REJECTING CLASS

The article in the most recent issue of the Australian Left Review written by the co­ordinator, David Burchell, is one of the most astonishing I have read in that journal for some time. Burchell's treatment of class, for example, can only be described as, at the very least, eccentric, for he views it in general and the working class in particular, as some static and "finished" entity. It is, of course, nothing of the sort. Class in general is a word that implies relationships between people and between sets of people, and the working class, comprising as it does a particular set of relations, is active in defining itself and the society it inhabits.

The changing nature of the working class, from rural proletarian to urban manufacturing to metropolitan service sector, for instance, the changing gender composition of the paid sections of the class, for another; and the various waves of ethnicity through the class as a whole in yet another instance, all render quite silly accusations that the working class is, or see itself to be, somehow static.

But it is in this notion of the working class perception of itself that Burchell is at his most ridiculous, for it is this that is best called "tradition", a word that Burchell finds wholly repugnant. As the working class changes itself and is changed by the world it at least partially defines its view of itself and its place in the scheme of things, etc. A tradition is not something given and fixed. It is, rather, full of diversity, variation and disagreement but, nonetheless, maintains a basic set of assumptions and guidelines about how the world works.

What is at stake in the current debate is precisely the nature of that tradition itself. The socialist tradition pre­existed the marxist tradition and the latter built on and is part of the former. But even though that relationship has been and will continue to be problematic, centring as it does around the immediate question of the relationship between marxists and the largely non­marxist socialist in the ALP, a common threat between and through the two traditions has been an understanding of the efficacy and saliency of class.

By rejecting and repudiating both the notions of class and tradition, Burchell quite simply renders even more difficult the establishing of common ground between marxists outside the ALP and non­marxist socialists within it. In an era when we are apparently trying to build bridges and linkages between socialists, destroying those that already exist seem to me to be particularly stupid.

D.W. Barker,
Turner, A.C.T.

AWAITING BURIAL

Congratulations to ALR in opening its columns to reader participation.

May I present some opposite views to those on "The Left and the Economic Crisis" in Briefings (ALR 97). In my view the analysis in that article is completely arse­over­head.

The article attributes what it so quaintly describes as "the current economic malaise" to "a massive strategic contradiction within the policies of the Hawke government" between its policy of sustained economic growth which along with the Accord predated Keating and "its deregulatory financial policies". If you believe this you can forget about socialism: all that is needed is to change the personnel and direction of the Hawke government and the problems and crises of capitalism will melt away!

I suggest that the real position is the total reverse of what the ALR piece states: that the analysis in the article is fundamentally wrong. The world and Australian depression and all its attendant crises is not caused by the Hawke government elected in 1983, but rather the crisis of th Hawke government and all other social democrat governments is the result of the contradictions and crisis which has beset world capitalism since 1974.

There are two basic sources of the crisis in the Hawke government, leading to its betrayal of its stated policies, and of the working class.

One is the general nature of social democratic and welfare­state parties, as party­ies of and within capitalism, sometimes giving lip­service to socialism by gradual reform, but always opportunist, always limiting themselves to reforms which are acceptable to and can be accommodated by capitalism, always in office jettisoning the more militant rhetoric which they have picked up in opposition.

The material basis for the existence of social democracy, as well as for liberal reform parties, has always been the availability of expanding profits and increasing exploitation of workers, initially by the expansion of imperialism and the robbing of colonies, and then more subtly during the growth waves of recent capitalism, by the manipulation of productivity and inflation at the expense of the working class.

Apart from the general contradiction of social democracy between its stated and real aims, a particular contradiction has consumed all such parties since 1974. The post­war long boom ended, world­wide depression overwhelmed the economy, the material possibility of pursuing social democratic reform programs vanished (and on no­one's prediction is likely to return in the foreseeable future). This development was reflected in the political and personnel changes in the last year of the Whitlam government, as it abandoned most of its reform program.

The particular post­1974 contradiction made the general contradiction sharper and irreconcilable. The ALP had two alternatives: to support its verbal policies, raise wages, the social wage, public spending, and taxation on high and unearned incomes, backing the working class and assailing the profits of the owners of capital — or — to back the capitalists, cut wages, cut social welfare, cut public spending, deregulate the economy, boost profits, and bash the unions. A middle course is a total impossibility in a depressed and contracting economy.
Given the fundamental nature of such a party, the choice the ALP made, to betray the working class, was inevitable.

The issue, and opportunity, before us now is the development of real alternative policies, based on a true analysis of the crisis of capitalism, and the launching of a struggle for the development of a transitional government, NOT any dream about restoring the ALP. Social democracy is dead, and awaits burial.

Brian T. Carey, Canberra, ACT.

STIMULATING

I am responding to your invitation in issue No. 98 to offer comments on that issue. There were quite a few articles I liked and found stimulating — a departure it seems from our usual practice of writing only for the converted — for once we had articles on subjects in which practically everyone is interested. For instance, the cricket season, the Chamberlain case, Carmel Shute’s on politics and pleasure, and Ken Coales on disarmament.

On the whole, No. 98 is easily the best issue of ALR that I’ve read for a very long time — so good in fact that it changed my mind about discontinuing my subscription which I had decided to do after reading No. 97. But I feel compelled to speak out against the forbidding format of the pages. We need to stop crowding so much print on every page — a bad habit that must make even the bravest heart quail whilst deciding whether To read or Not to read.

It might mean less room for an article or two, but I’m on the side of Lenin when he said “Fewer but better” — I forget in what context, but I’m sure he was pleading with dedicated bolsheviks.

Now that I’m sufficiently wound up, I feel like having you on about the covers of ALR. Invariably uninviting. Now that you are entrusting it to the newsagents you should aim to make it easier for them to gain sales. The cover of No. 98 is a good

illustration of our fixation about giving pride of place to articles which seem to us the most important. So we have in great heavy black capitals THE MORAL MEETS THE NEW, followed by an almost equally heavily printed sub-title Alliances on the Radical Right. The rest of the also-rans (and perhaps more likely to attract new readers) are printed in super light italics on a yellow ground almost invisible except for the most searching eye.

Dear Collective, I have stuck by ALR through thick and thin, so please bear with me!

Win Walsham, Sydney.

WHICH WAY THE LEFT?

The domination of current politics by the struggle for control of the conservative political forces in Australia illustrates the extent to which the left is isolated and in an historically weak position.

The left’s concentration on single issues and on reactive and oppositional policies; the pursuit of sectional demands; and the absence of a credible and popularly supported program has created an ideological vacuum.

For example, the left has been largely silent on what economic response there should be to the collapse in terms of trade and the loss of national income, except to oppose the strategies employed by the Hawke government. Coffee-shop Keynesianism is not a sufficient response to the widely accepted views of the federal Treasury and Paul Keating’s contemptuous dismissal of alternatives. Founded more on hope than logic — is depressing and monotonous in its regularity.

Many on the left largely relied on neo-Keynesian commentators such as the Melbourne Age’s Ken Davidson, who are themselves now arguing for a reduction in government expenditure in response to the decline in the terms of trade. Conventional left positions on government intervention, extension of government control and nationalisation are now little more than articles of faith, rarely put forward in any concrete manner.

This problem is part of a more general malaise whereby the left is unable to articulate a concise set of objectives, or to represent itself through a unifying set of values with which people can identify.

The sum total of a diverse range of issues and the articulation of a range of often maximalist demands does not represent socialism in any organic sense. Let alone establish a socialist agenda with any sense of strategy or priorities.

In the face of the simplistic nostrums of the New Right, the left is seen as being largely negative — reacting to events, opposing specific policies and initiatives, representing values which are not appealing to a significant number of people. The left seems unable to fashion the needs of its many parts into a coherent vision and philosophy.

The right has cleverly shifted the grounds of the political debate away from its traditional image of social conservatism and, representing powerful interests, to that of concern for the material well-being of individuals and families. That shift, and an appeal to selfish individualism, continues to allow them to dominate the tax debate.

Whereas socialism is undergoing a crisis, both in its theory and its application, the possibility for at least some
individuals to benefit materially under the strategies of the New Right means that it can draw a surprising level of support. Many people believe they stand to gain from deregulation and cutting personal income tax, while social wage benefits are more difficult to identify and quantify.

Moreover, while it is possible to demonstrate that a number of leading New Right figures are merely the old order in a new guise, Bjelke-Petersen is a more elusive figure.

Apart from the professionalism of his political machine, his own inadequacies of speech and manner, combined with his ability to articulate the concerns of many working people, and his image of strength and determination provide an empathetic figure for at least a significant minority of working people, particularly those with socially conservative values.

For instance, in the recent Queensland elections, many voters who had doubts about Bjelke-Petersen nevertheless must have been able to enjoy being part of “doing” professional pollsters and the media in the eye.

His supporters like to portray Bjelke-Petersen as a threat to the existing order not only to the Hawke government but also to established interests such as the professions, the media, trade unions and public servants. Frustration and anger about the failure of that “established order” to address social and economic problems, and the fact that he is a threat to those interests, may in itself generate support from people who ironically have most to lose. Their feelings of powerlessness and alienation, particularly if they feel the ALP no longer represents them, will contribute to that process.

Nor is it sufficient to expect that the extremism of many of the policies of the right will repel many of his potential supporters or that the actual experience of neo-conservative governments will produce a swing back in public opinion. Events in the US, UK and recently in West Germany testify to that.

Unpalatable though conservative policies in those countries may be, the left has been unable to develop credible alternatives. Put simply, the left is no longer the engine room of the ideas which directly and indirectly strongly influence social and political thought beyond its ranks.

To recapture this role, the left must engage in some free thinking and critical appraisal of its own policies. There is an urgent need to reconstruct a core set of socialist values and beliefs which address the central concerns of working people in their daily lives.

Socialist values must therefore address issues such as wealth creation, the national interest, productivity and specific industry measures, rather than being seen as concerned with only the redistribution of wealth, or single issues. This is particularly so when those issues can be portrayed as having a negative impact on growth and employment. By way of contrast, the work done in the environmental movement on specific and feasible economic alternatives to dams and logging forests in Tasmania is an important forward step.

Media and conservative attacks on the public sector cannot, of themselves, shift public perceptions about its performance. The attacks have been effective because they have fallen on fertile ground.

Too often, the left’s reluctance to address questions of the performance of the public sector, the need for restructuring, resource reallocation, waste and inefficiency leads to arguing for “more of the same” in the pursuit of an apparently abstract social goal. In the public sector, the left has been irrelevant in the inevitable restructuring which has taken place and has been unsuccessful in influencing broad public opinion about the need for an expanded public sector and an interventionist role for government.

One does not have to be an economic determinist to recognise the critical importance of economic policy to the credibility of a socialist stance.

Socialist ideology has had a measure of popular support in previous decades because it appeared to have a scientific basis, and because it afforded hope through collective action around basic economic and industrial issues. Certainly there is a need for a new style of politics which seeks to extend democratic practices and offers the possibility of personal growth and development — major current concerns. These concepts are not inimical to the socialist program which has an economic focus as its centre-piece.

In summary, if socialist renewal is to have a real meaning, I believe a consensus must emerge around priorities for socialism through a reappraisal of traditional left positions.

Peter Noonan

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