Dreaming of a GREEN XMAS

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Post-Ideology?

Nick Greiner and Bob Hawke agree: the era of ideological conflict is over. And Eastern Europe would seem to underline their claims. Peter Beilharz ponders the end of a year when ideology was given premature burial.

Ours, of course, the age of posts, or as Pierre Bourdieu puts it in Homo Academicus, the age of deaths — death of the subject, death of humanism, end of history, end of socialism/communism/marxism, end of absolutely everything — end of ideology. Yet even with all these mythical, wish-desired and piling corpses, we still continue to live in pretty much the same way as folks used to before. When I talk to my octogenarian grandmother, we can agree that the world’s changed a lot, and yet that people still do the same things — seek fulfilment and identity, work and income, lovers and (sometimes) children, seek respite from work, seek friendship, company, still do the same things, fall ill, get stressed, push on.

If we read the papers, we get the same, actually conflicting messages. On the one hand, Labour in New Zealand trailbreaking the way for an even more openly economistic government, Labor and Liberal in Australia agreeing to privatise and to introduce Thatcher tilting still against socialism, wherever possible; on the other, Thatcher tilting still against socialism, against the spectre of Marx in the British Museum, yet aspiring, like Marx, to the slogan of the classless society. So the conflicts continue, but so too do the increasing trends to agreement. What is happening on earth? Is the world really changing itself at such an exponential rate that we cannot even sensibly interpret it?

This is the dominant response to the 90s, manifest too in the response to changes in Eastern and Central Europe — it’s all changing so fast. But it also changed ‘fast’ after World War Two, and it took some time for the dust to settle and for people to realise that some things hadn’t changed at all. This is, after all, what we also argue when we discuss the Industrial or French Revolutions - the change which seemed so apocalyptic took decades to filter through. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Is it sensible, then, to proclaim the end of ideology, because the East seeks markets and both sides of politics in Australia favour lean and mean management? A first response is that it ought, in principle, be taboo to proclaim the end of ideology. When ideology is over, we are all in big trouble, because political difference is over. Marxists, too, had hoped for the end of ideology — the end of politics, the end of the state — and they were wrong. The good society is not one where there are no disputes or differences or arguments. The good society should seek civil harmony, and social justice, but political difference. Local and international politics today are nowhere near these values; indeed, they are arguably further from them than they ever have been.

But isn’t there, all the same, some kind of process of convergence or globalisation going on? Isn’t ideology over? A second answer is both yes, and no. Modern, or postmodern, culture (delete as applicable) is based on the cult of homogenisation. Another irony: culture crows about difference, but what it stands for is homogenisation. Cities become more and more alike — motel chains, fast food outlets, movies, video clips and advertisements. It is as though we still yearn for stability and uniformity, but the more urgently the more social time accelerates (seems to accelerate). The best symbol of this is the sense the America is utopia. Notwithstanding its poor and its tragic, America is increasingly viewed as utopia. Baudrillard tells us so, even tells us it’s Disneyland which is really the place of utopia.

From a somewhat different position George Steiner agrees, lamenting the fact as he writes on the Great Revolutions of 1989 in Granta. One point of which neither view directly connects is that none of this is new, either. On of the greatest Americanists was a marxist called Leon Trotsky. The big/beautiful, brash and bawdy appeared not just to flapper-dancers by earlier, in different rendition, to Edward Bellamy in Looking Backward. There were relatively few voices raised against all this fuss — Barth, moans of the troubled romantics, for Ruskin, William Morris, Walter Benjamin.

For all this, enthusiasm for the same and dust of the metropolis was nonetheless still largely accompanied by commitment to the development state. The state was as much a part of the conversational furniture as was the market a century ago. Now we come to the end of our own country, big one, the new millennium looming large, economic prospects appallingly dim (especially if you’re a Victorian ecological limits staring us in the face, people arguing that we shouldn’t have kids (or at least that they shouldn’t be allowed to have kids).

One major shift in this, then, has been the marginalisation of the State. From William Morris Hughes to Menzies, Whitlam, the state was indeed a part of the furniture. Today the major word is market, and too often people fail to differentiate between capitalism and market. Markets are also part of the furniture, since the 5 year dot. But capitalism, that form of economic organisation is not only now coming into its own, being so
which fabianism rode to influence, if not power. State provision throughout this period was taken as a norm, even though the market really ruled. Into the interwar period, community and local provision had largely given way to the idea of state provision, and statism, welfarism and socialism all came to mean the same thing. The state remained the major actor in the second war, not least of all in Australia, which has always had a statist culture anyway.

Along the way new liberals such as Hancock and Eggleston protested that the power of the state would constrict the responsibility of individual and community, and they were right. Menzies had the shrewdness of insight to realise this, at least on the level of rhetoric, though practically he was as much a statist as any other, viewing the state as an instrument, just as earlier liberals had viewed private property as an instrument, and not as the goal-in-itself which it is now, apparently, widely viewed as. Like John Stuart Mill, Menzies believed in the sanctity of property except when it came to education. Whitlam then expanded the optic to fabian dimensions, to take in housing and health and cities as well as education.

The arguments about privatisation have been especially difficult for Australian radicals, given the combined impact of statism within both certain socialisms and Australian culture as such. Underneath this, too, is the substratum of common sense for which everyday life really will become nasty, short and brutish if the welfare state is too much diminished. The issue here is that, while there has been a recognisable shift away from the idea, if not always the practice of the state towards that of the capitalist market, the broader trend has been to the increasing economisation of public life.

If Australian Airlines was not tangibly different to Ansett, then it should have been, or else there is little obvious case for the two-airlines policy (a major plank of Menzies' platform). If the Commonwealth Bank does not function to meet popular need, then it ought be obliged to do so. It is a massive giveaway when we confess that state-owned or operated or supported institutions fail to meet popular needs. But it is not primarily a confession about the institutions so much as about our culture, which seems apparently to function only when the dollar-signs go up. This does not represent the end of ideology so much as it symbolises the hegemony of the culture of capitalism.

It is not 'markets' which are responsible for this process, so much as the belief that everything should be marketed. The older traditions of labour got within cooee of this problem when they called it 'the money power', only by this they too often meant the power of monopoly capital, which could only be overcome by the power of the State. They did not realise that the state was a problem too. And they did not understand that money power was capable of insinuating itself into the fibres of everyday life, as consumption took over the power of influence which they had earlier ascribed to production. The commodification of everyday life has in fact changed, exploded since the 30s. The immanent trend of 19th century capitalism has become its defining attribute into the 20th. Now the Sorcerer's Apprentice beckons us into the new millennium. The prospect is simultaneously sobering and challenging. It may, after all, be the case that the more things stay the same, they more they change. The answer will not be in the post.

PETER BEILHARZ is one of the editors of Thesis Eleven.
Tortoise and Hare

Good economics is supposed to be sound politics. So when a Labour government which has attracted top marks from the world’s leading economic agencies gets thrown out of office in a landslide electoral defeat, questions need to be asked.

And the answers as to why the New Zealand government led by new-boy Prime Minister Mike Moore was so thoroughly thrashed at the 27 October election contain lessons for this side of the Tasman.

Australians pay scandalously little attention to New Zealand. Yet the two countries comprise their own trading bloc; their business structures are developing toward a single Australasian corporate zone; and the labour markets of Sydney and Auckland are as economically integrated as Adelaide’s and Melbourne’s. As well, the political cycles of the two countries have swung together over the past 20 years. Pre-oil shock reformist (Lab(u)r) governments (Whitlam and Kirk/Rowling) in the early to mid-70s; paternalist Tory governments (Fraser and Muldoon) from the mid-70s to the mid-80s; and then rationalist Lab(u)r administrations (Hawke and Lange/Palmer/Moore) in the 80s.

But, over the past six or seven years, the economic strategies implemented by the two Lab(u)r administrations have diverged markedly. In New Zealand, Finance Minister Roger Douglas pursued ‘Rogernomics’: a crash-through-or-crash program of economic deregulation and privatisation combined with a rugged inflation-first monetary policy. In Australia, Paul Keating has run a more ‘gradualist’ program of microeconomic reform combined with an incomes policy based on macroeconomic policy which initially emphasised ‘jobs, jobs, jobs’ but which lately has been forced to pull in its growth sails.

If ever there was a control experiment for economic strategies, Australia and New Zealand in the second half of the 80s is it.

The starting-point differences must be noted, however. In New Zealand, Labour took over a country in which the decline in post-war economic performance was much more marked. Again, Douglas faced fewer direct political constraints in implementing his radical program of ‘Rogernomics’. There are no states in New Zealand, no senate and no written constitution to bind the hand of the executive arm of the central government.

The program implemented by Douglas was heavily influenced by the New Zealand Treasury’s adoption of free market economics from the University of Chicago school. In Labour’s first term, Douglas removed the minimum payments subsidies given by Muldoon to the farmers; cut import protection for manufacturing; corporatised a range of featherbedded government instrumentalities operating anything from forests to coal mines; deregulated the finance sector; floated the $NZ and slashed marginal income tax rates while implementing a broad-based value-added tax dubbed the Goods and Services Tax. And Douglas departed from the Keating model by eschewing any incomes policy with the New Zealand trade unions and adopting a hands-off approach to the wage system in favour of fighting inflation with high interest rates and an overvalued exchange rate.

Lange won the 1987 election — the first re-election of a Labour government in New Zealand for 49 years — largely because the electorate was not prepared to return to the National Party, an even less impressive band of Tories than the Liberal National Party coalition in Australia. But the seeds of Labour’s downfall were evident in different messages coming from Lange and Douglas. Lange campaigned on the fanciful theme that New Zealand could quickly start to reap some of the gain from the economic pain of the previous three years, whereas Douglas argued that Labour should be given a chance to “finish the job”.

Douglas, however, used the October 1987 stock market crash as a political opportunity to push Rogernomics even faster. In December, he prism Cabinet to agree to a radical package which included a flat rate of income tax — possibly as low as 23% — plus the first thrust of Rogernomics into the New Zealand welfare state. Douglas free market reform of the social welfare, health and education sections as an intrinsic part of producing a more efficient economy. But Lange had hoped that reform of the welfare state would produce resources to fund an extended welfare state.

The Prime Minister had second thoughts about the December package and — while Douglas was over seas — publicly overturned his reforms before they had been implemented. This sparked an intense highly-public political battle which saw Douglas sacked and Lange thrown in the towel, to be replaced by deputy Geoffrey Palmer.

As well as disintegrating at the top, the government also frayed at the bottom with the creation of a let’s breakaway New Labour Party, led by Jim Anderton who retained his seat at the October election in the face of an anti-Labour landslide. With the government trailing badly in the polls, Palmer also threw in the towel to be replaced by Labor’s own deputy Geoffrey Palmer.

This new government was well prepared to return to the view that Rogernomics was a major contributor to the economic crisis. But it was not prepared in a practical way. What has taken place is a new, more controlled, more cautious approach.

Weeks before the October election Mike Moore announced an L-turn in the form of a “growth agreement” with the trade unions.
the imminent arrival of an anti-union National Party government, the leftist TUC leader, Ken "lblglas (no relation to Roger), was keen to demonstrate the potential for government-union co-operation. But it was too little and too late to save Labour. By then, the government was haunted by charges of broken promises relating to its unpopular second-term program of privatisation of such public enterprises as NZ Telecom. Its leadership brawling had left it looking disunited. The thousand flowers which were promised to bloom from economic liberalisation had been torched by the relentless anti-inflation pressure from higher interest rates and an over-valued exchange rate. Although inflation has fallen to 5%, the cost of this has been a doubling of unemployment to levels not experienced in New Zealand since the 1980s. And, despite a comatose economy, the high $NZ has come home to roost in the form of a balance of payments deficit larger even than Australia's.

While condemned by the electorate at home, Rogernomics was hailed by the rightwing economic think-tanks in Australia and by international economic agencies such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the International Monetary Fund.

The extreme rationalist response to this paradox is that Labour did not move fast enough in extending Rogernomics into reducing the underlying budget deficit, reforming the welfare state or deregulating the labour market. Yet the electorate stated overwhelmingly that it has had enough of Rogernomics; despite the lack of formal constraints on the executive arm of government, the three-year election cycle still enforces its own political speed limits.

This leaves the National Party government led by the pragmatic Jim Bolger in a quandary — and even publicly praying for guidance from above. While Keating's gradualist strategy has pushed the Opposition further to the right, Douglas' crash-through-or-crash program has left the Nationals with a mandate for good times but without any obvious means of getting there.

The Nationals' Finance Minister, Ruth Richardson, is possibly drier than even Douglas. But the government remains saddled with an updated version of Muldoon populists and wets susceptible to special pleading by the Nationals' business, farmer and grey power constituencies. Richardson may get her way for traditional Tory favourites, such as labour market deregulation and attacks on welfare for single mothers. But the Nationals already have signalled a retreat from Labour's 0.2% inflation target as well as a reversal of Labour's tertiary education tax and its means testing of New Zealand's generous aged pension. As well, they are likely to ease up on Labour's plans for further cuts in import protection and extend tax concessions to favoured industries such as forestry and race-horse breeding.

The interventionist Left-liberal position can take little comfort from these areas of retreat from Rogernomics, as they are being driven by the pork-barrelling favouritism of the New Zealand Tories. But they are also a cause of dismay for economic rationalists. From this perspective, Keating's gradualist reform program in Australia can be likened to a tortoise which is catching up on a New Zealand hare that has run out of puff.

MICHAEL STUTCHBURY is the economics editor of the Financial Review.
Following the special premiers conference in early November, Commonwealth and State officials will be working jointly on a new regime for government-owned businesses. The end result will be to transform their operations more dramatically than at any time in the last hundred years.

Two reports are to be submitted to the first of a series of special premiers conference meetings in May 1991. One is to clarify the tax positions of government business enterprises (GBEs) and the other is to outline principles for monitoring their performance. Also in May (after years of debating the pros and cons) the Loan Council will decide whether or not to lift the borrowing restrictions which have hitherto applied to such bodies, and which have conventionally listed borrowings by GBEs as if they were part of the general government debt.

Taken together these reforms are designed to support a nationwide thrust towards the formal corporatisation of GBEs. 'Corporatisation' is a word from the new jargon of micro-economic reform: briefly, it means the restructuring of government businesses to parallel the business structures of private firms. However, a broader movement towards commercialisation of public enterprise has been around for 100 years. The professor of public administration at Canberra University, Roger Wettenhall, traces its genealogy back to the premiers of last century when Sir Henry Parkes (NSW) and Duncan Gillies (Vic) took the management of state railways out of government departments and granted them greater management freedoms under statutory charter.

In the 90s the motive is the same — but the emphasis has shifted to converting government enterprises into limited liability companies governed by the 'ordinary laws of commerce'. The rationale is that in order to create a 'level playing field' GBEs need to be in the same position as private sector companies. This would enable them to maximise their profitability and productivity and to compare the performance of different GBEs within and between states.

Accordingly, corporatisation aims to remove both the disadvantages to public enterprises under the present regime — including the funding of community service obligations like pensioner concessions — and advantages like government guarantees on loans and tax exemptions. A corporatised entity could, for example, provide community service obligations under contract to government, so that the government budget rather than that of the enterprise would be responsible for them. In strategic terms this should provide 'transparency' (in the policy jargon) for the social commitments of government enterprises, and this should enable a more realistic price-tag to be attached to public policy decisions — allowing taxpayers to better judge the cost/benefit bottom of their public enterprises.

The states also want to see tax reform on two key fronts. First, they say they need a broader tax base in order to return the savings from more productive public enterprises to as many households as possible. State governments at present have a narrow tax base, and this means that most of the burden falls on a small number of tax-paying groups — mostly small businesses and property owners.

Second, the shifting of public enterprises from the status of statutory authorities to that of ordinary limited companies will change their legal position — and there is a dispute over whether this means they should pay federal income tax just like every other private business. The states have said they would think twice about corporatisation if it meant having to hand over money to the federal government in federal taxes.

The proposals for monitoring the performance of GBEs aim to create a national monitoring agency to which states would supply information such as the cost efficiency, service delivery and financial performance of state enterprises. This register would provide GBEs with 'yardstick competition' — a standard against which they can compare the effectiveness of their operations against those of comparable enterprises in other states.

The most critical reform under consideration is the Loan Council proposal. Loan Council restrictions on borrowings by GBEs have been a priority target in the Hawke government's strategy to cut public sector borrowing requirements (PSBR), or public debt. The states are unhappy about the PSBR targets set by the Commonwealth because it combines the debts of government departments with those of business and trading enterprises. This accounting definition — which has similar bedevilled federal GBEs like the railways, limiting their ability to borrow — confuses borrowings for consumption expenditure by government departments with borrowings by GBEs to finance infrastructure. With the former a direct allocation of revenue to spending, and thus indirectly to debt, infrastructure spending by business enterprises generate the revenue to pay the last debt without costing taxpayers. Discussion paper to the recent premiers conference argued that where authorities meet strict commercial standards 'there should be no restrictions on their borrowing capacity except those dictated by normal commercial principles'.

With at least two special premiers conferences already organised for next year these proposals for reform
the first in a series of changes which revolutionise the future of GBEs. Public enterprise inefficiency has been costing Australian households too much money for too long. Commercial changes to NSW government enterprises over 12 months lifted their contribution to this year's state budget by 70%, to $600 million. Queensland's discussion paper on enterprise reform estimates that a 1% boost to the return on assets owned by its top seven authorities would generate $250 million annually. Western Australia has claimed that a similar improvement by its five major enterprises would generate $170 million annually.

Public policy is going back to its balance sheets. Not in a politically testable way (by replacing attention to social need with economic darwinism) — but by making it easier to identify the beneficiaries of the operations of GBEs, and helping us decide whether the money used to run them is well-spent.

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A card-carrying Christmas

Judy Horacek, ALR's resident cartoonist, has produced a set of six ideologically squeaky-clean cards for Xmas, to gladden the hearts of your friends, and thoroughly confuse your relations.

Among the subjects: herstory's discovery of Mother Xmas; the three shepherds and male menopause; and Joseph's and Mary's childcare plans. The cards sell for $10.80 for the packet of six, post-free. Write to ALR Xmas Cards, Freepost 28, PO Box A247, Sydney South 2000. (No stamp required if posted in Australia.)
An Indecent Obsession

On 25 October, Tim Anderson was convicted on three counts of murder relating to the bombing of the Sydney Hilton Hotel in February 1978. Anderson (along with two other members of the Ananda Marga group, Ross Dunn and Paul Alister) has already spent seven years in prison on charges for which he (and the others) were later unconditionally pardoned and compensated.

It is clear that Ananda Marga (and perhaps Tim Anderson in particular) has since 1978 been regarded by certain police as the most eligible target to bear the responsibility for the Hilton bombing, despite the paucity (at least until last year) of any evidence directly linking the organisation or its members to the events. The earlier charges (brought in 1978) relating to Anderson in particular)

"real"

"true"

"real" crimes of these men, the Hilton bombing, for which no evidence existed to charge them. This was so much the case that over the years journalists have unwittingly referred to them as the Hilton bombers on a number of occasions. The prosecution of Anderson for the Hilton bombing cannot be detached from this longer history of police and media prejudice relating to Ananda Marga and Anderson in particular.

What this process illustrates is the ease with which an aura of guilt, often verging on moral certainty, can be generated around an individual or social group despite the absence of evidence to support it. There are many other examples: the Chamberlain case, the dramatic arrest of Harry Blackburn on multiple rape charges, the alleged Greek social security fraud conspiracy. Of course, we are supposed to have a legal system which places major obstacles in the way of such prejudices proceeding to ground the actual criminal prosecution and punishment of innocent people. These cases demonstrate the folly of this assumption, for in vital respects the legal and organisational framework of the criminal justice system allows (even, in various ways, encourages) such miscarriages of justice to occur.

The adversary system of justice is, as the term suggests, a contest in which it is assumed that the truth will emerge, not from any direct attempt to find out what happened, but from the two parties, the prosecution and the defence, each putting their version of events in a partisan manner. In the trial process the judge presides over this contest to see that it is carried out according to the rules of fair play.

Thus, the prosecution process is in fundamental respects organised in such a way that once a decision has been taken early in the process that a person is guilty then does not need to be shown guilty. The legal procedures applying to the pre-trial process, for example, are so designed to allow the prosecution to attempt to suppress evidence that is suggestive of the innocence of the accused person. At the other extreme there are temptations actively to suppress such evidence and to beef up the incriminating evidence often to the point of fabricating it. It is also important to note that the adversarial processes within the prosecution command wholly unequal resources: the authority and resources of the state are pitched against those of individuals of usually less than modest means.

Compounding these problems, however, is the fact that these crucial processes within the prosecution sys-
completely without foundation — an impossibility on a grand scale. He was not recalled to explain how he could have got something so fundamental wrong. It is improbable that a person would admit to such a heinous crime as the Hilton bombing if they had not committed it and this is the trump card that the prosecution played throughout. However, it is not unprecedented. It is equally improbable that anyone who had committed such a crime in the way Pederick suggests he did could get all the important details so wrong. The above instance is merely the top of the iceberg of improbability.

A linguistic analysis of Pederick's various records of interview with police identified no less than 18 significant amendments to Pederick's story which were produced in the course of the police assemblage of the prosecution case, as a result of suggestions made by police.

The analysis demonstrated that a third of the police questions and statements in these interviews were directed at leading Pederick rather than eliciting his own account of events. These refinements, many of which related to crucial bits of the evidence, brought Pederick's story into alignment with many of the known facts of the case and led to the suppression of sometimes glaring discrepancies and problems in Pederick's initial confession.

Even after all of this (and much more) the Prosecution in its summing up in the Anderson trial had to abandon Pederick's account of the central part of the alleged assassination plot as being hopelessly wrong.

The trail to the wrongful conviction of Tim Anderson in this case was initially laid many years back and winds through some shadowy corridors and over some dense thickets of prejudice. To assert that the jury got it wrong in this case is to say much more than that juries are fallible. The problems reach deep into the fabric of our law enforcement arrangements.

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dispute — any poll on the reintroduction of the death penalty suggests strong support for a tough stance against violent crime. Yet it is hard to discern his overall plan for the state’s penal system — except that he “must regain control of the jails” and that he rejects any “soft-liners” pushing rehabilitation rather than punishment.

The principle ingredients of Yabsley’s penal doctrine began in September 1989 with the NSW Liberals’ promised “truth in sentencing” policy — “if you get 18 years, you serve 18 years instead of three”.

As a result, NSW prisons now have the worst overcrowding problem the state has ever seen. To counter it, Yabsley developed the biggest prison construction program in NSW history — three new maximum security jails are being built to house 800 prisoners at a cost of $160 million. But it is not enough; even with the new ones, the prisons will still be overflowing. While awaiting the new jails, Yabsley has thrown more prisoners into cramped cells and kept them locked up for 16 hours a day. The mounting violence in NSW jails during the year has resulted in at least six prison officers receiving needle-stab injuries, including Geoff Page, who has since tested HIV-positive. Thus, drugs and other illegal possessions had to go.

In September Yabsley ordered the confiscation of personal property. Thongs, guitars, wedding rings, ear-studs, cooking utensils, religious ornaments and posters (“I’ve seen too many religious statues stuffed full of heroin”) in maximum security jails. Pet birds had to go, as well as of course writing materials and treasured items such as manuscripts.

Intent on “regaining control of the jails” Yabsley then introduced compulsory AIDS testing — this time against the advice of the prison officers’ union, which considered the move too hurried and lacking adequate medical and psychological counselling services.

Over recent months cries of “enough! enough!” have come from disparate quarters — from within his own department, the Law Society, the churches, the welfare sector and more recently NSW independent MPs. But Yabsley claims the public supports him “absolutely” and says he feels very secure in the portfolio.

Politically Yabsley is an arch conservative in a conservative party. As a student, he won a Rotary exchange to South Africa and was described as a right-wing activist at university. At 24, he first stood, unsuccessfully, in a federal election. Undeterred Yabsley soon became the youngest MP in NSW by winning the state seat of Bligh in inner-Sydney. After holding Bligh for four years, Yabsley was defeated in 1988, but popped up three months later as the new member for the blue-ribbon seat of Vaucluse — where he’s been ever since.

He admits to leading an “extremely good lifestyle” in a $700,000 Victorian terrace in Woolloomooloo, owns a guesthouse outside Lismore and “a few other properties around the place”. And he does have some powerful friends. It was recently disclosed that he was given a week’s free trip to London by stockbroker Rene Rivkin while on a government-funded prisons tour — the largest gift declared by a state MP this year.

If Yabsley survives his prison reforms he will no doubt move on to bigger and brighter political challenges if in the meantime we can expect more violence. In Peter Frecklington’s words, the recent crackdown “resembled scenes of Pol Pot and Hitler. What books the screws were throwing on to the rubbish heaps the crimes were setting fire to.”

Clare Curran
you may regard the short-term pursuit of profit at all cost as an efficient expression of pure market logic or a crazily inefficient flouting of long-term economic good. Again, the definition of what is efficient relies upon what one defines as an economic good: as environmentalists only too well know, if natural resources are priced as 'free goods', 'efficiency' in production can go hand in hand with an extraordinary contempt for the efficient use of those 'external' resources.

And herein lies the rub. For try as one might, there's no way to remove some definition or other of efficiency from the centre ground of contemporary social and political debate. For one thing, there's no sensible way of conceptualising environmentally sustainable development without invoking a lusty critique of the traditional parameters of market-allocated costs. But that in turn requires developing a broader, more satisfactory definition of efficiency of one's own.

Back to the public sector. It may surprise many on the Left with short memories to learn that the post-war settlement which involved, among other things, dramatically increasing the roles of public business and industrial enterprises in the Australian economy, was dictated by none other than a hard-headed interest in efficiency. Indeed, the Morrisonian model of the public corporation applied to the public sector in Britain and Australia after 1945 took as given that it was more efficient to amass natural monopolies under centralised public management than under the feuding fiefdoms of obsolescent private concerns.

For several decades this was assumed to be the essence of the advantages of public ownership of business enterprises in mixed economies. Indeed, it was precisely this concern with efficiency above all else which motivated the annoyance of the Left with the public corporation model, and which led to demands for 'workers control' and a greater social role for public enterprises.

It was not until the recent vogue of 'micro-economic reform' that the traditional assumptions of the validity of economies of scale and of the benefits of a unitary, centralised management for 'natural monopolies' came under sustained attack in the mainstream of political debate. In other words, one set of assumptions about efficiency forged in the years of the postwar settlement came up against another set of assumptions forged in the new, deregulated environment of the exploding international economy.

In analyses of efficiency today, of course, public sector enterprises find themselves on the horns of a dilemma. If on the one hand they sustain costs well above those of private sector competitors they can be justifiably cauterised as inefficient. If on the other they follow the 'corporatisation' path and behave increasingly like their private sector competitors, the rationale for their ownership by the public in the first place becomes tenuous. The controversy over public enterprise borrowings only adds to this malaise.

Still, there's no point in defending the practices of public business enterprises which are genuinely cost-inefficient to no obvious social purpose, particularly when the public foots the bill. Such social functions as are performed by public enterprises should be able to be costed by some means — or at the very least, the cost of providing them in other ways should be identifiable.

More broadly, as noted above, the growth of environmental economics puts a greater premium on efficiency — not just the lowering of input costs to businesses — than ever before. For a more efficient use of the scarce natural and processed resources at our disposal is the sine qua non of a more environmentally sustainable economy. It's also the key to the maintenance of living standards in this new era dominated by the 'return of scarcity'. All of which suggests that, whatever its uncomfortable implications, efficiency should be playing a greater, not lesser, role in the lexicon of the broad Left-liberal stream of opinion.
The fall of the command economies leaves the market without rivals. For environmentalists it suggests a green market economy is the only path. Lyuba Zarsky sketches out what such a vision might look like.

The triumph of market over centrally planned economies continues unabated, with Mozambique the last of a growing list of converts. State socialism has been the primary 20th century adversary of capitalist market systems. With its collapse, capitalist markets will come under increasing attack from internal critics. Pressures for reform are coming from many sources, including spectacular financial debacles, economic slowdown, growing income inequities, and persistent obstacles to racial and gender equality.

But in many countries, including Australia, the greatest push is likely to come from a conservation movement newly alerted to the importance of going beyond the politics of anti-development. The four big environmental organisations — the Australian Conservation Foundation, Greenpeace, the Wilderness Society and the World Wide Fund for Nature — recently issued their first comprehensive statement on 'ecologically sustainable development'. While very much a first step, it signals the growing recognition of the importance of economics in green thinking. The success or failure of the environment movement in articulating a vision of a green market economy — one that speaks to the economic realities of Australia in the 21st century — will likely spell its political success or failure in the coming decade.

What might a green market economy look like? How can it promote environmentally friendly production and consumption patterns? How would environmental aims align with other progressive goals such as expanding democracy, promoting social, gender, and racial equality, and revitalising public life? How could a green economy generate new sources of income and employment, help Australia to get out of the foreign debt hole? Cohensasy not politically energising answers to such questions will spring from the head of a green Zeus. Rather, they will be fashioned through widespread debate and discussionscompassing activists and intellectuals throughout the
environment movement and beyond. The use of futures-oriented strategic thinking — clarifying the vision and then developing a guiding strategy — would help the process. One of the first issues to be confronted in constructing a vision of a green economy is the desired role of market forces and the role of the state in thwarting, controlling, or channelling them. Historically, greens as well as the Left have seen markets and the private property systems upon which they are typically based as the enemy of the social good. On the Left, free enterprise is seen to privilege the rich and to enhance the power of capital over labour. For greens, untrammelled market forces allow property holders to pillage the resources which they 'own' and to dump the costs of degradation onto the current or future society at large. For ideological reasons, the Left has often supported nationalisation over privatisation, while greens have supported regulation over market-based incentives and state over private ownership of sensitive environmental resources.

A green economy, however, must succeed on two counts: it must promote economic efficiency in a modern, internationally integrated, industrial society while enhancing ecological health, knowledge and ethics.

On the economic side, market systems have significant advantages over administrative ones. They are immensely more flexible, allowing the co-ordination of literally millions of prices in complex domestic and international economies. Markets also limit the power of state bureaucracies and disperse economic initiative (though, if unregulated, markets tend to concentrate economic power in big corporate bureaucracies). Most important from an economic point of view, competitive market forces provide incentives for technological and managerial innovation, as well as increased work effort. The upshot is a tendency towards rising labour productivity, which provides the potential basis for rises in material well-being — including less work-time.

On the downside, unregulated markets have a bad history when it comes to the environment. The great dynamism of market forces has fuelled an explosion of capital accumulation and mass consumption in the rich countries. Seen as limitless and costless — and as something for man (sic) to dominate — the environment has been simply left out of market equations. Of course, the experience in state socialist societies has typically been even worse, suggesting that the problem lies deeper than ownership patterns alone.

Markets have acted to pillage, rather than preserve, the environment, in part because they have treated nature as a free good. Left to their own devices, prices — the primary form of information in a market society — do not incorporate the costs of pollution, depletion, or degradation. Such 'external' costs are borne not by direct producers and consumers but by the wider community through deterioration in health or simply foregone opportunities. Environmental 'goods', such as the Toolache Wallaby, the Desert Bandicoot, or the 126 other species of Australian mammals, birds, and plants, now extinct, had no price. The 'cost' we and our children's children will pay for their loss exceeds economic calculus. Moreover, future generations do not get to 'vote' with their consumer dollars — the primary form of economic direction to which markets respond.

Free market zealots like Michael Porter at the Tasman Institute in Melbourne argue that environmental degradation can be traced to markets which are too stunted, rather than too free. As they see it, the problem is exactly the inverse of the traditional Left view: not too much but not enough private ownership. Because private property rights to the environment are incomplete, there is no incentive to conserve 'common' or public resources such as the ozone layer, the atmosphere, rivers, or oceans. The answer
is to devise ways people can own environmental resources, enjoying rights of use and exclusion and absorbing degradation costs. In this view, more extensive markets are the saviour of the environment and the key to a green economy. If conservation groups wish to preserve forests for animal habitat, for example, they should be allowed to join other bidders in the purchase of forest land.

The problem with this approach is that it is impossible to exclude other people from enjoying the benefits of certain uses of the environment. If a conservation group does buy the South East forests, everyone will benefit from the protection of habitat and conservation of species, not to mention access to a nice forest walk or just feeling good that the old-growth forests have been preserved. These public benefits mean that environmental amenities can never be exclusively private goods. Their use and disposition must be based not only on market valuation but on ethically-informed public policy.

Moreover, the free marketeers' notion that private ownership itself provides incentives for conservation is suspect. The argument is that, say, farmers or forestry companies would be killing the goose that lays the golden egg if they were to harvest timber unsustainably or use farming practices which degrade the land. Economic self-interest dictates a conservationist stance.

Prima facie, this argument is plausible. The problem is that foresters and farmers can be subject to market pressures which contradict their long-term economic interests in managing a particular resource. In northern California, for example, a timber company recently bought one of the few remaining stands of old-growth redwoods as a way of quickly paying off sour junk-bond debts. The prospect of 1000-2000 year old trees being mined to bail out bad financial planners ignited 'Redwood Summer' — a three-month confrontation between greens, tourist operators and a large part of the general public on one side, and the timber industry and unions on the other side.

There are cases, however, where market expansion can serve green ends. Developing property rights and thus tradable use rights to water, for example, can help to conserve it. As a tradable commodity, it is treated as scarce rather than free good. Breaking the power of state monopolies in energy production can potentially spark private, corporate and community initiatives in providing more efficient and renewable sources of energy.

Government ownership of environmental resources, on the other hand, provides no automatic guarantee of sensitive environmental management. Government-owned national parks are often simply unmanaged and thus subject to incursions of livestock, feral animals or exotic plant species. Proper management would require bigger outlays in training and on-the-spot personpower to enforce regulations — outlays which would have to be fought for bitterly in this era of fiscal austerity.

Sometimes, regulation over publicly owned resources itself is inadequate and use-rights are sold to developers without adequate environmental (or social) guidelines. Some analysts suggest that a system of smallholder-owned national parklands, subject to environmental regulation designed through public consultation, offers a better approach on both environmental and economic grounds than the American-pioneered system of government-owned parks. In Australia, Aboriginal communities could potentially play a much larger role as owner-managers of parklands.

The point is that an ideological stance on ownership, whether public or private, is not a promising foundation for a vision of a green market economy. Market forces and government ownership — are neither saviour nor enemy. The key to a successful strategy is to find ways to channel market forces toward environmental (and other social) goals. The 'channels' are the social rules and mediating institutions which structure the day-to-day investment, production, consumption, and conservation choices made by people both in markets and government.

Markets never operate in an institutional or cultural vacuum. The way that market processes work in a particular society is structured by social constructs, including laws, especially with regard to taxes, tariffs, contracts, and regulations; state fiscal, monetary, and industry policies; the structures of political governance; economic institutions such as the banking system and unions; the legal and education systems; and social history and more. These rules and institutions form the economic infrastructure, a market society. Channelling market forces toward green ends will require at least an examination and likely creative reshaping of all aspects of the infrastructure.

Since the 70s, most efforts towards greening the infrastructure in Australia have focused on regulation: creating laws which simply constrain businesses in certain ways, such as limiting allowable polluting emissions, not allowing logging within a certain distance of streams and water sheds, and so on.

A drawback of the command-and-control regulation approach is that it is only as good as the policing system which enforces it. In certain cases, a cheaper and potentially more effective way to achieve the same end is to develop a system of market-based incentives. Environment taxes, for example, add the cost of environmental degradation to a product or service. Widely embraced in Europe, such taxes provide incentives to consumers to switch to greener products, and to producers to seek technological and product alternatives. Scandinavian countries have adopted a tax on all coal and oil-based products, a way of cutting greenhouse-causing carbon dioxide emissions. The aim is not to 'get the price right' in the sense actually costing something as uncertain as the greenhouse effect, but rather, to affect people's behaviour in market.

Other market-based incentives include tradable permits and deposit return schemes. Tradable permits impose setting a pollution target and issuing rights to pollute that limit. Private or public companies who pollute less sell the remaining permit to another buyer. The advantage of tradable permits over regulatory standards alone is three-fold. First, they are more flexible, allowing an
panies for whom the costs of pollution abatement are low to act differently from high-cost companies. This means a lower social cost of reducing pollution. Second, because it relies on incentive rather than policing, it requires less public funds to enforce. Third, by providing an incentive to low-cost companies, it can exceed the standards. When they work, tradable permits can get a bigger environment bang for a lower buck. Tradable permits are also used to prevent over-depletion of a renewable resource such as fish. A state authority sets a quota and issues licences to fishing people to take a catch-up to the quota. The fisher can sell any remaining right to fish to someone else.

Many businesses, including the Business Council of Australia, have embraced the market-based incentive approach. Unfortunately, they have often posed it as a substitute for, rather than complement to, regulation. In reality, regulation and market-based incentive work hand-in-hand. Both affect how markets work. Some of the most creative approaches to green economics entail effective mixing of the two.

The Scandinavian carbon taxes, for example, were designed to help implement emission reduction targets of 30-50% set by public policy. In Italy, a tax on plastic bags at supermarket check-out counters ‘warmed up’ consumers and producers for a complete phase-out. Tradable permits are often set to step-by-step declining pollution thresholds in a progression toward ever lower emissions. Setting desirable environment targets and then designing public policies to meet them — including market-based incentives — is a strategy gaining momentum in Europe.

Environment taxes, tradable permits or other types of environmental regulation can stimulate innovation in new non-polluting products and technologies. Rather than stifling market forces, strong environmental ‘channelling’ can help position companies for new commercial opportunities. West German waste management companies, for example, have received a boost in international competitiveness from having to meet some of the world’s toughest environmental standards.

Many environmentalists have already gone beyond the regulation versus market-based incentive debate. They recognise that the better strategy is to use both in tandem to generate a process aimed toward ecologically-oriented change in production and consumption. Such a process seeks enhanced energy and resource efficiency; alternatives to fossil fuels; minimal or zero waste emissions; enhanced recycling and re-use; reduced and re-useable packaging; sustainable use of renewable resources; and conservation of species habitat.

Regulation and market-based incentives can alter the direction of market forces. Environmentalists worry, however, that markets drive a process of economic expansion which entails an ever-growing scale of production for the society as a whole, especially in the context of a growing population. Economic growth would mean an ever greater throughput of environmental resources into the economy, effectively using up the environment. This is why some greens have called for a no-growth or negative growth economy.

Debates about growth and no-growth, however, obscure the kind of initiatives which could help to green the economy, at least in the medium term. Moving toward much higher energy efficiency, for example, and eventually to a greatly reduced dependence on fossil fuels, will stimulate lots of growth — creating jobs, companies, income, and potentially foreign exchange related to the manufacture, fitting, and conversion of energy products. The result will be much lower per capita energy consumption, a goal very high on the ecological priority list, while at the same time promoting a potentially higher level of overall employment.

"Market Forces — and government ownership — are neither saviour nor enemy."

The central issue is not growth versus no-growth but what kind of growth. Greening a market economy requires a strategy to channel market-based dynamism toward resource-reducing or even environment-enhancing ways to earn our quid. Besides reduced resource inputs per unit output, it is clear that products and services of the future will have a higher value-added component of skill, design, and intelligence. Environmental conservation itself is a form of value-added, as green consumers around the world have indicated. Directed expansion of such products will put a lower burden on the environment.

In the longer term, however, and especially if population continues to grow, market-based economic expansion — even if it is environmentally sensitive — could push up against absolute environmental limits. One way to deal with this is for public policy to set economy-wide ceilings on the use of certain environmental resources such as oil, coastline, scarce minerals and forests, and distribute or auction the rights to them. The social throughput ceiling could work like the tradable permit system. Indeed, tradable pollution permits themselves auction rights to a scarce resource — the capacity of the environment to absorb waste.

Of course, growth is an elusive and ideologically-loaded concept. Formally, growth is measured by changes in the Gross National Product as indicated in national income accounts. When per capita GNP goes up, the society is supposedly better off economically and vice versa.
But the accounts exclude many aspects of economic activity, including unpaid household labour and environmental degradation. They measure only cash flows and do not take account of stocks of resource assets. They also count as income monies spent protecting against or cleaning up after industrial activity. Increasing health expenditures, for example, count as social improvements when perhaps they measure deteriorating health. The billions of dollars spent cleaning up after the devastating Exxon Valdez oil spill off the coast of Alaska showed up as an enlarged American GNP. Few would argue that it enhanced social welfare.

New ways to measure overall economic well-being are emerging. These include attempts simply to add environmental resources to existing national income accounts; satellite accounts of environmental resources; and various indices of economic welfare. Herman Daly and John Cobb's 'Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare', for example, adds in the value of household labour and public expenditure on health and education; and subtracts expenditures on advertising, air pollution, and long-term environmental damage. It also incorporates an index of distributional inequality.

Greening the economic infrastructure entails greening traditional infrastructure activities such as transport, communication, and information. Raising the price of petrol to reduce carbon emissions will work only if there are reliable, affordable alternatives to travelling by car. If there are not, the main effect will be to impose a burden on the poor. Since efficient infrastructure systems reduce resource requirements, environmentalists are potential allies of micro-economic reform.

Beyond affecting how prices work and how we measure economic welfare, greening the economic infrastructure requires the reorientation of industry policies toward the production of environmentally friendly goods and services. Such policies would look for synergies between economic and ecological goals. Eco-tourism, for example, would not only conserve but enhance environmental health while boosting foreign exchange. A much expanded food growing and processing sector based on 'clean' and 'healthy' food could promote sustainable agricultural practices and community health — while expanding jobs and exports. This would require a coherent national food policy based on a commitment to matching and enforcing the world's highest standards. 'Greenness' itself could be an important component of value-added.

Consumers are way ahead of businesses and governments in seeking green products. One recent survey of Australian shoppers, for example, found that 83% would prefer food without chemicals. There are also likely to be growing markets for 'clean' Australian food in Europe and Asia. In Taiwan, chemical use is so intensive that many farmers maintain separate organic plots to grow food for their own families.

The identification of 'green' industries, especially those with high employment potential, and the means to nurture them will be a fundamental aspect of a transition to a green market economy. Nurturing policies include standards, labelling, and marketing, as well as more direct strategies such as identifying industries and providing long-term credit. In California, a 'Sustainable Fund' was established in the late 1970s to provide grants and loans to companies or communities to seek renewable alternatives to fossil fuel energy sources. By the late 1980s, over 10% of the electricity in the Californian grid came from renewable sources.

Besides serving the domestic market, 'green' industries will also be needed for export. Some argue that Australia itself could become a centre for environmental excellence, leveraging its relatively abundant environmental resources into internationally competitive industries which succeed because they conserve the environment. Environment management skills, for example, and the new products and services which they require, could be part of the forward and backward linkages of a green market economy.

The rules which govern international trade will themselves need to incorporate ecological principles. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, for example, could provide a forum to generate international agreements on minimum acceptable environmental standards. It is important that such agreements set floors, rather than ceilings, on standards. The United States is currently pushing a 'harmonisation' approach which would lock all countries into a common ceiling on the use of agricultural chemicals. Any country which enacted tougher standards would be subject to trade retaliation on grounds of erecting 'tariff environment barriers'. Such an approach is harmful not only on ecological grounds but, by foreclosing markets, opportunities for cleaner producers, on economic grounds as well.

Markets can serve the social good, provided that the rules and institutions which govern them are designed to do so. The key question is: who defines the social good and who designs the rules and institutions? There are two broad answers. On one side, the severity of the ecological crisis has led some environmentalists to argue that only authoritarian methods will give the economy the job it needs to get off its destructive course. In rich countries, this typically means getting consumers to adopt lower standards of living. In poor countries, it means forcing population controls. In this view, only a strong state or system of states and a curtailed democracy and market system can provide ecological deliverance.

Against this neo-Hobbesian perspective is a populist argument which asserts that it is precisely through the expansion of democracy that a green economy is possible. Formal and informal institutions which allow consumers as groups to help design investment strategies, for example, can help save time and resources in waiting for what consumers as individuals want. Consumer and community groups could usefully work with governmental businesses in developing environmental standards which also meet their aesthetic and convenience requirements. They can also articulate wants for products or services which simply cannot be expressed through buying decisions.
Moreover, expanded community participation in regulation and investment decisions would help overcome debilitating social conflict over environment and economic development. Greens and businesses can often stallmate economic projects or environmental initiatives; yet there are no institutions in which they seek to find common ground in designing policies and projects or developing industries which are both ecologically sensitive and economically sound. Governments tend to intervene to 'resolve' a dispute by choosing one side or the other, typically in an ad hoc fashion which is primarily geared toward the ballot box. This ad hoc approach is conducive neither to longterm investment - so crucial in developing a vibrant and efficient economy - nor to building momentum toward environmentally sound practices.

"When they work, tradeable permits can get a bigger environment bang for a lower buck."

The current government has made progress in creating institutions which aim to resolve disputes. Nonetheless, institutions such as the Resource Assessment Commission are based on an arbitration, rather than participation and negotiation, model. The 'judge' delivers the verdict, rather than providing opportunities for creative problem-solving interaction and social bargaining over trade-offs.

Participatory, 'round table' style institutions would involve community, green, business, trade union and government groups in designing the rules which govern industries and the economy as a whole. Such institutions could take many forms and be placed at various levels throughout the society; at local, state and commonwealth governments, as well as within businesses, trade union, and community groups. In early steps, some businesses have put environmentalists on the board of directors where they regularly participate in investment decisions. Community input at the design stage would reduce the likelihood that projects have damaging environmental or health impacts, as well as the probability that they will be blocked by local opposition after construction has begun.

Most important, expanded popular participation in economic decision-making would help to develop adjustment strategies out of activities and industries which are environmetal 'baddies' and toward the 'goodies' - in ways which do not impose hardship on workers and the poor. There is a gain not only in social justice terms but also in political terms, since losers typically try to block otherwise socially desirable initiatives. In Southern Oregon, for example, a local Labor Council accepted a forest industry strategy based on regrowth forests once a labour-green coalition developed the principle of minimal hardship adjustment.

Negotiation, adjustment, and participatory design add up to economic institutions which expand the potential for longterm, strategic planning. The transition to a green market economy will require decades of initiatives, some of which will bear fruit slowly. Such a transition will be made difficult in a stop-and-start context of constant confrontation.

The Working Parties on Sustainable Development established recently by the Commonwealth government are a start in the right direction. The Working Parties bring representatives of green, trade union and business groups together with government bureaucrats to seek industry guidelines in nine critical areas. Nonetheless, the 'peak body' approach alone is corporatist rather than populist in nature. Without opportunities for much more widespread education and participation, its accomplishments will be stunted.

The populist approach to a green economy offers both economic and political advantages over its authoritarian opposite. While some worry about the cost of participatory institutions, there is no doubt that coercion is a more expensive - and brittle — social glue than democracy. The costs of supervision and punishment, let alone stifled initiative and rebellion, would likely be high in both resource and financial terms. Savings in personal resource consumption would be made up in policing and military costs.

Politically, a participatory society is more stable, since public authority enjoys greater legitimacy.

Of course, democracy is far more desirable socially and culturally than authoritarianism. Populist participation in economic decision-making would revitalise public life. If this direction is successfully taken, then attempts to green the economy will have provided the boost for a transition not only to an economically sustainable but also to a democratic economy.


5. Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr, For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).
The Soviet economy is in tatters, with official rationing enforced in Moscow and Leningrad. But the transition to a market economy is fraught with social upheaval. ALR spoke to Alec Nove in London on the extent of the crisis.

ALEC NOVE is emeritus professor of economics at Glasgow, and a distinguished expert on the Soviet economy since his first visit to the USSR in 1955. Among his works are The Soviet Economic System and The Economics of Feasible Socialism. His latest book, Glasnost in Action: Cultural Renaissance in Action is published by Unwin Hyman, 1990. He was interviewed in London by Mike Ticher.

Would you agree that, at the moment, of all the problems facing Gorbachev, the economy is the most fundamental?

Yes, although now it's very much complicated by politics as well; the economic mess and political mess interact, and one of the reasons why it's extraordinarily difficult to make any headway with the economic mess is the collapse of political power. The two are connected, and are both source of great worry.

What's your perception of Gorbachev's compromise plan for the economy?

As a plan it's quite radical. I'm rather surprised it's called a compromise plan. If you look at the actual content, a great many of the aims are in common with all the plans with Shatalin's original version. They want to get a market economy; they are all unclear about the ultimate role of the state; they all speak of privatisation, some more enthusiastically than others, but it isn't clear precisely what are going to be the limits of privatisation or, indeed, the possibilities of privatisation. You can't create capitalism without either capital or capitalists. There's
great shortage of both. Whether it’s desirable or not is another question.

I’ll give you an example. The most radical of the plans still envisages that almost 90% of the total sown area of the Soviet Union would probably be cultivated within state and collective farms. For no other reason than the practical, there are extreme difficulties of shifting to individual cultivation when you need new investments, new buildings, more machinery and, of course, a bunch of peasants who actually want to be individual peasants.

Do you share the view that there’s also a psychological problem with the Russian people when it comes to being capitalists?

I think so. It’s a very interesting psychology in the sense that it’s a combination of the sort of attitudes and style of a market-type society, which you got in the 19th century, with the intellectuals like Dostoevsky on the one hand, and the sort of communal or communist traditions of the Russian peasantry on the other. After all, at the time of the revolution, they demanded the nationalisation of the land, they considered that the purchase and sale of land was somehow immoral.

Would you distinguish between Russians and other nationalities within the Soviet Union?

I would certainly do that. The most obvious distinction is with the Baltic republics where they have a completely different attitude, different work ethic and different traditions. In these societies, oddly enough, at least in Estonia and Latvia, in the old days before the revolution, the landlords were German, and between the wars the Latvians and Estonians in fact largely expropriated the German landlords and distributed the land to the peasants - and then the Soviets came to take it away again! You can see that this is a completely different historical experience and a different tradition. Central Asia is something else again. The Georgians are past masters at blackmarkets and evading the regulations. They, too, I think, should be looked at differently.

The essential point is, nobody doubts that among the obstacles to change are folk attitudes because, of course, reinforcing tradition there’s also 70 years of communist propaganda. Buying and selling is ‘speculation’, therefore any co-operative intermediaries, for example, are straightaway lampooned, or persecuted almost, as speculators. Part of the reason is that, in the extremely distorted market that they have, free trade does enable some people to get unreasonably rich. But another reason
is simply that personal enrichment through buying and selling is regarded as wrong.

You mentioned the lack of capitalists. It's been said that when it comes to privatisation the only people with money to buy the enterprises will be black-marketeers and corrupt officials. Would you agree with that?

Yes, this is a major problem which has already become more advanced in its discussion in the Eastern European countries where exactly this same problem arises. Whereas in Poland, for example, there was an explicit decision to restore capitalism, in the Soviet Union some people clearly wish to do so, but Gorbachev and the official line say that they are trying to find some kind of socialist market solution, or, as he calls it, a mixed economy. But even there, of course, you do need capital, you do need entrepreneurs. Under the old system, if you did have entrepreneurs, they virtually had to be illegal. So there are both genuine entrepreneurs, who had to break the rules, because the rules forbade them to act, and crooks, who the Soviets themselves call organised crime, the mafia and so on. And, of course, also corrupt officials.

You called the Gorbachev plan relatively radical. Is it radical enough, or accurate enough, to stave off disaster in the economy?

No. The problem isn't that the plan isn't sufficiently radical for its ultimate objective. It probably is. But the problem is much more immediate: it is that things are falling apart now. And the measures which are intended to put right the immediate crisis are plainly, and grossly, inadequate. Now the obvious point, straight away, is inflation, the printing of an enormous amount of money, and the creation of a huge budget deficit. The measures which are intended to eliminate as quickly as possible that budget deficit, to stop the printing of money, are in the plan - but that's not what will happen! For example, one reason for the unbalanced budget is the attempt to keep the prices of necessities, rents and so on, very low. Meanwhile, people are paying higher prices to the producers of these goods and services. So the gap covered by subsidy increases. There is no way of reducing that gap, though they've got other plans by which to cut some expenditure and raise other revenues, but in the end, without a drastic change in the price system, which means increasing the prices of necessities severalfold, the health of the financial system is absolutely unattainable.

I'll add one other point: in the plan the idea is to improve financial discipline in enterprises, no more soft credits, no more subsidies. But at today's prices, you can't do it! In other words, drastic changes in the entire system can't, as the plan says, follow the creation of some kind of monetary order; they must either accompany or precede the creation of some kind of monetary order. That's not a criticism of the ultimate objective; it's a criticism of what they're doing now, which is grossly inadequate.

Can you see things getting to such a state soon where even the limited control that Gorbachev has breaks down?

It may be. There's only one solution for Gorbachev, which is that he again makes his peace with Yeltsin, that some kind of government of national unity is created. They would probably then have to say that those republics that want to come in should come in, and the others stay out. If they try to carry all 15 republics with them they're going to get nowhere; it's impossible under the present circumstances, unless they send in the troops. The other possibility which is sometimes discussed is a military coup. I don't think it is likely; most of my Soviet colleagues seem to be thinking, not in terms of a coup in which the military take charge, but a civilian state of emergency enforced by the military and no doubt the KGB. The day in which you can do this are numbered because the army and the KGB will also fall apart.

So, is there a collapse of political power?

There are a whole number of aspects to this. One is nationalism. Quite simply, the Lithuanians, the Ukrainians, or the Georgians, are simply saying: "we will do our own thing, and the orders issued by Moscow we will only obey if it suits us". That clearly seriously affects the All-Union authority in any national republic, and it's important to realise that the biggest of them all, the Russian republic, is also trying to ignore what the centre is saying. That's one side of it.

The other side of it relates to all the republics in varying degrees. I say in varying degrees because, say, in Estonia, Moscow isn't in control, the local people are. But for the rest — for Russia itself, for example — how was authority exercised before? Through the Communist Party machinery of course. In any province, the first secretary is the vicem of course. Of course, in real life he represents his province in Moscow as well as Moscow in his province. But he's appointed by Moscow through the nomenklatura system — Moscow was annoyed with him it could dismiss him. The local authorities were helpless in comparison.

But now the Communist Party is in retreat, its status, position has been largely eliminated, I don't mean it's powerless, but it's lost a great deal of its power. What has replaced it? Nothing. The local Soviets are elected, okay? A strong local Soviet leader now has some standing and some authority arising from the fact that he's been elected. But he's not a representative of Moscow, he's elected by the local people, so this actually strengthens the break process. Now, add to this the acute economic shortages and you have a system of bilateral power which, in turn, destroys central control. So the old central control is breaking down. The market, which is supposed to replace it cannot exist in the face of all the monetary confusion and economic chaos. This economic chaos, in turn, hastens the political break-up of the system. Everybody's trying to save themselves, or going off at tangents in their own republics.

In the middle of all this, Gorbachev, as president, has the power to issue emergency decrees, and does so. But w
What effect? Where is his method of enforcing these decrees? He hasn’t got one, unless he wants to send the army in.

Do you think it was a mistake for him to take on those powers, in the sense that it identified him even more closely as being responsible for the economic situation?

We could argue that the major economic changes which are essential can only be carried out by a strong political force, so you need a concentration of genuine power at the centre to push through a set of reforms which are, necessarily, rather painful. There is no painless solution. From this point of view one could say that additional powers at the centre are indeed needed. But they don’t exist! You see, no good passing a law giving yourself executive power to issue decrees if these decrees are not enforced. If Gorbachev issues a decree applicable to the whole of the Soviet Union, half the republics are saying ‘we’ll only obey the decrees that we like, and we don’t like that one’. So Gorbachev is in a position to be blamed, but he is in fact helpless.

What are the consequences of this for the party?

In the question of authority, and the role of what is still the biggest organised party, the Communist Party, one Soviet commentator said recently: “Imagine the Communist Party’s appeal to the people of Russia. It might go something like this: ‘For 73 years we’ve led you down the wrong road. In the last five years we’ve ruined the economy. So trust us to lead you through inflation and unemployment to a radiant future.’” This point is very important. It can’t be sufficiently stressed that the political breakdown is, in a large part, due to the collapse of ideological legitimacy. Voices are now being raised genuinely analysing the underlying causes of Stalin’s terror - how come, after the Bolshevik revolution, this happened?

To quote one person with whom I discussed the matter and who has published a great deal on the subject: “Stalinism, despotism, was the responsibility and tragedy of Bolshevism.” Then you have economists actually saying that in relation to the US, the Soviet Union is as far behind as Russia was in 1913. The logical conclusion of all this is that millions of lives have been sacrificed for nothing. Yet Gorbachev’s legitimacy rests on the claim that he is, so to speak, a successor of Lenin, and in his speeches, he’s still talking about realising the ideals of October 1917.

So if you’re looking at the reasons why the necessary drastic reforms are not being implemented, there are technical reasons connected with the reforms themselves, but they can only be implemented by a government with a sufficient degree of public acceptance, acting in the name of something. One anecdote I heard recently in Russia went like this: “The Poles have certain advantages over us. 1) They have a government of national unity which the people trust. 2) They have only one nation. 3) The Catholic Church plays a very important role as a moderating influence. 4) The Pope is a Pole! None of these apply to the Soviet Union.” I think that’s a very legitimate and serious point. I was in Warsaw a few weeks ago and the sacrifices the people are making are tremendous. I’m not saying the Polish government has got it all right, probably to some extent, they’ve overdone it, but the point is that there has been no revolt, and because of this fact the government enjoys wide support, despite the unpleasant things that are going on. Now, if unpleasant solutions are necessary in the Soviet Union, which they are, who is going to impose them?

Despite Gorbachev’s own lack of authority, there still seems to be no credible opposition to him, either inside or outside the party. Can you explain that?

One of the great difficulties is this. There he is, within this very confusing political system, and very confusing constitutional set-up, and public opinion, of course, is evolving. Inevitably, since conditions are so dire, people are thinking new thoughts. There are numerous new parties, some of them on the Left, but they have the greatest difficulty in combining into one coherent alternative party. There are too many chiefs and too few Indians. Each of the leading intellectuals on the radical side — the so-called inter-regional group in the Supreme Soviet who have recently walked out of the Communist Party — is heading his own mini-grouping. Further to the Left there are people like Boris Kagarlitsky who’s trying to form a socialist party, another group which is trying to form a social democratic party, even some anarcho-syndicalists. From the point of view of human freedom, no doubt, we can applaud all this, but from the point of view of dealing with a dire emergency, which requires power exercised by an administration, well, the Russians have never been terribly good at that anyway...

How successful have they been in curbing military expenditure?

Moderately so. There have been some cuts, but some people are disappointed, and think the cuts should be greater. There’s one problem with Soviet military cuts, and that is that there’s no agreement about what military expenditure actually is. For years they published a total military budget of less than 20 billion roubles. Now everybody knew that this was absolute rubbish, but nobody knew what the right figure was. Two years ago they admitted that 20 was a lie — though they didn’t use the word ‘lie’ of course. So then they came up with a figure of 80 million. I thought then that if you say 20 and then admit it’s really 80, you may be telling the truth. So judge my surprise when a leading Soviet academician thought the real figure might be 160! And when the authors of the various reform programs, including the Shatalin committee, asked the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Finance for certain figures, they were complaining that they didn’t get them. I rather suspect that this was the reason.

However, they are trying, certainly, to reduce military expenditure. They speak a lot about conversion. When I was in Moscow I was taken round an aircraft factory which is now making automated kitchen hardware, mixers and so on. And this is rather painful. Here are these skilled...
people, very good at making Mig jet fighters, now reduced to making, as someone put it, lemon-squeezers. And, of course, if they get paid the same wages for making lemon-squeezers as they did for making Migs, lemon-squeezers become prohibitively expensive! You can see the problems.

From the West’s point of view, is there anything they can do other than support Gorbachev from the sidelines?

It’s very difficult to know what the West either can or should do. Think of the massive Western aid that would be needed to see this process through, if it’s to make a serious difference. Who is going to provide it? Germany’s busy with the ‘ex-GDR’! Japan is far away and doesn’t show much sign of doing very much. America has a huge trade deficit and the dollar’s going down. The British situation is not at all easy. There’ll be some credits, of course, but the Soviets themselves agree that they must get their own house in order. At the moment, for instance, there is a yawning gap which is vitally important for trade and for credits — ownership. I don’t mean just the question of private ownership, but also state ownership. Supposing there’s an industrial complex in Kharkov, in the Ukraine. At present it forms part of the all-Union ministry. But next year, is it going to be under the Ukrainians? Who, then, is going to take responsibility for its debts? The legal position, the formal, property position, is extremely vague, and this applies equally to the burgeoning private sector, because it will be subject to rules which will be issued — by whom? And what rules?

Finally, can you see any grounds for optimism at the moment?

No. I wish I could. There used to be one of these Radio Armenia jokes which went like this: “Q. Can there be a way out of a totally hopeless situation? A. We do not discuss agriculture on this program. “Now it’s extended far beyond agriculture. I would say that there are two things which have happened recently which, if the situation were not so dire, would have been extremely helpful to them. Firstly, the Gulf crisis, which has doubled or trebled the price of oil, and the Soviet Union is an oil exporter, so they now earn more money. This is to the dismay, of course, of the Eastern European countries who are not oil producers and who now have to pay in hard currency. They’re in deep trouble as a result, but it’s to the benefit of the Soviet Union. The second thing is that this year the weather was rather good, and the harvest was unusually good, even though a lot of it was lost because of the general disorganisation. Three years ago, the same combination would have been very helpful to them. Now I just wonder if it isn’t too late.

As I never fail to say in public, not for diplomatic reasons, but because I feel it, I wish them well. Like the Russian people, they’ve suffered enough in this century, God knows. It gives me no joy whatever. I wish I could see the way out, I’m just sorry that can’t.

MIKE TICHER, a member of the ALR collective, is currently sojourning in London.
Reading between the Party Lines

hillip Clark speculates on the reading habits of the headline hauntes.

As the sun gets hotter and the sunshine sharper the minds of most of us may be turning to the summer holidays and what we'll be doing at the beach or the septic-scented holiday house.

We may be contemplating these matters stretched out in one of those Brazilian hammocks which we bought in an optimistic rush from a credit card gift catalogue months ago and for which we are alarmed to discover that we are finally being billed.

Lying beside the hammock is the inevitable pile of unread books. Yes, the resolutions are still painfully fresh. As fresh as the spines on the stack of Picadors. Remember how you were really going to come to grips with Foucault this year, to get on top of the tariff debate, put behind you those painful obsfuscations required when the subject of postmodernism came up? Even to be able to crack a few witticisms about the latest Mary Wesley novel.

Good heavens, perhaps to have actually read one to the end.

Relax, you aren't alone. As the world collapses around us, even those we only read about at breakfast are learning that a good book is as safe a place to hide as the Cook Islands share register.

Using our special upside down reading glasses and periscopic lapel badge, we have managed to infiltrate the bookshelves of a number of 1990's headline inhabitants. The results are revealing.

Tim Fischer, federal leader of the National Party: Tim is a politician of the old school when a country vote was worth ten in the city, the pubs closed at six and everyone knew how to dance the Pride of Erin. Tim has been forced to dip into The Single Man's Guide to Picking up Girls after a number of notable failures this year to find a wife despite presiding at a record number of country debutante balls. Tim's failure is inexplicable to most observers. Some have speculated that it's the Complete Train Spotters Guide protruding from his coat pocket that is putting some women off. Or perhaps his anecdotes about how he rode on the footplate with the engineer of the 3801 isn't the best way to break the ice.

Ron Boswell, leader of the National Party in the Senate: Ron is a robust sort of bloke who knows how politics works. When he arrived in the Senate he declared that he'd had to suck up to Joh to get there and what was wrong with that? Despite his high office, books are not Ron's strongest suit. One is reminded of the joke about the boy who complained about being given a book for Christmas because he already had one. Nevertheless Ron is thought to have made good progress on The Cat...
Wal Murray, NSW leader of the National Party; Wal confessed recently on Sydney radio that he enjoyed thumbing through a Phantom comic from time to time, so his reading habits are no secret. The Nationals' behemoth is also a keen chef and in between scoffing down a few platefuls of his wife Dymphna's classic cheese crisps, the big fella is known to ponder the inner mysteries of 101 Ways with Beef, Pork, Lamb and Chicken.

Steve Cosser, Broadcom boss: since losing control of Channel Ten, Steve has found himself with a lot of reading time on his hands. He's probably made his way through all of fellow Broadcom director Max Walsh's economic articles but is none the wiser about where he went wrong. A dog-eared The Art of the Deal by Donald Trump didn't help him much either. He's had to settle back with Robert Roget's Retribution to see if that gets him anywhere.

Bob Hawke, prime minister: With Bob's prostrate in the condition it is he finds being stranded at the 11th tee and far from the clubhouse a nightmare. Admittedly this is an improvement on matters before the operation when he was lucky to make it down the first fairway before that feeling started. The solution? Improve his game so that he can get around the course faster and nip that rusty nail sensation before it strikes. The book? Tommy Armour's ABC of Golf.

John Hewson, federal opposition leader: Dr Hewson is trying hard to look like a prime minister but he'll have to give away that former swanky image. Earlier in the year he was understood to be engrossed in such tomes as Fabulous Marques: the Life of Enzo Ferrari, How To Get More Punch out of your Porsche as well as thumbing through back issues of Modern Motor magazine.

With his new responsibilities Dr Hewson is now thought to have put reading aside in favour of writing his autobiography, There's a Track Winding Back to an Old Fibro Shack.

PHILLIP CLARK edits the 'Stay in Touch' column for the Sydney Morning Herald.
ment of five cats in order to clear a forward post of rats”.

Under Misunderstanding, a tale about Captain Cook seeing an odd creature bounding past and asking a native what it was called. “The Aborigine replied ‘kangaroo’. Only some years later, after the name had stuck, did the good captain learn that ‘kangaroo’ in the local dialect meant ‘I don’t understand’.”

And under Seaside: “If you do like to be beside the seaside, try Canada. It has the longest coastline of any country, six times that of Australia”.

Face it, if you really must know something about this wide brown land of ours, you might as well know something irrelevant. That way, you can know fuck-all, but still seem informed! Believe me, that’s how most of the ‘smart money’ became smart.

Heaven knows how the authors, William Hartston and Jill Dawson, went about the awesome task of working out what was not important enough to go into this encyclopaedia but, obviously, they consider it definitive as - according to the front cover - this is the “Fully Unrevised Edition”. The great thing is, though, it doesn’t matter.

After all, is it any more important how they decided on their information than the fact that the elephant’s penis may be 5 feet long (Sleep, p.226) or that Rin Tin Tin died in the arms of Jean Harlow (Acting, p.2)? Of course, it isn’t. Anyone who thinks otherwise should immediately go and watch a news bulletin or read today’s newspaper then come back and tell me what was in it. If all you can remember is the newsreader’s name or the syndicated cartoon, then this is your book.

The Ultimate Irrelevant Encyclopaedia is essential reading for people who’ve come to realise that nothing is essential any more. It could, in fact, be the most useless and unimportant book of the latter part of this century. I thoroughly recommend it.


Andrew Denton hosts The Money or the Gun on ABC TV.

And under Barbados, a chat about the eggs of Barbados flying fish which leads on to the fact that “in Australia a folk remedy for boils is to cover the affected area with the wetted skin of a boiled egg”.

Under Borneo, news that “during the Borneo border war, the Australian army dropped a detach-
the area into the cultural and sporting heart of Australia.

Most of them have lived there for years, getting to know each other in a variety of places, like the imposing Tunks Centre in town, or on picnics in the Keith Barnes Reserve or on the limpid waters of Lake Ray Price, or again in the majestic forests of Mick Cronin National Park.

What these people get up to in Ulugadulla is excitingly reported by Roy Slaven, the man who makes it his business to know other people's business. And the things they get up to! It's not uncommon for young Rugby League players to suffer bite wounds to the buttocks requiring 60 or more stitches after the game. Quite a few big, boofy sporting giants renowned for their masculine Clyde's Style

For reasons that have little to do with literary merit, the book I most enjoyed during 1990 was The Cameron Diaries.

It affords a glimpse into the mind of a quintessentially professional politician, a man to whom politics is life and life is politics.

The time that has elapsed since Clyde Cameron recorded these momentous events tends to underline their essential triviality. The book is a warning to readers to discount much of the hype which surrounds such events at the time they are happening. Like now.

I derived a lot of pleasure from a memoir of a very different kind, John Updike's Self Consciousness. He is a master of a literary art with a long and honoured lineage, that of making the ordinary seem extraordinary and vice versa. Distinguished precursors were Flaubert and Jane Austen.

Jim McClelland is a columnist for The Sydney Morning Herald.

authority on the field often choose to relax after hours in a frock, high heels and mascara rather than the traditional tracksuit. And some of the relationships, particularly the fiery liaison between Ashley Mallett and Marcia Hines, leave so-so yarns like Romeo and Juliet and Anna Karenina in the literary shade where they belong.

Slaven's book is a winner! It's a raunchy and exciting read made even more delectable by the brilliant and daring illustrations of Bill Leak. I can confidently say this is the best book I've ever read. As Roy said to me the other day, you won't want to put it down!

Paul Murphy is presenter of not only This is the South Coast News, but also PM, ABC radio's current affairs program, and Dateline for SBS TV.

Gloom Busters

The recession of 1990 has not been felt yet in the quality or quantity of Australian books being published. This will change dramatically in 1991. Fewer books will be published and fewer books sold in the next 12 months. So these recommendations are really an urgent call from the front line for a halt to the 'short arm, long pocket' crises. My top 10 Australian titles for this year are:

A terrific meditation on Modjeska's mother that peels back layers of life.

2. The Selling of the Australian Mind. Stephen Knight.
The author is to the Left what Geoffrey Blainey is to the Right. Fascinating essays that sweep from the bourgeois dinner party to a defence of the humanities.

Great beach reading for the guilty tale of obsessive jealousy that will find echoes, unfortunately, in both men and women.

This last novel from one of Australia's finest writers is an intriguing tale of a middle-class culture touched by AIDS and the youth culture.

5. The Quest for Grace. Manning Clark.
Volume Two in Clark's autobiography brings us appreciably closer to a sense of the historian's origins.

6. At Last! edited by Geoff Slatter.
A most important document for football and a testimony to the dedication of Collingwood supporters.

This latest novel, by the author of Messages from Chaos, Flying le
The book that captured my interest in the last month or so was the biography of the former British leader of the Independent Labour Party, James Maxton, by current Labour Party frontbencher, Gordon Brown.

I have to declare an interest first of all and indicate that I am a biography junkie. Often looking for non-work reading material I turn to biographies and, in particular, political biographies. Maxton provides a fascinating study of reform politics and the people and motivations which bring about reform, as well as the history of those involved.

The interesting thing about reading this particular book is that it gives one a chance to learn about Maxton, perhaps a figure in British Labour history little known to members of the Australian Left; and simultaneously about Gordon Brown.

I was first attracted to the book because of its author, having met him during a 1989 visit to the UK. I found him very impressive and I expect him to be a key player, perhaps Secretary of State for Industry, in the Kinnock Labour government after the next British election.

The book is also an interesting read for political junkies of all persuasions. As the fly leaf says: "James Maxton was Britain's most charismatic socialist politician of the inter-war period and the best known platform orator of his time." As Scottish MP for Bridgeton in Glasgow from 1922 until his death in 1946 he never ceased to speak out against privilege, inequality, poverty and, in particular, unemployment.

As with all political biographies it is interesting to see the connections between life experience and political attitudes and practice, both as a matter of philosophy and as a matter of style. There are also some points
of contemporary interest. One worth noting for itself and as it relates to previous events in Australian Labor history, is a quote from Aneurin Bevan to Jennie Lee, another ILP MP. He said:

I tell you what the epitaph of you Scottish dissenters will be - pure but impotent. Yes, you'll be pure alright but remember at the price of impotency you will not influence the course of British politics by as much as a hair's breadth.

I have to say the study of the book indicates that Bevan's critique, at least of the 1930s ILP proved to be correct.

But either way, it is an important statement about the nature of the political reform process with the trade-offs we all have to contemplate and the hard decisions we are prepared to make, in general and on each specific occasion, when we are confronted with a political dilemma.

The other interesting fact, of course, is that perhaps many of you, like I, thought that this was a Gough Whitlam original. Or at least I thought it was a Graham Freudenberg original. But then again I should have known what a great student of labour history Freudenberg is.

It is also interesting to note in such a hard line political activist as Maxton, his judgment of Ramsay MacDonald. When all those in the Labour movement were criticising MacDonald for his treachery, when he left the party to lead the National government, Maxton expressed the view that accusations about treachery were out of place. His view was that MacDonald shouldn't be criticised for being true to his own beliefs. The misfortune was that MacDonald's beliefs were unsound and his theory of society and social development unsound.

It is a more interesting analysis of the motives of opponents within the movement than most in the Australian Labor movement are prepared to give to their opponents in contemporary analysis. The book also provides an interesting insight into other better known characters such as Attlee, Bevan and, of course, MacDonald.

As an aid to analysis of British politics in the 20s and 30s, and British social history of the time, Maxton is really worthwhile.

An insight into the reform process, it merits reading and it also will give a return on your investment in time by shedding light on one of the leaders of the next British Labour government. More than that, if you are interested in politics and the political process, and if you like a slightly esoteric journey in that overall arena, I think Maxton by Gordon Brown, published by Mainstream Publishing, is well worth a look over Christmas.

Senator Bob McMullan is Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasurer.

A Hollow Faith

The famous little guy of Czech literature, the Good Soldier Svejk, once remarked of a prison sentence: "I never imagined they'd sentence an innocent man to ten years...sentencing an innocent man to five years, that's something I've heard of, but ten, that's a bit much."

A vein of satire runs through much Czech writing, all the more remarkable when the real world beyond the writer's imagination is offering daily examples of unconscious satire richer than anything the most gifted writer could dream up, as it did with a vengeance in postwar Czechoslovakia.

Pinnacles of absurdity were reached during those bitter 40 years. Heights of lunacy transcended. Interrogators demanded of the Czech actress caught staging a reading of Macbeth in her living room that she name the play's subversive author.

Wide-eyed Prague schoolchildren were herded into the police museum to gaze on its most infamous exhibit, a stuffed border Alsatian dog, a canine hero for apprehending the largest number of escaping dissidents. "Open a page of Canine News", wrote Ivan Klima in one of his short stories, "and there on the very first page you come across yet another wretched article about someone else's glorious revolution."

A philosopher of Klima's student days once considered the great hope of Czech philosophy worked as a night watchman in the Institute of Philosophy. "How about that for an example of a special kind of absurdity?" Another philosopher dug tunnels for the metro; a literary critic washed windows; the Prague Hotel had the distinction of having its boilers stoked at various times by signatories of Charter 77.

In his collection of essays, A Cup of Coffee with My Interrogator, Ludvik Vaculik recalls once telling his interrogators how Charter signatories were treated; how people were dismissed from their jobs, had driving licences taken away from them, telephones disconnected, made miserable. They looked at him, the typist included, as if hearing something incredible. "I was rendered to my impression that was talking to people who were working on so distant a site that they did not even know what their feet was producing." It is no coincidence that Kafka was born in Prague one year on the anniversary of Palach's self-immolation in protest against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Palach's self-sacrifice in 1969 lit the flame of the people light candles at his grave, but Palach is no longer there. We must extinguish his memory the regime had his body removed to a costume
Looking Beyond Yesterday is a superb anthology of Australian writers, cartoonists and activists, who muse about the threat of nuclear war and how their talents may be used to prevent such cataclysm.

Looking Beyond Yesterday is also an assault on the governments, media barons and the rich and powerful who seem to be saying, as the editor David Headon notes, "Hands off the big issues". The biggest issue with which the book deals is the threat posed by the existence of nuclear weapons and the "Escalation Dominance policy" of which they are the structural core.

The pervasive power of this threat is demonstrated in the quoted story by Tilley Olsen in which the narrator's daughter, when asked about her exams, dismisses them from serious consideration saying that "in a couple of years when we'll be atom-dead they won't matter a bit".

Several contributors — among them John McLaren, Dorothy Green and David Martin — carefully and rigorously describe the facts about the nuclear threat, and using their skills as writers, go further than the usual comments by strategic analysts.

John McLaren, for example, notes that "while the language of nuclear technology conceals the truth beneath euphemism, the words of the cold war warriors become weapons which destroy the possibility of reasoned agreement".

Dorothy Green notes an appalling report by a committee of scholars at Harvard in 1983 who said that nuclear weapons were part of the order of things and commented that "living with nuclear weapons is our only hope and there is no greater test of the human spirit". As she says,
any sane person in answer to the question 'our only hope of what?' would reply at once, 'of damnation'.

Since this book was written the cold war has ended and we are being offered opportunities which have not been available to humankind for nearly a century. The 20th century has been the century of war, not only the First and Second World Wars, but an endless array of regional wars including the Vietnam War, and for the last 50 years the massively wasteful military spending associated with the Cold War. Yet the possibility of a period without war now exists — provided Bush and Hussein can be restrained. The conflict over Kuwait illustrates the fragility of the peace for which we were all hoping at the beginning of this year. That conflict could yet be the occasion on which nuclear weapons are used again if, for example, Iraq uses chemical weapons against Israel and Israel retaliates with its own nuclear bombs.

I doubt if Australia's most effective contribution to ending the nuclear threat is armed neutrality as suggested by David Martin for that is a recipe for increased military expenditure here and competitive rearmament elsewhere. Rather, cannot we concentrate on co-operative, collaborative arms reductions by, for example, establishing a conference on security and co-operation in East Asia through which confidence building measures could be negotiated, leading on to due course to multilateral disarmament in this region in the same way as it is now happening in Europe.

The nuclear threat is far from being the only issue effectively addressed in Looking Beyond Yesterday. A number of writers comment on the superficiality of the popular press and the link between that and the concentration of media ownership. The fact that 70% of our metropolitan newspapers are controlled by one company, dominated by one foreigner, is perhaps the major failure of Australian democracy. This degree of concentration of media ownership is unprecedented in any liberal democracy at any time yet it is the most notable non-story in public affairs reporting. Rodney Hall outlines the possible significance of that in his description of the plot of Kisses of the Enemy. David Headon is right to emphasise the critical role of the artist in truth-finding and truth-telling in this world in which the mass media are in the hands of a small group of entrepreneurial robber barons. We can share Gore Vidal's foreboding that we are not threatened so much by Big Brother watching us by his choice, as by us watching him, by ours.

Another theme which goes to the heart of the malaise within the Australian body politic is the rise of the "new breed of economist politicians". Most Australian government policy during the last decade has originated in the minds of the waspish males in the Treasury and the Prime Minister's Department and the like whose basis for action is an ideology of perfect markets. This ideology is naive because all markets fail and therefore to rely on them for either efficiency or equity, let alone humanity, is foolish utopianism. Perhaps the community will recognise the inadequacy of their prescriptions and of their deregulatory and privatising policies as a result of the massive corporate failures, and of the corporate exploitation of market power which has led to the explosive growth of directors' and executives' incomes.

Many other themes are picked up by the contributors: the dehumanising impact of mechanisation; the sense of powerlessness which is widespread within the politically alienated community; and the oppression of women, minorities and the poor.

It is not, though, the identification of these issues which is inspirational; it is the way in which the writers wrestle with how to bring together their political convictions and their artistic integrity. Amanda Lohrey notes that "politically informed fiction has had a bad press in literary circles. It is assumed to be the fellow traveller of 'dun-coloured realism', not really art but propaganda..." Most contributors agree with Judith Wright that "art is not propaganda" and that the responsibility of the writer "goes deep into the centre of humanity, and to the natural world by which and through which we live...and it goes not only to our potential readers, but to those who for one reason or another are fingewinders, ignored, oppressed, out of touch or out of sight".

There is much fascinating discussion of the process of writing — by Rodney Hall, Amanda Lohrey and Martha Ansara, for example. It is a pleasure to read writers demystifying their work: I often wish the economists would more frankly demystify their because that would show the shallowness of much of David Headon and Amanda Lohrey rightly emphasise the potency of humour. Mockery is the most powerful political weapon but many forms of writing are available simply telling stories effectively is perhaps the most compelling. Bruce Deebs notes the poet's power through using images as paradigms. A striking example is Ian Matthews' phrase from Beowulf on the 'peace weavers' in describing the poets and cartoonists who pick up the strands which often run in opposing directions.

An appealing vision for the future comes from the ecologists. Ait Runciman writes of the goal of "just, compassionate and sustainable future". In an unexpected chapter by Colin Campbell and David Mcmillan the life sciences are assigned the role of bringing a new vision of the world as alive, with functions inter-related as "its care and nurture, a matter of sustaining life". The advocate accelerating the movement "from economics to ecology as to governing science of our era".

Patrick White reminds us that part of the required vision for the future is simply to recognise that, in a quotation from Robert Cray:

...all that's important is the ordinary things.

Making the fire
To boil some bathwater, pounding rice, pulling the weeds And knocking dirt out of the roots, or pouring tea.

JOHN LANGMORE is the member for Fraser (ALP, ACT) and convenor of the ALP caucus committee on funding government business enterprises.
Giving up on the body politic

Miso, tofu, tempeh, noodles. In an exclusive extract from her forthcoming third novel, Amanda Lohrey muses on Zen, nutrition and mother-knows-best.

I grew up on a desolate housing estate out in the hot suburban wilds that manage to be at once both bland and hysterical, to look like a retirement village and operate like a combat zone.

Bored, terrified of the gangs, we studied our bodies obsessively for signs of strength, worshipping at the shrine of Muscle. Instinctively the body sought for a path of grace, of poise, and found as the only outlet, fighting and football. We spent strained, anxious hours in the gym. We ate milk-shakes, Sustagen and cream buns to build up our weight and then sweated in the gym to alchemise the puppy fat into Muscle. We stocked up our arms, our shoulders, our chests, our male armoury.

The schoolyard was shaped like Pentridge prison, a bleak rectangle with railings. We were restless and apathetic; our teachers were weary and tense. One of them pulled me by the hair once, with such a wrench that a tuft came out in his hands. Cowered, we learned to hunch our shoulders.

On loose, empty Saturdays we loitered in the bowling alley, sending black ball after black ball down the glossy boards to a mirage of ninepins that quivered and, sometimes, fell. Then we raced home on bikes, spitting up the grovel in the convent schoolyard, doing wheelies on the bitumen courts. Home to Saturday night feasts of sausages and fish and chips and bacon and hamburgers and frozen peas and boiled eggs and tomato sauce and Neapolitan ice-cream in scoops with cascades of caramel topping and dusty walnuts if Mother was in the mood for the trimmings.

Initially a stripling, tall and thin, by eighteen I had built myself into a facsimile of a brute; an architecture of meat pies and chiko rolls and steak and chips and mashed potato and pasta before football games because carbohydrate gave you a sustained energy burst. I can recall, especially, the taste of a cream bun.

The feeling when your teeth mesh into the yellow dough, the spongey, chewy mush of it, the smear of artificially coloured jam, hi-tech strawberry.

My football body was another body from the one I have now. Bulk. It was a dream of ballooning pneumatic contours, of pumped up Muscle. I ate. I ate. I ate. I ate my body into an artificial corset, a contoured landscape of the calorie.
And now I strip it away. Strip it back to the sinew, the bone, the finest silk purse. I am thin, wiry. I have the Zen body. Lean, minimal. I no longer sprint and pump iron. I liberate the Ki in the flowing meditative movements of the Kung.

Last month I went on my first three day rice fast. On the night of the second day I dreamed of chocolate cake. It was a brown oval mound like a huge cream puff and when I bit into it, it was dark and congealed and gluey and stuck my teeth together so that I couldn't speak. The sickness of it made me cringe. The tongue, you know, is the body's opening for the heart. We eat; we speak.

You think I'm self-obsessed, don't you? You think there are bigger issues in the world than the state of my body. Famine in Africa. The greenhouse effect. Political stability in Europe. Perestroika. Tax reform and retrieving the Common Wealth.

Marita sometimes teases me about this and I retaliate by mocking her cumbersome tape recorder, her obsession with taping her friends and what can only be a series of lies, an outpouring of phantoms locked in words. Words will always let you down, words will betray you; the only tangible reality is the body. Marita transcribes her tapes and turns them into stories. I tell her this is a karmic cul-de-sac if ever I saw one.

You don't understand, she says.

One night, after work, she takes me to a lecture at the university, that dismal tower on the edge of the city. Up in the creaky lifts to the fifth floor where a visiting Italian professor, Claudia Guiliani, presides over a large seminar room. Professor Guiliani is an oral historian in a smart maroon linen suit and black stockings. We sit and try to absorb her indistinct English over the noise of the traffic below. Every man or woman, she begins, is the subject of his or her own history and has the right to speak out and All subjectivity is antagonistic to the existent systems and Treat your own life as if it were an object of history. She says we are all ego-historians. She is wrong. Where is the ego? It is ephemeral. My history is inscribed on my body.

Andrzej says it will take seven years to clean out my body, to eliminate the emotional and material dross of a lifetime.

I could tell Professor Guiliani this but she would not know what I'm talking about. She would sip her red wine and short black and shrug and smile. Her poise is European; it is gesture, smile, an expensive haircut, understated clothes. But her shoulders are hunched, she twists her legs under the table, there are black smudges under her eyes, tell-tale signs of fear stored in the kidneys. Too much red wine, too many coffees heighten the fear. Her poise is a chimera, a sleight-of-hand, a dance of gesture to conceal decay. It is beguiling, the gloss on the leaf; it does not spring from the roots.

She talks to peasants about memory, their thoughts after fascism. She asks: what is it that they remember? I ask: what does it matter what they remember? The question is: what did they eat under fascism? If they'd given up meat they wouldn't have had fascism. I could explain things to her; I could explain that to solve the problems of the body politic you must first concentrate on the body.

That night in my dream Professor Guiliani addresses me. She shrugs, smiles. Hitler was a vegan, she says. Furthermore, he did not drink or smoke. The cancers of the body politic cannot be cured with seaweed broth and pickled radish. She shrugs again. And surely we must take into account the fact that the home of your Zen macrobiotics, Japan, has nourished a long-evolving militaism and fascista of its own. Just a minute! I cry out in my sleep - and wake. Too late! I want to tell her that George Oshara, the founder of macrobiotics, was one of the few Japanese to oppose the war in the Pacific. I want to say -

Never mind, one night I will dream her again and she will have to stay around to listen.

Tuesday

I walk home, up through the warm leafy back streets of the Glebe. Home is my sister's place on the Toxteth Estate. Joanna and Ric are away for six months in Europe and I am babysitting their gargantuan mortgage: an elegant terrace with romantic balconies in wrought-iron lace, gilt mirrors, an acre of mushroom-tinted carpet and upstairs, off the master bedroom, my retreat: a curved sundock that seems to float in the sky, hovering like a platform suspended from invisible wires. On warm evenings I sit up there and meditate, sunk in my sister's padded chair.

10.40 pm. I open the glass panelled front door and switch off the security alarm. On the lush pink carpet is a pile of mail, including, I see, postcards from my sister and brother-in-law who seem, unaccountably, to write to me in tandem.

July 2

Dear Steve, How is Sydney? I must be crazy but I miss it, although what exactly it is that I 'miss' I can't define. Jo is in love with Venice but it's too gloomy for me. I really made an effort today to traipse around with her. Dimly lit galleries, sulky madonnas, doughy little angels, smirking 18th century aristocrats surrounded by their children. At the Ca' d'Ora we looked at Mantegea's Death of San Sebastian by Cima - bland faces of pseudo-suffering, the fake ecstasy in pornography magazines. Complacent, self-satisfied suffering - hovering of fat little angels - a technical martyrdom - note the few discreet drops of blood that trickle from the arrow wound in the neck and thigh. No pain, no convulsions, no distortions of limb. Nothing messy. I think they were all gay into S and M and mugs like us are supposed to fall for it. We ate in the San Marco piazza, a dish of black risotto cooked in calamari ink - Black, rich and oily, like the canals. Am tired and ratty, Sat up all night on the train from Venice. We saw a young girl reading a novel in English. She read aloud to us. By night they gorged on one another, their lips swollen, their cheeks flushed, the blood simmering in their heads, their mouths full of whatever they could get into them. That's how I feel about Italy. A searfeit of civilisation. Cheers, R.
Florence, July 28

Dearest Stephen, How is the house? How far away it seems, at times I have trouble remembering what it looks like. And yet I dream about it quite often and always that burglars have broken in. I think our dreams are always some months behind and our brains slow to catch up.

And how are you? Are you still growing thinner and thinner on that diet? Will there be anything left of you when I get back? It was you I thought of this morning when I was in the Uffizi and a German tourist took a fit in front of Raphael's Madonna. I thought nothing of it but the Madame at our pensione told us that once a month on average a foreign tourist is rushed to the psychiatric ward of the Santa Maria Nuova Hospital suffering from an acute mental imbalance seemingly brought on by an encounter with the city's art treasures.

These people are apparently healthy when they leave home, Madame said. Hence, they suddenly lose their equilibrium. The beauty of Florence, while not the cause itself, is a factor. It seems that art isn't always therapeutic. What can we deduce from this? That art isn't always therapeutic? Certainly it isn't for Ric. He moans constantly. Love, Jo.

The content of this postcard does not surprise me. This is the legacy of late Western civilisation: the destruction of equilibrium. The legacy of the past is to help us regain it. There is also a letter from my mother but I put that...
off until later - one reproach at a time and besides, it's late and I must prepare my food for the next day.

First the basic elixir, miso soup.

My sister used to say that I live by the knife. I moved into this house a week before they left and she complained of insomnia, of lying every night in her bed listening to the steady thud of the cleaver hitting the chopping board as I made my miso soup. Thud, thud, thud, thud.

I gave it to her for breakfast and she had to admit it was good.

Miso is one of the keys to Zen cooking. In the processing of miso several types of energy have been wisely combined. The main ingredients are soybeans (representing autumn energy), salt (representing winter energy), and barley (representing spring energy).

Traditionally the fermentation process (representing tree energy) passed through at least four seasons. In this way an energetically well-balanced product is created which can be used in all seasons. Over all, miso has a slightly upward-going energy, and is therefore very good for promoting digestion and for giving energy.

Here is my own recipe for miso soup. Chop seasonal vegetables into small pieces - ginger, carrot, celery, onion, pumpkin, sweet potato and any greens and saute well in small amount of roasted sesame oil.

Cover with water and add one strip of washed kombu seaweed cut into small pieces with scissors and three shitake mushrooms soaked on their backs. Simmer for 20 minutes then add miso paste mixed with a little warm water.

Garnish with something fresh just before serving - chopped spring onions, parsley, grated daikon radish. This will activate the salt and the enzymes. Always keep soups covered during cooking for full flavour.

To make a meal add diced tofu and tempeh, a handful of cooked brown rice or noodles.

11.40. I eat a small bowl of this standing over the sink and thus fortified I am ready to read my mother's letter. Well, not quite, I go upstairs, take a shower in the white-tiled en suite with the gold taps, armoured myself in Ric's red silk kimono and open the French doors onto the balcony. How benign the night seems when you sit on a high ledge cradled by the warm air. It's then that I feel supported by nature. This is one of Andrzej's phrases: let's do what we want to do, let's take risks, and hope that nature will be supportive.

I open my mother's letter.

'My dear boy,' she begins. 'I can understand why you are studying meditation and massage. You always did need to relax.'

Relax! What an ugly, detestable word that is! How characteristic her opening sortie!

My mother writes to me once a week. She writes on a battered old typewriter on which the 't' jumps half a line above the other letters giving her writing the look of a prolonged stammer. Her letters are full of irritating 't's. With every letter there are clippings. She is shameless in summoning every dubious authority to contest my diet. The daily paper is treated like gospel and we have entered into a war of citations, of chapter and verse, which began, as I recall, with this.

The Melbourne Sun, August 7. 'PESTICIDES FOUND IN SOY MILK'. Sunshine housewife, Diane Walsh, who is also President of the Northern Suburbs Consumer Group, expressed her concern yesterday at recent warnings about the level of aluminium in soya based milks. Mothers using these would be horrified to read of the possible dangers of brain damage and later development of Alzheimer's disease, she said. At that point I stopped reading.

Fortuitously there was an article in The Sydney Morning Herald some days later: 'DIOXIDE FOUND IN CARTON MILK'.

I decided to fight fire with fire. That night I cut it out and posted it off. 'Traces of highly poisonous dioxin have been found in cartonned milk, a Department of Scientific and Industrial research scientist said...'

She retaliated: 'MACROBIOTIC DIET IS DANGEROUS says Head nutritionist at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital.

I'll spare you the tabloid rush on this one, the gist of which was that some birdbrain girl had died from living on a diet of rice and seaweed and nothing else. Couldn't be bothered cooking, probably. Missing the point, which is to invest your food with your own good energy; the preparation is vital; it should be slow, meditative, a pleasure, almost a ritual. As Sanjay says, to cook the rice you must respect the rice. Don't just throw it in a pot; first wash it in a strainer under the tap, in warm water, running your fingers through the grains to loosen the dust, then set it aside to drain while measuring out the cooking water carefully...but I digress.

I didn't have to wait long for Mother's return sally. 'NOT ENOUGH OIL IN YOUR DIET CAN MAKE YOU INFERTILE'. 'You know,' she wrote, in the accompanying letter full of the jumpy 't's, 'how much I look forward to having grandchildren. I read once that models who go on prolonged slimming diets can develop shrivelled ovaries from lack of Vitamin E...'

As time goes on she sends me more and more clippings: I have come to recognise the familiar self-seal envelope, grey-white and stuffed full with folded newsprint; small missives of war. Once, manically, there was a telegram, brought on, I was informed, by an attack of panic. YOUR SISTER SAYS YOU ARE Fasting STOP PLEASE RING ME TONIGHT. 'A healthy person carries a little weight,' she had urged that evening, 'something in reserve. This is a famine mentality,' I told her. 'The war is long over. We suffer now from a glut.'

But she was not persuaded.

She wrote: September 20. Launceston ARSENIC LEVELS IN SEAWEED TOO HIGH SAY CSIRO.

I replied: October 3. Sydney CHEESE BAD FOR THE HEART.

She wrote: October 25. Adelaide VEGETARIANS RISK IRON DEFICIENCY.
I suppose I should be pleased at this; she has begun to acknowledge the sentence was heavily underlined and it was very nice, if a little bland.

I added some cummin and chili.

It's one of those heavy, paranoid days, overcast, the air dense, stuffy, like my head. Tropical rain has been pelting down at sudden intervals; the traffic is clogged all up and down the Parramatta Road. I'm sitting on the bus my nose pressed to the fogged-up window, to the pane of my unconscious (ha, ha, joke), half expecting one of those low-flying 727s to burst into flame and dive into the rooftops when I notice the woman opposite me. A thirtysomething, with grey track pants that are stained with grease; her bare feet are smelly, or is that from the smell alcohol, or is that from the driver, 'I've gone past my stop.' The baby grins. The woman lurches out of her seat. I look at her wide side, her lank straggly hair, the stubby white thongs. How could this self-possessed child belong to her? Did she steal it?

For two weeks I had no reply. And then: 'Thank you for the book,' she wrote. 'I think you could do worse than take Keith Michell's advice. 'If you feel like eating a steak do so with green vegetables and a glass of wine to balance it. Just be aware of the balance. Above all, don't become a fanatic about it.'" This last sentence was heavily underlined and the 't' in fanatic seemed to have jumped even higher, disappearing almost into the preceding line. She continued on, 'Exactly! All things in moderation, that's what I've always said. P.S. I tried his hummus recipe and it was very nice, if a little bland. I added some cummin and chili. It was a lot of mucking around, I ate it all in a day and it gave me wind.'

I suppose I should be pleased at this; she has begun to acknowledge the principle of harmony and when next I see her I may be able to speak to her of yin and yang and once you succeed in changing someone's vocabulary, even a word or two, you have begun to change their thinking. But how typical of her to change the recipe, convinced that she knows best and can improve on everything. Like all mothers she has a control problem.

Mother: border-guard of the body.

12:01. I lie in bed and think of my sister's postcard. Of the German tourist stricken with the lows of his equilibrium. Of Yuan-Shen who seems to possess some depthless source of it. And I begin to compose a letter in my head.

'Dear Mum,' it begins, 'I am not, as you put it, learning to 'relax'. I am embarked on something infinitely more profound, an existential inquiry into the meaning of the word poise...'

And then I'm dreaming, and in this dream I'm on my way to a Buddhist prayer-meeting in Randwick.

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It's one of those heavy, paranoid days, overcast, the air dense, stuffy, like my head. Tropical rain has been pelting down at sudden intervals; the traffic is clogged all up and down the Parramatta Road. I'm sitting on the bus my nose pressed to the fogged-up window, to the pane of my unconscious (ha, ha, joke), half expecting one of those low-flying 727s to burst into flame and dive into the rooftops when I notice the woman opposite me. She's a slattern; let's face it she looks retarded. She wears grey track pants that are stained with grease; her bare feet are in rubber thongs that reveal the thick black grime in her toenails. She sits with her feet up on the seat opposite and she is holding a baby, a pert child of about nine months, clothed in a grubby white nightdress and barefoot, with a single wispy of hair that rises elfishly from her downy head. And she is so alert and cheerful; she looks around; her eyes are bright and mesmerising. And still we are stuck in the traffic, hemmed in on all sides by cars and vans and semi-trailers that hum resentfully in the rear. In the fetid atmosphere of the steamy bus the woman's head begins to nod, her eyes close, she slumps into the window, dozing. Her arm that holds the baby on her lap loosens and I hear the noise of her purse sliding onto the floor, the rattle of change. The baby is alert; her elfin head bobs with a cheerful poise; she looks around, smiles at us. We watch, me and the other passengers on the bus, to see if the baby will fall. I tense, ready to spring forward. The schoolboy sitting next to the sleeping woman is flushed and taut with embarrassment; he catches my eye and looks away again. The baby puts her finger in her mouth and then in the woman's mouth, and jabs persistently. This wakes the woman. The baby smiles.

The woman looks up, blinks. The schoolboy hands her the fallen purse and she opens it, registers the $20 note inside and presses some silver into his limp, unresisting hand. 'Ya coulda pinched it and ya didn't,' she says, over and over in a raucous croak. The boy doesn't move, his face is pinkish pale with tension. 'Gees, mate!' she shouts out to the driver, 'I've gone past me stop.' The baby grins. The woman lurches out of her seat. I look at her wide side, her lank straggly hair, the grubby white thongs. How could this self-possessed child belong to her? Did she steal it?

The driver opens the door- it's not a designated stop but we're locked in a traffic jam so what the hell. She lurches down the steps and out the door, the baby is still smiling; she looks around perily, gives us all a look of gay farewell, her little head looking up at the driver, 'I've gone past me stop.' The baby grins. The woman lurches out of her seat. I look at her wide side, her lank straggly hair, the grubby white thongs. How could this self-possessed child belong to her? Did she steal it?

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The driver opens the door- it's not a designated stop but we're locked in a traffic jam so what the hell. She lurches down the steps and out the door, the baby is still smiling; she looks around perily, gives us all a look of gay farewell, her little head bobbing with a cheerful poise as she is carried down the steps. And I can smell alcohol, or is that from the dark priest sitting next to me, staring unmovingly at me, staring woefully at the floor? Through the window I can see the woman shuffling back along the footpath in the direction from which we've come. The dim, oppressive smog begins to close in on us; the traffic is stale and unmoving; it's 4.13 and I'm stuck on the Parramatta Road on the way to a Buddhist prayer meeting.

Who is that baby? Where does she belong?

Wednesday

In the morning I'm summoned by Frank. Upstairs to the big boys; into the holy temple of tax auditors.
Have you ever seen a group of tax auditors? They have special bodies, but not bodies exclusive to them; no, solicitors and other public servants share it. It's the colon look. It's the soft jowl look, the disappearing jaw-bone, the fleshy cheeks and the bulging gut. And it's not beer, or even if it is that's not the crucial element. In their case it's coffee and biscuits. Too much sweetness and wetness. Too much yin. That's what they work off. That's their hit. Go into the tea room and look at the stacked packets of Family Assorted. And then they get fluid retention and flab. They lose their yang definition, their outlines. They work from 8 until 7, recovering the Common Wealth, living on coffee and biscuits and complaining a lot: 'I could be getting $80,000 in private practice' - that sort of thing.

And I'm about to go upstairs and work with one of them, Frank Kelly, a senior auditor investigating a big fraud case who wants me to assist him for six weeks as a paralegal. Fine, anything for a change. The Dwarf has been informed and told me to clean up my desk, as if I'm about to be let out of school and he's so pleased to see me go that in a burst of optimistic hope that I'll never return he's reshuffling the sections and moving Les and Lewis into my area. This is good news for Sanjay who loves to tease the fundamentalist Christians and Les and Lewis are as fundamental as you can get although, for obscure reasons unfathomable to the rest of us, they hate one another, belonging to different sects and each, I suspect, wanting to have a monopoly on the Word.

For Les everything is the work of the devil: he showed me a Bankcard the other day as if it were a strange and rare artefact from a doomed civilization. "Look at that," he said, pointing to the dot-matrixed design of the triple six.

"What about it, Les?"
"Sign of the devil."
Oh no, not again. "Who told you that, Les?"
"That's what they tell me."

"That's what who told you?"
"That's what they tell me," he repeats, with irritable rising inflection.

Everything Les knows comes from 'they'. I wonder who 'they' are - a colloquialism that overcomes his diffidence about asserting the 'I' and his own view of the world, or does he hear voices? Whatever the source Les refuses to use a Bankcard: credit is the sign of the devil. This sounds like a loopy edict although, I suppose, you could make out a case for it.

"The capitalist system is based on credit, Les," I tell him.

He looks at me blankly. "Sign of the devil," he says "That's what they tell me."

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AMANDA LOHREY is the author of The Morality of Gentlemen (Picador 1984) and The Reading Group (Picador 1988). She is currently working on her third novel, from which 'Giving up on the body politic...' is an extract.
Angel Droppings

The Bahamas, romantic novelettes, and a guardian angel swinging from the Hills Hoist.

A short story from Kerry Bashford.

1

Janet Walker has never been to the Bahamas. She knows very little about them. She knows that it's warm there, that there are beaches and tourists and, she seems to recall, black people, but that's about it.

Yet, two pages ago, Cecilia Van der Post was to be found on a West Indian beach. When her editor at Playhouse Publications insisted that, in Chapter Six, Cecilia simply had to be found on a West Indian beach, Janet Walker panicked. Two hours later, she left the travel agents with a handful of brochures.

It is from these tracts that Ms Van Der Post's Bahamas have been created. After another fraudulent paragraph of "sun scorched beaches" and "thunderous waves", Cecilia will look down the beach and see "an astonishingly attractive man emerging from the twilight, it would seem out of nowhere as if an angel had fallen from the heavens".

2

A meal is rarely as meaningful as when it is consumed a few short steps from death. Patrick lets this thought repeat in his mind as he mounts the stairs to the roof. His lunchtime encounters with peril are, in fact, brief and uneventful. Yet, Patrick finds it satisfying to leave the safe, predictable enclosure of the office and snatch a few moments of adventure on the roof of a 20-storey office block.

One day, he imagines he might even sit on the edge. This would give the occasion a hint of credible risk. But for now, he is content with remaining a respectful distance from the street.

3

Around noon, every weekday, she wanders to her window and watches a figure appear on the roof opposite her apartment. She has been intrigued by the man from the moment she first saw him and has devised an elaborate life for him. Some days, he intercepts signals from enemy satellites with a receiver hidden in his lunch box. Other days, he plans the murder he will commit as soon as he lures a victim to the roof.
Today, his life holds little possibility. Today, she must return to her typewriter. For now, Cecilia's life is elaborate enough.

Patrick has just returned home from work. He has just watched a cup that he carelessly nudged off the kitchen counter fall like a feather to the floor. It is now 5.52 and six seconds, Eastern Standard Time. The problem is that it has been 5.52 and six seconds for the last ten seconds. The problem is also that Patrick has come home from a difficult day to find that the cat has left the remains of his canary on the living room floor. He is not in the mood to find that the universe is misbehaving as well.

One hundred and thirty miles south of Patrick's house, in a town he is never likely to visit, an incident has just occurred to a group of people he is never likely to meet. During an office party at the Institute of Seismology, the revelry is interrupted by a report from the adjoining room. An earthquake had apparently just occurred in the city one hundred and thirty miles to the north. The earthquake was of such magnitude that the city would have been propelled into the Pacific Ocean. Workers grieved for lost relatives and friends, secretaries stumbled to their seats, scientists clambered under tables. Soon, it will be discovered that no such catastrophe has occurred. Hands will be folded in prayers of thanks, glasses will be raised in expressions of relief and the bearer of the message will be promptly fired.

A few minutes before six, Eastern Standard Time, a violent power surge throws Janet Walker across her apartment. At the moment of the accident, she had barely finished reworking chapter three, in which Cecilia Van Der Post is horrified disfigured in an electrical fire that guts her ancestral home and torches the entire family.

Janet is not just unnerved by this coincidence. She is distraught. Her typewriter has just come out of warranty.

It is now a few moments before six. In retrospect, Patrick will not be able to say with any certainty whether it was the slippery tiles in the backyard that threw him to the ground or whether it was the sight of an angel hanging from his Hill's Hoist.

The angel, as he will soon learn, had been doing aerobatics. Patrick, as he will soon forget, had been doing laundry.

Patrick is not accustomed to having members of the celestial host in his backyard. He is not entirely sure what he should do. At first he considers calling the authorities but no book he has ever read or film he has seen ever identified who the authorities are and what they might do if called upon to assist.

Suddenly, the creature stirs. The wings stretch. The head lifts. The eyes widen. The mouth opens.

"Holy shit!"

By then, it was too late for Cecilia to escape. She had thought that she was alone on the beach and had been so occupied by the sky that was seared by a shimmering sunset.

If in doubt, alliterate.

...that she failed to notice this man, this exquisite intruder, until he was almost at her feet. He stood there with a dog at his side...

A Labrador or a German Shepherd. A German shepherd, I think, more noble.

...a German shepherd at his side, a strong and aloof figure pressed against a blazing backdrop. As the sea lapped seductively at the shore, the dog lounged playfully at her feet.

Janet, Janet, I think you need a good lie down.

...Cecilia pressed her scarred hands to her charred cheeks, afraid of offending this beautiful creature with her disfigurements. He did not shield his eyes from her twisted face. He did not turn away from her terrible burns. He simply stepped forward and fell over her foot.

"Hello, hello, that's just wonderful. I make contact with a species that has spent the last few millennia wondering whether there is other intelligent life in the universe, whether there is in fact a god and when they actually find this to be true, do you think they can put two words together in greeting?"

Patrick is not coping.

"Sorry but I have had better days. If it wasn't bad enough being assigned to this third rate rock, a few moments ago I was hanging out with a few friends in an upper stratosphere and then I suddenly find myself hanging out with somebody's underpants."

Patrick is not coping at all.

"Listen, are you going to help me out or aren't you? You don't seem to realise the significance of this. You must be the first person in centuries to have met an angel. Haven't you always dreamed of something like this happening? Aren't there any questions that you're just dying to ask me?"

"Yes, how quickly can you leave?"

Patrick is exhausted but sleep is the furthest thing from his mind. What does occupy his thoughts is a night in a year he had almost forgotten. It was the evening of the nativity play. He was on the stage, approaching the Virgin Mary in the garb of the Angel Gabriel. At that moment, he tripped over the microphone cord and fell into the manger. The Virgin threw up her hands in fright. The baby Jesus bounced off the stage. The detached head of the doll fell into the lap of a parishioner.

Later, in the parking lot his mother chastised him for his public sacrilege. She reminded him of how long she had laboured on his costume, the many hours she had spent creating a facsimile from his Sunday school books. He had sat beside her...
as she worked, staring at the image of an angel, androgynous in a white robe, blonde curls and a bland smile.

The creature that lies snoring beside him has no robe, no hair and certainly no smile. The angel does remain faithful to the artist's impression in every regard. There is no indication of gender and no sign of genitalia.

11


Dear M/s Walker,

I have read Chapter Seven with great interest. Although I found the narrative quite satisfactory and the description of the Bahamas quite authentic, there is one small problem. You have described the male character as tall, tanned with "deep, dark eyes almost disguised by a shock of blonde hair". The problem with this - we need the character to have dark hair. Our research has indicated that heroes with dark features and hair colouring were particularly popular in the last financial year. As the action takes place in the Bahamas, which I believe is close to South America, it would be fitting that the character should be of Latin extraction, preferably with a name like Angelo or something suitably ethnic. I would appreciate your co-operation in this regard.

Yours faithfully,

James Stevens,
EDITOR.

12

The angel lights a cigarette.

"You'll get cancer."

"Spare me, Patrick, I'm immortal."

"Well, I think it's appalling. You've lounged around my house for two days now, filling up ashtrays. Haven't you a higher purpose? What exactly is your mission here, anyway?"

"What mission?" I was in the middle of a double somersault with a three-quarter twist and somehow I screwed up my angle of entry and
ended up belly-flopping into your backyard."

"So you said. Well, forgive me, but you have been something of a disappointment."

"I've been something of a disappointment, Patrick, let me tell you, watching out for your welfare hasn't exactly been an intense experience. Since birth, the biggest risk you've taken has been changing brands of toothpaste. When you were a child, you didn't do challenging things like sticking cutlery into electrical sockets or playing with firearms."

"Sorry. If you're lucky perhaps in your next assignment you'll be looking after a mass murderer."

"Hey, there's an idea. You know how you always have lunch on the roof at work. Perhaps next time you could pack a rifle and drill a few pedestrians. You know, something like that. Make my life more interesting."

"I don't believe what I'm hearing. My guardian angel wants me to become a sniper."

"Sorry. Just a suggestion."

"So, have I always been a disappointment to you?"

"Well, no, there was a time when I held out some hope for you."

"Really? When was that?"

"When you finally decided you were gay."

"You knew about that?"

"Sure. It's my business to know everything about you. Well, anyway, when you came to this startling revelation despite repeated hints from me...Like, remember, when Mr Johnston in the third grade kept putting his hand on your knee? Well, that was my idea. Except it took years for the idea to sink in. And when it finally did, I thought, great, the guy's gay, now we can start having some fun. Somewhere along the line he's bound to be bashed, arrested, do dangerous drugs, some serious partying or, if I'm lucky, start hanging around public lavatories. But you - no way. You have absolutely no sense of adventure. For years, your closet door was so securely closed that it could have functioned as a fall-out shelter."

"So, what do you suggest I do?"

"You're not doing anything tonight. Why don't you go out for a change?"

"And leave you alone in my house? I'm not sure this is such a good idea..."

"Who said anything about me staying home? I'm coming with you."

"You can't be serious."

"Of course I can. This will be my opportunity to do some field work. Anyway, what's the problem?"

"Well, how do we explain the wings? A congenital defect?"

"Costume party? Anyway, we're going to a gay bar, they wouldn't notice something like that there."

"I think they might notice two huge feathery appendages flapping in their faces."

"Don't worry. It'll be fine. What could be safer than a night out with your guardian angel?"

13

Stop me if you've heard this one before. There's this angel, okay, and he walks into this gay bar, right. Anyway...

14

The angel lights a cigarette. "Remind me never to go there again."

"I don't think I'll need to. The management will be more than happy to remind you of that."

"Well, I didn't see what the problem was."

"The problem was that you decked one of the barmen."

"But he made derogatory remarks about my wings. I don't see why I should tolerate that from a lower life form."

"And just when I was getting friendly with the guy in the corner."

"What...the unemployed seismologist? Why would you want to waste your time with him?"

"I thought he was nice."

"Patrick. Patrick, one look at him and even I began to question Creation."

"What do you mean?"

"The man had no neck and I'm sure if you checked his knuckles you'd find signs of contact with the pavement."

"What? Who the hell do you think you are?"

"Your guardian angel. Show some respect. And pass the ashtray."

"If you're my guardian angel, what is it exactly that you do?"

"I don't know. I just hang around, making sure you don't step under a bus before your time."

"So, I'm going to step under a bus am I?"

"Now, I didn't say that."

"But you do know when I'm going to die, don't you?"

"Yes, I'm aware of the length of my employment. I wouldn't have taken the position otherwise."

"So, when do you finish the job?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Well, at least tell me one thing what's God like?"

"How in heaven's name would I know? Look, I'm a guardian angel, a shit kicker. I don't mix in those kinds of circles. And you'd better pass me the ashtray."

"No. Get it yourself."

"Patrick, I think it's time you started being nice to me."

"Give me one reason why I should."

"Genesis, Chapter 19. You are, I hate it, familiar with the sin of Sodom."

"Well, I have had the occasion to commit it a few times, yes."

"No, no, not that. These angels turn up in this city, right, and the townsfolk give them a hard time as it results in a riot. And then the place goes up in flames. You know, the sin of Sodom. Beinginhospitable to angels."

"So, what are you trying to tell me?"
Start treating me nice or the town's best.”

Oh, great, great, now I find out for the last two days I've been entertaining a pyromaniac from another dimension. If it wasn't bad enough you got me barred from the only gay bar in town. You've slept in my bed, stolen my sheets, kept me awake half the night with feathers in my face. And the only time I can truthfully say I've slept with an absolute angel, it hasn't even got the decency to have a cock. I'm living with this free-loading, chain smoking, life-size fucking Christmas decoration. And another thing... oh my god, what's that?

Oh, look, look, the stars are so beautiful,” Cecilia says, her face pressed against the telescope lens.

Are they?” His voice sounds suddenly distant.

Oh yes. Come and see for yourself.”

I can’t.”

What do you mean, you can’t? Just come and have a look.”

I can’t see.”

Of course you can. You’re not blind, are you?”

Yes, in fact, I am.”

Cecilia gasps, her cheeks stinging with shame. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I... didn’t realise. Please forgive me.”

There’s nothing to forgive... Cecilia, all me once again. Tell me how the stars look tonight. You can be my eyes, Cecilia.”

She turns and looks once again into the telescope. She cannot see the stars, she is blinded by her tears.

Oh, they seem so wonderful, so close. It’s like holding the heavens in your hands. It’s like...”

...a telescope, Janet, of course. Oh, but I couldn’t...

...oh my god, what is that?”

“What?”

“That. That between your legs.”

“Well, Patrick, you complained that I was physically lacking, so I improvised. Don’t you like it?”

“I must admit, it is impressive if not a little impractical.”

“Why, what’s wrong with it?”

“Well... for a start, it’s not supposed to hang any lower than your knee.”

“Sorry. Artistic licence... how’s that?”

“Better but still a little ambitious... Now let’s see if we can take it up a little higher... yes, yes... just a little bit more... perfect. Now... if we could just make the width a bit more proportionate... no, no... back, back... lovely, yes, that will do nicely.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Now, let me see... how about making the left testicle hang lower than the right?”

“Whatever for?”

“I don’t know. Authenticity, I guess.”

“How’s that?”

“Very nice, very nice... now, just a few adjustments to the upper torso. Firstly, we can ditch the wings.”

“No. Absolutely not.”

“Come on. Just a few suggestions.”

“No.”

“So, now that you’ve performed this extraordinary feat, what happens next?”

“I would have thought that was obvious. I haven’t done this purely for self-adornment, you know.”

“You mean, you want to... but isn’t there a commandment against that?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Are you sure we won’t be interrupted by a bolt of lightning or something?”

“I’m sure we won’t even create a turbulence.”

“Have you done this before?”

“No, but I’ve been watching you for years. I think I can manage it. But, Patrick, before we go any further, there’s something I’ve always wanted to ask you.”

“Yes?”

“Why do you always kiss with your eyes closed?”

Patrick is not really sure. However, it will be to his advantage half an hour later when, lying in the angel’s arms, he fails to realise that he is floating five feet above the bed.

17

Cecilia Van Der Post has a problem. During her stay in the Bahama, she has fallen desperately in love with a man who is both incredibly gorgeous and incredibly sweet. This is not the problem. A few months ago, Cecilia received third degree burns to her face. This is only part of the problem. The man in question is completely blind. The problem is that his blindness can be treated and his sight surgically restored, with a great deal of money. Cecilia has a great deal of money. She can restore his sight and risk losing him when she discovers her disfigurement. Or she can leave him in the dark and save her relationship and her money.

Janet Walker has a problem. She has just rented a telescope. However, the accompanying instructions are for a typewriter.

18

Patrick is walking on air. He is on cloud nine. He is on top of the world.

He is on top of the office building, sitting on the edge, dangling his feet above the traffic. In 20 minutes’ time, he is due to return to the office. In five hours’ time, he is due to return home.

He will never return to the office. He will never return home.

In a moment he will be blinded by a flashing light from across the street.

19

Now we’re in business.

“Welcome to the world of telescope viewing. See the stars as if they were across the street. See the many
42

wonders of the world as if they were within your fingertips."

Okay, okay...so, how does the fucking thing work? Let's see...remove lens cap...right, I see...no, actually, I don't...where's the bloody focus? No, but at least I know how to adjust the tripod...oh, here we go...so, where is he? Oh, there he is...he's sitting on the edge...he's looking right this way...there seems to be a light in his eyes...must be the reflection from the telescope...jesusfuckingchristno!

20

A fall.
An outstretched pair of wings.
An outstretched pair of arms.
A rescue.

21

It is now 12.13 and six seconds, Eastern Standard Time. Janet Walker turns and throws her hands to her face and screams. She has not noticed the telescope, that she carelessly nudged off the tripod, fall like a feather to the floor.

22

In the next few days, an unemployed seismologist will be reinstated with a full apology.

23

Janet Walker is not coping.

"Yes, Miss Walker, so you say, but there have been no reports, no evidence of a man falling off a roof." Janet Walker is not coping at all.

"You're not in the habit of playing pranks on the police, are you, Miss Walker?"

"No, officer. I must have made a mistake. I'm sorry to have wasted your time. I guess that will be all then."

As they rise to leave, she catches the expression on their faces. It is the same expression she sees on the faces of her neighbours and on the face of the delicatessen owner.

"Mr Kouros, you didn't by any chance happen to see a dead body splattered on the pavement, did you?"

"Ah, no, Miss Janet, but if I do see one, I'll be sure to let you know. That'll be $5.20. Thanks. Have a nice day."

It's the same expression that she sees on the faces of the pedestrians when, moments later, they watch her reaching into the garbage bin outside the shop.

24

"You mean, you still love me?" Cecilia says, her bottom lip quivering in disbelief.

"Yes, my dear, how could I not love you? You have given me back my eyes and with my eyes I can see how beautiful you really are," he replies. As he lifts her trembling frame into his powerful arms and walks down the beach, Cecilia sobs into his left shoulder.

Suddenly, she feels like she has been borne aloft, like she is in mid-flight, like she is soaring into the sunset that softly caresses the beach.

25

Playhouse Publications,
2/206 Main Street,
Kingston. 2022.

Dear M/s Walker,

I must say, in all frankness, that I am alarmed by the alterations that you have made to the final chapter. On an earlier date, you might recall, we decided that the character, Cecilia, would finance her boyfriend's operation. Yet, in the manuscript that you have sent me, I find that Cecilia has abandoned her boyfriend and the Bahamas and flown off to Switzerland for plastic surgery. I'm afraid that this is not suitable. I take it your actions represent a dissatisfaction with company policy and have seen fit to terminate your contract with this company.

Yours faithfully,
James Stevens.
EDITOR.

26

Janet lights a cigarette.

"Honey, it's so good to have you home."

"Janet, are you okay? You look dreadful."

"I've had a hard week, that's all. I tell you about it later."

"What's that you're playing with?"

"Oh, it's just something I found in the garbage downstairs, a couple of days ago."

"Don't tell me things have got so desperate that you're rifling through the rubbish.""

"No. It just caught my eye."

"Must have come from a fucking huge bird."

"Mmm."

"So, how's the book going?"

"It's finished."

"Really, can I have a look at it?"

"Sure. Here it is."

"Thanks...Hey, what's this 'Cecilia, you didn't by any chance happen to see a dead body splattered on the pavement, did you?'"

"Well, at least you were assured of being constantly in my thoughts."

"I'm not convinced. So, what did the publishers say?"

"They turned it down."

"But why?"

"Let's just say that I expressed a dissatisfaction with company policy.

"So there go the holiday plans, et cetera?"

"What holiday plans?"

"Oh, I just noticed all those travel brochures on the table."

"Oh, right...yes, it's a shame the beach is never been to the Bahamas."

"I'm sure you'll find a way."

"Well, I could sprout wings. Stranger things have happened."

KERRY BASHFORD is editor of the forthcoming Pink Ink anthology of lesbian and gay writers. He is supposed to be writing a detective novel.
Perestroika and glasnost began as an attempt to salvage the reputation of the Soviet Communist Party. They have resulted instead in its virtual disintegration. Tony Phillips traces the history of Gorbachev's failed attempt to rescue Soviet Communism.

Gorbachev began his process of perestroika as an attempt to revive a moribund economy and polity. At the time of his accession he was seen as representative of the first of the Khrushchev generation. I do not want to make too much of this but it needs to be noted since it has contributed to many in both the East and West expecting much of him. The election of a new general secretary is frequently attended by analysis and conjecture similar to those which accompany the choosing of a pope. While I would not seek an answer to Soviet events entirely in Gorbachev the man, who he is and what he represents must be borne in mind as factors with a role to play.

The initial reforms of 1985 called for little more than continued pressure on corruption within the economy and a revamping of the planning mechanisms. In terms of precedent the first of these had been broached by Gorbachev's patron Andropov and of course the reshuffling of ministries and assorted bureaucracies had been attempted on a grand scale under Khrushchev.

What had not been challenged before Gorbachev, however, was the post-Stalin settlement of Soviet politics and economy. That is to say, the means by which, and the structures within, the Soviet people lived their everyday lives were bounded by a bureaucratic economic and political system. Not a bureaucracy based so much upon rules but upon a hierarchy of personnel whose wants and needs (structured by the inertia of relationships set during the Stalin period) continued to dictate the nature and uses of the productive forces. It was a realm of political authoritarianism without terror. If the structure of the Stalinist period was change from above administered by an iron fist the post-Stalin period settled for relatively predictable routine (known as normality) kept in check by a velvet-gloved fist which only showed signs of agitation when faced with change.
Two primary outcomes of this system were the continued stifling of information flows and thus culture creation and the consolidation of the Communist Party as the prime and reliable source of elite recruitment and general social mobility. The rituals of the Communist Party were the core routine of this routinised society and only within the inner sanctum of that core could change happen — and even there rarely.

The pre-Gorbachev, post-Stalin period might fittingly be called the age of the nomenklatura. Further, as this process continued over time its justification (marxism-leninism), which was also a crucial factor in economic direction, went into a steady decline in terms of its relevance to the ruling elite and to the population. It no longer drove nor explained very much.

Therefore the drive against corruption and the drive to reinvigorate the economy both had to challenge and modify the nature of the Communist Party and its ideology since the latter sat at the hub of political and economic power. In as much as the communist system was in a crisis (staring at economic stagnation and military failure) when Gorbachev came to power it was the party and the ideology which were both the cause and the possible redemption. Certainly it would not be surprising that those within the system, communists, should see it that way. What I want to examine in this article is how we might make sense of the transformation the party has undergone.

It is important to accept for this interpretation that Gorbachev was what he appeared to be in 1985: a talented member of the nomenklatura who had risen through the ranks of an extremely centralised and hierarchical structure to a position of power and responsibility. His subsequent actions can be seen as both an attempt to consolidate that power (which is what most of the early Western interpretations of Gorbachev concentrated on) and to address himself to the responsibility for the continuation of the 'normal' state of affairs. The tension between the two, most notably corruption, made it obvious that the 'normal' state of affairs, in order to continue, did have to change. In fact the 'normal' state of affairs has been overcome by events.

Suffice it to say that Gorbachev appeared for the most part to be trying to improve the system very much within the terms of that which already existed, in particular the ideology and the party. He has been concerned with matters of reform primarily for political reasons; that he has spoken of economics is a reflection of a reliance on the effects of economic outcomes on politics rather than vice versa. This is a position he shares with all those involved in modernisation processes. It is also a formulation which has placed the one party system under impossible pressure.

Given all this, how then should we read glasnost and perestroika? Gorbachev did not initially turn to the market though a number of his advisers (Aganbegyan, Zaslavskaya, Meshnikov) had put it forward as part of the solution. Initially the criticism concentrated on the "braking mechanism". This inertia was blamed upon bureaucratism, rules for rules' sake, corruption and above all the promotion of incompetents on the basis of loyalty. The problem was a failure of ideology: the party was no longer pure.

Therefore perestroika, restructuring, was initially just that — an attempt to get the planning system to work by addressing its basic deficiencies. A measure of democratisation was a means to ensure accountability and responsiveness in production. Observers have noted that three basic feedback mechanisms steer modern industrial societies: democratic processes and attendant civil rights, the market, and technical inquiry (attendant to bureaucracy). Soviet society had hitherto relied almost exclusively on the latter in the incarnation of planners and the party. The processes of glasnost were part of a shift (along with cost accounting in the economic sphere) to more reliance on the others.

Apart from these economic spin-offs the emphasis on information flows as a central part of Western economies provided a good source of arguments for glasnost. Soviet science had of course already won some victories over the years but in the age of the information society the field of openness had to get larger. I do not know whether Gorbachev or Aganbegyan keep copies of work by Daniel Bell close to their beds but I would not be surprised.

Unfortunately for Gorbachev glasnost also provided for an increase in expectations in a variety of ways. Comparison with the West fuelled consumer desires and openness of debate had a similar effect on political wants and ideas. These problems were exacerbated more in the Soviet system than they would be in a simply authoritarian regime based on a developing capitalism because of the rigid fusion between politics and economics. It is virtually impossible to raise a problem in the Soviet Union that does not lead logically in most people's minds back to politics. After all, hasn't the party always claimed responsibility for everything? Much of Gorbachev's strategy since he let the fuse of glasnost has been about attempts to separate these two. Only if the party did not have to take total responsibility for the economy could it hope to retain political dominance. It could take credit for improvements but it had to find a way, sans capitalist legitimisation, of avoiding blame for failures.

What role then for the Party? Under Gorbachev the party was to replace its dominance with hegemony — or, if you like, to replace its constitutionally-enforced political leadership with a kind of moral leadership. Such a notion was already implicit in the ideology, via the party's leading role. The reformers have been attempting to give this a new shape. The party's leading role hitherto has found its expression within the nomenklatura system, giving a control over personnel in all bureaucracies and also the sole right to make and interpret ideology, the control of information.

Gorbachev appears to have believed the party could convert its leading role into an hegemony based on the persuasiveness of its ideology in contest with others (not such a crazy idea when one considers there have been at least 60 years of the instillation of socialist values) and the party...
and self-sacrificial nature of party members. Essential to this conversion has been an emphasis on democratisation of the party. He was trying to turn a power apparatus back into a social movement. By the 28th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union this year we could see he had abandoned this project.

The 28th Congress of the CPSU came two years earlier than scheduled and at a time of deepening fragmentation in the USSR — greater even perhaps than Gorbachev had expected when he set in train motions to bring it on early in August of 1989. With centrifugal tendencies besetting the Union, an economic program hastily withdrawn just days after its announcement and the accession of Gorbachev's most obvious rival to head the most important new power base in the Soviet Union, the Russian Soviet, the 28th Congress promised to be a watershed in Soviet history. It wasn't. The decisive changes had already happened and the congress was just the party's last chance — a chance it was incapable of taking.

In late June 1988 the party held an extraordinary conference, its 19th, from which momentous things were also expected. However, little actually happened. The con-
ference failed, as had the 27th Congress in 1987, to get substantive changes in the Central Committee. At best it beat off conservative attacks upon glasnost. Of far more interest were the kites flown before this conference and the events following it.

Three proposals mooted before the conference stand out. The first was to do with protection for Gorbachev from removal by the party. In particular, the intention was to guarantee that his removal could only take place via some form of national vote. Such a move would have made the man greater than the party. Not surprisingly no such rule changes were made by the party. The power to remove Gorbachev remained with the Central Committee. Gorbachev could still go the way of Khrushchev. However, the separation of state and party power which was implicit in substantive changes in the Central Committee. At best it symptomatic of the events bubbling up from below and found its vent in the democratic electoral reforms for an expanded presidency. The third was merely found profound expression in the period following it, often and their membership for younger cadres and appealed to challenged the Brezhnevite old guard within the system, it produced by Gorbachev to deal (in some measure) with the threatened the entire nomenklatura system which had grown up around Brezhnev’s ‘stability of cadres’. Party chiefs hadn’t spent years crawling to the top only to be knocked off after a few years by something so contemptuous as a rule! Such a move would not just have challenged the Brezhnevite old guard within the system, it was a challenge to the very system which had created them. However what it also represented was both a call and a means to renew the party. It would have opened the way for younger cadres and appealed to different motivations among those seeking top posts.

Another of the many kites floated before the conference was the demands made by Latvian delegates who, faced by a choice between demands for independence at home and their membership of the Soviet Communist Party, chose to echo the call for independence. This issue was probably the most swept under the Conference’s carpet; it surfaced most dramatically six months later when the Latvian branch of the Communist Party split in the run-up to the elections.

To varying degrees these issues all failed to be properly addressed at the 19th Conference. However, each has found profound expression in the period following it, often in a most dramatic manner. Gorbachev himself dealt with the reforms to the state system and took up the proposal for an expanded presidency. The third was merely symptomatic of the events bubbling up from below and found its vent in the democratic electoral reforms introduced by Gorbachev to deal (in some measure) with the first problem. The second, the renewal of the party, is still unravelling in tandem with the other two. The 28th Congress, which was specifically addressed to the general problem of the moribund nature of the CPSU, represents the final denouement of the problem.

At the end of September 1988 Gorbachev dramatically reshuffled the Politburo and restructured its duties. Approval for a new electoral law was set in train and in October 1988 the Supreme Soviet was presented with a draft for comment. In December the Soviet virtually abolished itself and elections were called for.

The new-look Congress of Deputies and Supreme Soviet can be viewed on the one hand as providing a new fillip of legitimacy to a system still lacking economic winners and on the other, like glasnost before it, as providing new forces of criticism. However, the creation of this alternative power base gave Gorbachev considerable leverage against the party conservatives.

Nonetheless this must have been the beginning of the end of the dream of Communist Party hegemony for Gorbachev. The results in the Baltic republics were particularly showed the party had no hope against national movements. Further the nationalities problems showed no sign of going away and local elections later in the year intensified the pressures on the Communist Party.

From 1989 onward the progressives have marched off into the new state structures and really only the conservatives have wrapped themselves around the party banner. Among the progressives Yeltsin emerged in June 1990 to head the Russian Soviet and Gavril Popov became mayor of Moscow. A third respected reformer Sobchek became mayor of Leningrad. All of these men have now left the party, Yeltsin during the congress, Popov after it.

In March 1990 Gorbachev began what can be seen as the final preparations for abandoning ship. Against considerable resistance from the progressives in Soviet society he pushed through sweeping reforms to the Presidency. At the same time as granting Gorbachev the new, more powerful Presidency, the Congress of Peoples’ Deputies abolished Article 6 of the Soviet constitution. The leading role of the party now had no formal legal support. In a third move to outflank the party Gorbachev established on 24 March a Presidential Council which has basically garnered more and more of the important Politburo functions (and functionaries) to itself.

In June Boris Yeltsin took control of the Russian Republic, and the Congress of Russian Deputies began drafting proposals that would exclude the Communist Party from the judicial system and the workplace. A founding congress of the Russian Communist Party emerged with a firmly conservative leadership which prompted an even greater haemorrhaging of membership from the party. This, plus the continued growth of new political parties such as Democratic Russia, boded ill for any “renewal” of the party. Instead many expected a complete split at the congress.

While a major split was in fact avoided, a number of changes occurred which can only consolidate the decline of both power and influence. Firstly the new Politburo was more notable for who was out rather than who was in. The prime minister, the minister of defence, the head of the KGB and the minister of foreign affairs are among the notable omissions. All of these now centre their formal power base in the Presidential Council. The overlap between both functionaries and party officials, a key to the post-Soviet settlement, has undergone a dramatic reduction at the top.
Congress delegates point to a still dominant party apparatus. Many other people in substantial posts in Soviet society also owe their position to the Communist Party but the loyalty of the general rank and file must be extremely open to question.

While these factors indicate a continued bias of power in favour of the party it is for the most part negative. The conservatives have no real alternative to offer and lack the credibility to defend their position in ideological battles. The party’s levers of power are also much reduced. The vanguard party has been reduced to a rearguard action.

Thus we may say that in one sense at least the post-Stalin political settlement has broken up. Ideologically marxism-leninism has broken down before a new wave of Westernisation and the central power apparatus, the CPSU, has been pushed to a more marginal position. However, as yet no new settlement has been reached. It is not at all clear just where power does lie the Soviet Union at present. Gorbachev and those around him as much by the positions and power they used to have as the new ones they have created. Hence Gorbachev’s unwillingness to break formally with the party. However, to qualify that we must say that the presidency is powerful, not least because Gorbachev the man fills it rather than Gorbachev the General-Secretary of the party. Power is fluid and no position fully guarantees it.

Soviet politics now centres more around the conflict between those who brought the reforms into being and those who have benefitted from them. Gorbachev has recently battled for and won the right to implement economic reform by decree. This gives him important weapons against the negative power directed at him by an apparatus fearful of its future and a population threatened by price rises. In this sense he remains in a centre between the Left and Right, and between state and party. However, with regard to another centre he occupies—Moscow vis-à-vis the Republics— he is at a greater disadvantage.

The idea of a hegemonic, democratised one-party system that was a central part of the early perestroika vision no longer exists. Gorbachev’s transfer of power to the Presidency and undermining of the politburo confirms this. The attempt to run the existing state of affairs ‘properly’ has led to the need for a new state of affairs. Power no longer lies with the party but it is not with Gorbachev either. It may well be that it is not so far from the streets.

TONY PHILLIPS teaches Soviet politics at Melbourne University.

2. See for example quotes from Gorbachev in Pravda 27/4/89 P.2 and 13/7/89 P.1 Also Izvestia 19/7/89. Others in the Party also took this up. One worth noting is Shostakovsky, former head of the Moscow Higher Party School who left the Party during the 28th Congress and was promptly sacked. For his ideas see Argumenty i Fakty No.3 1990
3. Over 23,000 have left the Moscow party this year, 8,000 in June. This compares to a total of 12,000 last year. Tass 16/7/90.
RAHAM RICHARDSON was born in Kogarah, NSW, in 1949. He joined the Labor Party in 1966, and was NSW state organiser from 1971-76 and general secretary from 1976-83. In 1983 he was elected to the Senate, and from 1987 until April this year was Minister for the Environment. He is now Minister for Social Security, and is still recognised as the leading factional figure on the ALP's Right.

Prior to your accession to Cabinet you were one of the most recognisable factional figures in the ALP and one of the most disliked by your opponents...

That's certainly true.

But over the last seven years it seems to have become more difficult to identify people's positions on a range of political issues strictly by reference to their factional labels. In the current Cabinet, for instance, some people would identify the factional Right with rather pragmatic positions on a number of political questions, and at the same time there is a current of opinion, the 'economic rationalists', who overlap the factions, or at least the Right and Centre Left. Why do you think this growing separation of issues from factional labels arose and how significant is it?

Obviously within the factions there are differences on a lot of issues. Clearly within the Right I've got some fundamental differences with John Kerin on a number of issues, particularly relating to the environment. That doesn't mean you can't both be in the Right. With the Centre Left, the views that John Dawkins has on economics are very different from those of Barry Jones or some of the South Australians.

And there are obviously differences within the Left: compare the views of Frank Walker with those of Brian Howe, for instance. In any factions there are differences, and those differences are allowed: you can't have a rigid adherence to every policy position. So that's blurred the lines to some extent. As well, I blurred the lines with the environment pretty badly and probably forever, because I was taking a more left-wing view than some of the Left. And I still think Dawkins and Button have blurred the lines from the Centre Left's point of view by going much further to the Right on some economic issues than anyone in the Right. So with of that happening it's hard to maintain the old labels.

When you describe yourself as more left-wing on the environment than some Left figures, and some members as being more right-wing on economic issues than many on the Right, that does seem to be the question of what these terms actually mean these days. What do you mean when you say you're more left-wing on environmental issues?

I've taken the view that it's pretty hard to put a price on irreversible environmental damage and that jobs economic wealth are not necessarily more important to the environment. That puts me at odds with most of the Right. If one goes back to the debates on the Tasmanian forests and Wesley Vale, I took a harder line than anyone in my group, than anyone in the Centre Left and than in the Left. But I don't think that matters. You say...
This actually mean anything? Of course, they do. If you look at the recent national conference, the meaning of the word is pretty bloody obvious. We were seeking change, you were opposing it and the Centre Left finished up fighting along with us.

In the past you've been the great bogey of the Left, particularly in NSW. What do you think about the effectiveness of the parliamentary Left in the ALP at present?

The Left has changed a lot. It had to change. It evolved into an organisation which controlled the Labor Party most of the time, because most of the time we were in opposition. The Left will never control government. So they had to figure out how they acted in government. And I think they've adapted pretty well. I'm not just saying that because you're an Australian Left Review. By and large they're constructing for all my bogeyman reputation, I have a lot of feelings with the Left, and I am their natural ally on a number of issues. Some of them are hopeless: some of them are absolutely no idea about running a modern economy, but most of them now have a good idea about what that site. Look at the record — when in the last few years have you had a clash?

What about the recent conference?

What you saw at the national conference was the Left's left wing XI speaking, and they spoke because the First XI didn't agree with what the Second XI was saying. The Second XI had a very narrow majority in the Left caucus. Look at the list of speakers. Where was George Campbell? Where was Brian Howe? The lions of the Left weren't there. You're only going to have a real clash when lions of both sides — lions or Christians, depending on where you stand — get involved.

Yet the more pragmatic position that people like Howe had in the privatisation debate fared no better than the more straightforward oppositional position of others on the Left.

I think Howe's view was shared by a lot of people on the left. They didn't win, because they didn't get the numbers in the Left.

I'd like to ask a quite different question about the Labor Party now. There have obviously been a number of recent decisions — for instance those arising from the September national conference and on the South East forests — that have upset a lot of Labor's rank and file...

The suggestion that the South East forests decision has upset a lot of Labor's rank and file is nonsense. The decision hasn't ever been explained, and obviously there are people who'll say you should have reserved more. But to say that Labor's rank and file feels that way is silly. The trade union rank and file would certainly have a different view.

Okay, let's just say that that decision alienated a particular segment of Labor's rank and file. Then didn't the privatisation decisions alienate another important segment? Haven't there been many decisions which have confused, demoralised or angered significant tracts of Labor's rank and file?

Yes, I'd certainly agree with that. The decision which has enraged Labor's rank and file more than any other is the Commonwealth Bank. Everything else pales into insignificance. In fact, had the Commonwealth Bank decision not been taken, I think we'd have got Left agreement on the Telecom decision. But there's an incredible amount of bitterness about the bank — not just from the Left, but from all sides. There's hardly a Labor Party branch anywhere that would have passed a resolution supporting that decision. And that's very serious for us. The trouble is when you're in government it's not possible to go to all the branches and say, "Do you think we should do this?", when you're confronted with a deadline and when, unless you make a quick decision, you risk the savings of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of ordinary working people. So you don't have the option of going to the branches. But we've made a decision which has really upset them, and we'll have to explain that decision. I think it's already calmed down a lot, and it will calm down completely once they've got a real explanation about what we've done and why. But I think we've taken them about as far as we can. I would hope that we don't stretch their loyalty any more than we've already have.

It seems that it's very difficult to keep people in the Labor Party at the moment, regardless of factional
alignments. And this seems to be simply the latest and most acute expression of a longer term trend—that the membership base of the ALP is shrinking quite sharply. There is a strong perception in the party that many members don’t have any useful role to play in the deliberations of the party, and that all they have to do is pass resolutions supporting, or objecting to, government actions.

In the NSW ALP we had 23,000 members in March 1983 and we have 15,000 now. That’s a hell of a drop. And each state branch has experienced a similar drop. Of course, that’s not all because we’ve sold the Commonwealth Bank. I think there are a number of reasons. First, Australia is becoming less and less a nation of joiners. Fewer and fewer people are ready to go to meetings of any kind, whether they’re the local Lions Club or the ALP. The Liberal Party’s membership has been devastated since the late 60s, and, while the National Party’s membership is still far higher, nobody ever goes to meetings. Membership is simply dependent upon an annual bank draft. So the political parties do horrible things to working people. The outrage becomes greater and so do the numbers who want to fight them. This is the first time we’ve had to digest a long period of government — except for Curtin and Chifley between 1941 and 1949, though that was largely during a war.

So if the government were defeated at the next election, would the membership bounce back?

Yes. It won’t bounce back to where it was, but it will grow as the realisation of how horrible a conservative government is grows. It’s now all right to say: “You’ve strayed from the true path; you no longer have the faith. You’ve sold the Commonwealth Bank and you’ve opened Telecom up to competition and you don’t care about us any more.” That’s fine and well, but when the conservatives come in nobody ever goes to meetings. Membership is simply dependent upon an annual bank draft. So the political parties can’t attract members, and that’s a real worry. The other reason is that the Labor Party’s always been a party of opposition. You can get a lot of members and more involvement in opposition because conservative governments do horrible things to working people. The outrage becomes greater and so do the numbers who want to fight them. This is the first time we’ve had to digest a long period of government — except for Curtin and Chifley between 1941 and 1949, though that was largely during a war.

You say people aren’t joining things. Phillip Toyne says they’re joining, but not political parties. They’re joining the ACF or the Wilderness Society. They’re not joining the ACF; they’re paying money to the ACF. They pay money and get a newsletter. They don’t go to meetings. We have a meeting-based membership.

On that logic do you see a future for the ALP where the membership isn’t meeting-based?

It is my fervent and earnest hope that we’ll always have a meeting-based membership, but we’ll get more and more people who’ll just send us money and want to be associated with us in some way. But we have to maintain our meeting-based system, because it’s the only contact we have with the grassroots. How are you going to know what they think if you don’t have meetings?

I’d like to go back to the South East forests decision for a moment. That decision greatly upset the various environmental groups. Phillip Toyne commented that it was another example of ad hocery. The government has been trying to move towards a more planned model for sustainable development, but how are you going to keep people supporting this model of sustainable development if you continue to make decisions which look like unhappy trade-offs?

The environment movement loves us when we make decisions they like and hates us when we don’t. And when you make decisions like this one, you get accused of ad hocery. Whatever is said about the South East forest decision you can’t say it’s ad hoc. There was 12 months of study, there was a wealth of evidence collected, sifted, analysed and debated. That’s not ad hocery.

The environmental groups would argue that the decision wasn’t the logical outcome of that evidence...

With the South East forests there’s a complicating factor. With the Tasmanian forests we had World Heritage material — four-hundred-year old trees and that sort of stuff. We had a jewel. You haven’t really seen a big campaign to have the South East forests nominated for World Heritage listing. They aren’t in the same category. If there are levels of wonder, here we’re talking B-grade wonder. Had they been eligible for World Heritage listing, I’d have done it. You can’t argue that every old-growth forest is untouchable. We’ve got to preserve as much of them as we can. I understand the anger and the criticism but in these situations we need to focus on scientific information and we need science-based decisions. The difficulty is that when science-based decisions don’t please people they say it’s crooked science.

But scientific evidence by itself doesn’t allow objective decision-making — it’s often ambiguous or contradictory.

You have to look at the weight of evidence, what else can you do? It’s not an exact science, obviously.

Can we turn now to social security? You were recently quoted as saying that there were no further cuts to be made in the social security budget and that you would have no part of it if such cuts had to be made.

What I said was that we would have to hurt a lot of people at the bottom end of the scale to make any more cuts. And I actually used the phrase “I would resist that very strongly”. I have resisted it in this budget and was successful. The same options have been trotted out budget after budget and been rejected. There was a big savings task before us in this Expenditure Review Committee (ERC) round, and I found ways to get savings without taking money out of anyone’s pocket unless they’re involved in fraud. I don’t think the government will change tack on this: it’s rejected those options every year. My personal view is that we can really do no more.
The article definitely gave the impression that you would not accept further cuts. So that’s not what you meant?

The interview I said I didn’t think further cuts were acceptable. I was then asked: “What would you do about it if there were further cuts?” And I said that I didn’t think there would be further cuts and so I didn’t think I needed to make a pronouncement on what I’d do about it. And I don’t think there will be any further cuts.

On the subject of the budget process, you’ve also been quoted as saying that because social security is the largest spending ministry it’s the first place people look to when they want to make cuts.

Is that focus on social security reasonable? There seems to be a view that because social security is a spending department rather than a productive department the money spent in the department goes into a black hole.

There’s often a view in the bureaucracy which prepares the options for the ERC that some expenditure in social security is discretionary. I don’t think it is, but some people think it is. You’ve got to accept the right of the Department of Finance, for example, to prepare options to cut expenditure. There has to be a devil’s advocate — someone who stands up and says you can cut this and this and this — so that the government can look at every option. That’s what the budget process is about.

Many in the welfare sector would argue that one of the problems with the budget process is that some items — for instance, subsidies to industry — aren’t viewed as burdens to the taxpayer in the same way that welfare expenditure is.

Well, they’re wrong. Every avenue is looked at each year. And there aren’t too many tax subsidies around these days. With the capital gains tax and the fringe benefits tax we’ve eliminated a lot of the tax subsidies. I think we’ve tightened enormously on what business can write off on tax. I don’t think we’ve got sufficient credit from the professional social welfare organisations for doing that.

Another criticism from the welfare sector comes from people who aren’t opposed to the active employment strategy itself, but who say that this is a very bad time to be embarking on such a process. Won’t it put more pressure on the unemployed at a time of growing unemployment and a big economic downturn?

Obviously it’s a time of growing unemployment and it’s hard to get a job, and this puts pressure on people who are being asked to undergo training or demonstrate activity in looking for a job. But it’s all cyclical. And you can’t have a policy that operates when employment’s growing and stops when employment isn’t growing.

Yes, but their point is the timing of the introduction of the strategy.

Frankly some social welfare organisations wouldn’t agree with it whenever you introduce it. We’ve been working on it for a long time, and the announcement of its introduction came some time ago, when the situation wasn’t so bad. In any event no one loses benefits as a result of training or activity tests — they’re just being asked to do more. If you can show that you looked for a benefit and didn’t get it, your weekly payments will keep coming. I don’t think that’s wrong, whether or not it’s popular now.

One final question. A lot of people are saying that the problem with the mainstream political parties, and particularly the ALP, is a lack of vision. The government has over the last seven years made a number of decisions which have not struck people as being in line with traditional Labor values, and this has demoralised many people. What kind of values, what kind of vision, do you think could sustain Labor and its supporters into the 21st century?

I’m not sure what you mean. Our policies on the environment over the last few years could not be described as anything but visionary. We have taken some courageous decisions on major environmental questions. I think the greenhouse emissions decision recently demonstrated that vision is alive and well in this government, and is not about to disappear. When you turn to economic policy and people say our traditional values have disappeared, the truth is that every Labor leader since Federation has been accused of abandoning Labor’s traditional values. For Curtin it was conscription; for Chifley it was the mines; for Whitlam it was tariffs; for Hawke it is the Commonwealth Bank.

Every Labor leader has the same accusation put at them. But Chifley didn’t face what we’ve faced. Chifley didn’t have situations where individuals typing figures into screens in five or six capitals around the world could shape the destiny of nations and change economies overnight. With the internationalisation of the economy the old values don’t apply. The whole basis to which they were supposed to apply is gone. Labor’s vision is about adjusting to that new problem, and making sure that in the adjustment all those whom we’ve traditionally represented, all those who need help and protection, keep getting it, even though it’s harder to deliver. I think we’ve got a tremendous record of doing it in the last few years.

For all the talk about abandoning traditional values, look at the work that Howe’s done in the last few years in social security. Looking after the battler is supposed to be one of our traditional values. Well, if that’s the yardstick by which you judge, then this government is as traditionally Labor as any which has preceded it.
The PRIVATE Paradox

Britain was the laboratory of the world's most sustained privatisation program. But the lessons are more than a little surprising. Grahame Thompson concludes that, for the Australian Left, regulation, not ownership, should be the key issue.

The pressures to privatise various public sector activities are growing on a global scale, and these pressures are expressed nowhere more strongly than in Australia at present. The UK can claim the somewhat dubious distinction of having pioneered this movement, and it has probably pushed the process further than most countries because of the head start it gained when a radical 'new Right' Conservative government was elected in 1979 bent on 'transforming' Britain's admittedly creaking economy.

The main privatisations so far achieved in the UK are detailed in the adjacent table. This shows the formidable extent of the sale of publicly-owned business to date. If the UK Conservatives have their way and win the next general election, more sales can be expected — British Rail, British Coal and the prison service being the most likely targets.

Privatisation programs are usually discussed in terms of the increased resort to the market mechanism for organising and regulating the economic activity involved. Here I want to use the UK example to show that this characterisation is too simple. In practice, things are far more complicated than generally recognised, particularly by

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### The UK Privatisation Program — Main Companies Sold

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Company</th>
<th>Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cable and Wireless</td>
<td>1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Aerospace</td>
<td>1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amersham International</td>
<td>1982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britoil</td>
<td>1982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated British Ports</td>
<td>1983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enterprise Oil</td>
<td>1984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Telecom</td>
<td>1984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Gas</td>
<td>1987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Airways</td>
<td>1987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rolls Royce</td>
<td>1987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Airports Authority</td>
<td>1987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Petroleum (31.5%)</td>
<td>1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water Authorities</td>
<td>1989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity generation and distribution</td>
<td>1990</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Various reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General.)
THE PROCESS OF 'MARKETISATION' HAS BEEN ACCOMPANIED BY A PROCESS OF DEEP REGULATION IN THE UK WHICH HAS MEANT A CLOSER PUBLIC SCRUTINY OF MANY OF THE POST-PRIVATISED COMPANIES THAN THEY RECEIVED WHILE IN PUBLIC OWNERSHIP.

The main point to drive home is that there has been a change in the form of intervention in the UK, rather than a simple withdrawal from intervention. This poses very important issues for the precise regulation of post-privatised companies in other countries now facing the full force of privatisation. The Left in the UK was totally unprepared for this issue and, as a result, it was the Right and traditional economic arguments that drove the discussion about the post-public ownership regulatory regime.

I begin with an obvious point but one that seems to have escaped many of those on the 'new Right' as well as on the 'new Left'. It is impossible not to regulate industrially advanced, financially sophisticated, and internationally interdependent economies like those of Western Europe, North America and Australia.

Such economies demand an extensive regulatory and interventionary framework as a condition of their existence. Thus, despite calls for a withdrawal from intervention and a rhetoric that claims to produce this, the actual picture is considerably more complex. The general point here is that the usual way of conceptualising these issues — along a dimension of 'more or less' intervention — is neither a satisfactory nor a useful one. What is at stake is a change
in the forms of intervention and regulation. The quantitative dimension of 'more or less' is simply one aspect of the qualitative 'change in forms' dimension; it is not totally unimportant, but rather secondary.

The challenge is to specify the change in the forms of intervention over the period of the 'conservative turn', to assess the consequences of these, and to ask what the appropriate response might be from the Left.

Over much of the post-Second World War period three fairly distinct mechanisms of micro-economic intervention were legitimised within liberal democracies of the European, Australian and even North American type. These were subsidisation, regulation and nationalisation. Broadly speaking, it is these types of intervention that have been ideologically sanctioned by the 'legacy of liberalism'. I list them deliberately in the above order to indicate the degree to which the implied intervention challenges the established status quo of free market organisation.

Subsidisation challenges this the least in that the subject of this form of intervention need not necessarily respond positively to the offer of subsidisation, nor will it attract a penalty as a result (other than not receiving the subsidy, of course). This form of intervention is an indirect form because it encourages a particular type of response without directing it. On the other hand, regulation, as usually understood, is a direct form of intervention inasmuch as there is a penalty for non-compliance. For instance, policing is involved and legal or semi-legal sanctions can be brought to bear if the regulated activity does not conform to requirements. This mounts a greater challenge to the private decision-making of market agents. Finally, nationalisation represents the most serious and direct challenge to the established order since it transfers ownership of resources to a public body. Notice, however, that this remains a legitimate and sanctioned aspect of liberal social democracies in my schema. While this is clearly a controversial claim, the way nationalisation was carried out and has functioned within mixed economies of the liberal type in the post-Second World War period tends, I would submit, to bear it out.

One important common characteristic that further justifies the combination of the above three forms of intervention, despite the differences between them, is that they all presume existing economic activity. The object of any of these interventionary mechanisms is already established prior to the attempt to subsidise, regulate, or nationalise. Contrast this with a different form of intervention, one directed mainly at the industrial field—one that tries to establish new economic activity from the outset. Robust mechanisms to carry out this kind of 'intervention' within liberal democracies are very difficult to come by. Attempts at identifying gaps in the productive structure and seeking to fill them with publicly-controlled institutions have usually ended in failure. Such attempts are politically sensitive because they contain the seeds of a type of economic practice that could exceed the legitimate bounds of the liberal and social democratic tradition.

Inasmuch as regimes of regulation involving these type of interventionary mechanisms became robustly established in the post-war period, I would like to suggest they characterised a 'relatively extensive' system of intervention. By this I mean the scope of intervention was wide; the mechanisms were complementary. There was some overlap, of course, and it is not always possible to separate clearly where one type of intervention began and another ended. But, by and large, these three mechanisms were conceived as separate types, fulfilling separate functions, and, in the main, operated separately. The question is what has become of them?

Some mechanisms remain firmly in place. For instance, the tax-subsidy method—always at the heart of the liberal interventionist framework—continues, albeit in a redirected form. It is important to recognise the continuities between the old, pre-conservative turn system and what I will argue in a moment is the newly emerging one.

The most obvious transformation occurs with the idea of nationalisation in the UK and elsewhere. It no longer represents an interventionary mechanism but, rather, the reverse; a classic case of the withdrawal from intervention, many would argue. This claim, however, needs to be approached with caution. Again, it is perhaps best described as a change in the form of intervention. The traditional UK nationalised industries are being transformed from large public monopolies into private ones, sometimes into private duopolies, accompanied by a new extensive set of regulatory apparatuses. Even the water and electricity industries, which were not privatised per se, have attracted an extensive regulatory apparatus.

At this stage it may be useful to characterise these changes overall and then go on to justify this characterisation.

Above I suggested the post-1945 to mid-1970s regime of intervention was a 'relatively extensive' one. At present, suggest, this is being replaced by a 'relatively intensive' one. This displays four main features. The first is a narrowing of the field of operation of intervention involving restrictions on its scope (though this is offset somewhat...
The prevention of outright and obvious abuse of 'monopoly power' and the 'protection of the consumer interest' have remained the primary ostensible objectives of the regulatory bodies. OFTEL in particular has been surpris-ingly diligent in pursuing the worse excesses of British Telecom. The general criteria by which these regulatory bodies are required to scrutinise involve the famous 'RPI- n%' formula. This sets the pricing framework within which the companies must operate. They are required to set their prices according to the formula 'retail price index - n%', where n% is some agreed figure for the company. Clearly, this is hardly the criterion of a non-interventionist; it goes to the heart of private sector decision-making. In addition, 'maintaining regulatory vigilance' has forced OFTEL to go further and inquire into rates of return on capital employed of British Telecom (BT), and its duopolist rival Mercury Communications. Quality control has now entered the regulator's vocabulary as well. And OFTEL has the power to consider any merger that either BT or MC might propose. Thus, in effect, OFTEL has at least a potential to influence all the central financial decisions either company is likely to make. The same goes for other the other regulatory bodies.

Another feature of the post-privatised regulatory regime is the way the government has retained a 'golden share' in a number of the companies, which allows the government wide powers to block certain shareholdings, to influence variations in voting rights, share issues, disposal of assets, and other matters.

All in all, these measures trawl in most of the major financial decisions that the privatised companies are likely to make. To exercise their powers, the regulatory bodies have initiated very detailed analyses of the companies' cost and revenue structures, their investment programs and their general business strategies. They have devised elaborate contracting arrangements to protect customers. Thus, they have been forced to install a very deep regulatory structure, with wide powers of investigation.

With respect to those industries where a number of separate companies were already in existence (the water industry), or where they could be easily created out of the existing industry structure (electricity supply), a different form of regulation has arisen. This is known as 'yardstick' regulation, and it involves comparisons between the various component companies within the industry. Although these do not extensively compete between each other, their regulatory targets can be set according to best practice comparisons between them, thus in theory allow-
ing a more hands-off approach to development. The practical consequences of this form of regulation have, however, yet to emerge.

One very interesting feature of the privatisation of the electricity supply is the creation of an 'internal market' for electricity within the newly privatised operational structure, involving a complex set of contractual arrangements between the power generation arms of the industry and the distribution companies. Nobody is yet sure how, or whether, this 'market' will actually work. It is illustrative, however, of a number of trends within the UK public sector where 'internal markets' have been set up (in health and education services). But these are not markets in the usual sense of the term and should not be confused with a traditional 'marketisation' of economic activity. They are highly regulated; price is not used to determine where resources are located - budgets are set 'prior' to providing a supply so 'cost minimisation' becomes the main objective.

A final aspect of the new regime is what I would describe as its 'layered' character. Instead of just one level of interventionary mechanisms — where a complementary but largely non-overlapping system results — it now seems to be deliberate policy to foster overlapping and even over-layered mechanisms. What is more, such a system is emerging even though it is not official policy to foster it.

In part, this results from the struggles emerging between the privatised companies and their regulatory overseers. It also results from the way some of the de-nationalised companies have become increasingly predatory in terms of their competitors. The takeover by privatised British Petroleum of another privatised company, British Airline and British Airways' takeover of its main domestic rival, British Caledonian Airways (both in 1987) caused some disquiet and confirmed that 'competition' was no longer a serious objective of the government.

In connection with these cases and as an example of the trend towards a layered regulatory regime, we can point to the dual nature of the monopoly and merger legislation that applies to the UK — in the domestic sphere and again in the European sphere. Thus British Airways' bid for British Caledonian was referred to the European Commission after the domestic UK bodies failed to act. Similarly, the takeover proposal for the Rover Group by British Aerospace — again involving a recently de-nationalised company — was also referred to the European Commission. Again, the UK monopolies and merger legislation has been extended to include the remaining nationalised industries, which were previously exempt from this legislation. Other examples could be quoted.

One of the reasons advanced for this new layered approach is that it makes the capture of regulatory bodies by their regulated companies much more difficult. Although thoroughly exasperated by American writers, this phenomenon of 'regulatory capture' has struck a chord with UK policy makers as the UK embarks upon an American-type odyssey with 'regulatory intervention' (instead of the now unfashionable nationalisation).

Rather paradoxically the 'new Right' Conservatives have presided over one of the most sustained and rapid interventionary initiatives in British history. In general, it is clear that an approach to economic issues stressing a totally free-market, non-interventionary stance is on the defensive. A new realistic Right has emerged to take the initiative in these matters, a Right which is more pragmatic and less doctrinaire.

Given the installation of extensive powers to determine the course of the post-privatised companies there seems no strong argument for re-nationalising any of them. With a strong regulatory body — which itself has control over pricing structure and which provides a proper accountability for their monopoly or near monopoly status — there is little need to embark on the politically hazardous course of re-nationalisation.

The better approach is to supplement and strengthen the now already existing structure. Very dramatic effects, for instance, could be had by increasing, or merely threatening to increase, the 'n' component of the 'RPI-n%' pricing formula discussed above. In addition, the government now holds a large part of many of the privatised company shares, and it could buy more on the open market if it wished. Given the well-known ability of consolidated shareholdings of 20% or so to secure effective control of private companies, it would be easy to secure such a shareholding to be invested in an independent trust company which could supervise a privatised company and which could be made up of a wide range of social interests. This would have the advantage of once and for all eliminating any residual element of state ownership from the post-privatised industries.

How important any of these suggestions is for the Australian example remains to be seen. If there are any lessons to be learned they are twofold. First, devising a suitable regulatory structure is paramount. One will emerge or be imposed, regardless of the explicit intentions of policy makers. Secondly, this apparatus will have to contend with the business strategies devised by the privatised companies. British Telecom has set out to become a major global communications company by pursuing an acquisitions strategy in the US and elsewhere. Although this put considerable strain on its financial position — recently it was thought to be technically insolvent as its investment commitment overwhemed its cash-flow and credit lines — it is probably a large enough company to achieve its aim. Can the same be said of Australia's Telecom or will it be swept up itself by a stronger company? Similarly with Qantas, a small airline by world standards. A number of airline companies have eyed Qantas for possible acquisition, and its privatisation may present a golden opportunity for this unless watering steps are taken in advance to prevent it.

Labor's membership crisis looks like a crisis of party democracy. Adam Farrar begs to disagree. Giving ALP members more influence on Labor governments isn't the answer, he argues. A wider relationship between party and community is called for.

Remember the early years of the Hawke government? It may be a little hard now to recall the defeat of Paul Keating's consumption tax, when Left unions, the community sector and the ALP Left showed, combined in the sort of public forum produced fleetingly in Hawke's 'national consensus' days, they amounted to something.

It has been a long time since that type of public victory was won. For a while it looked as though the Left had done it again by heading off privatisation at the last ALP Conference. But that 'victory' is looking a bit hollow now. Its legacy may have been finally to push power brokers and ultimately ordinary branch members — had on the government and the Cabinet.

But before the Left outside the ALP begins its ritual gloating at the problems of those who chose to work within the ALP, they should pause for a minute to ask whether the issue isn't more than a matter of the Left getting rolled, but more fundamental issue of whether — and if so, how — political parties can be effective vehicles for social change. The problem of inner party democracy in the ALP is not just a matter of how the parliamentary leadership can be made to stick to policies won by the rank and file. More importantly, it is a matter of how the political practice available to parties bears on the practice of activists. It is a matter of whether the conception of the party in the ALP, and in other parties of social change, is responsible for their steady decline.

The current ALP debate over inner party structures and control might seem a spectator sport to those outside. But an examination of that debate might also throw up some of those wider questions. One of the most interesting is the way in which the, by now rather glib, question of how political parties (as opposed to governments) relate to social groups such as environmentalists, welfare lobbyists and so on has become linked to a perception that these new groups are undermining democracy, both within parties and in the wider community.

A loose debate has been going on for some time. Last year, for example, Stuart Macintyre argued in Australian Society that new political groups such as the Rainbow Alliance and the New Left Party would be wrecked by diverse and often conflicting interests as they try to cobble together different movements. On the other hand, he argued, the Labor Party with its old monoculture breaking down, was a far more useful place for the activists of these two organisations.

In the August issue of ALR Stuart provided a rather more interesting account of the new composition of ALP branches. Replacing "the precipitate decline in the original base of the party, the manual wage earners" are, for example, women and people from non-English speaking
backgrounds. But these new members are often public administrators or "in social movements competing for the attention of the government". To an extent this is reproducing within the party what has already happened at the level of government, where peak bodies - not just the ACTU or the BCA, but the Conservation Foundation (ACF) or the Council of Social Service (ACOSS) have been given, to varying degrees, a direct line to the ALP in power which has increasingly been denied to party members.

The question of democracy within the ALP, of keeping the parliamentary leadership committed to the policies of the party, has now become the crucial issue for the ALP Left (and for many branch members). But Macintyre's observations seem to raise a deeper question: from what kind of influences should party policy arise? This seems to signal some very special worries which are somewhat cloaked by a focus on democratic control over policy.

"The answer to the ALP's malaise is not structural but rather requires political solutions."

Macintyre was responding to Lindsay Tanner who argued in ALR's June issue that ALP structures and the factions themselves were such an impediment to participation and democracy that they must change dramatically if its current decline is not to be terminal. Lindsay argued that the interaction and alliances between new political currents were such that the old factional divisions are being blurred on many issues, that binding factional decisions are no longer appropriate and that interest groups should be added to the party structures to attract activists in specific areas to the ALP.

While accepting most of Tanner's description of the disease, Stuart Macintyre argues that the answer does not lie in structural changes to faction power or branch structures, but rather "a fundamental revitalisation of Labor Party politics on the basis of principle rather than expediency". This basis, Macintyre argues, must include an urgent revision of the "broad ideological tradition which spans a spectrum from labourism to socialism".

This contrast between 'principle' and 'expediency' is perhaps a more useful way of characterising the concern about Labor in government than to focus exclusively on the formal democratic rights of members. But it raises again the crucial question of where and how the principles are to be found. It raises the question (for all such parties) of whether such principles might well be found outside the party's 'traditional base', outside its membership, or outside the territory carved up by the formal faction structures. Much of the debate, however, seems concerned to defend these influences against the incursions of outsiders.

It is hard not to read much of the debate as an argument over who the most politically 'genuine' influences are. Nor is it restricted to a choice between members and outsiders. The long-running debate in the ALP Left over the influence of affiliated unions relative to branch members is part of the same concern. Bob Hogg's most recent suggestion that union amalgamations will reduce the diversity of union views and hence the vitality of the party is an attempt to shift the weight of influence towards branch members. The efforts of some on the Left to increase union influence seems based on the rather questionable view that unions constitute a sounder socialist base.

A number of the same concerns were also taken up in the recent draft National Left position on Bob Hogg's Organisational Review Committee prepared by the venomers of the National Left; and it's clear that Tanner, as well as Hogg, inspired some of the comments. Like Macintyre, the authors argue that the answer to the ALP's malaise is not structural but, rather, requires political solutions. Unlike Macintyre, they don't challenge the kind of policies required, beyond arguing that the ALP must return to policies which improve the life chances of ordinary people, particularly those on incomes of about average wage levels, must base itself in local political activity and must ensure more broadly based participation of members in the policy development of the party.

It is particularly striking that the National Left draft, rather than seeking to broaden the basis of the party's ideological base to embrace new forces for social change, insists that the task is to "reassert [the] political and ideological identity" of the labour movement, placing other political concerns in an ideological and class context. Interestingly, exactly the same words, "a holistic ideology that incorporates the needs and aims of those who presently care about it", appear in both Macintyre's article and in Bob Hogg's draft. However, in the latter the sense changes in an assertion of the need for a revised basis to a reassertion of the centrality of the role of economic forces.

It is probably not unreasonable to suggest that this hard offers an attractive alternative to those social activists who find that they can be more effective bypassing the party and going straight to the government. But it is this bypassing that is of most concern. "At times it appears that there is no influence on Labor governments, one is in a heteronomous position as a member of any organisation other than Labor Party itself."

Both Macintyre and the National Left draft identify the same two problems mentioned above. First, the government's 'corporatist' approach means that government deals with peak bodies rather than activists or out of the ALP. And second, the policies of both party and government are increasingly being set by the peak bureaucracy.
There is some irony in the fact that, two years ago, the Left briefly with the option of including one of the social change groups — the community welfare sector — directly in policy making; thus breaking the peak body-government nexus. It was a bold experiment prompted by some of those Left unions who had already begun to work with such groups. Sadly, the experiment was abandoned after just one ALP Left/Left unions meeting. It all seemed to much, even on the Left, to have ALP strategies realigned by those who hadn’t joined the party. The fact that a number of the representatives of Left unions may not have been members (although their union was) somehow wasn’t seen as inconsistent.

For the ALP Left, then, the ability of those organisations outside the party with an interest in social change to gain effective access to the party or government is seen as a serious threat to party democracy. It is then not too much a step to see this as a threat to the broader identity between a vigorous membership and the labour movement and working people which the party was established to represent.

Ultimately, however, this reaction reflects a discomfort with the notion of a participatory democracy which the various social change groupings represent. On that model of democracy, people contribute, wherever they are involved, to decisions affecting their areas of involvement. In that model, the structures of consultation and decision making reach right into the community, drawing directly on the knowledge and desires of its members. Participation is, after all, one of the four cornerstones of labor’s social justice strategy.

While it would be laughable to suggest that the links between government and peak lobby groups is an unashamed example of participatory democracy, it would be an even bigger mistake to be blind to the extent to which such processes in Australia today — however frustrating their operation and however often they are misunderstood or perverted. Both formal processes such as joint planning in, say, the Home and Community Care program or the plethora of advisory committees, and the practical interventions from deep in the community by organisations like the Nursing Mothers Association or the Combined Pensioners Association, mean that — however vexed — the sharp line between community and state is being broken again and again.

These are the very mechanisms which a politics of social change should be seeking to build on, rather than pushing them away in defence of party prerogatives. It must be remembered that the ALP itself is one such experiment — an attempt to provide a link between working people and the state through their labour organisations and a participatory party. But the lives of ordinary Australians embrace needs, issues and activities which are simply outside the sphere of the labour movement or the world of paid work. A century on, it no longer makes much sense, as the Nuclear Disarmament Party showed, for every movement to have its own party.

However, the Labor Left draft seems concerned to maintain the division between the genuinely political — embodied in the party which, in turn, provides access to the state — and mere interest or single issue campaigns. Not only is such a distinction undesirable (and arrogant insofar as it gives priority to the labour movement), but it may well be a lost cause — a 19th century politics which has outrun its time. A far more progressive alternative may well be to work to build more effective mechanisms to help participatory politics to evolve.

Nor should it require every activist to join a political party. They should have avenues of access which are real, but which don’t co-opt or drain their efforts. It must be remembered that social change activists are caught in a similar bind to rank and file ALP members. Many of the peak lobby groups move in a world which is just as distant from their constituencies. Nor are activists’ needs for access, debate, co-operation with other activists likely to be satisfied by their relation to their peak representatives.

But what does this mean for political parties? It may mean that parties will continue to decline in importance as direct lines of influence on governments — at least for most activists. For those in the ALP who are challenged by the internal workings of party machines, the challenge will be to ensure that the party — particularly in government — responds to the rank and file rather than that it should be receptive to claims of the social change groups outside the party.

Of course, social change groups or ‘movements’ are not homogeneous (any more than the union movement) — even when they have not formalised their differences into Left and Right groupings. Fundamental political and social values will determine which positions should be responded to; which makes the ideological framework of the party or faction its crucial contribution to the political process.

For those parties of social change outside the ALP electoral politics may well become more important than it has been — but it is likely to become a politics of coalitions and consultation. While the party can provide a co-ordinating framework for such electoral work, its legitimacy will depend on the extent to which it has become a forum for cross fertilisation and debate — how much it has become an honest broker and how clearly it can articulate and relate the values of social change across the board.

ADAM FARRAR is a research officer for the NSW Council of Social Service, and an activist in the New Left Party.

This is the fourth in our series of articles on the future of Labor. Previous contributions were by Lindsay Tanner (June), Stuart Macintyre (August) and Robert Ray (October).
CONSUMING PASSIONS

Correct line cooking

Welcome to the newest and definitely the tastiest column to grace the pages of this august journal in quite a while. Be prepared to salivate as we deal with that subject nearest to the heart of every progressive Australian: FOOD.

A veritable melange of sage and timely critique awaits you as we explore the pleasurable and political world of the kitchen.

Eating is our first pleasure in life, from our earliest moments. It is the pleasure from which all others follow, and the focus of this column will be on the celebration of eating and cooking. Too often 'political' discourse tends to assume we exist on ideas and vitriol and ignores our bodies and pleasure.

As we focus on the activity of eating, we shall also look at the production, consumption and meaning of food in our culture. The production of food is linked with questions of the appropriate use of land, and conservation, both here and overseas. Food is marketed in Australia in ways that endanger our health, and even fruit is chemically 'improved' to give it a longer shelf life. Taste and safety are sacrificed in the process, as are foodstuffs that are the 'wrong' shape for display on supermarket shelves. Varieties of seeds are owned by companies which also control the fertilisers necessary to grow them.

Meanwhile, while we try to 'burn off' fat, much of the world subsists on too little. Nowhere is the question of gender roles raised more acutely than in the preparation of family meals on a day-to-day basis. Cooking is not seen as 'work', but as a natural, unskilled activity when performed at home. Women are expected to provide food, yet to deny themselves the fruits of their labour, sometimes to the point of starvation. Similar gender bias results in the farming work of women being ignored in aid programs overseas. Each bite we take connects us with a world of questions which will be touched on here from time to time.

As the months go by, we will look at vegetarianism and the production of meat, at chemicals in food, at images of eating on television and at the sexy world of cookbooks. All this and recipes too! The practical side of cooking will be given equal time. Today, as the festive season approaches, I turn to two central problems of this postmodern era: how to survive the Christmas period and should the Christmas meal be hot or cold?

Pickled Prunes

If, like me, you despise the commercialism of Christmas, why not rediscover the pre-industrial world in the privacy of your own cottage and make presents? I now present a very useful recipe that is so easy that literally anyone could make it.

First, locate a bottle of port. I usually have several bottles foisted upon me by a diversity of political groups bearing allegedly humorous labels. It is often inadvisable to drink the contents of such bottles direct. Buy a packet of prunes. You know, the healthy things that usually end their lives rotting away in the fridge. Pour the prunes into sterilised jars and cover the prunes and covering them. Seal and leave for six weeks, or three to four if you are reading this now and want to eat them at Christmas.

These make good presents with those cute little pieces of material on top, or with your own designer labels. Pickled prunes are also great as a cold pudding on Christmas day with cream. (That answers one of the above questions.) The prune stones add the element of dental danger more commonly provided by small change.

All of us get bloated and plump at Christmas, rather like these prunes, which are pickled only in the sense that you will be. Alcohol consumption is all but compulsory during Christmas, as a means of being 'sociable'. However, if you start serving the above on muesli while looking through your presents it may be time to seek help.

Hint of the month

Vegetarians who want to prepare a Christmas feast may find Sarah Brown's Vegetarian Cookbook (Doubleday) useful for suggesting menus which will please Hall but the most die-hard traditionalist. The emphasis is on hot food.

Next month: The Rise and Fall of the Potato. Send in ideas, comments and recipes.

Penelope Cottier.
In the article “Oil Spills” (ALR, September 1990) Michael Humphrey writes: “Another Arab Israeli War and Arab defeat would deepen the conflict in the Arab world and in the worst scenario see the ‘Jordan is Palestine’ doctrine imposed through the annexation of the occupied territories by Israel.”

The Jordan is Palestine doctrine as expounded by this organisation for the past ten years has been designed to point out that Jordan occupies almost 80% of the territory once called Palestine and to that extent that the Arab residents of the territory once called Palestine already have their own sovereign state.

No clearer exposition of these facts could be found than in the statement of Abu Iyad, the PLO Number Two man after Arafat who was reported in Kuna, 15 December 1989 as saying:

You cannot make distinctions between a Jordanian and a Palestinian...all those who tried in the past and are still trying to create divisions between the Jordanian and Palestinian people have failed. We indeed constitute one people.

There are already two successor states in the former territory of Palestine, the Jewish state of Israel and the Arab state of Jordan. The sooner those two states engage in direct negotiations to resolve the border between them and to mutually recognise each other’s existence the sooner peace is likely to come to the Middle East.

David Singer,
Convenor,
Jordan is Palestine Committee.

The New Hitler?

The exchange between Fred Halliday and Joe Stork on the Gulf crisis in ALR (November 1990) certainly raised some important aspects of the crisis which are too often ignored by those on the Left here.

But Halliday’s conclusion that he would support the West using military force to defeat Saddam Hussein if other political and peaceful options failed is impossible to accept, not simply because of a “general hostility to war” but because this particular war would be such a disastrous one for all involved.

Halliday characterises the Iraqi regime as “fascist”. Certainly the condemnation he makes of it is accurate, and the regime’s crimes should never be forgotten. But “fascist” is too easy a term. For Halliday, Ba’athism is reduced to something “racist” with an ideology that is a “mythical, mystical and bombastic evocation of the greatness of the Arabs”.

But Ba’athism is also a secular nationalism, anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist, at least in its origin, with an “evocation” of socialism and social justice. The bloody repression so ruthlessly carried out by Saddam Hussein is only quantitatively different from that of the Syrian Ba’athist regime of Assad.

Halliday stretches his argument beyond credibility by claiming that because Iraq is a “fascist state”, then any US-led Western invasion of that country could be compared to the action of the Allies in World War II. But if Hussein is the ‘new Hitler’, as Halliday apparently agrees with Bush that he is, then what of the new Mussolinis (Syria’s Assad?), the Franco’s (the Turkish regime?) or the Tojos (the Saudi emirs?) who on this occasion are lined up with the ‘democratic’ West?

Arguing by such anti-historical comparisons gets us nowhere. The situation is very concrete and the desirable outcome clear: the Iraqis must withdraw from Kuwait and the US and its allies get out of Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the region. The criminal Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza must then be ended.

As deplorable as the invasion of Kuwait was, any full scale war would result in casualties many hundreds times greater. Halliday dismisses the reaction as “a general hostility to war”. Unless you adopt a “thorough-going pacifist position”, the “normal response is to justify a “military response,” he says.

But what if even the harshest economic blockade fails to force Saddam Hussein to withdraw from Kuwait, Halliday asks? Do you let him keep his ill-gotten gains? It’s a fair question. But it remains a question of time. Sanctions are already biting in Iraq, particularly in industry. At a certain point that will bring the country to a halt. It could take another year or more. But isn’t it best to allow time for them to bite than to sacrifice some many lives?

Joe Stork is right when he says “whatever happens, I think it is vital to avoid a shooting war”, even though he ends up half agreeing with Halliday at the end. It really is time to give peace (and sanctions) a chance.

Denis Freney
Sydney, NSW.
Homo Economicus

Reading the opinion columns by economic journalists in the Sydney Morning Herald I can't help feeling that it is all written by communists. It may seem absurd to suggest that Max Walsh, Robert Haupt, Michael Denholm et al are communists, and before the abovementioned start reaching for the phone to speed-dial their defamation lawyers, let me explain what I mean. Neither these economic-communists nor old style stalinist-communists were ever very big on theoretical specification - and this is not the least thing they have in common.

Both are long on remarkably similar rhetorical devices; both offer a care-all ideology which explains everything. In stalinist dogma there is supposed to be a difference between utopian and scientific theories about communism, the latter being superior to the former. A closer peek at stalinist rhetoric uncovers the fact that the utopian blueprint has merely been hidden away inside the scientific jargon. The outer surface of this ideology, so to speak, is all hard algebra and tough logic, while the soft-hearted innards contain a vision splendid of the good life hereafter which will result from the logical workings of history plus the vigilant guidance of the party and the plan.

In short, the connection between the rhetoric of science and the utopia of the good life is a narrative one, a story about how history is supposed to work. The characters who walk about in this story with their ten-league boots are the working class and the party, triumphing over enemies, marching together into the new dawn of prosperity for all. The good life, in Stalin's classic Economic Problems of the USSR, is measured in tons of steel and bushels of wheat without any of that namby-pamby goodness and light stuff. This is science, after all. Science which is the sole property of the party, administered through the plan on behalf of homo faber - the workers.

What could this possibly have in common with the economics of Walsh and Haupt? Well, everything, really. In economists dogma, there is also a utopian blueprint hidden away inside the scientific jargon. The outer surface of this ideology, too, is all hard algebra and tough logic, while the soft-hearted innards is a vision splendid of the good life hereafter which will result from the logical workings of the market plus the vigilant guidance of economists and their sagely interventions in favour of deregulation. The connection between the rhetoric of science and the utopia of the good life is a narrative one, a story about how history is supposed to work. The characters who walk about in this story in their shiny new shoes are the investors and the economists, triumphing over enemies, marching together into the new dawn of prosperity for all. The good life, for economists also, is measured in tons of steel, bushels of wheat, and kilos of home entertainment centres — not any of that namby-pamby goodness and light stuff. This is science, after all. Science which is the sole property of the economists, vigilantly overseeing the true workings of the market on behalf of homo economicus.

The structure of these two ideologies is thus pretty much the same. Where they differ is in the masters they serve and the enemies they denounce. In its stalinoid version, communism is an ideology which serves the state. In its quirky new economicist version, this communist rhetoric of the good life, with pop-up toasters for all, serves capital. The demonology of stalinism naturally picked on the market as the source of all evil, for the market is ideologically linked to capital. Economism as an ideology can think of nothing more original to do than turn this on its head and denounce regulation. Regulation is the business of the state. Both these ideologies concur in claiming to be on the side of us poor folk with neither state power nor the money power to stand by us, when in reality neither is in our interests at all. This, after all, is what communist ideology is for: to delude otherwise sensible people into thinking that all is well, that acquiescing with the dominant view of things will benefit us and not just the powers that be. The communist promise either way is a good life of more and better things for us to buy and have.

Both the economists and the communists are prepared to make great sacrifices to reach this promised land. They are further prepared to sacrifice us. We all have to chip in for the good of production, be it for the five-year plan or micro-reform. Both want to abolish any complex and messy social relations, cultural hang-overs from the past, safeguards of traditional patterns of life, all in the name of a rational model of the future, the future of the plan or the market — take your pick.

Both have a vision of communist man. The stalinists saw him as a collective entity, a model of perfect altruism. The Herald's economists have completely flipped this on its ear. Their model of communist man is a pure atom of individualism, motivated only by self interest. Whether he be homo economicus or Homo Faber, this model is a reductive one. On the one-dimensional model of man, economists and stalinists build a one-dimensional model of the good life. As we well know, therein lies its terror. The dan-satanic mills of old laissez faire England could be found just as readily in Stalin's Russia. Needless to say, there is no place for minorities in this vision splendid. All will be reduced to equal but opposite norms.

Lest one become critical of these high minded ideals, both stalinists and walthist economists have a
scientific theory which proves everything. Because the theory is scientific and rational, it (and by extension those who hold it) speak for the common good. The pronouncements of the Stalinists or of Max Neish are by definition statements of what is in the best interests of everybody. If you disagree with this rational statement, then you must logically be speaking on behalf of some special interest. Special interests are the enemy of communists, champions of universal consuming and producing man. Spokespeople for special interests will be silenced. Great progress has been made in this department. It is no longer necessary to haul people off to prison or the rustic concentration camp for opposing the economists, although there are places in the world where this is still necessary for the good of all.

Throughout the Cold War, one was offered this limited range of ideological goods: one chose either to be tyrannised by bureaucrats or exploited by the bosses. In having so little choice of ideologies available, the cold war itself was a kind of ideological war communism. This restricted range on offer in the ideological deli is still the state of things at the Sydney Morning Herald. If you are not in favour of deregulation and privatisation then you must be in favour of bureaucratic sclerosis and stagnation. Glasnost, it would appear, has not happened at the Herald. The Cold War is still alive and well, pitting one version of the same ideology against another.

Both walshists and Stalinists want to abolish politics. Politics, and the civil society in which matters political are discussed and bargained, is about special interests, the formation of some kind of hegemonic compromise between this group and that. Communists of both the market and plan variety are opposed to all that. In place of all this would go the pure rationality of the plan or the market. The only real ideological difference is that a plan must have authors.

The market, on the other hand, is a kind of plan without an author. Like god, it works divinely, sight unseen. Very postmodern, this — market communism is plan communism that has gone through that phase known in French theory as the death of the author. Apart from that it remains untouched. Politics, in a democratic society, is a mechanism through which people might wrest a bit of power from the state and capital. So it is politics, above all else — politics in the best and most useful sense of the term — that Cold War communism of both the Eastern and Western style were hotly against.

The flaw in the symmetry of this argument is obvious: Eastern communism falls to bits while Western walshism thrives - even in the East. The remarkable thing is just how quickly the apparatchiks were able to swap Stalin for von Hayek, market for plan, capital for state. If anyone wanted a demonstration of the close affinity between Eastern communism and the market ideology of the West, this is it. Far from being a triumph of free, rational, inevitable economics, it is rather more a swapping of one hoary old cold war communist rhetoric for another. The Soviet magazines still impose a censorship almost as strong as in the old days. Only these days it is von Hayek who gets in print, all that plan stuff is out. As one might say in Eastern Europe now: “meet the new boss, same as the old boss”.

At least they can have some fun there with a new ideology. At the Herald we’re stuck with the tyranny of the old one. One only wishes the Cold War would end at the Herald so we could have some real discussion, realistic but not ‘scientific’, pluralist and frank about the real problems of interests, power, production, not to mention some visions of the good life as more than just more washing machines. It is one of life’s small ironies that such a discussion might take place in Australian Left Review and not at the Herald, where Cold Power communism reigns supreme.

McKenzie Wark.

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ALR : DECEMBER 1990
Hello patients,

This is a difficult time of the year for those of you who have been silly enough to obey your biological clock and produce offspring. The Christmas holidays are approaching and soon you'll have to spend prolonged periods of unbroken time in close company with the bearers of your genetic material.

At least for parents, there is some intellectual and emotional satisfaction in observing the antics of little people who have an uncanny resemblance to themselves. But let's spare a thought for that group of women in the community who spend large portions of their lives in the company of other people's children.

I'm referring to that band of masochistic mothers who work for Family Day Care. These workers are paid three peanuts and four buttons an hour to care for other people's children, and they are silly enough to agree to do this in their own homes.

I recently attended a dinner to mark the tenth anniversary of Family Day Care in Newcastle, NSW. There I learnt that even though this year's Newcastle earthquake was terrible, it pales into insignificance when compared to the daily damage that a group of toddlers can do to an average suburban home.

Actually, a scientific experiment was carried out in Britain this year which has implications for the mental health of Family Day Care workers. In this experiment, top commandos from the crack SAS security forces were locked up in small suburban homes. They were left there, utterly alone, with five toddlers. They were armed only with six bananas, two bottles of raspberry cordial, and a pile of paddle pop sticks.

These commandos were then told that they had to survive without adult company for at least ten hours. It proved to be the ultimate test of physical and mental endurance for a group of men who were considered invincible. The results were monitored via a closed circuit television camera. I don't have to tell any parents of toddlers reading this what happened, because you can probably guess. It was like Armageddon.

There were toys, food scraps and dirty nappies all over the walls.

Men who'd survived the Falklands War were reduced to screaming meemes in a very short period of time. 92% of the men were dropped from the houses dribbling and mumbling incoherently within six hours. Only 8% survived the full ten hour period, and 3% of these men have been unable to communicate with another adult person since.

This Toddler Torture Containment Program has evidently been used in recent months to break suspected IRA agents in Ireland. The suspect is simply locked up with toddlers in a specially designed model of an ordinary suburban home. The suspects invariably collapse and confess in a very short time. In fact the British have found they'll confess to anything at all, even if they haven't done it, just to get out of those houses and back into adult company.

The Family Day Care worker is all too familiar with the pressures experienced by these Toddler Torture victims. In fact the rate of psycho-sexual collapse among these carers is so high that I have been forced to develop special programs at my clinics tailored to their special needs. If you are a parent faced with the school holiday horrors, you may be interested as well.

At my clinics we can teach you how to keep large numbers of little kiddies quiet in one spot all afternoon. We'll teach you things you'll never hear about at Parents' Effectiveness Training. Things like how to build giant spiders' webs out of thick rope.

You cover the rope in industrial glue, dress up the kiddies as flies, and then just let them buzz into that dirty great web. They won't make another move all day! It's so simple, it's frightening.

My highly trained staff can also teach you how to build tiny sensory deprivation units out of egg cartons. Yes, you can have a Katin-gal and a Jika Jika in your own back yard! These tiny human zoos are so absolutely soundproof, you'll never hear the kiddies crying out for help, no matter how loudly they scream.

In fact, the NSW prisons minister, Michael Yabsley, learnt everything he knows about running jails at one of my special Family Day Care Workshops on Discipline Techniques for the Under Fours.

Happy holiday daycare, and I look forward to seeing you at one of my clinics.

Send your problems to Dr Hartman's secretary, Julie McCrossin, care of ALR
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