New Horizons
Viewpoints on Moving Left, edited by David McKnight (Pluto Press, 1986). Reviewed by FRANK STILWELL and BOB MAKINSON.

The need for the left to reassess its position in Australian society and politics is all too obvious. The New Right is rampant (although the ideas are far from new, being largely a mixture of social Darwinism and pre-Keynesian economics).

The Hawke government is pursuing policies of conservative economic management which make John Howard's policies as Treasurer in the previous Liberal government look positively anaemic. The buoyant economic conditions which prevailed in 1983-85 are now in tatters, with all the leading economic indicators pointing to a looming recession. Australian capitalism is not delivering the goods.

Yet the support for a left alternative has not been established. The membership of the existing left political parties is small and fragmented. The ALP left is not evidently influential in the determination of policy (with the exception of the effective brake it placed — in conjunction with the trade unionists and welfare groups — on proposals to the 1985 Tax Summit). The conservative media bias perpetuates a bourgeois hegemony, most obviously in the realm of economic policy, where the manifest irrationality and blatant egalitarianism of the "economic rationalists" currently holds sway.

In these circumstances, the issues raised in Moving Left are crucial and timely. The project which the book represents — one of stocktaking reappraisal, self-criticism, and redirection for the left — is admirable. The nine contributors represent a spectrum of views, including "green" and feminist perspectives, ALP and CPA, for and against a new left party: but, more important, for the most part their contributions are open, inquiring and non-dogmatic. This is a book to stimulate critical rethinking on the left, both individually and collectively.

The most obviously tantalising area of debate involves the relationship between social movements and political parties. The movements formed around issues of environmentalism, peace (including the movement against uranium mining) and feminism have been more prominent and commanding of community support than the formal party organisations of the left. (One might also add to the trilogy a fourth leg, that of anti-racist movements, broadly encompassing the movements for multiculturalism, for Aboriginal land rights and against apartheid.) How, if at all, are these social movements, which are certainly not socialist in all respects, to be linked?

Attempts by existing political parties of the left to capture movements are obviously counterproductive, as the NDP/SWP experience has shown. Is some kind of "rainbow coalition" the answer? That seems too diffuse to be effective, let alone to serve as a means of accelerating the process of people's radicalisation through struggle and of harnessing that experience to a socialist analysis. So what of the third alternative, of a new political party built on principles of environmentalism, feminism, peace and anti-racism? Could this generate anything more than the superficially progressive policies of the Australian Democrats?

What, if anything, would be its relationship to a marxist analysis of capitalism or to a vanguard role in the process of political change? My own conclusion, derived from pondering the contributions to this book (and other discussions and experiences) is that a new political grouping is needed. There must be an effective means of harnessing the progressive elements within the various social movements and of seeking to capture the energies of those on the ALP left who are disillusioned with the unprincipled politics and conservative economics of the Hawke-Keating administration.

Still, the issue of an alternative strategy remains a problem. The introduction to the book notes that "the economy is the logical starting point since, if the left is known for anything, it is that it places the control and operation of the economy at the centre of its theory and practice". A number of contributors subsequently refer to the issue: but it is clear that they are more comfortable discussing visions of socialist society and/or problems of reconciling social objectives and political practices, than in setting out a transitional program for managing and transforming the capitalist economy. John Mathews' chapter in the book suggests that the Accord has — or could have — the role of a transitional program towards socialism: but with the benefit of a few months more hindsight, it seems like so much wishful thinking. What would a more radical alternative economic strategy look like? Is it possible? These are questions which clearly underlie the discussion of the prospects for progressive social change: they are not adequately considered in this book but, by the same token, they are not pre-judged either. The formulation of an alternative economic strategy is clearly an important and urgent
analytical task for the left. What this book reminds us is that the process of such strategy formulation must be decentralised, participatory and democratic.

It is not difficult for the left to be self-critical. The problems of analysis, including the reappraisal and modernisation of marxist analysis, are daunting. The imperfections of the institutions of the labour movement, such as trade unions and existing left political parties, are evident: everyone has their own illustrative anecdote. The task is to rebuild without unnecessary demolition in the meanwhile. The foundations are there. The revolutionary slogan “liberty, fraternity, and equality” remains a shorthand expression of the objectives: if nothing else, it reminds us that the New Right should not be unchallenged in their claim on the objective of liberty — its preconditions, of course, include the elimination of economic exploitation. So, too, the goals of fraternity (suitably modified to eliminate patriarchal connotations) and equality remain the moral high ground which the left should continue to take pride in occupying.

The various contributions to Moving Left are a frank airing of different views about the most appropriate process of rebuilding and regrouping. It deserves to be widely read. A more sharply focussed introduction or conclusion — even the reproduction of David McKnight’s previous essay published in Socialism in Australia: Toward Renewal — would have helped bring out the key issues. It is hard to imagine the right coming out with such a public exercise in self-appraisal and criticism: but the left has nothing to lose for such candour. Pluto Press is to be congratulated for its good work in providing a vehicle for this ongoing debate.

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Moving Left is dense reading, but worth it. It is a useful step in analysing at least three of the key questions facing us:

- what are the ideas around which sections (not necessarily all) of the left could, or should, unite?
- what are the ideas on which a new or re-formed socialist formation could being to gain mass support?
- what sort of organisational forms will lend themselves to the complicated, and sometimes contradictory, tasks of movement-building and party-building?

The concentration on ideas is not accidental — nearly all of the contributors acknowledge that counter-ideological struggle is the order of the day. Some express this as popularising a “new socialist vision” for society. Others see it in more traditional (they would say “less nebulous”) terms of program and policies. The distinction is scarcely important — socialist renewal will require a thorough spring-cleaning from ethics to economics and back again.

All the contributors demonstrate some commitment to an integration of the socialist economic and class analysis with “new movement” analyses. All are concerned with what sorts of visions and policies will strike a chord with a constituency in the working class and beyond, and with what sort of package of radical reforms could provide a platform against the current rightwing offensive. Not all see that offensive in the same light — Belinda Probert, in an otherwise incisive essay, denies “any generalised shift to the Right, nor have progressive forces generally been more on the defensive than usual”. This may be so for some of the social movements, but is certainly not true for the union, welfare and living standards areas.

Some of the old perennial debates are given an airing — what is class? To what extent is work in the ALP desirable or possible? These get a reasoned and tolerant treatment that probably has more to do with the selection of contributors than with any real new-found consensus on the left. The problem of linking socialist and “new movement” goals into an integrated program is mainly dealt with at the level of practical politics, with an occasional encouraging foray into the moral implications, which are, after all, essential if our ideas are to inspire millions. The only attempt at a philosophical approach is by Eric Aarons, whose “rainforest ecosystem” model of society is counterposed to the mechanistic views which tend to dominate socialist theory.

One nevertheless gets the feeling that we are still dealing with variants of the shopping-list approach, with a main aim of negotiating a new working relationship between existing progressive forces. There is less attention to the tactical and strategic problems of appealing to entirely new sections of the population. The whole question of nationalism or national identity, which is certainly recognised as an area for activity by the right, is largely ignored. Nor is there more than a cursory reference to the migrant communities, their orientation towards the ALP, and whether that can be changed.

One key practical question in the debate on the limits of reform is touched upon by some contributors, and can be illustrated by environmental issues. While the Franklin Dam and NSW rainforest decisions have been politically significant and have secured those areas for the time being, it remains true that an ironclad social consensus on preservation of wilderness and genetic diversity is still a long way off. Incremental gains, based largely on piecemeal legislation, can still be rolled back by a mere change in government and, in any case, are not comprehensive. (Witness Aboriginal land rights, around which there were real but fragile advances in the 1970s.) Rainforests are, thanks to the work done by the environmental movement, a popular issue. Preservation of semi-arid environments has less public appeal, but no less scientific or social priority.

Environmental politics must sooner or later tackle the need for a national land use plan as a national priority, which enshrines wilderness preservation as a national goal, but also sets management goals for exploited land (including freehold). The left and environmental movement could be seen in this way as being to take up major national issues that no one else is prepared to address. We could
begin to get across the idea that three-year electoral schedules and political expediency provide no rational basis for dealing with many of the problems facing Australia and its working people. This is not to suggest that we should not pursue incremental legislative gains — but we should also begin to muster support and expertise for cogent and popularly-arguable national goals. Socialism is, after all, supposed to promote rational and humanistic planning for social development.

The same sort of reasoning applies to any strategy for significant constitutional reform, or for revival of the recently-murdered Bill of Rights, and for industry/government research and development strategies. The general problem remains of how best to popularise the notion of goals and planning, and particular reforms. It can do us no harm to try out alternative approaches to coalition building on such questions, as long as we can (eventually) wrest from the right and big business control of Australia’s political agenda.

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After the Decade


It might seem a trifle late for a review of a book which was, as its preface states, produced “as an attempt to capture the essence of the position of women” at the end of the UN Decade for Women. But then, it sometimes feels as though the women’s movement has been placed in a time warp — with the End of the Decade providing a signal for conservatives to turn the clock well back. With this book, despite some of its shortcomings, we can savour, to an extent, the gains made through hard slog, and an awareness of differences within the international women’s movement.

The book looks at five aspects of women’s life: family; work; education; politics; and sex. Two countries are examined under each of these — a poor country and a wealthy country, with a woman from a poor country visiting the wealthy country and vice versa, each giving their personal impressions of the country visited. The purpose of this was to give the book “true depth”. And the purpose of the reciprocal conjunction of wealthy and poor was to avoid “just another piece of international voyeurism” with “the rich world ogling at the poor”. Hence, under the heading of “Women and Sex”, Australia was visited by Elena Poniatowska (journalist; born in Paris of French-Polish father and Mexican mother; now living in Mexico), while Angela Davis (Black American activist) visited Egypt. With all due respect, the fact that the writers spent only a matter of days (eleven in Elena’s case) in each country means that the pieces are indeed impressionistic. This, in itself, can be useful to locals — to see just what it is that impresses a visitor.

But there is a very real danger of mixing preconceptions and foreknowledge with first, fast impressions. What can result are cliches. In the case of Australia, I fear this was the result.

The section on Australia begins with a full-page pic of a Surfers’ meter maid — replete in tinselly highcut one-piece bather, sash and hideous tiara/1950s waitress-style headdress with the words ‘METER MAID’ appliqued across it — and grasping a parking meter. Elena Poniatowska’s observations of Australia were that of a tourist-with-a-difference, in that she had a specific brief and contacts were provided. But these observations were not particularly new or enlightening.

The comparisons between rich and poor communities are inevitable, and it is of value to see someone else’s astonishment at the community services women in Australia have gained through the hard struggle of the women’s movement; women’s confidence in their own sexuality; and, inevitably, the continuing and high degree of exploitation of women and sex through commercialism. It is also useful to be reminded, albeit secondhand in this instance, that Aboriginal women are well and truly fed up with the predominantly Anglo-feminist movement’s pontificating on and co-opting of their specific concerns. Nevertheless, the real issues for Australian feminism are far more complex than such an impression might give readers outside Australia (and even readers outside the women’s movement in Australia).

It came across quite clearly that allotting each country a specific topic was perhaps not the best way to gain an informed opinion of the state of the women’s movement and women in general. And this was compounded by the shortness of the visits. A particular example is the assignment of sex as the specific topic for Egypt. Angela Davis was taken aback by the “palpable hostility” from a group of Egyptian women when she introduced her topic. However, she handled the situation with sensitivity, and her experience as an activist and theorist helped produce an interesting account of Egyptian women’s concerns. It’s worth noting that the editors apologised for a lack of adequate communication with Davis over the project’s intention.

And that intention was to produce a substantial analysis of, and insight into, women’s lives around the world which, at the End of the Decade for Women, would set the future agenda. For the reasons I have mentioned, it has fallen short of this, but it is still a worthwhile addition to literature on the development of the international women’s movement.

There are other pieces by recognisable names, such as Nawal el Saadawi (on the UK), Germaine Greer (on Cuba) and Marilyn French (on India). The book also contains a useful statistical section. It was certainly a mammoth task — an appetiser, perhaps, for a deeper analysis.

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