Socialists have not sufficiently appreciated the magnitude and quality of changes which have taken place in the last twenty or thirty years, says Eric Aarons. The way we look at the world, the connections we see (or fail to see) between politics and other aspects of society, and the absence of a philosophy which can make more cohesive the diversity of radical and leftwing thought, are some of the things we need to address, he argues. In the following extract from the book *Moving Left: the future of socialism in Australia*, he looks at some of the long-term questions confronting socialists in Australia.

**Has socialism got a future in Australia?**

It better have! Because we face many problems which can only intensify if capitalism continues to dictate the direction in which we go. This has been given added point by the rise of John Howard to the leadership of the Liberal Party.

It is also highlighted by the direction taken by the Labor government under Hawke and Keating. To say this is not to equate Labor and Liberal, but to recognise that John Valder, Liberal Party president, did more than crack a political whip when he said that the best scenario was for Labor to continue implementing some of the main (unpopular) Liberal policies, then be thrown from office.

And socialism will have a future to the extent that it shows that it is a resolution of the conflicts deeply felt by the poor, oppressed, exploited, alarmed and alienated of contemporary society; shows that socialism means to live differently as well as living better.

"... the reality is that socialism is weaker, more divided and less certain as to how to press its cause than it was 30, 40 or 50 years ago."

But saying socialism "better have" or "will have" a future does not of itself change anything. And the reality is that socialism is weaker, more divided and less certain as to how to press its cause than it was 30, 40 or 50 years ago.

This is so, not only in Australia where socialism has never yet achieved a major place in politics, but also in other countries where it has. No less knotty problems are evident in countries which describe themselves as socialist.

This book is about socialism in Australia, as it should be. But the fact that socialism displays diminished thrust in many countries forcefully indicates that there are problems which go beyond the nature of the political terrain of individual countries, or the particular failings of the socialists operating in them.

Although I cannot take this contention further in a short essay, and will concentrate on our conditions, I stress my belief that socialists seeking renewal of their cause in Australia should look deeper than the formulation of suitable sets of demands and their vigorous propagation by a regrouped left, essential though those things are ...

**Socialist assumptions**

The long post-war boom undoubtedly had political and ideological consequences which adversely affected socialist achievements in that period.

Large numbers of socialists, however (certainly those in the CPA), expected severe depression after the war and conducted much of their activity on that assumption, even as the boom was well on the way. (Such as a colleague who convinced a reluctant father-in-law to sell for a song land on the Gold Coast now worth millions — before that "coming depression" made it unsaleable.)

Such simplistic views of the workings of capitalism were rejected in practice as the boom continued with minor interruptions and, from the middle 1960s, the CPA began to break from the theoretical log-jam associated with stalinism. Nevertheless, many of us believed that the end of the boom in 1974 would herald a mass leftward swing — not overnight, but within a reasonable period of time.

It is well over a decade since the boom busted. Unemployment is high and, it seems, is destined to grow despite some recovery. Yet support for socialism has not received any impetus; rather, it has declined further.

Such facts — and more could be stated — indicate that the causal links between economics and politics are not as simple, direct, or of such predominant weight as many socialists have thought and their theory has suggested.

The connections between economics and politics have been over-simplified and commonly presented as encompassing the whole socialist vision. A small illustration occurred at the end of the 1983 ACTU Congress, when there had been some discussion of socialism in the media, and a reporter asked a number of leftwingers to define their concept of socialism. Practically all the responses were at the purely economic level, one Labor Party leftwinger going so far as to say that "socialism in Australia is a Jaguar for everybody."
Allowing for semi-humorous exaggeration here, this kind of response is typical.

The hip-pocket nerve may be very sensitive and the most exposed, but it is not the only conduit motivating the individual or social organism, nor does it twitch in isolation. Liberation, human empathy with others, community, pursuit of self-fulfilment, an aim in life, participation in a cause greater than self, love of nature, love of country, sexuality, and other human traits and needs are all powerful forces motivating human activity.

**Reassessing economic questions**

My purpose in pointing this out is not to downplay the importance of economic questions. The economy is indeed connected with everything else and, in many cases, the economic interests involved in issues carry a major weight. Like others, I spent a long, not entirely wasted apprenticeship learning to discern and disclose such connections. I think many present-day radicals seriously err when they ignore them or the compulsions and restraints which economic realities impose on any social program.

My purpose, rather, is to urge greater attention in socialist thinking to other dimensions of society and to contest the view that the economic connections are the ultimate source and justification of all social struggles, or necessarily the underlying foundation for eventual, if not inevitable, socialist victory.

This theoretical issue has practically been forced upon socialists' attention by the rise of the social movements in the '60s. These have involved fluctuating, but always large, numbers of people, in passionate activity around causes they believed to be vital. Socialism, as a movement, is only 150 years old, the first use of the world occurring in the 1820s. But, in that short time, its ideas have spread more widely and deeply than those of any cause or belief in history which, in a way, emphasises its present difficulties.

Socialism always had a number of strands within it:

* a revolt against the industrial society which capitalism developed on the ruins of feudalism,

* a demand for collective ownership of productive wealth and the fostering of community as against private property, exploitation of others and extreme individualism promoted by capitalism,

* promotion of the ideal of social justice — against extremes of poverty and wealth, for equality of opportunity,

* contained in the above, an ethical critique of capitalist society in general and its economic system in particular, ranging from its injustices to its cold cash calculation of every issue, and a belief in the actual or potential "goodness" of humanity.

Although there have been differences in emphasis, broadly speaking the economic side became dominant, while the ethical was relegated to the background or even rejected on the grounds that socialism was scientific and thus value-free.

Along with these attitudes and corresponding theoretical tenets, and partly because of them, socialists have insufficiently appreciated the magnitude of the changes that have taken place in the world and have not developed either their own ethical critique of modern capitalism, or the required positive social philosophy. I believe these are the deepest roots of socialism's current world-wide malaise.

I believe that those values which oppose the values generated by capitalism, and which are necessary for the functioning of a renewed socialism, are already present in embryonic form.

The deepest motivations of the labour movement, the peace, environmental, women's, land rights and other movements, the striving of people for more control over their lives, etc. have common elements, though the degree to which they are present may vary. Putting them down schematically, they seem to me to be:

* Social need before private profit.
* People before things; meaning the right of all to the fullest individual development, not just a few, or those who climb to the top of the heap.
* Appreciation of the variety and, at least potential, richness of life and the right of people to their own "lifestyle" provided they do not harm others.
* Recognition that we are ultimately dependent on the rest of nature, dictating the goal of a sustainable society and respect for future as well as present needs.
* An orientation to the development of community and of direct democracy and consensus decision-making with corresponding reduction of hierarchical and bureaucratic forms of organisation, though with recognition that representative democracy will always have a place.
* A new approach to work which embraces the right to work, but is not confined to it. An approach which looks ahead to a new era (now technically, though not yet politically and socially within reach) in which work would not be the aim of life as it largely is in the protestant "work
The aim would be the development of human beings for their own sake.

* A view of human nature which stresses the need to change social conditions. As stated earlier, socialism historically has put its emphasis on the actual or potential "goodness" of human nature. This is not to deny the possibility that human beings individually or en masse may become selfish, cruel, aggressive, macho, manipulative, power hungry, etc. Clearly, they can and do. The standpoint of socialists is that they aim to eliminate, so far as we can discern them, the social conditions which engender such characteristics, and to combat the values which sustain them with counter-values of their own.

"In a sense, something of the new is being created within the shell of the old."

This is far from complete, but I hope it is sufficient to make my point. In any case, a set of values or principles to live by cannot be artificially created or developed merely by "spreading the word". It must emerge organically from people's lives as they live or want to live. The grounds for optimism are that it is already emerging. Put in Gramscian terms, a new "common sense" is taking shape. From different starting points, people are developing, broadly speaking, a common view on the things they value in life and those they oppose or detest. That many do not associate their strongest feelings and aspirations with socialism is something that socialism itself has to overcome, as I have already argued.

No more than anyone else can socialists create values out of their own heads. But they can — and should — help to make more explicit the values which motivate their own and other radicals' political and social activity. They can draw out the common links in values and political import of the struggles of different movements. They can act as "organic intellectuals", as Gramsci called them (which has basically nothing to do with level of education or "brain power"), helping to develop the social philosophy, the new "common sense", indispensible in the struggle for the transformation of the old society and the functioning of a new.

This is the most essential function, as I see it, for any new organisation of socialists to achieve both identity and purpose for existence. But it is not the only one.

Two others which I would like to discuss are a common view of a "strategy" for the achievement of their goal, and a common view of proper and suitable "methods of work" to be adopted. (Again, I use inverted commas because the terms have connotations which I am inclined to disown, but I have no suitable substitutes.)

**Strategy**

Discussion of means to achieve the socialist goal in our kind of society can well begin with a look at the time scale of likely change. Any sober participant or observer, it seems to me, has to accept that no quick or sudden revolutionary change of the kind seen in the Russian or French revolutions, is on the cards.

If this is so, young socialists, and others who may become socialists — not just us oldies — have to recognise that they are embarking on a lifelong endeavour. But it can be quite a problem to maintain the necessary elan and offensive spirit in circumstances where the "great victory" is not in sight.

The first condition for tackling this problem is that the "vision" projected should be relevant to the concerns of increasing numbers of people. This has already been discussed as something that it is within the power of socialists to achieve.

The second condition is that the activity undertaken today in pursuit of that vision should be making an actual, discernible contribution to bringing about the changes sought. That is, it has to be more than just "spreading the word" and waiting for that grat day when "real" change will occur.

The view which equates socialism with a change in ownership of the means of production and makes it coextensive with it, in effect means that nothing of real importance in the social set-up can be altered until that change is achieved, except to increase the number and political understanding of participants in struggle.

This latter, of course, is a major concomitant of struggle, though it is not a one-way street. There is no "ratchet effect" which will stop it going back the other way. But if power is involved, if control of one degree or another is seen as a dimension of change no less vital than that of ownership, struggles take on a rather different aspect.

This view, to which the CPA has given the rather clumsy title "interventionism", signifies participation in struggles with the view that those struggles can, and with the intention that they should, change power
relations and the ideological-political conditions of the forces involved at one and the same time.

"... it can be quite a problem to maintain the necessary elan and offensive spirit in circumstances where the 'great victory' is not in sight.”

Changes in power relations, and in values, can occur in all areas — in factory, office, institution, government department or instrumentality. They can occur between men and women, Aborigines and whites, children and adults, communities and developers, and so on.

Since, in addition, the spontaneously occurring struggles on a wide range of issues are developing values of the kind a future society must embody, the whole process means that socialism is actually being brought closer. In a sense, something of the new is being created within the shell of the old. Many radicals are, in practice, adopting something of this view in their own lives and are striving to live the values and principles they profess. The contention of the women’s movement that "the personal is political" applies here and now, not just for some distant future.

Such a process cannot, of course, be expected to go on gradually and smoothly, because the adversary will not just be marking time. I believe the program of the CPA puts it correctly when it says:

The development of a broad alliance for socialism will not proceed smoothly. As its mass support develops, and as capitalist power is eroded, the possibility of a transition to socialism is opened up. This will be a revolutionary democratic process in which decisive state and economic power is taken from the ruling class minority and the active democratic rule of the majority asserted in all social affairs. This decisive shift in the balance of power will not happen all at once, but it must take place over a relatively short period to prevent the ruling class using major levers of power left in its hand to subvert the popular will.

The actual course of events cannot be predicted but a revolutionary transformation will involve a period of sharpened class and social struggle developing beyond normal limits.” (Towards Socialism in Australia, pages 52-53.)

It is true that there may be sudden upheavals changing the long-term perspective which I have suggested corresponds with our present and currently foreseeable future. If so, one would be very happy to re-assess. But the strategic task at present, I believe, is along the "interventionist" lines suggested. The further this is taken, the more chances there are for a favourable outcome of any upheaval that may occur.

A new "party"?

Over the years, many socialists have considered the general circumstances in Australia to be such that it is too difficult, unrewarding, or unrealistic to try to pursue their beliefs in any other way than in the Australian Labor Party. The number of people holding such views waxes and wanes according to the ALP’s electoral fortunes and the expectations or disappointments of Labor in office. But one can expect that the number will always be large.

Others, while sceptical of the Labor Party’s socialist-credentials after its nearly 100 years of existence and its record in office, for various reasons stop short of joining the existing socialist parties and groups.

The Communist Party of Australia is conscious of the dangers and the possibilities of today, and of its own unsuitability, for historical and other reasons, to itself cope with those challenges. It has therefore taken the initiative to call for a socialist renewal, for a re-groupting of the fragmented left, and has raised the possibility of the formation of a new socialist party.

"Party" is another word with so many connotations from that past that it is not entirely suited to what is required by socialists today, when traditional political practices and forms of organisation are being increasingly questioned.

"The grounds for optimism are that (a new set of values) is already emerging. In Gramscian terms, a new common sense is emerging.”

But a “party” is still needed, I believe, to perform various tasks essential to socialist renewal, including:

* hastening the process of refurbishing the socialist vision in accordance with today’s needs and the development of the corresponding social philosophy, and the expression of that vision and social philosophy in practical policies and vigorous campaigning for them.
* elaboration of interventionist strategy,
* development of its own democratic procedures and
methods of work, including non-manipulative relations with other organisations and respect for their autonomy.

* fostering of a broad understanding of the overall social-political situation, of its separate components and of their inter-relations.

I further believe that such tasks cannot be adequately performed by socialist groups which now exist even should the desired co-operation between them develop, nor by the Labor Party. Attitudes to, and relations with, the Labor Party is a subject in itself, but the main points are set out in the decision of the CPA Special Congress in November 1984.

Socialists in the ALP are only too well aware of the restrictions they face inside the ALP and the problems of an essentially electoralist party.

Socialist advances can only be democratically achieved if there is widespread support for socialist alternatives. To do this we need a party which provides a focus for socialists to develop a strategy to build this support in every sphere of social and political life.

Socialists in the ALP are in an invidious position. By seeking to change the ALP into a socialist party they risk retaliation from Socialists in the ALP are only too well aware of the restrictions they face inside the ALP and the problems of an essentially electoralist party. Socialist advances can only be democratically achieved if there is widespread support for socialist alternatives. To do this we need a party which provides a focus for socialists to develop a strategy to build this support in every sphere of social and political life.

For these and other reasons, only an independent socialist party can begin to build support for socialist alternatives without threatening the electoral viability of the ALP and a return to the reactionary climate engendered by conservative governments.

The form which a new "party" would take, and the actual steps which might bring it into existence, cannot be decided by any individual or group, or decided in advance.

They will emerge, if the possibilities actually exist, as I think they do, from practical co-operation and discussion among all who believe that socialist renewal is a central need of our time.

Eric Aarons has been secretary of the Communist Party of Australia, and spends his spare time sculpting.

Behind Marxism Today continued.

We are in a very dangerous situation because, for the first time this century, the existence of the unitary trade union movement in Britain is under challenge. If there is one thing the left must protect and fight for it is a unitary trade union movement. If that is destroyed, then with it goes much of the effectiveness of trade unionism and with it goes the modern Labour Party. I think the stakes are more or less as high as that.

There are two sets of forces which are making waves in the trade union movement at the moment. There is the right who would be quite happy to see a new kind of trade union centre. They see it as a new, collaborationist trade unionism based largely on no-strike deals of one degree or another. But also, a section of the left, the hard left in particular, has persistently and completely either ignored or underestimated the importance of maintaining a single trade union centre. They felt that the issues of principle have priority over all else.

The sensible left position is to start with the principle that we must maintain a unitary trade union movement even if that means that the TUC is united around only a very low lowest common denominator. But better that than the alternative which will be two centres organising probably less than would a single centre.

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