DISCUSSION

Alienating and Elitist

I read with great interest McKenzie Wark's article "The Green Old Days" in ALR's July issue. It put its finger quite precisely upon a significant critique of organisation-based politics, and on the possibilities opened up by information and communications technologies for new forms of political practice. However, I believe that Wark's rejection of forms of political activity based around organisational structures could lead to a 'doughnut-like' situation in alternative politics—in other words, a lot at the edges, but no centre. In the end, this would be counterproductive for the process of achieving real political change.

The strengths of the piece were, in my view, threefold. First, Wark argues persuasively that it is controls of flows rather than territories which is critical in the current stage of capitalism. One can think of the hypermobility of money-capital, and the inability of national governments to control its movements effectively, to realise the enormous power which accrues to those who control these mechanisms. Likewise, the regimes in Eastern Europe, while ultimately brought down by the masses on the streets, were initially undermined by the capacity of a small number of people with access to PCs, fax machines and photocopiers to subvert the complex webs of control, which had been constructed to contain and eliminate dissidence.

Second, it is true that attempts to "unite the fragments" or reconstruct Left politics based upon traditional organisational forms (parties or alliances) have foundered upon the inability, in an era of 'media culture' and more complex political allegiances, to build the bases from which even a modest form of political effectiveness could occur.

Further, pyramidal structures based upon branch networks which link up to centralised power systems have proved widely unappealing to many people who are, in a more general sense, politically 'on the Left', and may well be redundant in an era where 'networking' can take place through IT systems in a much less time-consuming and more effective way. In an era where the promotion of pluralism, diversity and difference are the goals of a revised left, and where there are no simple answers to increasingly complex questions, a return to the era of 'ideological correctness' or 'Unity Statement #242' is not helpful.

Third, Wark is right to say that media and cultural strategies have to be at the centre of alternative political strategies. In an era of increasingly mediated communication, as much time in any campaign should be devoted to accessing the means of communication in a professional way as to building the number of supporters on the ground. This requires approaches which are media-literate, well targeted and professional in their look. No group has a natural constituency; alliances are always to be constructed, as much through the mass media as the mass meeting, and this requires a certain degree of media savviness in one's approach.

It is important to consider, however, what is lost if traditional political forms like parties are rejected. Wark makes clear the possibilities for communications technologies to create new forms of how groups and individuals interact and unite. But what is in danger of being lost in this discussion is the question of why they would, and who would initiate action around particular issues. One obvious example is the need for many groups to act co-operatively to oppose the Liberal-National Fightback! program. At present a campaign against Fightback! lacks an appropriate vehicle through which an alliance could be built.

Another problem is the absence of a political culture in the absence of political organisations. Strategies based around control over communications flows, rather than personal debate and interaction, face two real problems. The first is that they necessarily exclude that large proportion of the population who are most disadvantaged, but who don't have access to the IT systems required to participate in such a politics.

The second is that, even for those who can participate in such networking and exchanges, the experience is in many respects an individualising and alienating one. Further, there is no reason to believe that the high-tech hackers and networkers of yore; certainly they are less accountable for their actions. Wark's privileging of a politics based around information technologies and speed leaves an enormous gap in terms of attachment to real communities, localities and everyday life.

Wark's approach runs two risks. First, it strengthens the position of the political Right, who are not nearly as disorganised and who certainly see disorganisation as a weakness. Second, it runs the risk of leading Green and Left groups into both a political strategy which has no real connections to people's everyday lives, and a political practice which is ultimately alienating, individualising and elitist.

Terry Flew, School of Humanities, University of Technology, Sydney.
False Impressions

In ALR's June issue Michael Easson made an assertion about the consequences of the ADSTE-AMWU amalgamation which cannot go unanswered. In the articles under the general heading "Is the Left Brain-dead?" he wrote:

Of course, we are attempting to answer that problem (of a potential Coalition Federal Government) by award restructuring, by the amalgamation 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 organisation, one which won’t be responsive to many of the wishes of rank and file activists. That applies whether the amalgamated union is supposedly rightwing or leftwing. It will apply when the ADSTE merges with the metalworkers union and 40% of the ADSTE members no longer choose to join the union. It will apply when the ADSTE-AMWU amalgamation was successfully completed on 19 November 1990 and amalgamation took effect on 1 April 1991. One year later the membership had dropped, but by less than 6%, in the worst economic recession in 60 years. A close monitoring of the resignations showed that redundancies in the public and private sector was the overwhelming cause of the loss. A small handful of individuals cited the amalgamation or its perceived effects as a reason for resignation. Interestingly in the ACT and Western Australia the membership of the Technical and Supervisory Division actually increased because of local factors. These were the two branches of ADSTE who most actively opposed the amalgamation and they had predicted dire consequences for our ability to recruit and maintain ADSTE membership.

The notion that the ADSTE-AMWU amalgamation has created a bureaucratic and unresponsive organisation is simply wrong. All the mechanisms for involving former ADSTE members no longer choose to join the union. It will apply when the Australasian Society of Engineers joins with the ironworkers to form FINE (sic) and 30-35% of the ASE’s members just disappear. And I worry that we do not debate many of these issues in a serious way within the trade union movement.

It is a worry that Michael Easson has not treated these issues seriously. He has also created a false and damaging impression of the consequences of the amalgamation of the ADSTE and the AMWU which formed the Metals and Engineering Workers Union (MEWU). The ADSTE-AMWU amalgamation was successfully completed on 19 November 1990 and amalgamation took effect on 1 April 1991. One year later the membership had dropped, but by less than 6%, in the worst economic recession in 60 years. A close monitoring of the resignations showed that redundancies in the public and private sector was the overwhelming cause of the loss. A small handful of individuals cited the amalgamation or its perceived effects as a reason for resignation. Interestingly in the ACT and Western Australia the membership of the Technical and Supervisory Division actually increased because of local factors. These were the two branches of ADSTE who most actively opposed the amalgamation and they had predicted dire consequences for our ability to recruit and maintain ADSTE membership.

The notion that the ADSTE-AMWU amalgamation has created a bureaucratic and unresponsive organisation is simply wrong. All the mechanisms for involving former ADSTE members in the management of their areas of industrial involvement have been maintained. Former ADSTE members have proportional representation on all governing bodies of MEWU. Our commitment to delegate training and involvement is as strong as ever. The amalgamation has allowed a rationalisation of resources in a difficult industrial and economic period. It has allowed the expansion of a union presence in many areas where ADSTE had not previously been able to gain access.

I do not think it was Easson's intention to be malicious. His is, rather, an uninformed and prejudiced view of the union rationalisation process. This is a shame as Michael Easson holds an important position in the movement and he has been far more willing to debate issues rationally than many of his predecessors. In fact, openness of debate is the thrust of his contribution to the question "Is the Left Brain-dead?"

Is the NSW Labor Council secretary braindead? No, but he needs to talk more to his leftwing colleagues and not just about them. These issues are of great importance to the movement and the ADSTE-AMWU amalgamation experience is one from which a number of positive lessons can be learned.

Brian Mason, Acting Assistant State Secretary, NSW, Metals and Engineering Workers Union.

(Through a regrettable accident, Michael Easson failed to receive the edited copy of his talk prior to going to print. Nevertheless, as he readily acknowledges, what was printed was what he said.—Ed.)


Invitation for Papers and Expressions of Interest

National Conference in Labour History at Newcastle, New South Wales.

The next National Conference of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History is to be held in Newcastle, NSW, industrial city and seaport. 25th and 26th of June 1993.

Please write: Bob James, c/- History Department, Newcastle University, Callaghan, NSW 2308 or c/- Hunter Labour History Society, 3/79 Tudor Street, Hamilton, NSW 2303

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