A hard-headed examination of the Australian political scene in 1985 suggests that the Left is now in a very serious state of decline. Whether one looks at superficial indicators or deeper trends, the short-term outlook for the Left is bleak and the longer-term outlook simply unknown.

The Communist Party is in severe difficulties after having proved to be a relatively durable if not dynamic force in the turmoil of the 'sixties and 'seventies. The contradictions of a Eurocommunist line in a small socialist sect have gradually been exposed. The departure of the Victorian CPA leadership to form Socialist Forum in 1984 has had a traumatic impact on the Victorian ALP Left and union movement. The emergence of Socialist Forum has led to quite vicious internal conflict both within the ALP Left and in the trade union movement. The CPA is now seriously contemplating the formation of a new political party founded explicitly on the sort of "community coalition" approach which gave birth to Socialist Forum. The major area of disagreement between the two groups appears to be over the issue of forming a new socialist party rather than attempting to influence or convert the ALP — appears to be over the issue of forming a new socialist party rather than attempting to influence or convert the ALP — the perennial dilemma of Australian socialists.

The socialist sects, which have been characterised by a renewed bout of splits and realignments, have fared suffered the problem of SWP entrism and is now also in disarray and decline. However, thousands of Australians are now actively involved in community groups and issue campaigns which tend to reflect Left attitudes and philosophy, such as animal liberation, consumer groups, People for Nuclear Disarmament, the women's movement and so on. Both the Socialist Forum group and the remaining CPA stalwarts have recognised the importance of harnessing the latent political energy which rests in these forces.

In parliament, and in the trade union movement, the Left's position is weakening. In federal parliament, though more organised and cohesive than ever before, the Left remains in an entrenched minority, lacking leading national figures like Jim Cairns because of a temporary hiatus between the expiring older generation and a rising new generation of Left leaders. At the state level, the Left is strong only in Victoria and New South Wales. Yet, in New South Wales, the Right forces remain firmly in control of the party and, in Victoria, the relative strength of the Left at the parliamentary level is merely exacerbating the deep divisions within the Socialist Left over the role of labor governments.

Within the trade union movement, the Left's position has fluctuated. The massive assault on the AMWU (Amalgamated Metal Workers Union) has been averted for the time being, but has highlighted the vulnerability of progressive unions to attack by external forces with vast amounts of money. The Left has made major gains in white collar unions and more or less held its position in other areas. However, the divisions within the trade union Left, particularly over the Accord and relationships with labor governments, have severely hampered the Left.

Among the rank and file of the labour movement, and in the community generally, the situation is a good deal more serious. The proportion of the population professing a commitment to socialism is small, and apparently declining. The absence of a unifying, inspirational focus on the Left and the increasing fragmentation of Left forces has brought things to the point where outright marginalisation looms. The political debate in Australia over the next five years is likely to be fought between Thatcherite radicals and social democrat preservers of the status quo.

"... the Left is rapidly acquiring an image of an old-fashioned, outmoded theology."

Young working class people have retreated from political activity, and the idealism of middle class youth of the late 'sixties and early 'seventies has been usurped by mindless hedonism and self-interest. Rank-and-file involvement in trade unions and the Labor Party, particularly among the young, is very low, and apparently declining. The trade union movement is more unpopular, even among union members, than it has been for decades. The values of the Right are spreading, and the Left is rapidly acquiring an image of an old-fashioned, outmoded theology, perhaps appropriate during the 'forties, but now completely out of touch with contemporary reality.
Causes of Decline

The primary causes of the declining strength of the Left lie inevitably in the dramatic changes in Australian society in recent decades. In particular, the semi-tribal working class communities of earlier years have all but been destroyed by suburbanisation, improvements in transport and communications, the development of the mass media, and burgeoning materialism and the consumer culture. The post-war boom raised individual expectations and reduced the influence of work relations over social horizons. Increasing detachment of working class leaders in union and party apparatus from the people they represent has been accompanied by the disintegration of an entire political culture.

The "consciousness industries" which blossomed during the sixties, such as television, music and fashion, have dramatically eroded the distinctive working class culture of the shop floor, trade union consciousness and the ethos of socialism. Trade union consciousness has been diluted by the artificial accretion of paper membership brought on by the spread of compulsory membership by means of agreement between union and company rather than pressure from below.

"The older generation within the Left appears to believe that bad publicity does not really matter."

The changing industrial structure in Australia has rapidly reduced the numerical and industrial strength of the manual working class, traditionally the primary base of the Left and the labour movement. There are now more members of the Australian working class working in offices than in factories. The Left has compounded the effects of this change in the structure of Australian society by its almost obsessive attachment to the images of the factory floor, trade union consciousness and the ethos of socialism. Trade union consciousness has been diluted by the artificial accretion of paper membership brought on by the spread of compulsory membership by means of agreement between union and company rather than pressure from below.

The increasing dominance of educated professionals within the ALP has provided a base for the formation of a Centre-Left. Wedded to the concepts of efficiency, professionalism and elitism, most people in this group tend to recoil from the industrial militancy and economic policies of the Left, and content themselves with radical reformism on social issues. The Left faces the difficult task of trying to separate out the truly radical spirit from the naked opportunists among the centrists, while avoiding being "colonised" as a power vehicle to be used in a struggle for internal party supremacy against the Right. The Left also needs to develop a strategy for coping with the increasing problem of blue collar alienation from the ALP and politics generally, which is an inevitable product of burgeoning tertiary education, white collar employment, and radical professional activism.

The older generation within the Left appears to believe that bad publicity does not really matter, as it will not affect the faithful rank and file. Many left leaders still shun the media because it is the "capitalist press" run by establishment lackeys like Rupert Murdoch. The same leaders drive around in cars manufactured by American multinationals which oppress Australian workers and cheat Australian consumers. Like everything else, including the Labor Party and the trade union movement, the media is part of Australian capitalism. To use it intelligently to convey the Left's message does not necessarily imply capitulation to superficial "image politics".

The media is naturally biased against the Left, but is obliged by its own precepts to provide the Left with some coverage: the Left should, therefore, aim to use that coverage to neutralise to the greatest extent possible the impact of that bias. It is a sad fact, but true, that the ordinary ALP member and trade union member gets the bulk of his/her political information from The Sun, Channel 9 News, and so on.

The Left and Economic Theory

The Left has failed to come to terms with the demise of state capitalism of Keynesian economics in the mid-seventies. The Left has vacated the field of economic policy and allowed the ALP Right to dominate almost unchallenged; consequently, the central economic debate in Australia today is between social democratic supporters of the status quo and privatising liberals. Yet there are signs that the Left is now slowly and painfully coming to terms with recent change: nationalisation is now widely regarded as an inadequate solution, there is growing realisation that Keynesianism is essentially a social democratic rather than a socialist economic strategy, and the earlier crude protectionism is gradually being replaced...
by a more sophisticated and creative approach to industry policy.

However, the Left still has not recognised the extent to which the Australian economy has been integrated into the world economy, and continues to assume that the Australian government exercises the dominant role in determining Australia’s economic future. The Left has suffered increasing marginalisation because of its floundering in the economic sphere, and preoccupation with issues such as uranium mining, ASIO, US bases and abortion. However important, such issues are not integral to the achievement of socialism — as a cursory examination of the Australian Democrats’ policies will demonstrate.

"... the Left now lacks a sense of itself as a 'moral community'."

A key feature of the Left’s decline has been its failure to analyse thoroughly and criticise the welfare state and the various instruments of the public sector. Rather than exercising a sceptical vigilance over the efficiency and effectiveness of the welfare state and the public sector, the Left has tended blindly to defend these institutions against attacks. A related factor which provides grounds for concern in the future is the growth of the welfare politics industry and the proliferation of leftwing activists in a variety of publicly-funded and fairly well paid “social caring” and community group jobs. Although the tendency to board the public sector gravy train is both natural and understandable, lack of money and full-time workers being a perennial problem for even the most worthwhile organisations, it is important that the dangers inherent in this process be kept in mind. These include dependence upon, and accountability to, the state, the tendency for well-paid activists to purport to speak on behalf of their disadvantaged clientele, and a fundamentally “band-aid” approach to tackling deep-seated problems.

For many years, the Australian Left has suffered from a tendency to uncritical imitation and adulation of various foreign movements and governments. A cursory glance around the Australian socialist landscape reveals the extent to which it has been shaped by overseas events. Every major crisis in the Communist Party has either been in direct response to overseas events (the invasion of Hungary and Czechoslovakia for example) or related to foreign ideological developments (the rise of Eurocommunism). Most of the smaller socialist sects are essentially colonies of parent bodies in the US and UK.

Blind subservience to the “line” of a foreign country such as Russia or China has had a particularly debilitating effect on the socialist movement in Australia, alienating many outside the movement and causing serious divisions within it. While it is obviously valuable for Australian socialists to draw on the theoretical debates and experiences of socialist movements elsewhere, it is essential that the colonial mentality of blind obedience is abandoned and original socialist thought in Australia fostered.

The recent serious decline in the counter-hegemony of socialist and progressive ideas must be seen as a vital concern to Australian socialists. The dramatic advances in the late sixties and seventies, when progressive values on a wide range of matters took hold in much of Australian society, have been turned around by a concerted counter-reaction. The impact of anti-racist, feminist and humanist values emerging largely from the youth revolt in the sixties has been enormous, but still, in many respects, superficial. Like smoking, people now bear an intellectual conviction against racism and yet continue to practise it in their daily lives without any apparent concern. There has clearly been a marked failure to capitalise on the major gains made during the anti-Viet Nam campaign and the Whitlam period: those which have endured have primarily been those of hedonism and nihilism — such as sexual liberation — rather than socialism.

As a result, in contrast to much earlier days, the Left now lacks a sense of itself as a “moral community”. There has been a marked decline in distinctively working class and socialist cultural institutions. This is partly a feature of the impact of changes in society outlined above and, in particular, of the effects of television, but it also reflects the dramatic decline of morale and general optimism on the Left.

"A great deal of economic policy formulation within the Left seems to proceed under the assumption that larger budget deficits are intrinsically socialist."

The mood of the socialist movement has fluctuated between naive optimism and profound pessimism as it has moved through various phases and crises, such as the Stalinist terror, the triumph over fascism, the McCarthyist witch-hunt, and the youth revolt in the sixties and early seventies. At present, the mood both in the Left and its natural hinterland in the community is one of deep pessimism and uncertainty. The origins of this mood lie in
contemporary circumstances: the future is now regularly defined in terms of dangers — nuclear war, large-scale structural unemployment, ecological crisis.

The development of socialist consciousness and solidarity is, to a considerable extent, dependent upon individuals having a long-term vision of their own future and an expectation of the economic and social framework in which they are likely to live out their lives. With the perceptions of young people so overwhelmingly dominated by the twin fears of nuclear war and indefinite unemployment, it is not surprising that the ground for development of socialism and especially for a forward-looking socialist vision is not very fertile.

Which Direction for the Australian Left?

The recent decline of the Communist Party into virtual sect status has been a significant factor in the increasing fragmentation and loss of direction of the Left. For years, the CPA played a central strategic role in the Australian Left, developing new strategies and campaigns, setting the ideological agenda, and marshalling human and material resources with some form of global conception of the needs of the struggle for socialism. Australian socialism is crying out for a grouping not necessarily a political party — to take on the vanguard role once performed by the CPA.

The recent disputes surrounding the existence and activities of Socialist Forum have been perfect illustrations of all that is bad about the Left. The sectarian viciousness which has surrounded the disputes in the Victorian Socialist Left in 1985 leads one to despair for the left's future. The paranoia, personal bitterness, self-delusion and pious hypocrisy which characterise the activities of participants from all sides in these disputes is enormously damaging. Until the Australian Left is able to develop a degree of tolerance and respect for internal differences, it will remain in its present isolated, marginalised position.

The Left has contributed to its own decline by its addiction to language and expression far removed from that of ordinary people. Many on the Left have a habit of talking in slogans, appearing as priests chanting catechisms rather than thoughtful and tolerant socialists prepared to listen to a different viewpoint. The Left also suffers from occasional outbursts of erratic behaviour, such as the slapstick antics of tomato throwing and internal abuse which highlighted the April 1985 "four unions" Victorian ALP Conference.

Possibly, the most serious problem facing the Left is its failure to devote sufficient attention to questions of political theory and ideology. With the honourable exception of the Communist Party, attention to theory has always been inadequate on the left in Australia. Even today, the word "academic" is a term of abuse in the labour lexicon surpassed in virulence perhaps only by "scab".

This problem is readily apparent in policy formulation — by the Left. Foreign policy tends to be a miscellaneous collection of specific statements about individual crises, rather than an exposition of basic principles. Economic policy is usually developed without any regard for what ought to be the fundamental concern of Australian socialists — transformation of the Australian economy from a capitalist to a socialist mode of production. A great deal of economic policy formulation within the Left seems to proceed under the assumption that larger budget deficits are intrinsically socialist, that protectionism is a foundation-stone of socialism, and that regulation is the key mechanism of transformation from capitalism to socialism.

"The siege mentality which currently permeates the Left must be broken, and the earlier sense of optimism, idealism and moral commitment revived."

Nevertheless, the Australian Left is deeply divided on an ideological basis between those committed to fighting individual (most industrial) struggles without any broader vision or program for a socialist Australia, and those who do have a "grand strategy" of sorts and devote considerable energy to reining in those individual struggles in order to ensure that the strategy is not jeopardised. Those who oppose the Accord strategy have failed to develop an alternative which extends beyond the isolated industrial conflict. Those who support it have failed to realise that a strategy which allows no room for struggle from below and requires constant effort to keep the troops from mutinying is inevitably elitist and social democratic in flavour. A transformist strategy for a socialist Australia must be based on a framework which has room for the pursuit of isolated sectional struggles and enables the energy devoted to those struggles to contribute effectively to the broader struggle.

Grounds for Optimism

Although the Australian political landscape appears particularly depressing from a Left perspective in 1985, there are various factors working in the Left’s favour. The most notable of these is the effective nationalisation and internationalisation of politics as a result of developments in mass communications. Ignorance is the foremost weapon of reaction and, despite its role as an agent of social conditioning, television has brought a knowledge of politics and world events to ordinary people which is unparalleled in human history. Developments in media and communications technology have also assisted the left in various other ways. Cheaper printing, cheaper travel and the growth of public radio have allowed the left to communicate more with the outside world, and increasingly draw on sources of information which are not controlled by political opponents.

The emergence of a widespread network of conservation groups, women’s groups, migrant organisations and self-help groups has provided the traditional Left with

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potential allies sympathetic to the Left’s approach, and with a very important source of new policies, new ideas, and new political techniques. These organisations often pose a refreshing challenge to established shibboleths of the Left, and allow for a fairly dynamic relationship between political party members and community group activists.

"Rather than exercising a sceptical vigilance over the efficiency and effectiveness of the welfare state and the public sector, the Left has tended blindly to defend these institutions against attacks."

These developments are symptomatic of a wider syndrome of immense significance to the Left: the increasing politicisation of women, migrants, church groups, welfare organisations, and white collar unions. In many respects, quite independently of the established Left, groups such as the Brotherhood of St. Laurence and the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace have begun to espouse policies on issues such as poverty, unemployment and foreign military bases which are similar to Left positions. Similarly, white collar unions have begun to reflect an increasingly radical and aggressive activist stratum within their rank-and-file membership, often people previously involved in, or exposed to, the wave of student political activity on campuses in the late 'sixties and early 'seventies.

The most promising recent development for the Left in Britain has been the surge of activity and achievement in local government. Local authorities have been used as a base for intervention in the planning, investment and production processes to an extent simply unheard of in Australia. The leftwing leaders of such authorities have been aggressive and innovative in their approach and, consequently, managed to achieve substantial public support despite the constant attacks of the Thatcher government and the vitriolic British press. The Australian Left needs to recognise that grassroots work at the local government level is a much better way of building genuine consciousness than the ritual capturing of major institutions in society.

The final important reason for holding some faith in the future of the Left is the growing indications of movement towards left unity. Almost every major party and sect on the Australian Left seems to have been involved in unity discussions with another organisation in the past couple of years. As usual, greater adversity tends to produce greater unity and, although there are very deep divisions within the ALP Left in Victoria, there are good reasons for an optimistic outlook in the medium term for unity and cooperation within the left forces throughout Australia. Once again, the major stumbling block will be the inevitable question of attitudes to Labor governments and the Labor Party.

In the Australian Left needs to develop an ethic of ‘building socialism from below.’ It is crucial that the Left comes to terms with the trend towards white collar employment and the gradual proletarianisation of white collar workers in Australia. There exists within the white collar sector a vast and largely untapped potential for political and industrial activity. Mobilising this potential will be difficult: it requires nurturing of the idiom of the office rather than the factory floor, recognition of issues that are important to white collar workers, and a drastic revision of the Left’s attitude to public sector efficiency. The key need for a collective change in the state of mind on the left, to
eliminate the “middle class bureaucrat” stigma still attached to white collar workers.

Fundamental change is required in the Left’s approach to youth. The impact of the consciousness industries since the sixties may be annoying, but it cannot be ignored. The

“.... the Left needs to reorganise around new concepts and new structures to take account of the emergence of new forces on the progressive side of the political spectrum.”

Left needs to identify the common denominators of contemporary youth culture, and integrate socialist perspectives with them to the greatest extent possible. It is essential that the Left transcends the apocalyptic visions of nuclear nightmare and deals also with the more mundane levels of youth aspirations.

Coming to Terms with Change

The entire basis of the Left’s approach — a commonly agreed set of socialist ethics — is in urgent need of reinvigoration. One of the major reasons why the Left has developed an image of pig-headed conservatism and aberrant opportunism is its failure to assert fully the “moral foundations” on which socialist doctrine is based. The Viet Nam campaign and, more recently, the NDP phenomenon have demonstrated the extraordinary power of the moral impulse in Australian politics. However much the Left is committed to economic ideals such as protecting Australian living standards, the primary rationale behind any socialist position should be that it is fair and just.

The application of socialist moral philosophy to the personal lives and relationships of socialists is equally important. Tolerance, understanding, and a willingness to listen to and treat seriously another person’s point of view are in short supply on the left in Australia. Male socialists need to recognise that however progressive the attitudes they profess about women may be, in practice, most, if not all of them, have taken about two steps down a path of a hundred towards living in genuinely equal relationships with women, whether politically, sexually, at work, or otherwise.

The Australian left needs to develop an ethic of “building socialism from below”. Australian socialists are still heavily permeated with the philosophy of “capturing the state”, and thus tend to devote too much energy to taking control of institutions and not enough to activity at grass roots levels such as local government and community groups. It is a short-sighted approach for socialists to rely on the quirks of representative democracy as a means of achieving control of social institutions, as ultimately they will be constrained by a politically backward rank and file to have a say, but also by being genuinely part of that rank and file, and reacting in a tolerant, creative and non-manipulative way with other rank-and-file people.

The final key requirement for a Left resurgence is the development of a basic practical program which is readily understandable and clearly transformist, and allows a role for individual struggles in the industrial and community spheres. The electorate is increasingly judging all parties, and particularly the Labor Party, by practical considerations: hence, although the development of a “moral crusade” aspect to the Left’s appeal is of great importance, its value is minimal unless it is accompanied by clear-cut practical policy proposals.

These suggestions for reviving the Left’s political fortunes all boil down to one thing: a dramatic change in consciousness within the Left itself. The siege mentality which currently permeates the Left must be broken, and the earlier sense of optimism, idealism and moral commitment revived. Many techniques and approaches traditionally employed by the Left need to be abandoned or substantially revised. Australian socialists need to

“Until the Australian Left is able to develop a degree of tolerance and respect for internal differences, it will remain in its present isolated, marginalised position.”

develop an entirely new strategy which both harks back to the traditional moral ethics of socialism and acknowledges the contemporary realities of a rapidly changing society, a “new socialism” to counterpose to the threat of new conservatism.

While it must be accepted that underlying economic forces provide the motivating force behind social change, the Australian Left cannot simply sit back complacently, set in its ways, and wait for it all to happen. The present decline is very serious, and shows no signs of abating: it will take a massive effort of will on the part of the Left to eventually revitalise the socialist cause in Australia.

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