AFTER THE EVENT: BROAD LEFT VIEWPOINTS

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It brought together more than 1600 people from all parts of the country and from all areas of work. It brought open and constructive debate on such vexed questions as the Accord, economic strategies, the public sector, the socialist countries, the Labor government — and even, contrary to all expectations, the BLF.

It lifted the morale of most, and brought a sense of relief to many — especially those from outside the metropolises or the major left institutions — that they were not alone in their hopes and fears. The national Broad Left Conference, held in Sydney over the Easter weekend, was instantly recognisable as the largest and most timely gathering of the left over the last decade, and its influence is sure to be felt for some considerable time to come.

Possibly the most dynamic contribution to the conference’s success was the intervention of socialist-feminists, and especially the Melbourne socialist-feminist group. Among many others, Anna Kokkinos redirected the debate from the more sterile polemics over the role of the ALP to the question of grassroots alliances. Ann Sherry discussed the relationship of unions to social movements, Kate Macneill stressed the centrality of feminist insights to left economic strategies, and Penny Ryan and others visualised a future in which child care would become an integral part of working life.

The land rights movement had a high profile. Barbara Flick pointed to the inter-relationship of land rights issues and “movement” issues, while Marcia Langton, on a more cautionary note, recalled past fickleness on the part of the environmental and anti-uranium movements and called for more principled alliances in future. Helen Boyle probably reflected the emotions, if not the more serious analysis, of those involved in the debate with her parable of joining the ALP being like “trying to reform a crocodile from the inside”.

On the ALP left, by contrast, Brian Howe was noticeably reticent about the land rights debacle, preferring to cauterise rightwing economic policies both inside and outside the federal government. Frank Walker spoke on the threat of the New Right and its think-tanks. Bruce Childs and Anna Kokkinos discussed the relationship of the ALP to the left and progressive mass movements, with the former stressing what he saw as the centrality of the ALP to socialist strategy. Representing the trade union left, George Campbell provided a critical defence of the Accord and Laurie Carmichael analysed the current economic malaise and the role of government policy. Jennie George and Tricia Caswell both emphasised the impact of the women’s movement upon the trade union left.

The conference was not, and could hardly have been, a source of “instant” unity or a worker of strategic miracles. A few came away disappointed that nothing had happened in the way they had vaguely hoped it might. In a sense, this said more about the nature of such expectations than about the conference, or even the state of the left. The conference was a new kind of left gathering precisely because it did not assume that anything predetermined should ensue, or that there had to be an outcome expressable in manifesto terms.
At the same time, the conference was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a mere “talking shop”. In the first place, the disavowal of cosmetic “unity” staked a good deal on the maturity of the diverse forces and groups comprising the broad left — a stake which clearly brought rewards. This meant that issues which did not offer easy solutions or consensuses were able to be discussed in an open and critical manner. In consequence, a number of the commissions which reported back to the final plenary session became vehicles for the carrying through of broad left perspectives beyond the conference itself. Notable among these were the left unions coalition meeting in Melbourne in May, and the development of a community group/union coalition. In that sense at least the conference clearly was the initiator of broader debate.

Many people had feared that calculated sectarianism could too easily triumph over a genuinely pluralistic left gathering, as had too often been the case in the past. In the event, these fears proved misplaced. Sectarian currents, unable to dominate debate by virtue of the sheer numbers of people present, were forced to the expedients of a rival evening rally and a rival press conference in order to maintain their self-isolation. It became an object lesson in the dead-end paths leading from the kinds of “narrow left” approaches.

If there was a single frustration which seemed to strike a chord among participants, it might have been that the structure of the conference tended to reinforce existing divisions and hierarchies within the left, rather than forging links between them. In large part, this was probably an inevitable side-effect of the vast range of inputs made available to the organising committee by grassroots activists. That such damaging demarcations could be overcome was evidenced again by the contribution of the Melbourne socialist-feminist group which struggled to install a feminist perspective into a range of fields far
removed from the narrowly “feminist” themes in the program.

Following the conference, ALR approached five participants - Barbara Flick, Kate Macneill, Andrew Theophanus, Jim Falk and Kim Back - and asked them their overall impressions of the conference and its longer term significance. We asked them:
* What they felt was the major positive contribution of the conference;
* What aspect or aspects of the conference gave them the most hope for the left’s future;
* How they felt the conference responded to the problem of how to view the federal ALP government; and
* What aspects of the conference suggested to them that the left had changed its approaches and attitudes since the last major gatherings of this kind.

These are their responses.

**Barbara Flick:**

Barbara Flick works for the Western Aboriginal Legal Service in Dubbo, NSW.

I found it really easy to work with the women who were organising, and also appreciated the response we got from George Campbell and the people on the national organising committee when we were working around the land rights question and trying to get a statement into conference. It was very good the way the conference responded to that.

So I saw that as a good way to address lots of people about an issue that we felt was important at that time. It was really good the way the whole thing was organised, also the women who were working and the women who were on the panels. I didn’t expect it to happen, but I was pleasantly surprised about that.

I don’t know whether I got any hope out of it at all. I mean, we’ve given up hoping. We’ve given up thinking that we’re going to get anywhere with the left or anybody else actually, but it gave us an opportunity to contribute to the conference and, hopefully, to educate the people about what is happening in the Black community.

It was also good for us to get involved in other panels like those on nuclear disarmament, international relationships and just the position of workers in the country. But I think the left has to be much more organised. I saw the conference as a forum in which people were able to get together and talk to each other. People of the same political persuasion were actually able to work through their ideas with other people and I don’t think they would have got that opportunity anywhere else.

So, as a forum, it’s a very good idea and should go on. It should be something that happens every six months or so. That’s the only way the left is going to get anywhere. They were forced to think a little about what is happening with women and what is happening with workers, and to work towards some sort of left philosophy about how you encompass all those things and become one force.

Not just a coalition of forces where people start thinking, well, that’s the way you think about people who are oppressed in the community, they’re not special, or they’re not different, they’re just part of your overall view of left politics and you should care about them.

I think that people on the left find it difficult to work out how to view a federal government which is supposed to be Labor and who are acting like Liberals. It is much easier to react or respond to things that the Liberal Party is doing when it is in government, and people get more active, more vocal, and campaigns seem to work much better when you know who your enemy is.

But it seems more difficult for people to get it together when there is a federal Labor government. The whole idea about another party, and all the people who supported working within the party was a difficulty and it certainly wasn’t resolved. So it makes it much more difficult to organise ourselves as a group if you’ve got these two different points of view.

People are saying, stuff it, we’ve had enough, you know they have betrayed everybody. The problem is that there aren’t many alternatives. And if there is going to be a real alternative, then a lot of work has to be done, there’s got to be a lot of educating the masses. It’s no good setting up another party which has a hierarchy and doesn’t respond to what people are saying on the ground.

But people are waiting for options and alternatives, particularly people away from the capital cities where they only have two alternatives. So that’s something that I think could and should happen — that there should be more alternatives. But, then, the way the federal government works, it’s hard to say whether you’ll have any influence anyway.

Barbara Flick and Brian Howe.
Jim Falk:

Jim Falk teaches at Wollongong University: he is the author of Taking Australia off the Map.

I think the major contribution of the Broil Left Conference was to demonstrate that the diverse groups which make up the "left" are capable of recognising that it is possible to cooperate with each other on mutually held objectives, even though differences continue in their analysis of why those objectives are important and how they should be reached.

The identification of land rights as one of those objectives was also important. It represented a recognition by the left that its common objectives extend beyond its more traditionally held concerns. And, the most overwhelmingly positive feature of the conference was the broadly held feeling of goodwill by those who attended towards each other. Although factional differences continue to exist, those at the conference seemed ready to demonstrate that they are prepared to submerge many of those differences below the common goal of having to work together at this time when the left, the working class and progressive movement are under attack.

The largest area of disagreement seems to be how we should approach the ALP government and Accord. I don't think the conference has taken us as far forward as we need to go with this issue. I still await a careful analysis of just what the Accord has achieved in comparison to what it purports to achieve, and a comparison with any damage it has also done by holding back political developments which might otherwise have occurred. However, I do not believe that the issue of the Accord did, or should, be allowed to interrupt the process of regaining the left on a wide range of issues.

Over the last ten years since the last major left conference (the radical ecology conference) we have seen a recognition by the left that a wide range of issues, outside the traditional concerns, are issues which it can, and should, legitimately intervene in. Environmental, peace, women's, Aboriginal land rights, and issues of economic justice have, over the last ten years, been areas in which leftwing groups have intervened with great success - they have developed mass movements which extend far beyond the traditional left. This central lesson of the last ten years was fully understood by many people at the conference.

It seems to me that that recognition can provide the basis for a reuniting of the broad left into a large and growing political force in Australia over the next ten years.

Andrew Theophanus:

Andrew Theophanus is a federal Member of Parliament and a member of the Socialist Left of the Victorian ALP.

The positive contribution was that the conference led to an understanding of the issues that unite people from a number of left perspectives. It was very impressive to see a number of fundamental issues which unite the left - and these include industry policy, redistribution of wealth to the poor, Aboriginal land rights and anti-sediscrimination - discussed at such length.

I believe that there is room for guarded optimism as to the future of the left, provided that a number of theoretical and ideological differences can be subsumed for the sake of unity. At a time when there is an attack on the left generally from the New Right, we should not allow such theoretical differences to undermine us.

While the responses to the current direction of the ALP government were quite understandable, I do feel there was insufficient appreciation of the efforts of the left of the Labor Party which has to work under difficult circumstances and is in a minority position. The conference further confirmed my view that socialists ought to join and work within the Labor Party.

The left, I believe, is now a lot more self-critical and realistic. There is a much greater appreciation that slogans and old formula are no longer adequate and that detailed policy development on complex issues is needed. These include such things as what is the role of the market, what is the role of the public sector.

Kate MacNeil:

Kate MacNeil works for Jobwatch and the Council of Action for Equal Pay in Melbourne.

There was general feeling among socialist-feminists that a major contribution of the conference was the acceptance of the legitimacy of the economic concerns of women and the need to place these matters firmly on the left agenda.

The presence of socialist-feminists on panels in key economic and political sessions gave a broader perspective to the issues and set the tone for more down to earth discussion. This, in turn, made material more accessible to the audience and encouraged people to engage in debates on issues that might otherwise be alienating.

The experience of working very successfully with socialist feminists from all around Australia during the conference has encouraged many women to establish stronger socialist-feminist networks in their own states. This will, hopefully, ensure a continued input into future activities of the left.
One of the most significant developments was the apparent acceptance by trade union representatives and left parties of the need to re-evaluate their constituency. It was recognised that many of the campaigns of unions are linked with the demands of people organising outside unions. The joint public sector/community groups campaign to defend and extend the public sector is one immediate expression of this.

It is hoped that unions, and particularly the ACTU, will heed the criticisms made of current trade union strategies favouring higher paid workers over lower paid workers and largely ignoring the needs of those outside the paid workforce.

It was particularly encouraging to see that, while the "organised" left might be regarded as having had limited impact lately, there were large numbers of people at the conference who were clearly engaged in struggles at a grass roots level, and who spoke with the passion and anger that such involvement brings. The challenge for the left is to focus its attention more directly on the current and very real struggles of people.

A very strong feeling came through from the conference that the left must throw off its current complacency towards the Labor government. This does not have to take the form of a full-scale assault on the government but, rather, a wide mobilisation around particular demands.

Instead of getting bogged down in debates over whether we're pro- or anti- this particular Labor government, it was felt that support and encouragement should be given where positive actions are taken by the government and where the government breaks promises or acts against the interests of the people there should be united resistance. The economic policies of the government, particularly the Trilogy, were identified as immediate targets for this activity.

I felt that there was considerable dissatisfaction with the Accord process which was seen by many as encouraging mobilisation around issues, and diminishing the capacity of the left to resist future attacks. It was widely accepted that this trend needs to be reversed.

Whether there has been any real change will only be able to be established over time, for, while the conference had many positive aspects, it was still very much a talk shop.

It was encouraging to see that old political divisions generally did not surface. This seemed primarily due to the fact that debate focussed on current economic and political reality rather than organisational differences. The conference articulated many demands around which all on the left can unite and which should receive widespread support from the community.

If these common demands provide the focus for unity and co-operation across the left, then there is cause for optimism. However, if energy is again diverted into organisational questions, then little will have been gained.

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**Kim Back:**

Kim Back works at the Cabramatta Community Centre in Sydney and is a member of the Communist Party.

In my opinion the major achievement of the conference was the presence of a significant number of Aboriginal people, attending the conference as a whole as well as to discuss land rights — and the need this highlighted for better links between the left and the Aboriginal movement.

What gave me the most hope for the future was the way participants were interested in identifying the links between the range of different issues and movements across which activists are involved in building towards socialism. In practice, it would have been easy for people simply to have attended "their" sections of the conference, and to have remained disconnected to issues outside their own area of interest — yet mostly they chose not to do so. And the statements compiled by the various commissions at the end of the conference seemed to indicate that a broader socialist-feminist, anti-racist politics was being demanded of the left as a whole.

As far as I was concerned, the conference responded well to the challenge of how to view the ALP government. The sections of the conference I was involved in demonstrated a sensible critique of the government's backdowns in many of the areas that brought them to power in the first place — the Accord, land rights, uranium mining and welfare spending...

If I were going to criticise the conference for what it left out, I would say that there were major gaps around the area of looking concretely at multiculturalism in Australian society and within the left. This required a broader critique of multiculturalism in practice, and more analysis of the needs of ethnic minority groups — especially those from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

The conference failed to reach significant sections of activists within a number of ethnic minority groups. We also failed to look at how the structures of the left exclude people, especially people of non-English-speaking backgrounds, and especially through racism.

Another gap was around the need to develop serious responses from the left to the actual needs of a variety of exploited and oppressed groups at present marginalised in the left's perspectives. An example is the declining influence of the left among young people, and the problem of how to build forms of political activity and a political culture that involves the needs and experiences of more young people.

The conference did seem to me to indicate that certain parts of the left have changed their attitudes and approaches over the last decade. An indication of this is that after ten years of seeing active movements campaigning around issues not traditionally seen as "class" issues (although in reality they are integral to them), many people are starting to see "the left" as a broad concept involving many different ideas of what political action is and might be. While some areas of the left seem as if they've missed the last ten years altogether, the world of left politics in 1986 has become more open to adopting coalition-building as a stated strategy. Likewise, much of the left is gradually becoming more aware of on whose terms decisions are made in the old world of left politics — and who gets excluded.