrative. For example, he discusses communist united front activity in the Movement Against War and Fascism during the 1930s. He remembers a priest, Rowan MacNeil, telling him that he had decided to join the Presbyterian Church, not because he believed one hundred percent in all its beliefs and practices, but because to him it seemed the best body to work in — and a man who wanted to do something towards a better world couldn’t do it on his own, he needed an organisation to work in. Ralph Gibson, MacNeil added, had decided to work in the Communist Party. Fox comments:

In the 1930s there were a number of people who wanted to find an organisation in which they could join with other men and women in doing something about the evils of depression, fascism and war. The Labor Party at the time was, to a large extent, dominated by powerful Inner Groups which were not only doing nothing about these evils but were shouting abuse at those who tried to get something done. Some of the Labor Party groups and some church groups were covertly or openly pro-fascist. It was not strange that the Communist Party, whatever its weaknesses and limitations, appealed to many of these people as a body in which they could work.

In the post Viet Nam war days, a number of young people made a similar decision and joined the CPA - it appeared to them to be the best organisation at that time through which to work for socialism that was Australian in origin, democratic in nature, and capable of responding to the new challenge of feminism and the environment.

But ten years later, in 1983, it is, in fact, to the ALP that increasing numbers of young people turn as an organisation in which to work for socialism.

The next period will see how the left will reflect on the past 60 years of experience as it faces up to the challenges before it. Some will seek to recreate the advances of the 1930s by much the same praxis. Others seek a new direction by finding suitable organisational forms through which to work with vastly increased numbers of people around the new ideological challenges of a democratic socialism appropriate to the world of the 21st century. The challenge will be to find the way to give cohesion and ideological focus to the activities of the many small groups of people. As this reflection proceeds, it is useful to remember what American socialist Al Richmond wrote some time ago: “the important point is not to arrive at retroactive judgments of what the left should have done. The point is to arrive at a better understanding of what needs to be done now.” Broad Left, Narrow Left is a contribution to that process.

Philip Herington was a student radical who joined the CPA in the 70’s. He worked as Vicotrian Secretary of the CPA until last year. He is presently a teacher.