STRENGTH
IN
DIVERSITY

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The conference gave me hope. It filled me with optimism about the variety and vastness of the left in Australia, our convictions, our culture and our potential. To have people from Tasmania, North Queensland and the West giving up their longest weekend of the year to tackle the problems of the world and its future has boosted the morale of most progressive people I know, whether or not they actually attended.

My hopes arise out of the initial goals we set ourselves as sponsors, my particular experiences during the conference, and tales others have told me. The 1600 who attended all attended different conferences—there were so many panels, action working groups and workshops that one would expect the participants to have had very different experiences. Some days I did talk to others who had reported ideas and activities that were entirely different from my experience. I think that is terrific. It means the worlds that left people participate in are spread right through the fabric and business of Australian life. It means that diversity can exist within a framework of common values and goals, without reducing and restricting ideas and activity. It means we are able to be creative about our political and social work, welcome and work with those who are not carbon copies of our particular heroes or ourselves.

The degree of unity expressed on the last day when so many packed the Great Hall to hear the final reports and summary statements from the commissions on issues around industrial and economic policy, social movements, international peace and solidarity, women and left political strategies was deeply moving.

Analysis was not the strong point of the conference, but real progress was made in many hearts and minds “about the need to establish ongoing structures to provide proper political analysis, political education and more effective communications across the left; the extension and development of more effective forms of democracy and participation within the left” (from the Summary Statement). It will be much harder to get our hearts and minds geared to practice; to be more communicative and democratic across the left; but the recognition of the complexity of women’s issues and Aborigines, about the vitality and potential of social movements was a significant step forward. Even the very conscientious among us were forced to acknowledge that there is much persistent left activity that we do not know about. In government departments, in country towns, in conservative community organisations, progressive ideas are being presented and supported by many who have no political organisation to rely on, and who may have no connection with orthodox left traditions. Many of us have failed to appreciate the diversity, even the commonness of such activity. We need to be much more broad-minded about what we regard as progressive; we must be less anxious to dismiss the supposedly eccentric.

In the context of economic alternatives and the performance of Labor in government, the Accord was soundly criticised on many grounds, and particularly that Labor had failed to deliver on anything but wages policy. And there was considerable debate about the success of even that policy.

Despite the immense disappointments and frustrations of Labor in government, participants overwhelmingly endorsed our continuing activity inside and outside the Labor Party. There was a reluctance to consider seriously the establishment of a new party. Instead, the seeds were sown for further co-operative ventures like the conference itself, for better communications across unions, social movements and community groups; for the establishment of purposeful coalitions, such as around the public sector. Already, representations about the government’s failure in Aboriginal land rights have been lodged, a public sector coalition has established some roots, a left unions meeting has been called to discuss the Accord, and the National Steering Committee is to meet once more to discuss further action—including the publication of some of the proceedings. In Victoria, the local steering committee is proposing a Victorian Broad Left Conference in 1987.

Rather than the conference setting rigid and specific goals and activities for the future, for me it set in train a critical review of the past with invigorated hope for the future. I shall never again think of the left in terms of parties and unions. I shall never again feel we have all the answers, or that it’s just a matter of time and political will. If we are to be an influential force in shaping the future, we must take heed that most Australians do not take us seriously; that our influence in the past has seldom been attributed to us unless in a very negative sense, say by the New Right. It is incumbent on all progressive activists to treat the conference as the very beginning of a new era in left politics in Australia, where the barriers among the left and between the left and the Australian community continue to be challenged until they remain no more.

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