Is the Left BRAINDEAD?

A combination of the loss of old political certainties and the fragmentation of its political priorities has left the political Left marginalised and demoralised. Does it have a future? At a recent Sydney seminar sponsored by ALR, Peter Baldwin, Sue McCreadie and Michael Easson outlined their prognoses.

What’s to Celebrate?

Sue McCreadie argues for a new kind of social democracy.

Recently I noticed a poster advertising a May Day march which also invited us to ‘celebrate socialism.’ The first thing that came to my mind was the slogan from the bicentennial year: ‘what is there to celebrate?’ Because it’s really not clear to me what’s left of socialism, nor what the Left project is.

There are several reasons for this, but the first and most obvious is the events in eastern Europe. Whatever one
thought of the socialist credentials of those countries, I think the events there can’t help but inform our thinking, not least because the cynicism in the wider community about anything called socialism has probably reached a terminal stage by now. In response to the triumphalism of the Right about the death of Communism, people on the Left often respond by saying: look at the capitalist world, at the people living in the cardboard boxes in New York and London, at the lengthening dole queues and at the state of the environment; our own system is not conducive to environmental sustainability or to social equity. All of that is true, but the problem is that that in itself doesn’t give us any kind of map for social action.

Second, the perceived move to the Right by social democratic and labour governments around the world, the adoption of seemingly conservative policies of privatisation and deregulation, have led to a loss of morale on the Left, and the perception that traditional Labor and social democratic values have been abandoned. And third, the crisis in our political organisations seems important. There’s clearly been a decline of the traditional parties, and particularly of Left parties. The ALP has seen declining membership and activism over a period of years, and the consolidation of single-issue campaigns and social movements, which are a lot more attractive to many young activists. For all these reasons, there’s a need to rethink not only policies, but also political practice.

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Another debate the Left has to come to grips with is that around ‘post-Fordism’—the assertion that changes in production and consumption suggest we’re moving away from the Fordist era of mass production and mass consumption, towards a new type of industrial organisation. I think this is an important debate, not only because of what it suggests about industrial winners and losers around the world, but also because of the potential it suggests for the democratisation of the workplace, and of other areas of life. It also gives us the potential to look at how we might renovate social democratic theory. I say this with some trepidation, because I know that for many people on the Left social democracy is a dirty word. However, if we don’t want to describe ourselves as social democrats, then the question arises: is there really a ‘third way’ between the old-style stalinist model and the social democratic model, and if so what’s it called? We used to talk about democratic socialism. But those on the Left who use the term nowadays, if they’re pushed, say it really means that we’re about participation and democracy. We believe that people should have more control over their own lives and their own environment. Well, I think that’s commendable. But the question for me is whether that constitutes something separate, or whether we’re actually looking at extending and reforming the existing institutions of liberal and social democracy, rather than counterposing that to them.

Again, some of the most interesting recent debates in the Left have been about redefining citizenship in a modern democracy. But again, the politics of citizenship doesn’t require a specific category called democratic socialism. As a result, the boundaries between the Left and the Right are increasingly becoming blurred. Often the divisions within the factions of the Labor Party are as large as the divisions between them. There are certainly troglodytes in both factions, and there are people who are bordering on braindead in both factions. And hopefully there are thinking people in both factions as well. The factional system makes it very hard for people to say, well, I agree with you on one thing, but I disagree on another. It’s a system that’s very much focused on number-crunching; people want to know who’s reliable, who’s in our camp, and so people are frightened to say: I disagree with my faction on that. It seems to me that the basic political culture of the party is a problem.

This brings me to my final point. There is a clear crisis in the old form of political party; for many people, especially younger activists, social movements and single-issue campaigns are much more attractive. They are not much enthralled at the prospect of sitting around passing resolutions or the prospect of trying to get the numbers. Both the Left of the Labor Party and the Left outside the Labor Party have a problem with social movements. They find them very difficult to deal with, for a number of reasons. One is the traditional Left view that there’s somehow a hierarchy of relevant categories, and at the top there’s class, then there’s party, and then there are other things like gender, the environment, peace, gay and lesbian politics. In this scheme of things all these latter categories are very nice, but they’re basically secondary. But the growth of those move-
ments and their tenacity is testimony to the fact that class is becoming a less significant binding force than it once was, and that people don’t simply define themselves by their class any more.

The attitude of the Left has often been to try to colonise the social movements, and they’ve managed to wreck a few in the process. The other approach, of course, the more ‘enlightened’ one, is to say that we should form some sort of alliance with them. We’ll add their concerns on to ours in a shopping-list, and out of that we’ll come up with a new manifesto. That’s a more commendable approach, but it’s still problematic, because most of the people in those movements and campaigns don’t see themselves in that way, and refuse to so neatly be put into the Left-Right spectrum. Indeed, many of them would tell you that the Left, the labour movement and social democrats are really part of the problem, and can’t be part of the solution.

So, in conclusion, I think we need a renovation of our theory and our sense of identity. But I think it’s unlikely that out of this or any other process we’ll get a blueprint for change. On the Left we’ve always been looking for blueprints for change, we’ve always been coming up with new manifestos because the old one didn’t work. I don’t think it’s possible to proceed in that manner any more; the problems have become far too complex. Instead, we’ll probably have a very messy process of reconstruction. New issues will arise, and it won’t be quite clear how traditional Left categories can respond to them. If the Left is to be effective in this kind of environment, if it’s to be vibrant and a leader in trying to respond to new challenges, then it’s very important that we create structures and practices which enable more free-thinking and interaction. And that’s a far cry from our structures and practices at the moment.

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A Sterile Debate

Michael Easson contends that the fundamental task remains to ‘civilise capitalism’.

One can define the Left as the non-conservative forces in society; one can also define it more narrowly as the Left traditions within the labour movement. It is apparent that there are various traditions that make up the Left of the labour movement in this country. Various of those traditions are alive, and some, I think, are dead. Yet on the various problems and challenges facing the labour movement today, it seems to me disturbingly evident, as someone active both in the Labor Party and the trade union movement, that there is hardly any debate going on.

Indeed, a lot of the debate that does take place seems to me to be fairly sterile and mindless. For example, the debate about whether or not Australian Airlines should be privatised largely turned on one’s attitude to the traditional goal of public ownership. The shibboleth of public ownership for its own sake became a key issue among many of us, rather than asking the important questions, such as; what should be the role of government, what are the principles that we should be seeking to have achieved through the labour movement, and does Australian Airlines play a role in that?

What kind of forum is there to debate issues within the labour movement? Most Labor Party branches are mindless events. There is very little debate about policy, and no-one seems to be greatly interested in changing that.

The trade union movement has similar problems. Here we have to confront the prospect of a change of government. One of the facts facing the trade union movement this decade is that Dr Hewson or another conservative leader will become prime minister. If it isn’t the next election, or the election after that, one day the conservatives will win. And when they do, they will be more vicious and determined in their approach to the trade union movement than ever before.

Of course, we are attempting to answer that problem by award restructuring, by the amalgamations strategy and the like. Yet it seems to me we ought to have a number of reservations about that strategy. I worry, for instance, that we are creating a more bureaucratic trade union organisa-