AUSTRALIAN LEFT REVIEW

THE KURDISH CRISIS
PETER BALDWIN AND PETER ROBSON ON THE LEFT

JAPAN
BART SIMPSON

VIC LABOR SPLIT SHOCK!

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ALR - What Else is Left?
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The Forgotten Kurds

A Kurdish proverb says that the Kurds have no friends - a proposition which has been all too painfully obvious in the last few weeks.

However, while the Kurds may be friendless, they are no longer ignored. The mass media, and particularly television, have seen to that. This does not mean, of course, that their problems are better understood. I heard a radio commentator remark that the Kurds were unlucky because, unlike the Kuwaitis, they have no oil. This is to invert the problem. The Kurds do have oil: or rather, they live in a major oil-bearing area of northern Iraq. What they lack, and have always lacked, is sovereignty over the area and hence the ability to gain revenue from oil.

Some history is important. The Kurds are a non-Arab people who trace their history back to the ancient Medes, whose empire flourished in the same region in the seventh and sixth centuries BC. The most famous Kurd was Saladin, who established a dynasty which ruled the area between the Nile and the Euphrates-Tigris valley. The historic area of Kurdistan was ruled for many centuries by Kurdish princes who paid tribute to the Muslim caliphate. The Kurds are Sunni Muslims, and were converted at the same time as the Persians.

Kurdish troubles date from the mid-nineteenth century. The Ottoman empire, crumbling under attacks from newer imperial powers - the Russians, French and British - turned against its rebellious minorities - Armenians, Bulgarians and Kurds, among others. By the outbreak of the First World War, there was an articulate Kurdish nationalist movement demanding independence; its claims were recognised in President Wilson's Fourteen Points, which became the basis for the peace treaties and the Covenant of the League of Nations. The Kurds were promised a homeland, but the promise was withdrawn as a result of the Lausanne Treaty of 1923, negotiated between the Western powers and the new Turkish republic headed by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

The history of Turkish repression of the Kurds is itself a long and melancholy tale. As far as Iraq is concerned, the story dates from the establishment of the new state of Iraq in 1921. Oil had been discovered in the largely Kurdish province of Mosul in the north of the river valleys (though not yet in commercial quantities), and the British, who were already exploiting oil discoveries in neighbouring Persia, were anxious to maintain their control over the Mosul province as well.

The League of Nations, having invented the new concept of a 'mandate', gave the French a mandate over Syria, while the British gained mandates over Palestine and Iraq. The British insisted that the newly mandated state of Iraq should include the Mosul province. The Kurds, having been promised their own state, now rose in revolt, and were bombed into submission by the RAF on behalf of the new Iraqi government.

The Kurdish resistance in Iraq was led mainly by traditional tribal chiefs, of whom the most important belonged to the Barzani clan. In 1958, the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown by a military coup d'état, and the new government promised much greater autonomy to the Kurds - a promise which did not last long. Mulla Mustafa Barzani, a veteran opponent of the Iraqi regime, then established himself in the north with support from the Soviet Union and later from the Iranians, the Americans and the Israelis. In 1975, however, the Shah of Iran made a deal with Saddam Hussein and withdrew his support for the Kurds. The Americans followed suit and pressured the Israelis to do likewise. The Iraqi army defeated the Kurds and Barzani fled into exile, where he died in 1979.

The hostility of Turkey, Iran and Iraq towards Kurdish claims for autonomy is not difficult to understand. All three are centralised, authoritarian states which do not tolerate ethnic (or religious) minorities. A more perplexing question is why their plight has attracted so little attention, until very recently, on the Western Left.

Gerard Chaliand, a radical French journalist who has written movingly about other victims of imperialist and colonialist oppression, remarks on the failure of 'progressive' people to pay attention to the Kurds. The Kurds do not fit into the conventional categories approved by liberal or radical opinion. In a 1980 collection of essays, Chaliand observes that left-wing people who support the Arab cause seem unable to extend their sympathy to the Kurds. "For some people", he notes caustically, "Arabism is revolutionary by definition. The Kurdish movement is 'insufficiently radical' to be supported by those who accept the claims of Iraq to be 'anti-imperialist'."

Chaliand is right to point out that Iraq was, for a long time, regarded as "objectively progressive" by many people on the Left who were seduced by its 'anti-imperialist' rhetoric and ignored the violent and brutal character of the Iraqi regime and the quasi-fascist ideology of Saddam Hussein's ruling Ba'ath Party. A solution to the problem of the Kurds will require drastic rethinking in a world where concepts derived from the Cold War no longer match with such unpleasant realities.

SOL ENCEL is the recently-retired professor of sociology at the University of NSW.
delinquent Calvin wreaks mayhem on the world with the aid of the tiger Hobbes (who lives only in his imagination). Unfortunately, Calvin and Hobbes too often find themselves becoming whimsical and sentimental about each other; it's a daydream, not a nightmare. Bart—who's an animated cartoon, true, but with roots more in comic strips than in the Hanna-Barbera world of recycled plots and ninth-rate jokes—has no such constraints placed on his behaviour, and we can confidently expect him to grow up to be as much of a no-hoper as his dad Homer.

He's Bart Simpson of TV's anti-family, The Simpsons, and it's hard to remember how Western culture functioned before he came along, dispensing ludicrous catchphrases like "Don't have a cow, man", "Whoa, mama!" and...but I'm sure you know them all already.

However, despite his unique style, Bart Simpson is not the first cartoon Bad Boy to wheedle his way into Western thought. One is reminded of the turn-of-the-century adventures of Buster Brown, a colourful comic strip created by R F Outcault for William Randolph Hearst's American Sunday newspapers.

Unfortunately for Buster, however, conventional morality at the time meant his wickedness had to be punished at the end of every episode, and the last frame of his weekly strip had to contain a vow never to be bad again. A more recent 'bad boy' is Calvin of Calvin and Hobbes, a remarkably imaginative comic strip in which the inquisitive would-be

If I had to sum up my favourite memory of Bart it would be the time his sister Lisa found him taking a photo of his "butt" with his spy camera. However, there are numerous charming aspects to his character; take, for instance, these selections from his "Bottom 40": "The fact that Otto hardly ever lets me drive the school bus"; "Being tried in court as an adult"; "Stories with morals at the end"; "Cartoons with redeeming social messages".

Cartoonist Matt Groening came up with Bart and his family when the producers of the faintly bearable Tracy Ullman Show came to him with a proposal to turn his comic strip Life in Hell into short animated sequences to plug a few gaps in the live-action show. Fearing that a negative reaction to the cartoons would hurt Life in Hell, Groening (rhymes with "rain-ing") created a new set of characters based loosely on his own family—all except Bart who, one assumes, is based on the 'national character' of the USA.

The short Tracy Ullman spots were sufficiently successful to allow a series to go ahead: and the series was, of course, an instant success. It took over from where Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles left off and cornered the cartoon-based merchandise market for six months or so. (I'm told that shops in Los Angeles these days are full of remaindered Bart merchandise—the Americans, after all, have had a year longer than us to get used to The Simpsons). As I write this I am supping coffee from a Bart Simpson "Don't Have a Cow Man" mug; I've got a bumper sticker (don't own a car), a key ring (too big to fit in my pocket) and a copy of the quarterly magazine Simpsons Illustrated on the table in front of me. That's a tiny proportion of the Simpsons merchandise available. The T-shirts are the most popular; I've seen whole families wearing them. (Buster Brown had the same problem. In 1905, after being presented with a Buster Brown-endorsed suit, sled, stockings, camera, books, breakfast set and games, he is seen running to check into the Nervous Prostration Hospital.) Of course, there's a lot of unofficial Bart merchandise, too—the most creative being the bootleg "Black Bart" T-shirts. Depicted wearing Public Enemy-style medallions and smoking reefer, the black version of "the little dude who's crude when he shoves his food" says unimaginative but at least positive things like "Being black is cool, man".

And what does Bart make of all this? Well, apart from being called on to sing for the Simpsons Sing the Blues album, he seems to be blissfully impervious to it all. On the other hand, someone as totally self-centred and egotistical as Springfield's youngest delinquent could only assume that the rest of the world was as interested in him as he is.

David Nichols
Curiouser and Curiouser

With the factional alliances in the Victorian ALP growing curiouser and curiouser, the round of pre-selections in the party last month, which decimated the previously dominant Socialist Left faction, resembled nothing so much as the mad hatter's tea party.

Consider the following. Last October the federal Minister for Defence and most influential numbers broker in the rightwing Labor Unity faction, Senator Robert Ray, declared the Victorian ALP the Albania of the southern hemisphere. His observation was provoked by the foreign policy debate at the Victorian ALP State conference where a Left delegate described Saddam Hussein as "one of the true socialists" and the then dominant Socialist Left (SL) faction used its numbers to pass a resolution opposing Australia's military presence in the Persian Gulf.

Six months later, the Socialist Left is split. Labor Unity delivers the numbers to pre-select hard Left figures as ALP candidates for five Victorian parliamentary seats. In return, a group of seven militant Left unions break with the mainstream leadership of the SL and deliver several seats to Labor Unity candidates. Senator Ray, presumably with a straight face, now tells the Melbourne Herald-Sun he is happy to champion candidates like Ms Jean McLean, a remnant of the hard Left Old Guard (once dominated by ex-state secretary Bill Hartley), despite their ideological differences.

A permanently raised eyebrow now seems the most appropriate expression for observers of the ALP to adopt in the coming months following the unholy alliance between Labor Unity, the hard Left and the Independents faction over pre-selections.

The temptation—to which many in the mainstream leadership of the SL succumbed—is to dismiss this new alliance as an absurdity in ideological terms. But the political reality is that it has produced the most fundamental realignment in the Victorian ALP's internal power structures since federal intervention in 1970 began the process of dismantling the old Hartleyite Left machine.

This new fluidity in Victorian Labor politics is the result of a series of significant intra-factional and inter-factional shifts which have been under way since about 1988. These shifts, in turn, have their roots in the shake-up in the SL during the early to mid-80s.

In the beginning, the SL was a monolithic machine run by figures such as Hartley, a ruthless and formidable factional operator, George Crawford and Tom Ryan. Hartley's group controlled the faction by putting up groups of candidates for the SL executive at general meetings of the faction on a take it or leave it basis. As long as they had more than 50% of the vote at factional general meetings they determined the shape of the entire SL executive.

But in the early 80s there was a push for proportional representation as younger, more moderate Left groups with rank-and-file support in the party branches emerged and sought a slice of the cake. These emerging groupings—associated with individuals like Gerry Hand, Peter Batchelor, Kim Carr, Jenny Beacham and Graham Bird of the Meat Workers Union—coalesced as the so-called New Guard which wrested control of the faction from the Hartleyite Old Guard in the mid-80s.

The New Guard came to be seen as the mainstream of the SL and secured the backing of the key Left unions in Victoria: the Metal Workers, the Miscellaneous Workers, the Australian Railways Union, the Meat Workers and the Liquor Trades Union. The Old Guard forces could only rely on smaller militant Left unions such as the Plumbers, the Theatrical Employees, the Confectioners and the Food Preservers.

But since the New Guard's ascendency, competing tendencies have emerged within both sub-factions of the SL. Within the hard Left, as the influence of Old Guard figures such as Hartley, Crawford, Joan Cossedge and Jean McLean waned during the 80s, a loose grouping of younger activists emerged. These are individuals such as Ted Murphy of the Council of Academic Staff Associations, Ian Jones of the Vehicle Builders Union, Doug Walpole of the Electrical Trades Union, Franz Timmerman and Nell Cole. This new group has been known by apppellations as various as the Fitzroy Trots and the Democratic Left.

At the same time, divisions emerged within the New Guard over the issue of Hartley's expulsion from the ALP. Figures such as Peter Steedman and Caroline Hogg wanted to confront the Old Guard by supporting the expulsion of Hartley. But the Hand-Batchelor leadership of the New Guard preferred to support Hartley publicly in the interests of holding the SL together, while privately accepting that Hartley had to go.

As a result there is now a significant minority grouping within the New Guard associated with figures such as Steedman and the Socialist Forum discussion group formed by former members of the Victorian state committee of the Communist Party who resigned from the CPA in 1984.

This grouping is characterised by younger activists such as Michael O'Connor and Julia Gillard—activists who cut their teeth in student politics fighting the extreme Left in the Australian Union of Students during the mid- to late 70s. While they have been critical of the Hand-Batchelor-Carr leadership of the SL and, in turn, have been regarded by the Left leadership with a degree of hostility, this Steedman-Hogg-Socialist Forum grouping continued to give the New Guard the support it needed to reduce the Old Guard to a rump within the SL by the second half of the 1980s.
By the late 80s, then, the New Guard mainstream leadership of the SL had become the dominant force within the Victorian ALP. This was cemented by the collapse of an attempt by Labor Unity to gain control of the branch through the readmission to the party of the four rightwing unions: the Federated Clerks Union, the Federated Ironworkers Association, the Shop Assistants’ Union, and the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners.

From about 1988, Labor Unity lost control of several of its largest unions as new militant reform groups defeated the rightwing Victorian leaderships of the Clerks Union, the Transport Workers Union, the Hospital Employees Federation and the Australian Workers Union. These losses reduced Labor Unity’s strength to something like 35% of the vote on the floor of the Victorian ALP conference and projected the SL into a position of apparent long-term dominance.

While the new militant Left-led Victorian unions did not formally join the SL caucus, the Left leadership could count on their votes on most issues. This, together with the SL’s alliance with the small Independents faction of figures such as John Cain and John Button, gave the Left almost two-thirds of the vote at state conference, putting it in a seemingly unassailable position.

But the SL had not reconciled its own internal contradictions. With the departure of Hand and Batchelor for parliamentary careers, the leadership of the SL fell to the faction’s administrative secretary, Kim Carr, a former teacher and adviser to Joan Kirner. Carr constructed a network of close personal relationships with influential figures like the Meat Workers’ Graham Bird and Wally Curran, and the Miscellaneous Workers’ Ray Hogan.

Carr is a highly effective activist. Yet he has a streak of arrogance which has helped to create a coalition of the discontented against the mainstream leadership of the SL on the part of rival tendencies who, rightly or wrongly (and the point is debatable), felt they were being frozen out of the faction now that it had the numbers within the party. This discontent was to be the genesis of the classic unholy alliance between the hard Left, which was a minority within the SL, and Labor...
Labor's new Victorian face

For those interested in the numbers behind the pre-selection deal which froze out the SL, this is how they fell on the Victorian ALP's 100-member central pre-selection panel: Labor Unity has a core of 35 votes and can usually rely on another two votes (from Municipal Officers Association delegates); the hard left 'pledge' group of unions has 18 votes; the small Independents faction has six; the SL has been reduced to a core of 36 votes; and the remaining three votes (from Federated Clerks Union delegates) waver somewhat but at this stage go mainly to the SL. As the panel is elected proportionally from the floor of the ALP state conference, these figures are a rough guide to the relative strengths of the various groupings at conference.

The core of the hard Left vote is the new militant 'pledge' union leaderships - so called because of their circulated 'pledge' to oppose privatisation lock, stock and barrel.

For the record, the pledge unions represented on the panel are the Liquor Trades Union, the Vehicle Builders Employees Federation, the Electrical Trades Union, the Hospital Employees Federation No. 1 branch, the Plumbers and Gasfitters Employees Union, the Australian Workers Union, the Transport Workers Union and the Cold Storage Union. Other pledge unions with votes at ALP conference but not on the pre-selection panel are the Australian Telecommunications Employees Association, the Seamens Union and the Theatrical Employees Association. Unions which were originally in the pledge camp but which returned to the SL fold after they discovered they were expected to vote with the Right on pre-selections were the Federated Clerks Union, the Australian Railways Union, the Building Workers Industrial Union and the Hospital Employees Federation No. 2 branch.

Unity which, in turn, was a minority within the Victorian branch of the ALP.

The main hard Left players who stitched up this alliance were Ian Jones of the Vehicle Builders Union, the Victorian secretary of the Electrical Trades Union, Gary Main, and the Victorian secretary of the Australian Telecommunications Employees Association, Len Cooper, who is not a member of the ALP and has been associated with the radical Left Workers Against Imperialism group.

In retrospect, one of the key misjudgments on the part of the SL leadership lay in its dealings with the new militant Left union leaderships in Victoria - unions such as the TWU and the AWU which had left the Labor Unity orbit but never formally joined the SL union caucus. The very phenomenon which had seemed to signal the relegating of Labor Unity to the status of a rump within the Victorian ALP proved to be the undoing of the SL leadership.

Here is how one influential mainstream Victorian Left figure, who did not want to be named, put it:

What the Left have failed to do over the years is work out how they can relate to these new emerging leaderships of the independent Left unions outside the SL caucus. There has been a rash of unions that have changed their political complexion both through internal Left fights as in the case of the VBU, the ETU and the Liquor Trades Union, and through losses by Labor Unity as in the cases of the TWU and AWU. You can characterise a new type of younger Left union official now who has come up to be in control of a union only under federal and state labor governments, who is industrially militant, but feels constrained by the Accord and by the leadership of the Left. In a lot of these cases an industrially militant team of officials has taken over and they do not have a primary interest in the ALP and have not been woven into the fabric and culture of how the Left unions engage in political activity.

Meanwhile, in the Labor Unity camp, equally significant shifts in the intra-factional power balance lie behind the Right's willingness to sup with its one-time bete noir, the hard Left.

Senator Ray and his team of highly pragmatic apparatchiks have run the Labor Unity machine now for several years. But, during the mid-80s, the Ray forces had been balanced by a group associated with key Labor Unity ministers in the Cain government.

In the state parliamentary Labor Unity faction, ministers such as Steve Crabb and David White, together with then Labor Unity backbenchers Neil Pope and Michael Arnold, forged a co-operative working relationship with the key New Guard Left figures in the state parliamentary Labor Party which contributed significantly to the smoothing out of potential factional conflicts over the Cain government's policies.

But the 1988 Victorian election introduced into the parliamentary Labor Unity faction several ambitious figures from the Ray grouping, MPs such as Ian Baker (now Victorian Minister for Agriculture), Burwyn Davidson, Michael Leighton and Victorian ALP vice-president Bob Sercombe (who became Labor Unity's caucus convenor). As a result the Labor Unity parliamentary faction was brought into line with the thinking of the dominant forces within the extra-parliamentary Right, the so-called Labor Unity broad group, and the working relationship between the Right and the mainstream Left broke down. The new Labor Unity power brokers, who were being squeezed by the SL leadership in pre-selection negotiations, cut the deal with the hard Left with the support of Ray and the key remaining Right union in Victoria, the National Union of Workers.

The upshot has been a classic example of the cyclical nature of power relationships within the Victorian ALP. History suggests that whenever one group in Victorian Labor has gained the ascendancy, the other groups around it have tended to reshape and realign to bring the dominant group back into line.

MARK DAVIS is an industrial reporter for the Financial Review.
The ANC revises

Back in August I suggested in this journal that the ANC was well on the way to abandoning the commitments to public ownership enshrined for more than three decades in its Freedom Charter. Since that time a number of forces have converged to make major nationalisations in a post-apartheid South Africa extremely unlikely.

Some of these emanate from F W De Klerk's National Party government which continues to dismantle the huge apparatus of state enterprises built up over more than half a century. In a number of key areas De Klerk has been arguing that funds needed for social reform can only come from the privatisation of nationalised industries. In addition to announcing the prospective repeal of the racial classification and land acts in his February speech to parliament, the President also announced a massive package of social spending measures which are to be financed from the sale of state-owned enterprises.

Seasoned observers of the South African scene will have no difficulty in spotting the motives behind this move. Firstly, in the face of continued high inflation and unemployment, some social spending must occur at the bottom end in order to contain township violence.

A second motive is De Klerk's determination to emulate Mrs Thatcher's enlargement of the home-owning working class. In mid-March, the chair of the Independent Development Trust (which is not independent), Jan Steyn, announced the grant of R750 million (A$375 million) to enable more poor black families to buy homes.

Each grantee will receive a direct grant of R750 towards the cost of a serviced home-site on lands already owned by the government. Steyn is targeting approximately 100,000 households with incomes below a maximum of R1000 (A$500) per month. In other words, money from one branch of the government (the Development Trust) is being passed to other branches of the government which hold land for potential homesites, with the aim of defusing tensions among the urban poor.

This is precisely the sort of scheme that might have been expected of Steyn who formerly headed the Urban Foundation, a business-backed organisation which aimed to fight radicalism by promoting better housing and petty capitalism in the township economies.

In a parallel thrust last month, a White Paper foreshadowed five land bills to be brought before parliament. The part that grabbed headlines was the scrapping of the three principal land acts, including the notorious 1913 act. As the ANC and other critics immediately argued, this will hardly remedy the problems of rural landlessness; few black farmers have the capital to buy into the productive agricultural lands. More indicative of the government's thinking are the bills to legalise squatter camps and shack settlements, to transform 99-year township leases into freehold ownership for about 300,000 black leaseholders and to transfer about 400,000 hectares of rural land to peasant farmer ownership. Again, the aim is to fracture the unity of both rural and urban working classes by giving key elements a stake in the status quo.

At the same time that these various initiatives have been taken by the state, the ANC has been further redefining its public ownership aims. It recently distributed to its membership a discussion paper generated at the Centre for Development Studies at the University of Western Cape (an increasingly important intellectual force on the South African Left). This contains the significant statement that "we need to have convincing proof that nationalising a particular section of the economy carries with it more benefits than costs". The discussion paper goes on to estimate the cost of buying out the gold mines at the enormous figure of 70 billion Rand (A$35 billion). Such an expenditure would saddle the state with a debt problem far worse than those that have
brought the apartheid state to its knees. Furthermore, not a single new job would be created by the nationalisation. If skilled workers, doubtful of wage rises, deserted the mines, the resulting skills shortage could cause a virtual collapse of the gold industry. The discussion paper concludes that the goals of nationalisation could be more effectively achieved by other means, including taxes and royalties, new safety laws, and state control of mineral rights on a leasehold basis.

All these arguments will sound very familiar to Australians. If they become ANC policy they would put the organisation pretty much on all fours with the Hawke-Keating government as far as mining is concerned. Any old Leftie can readily spot the seeming hole in the discussion paper. Why pay 70 billion? Why not simply seize the mines? The response is that the very prospect of such a seizure would provoke a flight of capital and a desperate round of asset stripping by the mine owners.

The tide has turned dramatically against state ownership in other nations of the region. In newly democratic Zambia, Frederick Chiluba, the leader of the Zambia Confederation of Trade Unions, has just been elected president of the main opposition party. He promises to make privatisation of Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines a first priority if his party wins government. Like the Zimbabwean government of Robert Mugabe, he also proposes to adhere precisely to the IMF plan for economic restructuring. However, by the time he gets to government there may be nothing left to privatise. Zambia has recently hired a Swedish consultant to help it plan the sale of loss-making state enterprises.

White farmers threatened by land reform in Zimbabwe are being actively wooed by the neighbouring governments of Zambia and Mozambique. Both the IMF and the World Bank have recently sent high-profile delegations to southern Africa where they have been given receptions verging on the rapturous by a range of governments and political organisations.

It is not, therefore, surprising that the ANC grows increasingly tepid in its commitment to state ownership of basic industry. And while the rival PAC has, from time to time, boasted of being more socialist than the ANC, it has no firm document on economic policy to point to. In February it went into a confidential huddle with the informal South African business grouping known as the Consultative Business Movement—just three months after the ANC had done the same thing.

NORMAN ETHERINGTON is professor of history at the University of Western Australia.

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Eternally Indebted

Every third month an International Monetary Fund (IMF) delegation calls on Hungary’s economic policy-makers. It is a day of reckoning for the National Bank and Finance Ministry chiefs in Budapest. They well know that their progress according to IMF economic stipulations holds the key to the country’s financial solvency.

For Hungary, as for all of the former communist countries, IMF approval for free market transition policies is critical to short-term survival. Should the IMF deem the policy-makers too lenient in the application of its austerity programs, loans may be halted, and the financially-strapped countries forced to default on their looming debts. The IMF’s word not only determines countries’ access to its reserves, but acts as a seal of approval for all major private and government creditors, as well as investors.

To Eastern Europe’s new heads of state, the hard terms of the IMF’s tight monetary packages seem the lesser of evils. All post-communist govern-
spring. Czechoslovakia is in somewhat better shape with $7.8 billion outstanding; Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union owe foreign creditors $16 and $52 billion respectively. While the circumstances of each country vary, the pattern of Eastern bloc indebtedness has its roots in the early 1970s. The East Europeans, along with the Third World countries, took advantage of rock bottom interest rates until the mid-70s to borrow heavily. The rationale was to switch to import-led growth strategies, fuelling domestic growth through technology and capital imports from the West. In theory, the export of the derivative manufactured goods to the West would cover the accrued debts.

The expected export pay-off on the world market, however, never materialised. Industrial goods were peddled instead to the Soviet Union for rubles, leaving balance-of-payments hard currency deficits. When the oil-price shocks hit, followed by the 1979-1982 world recession, the Eastern Europeans, Africans and South Americans plunged together into an abyss of debt. Interest rates sky-rocketed and with them the debtors' foreign deficits, of which only a fraction had ever been invested. Hungary, for one, had invested only $3.5 billion of the $12 billion that it owed by 1981. When the debt crisis came to a head in the early 1980s, Hungary and others sought out the IMF for help. The structural adjustments and debt-financing schedules began a vicious circle of borrowing that would double and triple each year, leaving the country's debt service ratio (servicing costs as a percentage of total export earnings) has fallen to "only" 40% from 70% three years ago. Yet the collapse of the COMECON trade bloc and conversion to dollar-based trade with the Soviet Union (particularly for oil) has the government predicting a 14% drop in the terms of trade for 1991. The 10% increase in the volume of 1990 hard-currency exports to the West offset a 25% decline in rouble trade. But as the East now finds itself competing with the West on an equal basis for Soviet markets, the boom in westward exports will not cover its losses this year.

According to IMF rationale, the only recourse is thus harsher austerity measures at home. "The economy is expected to burden higher and higher financing costs from a stagnating GDP," says economist Laszlo Andor of the Hungarian Trade Unions Economic Research Institute. "In the long run, chances of repayment can only be improved if the economy develops competitive, productive industries. But with these restrictive monetary policies there's no chance for development. Internal investment is almost non-existent because everything's going to the debt."

Although the human costs of austerity are daily more visible on the streets of every Eastern European city, opposition to the IMF's rule is nowhere to be seen. In Hungary, the entire spectrum of parliamentary parties backs prompt debt servicing and adherence to the IMF contract's general terms. "There's no alternative" is the common response. The ruling HFD-led coalition has resisted the all-out "shock therapy" that IMF bankers pushed through in Poland. Yet their somewhat more "gradual" approach is only a version of the same economic program.

"It's simply not the case that there are 'no alternatives' to debt slavery," says radical Dutch economist Andre Gunder Frank, recently in Prague to discuss the debt crises. "Debts have come and gone for ages and only rarely have they been paid back."

The most dramatic breakthrough came in March when Western governments agreed to cancel half of Poland's 17 billion British pounds government-to-government debt. Unlike Hungary, which owes the majority of its debt to private sources, Poland's borrowing was done mostly from foreign governments. A bit envious, Hungarian economists wryly note that the banks are not so generous.

PAUL HOCKENOS is a regular contributor to ALR from Hungary.

Three Apologies to Readers from ALR

ALR's April issue was plagued by disasters: some out of our control; some not.

Apology 1: Due to spectacular mismanagement on the part of our mailing house, subscribers did not receive their April ALR's for more than three weeks after they were despatched by us to the mailing house. If you have still not received your subscription copy of the April ALR, but are reading this, please ring us on 02-281-7668, and we’ll send you a copy. Our apologies to readers.

Apology 2: Readers who actually received their April issue may have been confused to discover it marked 'March' on the cover. It was indeed the April issue, as indicated on the contents page and on page folios. The misdated cover was the result of a layout and proofreading oversight. Again, our apologies to readers.

Apology 3: The graph of page 14 of the April issue was unattributed. The graph was courtesy of Andrew Scott; the artwork was courtesy of Social Change Media. Our apologies to both.

Today, the nationalist-conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum (HDF) government grapples with the same tight guidelines as the former communist rulers. The marginal balance-of-payments surplus that financed the $3.9 billion debt-servicing bill last year will not materialise in 1991. The IMF pact stipulates that Hungarian export surplus and tourism revenue must cover the $2.6 billion interest payments in order to receive $2.35 billion in loans to pay off principal.

The president of the Hungarian National Bank optimistically points out that the country's debt service ratio (servicing costs as a percentage of total export earnings) has fallen to "only" 40% from 70% three years ago. Yet the collapse of the COMECON trade bloc and conversion to dollar-based trade with the Soviet Union (particularly for oil) has the government predicting a 14% drop in the terms of trade for 1991. The 10% increase in the volume of 1990 hard-currency exports to the West offset a 25% decline in rouble trade. But as the East now finds itself competing with the West on an equal basis for Soviet markets, the boom in westward exports will not cover its losses this year.

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The 80s saw shrinking public sectors and the collapse of the state-run economies. Around the world, defenders of the public sector looked defensive and out of touch. Is the tide now beginning to turn? Peter Baldwin and Peter Robson discuss how the Left can recover the initiative.

Peter Baldwin is the federal Minister for Higher Education. Peter Robson is the joint national secretary of the Public Sector Union. The discussion was chaired by David Burchell.

Since the last election there have been several major policy controversies involving the public sector in which the Left has found itself forced onto the defensive. Examples that come to mind are the Telecom debate, the debate over the privatisation of Australian Airlines and the part-privatisation of Qantas, the Commonwealth Bank decision and, most recently, the ALP’s uranium policy. In all of these the Left has been forced into reacting and defending the status quo against the forces of change. Is there a danger with these debates that the Left will become simply a large protest group?

Baldwin: A key part in the background to this phenomenon is the developments in Eastern Europe since 1989. I think it’s important not to underestimate the significance of those events for the Left in the West, including Australia. It’s all very well for us to seek to distance ourselves from the societies and economic systems of the old Soviet bloc. Ultimately, though, that’s simply a form of escapism, and we really have to come to terms with that legacy. Until we do, it’s going to be difficult to reconstruct a credible position for public enterprise and an expanded public sector, the sorts of positions that the Left has traditionally espoused. Even in Caucus committees, for instance, when people argue for more regulation, Paul Keating will hurl in their face the argument that ‘Gorbachev has now abandoned that sort of obsolete thinking and yet we’ve still got you people espousing it here’. That’s a pretty tough argument to deal with. But it’s no excuse for not thinking soberly about it.

Robson: Nowadays we’re operating in a global economic framework. The dominant forces around the world are essentially for economic rationalism, and one of the principal pressures from those forces is for governments to do a job on the public sector. This holds true whether a conservative or Labor government is in power. In those cir-
cumbstances it doesn't matter which way you look at it: you're going to get pressure to reduce the size of the public sector.

Having said that, the Left has been far too defensive about the public sector and particularly about maintaining the status quo in the public sector. We've come into the argument late, defending the public sector without having an early agenda for changing it. It's a bit late in the day for developing that agenda now because the forces, economic and ideological, which want to whittle back the public sector have been unleashed, and have already done a large part of the job.

Essentially the Left has been defensive because the role of public enterprise and regulation of the labour market have been the two tests that have separated Labor from the conservatives in a major way. When it came down to having the fight in the Labor Party about public enterprise then the Left was forced into a defensive position because we didn't have a pro-active agenda much earlier on. We're now being forced to confront the changes to Telecom, and what is certain about the Beazley plan is that it is forcing, in a very short time, the enterprise and the union movement to face up to major changes, which are going to mean the loss of thousands of jobs. If we had adopted a position about the economic arguments for a monopoly much earlier we would have been able to develop an industry plan for the monopoly which would have included changing some of the existing work practices in Telecom. This would have meant unions having far more influence, and the community would have been in far better shape on the Telecom issue than we are today.

Baldwin: I agree with Peter that the Left has to move away from a defensive stance on public enterprise to one that affirms a positive role for it. To relate that to my earlier comments I don't think it's good enough any more simply to affirm public ownership as inherently good. In that respect the collapse of Eastern Europe has changed the whole climate in which the debate is conducted. It's necessary to put forward quite specific and practical arguments to demonstrate the benefits of public enterprise. In a whole range of areas we can do that a whole lot more effectively than has been done thus far. To take the Telecom example, there is a very good argument for public ownership based on the natural monopoly characteristics of telecommunications carrier networks. That's a clear and respectable argument in conventional economic circles, and I don't know that we really developed that enough. Nor did we develop a vision of the facilitative role that Telecom could potentially play as a key piece of infrastructure in the wider economy. A positive vision—that's what we need to try to create in future debates on public enterprise.

Robson: While they mightn't have been highlighted in the Telecom debate, those arguments were certainly there. In fact the role of Telecom as a monopoly carrier was actually very clearly dealt with in 1981 during the Davidson inquiry. But it didn't matter how good the arguments were in the recent debate. There was a broader agenda, and that meant that we were reduced essentially to two options: either we had to get another carrier, or we had to deregulate the whole telecommunications market—because that's what the economic theory dictated.

My concern about what's happening to the Left is that it's being polarised between the people who defend at all costs and those who say we've got to be part of the debate and be relevant. The present divisions in the Socialist Left in Victoria are a reflection of that. The tendency exists in the union movement as well, though we've held it together thus far. The real political question for the Left is: how far does compromise go? How much do you have to give to be relevant in the debate? I'm not sure I know the answer, but I know it's a central question. However, in facing this question from the standpoint of public enterprise, I'd say: don't defend the indefensible. The same applies, of course, to private industry.

I'm sure what we're going through in the present climate of economic debate is really a cyclical phenomenon. In ten years' time we may well again be saying: what we need in this country is a 100% publicly-owned bank because the economy's in a disastrous mess. That is a very distinct possibility. I'd even go further and say the economic agenda is already changing internationally to a more interventionist position. Have a look at what's happened in Britain since Major replaced Thatcher.

Baldwin: Or, indeed, in America since Bush replaced Reagan...
Robson: It will be a new interventionist position, of course, not the same old one from ten years ago. And in this new climate of opinion the Left will be judged on how it handles this dilemma, about how you remain relevant without giving too much.

When you say it’s difficult to know how far to compromise, I wonder if that’s a particular problem for a lot of people on the Left at the moment. After all, to be clear on how far you can compromise you need to be fairly confident about your general principles, and about how to separate them from the purely pragmatic elements in your program. Yet at present there’s a sense of disorientation on the Left, a lack of confidence about values, priorities and principles. Indeed, it’s really not so clear what the Left stands for at present.

In terms of the public sector, the traditional Left conception of public ownership has been undermined to a certain extent. The Left has always assumed that the public sector behaves differently, and has a different sense of purpose to the private sector. Yet for the last few years public sector management has tried to behave more and more like the private sector. This raises the question: what is the distinctive role of public sector enterprise nowadays? What is its raison d’etre? And how does that relate to how the Left looks at the world?

Baldwin: One of the problems in our approach to the debate on public enterprises stems from a failure systematically to ask precisely that question. Quite specific arguments can be made based on considerations like the natural monopoly argument and market failure. One case that comes to mind is the question of how we foster investment in activities that are inherently long-term and relatively risky. Everyone you talk to who knows something about the Australian capital market will confirm its time horizons are far too short by comparison with more successful economies such as Japan. The fact is that in Japan people contemplate long-term strategies to develop products and processes and to penetrate markets, but in Australia these things don’t happen.

How do you correct that? One way is through a public enterprise vehicle like the Australian Industries Development Corporation. If you favour interventionist industry policies the AIDC has a strategic and very significant role to play. Yet a proposal to part-privatise the AIDC and thus expose its decisions to pressures from the short-term capital market attracted remarkably little debate at Labor’s national conference a couple of years back. At the same time, maintaining 100% public equity in the airlines was, in the eyes of some, the be all and end all of Left ideology. There was something wrong about this set of priorities. You’d expect the airlines to conform to market signals, to be good competitors and go after market share. In other words, they had no distinctive role which the private sector couldn’t have carried out equally well. But the Left was prepared to fight to the death to defend them. In the case of the AIDC, however, which explicitly wanted to do something that the market wouldn’t do, the Left just wasn’t interested. That always struck me as a curious anomaly in the Left’s position and it was symptomatic of a broader malaise. We need to think in terms of a positive agenda for the public sector, to look at the strategic role it might play in broader economic strategy.

Robson: There are three simple tests for whether an enterprise should or should not be in the public sector. And the tests are: market failure, equity and access. They’re pretty clear tests, and if you apply those tests there are much better arguments for some existing public sector activity than for others. In the case of Australian Airlines, when these general tests were applied, frankly the arguments were never strong. The argument came down to: why privatise it when it’s doing all right now? My view about where we should be headed is that we have got to change the agenda into using those tests and then deciding what industries, both new and existing, we want in the public sector.

I believe that there’s got to be much stronger intervention through the public sector in the tradeable goods sphere—particularly in the secondary processing of our...
primary goods. Why not set up a public enterprise for a fixed time for wool scouring? We send 80% of the wool out of the country unscreened. Why not intervene strongly in the market because, in a sense, there’s been a market failure? I much prefer the Left having that sort of agenda and sticking to it. That’s a far better way of doing business than getting stuck into weak arguments about Australian Airlines. On the other hand the arguments for keeping the Commonwealth Bank in the public sector are extremely strong. In that we were taken a bit by storm, but it was an area where the Left should have made a far clearer statement of outrage, because that was a different issue—as was Telecom. In the case of Telecom, as well as the natural monopoly argument there are arguments about access and equity which are critical.

Baldwin: We need to look at what the coming social, economic and environmental priorities are for public enterprise. The environmental area is one that’s particularly significant. A clear example where there’s market failure is the degree of emphasis that we in this country put on developing alternative energy technologies. In the public sector research institutions—in higher education and the CSIRO—there are some very significant things being done on alternative technologies which, further down the track, could find significant world markets. Yet there is a persistent problem in attracting a patient long-term partner for these public entities, to take the innovations through the long process of developing them to the point where they’re commercially marketable products. That’s a clear case where public sector intervention is required. That’s a positive vision; it’s going into a new area.

Robson: One of the biggest problems for the Labor Party at the moment is: where is the vision? What is it fighting for, and why belong to it? Undoubtedly the attack on public enterprise was seen as a breaking point. It was a symbol. For the way ahead we’ve got to have different symbols. We’ve got to have an agenda that’s right for Australia, that’s right for getting out of the economic mess we’re in and right on equity and access grounds.

The private sector isn’t the model for the way the public sector should work. Some private sector enterprises are excellent and they’re miles ahead of some parts of the public sector, but other public institutions are a model in themselves. Take for instance the difference between OTC and Telecom. OTC is a very well run enterprise which is forward-thinking and aggressive in the international marketplace. Have a look at Medicare; its administration costs per health care dollar are four cents, whereas the private funds’ are about 14 cents. What we often encounter with the economic agencies of government, however, is the idea that everything done by the private sector is superior.

Another problem which still hasn’t been resolved is the need to let the managers manage—because governments mostly won’t let go. They want central control, and there’s no better example of that than in telecommunications. One of the bottom lines for the unions was that if you introduce a competitor to Telecom, then you have to remove central co-ordinating arrangements on industrial relations, and you have to remove loan council restrictions. Yet those battles are still far from won.

Baldwin: One of the issues we’ll need to continue to address—and the Left has argued strongly on this point—is the need to change the accounting practices for public sector activities. Much of the imperative for privatisation has been based not on rational arguments about whether this or that enterprise should be in the private rather than the public sector, but rather on the need to make the budgetary aggregates look better. We treat the sale of a public asset in our budgetary accounting conventions as an outlay with a minus sign on it, which unambiguously makes the budgetary aggregates look better, even though no permanent benefit accrues to the public sector as a result. No serious economic analyst who’s looked at the question will support that as a rational motivation for selling public assets. Yet it’s what has been largely driving this privatisation agenda.

Another problem for the Left, along with the debates on privatisation and corporatisation, is the micro-economic reform debate—or rather, the form that the micro-economic reform debate has taken. I’m not sure that many people on the Left know exactly what they think about micro-economic reform. Inasmuch as they do, they’re probably instinctively suspicious of it. But in the absence of a coherent Left position, the debate has taken on a complexion which is far from supportive to the public sector. One of the dominant images in much of the rhetoric of micro-economic reform is that of the economy as a conveyor belt producing wealth for the private sector. And it just so happens that a large part of the conveyor belt is comprised of public sector enterprises. If anything goes wrong with the economy, attention becomes fixed on how to make the conveyor belt work better. And that means that an awful lot of attention is focused on inefficiencies in the public sector.

Robson: The economy does need restructuring and the public sector has got to be part of that process. You can call it micro-economic reform or whatever you like, but that’s a fact of life. If we don’t restructure, we’re doomed to be a Third World country. Restructuring for the sake of restructuring, however, is the New Zealand model. If you go there, politicians will tell you: “Things are great. We’ve got rid of the labour laws, we’ve fixed the public sector up, and so on.” Then, if you ask how the standard of living is or how exports are, they’ll tell you they’ve got some problems. “We’ve done everything, but nothing’s happening.” It would be a great tragedy if we had structural change, without a view of where we’re going, on the New Zealand model. I’m not sure that clear vision exists at the moment.

Having said all that I can understand why workers are sceptical of micro-economic reform, because in the last few years there hasn’t been any reform of capital: only deregulation. This has benefited the sleazy dealers in capital who, in many cases, made a significant personal fortune and have done the rest of us in the eye. As a union official I certainly know that workers in the public and private sectors think that all the change is happening to them and not in too many other places.
Baldwin: The micro-economic reform agenda is another in which it is possible to take some positions with a distinctively Left quality in the sense that they involve expanded public sector activity, but at the same time are rationally defensible. For example, on the question of public infrastructure there's a growing body of evidence—from America, in particular—that failure to spend adequately on public infrastructure exacts a toll in terms of the growth of productivity. In a sense this fiscal tightness can be counter-productive if it involves putting a squeeze on necessary public infrastructure. We need increasingly to point to the counter-productivity of this obsession with fiscal austerity at the expense of the proper role of the public sector.

Robson: I want to go further on this issue than Peter. This is something that the Left has to be far more aggressive on. In the mid 70s, 8% of GDP was going into public infrastructure. Now it’s about 5%. We’re in a recession; one of the economic instruments that could be used to get more people back into work would be spending on public infrastructure. I have come to the view that you’ve got to target your spending and that should be done in the tradeable goods sector and in the infrastructure. In the current American budget there are very substantial increases in roads and rail. It might be considered a bit old-fashioned, this business of putting public money into infrastructure during a recession so that you supplement the productivity of the private sector. But it also creates jobs and stimulates the economy. We’ve got to be arguing far more strongly for that sort of program in this environment.

Baldwin: The contrast between the Bush and Reagan administrations is quite an interesting one because it extends both to the attitude on spending on public infrastructure and to the degree of regulation of financial markets. There is a distinct shift between the two administrations, and what that indicates is a broader shift in sentiment and opinion throughout the world. We’ve gone through a decade where the Left has been very much on the back foot. Deregulatory and small government policies were very much flavour of the month, not only here but throughout the Western world. You can couple that with Eastern bloc communism and Eastern Europe and the discrediting of bureaucratically-administered socialism.

Those shifts have created a period of great difficulty. But I sense that the tide is now turning, and the Left really has to think about how to position itself to take advantage of that. One thing that is absolutely essential is to foster a genuinely inquiring political culture within the Left. We must not have a situation where people are afraid to espouse their views about the direction in which the Left is going to go, out of fear of being labelled an ideological heretic. Far too much of that sort of thing has gone on in the Left in the past and we have to break with that kind of mentality if we’re to progress. I’ve seen time and again where people are reluctant to speak within the forums in the Left for fear of being seen not to adhere to the one true path. Perhaps we are now slowly starting to get away from that kind of inward-looking culture.

Robson: It’s a bit of a problem with Labor in power as well. It must be extremely hard for the Left Labor ministers who

are part of the policy-making process to go into the robust meetings of the rank-and-file Left—meetings where often there’s a purer than pure position which says don’t change one bloody thing or you’re a sell-out. That’s a nonsense position, but it must be said that it’s central for the leadership of the Left both in parliament and the unions to have a clear agenda. Even with crunch arguments over the Commonwealth Bank there has to be a position of principle adopted because the Left has taken a leadership position representing workers. That, for me, is a critical factor. Workers want to know where people stand.

Having said all that, the most important thing now, I agree, is to have an inquiring, inventive and intellectually rigorous approach to things. Labour market reform is a classic example. The world’s changing rapidly, the Right’s setting the agenda and we seem to be reacting. The Left in the union movement has been an important part in developing an alternative position but it can only acknowledge a certain amount of intellectual leadership. To his great credit, much of the intellectual vision has come from Bill Kelty. The Left needs to be playing more of a leading role.

One of the biggest problems for Labor is: where is the vision?
- Robson
The Telecom debate came and went with a splash. The real decisions, though, are now being made without that media attention. Robert Clark argues that they make it even more important for the Left to develop a plausible posture.

Remember ‘Megacom’? Remember how telecommunications reform in the form of a contest between Keating and Beazley stalked the pages of our newspapers, with the ‘Telecom versus OTC’ model staked against ‘Megacom’ versus a privatised Aussat? Such was the urgency of the reforms that a special ALP conference was called to push through party approval for the Beazley proposal to merge Telecom and OTC and to establish a second network operator around a foreign-owned Aussat.

Despite a great deal of bureaucratic activity since then, cracks are appearing in the grand scheme; deadlines in the fast-tracked implementation schedule are not being met and interest in purchasing Aussat is unexpectedly low.

If the reforms go wrong, the costs could be enormous, though it will be future governments and consumers who will have to pay. The Beazley strategy is to have the new regime up and running before next election; partly to help establish the government’s reform credentials, partly to make it hard for a future coalition government to undo them. There may not be many votes to be had in posting ‘micro-economic reform’ or ‘deregulation of telecommunications’ on the scoreboard—but there is a lot to be lost if the government gets it wrong.

One danger is that Telecom will be starved into privatisation. On this issue, everyone agrees—without a removal of restrictions on loan-raising, Telecom is fated to be privatised. Private ownership of Telecom is believed to be Keating’s preferred option, and is coalition policy. Beazley’s defence is that there are more productive ways to spend $20 billion in Australian telecommunications than in buying Telecom. The coalition’s 100% privatisation is no more than an ideological exercise, wasteful and impractical given the current scarcity of Australian and foreign capital. Telecom’s current application for a two cent rise in local call charges in part reflects nervousness over its capital needs.

Another is that the newcomer will ‘cream-skim’ from the most lucrative—ie, STD and trans-Tasman—routes and hence make it harder for Telecom-OTC to fund the non-
commercial services (known in the jargon as community service obligations). For the ordinary user, the only consolation is the dubious Hawke guarantee that "no householder or ordinary subscriber in rural areas will be disadvantaged by these reforms" and some ambiguous price caps.

Last year's telecommunications debate was couched simply in terms of 'competition versus monopoly', and evolved into a two-cornered Cabinet contest between Beazley and Keating, each advocating different models involving network competitors. Beazley's 'Megacom' plan was backed by Telecom; OTC (and, incidentally, Beazley's department) supported Keating.

The pro-OTC forces argued that as the second biggest telecommunications company OTC was better placed than a new competitor to compete with Telecom. They pointed to a range of statistics which showed OTC to be among the world's best performing network operators.

The Megacom groups saw Telecom-OTC as a national champion, bigger and better able to compete with the giants in international markets. Competitive pressures would push the champion to improve productivity and replace its bureaucratic corporate culture with a service culture. The pro-Megacom camp argued that OTC performance figures were artificially flattering because it did not have to carry out many of the nuts-and-bolts tasks, such as billing.

As we know, the ALP special conference in September last year approved the introduction of network competition, and these decisions were given effect with a policy announcement in November. Between those two decisions Beazley lost a couple of rounds against Keating and Finance
Minister Ralph Willis. They foisted provision for resale of leased capacity and a third mobile network licence, which have somewhat muddied the waters for the newcomer.

On its own, the opening of the resale market looked to be a quite promising option, and the model preferred by Professor Bill Melody, director of the Melbourne based research centre CIRCIT, and public interest groups such as the Communications Law Centre. By allowing groups to lease excess capacity in bulk and "on-sell" it to users, competitive pressures are imposed upon Telecom without the duplication of infrastructure and scarce investment capital. Professor Melody's view would be to allow resale "to work its way through" and review the need or otherwise for full network competition.

What should be emphasised about all the reforms of telecommunications so far is that they have focused on the needs of business--both business users of Telecom services and those of the industry itself, viewed as an important export earner. Telecom-OTC and Australian equipment suppliers will pitch for the Asian contracts. Megacon's hubbing capabilities will lure multinationals Down Under. Far less attention has been paid to the needs and wants of individual consumers.

One of the lessons from last year's debate should be that it is not enough to assert 'public ownership' as an end in itself. Those on the Left who did that last year then looked foolish when Telecom itself changed tack and accepted the notion of competition.

Moreover, Telecom's poor public image is not just because of bad PR. It's because of its inflexibility and lack of accountability in dealing with the public. On quality and range of network services it is deservedly among the world's top five. In customer service it often rates an equally well-deserved raspberry--a point accepted by Telecom manage-

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**AUSTRALIAN TELECOMMUNICATIONS - A BRIEF HISTORY**

Despite its ubiquitous nature, the inner workings of the telecommunications industry are a mystery to most of us. Telecommunications in Australia has always been a government activity, despite some early initiatives by stock exchanges in Sydney and Melbourne to establish telephone networks in the 1880s. The reasons for this are simple: governments were (and often still are) the biggest telecommunications users; and it was in the interest of governments--for political, strategic and economic reasons--to establish telegraphic and telephonic links between the colonies and between Australia and the UK.

Through the 80s, other pressures on Telecom and the Australian government began to make themselves felt. The Fraser government commissioned the Davidson Report (1982-83), which recommended the breakup of Telecom. Around the world, changes were in train: the AT&T monopoly in the US was broken up into a series of regional monopolies (known as 'baby Bells'); Japan part-privatised its giant monopoly NTT and introduced competition on long-distance routes; and the Thatcher government invited a Cable and Wireless subsidiary, Mercury, to compete against British Telecom.

But while ideology informed these reforms, the pace of technological change played an even greater role in bringing them about.

Traditionally, managing a national carrier meant merely the oversight of provision of telephone and telex service provisions--an activity that was not profitable until the mid-60s. Signs of change began perhaps in the late 70s when Telecom began to install digital exchanges. Then in the 80s, technology developed by the US military enabled the introduction of cellular mobile telephony; high quality, inexpensive fax machines appeared; with the spread of information technology, governments and large corporations began shifting huge amounts of data between distant locations, often using their own private networks. Not to mention fibre optics, capable of carrying simultaneously up to 100,000 conversations; ISDN, which can carry very high speed signalling in a variety of modes; satellite services; video conferencing; intelligent networks where carriers can provide high level services to individual customers through sophisticated exchange equipment; value-added services, such as Telecom's Discovery network, offering instant financial information and electronic mail; paging; voice mail and so on.

Even the standard phone nowadays boasts software to provide facilities such as number storage and redial.
ment whose excuse is "we are improving". Last month the corporation was on the end of a serve from Labor MP Alan Morris who, as head of a parliamentary inquiry into handling of complaints, accused Telecom of inflexibility and arrogance in dealing with customers.

It is more useful for the Left to focus on outcomes; to demand universal affordable access, a coherent approach to the 'information society' and new technology issues, and to require purchasing and R&D practices which support local industry.

The issue should not have been whether to allow competition, but in what form. Because of the technological advances (see box), a good many telecommunications services are already provided privately. While there are good arguments for not restricting provision of telecommunications services to a monopoly provider, Canberra seems to have gone about this with its usual near-religious fervour for ideal conceptions of 'competition' and 'deregulation'. The first assistant secretary of the Department of Transport and Communication, Vanessa Fanning, revealed recently a goal of the reforms was to "normalise" telecommunications. It's always been an "unusual industry", she said, and "a key theme" has been to get it to the point where it can be treated largely like any other industry. Which, quite bizarrely, seems to suggest for an industry merely to differ from Canberra's idea of "normalcy" is cause enough for the imposition of a major industry restructure.

The overseas experience in licensing new carriers does not inspire confidence. Although service standards in the varied US, UK and New Zealand markets have gone up, so have prices in many cases. There have been positive results, but overall outcomes are mixed, and interpretations of them is a major cottage industry.

Progress on the merger of Telecom and OTC is so far only slightly more than zero. When Beazley and Hawke pleaded for party support seven months ago it was to enable 'Megacom' to breach quickly the soon-to-boom Asian markets. Apart from naming an interim board, no visible progress has been made. The two companies compete still in the value-added services area and even their overseas arms remain separate. Staff at both firms are confused and morale is low. With 84,000 employees, Telecom is Australia's second biggest employer. Many of these employees are waiting for the axe to fall. Up to 8000 line and maintenance jobs might be lost through the use of sub-contractors, while Country Division management talk openly of "down-sizing" from 18,000 in mid-1990 to 12,000 in the next 12 months.

Meanwhile, the world has not rushed to buy Aussat. At time of writing only two consortia are regarded as serious contenders: Bell South-Cable & Wireless and Bell Atlantic-Ameritech-Hutchisons. Some of the would-be bidders doubt that the sale will go through on schedule, by the end of the year. Caucus can be expected to approve a stepped increase in Australian ownership over several years before the 51% level is reached.

The timing of the Aussat sale could not have been much worse—during a partial international recession, and with 27 other privatisations under way around the world—in Eastern Europe, Korea, Latin America, among others. The UK market is opening up to full competition. Professor Bill Melody, points out that the only criteria used by DOTAC for measuring the success or failure of the reforms are market share and the economic viability of the new carrier. "The judgment is going to be 'how successful is the second carrier?', rather than 'are consumers better off?'" says Melody. "The easiest thing to grab onto is just how well the second carrier is doing."

The gathering pace of change makes the traditional monopoly less meaningful: there is no real reason why only a single operator must provide all the basic telecommunications needs. More practically, it is quite difficult for one operator to be the all-encompassing provider. Telecommunications is evolving into a global market. The pundits and the government's main advisers predict it will be dominated by no more than a dozen corporations by the end of the decade. Beazley's ambition is that up there with AT&T, British Telecom and Japan's
NTT will be our own Telecom-OTC. He predicts that by 2000, the company will be the same size as AT&T is now (the US company's 1990 revenues were four times that of the Australian pair).

The first round of telecommunication reforms was announced in May 1988 when Gareth Evans was Minister. These liberalised the value-added services area, corporatised Telecom and OTC and established Austel. Barely 18 months later, telecommunications reform was on the agenda once more, this time driven by the need to extinguish Aussat's burgeoning debt, forecast by some to be more than $700 million by the time it is sold.

The new carrier now will have to cope not only with an entrenched Telecom but also with schools of resellers on its flanks. This, and the granting of a third mobile licence (Aussat's new owner will hold the second licence), won't do much for the viability of the new carrier in the early years—a key government goal. It is quite possible that the new environment will become overheated with competition in the early years.

For now, the task is to get Beazley and his department to establish a broader notion of telecommunications, rather than a means of improving the balance of payments. Whereas the 1988 reforms set our social objectives, such as universal access, this latest restructuring is presented as part of the government's micro-economic reform program.

Telecommunications policy needs to go beyond purely economic issues. It should stipulate basic levels of access to telecommunications services. Presently, basic service is considered to be a standard telephone, but the technological changes through the next decade will outstrip the 80s, requiring a continuous re-evaluation of the question. This might be best done through Austel with a much stronger consumer brief, requiring it to investigate and monitor the evolution of telecommunications. This would also encompass other consumer concerns such as quality and pricing.

Meanwhile, it would be useful to see the government (and, to a lesser extent, Telecom) explain some of these changes to the community. The evidence is that a great deal of confusion and concern exists across Australia, especially among rural and disabled telephone users.

For many on the Left, the Telecom debate was a 'sham', a loaded debate with a predetermined outcome. It is better to see the debate as a useful pointer to pressure politics, 90s style. Indeed, the debate included in one aspect or another most of the key economic issues which will confront the Left in the 90s, involving public ownership, employment, consumer issues, new technology, international economic integration, and the development of Australian industry.

As we head into the 'information age', the old monopoly in telecommunications, based around one or two technologies, has had its day. Yet Telecom can and will play the dominant role in the sector. It will be the end-to-end provider for most Australians. It will be able to direct and guide implementation of new technologies and services. Its investment will create jobs in manufacturing and services.

Though the old certainties have disappeared, the basic practical demands of social justice remain the same—but fairness, access, jobs and empowerment are not automatically provided by a publicly owned monopoly. Securing these today requires an ability to argue flexibly from basic principles, without remaining locked in traditional postures.

ROBERT CLARK is the editor of the newsletter Communications Report.

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**TELEXICON**

**Your guide to the telecommunications word-maze.**

**Austel:** the regulator, with responsibility for technical regulation, competition policy and, officially, consumer protection—although it is criticised by consumer groups as upholding the first two responsibilities to the detriment of the third.

**Community service obligations:** one of the jargon phrases for non-commercial services which Telecom provides, such as for rural customers. Telecom costs the cross-subsidies from other services to fund the CSOs at $800 million; the Bureau of Transport and Communications Economics at $240 million.

**Interconnect:** simply the connection into the Telecom network by a) the new carrier and b) resellers. Each will be subject to a set of (separate) interconnect arrangements.

**ISDN:** Integrated digital services network. A new 'premium' service from Telecom for corporate and government customers with high transmission speeds which can be used for sending data, very high quality fax and (increasingly common) video-conference pictures. Tariffs are based on timed charging, even for local connections.

**Value-added services:** literally, any service added on to the basic network capability. However, given the advances in network technology, the distinction is increasingly blurred. An example, however, would be an electronic mail service, such as OTC's Dialcom, or Telecom's Discovery, which is an on-line database service.

**Price caps:** usually expressed in the form of CPI-x where CPI is the previous inflation rate. Currently set at CPI-2 for local calls—meaning Telecom and OTC price rises must be more than 2% below the annual inflation rate—and CPI-5.5 for STD and IDD.

**PABX:** Private Automatic Branch Exchange—the local 'exchange' in say an office or organisation which can carry anything from 40 to 10,000 lines.

**Resale of leased capacity:** the practice of purchasing spare capacity on the Telecom network and selling access to it to third parties.
TELEFUTURES

The present reforms of Australian telecommunications are lacking an overall vision and are based on an uncritical acceptance of notions of competition, deregulation and privatisation, according to a recent report by the Everett Foundation.

The report, Telefutures, which was released in April, says international experience shows that without a strong interventionist policy local industry would become increasingly dominated by overseas interests.

This paper follows an interim report on telecommunications, released last July, at the height of the ‘Megacom’ debate. The interim report was very much a case for status quo in Australian telecommunications.

Like the interim report, the final paper was backed by Telecom, LM Ericsson and unions. It has arrived too late to affect the debate for the time being, but the arguments over telecommunications doubtless will whirr up again when the duopoly comes up for review over the next six years.

Much of the report amounts to a general defence of the role of the public sector in telecommunications. Its main weakness is the lack of grounding in issues specific to ‘information economics’, and ‘information society’ of those who produced it. However, it does offer something by way of setting the overall context, a reminder that the present policies are focused almost entirely on the economic and commercial aspects of telecommunications.

Judy Horacek

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I think you mean copulate

Cals used: 14

Selling raffle tickets for Amnesty International

So what’s the prize?

I can’t believe you asked that

Cals used: 62

Remembering exactly what & who you’re boycotting

Hmmm cheap week

Cals used: 5,421

Redesigning the government

Warts, Hitler, moustache or clown’s nose on this one?

Cals used: 5

Joining/Resigning from your local branch of whatever

Vive le gauche!!

Cals used: 42

Updating the stickers on your car

Free who?

Cals used: 55

Collating the Country Profiles from New Internationalist

Oh no, another one I’ve never heard of

Cals used: 963

The government’s November 1990 statement, unlike the previous May 1988 policy reforms, lacks a coherent overarching vision of telecommunications in the future, according to the report. The decisions were merely a short-term remedy to overcome Aussat’s financial difficulties.

“The proposed duopoly does not rest on any basic concern that technology should be kept in balance with economic, political and social considerations,” says the report. It argues for the reinstatement of the basic principles informing the 1988 reforms, that access to telecommunications should be regarded as a right, “more or less as education has come to be a right”.

The chapter by former Sydney University political economist Ted Wheelwright on industry policy development provides the best and most pertinent analysis. It points to Telecom’s role in building the local telecommunications manufacturing industry and the part played by recent initiatives such as the Industry Development arrangements and the Partnership Programmes. It also recommends that Australia follow the French practice of requiring foreign newcomers to commit themselves to being at least balance-of-payments neutral.

Industry policies should not benefit not only the local operations of transnational corporations, it argues, but also small to medium operators in the information technology sector such as packaged software developers in telecommunications.
In the 60s and 70s, women’s struggle was to get out of the home and into the workforce. The big issue of the 90s, according to Karen Throssell, will be rather different. The relationship between work and home life is the key to a new gender settlement.

While it patently is not and has not been the reality for some years, Australian society is still structured around the presumed norm of the ‘at-home wife’. Many tradespeople still only call between 8.30-5.00. Schools close at 3.30 and have more and more child-free days, while only a small number run ‘after-care’ programs as back-ups (as if it were only for a ‘few’ children).

Our work practices are still rooted in the work culture of the 50s: rigid adherence to a 38-hour week (and much more for the ‘seriously career minded’); a concept of career paths inconsistent with the life-cycle of a person with serious family responsibilities; notions of equity formed in a different era (ie, treating everyone as though they had a wife at home); performance evaluation systems that confuse effort with results by equating hours of work with productivity, and confusing presence at the office with work.

Despite this growing mismatch between the rules of the workplace and the needs of the workers, things are changing slowly. After all, employees still get to work and do their jobs. Somehow the plumber finds the key. We know the children, the adolescents and the elderly are somewhere. Women’s entry into the workforce has been increasing for 20 years and the system still appears to function.
However, a slight glimmer of light is appearing on the horizon with the relatively recent emergence of 'home/work balance' as a social and political issue. The issue has clearly surfaced in response to the increasing pressure this accelerating imbalance places on families and organisations. In one sense the arguments in the 'home/work balance' debate are similar to those involved in the debates around women's dual role and lack of access to the 'real world of work'—in other words, the imperative on women to come home to cook the evening meal rather than staying back for that evening meeting.

But the 1990s 'home/work balance' debate brings in some new emphases sometimes lost in the debates about women's 'dual role'. Among them is the central question: whose responsibility is it to ensure a better balance of tasks both within households and within society as a whole and who benefits from a better balance?

Thus, where the traditional emphasis in feminist debate has been on the personal—how you can get your partner to have responsibility for child-care/housework; how you adjust to the competing demands of home and work—there is now a greater emphasis on the employer's and ultimately society's, responsibility for ensuring a better balance between home-life and work-life.

Because this new thinking stresses access to home as well as work it also changes the emphasis on who will benefit from a new balance. Clearly, women still get the worst side of the bargain under the traditional balance of labour. However, there is now an acknowledgment that in our lop-sided system where men are expected to single-mindedly climb the ladder in order to 'succeed', they too have been missing out—missing out not just on the raising of their children, but also on other parts of their lives.

There is also an increasing emphasis on the benefits of a better balance for organisations and ultimately for society as a whole. Thus, just as organisations benefit from 'using the full quota of human potential' (ie, women as well as men) so will society benefit from children experiencing 'shared parenting'.

In fact, Dorothy Dinnerstein (in *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*) asserted 15 years ago that shared early parenthood was a necessary condition for the very survival of the species. She also claimed that equally shared responsibility for child-care and short and flexible enough working hours to make this possible 'are so well within our technical means that the problem is to explain why they do not now exist'.

So how can we explain "why they do not now exist"? Very simply. It is the nature of work that operates as the major obstacle. Earlier explanations emphasised the sex-role conditioning which accompanied the first industrial revolution—a conditioning which permeated every facet of life. In recent decades, though, attitudes have been changing towards sex roles. The declining numbers of 'housewives' and 'breadwinners' are testimony to this.

Whereas in the 50s, it was generally believed that most married women would not choose to work outside the home, by the 70s it was inescapable that the majority of women, regardless of whether they were married, would not choose to remain at home, except when their children were very young.

This has been verified by a variety of surveys which have found that, contrary to attitudes in the 50s and 60s, there
has been a major increase in the proportion of women who considered a career as well as motherhood as important to their self-image. The fact that many employers still organise employment as though parenting is exclusively female and a career is fundamentally male means that the raised aspirations of many women are clearly on a collision path with their desire to be parents.

While women have come some distance towards a re-evaluation of their "pre-ordained" nurturing role, however, men are only just starting to look at the negative side of the breadwinner/corporate man role. The task of persuading men to relinquish what they perceive as the positive 'personality defining' sides of the equation of career-life is a much more difficult one.

This would be particularly so if, as the biological determinists assert, aggression, competitiveness and their ultimate goals, power and 'success', were innate masculine traits predetermined by an excess of testosterone. But as Dinnerstein points out "to overestimate the rigidity of [these traits] in our species' biology [is] to see it as less genuinely reversible than it actually is". In fact, some would argue that there is a trend (albeit a very gentle one) towards a re-evaluation of masculinity. An American training and developmental journal from the late 80s put it like this:

In a sense [if] the 1960s and 1970s were about women [read re-evaluating roles]; the late 1980s are about men. Books about men are proliferating. At least 25 universities have begun offering courses in men's studies. Men are beginning to re-examine the male experience and the costs paid for the overuse of competition, the absence of close male friendships in adulthood and the Long Ranger Life.

This gradual change has also been reflected in various surveys of priorities. For example, an Age poll in 1986 which ranked personal values revealed that 64% of men surveyed ranked family as most important compared to 4% who ranked work as most important. (Other factors measured were leisure 13%; friends 9%; religion 4% and possessions 1%).

What is interesting (though perhaps not surprising) is the discrepancy between theory and practice. The vast majority of men act as though their priorities were the other way around—as though work-life, rather than family-life were their chief source of self-fulfilment. There is a similar clash between theory and practice evident in the conflict between men's stated increased 'commitment' to sharing housework and the amount they actually do. Some would claim that this discrepancy is because men do not really want to change. But for those who do (and for those who need some 'encouragement') the major obstacle is the inflexibility of men's paid work, and the continuing expectations of the role it should play in their lives.

To remove this obstacle there needs to be a fundamental revolution in the nature of work—in how it is defined, in what role it plays in men's and women's lives and in the nature of child-rearing and dependent care and who accepts the major responsibility for it in society.

First and foremost, it is necessary for employers to re-evaluate their expectations—expectations which demand that you don't just get work from your employees, you get blood defined as "full-time commitment" or "total loyalty". It has to be asserted forcefully that a life outside the office is important, and that a person who is a 'good parent' may also be a 'good worker'. Men also need to re-evaluate their priorities (or to put them into practice) vis à vis work and family.

It is essential that employers cater properly for their "workers with family responsibilities"—and "properly" could well mean tipping the current home/work balance in favour of home at the expense of work. In doing this employers must challenge not only issues as basic as the male 'hunter/warrior' role model but the entire protestant work ethic.

It may be objected that this is far too ambitious a goal—after all, does it not involve a questioning not only of most corporate culture but of the very definition of masculinity? Again, it may be argued that such a task is especially difficult during a period of political (and ostensibly social) conservatism.

Arguing that work/family integration may be an unattainable dream in the recession-bound 1990s, the pessimists marshal persuasive statistical, anecdotal and sociological data to support their position. It is important,
however, to distinguish between well-founded economic arguments and those based on an insidious return to biological determinism. These latter kinds of arguments, as presented in books like Brainsex, are currently undergoing a renaissance. What they involve is not only a dismissal of any change that has occurred already, but a denial on 'biological' grounds that any change is possible—replacing the feminist-inspired optimistic rhetoric on the need and possibility for change in men with a biologically-focused pessimism.

The economic arguments, however, are more difficult to dispute. These relate to the fact that poverty and the dramatically increasing incidence of one-parent families make 'balancing' not a choice of the best options for fulfilment but instead a grim battle with reality. (In fact, it could be argued that the validity of these criticisms makes much of this article relevant only to two-parent families.)

There are those in the trade union movement, indeed, who regard those two parent families who are able to make adjustments to the home/work balance (especially in favour of 'less work') as already so privileged that they do not merit their concern. This is a logical extension of the traditional trade union antipathy to part-time work: so the argument runs it is only the privileged (white collar) workers who can afford to freely choose to live on 'part' of their salaries. Yet, while there is, of course, some truth in the economic objection to the argument in these pages, what this ignores is the willingness of many workers (who could not all be classified as privileged) to exchange time for money.

Despite the current bleak economic climate there is a range of indications that 'home/work balance' is being considered by an increasingly wide range of organisations. This has been evident both at a legislative level (with EEO legislation and the ratification of International Labour Organisation Convention 156), and at a trade union level (with the parental leave test case which cited ILO 156, and an increasing interest in work-based child care). At the corporate level there has been a gradual acknowledgment that women workers are a vital force whose special skills (and needs) must be accommodated.

This latter trend is quite striking and is worth looking at in some detail. There are two themes running through current management theory. Firstly, an acknowledgment that so-called 'female qualities' are not only valuable at a senior management level, but indispensable; and secondly, that employers (like unions) are going to have to take specific steps to attract and retain female employees—steps like establishing work-based child-care and making working hours more flexible.

It does seem to indicate a remarkable shift from the earlier view that women were not suited for the ranks of senior management (because they're not single-minded, tough, aggressive, ruthless—or even smart enough). Now there is some acknowledgment that you don't have to be tough, ruthless and so on to be a good manager—in fact that many organisations will be better off for an injection of the 'female management style'.

This increasing interest in the notion of a dichotomy of management styles (among the theorists at least) is illustrated by the variety of labels the two styles have been given: male/female, autocratic/democratic, macho/tough-love(!), control-driven/commitment-driven, left-brained/right-brained. The trend, however, is not to argue for one style over the other. Just as an individual needs to use both sides of the brain to function properly, so does an organisation need to integrate both the 'feminine' collaborative approach with some of the 'masculine' analytical, bureaucratic qualities. Thus we have the contemporary management-theory phenomenon of the 'androgynous manager'.

What has prompted this change? Objective factors, rather than a sudden burst of subjective enlightenment, are the major motivating forces. On one level this is represented by the shift from a predominantly industrial to a predominantly service economy. An economy where organisations create value from knowledge rather than muscle means that the autocratic management style of the 40s, 50s and 60s is less and less appropriate. Today's managers spend most of their time interacting with people rather than machines—thus a 'people-oriented' management style is now much more important to 'good management'.

This is epitomised by the change in terminology which took place over the 80s. Where the 'personnel' departments of the 50s confined themselves to hiring and firing, advising and arbitrating, the 'human resources' departments of today look much more creatively at broader personal development needs through counselling, training, staff development and organisational development.

In fact, at a conference on work-based child-care in Melbourne last year the two main reasons given for the increased employer interest in this issue were: more enlightened human resource management and (as a result of this) the dramatically increased emphasis on training within organisations.

Of course, one of the major motivating influences on this has been the entry of women into the workforce. If women's entry into the workforce put family issues on the agenda, then the fact that they will comprise 80% of new entrants to the workforce in the next decade will ensure that they are high on the agenda.

Naturally, the bottom line of the motivation of employers in these debates is productivity. A recent article on work-based child-care put it this way:

Child-care—and many issues that have usually fallen into the same category—is increasingly being seen by forward-thinking Australian employers as a factor that impinges significantly on staff retention and recruitment, productivity, turnover and absenteeism, morale and corporate image. In other words—a dollar issue.

The assistant director of the Business Council of Australia, Michael Angwin, speaking at a conference on 'labour
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ALR WORKER

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ALR will soon be reorganising its staffing for the Sydney editorial office, and this will involve employing one or more part-time staff for production and editorial tasks. At present, the exact makeup of the different jobs is unclear. However, at least one part-time job will be available for a production editor/business manager, with responsibility for aspects of the production of the magazine, and for maintaining our subscriptions service and accounts. Some editorial work may also be available.

If you're interested in working for ALR, give David or Mike a ring on 02-281-7668, or write with details of yourself to ALR, PO Box A247, Sydney South NSW 2000. Note that ALR will be moving from mid-May, but that a change of phone number will be available from Telecom directory assistance when that happens. The PO box will remain unchanged.
market flexibility for a changing workforce" cited the
globalisation of the economy as one of the major factors
forcing business to respond to the needs of the changing
labour market. Thus, in a situation where economic success
depends on the ability to compete in the global
marketplace, it is now no longer enough to be competitive
in finance and marketing alone. Organisations now have
to be competitive in employee relations.

This is the theory. Is there any evidence that organisations
are actually responding to these theoretical developments?
There is some. According to the Institute of Family Studies,
many employers are now considering measures aimed at
assisting workers to balance the demands of family and
work responsibilities. The range of measures in place or
being considered include: the provision of child-care;
flexible work hours and schedules; the provision of per­
manent part-time employment and job sharing; and spe­
cial leave provisions (such as maternity, parental and
special leave).

A recent national survey of 183 private sector employers
found that 45% supported the provision of child care and
are actively investigating options; nearly 75% of large
companies offer permanent part-time work; 40% allow flexible
working hours; and 19% have introduced job-sharing.6

There is significant evidence that there is a gradual change
in employer behaviour. At the same time, there are real
dangers in the use of rhetoric about family responsibilities
to justify so-called reforms which are in reality crude cost­
cutting measures. It is necessary to observe how the con­
cept of flexible working hours is defined. It has already
been used to justify the abolition of penalty rates (flexibility
to meet employers' needs rather than the families'),
increased casualisation and 'contracting out'—all in the name
of allowing women more time with their families.

Changes to bring about a better home/work balance must
also cut across class as well as gender barriers. In this
regard it is the constant reference by managers to the need
to attract and/or retain 'skilled' workers that causes par­
cular concern. The fashionable theory that the workforce
of the future will comprise two tiers—a 'core' of 'skilled'
highly paid information workers and a 'periphery' of
contract/manual/support workers—compounds this concern.

Does this mean, for instance, that child-care places are
offered only to our senior women because they represent
a greater dollar investment; or that part-time work is of­
fered only to junior staff (because you have to keep getting
blood out of your senior workers)? Does it mean that
'workforce flexibility' may not only exclusively benefit
senior middle-class women, but in fact penalise working­
class women—eroding their working conditions and lock­
ing them further into their dual role?

And where do male workers/parents fit into the
employers' home/work balance agenda? For both unions
and corporations, it seems that the other side of the
balance—the male/home side—is still downplayed if not
ignored. Initiatives like the recent ACTU Paternity Leave

A lucid and well-researched analysis of how employers are trying to meet the demands of family and work responsibilities, highlighting the need for measures that actually benefit all workers, not just the middle-class. The author challenges the common rhetoric of 'flexibility' and points out the potential for these reforms to exacerbate existing gender and class inequalities. The article also highlights the importance of addressing the needs of male workers and parents. The author calls for a more holistic approach to home/work balance that recognizes the contributions and challenges faced by all workers, regardless of gender or class.
The Gulf War highlighted the ambivalent relationship of the Western Left to the Third World. Here, in a selection from his new English-language edition of essays, Hans Magnus Enzensberger casts doubt on the cult of solidarity.

The intellectual world has its own deadly sins, which are not to be found in the catechism. As if they didn't have their hands full with envy and gluttony, pride and fascination, the intellectuals are constantly inventing (and trespassing against) new prohibitions. Venerable and familiar names, like those listed in the confessional—sloth, avarice, pride—are out of the question as sins for the intelligentsia; they lack the high-quality scientific cachet, the watermark of abstraction.

Nor can the deviations of consciousness put in a claim for consecration by eternity. A wrathful god who would separate the white from the black sheep is not in sight, and the world spirit has fallen silent too. Rather, it's the watchdogs of whatever doctrine is dominant, if not indeed of fashion, who take care that the villain is exposed and the upright man is rewarded. So whoever sins intellectually, by no means risks eternal damnation. At worst he is reviled for a while, pulled apart by critics or completely ignored. A few years or decades pass, a new register of sins is agreed upon, and the formerly depraved deviationist is rehabilitated. Anti-communism, for example, an aberration which was considered unforgivable among enlightened people for decades is today altogether socially acceptable again, indeed it is almost de rigueur.

It's quite a different matter, however, with the cardinal intellectual sin of the 70s, a mode of thought which bears the curious name Eurocentrism; its reprehensibility, I believe, remains unquestioned even today. The Europeans noticed quite early on that they are not alone in this world; and they turned this circumstance to their advantage quite early on. The history of our 'discoveries' consisted, as we know, of colonising the inhabitants of other continents, and that means conquering and robbing them.

Ethnology, a new science of humanity, owes its development to this bloody process. Its Anglo-Saxon representatives have introduced the ambitious name 'anthropology' for their subject, a variation which, for lack...
of specialist knowledge, I would rather leave unexamined. After the seafarers and the soldiers, the adventurers and the missionaries, the planters and the engineers, the travelling scholars also fanned out in their turn, to discover what kind of peoples were to be converted and robbed, civilised and exterminated, there in the remotest regions of the earth.

The more intelligent among the anthropologists soon noticed that their researches were leading them into an epistemological and moral labyrinth. Because it was precisely what interested them most, the otherness of what used to be called the primitive peoples, the savages, the barbarians, the coloured races, which remained inaccessible, and that not only because the latter received them with a mistrust that was all too justified.

But the real hindrance to research was the researcher himself, together with his discipline. It was this, like everything else that the ethnologist brought with him—his gaze, his standards, his prejudices, his language—which placed itself between him and what he wanted to investigate, and so he ran the risk of bringing home only dead facts and living errors. His arrival alone was already a considerable invasion of the societies he wanted to observe, an interference factor of incalculable magnitude.

It is not surprising therefore that the booty of anthropological research consists largely of European fancies. It's our own reflection that perpetually appears on the projection screen of science; only we have no desire to recognise ourselves in it.

Ways of escaping ethnology's dilemma are few and risky. Of course, it is possible to postulate the equality of all human societies and to raise the demand that every community must be described and judged on the basis of its own conditions. But that is easier said than done. A consistent relativism assumes an observer who would be in a position to leave his own cultural baggage at home. Such a scientist would not only have to be a master of brainwashing, he would also have to be capable of using it on himself. Only then would he, as an ethnologist, be completely free of his 'European' prejudices—but along with them of his science as well.

Another way of solving the dilemma—it could be called the existential one—is to gamble one's own identity. The researcher becomes a kind of renegade. He joins his Melanesians, Nahuas, Malagases in the bush. He goes native: that's what in their day the English colonial rulers called the irregular, unscientific form of such a change of identity. In anthropology, a mild version of this method is
described as 'participant observation'. The stranger adapts to the way of life he meets with, he tries to penetrate the mentality of the peoples with whom he is staying, by transforming himself into a Melanesian, Nahua, Malagasy.

It is evident that such experiments do not spirit away the original dilemma. They lead rather into an extensive maze of ambiguities. Because the researcher's transformation is an experiment with a time limit, an as-if, which once again divides him from his hosts. His ulterior motive remains intact. The anthropologist becomes an actor, a ventriloquist or a spy.

These are roles which a respectable academic finds difficult. Anthropology as a swings-and-roundabout of culture and identity: not all researchers would be prepared to come to terms with such a definition. A minority sought and found a way out of the dilemma in the politicisation of their discipline. They took the side of the oppressed and threatened peoples who were the object of their work. Some of these radical renegades saw the civilisation from Cambridge, All in all an esoteric business, one of those theoretical bones has and found a way out of the dilemma in the politicisation of their discipline. They took the side of the oppressed and threatened peoples who were the object of their work. Some of these radical renegades saw the civilisation from which they came as the principal enemy of humanity. In accordance with the maxim 'the last shall be first', they believed in the future of the 'savages' and demonstrated their solidarity with them. And it was they who coined the term Eurocentrism and turned it polemically against their academic colleagues who preferred to remain what they were: professors in Uppsala and Göttingen, in Louvain, Cambridge and Paris.

All in all an esoteric business, one of those theoretical bones on which a small band of specialists gnaws in quiet and with some pleasure. So it might appear, and so indeed it was, until about 20 years ago. In the short period of time which has passed since then, the problem of Eurocentrism has irreversibly established itself in our consciousness—yes, one can say that in its most general and trivial form it has become a platitudine.

The historical reasons are obvious. The collapse of European colonial rule in its traditional form, the liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America and the political, economic and ideological consequences of this global process have fundamentally altered our picture of the world.

We have learned that we are in the minority, and that those others, the majority, are not hanging around somewhere on the periphery of the inhabited world as passive objects of our economic interests and our scientific curiosity. Such knowledge is not gained voluntarily; it only establishes itself when there is no other possibility.

Only 30 years ago Europeans and North Americans could still ignore the most enormous events without much effort; the Chinese Civil War, the colonial massacres in Indonesia and Madagascar were only hazily noticed. That only changed with the Algerian war, the Cuban revolution, the conflict in the Near East and the wars in Indochina. The brightly coloured scenes from the cigarette card album, the wax figures in the ethnological museum came to life, they turned up in person in the living room. The TV screen teemed with evidence. A problem that until then a couple of anthropologists had discussed in their tent or in a seminar, became the property of primary school teachers and leader writers, of social workers and parish priests.

Really understanding what was now on the agenda of history was another matter. That is obvious even from the attempts to give the state of affairs a name. The crudest terms were good enough to indicate the breach which had opened up before our eyes: over here the developed, over there the underdeveloped countries, over here the poor, over there the rich countries; and the confrontation between them was sometimes called the international class struggle, and sometimes, in the euphemistic vocabulary of Social Democracy, the North-South conflict. In a futile effort to label an explosion, the majority of the others in Asia, Africa and Latin America were given the name 'the Third World'.

That this was not a concept, but a portmanteau, a semantic all-purpose term, became clear in the 70s at the latest, when the oil-producing countries became the moguls of the world economy while in Africa and Indochina whole countries more or less starved.

Has there ever been a European who seriously believed that the yellow races were yellow? Did you really think that the Savages were savage, the Coloureds coloured, the Primitives primitive? Did you perhaps think that the explosion of the world could be numbered one, two and three? What can China and Niugini have in common, for example? If they have a common denominator at all, then it can only be defined negatively—and that is from our perspective: as lack. These people were missing something, whether it was history or development, a god or a state. And with that we have arrived at Eurocentrism again.

It's the commodities that tell the truth; the cassette recorders in the souks of Damascus, the Seiko watches in the shop windows of Peking, the jeans and the sunglasses, the whiskies, the perfumes and the cars. Above all, the cars. No victorious liberation front, no starving tropical country, no pedagogic dictatorship, no matter how puritanical, get by without them. Electrically controlled sliding windows, air conditioning, tinted and bullet-proof glass, stereo, automatic locking devices—all inclusive.

This frenetic desire to imitate is a worldwide phenomenon whose implications no one has yet thought through to the end. Its effects are like those of a natural force, they are as irresistible and as little responsible to the control of reason as an avalanche. There has certainly been no shortage of attempts to analyse rationally the needs of poor and underdeveloped countries. Again and again intermediate technologies were proposed in order to relate the structures of traditional societies to the demands of industrialisation.

After years of work, the engineers of a European car company developed a vehicle adapted to the conditions of poor tropical countries. Built on a simple modular principle, it didn't need any care, was economical, easy to repair and handle; it was also cheap, since all unnecessary accessories
were missing. This car never went into production, since
the countries concerned firmly refused to drive cheaper
cars than the French or the Americans.

This confidence, or rather this lack of confidence, is not
only to be observed in the drawing-board states of Central
Africa; even great nations with a great past are not free
from it. In China a luxury limousine is still being manufac-
tured today which matches in every detail a Russian
vehicle from the 50s which, in its turn, is copied from a 40s
American Packard. This copy of a copy moreover bears the
name 'Red Flag'.

"Every chair, every bottle of
lemonade, is a slavish
imitation of a foreign
model"

On its sky-blue cover the Shanghai telephone directory
shows happy people gazing at a sky which is pierced by
television towers, rockets and satellites. The text is inter-
spersed with black and white adverts and coloured plates
in which European-looking models display European
women's fashions. The pieces of furniture are exact copies
of those splay-legged side-tables, dressing tables and
wardrobes which we remember from the Adenauer era.
The whole book is a slim version of the Neckermann
mail-order catalogue of 1957.

Now I haven't the least wish to poke fun at this evidence
of Chinese modernisation policy. It's much too depressing
for that. What makes one's heart sink is not the fact that
the population of a poor country is insisting gently but with
elementary force on an improvement in its living stand-
ards, but the path of compulsive imitation that it adopts in
doing so. It seems as if every mistake, every whim, every
folly of the West has to be repeated, as if no deformation,
nor wrong turning can be left out.

Every chair, every bottle of lemonade, is a slavish imitation
of a foreign model, as if it would be unthinkable to invent
something of one's own, even if only a new reading-lamp
or radio cabinet. It's inevitable that the copy is inferior to
of a foreign model, as if it would be unthinkable to invent
doing so. It seems as if every mistake, every whim, every
folly of the West has to be repeated, as if no deformation,
nor wrong turning can be left out.

But, you will object, a society doesn't consist of com-
modities. Let the Chinese and the Peruvians, the Congo-
sele and the Pakistanis make themselves comfortable however
they like; the main thing is that they manage to get hold of
the most essential things of all that a human being needs
in order to live, a pair of shoes, a bowl of food, a doctor
who can bind their wounds. No one can dispute that. But
the commodities propagate something beyond their imme-
diate consumption. At just that point at which each person
has his shoes, his bowl, his surgeon—and this goal has been
achieved in China—they prophesy the future victory of a
single culture. But this culture is not Chinese.

Or do you think it doesn't make any difference whether
someone carries out calculations with an abacus or with a
computer? What happened to us at that moment when we
sat down behind a steering wheel for the first time, alone,
in our own car? Our tools, machines and products have
altered us beyond recognition. Our idiotic architecture, our
supermarkets, our three-room apartments, our cosmetics,
our television programs which are spreading across the
whole world are only individual elements of an evidently
irresistible totality.

We've experienced more than one fiasco with 'the iron laws
of history', but a person who watches television is very
different from someone who listens to stories. A marxist
thesis, which no one has yet refuted, says that the unfor-
tuned productive forces of capitalist industry make short
shift of every recalcitrant legacy, every autonomous
'superstructure'. They are the bulldozer of world history
which clears away everything which blocks its way and
levels every traditional culture.

And the commodities, appliances and machines are only
the most visible part of what the 'developing countries'
import. We supply them with weapons and toxins, techni-
ques of government and propaganda. Even the symbols of
their sovereignty are slavish imitations of what they
believe they have liberated themselves from through
bloody struggles; the idea of the nation, the slogans of the
revolution, the concept of the party, the emblems of
statehood from national anthem to constitution, from flag
to protocol. The idee fixe of progress is increasingly being
questioned by Europeans and North Americans; it
dommates unchallenged only in the 'developing countries'
of Asia, Africa and Latin America. The true Eurocentrics
are the others.

It is probably fair to say that there is a lot of cant in Western
anti-imperialist discourse. There is, by now, a long tradi-
tion of self-criticism in our part of the world, particularly
on the Left. Ever since the beginning of the 20th century,

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Others, however, and perhaps they are the best among us, take a different decision. I'm not thinking about the drilling engineers in their air-conditioned ghettos, or the businessmen in their private jets, or the mercenaries, policemen and marines, but about the doctors on the Cambodian border and the agronomists in the Sahel; about people who have given up their three-room apartments in Wuppertal or St Louis in order to train mechanics somewhere in the bush or sink wells in the desert.

The readiness to render spontaneous, altruistic aid appears so strange under prevailing conditions that one responds with perplexity to such non-conformists. Some admire them, others call them, with a certain dubious respect, idealists. Yet others shake their heads or even believe them to be unsuspecting tools of some imperialist plot.

That is always unjust and usually wrong. Nevertheless, it is still necessary to enquire about the inner motives and the meaning of that solidarity with the "Third World" that stirs here and there in the industrial countries of the West. Official development aid doesn't need to concern us any further; its political and economic goals are not secret after all. It is a matter of spheres of influence, raw materials, export interests. The development policies of every industrial power East or West are the continuation of colonial policies by other means.

Anyone, on the other hand, who risks his life as a doctor in order to dress the wounds of rebels or refugees in some African civil war has something else in mind; and something of this larger interest is also to be found among those who have stayed at home, working on obscure committees to raise money for imprisoned trade unionists in Bolivia. The self-deceptions to which such a commitment can lead are well known, and it's also no secret that the ritual playing of Chilean protest songs in Berlin bars had no noticeable influence on the bloody course of events in that country.

But independently of that, of how seriously or half-heartedly, of how effectively or how ineffectively the helpers of the 'Third World' may go to work, they are agreed on one point, and this point is the decisive one: they all identify themselves with a cause which is not their own. In this respect, they are the successors of those ethnologists who understood themselves as cultural renegades. The Dane who makes the problems of the Eskimos his own, the student from Massachusetts who organises a lobby for the defence of the Brazilian Indians: all these people want not only others but themselves too, and this is completely legitimate.

One could perhaps call what they are looking for among those distant peoples the utopian minimum. The stubborn hope which they place in the future of the 'Third World' corresponds to their scathing critique of the society which produced them and which has consumed any utopian surplus. The ideological shreds of marxism or religion in which some of them clothe their search cannot conceal the fact that the goal of this search is to find the 'completely other'.

But what if this 'completely other' doesn't exist? These peoples, proud of their own traditions, unhampered by consumerism, less decadent and ruined, but older, purer, less corruptible than we are, pursuing their own project despite sacrifices and hardships—perhaps they exist only in the imagination of those who are looking for them?

And does this search not also have a disagreeable side? Does it not reproduce the old dilemma of the anthropologist, forever confronted by his own ghosts in the stranger's mirror. Is the "Third World" in the end nothing more than a projection?

At any rate, there's something odd about the enthusiasm with which many visitors from the industrialised world regard the spartan features of some 'liberation movements'. Someone who, having flown 4000 miles, enthuses about the unique dignity of the rice farmers cultivating their fields with their bare hands standing knee deep in the mud, deserves to have his behaviour called moral cretinism rather than solidarity. And what about the iron social control, the sexual repression, the dull-witted formalism, the bureaucratic despotism which weighs upon large parts of the underdeveloped world? We can't judge that from our position, these are transitional phenomena, the people there have different needs... Admittedly that wouldn't be right for us, but in their circumstances... And so on.

Is that not the most naked racism masked as sympathy? Is it asking too much for an American in Angola, a Swede in China, a German in Cuba, to say to himself, at least once a day, as an experiment: These people are just like us? And that means that they do not only want schools and hospitals, canteens and barracks. They want to choose their profession just like us. They want to love one another. They want to have the choice. They want to have freedom of movement. They want to think for themselves and make decisions for themselves. And apart from that they want machines instead of flails, cars instead of hand-carts, refrigerators, holiday trips, telephones, three-room apartments. Just like us.

Since the abandonment of the last alternative project of history, that of Mao Zedong, only one future seems still to be left. The peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America have fallen under the spell of a universal cargo cult everything new, whether for good or ill, comes from the industrial countries, and everything old must be sacrificed to the new.

But the massive approval which our civilisation receives does not fill us with triumph. On the contrary, it disappoints us, irritates us, makes us uneasy. We have no desire to be number one. We long ago got out of the habit of regarding Europe as the navel of the world, and we find the idea that the future of the human race could resemble a migration of lemmings led by us altogether depressing.

There are several reasons, subjective and objective, good and bad, why we don't like to be confronted by the Eurocentrism of the underdeveloped. It is not an uplifting thought to be flag-bearers of a civilisation whose catastrophic potential becomes more obvious year by year.
It has never been the case before in history that humanity has staked everything on a single card. To a certain extent it lived scattered in a great number of autonomous cultures, each one pursuing its own project. Looked at in that way, the Tower of Babel had its positive side: far from coming to terms with one another, a multiplicity of societies evolved, inventing specific solutions for their own survival. With the industrial revolution this diversity began to disappear. Its last remnants are being liquidated before our eyes. That’s not only sad, it’s very dangerous; because the more homogeneous a population is, the more susceptible it is to catastrophes and the gloomier are its prospects for the future.

Besides, it’s as good as certain that our able successors in the poorer countries are backing the wrong horse. A simple computer projection of their needs and of the resources which would be required to generalise the material standards of the Western industrial countries demonstrates the hopelessness of such an undertaking. Three billion cars, 400 million tons of meat, 40 million gigawatt hours of electricity, 12 billion tons of oil per annum. The planet which is our home can’t provide all that. The consequences of unchanged targets are wars of distribution, extortion, vast conflicts. The ‘Third World’ enthusiasm willingness to learn does not only worry us for noble reasons. The vitality of the West derives, in the end, from the negativity of European civilisation lives from its voracious nature, its eternal dissatisfaction, its voracious unrest, its lack. Doubt, self-criticism, self-hate, even, are its most important productive forces. It’s our strength that we can’t accept ourselves and what we have produced. That’s why we regard Eurocentrism as a sin of consciousness. Western civilisation lives from whatever calls it into question, whether it’s barbarians or anarchists, Red Indians or Bolsheviks. And if a cultural other is no longer available, then we just produce our own savages; technological freaks, political freaks, psychic freaks, cultural freaks, moral freaks, religious freaks. Confusion, unrest, un gover nability are our only chance. Diversity makes us strong.

From now on we have to rely on our own resources. No Tahiti is in sight, no Sierra Maestre, no Sioux and no Long March. Should there be such a thing as a saving idea, then we’ll have to discover it for ourselves.

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A FAREWELL TO ARMS?

The Gulf War put the spotlight on Australia's fledgling arms industry. Mike Ticher argues that, short of pacifism, Australia can't hope to keep its hands 'clean' of the arms trade. What it can do is try to exercise a little responsibility.

Defence Minister Robert Ray's recent announcement that his department had refused clearance for huge weapons sales to foreign governments marked a new twist in the recent history of Australia's policy on arms exports. According to Senator Ray, one proposed deal involved the sale of $450 million of (unidentified) offensive weaponry to an (unnamed) country in an "area of instability", and that this was "by no means the largest" deal rejected by the department.

In other words, the government is prepared to forgo as much as $1,000 million worth of exports for the sake of maintaining Australia's "strict policy" on overseas arms sales. According to a spokesperson for Senator Ray: "What we're saying is that we're putting our hands up and saying that we've got to look a lot more closely at our role in the bigger picture. And if it hurts us and costs us, well that's something that we're going to have to bear."

Just how big a hurt this implies can be judged from the fact that the $450 million deal alone would have represented considerably more than the total value of Australia's arms exports for 1989-90. There are those who doubt that this apparently highly principled stance has any basis in reality. Democrat leader Janet Powell says that "the minister's claim has either been fabricated or greatly exaggerated. Unless he reveals all the relevant details, the public should assume that he has misled them." Certainly the government's refusal to name even the country for which the equipment was intended makes it impossible to assess the way in which the guidelines on arms exports are being interpreted, even assuming that the accusation that the contracts never existed is groundless.

Nevertheless, the minister's assertion that "there does have to be a change of attitude" is a welcome, if slightly confusing, policy shift. The current guidelines on arms exports, announced in June 1988 and introduced the following year, represent a considerable liberalisation of previous controls. They maintain the ban on exports to countries subject to UN resolutions embargoing sales (this essentially has meant South Africa and, recently, Iraq). They also retain
restrictions on selling weapons to "governments that seriously violate the human rights or constitutional rights of their citizens". However, then Defence Minister Kim Beazley indicated that sales to such governments would be permitted, as long as there was "no reasonable risk of using the equipment against the citizens of a country with a dubious human rights record".

Other significant alterations were made to the old guidelines as part of the government's attempt to boost overseas sales of defence equipment. For example, a distinction was drawn between 'inherently lethal' and 'non-lethal' equipment, with only goods that are 'lethal' or 'of major military significance' now subject to controls. No specific commitment was included not to supply countries engaged in military conflict, although subsequently the department has stated that its "strict policy" does not allow sales to "areas of instability". The processing of applications was speeded up, with a decision now required within 21 days of submission, with a presumption in favour of allowing a sale "where our friends and allies would supply comparable equipment". At the same time, the role of the Department of Foreign Affairs in assessing export applications was drastically reduced, giving Defence the clear responsibility for policy and thus weakening foreign policy considerations in the decision-making.

The stated purpose of this change in policy (which was based on the recommendations of the 1986 Cooksey Report) was to reduce the necessity to import equipment
for Australia’s own defence needs, by encouraging the growth of locally-based manufacturers. At the time, Kim Beazley confidently asserted that exports could rise rapidly from $200 million a year, to around $500 million. The Sydney Morning Herald commented that “the [Cooksey] report confirmed what was already understood in defence circles—that Australia was losing many opportunities for defence equipment sales because of the extremely cumbersome bureaucratic constraints on such sales” (SMH 15/6/88).

Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on your point of view), the expected bonanza did not take place. Robert Ray claims that Australia’s defence supplies are now 70% locally-manufactured, compared to 20-30% under the old guidelines. Yet despite vague sums of “around $300 million” being mentioned by Ray, the government’s own figures show that the real figure for applications approved (not contracts completed) in 1989-90 was just $157 million. The figure for actual sales may be around $115 million (Weekend Australian 9/3/91) or even lower, according to analysts such as Dr Graeme Cheeseman of the Peace Research Centre at ANU. He claims that the government “embarked on this whole program, as far as we can determine, without doing any studies on the economic feasibility, or taking in the potential political costs of arms exporting. The Cooksey Report...promised pots of gold, but all the problems are well-known from other countries’ experience.”

But while the government may have failed dismally in its aim of substantially increasing arms sales, the new policy nevertheless led to some extremely dubious transactions. The most notable of these was the sale of 50 Mirage fighters to Pakistan in 1990, which raised two important issues. One, that had foreign policy considerations been given more weight, the almost derisory sum of money involved ($36 million) would surely not have been enough to win the argument in favour of the sale. The other was the Defence Department’s interpretation of the concepts of ‘major military significance’ and ‘regions of instability’.

Robert Ray denied that the sale breached either of these conditions at a press conference on 1 February this year. "The degree of offensiveness of those weapons, I suppose, would be very much in question with the Indians, but the reason why we no longer wanted them is that we don’t regard them as particularly effective weapons. The Pakistanis have a different view on that, but most of the decisions and agreements were made long before the tensions between India and Pakistan had built." Lest it be assumed that Senator Ray meant that the sale was decided upon some time in the 1930s, his spokesperson added: "at the time we sold those weapons systems, there were extremely good relations between India and Pakistan—it really did look as though those problems had been resolved, but unfortunately the situation completely turned around". (Pakistan and India threatened war over the Indian state of Kashmir.)

This begs the question of what exactly is a ‘region of instability’ if not the Indian sub-continent, and what exactly are ‘lethal’ weapons, if not fighter aircraft (albeit old ones)? The same points could be made over the proposed sale of spares for PC9 trainer aircraft to Iraq, which was only halted after the UN embargo was imposed following the invasion of Kuwait. Clearly, such aircraft have no combat role to play in the war, but equally clearly the Iraqis felt that they were useful for training pilots who would eventually fly something a little more dangerous. It seems particularly obtuse to deny that any military assistance to a regime like Saddam Hussein’s does not have the potential to be ‘lethal’. It also reflects the same idiosyncratic interpretation of ‘regions of instability’ as Kim Beazley’s comment on a defence equipment exhibition in Cairo in 1987, which he said "will provide an excellent opportunity for Australian companies to assess the market potential for their products in the Middle East".

Australia’s own arms bazaar, AIDEX ’91, is due to be held in Canberra in November. It has expanded considerably since the last exhibition in 1989 and this year the organisers proudly note that “particularly targeted will be government defence and industry leaders from countries in the Asia-Pacific region”. As described in the Independent Monthly (October 1990), Asia is one of the few regions of the world where defence expenditure is rising sharply (before the Gulf War, of course), and Australia has supplied equipment to many countries in the region. Sales are not vast, as most transfers are part of government aid under the Defence Co-Operation Program. Nevertheless, approvals for sales to the Philippines ($3.3m), Indonesia ($1.0m) and Thailand ($0.75m) were given in 1989-90, as well as for smaller deals with Singapore and Myanmar (Burma). If Robert Ray is seriously concerned about the dangers of regional arms races, and Australia’s potential contribution to preventing them, he needs to look no further than our own backyard. Nor are the DCP deals without controversy, as the use of Australian helicopters in the Bougainville conflict showed.

A third deal which should have raised more eyebrows than it did was the proposed sale of Strikemaster trainer aircraft to Somalia in 1989-90, which was approved by the department but subsequently fell through for commercial reasons. The ethics of supplying military equipment worth nearly $5 million to a country with such obvious needs in other areas are surely questionable (Australia also sold $2 million worth of equipment to Bangladesh in the same year). Quite apart from this, and the notorious ‘stability’ of the Horn of Africa, the (former) Somali government’s record on human rights was shameful, a point made by Democrat Senator Paul McLean in a question to Robert Ray earlier this year. Ray replied that the “distinction [between lethal and non-lethal weapons] is quite a clear one in terms of our export policy. I do not say that it is based strictly on morality.”

Morality aside, it is nonsense to suggest that the distinction is a clear one, or one which facilitates a consistent policy. The minister himself admits that “these are not easy distinctions to make”, but nevertheless maintains their resolution ensures that “we are avoiding selling lethal weapons into areas of instability”. But the sheer vagueness of the terminology means that gross anomalies are bound to occur. For example, no controls whatever are applied to sales to our third largest customer, the UK (along with the US, New
What exactly are 'lethal' weapons, if not fighter aircraft?

Zealand and Canada they are specifically exempted). Yet who could seriously argue that Northern Ireland does not constitute an area of instability? The inability to predict political developments overseas is another obvious hazard. Australia's arms transfers to Fiji, for example, were halted after the coups of 1987 but, of course, that didn't prevent equipment supplied previously from being used by the military. In this case the quantities and type of materiel were insignificant, but it shows the problems inherent in supplying goods even to apparently 'stable' countries. The same applies to the recent coup in Thailand.

And then, of course, the question of morality does arise, whatever the minister might say. Unless we take a completely pacifist stance, an arms industry in Australia will continue to exist, and a certain amount of exports will help to offset the cost of imports for our own military. It can hardly be argued that importing weapons is somehow morally superior to exporting them. The important thing is to be clear about the function of an export industry and the restrictions that should be applied to it. At the moment, the government seems caught between the Beazley doctrine of positively encouraging sales within guidelines which make a mockery of most people's understanding of the English language, and Ray's apparent concern to see Australia take a lead in curbing sales worldwide.

Australia is by no means in the big league of arms dealers, and compared to countries such as the Soviet Union, France and the UK, does have more or less 'clean hands': although, it might be added, not for want of trying in the last couple of years. The fact that the expansion of the industry has largely been a failure does not mean that we can afford to be complacent about Australia's moral standpoint. A return to stricter guidelines would give Australia a firmer moral base from which to argue for a reduction in the global arms trade.

These should ensure that Australia is not only not supplying weaponry for use in dubious circumstances, but is also seen to be sensitive to the issue. Sweden, a country with a proportionately large arms industry, but whose export policy the Defence Department quotes approvingly as a model for Australia, takes a distinctly different line from Kim Beazley on exports to countries with dubious human rights records. Its government accepts that "consideration of human rights involves a detailed assessment of the situation in a country, and not merely of whether Swedish military equipment is likely to be used to suppress these rights".

Australia should also rely on its own judgment about what is or is not acceptable, rather than favouring sales where "our friends and allies" would supply comparable equipment. Some of our friends and allies--France for example--seem perfectly happy to supply huge quantities of weapons to almost anyone who can pay for them. A more sensitive attitude in general would be engendered by toning down expectations of the volume of business Australia should expect to do in a contracting international arms market and by re-integrating the Department of Foreign Affairs into the decision-making process. Gareth Evans admitted on Channel Nine's Sunday program in February that he was unaware of both the Iraqi and Somali deals until after the decisions had been taken, and criticised the present guidelines for "not being sufficiently explicit about the kinds of foreign policy considerations that should be taken into account".

If the horrors of the Gulf War have convinced Robert Ray that the political problems involved in upping arms exports may not be worth the revenue (even $1,000 million of it), then some good at least would have come of it. But it seems optimistic to hope that his recent pronouncements signal a genuine change of heart and a re-evaluation of Australia's priorities in this area.

Last June he described AIDEX as "an appropriate forum for manufacturers to promote their products and services to both local and international visitors", adding that he "would anticipate that AIDEX 91...will promote awareness of our defence industry potential". Ray now says that "the great lesson that everyone has learned out of the Gulf is that we must control the international arms trade". However, action to match his bold words, such as withdrawing government participation in AIDEX, seems to be unequivocally off the agenda.

For all the talk of cancelled contracts, Australia does not seem likely to deviate from the worldwide pattern of response to the devastation caused in the war--a brief period of public hand-wringing over arms sales, immediately followed by a return to 'business as usual'.

MIKE TICHER is a member of ALR's editorial collective.
Nice Life

McKenzie Wark muses on Tokyo, the postmodern city.

Tokyo is a strange yet uncannily familiar city. Much of the surface of daily life there seems remarkably familiar, distinguished only by slight oddities of detail or nuance. It is possible to find yourself remarkably at home, there as anywhere. Tokyo is a city exactly like any other because it is a city made in the image of capital.

Money made these highways, subways, department stores, apartments. Money advertises its way of life and its values on the television and the billboards and magazines, just like it does anywhere else.

So much so that if there is one thing any tourist can glean for her or himself into the universal feature of this life made by money, 'this nice life', as a Tokyo subway advert so succulently puts it. Living in Sydney, one doesn't notice too much how the language and style of the commodity saturates and infects every and any pore of everyday life. Here in Tokyo, this omnipresence of commerce strikes a slightly unfamiliar note. The trick is to use this oddness, this peculiarity as the key, not to some bizarre inscrutable Japanese otherness, but to unlock what is so familiar yet so strange about living in any city where the spectacle of the commodity has grown to cover the whole landscape.

The first noticeable thing about everyday life in Tokyo is how much English there is in the advertising. Often the product appears with a name in English lettering. Pocari Sweat is a soft drink. Gyro-Sneaker is a moped. Apa-man is a magazine all about apartment living, with a classified section. Earth is a groovy restaurant which serves everything on paper plates. My personal favourite is a brand of luggage called Urban nonslip yet snow net. The oddness of these labels is intentionally unintentional, one suspects. The copywriters and marketing strategists here are not stupid. They are not trying to mimic or ape the West, in that sad and powerless way one finds in the Third World. They know these brands do not make English sense and they don't give a damn. If it evokes the right sounds, if the letters look nice together, then why not? They have broken the bonds which tie English to reservoirs of lived experience in the West, and set it free for other tasks and connections.

This practice extends to whole sentences of copy splashed over products ranging from stationery to soft drinks. Stationery often has some elaborate texts on it, conveying a quite particular range of associations. Rapture: "I have my own favourite things to do I want every day to be full of excitement, totally happy and rewarding." Mint Land: "Country life is simple and uncomplicated." "Mister Summer Time in paradise." "Gingham Check Village." My personal favourite, Donguri Club: "This is the nature." Although Wood-song: "We are always cheerful shrewd and naughty pleasure. So happy" is hard to beat. Here the old syntax of English appears to be replaced by a new one which disrupts the old order and recombines familiar words in unfamiliar ways around a logic of the commodity.

The images conveyed here are of another space, another time, another life. These texts go on stationery for schoolkids cramming for some of the most competitive exams in the world, so it is not surprising that they conjure up an image of a better life. What is odd is that English is stripped of the usual, everyday associations which a native speaker might find in it. English is purified of its mundane uses and senses, and emerges in the copywriter's hands as the language of a utopian realm, an 'elsewhere', far away, where one can indeed say "I have my favourite things" and where "we are always cheerful". This language promises shared experience precisely because it is thoroughly privatised. It addresses the individual consumer, but promises friendship. The friendship on offer, however, is the friendly commodity, the nice objects out of which a nice life is accumulated, rather than actually lived.

The spectacle of this other space, promised by these English slogans, is a place of communion, where an unspoilt kind of togetherness is celebrated. A togetherness unspoil by divisions and differences, where competition is banished. One slogan reduces this to a touchingly knowing kind of naivete: "Boy and Girl are having a picnic. They sit on the grass to eat their lunch and drink their milk. Picnics are fun." In a city where practically everything has been mown down in the name of the expansion and reproduction of capital, crushed underfoot by concrete and glass and cubic miles of garbage, this longing for another world of friendship and picnics is not hard to understand. In an urban space where almost everything has been sacrificed to accumulation, picnics and friendships are among the lost things projected into another realm. Nice life is somewhere over the rainbow.

By participating in the competition, the pointlessly long hours of work, the systematic subordination of desires to the domination of work, these lost things are promised a return. Commodities become the bearers of these lost values and feelings. A cigarette is not just a smoke; in the case of Mild-7 it is "an encounter with tenderness".

As the privileged language of the commodity, English becomes the lexicon through which the commodity becomes associated with otherness, with other places, with a perfect realm, elsewhere. There is a blurring of the line here between the pure other space of the perfect commodity and the other place of travel, of an 'overseas' where leisure is plentiful, where life can be fun. The rainbow is a neon one, over
the threshold of the vast and luxurious department stores, homes of the nice life. The other place mapped out by the nice life is still within the territory of the commodity.

Perhaps this accounts for the seeming oddness of Japanese tourism. Advertisements for All-Nippon Airlines ski resorts call them hyper-resorts. They promise "hyper-skiing" on perfect slopes, "hyper-fashion" in designer ski-wear, "hyper-staying" in fabulous hotels, with even "hyper-history" thrown in as well. It is as if the advertising tries to make a seven-day package holiday actually live up to this image of the commodity utopia. Stranger still is seeing Sydney advertised in exactly the same terms as a little capsule in time, a tiny perfection carved out of dominated time. With so much time commanded by capital, with so little free time to oneself, capital takes it upon itself to make that thin slice of free time even more perfect, even more memorable, even nicer than it would be if left merely free.

There is no 'outside' to capital and its culture here, no hint of that romantic strain which one finds in the West which would resist the commodification of everyday life. The art and criticism which we take for granted, based on the premise that areas of life ought to be exempted from the law of capital, is simply not in evidence. This is not to say there isn't fantastic art and culture in Tokyo—there surely is. But it does mean that the sources of cultural dynamism and change are different, and radically so. One never experiences a contradiction between the rule of capital and something outside it, for here there appears to be nothing outside it. Even 'traditional' culture seems mostly a manufactured artefact. One experiences instead an impossible relation within, between the mundane production of things and the consumption of images promising far more than mere things can ever deliver.

Not having spaces 'outside' capital in the way that is familiar in the West, it is as if the culture of capital divided itself and created its own image of the other from within, as a kind of self-balancing spin-off. Thus, one gets the language and the culture of work and domination, on the one hand; and on the other a far more pervasive and extensive language of advertising and promotion which is utopian in a much stronger sense than in the West, be-
The answer to the pretty girl's dreams can be sure that the average television alights gracefully on a pillow beside viewer in Tokyo is not so wakes up as it lands and smiles. One floss clouds, as if from heaven. It A TV ad for a camera shows the magic product descending through everyday language reappears in another realm, in a foreign tongue. With its associations with other places. Without English seems to be one of the privileged languages of this other, with its other forms of culture and experience, then English here too might lose its range of associations, its reservoir of resourcefulness. It might become a pure language of the commodity for us too, with its cheerfully impossible promises, stripped of all discordant ironies and cynicisms. We too might be able to entertain the feeling that nice life really does refer to something nice, if unreal, rather than immediately suspecting the expression of hiding something in its blissfully inane surface. Perhaps language is already like this for us, but our intimacy with the babble of commerce whispering in our ear has us spellbound.

It is possible, however, to imagine that the poetics of Japanese advertising is an image of what English will be like for us too some day. If the commodity realm swallows up and 'privatises' all other forms of culture and experience, then English here too might lose its range of associations, its reservoir of resourcefulness. It might become a pure language of the commodity for us too, with its cheerfully impossible promises, stripped of all discordant ironies and cynicisms. We too might be able to entertain the feeling that nice life really does refer to something nice, if unreal, rather than immediately suspecting the expression of hiding something in its blissfully inane surface. Perhaps language is already like this for us, but our intimacy with the babble of commerce whispering in our ear has us spellbound.

A TV ad for a camera shows the magic product descending through fairy-floss clouds, as if from heaven. It alights gracefully on a pillow beside the head of a sleeping beauty. She wakes up as it lands and smiles. One can be sure that the average television viewer in Tokyo is not so unsophisticated as to take all this at face value. The answer to the pretty girl's dreams is a camera? Yet the mere fact that the ad exists at all is a testament to a quite different relation here between the product and culture, a kind of pornographic intimacy not possible in the puritanical West. The irony of the promise being redeemed in a shiny new product has somehow been normalised to a far greater degree here than anywhere 'else' in the West.

Nevertheless, this feeling of being totally within the space of commodity culture is stronger here in Tokyo than anywhere else. This is not entirely a demoralising experience. Here, as anywhere, people make beautifully different uses of the resources the modern world dumps on their doorstep, drawing the art of living out of hand-me-down tricks and games for getting by. In this respect the games young people play with pop culture are a fabulous spectacle here. All the signs and values of Western pop are all on show, but the limits imposed in the West on this or that totemic icon are missing. Everything from hippy to punk is reduced to beautiful, pure style. In the nightclubs on Saturday night and in Harajuku park on Sunday morning people make their own collective experience within the gap between the signs of commodity culture and their indeterminate meanings.

The spectacle of the nice life can strip language of its reservoir of meanings, leaving language free to be drafted into the service of the banality of the commodity. On the other hand, it also leaves it free for new collectivities, new micro-masses dancing on the folds in the map of the all-expansive spectacle. In the shadow of the nice life, they redefine the meaning and experience and sensuality of the surface of the spectacle for themselves.
**West Wind**

**WA doesn’t just produce our best Royal Commissions, but also some of our best writing.**

Jeremy Eccles reports.

The prospect of a visit to the annual Festival of Perth refined my thinking; once again I would be seeing important Aboriginal theatre (a reading of Sally My Place Morgan’s first play), and Writers’ Week at the Fremantle Arts Centre—entitled Old Lands New Writings—would have a strong local Black presence. Does the West really dominate Black Australian writing? —and, if so, how had this come about? For surely NSW Aborigines have had the longest exposure to White writing, Queensland Aborigines had more to be bitter about, and NT Blacks are numerous enough to set their own ground rules. But it was all happening out West.

True, there had been the poetry of Kath Walker (now Oodgeroo Noonuccal) on Moreton Island; and, in theatre, NSW had seen a sort of flowering in the 70s when Kevin Gilbert’s The Cherry Pickers was followed by Bobby Merritt’s Cakeman and Gerald Bostock’s Here Comes the Nigger. But what then? Cakeman may have gone on television and to America, but it never made it to Sydney’s mainstream theatres. The odd community theatre piece came from Bob Maza, a Black Theatre building existed in Redfern but had virtually no content, and the next play about Black issues in the 80s was written by a White man, Tony Strachan. And even then, with a story set in Queensland and productions in Sydney and Melbourne, they had to get actors from WA to perform it.

Meanwhile, every state capital has enjoyed visits from the plays of Jack Davis (putting him in the Williamson class), sung along with the music to Bran Nue Dae, bought and read My Place (making it one of the best selling books in Australian history) and marvelled at the idea of a publishing house like Magabala Books being set up in an apparently God-forsaken place like Broome by Aborigines, for Aboriginal books. What is it in the sunlight over there?

There must be some intangible factor that has created the phenomenon—a factor that’s harder to put one’s finger on than the more practical factors which have simply made it easier for Black writing to reach the marketplace and be appreciated.

To start with the most obvious. The 15-year-old Fremantle Arts Centre Press was less interested in international or even Australian literature than in stories uniquely from West Australia, which it then saw as having the potential to become international literature. Early on, a woman dismissed as quirky by OE (Over East) publishers came to them to be told that they liked her quirkiness. Elizabeth Jolley was discovered. Later on, a pile of scrawled-over tissue paper tested the limits to which a publisher might go even further.

Bert Facey’s Fortunate Life was not an attractive prospect. It ran as a single sentence from start to finish, it covered every conceivable inch of the tissue paper, and it was twice as long as the published version. Only by accident did the Press’s Ray Coffee even dip into it. “Thank God I smell some interest,” he recalls now. “And thank God I realised that here was an instinctive oral story-teller who was, in fact, easy to divide into chapters. But cutting it all back still took time—with all changes checked out with him....latterly, when Facey’s eyesight failed, by reading them all to him.” Not only did the Press have a hit, but selling the film rights to local script-writer Ken Kelso led him to push over to Ray Coffee two chapters of a book started by an old schoolmate—Sally Morgan. Morgan, who’s only now turned to theatre, had been inspired to start the great literary quest for her Aboriginal origins by the success of former poet, now playwright, Jack Davis. For both, the Nyoongah Aboriginal community of the South West and, indeed, the population of the state as a whole, was small enough for news of anyone’s fame to have a quick impact. And Davis, beginning with the local production of Kullark in 1979, had quickly climbed to fame with the first of a basically autobiographical quartet of plays, The Dreamers, in 1982. This was picked up by the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust for a national tour. Subsequent plays began their life at the West Australian Theatre Company, and were often presented initially by the Festival of Perth before going on tour, but were controlled by Jack Davis’ own Marli Biyol Company. This is a pattern that has also worked for Broome’s Jimmy Chi with the musical Bran Nue Dae.

The director for all of these shows has been Andrew Ross—who is white and not local to WA but is clearly appreciated for his “collaboration and friendship”, just as Jack Davis describes it in his dedication to the published text of Kullark. Ross raises the question of whether Aboriginal writers are best fostered by having a separate industry structure (like the Black Theatre of Redfern) or not. “In WA, they’ve gone in with mainstream companies, which I feel are more flexible and less affected by ideology than the fringe. And then, they’ve developed organisations like Marli Biyol and the Bran Nue Dae Company which don’t need the resources to actually produce the shows, but specifically look after the interests of the Black artists in making arrangements with presenters all over the country—even abroad.”

Magabala Books, on the other hand, may be the exception that reveals the future. It has an entirely Aboriginal management committee, and an increasing number of Black staff. But, as its White editor, Peter Bibby, points out: “We are there to work for Black culture—encouraging oral historians by bringing their stories faithfully to

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**MATTERS ARISING**

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print and helping to keep languages alive by bilingual publishing. If there's a spin-off in terms of helping White Australia understand Aboriginal Australia, so much the better. Personally, I think that Black oral story-telling is as important as the explosion of campfire stories that occurred in the 1880s with Henry Lawson, Tom Collins and Banjo Paterson. I compare it in my own mind to hearing the voice of the miller or the pardoner still when reading Chaucer. And I think it will be important to the development of language in Australia. But that's not primarily what Magabala is about.

Magabala has been around since 1987 and it's already attracting manuscripts from the rest of Australia. But in WA there's still a sense that both the history and geography of Aboriginality are much closer than in the rest of the country. As Ray Coffee explains it: "the history of exploitation runs into the present time. Until Alan Bond and the entrepreneurs came along, the squattocracy still dominated WA life—right into the heart of Perth. And of course the pastoralists were in touch directly with the subject matter of My Place and Jack Davis' plays. Older women who jumped up to cheer the opening of Bran Nue Dae a year ago probably grew up on stations, and were just enjoying a sense of justice being achieved at last."

"Not that they see history repeating itself among the fringe dwellers of Middle Swan or at the Black Deaths in Custody Royal Commission. Only distancing through history is actually manageable. But some of the old pastoralists are now trying to claim exotic backgrounds like the Drake-Brockmans in My Place. They all want their Sally Morgans! For all these people—Black and White alike—Perth was and is just a big country town; a place to visit, rather than a cultural beacon dragging them in and keeping them. "There's a regional embrace...a sense of country rather than city," is how Coffee defines it. "And I think that's made it easier for Aborigines to identify."

Certainly Mudrooroo Nyoongah (formerly Colin Johnson) would seem to agree. He even claims that Perth is the ultimate post-modern city: "just look at Forrest Place!". As he also claims post-modernity for his recently published novel, Master of the Ghost Dreaming, Mudrooroo will surely feel at home when he returns to the West soon. Having founded the Aboriginal Writers, Oral Literature and Dramatists Association with Jack Davis, and pioneered Aboriginal literature courses at Murdoch University, Mudrooroo is definitely part of the Black writing scene in WA, even though he hasn't lived there for years. "I think we Nyoongah in the South West always had the advantage of the influence of traditional culture coming in from the North West and Kalgoorlie. That myriad of influences simply made our contemporary culture more dynamic."

Significantly, it was the North West and the goldfields that inspired earlier white literature in the state. The Duracks, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Henrietta Drake-Brockman, even Ion Idriess and Ton Ronin—all were inspired by rural and often Black Western Australia to write their best work. Now the compliment is being returned with interest.

JEREMY ECCLES is a Sydney film and theatre critic.

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**Reason and Imagination in Modern Culture**

The early modern period fragmented the world of experience - and ways of conceptualising this experience - in three directions: the aesthetic, the rational and the ethical. But underlying this fragmentation is a broader and deeper division between reason and imagination. The aim of this conference is to present competing contemporary perspectives that explore this division and its impact on modern culture.

Speakers include:
Cornelius Castoriadis, Ferenc Feher, Agnes Heller, Axel Honneth, Peter Hohendahl, Martin Jay, Niklas Luhman.

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**Dates:**
Tuesday 6th - Friday 9th August, 1991

**Place:**
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5th Floor, 253 Flinders Lane
Melbourne.

**Registration:**
$90, $45 (students, unemployed)
Send to John Rundell
Department of Anthropology and Sociology
Monash University
Clayton Vic 3168
Australia
The Cambridge Handbook of Contemporary China by Colin Mackerras and Amanda Yorke. Cambridge. $24.95 (PB). Reviewed by Kitty Eggerking

I'll probably never write a book for the simple reason that I'd be so preoccupied with the preliminary processes of devising the perfect way of setting up the computer for the exercise and working out the perfect arrangement of the contents and argument that I'd collapse in a nervous heap before ever beginning the task of writing.

It's not that I spend every waking moment contemplating such horrors or my own neuroses, though I am reminded of them from time to time when a friend or a colleague mentions the intransigence of their computer in failing to recognise the final word of the final chapter of their epic PhD thesis. It's with such instances as these that my worst nightmares are realised.

I'm reminded of such things too when I turn to a book like The Cambridge Handbook of Contemporary China. I find myself staring uncomprehendingly at the contents page, stupefied by the smorgasbord there presented and bewildered by the seemingly random ordering of the chapters. Confusion in profusion, if you will. Indulge me while I try to explain my difficulties.

Chapter 1 presents a chronology. Fair enough, except that it is marred by rigid sub-categories. Followed by a chapter on politics. Again, that's fine. Then Chapters 3 and 4 are, respectively, eminent contemporary figures and a bibliography. Does this strike you as odd? It certainly confounds me. Aren't such things the proper stuff of appendices? Then it's back into the more regular flow of what you'd expect in this sort of book—a chapter on foreign relations, followed by another on China's economy. And then again chaos: the next three chapters are respectively the population, a gazetteer and China's national minorities. Why is it necessary to separate the minorities from the rest of the (presumably, Han) population in the first place, and, why in heaven's name, are they kept apart by an excursion into China's geography? If it's relevant to link the population to place names at all, wouldn't it be better to deal with the geography first so that we can then locate the people? The final two chapters are again in the more normal scheme of things: Chapter 10 is education; Chapter 11, culture and society. I have a niggle here: if the section on society describes the health system and pensions, couldn't education also be addressed here? Do you start to appreciate my problems of order? Part of the problem arises because, as the preface notes, the authors—one sitting in Brisbane, the other a continent away in Perth—only collaborated on two of the 11 chapters.

And away, finally, from the contents page to the more substantive issue of information. There's a great deal of it—some of it good, some so-so, and some plain out of date. I acknowledge the impossibility of being thoroughly up-to-date in things like the latest changes in the Chinese leadership—which happen to be reasonably accurate for the present in the Handbook—but I can see no reason why the only film mentioned in the two paragraphs devoted to the cinema is Yellow Earth, made in 1984 by Chen Kaige. What about Zhang Yimou's quite prolific output and similar contributions to Chinese film since the mid-1980s. The world has moved on.

To cite another example: the casual reader may take some comfort from the fact that there were 2,03 hospitals beds per 1,000 head of population in 1982, but what about more recent figures so that we can gauge whether health services have improved since the maturation of that economic miracle known as the Open Door Policy? Again, I acknowledge the huge difficulties in obtaining timely and credible statistics from China.

I acknowledge also the almost impossible task of selecting succinct and relevant information on any country, let alone one so enormous and ancient as China, in a volume of 236 pages (excluding index, abbreviations and notes), but here again a lack of collaboration and a lack of a clear vision on what to present, and more particularly how to present it, is evident.

The information works best when it's presented as lists of unadorned facts. It is useful for researchers to have tables on the timing and location of all the plenary sessions of the CCP central committee, on CCP membership fluctuations, on imports and exports and things of this nature. Other lists have been incorporated into the text, making their detection more difficult. Indeed, I wonder why the Handbook goes in for description and narration at all. Perhaps where descriptions of systems or narrative explanations of historical events are felt to be necessary, these would be better presented as bold-headed boxes, easily identifiable from the myriad of other tables. It would be invaluable if these short textual entries contained cross-references to other sections of the book.

What all this boils down to is that the Handbook is neither fish nor fowl. It is neither compendium/almanac nor introductory textbook. The authors may have had an initial vision, and I suspect it was of the grand variety, for the book but somewhere the vision became distorted and the initial mission was abandoned. Perhaps Mackerras and Yorke could have pulled it off if they'd had the time and space allowed Sir Joseph Needham, but they did not have this luxury. However, with a little more planning and collaboration the final product would have been more coherent. But that's the phobic organiser in me talking.

Kitty Eggerking edited ALR's China Supplement (No. 125).
Lost Illusions

Longtime Companion, directed by Norman René, showing independently nationally. Reviewed by Jill Sergeant.

Longtime Companion is a film about transformation. AIDS has been with us ten years now, and it has transformed the lives of everyone affected by it. AIDS has brought fear, grief and multiple deaths of friends, lovers and relatives, and the distress of coping with a hideous disease. If there is any consolation to be derived it must be from the positive responses the crisis has provoked. The first feature film about AIDS, Longtime Companion is actually a 'docudrama' which records both the grief and the empowerment that AIDS has brought to one of the communities most affected by it: American gay men.

In a fictional account of the first eight years of the epidemic, the film follows the lives of a group of gay friends and a more closeted gay couple who live next door to the main female character. Starting on 3 July 1981, the day that a new 'gay cancer' was first reported in the New York Times, the film observes these characters on just one pivotal—yet ordinary—day each year until 1989. This technique, which condenses a period of dramatic change, is an effective reminder of just how quickly AIDS invaded our lives in the 80s.

In 1981 the news of a 'gay cancer' is greeted with a mixture of derision and concern by the central characters—comfortable, affluent middle class gay men in their New York subculture. But by 1982, one of them, John, is ill in Casualty with pneumonia. His friends fear, but don't dare to name, AIDS. By 1983 John is dead. One of John's friends, David, won't believe that his own lover Sean may have the disease. But by 1984 Sean is in hospital being pumped with vitamin pills and herbs by a new age friend. We see the painful, humiliating progression of his illness until two years later, he dies. David, at his bedside, urges him to 'let go, my baby, let go'. As the years go by the illnesses and deaths multiply. Visits to the hospital become routine.

At the same time, the transition from paranoia to compassion and empowerment takes place. The gay community's plentiful prejudices and fears about AIDS dissolve as the years pass and they are forced to deal with the day-to-day realities of the epidemic. Willy, a friend of David and Sean, is the main exemplar of this process. On his first visit to Sean in hospital he arrives armoured in plastic gown and mask. After Sean kisses him he escapes to the bathroom to scrub his cheek—he even uses a paper towel to turn the tap on. But when Sean dies two years later, Willy holds his hand. Still later, he becomes a 'buddy' helping out with household chores for a Hispanic man, Alberto—someone Willy would probably never otherwise have known.

By 1988 all the surviving characters have become actively involved in AIDS work—at the Gay Men's Health Crisis Centre, at benefit concerts for people with AIDS, or by being a 'buddy'. It's become the best way of fighting both the disease and the emotional distress it has caused.

The impression given by Longtime Companion is that AIDS took the 'mainstream' gay community into a world that maybe they didn't know existed. Their comfortable lives contrast strongly with the crowded casualty ward, the shared hospital room, the poor neighbourhood where Alberto lives. Poverty, lack of privacy, and discrimination start to press in upon them. One man is out of work—and possibly out of an apartment—because his lover has died as a result of AIDS, and rumours are going around that he has it too.

Longtime Companion has been criticised for being just about gay white men and, it's true, the stories of Blacks, Hispanics, women or intravenous drug users are not told. But the filmmakers themselves have said that they did not set out to make everybody's story. They focused on the community they know and are part of. Longtime Companion is an affirmation of this community's experience of and response to AIDS. Gay activists in Australia and overseas have pointed out that what they have to say about their experience of AIDS is often marginalised or discounted—the media and the public seem to prefer 'innocent victims'. Their voices need to be heard.

The film ends with a scene of hope. Willy, his lover Fuzzy, and a woman friend are walking on the beach talking over their lives of the past eight years. Wishing for it all to be over, they have a vision of a giant party where all their friends who have died of AIDS return to life. This scene, too, has been criticised for being overly sentimental, or a cop-out. Given the mood of the 90s, perhaps a more defiant, political challenge would have been appropriate. But Longtime Companion is less about politics than it is about emotions: how AIDS has made people realise how precious their friends and lovers are, how they've gained the strength to live with this epidemic. The bonding that such a crisis produces goes very deep. And schmaltzy though it may be, the final scene represents the deepest, most heartfelt wishes of anyone who has been touched by AIDS: that it could be all over, and that everyone who has died could come back to us.

JILL SERGEANT is the editor of Talkabout, the newsletter of People Living with AIDS (NSW).
Sitting at the top of the English pop music charts as I write is a song recorded in 1982 by a band which broke up years ago. Its current burst of mass popularity is entirely attributable to the fact that it has been used in a TV commercial for Levis jeans.

This isn't the first time this short circuit of the traditional pop-plugging process has forced or foisted itself onto the pop public. A few years ago the late, great pioneer of sweet soul, Sam Cooke, had a hit 20 years after his death, courtesy of the combined weight of high rotation airplay and advertising jingles feeding promiscuously off each other.

What makes this more recent episode remarkable is that the song is by the greatest punk band of the 70s next to the Sex Pistols. Levis are being cooned to a tune by those likely lads who brought us "White Riot", "I'm so bored with the USA" and other radical punk classics: The Clash. For The Clash were an excellent case of the postmodern problem. The great German critic, Walter Benjamin, summarised this dilemma as one between a politicised aesthetics and an aestheticised politics. Now more than ever it seems that any attempt to politicise a mass art form like popular music will be a risky strategy. The risk is one of turning images and ideas which have a meaning and a history in the community connected to the Left into pure, disembodied, meaningless signs, part of the great rotating catherine wheel of image and style.

The issue is that these days more and more people are more reliant for cultural resources on mass cultural forms, and have less and less access to traditional popular culture, folk art and community knowledge. So perhaps it is necessary to try to inject the raw material for progressive worldviews into the mainstream, and hope that what remains of community knowledge can provide the resources to interpret and deploy those fragments in a way which affirms progressive values and ideals. The demand this places on the culture of the Left is that it then has to keep offering up new versions, new styles of its core values and images. Postmodern culture demands novelty of form but not of substance. In the battle of ideas, style is what gives the contending parties the edge—as The Clash were very well aware.

While The Clash lasted they turned out a steady stream of radical images and sounds, including records dedicated to the Sandinistas and songs celebrating Spanish Civil War loyalists, as well as others which expressed the experience of life on the dole, police harassment and other everyday stories of the 70s recession years. Cut free from their original social contexts and allowed to float freely in the media stream, these images could be ignored or reinterpreted as pure style. Or they could be seized upon by young people searching for ways of interpreting and relating to the world which suggested the necessity of political critique, a constant suspicion of power and the need to remember past struggles. A pop song can't substitute for political consciousness, but it can affirm it.

The challenge for the Left is to integrate its more traditional forms for reproducing Left culture and resources from generation to generation with the kind of cultural reproduction which takes place at large, through the mass media, to integrate the politics of style with its style of politics. It is possible to construct meanings and make distinctions in the postmodern world of mass-media culture, but it is a two-way street. Mass culture throws up resources to be used as well as crude to criticise. There are possibilities for creating radical mass media images. The Clash are an excellent case study in what is possible and not possible. In what to do and what not to do.

McKenzie Wark.
Marion Halligan's long residence in the ACT.) However, I found much else of interest in Eat My Words.

While the scope of the work is quite broad, it manages to avoid sounding like an unrelated collection of anecdotes or reflections. Indeed, Eat My Words is to the Readers' Digest what homemade pesto is to a Big Mac, tasty and not totally smooth.

Halligan's unifying theme is pleasure, and she traces her palate's frisson from childhood days of jam and cakes to dinner party days in Canberra and Paris. Along the way we get some insights into changes in diet and food fashion in Australia and elsewhere over the years, and some great recipes too.

The history of the author's changing appreciation of food over the last 20 to 30 years is an illustration of some of the changes that have occurred in the eating habits of Australians. For example, Halligan can recall her first olive which she ate (perhaps recalling Eve reaching for wisdom?) as a university student. Her children (Halligan's, that is, not Eve's) have eaten olives "since their first year of life". One wonders what will represent 'sophistication' for them when they look back; the easy referent of the olive will not be available.

The education of the author in such 'exotic' foodstuffs now reads as almost quaint or contrived but these changes are also charted by Michael Symons in One Continuous Picnic, a history of the 'national tuckshop'. Pesto was my olive; a green thick sauce which bore absolutely no resemblance to the spag bol which had previously been my experience of pasta. My tongue still tangles at the memory of my first pesto; now it is hard to enter a house in Brunswick without seeing a jar of the stuff in the fridge next to the beer. But I digress...

Some might feel that Halligan's recounting of banquets held for the Symposia of Australian Gastronomy overstates sophistication to the point of vulgarity. However, Halligan is discussing "professionals pushing their skills to some sort of limit...food of course is essential; it's also marginal." The deliberate playing with food to bring out irony or to make a statement is an art. There is no reason why the limits of taste cannot be explored through such events or descriptions. Why should art be comforting?

Halligan states, correctly, that like art, "cooking needs its autonomy". However, the question of where autonomy ends and exclusion begins is not the subject matter of this book. I felt uncomfortable (that word again) reading the banquet descriptions against Halligan's later discussion of the "happiness" of beggars in Paris. Perhaps this represents a return of the author's repressed Australian childhood of scones and junkets crying out "let them eat trifle"?

Halligan constantly returns to the ironies of food; its necessity and its ephemeralness. She examines cake decorating, nouvelle cuisine, the changes in the kinds of recipes provided in magazines and the violent language of food (all that beating, carving and separating). I would suggest that this is a book for those hoping to be introduced to food or to cooking. However, for those already interested in the area or for anyone wanting to sample an original mind combining disparate ingredients in an entertaining way, I would recommend Eat My Words. Here are two recipes from the book.

**Lamb with Apricots**

Chop two onions, cook gently in butter, add 1 kg of lamb in cubes, brown, add 500g apricots, halved, two tablespoons raisins, scant teaspoon cinnamon, pepper and cook gently till lamb is done. Serve with rice. (This will make quite a lot, you could cut the quantities down—PC.)

**Strawberry Icecream**

500g strawberries, juice of 1/2 lemon and 1/2 orange, 100g icing sugar, 300 ml stiffly whipped cream.

Puree fruit, sweeten with icing sugar and add juices as desired. Fold into whipped cream, freeze in a sorbet maker or icecream machine or in your freezer stirring occasionally.

Halligan states that, partially as a result of nouvelle cuisine, "writing about food, in all but the most technical recipe communicating terms, is in danger of becoming a lost art". Eat My Words places the meanings and joy of food back on the menu.

Penelope Cotter
from the West Bank and Gaza Strip? Who runs the UN? Two days after the 1980 vote President Carter disavowed US support even though his representative had voted for it!

For those of us involved in "the great struggle" for "collective security", we were about defending the USSR, not oil. At that time it wasn't a mistake. But this time?

Betty Searle, Mosman, NSW

Witch-hunt

I read Yvonne Preston's article on ritual child abuse (ALR 126, March) with interest and concern. Protecting children from harm is a very human and commendable goal. But there is an old saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. In her last paragraph Preston derides "male columnists" who fear "witch-hunts". Yet her article itself demonstrates that it is not only males who are being accused. I refer to the allegations about the old Sydney woman whom children called "the hag".

A few centuries ago, witch-hunts were more than a figure of speech. "Hags" were regularly hanged or burnt at the stake for tormenting the innocent to please the Devil. Children and adolescents were key witnesses in many of the classic witch-hunts, including the one at Salem, Massachusetts. Ann Putnam, 12-year-old leader of the group who identified the Salem witches and wizards, was later to admit that her evidence had been wrong—14 years after the trials and hangings.

While the Salem charges weren't identical to those in Preston's article, the purge demonstrated two important things. Firstly, that children aren't always reliable witnesses. Secondly, that fear of devilish religion breeds injustice. Out of such fears grew the "blood libel" against European Jews, the claim that they killed Christian infants for ritual purposes, especially at Passover. More recently, a nation's fascinated horror with the idea of child sacrifice led to the false imprisonment of a Seventh Day Adventist called Lindy Chamberlain. Rumour had it that the name Azaria meant "sacrifice in the desert". In this instance forensic experts, not children, came up with the prosecution evidence—demonstrating that adults can get things wrong too.

In the days of the witch-hunts there may well have been a few people who experimented with "satanic" inversions of church rituals, as there are in Christian countries today. Conceivably, some of these activities caused physical or psychological harm, either to children or to adults. But the harm done by well-meaning witch-hunters was (and perhaps will be) much greater.

I object to any practices (ritual, sexual or otherwise) which injure or upset children. Inquiry into children's allegations would be welcome, if only it could be accompanied by enough sensitivity to avoid worsening any trauma, and by enough scepticism to avoid smearing or convicting people who have done nothing wrong. Children are not little angels incapable of falsehood or confusion, nor are they perpetually full of mischief—they are human.

But Preston equates scepticism with "slander". She points to "the impropriateness of the adversarial court system" for ritual abuse cases. She also approvingly cites "a member of a special investigating unit in the United States" as saying that "occult crime should be seen as the outcome of the decline in rationalism, disenchantment with traditional religion, the influence of Eastern religions, para-psychology, the popularity of pseudo-satanic heavy metal music and the proliferation of occult literature."

For consistent defenders of human rights there can be no exceptions to the principle that an accused person is innocent until proven guilty. The right to a defence and the benefit of any reasonable doubt must be granted even to such un-American elements as Buddhists, heavy metal fans and tarot card enthusiasts. Even to Jews and Seventh Day Adventists. Even to "hags".

Otherwise we are back in Salem.

Colin Robinson, Sydney, NSW.

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LETTERS

Divided Nations

May I comment on a couple of points in David Burchell's item in 'Margins', ALR 125 (February).

While there were those in the anti-Gulf War movement in the United States who espoused horror at all wars, the most vocal and the most numerous participants were led by the churches and Vietnam veterans who have consistently campaigned against the use of the Contras against Nicaragua and El Salvador's rightwing government, losing some of their own people in those struggles. Clergy and priests have been jailed in the United States for harboursing and assisting refugees from El Salvador and Chile.

It is unfair to give the impression that those who could not differentiate between a just and unjust war were a large slice of the United States protest movement. I must admit that there were grounds for confusion when a group formed to support the United Nations now ignoring the 1 March 1980 resolution calling upon Israel to withdraw...
We are saving sinful metropolises. Hordes of and you'll see hordes of and they're now rushing into the chase are suddenly considering the arms of grinning real-estate agents. This dream home had the stressful nightmare. Each night she dreamt because she had already signed the documents. People who once prided themselves on their detailed knowledge of current affairs and all the latest political nuances now turn immediately to the list of up-coming auctions, and don't even feel a twinge of interest in the plight of the Kurds. You can only attract their attention to the New World Order by pretending it's some sort of new home loan marketing scheme. If you try to talk about the latest revelations in WA Inc their eyes glaze over with boredom. Mention the magic phrase ‘rear lane access’ and suddenly the air is electric with excitement.

If you suddenly notice your friends are wearing steel capped boots, elbow pads and knuckle dusters every Saturday morning, you can be sure they have joined the savage pack of homeseekers which drives around to inspect all the open houses. The agents pop out almost all the “Open for Inspection” signs between 10 am and 12 noon. This makes it virtually impossible to get a really good look at any house because every house is crowded and everyone is hurrying.

Of course, people can only take this kind of pressure for so long before they crack and come to my clinics to talk about the latest ‘products’ (or loans, as we used to call them). You find out later about the interest and the ‘establishment costs’.

One of my patients was recently brought to me on a stretcher. She had collapsed with shock when her bank manager asked her to show him how to use the percentage button on his calculator. She collapsed because she had already signed the documents.

The only really nice people you meet during the process of home acquisition are all the guys who do their pre-purchase inspections. They’re so nice because they’re so rich. They’re always smiling because the system is set up in such a way that they inspect the same houses over and over again and prepare the same reports for all the different people interested in buying them. They get the same fee each time. Wouldn’t you be smiling?

There’ll be more on home ownership next time. Watch this space.

Send your problems to Dr Hartman’s secretary, Julie McCrossin, care of ALR.
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Invisibility Blues discusses the tensions and boundaries between high and low art, elite and mass culture, male and female and argues that these boundaries are becoming increasingly fluid.
Invisibility Blues is certain to become a landmark in cultural studies and a fundamental document in the history of black feminism.