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ALR, February 1990

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Polar Politics

When Mikhail Gorbachev claims to be a socialist in the mould of Willy Brandt and the Swedish SAP (ALR 133, October), we really know Communism is dead. Not that we ought to take Gorbachev’s miraculous conversion on the road from the Crimea too seriously in itself; after thirty years or more as a member of the CPSU, his sudden (re)discovery of Western social democracy seemed a little forced.

But Gorbachev’s statement does at least accurately reflect one important reality. Like many former socialists in the formerly Eastern European satellite states, he realises the game is up, not just for Communism, but also for the formerly Eastern European satellite reality. Like many former socialists in Western terms is not always immediately apparent. At present these would appear to be: Western-style social democracy, a form of West European Christian democracy, a peculiarly rigid interpretation of Anglophone neo-liberalism, and old-style Russian atavistic nationalism.

At the moment in the ex-Soviet Union the main political and ideological struggle is between a loose coalition of the first three against an unholy alliance of the fourth — old-style primordial Russian nationalism — and the remnants of hardline Soviet Communism.

Over the next few months and year, one suspects, as Communism fades from view, the parameters of political debate will be reshaped closer to the Eastern European model — where the major dividing line at present is between those who want a more rapid, and those who (for various reasons) want a slower transition to the market. Even this, though, will not clearly replicate the Western ideal of a ‘spectrum’, with calibrated ‘Left’ and ‘Right’ arms, because the forces on either side will remain disparate and fluid. On the ‘slower transition’ side — at present the losers — will be found both social democrats and nationalist reactionaries, old-style Communists acting in defence of the old order and new-style trade unionists acting in defence of living standards.

One response from the western Left to these seismic political shifts is to argue that it all doesn’t really matter to ‘us’, anyway; ‘we’ gave up on Soviet-style socialism years ago: and it’s all just a matter of the collapse of ‘stalinism’, rather than socialism, anyway. However, there is something a little hollow about this sort of disclaimer. After all, regardless of subsequent disclaimers, the tradition founded in 1789, with ‘progress’ and ‘reaction’ respectively (the tradition of 1917 has had a seminal influence on the character of the Western political lexicon over the last three quarters of a century. Indeed, the very conception of ‘the political spectrum’ in Western politics is itself the product of the two epoch-making events of modern European history: the French Revolution (which coined the vocabulary of ‘Left’ and ‘Right’) and the Soviet Revolution (which created the divisions within the left-of-centre spectrum which we take for granted today, and more particularly the conception of calibrations of ‘leftness’ defined by proximity to, or distance from, the revolutionary absolute).

This lends a strange sense of schizophrenia to much contemporary debate on the left side of politics. At one level it is freely admitted that the self-definition of left and labour politics is ‘in crisis’, and that the collapse of the old Soviet model is not without consequence for our own vision of the good society. In the very next breath, though, conversation usually proceeds as if this crisis had been resolved, and resolved decisively in favour of the old verities.

Perhaps it is this schizophrenia which explains the mood of defensiveness and ‘return to fundamentals’ which seems currently to be abroad in leftist politics. After a decade of pragmatism and compromise, it’s asserted, now is the time for the Left to return to its traditional role as conscience of the labour movement and guardian of maximalist rectitude. On the face of it, one might have thought the times demanded something radically different: a comprehensive rethinking of the ‘boundaries’ of politics and of the instincts and assumptions underlying them, for instance. But what if it is precisely the fear of the ‘loss of identity’ which this process might create which causes otherwise well-intentioned people to fall back on the eternal truths?

DAVID BURCHELL is ALR’s editor.
the way he discovered and made famous musicians like John Coltrane, Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock, Keith Jarrett, Philly Joe Jones and John McLaughlin.

Davis did not help matters by giving a series of outlandish interviews in the last years of his life. And his scatological and acerbic verbal skills make his 1989 autobiography, Miles (transcribed from tapes of Davis freeassociating), a kind of lexicon for badass musicians. It is hard to reconcile the author of Miles with the melancholy soloist on records like Porgy and Bess (1958), Sketches of Spain and Kind of Blue (both 1959). Davis was not so naturally gifted a trumpet player as Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Fats Navarro, Clifford Brown or even James Morrison, all of whom could (or can) improvise solos of carefree magnificence. But Davis transcended his technical limitations by playing with a uniquely poignant tone. If a Dizzy Gillespie solo could sound like magnesium sketches on the night sky, Davis' playing reminded one more of fiercely glowing embers.

This is not to say that his work was always sad. He could express anger, elation or spirituality, but whatever he had to say, his playing had a wry, slightly mournful tone. It was not accidental that he produced his finest work with his legendary first quintet, where his mordancy contrasted with the exuberance of John Coltrane's saxophone playing. When he formed the quintet in 1955, Davis was its only musician of established reputation. Now it is regarded as the finest small group; in jazz history, and the players in it—Coltrane, Red Garland, Paul Chambers and Philly Joe Jones—became the aristocracy of post-bop jazz.

He had come back to regular performing after years of heroin addiction and pimping. He quit his habit, cold turkey, because it had become too expensive. Often he would play with his back to the audience and, after finishing his own solo, would leave the stage. In hospital after minor throat surgery he was told to keep quiet, but couldn't resist yelling at the staff, and for the rest of his life he could only speak in a throaty whisper. His style could be aloof. At the end of a rehearsal he told the drummer of his second great quintet, Tony Williams, to play more of "that Rat Patrol shit"—which, the group discovered, meant that he was after a more martial drum sound. Williams' consequent playing of sticks-on-snare gave the group a whole new sound.

In the late 1960s, Davis' admiration for Jimi Hendrix and Sly Stone led him to jazz-rock and the astonishing soundscapes of albums like Bitches Brew. But in the 1970s, Davis entered a period of artistic decline, linked with cocaine abuse. When he died in October this year, he had not made a really satisfying record for perhaps 20 years. At least, he was never so impressed by his own past masterpieces that he didn't explore new music. In a 1986 interview, he recalled:

"All this shit about me being better in the old days...music being better. That's reactionary thinking from pitiful motherfuckers who weren't even there...In the old days...jazz was made by this breed of musician...creative guys but weird, idiosyncratic cats...I'd book a session...Hell, half the cats wouldn't be there...Running around these fucking dives looking for the drummer...say, 'cos he's probably off somewhere scoring dope...Meanwhile the sax player, he's pawning his Goddamn horn! That's the old days, far as I can recall."

MICHAEL CONATY is a devotee of bad-ass jazz musicians.
The Barbarian Syndrome

His blueprint for Australian conservatism in the 1990s in tatters, NSW Premier Nick Greiner is starting over. Immediately after his election in 1988 he set up the Curran Commission of Audit which delivered a blueprint for small government in NSW based on its assessment of the state's public debt problem.

And his early conceptualisation of government as a body corporate focused on budget-balancing as an end in itself seemed to eschew all political considerations. But even private companies have articles of association (which equate to a constitution) specifying benefits to be delivered to shareholders. And while the pursuit of profit is generally enough to satisfy shareholders in the private sector, government is driven by a different logic. Voters are used to getting social dividends. And Carr has managed to convince the state's most marginal electorates that Greinerism failed to deliver.

The Government's preoccupation with micro-economic reform was a sterile agenda in the realm of popular politics. Good housekeeping in accounting terms is a good thing but sooner or later Mr Greiner should have expected voters to ask him to explain what kind of government he was building.

Any government needs some conception of a definite function for the public sector and how it might fit into a political vision (be it liberal or conservative) in order to invigorate people and encourage them to vote for it. The former head of the NSW Premiers' Department, Mr Gerry Gleeson, warned last November that Greiner-style administrations were ironically putting economic reform at risk. He argued that economists and politicians had failed to obtain community understanding and support for microeconomic reform. And he voiced concern that the policy pendulum had swung too far towards "economic rationalism" and "efficient management" to the detriment of the political needs of the government and the social needs of the community.

It's a tough balance to strike, because the initial impact of any microeconomic reform, however well-intentioned, will be to produce job cuts and service rationalisation. State governments stand in the front line of interest group mobilisation, and reforming administrations have to emphasise the communication of their
agenda to the wider public in those circumstances.

The Greiner government’s confusion about its own agenda is clearly illustrated by the alienation of groups and interests across the political spectrum. Even soul mates like the Institute of Public Affairs have attacked Greiner for failing to cut harder into government spending. The IPA concluded he had made “little progress” in reducing the role of government, and had compromised conservative politics in the process. Indeed, there has been a lot of compromise in the face of a deeper than expected revenue collapse over the last 12 months. Most recently Mr Greiner has decided to use privatisation proceeds from the NSW State Bank and the Government Insurance Office to finance budget outlays, and to suspend his stated aim of halting borrowings for public works.

As the last election drew closer he dumped both the rhetoric and the rationale of fiscal crisis to focus instead on the “sound management” of NSW Inc in contrast to the public sector disasters in Victoria and WA. The political pundits agreed he had a case which would merit a comfortable win. But swinging voters in the seats Mr Greiner had to win were not convinced. School closures and cutbacks in the delivery of community services did not equate with their understanding of “good management”. The result was a hung parliament — and the government’s domination of the agenda has been crumbling ever since.

Now the budget has gone bad (with an underlying deficit of more than $1 billion) he faces an uphill battle against an Opposition which has acquired a new stature in contrast to Mr Greiner’s yawning credibility gap.

All of which indicates a need for governments to envisage a positive role for the public sector—and to act on it. Yet Mr Greiner’s efforts to depoliticise the functions of government have caused deepening tensions inside his administration. On one hand there is his preference for the job of rationalisation and the introduction of market-based solutions (like corporatisation and privatisation) to management problems associated with public trading enterprises. But there is a marked reluctance on his part to acknowledge the need to sell the desirability of that approach.

The sense of betrayal, of useless sacrifice, has grown in the wider community. The Greiner government seems to have “lost the script” in the same way the dominant voices in the economics profession have “lost the script” in the last few months.

Doubts about the good sense of free market policies and the preoccupation with managerialism now run deep in the community. But so too do the objective economic problems which spawned those policy experiments in the first place. Popular socio-economic debate is still couched in the out-of-date slogans of Keynesianism and Monetarism from the 1970s. The failure of economics to live up to its own promises has created a hunger for politicians with a broader sense of purpose—and greater sensitivity to community opinion.

Nick Greiner has always equated politics with populism, and he is determined not to undermine reform with opportunistic vote-buying. But the test of the best politicians in the 1990s will be their ability to put forward constructive policies, without capitulating to soft political options. Should he find himself in government soon, Bob Carr will find himself in the same boat.

PRUDENCE ANDERSON is a political journalist on the Financial Review.
Sweden Sour

In September, the Swedish Social Democratic Workers Party (SAP) secured its worst election result since 1928. Since the introduction of universal suffrage in the early 1920s, SAP has decisively lost only three elections: in 1928, 1976, and 1991. The party governed for 44 years from 1932 until 1976. Then, after six years in the unfamiliar role of opposition, it returned to government in 1982 and survived the 1985 and 1988 elections.

In 1976, when the social democrats lost national elections there was widespread discussion of the passing of an epoch. There is no such discussion today. Fifteen years ago the leaders of SAP were thought to have finally run out of ideological steam, to have become grey and bloodless technocrats. Having engineered the construction of a welfare state with comprehensive, non-means tested rights of social citizenship, it seemed they had no clear idea of where to go next.

The SAP leaders may have run out of steam but the leaders of the social democratic Confederation of Trade Unions, LO, had not. They had a controversial idea of where to go next: economic citizenship. Not long before the elections, and to Olof Palme’s horror, LO launched a campaign to introduce economic democracy in the form of wage-earner governed investment funds financed by a substantial levy on corporate profits. These funds might have taken over the ownership of most of the largest corporations within 20 years.

Between 1976 and 1982, the centre-right parties—Conservatives, Liberals, and Centrists—were unable to agree on very much among themselves, and certainly not on anything that was unpopular. Consequently, several governments formed by various constellations of parties ended up following the welfare reform path long pursued by the Social Democrats.

The public sector continued to expand while the number of child care centres and women in the workforce increased greatly. Fearful of the Social Democrats’ outcry over unemployment, the centre-right parties nationalised more bankrupt private firms in six years than the Social Democrats had in forty-four. By the early 1980s, trade and budget deficits had ballooned dramatically, and SAP secured a triumphant victory in 1982 on a familiar call for a return to competent government.

Within weeks of the election, before the full government had even been sworn in, the SAP Treasurer, Kjell-Olof Feldt, announced a massive 16% devaluation of the Krona. This came only ten months after a conventionally cautious devaluation of 10% by the previous Liberal government.

The 1982 devaluation in many ways marks the dramatic end of a mildly interventionist social liberalism within SAP. The devaluation was ‘competitive’ because the Treasury put the value of the Swedish Krona at a level clearly below that dictated by the actual strength of the economy. Thus it flaunted the nostrums of international economic liberalism. Subsequently, however, the SAP leaders have followed international trends in domestic economic policy away from Keynesianism towards economic liberalism. They have liberalised control over currency import and export; eliminated industry assistance and the large budget deficit inherited from the previous government; and followed what was quaintly described as an ‘Australian model’ in taxation reform.

Like Keating, Feldt in 1989 sought to eliminate innumerable possibilities for cheating by taxing wages and corporate income at the same rate. But in Sweden this was a political disaster. Meanwhile, LO protested loudly against the abandonment of progressive ambitions.

The way Feldt sought to cope with the aftermath—of imported inflation, glaring strong profits, and acrimonious wage negotiations—in large part explains why the party lost the recent elections, even though there is still no credible alternative government. Feldt now believes that voters have finally seen through SAP’s long-standing claim to be able to produce both welfare reforms and economic growth, both full employment and low inflation, like a magician produces rabbits from a hat. He espouses wholesale abandonment of this outdated belief in political magic and urges social democrats to face up to economic reality. Thus he likes to contrast fuzzy-minded welfare-reformist ‘political magic’ with hard-nosed ‘economic rationalism’.

After the massive devaluation, the LO leaders succeeded in persuading the leaders of member unions to exercise restraint and accept real wage cuts for their members, for the sake of putting industry back on its feet and securing private sector employment. The government had been elected on a promise to introduce wage-earner investment funds. Once made into law it was thought that they would neutralise the disruptive effect on wage negotiations of an expected boom in corporate profits. Thus the promise of the funds stymied rank-and-file rebellion against wage restraint and ensured the early success of the devaluation.

Yet the funds have been a major disappointment for the LO. They are far too small to have had any significant effect in redistributing the profits boom of the 1980s. Nor have they ever been a factor in wage negotiations. Union discontent simmered throughout the period from 1982-1988, breaking out in 1987-88 in the form of several large white-collar strikes which bypassed the now somewhat undermined authority of LO.

In 1988, SAP narrowly won the elec-
tions on the strength of promises to extend parental leave from nine months to eighteen months, to extend holidays from five to six weeks, and to build enough child care centres that all parents who wanted child care could have it by 1991, Feldt was unwilling to make these promises, which were demanded by the election campaign strategists. Subsequently, he forced the party to break them, under the pressure of economic 'reality'.

By 1989, the LO leadership had more or less given up on exercising effective behind-the-scenes influence on the government. According to Stig Malm, Feldt's latest proposals to dampen demand by increasing the consumption tax were "the wrong medicine for the wrong people...our members are not the ones who need cooling down". When Feldt resigned in February 1990, he cited Malm's attack as a key element in his most bitter defeat during his time as Treasurer.

In October 1990 the new Treasurer, Allan Larsson, announced a mini-budget package of measures to stop the worrying outflow of currency. At around 10%, inflation had long been higher than in Sweden's primary export markets in Germany, the USA and UK. In an effort to avoid raising interest rates drastically, the Treasurer announced that Sweden intended to apply for membership in the European Community. This announcement of intention, combined with a minor increase in interest rates, had the desired effect on money dealers' expectations. The outflow of currency ceased. Malm spoke disparagingly of Larsson's seemingly fragile commitment to full employment and his all the more determined commitment to see Sweden join the EC. Yet neither the LO economists' reasoned argument nor Malm's outburst had any substantial effect on the Treasury. In July 1991, the SAP government formally applied to join the EC, thus greatly circumscribing possibilities for future public intervention in capital and currency markets.

Yet broken promises only partly explain the party's recent defeat. It lost primarily because of the internal ideological tension between SAP and LO over economic policy. This tension was between a social liberalism all too close to economic liberalism and a remarkably explicit democratic socialism, rather than between Feldt's dichotomy of political 'magic' and economic 'reality'. SAP leaders have long since forgotten the socialist statecraft used by earlier leaders in the 1930s and 40s to establish full employment. Today, maintaining full employment must involve a socialist statecraft of considerable subtlety and perseverance, rather than any mysterious political magic, however competently performed.

As governments in the next three years attempt to emulate the SAP leaders, a period of opposition might provide them with time to restock. Given the clarity of LO's challenge in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the acrimony of the public confrontation between LO and Treasury in the late 1980s, it will be most interesting to follow how thinking social democrats interpret the labour movement's recent stormy past.

On the other hand, the social democrats may well return before they have had time to rethink very much. There is very little chance of any one constellation of the five other parties surviving for very long. The budget is due in February and this will be a crucial test of how little the current Conservative prime minister can achieve and yet remain in office. A cabinet crisis will quite likely bring about early elections and deviation from the fixed elections due in September 1994.

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"The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

Antonio Gramsci.

From his prison cell in 1930, Gramsci sensed the ominous political vacuum that loomed over Europe between the wars. Today in Eastern Europe, the legacy of the postwar dictatorships—moulded by 45 years of communism with an eye toward the new economic crises in every country has prompted a worrisome reach into the societies' complex transitions to democracy. Without exception, the peoples of the former Eastern bloc toppled communism with an eye toward the new Europe. Yet, the jarring political and economic crises in every country has prompted a worrisome reach into the past for answers. Perhaps the most dramatic example is Romania, where the resurgence of ultra-nationalist ideologies—moulded by 45 years of communist rule—further undermines the country's unsteady transition into the European mainstream.

Under the late President Nicolae Ceausescu, nationalism was ruthless-ly suppressed as well as manipulated. The regime's monopoly over national mechanisms enabled it to bolster its popular legitimacy, as well as to fragment opposition along ethnic lines. The further the dictatorship's power-base eroded, the more it relied on the instruments of chauvinism, xenophobia and violence. In the 1989 revolution's wake, the same psychology quickly filled the gap that the dictatorship had left. The two million-strong Hungarian minority's call for full collective rights triggered an emotional chain-reaction of fear and demagoguery. Under a changed banner, nationalists resurrected verbatim the slogans that had worked so well for Ceausescu in the past.

In February 1990, the extremist ultranationalist movement Vatra Romaneasca (Cradle of Romania) was formed in Transylvania, where the vast majority of ethnic Hungarians live. The ranks of the Romanian cultural organisation’ swelled overnight as it fanned Romanian doubts about Hungarian irredentism. Violence climaxed a month later in Targu Mures when Vatra-inspired bands attacked peaceful Hungarian marches, leaving at least eight people dead.

The Vatra’s program itself is shrouded in emotional appeals to Romanian patriotism and historical glory. Vatra Romaneasca underlines that Romania is a homogeneous national state, a principle which Hungarian ethnic rights implicitly jeopardise. The claim that “Romanians must be masters in their own home” comes straight from the pages of Ceausescu propaganda. “Romania is not a multinational state but a national unity in which different percentages of minorities live,” said Vatra president Radu Ceonea. “And no minority is permitted favours just because its ancestors were oppressors for centuries.” The Vatra leadership of wartime fascists, former communist apparatchiks and disempowered members of Ceausescu's secret police has found a new rationale for strong-arm rule. “Our popularity stems from the Romanian Transylvanians’ feelings of uncertainty after the revolution,” says vice-president Ion Coja. “The Hungarian minority had put the Romanians' lives in danger. This was a result of the lack of authority on behalf of the government, police and army.”

In the aftermath of the Targu Mures pogrom, the Vatra and its parliamentary arm, the Party for National Union of Romania (PNUR), emerged as the dominant Romanian political force in Transylvania. One independent spring 1991 poll showed that 56% of people nationwide harbour a positive opinion of the organisation which claims a membership of four million. According to the survey, 8% of the electorate today would vote for the PNUR, up from their 2.5% showing in the May 1990 election.

The rise of Vatra is simply one manifestation of Romania's turbulent political consciousness. Opinion polls attest to a dangerously desocialised people, ripe for a populist ideology that preys on the anxieties of change. The ruling Front for National Salvation (FNS) received its May 1990 landslide victory as a guarantor of stability and continuity. Over half the population still supports President Ion Iliescu’s decision to send coal miners into Bucharest last summer against demonstrators. “The severity of the dictatorship has left Romania wholly without moral direction,” says journalist Rudi Herbert from the German-language daily Nueher Weg. He points out that the cities consist largely of an urbanised peasantry with no stable middle class. “The thin intelligentsia that exists has been thoroughly discredited in the press,” says this member of the German minority.

So commonplace are populist sentiments that they now form an unspoken consensus. Even the democratic opposition and leading intellectuals have chimed in. Nasty polemics against Jewish influence, the ‘gypsy threat' and the minorities in the neighbouring (heavily Romanian populated) Soviet Republic of Moldavia surface regularly in the press. The works of Romania’s wartime fascist thinkers are for sale in Bucharest bookshops and are now the rage in philosophy departments.

Perhaps no issue enjoys such broad approval as the rehabilitation of Romania’s wartime military dictator, Marshal Ion Antonescu. An Axis-allied power until 1944, Romania has a brutal wartime legacy which was treated gingerly during the Ceausescu era. Today, virtually the entire political spectrum hails Antonescu as a national hero. On June 1, the 51st anniversary of Antonescu’s execution, the Romanian parliament observed a minute of silence for its nation’s misjudged son.

In the press, article after article praises the Marshal, branding the Romanian holocaust a communist-propagated
lie. “After 44 years, history has at last allowed the Romanians to shed a tear and light a candle for Ion Antonescu,” wrote the leading democratic opposition daily Romania Libra. In the FNS daily Azi, one author contends: “From every part of Europe, with the exception of Romania and Bulgaria, Jews were sent to the gas chambers. Romanians never suffered from anti-Semitism and never gave into fascist pressure.”

Western historians differ over Antonescu’s commitment to fascist ideology. The Marshal himself put an end to his ruling partnership with the openly fascist Iron Guard. Yet, during Antonescu’s 1938-1944 reign, 400,000 Jews and tens of thousands of gypsies lost their lives. In Eichmann in Jerusalem, Hannah Arendt described Goebbels’ shock at the “radical pace” of Romanian deportations before the 1941 Final Solution plans had even been approved in Nazi Germany.

Alongside the Vatra, a number of like-minded groups and publications have emerged. Romania’s largest weekly newspaper with a circulation of 600,000, Romania Mare (Greater Romania), champions xenophobia at an extensive tie to the Securitate. Both with extensive ties to the ultra-nationalist circles have pushed ever harder for a positive reappraisal of the Ceausescu years. As Romania’s economy slides rapidly towards collapse, those segments of the population hardest hit have begun to look back on the security of the dictatorship with nostalgia. At Ceausescu’s unmarked grave on the outskirts of Bucharest, supporters daily place candles and flowers at the tyrant’s resting place.

The ultra-nationalists now openly demand Ceausescu’s posthumous rehabilitation, as well as the acquittal of all those found guilty of the revolution’s suppression. “History will evaluate Ceausescu very differently than many do today,” says Coja. “I think that we are much too harsh in our judgment of him.” In a recent ode to the late dictator, Tudor wrote: “All Romanians are waiting for you to come back/To rid the country of thieves...To make the gypsies work/And discipline the Hungarians.”

Romania Mare declares that the meagre handful of Securitate officers and nomenclatura sentenced to mild prison terms are the “victims of the new democracy”. The accused did all they could to prevent bloodshed, insist the extremists. Rather, the 1989 Timisoara massacre was the work of Hungarian and Soviet agents. “These real provocateurs of the December riots must be arrested”, according to Romania Mare. “Those who were framed-up should be let free to protect Romania from national dishonour.”

The most troubling political development of late is the nationalists’ ever closer ties to the ruling Front. The Vatra and Romania Mare have distanced themselves from the democratic opposition’s critical tone, and now obediently toe the Front’s line. Since the Timisoara events, the Front has taken aboard many of the right’s nationalist positions.

Once the ultra-right’s favourite target, Prime Minister Petre Roman, the grandson of a rabbi with a Spanish mother, has led the Front’s anti-Jew, anti-Hungarian campaign. While President Ion Iliescu represents the interests of the old apparatus and Securitate, Roman is considered the nationalists’ man in power. “Roman is out to prove that he’s a better Romanian than everyone else,” says one Hungarian human rights activist. “Even the government’s own newspaper is full of anti-Semitic references.” Rabbi Rosen has stated that if the anti-Semitism was not stopped it would become necessary to airlift Romania’s remaining 18,000 Jews to Israel.

The PNUR and the Front have collaborated with increasing regularity and goodwill, leading many observers to fear a formal electoral alliance next year. “I’m not at all optimistic about the next five to ten years,” says Gabriel Andreescu, one of Romania’s foremost democratic intellectuals. “There’s a real chance that these people will come to power.”

The question within nationalist circles is whether they will need the Front at all by the time of the next elections, due in a year’s time. At the moment, neither the Front, a nationalist coalition, nor the democratic opposition could win an electoral majority in their own right. But Romania Mare recently formed a party and the popularity of the PNUR has tripled over the past year. The former hardline Romanian Communist Party has also resurrected itself, playing on the same anxieties to justify a return to the byegone order.

A ruling nationalist-FNS coalition could well usher in a tragic period of autocratic military-backed nationalist rule in Romania. Although such a development would dangerously destabilise the entire region, the West has done little to encourage Romania’s democratisation. As in Yugoslavia, the US has simply withheld financial aid to punish Eastern Europe’s last bastions of communism.

The West must realise that promising financial assistance, concrete democratic proposals and full inclusion in the European integration process would serve Eastern Europe’s trouble spots far better than punitive exclusion. Until such alternatives find their way onto the agenda, Eastern Europe threatens to drift ever further away from the ideals of a united Europe.

PAUL HOCKENOS is a Budapest-based freelance journalist.
How rare to record some happy events in Papua New Guinea. But the recent forced resignations of the Governor-General, Sir Serei Eri, and the deputy prime minister, Ted Diro, are certainly cause to crack open a few juicy betel nuts.

In the case of Sir Serei, though, the celebration must be tinged with regret. As Vincent Eri, he was the author of PNG's first novel, *The Crocodile*, published 20 years ago by Penguin books, and translated into French and Russian. This was set during the Pacific War, mainly in his home Gulf province—then as now a neglected, substantially swampy area, and a prime recruiting ground for disaffected rascal gangs in neighbouring Port Moresby.

Eri, the first Papua New Guinean to become head of a government department, commuted daily from his modest home in the suburb of Hohola rather than moving into Government House, with its beautifully maintained tropical gardens, upon becoming Governor-General.

But he was hypnotised by his younger Papuan hero, Diro, who had been army commander when Eri was permanent secretary of the Defence Department. Eri became founding president of Diro's political party, the People's Action Party, named by Diro after his own hero, Lee Kuan Yew.

Diro fought from childhood in a remote mountainous area east of Port Moresby to gain an education. He has known personal tragedy; two daughters have died recently. Yet he somehow believed he could do no wrong, that he was fated to reach the top, and that his devoted supporters would win him a place in the history books as the first PM from Papua.

Australia ruled New Guinea, the northern part of what is now PNG's territory, under first a League of Nations mandate, then a United Nations trust. Papua was a colony, and as such subject to no external supervision. Thus New Guinea inevitably appeared to receive the greater attention and development opportunities.

Dame Josephine Abaijah, the country's first woman MP (there have only been three; a significant factor in the growth of corruption and the growing chasm between politicians and the electorate) led a pre-independence charge for a special status, if not independence, for Papua. But this stuttered to a halt, with Abaijah's own lack of direction and the failure of the region to throw up widely accepted leaders - until Diro.

Under Diro the region's MPs became united as never before, and after the 1987 election his PAP became the nation's second biggest party (after Pangu). He was appointed Forests minister by Paias Wingti when the latter displaced Michael Somare as PM in 1985. The logging of PNG's rainforests soon shifted into top gear, with the regulatory restraints being discarded by the new minister. Soon the *Times of PNG* began to uncover a trail of timber corruption involving politicians, including Diro, foreign companies (chiefly from Malaysia and Singapore) and the former Malaysian foreign minster Tan Sri Ghazali.

Eventually Wingti was forced by the weight of evidence to establish a judicial inquiry - with the eventual outcome surfacing only in September.
when Diro was found guilty of 81 counts of corruption, and barred from all public office for three years.

Early in the proceedings Diro had been able to bring hundreds of Papuan supporters to cheer him on at his various court hearings. Port Moresby is in any case in the heartland of Papua. But the most significant part of the whole affair came at the end - akin to the dog which, as Sherlock Holmes painstakingly pointed out to Watson, did not bark in the night. When Diro suffered his crucial defeat, the streets of the capital were quiet. When he answered calls on talkback radio, they were mostly negative. Papua was not in flames, despite the efforts of friend and mentor Eri to sustain the crisis and his career.

In part, this may be attributed to the continuing high regard in which the PNG legal system is held - and especially the Chief Justice, Sir Buri Kidu (also a Papuan). Indeed, it was Kidu who provided the backbone that kept PM Rabbie Namaliu pushing the right constitutional buttons in the right order. Eri, who had been high commissioner in Canberra at the time of Gough Whitlam’s dismissal, appeared not to realise that PNG’s constitution gave him no such reserve powers.

And just as the Papuans didn’t bark, nor did the army. There was no hint of a coup from the force Diro had commanded for its first eight years.

One of the lessons of all this from the Australian perspective is that values sometimes seen as uniquely ‘Western’ cannot be written off as irrelevant in analysing popular perceptions in developing societies. Diro, like his Indonesian contacts Ghazali and General Benny Murdani, may like to see themselves as exempt from popular accountability. But such sentiments do not reflect a supposedly ‘traditional’ culture so much as a political culture introduced with the nation state. Given a system which enables them to assess their leaders and hold them accountable, Papua New Guineans at any rate appear ready - indeed eager - to see the system work independently, whatever the outcome.

ROWAN CALLICK writes for Time Australia.

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Carry on DOCTOR

Brian Howe's copayment scheme justifiably raised the hackles of Medicare's supporters. But the problems it tries to confront are real enough. Deirdre Wicks and Roy Green argue that defending the health status quo isn't enough. And they detect a hidden theme in Howe's reforms which could direct the scrutiny about overservicing back onto the major culprit—the medical profession. And Julie Power interviews Medicare architect John Deeble.

As it turns out, Health Minister Brian Howe may unwittingly have done the health care reform debate in Australia a favour with his decision to bulldoze a $2.50 Medicare fee copayment through Labor's federal Caucus.

This is not to say that the idea of copayment has any merit. Virtually every health and consumer organisation in the country has shown why it doesn’t. However, what the proposal will now do is sharpen the debate about the kind of health system Australia needs with the prospect of an ageing population and steadily rising health costs.

Of course, the immediate reaction to Howe's August Budget Paper, Health Care in Australia, was to defend the basic principle of Medicare against an unprecedented and unexpected attack from the very government which introduced it. While this reaction was justified, we will argue here that defence of the status quo in itself, in the absence of fundamental reforms to the health care system, will prove to be self-defeating in the longer term. Ironically, the seeds of such reforms may be found, as we shall see, in the Budget package itself. These reforms, if developed in the right direction, would allow the government to replace Medicare fee for service arrangements altogether with a system which promotes not only fairer access and achievable cost control but also better health outcomes.

It is simply no solution to the problems identified by Howe to call for an increase in the Medicare levy, though this would at least be preferable to a flat charge which discriminates against low income families and the chronically
sick. Nor is it feasible to design a more ‘equitable’ system of copayments, which penalises fee-charging doctors as opposed to bulk-billing doctors—or, more accurately, which penalises their patients. In attempting to do so last month, the Caucus committee established to ‘second guess’ the Budget changes was on a hiding to nothing.

The danger of this limited approach is illustrated by the response in Britain to the Thatcher government’s attacks on the National Health Service (NHS) in the early 1980s. Thatcher was able to capitalise on widespread disenchantment with the faceless, bureaucratic nature of the NHS, and its failure to cater for women and groups with special needs. For example, as one British commentator on the Left pointed out at the time, “The NHS has failed to meet women’s needs in relation to contraception, abortion, pregnancy and childbirth” (C Thunhurst, It Makes You Sick: The Politics of the NHS, 1982).

In this context, the slogan ‘Defend the NHS’ fell flat not because it went too far for public opinion, but because it did not go far enough. While chronic underfunding of the health service by successive governments was seen as a key factor in queues for surgery and hospital beds, it did not explain or justify the inadequate nature of health care provision. Rather, this reflected the class character of British society, the power of the medical profession and the associated dominance of a medical ‘cure-focused’ perspective over more ‘holistic’, health-focused models.

Unfortunately, the analysis of these deeper forces shaping the health care system in Britain was conducted ‘on the hop’ by the opposition Labour Party, health unions and user groups, under pressure from a deliberate government strategy to wind back the NHS in favour of private hospitals and private health insurance. Ultimately, the slogan was changed to ‘Defend and extend the NHS’, but the
initiative once lost was not easily regained. Even the latest Labour Party policy document, *A Fresh Start for Health*, is open to the criticism that it "smacks of half measures", for its key proposal to finance hospitals according to their workload will simply "reinforce the power of the hospital doctors and undermine the ability of health authorities to shift resources into other fields of health care" (*Economist*, 28 September, 1991).

We shall return later to this analysis, which applies equally to the Australian health system. The dear lesson to be drawn from the British experience is that in defending Medicare, perhaps the most outstanding achievement of the Hawke Labor government, we cannot afford to ignore its defects. And it is the manifestation of those defects in rising costs which has provoked Howe into action.

Indeed, in the current debate, while the forward estimates are inevitable contentious, the economic background to Howe's Budget statement is not in dispute. It is a widely acclaimed feature of the success of Medicare that health spending as a proportion of Australia's GDP has remained relatively stable at around 8%, and is far from excessive by comparison with other OECD countries. However, this apparent success should not be allowed to breed complacency, for spending as a proportion of Budget outlays has blown out by 46% over the last six years.

The main cause of the increase is hospital grants to the states, but spending on medical services has also grown by over 30%. Nor is it difficult to identify the fastest growing expenditure items. The National Health Strategy Background Paper No. 2 (February 1991), *Medical Services through Medicare*, reveals that, while benefits for GP consultations remain the ‘big ticket’ items, the use per person of diagnostic services such as pathology grew at twice the rate of medical services generally.

The demographic picture is even more revealing. While people aged up to 59 increased their use of pathology services by around 25% over the last six years, those aged 60 and above increased their use of these services by no less than 60%. A similar picture emerges for other specialist and diagnostic services, and this highlights a further dimension of the health funding crisis. As the ‘baby boomers’ get older, unless health priorities change drastically, the growing demand for expensive, high-tech services will stretch the system to breaking point.

Obviously, something has to be done to control spiralling health costs, but what? As *Medical Services Through Medicare* points out, Australia has a unique problem in that its health care system is “open ended in two major aspects—utilisation and doctor fee charging”. Most countries have closed off one or other of these openings. However, whereas costs have been relatively successfully controlled in the British NHS by supply side management, the US approach of managing demand through various insurance options has been a widely acknowledged failure in both economic and human terms.

Indeed, the recent illness and death of a prominent US Republican turned the public spotlight onto the fact that his own staff members could barely afford their gigantic medical premiums. It was reported that this “underscores a trend that is pushing health care rapidly to the top of the domestic political agenda and creating a consensus for change. The middle class, not merely the poor, are finding themselves disadvantaged by the current system”. And, of course, “Few rules of politics are so consistent that when the middle class is hurting, change is inevitable” (*Australian Financial Review*, 28 June, 1991).

In Australia, growing service utilisation is directly correlated with the increasing number of doctors. Indeed, Howe’s Budget Paper concludes that “the current and increasing supply of GPs is the single biggest factor affecting Commonwealth Medicare benefits outlays”. In this context the market cannot operate to restrain fees; unit prices are insensitive to ‘oversupply’ because the floor price is determined by the Medicare benefit level. This has convinced Howe to accede to the AMA’s self-serving policy of reducing the doctor intake, especially those from overseas.

Yet this policy, far from restraining fees, will almost certainly give doctors the opportunity to increase them, as
Bill, as opposed to those who do not. This is well under-

Also paying would be those doctors who choose to bulk-

moreover, which have nothing to do with market forces.

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by the Budget. In reality, the costs would be transferred to

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more than a chimera in the imaginings of the Finance

The proposed $2.50 copayment for GP visits would thus

in copayments since 1976 accounts for no more than 10%

The Effects of

Consumer Co-Payments in Medical Care,

And the evidence is overwhelming. The National Health

Strategy Background Paper No. 5 (June 1991), The Effects of

Consumer Co-Payments in Medical Care, shows that the fall

in copayments since 1976 accounts for no more than 10% of

the increase in service use over this period. Equally, the

paper concludes, it would require an increase in co-pay-

ments to 50% of medical bills to reduce service use by 7.6%.

The proposed $2.50 copayment for GP visits would thus

have a negligible effect on service use, and could not, even

taken together with a cut in doctor numbers, produce the

estimated net saving by 1994/95 of $605 million.

Nor let it be forgotten that this saving, should it be anything

more than a chimera in the imaginings of the Finance

Department number-crunchers, would not constitute a

reduction in health costs, but merely in those costs borne

by the Budget. In reality, the costs would be transferred to

the patient, unless dissuaded from visiting the doctor. It

would effectively signal the end of bulk-billing, as pressure
grows to insure the 'gap', and open the door to the

American model of health care. Patients would be paying

the price of 'problems' outside their control - problems,

moreover, which have nothing to do with market forces.

Also paying would be those doctors who choose to bulk-
bill, as opposed to those who do not. This is well under-

stood by the Opposition Leader Dr John Hewson, who
welcomed the government's decision on co-payments as

"the first tentative step to making health care more price

sensitive".

The fact is that the health care system throughout the

world, as Howe's Budget Paper itself recognises, "has

characteristics that stop a pure market working". Medical

Services Through Medicare puts it more bluntly: "Price is not

a mechanism which equilibrates supply and demand, only

a variable which, with service volumes, can be ordered so

as to achieve the driving force behind the whole system,

namely the doctors' target incomes". The basic problem,

which the government has yet to confront, lies in the

traditional prerogatives and power of the medical profes-

sion.

This is by no means a new problem in Australia. As long

ago as 1868, Florence Nightingale wrote to the then NSW

Colonial Secretary Sir Henry Parkes warning him that,

"Your Medical Officers, Resident and other, have more

power than almost anywhere else". What is extraordi-

nary is that even today, thanks to a constitutional anomaly

created by a previous Labor government, this vested inter-

est is permitted both to set the health care agenda in

Australia, and to make the community pay for it.

Buried deep in the Budget paper are Howe's proposed

'Future reforms to the funding of general practice'. These

reforms are a start to tackling the problem of professional

power, and to delivering substantial and realistic savings

across the health portfolio. So deeply buried are they,

however, that they have been largely ignored by the

media—though not by the AMA which has already begun

to organise a national campaign of opposition. They do so,

of course, in the certain knowledge that the government's

own constituency, and potential source of support for radi-

cal reforms, has been alienated by the proposal for copay-

ments.

The Budget Paper proposes three main reforms. First, prac-

tice grants would provide "some remuneration to those

general practices which choose to reduce their reliance on

fee for service". This could be interpreted as the beginning

of a move away from fee for service, with all its attendant

problems of over-servidng and fee drift, towards some

kind of salaried arrangement. Already, as part of the

Caucus compromise, Howe has agreed to allocate $12

million to practice grants in 1991/92, which is surprising

given the absence of any developed policy criteria for these

grants.

Second, practice budgets would be allocated to general

practices to "cover the costs of diagnostic services and

pharmaceuticals". This reform, which surfaced in NHS

Issues Paper No. 1 (July 1991), The Australian Health Jigsaw:

Integration of Health Care Delivery, is a proposal for budget-
holders to purchase "packages of care". Although equally

vague at this stage it might, together with practice grants,
introduce a measure of financial accountability to the real

consumer of medical services—the GP.

Third, accreditation of general practices would, according

to the Budget Paper, provide a framework for addressing


"quality of care issues". In particular, it is suggested that links with academic departments of general practice in medical schools could result in improved continuing education and quality assurance programs. There are good grounds for questioning the suitability of the current level and type of undergraduate medical education and postgraduate hospital-based training for primary health care work in general practice. For example, Medical Services Through Medicare found that, while GP consultations account for 70% of services to young people under 20, they represent only about half the services to people over 60, who are more likely to be referred on for further tests or specialist consultations.

Consequently, an important aim of reform in this area is to ‘upskill’ GPs so that they are better able to deal with health and medical problems without further referral. Again, it will not be an easy task, for it means reversing the whole process of specialisation which has been a feature of the 20th century medical profession.

Before focussing on the inadequacies of these proposals, at least as they are presently formulated in the Budget Paper, it is worth speculating on where ultimately they might lead. The service model which could emerge from the reforms is a publicly funded, multidisciplinary practice, separating funder and provider, where the GP is, in the words of the Budget Paper, “the co-ordinator of a network of care”. When the budget for diagnostic services and pharmaceuticals also includes, under the supervision of area health management, a component for hospital in-patient services, the model begins to look very much like a Health Maintenance Organisation (HMO). If, indeed, this is what Howe has in mind, he is on the right track.

Essentially, HMOs comprise a group of health and medical practitioners with a set budget and a population of enrolled members. They provide directly, or arrange provision of, a wide range of health and medical services, including hospital services. Because the budget is fixed, there is a built-in incentive to keep HMO members healthy and out of hospital. As a recent Economist survey of health care pointed out, HMOs “amputate the incentives to overtreat, overspend and overhospitalise. They put a premium on prevention and primary care, both neglected in traditional health care systems”. They thus “add to the advantages of Britain’s GP system a closer link between primary and secondary care and a smaller incentive to refer patients to specialists”.

Even where hospitalisation is required, US studies show that the number of short-stay hospital bed-days per head of the HMO population is about half that of the population generally (H Luft, Health Maintenance Organisations: Dimensions of Performance, 1981). The portfolio savings implications for Australia should be obvious, especially since the public sector model which would presumably be favoured by Howe avoids the drawbacks of private sector HMOs in the US—not to mention the disastrous ‘self-governing trusts’ recently introduced by Britain’s Conservative government as part of their ‘internal market’ reforms to the NHS.

Nevertheless, there are three fundamental inadequacies in Howe’s approach to structural change. The first relates to the method by which he hopes to introduce his reforms, namely by “discussions with the medical profession”. The experience of health care reform in Australia suggests that, despite the sympathetic views of a minority of GPs, the AMA, like the Soviet old guard, simply will not co-operate with any changes which appear to threaten their professional power. It seems that, while all reforming health ministers must learn for themselves this basic truth, few have been blinded to it as comprehensively as Brian Howe.

It may be said, by way of justification for Howe’s tactics, that the position of the medical profession is made unsailable by the ‘civil conscription’ clause in the Constitution, which invites non-compliance with policies ranging from bulk-billing to filling in forms for notifiable diseases. Yet any government which is serious about controlling health costs, let alone introducing reform, will sooner or later have to challenge this clause in the High Court, whose approach to such issues has itself undergone considerable change in recent years. (Witness, for example, the Court’s interpretation of the Constitution in relation to the environment, and even managerial prerogative.)

The origin of the clause was a referendum called by the Chifley government in 1946 to seek powers to make laws and regulations with respect to social welfare matters. After winning the referendum in the teeth of a vociferous campaign by the doctors against ‘socialised medicine’, then Attorney General H V Evatt, in a gesture as inexplicable as it was short-sighted, accepted an Opposition amendment to the new powers ruling out ‘civil conscription’. The effect of this amendment, at least until now, has been to ensure that no major health reform could be introduced without the co-operation of the medical profession.

The question for the present government is whether the ground for a High Court challenge is better prepared by keeping the reform agenda under wraps, in the futile hope that the AMA may not notice it, or by opening it up for public education and debate. Although inevitably there is a risk that Howe might lose the High Court battle in the short term, the democratic process will at least give him a chance of winning the war, either through a further referendum or possibly just the threat of a referendum.

That the mere thought of this approach makes the government nervous (“Whatever you do, don’t mention the Constitution”) indicates how remote it has become from its pre-reform constituency. If the Labor leadership can rediscover and renew its confidence in the constituency responsible for its political agenda, that confidence will be repaid by a popular campaign with far greater impact than a tete-a-tete with Dr Bruce Shepherd. If it does not, a fundamental issue distinguishing Labor from the Opposition will have been thrown away.

The second, closely related, inadequacy in Howe’s approach concerns the dominant status allotted to the medical profession within the reform package itself. Of course, doctors play an important part in the delivery of medical services, but so do nurses, physiotherapists, dieticians,
midwives and a whole spectrum of health workers, most of whom now receive their basic education in university at degree level.

Yet the medical profession enjoys a monopoly over health decisions and practice which is looking increasingly out of place in a society which values, on the one hand, choice for the consumers of health care and, on the other, opportunities for all health professionals to make full use of their skills. If the government is working towards a model of Commonwealth-funded HMOs, why should the co-ordinating professional be a doctor? Why not a nurse practitioner? And why should the "network of care" referred to in Howe's Budge Paper not include complementary therapies, such as chiropractic, naturopathy and acupuncture?

Here, the substance of health reform has been subordinated to the prospect of 'successful' negotiations with the AMA and the College of GPs, for, as every health worker knows, the dominance of the medical profession is the basic source of the continued dominance of the medical model, with its primary emphasis on treatment and cure. That is why it is crucial for a government committed to social justice, access and equity in health care to ensure that HMOs are explicitly funded and accredited according to their adherence to the 'New Public Health' principles established by the 1986 Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion.

The Charter identified five health promotion action areas: building healthy public policy, creating supportive environments, developing personal skills, strengthening community action and reorienting health services. No one would expect the Department of Finance to understand these principles, but they should be second nature to a health minister in a Labor government. The focus of the principles on long term health outcomes, if matched by the provision of appropriate services, would be a priceless legacy for future generations.

The third inadequacy in Howe's reform package is its timid approach to restructuring pathology and diagnostic services, which relies on the existing private infrastructure to restrain exploding costs. There is, of course, well documented evidence on the scope for abuse at the point of intersection with the users of these services, mainly the GPs. Even the Australian Association of Pathologists has been forced to admit that "unethical pathologists bribed GPs so that they could perform thousands of dollars of unnecessary tests on their patients" (Sydney Morning Herald, 30 August 1991).

Again, Howe's attempt to reduce the incentive for over servicing potentially disadvantages patients by restructuring benefits and, in a bizarre move akin to removing $100 notes from circulation to discourage consumption, halves the number of collection centres. The package completely ignores the proposal in NHS Background Paper No. 6 (July 1991), Directions for Pathology, to reorganise pathology services in Australia by expanding public provision "particularly where the public sector has an advantage, such as the provision of specialised testing in reference laboratories".

It is arguable that the establishment of a publicly-owned testing service—and indeed pharmaceutical industry—possibly in collaboration with the CSIRO, would not only reduce costs but would also permit closer surveillance of overservicing. Indeed, it is apparent from reforms already introduced by the government that the identification of doctors involved in overservicing, followed by counselling and education, has a dramatic effect on their behaviour. While the public sector may recently have fallen out of fashion, its superiority over the market in important areas of our national life cannot be dismissed.

In conclusion, we have identified the enormous potential of the government's proposed structural reforms to health care in Australia, but we have also pointed to serious inadequacies in the strategy for their implementation. If the government is to win back the trust of health activists and the electorate, it must begin to address these inadequacies openly, and develop the potential within its reforms as part of a wider process of public discussion and debate.

Brian Howe is still relatively new to the Health portfolio, and has found himself on a steep learning curve. Like all avowed social reformers, he would like to secure his place in history, but has begun to realise that health care reform is a less straightforward area than most. Unfortunately, in his first attempt, he has been too clever by half. He wanted to win the support of the doctors by introducing copayments, while playing down future reforms to the health care system. Instead, he has united not only the doctors but also his potential base of support for reform against his whole Budget package.

Instead of being remembered by history as a champion of social reform, Howe is now in danger of being remembered as the ambitious cabinet minister who was able to secure influence and respectability for the Left in a Labor government, but only at a terrible price—the destruction of Medicare, and the best prospect of health care reform in a generation.

DEIRDRE WICKS teaches in the sociology of health at the University of Newcastle, and is the former director of Health Advancement, ACT.
ROY GREEN teaches in economics at the University of Newcastle and is a former adviser to the British Labour Party and the Australian government.
Health Wars

John Deeble is health services fellow at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University. Until 1989, he was a first assistant secretary in the Department of Community Services and Health. He is often described as one of the two architects of Medicare. He was interviewed for ALR by Julie Power.

You have described the budget changes to Medicare as ill-advised, unjustified and ultimately destructive. Do you still believe this?

Yes, I do, because I don’t like watching the creation of a two-class system in Medicare, with one set of conditions for pensioners and one set for other people. I don’t like Medicare being converted into a quasi-welfare system because it could lead to something like the pharmaceutical benefits scheme, with Medicare benefits restricted to old people and high users, and nothing for the general population.

So you think there’s something in the ‘thin end of the wedge’ argument?

Well, I think what happened with pharmaceuticals was a good example. I always thought that was a signal that the same could happen to Medicare.

Can you explain what you mean when you say that this is the first step in making Medicare into a welfare system?

Medicare has been involved in managing a big industry, not just looking after the old and needy. It is necessary to do that, because if you are going to control costs, you need to control and influence all expenditure, and not just spending by the few people you are particularly responsible for. If you go chasing the prices and technology in the private sector, you’ll end up like the United States: high expenditure and a lot of people left out of the welfare net.

Is that what we are looking at now for the future of Medicare?

To be fair, not yet. We are still a long way away from that. But the conceptual justification has been provided for doing it.

Going to the detail of the budget, has a copayment ever been shown to decrease demand?

Yes. Copayments do in every case decrease demand. They don’t decrease demand as much as people expect, because what is a reduction in outlays for government is also a reduction in income for providers. And even though the providers may see less patients, they may increase the servicing of the patients they do see, to make up for the loss of others.

The Canadian and US experience has shown that there is some redistribution of services, because the new services go to those not deterred by price (mainly better off people), whereas the cuts affect mainly poorer people who are deterred by price.

Is there an arrogance in Brian Howe’s comments that as the new charge is only a few coins, it won’t make much difference?

He can’t have it both ways. If it doesn’t make much difference, it’s just a revenue item. If it does, there is the possibility that it will make a disproportionate difference to the less well off. If you look at it as just a revenue item, then there’s no argument that a flat rate charge is less equitable than an income-based levy contribution.

Are you surprised that the government didn’t increase the Medicare levy?

No, not given the objectives of the Department of Finance. Its overriding objective was to cut government spending. Raising the levy doesn’t cut government spending, it may increase it.

Is there really a need to cut demand?
Our usage growth since 1975 has been almost exactly in line with that of Canada. That doesn't mean to say that both countries haven't got some element of unnecessary servicing, there is some in all systems. The Australian system had kept costs under control because Australia had been gradually cutting medical fees in real terms, to make up for growing usage. So while usage was rising, costs weren't. Obviously you can't go on doing that forever, and an alternative had to be sought, but user fees was only one option.

So where was the growth and how would you have tackled that?

Initially, the introduction of Medicare, bringing in 16% of the population not covered before, pushed up use by 2% to 3% beyond the previous growth rate. It slowed down after that to the same rate as in the previous ten years. In the last two years, the growth in GP consultations has slowed down very considerably. The big growth currently is in diagnostic services (pathology and radiology) and operations.

I would have been more cautious about tackling the GP side, because I think a plateau may have been reached. But I would have worked harder on finding incentives and controls in procedural medicine.

Should rising demand be accepted as part and parcel of having an increasingly sophisticated and wealthy population?

Australia has been remarkable in controlling health expenditure to about 8% of GNP for 15 years, almost the only country which has done that. People are more inclined to spend any greater wealth on health services than on other things, but there is more to it than that. Growth is technology driven too. For example, 20 years ago, relatively few 75 year-olds could face hip replacements with confidence - not because the operation was much different, but because anaesthetics and control of risk factors, like heart conditions, were not really as good as they are now. Now replacement is a real prospect for many people, and it is not unreasonable for those older people to expect that they should have those services which, for technical reasons, were not possible before.

Do you see the dominance of the Treasury dry line accounting for the copayment getting up?

Yes, I do. It's a reward for persistence on their part, because they have been putting the same arguments forward since the beginning of Medicare. The form varies from year to year, but the import is the same. They always favour patient charges. I think pharmaceuticals was the big breakthrough. When the government cut it down to a fairly nominal scheme for anyone but pensioners and high users, that was a major victory for the econocrats.

Would you agree that Medicare is in a state of crisis?

No, I don't think it's in a state of crisis at all. Spending has increased as a proportion of all government spending only because other budget items have been cut. I see the social contract which the government has with the community over Medicare as being a contract to run an insurance system on the community's behalf. Only the government can do this effectively, because only the government has the power both to tax equitably and to bargain with the providers of services, which include the states and hospitals.

Which parts of the package do you endorse?

I don't know if it is proven that we have too many doctors. That's a value judgement. It is true that the number of doctors is increasing faster than the population, and we have to look seriously at migration and the output of medical schools.

I don't dispute what the government is doing in the restructuring. It will probably succeed because there is a sufficient number of doctors to whom it will be attractive. I would have argued, of course, that it could have succeeded without the copayment.

Does the fee for service system you set up encourage doctors to overservice?

Fee for service pays doctors for doing identifiable things. However, the other side of the coin is that it's hard to deny people the right to insure against a charge of this size if they want to. And while this government might be able to prevent it, the next government might be quite happy to concede it. Once there's a private and a public system running side by side, there is a big temptation for the government to pull out and return to the private system altogether.

JULIE POWER is a Canberra press gallery correspondent for the Financial Review.
GOVERNING

Corruption

Government corruption is a cancer on the body politic, eating away at governments across the continent. Or is it?

Gary Wickham and Gavin Kendall suggest our instincts about corruption, like those about 'good health', are often misplaced.

Corruption is with us. The WA Inc Royal Commission and its media coverage parallel Queensland's Fitzgerald Inquiry which itself had echoes of the inquiry into the Askin government of New South Wales. And so on. In other words, the WA Commission and the stories surrounding it are part of a tradition of government in Australia, hardly a noble tradition, but a tradition nonetheless: our governments, it seems, are constantly under threat from corruption.

The inquiries and the stories would have us believe corruption is a cancer. Unless we, the voters, act as a surgeon, urging healthy living on our governments and cutting out the cancer quickly whenever it appears, the consequences will be dire. We know enough to know we're not alone in the fight against this disease. Italy, Japan and the US from among the democratic countries, and just about all the falling communist countries, are acknowledged to be fighting it as well. We wish them well (sort of) though no one is too surprised when a government, a system, or even an entire nation has to be buried because of the disease and the surrounding area fumigated in its wake.

We also know enough to know that corruption is hardly a new problem. The Roman emperor Augustus, for example, identified the corruption of the empire as the major target of his new governmental program, although he can hardly be said to have succeeded. Ultimately, so our mythology has it, the Roman Empire was destroyed by decadence and corruption. Our fear is that we are going the same way.
What we don't seem to know is that there are other ways of looking at corruption. One of these other ways, we're arguing here, is actually more useful if one is concerned, as we are, with good government. In fact, we suggest corruption is better thought of as a necessary, though necessarily limited, aspect of modern government, including modern Australian government. To begin, we need to think about health. It's in the context of trying to assess the health of the nation and of its system of government that we understand corruption is inimical to health; the idea of corruption as a 'cancer' is entirely appropriate to this currently dominant way of thinking.

Let's take a few steps back. The health metaphor which we apply to our nation is, of course, derived from what is ultimately a medical source focusing on the body of an individual. The body is seen to be in its normal state when in perfect health, while illness and disease are the things that remove 'health', disrupt this 'normal' condition, and threaten the body.

By analogy, our nation has a normal condition when things are going perfectly well, and this normal condition is disrupted by such problems as corruption (although, of course, there are others, such as riots, civil disobedience,
crime, and so on). Too many of these problems, and the nation, like the body, can be destroyed. The job of the voter, as surgeon, is to ward off the incursions of these malign influences, and ensure the normality and equilibrium of the patient-nation.

However, this notion of health, although deeply embedded in our common sense understandings, is only one of a range of possible ways of understanding health. It’s an understanding which arises at a specific historical moment; it is not an understanding which is good for all time.

Good government is a messy and complex business.

Another understanding of the health of our nation may help us better understand the function and the dangerousness of corruption and similar ‘evils’. This very old way of understanding health, which is being revived in some versions of homeopathy, organises itself around a conception of the body as necessarily overtaken by ills. The movement of the body through various stages of being ill and being well, and eventually dying, are all part of what constitutes ‘health’—thus even death can be thought of as ‘healthy’. This is very different from regarding a state of total wellbeing as the ‘default’ position.

It should be fairly clear how taking up this metaphor could transform our understanding of the ills of the nation. We are by no means advocating that such ills should not be the object of the voter-surgeon’s interventions, but we are suggesting that anyone who expects to see a nation reach a peak of ‘normality’ is being naive. In addition, perhaps it is appropriate that some nations and empires be allowed to die, as part of their cycle of health.

Some readers might well be saying: but isn’t this exactly Marx’s point? Didn’t Marx formulate a notion of capitalism as necessarily beset by evils and ills, by the tension between the relations and forces of production, and by the alienation of the workers from the means of production? Indeed so, but only in the context of setting up capitalism as deeply pathological. Alienation was merely a symptom of a deeper malaise. When capitalism gets replaced by communism, so he said, all the cancers will disappear or wither away.

Our outlook is different. If one understands the health of the nation and its system of government in the way we have outlined above, then it is no longer necessary to regard capitalism as pathological. Its ills are an inevitable part of its life course. Capitalism requires an understanding doctor, not an executioner. Following on from this, one would expect communist systems of government to suffer disease just like any other system—and Marx’s idealism in believing communism would prove different from the systems that preceded it has been blown apart by recent events in Eastern Europe, as we hinted earlier.

By contrast, Max Weber’s vision of a bureaucratic form of government was much more like the kind of metaphorical understanding of health we are arguing for here. Weber realised that a bureaucracy would be beset by problems such as corruption, and would cause a certain amount of stifling of the body, but he writes as though this were somehow a necessary oil in the machinery of government—necessary but still in need of careful regulation.

We are calling for a new realism in coming to grips with the ills of the nation. We believe that it is important to stop seeing the signs of decadence and decay all around, and to get on with the job of regulating the inevitable hiccoughs in government. No doubt our form of government will die, in time: but our over-reactions to its problems only make it more difficult to see how to act to improve the situation.

We realise that we have not said anything about what makes one form of government better than the other; perhaps we could be accused of suggesting that since all forms of government are equally prone to disease like corruption, then we have no way of deciding which is better. However, we would resist such a paralysis of thought. We reiterate that the purpose of this exploration is to engender a certain sense of perspective about our current problems, and a certain sense of modesty about the times we live in—they are almost certainly no more debauched or depraved than any other.

We need to understand that the piece of the life-cycle of government we are experiencing is just one of many such pieces. In addition, we would maintain that it is possible to make further ethical decisions about what forms of government are best (an analysis begun by one of us in ALR 129). Moral panics about diseases (like corruption) can only cloud our judgment and obstruct our ability to make such decisions.

So the WA Inc Royal Commission is more an indication of the way government works. Sure, it’s an indication that it never works evenly or smoothly, but this is hardly grounds for panic.

In this sense, our conclusion is that corruption inquiries should be seen as useful aids to a sort of popular political sociology. Given sensible reporting, they should help to make voters aware that good government is a messy and complex business. If voters want government that’s clear and simple, they’ll simply get bad government.

GARY WICKHAM teaches in sociology at Murdoch University. GAVIN KENDALL teaches in psychology at Lancaster University in England.
Inside the BLF
A union self-destructs

In one of the most controversial books yet published on an Australian union, *Inside the BLF* provides an insider’s view of the Builders’ Labourers Federation as it faced a Royal Commission and repeated attempts at deregistration.

A leading official of the BLF during the 1980s, Brian Boyd kept a diary of significant events. *Inside the BLF* shows how the union was “held hostage” by BLF Secretary Norm Gallagher and used as a personal weapon in his battle to avoid corruption charges.

This book provides unprecedented insight into the BLF’s relations with State and Federal governments, building companies, and other unions. It describes how a once powerful trade union was isolated and destroyed.

Boyd’s conclusion is that the 1986 deregistration of the BLF was both avoidable and unnecessary.

Brian Boyd is now an elected officer of the Victorian Trades Hall Council.

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Australian Left Review has compiled an index of its contents beginning with Issue No.85 (Spring, 1983). As of February, 1990, ALR became a monthly magazine, producing 11 issues per year. The Index cross-indexes articles by various topics, and also includes brief descriptions of each. It’s an ideal resource for libraries and researchers.

Copies of the ALR Index are available at a cost of $55 each (price includes the index in a binder, postage and a regular update). Updates will be sent out annually, at the end of each year (December).

Write to: ALR Index, Freepost 28, Box A247, Sydney South 2000, for more details.
A change of heart

The Accord was the linchpin of union strategy in the 80s. Now its record is under severe scrutiny, and many of its erstwhile union supporters have had second thoughts. Clare Curran spoke to the authors of an upcoming book which charts this change of heart.

The 80s began with a brave new experiment for the labour movement manifested in an Accord which, it was hoped, would provide ordinary people with more ability to intervene in determining the conditions that governed their lives.

But according to the authors of a forthcoming book, Surviving the Accord: From Restraint to Renewal, something has gone horribly wrong with the experiment—something that has as much to do with those who set it up as the forces acting against it. Four of the authors, Meg Smith, Peter Ewer Chris Lloyd and John Rainford, were until recently research officers for the Metal and Engineering Workers Union (MEWU). They and co-authors Steve Rix (Public Sector Research Centre, UNSW), and Ian Hampson (Science, Wollongong University) argue that the last eight years of accord between labour and a Labor government have provided few real benefits for working people and have inadvertently allowed the conditions to emerge for a new and more sophisticated conservative agenda, one that much of the Left hasn’t grasped or is powerless to avert.

ALR’s Clare Curran interviewed four of the authors, Peter Ewer, Chris Lloyd, Steve Rix and John Rainford, about the book and their controversial claims.

Why did you write this book? Why did you get together as a group?

Peter: It came about as the result of our collective despair about the trajectory of the union movement, a mood that
really became chronic for us around the time of the intro-
duction of Accord Mark VI at the beginning of last year. At
that time it became obvious that large parts of the union
movement were determined to bastardise restructuring in
the interests of a fairly amorphous and unclear vision of
productivity bargaining at the enterprise.

What do you mean “bastardise restructuring”?

Peter: Accord Mark VI was made up of a number of
contradictory elements. Particularly contradictory was the
way it anticipated the system would be topped up by
flexibility components to be negotiated at the industry or
enterprise level. In the recession it seemed perfectly ob-
vious that this sort of flexibility would amount to tradeoffs,
speedups, and a general emphasis on short term produc-
tivity improvements that would not give scope for the
training based restructuring that we've been pursuing in
the metal industry award. The real question was whether
the union movement continued to pursue a national agen-
da of restructuring or whether it allowed it to be dissolved
into enterprise bargaining.

And you would argue it took the latter course?

Peter: That was the framework within which Accord Mark
VI was negotiated. At the end of 1989 Keating was telling
corporate interests around the world that the next wages
system would allow for uneven wage increases across
industries and enterprises, which he called flexibility in the
interests of productivity bargaining. And the program-
matic form of that push was the Accord Mark VI flexibility
component which had a very uncertain relationship to the
national agenda with skills based restructuring.

And the union movement just went along with this
process?

Peter: It would appear that those parts of the union move-
ment leading the skills based restructuring never really
understood what restructuring involved. They believed it
could be turned off and on like a tap as the needs arose.
Before Accord Mark VI there were three outstanding
restructuring matters of real strategic importance. The first
was the recognition of training boards in the award system
as providers of skills standards; the second was the
development of those standards; the third would have
been the provision of adequate paid training leave in the
award to make the skills approach realistic and available
to people. Those three things were outstanding before
Accord Mark VI and they're still outstanding 18 months
later.

Was it intentional that they were moved off the agenda?

Peter: I don't know if it was intentional, but certainly there
was a push from Keating at the end of 1989 for an uneven
access to wage increases at an enterprise level which really
cut across the national approach that had been taken. This
is essentially what Chris Lloyd was saying in ALR in July
1990, and this book arose out of our despair of not being
able to have those views taken seriously. Chris couldn't get
a hearing for those views within the movement—and that
led to the ALR article. The reaction to that showed how
little thought was being put into strategic issues about
workplace change, particularly on the Left. The state of
Accord Mark VI and the fiasco that surrounded it has just
intensified our interest in finding some sort of alternative

It sounds as though there's not much discussion of these
issues in the union Left. Are you six the only people
talking about these things?

Peter: No, I think there's a great degree of disillusionment
and concern among the Left, but the inability of those
views to come forward shows a decline of the Left in
organisational and ideological terms. The collapse of the
Communist Party of Australia (CPA) has removed one
major venue through which alternative views on the Left
could be put forward. And there's a general ideological
crisis that we're all confronted with. The rise of neo-
conservatism, the collapse of the command economies, the
seeming triumph of economic liberalism, each has impli-
cations not just for conservatism but for the labour move-
ment. I think a lot of people on the Left are concerned
privately—though perhaps not in the terms that we're
putting it in—about the failure of productivity bargaining,
enterprise bargaining and the Accord Mark VI. There
would be widespread concern on the Left that that strategy
has failed and that the Left has contributed to it as indeed
the Left has contributed to the failure of the Accord.

How has the Left contributed to the failure of the Accord?

Peter: Only the Left in the union movement could disable
the incomes policy component of the Accord, which rested
for its practical implementation on Left endorsement or
acquiescence. The Right certainly has never been able to
smash a wages system and has hardly ever sought to do
so. The Left in our view is directly responsible for the
course of the Accord and for the fate of the movement
under the Accord.

The reasons why the Left failed really touch on a strategic
miscalculation which took place in the early 80s. The Left
had for many years pursued its political objective in the
union movement by wages struggle. Those overaward
campaigns in the late 70s were showing signs of flagging.
They benefitted militant pockets of the union movement,
but segmented the working class in many senses, because
the overaward campaign didn't mobilise people in a way
that it's often claimed. And it's said that the overaward
campaign relied on pockets of usually maintenance
workers in the metal industry to break through and a
comparative wage justice to take care of the rest. But that's
hardly a mobilising strategy. With that experience and also
after the profound recession in 1982/83, the Left turned to
the Accord and attempted to shift the point of nullification
from wages to industry policy. The Left realised that in-
comes policy on its own would fail and it would
degenerate into wage restraint. Social interventions into
economic performance were going to be needed if any-
thing progressive was going to be made of the Accord, and
that's where the industry development campaign came in.
The Accord is been elevated to an article of faith is there seems to be very little debate in the last few years about alternatives to current trends. Does this mean that people do accept and are reasonably happy with what's going on, and if so, are you just a radical breakaway?

Peter: My personal view is that there is a wider constituency of concern, if you want to put it in those terms.

"The Left is directly responsible for the fate of the movement under the Accord."

How does it manifest itself?

Peter: That's precisely the difficulty. There are no forums where that can take place. I don't think we're isolated heretics or malcontents. I think there's wider concern, but there is also a very pervasive orthodoxy inside the union movement which is stultifying debate. The way in which the Accord is been elevated to an article of faith is symptomatic of that.

John: The last ACTU Congress was an example of that. Where was there any debate other than on the issue of union rationalisation? And even then most of the 40 odd speakers were protecting their own position.

Peter: I think that the inertia on the Left is reflected in the way that the Right, which has never been graced with a huge number of strategic thinkers, is now putting forward quite sophisticated political views which aren't finding any response from the Left. The views of Michael Costa and Mark Duffy (ALR 129, June) are a case in point; whatever you think about it, theirs is a very sophisticated piece of political analysis. Who would have thought that at the end of an effective wage freeze, thanks to the union movement's own miscalculations over Accord Mark VI, the chief public critics of that cut in living standards have been the Right, not the Left?

Are you saying that the Accord was essentially flawed and should never have happened?

Peter: We're saying that the Accord is a symptom of labour's deeper policy crisis, a crisis which has been com-
abetted by the ACTU in its intimate relationship with elements of the ALP. I think it’s useful to say now that quite a few of us then began to realise that the enterprise bargaining agenda had cemented itself far more in to the consciousness of the leadership, both on the Right and Left of the trade union movement, than we’d expected, and that enterprise bargaining was really the shadowy form behind all sorts of restructuring. We were looking down the throat of what seemed to be the dismantling of the current centralised wage fixing system.

So what’s your alternative?

Chris: I think we’re starting from a more grassroots approach towards how the labour movement organises, and identifying where power in the labour movement lies. It certainly didn’t lie in sitting on the government committees that supposedly manoeuvred economic policy. It means going back to the workplace and beginning to become relevant again to our membership.

Peter: What we call the crisis of organised labour at the moment has its roots in the way we have tried to organise workers in the past. We’ve tried to do that essentially through division, through locking up parcels of skill, by locking up discrete areas of the labour process, cementing those through craft demarcation and then allowing comparative wage justice to trickle through the working class. That organising practice has reached a terminal crisis for a whole series of reasons—some technologically induced, some politically induced—but at any rate, the days of craft unionism are at an end. The question is whether we go back to the workplace and begin to become relevant again to our membership.

How do you propose the movement should go about this? Have you come up with some kind of blueprint or series of steps that need to happen?

Chris: We make no pretence to be putting up a programmatic blueprint for the Left. It is not our job—and neither should it be our job to dictate to the public sector, to the environment movement or to any other social movement, how they should act. What we’re trying to do is find ways of making those connections with collective action. So we take as an organising point the nature of work itself and where the labour movement can harness the organisation, the skills, the relationships that go on in the labour process and connect that to other collective action.

This suggests, for instance, moving beyond a simple health and safety consciousness to a broader environmental consciousness in the workplace—not just health and safety problems, but the community of health and safety for that plant. Yet organised labour, and its mouthpieces in government and industry, generally argues that your job’s at stake if you question the validity of the process that’s poisoning your own community environment.

John: There’s an urgency about what we are saying. If we’re not able to throw off this undemocratic cloak we’ve worn since 1983 and empower members at the workplace, then the relevance of unionism at the workplace might surely be questioned much more than it is now. We all believe that unless some sort of program like this is taken up there is a very dim future for unionism.

Chris: This crisis of credibility for unions is accentuated by the process by which the most hardline employers and their ideologues argue that unions are effectively no longer relevant because they don’t know anything about what people are doing inside their workplace; it’s an enterprise-based culture, and the people who know your enterprise best are of course none other than your boss.

Peter: The great subtlety of this current direction by some employers and the conservatives is that they are leaving behind outright opposition to wage struggle; their opposition to unionism has moved to a more sophisticated attempt to snap the linkages between workers and trade unions. And it’s actually the trade union movement that’s opening up space for enterprise bargaining through its own strategies.

There is another, more flexible, perspective which some employers adopt, which has proved quite beguiling to progressive people who now form what you would call the workplace change industry. Within the project of enterprise bargaining, management is prepared to devolve autonomy, devolve responsibility, prepared to embrace group work. But it’s only prepared to do so where the devolution, the responsibility, the autonomy can be internalised and controlled by the corporation. And that’s how the workplace change industry and the advocates of industrial democracy get so tangled up with enterprise bargaining.

So you think this workplace change culture has gone off the rails?

Chris: It’s gone off the rails because people are confusing industrial democracy and participative workplaces with enterprise bargaining. The focal point for this enterprise bargaining culture is the primary processing of commodities in the low value-added sector but large plant areas of the economy—an area where it is quite easy to mould an enterprise-based culture because you don’t have to draw on public sector skills systems. It’s a vastly different thing for the majority of Australia’s workers who work for medium to small size companies which do not have the luxury of establishing these consultative edifices.

Is what you’re arguing realistic?

Steve: The critique is accurate. For myself I want to see politics back on the agenda. I’m personally fed up with the...
Peter: there is a point at which political principles and political ideas have to be reactivated and debated. And if that happens there's some debate around these issues, think that most of us would rest fairly content.

Chris: One of the reasons that I was personally interested that too often I've had thrown in my face by my comrades in the Left the argument that I was merely supporting a restructuring process that was anti-union, and which came from craft unionists who were interested in preserving the privileges of male-dominated minorities. To me, it was increasingly alarming that the Left in the trade union movement was seeing restructuring as the sole preserve of privileges of male-dominated minorities. To me, it was m

Peter: Other than an end to paid employment? There's a very realistic purpose to at least part of the book—and that is that we are trying to establish an ideological and political context for the sort of skills-based restructuring and workplace change that we'd like to see. The political and ideological base on the Left for skills-based restructuring has never been adequately put, and in our view never been adequately debated.

Peter: This is without a doubt the largest crisis of legitimacy the trade union movement has faced. We have watched the trade union movement in Britain and the United States being gradually whittled away. We have managed to survive that process better than most. We now come to a point where unions have created a legitimacy crisis with their own members.

Peter: I don't think there's any doubt about this crisis of legitimacy. I think that's accepted right across the board. The previous ACTU Congress spent a lot of time on that and its solution was 20 or so super unions. But the interesting thing to observe about that is that those propositions about union rationalisation have not been put to the members themselves. Rather it's been driven by agreement at the top and through legislation.

Chris: The Australian trade union movement is one of the largest asset-rich groups in Australia, and yet these assets are never disposed towards setting up training systems, for instance—because that's not seen as a union's job. Yet if anything might extoll the value of modern-day trade unionism to an individual worker it's that they might receive their nationally accredited skill qualifications from a union training centre. This may initially cost substantial capital, but after that capital's in place, it would probably pay for itself in a new open market for training.

Peter: And asking how to deliver those benefits in a way that's really egalitarian. For example, there's a big push on for the 12 hour shift, particularly in maintenance areas of the manufacturing industry. You might ask: if that's approved of by members on the job then why shouldn't they work 12 hour shifts and get the benefits outside the job in increased leisure time? But making that decision will reinforce the gender bias of the workforce, and going to 12 hour shifts effectively locks out women from a whole series of trades. How many women with family responsibilities can entertain movement into a trade when the men already there voted to go on a 12 hour shift?

Chris: We've effectively vacated this field to the Right. They are dictating the terms on which change will happen; they are thinking through the demographic changes in society. The conventional view that we will always have a nuclear family-based society is a myth. But we didn't recognise that back in the period when we called those sorts of things tradeoffs; consequently we rejected any attempt to tamper with them. But the Right didn't. The Right sat down and thought quite concisely that there would be massive social changes and it began to gear towards them. As a result, we are left without any clothes at all, and no agenda to put up about working hours and conditions.

The book does not attempt to provide a blueprint for how to rectify that situation, but rather to examine the basic issues: the nature of work itself, why people work part-time, why capital has to be used more efficiently, and not just for profit, but also for environmental purposes. Apart from the question of school hours, the only winners from the five-day working week, eight hours a day, 9 am to 5 pm, are organised sport and religion.

Peter: The political and ideological base on the Left for skills-based restructuring has never been adequately put, and in our view never been adequately debated.
Think globally, act globally. The green movement’s greatest challenge is the turbulent world of international trade. Lyuba Zarsky explains why it’s not good enough to argue for an isolationist green protectionism.

In the past decade, the environment has risen to the top of the global diplomatic agenda. International meetings on the greenhouse effect, biodiversity and the preservation of rainforests have proliferated as governments, scientists and activists try to find global solutions to global problems. Now the environment has made it into the big league of international trade diplomacy. With almost 100 member nations, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) is the primary vehicle governing world trade. In October, GATT’s member nations agreed to convene a working group on Trade and Environment.

A Trade and Environment Working Group was first established in 1971, but it was stymied by conflicts among GATT’s contracting parties and was never convened. The recent push to get the environment onto the trade agenda was spearheaded by northern and western European countries such as Austria and Sweden. European countries with strong domestic commitments to ecologically sustainable development want a more level ‘environmental playing field’ in global trade. They fear that lower environmental standards in the countries with whom they trade will allow those countries to undercut costs in the international arena, undermining their own ecological goals and international competitiveness.

Pressures for GATT to embrace environmental concerns are coming from both international and national directions, yet the situation is fraught with contradiction and conflict. At the national level, diverse health and environmental policies have triggered trade conflicts. The United States and the EC, for example, recently had a row over growth hormone residues in US beef exports to Europe. Claiming higher sensitivities to chemical residues, the Europeans forbade the beef imports. The Americans contended the hormones were safe and argued that the restrictions aimed to protect not consumers but European farmers.
In what will likely be a precedent-setting case, Mexico and the US are currently involved in a dispute over US legislation to impose dolphin-kill limits on caught tuna. A 1988 amendment to the US Marine Mammal Protection Act, driven by American environmentalists, set dolphin kill limits on both domestic and imported tuna. Importers were threatened with embargoes if they could not achieve an average dolphin-kill no more than 1.25 times that of the US fleet. With a large but technologically less sophisticated tuna industry, Mexican exporters faced a virtual ban on imports. Mexico filed a complaint with GATT, claiming that the legislation constituted a disguised trade barrier aimed at protecting the US tuna industry from foreign competition. A GATT dispute resolution panel is currently evaluating submissions.

On the international side, GATT faces the conundrum that international environmental agreements aimed at protecting global resources are increasingly hedged with trade provisions. GATT was originally set up in the 1940s as an anti-tariff watchdog, and these trade provisions are often at odds with GATT’s own charter. The resulting potential for confusion and conflict undermines the role of GATT as a comprehensive trade organisation. The threat of trade sanctions has been used both to get nations to endorse emerging agreements and to enforce existing agreements. The Montreal Protocol on Ozone Depleting Substances, for example, calls for trade sanctions against non-signatories. Such sanctions are contrary to the spirit and the letter of GATT.

Besides the essentially negative tool of trade sanctions, international environmental diplomacy increasingly aims to use trade in a positive way to promote ecologically sound development. The chief mechanism is the design and implementation of a range of product standards and
especially process standards. Product standards put restrictions on end-products—for instance, requiring that they not contain ozone-depleting CFCs. They have been around for a long time as a tool of domestic policy by governments. However, aiming them at protecting the environment, rather than consumer health and safety, and setting or 'harmonising' them internationally are relatively new and controversial concepts. Process standards, on the other hand, put restrictions on how products are produced, such as requiring that they not be manufactured by technologies which contain CFCs. In short, environmentally benign product and process standards aim to squeeze out environmental vandals by market forces.

The tool of process standards arose out of international agreements to conserve species or primary resources. The Convention on International Trade In Endangered Species, for example, restricts trade in plants and animals in danger of extinction to those harvested under sustainable management plans. The Wellington Convention on Drift Net Fishing prohibits the use of drift nets in commercial fishing. The International Tropical Timber Organisation aims to restrict trade in rain forest timbers to those produced under certified sustainable management plans by the year 2000. Proposals have been floated for international resource agreements to set process standards for sustainable agriculture and the harvesting of genetic resources.

Environmental process standards present an entirely new approach to regulating markets. They are probably the single most innovative and important mechanism to conserve the environment while encouraging economic development. Without requirements for sustainable forestry management—and the higher prices such requirements bring—the world's rainforests will be logged out within thirty years.

Yet, except for products made by prison labour, process standards are generally not allowed by GATT and are seen as a non-tariff trade barrier. GATT does contain provisions which allow exceptions to free trade which are 'necessary to protect human, animal or plant life or health' and which relate to 'the conservation of [domestic] exhaustible natural resources'. However, there is very little definition of such conditions, and there is no provision for placing explicitly environmental conditions on trade.

Besides international agreements, process standards are creeping into national and regional environmental policies. The US dolphin-kill legislation sets a process standard for harvesting tuna. The European Parliament has passed a regulation known as the Muntingh Proposal which, if adopted by the European Commission and Council of Ministers, would introduce comprehensive controls over imports of tropical wood and wood products. Quotas would be set for each exporting country based on individualised forest management and conservation plans. Australian environmental groups are considering ways to use process standards to promote sustainable forestry management in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.

The national or regional use of process standards poses the additional problem for GATT of extra-territoriality. Under what conditions can a nation's regulatory arm extend beyond its own land, sea and air boundaries? In the US-Mexico tuna dispute, the US attempted in effect to regulate use of international waters. If the Muntingh proposal is adopted, the EC, which has no rainforests, would in effect be regulating foreign production. Besides the problem of extra-territoriality, the EC restrictions could be seen as violating two of GATT's fundamental principles: non-discrimination among trading partners; and transparency of trade barriers.

GATT's Trade and Environment Working Group will have to consider how to respond to both these national and international pressures. The key problem is how GATT can respond to ecological imperatives while still maintaining its commitments to liberal, multilateral trade rules. At minimum, the working group must consider how to make international trade and environmental agreements consistent. Some voices at GATT will no doubt argue that the way to consistency is to roll back environmental agreements for the sake of freer trade. However, it is unlikely that they will win the day; the environmental diplomatic momentum is too strong. It is more likely that GATT will create exceptions to its provisions in cases where international agreements have been reached in other forums.

At best, the working group could consider how GATT could join the environmental bandwagon and set broad guidelines actively to promote ecologically sustainable development. International rules governing the protection of intellectual property, for example, have a potentially important significant impact on the transfer of environmentally clean technology, especially to developing countries. The Uruguay Round of trade talks is presently considering ways to tighten up intellectual property protection, but without considering how it could affect the environment.

At the national level, GATT must consider how to establish broad guidelines for national approaches to environmental policies which affect international trade. One item on the Working Party agenda, for example, is the effect on trade of new packaging and labelling requirements aimed at protecting the environment. Some countries, especially in what used to be described as the Third World, worry that such a requirement and others like it represent disguised non-tariff trade barriers. To reduce that likelihood, GATT will need to develop criteria for justified environmental regulation which affects trade—which could include transparency, environmental purpose and effectiveness in achieving environmental purpose.

The overarching issue is whether GATT itself should develop global environmental conditions on trade or whether it should enlarge the scope for nations to regulate their own trade. The former approach could require, for example, that process standards apply only to specified products agreed to by GATT members or in other international forums. The latter approach would allow nations to set their own process standards and spell out conditions under which they could do so. Likewise, a global approach would seek to harmonise international environmental
product standards, while the latter would specify conditions for differing national standards.

The best environmental standards would probably come from a combination of the two approaches. A global approach points towards mechanisms such as global minimum environment standards. Just as they agree not to use slave or prison labour, nations would agree not to use tactics which would degrade the environment. However, ecological and social conditions differ across nations, requiring different national standards. A global floor, rather than ceiling, on standards, combined with specified conditions for higher national standards, would provide the best integration of trade and environment objectives.

Some environmentalists, however, worried about GATT’s pro-free trade bias, are pushing for amendments which seek to extend the sphere of national policy rather than develop a global framework. Heralding a regime of ‘green protectionism’, they want nations to be able to unilaterally exclude environmentally degrading imports or to slap ‘environment tariffs’ on them, as well as develop process standards. Support for such policies often grows out of general hostility to trade in groups which favour local self-reliance.

The nexus between environment and trade is a new issue and many green groups are still coming to terms with it. In the US there is a chasm between environmental groups who support environmental regulation of the proposed US-Mexico Free Trade Agreement and those who oppose the agreement altogether. Greenpeace surprised many American conservation groups when it opposed the US dolphin-kill legislation and embraced a global approach. The solution lay instead, it argued, in the establishment of an international regime “in which all the governments, the fish processing and distribution industry, the purse seine fleets, and non-governmental environmental and consumer organisations work co-operatively to regulate the fishery and the international encirclement of dolphins”.

The effectiveness of GATT’s working group will depend to a large extent on whether it incorporates the concerns of developing countries. Like most international forums, GATT is split by a North-South divide. Powerful developed countries have excluded key commodities of developing countries such as agricultural products and textiles from free trade rules. Moreover, developed countries often maintain policies of ‘tariff escalation’ which put increasingly higher tariffs on products with more fabrication. The effect is to encourage the South’s export of raw materials and retard its industrialisation efforts.

Some developing countries, including India and ASEAN, initially opposed the formation of the working group. They worry that environmental regulation of trade is a new form of economic protectionism aimed primarily at maintaining the North’s lead over newly industrialising countries. They agreed to support the group only after the GATT secretariat had consented to produce ‘factual papers’ on the evolving process of the UN Conference on Environment and Development and the key issues surrounding trade and environment.

Incorporating the concerns of developing countries is important on three counts. First are ethical imperatives to improve the welfare of nearly 80% of the world’s people. Average income in the South is about 6% of that in the North. Second, with a rapidly expanding population, developing countries will have an increasing impact on global and local environments. Helping them to chart ecologically sound economic development paths will benefit everyone. Third, international co-operation is the key to solving nearly all the world’s developmental problems. Polarisation on the environment issue at GATT will undermine prospects for co-operation on other economic and environmental issues.

Two leading concerns for the South are access to the markets of developed countries and technology transfer. The working groups will have to consider ways to promote ecologically sustainable North-South trade. One idea is to create North-South ‘environmental trade preferences’. Preferential access could be given to particular products from developing countries produced under strong environmental guidelines; or to a developing country as a whole which adopted sweeping, multisectoral commitments to sustainable development. For example, a country which undertook land reform, promoted sustainable agriculture and agro-forestry, and implemented sustainable forestry management could get preferential access for its agriculture or forest-based products or be allowed to protect infant food or timber processing industries.

Technology transfer can be accomplished through a variety of means, including aid programs and the generation of new sources of revenue. International forestry agreements, for example, could pay developing countries for the environmental service of conserving standing rainforests. On the other hand, the South should be able to gain revenue from the development of its crop and rainforest genetic resources. Currently, international seed companies and developed countries reap enormous benefits from developing country plant varieties. Royalties and other payments to developing countries are a pittance.

The trade environment agenda at GATT and elsewhere is still at an early stage. The active, informed, and articulate participation of development and environment groups could make a significant difference in its evolution. Besides providing a strong ‘voice of conscience’, non-governmental groups can call on scientific expertise. Unburdened by the requirements of the narrow political goals which beset governments, they can be creative and bold. Conscience, science, creativity, courage and democracy are all needed in large amounts to point international trade towards ecologically sustainable paths.

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Another sore point for the green movement is immigration. Jock Collins argues that the environmental case for shutting the gates is weak at best — shabby at worst.

A new immigration debate is snowballing in Australia today. If the critics of immigration are to be believed, stopping or dramatically reducing immigration would immediately solve Australia's current account deficit problem, help end the recession, overcome the problems of international competitiveness and herald the end to Australia's environmental problems.

Australia's immigration program has always been controversial. Debates about the impact of immigration on lifestyles, the economy, our defence and on the social cohesion of Australian society have surfaced many times since Arthur Calwell introduced the postwar immigration program in 1947. Public opinion has almost always been opposed to immigration. Occasionally, this opposition has erupted into major public debates. In 1984, the Blainey debate preoccupied newspaper headlines for more than a year, while in 1988 John Howard fell very publicly on his sword of anti-Asian, anti-multicultural policy.

In 1991, as economic recession deepens, immigration is once again under attack. In September, John Hewson announced that the Opposition would call for big cuts in immigration in the next federal election campaign. This follows the Australia Speaks survey of community attitudes commissioned by the Coalition, which found that more than 40% of written responses raised concerns over multiculturalism and immigration.

Hewson's move to break the bipartisan immigration consensus comes at a time when immigration is under attack from both economic rationalists and environmentalists. Today's immigration debate is really the same old arguments dressed up in newer, greener, clothes. It is no coincidence that the 1984 Blainey debate emerged after the depths of the 1982-83 recession. As Hewson's predecessor John Howard showed in the bicentennial year, if politically desperate, play the prejudice card.

Just as the findings of the Club of Rome in the late 1960s led to calls to reduce Australian immigration on environmental grounds, so the names of international environmental gurus David Suzuki and Paul Ehrlich are invoked in the 1990s green demands to stop immigration. Groups such as Writers for an Ecologically Sustainable Population, Australians for an Ecologically Sustainable Population, leading Australian Democrats such as newly elected leader Senator John Coulter and environmentalists such as Milo Dunphy lead this attack. They favour maintaining refugee intakes and support limited family reunion, but are opposed to other immigration.

At the heart of the green critique of immigration is the argument that population growth is the key environmental problem. The leading advocate of this position is US academic Paul Ehrlich, author of The Population Bomb (1968).
In 1990 Ehrlich, with Anne Ehrlich, reasserted the case that population control is critical to avert environmental disaster on a world scale.

If population is the principal environmental problem, immigration to countries like Australia is the major contributing element to the problem, the Ehrlichs argue, particularly when immigrants come from the Third World: "To the degree that immigrants adopt the lifestyles of their adopted country, they will begin consuming more resources per person and do disproportionate environmental damage".

Following this logic, the solution to Australia’s manifest environmental problem is clear and simple: turn off the immigration tap, and we can have an environmental paradise of 18 million people—or 10 million, according to recent statements in Australia by Paul Ehrlich—living in a Zero Population Growth Nirvana. The argument appears to be that the best way for Australia to help the international environmental problem is to cut ourselves off from it, albeit after some conscience salving increase in foreign aid to help poor peoples in the Third World. This gives a new selfish twist to the slogan: think globally, act locally.

The green critique of immigration has three major problems. First, the link between Australian immigration intakes and population growth is not a simple one. Again, it serves to direct attention away from the real causes of the environmental problem. Finally, the danger emerges that scapegoating immigration as the main environmental problem may escalate anti-immigrant violence and act as a catalyst to renewed racism and prejudice.

To put population at the centre of any model of environmental damage distracts attention from the socio-economic framework in which past and present environmental damage has arisen. Environmental destruction is not something imported or exotic, but rather results from forces intrinsic to society itself. One key problem is that the marketplace puts prices only on what are called direct economic costs and benefits. The indirect costs and benefits of a corporation’s activities—that is, the impact on the environment and on other people—are overlooked. “Externalities” or “spillover effects” such as pollution and congestion exist because of market failure. It then becomes profitable, and therefore rational, for corporations to continue their destructive practices. In addition, the government tacitly condones such activities by imposing puny penalties for corporations caught polluting. Clearly, reform in the area of the marketplace and government legislation are critical to rectifying past, and minimising future, environmental damage.

The other problem with the emphasis on an anti-immigration solution to the environmental problem is that it gives legitimacy—from a more enlightened sector of politics—to anti-immigration and anti-immigrant viewpoints. The process of scapegoating immigration for a complex problem like environmental deterioration as with other problems: recession, unemployment, lack of education places, crime, makes it hard to prevent a slip from an anti-immigration to an anti-immigrant argument, despite the best intentions.

In the western Sydney suburb of Campbeltown, for example—according to the EEO Commission’s National Inquiry into Racist Violence—47% of adult immigrants interviewed had experienced racist abuse, as had 36% of students. Moreover, 9% of adults and 14% of students had experienced racist violence. The newly-arrived suffered most from racism.

Recent history in Australia and overseas suggests that racism increases during recession times because many people blame immigration for their unemployment or economic hardship. Much of the Western world is in, or emerging from, economic recession. Some of these countries have large immigration programs, while in others immigration is almost non-existent. Any simple correlation between levels of immigration and economic recession cannot stand scrutiny. Even in Australia, the state (NSW) with the highest immigration intake is the state with one of the lowest unemployment rates.

Recent events in Germany and France sound a warning for Australia as the resurgence of racist violence against Turks and North Africans emerges as a response to economic difficulties. In eastern Germany, where foreigners are only 2% of the population, the Guardian Weekly (29 September) reports the “daily witnessing [of] brute attacks on foreigners, and an ugly rebirth of overt racism”. Last month, former French president Valery Giscard d’Estaing called for an end to the immigrant “invasion” and for a change in laws to make it harder for immigrants to gain French citizenship.

The contradictions of the ‘green’ anti-immigration position are reflected in the views of the new Democrat leader John Coulter. To strengthen the anti-immigration argument, Coulter has taken on board the position of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library researcher Stephen Joske that immigration costs Australia $8 billion per year on the current account deficit. The argument is that Immigration adds to the population growth of our major cities such as Sydney and Melbourne. As these cities push against their outer extremities, massive government investment is required to pay for urban infrastructure for the new suburbs.

There are a number of problems with this analysis. First, the economic benefits of such public investment—jobs, social infrastructure—are not considered. Second, most new immigrants live not in the new suburbs in outer Sydney and Melbourne but in the older working class suburbs which have traditionally been under-provided with community assets. Moreover, any long-term solution to the environment requires much larger public expenditure on public transport and on environmental resources. Should the Green movement put their support behind an analysis that rejects the economic and environmental case for public infrastructure investment?

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THE CHINA syndrome

Beijing likes to portray itself as the last bastion of Communism. Annette Chan isn’t convinced. She finds the Communist elite adapting remarkably effortlessly to the brave new world of China’s market experiment.

In the socialist and post-socialist economies alike, profound social tensions threaten to stymie the economic reform processes that have been set in motion. In the Eastern European countries which have already adopted a democratic political system, it is now all too clear that even after the overthrow of the communist parties, it is not easy to transform the economy into a capitalist one.

Some of the former East European dissidents—the likes of Vaclav Havel—have articulated concern regarding the plight of ordinary people during the difficult transition to the new economic order. But such concerns have been near-absent in China. Here I am not thinking of Deng Xiaoping and the political hardliners, but rather the increasingly influential intellectual elite and, in particular, the branch of the political elite that has been most fervently in favour of economic and political reforms. A large number of well-known intellectuals have, in the past, served in the think-tanks of the now-ousted Communist Party secretary Zhao Ziyang, the champion of economic reforms. In their reform program there is little mention of the human costs to be incurred. Concern about unemployment and widening inequality are dismissed out of hand as a throwback to the “eating from a big pot” syndrome of maoism.

It was under this new program of economic development through greater reliance on market forces, spurred on by the official slogan of “allow a few people to get rich first”, that China reformed its economic system in the 1980s. The initial successes of the economic reforms invoked the envy of the East Europeans and the Soviet Union. China’s private capitalist sector was then the most sizeable of all the socialist states.

However, over the last decade, this hybrid planned/free market economy has become a mechanism by which the Chinese nomenklatura has been able to enrich itself. Officials could take advantage of a government-sponsored double-track pricing system, using their power and connections to resell, privately and at a high market price, the...
centrally-allocated goods they had bought at a low state-controlled price. Or else the party secretaries and directors of enterprises could step forward as candidates to lease out their own enterprise, guaranteeing that a fixed amount of revenue would be turned over to the state as rent each year. They could then lay off workers and reduce wages, cutting the salary budget in the name of efficiency, meanwhile granting themselves high salaries and bonuses. So lucrative has this ‘leasing-management’ practice become that it has aroused a heated debate in the press as to whether it constitutes ‘capitalism’ and whether a new class of ‘capitalists without capital’ is in the making.

But the most lucrative exercise of all is to get into the import-export trade, a line of business which is largely monopolised by the close kin of national leaders. Much of this economic activity involves establishing ‘trading companies’ in the various provinces of China, or in the
special economic zones like Zhenzhen, or in Hong Kong. The rakeoffs are massive. In many respects these export-import middlemen, whose only assets are high family connections, can be called ‘socialist compradors’, the equivalents of the pre-1949 businessmen who were labelled as hated “enemies of the people” when the communist government first took power.

In short, while the political structure and the command economy are still under the control of a one-party system, the Chinese economic reforms have within ten years effected the rise of a new monied class—a class largely born within the households of the party nomenklatura. The remainder of this new monied class, to be sure, are entrepreneurs who have risen by their own efforts, all the while paying off the nomenklatura for the privilege. These two groups of different origins within the new monied elite are beginning to intermingle, and are intermarrying. That is to say, while monopolising political power, and not even aiming for a complete dismantling of the command economy, the Chinese nomenklatura is well down the path of transforming itself into part of a new dominant economic class.

Whichever direction China heads in over the next couple of decades, be it as a one-party state operating a hybrid command-market economy, or a multiparty system with a free-market economy, the nomenklatura and its progeny and in-laws look likely to end up controlling a lion’s share of the wealth.

In the mass protests of 1989, the democratic movement demanded an end to “bureaucratic corruption” and “official profiteering”. These demands implied that if the party had the will to reform itself and combat its members’ “corruption”, the health of Chinese politics and economy could be restored. After the Beijing massacre, in response to the grievances that had been expressed in the streets, the top party leadership trumpeted a major anti-corruption campaign. This proved ineffectual. The underlying reason is that the “corruption” is not a by-product but rather an integral part of the economic reforms. “Bureaucratic corruption” and “official profiteering” are part and parcel of the gestation process of a new elite class. Though the participants in the 1989 mass protest movement did not always see things this way, their fulminations against “corruption” could be seen in effect as a concerted outcry against the rise of this new class.

Some Western and Chinese observers have argued that this was the source of the popular protests. Yet the economic reforms of the 1980s had, if anything, been proceeding at a helter-skelter pace. More often than not, laws were promulgated only after Communist Party reform edicts had already instituted substantial economic and social change. Policies were carried out without any adequate legal provisions or institutional framework to prevent the rise of blatant corruption. Instead, the economic restructuring was made possible because the party nomenklatura found the restructuring within its own interests; they did not resist it precisely because it enabled them to be the beneficiaries of a less economically fair society. And the top party leadership was clearly aware of this. In order to persuade the bureaucracy to implement the reforms, the reform leadership refrained from cracking down on the corruption and the shady ‘grey areas’ of nomenklatura self-enrichment. If there was to be a new monied elite, after all, why should it not be this group as against, arbitrarily, some other?

By comparison, the urban workers deemed themselves to be the losers in the new order, as the protests of 1989 amply showed. While the workers had accepted in principle that economic reforms of some sort were needed, they were not ready to accept growing lay-offs of blue-collar employees in the name of industrial efficiency. Worse still, workers were being told to tighten their own belts at the very same time that they could see the nomenklatura fattening themselves. The nostalgia expressed by some workers during the Tiananmen protests for the Maoist era—an era of near-equivalent poverty for all and of low-productivity job security—reflects the fact that many have not seen the reforms as benefiting themselves sufficiently to offset the loss in their social standing and security of employment.

If the 1989 mass protest movement was an inchoate initiative to block the formation of a new political-economic class, one that they could see had been taking root under the tutelage of the monolithic party-state, the apprehensions of the democratic movement have not abated over the past two years. The private sector of the economy is again expanding rapidly. In terms of who is able to rise, the playing field is still not level, and thus the resentments remain.

Since 1989, the party leadership has been desperately trying to woo the workers back into the fold by appealing to their “proletarian consciousness”. Despite the chronic problem of over-staffing in the workplace, great efforts have been made to rehire dismissed or partially laid-off workers. The new twist in enterprise reform, at least rhetorically, now includes workers’ rights to participate in management. Staff-and-workers’ councils are to be strengthened; and trade unions are to represent the workers’ interests instead of serving openly as an arm of the administration. There are signs that the trade unions are, in fact, taking advantage of these new slogans to wrestle greater independence and power for themselves.

But without radical institutional reforms, the chances of success in placating the workers and in raising their work incentive remains poor. Workers’ productivity in the state enterprises continues to decline. The clarion call to “save socialism” is raised in the name of “class interest”, but it is too palpably devoid of content. Whereas Chinese reformers put a premium on economic development at the expense of heavy social costs, the Chinese hardliners put a premium on protecting their power and maintaining stability by half-heartedly asserting that they wish to mitigate the social costs involved—all the while doing little to stop the nomenklatura from transforming itself into a monied elite. In this regard the top Chinese leadership has clearly learned no lesson from the 1989 upheavals.

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The Museum of Contemporary Art opens in Sydney in November in the old Maritime Services Board building on Circular Quay. The MCA is a contemporary museum not just in the sense of what it will display, but also in how it is funded.

Originating with a bequest from the will of the widow of the artist John Power, the MCA covered the conversion costs of the MSB building with an interest-free loan from Sydney University (where the Power Foundation is based), while the NSW government agreed to let it at a peppercorn rent for 50 years. The third partner in the Museum, says its quietly dapper director, Leon Paroissien, is “the people of Australia. They come into it because John Power was a bit of a socialist who had no children of his own—so left his money for our improvement”.

But ‘the people of Australia’ are going to have to pay for their improvement. For, from a tiny $50,000 a year for the first three years, the MCA is unfunded by state or federal governments, and will have to rely on entrance charges, membership, sponsorship and other activities, such as the shops, café and bar which will stay open late at night in a major social and tourist area of Sydney.

According to the MCA’s own brochure, “it will be the most entrepreneurial arts institution in Australia”. As a former Director of the Australia Council’s Visual Arts Board, one might have thought that Leon Paroissien would find this all rather distasteful. Far from it. “Even in the 70s, I realised that there would have to be a limit to government money for the arts, and that we would have to empower ourselves to gain authority in the community if we wanted to win arguments for increases in public funding as the conservationists have done. For, though there are limits, we can’t become infected by the rhetoric of Reaganomics, which tries to say that the arts can be funded entirely by the private sector”. So far, the commitment of ‘the people’ has been reflected by memberships coming in at a rate of more than a thousand a week, and a steady flow of $1000 donations.

The realisation of a vaguely socialist ideal through hefty private contributions is just one of the contradictions that are associated with this transformation of a public building. Another is the inappropriateness of the building itself—designed in the 1930s but not inhabited by bureaucracy until the 1950s—to be either an office block or an art museum. Architect Andrew Anderson has had a few problems with red and green scagliola marble pillars and finishes that are hardly the perfect accompaniment to contemporary art.

The original offer of a handover came from former NSW Labor Premier Neville Wran, but nothing had been formalised when the Liberals took over in 1988. So it took heroic restraint on the part of Premier Nick Greiner to accept his Arts Minister’s recommendation that $100 million in real estate be forgone in exchange for the warm glow of a Museum of Contemporary Art! Subsequently, the government has made a policy of encouraging the recycling of other historic buildings as a solution to the arts’ need for appropriate accommodation.

A further problem is the very use of the word ‘museum’—suggesting history rather than contemporaneity. Paroissien reveals in these contradictions. “I want the art to dominate people’s thinking, not the building. I want amazing things to happen inside and irreverent things to burst out of the building. The word ‘museum’ turns up in John Power’s will and I’m happy enough to use it to challenge the passivity with which the Anglo-Saxon world accepts the notion of a gallery. But I also want to challenge what a museum is expected to be.”

Dr John Power, apart from being a medical man, was a serious artist, one of the rare writers about Cubism, an expatriate, and extremely rich. One can almost feel sympathy for all that wealth, inherited from his medical father, who used his scientific training to set up an insurance company that eventually became the MLC. Son John had to qualify as a doctor too, before being allowed to fulfill his real desire of heading off to Europe to paint in 1920. Even there, mixing and matching with Picasso, Gris and Braque, he was different in lacking the garret hunger of the others. He lived in Bournemouth, for God’s sake (dying in equally genteel Jersey), and, not having to paint to live, rarely sold his works—despite having shows all over Europe and in New York. As a result, his widow ended up with a thousand Powers along with two million pounds in cash at the end of her life in 1962. Since then the curators appointed by the University of Sydney have diligently spent the money to accumulate 3,000 works of contemporary art. But until now it’s never had anywhere to display this collection. Nor, for reasons that Paroissien finds odd, has it ever bought any Australian works.

Since 1984, he has worked to remedy that deficit. “We felt we had to shape the collection so that Australian artists of the middle generation were put up there beside their overseas counterparts. And we simply had to add Aboriginal art—which we’ve done with care, I think. One collection we have is jointly owned with the Maningrida Community in Arnhem Land, for instance. In the future, we’ll try to build an archive that gives an insight into the working methods and ideas of certain contemporary artists so that future generations can study how we make art now”.

A socialist vision nourished by private contributions—it’s Sydney’s new Museum of Contemporary Art. Jeremy Eccles investigates.
Although the Power Collection has given them the building to house and display it, the real heart of the MCA's activities will not necessarily involve the collection at all. Parts of it will always be on display, such as Power’s own works and mildly historical retrospectives of Op and Pop art. That icon of modernism, Joseph Beuys, gets a show of his own as the museum opens. But if the MCA is to keep the excitement alive week after week, year after year, it’s going to have to innovate and import constantly.

The determination of the MCA to be genuinely popular is revealed by an opening exhibition called TV Times. 35 years of Australian television may not be everybody’s idea of art, but for Paroissien it’s a statement that the museum doesn’t intend to be remote behind its marble portico—and that the moving image has to have a place as prominent as the still image in modern art. A cinemathèque on the Parisian model is another firm project for the future which will treat film as a serious art form.

Paroissien sees this process as “taking what used to be called the fine arts and pushing them outwards towards popular culture”.

Caravan is another such push. In January, the Sydney harbourfront will be embellished by five radically new models of caravans—that ever-diminishing aspect of the summer holiday road crawl. Here the MCA is toying with sociology—as well as revealing something about the process of design, rather than simply hailing brilliance in design, as New York’s Museum of Modern Art does. Less parochial concerns in the near future range from New Zealand’s bicultural art to South America’s post-colonial experience; from Eastern Europe after communism to China after Tiananmen. As part of this constantly changing and challenging vista, Zones of Love: Contemporary Art from Japan went on tour around Australia and New Zealand even before the home base was open.

Such innovation and flexibility demands versatility in all aspects of the museum’s management. “We refused to have a structure”, says Paroissien, “where administrators raised money which they handed to curators to spend. We all have to be artistic and financial managers here.

“It’s actually been a miracle,” he concludes, “that in two and a half years, we’ve developed the building, the institutional infrastructure and the program—all from scratch. It’s certainly helped having that rather serious self-portrait of John Power looking over our shoulders all that time, driving us on”.

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BIMA Up

The Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody may have sunk from view (ALR 132, September). But it’s the cause at least of one bright star—Murri radio. Michael Meadows reports.

Six months after the release of the report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, one of its recommendations relating to Aboriginal media may at last be reaching fruition—in Queensland, at least. The Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT) has given the go-ahead for a special interest public radio licence for a Brisbane-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media group, the Brisbane Indigenous Media Association (BIMA). It is only the second licence of its type to be offered in Australia and the first in a capital city (the first was Alice Springs’ Central Australian Media Association in the early 80s).

The decision had been much delayed. One of four original applicants for the licence, a Christian broadcasting group called Family Radio had appealed against the tribunal’s decision last year that the licence be designated ‘special purpose indigenous’. That appeal was dismissed by the Federal Court early this year, after which the ABT formally awarded the licence to the Murri group.

The Royal Commission urged “adequate funding support” for Aboriginal-controlled media, based on a recognition of their importance in informing both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences. The Royal Commission saw indigenous media playing “a very important role” in presenting detailed information to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities—about successes in other communities, for example. This is especially significant in the light of a widespread, extremely negative perception of the behaviour of Australia’s mainstream media on the part of indigenous people. The Royal Commission report, among other studies acknowledged that Aborigines are largely presented in the media as ‘problems’.

During the recent Tribunal hearing, chair of the BIMA Board, Charlie Watson, explained that Murri radio in south-east Queensland hoped to have some influence in educating mainstream Australia in the under-
standing of such ideas as Murris' association with land and other insights into indigenous society. Watson accused much of the mainstream media of being concerned with sensationalising issues like violence and alcohol abuse within the Aboriginal community. Murri radio, he said, intended to put forward positive aspects of Aboriginal culture, believing that this would educate a "good portion" of the mainstream audience.

BIMA plans a country music format using a large percentage of Aboriginal bands. Former Brisbane Labor Party-owned AM radio station 4KQ abandoned its country music format some years ago, leaving a convenient marketplace niche. Although the new station will be funded almost entirely by the federal government, BIMA is hoping for sponsorship from relevant local authorities as well as some public subscription support. BIMA, through the Murri Hour Collective, has been broadcasting regularly since 1984 on public radio station 4ZZZ-FM in Brisbane. The collective currently produces around 16 hours of Aboriginal radio each week, serving a diverse audience from Stradbroke Island, east of Brisbane, to inmates of Brisbane's Boggo Road jail. During the lead-up to the Bicentennial, BIMA networked with a number of other east coast Aboriginal broadcasters, including Radio Redfern in Sydney, to stress the significance of that day from an Aboriginal perspective. It made broadcast history as the first time Aboriginal broadcasters had networked along the east coast, yet was ignored by the mainstream media.

While the Royal Commission has recommended "adequate" support for Aboriginal media, just how the federal government will interpret this remains to be seen. Both ATSIC and the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) have committed funds to supporting BIMA, subject to the licence offer being made. But what is "adequate"? Perhaps the most pressing problem in Aboriginal broadcasting is the absence of a coherent and acceptable (to indigenous people) policy framework to provide guidance for bureaucratic decision-making— including funding.

Canada currently funds its native broadcasting sector to the tune of around Can$12 million a year. A further $10 million has been earmarked over four years for a dedicated national native television channel— Television Northern Canada—to be launched next January. Compare that with an estimated $6 million available to indigenous broadcasters on this side of the Pacific, about 40% of which is used to support the ailing Central Australian Remote Commercial Television Service, Imparja. Comparatively little finds its way to community radio broadcasters.

About 30 disparate Aboriginal broadcasting groups take to public radio around Australia to get their message across—most relying almost entirely on volunteer labour. They put out about 130 hours of Aboriginal programming each week. ATSIC and the Department of Transport and Communication (through the Public Broadcasting Foundation) are providing some funding support to around 25 public broadcasting groups this year, but the total available for the current year is less than $300,000.

A system of small public television stations in 80 remote Aboriginal communities (the Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme— BRACS) is only now about to become licensed, years after installation. But future funding support for training and maintenance of this potentially innovative system is still unresolved despite pleas from many of the target communities. Moves from within ATSIC to formulate an acceptable Aboriginal broadcasting policy with a politically secure base have been frustrated by the very bureaucracy the policy claims to circumvent.

Federal Aboriginal Affairs Minister Robert Tickner has urged nationwide support from state premiers for implementation of the recommendations of the Royal Commission. His much publicised differences with Queensland Premier Wayne Goss over inadequacies in that state's Aboriginal land rights legislation may overshadow the need for co-operation on this vital issue. Perhaps if an Aboriginal radio station had been on the air full time 12 months ago, it could have made a positive contribution to educating south-east Queensland audiences in a manner which has so far proved elusive for the mainstream media and both federal and state Labor governments.

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TROUBLED TIMES

ALR helped set the agenda with its influential set of articles on Labor's new age of anxiety. Now those articles, along with others commissioned especially, have been published as a booklet by ALR in conjunction with the Fabian Society and Pluto Press.

Labor's Troubled Times discusses the problems of Labor's diminishing membership base, the role of factions, the declining culture of Laborism and Labor's increasingly perilous social base. It features contributions by Bob Hogg, Sue McCreadie, Bob McMullan, Robert Ray, Marlan Simms, Lindsay Tanner and others.

ALR readers can purchase Labor's Troubled Times at the reduced rate of just $4.50, post free (normal rrp is $6.95). Just send remittance to ALR, PO Box A247, Sydney South NSW 2000.
When you're thinking 'pop star' always think 'angle'. A pop personality has to appeal to both a male and a female demographic. Jon Bon Jovi, for instance, developed twice the market by taking men on board with his rough, rugged image while making sure he still had nicely washed hair for the ladies. Madonna, by the same token, establishes herself as a role model for girls while pandering utterly to blokes, guys, men and males.

That's the way it is and the way it always has been. But occasionally someone comes along who only seems a part of the music industry because they have been squished into it. They are not going to fit easily into that big, stylistically-standardised family tree: they have brought something entirely new with them.

"The truth is that Sinead pulverised her hair for her own reasons, among them that she did not want to be another typical female rock star with big hair." So writes Jimmy Guterman in his 148-page study of the undoubtedly impressive Sinead O'Connor. Sinead's most famous feature must surely be her near-baldness which might just as easily be seen as a gimmick as an anti-gimmick. Her career—no matter how detailed Guterman's discography—can basically be summed up as two albums (neither of which, incidentally, Guterman seems to like very much) and a few singles.

She took America by storm with her second LP I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got, and then rubbed their noses in it by firstly refusing to allow Andrew "Dice" Clay. Both admirable stances, maybe, but that's it. This leaves one to wonder why the book was written now and not in 1997,

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Sinead: Undoubtedly impressive.
why Guterman—a strange biographer indeed, who refuses to probe his subject's private life, childhood or motivation—was assigned to write it. And despite Guterman's attempts to escape such frippery, the hair is always lurking in the background. The book even prints as the first of 16 fairly uninteresting photographs an odd, unexplained shot of a haired Sinead in a French maid's outfit. The hair eventually starts to take on a life of its own, overtaking whatever was important about Sinead O'Connor in the first place.

"What really caused the bad feeling between her and U2? What are her views on Northern Ireland? Why do her folk-tinged ballads top the charts in these dance heavy times?" ponders the back cover blurb. The three-quarters of an hour it takes to read Sinead—Her Life and Music will not reveal the answers to the first two, though it does show the third to be nonsensical (after all, Sinead's biggest hit was written by Prince, a man with almost every musical leaning except folk).

Where Sinead is known for her naked head, Sandie Shaw is best remembered for her naked feet. But the two have more in common than that. Both write and co-produce their music; both make striking fashion statements; and both have been content with an image of devil-may-care risk-taking, when in reality they have been dominated—for large periods of their careers—by overbearing and sanguine managers.

One might better differentiate between their respective attitudes by noting that, whereas Sinead wears a badge between her breasts demanding that the viewer "stop staring at my tits", Sandie, conciliatory, appears on the cover of her autobiography The World At My Feet dressed in a cloak covered in peace signs.

Sinead has yet to write her own book (or even record twenty different songs), but it seems not unlikely that her confident face hides the kind of frightened interior Sandie admits to in her "Personal Adventure". On the other hand, Sinead has never allowed herself to be conned into recording a song like "Puppet on a String" the way Sandie was, despite the fact she "hated it from the very first oompah to the final bang on the big bass drum...I was instinctively repelled by its sexist drivel and cuckoo-clock tune..." She credits herself with originating this feminist revelation: "Was this how they wanted women to behave—like stupid puppets?" (Of course it was!)

The World At My Feet is a far better book than Sinead, though of course it has a lot more terrain to cover. (Sandie's been performing, on and off, for 25 of her 41 years; Sinead for three of her 23.) Shaw has come through an impressive career that has seen her happily leap from million-seller to cult figure with her principles and brain totally intact. Her book isn't even ghosted.

Skipping back and forth between various points in her life (but starting and ending in the late 80s) Shaw spins a good anecdote, shares an intimate moment (though never too intimate) and makes sure we remember her current togetherness is mainly to do with her Buddhist beliefs (it is the only non-sexist religion, she claims).

The only disappointing parts are when Sandie's fears bring her down to earth with a bump—and yet 'disappointing' is the wrong word; it's refreshing to see someone so un-tainted by rock lies and still unashamedly 'of her time' despite her enlightenment. "My pregnancy instantly solved the problem of whether or not I should...start recording again", she says at one stage. "The energy and self-absorbed single-mindedness required to launch a new career in the precarious music business is totally at odds with the hormones rushing around a pregnant woman's body telling her to calm down and build a secure nest for her fledgling."

Sinead would have something to say about that; she started recording her debut album when she was seven months pregnant. "Sung by a twenty-year-old bald, unmarried, pregnant woman..." says Guterman of a track from this LP, "these lines are penetrating and persuasive."

Those lines are fatuous and insignificant. Ignore the Sinead tome, but read the Sandie Shaw book—even though she doesn't say if she slept with Jimi Hendrix or not.

DAVID NICHOLS plays drums in two unsuccessful rock bands and is currently working on his first Mills & Boon novel.

This book is a series of interviews with the key members of Australia’s most powerful political society—the right wing of the New South Wales Labor Party.

Fia Cumming’s book is strikingly seductive because it gives the reader the impression that she or he is sitting together with the Mates (Paul Keating, Graham Richardson, Leo McLeeay, Laurie Brereton and Bob Carr) at a rather lengthy, drunken dinner party. Over several hours the Mates reveal how they made it to the top and, while one may be repelled by many of the details, the story is compelling because it comes directly from the horses’ mouths. As history, the book may be embarrassing, but as gossip it is superb.

At the outset, something must be said of Cumming’s method. The dust jacket describes her as a senior Canberra political journalist “specialising in probing behind the daily headlines”. This book certainly doesn’t provide any evidence of that—in fact her method appears to be to transcribe directly from tape whatever the Mates tell her. As a result, the text is replete with errors in transcription. For instance: who is the Holden mentioned by Paul Keating in the same breath as Billy Hughes (p.15)? Surely he meant W A Holman, onetime Labor Premier of NSW and central figure in the split in the party during World War One.

Errors of fact rather than transcription also abound. On p. 2 Cumming has Bob Carr elected as a Shadow Minister in the NSW parliament in 1984; I thought we had an ALP government in NSW in 1984. (Again, the names under the lower photograph opposite p. 89 are all wrong. Were any editors employed by the publisher?) I can only imagine Bob Carr, who is at least accurately depicted as the intellectual among the Mates, cringing in embarrassment as the howlers come thick and fast. Analysis of the Mates’ musings is almost non-existent, and in keeping with the tradition established by Keating’s first biographer, Edna Carew. Cumming appears not to have sought alternative views on the historical account presented by them.

That brings me to the main criticism of her method. These three hundred odd pages of magazine style verbal meanderings, put together by someone who is either an acolyte or who simply doesn’t know the right questions to ask, have simply provided the Mates with an opportunity to indulge in a massive exercise in pentimento. Readers may remember the borrowing of this artistic term by Lillian Hellman in the collection of stories which eventually gave rise to the successful Hollywood film Julia. The term denotes having second thoughts and going back over one’s painting to paint over some unwanted details. We all do it in our recollections of our own pasts. We all replace “remembrance of things past” with a pastiche created by our own memories.

This does not necessarily imply bad faith or a deliberate attempt to reconstruct the past (though remember those grainy black and white photos of V I Lenin addressing the crowd in Petrograd in late 1917—one version with Leon Trotsky hovering near and another version where Trotsky has disappeared into the ether.) But the past is reconstructed nevertheless and recorders of oral history tend to be aware of this. Not, however, Fia Cumming. While on the subject of Italian terms we might also recall braggadocio and its role in oral history. I was interested and amazed to learn from Cumming’s book that the elevation of Neville Wran to the leadership of the NSW Parliamentary Labor Party was entirely the work of the Mates. Jack Ferguson and Arthur Gietzelt seem to have disappeared into the ether along with Trotsky.

The title of the book summarises its main theme—the rise to power of a small coterie of working class, Catholic (except for Bob Carr) men. Women hardly figure in this history in a political sense. Mothers, wives and sisters are presented as possessing significant political skills (for instance, Brereton’s sister Deirdre Grusovin, Dorothy Isaksen MLC—whose name is misspelled throughout, Brereton’s wife Trish Kavanagh) but they never seem to be at the centre of things. They are never players in the main game.

This is no doubt an accurate depiction of the state of affairs in the period under Cumming’s scrutiny—and to be scrupulously fair, things were only marginally better in the NSW Labor Left (known as the Combined Unions and Branches Steering Committee for most of the period). Both factions operated like private clubs. Women were, in effect, associate rather than full members. The picture painted by Cumming of endless meetings, ceaseless marshalling of numbers (see especially the descriptions of Keating’s virtually full-time efforts to win a seat in parliament) and endless strategy discussions—all confined to the Mates—makes it clear that anyone with family responsibilities would simply not be able to compete. All of
these men (as likewise men on the Left) were able to devote themselves so fully to their pursuit of power because someone kept up the hot dinners and provided a steady stream of clean shirts.

The other startling aspect of the rise and rise of the Mates is the critical role the Youth Council (NSW Young Labor) played in their political training. For both factions in NSW Labor it played the roles of meeting ground, laboratory and nursery for those who, along with the Mates, later came to prominence in the wider party, many finding seats in parliament. The Youth Council/Young Labor described by Cumming and the Mates is the same rather rough and brutal place I remember from later years. I imagine I was not the only teenage girl who felt both horrified and bewildered by the experience. I suspect some of us joined factions as much out of a desire for friendship as out of conviction. Much of the time the experience resembled nothing so much as the Battle of the Somme; life was much safer in one trench or the other than in the No Man’s Land outside the factions. We all learned these lessons (and other machine skills) well.

Perhaps this last point deserves greater attention from a better writer than Cumming. I wonder to what extent the views and methods of many young people who have passed through NSW Young Labor in the past 30 years or so have been permanently skewed (or warped) by the things we saw and did.

SUZANNE JAMIESON teaches in industrial relations at Sydney University.

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**Hearts and Craft**


Winterson’s second novel seems an appropriate choice for reprinting in the Bloomsbury Classics series—a series which features a compact, hand-sized format and an aesthetic, stylised jacket design. The look of the book says ‘precious’, and the reader’s expectation is that the contents will be equally so.

And the story is somewhat jewel-like. The perspective moves between the two protagonists, Henri and Villanelle, and the story is woven, with vivid magic, around the crossing of these two lives. It is languidly historical—Winterson starts by creating convincingly, and with wit (“No one over five foot two ever waited on the Emperor”), the nuances of the life of Henri, a member of Napoleon’s army during his period of supremacy in Europe. Winterson then transforms that voice into that of the daughter of a fisherman, a woman who survives by working as a casino croupier in war-dissipated, water-engulfed Venice.

The Emperor has a passion for chicken and eats one at most meals—it is Henri’s task to prepare these. Henri idolises Napoleon, in the way that innocence adores greatness. The creative history in the first section of the book (‘The Emperor’) is smooth and seductive—Winterson skilfully captures Henri’s faith, his innocence, his pleasure at existing so close to the Emperor, his bonding with his two particular army buddies—the whole patriarchal culture of war, with all its glorified privations. By contrast, Villanelle, in ‘The Queen of Spades’—is painted as a worldly and independent loner, who has experienced and lost great love (with a woman), and who looks pragmatically at the world, seeking only survival. Henri is real, Villanelle ethereal. He is material, she magic.

It is only with the doomed winter invasion of Russia, as the troops freeze around him that Henri realises Bonaparte’s megalomania. He deserts, and it is here, in the icy fields outside Moscow, that he discovers Villanelle. Circumstances have led her to the army as a vivandiere—a provider of sex to the troops. During ‘The Zero Winter’ these two trek together across countries to “the city surrounded by water with watery alleys that do for streets”, to continue their fates.

This is a richly woven and ambitious work which is, at first, captivating and unusual. Winterson’s style is spiritual and romantic, fatalistic and cyclical (there are just four chapters), and it is a poetic and well-wrought piece of craft. Perhaps it was this, for me, which created the distance which prevented me from falling whollyheartedly for this novel. I could appreciate its craft, but at the end I remained somewhat untouched. On ‘The Rock’ (the book’s fourth section) the story founders, dissipating into a treatment of an ubiquitous and traditional theme—one of spirituality, denial, exile and escape into the otherworld of madness. Winterson, perhaps in an attempt to avoid conventionality, disappointingly shirks a satisfying resolution to their, and our, journey.

VIRGINIA ROSS is a Sydney artist who is currently writing a detective novel.

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ALR: NOVEMBER 1991

Immortality is a large novel dealing with large themes. Readers of Kundera’s earlier novels such as The Unbearable Lightness of Being will know that what is so special about Kundera’s writing is the way he interrelates theories about the way the world works with the emotional fabric of his characters’ lives, escaping the brittle world of academic game playing of so much recent fiction writing.

In Immortality he explores notions of fiction and authorship. As the observer/narrator Kundera speaks about the creation of his characters. He introduces the character Rubens by noting that, in Part Six “a completely new character will enter the novel. And at the end of that part he will disappear without a trace.” Likewise, Kundera summons up the creation of the character Agnes, which occurs while he watches a woman at his health club; “...Her arm rose with bewitching ease...The essence of her charm, independent of time, revealed itself...And then the word Agnes entered my mind.”

Immortality explores the way people construct their own identities and the way in which they will be remembered. Agnes observes that people make passionate statements about their likes and dislikes: “Because only in this way can we regard ourselves not merely as a variant of the human prototype but as a being with its own irreplaceable essence.” A large section of the novel delves into the historical relationship between Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Bettina, his admirer, who use their friendship as a way of constructing their respective identities. Goethe tries to prevent Bettina from playing a causal role in his life “assiduously keeping her outside his biography” while Bettina collects and publishes their correspondence, determined to make their friendship part of human history and myth.

Immortality is engrossing in its interpretation of the way that people’s lives slip in and out of each other’s stories, suggesting by its depiction of these characters that each individual’s life is a profound and seething piece of writing inscribed on the human world of myth and representation.

JANE SUTTON is a Sydney freelance writer.

Judy Horacek

At Home with the Tomatoes

Don’t you bloody try & deny it - you’ve been at one of those damned demonstrations again

ALR: NOVEMBER 1991
The recent rugby union World Cup has once again exposed Australian sports lovers to the talents of an ABC commentary team. I was going to say 'idiosyncrasies', but that's just the point—there aren't any. The symbol of the ABC's mediocrity when it comes to sport is their insistence that all their commentators and presenters appear dressed in bright green blazers with bright red ties. It's not just that such an outfit is an offence against any normal standards of sartorial decency. The green blazer and red tie are screaming at us from every fibre that what the ABC really loves in its sports presenters is not wit, insight or communication skills of any kind, but uniformity.

I would hazard a guess that the roots of this sad quest, along with so much of the ABC's cultural baggage, lie with the BBC, and a disastrous misinterpretation of what it stood (and stands) for. While the BBC was certainly founded with a conservative ethos, it has almost always been able to make room for eccentricity and individuality, within certain limits. Usually these limits have been defined by class—hence the free rein given to Monty Python, for example. In sport, this tolerance, even encouragement, of upper middle-class idiosyncrasy has been particularly prevalent in those major sports which the BBC regards as its own exclusive preserve: rugby union, cricket and tennis.

The voice of rugby for decades has been Bill McLaren: cultured, Scottish and a pompous ass. McLaren would never describe a thug of a prop forward as anything more pejorative than a "stout citizen", as long as he was a doctor or lawyer in his other life. The best cricket commentator on British TV is, ironically, Richie Benaud. But for years it was John Arlott's West Country drawl which was the quintessential embodiment of English summer days. (English summer days up until about 3:40 pm, that is—after which Arlott was prone to indulge in his other great passion, fine wines.) The third icon of BBC sports commentary is the ancient, crusty Dan Maskell, the only man in Britain who can still say "Oh, I say", without the slightest hint of self-parody. Maskell has been bemoaning declining standards at Wimbledon at least since Fred Perry won Britain's last men's singles title in 1936.

Three very different men, but all with similar qualities: a love for the game; an ability to communicate that passion, however irritatingly; and a personality which over long years became inextricably bound up with the sport itself. Above all, all three possess a certain gravitas which surpasses ridicule. One of the few ABC commentators of recent memory who could be said to possess the same quality, is cricket's Alan McGilvray (perhaps significantly a radio rather than TV man). None of the above, it seems almost superfluous to add, would be seen dead wearing a scarlet tie with a loud green blazer—and certainly not if they were told to do so.

The aspect of the BBC's character which the ABC seems determined to perpetuate is its altogether less admirable stuffy superiority. This was exemplified by Lord Reith's insistence that all radio announcers should wear evening dress, or the assertion by early newsreaders on occasions that "there is no news tonight" (I kid you not).

Thus the green blazer signifies a modern-day craving for respectability and a reluctance to criticise, or even to express a mildly controversial opinion. The outcome is all too often a grating, hearty enthusiasm, combined with creaking attempts at informality, as when Gordon Bray refers to "Campo" or "Poido". The same trait used to be painfully evident in the ABC's National Soccer League coverage (RIP), with wooden frontman John Bell's torturous attempts to engage "Kozzie" (former NSL star John Kosmina) in relaxed banter.

Nowhere is the inhibiting effect of this attitude more clearly to be seen than in the ABC's rugby league line-up. The sight of poor oversized league icon Artie Beetson unfeelingly stuffed into The Blazer is almost enough to make you yearn for Channel 10. I can't help feeling that if only Artie were allowed to appear wearing shorts and to bring a few stubbies into the studio with him, not only would he enjoy himself a lot more, but his comments on the game would be much more incisive too.

The ABC present sport as if it were a wedding or a funeral: an important, solemn occasion, for which everyone gets dressed up like a dog's dinner and generally has a miserable time. What sport is really about is something much more akin to emotions of the reception or the wake. It's a chance to unwind, to laugh and to cry, to have a few drinks, get a bit sentimental and to say what you really think about the bride's father (or the pathetic inadequacy of the Welsh pack). So come on Aunty. Loosen your collar a bit and stop taking it all so seriously. And get rid of those blazers, for crying out loud.

MIKE TICHER was glued to the ABC for the duration of the rugby World Cup despite himself. Dr Hartman has unfortunately had to suspend appointments.
CORRECT LINE COOKING

Function Fantasies

There are times in one's life—or in my life, anyway—when one sits, stands or lies and wonders how on earth and by what peculiar paths one actually ended up at a particular place, or with a particular person. The other day I found myself at the ACT Young Achievers Award, a function designed to recognise "the achievement of young Australians" and to help "each of us in society—young and old—to perhaps see the greatness in ourselves and be inspired to discover what is beyond "doing our best". I was very much hoping one particular person would win, but my main reaction was to wonder if I had died and been reincarnated as a Young Liberal for my myriad sins. Such was the general ambience of the evening, beyond the welcoming embrace of my friend's table.

However, as regular readers of this column would have noticed, philosophical and spiritual reflections are not its mainstay. After all, cooking is a material practice, a bit like sewing. Accordingly, I will now present a series of practical guidelines by which one can make almost any formal evening a total buzz. These can be employed at wedding functions, award nights, dinner parties and so on. Because I was at a genuinely interesting table at the aforementioned night I did not have to resort to these desperate measures, but this was very much an exception. The general rule is that whenever you are put on a table of people you don't know, at least 80% of them will be accountants, and the other 20% will be Rugby League supporters with an unquenchable desire to discuss Mal Meninga's physical attributes all night.

1. Develop your fantasies

First and foremost, you must dispense with the truth. You may have a very interesting job doing something incredibly worthwhile, but if you are so fortunate, why reduce it to a few fatuous clichés? My advice is to fabricate (a much nicer word than lying). Fabrication is not necessarily a bad thing, so long as it doesn't affect anyone's wellbeing. Make up a job, or pretend that you just won TattsLotto. Kidnapping attempts aside, the evening will pass much more enjoyable as you plot your world trip, describe the new Harley you are picking up tomorrow, or how your book on theoretical physics is going. Name-droppers perform a primitive version of this game, as I was saying to His Holiness the other day. Remember, you are unlikely to meet the people on the table again, and they'll feel happy tomorrow as they tackle the trial balance, thinking about their new friend the scientist.

2. "Run that one past me again"

I would never recommend full-scale pandering to the male ego, but if some women would say this is not quite smooth, and mix in with pasta when cooked (al dente for preference). Can be kept in the fridge, monkey capital? No, but it says a lot about bland chicken.) My usual strategy is to eat virtually nothing and drink more—which is dangerous if you are pretending to be a physicist. Once you begin to believe that you are a physicist it's probably time to save a few neurones and stop drinking.

The recipe below will be no surprise to some. Somehow it seems to be the antithesis of function food in that it is fresh, tasty and casual. I hereby enter it in the Alltime Great Recipe Hall of Fame Awards, coming soon to a function centre near you. I will be going as an accountant who runs a brain surgery clinic and breeds Angora goats for export to Japan. Or maybe I'll just get drunk.

Pesto

Boil water. (Can you run that one past me again?) While your pasta is cooking, take the leaves of a bunch of basil, two cloves of garlic, some parsley, oil and melted butter, and a small handful of pine nuts. Blend together until not quite smooth, and mix in with pasta when cooked (al dente for preference). Can be kept in the fridge, but is better made fresh each time.

Penelope Cottier.
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