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ALR, February 1990

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The Burden of History

History is the key to liberation. History is an insufferable burden. Which one do you choose? That has been the essential choice facing the Labor movement since the election of the Hawke government eight years ago. The fabric of the Labor Party has been stretched in every direction as its parliamentarians have headed off this way, while the rank-and-file has gone another. Business and respectability have been knocked; ordinary suburban and provincial workers have appealed, but less so.

At the centre of the torment has been the uncertainty about what the Labor Party should stand for when it is in office, and this has been the nature of the debate within the Left from the mid-80s onwards. But it is possible that the real question the ALP needs to ask itself is one that confronts deeper, darker concerns, matters that go to the very raison d'etre of the party. Is it relevant at all?

There seems to be some evidence that the Labor Party has steadily lost its relevance to our broader society during the past 15 years. One of the most potent examples of this is the urban infrastructure issue: first, the difficulty with which the Left, and more particularly Brian Howe, has been faced in trying to make urban infrastructure a key Labor issue; and, second, Labor’s self-delusion in thinking that the adoption of the issue now is proof that it is in touch with what is actually going on out there.

The chronic problems of the outer suburbs have plagued our cities—and for ‘our cities’ read the people who live there, the welfare system that must service the place, the industries that do and don’t establish themselves there—for up to 30 years. The suburban sprawl is an integral part of our post-war culture. Whitlam recognised this in the late 60s, launched the 1972 election campaign at Blacktown and implemented policies aimed at providing services in developing metropolitan areas. But when Kerr sacked him, the ALP lost interest in this fundamental issue and it took 15 years to rediscover it. Why?

How could such a thing go missing in a party that purports—wrongly—to be mass-based? Should the ordinary working men and women, with their new families and their massive mortgages and their fear of unemployment, have formed a lobby group and paid a bunch of suits to make representations to the nobs of the ALP on their behalf?

The modern Australian society sits very uncomfortably with the institutions that underpin the Labor movement: the trade unions and the various state branches of the ALP. Organisationally, the movement still reflects a post-colonial society that took refuge in suburbanisation after many grim decades as a social and economic frontier. The Labor Party and the unions are founded on notions of struggle and self-improvement, notions that suited that early 20th century framework. They were established as vanguards of action by and for ordinary people; the key to their success was that people had to not only get involved but want to get involved.

Those fundamental suppositions are not native to the great mass of modern Australians. In the information age, there is very much a ‘fee for service’ attitude towards political action. Australians expect direct, tangible benefits for their efforts. Many important aspects of life nowadays dis-courage enfranchisement; physical, emotional and spiritual disconnection is a strong feature of the suburban lifestyle.

The example of consumer goods helps to make the point. For the average suburban working family, an important goal is the acquisition of a substantial quantity and variety of sound and video equipment and white goods. In the past 15 years, these (mostly imported) goods have become inexpensive, in relative terms, and are within reach of most income earners.

This is a society of watchers, not doers. Labor Party and union membership has fallen because out beyond the freeway’s outer reaches you feel like you’ve been done over by political institutions that don’t feel for you any more. If you’re going to join something, make it something you’ll enjoy, like the footy club, or something that can produce results you can see, like a local conservation group.

For the Labor Party, the way ahead is not a matter of marketing or reorganisation. It is a matter of its activists and parliamentarians watching what people watch, reading what people read, waiting for the bus route and the child-care centre to come to their neighbourhood, being frightened of the things that frighten them. A proud history of struggle is all very well but it’s no help when you’re stuck in the peak-hour traffic every morning.

SHAUN CARNEY is a columnist for The Age.
When British dance music artist Betty Boo was caught miming and harassed off stage by jeering punters in a Melbourne club in July, Collette Roberts might have had a feeling of déjà vu.

Two years earlier, Collette herself suffered the same rejection when she supported American rap star Tone Loc at a Sydney show—though whether she was really miming or not was never established. Betty Boo blamed stress and overwork for the enforced cancellation of the rest of her Australian tour; Collette, with nowhere to flee to but her modest Sydney terrace, blamed “bad sound” and soldiered on.

Collette Roberts, 24, came to Australia from New Zealand in her late teens; she was a successful model, starring in many a supermarket sale catalogue before turning her attention towards the world of music.

Collette entered the pop world on the tail-end of the Kylie Minogue backlash and, despite the success of her first single “Ring My Bell”, soon found the pent-up indignation of rock hacks diverted her way.

Collette’s image was ‘fun’; she seemed like a young mother figure, or an au pair perhaps. Long blonde hair and cycling shorts; that was the look. She wrote the words to all the songs but one on her first album Raise the Roof, and we presume her collaborator, Sydney DJ Pee Wee Ferris, didn’t mind when she implied they were all her own work.

It didn’t do any good; Collette was consigned to the bimbo drawer from the start. Newspapers and even pop magazines never took her seriously. It suited her detractors to categorise Collette as a hugely successful mindless ex-model with no talent.

It was time for a re-think—always difficult in a market which rarely allows a second chance, especially for the lightweights. Midway through 1990, Collette took the plunge and went ‘street smart’. She cut her hair short and donned a velvet jumpsuit for “Who Do You Think You Are?”—probably her best track to date. The song announced her new approach with a gritty video and chorus of “Who do you think you’re foolin’?” It was as good and as opinionated as anything megastar Janet Jackson could manage, and Collette announced that it was about the critics who’d panned her in the past and who were about to get their comeuppance.

But the damage to her career was already done, and neither the single nor the new album, Attitude, sold in any great quantity here.

Collette is unrepentant, and nowadays looks to foreign markets—particularly in Asia—for her music. But while she persists in the struggle, it is interesting to reflect on just why Collette’s commercial success has been, well, not much of a success, especially considering the excitement generated by other young Australian female dance stars like Dannii, Tina Arena and Melissa.

Firstly, I think it’s the look. Collette is self-assured and, though her videos have always been light-hearted affairs, there is nothing fluffy or cute about her. Secondly, there is the content. The Attitude LP took a more hardline approach lyrically but Collette has never been about sex, or even love, very much. To an average teen consumer, Dannii and Tina Arena really do have a sexy, little-girl quality. The sexiness gives credibility and interest; the girlishness makes it non-threatening. Their songs, too, have an air of anguish about them which makes them somehow ‘feminine’.

Thirdly, she has an attitude problem. Collette is more concerned with her music than anything else; she takes, you feel, no little pride in her work. But because she seems to feel compelled to present herself as a face, a figure, an image, she is less eager to show us this serious or creative side—though she will readily say that she’s now writing (read: co-writing) songs for other people.

In August, 14 top forty singles in the Australian charts featured women’s voices singing lead vocal—as well as two male/female duets. Only four of the top twenty albums, on the other hand, are by women. The majority of these women aren’t writing their own songs—though, unlike most male singers (who don’t have to worry much about such things), most of them are taking responsibility for their own ‘look’.

If Collette is to be singled out from all female pop stars as the ‘manufactured’ one, then the obvious should be stated: there isn’t one artist in pop music today who doesn’t rely on an image to help sell records; there probably hasn’t been one in thirty years. (‘Not having an image’ is one of the most powerful ‘images’ around, of course.) Subjective evaluation of Collette’s career gets harder by the day, especially since, with Attitude, she’s joined the argument herself. But I, for one, am on her side.

David Nichols writes for teen magazines.
Five months ago the ACTU leadership embarked on a very risky course by leaping into a wage campaign in the middle of a deep recession. It had just turned its back on a national wage decision in which the Industrial Relations Commission was prepared to allow a 2.5% per cent pay rise.

The new campaign, which was a direct assault on the authority of the Commissions’s centralised wage-fixing system, was undertaken at a time when the bargaining power of organised labour was at its lowest. The ACTU’s secretary, Bill Kelty, nevertheless rallied support at a national union conference in Melbourne for bypassing the Commission and seeking direct negotiations with employers based on Accord Mark VI claims which the wage decision in April had either rejected or deferred until November.

Kelty admitted the campaign might take time, but he vowed to fight to the last ounce of his energy. Unions, he warned, were either “in it, or out of it”. The unstated penalty for breaching union solidarity was isolation — perhaps forever. So intense was Kelty’s public animosity towards the Commission that he described its decision as “vomit” which unions did not intend to eat. He later told one newspaper interviewer that he could have no respect for any person who sat on the wage bench. In another interview, he compared the Commission’s president, Justice Barry Maddern, to Fidel Castro.

Kelty’s stand was reinforced by support he received from the federal government, and in particular by a blistering attack on the Commission’s credibility by his ally and friend, then Treasurer Paul Keating. Both men were irritated that the Commission had rebuffed the Accord Mark VI deal negotiated in the leadup to the 1990 election. The Commission’s cardinal sin, according to Keating, was its failure to respond to Australia’s changing economy. Instead of accepting the Accord’s model of decentralised enterprise bargaining, the Commission was supposed, according to Keating, to have said: “Oh no, let’s have a trip back down the time tunnel to a rigid centralised system where we sit above everyone else.”

In late June, two months into the fight, a confident Kelty told an assembled gathering of reporters that the ACTU’s wage campaign against the 1991 national wage decision was running “precisely to plan.” But was it? By mid-August all the major union sectors upon which the ACTU hoped to rely — including road transport, building, waterfront, banking, metals and even the Commonwealth public sector — had returned to the Commission. They accepted a 2.5 per cent pay rise in line with the national wage decision and gave commitments as sought by the bench, with some minor fiddling on detail, to make no extra claims until November 1. If there had been a strategy behind the ACTU campaign in the first place, the difficulty now was identifying what it was.

The lack of a clear strategy is what sets this ACTU campaign from its predecessors. Kelty, a gifted strategist who has generally served the trade union movement well in his eight years as ACTU secretary, slipped up. His main problem appears to have been the bewildering array of agendas he has had to juggle and which, over time, have complicated his life and torn his loyalties.

One theme which keeps bobbing up is Kelty’s role (mainly behind the scenes) in trying to help Keating in his attempt to topple Bob Hawke and win the prime ministership. A number of union leaders believe Kelty’s pro-Keating sympathies explain the spoiling role he played at certain stages of the wages campaign after April when he tried to frustrate their unions’ wage settlements in the Commission. The point, they say, was not just to make life difficult for the Commission; Kelty...
also wanted to cloud the political environment for Hawke.

Another key to Kelty's behaviour is his apparent attempt to prepare the union movement for a potentially difficult future under a Liberal-National government. Kelty is doing his best to help keep Labor in office (something which has also often undermined his allegiance to his union constituency, so far as his support for reduced real wages and higher interest rates is concerned). But he knows what might lie ahead. The Coalition's industrial relations spokesperson, John Howard, means business when he talks about breaking union power and replacing award structures with employer-employee enterprise agreements.

Howard, not the Commission, is Kelty's real enemy. But Kelty wants to prepare unions for a possible fight ahead when they may not be able to rely on the Commission for support. His big problem is that unions are not responding to the call in a recession. Indeed, influential figures such as Peter Sams of the NSW Labor Council believe Kelty has taken entirely the wrong approach. Sams contends that unions need the centralised wages system when faced with a hostile conservative government, and hence that denigrating the Commission now is counterproductive.

For more than a year now, Kelty has waged a bitter feud against the Commission, a feud which seems to be based on genuine animus over its decision-making and a dispute overbench salary levels. But union critics also claim he appears to have 'set up' the Commission so that the ACTU could reject its national wage decision.

In one sense, the ACTU probably had to reject the decision. How could it live down the ignominy of receiving such a comprehensive rebuff to the Accord for the first time in its eight-year history? Kelty's problem was that the fight became devoid of logic. The ACTU leadership misrepresented the wage decision and turned its attack into personal abuse of Commission members to try to justify the unfathomable.

Without first testing the decision, Kelty claimed that it required unions to make too many concessions to gain a meagre 2.5 percent wage rise. And in one of his harshest attacks, he claimed the Commission had deserted the low-paid in rejecting the ACTU's flat $12 claim in favour of a percentage increase. Here he ignored the Commission's explanation and instead personalised his attack by pointing out that Commission members themselves stood to gain a fat pay rise by opting for a percentage rather than a flat rise.

Nowhere in Kelty's rhetoric did he acknowledge that his strategy - a wage campaign conducted on the scorched earth of a recession - would likewise mean deserting the low-paid and weak bargainers among ACTU affiliates, many of whom would end up with nothing. And amid his barrage of attacks on the Commission, he conveniently overlooked that the Accord agreements he had negotiated with Keating since 1983 had orchestrated a fall in real wages of at least ten percent for the ACTU's same low-paid constituency.

Two years ago Australia's domestic pilots were the bad boys of the centralised wage-fixing system for daring to step outside it and seek negotiations over their admittedly outrageous 30 percent pay claim. Now the ACTU has to contemplate the consequences of rejecting the same system.

The April Wage Decision

1. The ACTU asked for a flat $12 rise for all workers. The bench converted this into a 2.5 percent pay rise, which is roughly equivalent to $12 for an average wage earner. The bench argued that a percentage increase made more sense because it followed a realignment of award relativities previously requested by the ACTU. A flat-dollar increase would have compressed the same relativities which the ACTU had sought to fix. The ACTU argued that the low-paid would fare poorly without a flat dollar increase. The bench dismissed this, declaring that low income earners would be looked after by a separate round of minimum rate award increases.

2. The ACTU asked for a staged doubling of award-based superannuation contributions to 6 percent by 1993. The bench did not reject this outright. Rather, it argued that problems existed in the present system. It recommended that the future of award superannuation, and the formulation of an overall retirement income policy, be sorted out first by a conference convened by the federal government.

3. The ACTU asked the Commission to dispense with rules which had prohibited unions from making claims outside the centralised system after giving a 'no extra claims' commitment. The ACTU wanted to add decentralised wage bargaining at enterprise level to the existing award system. This was partly motivated by the intent to steal the thunder of Coalition industrial relations policy, and partly by a genuine attempt to devolve the wage system and release some unions from their eight-year Accord straitjacket. The ACTU argued that unions be free to make over-award claims based on productivity improvements and profitability, and that over-award payments were the best way to control wage outcomes and avoid widespread flow-ons. The Commission initially warned to the idea. A problem arose when the Metal Trades Industry Association (MTIA) categorically rejected over-award payments because of strong fears of wage flow-ons, based on past experience. It wanted all payments to be somehow included within metal industry awards. In a compromise, the ACTU accommodated the MTIA's position - but this meant tacitly supporting conflicting arguments about the conduct of enterprise bargaining. The bench did not reject enterprise bargaining, but said the arguments put were conflicting and vague. It appeared concerned that wage outcomes in a decentralised system might run out of control once the economy recovered, and asked all sides to reexamine their proposals and resubmit them for a new decision on enterprise bargaining which it proposed to deliver by early November.

ALR: SEPTEMBER 1991
The ACTU's wages policy is a key issue to be debated at its supreme policy-making body, the ACTU biennial congress, in Melbourne this month. If they have the courage, unions will challenge the way Kelty conducted the ACTU's unsuccessful wage campaign. Even if they don't, and public debate is minimised for the sake of unity, they will set official policy for the future.

The ACTU's behaviour since April suggests that reliance on national wage cases to deliver general pay rises may be a thing of the past. But the Right and Left of the union movement have joined in supporting future national wage cases and general pay adjustments linked to prices — not just enterprise- or industry-level claims linked to productivity as Kelty has intimated.

Unions also appear to be conforming to the timetable set by the Commission for reviewing the April wage decision this month. The commission is due to use a metal industry pay deal as the basis for reconsidering how enterprise bargaining might operate in a centralised wage system.

The Commission has also asked the ACTU to address the question of what role exists for centralised wage-fixing. The question now seems to have been answered.

BRAD NORINGTON is the Sydney Morning Herald's Industrial editor.

After Inkathagate

The recent media revelations about the funding of Inkatha forces by De Klerk's National Party government should come as no surprise to anyone who has studied South Africa's recent history. From its formation in 1975 by Chief Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi, Inkatha relied upon two government-sponsored platforms from which to launch its rise to international prominence. The first was the so-called homeland of Kwa Zulu where Buthelezi was made Chief Minister. By allowing Inkatha to engage openly in national politics, free from state harassment, while leading resistance movements like the African National Congress (ANC) and Black Consciousness were banned, the government provided Inkatha with an almost exclusive second platform.

Many critics describe Inkatha as 'petty bourgeois' because it advances the economic interests and ideology of the traders, civil servants and bureaucrats of the Kwa Zulu 'homeland'. In order to hold onto its power and privilege Inkatha has been forced to collaborate with the white minority government which controls the resources and holds ultimate authority over the 'homelands'. Inkatha's activities plainly work against the long-term interests of black workers. Despite this they have managed to form a popular alliance of various classes in the Natal-Kwa Zulu region.

Inkatha has used all the resources that the white minority government provides for Kwa Zulu in order to marshal its support. Joining Inkatha provides access to jobs, services and facilities in Kwa Zulu. There have been reports of teachers and public servants being forced to join in order to obtain employment in the Kwa Zulu bureaucracy and of students being forced to join the party's Youth Brigade before they were enrolled in school. It has been suggested that much of Inkatha's support from among black workers living outside Kwa Zulu in the 'white' areas is derived from migrant workers, who rely upon the Inkatha-controlled Kwa Zulu bureaucracy for land allocation, old age security and the other benefits that their families living in the 'homeland' receive.

To maintain its multi-class appeal the Kwa Zulu bureaucracy has sought to idealise its motives and minimise the appearance of self-interest in its rise to power and prestige. To serve these ends Inkatha's activities have been portrayed as an attempt to retrieve the dignities and glories that the Zulu people have lost. The resources and authority of the 'homeland' have been used to promote a form of Zulu ethnic nationalism.

While the promotion of Zulu ethnic identity served Inkatha's interests, it simultaneously supported the apartheid regime's strategies of divide and rule. The now discarded policies of 'separate development' demanded that blacks regard themselves as members of 'ethnic homelands' rather than citizens of South Africa. Inkatha's ethnic nationalism runs directly contrary to the aims of other black liberation movements which place primacy upon the unity of Africans as an essential conditions for liberation. Through the selective use of the history of his clan and some plain invention, Buthelezi has sought to portray himself as an hereditary Zulu prince, rather than the appointee of the apartheid regime that his critics claim him to be.

Inkatha has manipulated the material insecurities and frustrations of the impoverished Kwa Zulu peasants and migrant workers by appealing to old ethnic bonds. Inkatha ideologues have explained Zulu unemployment
The decision of federal Cabinet in August not to provide special tax breaks for the Very Fast Train (VFT) proposal has halted the project in its tracks. Following the Cabinet decision, BHP—the last of the original four VFT consortium partners—announced the suspension of further feasibility studies.

The project may get a second wind if the Premiers' Conference in November agrees to restructure the tax system to provide a more concessionary tax structure for companies formed to develop infrastructure privately. In the meantime, the suspension of work on the VFT proposal provides an opportunity to review the contentious debate over the options for high speed rail travel in the Sydney/Melbourne corridor.

Currently, train travel in the corridor occurs on a steam-age alignment characterised by hundreds of tight curves, steep gradients, low tunnel and bridge clearances and therefore slow transit times. In addition, the principal intermediate city in the corridor—Canberra—is only linked to the main line by a meandering branch line which has previously been considered a target for closure by its owner, the NSW government.

In contrast, the road infrastructure in the Sydney/Melbourne corridor has been fully funded by the federal government since 1974 and reconstructed to a four-lane dual carriageway standard. This, the deregulation of the airlines and the continued neglect of the rail main line between Sydney and Melbourne have eroded rail freight’s share of tonnage in the corridor in the last 25 years, and rail’s share of the passenger market has declined from 15% to 3% in the same period.

The ANC will no doubt exploit these revelations as a means of destroying Buthelezi's claims that he has been a legitimate opponent of the apartheid regime. However, the history of Inkatha serves to highlight an enormous problem which must be faced by post-apartheid South Africa—the fate of the millions of unemployed and land-hungry peasants. Those blacks who gain the economic benefits that political power and labour rights will bring in a non-racial capitalist system cannot afford to ignore the plight of this under-class—for, as recent history has demonstrated, they are ripe for manipulation by unscrupulous demagogues. South Africa's troubles will not be over until their problems have been addressed.

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the existing rail corridor will remain. It seems extremely doubtful that any government could justify a high speed passenger line and a separate high speed freight line between Sydney and Melbourne—the railway equivalent of building two Hume Highways. The VFT is not without competitors. One of the most prominent, the Fast Freight Train (FFT) proposal, was developed by consultants to VLine (the Victorian railways) in 1989. The proposal is aimed at transferring freight from road to rail through minor track realignments and the purchase of modern rolling stock. The FFT would reduce transit time between Melbourne and Sydney to nine hours. However, the proposal are its relatively low cost and its benefits to both rail freight and passenger services. However, the economic justification for the proposal (which does not directly link the nation’s capital) is critically dependent on achieving door to door transit times between Sydney and Melbourne which are competitive with road transport. In the existing FFT proposal there is absolutely no margin for delays—which is both unrealistic and, at the same time, vital to achieving its ambitions.

Another competitor—the Tilt Train proposal advanced by the NSW State Rail Authority (SRA) in 1990—is designed to offset centrifugal force so that a train can travel through smaller radius curves with greater passenger comfort at higher speeds than conventional trains. Using XPT cars, a tilting train has the capacity to reduce passenger transit times on the existing rail alignment between Sydney and Melbourne to nine hours. However, the self-steering bogies of the Tilt Train are not designed to manage the substantial weight differential between empty and loaded freight wagons, so a significant disadvantage of Tilt Trains at present is that they are not suitable for freight transport.

The final contender is the High Speed Rail proposal (HSR) developed by Jacana Consulting for the NSW Labor Council rail unions in March 1991. The HSR builds on the advantages of previous proposals—and, most importantly, addresses their weaknesses.

The proposal aims to reduce journey times for both rail freight and passenger services in order to capture markets from road as well as from air. At the end of a three-stage, ten-year upgrading and extension process, rail passenger transit times would be reduced to five to 5.5 hours between Sydney and Melbourne via Canberra with freight transit times reduced to seven hours. The staging options in the proposal are designed to minimise risk exposure to large scale capital borrowings, and to ensure that none of the capital works would interfere with rail operations.

The capital cost of the HSR ($3.7 billion) is little more than half of that of the VFT and, unlike the VFT it tackles both rail freight and passenger needs in the Sydney/Melbourne corridor. $3.7 billion over 10 years is, of course, a large outlay. However, in the current debate about financing the construction and restructuring of our public infrastructure the future of rail transport deserves to play a crucial role.

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Rattled

Tweedledum and Tweedledee
Agreed to have a battle
For Tweedledum said Tweedledee
Had spoiled his nice new rattle.

Lewis Carroll,
Through the Looking Glass.

We have the makings of a Jeffrey Archer political potboiler right on our doorstep. The central characters are two working class boys made good. Both have always had a longing for the big end of town.

Each regards the prime ministership as a prize unwon. Despite appearing to be economic whiz-kids they have used the same grasp over economics as a Machiavellian tool to come within a hair’s breadth of winning the prize. Both are fastidious in dress and style but it would be a mistake to regard either as a dandy—they are hard men, made for politics.

The identity of these two characters is none other than Paul Keating and John Hewson. Everyone knows that the main event in parliament these days is the verbal jousting between the two, usually over the economic competency of either. Each, through public posturing, is trying to seize the economic agenda for the nation’s future. Hewson parades the country with his consumption tax, Keating with his revamped superannuation scheme for the workforce. Both devices, they argue, will lift our national savings ratio and curb our dependence upon foreign capital.

Despite their tough upbringing, neither Mr Keating nor Dr Hewson can recount any personal experience of being unemployed. Nor have either, I’m sure, seen up close the human calamity of deflationist economic policies. They should hightail it down to a local Social Security office to see the face of Australia 1991.

Although Paul Keating has been coping the blame for having deliberately engineered the recession, John Hewson should hardly be gloating over Labor’s misery. Had he been in power, as Andrew Peacock’s Treasurer, he would have done more or less the same as Paul Keating. For few
Many non-economists, on the other hand, must be asking why we got to the stage of "having to have a recession" at all. It is in this light that Dr Hewson and Mr Keating—sworn bitter enemies in the public arena—turn out to be ideological blood-brothers. For both are unreserved adherents to financial deregulation and free-trade policies. And it is the prosecution of these libertarian-type economics that has ultimately led us into having to have this recession. Most observers know that financial deregulation has meant the government surrendering quantitative control over the money supply; instead the lending activities of the banks now govern it. It was like putting children in charge of a lolly-shop.

We have had the banks play the leading part in financing the debt binge, the takeover frenzy, the asset boom and now banks, by virtue of corporate indebtedness, being the de facto controllers of multiple layers of industry. John Kerin has recently attacked Paul Keating's penchant for pulling the interest rate lever. This works more like a hand-brake in governing the pace of activity than the smooth accelerator/decelerator effect of liquidity controls we used to know. The other 'lever' of economic policy now rendered inoperable because of deregulation is the exchange rate—by all accounts the Australian dollar has become the plaything of international speculators.

In his reign as Treasurer, Paul Keating had been forced to reduce both Australia's current account deficit and inflation rate problems solely by tampering with the interest rates lever, but any economics student will tell you that in macroeconomics to beat two problems you need two instruments or policy levers. Most commentators, and even a repentant Keating, now realise that the high interest rates policy enforced to curb our inflation rate and cure our current account deficit has only partially worked. By pushing up the Australian dollar in foreign exchange markets, imports have appeared all the more price attractive to us while our exports, actual and potential, have suffered. You can find ready proof of this next time you are in a supermarket by glancing at the abundance of imported foodstuffs.

Also to blame for our import addiction, in all its forms, is the Keating-Hewson dogma on free trade. Both titans believe that regulation, and protection, have failed this country. Instead, both subscribe to the fuzzy ideal of letting market forces determine and shape Australian economic destiny through the 1990s. If, they say, we are to develop a diversified and robust economy for the future, we must let market forces rip. But waiting for market forces to make us a stronger more advanced economy is turning out to be like Waiting for Godot. Five years after Mr Keating's banana republic outburst we are still a commodity-exporting nation with only 10% of our exports having any value-added component. Like New Zealand, which has gone further down the libertarian economics road than us, Australia is fast becoming broke, isolated and confused about precisely where we are going. If anything, if the balance of payments figures are any guide, we seem to be becoming a Mickey Mouse economy; despite falling activity and output, imports (many of them necessary) remain stubbornly high.

The last time I can recall such widespread despondency about our economic fortunes was in the 1970s, when the first vestiges of stagflation appeared. To this seemingly unsolvable problem Billy Snedden proclaimed that we needed "a new Keynes" to unravel it. Maybe so, but the old version of Keynes could have played a considerable part in getting out of our current economic predicament; Keynes argued that countries suffering recurrent balance of payment deficits, like Australia, need not, indeed, should not, deflate their economy to repair the problem.

Devaluation of the currency was the easier way—but, alas, this assumes we have a fixed, not floating, exchange rate. Appeals for restoring control over the exchange rate and the money supply are, of course, likely to fall upon deaf ears. Keynesian economics is long out of fashion; but it does show that there is a way out of the tangle.

As it is, Australia is emerging from the recession with lower interest rates, lower inflation, an improved current account deficit and rising productivity due to the labour shedding now taking place. However, as soon as things improve and spending reignites, 'the unholy trinity' of imports, inflation and interest rates will surely edge upwards again. Imports will rise by virtue of Australia's seeming addiction for them and because domestic supply will be unable to satisfy the rise in local demand in any case. This, in turn, will push up the inflation rate. Consequently interest rates, too, will rise. And so, the treadmill, or cycle, repeats itself. Now you can begin to see why economics is called the dismal science.

Whichever of our working class heroes makes it to the top of the greasy pole, you can rest assured that either Tweedledum or Tweedledee will end up well and truly rattled by the economy before too long.

ALEX MILLMOW, a former Treasury officer, teaches in economics at Charles Sturt University.
The dramatic events of August threatened to derail the Soviet Union's second revolution. Instead, they look to have entrenched it irreversibly. For sheer 'people power', the resistance rivalled the Europe of 1848. In the first of our package of features on the USSR's 'springtime of peoples', David Burchell spoke to Alec Nove about the rise and fall of an ill-starred coup.

Alec Nove is professor emeritus of economics at the University of Glasgow, and the author of numerous works on the Soviet Union, including An Economic History of the USSR. He was interviewed for ALR by David Burchell on August 21, shortly after the first indications of the failure of the Moscow putsch.

Why did the coup fail?

It has failed for three very good reasons. The first reason was the crowds in the streets of Moscow and Leningrad. The second reason was the fact that the KGB and the army were, to put it mildly, in two minds about killing people in the streets of Moscow. In other words, it is no use saying that if the army and the KGB had acted ruthlessly, then the crowds in the street would have been unable to hold them back from the Russian parliament. Of course that's true. The point is, however, that even if the will to act ruthlessly had been present, this depended upon the instruments which were supposed to carrying out the killing being willing to do it — and I don't think they were. The third reason is that the organisers of the coup were a bunch of lacklustre, uninspiring mediocrities. Imagine, for goodness sake, someone following Yanayev to the barricades. It's ridiculous.

But Brezhnev was a mediocrity, and he ruled for twenty years.
It's true that Brezhnev was a mediocrity, but he was already in authority and not having to create that authority. In any case the system in the Soviet Union nowadays is quite different. People have made parallels with the ousting of Krushchev, but there are very profound differences between the two cases. Perhaps the only real similarity is that both Gorbachev and Krushchev were on holiday in the Black Sea. Krushchev was booted out by the Central Committee at a time which the Communist Party still ran the show. This was strikingly not the case with this coup. Gorbachev was not sent on sick leave by the Central Committee; it hadn't even met. Indeed, interestingly, the whole affair wasn't organised through the Party at all. And it was the vice-president who took over, not the deputy secretary of the Party.

And the attempt was not to dump Gorbachev as general secretary of the Party, but as president of the government.

Precisely. The point is that to some extent this is a recognition of the downgrading of the Party within the ruling structures. Consequently, when people argue that this was a coup by Communist hardliners, this is a mistake on both procedural grounds and on ideological grounds. That is to say that, when they made their appeal to the people, the coup leaders did not make that appeal as Communists. In their pronouncements they did not once mention the word Communism; nor did they mention Marx or Lenin.

Inasmuch as there was any ideological content in their pronouncements it would appear, would it not, to have
been an appeal to primordial Russian nationalism, and to the old Russian tradition of xenophobia?

That's right. But in this, of course, they had a problem with Yeltsin — because Yeltsin, in his capacity as leader of the Russian republic, can also appeal to primordial Russian nationalism, though in a completely different way. But of course, you are right, it was an appeal to primordial Russian nationalism — though maybe hardline, great power nationalism is a better description. After all, a number of the characters involved were not ethnic Russians; Boris Pugo, the Interior Minister, was a Latvian, for instance. This kind of great power nationalism is very strong among the armed forces, which are also very Russian-dominated.

The other point is that the position of the republics is vitally important. In the Baltic republics, the coup leaders repeated the actions of last January, when Moscow sent in troops to occupy public buildings. But again it would have been difficult for them to oust the locally elected governments by force, both because I don't think they had the will to do that, and because the local troops would be unwilling to obey orders to kill large numbers of people.

I was in Estonia last January, and even when there were threatening troop movements the Estonian authorities were always very careful to have quite decent, civilised negotiations with the local army commanders. It appears that the same thing has happened again, and that the army commanders promised the Estonian authorities that they would not shoot at people. If you are going to organise that sort of coup, and if you are not able and willing to kill a lot of people in the process, you are going to fail.

The coup's failure would seem to be a fairly ringing recommendation, for all his other faults, of Yeltsin's strategy of building up a mass base outside the apparatus. It would appear that Gorbachev's problem is that he has been forced to rely upon the support of people whom he could not ultimately trust, and who would not really defend him in this sort of situation.

That is absolutely right. There are parallels, in the history of other countries, of a leader trying to placate the military or hardliners and then being betrayed by them. Even Pinochet, after all, was supposed to have been trusted by Allende. Be that as it may, the position of the party is now extremely odd. They still have some power, but Gorbachev has considerably weakened that power and in some parts of the country the Party has split. In the Baltic republics, the majority of the party became nationalist, and a rump minority of the party remained loyal to Moscow, and the same is happening in the Ukraine.

Does this suggest that the apparatchiks have left their run too late?

Yes. I don't think enough people want to defend the power of the Party anymore. Where were the Party secretaries in the junta? Pavlov wasn't a Party secretary; nor was Yazov; indeed Yazov and Kryuchkov were, if memory serves, no longer even in the Politburo. The whole thing has been done as if they had accepted Gorbachev having shifted the focus of power from the Party to the government. It will gravely weaken the party.

If the coup-makers had their own way and been allowed to create a stable government, what would they have done with the economy?

Well, they are split too. Pavlov had an economic program that included marketisation and privatisation, to a limited degree. I think the key to the whole thing would have been the position of the military-industrial complex. As long as they feel safe that their claim on resources will be maintained, they are not at all against markets in other parts of the economy. Colonel Alksnis, for example, the leader of the Soyuz group of hardliners thinks that Pinochet is a model for marketisation.

Which suggests that the some of the hard and fast distinctions that have been made by some of the international media about the factions in Soviet politics are over-simplified.

Everybody is split. Among the hardliners, there are some who believe in Russia, in an indivisible glorious past which has been unfortunately wrecked by Lenin and the bloody revolutionaries. Others are neo-stalinists, who obviously don't agree. Among the radicals, there are, I can assure you, genuine Thatcherites, as well as others who are looking for some form of market socialism. So, all parties Right and Left are split on a whole range of questions, including the nationalist issue, of course. The key here is not the Baltics, they will eventually go their own way. But what about the Ukraine? How many Russians, who are by no means averse to democracy or the market, are prepared to let the Ukraine be totally independent? Some are, some aren't. Some, like Solzhenitsyn, want to go on bended knees to the Ukrainians to get them to stay in.

Coming back to the economy, even assuming that the coup leaders had some sort of unified program, it would obviously have been impossible to return to the past...

It was and it is impossible. They can't! They would have stumbled along the road to some kind of regulated market, whoever was in charge. I can't see what else they could do.

So that sounds more like the Chinese solution, perestroika without the glasnost...

Yes, with all the difficulties that the Chinese have found in trying to go along that particular road. The one area in which the Chinese could do it and the Russians find it much more difficult, is in agriculture. Chinese methods of cultivation, being mediaeval, you can let the peasants get on with it with water buffalo and primitive tools, but you can't turn a Soviet collective farm on a prairie into Chinese high agriculture or even into traditional Russian agriculture very easily. There's also obstruction on behalf of officials, and on the part of the management of state and collective farms to the development of private farming.
The coup in the Soviet Union on 19 August caught most observers unawares. However, analysis of the situation in the USSR over the last two years always indicated that such a move might be expected.

For at least the past twelve months, Western analysts have proposed four possible scenarios for the future of the Soviet Union. The first was that of a return to pre-Gorbachev communism, perhaps even a return to stalinism, beginning with the overthrow of Gorbachev and a terroristic crackdown.

The second consisted of a turn to the Right, but not one resulting in a return to the command economy. Party officials and other conservatives could be expected to clamp down on democratisation, which was pushing the reform process too quickly for their liking. The market would be introduced, but along the lines of the South Korean, or, at worst, the Chilean model. This clampdown might well have come constitutionally (through the conservative Supreme Soviet), via a coup, or even electorally, as the populace vented its resentment at a decaying economy on the democrats.

The third possibility was simply that the political and economic mess might continue for quite some time. Only in the breakaway republics was real change likely, and even there it was by no means certain. A combination of delaying strategies by unco-operative bureaucracies and uncertainty as to where legitimate power lay might allow perestroika to stumble on. Gorbachev would continue to dodge and turn in the political wind.

The fourth, and most optimistic, scenario — but possibly the one that people held out the least hope for — was the East European road. Somehow the democratisation process and the market reforms would continue in tandem to give the Soviet Union a more Western character. The problem, however, was that this seemed to be such a perilous balancing act. Grave doubts were often raised by academics, particularly economists, that early capitalism and democracy were incompatible. Since great sacrifices would have to be made by the population, an electorate given the chance to interfere in the economy to prevent this would probably do so. Therefore there would be little or no logical choice but to suspend democracy during this period.

This argument against what I have called the East European road was buttressed by another which stated that the Communist Party and communist culture were far more deeply embedded in the USSR than in the former satellite states, firstly because they had been there longer and secondly because of the ‘passive Russian temperament’.

Yet it is this fourth scenario which now appears the most likely. The Soviet Union after the coup is now almost certainly also post-perestroika in its original form — which is to say the attempt to reform communism rather than replace it. How did this come about? Possibly the best way...
to begin to answer this question is to examine the contradictory nature of perestroika itself.

Perestroika began as a program for making communism run properly, above all in the realm of the economy. The command administrative system was running out of steam. Its capacity to perform a transition from an extensive to an intensive economy (or, if you like, from producing more to producing better), to continue to provide the military with hardware to match the Americans, to provide consumers with goods of any quality and sophistication, or even to keep growing at all, was seriously in doubt.

It was from the need to reform the economy that Gorbachev first chose the strategy of glasnost, then democratisation and finally market reforms. Each new strategy did not just reduce the control of the old system, but also the ability of Gorbachev and his allies to control the pace of events. A process which began as an attempt to root out the corrup-

A civil society is definitely now alive and well in the USSR

tion of the old guard in the name of the system has left the system itself, and the man who would still stand with it, Gorbachev, friendless and isolated.

That Gorbachev himself did not foresee that this course of reform could not succeed can be attributed to a number of factors, of which three seem to me to be seminal. Firstly, Gorbachev was fundamentally out of touch with life in the Soviet Union. In this he was probably no different to most other highly placed apparatchiks, but under conditions where democratic and demagogic politics have become more and more important, this was increasingly important.

The second has to do with his status as a true believer. Gorbachev did actually believe that communism could be made to appeal to and rally the people. The ideology of Lenin was still credible if the perversion perpetuated by Stalin and Brezhnev could be swept away. How a holistic, rationalistic theory of knowledge that claimed to have the single truth about everything social, political and economic could be reconciled with democratic politics was a postmodern question which Gorbachev did not even appear to have considered. In short, Gorbachev hoped to replace structures organised by the discipline of democratic centralism with a network of power generated via culture and ideology, and in this he was simply naive about both the intellectual and social material he was working with.

The third factor was Gorbachev's weakness in the field of economics: again a weakness he shares with most other apparatchiks brought up in a culture focused solely on decrees and production. Questions relating to distribution, demand and co-ordination receive scant attention in the Soviet world. This meant firstly that Gorbachev had no real understanding of the fact that corruption was the logical outcome of unarticulated and choked demand within the communist system.

Corruption and the collapse of moral life were a clear example of a leakage of the economic system into the cultural world. Furthermore, corruption played a vital role in allowing the official economy to actually work, probably helping the system as much as hampered it. Some realisation of this slowly seeped through to the leadership as advice to adopt market reforms more quickly, but this was something they patently refused to do.

This weakness in economics also came through in simple fiscal policy. The Soviet leadership since 1988 has pursued the contradictory policy of half a market. They expect some sectors to operate as if money is a means of exchange related to supply and demand and the other sectors as if money is still a form of indirect ration cards. As a result the government has continued to print money, causing massive underlying inflation which has considerably weakened the economy and thus their legitimacy.

The threads leading to the August coup really began to be drawn together with Gorbachev's decision to introduce democratic elections in 1989. The restoration of the republican parliaments ultimately led to the reintroduction of dual power in the USSR — Lenin's coup of 1917 in reverse. Reconstructed as a base from which to mount a fresh reform assault upon a recalcitrant CPSU, the Supreme Soviet became a forum for a breakdown in Party unity and a platform for opposition groups out of all proportion to their actual numbers in the Soviet. Glasnost had given them some voice, but the parliaments had amplified it.

The Republican parliaments in particular often provided a clear voice both outside the Party and outside the apparatus. The system did not now just face reform; it faced alternatives.

After the 28th Congress in 1990, two issues emerged which set the reformers and the hardliners on a collision course. The first was the future of the Union. Here Gorbachev continued to align himself with the preservation of the central state, even though he was clearly at a loss as to exactly what this strategy should be. The second was the future of the command economy, or more particularly the personnel whose interests were bound up in it. The pace of reform, and the Shatalin 500-day plan in particular, threatened to wash vast numbers of careers away. In November 1990 Gorbachev yielded to the conservatives. Pavlov was appointed prime minister and Yanayev vice-president; Shevardnadze resigned in disgust.
Gorbachev had a minor win with the success of his Union referendum, but continually falling economic production and Yeltsin’s march towards the Russian presidency forced him to make a deal. The Union treaty, which would necessarily result in a massive loss of authority for the apparatchiks, was agreed to in April - but the old guard struck on August 19, the day before it was due to be signed.

While it is a little early to embark on a full-scale explanation of the circumstances surrounding the failed coup, a number of features can be noted. First, the politicalisation of Soviet society has been proceeding at a number of levels and at an accelerated rate over the last three years. The Communist Party, now divided and bereft of much talent, was now not only a plural political entity in its own right; this willingness to think and act politically had also penetrated the apparatus, including the military and security forces. It is particularly notable that the middle-level officers in the armed forces, always crucial in coup, appear to have been lost to Yanayev’s group.

The coup was always hesitant: not just because its leaders appeared to have no actual positive vision, but because its chain of command was extremely shaky. The leaders could never be quite sure that when they pressed a button it would really work. The military and security forces were at best doubtful, and in some cases actually swapping sides.

Again, the republican parliaments had achieved a massive amount of legitimacy. The position of people’s deputy had been an important springboard for the opposition from the very beginning (witness the way radical deputies swept into Georgia in 1989 to investigate the Tbilisi massacre, despite attempts by Interior Ministry troops to close off the area). All over the Soviet Union the republican parliaments remained more or less in charge. Even where they were run by conservatives they were reluctant to hand over power. It was the People’s Deputies in Leningrad and Moscow who, proudly wearing their official emblems, approached the tanks and demanded to speak to the commanders. Four years ago the republican parliaments were mere ciphers of Party power; their actions in August 1991 clearly stamp them as independent political actors in their own right.

Finally, it is impossible to ignore the talents of the opposition movement. Yeltsin, Rutskoi, Sobchak, Popov and their supporters scarcely put a foot wrong, which perhaps indicates that they, at least, were well prepared for this eventuality. Yeltsin in particular used his charisma in a way which highlighted fully the complete alienation from the people of the conservatives (who apparently froze out their own potential demagogues, the Soyuz movement).

Lastly, the Soviet people, and especially the Russians, by moving to the barricades gave a complete lie to their ‘passive nature’, and laid to rest what was now no more than the myth of Soviet terror. The last vestiges of the power of Stalin were swept away in the streets of Moscow and Leningrad during the coup and its aftermath. A civil society is most definitely now alive and well in the Soviet polity, and able to defend itself.

Ultimately, Gorbachev’s dream of reform was just riding too many contradictions to stay upright. The coup’s overall effect appears to have been one of accelerating reform and consolidating its gains. Gorbachev at least got one thing right when he said that its defeat showed that perestroika had taken root in society. Not only has it taken root, it is now leading a flourishing life of its own.

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The Empire Struck Back

Constantin Pleshakov, a Soviet scholar, argues that we are seeing the death throes of one of the world's most unsuccessful empires.

The Soviet Union today is in a time of trouble. A huge and powerful country, stable in its stagnation for many years (perhaps since 1930 when it became clear that the policy of collectivisation would not result in a successful peasant uprising) is now weak and politically shaky despite its nuclear warheads, missiles and submarines, factories and plants, the army and the KGB. The old Soviet Union is now in its mortal agony and it will die. Will many people weep? Not in the Soviet Union itself—in the country which used to be the prison of peoples and the jail of souls. But what frightens people is the transition period from the old Soviet Union to the new country (or countries for that matter) which will be built in its place.

What are the main features of the contemporary crisis in the Soviet Union which make it one of the greatest social earthquakes in human history? There are two: the agony of socialism and the agony of empire. When these two tremendous processes come together it results in an unimaginable outburst of energy (in most cases destructive) which most comparable countries have been spared.

The dismantling of socialism is now common to all of the countries of the former 'socialist camp' (except Albania, Cuba and North Korea, but even there the outburst of people's anger is inevitable in the foreseeable future). But for countries like Hungary and Poland it is not as painful as for the Soviet Union—a country which used to regard itself as a cradle of world revolution and, as late as in 1979, tried to introduce socialism to one more country—Afghanistan. But even the pains of dismantling socialism would not in themselves have led to the global crisis—however difficult they might have been. The greater problem is that the dismantling of socialism in the USSR coincides with the dismantling of an empire—and this fact is a sufficient reason for having a pessimistic prognosis. The Poles or the Germans can be optimistic; they are adjusting their society to the macrosystem of the outside world. The Soviets simply do not know what their society is; they understand that there is an Armenian society, an Estonian society, a Moscow society, but—as in any other empire—there is no such thing as a 'common society'. The West flattered the Soviet Union by calling its people 'the Soviets'. (Nobody—even Stalin—in the Soviet Union has ever dared to call its people 'the Soviets'; everybody used the unnatural term 'the Soviet people'.) The Soviets have no identity and the peoples of the country are in search of it now. Is it not dangerous to search for national identities in a country stacked high with weapons of mass destruction?

Because of its nature the Soviet Union cannot even have a national crisis—it can only face an international crisis in which different peoples are involved.

The Soviet Union might have survived the decline of marxism, but it will hardly survive the decline of empire. In one sense, the Soviet Union was mainly an empire and

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not a ‘socialist state’. ‘Socialism’ as a concept belongs to the realm of ideology; that of empire is more broad and basic. Empires can be marxist, or Islamic, or Confucian; marxism and Confucianism were borrowed by peculiar types of state to become empires; for empires first of all need some kind of idea to build their core.

It is more or less clear what a ‘socialist’ state is. But it is much more difficult to understand what empire is. One day some scholar living in a peaceful democratic country will go to the roots of empire as such, and general laws of imperial development will become clear. But now I would like to suggest only a few ideas about the nature of an empire. I am in an advantageous position because I belong to those who know an empire from the inside—to the body of citizens of the Soviet Union—perhaps the last empire in the world. Of course, one could argue that China, too, is an empire, but China is much more homogeneous—and if it is an empire, it is a sort of quasiempire which will not see such devastating decline as its Soviet neighbour.

What is an empire? Is it just a country possessing colonies? In that sense was Holland an empire? Definitely not. Even France after Napoleon could not be regarded as an empire. Perhaps what is crucial is the idea of empire. Suddenly, from ‘nowhere’ emerges the idea of consolidating different nations under the banner of one, and imposing the culture of this nation upon the others (it could be marxism, Islam or Roman law). Soviet historian Lev Gumilev explains such fluctuations by outbursts of energy, the origins of which are unknown. He calls that energy passionarily.

Paul Kennedy, in his The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers, is inclined to the economic explanation of the development of empires. This is, of course, a little simplistic: many empires in their prime were not economically efficient. The British empire was arguably efficient, as was the Chinese; the Russian/Soviet empire was not, and Hitler’s empire was an economic nonsense.

While the laws of empire development are still obscure, it is clear that any empire, in time, is doomed to decline.

The decline might be a civilised one, bringing order and law to the former colonies and peace and prosperity to the core of empire—that was the case of Britain (with the significant exception of Northern Ireland). The case of Rome was completely different and led to endless wars, chaos and anarchy. In a sense, when we speak about these two archetypes, the Soviet Union seems to be closer to Rome than to Britain. The tragedy of the Russian empire was that its colonies were not overseas and were not regarded as colonies; they were added to the core of empire—Central Russia—and nobody knew where the colonies ended and where the core began.

There are a number of different scenarios for the next 30 or 40 years in the USSR’s history. The most pessimistic would see a bout of nuclear civil war followed by a long ‘Dark Ages’; the more optimistic would see a relatively stable divorce of the nationalities, followed by a long period of moderate but independent development under a liberal democratic system. But even in this scenario there would be military clashes in the Caucasus and elsewhere.

The only possibility that I would exclude is a completely peaceful transition to a new Soviet Union. The coincidence of these two factors—the dismantling of socialism and the dismantling of the empire, makes it totally unrealistic. The Dark Age of Russia began in 1917; somewhere in 1988 Armageddon began. Now we are living through it. There is no medicine for imperial cancer. The empire has to die. But will the offspring of the empire be sensible enough to bury it with dignity and not turn the funeral into a massacre?

CONSTANTIN V PLESHAKOV is a senior research fellow in the Soviet Academy of Sciences. He was writing before the events of August.
Favourite Son

Eduard Shevardnadze was Gorbachev’s closest confidant until he resigned last December, predicting a coup. Tony Phillips looks at the man who has now assumed the status of a Soviet prophet.

When Eduard Shevardnadze resigned as Soviet foreign minister in December last year he created shock waves not just around the Soviet Union but around the world. Gorbachev himself was said to have been alarmed and surprised. The jolt was made all the greater by the explanation Shevardnadze gave: “Let this resignation be my protest against the impending dictatorship”.

At the time, many Western analysts saw Shevardnadze’s plea as an exaggeration. Now, following the August coup, it seems prophetic. In view of all this it is informative to dwell a little on the personal history of Shevardnadze, once the sole non-Slav in the Politburo and possibly one of the most influential foreign ministers in modern history. Shevardnadze is particularly interesting not just because he played such a major part in undoing the old world order, but also because he and Gorbachev were, in the heyday of perestroika, such a close double act.

Shevardnadze, like Gorbachev, could easily have been viewed ten years ago as just another loyal apparatchik on the way up. He had actually got a little further in his career than Gorbachev, becoming first secretary of the Georgian Communist Party in 1972, when he was a personal favourite of Brezhnev. While Gorbachev never achieved this dubious status, other similarities between them were quite strong. Both shared the unusual background for communist superstars of an educational background in the humanities; Gorbachev’s first degree was in law (an almost pointless area under the Soviet system of decree rather than rules), while Shevardnadze trained as an historian. Both were of the Khrushchev generation (Shevardnadze is two years older than Gorbachev). Both seemed imbued with a strong anti-stalinism—they were there when the victims began pouring back from the camps—but are nonetheless loyal to what they see as the values of socialism. Like Khrushchev, both appear to have believed Soviet communism could work if only it were honestly applied. Gorbachev moved quickly to dispense with the cult of the general secretary, while Shevardnadze had a formidable reputation as a corruption-buster in Georgia.

As with Gorbachev, the personal history of Shevardnadze provides glimpses of the champion of glasnost he was to become. The line from Andropov to Gorbachev begins with the attempt to make the Soviet system work honestly. Gorbachev took Andropov’s anti-corruption fervour and added to it the crucial ingredients of glasnost and democracy. This set in train a process in the Soviet Union that has in ideological terms seen the dominant “radical” ethic move from an economic anti-market pro-state ownership approach to a political pro-democracy anti-oligarchy one.

Despite his historian’s training, Shevardnadze had his greatest successes enforcing law and order on corrupt officials and economic criminals as the chief of the Georgian police. This was his claim for promotion to Georgian party boss. However, once installed he was not slow to use his ‘favourite’ status to institute local economic reforms which, in fact, decriminalised some of the acts he had been prosecuting and raised the general economic output of the republic. Shevardnadze was by no means a liberal democratic angel, but neither was he the typical Brezhnevite flunky-cum-fat-cat.
Cold War. Apart from negotiating vital arms agreements, the Soviets have withdrawn from Afghanistan, allowed the collapse of Soviet-backed regimes in Eastern Europe, normalised relations with China and opened diplomatic ties with South Korea. They also applied a fresh approach to the Middle East which put more emphasis on peace and stability than superpower rivalry.

Two things can be said of Soviet policy as it evolved under Shevardnadze. Firstly, it moved from a doctrinaire and ideologically-informed ‘class-confrontationist’ policy to one of ‘realism’. That is to say, Soviet foreign policy now presumes explicitly that states have interests which they seek to maximise while maintaining some degree of stability. Realism is, of course, also an ideological position—but it is one that most other states subscribe to, particularly those of the West. The explicit adoption of this position undoubtedly helped dialogue between the Soviet Union and the West. Secondly, Shevardnadze utilised the vocabulary of humanism in bargaining to great effect. It is still debatable whether the relinquishing of Gorbachev’s and Shevardnadze’s foreign policy was chiefly animated by weakness at home or a desire for an ‘offensive peace initiative’. What is clear, however, is that the language in which they couched that policy privileges the idea of a world community in a manner which has often made the West, and especially the US, uncomfortable.

The ideologies of humanism and realism should be logically contradictory, but Shevardnadze combined them surprisingly successfully. The chief outcome was a strong emphasis on conciliation of disputes and a move away from reliance on military means for prevention of war. During the 19th Party Congress in 1989 Shevardnadze made a strong attack on traditional thinking in Soviet foreign policy, arguing that war could no longer be a rational basis for policy, and that national security was more than the sum of one’s arsenal. He went on to demand further weapons reductions and described the Soviet stockpile of chemical weapons as barbaric.

Not only did Shevardnadze admit very early on that much of Soviet foreign policy had been wrong, he explicitly linked his changes in foreign policy to domestic changes. That Soviet foreign policy is made on the back of, and underpinned by, successful perestroika, was a continual theme in his speeches: hence his willingness to intervene occasionally in purely domestic matters. The most dramatic example came in December 1989 when Shevardnadze threatened to resign over the massacre of protesters in Tbilisi in April of that year. He said at the time: “Nothing and nobody can justify the deaths of innocent people.”

The reasons for Shevardnadze’s resignation in 1990 have been a matter of much conjecture. We have his own explanation that it was a personal protest about the way things were heading. It can be added that it was logical that, after Yeltsin and other radicals left the party and the conservatives gained ground, the liberals such as

Two aspects of his different style as party boss before the Gorbachev ascendancy are worth noting. First, he had a conciliatory approach to disputes. Confronted with a hostile, stone-throwing crowd in Abkhazia in the late 70s, Shevardnadze simply stepped forward and confronted the leaders. He spent the rest of the night in discussion. Such actions indicate a degree of self-confidence unusual in any politician, let alone a Soviet communist. I would argue that here we can see yet another parallel with Gorbachev, and further I suspect that, at bottom, the source of the self-confidence for both men was that they were and perhaps still are believers. They believed in socialism, they believed it could work and they believed in its explanatory power.

The second noteworthy action of Shevardnadze’s career was his backing for the film Repentance. The quintessential destalinisation film, made by a Georgian and shot in a quasi-surrealist manner with strong religious overtones, Repentance shocked and delighted filmgoers all over the Soviet Union on its general release in 1987. Shevardnadze threw his support behind the director Tenghis Abuladze in 1981, assured financial and production support via Georgian television and then pushed the finished product past important Politburo members, including Yegor Ligachev.

As foreign minister, Shevardnadze presided over a series of momentous events which culminated in the end of the
Shevardnadze and Yakovlev would follow the radicals. Some in the Soviet press speculated that the military-industrial complex had forced him out. A more sceptical view argues that Gorbachev had Shevardnadze in mind as the man to negotiate the new union treaty, but the wily foreign minister decided not to accept the poisoned chalice.

In the light of the August coup attempt, it might also be suggested that Gorbachev was facing the same scenario last year, but elected to go along with the hard line. Shevardnadze, perceiving this as something of a coup in itself, left. Whichever account is closest to the mark, the resignation was quite a momentous one—not simply because of the context, which was dramatic enough, but also because Eduard Shevardnadze may well go down as the first modern Soviet politician to retire willingly at the peak of his glory.

In February this year Shevardnadze popped up again with plans to establish an association to act as a think-tank on Soviet foreign policy. All the familiar Shevardnadze themes were present in his interviews: the importance of perestroika, the role an independent association might play in shaping foreign policy, the need to continue the ongoing processes and so forth. However, by July this year, the association had metamorphosed into something quite different: the Movement for Democracy. Among the leaders of the movement were: Shevardnadze, former Gorbachev political adviser Aleksandr Yakovlev and economist Stanislav Shatalin. It also attracted support from Yeltsin’s Russian vice-president, and leader of the Communists for Democracy, Aleksandr Rutskoi.

This grouping, made up of many of Gorbachev’s former allies, looked set to split the Communist Party in early August. It was certainly a place of refuge for those seeking to leave, including perhaps Gorbachev himself, eventually. When the coup took place, the Movement joined with Yeltsin’s forces very quickly. It was certainly able, through the standing of its members, not just to rally popular support (Yeltsin’s great strength), but also to hold back those in authority whose support was vital to the success of the coup. In the end, Shevardnadze did more than just protest against a coming dictatorship, he helped prevent it.

So the double act of Shevardnadze and Gorbachev ended with Shevardnadze standing in a besieged Russian parliament, denouncing Gorbachev for his weakness towards the hardliners which had allowed the coup to happen. In the coming months, it seems certain that Eduard Shevardnadze, an architect of the end of the cold war, will play a new and important role as an architect of a new order for the Soviet Union itself.

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ALR: SEPTEMBER 1991
The Limits of CIVILITY

In the wake of Eastern Europe, much of the Western Left has placed its faith in the new citizens' movements of the East. Paul Hirst finds the enthusiasm misplaced. There is no romantic alternative, he argues, to the dull necessity of building a Western political system with contending parties.

The dissolution of Soviet rule in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Communist Party's monopoly of power in the Soviet Union has opened up the necessity to think afresh about the political and constitutional future of those countries. This necessity is no less real in the West than in the East.

At the same time we have no ready-made answers to guide that thinking. Marxism offers no guide; it has spurned concrete political and constitutional debate in an obsession with building a socialist society. The dominant Western concept for analysing actually existing socialism, 'totalitarianism', is now obsolete, as the political structures which it attempted to capture have dissolved. Western liberal-democratic theory cannot analyse the complex processes of transition to new political regimes, as it offers a political ideal that is nowhere accomplished in Eastern Europe and which is, at best, the goal of some of the reformers in those countries. The political thinking developed by the democratic oppositions in the satellite states of Eastern Europe may appear to be more of a guide. Yet, as I shall try to show, it too is obsolete; shaped by the experience of resistance, it offers no adequate political model once the states dependent on Soviet power have collapsed.

This theoretical vacuum is matched by the ambiguity and uncertainty of political conditions in Eastern Europe. The Soviet Union in particular is threatened by dissolution and political chaos. This is an exceptional situation without historical precedent, and one which leads to complex and contradictory political responses. The Gorbachev leadership, for example, has tried to move in two apparently contradictory directions at the same time. It has attempted
to turn the Union into a real federation of self-governing republics based on a new treaty. It has also created an executive presidency that it hopes will prevent the secession of republics and contain conflict by ruling by emergency decree. In neither the Soviet Union nor in the ex-satellite republics is it clear that ‘democratisation’ will solve the political problems they face. Indeed, in the Soviet Union greater democracy may simply create the political mechanisms for intense social conflict and national fragmentation.

This is a difficult situation for the Western Left to comprehend. In retreat from fundamental socialism, it has staked its political future on the advocacy of the democratisation of both state and civil society in the West. It has hailed the revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe as offering the hope of democratic renewal and removing the antagonistic structures of the Cold War that inhibited radical reform in the West. The euphoria of the revolutions is already over, and new and harsh political realities confront the reformers in the East. The Western Left has quickly to comprehend these realities if it is not to be seduced by its own illusions. The Cold War is at an end, but this does not mean we are on the verge of a new era of peace and international harmony. Developments in Eastern Europe could well result in an altogether more complex and threatening situation.

When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 the West was still involved in the second Cold War that began with the invasion of Afghanistan in 1978. No serious Western observer imagined that in five years the monopoly of the Communist Party over Soviet politics would be for all practical purposes broken, that there would be intractable conflicts between democratically elected governments in the constituent republics of the USSR and Moscow, and that the full extent of Soviet economic failure would be publicly accepted by the party. In 1988 no serious Western observer could have predicted the revolutions of 1989, which destroyed the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe. The same is true of even the most acute members of the East European opposition.

Some Western thinkers had long indulged the hope of Soviet collapse: many had portrayed the Soviet Union as an inefficient and ramshackle command economy; but the Communist Party’s iron grip on political power remained an inescapable fact. In practice, the West had to deal with the Soviet system as a going concern, to attempt openly to subvert Soviet power was to court the edge of the nuclear abyss. In 1956, in 1968, and even after Afghanistan, Western governments were forced to practise realpolitik. So in a different way were the oppositions in Eastern Europe. They were forced after 1968 to treat Soviet domination as a fact, to work within the constraints and contradictions of Soviet rule. Until the very last gasp of Soviet power the opposition was forced to accept that the partition of the world effected at Yalta in 1945 was irreversible but, given that, they sought to exploit Soviet weakness. The opposition began to act ‘as if’ Poland, for example, was a free country, thereby attempting to undermine state power up to but not beyond the point where it would provoke a fatal crisis of the regime.

How did the party’s grip loosen? From the 1920s until the 1980s official Soviet writers presented the construction of socialism in the USSR as a story of uninterrupted economic and social progress. Soviet socialism built an industrial society by brutal and ruthless methods, but it brought the USSR to the brink of modernity, where comparisons with and expectations of competing with the West became appropriate. At this point its failure became apparent and inescapable: a system created by ‘primary socialist accumulation’ and the continuous expansion of heavy and defence industry reached inherent limits of organisation that imposed declining returns. Soviet industry expanded by the extensive exploitation of natural resources and labour reserves, growth by ever more lavish squandering of inputs. By the 1970s the limits of such extensive accumulation had been reached.

However, despite the inefficiency of the Soviet economy there was no reason why the Soviet leadership should have accepted either the reality of failure or the need for reform. The Soviet Union could have embarked on a course of continued confrontation with the West and an aggressive foreign policy, imposing sacrifices on its citizens in the course of containing enemies without.

What prevented this neo-stalinist policy emerging is a matter for conjecture. Part of the answer is that by the mid-1950s nuclear deterrence had removed the option of a policy of wholesale rather than piecemeal and proxy confrontation with the West. Soviet military expansion was in large part the attempt to match the West in the numbers and sophistication of nuclear weapons. This brought no advantage, only a stalemate. A reckless policy of confrontation was checked by the fear of a nuclear exchange should a crisis get out of hand.

The effects of this militarisation in the Brezhnev years was to reinforce economic retrogression. Given the inefficiency of the Soviet economy, military expansion forced an ever greater burden on the civilian sector, consuming between 25% and 30% of GDP. The drive for nuclear parity brought with it a resolute Western response, an arms race whose costs the Western economies could bear far more easily. Soviet leaders therefore faced an escalating crisis by the mid-1980s—accelerating military expenditure that neither brought ‘security’ nor the means of diversion from domestic ills through foreign confrontation. Stalemate was purchased at an ever higher price. Western leaders like President Reagan and Mrs Thatcher were clearly prepared to sustain the arms race to levels where the USSR could not compete.

The West ‘won’ the Cold War, but only because the Soviet leadership possessed the rationality to give way. At first this surrender to the needs of internal reform and external peace was cautious and conducted through leninist rhetoric. Mikhail Gorbachev came to power as a reformer committed to renewing the Soviet system so that it could become more efficient and preserve its grip on power. The aim was threefold—to lessen international tension and reduce the burden of arms spending, and to make Soviet institutions work efficiently but without relinquishing the party’s monopoly on power. Glasnost was to permit the
flow of information and discussion in order to breathe life into official policy making, undoing the illusions and lies that passed for official thought in the Brezhnev era. Perestroika was to restore legality, to recreate inner-party democracy, and to combat corruption and incompetence in the bureaucracy. But—as Gorbachev's own book Perestroika shows—not to abandon leninism. Gorbachev still relied on the illusion that the leninist state could be renewed, that a 'true' efficient communism was possible. In the first stages of reform he was far from abandoning the leading role of the Communist Party or the basic structures of the command economy; on the contrary, these were to be rebuilt by honest communists who could both speak freely and act within the law.

Slowly, but inexorably the agenda of reform was shifted in response to the realities of the Soviet crisis and the effects of freer public debate. His regime has been driven to radicalism because it permitted a measure of objectivity to enter into the debate about the true nature and future of Soviet society. Gorbachev was driven toward a more radical foreign policy by the desperate need for accommodation with the West. A lasting peace was impossible while the Soviets retained the option of containing reform in Eastern Europe through force. The Soviet Union thus at first left its satellite governments in Eastern Europe to their own devices, leaving them to make what accommodation with their peoples that they could—a process that led to what Timothy Garton Ash called 'refolution', (ie, a blend of reform from within and revolution from without the state), a phenomenon evident in Hungary and Poland, absent in the GDR and Czechoslovakia where the existing elites staged a last-ditch defence. 'Refolution' became revolution once the Soviet government made it clear that it would not back militant repression by force. Collapse followed swiftly, because fear of military force vanished once Moscow refused to play the role of gendarme which Russia had exercised in Eastern Europe since the 19th century. The revolutions occurred, not because the opposition could seize power through an internal dynamic—it was weak in the GDR and in Czechoslovakia, and on the verge of failure in Poland—but because Moscow aban-
doned the satellite parties and left them neither the means nor the will to resist.

Is the Soviet Union too passing from reform into ‘refolution’ and, finally, in the not too distant future, into dissolution? It has certainly passed to ‘refolution’. It has become evident even to cautious reformers that an adequate program of economic change cannot be achieved without radical political change. The economic renewal of the Soviet Union requires the decentralisation of economic decision-making, the autonomy of enterprises, the creation of alternative sources of investment. This involves the dissolution of the economic control of the ‘ministries’, autonomy for the republics, privatisation, the creation of a ‘hard’ currency, the ending of the state monopoly of foreign trade, and the creation of capital markets. This is simply incompatible with the party’s monopoly of power and it requires the separation of party and state. Once this is accomplished the party cannot refuse genuinely free elections, multi-party competition, and the sovereign autonomy of the republics. The Soviet system is at the edge of what can be attained by ‘refolution’, and is currently hesitating. Reform has come too late to be an orderly process, and was never possible within the existing constitution once the national aspirations and antagonisms, so long suppressed by the centre, could be given expression.

However, the possibility and the success of the necessary economic changes remains in doubt. If Soviet political institutions are inexorably transformed and yet the economy fails to begin to deliver some measure of prosperity, then the prospects for a relatively stable transition to a new social system are bleak. The Soviet system cannot cope with an open conflict between the centre and the republics, with conflicting agendas for reform, with defections from the Union, and with mass unemployment and poverty.

Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland are in the process of constructing Western style parliamentary democratic states and market economies. The new leaderships recruited from the democratic and anti-communist opposition see this dual process as an essential pre-condition for removing the objective foundation of the postwar Soviet system. Political pluralism and the winding up of the economy are politically essential if the sources of the monopoly of power by the party are to be eliminated, even if they bring in train conflict and economic dislocation.

Nevertheless, some elements of the new political elites in both Czechoslovakia and Poland have tried to cling to a source of legitimacy that had force in opposition as a basis for avoiding conflict in the new transitional period. That is, they are preying on the rhetoric of ‘civil society’ and the idea of a united ‘citizens’ movement standing above the traditional party-political divisions. Elements in both Civic Forum/Public Against Violence in Czechoslovakia and Solidarity in Poland have, until as recently as the early summer of 1990, hoped that these movements could remain majority coalitions, sustained by popular citizens’ initiatives at the base.

One should remember that this experience of opposition was entirely novel, and that the advocates of resistance through ‘civil society’ were responsible for a remarkable innovation in political strategy. Havel, Michnik and others preached non-violent resistance and Solidarity was able to practise it on a social scale in Poland after 1980. By not contesting political power, by building parallel structures, by mixing dialogue and resistance, the opposition in Poland was able to build a base of power beyond the reach of state repression. Martial law in Poland could suppress opposition and drive it underground, but not eliminate it. As a strategy for resistance, for creating opposition to communist attempts to pulverise political alternatives, it worked—up to a point. This experience was formative of the new political elites, as resisters. It in no way equipped them for power.

‘Civil society’ made sense in the context of the communist regime’s attempts to monopolise all social life and culture. It drew on sources of autonomy the regimes could not crush except at the price of wrecking their own compromises essential to the survival of their power—like the concordat with the Church in Poland or, less effectively, their formal subscription to the Helsinki accords. However, therein lies the great weakness of the appeal to ‘civil society’. Once social life is not monopolised, once independent political, cultural, educational and other institutions have the space in which to emerge, then the basis for the homogeneity of the forces united in opposition to the illegitimate communist state dissolves. Civil society, in another sense, opens up a field of potential conflict and competition between the forces hitherto brought together by a repressive state, and which hitherto possessed a common interest in helping each other to survive.

Yet a new solidarity cannot emerge without the institutions for some new form of political co-operation. To appeal to the old solidarity, to the old unity of ‘civil society’ is to try to recreate a political experience whose conditions are past. The appeal is credible to those who voice it because political parties are as yet prototypical and social interests are still incoherent, and not yet institutionally defined. Yet the process of political definition of the opposing groups cannot long be avoided if new source of stability are to be introduced into the system. These sources will not spring from the old ‘civil society’ and they cannot recreate the old ‘solidarity’.

The new societies of Eastern Europe will not quickly create the civil society of Western Europe. But they must quickly create the forms of political stability characteristic of Western Europe, that is, parties that define clear political alternatives and act as a political check one upon the other. Without such explicit expression and containment of political conflicts, the antagonisms that are emerging cannot be deflected by normal political processes of opposition, bargaining and compromise. These antagonisms are powerful—national and regional differences, the divergent interests of city and countryside, and of workers in large and inefficient socialist enterprises versus the economic modernisers.
'Civil society' is not homogeneous, and clinging to the political myth of its homogeneity fostered by the experience of opposition will probably do the opposite of what is intended, that is, accelerate the conflict between certain interest groups and the state. Only the creation of a party system and the building up of a political culture that accepts competition within democratic norms can secure the transition to Western representative democracy. This will be difficult if economic success and consumer prosperity do not come relatively quickly. If they do not—and that is the most likely outcome—then political stability may be threatened. Social interests may become increasingly antagonistic and political forces increasingly polarised. This is a real threat if the previous constraints of the authoritarian regime cannot be quickly replaced by a system of institutionalised pluralist conflict and a stable party system. In this context constitutional questions are of the utmost importance. The state must be strengthened both as a means of protecting citizens’ rights through constitutional guarantees and an independent judiciary, and as a means of preserving political order through the constitutional defence of the power to govern. In central Europe this balancing act may just prove possible.

The advocates of ‘civil society’ and an overarching ‘citizens’ movement’ are seeking to delay this process of formation of a party system in the interests of short-term political harmony. They are seeking a democratic depolitisation through a unified majoritarian rule of a citizens’ bloc over and against the aim of political containment through a Western style party system. The theory of ‘civil society’ developed on the liberal Left. It has found Western advocates on the Left; those who, like John Keane, seek the renewal of Western democracy through citizens’ and social movements. The East European advocates of ‘civil society’ like Vaclav Havel and Adam Michnik were non-violent and anti-authoritarian radicals. Yet the idea of a majoritarian bloc, building a mass base of support and containing the parties, could well develop in an altogether less libertarian direction.

‘Civil society’ as a homogeneous political force is an idea at variance with modern mass democracy.

The collapse of Soviet rule in Eastern Europe has in effect restored the ‘cordon sanitaire’ the Western states created against the USSR in the 1920s. That zone of economically and militarily weak states, governed predominantly by fragile dictatorships, constituted a source of weakness rather than strength. The precise conditions of the 1930s are unlikely to be repeated, but a zone of weak states on the border of an unstable and dissolving Soviet regime, outside the Western security system, offers multiple sources of conflict.

Even the most encouraging scenario is fraught with problems. The successful incorporation of the Eastern states into the Western economic, military and political order will inevitably push the ‘West’ towards the Soviet border. It would then face the Soviet world on a new frontier and one which gives both the USA and EC a real interest in the political future of the area which was the core of the Soviet Empire. A USSR that achieved the transition to democracy and economic renewal would pose no great threat. An unstable and dissolving USSR is a real menace to the West, if the West has to think of a frontier that begins in Poland. For that reason, the West has an immediate interest not only in the states of Eastern Europe, but in the political future of the USSR. Whether the Union will survive, and if so, how, are questions not only for Moscow but for Brussels and Washington.

PAUL HIRST is professor of social theory at Birkbeck College, University of London, and the author of Representative Democracy and Its Limits (1990). He was visiting professor at the University of Western Australia in July and August.
Pat Dodson was one of five commissioners of the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody, which reported in April. He is a longtime Aboriginal activist and a leading figure in the push for national land rights legislation. He is now director of the Kimberley Land Council in WA. He was interviewed by Liz Jackson.

It's now been almost four months since the release of the report of the Royal Commission. What do you think of the response to the issues raised by the report over that time?

The response has been disappointing in my view, given the considerable effort and money that was put in to deal with the complex and far-ranging underlying issues which give rise to the high levels of custody. Unfortunately the media, and the governments to some degree, have concentrated on the same matters that give rise to the Royal Commission — the allegations of foul play and even murder. These were the matters that people were expecting to find solutions to and rightly so, I suppose. But the Commission attempted not only to address the criminal justice system and the investigation of complaints but also to look at how services to Aboriginal people could be better co-ordinated and delivered, and at how a better understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people could be established. It is disappointing that that side of the Commission's report hasn't taken off. Most people seem to be simply seeking a quick answer to what has been a tragic experience in the lives of many Aboriginal people.

Do you have a concern that people will say that because there was no finding of foul play by the Royal Commission, there were no recommendations of charges, that therefore there is nothing wrong with the system, we don't have to worry about it?

I'm very concerned about that. The fact is that the Commissioners who enquired into those individual cases came
to those conclusions, but if we leave that as the solution we will not have learnt anything. If we as a nation simply drop what the Commission has said to be the underlying issues, we have been derelict in our responses, it seems to me.

Do you think that part of the problem is that people feel that the social disadvantage of Aboriginal people has already been extensively researched and so they don’t expect the Royal Commission to tell them anything new?

I think there may be a fair bit of truth in that. The Royal Commission is all about providing a mirror for non-Aboriginal people to see the history of their contact with Aboriginal people – that is, to understand how things have come to be as they are today. So there is no excuse for the Australian people or for governments to say they are unsure what it is that needs to be done or how to proceed, because the recommendations clearly indicate how those problems might be addressed.

I recently conducted a three day bush meeting at Mary River, between Fitzroy Creek and Hall’s River out in the Kimberley, which was attended by some three or four hundred people from the various Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley. The majority of police stations in the Kimberley region were represented, as well as the superintendent in charge of the area and the police union representative. So we sat down for three days out in the sticks, they presented to me a range of their concerns, and it also gave them the chance to see that there are many Aboriginal people who do take a responsible attitude to their community and the problems of the impact of Western law as well as the impact of their own customary law. In these sorts of situations I have been impressed by the concern of West Australian people, across all sectors, to try to find ways of addressing the levels of custody that Aboriginal people are exposed to. But what surprises me most and concerns me most is the lack of follow-through on the part of the government.

There is a view that since 1967 federal governments have been giving out money to Aboriginal groups and we don’t seem to have anything to show for it. Television programs can still be made that show appalling health statistics, appalling incarceration rates, appalling housing conditions. Do you think that some people in the community just feel like throwing up their hands and giving up?

I think that is right. Many people came to my conferences and put the view that Aboriginal people simply have to put together the figures and then collect a pile of money from Canberra or some other place that they had total and unfettered control over. Very few people realise that the decision-making process is somewhat removed from Aboriginal people. They have very little say over the way...
problems should be addressed, because programs are devised by government departments and then applied to Aboriginal people. There are some communities where up to 40 agencies in the course of one week have met the same Aboriginal group, offering a range of programs, all aimed at benefiting that group, without any real co-ordination or an integrated approach to what the impact was going to be. In that situation people feel fairly powerless over their own affairs, and the response to that sense of powerlessness is simply to let the bureaucrats do what the bureaucrats want to do. The lack of control over their own affairs underlies the excess drinking of many Aboriginal people, and it is understandable to me that ordinary Australians watching the news throw their hands up in horror at finding that Aboriginal people are still experiencing all these tremendous social problems. But the other side to that coin, is the efforts that are being made by Aboriginal people to put positive proposals about how some of those things should be addressed. It’s the interaction between those efforts and the bureaucratic reality which is the area that most Australians don’t understand, because it doesn’t affect their lives to the same degree. The Commissioners have pointed this out as one area that really needs to change.

The Commission certainly recognised that Aboriginal-controlled organisations should be given a greater level of acknowledgement for the things they do, and that, given resources, those things will only enhance the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. They are also important in breaking down the stereotypes about Aboriginal people being incapable of running their own affairs.

Non-Aboriginal people tend to think that these organisations arise because people want to have some form of apartheid. That’s not the case. The experience of these organisations is that people feel better able to utilise their services because in most cases the people who are employed in them tend to be more responsive and understanding of the broader and social and cultural problems of Aboriginal people.

The Royal Commission saw an inverse realtionship between the strength of Aboriginal organisation and the kind of underlying causes that cause deaths in custody. What about land rights? How much of a causal link are you prepared to say there is?

If there is a lack of security to land for Aboriginal people, that gives rise to a myriad of social problems for Aboriginal as well as non-Aboriginal people. If you have people who live around the fringes of towns because they have no access to land that they are able to establish proper houses upon, then you are always going to have fertile ground for prejudice arising in the community. Land is important from that point of view, but it is also important to the very identity of Aboriginal people, as it centres around the religious beliefs and practices that are essential to people's concept of who they are as a people. One of the responses the Premier of this state made to the Royal Commission report when it first came out was that land rights was back on the agenda. Within two days of making that statement, however, she claimed that was not what she really said.

The Report comes down with a strong statement in favour of reconciliation as a way forward for Aboriginal people. Does that mean that your Commission is endorsing the 10-year reconciliation process that the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs has proposed?

No, it doesn’t mean that; the concept of reconciliation that the Commissioners were talking about is not necessarily to be identified with a particular political thrust that the current Minister for Aboriginal Affairs may have. Obviously, there are some tangential connections, in terms of the idea that what is required in Australia to heal the rift between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is to break down the barriers that exist, to get rid of the stereotypes, to reduce the fears and apprehensions that people have about each other, to build up and strengthen where there are weaknesses on both sides of the fence. So, to reconcile people is a noble type of thing to do, but it is also a practical and essential thing to do, if we are going to reduce the levels of expenditure that we currently have for police, health and special types of programmes to tackle the backlog of needs that exist in Aboriginal communities. No doubt it will fall short first up, because it is the first attempt, but that doesn’t mean that the ideal of reconciling people and provide a greater sense of freedom and respect should be done away with.

Do you think there is a problem, though, in the confidence that Aboriginal people will have in the process of reconciliation, precisely because it does fall short of previous goals that Aboriginal people have put forward? Each of these policies has fallen short of the previous one.
National land rights was the most ambitious and then the Treaty was a fallback option from that, and now reconciliation is being described as a further fallback. Is that all that people are going to have to settle for now?

Well, I think they are immediate reactions that are valid for people to make. But I would think that any initiative that tries to be positive about terrifyingly difficult and complex issues needs to have some support given to it to make it work. Australians are great knuckers of things. I think you have got to be positive about the future of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationships in this country, otherwise the whole thing degenerates. This perception that governments never do anything to address legitimate concerns is not entirely true, and it would be wrong to continue to maintain this as the status quo situation, because governments do respond in a lot of positive ways, even if not always with the best thought-out strategy. But they do respond; at least there is a concern. And as I have said in the report, it’s a concern that I have found clearly in this state among a wide cross-section of the community, for an improvement in the conditions of Aboriginal people not just through acts of largesse or the welfare system, but to improve the standing Aboriginal people have before the law and the rights they might have in order to assert their positions.

So, I think there is a lot of good will there. There are lots of simple efforts being made by many different people, not of them are world-shattering events or activities but they are terribly important to the people in those areas and in a cumulative way they are important for the country the state and the nation.

Are you concerned that we are heading into a decade that looks like it will be dominated by conservative politics? Although things may be bad in a lot of areas now, people could say, politically speaking, that you’ve never had so good?

I really don’t know if we are heading towards a conservative reign of politics or not. I can only say that conservative politics in a lot of cases have produced the best results for Aboriginal people and those that have promised things of a radical nature have often wafted away in the wind. Australia has projected itself internationally as a country with some concern for justice in the broader arena, and in relation to South Africa in particular. And as we have seen very recently with the visit of our Foreign Affairs minister, it is not immune to the perception of foreign journalists of the relationships of any government with the indigenous people in this country. So I’m not entirely pessimistic about the way in which Aboriginal rights would be dealt with under any other government. The United Nations have declared 1993 as the Year of Indigenous Peoples. If Aboriginal people remain the most over-represented group in the social requirement areas, whatever government is in power will be held accountable for that.

In summing up the work of the Royal Commission, you talked about those things that may take a decade but there are things that are more pressing such as the immediate causes of those deaths. What do you think are the most important things for governments to focus on immediately?

I think they have got to focus on those recommendations that impact on the criminal justice matters. Really, you have got to look at those seriously, to see how Aboriginal people can play a greater part in that area. It’s not just having liaison committees but having Aboriginal people in the police department, and the Attorney-Generals department, having an Aboriginal panel of some type that is capable of looking at justice matters for Aboriginal people. I think that governments have also got to seriously look at providing alternative places for custody for those people who are not criminal but happen to be intoxicated or people who need to be taken into protective custody, so that the police are not the ones who have to shoulder that responsibility. They need to look at the nature of alternatives to custody for certain types of offences, and at ways in which Aboriginal people can participate in the discipline of their own people in a creative way. Those things appear to me to be commonsense things to do.

What do you think it says about the relationship between police and Aboriginal people that the families of people who died in custody still feel, angry, bitter and dissatisfied after the Royal Commission report?

It’s a terribly tragic situation, and hard for Aboriginal people to accept, that someone of their family has died while in custody of the police. The Royal Commission, while it has not recommended that charges be laid, clearly highlighted the concept of duty of care. If you take someone’s freedom away from them, and place them in custody, then you have a clear duty to look after that person and to ensure their safety, and there should be no complacency about that. That way of understanding the duty of care has not been the norm. That is what the Commission has said; that there was a fairly indifferent standard of care, in a number of places. Now certainly the excuse for not having a proper duty of care is no longer available, but the deaths are still a matter of concern. I would hope that the history of this tragic relationship over the last ten years that the Commission has looked at, is never repeated. And if the recommendations are adopted, it will go a large way to addressing that.

On a more hopeful note, I am more confident that the general goodwill in the community is such that people are no longer prepared to tolerate the appalling statistics of Aboriginal people are taken into custody in this state — 43 times more likely than non-Aboriginal people. That is an appalling record.

This is an edited version of an interview conducted for ABC Radio’s Background Briefing in August. Tapes of the program are available from ABC Radio Tapes, GPO Box 9994 in each capital city.
In recent years the claims of citizenship have ranked highly in the catalogue of Left values worldwide. Yet Australian Labor has had little or nothing to say about the citizenship debate. Peter Beilharz argues that the problem lies in the evolution of labourism itself. The answer may be a reconstructed and revitalised social democracy.

What has happened to marxism, politics, democracy and socialism? With the fall of the Wall, the collapse of communism and the increasing sense that the present is history, the temptation is to forget that marxism was in crisis from at least the late 1970s.

A number of particular factors were evidently at work then; the collapse of Eurocommunism and the hopes for union of the Left in France, interminable wranglings in the British Labour Party, the emergence of Green politics, the work of André Gorz and Rudolf Bahro, the continuing feminist critique of marxism, the parting of ways between marxism and feminism, the explosive work of Foucault among them. One key book in this process of dissolution was Nicos Poulantzas’ last work, *State, Power, Socialism* (1978). Poulantzas, like the Spanish Eurocommunist Fernando Claudin, broke away from classical marxism exactly on the grounds that marxism had very little to say about politics, or more particularly about democracy.

The fall of the Wall, in this sense, is the consolidation of this process of dissolution and rethinking: not its beginning. The realisation that marxism had no real theory of politics preceded the recent, apocalyptic events across central and eastern Europe. Gramsci, of course, anticipated some of these difficulties by rejecting the idea of proletarian socialism and arguing for the necessity of class alliances, eschewing the developmental tales of earlier marxism. In reformist ways, the necessity of class alliances was also the premise of two of the proudest moments in modern labour politics—the Attlee government in Britain between 1945 and 1951, and the Whitlam government in Australia, 1972-1975. The relationship between class and politics, however, has always been a major problems for socialists, whether revolutionary or reformist. The Bolsheviks, and those who might still long for them, could indeed argue that they had politics sorted out; what was missing from Marx’s theory, they would argue, was not a theory of politics but a theory of the party. Politics was really the business of the party. Enter Lenin—for his sole contribution to marxist theory was the postulate of the vanguard party; most other parts
of Leninism are borrowed directly from Marx or Kautsky, or Hobson or Helvetius.

Today, most of us are past vanguards, if stuck with mass parties. We’re stuck, in addition, with parliament. Those among us who maintain closer ties to class politics probably still persist in viewing parliament as a bad joke (there’s no denying that it can be a joke). But as marxism has come apart, some others among us have come to similar conclusions from a different direction. For, from the early 80s on, many marxists gave up their formal associations with communism and realigned with the heir apparent, the new hope, the new ALP, Accord unsheathed and at the ready.

Now, in the 90s, labour politics seems to have become a laughing stock—but that, again, is the recent turn. The problem which precedes it is that the labour tradition, like the marxist tradition, is big on class and short on politics.

None of this is to say that class is insignificant, let alone redundant. It stares us in the face every day of our lives, and especially in periods of depression. The problem with class politics, however, is that it immediately identifies questions of our goals—the good society, however imagined—with questions of interests. This hits an old knee-jerk in Australian political culture, where politics has always, historically, been identified with producer groups,
whether business, unions or agriculture. Thus politics in Australia has always been dominated by economics—and politics has come to be identified as the pursuit of group or class economic self-interest by other means. Class politics has worked against the development of civic culture.

If we reject the more abstract utopianism of, say, Lenin’s *The State and Revolution*, where the ‘good’ society is staffed exclusively by male comrades, proletarians—if we accept difference, and accept the fact that the society of the future will still have classes and competing interests—then the question becomes, how can we get beyond the ‘politics’ of self-interest? One way to begin to follow this line of possibility is to imagine the denizens of the future not as comrades or proletarians all but as citizens. This is an old way of thinking, which harks back to Aristotle and, more radically, was a keystone of the hopes of the French Revolution. The argument is simple. Persons in a society, conceived as a community, have rights and duties by virtue of their membership—their physical presence—in that society. Rights and duties are integral to persons, but not self-interest? One way to begin to follow this line of argument is to proceed with the aim of social and individual elevation, then labourism has no politics at all. The closest we get, perhaps, is the foggy-headed evangelism of Chifley’s ‘light on the hill’, or Whittam’s meritocratic impulses to elevation through education and health care support.

Labour’s politics since the 1890s have been caught up with the pursuit of state power and representation in its own interests. The strongest symbol of this is the trend which can be called state experimentalism. The question of the state and its role in recent Australian history is an intriguing one, especially because everybody agrees that the state has been central but no one has really explained the specific content of Labor’s statist. For labour statist, indeed, has largely been pragmatic. When we read, for example, Evatt’s biography of W A Holman, *Australian Labour Leader* (1942), we get a sense of civilising purpose or progressivism, but only an instrumental defence of statist; the state is merely the means to pursue economic development, to combat unemployment, to provide cheap foodstuffs through state butcher-shops and so on. Visiting German Social Democrats, convinced of the superiority of their own tradition, scoffed at such turn-of-the-century exercises in state provision. This was not socialism. And probably they were right. For the real achievement of German Social Democracy—classical marxism after Marx and Engels—was the creation of state within a state but of a society within a society, a set of social relations which could support and protect them from Junker capitalism, if not from nascent reaction in the 1930s. And the Social Democrats managed this even though they had no word for citizenship. Citizens were defined in German as *Bürger*, simultaneously citizens and bourgeois, there being no word which suggested the possibility of separating the two.

So we’re back, again, to the problem of property and citizenship. Ever since socialists have been prepared to make peace with markets and money rather than sloganise about their abolition, the issue of property has loomed larger on the Left. Indeed, the earlier labour Left was haunted by the image of yeoman socialists, envisaging the good society as one back on the land; ‘three acres and a cow’ or something a little more ambitious than that. Suburbanism, in a sense, became a half-urbanised version of that dream—the quarter-acre, perhaps, and a Vicet instead of the cow. Yet Leftists have often got no further than this on the issue of property, except perhaps to acknowledge the legitimacy of having a crack at running a takeaway
Neither marxism nor labourism have ever been strong on democracy or citizenship

shop or something like that. To put it in economic terms, the Left has never really been able to address the issue of entrepreneurship, let alone to provide an alternative vision of how economic life might be organised.

There are, however, others within Australian history who accepted the rights of property but argued that for rights, there were also duties. The most obvious figure here is H B Higgins, whose 1907 Harvester judgment can be criticised from various perspectives, but not this one. Higgins' view was plain: no duties, no rights. Capital had no god-given right to existence or valorisation outside its social context and responsibilities; if it could not offer decent wages, for example, it should not operate in a particular industry at all.

Higgins, together with others such as Walter Murdoch and Alfred Deakin, represented the legacy of colonial liberalism into the early 20th century. As Stuart Macintyre shows in his recent A Colonial Liberalism, this positive approach to citizenship was earlier pioneered by men like Charles Pearson, George Higinbotham and David Syme. There are parallel feminist stories about women such as Rose Scott and Catherine Helen Spence. Each of Macintyre's trio was in a different way dedicated to the development of the public sphere: Syme and Higinbotham via the print form, Higinbotham via the law and in parliament, Pearson in education. The concept of citizenship in their hands was active, rather than passive—it involved duties as well as rights—even if it nevertheless was constrained by Victorian ideas of race and gender. Their predilections may have been white and patriarchal, but at least they worked for a politics of public purpose.

They were followed, in turn, by other radicals and new liberals who can for convenience be grouped together as the WEA liberals, for they worked in and around that fascinating but oft-maligned institution, the Workers' Educational Association. They included among their number figures such as H C Coombs, GV Portus, WG K Duncan and Meredith Atkinson. Their project was to enable the pursuit of citizenship through community education, and in this they took a very different approach to citizenship or welfare than did the state experimentalists. They could argue in defence of state provision when it could be seen to enable participation, but not for its own sake; their orientation was, at least until the 1940s, local rather than national. Put in different terms, theirs was not a socialism of the stomach, but an argument that individual, group, and community were all deeply in need of spiritual development.

The consequences of my argument are clear. Neither marxism nor labourism have ever been strong on democracy or on citizenship. In the larger, global case of marxism the implication is that marxism's relation to liberalism in general, and to radical or new liberalism in particular, needs to be reassessed completely. For whatever the flaws of liberalism—including its own failure to be sufficiently democratic—liberalism has taken democracy much more seriously than marxism ever has. In the local, immediate case, marxism has failed to develop strongly political or democratic credentials because its purview has been exactly that of the socialism of the stomach. I do not mean this judgment to be dismissive, but simply critical. The Australian labour tradition can legitimately make all kinds of noble claims about its travails, but they have been conducted within the horizons of this kind of imagination.

It follows from this, too, that it is time to acknowledge that the stronger arguments for citizenship in recent Australian history have been advanced not by labour but by those often chastised or stigmatised as 'friends of labour', people like Higgins who actively worked with labour, but were not of it, and others like the WEA intellectuals who did not even think in terms of the cause of labour so much as the prospects of the community. Labour has had its closer friends who argued for citizenship: Evatt, before he joined the ALP, while he was a student of Francis Anderson at the University of Sydney; Whitlam, who in some ways sought to bend the ALP in communitarian and national directions into the 1970s through schemes such as the Australian Assistance Plan and Medibank. On the whole, Labor's legislative mindset has been closer to that of state experimentalism, viewing individuals as comrades or subjects rather than as citizens.

But this, too, brings us to another difficulty—the way in which arguments for citizenship were then garnered by the other bunch who drew on liberalism, the nascent Liberal Party of R G Menzies. Throughout the postwar period two
different but related processes have made it even more difficult to argue for citizenship than it may previously have been. The first is the conservative appropriation of the idea of citizenship and its reduction to the trivia of flag-saluting and tree-planting. The second is the increasing social acceptance that citizenship was only about rights and not duties, about welfare provision rather than political or social participation.

All of this helps to explain why arguments for citizenship have had such little hearing in Australia of late. Citizenship can too easily be mocked, as a token of puritan morality and imperial bootlicking. Moreover, the fundamental reliance of both marxism and labourism on the language of class means that the idea of citizenship can easily be ridiculed and rejected as incapable of addressing or transcending the brutal realities of class inequality and oppression. This is a pyrrhic victory for marxism and labourism, however, for they have no practical solutions to opposition outside the labour market, let alone beneath it, in the underclass whose members cannot merely be explained away as members of the industrial reserve army or as ‘workers out of work’.

A more incisive critique of citizenship is the feminist case, that citizenship is really only for boys anyway. If politics is seen as a contract between men, against women, then the slogan of citizenship is obviously unhelpful—we need a new kind of politics. But if the newer arguments are seen as emerging from the already existing traditions, then liberal feminism may still have some way to go. Citizenship may have been constructed in a patriarchal way, but then it can also be reconstructed.

In this regard, the positive postulate of citizenship in the 90s can be viewed as a political extension of the sociological critique of corporatism which was directed against the ALP-ACTU Accord in the 80s. Arguments against corporatism pointed primarily to the problem of exclusion—that social contracts are envisaged as deals between peak representatives of producer groups which therefore reconstitute citizens as producers and ignore and exclude citizens who are not constituted as authorised producers.

What has shifted, in this argument, is the implicit alliance between the critics of corporatism and the revolutionary marxist critics of class collaborationism. Through the 70s and into the 80s, corporatism was viewed largely as social democracy’s attempt to geld the labour movement by incorporating it into the state. Once we transcend those notions of the working class as a redemptive actor, we are also bound to rethink the idea of social contracts and the issue of social belonging. It’s also timely, in this context, to rethink the legacy of the social-democratic tradition itself, for social democracy after World War Two also came to accept passive ideas of provision rather than active conceptions of citizenship.

The defence of citizenship is entirely compatible with the critique of corporatism and also with the defence of class compromise. The idea of socialism, indeed, remains inconceivable without the idea of class alliance. The difference today is that class alliances cannot any longer be privileged over other forms of political liaison. The process within which the Left is living is, in a certain sense, a return to the social democratic tradition which was elbowed out of the main light by the incredible popularity of communism after the October Revolution, the Depression and the Great Patriotic War. Socialism is now being reconstituted as part of the democratic project, returning to broader questions of equality, democracy and participation. The liberal and socialist streams which ran in separate directions out of the French Revolution are now entering a process of renegotiation.

This is not to suggest that humanity is back where modernity started, nor that modernity has so far provided us with all the bits which we need to create a better future. This is no more likely than the prospect of resolving the mess theoretically by scotchtaping together Marx, Mary Daly and Lyotard. Distressed as we may feel, these are interesting times to be alive—fearsome, and yet challenging. The prospects for the future may appear to be modest, but they are more challenging than anything we have encountered since the 60s.

PETER BEILHARZ is an editor of Thesis Eleven. These arguments are pursued further in Beilharz, Considine and Waits, Arguing About the Welfare State: the Australian Experience (Allen and Unwin, forthcoming).

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COMING TO THE PARTY

Britain's Labour Party is undergoing a crisis of identity very similar to that of the ALP. Dennis Glover compares the experiences with the Australian debate conducted in ALR.

The ongoing debate in ALR on the factional, structural and policy directions of the ALP in many ways mirrors that occurring in the British Labour Party which has been inching its way to an historic structural overhaul. The ascendant sections of the party, from both the Right and Left, unions, parliamentary and constituency sections, believe that the notion of a union-dominated socialist party is an unpopular anachronism. The future, they believe, lies in the social democratic model predominant in Europe. Here, I want to approach briefly the Australian debate in the light of the British experience—which provides some thoughts on how Australian Labor could make itself more responsive to the social forces of the 90s and thereby give a more radical platform greater legitimacy in the eyes of the electorate.

Labor in the 90s has to appeal not only to those who identify as unionists or interest group supporters, but also those who wish as individuals to live in a more democratic society—people who support demands for a more liberal, equal and sustainable society but who oppose the corporatism and democratic compromises that they perceive Labor currently implies. These are the people who are currently attracted to the Australian Democrats and to the Liberal Democrats in Britain.

The current changes in the structure of the British Labour Party attempt to address these issues. They are designed to transform it from a traditional trade union dominated democratic socialist (its critics say "labourist") Labour Party into a European-style social democratic (its critics argue American-style Democratic) party.

Power within major parties, the electorates have judged, must be taken away from groups whose entrenched position militates against proposals for reform and instead be given to those who represent the emerging new social forces. These new structures must conform to society’s notions of what now constitutes democratic decision-making.

The British Labour Party’s current structure derives from its origins as the parliamentary voice of the trade union movement, and power within the party still rests largely with the unions. There is a growing consensus within the party that this should now change, as social changes make the union dominated ‘Labour’ parties less appropriate and less appealing to a constituency which increasingly identifies itself according to factors other than union membership eg, gender, as consumers, as environmentalists and so on.

In line with this changing emphasis, the leadership of the party is currently pushing for the adoption of a one member, one vote system of preselection. This would replace the current system whereby locally affiliated unions and socialist societies get a substantial bloc vote on the selection panels in each constituency.

At the same time, policy making is being transformed in two ways. First, a thorough Policy Review has just been carried out, following the highly publicised ‘Labour Listens’ campaign which was designed to rid the public image of the Leader taking orders from the unions and militant party members.

Secondly, proposals will be put to the next conference to set up a 170-strong National Policy Forum which will sit all year round, continually reviewing policy and submitting a platform to the conference which can be amended from the floor.
How should one interpret these changes taking place in British Labour? Could they provide an example for those trying to democratise the ALP? It depends on your level of cynicism.

The cynical approach, adopted by Labour’s ‘hard Left’ (symbolised by Tony Benn), sees the current proposals as creating a National Policy Forum which will be easier to control than the party conference, and will turn conference, supposedly the supreme expression of democracy in the party, into a rubber stamp of the leadership and a pathetic carnival—much like the US Democratic Convention. There is, indeed, a good deal to commend this line of reasoning. The reform proposal documents are not shy in stating the importance of the party conference to the electoral image and the need to keep the opinion polls in mind each October.

However, the Bennite hard Left should be the first to realise the weaknesses of the current policy-making structure. In 1974 the third Wilson government was elected with a policy manifesto largely written by Benn himself which stressed the need for sweeping public control, ownership and democratisation of industry. However, within a short period of time Prime Minister Wilson had shunted him sideways into the Department of Energy and effectively shelved the party program. Members of the ALP need no lessons on how easy it is for Cabinet not only to ignore but contradict totally policy that is formulated by one-off ‘binding’ party conferences.

A less cynical approach would be to look at the inadequacies of policy-making in both the Labour Party and the ALP. Policy, it is argued, is often hastily thrown together, not fully thought out in terms of the practicalities of financing and implementation, and motions passed often represent face-saving compromises full of internal contradictions or attempts to shelve debate on a politically damaging area without really resolving the issue.

Labour’s national platform committees face enormous pressure from factional leaders and cabinet members to produce suitably bland and moderate policy. Debates at conference become largely meaningless because the outcome is already known. In fact, rather than being an expression of party democracy, conference degenerates into a forum for the leadership to affirm their right to ignore its decisions and to implement policy emanating largely from the business community and the press.

We must come to grips with the fact that leaders will always reserve the right to ignore party policy. This is because, whether party members like it or not, the community palpably does not accept the principle that parties should have a veto over the decisions of elected legislators and governors. In their eyes, party policy does not have the requisite amount of democratic legitimacy to bind parliaments and governments. How do we give it greater legitimacy? This is the question which must be addressed by members of reforming parties who feel outraged by their governments’ continual records of ‘betrayal’. Some answers can be found in the British Labour Party’s proposed reforms. Others require us to go beyond those measures to explore new ways of merging the ALP more closely with the progressive elements in the community.

Firstly, policy must be aimed primarily at solving the problems at hand and not just at reconciling factional differences. We should seek to move towards the structures of European social democratic parties where policy is made on an ongoing basis by large elected standing committees or forums and ratified, amended or rejected by full party conferences.

A second measure that should be investigated, and which goes further than those proposed for the British Labour Party, is calling for large scale community involvement in the policy making process. The community feels hostile to the decisions of parties as opposed to those of governments partly because it rightly perceives that it has no input into these decisions which directly affect their lives if implemented.

Another possible measure and this will probably be rejected outright by many members is the inclusion of non-party members on the party policy committees.

The reasons for opposition to this idea are obvious. It seems, on the face of it, undemocratic. But, of course, party policy is already heavily influenced by non-party sources—mostly conservative ones. It’s obvious that the leadership at national conference is far more concerned with the opinions of the journalists, media entrepreneurs and finance markets than with the internal opposition within the party. The growing influence of hired electoral, marketing and advertising consultants is also manifest. Given that not all environmental, welfare, media, economics and other experts are interested in membership of a political party, we should think of ways of involving them, taking advantage of their specialised knowledge and reaching out to large groups of people not yet directly involved in the political process. Their influence can be prevented from becoming excessive; they would remain invited allies, helping the ALP harness support from areas which should be the natural territory.

On a more philosophical level, perhaps it’s time for the ALP, as for British Labour, to get away from the vanguardist notion of a political party. Internal party democratisation is important but is not enough. A total lack of internal party democracy certainly hasn’t hindered the British Conservatives in winning successive elections and implementing a radical reform program. We should, as a social democratic or democratic socialist guiding principle, be looking to involve the whole community in the political process, in democratising society at large. Events in Eastern Europe have proved that socialism or social democracy is doomed unless this occurs.

DENNIS GLOVER formerly worked for the Victorian Trades Hall Council. He is now a research student at King’s College, Cambridge.
There are no lesbians on television. It used to be the Golden Rule. Well, there was the occasional, passing reference on a Wednesday or Saturday night movie—a minor character, or an insult, or a joke. Think hard now; there was Cher in *Silkwood*, Meryl Streep in *Manhattan*, Cathy Tyson in *Mona Lisa*. The lesbian relationship in *The Color Purple* was much downplayed—Steven Spielberg justified it by saying he wanted to make a film people would “go to see”: i.e., a film about black people and not about lesbians, whereas, in fact, Alice Walker’s book was about black lesbians. *The Hunger* had an ill-fated but tasty fling between Susan Sarandon and Catherine Deneuve; but you didn’t see much because of those damn billowing white curtains, and anyway it was OK because one of them was a vampire. Ditto the simmering look and three-second ‘afterwards’ scene between Jodie Foster and Nastassia Kinski in *The Hotel New Hampshire*. Jodie was a sexual assault survivor and Nastassia thought she was a bear; they both returned to the straight and narrow within about ten minutes of movie time; what more can you say?

In *Good Morning Vietnam* Robin Williams made a joke about women in comfortable shoes, and in *Julia* Jane Fonda decked a guy and then threw a table on him just to be sure he got the message when he said that she and Vanessa Redgrave were lovers. (They weren’t. *Surprise*).

I’m sure there are a few more examples but, in 15 or 20 years of Hollywood filmmaking, I don’t really consider that much of an attempt. As for the made-for-TV genre the pickings are slimmer still. To my memory there have only been a few. In about 1980 there was a lesbian air hostess on *Skyways* (an Australian soapie, rather like *Young Doctors* but with air hostesses and pilots instead of nurses and doctors). Around that time, *Prisoner* hit the screen, too, with a long-running violent, sadistic prison guard Joan Ferguson and short-lived violent, sadistic (but misunderstood) inmate Frankie. In 1983 two lesbians who’d left their husbands and were raising kids together were interviewed on *Faces of Change* (a series of documentaries about Australian women) and in 1989 Gwen, a secretary on *LA Law*, revealed that Sam, her lover, whom she spoke to frequently on the phone was not the chap they’d thought she was. Interestingly, in both *Skyways* and *LA Law* (made nearly ten years apart) the character’s lesbianism is only revealed when a male character—her boss—makes a pass at her and she has to explain her rejection of him (as though a heterosexu-al woman in the circumstances would have had no ‘excuse’).

Now, in the last four or five months we’ve been flooded with dykes on telly and I, for one, don’t quite know what to do with it. Vixens (a group of lesbian motorcyclists) appeared on *Hitch* to talk about their anti-gay-bashing patrols of inner city Sydney. Two lesbians who were denied access to a Sydney hospital’s fertility program appeared on *Sixty Minutes*. Organisers of a recent lesbian festival and a lesbian conference appeared on *Good Morning Australia* to publicise the events (and were asked, incidentally, how their parents had ‘coped’ with their lesbianism). Then GP featured two lesbians seeking access to an IVF program and having a relationship crisis about who was going to be the birth-mother and who the co-parent.

So who are these women, these lesbians? Victims of violence, vigilantes, sadists, mothers, frustrated would-be mothers and creative, energetic women who organise cultural and political events for thousands of their kind but nevertheless broke their parents’ hearts.

Oh, and they’re lawyers, too. Yes, July saw the height of all things TV lesbian—*LA Law*’s latest and greatest (and thwarted) affair between CJ and Abby. First they were friends—then “The Kiss that Shocked America”!

Well, maybe it shocked American hets; I’m sure American dykes found it a tad disappointing: 2.8 seconds and no sign of any tongue. Still, it was the first ‘lesbian’ kiss filmed for television and hundreds of thousands of us were glued to our TV sets to see herstory in the making. Then there was the inevitable rejection and assertions of hetero- and bisexuality (Abby and CJ respectively) and, over the next six weeks (yep, it got me hooked) we had the re-establishment of the friendship, some sexual jealousy, a date or two—finally!—Abby telling CJ she’s ready now. Granted, it was presumptuous, but only a male scriptwriter with instructions about the advertisers would have made CJ reject her in such clear terms (“consider yourself two things: dumped and relieved” for those of you who haven’t memorised it after several viewings on the VCR).

Now *LA Law* was great and fun, and probably the most watched 2.8 seconds of television ever screened, but I think it’s worth thinking about the images we’re seeing, who is making them and what it means for lesbians.

So what was good about it? Well, it made lesbians visible, it put women who were attracted to each other on screen in front of millions of people. It forced straight people to think about it. Lesbianism became ‘topical’—by which I mean it was on the agenda for once without us having to raise it. It also confronted the myth that heterosexuals are so fond of: that one can spot a lesbian, any lesbian, at a distance of several hundred metres and there’s never any doubt about it.

In that sense, although Abby’s and CJ’s instantaneous disavowals of lesbianism were wishy-washy, there were also some positive elements to the scene. You had no warning, you never would have known—and it just goes to show that you can’t make assumptions.
Another myth the 2.8 seconds debunked rather nicely was that of the predatory lesbian—short-haired, confident, experienced, a tad manipulative, ‘unfeminine’—seducing a straight woman who is the opposite of all the above. It started off that way, with CJ initiating the kiss, but from there on in it was femmy old Abbey doing all of the chasing.

Furthermore, as in any stereotype, there is the grain of truth from which it germinated; a hell of a lot of women seem straight, even homophobic, until their attitudes are questioned and they are given options which they previously didn’t see as possible. And so, maybe in that sense, lesbianism is what your mother always feared: contagious. Maybe, after all, Abbey’s a dyke.

LA Law also broke down the friend/lover dichotomy that is so much a part of heterosexual romantic mythology. As though one either is attracted or isn’t, makes a successful pass or never speaks to the person again; as though there is no room for flux or for a continuum of feeling and action. Abbey and CJ care about each other and are attracted to each other, they’re in a relationship which will continue whether or not they become lovers.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it was not ‘the lesbian episode’ nor even ‘the lesbian episodes’ or ‘series’—it’s going to continue well into the new series later in the year. So, in this case at least, lesbians are not just a special interest episode, or an exotic fad, trotted on and off again in an hour as if that covers us for another few years. “Dumped and relieved” was a hiccup; it’s not the end of the story.

Now, before I start to sound all aglow with the LA Law lesbian revolution, there were a lot of problems with the program, as well as deeper issues that relate to images of lesbians in the mainstream. Lesbians have been rendered invisible for so long now, that to be portrayed, and portrayed at all positively, is a novel and exciting event. However, I can’t help the cynic in me asking “Why now?” and “What next?”

Interestingly, the word lesbian has not been uttered on screen. Neither has ‘bisexual’. TV Week used ‘gay’ and Woman’s Day ‘lesbian’ (followed by ‘shock’ and ‘shocker’ respectively), but on the show itself ‘flexible’ was as daring as they got. So what’s the message? Maybe it’s OK to feel it, but not to name it. Lesbianism has become a ratings scoop, but it’s still a dirty word.

A more subtle but perhaps more alarming issue is that of contextualisation. Any item of news or media gathers meaning from the items or issues which surround it. Homosexuality has long been associated with mental illness, being a registered psychiatric disorder until 1979, and still regarded by many as a sign of ‘maladjustment’. Now, I don’t know if the show’s creators put that much thought into it, but it just happens that in both episodes with explicit lesbian content (The Kiss and The Date) there was a subplot of severe mental illness. With The Kiss there was a concurrent storyline involving the trial for murder of a man with multiple personalities (all of them fairly unattractive). Weeks later when The Date screened there was the judge who ended up shooting himself because of a degenerative mental illness. The parallels may have been subconscious but nevertheless convey a dangerous homophobic meaning.

To return to more apparent flaws; both characters are thin, white, attractive, able-bodied, upper-middle class professionals. (The same criticism can be made of the two women on GP who, what’s more, weren’t separatists, ‘bad nothing against men’ and ‘would provide a male role model for the child whatever sex’.) The message? If you have to be a lesbian, then be as much of a success at everything else of importance as you can. So we have tame lesbians, acceptable ones. In reply it’s often argued that to portray lesbians as short, chubby and crop-haired is to reinforce a tired old stereotype. So it’s quite a Catch 22; either lesbians are ‘feminine’ or we’re ‘butch’—either way we’re fitted into narrow constructions of what women are, that we have no part in building. Hence attractive or ugly are the only choices women have in mainstream portrayals and the image is oppressive either way. But why not non-Anglo or working class and ‘attractive’? I cannot recall ever seeing a non-Anglo lesbian on television.

What is the point of braking down one stereotype if it helps to build up another? All lesbians are not White and White lesbians should not accept the domination of images of White women as if it is ‘all we can expect’ or ‘a start’.

In other words, should lesbians settle back and feel satisfied to have found our niche in patriarchal culture? The networks finally realise there’s an untapped market (LA Law’s ratings were their highest ever on the night of the kiss, and there is some speculation that the beginning of another series hinged on that), the heterosexual viewing public decide to be interested or voyeuristic or liberal—and lesbians get a guest spot on a variety of TV shows, as long as we abide by the rest of the rules. I wonder, do lesbians really want that? Do we want, for example, to have advertising targeted at us? It disturbs me, I must admit, to think of lesbian feminists dashing down to the local newsagist to buy TV Week to see if there’s going to be a date next episode, and Woman’s Day because Amanda Donohoe was seen kissing Cecil Hoffman in an LA nightclub. Buying magazines one has sheer contempt for and rationalising in the process; well, I know it supports the monarchy and female braindeath and capitalism and is full of evil diets but, hell, it has got a lovely close-up picture of Amanda in those boots.

Not that I’m attacking those of us who did just that—after all, my press clippings are right up there with the best of them. I’m just saying that visibility is the first step on a long path towards even the most basic civil rights, and at each step it is important to measure just what is being lost and what is being gained.

I, for one, don’t want an outhouse of tolerance tacked onto the edge of someone else’s culture. I want our own culture. Images of ourselves that we create and control, that reflect our own diversity and experience, that don’t trap us into suffocatingly narrow constructions of femininity. Images I can feel proud of. Images that don’t have advertisement breaks.

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McKenzie Wark looks at the utopias of the new postindustrial science fiction.

“Program a map to display frequency of data exchange, every thousand megabytes a single pixel on a very large screen. Manhattan and Atlanta burn solid white. Then they start to pulse, the rate of traffic threatening to overload your simulation. Your map is about to go nova. Cool it down. At a hundred million megabytes per second, you begin to make out certain blocks in midtown Manhattan, outlines of hundred-year-old industrial parts ringing the core of Atlanta...”

This is how William Gibson, leading writer of the cyberpunk revolution in pop science fiction writing, visualises the landscape wrought upon the world by the second great wave of the industrial revolution. It is an imaginary description of an emergent terrain for both politics and culture.

Science fiction is the great pop literature of the first wave of the industrial revolution: machinery and rationality were its material; speed and power were its obsessions. This was also the material which much of the modern movement worked upon. Hence modern art and science fiction can be viewed as two distinct but connected cultural levels within the first machine age. As with much of avant garde art, the dominant threads of sci-fi narrative were projection and teleology. They threw into the future an image of a coherent aspect of the present, which was subsequently depicted in either a utopian or dystopian light.

The great socialist critic Raymond Williams has pointed out that the utopian wing of science fiction also had strong connections with the socialist movement. William Morris wrote his utopian vision of the future, News from Nowhere, as a response to what he thought were the overtly statisit and technocratic visions of another socialist utopian, Edward Bellamy. More recently, there have been attempts to revive the utopian novel as a feminist genre by Ursula Le Guin, Marge Piercy and Joanna Russ, not to mention Callenbach’s Ecotopia. Nevertheless, this is not a dominant trend.

Writing in the American magazine Socialist Review, Andrew Ross has argued in favour of a revival of left-utopian vision. However, it is questionable whether there is really an avid public for such imaginings. Political culture, like religious culture before it, seems to be going through an intense and disillusioning process of ‘secularisation’. Forms of fiction which imagine how the technologies of today will affect the political and cultural terrain of tomorrow, and project local and partial tactics for dealing with it, seem more the order of the day.

This is where the cyberpunk literature can be useful. Cyberpunk is an attempt to revolutionise the sci-fi genre and create a pop literature appropriate to the postmodern world. Where sci-fi was historically determinist and projective, utopian or dystopian, cyberpunk writing tends to occupy a flat information landscape, where grand historical meta-narratives have ceased to give a purchase on the real. William Gibson gives historical explanations linking his cyberspace present to our present, but casually, as if the development of cyberspace had altered the very tracks of history itself. The passage of time is registered more in memory. History appears in Gibson’s novels in the jumble of old and new brand names and products, in the juxtaposition of dirty back alleys with gleaming new facades.

Gibson’s labyrinthine landscapes of the postmodern city are neither utopian nor dystopian but, rather, to misuse a term of Foucault’s, heterotopian. Spaces are juxtaposed against each other; the lush hotel against downtown funk; the byzantine mansion against the spiritual colony. Overlaid upon this heterotopic jungle is the atopia of cyberspace. This is the no-place, the locus solus of pure data, no longer even language, the ‘consensual hallucination’ connecting those with power to each other. The heterotopic world of the street, full of grifters and drifters and data-cowboys is a space for a new underclass, cut off from the speed and velocity of cyberspace. Yet within cyberspace is a still more disturbing hierarchy rules where all-too-human uses of the data-nets find themselves outwitted by artificial centres of intelligence.

The pathos of this postmodern sci-fi comes from the fact that it is not monstrosous great machines, product of our reason and labour, that have become a power of our reason and labour. Rather, the virus of information, lucid or hallucinatory, and a product of our unconscious desires and play as much as reason and labour, has been woven into a net in which our subjectivity now plays with itself. We no longer have roots, we have aerials. Even our psychopathology has been externalised in information technology. The old aesthetic, philosophical and political connections between reason and technology have been severed. Technology is a surreal concept, demanding a post-Freudian psychopathology which has nothing to do with reductive diagrams of the family.

By grasping the impact of information technology on the unconscious, science fiction writer J G Ballard and, particularly, William Gibson, turns the technical into a literary device for grappling with language that is fully in the tradition of surrealism, but which does not require the myth of the avant garde to sustain its experiments. Gibson’s work is fully within the pop mainstream. The genre it plays with realism and naturalism...
takes place within. New literary devices, disguised as sci-fi technology, allow the exploration of new regions of connection between language, subjectivity and the real. Gibson's particular novelty lies in dreaming up new information technologies and new medical technologies and quite literally grafting them together within the body. Hence his work can support a double reading, as writing about subjectivity itself, using these technical devices as literary devices. Here a deliberately impoverished style of writing contains a wealth of technique.

The best writing in the new cyberpunk genre is without a doubt contained in Gibson's three novels: Neuromancer, Count Zero and Mona Lisa Overdrive, and some of his short stories collected as Burning Chrome. (Two useful anthologies are Mirrorshades, edited by Bruce Sterling and the sci-fi issue of Semiotext[e], No. 14. Not much of the cyberpunk literature is up to the standard of Gibson's, but these two anthologies provide a representative sample from which the reader can make her or his own judgments.) Also of interest is the work of Sol Yurick, best known for his novel The Warriors and his non-fiction essay Metatron (published by Semiotext[e] in their Foreign Agents Series). His hallucinatory novel on the Kennedy assassination theme, Richard A and his story in the Semiotext[e] anthology are also recommended. Rudy Rucker's Software and Wetware novels, while not as erudite as Yurick's or as crafted as Gibson's, are written by someone a little more technologically literate. All in all, a liberal dose of this literature ought to provide a glimpse of what may become the pop imaginary of the near future. In the words of Alan Moore's fabulous graphic novel, The Watchmen, "a world of impending exotic, glimpsed only peripherally".

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Australian Psycho?

In mid-August a 33-year old man by the name of Waite Frankum ran amok with a semi-automatic rifle in the main shopping plaza of the Sydney suburb of Strathfield, killing seven people. Police were reported to be disturbed by his 'ordinariness', and unable to find an explanation for the sudden outburst of random violence.

I had met Frankum, after a fashion, a few months before. He was driving taxis, and I had caught his cab to my lane in Bondi. It was a late evening, and I was tired and disinclined to talk much. He mentioned that until recently he had been living in Bondi, not too far from my own flat. As he told the story, he had owned a clothing store in Bondi, and had mortgaged his house to raise the capital for it. The store had failed, and the bank had repossessed the house. He now lived in Strathfield, with his sister, and was driving taxis while he tried to put his life together.

The conversation stayed in my mind, more for the way it had been conducted than what had been said. Hundreds of small businesses have gone bankrupt, since this recession began to bite, and people's lives fall apart all the time. What struck me most about this individual circumstance, however, was the way my taxi-driver talked about the situation. His manner was preoccupied, his voice was flat and matter-of-fact; it was almost as if he was talking about the misfortunes of a third, absent, person. I attempted to respond sympathetically, but he seemed almost not to hear.

I remember most of all the end of our conversation. We had arrived at my flat, and I payed him. I got out and wished him good luck. He answered - I don't remember what he said - and drove off. But it was obvious that what
I had said had not registered in his mind. He was too sunk within his own malaise.

When I reflected on this conversation the day following the ‘Strathfield massacre’, as one of the papers called it, several things occurred to me. First, as the police had initially, bemusedly, acknowledged, my taxi-driver had seemed a perfectly ordinary person. He showed no outward signs of aggressiveness. He evidenced no obvious anger or bitterness towards Mr Keating, or the banks, or the unions, or any other hate-figure, for his troubles. He drove far more carefully than the majority of taxi-drivers. In appearance and demeanour he seemed cautious, controlled, precise, respectable.

The conventional explanation of ‘serial killers’ or other supposed ‘psychopaths’ is that there is something ‘wrong’ with them, something which marks them off from most of their fellows. Preferably, they should have had an unhappy childhood, an unnatural fixation, a deep-seated grudge or sense of hate. I could not imagine any significant respect in which my taxi-drivers’ conversation or reactions would have distinguished him from any other of many thousands of similar middle-aged Australian males. Newspaper reports, grasping at a sign of psychopathy, reported the suggestion that his unit contained ‘a large collection of violent magazines and books’, and, in particular, a copy of the novel American Psycho. The former could, I suspect, be said in one way or another of every second adolescent male in suburban Australia, while American Psycho is reportedly an international bestseller. If that made my taxi-driver a ‘psycho’, hundreds of thousands of Australian males are ‘psychos’ too.

It is easy to be glib about this, and indeed feminists and the Left sometimes are rather glib about the wellsprings of male violence in general, as opposed to its specific manifestations. Rather than say: my taxi-driver was violent in the way that hundreds of thousands of Australian males are potentially or actually violent, I would prefer to put the outcome of my musings about that taxi-driver like this.

Here was a man who had been treated to little luck by life, and who seemed to feel deadened and defeated by the experience. (In addition to his personal misfortunes, I discovered from the newspapers, his father had died recently, and his mother had committed suicide in loneliness not long after.) This is a feeling common to so many people, male and female, for its extent to be impossible even to guess at.

The specific factor which magnified this problem for him was his inability to communicate the fact, or to express it to others in a way which might make it real to them, too - a problem which is so typically male in our society as almost to be reasonably described as a ‘male’ one. In his inability to communicate, to interact with other people emotionally in even the most apparently innocent, conversational ways about his loss of self-respect and purpose, he cut himself off. His refuge was a fantasy world which happened, it would appear, to involve fantasies of violence towards other people. Within that fantasy world little consequence was placed upon the happenings in the outside world. The violence, then, was in a sense an incidental outcome of the emotional paralysis which dominated his relation to his life’s predicament.

All of this is not a case for or against tighter gun laws (though I personally happen to feel them a good thing), or in favour of or against any straightforward policy response by which a government could reasonably respond to such an occurrence.

Nor, in any simple sense, does it help to ‘explain’ male violence in general. A great many young men in this society are undoubtedly quite happy to hit, bash or rape to express hatred or anger, whether against women in particular or life in general, and probably make little effort to repress the fact. In many if not most cases they may go throughout life causing surprisingly little mayhem. My taxi-driver, on the other hand, did not seem a ‘violent man’, yet seven families were in grief.

Perhaps that is why media and police alike need to ‘discover’ the psychopath in people who commit killings like those of Waite Frankum. What if it were not only psychopathic men who killed like this — nor even come to that, apparently violent men? The strangest emotion I found in myself welled up a few days after the killings. As the psychopathic character began to take shape in the continuing media scrutiny, I felt a weird urge to defend the ordinariness of a mass murderer.

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Power Politics


Stuart Rees has attempted a very ambitious project: to bring together various facets of human experience which result in empowering individuals and groups. He has succeeded in identifying several processes which have an empowering effect, but the breadth of this inquiry has necessarily resulted in a generally superficial treatment.

For example, his thoughts on the use of biography, while interesting, do not extend the reader’s knowledge beyond what was achieved by early women’s movement strategies for empowerment such as consciousness-raising groups. Rees describes biography as a means by which sense can be made of one’s life, but this somehow descends into an injunction to write. The few examples and quotes from eminent persons who have found writing therapeutic does little to convince the reader of the suggested power of the pen. It is also unclear how biography could be of equal use to all people and groups. By hinting that this concept has universal application Rees created the necessity to outline the real difficulties involved in applying the concept across different marginalised groups. In fact, this is touched on briefly, but certainly not in the depth required.

The discussion of economic rationalism and social justice is by far the easiest section of the book to read; perhaps Rees is more comfortable in dealing with large-scale issues of empowerment or social justice than those at the local level, or in explaining the various steps of empowerment rather than how they all fit together as a world view.

But Rees struggles throughout the book to establish empowerment as a theory in itself. We remained unconvinced that empowerment is anything more than a theoretical concept战略布局 contained in many social theories (although admittedly differently defined in each). The importance given to empowerment by Rees is certainly not in dispute. But his ‘theory’ fails to cope with the basic difficulty that different people and groups perceive empowerment and use empowerment strategies differently.

Rees criticises the limitations of consensus-based social theory and practice yet his book ultimately falls into this same category. His processes of empowerment appear oriented to renegotiating/arbitrating inequalities, without addressing the fundamental structural sources of power and powerlessness in society. The required skills Rees identifies are at best tentatively linked to empowerment, and one wonders at their inclusion. They appear to be those skills necessary for any good social work practice: evaluation, preparation, assessment, planning and administration, formal negotiation and advocacy. The discussion of these skills focuses on social workers, rather than upon their clients, as one may have expected from an empowerment theory.

The book as a whole falls between being a commitment to social justice, a condemnation of economic rationalism and an attempt to encourage the further politicisation of social work and social welfare students and practitioners. Some interesting and challenging ideas are presented but are rarely developed enough to allow the reader to feel stirred to respond or act. This is a shame as surely empowerment is about stirring people to respond or act.

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He Told the Truth


We all know politicians lie. John Lennon sang: “You have to learn to smile as you kill, if you want to be like the folks on the hill”. But those politicians who become ‘king of the castle’ on Capitol Hill usually lack skills in statecraft; we soon find their charm transparent.

The memoirs of the recently retired Swedish Treasurer, Kjell-Olof Feldt, persuade me that he genuinely believes in the ideals which he espoused when he dominated the Swedish political scene. I am persuaded of this by the openness with which he admits to his part in the skulduggery of politics in Sweden in the 1980s. He details his part in the making and breaking of the 1988 election promises of the Swedish Social
Democratic Party (SAP) and he outlines endless rounds of tough negotiations without omitting the double dealing and double crossing in which he engaged just as much as did the opposition parties’ leaders, his cabinet comrades, and the party’s trade union ‘Friends’. (These union leader Friends are very often treated to ironic art of essentially democratic because he exclusive readership of princes, but dealing and double ideals of absolutist monarchy lines endless rounds of tough negotiation in Gramsd’s view, Machiavelli was therefore wondering whether his successor has managed to implement several of the reforms to scale down public spending for which he had long struggled. Feldt therefore wonders whether his own penchant for frankness hindered rather than furthered ideological renewal within the labour movement.

The people I spoke to in the months after these best-selling memoirs were published in Sweden in April, were divided over whether Feldt had harmed or aided the party’s chances in the upcoming September elections. Was Feldt contributing to the long-term intellectual respectability of the labour movement? Or was he kicking the party when it was seriously down in the opinion polls by revealing how promises were made so rashly in the lead-up to the previous elections, and then broken in the subsequent year? If a treasurer is to resign of his own accord then the least disruptive and most common time to go is in mid-term, which is what Feldt did. But it is most unusual for a treasurer to write a ‘kiss-and-tell’ autobiography a year later, only six months before the subsequent elections.

Party branch members and local trade union officials in Stockholm mostly agree that Feldt’s warts-and-all account of perennial problems in balancing budgets and restraining wage increases along the Social Democrats’ Third Way (between inflationary Keynesian expansion and harsh Thatcherite contraction), has contributed to the intellectual respectability of the labour movement.

I do not expose myself, more brutally than others, when I demanded review of current doctrines. At the same time I—perhaps too impatiently—sought concrete results from such a review. This led bourgeois commentators to describe me as a renewalist and an agitator while those who described themselves as ‘the Left’ thought I was a closet liberal and leader of the so-called chancellery Right. In any case, no one called me a grey social democrat any longer.” Since Feldt’s resignation his successor has managed to implement several of the reforms to scale down public spending for which he had long struggled. Feldt therefore wonders whether his own penchant for frankness hindered rather than furthered ideological renewal within the labour movement.

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Feldt therefore wonders whether his own penchant for frankness hindered rather than furthered ideological renewal within the labour movement. He recounts more than once how months of impossibly long days of intense work within Treasury almost always ended in a failure to find the political openings for doing what was economically correct. But he also rises above the understandable temptations of the factionalist, to a greater extent than his opponents might give him credit.

Besides his interesting account of the pressures journalists put on governments to make promises and deliver snappy headlines during election campaigns, Feldt’s memoirs will probably most interest international readers with his account of the incepcion, early success, and eventual decline of the ‘Third Way’. Highlights in this account include: the internal debates leading up to the ‘big bang’ devaluation of 16% immediately after the Social Democrats came to power in 1982; the unions’ support for devaluation and their initial toleration of high profits, high price increases, and eroded real wages for the sake of continuing to keep unemployment under 2-3%; Feldt’s stormy relationship with Olof Palme; the fortunate postponement of a brewing rank-and-file rebellion against wage restraint when Olof Palme was murdered in February 1986; and the poorly grounded international accolades of The Economist and the OECD in 1987 for the success of the ‘Third Way’.

There are two basic and related gaps in Feldt’s account of Swedish politics in the 1980s. The first is his anecdotal and unsatisfactory account of the controversial ‘wage-earner funds’ legislation in 1983. The other is his almost
total failure to explain the viewpoint of the blue-collar Swedish Trade Union Confederation, the LO, and account for his stormy relationship with the LO leaders. A couple of times he suggests that they were attempting to dictate government policy to the party leaders, while they themselves had no need to concern themselves about facing re-election every third year. There are a great many references to his feud with LO leaders Stig Malm and Rune Molin, and almost as many denigrations of the critical editorial line pursued by the LO-owned Aftonbladet (an evening tabloid with the second largest circulation in Sweden).

In the wake of financial deregulation, the international renaissance for private speculation swept through property and share markets in Sweden and elsewhere during 1987-1990. But there Treasury attempts to restrain aggregate consumption, greatly fuelled by easy credit, met centrally-placed resistance by union leaders who caused Social Democratic leaders a great deal of heartburn.

Feldt believes that Aftonbladet's editor, the union leaders, and the rank and file all adhere to an outdated statist view of welfare reformism and distributive justice, a view which he believes misunderstands the complex relationship between capitalist production and incentive-generating distribution. But as his respectful critic Gösta Rehn put it: "How could such an intelligent politician as Kjell-Olof Feldt not understand that the high profits fuelled by the 1982 devaluation, and his continual calls for wage restraint, would put impossible strains on the unions and their leaders?"

Feldt does tell us that towards the end of his period in office he realised that wages were increasing in the 1980s at about the same pace as they had in the 1960s, so all the talk about the collapse of the Swedish model of industrial relations was uncalled for. The problem, as he sees it, lies in a general restructuring of the workforce away from manufacturing and towards services. This has had a long-term detrimental effect on productivity growth. The economy can no longer afford both the same pace of wage increases and costly new public reforms such as the 1988 election promises to extend parental leave benefits, to extend annual holidays, and to provide day-care centres for all pre-school children by 1991. Thus, whereas the long-standing Social Democratic treasurers of old had waged many a battle against those who would not accept no for an answer, he had been compelled to persuade cabinet Comrades and union Friends to act in ways in which they did not want to act: to reduce welfare spending and accept declining real wages.

When the editor of Aftonbladet reviewed Feldt's memoirs he quoted Feldt's review of British Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer Denis Healey's memoirs. Of Healey, Feldt wrote that you should not read politicians' memoirs if you are interested in the truth. Aftonbladet concluded that the same naturally applied to Feldt's memoirs; this was his truth as he understood it today. Union leader Stig Malm echoed this sentiment when reporters asked him for comments. All he would say was; "You'll have to wait until I retire and publish my memoirs".

Perhaps then we will see an account of recent Swedish politics which counterbalances the former Treasurer's account and digs up the deep ideological roots of the union movement's highly controversial campaign for wage-earner investment funds.

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Judy Horacek

Hey Rocky, watch me pull a rabbit outta my hat!

Again? That trick never works

This time for sure! Waps - details of illicit government funding

Oh my god...

Woops, everyone's secret nuclear weapons caches

What did I hear? Do I deserve Budwinka?

Nope, details of everyone's illegal arms trade

We'll never be able to blame Bois & Horacek now

You do realise we'll never work again?!

What'll I do with the rabbit?

Set it free in some newly discovered country
Cultural Commodities

ALR’s ‘Local Cultures’ supplement (ALR 130, July) takes a broad definition of ‘culture’: it is what counts as culture for those who participate in it. This definition would seem to have much to recommend it. It is inclusive and non-evaluative, accommodates a diversity of interests and values and avoids any imposed and elitist notions of excellence.

From the viewpoint of policymaking, however, the difficulty in adopting this relativistic notion of culture is that there is no clear basis for deciding what kinds of cultural practices the state should support. How can one ‘plan’ for culture when it is such an all-encompassing and elusive concept?

The ‘cultural industries’ approach advocated by Gay Hawkins, Kathie Gibson and Colin Mercer really represents a strategy for ‘selling’ this broad concept of culture to hard-nosed planning and economic administrators who may not have given much thought to how culture may be integrated with social and economic policy. The cultural industries approach carries a number of inherent dangers which need close examination.

For a start, the focus on the market that will inevitably restrict what counts as culture. The overriding logic of the marketplace is the pursuit of profit, and the drive for profit leads to a focus on, and the constant attempt to create, a mass audience. While the idea of industry conveys an image of a set of organised and broadly related activities with a common orientation to the market, many ‘cultural’ activities either do not resemble components of an industry, at least as traditionally conceived, or they have limited value in the market. It is difficult to identify the common ‘industrial’ concerns of such diverse activities as Macedonian folk dancing, community choral performances and graffiti ‘art’ and the demand for these products in the market is certainly restricted, but they all, nonetheless, meet the ‘cultural needs’ of their respective groups insofar as they provide a vehicle for the expression of individual pleasure, group identity or life experience.

In pursuing the cultural industries approach, there is the danger in being locked into an economic rationalist argument about the ‘marketability’ of particular cultural activities. Without doubt, the market has provided opportunities for many cultural producers and has created a broad range of cultural products for the general population. But it has to be recognised that this ‘packaging’ of culture for a mass audience tends to occur at the expense of minority cultural producers and consumers. Given the logic of the ‘cultural industries’ approach, policy makers will always be disinclined to support the cultural pursuits of minority or fringe groups because they do not pay their way.

Again, the idea of treating culture as a ‘thing’ to be packaged and sold on the open market denies the intangible, yet very ‘real’ significance of cultural practices to the participants. It also turns one’s attention from examining the moral content of cultural phenomena. Does one wish to promote cultural forms which are racist, sexist, and ageist, and so on, but which have high market value?

As aspects of ‘pub culture’, female topless bartending and mud wrestling are popular (ie, have high market value) in Australian society, but they also help promote the view that women are merely sexual objects. The free market embodies no notion of justice or equity and, unless there is political will within the state to intervene in appropriate ways, the flow of capital to areas that generate highest profits will tend to dictate ‘cultural’, as well as economic and social, priorities.

All the ‘Local Cultures’ articles, in varying degrees, tend to attribute a ‘thing-like’ quality to culture, which reflects a more general problem of many contemporary analyses of culture: the failure to inspect the economic and political processes underlying the production, promotion and consumption of culture.

Hawkins and Gibson suggest that cultural planning is emerging as the 90s buzzword to replace cultural democracy as the new objective for local cultural development. If this is so, then let us hope that local ‘cultural planners’ do not also abandon the cultural democratic ethos that was beginning to emerge in the 70s and 80s: a primary concern with access, equity and participation.

Alan Petersen,
Curtin University of Technology,
WA.

Real World

Dear ALR

I wish to inform you that I will not be renewing my subscription to ALR. Quite frankly I fail to see the role which articles on Madonna (ALR, August 1991) can play in the debate over strategies to defend the interests of working people. Nor am I aware of the connection between an alleged Sixties revival and the urgent need to build a coalition of forces on the Left to challenge the Accord policies of the Hawke Labor government and the ACTU. ALR has become simply too indulgent and lifestyle-fixated to play any significant role in this project.

As for the dress entitled “Correct Line Cooking” and “Dr Hartman”, I can only suggest that if ALR’s editors can drag themselves away from their yuppie terraces for a moment, they might discover that such feeble attempts at ‘humour’ cut no ice with working people out in the real world.

Eric Winter
Northcote, Vic.
I love people and books with a fixation or obsession. Pigeons, Lolitas, motorbikes or matchboxes, that sort of thing. I have already referred to a massive and learned text about the potato in this column. Personally, I would love to focus my mind on one food or object long enough to write a book about it. In years, if not centuries, to come people would speak in hushed tones about Cottier on Creamokes or Penelope’s Big Book of Carrots. It shows true intelligence to free the mind from the dross of everyday life and to concentrate exclusively on a fruit or vegetable.

In moments of quietude I dream of the book I would write if my mind were not of the grasshopper variety. And who knows, one day I may yet write the definitive tome on bananas. I would open with a chapter on myths surrounding the banana like a second skin, from both a human and chimpanzee perspective. A serious (and mercifully brief) section on the United Fruit Company’s geopolitical grasp on the desirable fruit would follow. I suppose I’d include something about the nasty practice of gassing bananas to ripeness here, so that people could skip all the serious bits without too much trouble. Then we would slip into a discussion of the sexuality of the banana, its use in desserts and how to spot a limp one at 50 paces...Such dreams enfold me as I cradle the yellow crescent in my hand. Unfortunately, my enthusiasm is not long-lived.

No such problems of concentration afflict Zoltán Halász, author of The Little Book of Hungarian Paprika (Corvina Publications, Budapest 1987). I located this modestly titled book in Acland Street, St Kilda—which, given the cultural roots of the area, seems appropriate. I had just eaten an excellent Jewish-Russian meal and, barely able to walk, still managed to flick through cookbooks. My eye was caught by the red/orange cover of the aforementioned text. In other words, the book is paprika-coloured. Even the words are somewhat paprikaed, as if Mr Halász, unable to contain his enthusiasm for the blessed condiment, had sprinkled select amounts into the paper during manufacture. Unfortunately, the book does not smell of paprika—at least not until careless use by the reader remedies this lack.

The Little Book of Hungarian Paprika delighted me. Section headings include “A simple history, with complications”, “From magic potion to a source of vitamins” and “Is paprika really hot?” (The answer to the last question is: not necessarily, depending on the variety.) The illustrations show various happy Hungarians and capiscums performing unusual functions, such as the latter (from which paprika comes) acting as the barrel of a cannon alongside a description of the really hot paprika.

The recipes in this book are not for the faint-hearted, and certainly not for the vegetarian; even the fresh green bean soup is made with beef stock, for example. It may be that a really cold climate is necessary to appreciate fully the passionate beauty of paprika in a meat stew. (I will ignore curry and Asia at this juncture.) However, why not experiment with the following soup, and hopefully discover the reason for Zoltán’s enthusiasm. The recipe calls for “noble sweet paprika”, which is one of the milder but flavoursome paprikas and can therefore be used in greater quantities.

### Gulyás Soup

**Ingredients:**
- 500g good quality stewing beef
- 100g lard or 8 tablespoons oil
- 2 medium onions, 1 clove garlic
- 2 teaspoons noble sweet paprika
- 2 pinches caraway seed
- 3-4 large potatoes
- 2 medium green or yellow peppers (ie, capiscums)
- 2 small tomatoes, salt

Wipe the beef carefully, then cut into small cubes. Heat the lard or oil in a large pan and fry the finely chopped onions until golden brown. Sprinkle with a little of the paprika, add the meat and fry until slightly browned. Then add crushed garlic, the remaining paprika and the caraway seed. Season to taste with salt. Mix thoroughly together and add a little water. Cover with a lid and simmer, stirring frequently. Add a little more water from time to time if necessary to prevent the meat from sticking. When the meat is tender, add the sliced peppers, the tomatoes cut into quarters and the peeled and cubed potatoes. Finally, pour in enough water to cover well and continue cooking until the potato is done. Serves 4.

When I look at books like The Little Book of Hungarian Paprika my mind dwells more and more on what my Big Banana Book would look like. It will definitely have a yellow cover. The pages will peel off from the spine centripetally. It will have to be read in one day or it will go brown and soggy. A condensed version will be available, to be known as The Little Sugar Banana Book. I will insist that it be hung in bunches above the bookshelves, and the customers will have to clamber up to get it. But enough of this beckoning fruit—for the moment, anyway. In the meantime, turn your hand to Hungarian Red, and appreciate the little things which outlast political systems.

Penelope Cottier.
DEAR DR HARTMAN

Going One-Up

Hello patients,
It is a well-established scientific fact that every long-term sexual relationship is based on an intense power struggle. The cut and thrust of this struggle provides the all-important sexual tension which stimulates the partners to sexual activity even after a long day at the office and a tribe of fighting kids over dinner.

Clearly, it would not be possible to maintain psycho-sexual activity between the sheets without this vital tension created by the fundamental power struggle at the heart of human relationships. However, many couples waste hours of precious time ‘negotiating’ in an endless process of monitoring who is currently ‘on top’ in their dynamic struggle. This process of verbal negotiation and assessment to see who is ‘in the good books’ can be exhausting. Basically, after five, ten, or fifteen years, a couple may get tired of discussing similar things over and over again.

It is for this reason that I have developed the Points System at my clinic. It is a psycho-sexual accounting technique for couples who are in for the long haul in their relationship. The Points System offers a shorthand way of mapping the ebb and flow of dominance and submission within the ecosystem of your partnership.

Let me illustrate the process with an example. The single greatest source of tension for most couples is work. Any job is bad enough in this respect but when both members of the couple are employed in jobs which offer a sense of meaning and purpose, as well as money, then you really get problems. The trouble arises because these people both actually want to work longer hours.

They want to go to public meetings at night. They want to redraft vital documents on weekends. The list is endless and I’m sure most of you can add to it from your own experience. If ideas about social justice can be squeezed into your job description, then you’ve entered a big black hole that can swallow hours of your life.

Many couples have spent years bickering over this issue. Quite simply, work interferes with child rearing, shopping, washing, vacuuming, dog walking, car servicing, holiday taking, sex and fun (to name just a few fundamental activities). As one of my patients always says “Relationships are an activity that you do together. But how can we do anything when she is always at work?”

My Points System saved this patient’s intimate encounter with a significant other (or, as we used to say, his marriage). Instead of wasting precious hours in recriminations and negotiations over who had to do what, all caused by extra hours spent at work, they simply began to award and deduct points.

If you stay at work until 8 pm, leaving your partner to cook the dinner and feed the dogs, then you lose points and you have to make them up in some other way. You may bring tea and toast on a tray the next morning, or go to the supermarket alone the next weekend. You don’t have to renegotiate old ground. You simply know where you stand in numerical terms.

The really big advantage of this system is that the best way to make up lost points is to do something really nice that will give the other person pleasure. When the Points System is really working you stop nagging at each other and actually do nice things together.

Of course, the more heinous the crime, the more points you lose, and the more you have to do to retain ground in the ‘ledger of life’. I know one chap who is the human equivalent of the Mexican economy. His partner is an independent feminist with her own substantial income who had a baby to please him. He then got a job he really wanted interstate and left her for three months with a bottle in one hand, a nappy in the other, and a very sad look on her face.

Quite simply, this man’s points ledger makes the Australian balance of payments look good. To regain lost ground he is looking at perhaps a surprise trip to Venice with quality child care arranged in Italy, or offering to stay at home full-time for three months on his return.

The only way someone could lose more points than this chap is by committing adultery. Now I know some of the readers of this magazine may take exception to the use of the word ‘adultery’. You filled your minds with so much poppycock about ‘open relationships’ in the 70s and you still don’t like to call a spade a spade.

But God didn’t mince words when he sent his bureaucrat Moses up to the top of that mountain to get the ultimate policy document. He wrote that Ten Point Mission Statement in stone so that fast-talking lobbyists wouldn’t be able to water it down.

Whether you like it or not, if you commit adultery, you’ll be making up points for years to come. But if that means taking your partner on really exciting foreign holidays for a decade, at least the process of reconstruction can be pleasurable.

Send your problems to Dr Hartman’s secretary, Julie McCrossin, CL AR.

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