Abandoning the Struggle

Unlike the good prime minister, I was aware that ALR was still in existence. However, after reading through your last issue, I'm not sure what the 'Left' in ALR actually means. The articles that particularly confused me are those by Denise Meredyth and by Stegman, Mahony and Burchell.

Meredyth's review of Pusey's *Economic Rationalism in Canberra* enjoin us to smarten up our critiques and to this end she gives us what turns out to be some fairly ordinary stuff from Weber about the necessity of bureaucracy. She also throws in what is by now some very well-worn poststructuralist mysticism under the heading of 'theoretical shifts'.

These same theoretical shifts have, of course, functioned, particularly within the academy, to depoliticise and disorientate a whole generation of Australian leftists. Crucial to this project has been the abandonment of a notion of a social totality and the concept of class struggle.

Such is the advanced nature of Meredyth's theoretical sophistica
tion that she is unable to conceive of "a clear separation between the principled positions of the Left and the calculations of government". This, when unemployment has averaged around 8% for the entire period of Labor rule. Meredyth does point to reforms and these of course should be acknowledged. But their existence does not point to some extremely clever political breakthrough based on the policy manoeuvrings of a new intelligentsia reared on a diet of Foucault and Co. Before we actually begin to believe in this wonderful new creature of the 90s—Policy Woman/Man—we should remember that reforms are not new. There have been many reforms and even periods of reform under capitalism. However—and this is fundamental—their continued existence depends on the state of the struggle between the classes. To say this is, of course, in Meredyth's eyes to be a "romantic oppositionalist" and (horror of horrors) to deprive one of "access to policy debates". For Meredyth this appears to be her very raison d'être. Reformism has indeed shrunk to a very small measure.

For all the faults of Pusey's work, it is at least informed by a sense of outrage at what has happened to Australian society. This, alas, is too much of a totality for Meredyth; she appears unable to conceive of, never mind address, what has happened under Labor rule. The truth is that capitalism has entered a particularly vicious phase where it once more has become a brutal zero sum game. Neither Foucault nor Donzelot, Lyotard and Co. has anything useful to say about this. By 'useful' here I mean providing the oppressed with the theoretical means to overthrow the existing state of affairs and institute a more just system.

That ALR is a long way from providing the basis for such a project is made equally clear by Stegman, Mahony and Burchell on the economy. Here, the underlying fear of being 'oppositional' has led to an explicit endorsement of another period of austerity. There are several points here. The first is: austerity for whom? The answer is, of course, the working class. But I strongly suspect that the smart new theoretical sophisticates would choke if they tried even to pronounce the word 'class'.

The second point to make is that we have just come through a period of austerity where real wages fell considerably. But what happened through the opportunities that were deliberately created for the rich (old and nouveau)? In the orgy of speculation, borrowing and takeovers have left us with yet another period of austerity ahead of us. Burchell, it would appear, disagrees. He argues that more austerity does not mean we must accept the 'status quo'. He hints darkly that something might have to be done about the universities and telecommunications. It seems that this is where his 'Left of centre' axe would fall. One is tempted to say 'there but for the grace of God goes God'.

We do desperately need some solutions to our present mess. I would venture to suggest that the answer does not lie in a return to a watered-down or even full-blown Keynesianism. After all, it must be acknowledged that Keynesian economics failed and this left the way open for the return of neoclassical economics. We need instead to begin articulating a socialist project which requires full-scale democratic intervention by the state and imposes very severe constraints on the room to manoeuvre of the capitalist class.

At present, calls for austerity are simply disguised calls to make the rich richer, in the hope that they will invest. This, Burchell assures us, is realistic. However, given the present parlous state of both the Australian and world economy, this is the true 'self-deception' that Burchell is anxious to accuse his critics of. Unlike Burchell, I believe that the crisis is so acute that we must deepen the socialist content of our critiques. This may, of course, lead to our exclusion from some policy debates, but the present policy trajectory will inevitably lead to the return of a Liberal/National government, and I presume that then even the 'left of centre' would wish to be excluded from policy debates and committees.

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Conservative

I have been concerned for some time at the articles in ALR which only denigrate the Left or the Left’s criticism of rightwing ideology. In the May 1992 issue we have an article attacking Michael Pusey’s views as lacking intellectual rigour; another saying how much better off the East Germans are under West German auspices; another, “Love’s Labours Lost”, sneering at the British Labour Party; and a lengthy article, “Whatever Happened to the Debt?”, which takes a painfully correct academic approach in expressing a pretty conservative line.

The Left has often been open to criticism in its ideology, and also its administration. I would hope that a journal such as yours would concentrate on criticising the Right and providing alternative Left perspective in areas such as economic and social policies. Every left-thinking person has been aware of the absence of a coherent Left position for at least the last decade; there is no need for more articles stating what is already widely accepted.

The launch of the new format ALR had a cover which proclaimed “Death of Communism”—which was curious, considering the history of the publication. In June 1992 there is a cover which asks “Is the Left Braindead?” Such covers indicate conservative contents, and that unfortunately has proved correct.

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List

WOMEN AND RELIGION

The Women’s Studies Centre at Sydney University is presenting a one-day seminar entitled ‘Women and Religion’ at the Menzies Common Room, Women’s College, on Sunday 28th June from 9am to 5pm. This conference will cover a number of religions: Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism. Issues being dealt with include: Is it possible for a Feminist to be a Christian?, Women and Islam - the Rise of Fundamentalism and its Effects on Muslim Women, Women in the Ministry and Religion and Sexuality. Speakers include: Dawn Cohen, Imrana Jalal, The Rev. Dorothy McMahon, Gisela Meister-Rommer, Dr Barbara Thiering & Dr Erin White. Contact The Women’s Studies Centre on (02) 692 3638.

XY: men, sex, politics. XY is a national magazine for and about men. XY affirms a healthy, life-loving, non-oppressive masculinity and explores issues of gender and sexuality. Subscriptions are $15 (full-time), $12 (part-time), $10 (unwaged). Institutional subscriptions ($36), group subscriptions ($25). Sample copies are $5. XY, PO Box 26, Ainslie ACT 2602.

HISTORY OF AUSTRALIAN FEMINISMS

The Women’s Studies Centre and the History Department of the University of Sydney will present a Conference on the History of Australian Feminisms from 9 to 11 July 1992 at Women’s College, University of Sydney. Topics to be covered during the conference include the Origins of Australian Feminisms, Sex and Suffrage, Feminisms Between the Wars, Literary Feminists, the Media and Feminisms and Feminist Positions 1970 - 1990. For further information and registration details contact Penny Russell on (02) 692 2362 or Mary Spongberg on (02) 692 3638.

WANT TO FIGHT ‘Fightback!’? Baffled by ‘bracket creep’? Fightback or Frightpack: an Education and Action Kit has analyses by leading trade union, environmental, community and women’s movement activists. Also a guide to what you can do to stop Hewson. Cost $5 plus $1 postage, or 5 for $20 incl.

postage. Send cheque to New Left Party, Box 19, Trades Hall, 4 Goulburn St., Sydney 2000, or ring (02) 264 7789.

WOMEN’S LIVES, MEN’S LAWS, FEMINISTS FUTURES?

This series of discussion forums is for women to talk about recent developments in law and economic policies. Sunday 26th July: Whatever happened to a womb of our own? Reproductive rights and wrongs. Speakers: Heather Dietrich and others to be confirmed. Sunday 20th September: Challenging the Fightback package: Understanding the proposed goods and services tax. Speakers: Claire Young, Sue Outhwaite and others to be confirmed. Harold Park Hotel Bistro, 115 Wigram Road, Glebe, NSW. Childcare available if booked in advance - phone Elaine Fishwick (02) 519 4360 bh. For general information phone Marilyn McHugh (02) 697 3863 bh.

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