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Election Time

Whatever the result of the July 11 federal election, its outcome will be significant. If Labor wins it will be an historic event for a party deprived of office for much of its existence.

If John Howard wins, the effects will be far more profound. The Liberal leader and the forces behind him plan not just to proceed with new policies but to change the very terrain of politics itself.

A Howard government will attempt to roll back the unspoken consensus which grew from the postwar period - a consensus which (grudgingly) legitimised trade unions, assumed an extensive state intervention over industry, and provided a social wage in public services and a welfare safety net. Deep structural changes to this compromise, including privatisation, will be the order of the day.

Howard's determination to "hit the ground running" if elected is a reflection of a new spirit abroad in conservatism which is determined not to repeat the "pragmatism" of the Fraser government.

In this sense they are aiming for significant changes and the label (and image) of traditional conservatism inadequately describes them. The New Right's self projection as a radical and liberating force is something which needs to be taken seriously by the left and its allies.

The outcome of the election, then, will actually make a difference - something many of us disillusioned by Labor's performance tend to underrate. Many of Labor's supporters are angered by Labor's deregulatory policies, its toying with privatisation, its uranium sales to France, its cosy relationship with Murdoch - but if Howard wins, they'll find they haven't seen anything yet.

While Labor looked headed for defeat in 1985 and '86, this year has seen a growth in support for the government. How deep seated this support is, considering that some of its has been won by outdoing conservatism, is certainly open to question. This strategy has brought gains to Labor - and may even result in its third term - but at a far deeper shift in the political spectrum and mood of Australia.

For many, the emergence and popularity of Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen symbolises just how far things have drifted. Yet in terms of his larger project of creating a new conservative force using the raw material of the Nationals, the wheels have fallen off Joh's bandwagon. Unfortunately, the Labor leadership and many commentators have seen this only as a setback and have ignored the deeper process during the three month's of Joh-madness: with hindsight, this episode may well prove to be a clearing of the decks for the New Right, rather than a big setback.

Joh failed for two major reasons. The first is that he proved unable to unite the two major components of the New Right, the social conservatives where his own roots are, and the free marketeers - the latter being suspicious that his own practice showed he was not ideologically sound (as well as being ga-ga at times). Secondly, his narrow base in Queensland - won at the price of destroying the Liberals forced him to do severe damage to the federal coalition if he was to get anywhere. Hawke's election timing made maximum use of the dangers inherent in this attempt to re-order anti Labor politics.

If Labor wins, Joh's call for a new, radical conservative party could well re-emerge, though because of the first reason mentioned above it will still be unlikely to become dominant. Howard would probably be a casualty of a Labor victory, to be replaced by either Elliott or Peacock, with Joh taking Sinclair's position.

Another, more peripheral aspect of the election result, will be its effect on the process of renewal now under way on the Left. If Howard wins, Hawke and Keating will almost certainly disappear.
and their strategy of appeasing big business and conservative values will be modified or even substantially changed. But the upshot would be that Labor in opposition, after a period of recrimination and soul searching, would probably regain some of its crumbling grassroots support on its radical and labour movement flank. Thus the attractiveness of a new left party or movement would be diminished — a minor spinoff considering the destruction Howard will wreak, but a significant one in the longer attempt to reverse the tide of conservatism.

In a curious way, if Labor loses, it will be a victim of its own “success” in tailoring its policies to business and conservatism.

Two current examples further emphasise the oft repeated charge that Labor is actively consenting to pushing the political agenda further to the right. In the May economic statement, Treasurer Keating listed first among his spending cuts the abolition of the dole for 16 and 17 year olds. But as Ross Gittins pointed out in the Sydney Morning Herald this is more apparent than real. “The truth is that the youth dole has not been abolished. It’s merely had its name changed and been subject to a parental income test. The maximum rate for the new job search allowance is the same as the youth dole: $50 a week. But depending on the parents’ income, it may be reduced to a minimum of $25 a week. Changing the name of the youth dole will save the princely sum of $3m next financial year. Imposing a test on parental income will save $12m. Big bikkies to be listed as the first of the ‘main spending cuts’, eh?”

Gittins later points out that the mini budget increased spending on training schemes by $33m (and $63m the year after).

Keating deliberately crows about abolishing the youth dole, and Howard is happy to congratulate him on pinching a Liberal policy. But the more profound point is that Keating’s words, if not his action, have confirmed and encouraged all the conservative, mean prejudices which exist across the spectrum but which have been fuelled by the New Right. This announcement delivered a body blow to those disparate forces (like NSW Young Labor) who just a few months before had plastered Sydney with posters denouncing Howard’s pledge to abolish the youth dole.

A similar effect can be seen in the government’s actions toward the Industrial Relations Reform Bill which emerged from the Hancock committee. Not only was the Bill postponed when the election was called, but two key provisions were later ditched: a ban on employers’ use of common law for damages in favour of statutory fines; and the transfer of the secondary boycott provisions of the Trade Practices Act (45D and 45E) to the new Labour court.

Again, in the short term, it got the Confederation of Australian Industry off the government’s back (it was threatening a multimillion dollar campaign against the Bill during the election). And it put the Liberals on the back foot for a while.

But the price has been another big ideological concession which has helped to confirm widespread anti union prejudice. Moreover, it surrenders an opportunity to disarm employers of the dangerous weapon of civil damages — a decision which may have ramifications for decades.

* * *

At the same time, having been caught up very largely in the political culture of “betrayal”, the left has tended to ignore the significance of the Hawke government’s broader political strategy — and its effects on the structure of politics as a whole. The “pragmatism” of Hawke and Keating is not just electoral opportunism: it constitutes a very significant shift in the nature of the ALP as a party “representing” its electorate, in tune with the present dramatic shakedown of the party system as a whole.

Broadly speaking, the evolution of the ALP under the Hawke government fits the phenomenon often known overseas as “Eurosocialism” — a politics based upon non-ideological appeals to modernisation and efficiency, to national unity, to the workers in the “new industries”; and upon looser (or no) ties with union movements. This is the course which has been followed
more or less closely by the Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and French socialist parties over the last decade — and to some extent by Pasok in Greece as well. Older style “labourist” parties, such as British Labour, which have resisted this trend (represented in Britain by the SDP), have tended to be crowded out of the political mainstream and portrayed as “extremist”.

But where the “Eurosocialist” parties have generally had only qualified success in this transition from class and constituency-based parties to parties of “national unity”, the ALP has been rather more successful. In large part this can be explained by its continued close ties with a single central trade union body — a relationship which, in recent years, has actually become a closer one, but which has, at the same time, been renegotiated very much in the government's favour. Without the continued credibility of its claim to a special relationship with the unions, promising to the more moderate employers industrial peace in tandem with “wage restraint”, the ALP would undoubtedly be entering the present election campaign as a non-starter.

To this extent, the evolution of the ALP in government has been a simple one: a renewed and reordered contract with the unions, coupled with a loosening of ties both with its “traditional constituencies” and the newer constituencies consolidated during the Whitlam era. In a sense, this has been less of a political realignment as such than a reordering of the relationship between party and supporters.

In an era when traditional political loyalties are weaker than they once were, and where electoral volatility is demonstrably high, the Hawke-Keating strategy of recasting the ALP in the role of national saviour clearly makes sense in its own terms. And certainly the success of this supremely apolitical strategy has further highlighted the problems of a left (and left ideas) very largely confined to the margins of political debate. Yet it bears saying that the creation of a popular consensus around a new progressive democracy. The contract provisions are likely to reduce the employment conditions of private and public sector workers and undermine existing union organisation.

Changes to the Industrial (Commercial Practices) Act

This act was introduced in 1984 and subsequently amended in 1985. Initially, it was a state version of the secondary boycott provisions of sections 45D and 45E of the Commonwealth Trade Practices Act. In 1985, during the SEQEB dispute, the legislation was changed far beyond the original intention. Penalties were applied to “primary disputes” between a union and employer which involved superannuation, union membership or demarcation. Moreover, unions and workers became responsible for any dispute for which seven days' notice was not given. Cases were heard in the Supreme Court, not the Industrial Court, the process of granting injunctions and suing for damages was simplified, with maximum penalties of $250,000 for unions and $50,000 for individuals.

This year's amendments further increase the severity of the legislation. First, the liability of unions and workers for disputes involving superannuation, union preference and membership has been tightened. Second, disputes concerning "trade or commerce" and "research or development" are now liable to penalty. Trade or commerce definitely includes interstate and overseas transactions; it is possible that the provision could cover any trading within the state. The definition of "research and development" is also exceptionally broad and includes acquiring, increasing, using, providing and disseminating information or knowledge as well as introducing or changing machinery or technology. Effectively, any "knowledge" or communication activity is encompassed, and all but the most trivial change in organisation or equipment.

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David McKnight and David Burchell.

**Laws Unto Themselves**

In April, the Queensland government introduced two pieces of legislation into parliament which affect all union members in the state. Amendments to the Industrial (Commercial Practices) Act were rushed through parliament in around two hours without prior public notice; these are now law. Amendments to the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act to introduce "voluntary employment agreements" or contracts were tabled and it is the government's intention to have them passed in August. The changes are the most radical restructuring of industrial relations in the state since the introduction of conciliation and arbitration in 1916. The anti-strike provisions of the Commercial Practices legislation are some of the most severe of any western
In a concurrent amendment to the Conciliation and Arbitration Act, the Industrial Commission’s discretion has been significantly reduced. In making awards concerning “research and development” the commission shall not be bound by custom or practice, previous decisions or precedents, nor have regard to other awards. This shall apply whenever an employer is spending, or is proposing to spend, more than $500,000 over three years on research and development or more than $50,000 on changing equipment.

Further changes are that seven days’ notice in writing of proposed strike action must be provided to the employer, the Minister and to “every person ... likely to suffer loss ... who has notified ... that he desires to have prior notice of any strike”. Once a union has been asked to give notice (and some government authorities are already asking) the union is liable for all disputes involving its members. Other changes alter the way court cases are conducted; matters will be heard by a judge sitting without a jury and media reports shall be prima facie evidence and accepted as fact unless union spokespersons prove that they were misreported. The Minister is empowered to give financial aid to persons seeking to bring proceedings under the Act, and, if a union successfully defends itself, no costs can be awarded against those who brought the case.

The contracts legislation

The contract legislation provides for the replacement of industrial awards by “voluntary agreements”. These may be made between an employer and a union or between an employer and at least 60 percent of employees in an enterprise or occupational calling. The contract will bind all the employees in the enterprise, not only those in favour of it. In the case of a new enterprise, the employer can decide, without involving a union, to offer employment on contract terms rather than award conditions.
matters will not be included in contracts — such as leave loading, accouchement and paternity leave.

Owing to the shortage of space caused by our "Left Reading" feature, ALR's letters page has had to be held over until the next issue.

We welcome your letters for the next issue, due out in August. As a general rule, letters should be no longer than 250 words and, preferably, should be typewritten. ALR reserves the right to edit letters down to this length.

Authors' addresses and a contact phone number should be included although, naturally, they will not be printed.

The deadline for letters for the next issue is Monday, 27 July.

Express encouragement is given to house or enterprise unions. The Industrial Registrar is obliged to register any organisation which is "nominated in a voluntary employment agreement as the representative of the employees, subject to that agreement". This is particularly potent since contracts in new enterprises can be unilateral employer documents. Membership of the organisation will be restricted to those people working under the contract. Of course, this does not prevent people joining industrial unions. However, the ability of existing unions to service their members is substantially reduced; they cannot represent members working under a contract and the rights of officials to enter the workplace are restricted. In addition, the contents of agreements are secret, even though they are vested in the Industrial Commission. And if that is not enough, any disputes relating to contracts are subject to the provisions of the Industrial (Commercial Practices) Act and potential fines of $250,000.

— Howard Guille.

Educating Queensland

While Joh Bjelke-Petersen has been trying to save face at the federal level, his lieutenants in Queensland have been quietly but persistently getting on with the job. On April Fools Day, Education Minister Lin Powell tabled in the state parliament a series of proposals to amend the Education Act. Under these proposals, the 1964 Education Act would have the following enabling clause added to its title: "to provide the means whereby the State may exercise more effectively its plenary powers in the area of Education".

What this means, in effect, is that if these proposals are passed and the Act amended, then the existing bodies such as the Boards of Teacher Education, Advanced Education and Secondary School Studies will be abolished and replaced by an amalgamated body to be known as the Council of Accredited Courses in Post-Compulsory Education. This is to consist of fourteen (14) persons, all of whom are to be appointed on the recommendation of the Minister. At the time of writing the identity of these persons is unknown.

There will also be a new body called the Council of Non-Government Education (function and personnel unknown) and another called the Council for Education for Economic Development (function and personnel unknown). President of the Queensland Teachers Union (QTU),
Mary Kelly, has said that these sweeping changes "could mean increased political interference in areas such as curriculum in schools and colleges, teacher registration, college budgets and tertiary entrance".

Under present arrangements, all of these areas are dealt with by three independent boards. In the future, this independence is likely to disappear and the Education Minister will have the capacity for direct supervision and control of what is taught, how it is taught, and who teaches it — even to the extent that he will be able to appoint the unions' representative to the new council. This Course Accreditation Council will, in turn, have no real powers and will act in a largely advisory capacity to the Minister.

The vagueness concerning the actual composition of the various boards is compounded by mysteries concerning the criteria for membership of them. At present, for example, the Board of Secondary School Studies has 22 members, at least eight of whom must be teachers. The Queensland Teachers Union has two direct nominees and the Queensland Association of Teachers in Independent Schools (QATIS) has one nominee. University Senates are also entitled to nominate their own representatives. The new Course Accreditation Council will have a reduced membership and no guaranteed *bona fide* union representation as the bill proposes now a person "primarily involved with a union of employees". As Lyn Taylor of the QTU put it, "Which union and how 'primarily involved with' are defined is apparently a matter for the Minister's discretion".

On the Non-State Education Advisory Council, there will be eleven persons, seven of whom are "involved with non-State education" and two of whom are "involved in community activities". Unions will have no representation on this body and all members will be appointed on the recommendation of the Minister.

The Education for Economic Development Council will consist of 16 persons, again on ministerial recommendation, without guaranteed union representation, but with representation from Vince Lester's Department of Employment and Industrial Affairs, source of that other contemporary piece of anti-democratic legislation on strikes.

There are also changes to the wording of sections of the Act dealing with Technical and Further Education (TAFE) which, according to Lyn Taylor of the QTU, may point towards a strategy for the privatisation of TAFE or parts of it. When this is combined with the Bond University, we can be fairly sure that the structure of education in Queensland is being prepared for a major political and economic overhaul in tune with strategies of privatisation and the search for "economic development".

It is clear that these amendments to the Act are more about power and preparing the ground for such strategies than they are about making the administration more efficient and streamlined. Under this new system, for example, Lin Powell would have no more worries about the recurrence of old disputes over courses like MAGOS and SEMP, nor about sex education, AIDS education, creationism or anything else. This is for the simple reason that there will be no institutional and independent mechanism through which these disputes could arise. Crucial areas concerning cultural, educational, moral and political formation in secondary and tertiary sectors will be placed directly in the hand of the Minister's appointed bodies without recourse to any independent assessment or professional scrutiny.

The progressive Defence of Education Standards Coalition (DOES) has also predicted that the "changed structures could result in political interference in areas such as which course will be taught in school and colleges and which people could be registered to teach". Commenting on this, Mary Kelly has added that "Standards will fall if politicians and their hand-chosen mouthpieces are permitted to usurp professional representatives from the education community in these decisions".

The QTU, QATIS, DOES and many Parents and Citizens Associations have protested strongly at Powell's proposed amendments. There has been a picket of state parliament and a meeting with the Minister to make clear the level of professional and community opposition to his plans. His one concession to date has been to clarify that it was never his intention to exercise his new jurisdiction over private schools!

As in the sphere of industrial relations, the Queensland government is now apparently well on its way to establishing unmediated political power in the strategic field of education. Given the normal practices and procedures of the Queensland parliament, the Bill is likely to be passed unless, through concerted opposition, Powell can be pressured by unions, community groups and professional educators into dropping the proposals.

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**ALR’s turned 100!**

... and to celebrate, we’re having a party in three cities.

*In Sydney,* at the Harold Park Hotel in Glebe, on Tuesday, 30 June, from 6 pm; *in Melbourne,* at Democritus House, 193 Nicholson St, Carlton on Friday, 3 July at 6.30 pm; *and in Brisbane* at the Stock Exchange Hotel, 131 Edward Street, City, on Thursday, July 16, at 7.30 pm.

All *ALR* readers are welcome. For the Sydney bash, this is your invitation: bring it along. We’ll see you there!
Public culture and opinion is ambiguous about unions. Two examples spring to mind. The Hancock Committee of Review of Australian Industrial Law and Systems said that “the role of trade unions is accepted and endorsed within our society”. It also reported that there was a considerable public distaste for industrial action. The second example is that similar proportions of Australians belong to unions and profess allegiance to churches and organised religion.

Yet it extremely unlikely that the Queensland or any other government would even consider, let alone gain support for, curtailing the activities of churches. Church and religion are culturally legitimate, trade unions are not. A relevant indication of the position of unions in the public culture is their treatment in soap opera and television drama. There are almost no occasions in such programs when someone, as a matter of course, says they have been to a union meeting or talked to their delegate. Compare this with the frequency with which church attendance and participation are mentioned as unexceptional events.

The lack of legitimation of unions and unionism is particularly serious now that overt anti-union sentiments are being voiced. Notably, there is little reflex opposition, even by many union members, to criticism of unions and union activity. In considering programs to advance acceptance and
recognize recognition of unionism, it is instructive to consider the success of Aborigines and women in raising the level of black and feminist consciousness. The successes of these two groups, even though discrimination has not been eliminated, have been marked. At the very least, public anti-black and anti-women sentiments are unacceptable and those espousing them criticized.

The underlying theme of this article is the need to legitimise unions and unionism in Australian workplaces and the public culture. This requires the development among the members of unions of what will be termed "union consciousness". It is in three parts: the future facing unions in Australia, using the example of Queensland in particular, the major influences affecting that future, and the range of strategies available to unions in determining their own future.

The starting point is to outline three alternative futures. These are drawn from the experiences of other places, though it is not argued that what happens overseas will necessarily happen in Australia. Set out in a stylised manner the three futures are:

The Silicon Future
* no or very limited union membership
* unions in traditional industries
* conservative and timid rump unionism
* management in high technology and service sectors successful in maintaining union-free workplaces.

The Volvo Future
* high level of voluntary unionism
* high level of membership participation
* innovative and self-confident unionism
* management negotiating with workplace union representatives on technology, work organisation, health and safety and investment.

The Hyundai Future
* house or enterprise unionism
* restricted industry or national organisation
* enterprise based welfare arrangements

Each of these solutions is an amalgam of the trends and ideas in particular places; they are not descriptions of actual and existing arrangements. The Silicon Future draws on trends in California and the Southern United States where, despite a few successes, union membership is low and collective bargaining limited. In Houston, Texas, which is the centre of space research, only some four percent of the workforce belongs to unions; some years ago, the only union in Silicon Valley was that covering the few public bus drivers.

While the Volvo Future draws on the Nordic experience, workers in Sweden, Norway, and Finland do not live in an industrial and political Nirvana. Nonetheless, in Sweden for example, 85 percent of the workforce are union members; there are sustained educational activities for all union members; and it is a legal requirement that employers negotiate with the workplace representatives before making any changes in work organisation or technology. On the other hand—and it is a salutary warning—the mayhem of rightwing governments in Denmark has, in a decade, destroyed the economic and social fabric of a progressive welfare democracy.

The Hyundai Future is based on trends in Japan, South Korea, and the industrialising nations of South East Asia. The apparently consensual employer-employee relations are based on house or enterprise unions (there are at least 50,000 such unions in Japan) which have limited inter-industry solidarity. Political organisation is also limited and there is little prospect of reforming left governments gaining office. In part, this results from the destruction of the strong leftwing and communist unions in the 1940s and 1950s. It also results from the wooing by welfare of permanent or "life-time" workers; much of this has been at the expense of immigrant and women workers in the temporary sector.

Before considering what unions can do to affect the future, it is useful to examine the economic context in which they are operating and the demands of the conservative forces. Here, the most salutary example of the pressures on trade unionism is Queensland, and I shall preface my
THE AMALGAMATED METAL WORKERS UNION

congratulates the *Australian Left Review* on twenty-five years of covering the political and social issues of the left in Australia. The union hopes the *ALR* will continue to examine problems of vital concern to the broad masses of Australian working people. We look forward to helping the *ALR* celebrate its fiftieth anniversary.

THE BUILDING WORKERS INDUSTRIAL UNION

would like to congratulate the *Australian Left Review* on reaching its hundredth issue, and wishes it continued success for its 2nd hundred.
discussion of the Australian situation with a short outline of the factors influential in the Queensland example—factors which have made it the leading edge of the anti-union assault.

The first important factor is that in Queensland manufacturing is a less important part of the economy than in New South Wales and Victoria. Moreover, much of the manufacturing consists of low level processing of agricultural and mineral commodities. In consequence, there is a lower level of skills, the manufacturing sector is less dynamic and is a less substantial base for the union movement. A second feature is that there was an over-expansion in the so-called resources boom; job losses are occurring in heavy engineering and electricity generation and are prospective in construction. More generally, high unemployment is endemic and there are limited new job opportunities. This is especially marked in the provincial areas and even in areas such as Mackay and the Bowen Basin which developed extremely rapidly in the 1970s.

The Queensland economy is highly administered with an intricate net of regulations involving the government, public service, statutory authorities and autonomous agencies. This combines with the significance of "rents" from minerals and land development as sources of corporate and personal profit. Furthermore, the regulations themselves provide opportunity for rent incomes. For example, CSR Ltd has included the value of cane assignments in the selling price of Goondi Mill. Even the Lindeman Island affray can be seen in such terms. Arrangements of this kind make the whole system attractive to corruption and "insider" dealing. In Queensland, it is important to have someone to guide you through the system. As a corollary, those outside the system which, virtually by definition, includes unions, are placed at a decided disadvantage.

These economic factors, taken together, are corrosive of unionism. In particular, the industrial power of unions has been reduced and it is more difficult to establish breakthrough agreements and to achieve general improvements in wages and conditions. Furthermore, unions and the public service have become ready targets for the deregulators and free marketeers. In addition, since unemployment bears hardest on the young, not only are there fewer new entrants for unions to recruit, but also young people are susceptible to the blandishments of anti-unionism. This is made worse by the increased significance of "grace and favour" arrangements in obtaining employment. The majority of people obtain employment through "contacts", not through application for openly advertised positions. Research shows this to be especially true with "small businesses" whose proprietors are also, by and large, the most prone to discrimination and anti-union sentiments. In such circumstances, whom one knows, and what attitudes one professes will be critical in getting, or not getting, a job.

The motives of the conservatives

The demands of the conservative forces are being made in a context which is highly unfavourable for unions. The conservative demands vary from "the control of the excesses of unions" to the complete "freedom for the first time in a hundred years, the prospect of a 'union-free' economy is being actively pursued in Australia"

there are almost no occasions in soap operas or television dramas when someone, as a matter of course, says they have been to a union meeting...

breakthrough from unions". For the first time for 100 years, the prospect of a "union-free economy" is being actively pursued in Australia. Many of the established employer groups eschew the most extreme of the conservative provisions and accept the need for unions. However, the extreme positions make the established employers appear almost respectable and it needs to be remembered that all employer groups support the use of common law and commercial law actions against unions. While unions may wish to make common cause with the established employers against the extreme right, this should not be allowed to be seen as endorsement for deregulatory "reforms". Indeed, the differences within the conservative forces may be more apparent than real.

As well as understanding what the conservatives want, it is useful to understand their motives. For one group, the main objective is personal profit; this is the province of the "white shoe brigade". These are local "entrepreneurs" pursuing speculative and development opportunities which are frequently aided by contact with government sources. Unions, environmental groups and democratic politics are obstacles to the pursuit of private gain. Queensland anti-union legislation is seen as one way of removing some of these obstacles.
THE BUILDING WORKERS INDUSTRIAL UNION

Queensland Branch

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wishes for the second hundred.

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State Secretary

A J McLean
State President

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UACA

Union of College Academics

The Union of Australian College Academics representing 6,500 advanced education teachers and researchers congratulates ALR on the occasion of its hundredth issue. As a union committed to universal free public education and a growing public sector, we have found ALR's consistent and progressive editorial stance on these issues to be commendable. Many of our members, in a variety of discipline areas, find ALR a useful reference source for objective and informed debate on social and political issues.

Keep up the good work!

GRAHAIME McCULLOCH
GENERAL SECRETARY
The second objective is the maintenance and expansion of profits in the corporate sector. While the Australian economy is dominated by a few large corporate groups there is considerably more competition between them than previously. This stems, among other things, from changes in levels of protection, greater linkage with the world economy and the increased emphasis on financial performance. These changes have made increased productivity and reduced unit-costs more urgent issues for management. At the same time, the emphasis on financial performance has meant that accounting targets are set for the corporation as a whole and for its constituent parts. Management has become more concerned with finance and less concerned with production and personnel. As accountants, and those with finance-first attitudes, displace technically oriented managers (and this is one of the first consequences of most take-overs), attitudes to unions tend to become more intractable.

the Japanese future is the most likely. Unions are in a weak position to challenge it ...
officials, have internalised their membership and obligations to the union movement is an open question.

There are also some organisational and structural weaknesses impeding unions. Almost all unions have a majority of their members in a few locations and a long tail of sites with a few members. In consequence, they have logistical difficulties in servicing all their membership. Those members in the scattered locations are often in too small numbers to form effective workplace groups. In multi-union workplaces there is, by and large, little encouragement to form joint-union bodies. Thus, even in large workplaces, some union members may be isolated. Those who are isolated, whether by distance or organisational structures are all the more prone to the blandishments of employers and the temptations of house unionism. In the forthcoming world of secret ballots, not only will they be less likely to vote, but their voting intention will be less predictable. More generally, their continued membership cannot be guaranteed if they have neither the incentive of preference nor the visit of a union official.

There are four broad strategies open to unions to avoid the Silicon or Hyundai futures. These are:

1. Slog it out.
   This means competing in authoritarianism with employers and by industrial campaigns forcing the abandonment of anti-union developments. It is for unions to assess the probability of success. However, the outcomes in the United Kingdom and, more recently, in France, suggest caution. Moreover, even if unions were successful, this would only be the stimulus for a more determined conservative assault.

2. Wait it out.
   This strategy might find favour with those who rely on political initiatives. Essentially it involves waiting for the demise of conservative government in Queensland in particular, or a change in direction on the part of the federal government. As well as assessing the likelihood of the former event it is worthwhile considering whether matters would be all that different. This is not to suggest that a Labor government would be anti-union but, rather, for the present at least, the climate of ideas has moved against centralism, regulation and legislatively supported unionism. Increasingly, the effectiveness of unions will be proportional to the level of willing involvement of their members.

3. Repackage unions.
   Some people are arguing that the unions' problem is their “image” which should be remodelled and promoted through slick promotional campaigns. This is likely to be of dubious effect. Most promotion campaigns act to reinforce established attitudes rather than fundamentally redirect them.

4. New old-fashioned unionism.
   The basis of this would be to renew the basic strengths of unions. These are involved members and a sustained belief in collectivism. Three tests of these are, first, when

Likewise, most advertising and packaging is directed at selling brands of an already acceptable product. Advertising and sports sponsorship does not sell beer; it seeks market share for XXXX, Swan or Fosters. Something similar might be possible for individual unions—one union could mount an effective campaign to recruit members from another. This is very different from promoting unionism in general. In essence, the capitalist market system is individualistic and it is implausible that a collective idea such as unionism can be marketed through conventional consumerist channels.
members thinkingly agree (or disagree) with union recommendations; second, when it becomes a reflex action to buy union-made goods and services; third, when, as a matter of course, union members should extend to families as well as work groups. This is imperative if the blandishments of enterprise unions are to be countered.

Unions should be concentrating their activity on existing members and potential members. It is not feasible to convert rural fundamentalists, who do not all reside in the country, to unionism. Some of the potential members are working in almost union-free industries of which the recreation and service sectors are prominent cases. Others, however, are working in industries which are apparently more highly unionised. For example, only 50 per cent of employees in manufacturing are union members. Two other groups of potential members are important: first, young entrants to the workforce who have had next to no exposure to unions in their school or tertiary education. The second group are women returning to the labour force after a period of child rearing. Women comprise over 40 per cent of the workforce and something like 17 workforce and something like 75 per cent of all women have one or more periods out of the workforce. On each occasion they need to be convinced to rejoin a union.

Another aspect of new old-fashioned unionism is to adopt the new technologies and the new styles. Personal and individualised letters, membership cards and invitations are readily produced on quite cheap computer equipment. So, too, are effective publications. This is not a matter of replacing old ideas with new ones, but of putting new fashions and styles to work for the old ideas. Perhaps, for example, T-shirts, posters as good as record covers, and badges which compete with costume jewellery need to be investigated — even union badges which can also be used as ear-studs.

A third aspect of this renewed unionism is to “know your enemies”. The seductive charms of personnel practices and human resource management have already been noted. One can add to this the complete trust in the market which is imbibed by economists and which they transmit readily and freely. This is not a matter of individuals — though care in choosing advice and consultants is important — but of combating ideas and ideologies. The market and individualism are core parts of the school and tertiary education systems and trade unions need to consider ways and means of ensuring a balance.

This leads to the final aspect which is the development of alternative ideas. The free market approach and anti-unionism are attractive because they are being advanced as solutions to economic stagnation and unemployment. The so-called “rightwing think-tanks” have been an active part of this. Unless alternative ideas are developed and expounded, those of the right will prevail. In other words, one of the longer-term aspects of new old-fashioned unionism must be to provide members with a coherent set of ideas about the diseconomies of market society. People join unions for security, but they also join them to achieve real improvements in their lives. Unions which maintain the interest of their members will, of necessity, be unions which are espousing feasible change.

Summary

Of necessity, a lot has been left unsaid in this article. Unions need to address the problems of “no-strike” contracts and “single-union” agreements which are being preferred by Japanese companies and by the Murdoch group in the United Kingdom. These are attractive to some unions there and are promoting strong divisions between unions. Unions also need to address the practicalities of inter-organisational co-operation and to develop common positions towards management initiatives. In many respects, however, these will develop more easily out of a renewed level of identification by workers, first with their own union and then with unionism in general.

HOWARD GUtte teaches industrial relations at Brisbane CAE.
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AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY is ‘a
publication, I might say, not noted
for its intellectual rigour. Indeed, it
is about as lacking in intellectual
rigour as some of the work that is
poured out by the ratbag right via
the National Farmers' Federation
and the Centre of Policy Studies...
I am talking about the intellectual
non-rigour of the bourgeois left as
against the intellectual non-rigour
of the ratbag right’.
SENATOR PETER WALSH,
MINISTER FOR FINANCE,
HANSARD, 11 MAY 1987
There are thousands of women active in trade unions, yet the image of industrial relations and unionism as a male preserve still lingers. Who decides the issues, strategies and tactics which unions pursue? Do women unionists see things differently? What constitutes a feminist approach to wages?

In this roundtable five women activists spoke with Louise Connor about their approaches to key issues facing unions. The participants are:
Irene Bolger .................. Victorian Secretary, Royal Australian Nursing Federation
Joan Corbett ............. . .......... Women's Officer, Australian Teachers Federation
Brenda Forbath ........... Organiser, Hospital Employees' Federation, (No 1 Branch) Vic
Anna Kokkinos .......................... Solicitor, Slater & Gordon Industrial Unit
Ann Sherry .................. Occupational Health & Safety Officer,
                         Administrative & Clerical Officers Association, Vic Branch
Louise Connor is an Industrial Officer with the Australian Journalists Association in Victoria and a member of the ALR Collective.

Louise began by asking how the current two tier wages system affects women workers.
Anna Kokkinos: One of the ACTU's major selling points of the two-tier system is that it is going to benefit low-paid workers, in particular, women. I disagree with this assessment because, essentially, it is a wage restraint strategy that has been introduced by the ACTU and the Labor government to ensure a certain level of wages outcome which is within the Commonwealth's budget priorities.

The basic premise of this system is that, in the past, wage increases have been too high. So, in order to recover and rectify, for example, balance of payments problems, wage restraint is necessary. I would argue that wages are not a determinant in that problem.

One of the major reasons we have a balance of payments crisis is that we have a massive investment strike by capital and, instead, money has been used for mergers, takeovers and speculative gains, which have increased the balance of payments problem because they add to the public and private overseas debt.

The union movement has not attacked that basic premise. It has not argued forcefully that wages are not the cause of the problem and that wage restraint is not going to be the answer to getting us out of the economic recession.

Essentially, some really important issues about the way in which women's work has been undervalued over a long period of time are not going to be considered under these current wage-fixing principles. We've been told, for example, that supplementary payments are the answer for women in various industries getting access to over-award payments. This was one of the ACTU's big selling points of the two-tier system. But, in any event, I do not believe that supplementary payments will be the answer to redressing the historical inequities and discrepancies which exist in respect to women's pay.

But I certainly welcome a flat increase as opposed to a percentage increase because it is progressive in terms of low-paid workers.

Louise Connor: Instead of arguing that a two-tier system was the only way to guarantee any money wage rises in the face of a government strategy to reduce wages, what could the ACTU have done to redress inequities?

Ann Sherry: The position could have been argued quite differently. The ACTU could have said that workers shouldn't bear the brunt of the current recession and should be entitled to reasonable pay for the work they do. It is difficult to accept that workers have to pay more than
any other group for the current economic problems, and
women workers even more so because they are clustered
in particular groups of industries that are lower-paid than
all others.

The national wage decision does not allow, for
instance, for comparable worth cases or for arguments to
be mounted about the value of work done by those
groups of workers. Instead, you have to show that there is
an anomaly or special case. The principles in the current
guidelines will make even that more difficult than before
and, in addition, a ceiling of four percent has been set on
pay rises. We have been sold a lemon.

Brenda Forbath: In a sense, the decision simply
entrenches historical differences in wage rates. While it
might give lower-paid workers more of an increase than
they might otherwise get, it doesn’t leave any room to
question why certain groups of workers get paid so
poorly. Unless we are able to work that into our wages
strategy, I do not think we will really change anything.

Irene Bolger: This is not arrogance on our part, but we
just sat up and bit them. The Industrial Relations
Commission, the government and the ACTU wanted to
accuse us of being naive and not knowing the system
which, to them, was a real put-down. Of course we knew
the system, but we ignored it because it was their rules
and their system — and we decided that it was time to
chuck their rules out of the door. So our members didn’t
show lack of care about the system through naivety but
because they were fed up.

At our mass meeting in January we had members
saying that we shouldn’t have to give a no extra claims
commitment for two years, and commenting on the two-
tier system. A year ago our members would not have
known about these issues. They have been educated by

In a sense the two-tier system simply
entrenches historical differences in wage
rates”

the campaign and are starting to be much more aware of
what the Accord was, what the current principles are and
what a two-tier system means. So, one of the points I
wanted to make is that we have to start to educate people
at the grass roots about what wages strategies are.

LC: Can we define a feminist wages strategy?

Anna: One of the dangers of the two-tier system is that it
focuses totally on wages and nothing else. One of the
advantages I saw in the Accord, despite certain criticisms,
was that we could talk about things other than wages,
such as the social wage. Conveniently, that has been
dropped in determining incomes policy.

We should not allow ourselves to be locked into a
traditional view of wages but, rather, look at the whole
issue of the distribution of income and how that works in
the public and private sectors in relation to the amount of
expendable income people have and living standards
generally. Living standards are judged not just by the
amount of wages people receive.

Ann: An issue I would like to see incorporated into a
feminist wages strategy is the control of prices, because it
is absurd to talk about a wages strategy without talking
about some sort of prices control. We are constantly
chasing our tails, despite having an alleged Prices and
Incomes Accord in place for a number of years.

Joan Corbett: Certainly, the provision of child care,
education and education-related services relates directly
to wages. They determine who is able to work and in which
occupations.

“under the Accord we could talk about
things other than wages, such as the
social wage. Conveniently, this has now
been dropped”

We also have to focus on some of the mechanisms
which have been relatively successful for women in other
government programs. Family allowances, for example,
are a really useful form of income which have a very
direct bearing on women’s welfare and living standards,
even though they have never been indexed for price
movements.

Irene: There are practical things that can be done about a
couple of the issues which have been mentioned — prices
and child care.

Women could get their act together right across
Australia and really keep an eye on prices and do
something physical about rises, like organising boycotts
of goods.

I also think we should mount a national campaign
about child care. I have been through this problem when
my child was young and while I now don’t have to worry
about child care, I can assure you it is still in the forefront
of my mind because it was so difficult to cope with having
a child and working.

I think we do really take such a soft line about child
care. We back off so quickly and let ourselves get tied into
having to get government grants and having to justify the
existence of child care centres. By the time you get all
your submissions together and send them in to get a
grant, everybody is sick to death and too tired so it just
falls into a big heap.

We must start looking at strategies for addressing
some of these issues that are sidelines to the wages issue,
but mean real gains for women.

Brenda: Working within the union movement structures
to try to get these initiatives is absolutely vital. But the
crucial issue is, in fact, to change the grass roots. While
traditional union structures are important, we also have
to go outside them because, in fact, one of the major
problems has always been the distinction between waged
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and non-wage people — and this is a critical issue for women.

Traditionally, the union movement has never come to grips with the fact that there is a whole range of people who are not seen as part of their constituency. Certainly, one of the strategies we must adopt is to make unions raise, on a day-to-day basis, the practical issues which people feel they can be involved in.

**LC:** Is there a place for flat rate wage increases in a feminist wages strategy?

**Joan:** My own feeling is that there is a place at the moment for flat rate increases. I can see some merit in this measure in a situation where none of the best possible options is happening. It is a mechanism that at least ensures some kind of fundamental improvement in living standards for the people most in need. But the extent to which it makes sense as an ongoing strategy is very difficult to judge.

**Ann:** In public sector unions there has been a debate over a long time on this question because the ACOA, for example, covers people who earn from $13,000 to $60,000 per year. The bulk of the members earn below $25,000 per year.

There has been support for flat dollar increases because the disparity between the people at the bottom and the top has just blown out of all proportion. But the support for a flat rate is stimulated by the absence of a coherent broad wages strategy. It is a way of keeping some people off the poverty line.

But this debate has also focussed on social wage issues and I do not think that the notion of flat rate increases should really be countenanced without talking about all the other things outside money that affect people’s living standards.

**LC:** Is there a role for centralised wage fixing in a feminist wages strategy?

**Joan:** From a public sector unionist’s position, the reality is that the alternatives to centralised wage fixing for the public sector are pretty hopeless. Public sector workers haven’t done well in any of the systems that depend on free bargaining. We have a vested interest in a centralised wage fixing mechanism surviving in some way especially since an alternative strategy has not appeared.

Collective (industry by industry) bargaining processes can have the effect of exaggerating wage relativities for industrially strong or strategic unions compared with unions that are difficult to organise or less politically or economically influential. But I get very pissed off with the argument that, to protect women workers, we have to wear whatever the ACTU determines.

**Ann:** Do we have to have a centralised wage fixing system that is as narrow as the one we have at the moment? One of the problems with centralised wage fixing is that it has very narrow terms of reference.

On the one hand, there are arguments for maintaining a form of centralised wage fixing that reflects early twentieth century arbitration decisions; that is, wage fixing based on the notion of a male breadwinner earning a family wage. On the other hand, there is talk about the capacity to bargain outside centralised wage fixing which obviously benefits strong male-dominated unions.

**LC:** What do we do about some of the sacred cows of unionism in Australia, such as relativities? One of the things served up to women when we talk of upgrading low-paid jobs is that sections of the union movement will not tolerate relativities being eroded. They will argue that if they have traditionally received more than a particular group of workers, they will fight to keep that gap.

**Brenda:** You can’t just introduce a system that is going to challenge relativities without there being an acceptance that work is going to be re-evaluated in some way. It requires a willingness on the part of the trade union movement to debate the question of wage relativities over time. It involves a total change of thinking about wages systems.

**Ann:** I don’t think high-paid workers would totally reject changes to relativities if the arguments were clearly spelled out to them. There has been a huge blowing out of relativities over time and some unions are now starting to face that. The restructuring processes that are going on in the public service in terms of broadbanding will improve the lot of lower-paid workers. The membership of the unions involved has accepted it.

**Joan:** It means building solidarity among trade unionists. There is some indication that it can be done in the discussions about the two-tier wages system. There is a willingness to give priority to the lowest paid workers. There is an old Australian attitude of let’s look after the underdog. In any case, it is something we have to deal with through sensible education within the union movement.

The ACTU needs to develop a strategy that reflects the interests of the member unions. Over the past ten years, women have increased their numbers in unions.
The ACTU has not come to terms with the fact that its constituency is changing and that it is time to start reflecting that.

Anna: What really determines the role of centralised wage fixing is the relative strengths of capital and labour at any given time. When the union movement is disunited or weak, the wages outcomes it can achieve, and its impact on other issues is generally a lot less than what can be gained from a position of strength. Where unions are organised and are on the political and industrial offensive, the Arbitration Commission responds.

So it comes back to organising, because the commission will never, of its own volition, come up with anything decent unless it is under pressure from the union movement.

Ann: If the alternative to centralised wage fixing is free bargaining, or industry by industry bargaining, then some way of uniformly achieving wage rises across industries is important. So I must admit that there is a role for a centralised wage fixing process, though not necessarily as it exists at the moment. Otherwise, we could see workers in strong industries who are well organised, and with unions which are prepared to bite the bullet and represent their members' interests, getting much greater gains than workers in other industries where, for a whole range of reasons, they would not be prepared to take industrial action.

The reality for many women workers is that they are confined to industries where labour is poorly organised or represented by unions that are industrially weak or lack the will to pursue wages gains for their members.

Joan: Of course, there is a counter-argument and that is, given what has happened to women's wages over this last period, it wouldn't take them too terribly long, in the absence of centralised wage fixing, to really get up and fight. The evidence of the Victorian nurses' dispute is interesting because it broke all the rules. But they were under enormous pressure for a long time and do you wish that amount of hardship on any group of women workers?

Ann: The nurses also had a leadership with the political will to do it, as well as tremendous public support.

"while traditional union structures are important, we also have to go outside them"

Brenda: There had been a big campaign built up within the nursing profession over years about what they were going for in terms of wage justice. At the same time, it is a highly unionised field with large workplaces, which makes it easier to organise.

Ann: But there are many other groups of women workers who are represented by unions without the political will to make real gains for their members. Any feminist wages strategy must look at the unions that represent women and whether they are a stumbling block to wage justice for those workers.

LC: Ann, you mentioned earlier the increasing participation of women in unions and the movement's inability to reflect this. How can we focus on this?

Ann: The way to bring it home is to organise activity by women workers that cuts across union barriers. The comparable worth campaign had the potential to do this. But the ACTU made little effort to organise information out to its affiliates on the details of the case, and its implications for women workers. The comparable worth case, as with previous equal pay cases of the early seventies, had potentially huge support across a whole range of unions from very diverse groups of women workers who rarely come together.

Brenda: There also needs to be an awful lot of work done within individual unions. My union, the Hospital Employees Federation (Number 1 branch) covers the child care industry — which is under-unionised and difficult to organise. Only recently has the union had someone working full time for day and residential child care workers.

Unions must sink resources into unorganised industries and wait a while to get the returns — to put it in capitalist terms. They must get organisers out talking to potential members, preparing material for them and showing that the union can assist them. That's when people start to join unions.

Sometimes, these decisions are hard to make because of financial problems.

Ann: More often, it is a matter of priorities, not just of finances, because they are channelled into fairly traditional areas that the union has considered important for a long time.

Brenda: Yes, a union has to make the decision to take funds away from those areas where they are normally spent, where the traditional membership lies, and put them into these new untapped areas. These areas are often very small workplaces with one, two or three people working in them and, in the case of child care, with employers far removed from the place of work — which means time and effort in reaching them. It is a mighty job.

When you are confronted by the way some of those industries are organised, it makes you see the necessity of being involved at a broader policy level. It becomes a question of unions being prepared to broaden out from their traditional concerns of sorting out problems, running disputes and going for wage increases.

It involves unions in trying to influence government policy and being prepared to mount publicity campaigns around that. For a lot of unions, these are new pursuits and they don't have research or publicity officers, or people with the time, resources and skills to get involved.

LC: Several of you have spoken about the problems with the way work is organised and the historical differences in wages for women's occupations compared to male-dominated jobs. This issue is large enough to be the subject of a separate round-table but, briefly, how does it fit into a feminist wages strategy?
Ann: Fundamental issues about the organisation of work and the design of jobs need to be taken up in an overall wages strategy because, increasingly, women and low-paid workers are getting locked into jobs that have no future. In a way, it is the counter to equal employment opportunity programs. You introduce fine programs to give women and other disadvantaged groups in the workforce access to equal opportunity at work, but design jobs in such a way that these groups are locked into work areas that are unsatisfying and provide no career structure.

LC: The Victorian nurses' dispute last year was about the restructuring of the nursing profession as much as it was about pay rises. The ultimate result was a recognition of the high level of skills involved in nursing and therefore the necessity of professional rates of pay. Perhaps other occupations that are performed predominantly by women could benefit from this.

Irene: But there are problems with our move to a so-called professional rate. The argument that is put forward now is that higher education is going to bring our wages up. What that does is discriminate against the working class, so it is not just a feminist issue, but also a social issue, and something we are really going to have to battle out in the next year or two.

The government's intention is quite obvious. They would like to use the shift to higher education to make nursing more elite, reduce the number of nurses and bring in a new level of lower-paid workers. That might mean more State Enrolled Nurses (SEs), but it might also be another level of hospital workers.

The dilemma we have at the moment is that we, of course, support upgrading SEns, but we are worried that there is going to be a transfer of our exploitation to that group of workers. That started during our dispute and we are going to have to make sure that can't happen. We are already saying that our members are still going to be bedside workers. We are not going to allow the form of elitism which says that now there is high technology and higher education, then nurses should be administrators. We want to avoid a situation where nurses will be in charge and be paid at a higher rate, but their numbers will be halved and other workers will come into do the bedside nursing and be paid lower wages.

That is not what it's all about because the work that nurses are doing now is worth more. It is highly developed in some areas and pretty basic in others. But you have to look at the basic philosophy of what we value in work.

Ann: That really illustrates one of the problems that is going to come up again and again as groups of women workers fight to get out of the low-paid morass. It will be argued that they can get out of it on the basis that they now have skills like men, and not that the kind of work that has traditionally been women's work is to be valued in itself.

For example, much of the recent argument on clothing trades wages rests on establishing that women had machine skills like men in some industries, not that the work they have been doing for years is very skilled and therefore should be paid much better.

Joan: And with back pay to 1910!
MARKET FORCES

The Left, the New Right and the Market

David McKnight

The left should be taking the appeal of the New Right seriously.
And it shouldn't ignore the positive commonsense images of the market which underly it.

Is the Left complacent about the threat posed by the New Right?
Does it understand the basis of its appeals? More importantly, does the Left realise that its own way of thinking needs updating in order to understand and successfully oppose the threat posed by the New Right?

Among leftwing and radical people there is a school of thought which sees conservatism as essentially a simple and easily understood phenomenon. Conservatism functions as an ideology of the rich, privileged and dominant members of society. It disguises its defence of privilege in a number of ways, by speaking instead of the national interest, the good of the economy, the flag, the family and even the unemployed and the poor. The bottom line, so the assumption runs, is that non-rich, non-privileged or subordinate people have no real interest in what conservatism puts forward, nor is there any value in serious study of conservative thought because, put simply, “they’re all bastards anyway”. Why bother with profound study of the philosophical and political differences between Ian McPhee and John Howard when, at bottom, they’re as bad as each other.

Some take this a step further, arguing that those who ring the alarm bells about the New Right have a Machiavellian intent to cover up the sins of the Hawke government by crying wolf at the “greater danger” (which is not much different from a rightwing ALP government, they imply).

Another response decries the label “new”, arguing that its philosophy is not new at all but was, in fact, practised, at great human cost, in the earliest days of capitalism.

Decrying the “new” label effectively counters the purpose of that tired word, a stalwart of every advertising agency which ever wanted to revive an old product. But all these approaches beg some questions: why does a growing section of conservative thought feel the need for an atavistic change in its philosophy at the cost of a highly public brawl between wets and dries and among employers who are by no means united in support of the New Right approach to industrial relations? Why does a philosophy which benefits the rich and powerful also strike roots among the un-rich and un-powerful?

But, most importantly for the purpose of this article, most left responses to conservatism, on their own, relieve the Left of any need to study the weaknesses of its own view of politics and its own philosophy — weaknesses which are being exploited by the New Right.

Why does the Left and mainstream labour movement seem
response contains more than a grain of truth, but the Left rarely examines its own inability to respond adequately to the New Right critique of state regulation and its argument for market determined outcomes in economic and social policy.

Socialism's heritage is intimately involved with state regulation against the brutality and irrationality of the market. The "golden age" of the free market was, of course, nineteenth century England, which saw children working in the mines, and men and women working fourteen (or more) hours in ill-lit, dirty and exhausting manufactories.

In common with the enlightened rationalism and cult of science which emerged alongside the industrial revolution, socialism supported notions of the perfectability of humans and their social institutions. "Natural laws" did not decree that humankind was doomed to be composed of millions of ignorant labourers and a tiny elite of wealthy, cultured rulers.1

The early socialists and trade unionists aimed to improve the conditions of labouring men and women by regulation through combinations of workers called unions, and through state intervention. Socialism would be achieved by a political party of workers winning or seizing the state to institute this. Resources would be co-ordinated and distributed rationally, the economy planned and the education of workers by the state would see a new age dawning.

Socialism itself would have arrived when the means of production were in the hands of the whole people — that is, the state.2 These conceptions, at various stages, spanned mainstream social democracy, Fabian socialism and those who believed a social revolution was necessary to end exploitation and win socialism.

But, today, people in general, as well as the Left, have a long experience of state regulation, trade unionism, the operation of the market, and attempts to create socialist societies.

The various functions of the contemporary state in advanced capitalist societies can be emphasised quite differently according to one's political predilection. For some socialists, its monopoly of force in defence of the capitalist social order is the main feature, though it may only appear in the long term. For others, it possesses regulatory functions to curb exploitation and promote social change in the short term.

Yet the state is much more than this. It is a major employer, employing about one in four Australians. It is a major provider of services judged necessary for civilised life: education, health, transport, communications, water, and so on.

The importance of this is that the mass of the population are consumers of state services and the New Right wins support by posing as the upholder of the state consumers' interest and carving out a new constituency for itself. It speaks to people at large, whom the Left define as "workers", as consumers of state services, consumers of goods whose prices are affected by tariffs, as parents of children at state schools, as users of health care, as potential victims of crime, as telephone subscribers, and even as consumers of trade union services.

Against the traditional populism of the left and labour movement which had its hey-day from the time of the Depression to the Fifties, the New Right represents the modern, rightwing populism of the consumer society. (Bjelke-Petersen 's populism is different again, with roots in the same conditions and period which saw Labor and the left build a worker-small farmer populist base in Queensland which lasted until the late Fifties.)

A great many things could be said about the Left's attitude to the modern state but, practically, for many on the trade union based left, the state is an employer. The struggle of nurses, railway workers, teachers and other public servants are industrial struggles in much the same way as other industrial struggles. Thus, the New Right's call
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for cutbacks may materially affect
the livelihoods of thousands of trade
union members, an issue on which
the Left in the unions can make
common cause with the centre and
right.

While the many far-sighted
unions have long tried to express
their interests in ways which benefit
the consumer (better schools, health
services, etc.) most unions don’t.
Mostly, this stems from narrowness
and conservatism, but it is debatable
whether there is ultimately an
identity of interest between state
workers and consumers of related
state services. At least, in terms of
traditional industrial activity, such as
strikes, the interests are diametrically
opposed. But what of more common
conflicts?

An example was the clash, some
years ago in NSW, between nurses
and health workers defending their
jobs and opposing the closure of
inner-city hospitals and the
“transfer” of beds to the western
suburbs. More hospitals, not
transfers and closures, was the
answer, it was argued. On the other
side were local councils and a
popular feeling that the west was
hard done by regarding government
services.

In the end, the NSW Labor
government apparently brought
about an overall reduction in
hospital beds in Sydney, while giving
the west better access to hospitals.
The point, for our purposes, is that
the Left tended to construct its
political view based around jobs in
the public sector, rather than in terms
of overall health policy.

Yet, for a primarily political, not
industrial, force like the Left, an
overall view which entails
recognising and resolving
contradictory interests is essential if
it hopes to project an alternative
which are recognised by people at
large who see things in more
contradictory and complex ways
than is reflected in slogans such as
“defend Medicare”.

Unless it recognises the
complexity of reality and appreciates

most left responses to the New Right relieve the left of
any need to study the weaknesses of its own view of
politics and its own philosophy

unresponsive and inefficient.

The most positive part of the
Left’s attitude to the state has been
the development in the last decade of
“workers’ intervention” and
corporate plans in which the workers
take on the job of saving the public
sector from itself. That means
transcending the narrow style of
trade unionism which only thinks
about “the members’ interests” to
thinking in terms of reorganisation
of the public sector in the context of
overall social policy.

Another part of the left sees this
as suspiciously close to “reformism”
— reshaping the state gradually. An
 interventionist strategy does involve a changed attitude to the state by the Left, but it's a change which recognises that the character of the state is far different from the days when the texts of insurrectionary socialism were drafted. This was a period, particularly from the turn of the century to 1945, when Europe was convulsed with economic depressions, world wars, and several revolutionary insurrections. This views of the state is a conception of the market which sees it as incapable of producing any social good. A significant challenge to this comes, perhaps surprisingly, from the USSR where instilling a degree of accountability to the public and consumers through the market is a central part of the recent reforms announced by Gorbachev and others.

If we take at face value the need for such market mechanisms in such countries, how much more so must a western conception of socialism be market-based? And if this is so, it poses a problem for the left, does it say capitalist markets are wholly bad and socialist markets are good?

Well, the answer is probably "no" because the distinction which appears to exist in the question is blurred in practice. Socialist markets can also deliver socially undesirable results like bankruptcies, unemployment, high prices for scarce commodities and so on.

The Left's classical critique of the market is well based. In a market, competition leads gradually to the prospering and survival of the biggest and most powerful forces and ultimately to monopoly. Social needs are by no means likely to be met, and humans who work for wages become mere factors in production and are treated as such by employers.

But while the market ultimately leads to oligopoly or monopoly, on the level of a national economy, it means something completely different in the experience of ordinary people and at the lower and more competitive levels of an economy. Within limits, it can even mean what the New Right says it means: encouraging diversity, innovation and, to a degree, freedom of choice.

Take the example of shopping One of the most powerful images against "actually existing socialism" is that of the queue stretching around the corner, and of the inferior products which sometimes await consumers at the end of the queue.

What Gorbachev's planners seem to have concluded is that there actually is a link between abundance and choice of consumer goods on the one hand, and the market mechanism on the other.

Stuart Hall makes a similar point about the West: "(T)he Left has never understood the capacity of the market to become identified in the minds of the mass of ordinary people not as fair and decent and socially responsible (that it never was) but as an expansive popular system".

Another reason for the Left's resistance to cultural change probably derives from the belief that the market has delivered most — as it usually does — only to those who already have the market advantage of wealth, power, status and
influence: the sense that what we have been talking about is, for the majority of ordinary people, beset by the harsh necessities of life, a minority experience. But is it? It certainly wasn’t in the long boom. And while the recession prevents the mass of people from participating to the same degree on a regular or stable basis, it certainly does not prevent them from wanting — and often having — not yesterday’s but today’s goods for themselves and their children.”

An example which Hall uses, the rapid spread of video cassette recorders, is particularly pertinent to Australia which has one of the highest rates of ownership in the world. And VCRs are only part of the electronic paraphernalia which has not only been delivered to an eager working class during a recession but also, for a period at least, at continually falling prices.

What has the New Right to do with this association of consumer goods with the market? Hall again: “The intention of the radical Right which has been most penetrative has not been the conversion of the masses to the religion of the market and unemployment. Rather, it has been the subtle capacity to identify the positive aspirations of people with the market and the restoration of the capitalist ethic, and to present this as a natural alliance.”

Similarly, the redefinition of freedom, involving linking it with a market-based conception of freedom, is one of Thatcherism’s remarkable successes, he says. The point is that, in the ‘thirties and Forties, the Left was able to make a logical and natural connection between people’s aspirations for a better life and the Left’s program for state intervention. Today, a similar struggle is being waged by the Right for opposite ends.

Part of the reason for the Left’s loss of the initiative must surely be that when relative affluence did arrive for sections of the people, it didn’t understand how to handle it.

For the most part, the Left’s attitude to affluence has been (i) that it was a temporary phenomenon, (ii) that it was the result of a bitter union struggle, (iii) that it did not change the fundamental basis of capitalism — all of which are partial truths but evade the deep cultural changes that came in the wake of affluence.

Even today, across much of the Left (socialist feminists aside), there is a great deal of concentration on wages, working conditions, overseas solidarity, and little understanding (and often a degree of puritanism) towards the revolution in lifestyle, media, entertainment, and new modes of work and its relation to the rest of life. Many seem to have a sigh of relief when each cyclical economic recession appears, allowing “simpler”

The left tended to construct its political view around jobs in the public sector, rather than in terms of overall health policy.

to the New Right through its absolute opposition to private enterprise and small business. Practically, this means considering small business with the same suspicion as that directed to giant corporations. It conveys a notion of society in which state control reaches down to the tiniest enterprise and in which there is no incentive or freedom to go into business for oneself, one of the sustaining myths of this society.

Of course, some of the nastiest bosses can be found in the small shopkeeper, the contractor and the professional. But this is not to be countered by extending state ownership to every nut and bolt and eliminating the market. Attempts to do so are bound to become bureaucratic, repressive and economically stagnant and inefficient, the latter being the main
goad for reforms in "actually existing socialism".

In propaganda terms, the statism of the USSR and China have been a boon to opponents of socialism in the West. While the planning and state ownership in the USSR appeared to be a beacon to many who suffered in the Depression, the political repression which accompanied it turned many more away from socialism from the 1950s onwards.

Gorbachev's (and, at least until recently, Teng Tsiao Ping's) reforms have tried to tackle the consequences of centralised planning: apathy, lack of incentive and inspiration which lead to a system less dynamic and adaptable than capitalism. In the field of consumer goods, such reforms will undoubtedly mean higher prices for many commodities, but such a result is also a stimulus to factories and farmers to produce more goods overall. In the field of capital goods and raw materials, a limited market may allocate resources more effectively and on criteria which encourage more efficient use.

The Right already is arguing that such reforms show that "capitalism" was right all along, falsely conflating the market with private ownership. While the Left should be wary of identifying itself once again with a "socialist paradise" overseas, it must not fail to draw the lessons for strategy within the West concerning attitudes to private enterprise, the problems of state intervention and the market.

FOOTNOTES

1. Thus, the historical allusions in Charles Copeman's statement during the Robe River dispute in September 1986, when he spoke of "the struggle for freedom which has been lost in the mistaken belief that we could create equality where none exists in nature".

2. There was, of course, also a minority tradition within socialism of anti-state anarchism and libertarianism.

3. As well, there was a section of health professionals who argued that cutting funds to hospitals and doctors would be a good thing if funds were used in local community health centres and preventive health campaigns. A similar dilemma occurred with the recommendations of the Richmond Report on mental health. Deinstitutionalising patients on humane and mental health grounds meant some nurses' jobs could be lost.

4. The most telling recent example being the consequences in the newspaper industry in which, over the last fifty years, newspaper titles have decreased markedly and owners have shrunk to two.


DAVID MCKNIGHT is a journalist on the Sydney Morning Herald.
WASHINGTON'S
FOUNDERING FATHERS
The Contras and Contragate
Barry Carr

Contragate revealed the depth of Washington's commitment to the Contras. But it hasn't made life any easier for Nicaragua.

There is no issue closer to the heart of the Reagan administration than its crusade against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. President Reagan is completely besotted with the Contras. He has described them as freedom fighters following in the footsteps of the Founding Fathers of the United States, and has likened them to Simon Bolivar, the French Resistance and, most recently and bizarrely, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade of the Spanish Civil War. When the US Congress finally voted, in July 1986, to renew aid ($100 million) to the Contras, Reagan commented "I'm sure it put a smile on the face of the Statue of Liberty".

Support for the Nicaraguan counter-revolution is the best example of the US's grotesque efforts at "symmetry" — i.e. the attempt to
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mimic and counter the Soviet Union's alleged instigation of national liberation movements by fomenting anti-communist insurgencies in regions of the world where US hegemony is threatened by nationalist and socialist states.

The *Contras* emerged from the ranks of the hated National Guard who fled to Honduras and Costa Rica following on the fall of the Somoza dynasty in 1979. The bedraggled and demoralised *Somocistas* in Honduras were reorganised by the CIA during 1981, receiving $19 million in US government funds, and training from Argentine military advisers who had been blooded in the ferocious “dirty war” of 1976-81 in which 25-30,000 Argentine civilians were murdered. Since then, US strategy has been aimed at creating a unified military command for the counterrevolution, together with a civilian veneer (UNO) staffed by “respectable” non-somocista figureheads like Arturo Cruz, Alfonso Robelo and, to a lesser extent, a former Coca Cola franchise operator, Adolfo Calero.

The FDN (Nicaraguan Democratic Front) is the largest force within the *Contras’* umbrella organisation UNO (United Nicaraguan Opposition). It is also by far the most reactionary and brutal of the *Contra* groups. The military direction of the FDN is firmly in the hands of National Guard officers, the most senior of whom is Enrique Bermudez, the FDN's “defence minister” and a former Somoza military attaché in Washington. Bermudez' second in command, the heads of logistics, intelligence operations, and special warfare, and the bulk of the FDN's field commanders, are also former Guard officers. A number of other smaller *Contra* forces are based in Costa Rica, a state whose much-vaunted “neutrality” conceals a deep commitment to the anti-Sandinista crusade. Until 1985, the most important of the “southern” *Contra* groups was ARDE (The Democratic Revolutionary Alliance), whose best known military figure was Eden Pastora, a former Sandinista commandant. A series of major disputes within ARDE over the CIA's insistence that the body merge with the Honduras-based FDN led to Pastora's expulsion from the group in 1985. Since then, Pastora has consistently accused US intelligence of organising the attack.

A number of anti-Sandinista paramilitary groupings have also sprouted among a minority of the small Indian communities on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast now living on the Honduran-Nicaraguan border. Although their relationship to the *Contra* general command has always been rather tense, these indigenous groups constitute the only significant social base on which the *Contras* have been able to draw — a reflection of early mistakes made by the Spanish-speaking Sandinistas who failed to grasp the importance of national and ethnic questions in the struggle for reconstruction after 1979.

In 1985 and 1986, some progress was made in discussions between the Sandinistas and Miskito organisations like MISURASATA and KISAN over the question of greater autonomy for the Indian regions on the Atlantic coast. A final settlement has not been reached, in part because of extreme demands by some Indian leaders, including a call for the Atlantic Coast to be allowed to secede from Nicaragua. A number of Indian commanders who have participated in dialogue with the Nicaraguan government have been assassinated by hardliners within the *Contra* organisation.3

Over the last two years, the *Contras* have expanded their numbers through mass intimidation, including the kidnapping of entire communities, and forced recruitment from among Nicaraguan refugees in Honduras. Despite their access to lavish US funding (dollars are always a powerful attraction), the *Contras* have been conspicuously unsuccessful in building a real basis of support for their activities in the Nicaraguan countryside.

This is hardly surprising in view of the strategies adopted by the Nicaraguan counter-revolution. The *Contras* have increasingly directed their energies towards anti-civilian terrorism and economic destablisation designed to cripple the Nicaraguan economy and create an environment of demoralisation and resentment over economic hardships. The principle victims of the *Contras* have become health workers, doctors, teachers, agricultural aid workers — in short, anyone who is associated with the
socio-economic and political programs of the Sandinista government.

Other targets have been communications equipment, oil storage facilities, agricultural cooperatives, crops (especially coffee — which is a major earner of foreign exchange) and cattle. Most recently, the Contras have been planting land mines on roads in northern and western Nicaragua in an attempt to isolate remote villages and cripple rural trading networks. Civilian casualties have been enormous.

so far, the debate in Washington has not included any serious challenge to the Reagan administration’s anti-Sandinista crusade

There is also considerable evidence that the involvement in terrorism by the Contras and their backers extends way beyond the borders of Nicaragua itself. The FDN’s intelligence chief, Ricardo Lau, is now believed to have played a key role in the assassination of El Salvador’s Archbishop, Oscar Romero, in March 1980. More recently, the “Contragate/Irangate” scandal and the revelations of Eugene Hasenfus, a crew member of the Contra supply plane shot down on 5 October, 1986 have thrown more light on links between the Contras and the activities of rightwing terrorist networks spearheaded by Cuban exiles. Luis Posada Carriles, one of the two organisers of Contra supply operations in San Salvador, had been held in a Venezuelan jail on suspicion of involvement in the bombing of a Cuban civilian airliner in 1973, in which 73 people died. In 1985, another key pro-Contra figure, and head of the Alabama-based Civilian Military Assistance (CMA), Tom Posey, was involved in a plot (to be paid for by Colombian drug circles) to murder the US Ambassador to Costa Rica, Lewis Tambs.4

The Contras’ military record inside Nicaragua has so far been extremely poor. They have been unable to hold territory — a sign of their lack of a genuine social base — and the bulk of their forces have been pushed back into their Honduran bases. However, the Sandinistas’ worst nightmare is of a serious border clash between their troops and Contra forces supported by units of the regular Honduran army which could provide a pretext for direct US and Honduran military intervention. This might provide sufficient cover for Contra seizures of Nicaraguan territory either on the Honduran border or on the Atlantic coast — followed by the declaration of a counter-revolutionary provisional government recognised by the US. The Contras would then have a beachhead through which the US could massively step up arms supplies.

Nicaraguan fears regarding this scenario were strengthened in late November and early December 1986 by a sudden sharp escalation of border tension with Honduras in which the Honduran air force (the most powerful in Central America) bombed three towns inside Nicaragua killing seven soldiers and injuring 14 civilians. At the same time, a meeting of UNO in Costa Rica announced details of plans for the establishment of a Contra provisional government in Nicaragua, while the US announced the reopening of bases in Panama to house members of the infantry brigade which invaded Grenada.

Conclusion

At this point it is not clear how far the Irangate scandal will affect the viability of the Reagan Doctrine’s strategy of “rolling back” the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. So far, the debate unfolding in Washington has not included any serious challenge to the Reagan administration’s anti-Sandinista crusade and has concentrated largely on the legality of actions undertaken by government employees and agencies. It is possible that the scandal and the increased Democratic majority in Congress will make continued funding of the Contras more difficult, but the cowardice shown by most Democrats on Central American issues over the last year or so doesn’t give much cause for optimism.

Within Nicaragua, however, President Daniel Ortega and other Sandinistas have argued that the scandal could very well accelerate the likelihood of a direct US intervention following the Contra forces’ spectacular offensive in early 1987, intended to establish their credibility as a viable politico-military alternative worthy of renewed support by the US Congress. And even if further direct US government aid is not forthcoming, the last five years have clearly demonstrated that the Reagan administration is prepared to stop at nothing in its struggle to strangle the Nicaraguan revolution.

NOTES


2. 46 of the 48 positions in the FDN command structure are held by former guardsmen, according to a 1985 report by the US Congressional Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus. See Reed Brody, Contra Terror in Nicaragua: Report of a Fact-Finding Mission, September 1984-January 1985 (Boston: South End Press, 1985), pp. 132-143.


BARRY CARR teaches in Latin American Studies at La Trobe University.
SISTERS AND SLOGANS

Socialist feminism is getting out of touch, argues British journalist Melissa Benn. But its future can still be rosy.

Two books have recently been published by well-known socialist feminists: Lynne Segal's Is the Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism, and Anne Phillips' Divided Loyalties: Dilemmas of Sex and Class. Although the books, and particularly Lynne Segal's, have rightly attracted a lot of interest — extracts have appeared in Britain in Spare Rib, the New Statesman and New Socialist — there has been little sense of a debate around the issues raised in the books, and particularly the troubled question: what has happened to socialist feminism in the 1980s? Reviews have mostly been calm and descriptive, written in the same sad but wise tone of the books themselves.

What or where is socialist feminism in 1987? The difficulty of answering that question reflects the fragmentation of 1980s feminist politics as a whole. Definitions of a "socialist feminist" — any woman who is active in, or sympathetic to, socialist or left/radical politics who also holds to a distinct feminist position — are elusive in their non-specificity. In Britain, a socialist feminist could be in any one of a hundred political places. She might be active in the local ward or women's section of the Labour Party, or branch of the Communist Party; she might be in an anti-deportation campaign; she might be a shop steward in a trade union; she might be in a Greenham group, or camping outside the gates of the base; she might be no more than a woman who reads and thinks a lot...

This dispersal of socialist feminism marks the 1980s out as a very different time from the 1970s. Then, of course, women's liberation as a whole was different. It was more buoyant in the sense of being on an ideological offensive vis-a-vis society as a whole and it was more unified in the sense that the movement held national conferences which continued up to 1978, and socialist feminism had a coherent identity within that movement. Socialist
feminists themselves met nationally up until 1980.

Two key changes have happened since then. The first is that socialist feminism is now more present within the "socialist" part of its own politics than it was in the 1970s. Women in trade unions, political parties, single issue campaigns and academia are burrowing away to produce feminist change in whatever way they can in these areas. And are doing good things, undoubtedly. But the second — almost not necessarily logical — aspect of the change in the 1980s is that the "feminist" aspect of socialist feminism has loitered. Most socialist feminists no longer have an active involvement in the women's movement. Worse, there is even a sense among some of them that the women's movement itself has to be left behind, that it belongs to the politics of another decade.

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The first thing to say about sexuality is that most heterosexual socialist feminists simply don't talk about it any more

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As a result of all this, much socialist feminism has become privatised, over-academic and pessimistic. And as a current of thinking, it is often out of touch, not much interested in, or even impatient with feminist, politics of the 1980s.

Let me try to say what I mean in more detail in reference to three areas: discussions on sexuality within feminism; the relationship between different tendencies within feminism; and women's new involvement in mass politics — particularly the Labour Party — in the 1980s.

The first thing to say about sexuality is that most heterosexual socialist feminists simply don't talk about it any more. If the debate about sexuality has taken place anywhere in the 1980s, it has taken place within lesbian feminism. It is almost as if the subject of sexuality has returned to a pre-1970 situation for women on the left: the unspeakable clothed as the irrelevant, the disruptive dismissed as the merely embarrassing. Yet it is not as simple as that, of course, because socialist feminists have been influenced by feminist debates on sexuality and, as I said above, many have imported them into particular political, campaign or theoretical areas. Two random examples are the important work being done to combat sexual harassment at work, and the development of ideas on the psychology of women in the 1980s.

Yet there is no sense of an ongoing debate about sexuality among heterosexual socialist feminists now. To her credit, Lynne Segal tackles the subject at length in her book although there are ways in which I think she, too, refers more to the past than the present.

For instance: in the "Sex and Violence" chapter, she talks a lot about a debate which took place in Britain at the end of the 1970s — the famous "political lesbian" argument when a group of revolutionary feminists (women who argue that male sexual power is central to male power in general) argued that to be politically "correct" women should not only refuse to sleep with men: they should also make a political choice for women. This position provoked huge opposition from many feminists but was still, as Lynne Segal points out, responsible for much heterosexual defensiveness at the time.

But that was 1980. Where I would disagree with Lynne Segal is when she implies that this anti-heterosexual morality still heavily influences feminism now. What she neglects is that the revolutionary feminist position was defeated within the women's liberation movement, and that new factors are shaping a feminist approach to sexuality which marks the 1980s out as a very different period from that of the clashes of the "political lesbian" days.

There is now, I think, a greater acceptance of diverse sexual practices among feminists — and among women in general. On the one hand, precisely because of the defeat of a revolutionary feminist "morality" on heterosexuality in the late 1970s, few women are defensive about being heterosexual any more. I remember going to a Communist University of London workshop on "sexual politics" in the early 1980s and there being a huge argument about women who slept with men. There were tears and shouting: a group of us decided to hold a separate meeting out in the corridor because it was so unbearable. Compare this to last year's "Women Alive" event, where a friend of mine went to the sexuality workshop and told me that "It was all a bit bland really. An 'Anything Goes' attitude".

This may seem like a change confined to a few hundred London feminists, but it goes much wider than that. Women in general don't feel they have to explain and justify their sexual choice to anybody so much any more. They are far less in awe of men's sexual power than they were (while being more aware of the potentially coercive and violent nature of male sexuality). And I sense that, to young women in particular, men simply don't matter as much as they once might have...
done. They are there: they are not there. So what?

On the other hand, the growth of a women's culture in the last 17 years or so has had another effect. Numerous women-only spaces — from bars, to dance spaces, to bookshops, to peace camps, to reading and study groups — have been created and continue to be created. In these, women have come to appreciate and enjoy the sexual possibilities of one another. Lesbianism is simply not the "other" to young feminists that it was to women coming to feminist politics in the early 1970s. Young feminists now have a sexual ease about other women, even if they are not in lesbian relationships themselves.

There has, too, been a growth in the refusal of feminism to accept any idea of a "correct" or "incorrect" kind of sexual practice, and a new advocacy of women's sexual power. This question was most recently and publicly fought out in Britain in a debate over sado-masochism at the London Lesbian and Gay Centre in 1985. It was a debate perhaps incomprehensible to outsiders because the pro-SM position seemed to be about defending the right of women to inflict pain, or have pain inflicted, on each other. Some of the women who advocated SM, particularly younger women, wore threatening clothes and symbols which offended many people. However, despite its complexities, what the argument was really about was a rejection by some lesbian feminists of a prescriptive public morality about sex.

To suggest that there is a new plurality of sexual practice among women is not to say that this amounts to a bland bisexuality among women. These changes take place within a particular context: the growing recognition by feminists over the last decade of what it means to be a lesbian out there in the world. There is now far more recognition than there was in the 1970s that to choose to be a lesbian is not to make a purely private choice. It is a choice that carries with it all kinds of difficulties and dangers in the world (as well as pleasures!) Thus, feminists now see that lesbianism has to be publicly defended if it is to be privately enjoyed. And, of course, lesbianism does have a more public identity than it did 10 or 15 years ago, particularly in those metropolitan areas where local authorities, like the now abolished GLC, have funded and supported the creation of gay and lesbian projects, like the London Lesbian and Gay Centre itself.

The second area where I would be critical of socialist feminists is in their approach to the development of women's politics in the 1980s.

In the 1970s, feminist politics was characterised by a polarity between two politics: a "radical" and a "socialist" feminism. Broadly, radical feminism took the antagonism between the sexes to be the prime antagonism in society, while socialist feminists attempted to analyse the relationship between two systems of domination: capitalism and patriarchy. If there was not always hostility between the two camps — and there was a lot of that — there was a clear sense of division. These were irreconcilable politics.

Lynne Segal perpetuates this polarity in her book where she is, throughout, pursuing and then demolishing the image and the arguments of the Bad Radical Feminist (as exemplified in the works of Mary Daly and Dale Spender). She may well be right in her criticism of the work of these women — and particularly the idea that women have some sort of essentially "superior" nature to men. But, in concentrating on such ideas, she is both simplifying and ignoring the much more complex development there has been in feminist politics, and the relationship between the different strands.

How have feminist politics developed in the 1980s? Clearly, there has been a bleeding of the boundaries between radical and socialist feminism to the point where they often erode into non-significance. Many socialist feminists have been profoundly influenced by radical feminism: for example, the recognition that masculinity per se is a problem. Plus, many socialist feminists have been influenced by, and involved in, projects initiated by radical feminists. I am thinking here of work done to combat male violence — rape crisis centres, women's aid refuges and so on — many of which were initiated by radical and revolutionary feminists in the 1970s. It was radical feminism — whatever the dubious nature of much of its analysis of the causes of male violence — which actually did something.

On the other hand, radical feminists have themselves been challenged by changes within the women's movement. Following debates at the end of the decade (debates both Anne Phillips and Lynne Segal discuss) women of all politics have taken on a new sensitivity to, and therefore language of, class. Just as crucially, white women of all politics have been knocked back and changed by the criticisms of black women who have labelled so much of 1970s feminism as white and euro-centric.

All this has contributed to the key development in the 1980s of the idea of difference among women. This has been a contradictory
development: both important and dangerous. What was, and still is, important about it is that it gives credence to every woman's personal biography; makes legitimate individual women's experience — them from the outside? Those socialist feminists who have been involved in women's politics — I am thinking here of the SM debate at the LLGC — have been crucial in public arguments against this primacy of "identity" politics over ideas of solidarity and alliance. But the vast majority of socialist feminists have been completely absent from such discussion.

One of the reasons socialist feminists have not been involved in feminist politics is because of their concentration in the left. But if a real sense of a women's agenda within the left is to be constructed, then women in the left need to be in touch with, and accountable to, some kind of feminist politics. Lynne Segal argues that there should be a return to the principle of autonomy for women on the left — the gathering of socialist women for separate discussion. I agree with her: "autonomy" remains the single most important concept to come out of 1970s feminism. It is one we should retain — although it is hard to suggest the exact form any such autonomous gathering should take, and how it could realistically reflect the relations of women on the left in what are depressingly sectarian times.

Socialist feminists within the left, and within Labour in particular, need to keep talking about the difficult issues that face us. For instance, there are genuine problems about women having and deploying power at a local or a national level. We need it, too, to keep a sense of personal politics within socialist feminism — the dangers of not doing so were most recently shown in Britain in the lack of a concerted Labour Party feminist response to Patricia Hewitt's comments on the gay and lesbian dimension to the Greenwich by-election, in which she publicly declared the issue to be a vote loser, a politics-by-opinion-poll approach that most feminists in the party would find untenable.

In their books, both Anne Phillips and Lynne Segal seem very pessimistic about the future of feminism and the left. But what strikes me is their failure to see the very successes that "their" feminism has produced: the ways in which the politics of the 1970s and beyond has changed women's way of perceiving themselves forever. The language of feminism has become deeply embedded in our culture — albeit in often individualistic ways. Feminist ways of talking about women have changed too. There has been some transformation of the notion of woman as "object" (of oppression/discrimination) to something more complex, to ideas of woman as subject — an active agent of change and holder of power.

This is all a bit paradoxical considering the background against which a lot of younger women have come to life and politics in the 1980s in Britain. These women have come well-grounded in a feeling of perpetual and unbreakable outsidersness: joblessness, Thatcherism, the threat of nuclear war — not to mention the decline of a national women's liberation movement and the bitterness and break-up of the left in recent years. It is a background of utter pessimism, yet somehow younger women are more confident than those of an older generation. Well, they are bolshier. They want a lot from life: to have some kind of satisfying work, to have good relationships and to have children, if they want them. And they expect to get it.

(this is an edited version of an article originally published in Marxism Today. In coming issues we will be printing a number of responses to Melissa Benn's arguments from Australian feminists.)

MELISSA BENN is a British journalist.
Taking it to the Limits

It all happened back in 1980-81. I took an awful lot of grey hairs and illness out of it, and so did all my colleagues. It's probably the hardest thing we ever did, and I honestly don't know if I'd do it again. Thinking about it again now, I realised I'd put it out of my mind all this time. I had nightmares about it last night.

The thing I'm talking about is the split from Time Out — which is the London arts and entertainment magazine, to start a new magazine called City Limits. It's not directly comparable, I don't think, with any other industrial print dispute that was happening in England around that time. There was an awful lot of upheaval just beforehand, in the very late '70s. The Times started what I now see as the whole series of dreadful strikes and mishandled disputes which finally ended up with Murdoch. Nobody at the time really realised what was going on — and I can't claim any special prescience here.

But I think at that point, probably, the owners were beginning to wriggle under the pressure of journalists doing largely as they wanted — so they, the owners, decided they were going to reimpose a kind of Beaverbrook style of management, which is to say, "you will do that", as opposed to things just happening as they would. And that moment found its logical conclusion in the Murdoch takeover of the world. It certainly contributed to the entire restructuring of the British press to the extent that when I, who've been away a year now, look at them I just do not recognise anything about them any more. And it's a really frightening sight.

The story of City Limits isn't to do with the setting-up of alternative publications as such, because we didn't all sit around one day and say, "Hey, it would be a really good idea if we did this" — we actually already had one. We had an extremely successful magazine at Time Out. It was a magazine which had been started something like ten years previously on a loan of a hundred quid from the owner's auntie, and it started in his basement. At the time, the arts and cultural scene in London was very fragmented; the fringe as such didn't exist; and you really couldn't find out what was going on. It was very like Sydney now, I find, anyway — because I never know what's going on in this damned town until it's finished.

People say you couldn't do that sort of thing here because you don't have fringe theatre, you don't have fringe galleries, you don't have art house circuits in the same way, and so on. But you didn't in London, either, the two grew together. They actually service one another. We only realised this after the strike, that we
had this extraordinarily successful publication, which was known as alternative, radical, trendy left, and so on (and it was a bit of all those things), but which was also an extremely commercially viable one. And it was full of journalists who thought they were extremely radical, and trendy, and alternative and so on, but who also had extremely fat salaries, and thought they were really shit hot. And I was one of them, too.

But, at the same time, we'd built up a system of working which was unique. We had something which I find most people don't understand, which is to say strict parity. Everybody on the magazine was paid the same wages, whether you were the editor, the cleaner or the receptionist. It was a very good wage, which didn't hurt. So there was no such thing as a hidden pay-packet: everyone knew what everyone else got. That was one of the reasons why Tony Elliott, the owner of the magazine, actually decided to create the strike — because it really made him annoyed that he couldn't split people away from one another by paying his "stars" more than anybody else.

The magazine was also run strictly on the understanding that we would not tolerate anything that was sexist, racist, or promoted inequality. And that included advertising. We were very happy to accept advertising because it paid our salaries. I think a lot of people on the left don't realise that, in the print industry, the cover price is just a side issue — your revenue comes from advertising, and if you're going to have a successful publication, you need advertising. But we did insist that advertisers follow our code, and we refused a lot of advertising — particularly cinema advertising. And rather than the advertisers saying, pooh pooh, they'd go somewhere else, they'd actually change their advertising, and they would talk about it. It actually had a real knock-out effect throughout the industry, which was quite interesting.

In fact, it was a cinema ad that precipitated the strike: it was an ad for Dressed To Kill, which showed a female figure having violence committed against her — so we refused it. Tony decided enough was enough: this was going too far. He tore up our agreement, quite literally, and said "Push off". And we naturally said, no, we didn't think this was such a good idea... We went on strike and staged a sit-in that was extremely well-publicised, because we knew how to do these things: so it was on the TV news. We were on the fifth floor of the building in Covent Garden where our very ritzy offices were, and we had the TV cameras along to see us taking up supplies on ropes and the like. We had all sorts of real tear-jerking things like parents with kids, and the kids were going "mummy, mummy" — it was really great stuff. We got the sympathy vote, and we were characterised in the media as being human beings and not loonies, because we had kids and we were acting like ordinary people, and people could identify with that.

Then we made a crucial decision — it was sheer fluke, really — to start putting out a strike paper right away. We called it Not Time Out, because there has been a very successful paper during the Times strike called Not The Times. Tony promptly took out a court order against us — we weren't allowed to use the words Time Out. So, for the coming issue, all of us sat around with black texts scribbling out Time Out, so it came out as Not. Thereafter it came out as Not, just Not, and people would ask each other "Have you got your Not?" It was a broadsheet, and we took in paid advertising from the cinemas, the galleries, the theatres, restaurants, pine bed shops, futon shops, the lot. The whole panoply of London's subculture.

That paper kept us going in more ways than one: for a start, it kept us all together. It gave us something to do, so that people didn't drift away into corners and get depressed. And it made us realise that we could do this thing by ourselves that we'd been doing, but somehow hadn't been responsible for, all this time. The advertising came in, and then we found that we had this extraordinary support from the wider community of arts and alternative people in London, and also the broad left, inasmuch as they had no business, no livelihood, and absolutely no audience, without the magazine on the streets. That was when we realised that these two things had grown up together.

I think it was also a realisation on our part that there was something bigger here than just our little dispute. Theatres and theatre companies and cinemas and rock bands were putting on benefits at regular intervals, and brought in the most astonishing amount of money. One of the fringe theatres had a
basement rehearsal hall, which they gave us for the duration as our headquarters. There was an extraordinary march through London, with Arthur Scargill and a lot of really famous big union boys at its head — some 20,000 people marched for a scabby bunch of journalists to get their jobs back. And so it was that some forty to fifty people were able to stay out on strike for twenty weeks and not give in, and also have their essential bills paid and have a few bob left over to be living on.

Eventually, however, it began to be clear that, not only was Tony not going to reach any agreement that didn’t involve total capitulation from all of us — but also that the length of the strike was causing the unions to start getting edgy about wanting us to settle. People were beginning to say very quietly “We think you ought to settle, I mean we’ve got a very good offer here”. But we figured that we just couldn’t turn around to all those people who’d supported us all that time and say, thank you very much, folks, but we’re not going to win, so we’re going to take our jobs back and our big fat salaries, it’s been good ... The morality of that was even beyond us.

That’s when we decided that, since we’d been running the strike paper quite happily all this time, and since it had become extremely successful, well, all right, we’d put out our own magazine instead. That was a real leap of confidence. We’d always said to one another, and to anyone else who’d listen, that our management structure was hopeless and it was actually us who put the magazine out. But there’s a big leap between that and actually saying, “Forget them, we’ll go and do it ourselves”. And that’s exactly what we decided we would do: and we’d maintain the old principles, so that it would be non-sexist, non-racist, broad left, and have equal opportunities for all.

We got a committee together of members of staff, and set about planning it, and we worked out the finances to the best of our ability. That was our biggest drawback, because we had no financial experience whatsoever. I’m glad we didn’t know then what we didn’t know, because if we had I think we would never have gone ahead and done it. People sold their houses, I sold my car, that sort of thing. We raised £80,000 among us. Then we got a loan from the Greater London Council (it was always characterised in the press as a grant) — £100,000 at 17 percent interest, which was two percent above the going rate. And then we calculated the interest payments: but we only did that afterwards, thank God.

So somehow it got off the ground. It was entirely unlike people’s preconceptions of what it was going to be. The advertising industry and the marketing industry were all saying, forget it, you’ll never get there, and anyway we don’t want a magazine from people like you. They pictured us as these leftwing loonies, and so they thought it was going to be very much as that kind of publication had come to be seen in the eyes of the public — which is to say, extremely dull, worthy and turgid. Instead, it was fun, it was stylish, it was witty, it was sharp, it was irreverent. It quickly became the thing which, if you had any pretensions at all to radical youth chic, you had to have under your arm.

The first night it hit the streets was probably one of the most exciting things I’ll ever go through. There it was, and it was a success. What we realised very quickly, however, along with the gigantic problems about revenue, was that our core audience, what was considered to be the natural leftwing core, was very small. It was too small to support us and that’s out of a population in London of eight or nine million. But they were very vocal, and very demanding, and they were very loyal. This meant, however, that all the mail that came in said “You bastards, you’ve sold us out, you’ve got advertising, you’ve got this or that, how could you?” We’d read these and think, oh Jesus, we’re total failures. And then we realised that the people who wrote to us to tell us we were sell-out merchants really added up to about ten people. So we had to retain that core audience, but also build from it, into the wider reaches of London.

From within, we had problems arising from the fact that the magazine was solely owned by a co-op, which was solely owned by the staff. So everyone had an equal say, and if you worked there you owned it and it owned you. It was a very tight-knit and pleasant feeling. But among the staff, and thus among the owners, there were some hugely diverse opinions, and that made our success a problem — because some people actually didn’t want to be successful, they wanted to be in opposition. I think that’s a real problem on the left, because some people actually do want to be in opposition, and if you are successful, this can become a real difficulty for them.

These were some of the things that we found most difficult to solve. Another was how to stay at the top — and this entailed being completely redesigned within two years of hitting the streets, by a new designer. This was the designer I notice everybody now uses throughout the world as the trendy designer — a guy called Neville Brody, who also designed The Face.

Well, we did it, it was extremely hard, and we compromised all of the way. We still ended up with a really good product. We should have had more money: we actually ended up going for six months for no salary whatsoever, just to keep it going, back in 1981. Now the Christmas issue 1986 had 160 pages, and it’s five years old. I’m really proud to have been part of it. And I think it’s possible here, even though a lot of people would like to tell you that it isn’t.

Diana Simmonds


(This is an edited version of a talk given at a seminar on the future of the left and alternative press in Australia held in Sydney in April. We will be printing other contributions on the same subject in upcoming issues.)
Rugby League

"The virtue of all-in wrestling", according to the French writer Roland Barthes, "is that it is the spectacle of excess". Likewise, according to the Italian writer Umberto Eco, all sports activity "is dominated by the idea of waste". If Barthes and Eco are right, it must surely be true that Rugby League is the quintessential "spectacle of excess". Australian Rules is clearly a species of gymnastics, with all the aesthetic rules this implies. Rugby League, on the other hand, has exorbitant exertion without any discernible aesthetic whatsoever: it is spectacle without the trappings of art.

Rugby League is, for a start, one of the most gratuitously violent games in the world: this is universally commented upon by its critics. Very few of its leading exponents last beyond the magical age of thirty (by which time they are often balding and arthritic) — and even fewer who are over that age dare to admit it. Yet the idea of a "Rugby League riot", like that of "Rugby League hooliganism", is almost absurd. Anyone familiar with Rugby League crowds knows that they are far safer places to be than the average cricket Test match audience at the MCG or SCG. Violence, it seems, is part of the spectacle itself: to practise it in the crowd or on the stands would be an overloading of this "excess" — in other words, simply in bad taste.

Some of this peculiar character of Rugby League as spectacle can clearly be attributed to its elements of carnival. In carnival, we are told, taste is inverted, and what is normally seen as base or grotesque becomes exalted. Likewise, carnival is travesty, in its original sense: the spectacle of the mayor of the town, pilloried, dragging at the rear of carnivals, was (we are also told) a familiar mediaeval scene. Thus, also in Rugby League, the referee is the all-important catalyst of the game's entertainment value — a displaced authority figure (many are policemen), travestied in carnival form (even down to the absurd clothing). In Rugby League mythology, as every fan knows, one's team is never really beaten: either the referee awarded far too many penalties to the other side, or the invariably all-important forward pass in the first opposition try was somehow overlooked. Hooting and mocking the referee is an integral part of the really serious fan's pleasure.

Nor are the central social themes of gender and class far to seek. Rugby League is not just a "man's game", it is a particular definition of manhood itself. Australian Rules players are sex symbols, their buttocks an item of universal acclaim with their (heterosexual) female fans. But no Rugby League player far beyond the age of twenty-five is likely to be a pretty sight. Rugby League stars are invulnerable to being portrayed (even by the most subtle of feminist table-turning) as sex objects: like the classic Anglo-Saxon definition of manhood, their bodies are purely functional objects, their movements rational beyond the worst fears of sensuality.
And Rugby League has long served as a parody of class divisions. In Sydney, Manly-Warringah are the much-hated symbols of the Establishment: when they bought up the cream of the players from Western Suburbs—the “fibro” battlers—in the latter ’70s, the demonology both of class struggle and incorporation was complete. Parramatta, by contrast, are the gateway to the New Western Suburbs—clean-cut, stylish, and usually remorselessly successful.

And all the general themes of modern sport are here: the growth of professionalism, the era of “percentage football”, tackle counts, and the specialist defensive player. Appropriately enough, this last was an era ushered in during the mid-seventies with the development of the risk-free “bomb”, or high kick, by the then unfashionable Parramatta club.

But where lies the pleasure in watching Rugby League? (And this is a matter of constant mystery to its detractors.) It is to be found again, I would argue, in the territory of “excess” as spectacle: excesses of endurance and exhaustion; vast excesses of energy expended in travelling, often over the course of a full six tackles, no more than five metres. Another component of the spectacle is the old wartime rhythm of long periods of regulated monotony broken by short flashes of intense excitement. Unlike Australian Rules, where the action is conventionally described as “non-stop”, Rugby League can delay the moment of excitement, of climax, for five, ten, even forty minutes—and scorelines without tries to either side (which is not the same thing at all as soccer’s often satisfying “nil-all” draws) are becoming increasingly common.

Finally, the followers of anti-psychiatry might tell us, Rugby League also represents the playing-out of the dramas of psychiatry in sporting form. The repressive paranoid instinct, obsessed with territory lost and gained, lasts ten or twenty tackles or more: then comes the schizophrenic release of an apparently random fifty-metre breakthrough, the zig-zag chain of passes, and finally a spectacular leap back to Mother earth behind the tryline...
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What is the Left Reading?

Everything from acting to better health.
We asked eight people on the left what they’ve been reading lately.

Meredith Burgmann
Politics lecturer, Macquarie University

When you have babies you don’t read any more. My hazy memories of what I was reading B.B. (before baby) are:

Jean Devanny, *Sugar Heaven*. A terrific, ideologically correct novel about the 1935 North Queensland sugar strike. Amanda Cross, *Death in a Tenured Position*. A feminist detective story — a great idea but not gripping enough. We are writing a better one about a feminist detective collective called *Corpse at the Conference*.

Richard Hyman and Robert Price (eds) *The New Working Class? White Collar Workers and their Organisations*. I had to read this for work but still found it entertaining and reasonably enlightening.

Vita Sackville-West, *No Signposts in the Sea*. I read all her novels because I met her in the azalea garden at Sissinghurst when I was twelve. They’re actually a bit dull.

Bernard Smith
Art historian

My work hasn’t left much time for reading over the past few months, but I have enjoyed rereading Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and Lawrence’s *Kangaroo* — the latter feat prompted, of course, by Tim Burstall’s film. I was delighted to see what good use he had made of Robert Darroch’s excellent piece of literary detection, *D.H. Lawrence in Australia* — a book that did not get the reception it deserved until it was reviewed some years after publication by Edward St. John. I also enjoyed reading Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s autobiography *Blue-Stone Foundations* for its quiet, persistent honesty and skill in characterisation, I suppose.

Robert Hughes’ *The Fatal Shore* was one of the great literary surprises of my life. I came to it full of prejudice, because I’ve tended to think of Bob Hughes as a clever chap but a bit of a smart arse really. How wrong I was. This is a great book and a very personal achievement. A kind of expatriate’s peace offering: his *Ulysses* or *Fortunes of Richard Mahoney*. Now he can stay in the Big Apple as long as he wants to. The book pays his dues to Oz Culture Inc. — as a corresponding life member. I wonder how long it will be before Germaine Greer and Barry Humphries pay their subscriptions?

For some odd reason, *The Fatal Shore* sent me back to reading Michelet’s *French Revolution* (in translation, needless to say, though it would be nice to have the time to stumble through the original). If you like your history with oodles of passion, read Michelet. He would be excellent reading for Kanaks these days. It must have been Hughes’ involvement with his subject that turned me back to Michelet.

In the last few days I’ve been reading Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*. It’s full of piercing insights hidden among gnomic verbiage. How dense and opaque these modern continentals insisted on being! One yearns for the clarity of Sartre. When
they still believed that words could be about ideas and not merely about other words. Yet I do find Adorno compelling reading, looking for the brilliant bits in his great slag heap. He starts his idea of art too high up the ladder of production for my liking. But I do find him more exciting to read than Elwyn Lynn or Donald Brook. Must be suffering from cultural cringe ...

Hester Eisenstein
Leader, EEO Unit,
NSW Dept of Education

I am reading Lynne Segal, Is the Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism and Anne Phillips, Divided Loyalties: Dilemmas of Sex and Class.

Both seek to provide some kind of an interim assessment of where the women's movement is at in relation to the rest of the left. Not exactly light reading, but pretty interesting.

I'm also trying to follow the Conragate scandal with the coverage in the Sydney Morning Herald, although that only seems to give the tip of the iceberg.

Lyn Yates
Education Lecturer,
La Trobe Uni

I've been reading and enjoying Pavla Miller's Long Division: State Schooling in South Australian Society, rereading, and being irritated by, Carol Steadman's Landscape For a Good Woman; and escaping with Anne Tyler's The Accidental Tourist and Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, and Frank Moorhouse's Room Service. I've also been reading for pleasure The Victorian Readers (a facsimile reprint) and for duty Farmer Schulz's Ducks, Animalia, The Jolly Postman, etc. etc. (about three times a day, with frequent repeats).

Carmel Shute
Organiser,
Vic ABC Staff Union

When I'm not being a workaholic, I'm an addict of the printed word. Over the last few months, I've read more than usual — the result of two weeks' holidays (with a bag of books), persistent insomnia, and a bout of bronchitis.

As I've lately read so many books of so many kinds — feminist novels, thrillers, autobiographies, kids' books, histories, feminist texts ... I've decided here to stick mostly to what I'd urge on my friends who share the same passions.

Tops on my list is Umberto Eco's masterpiece, The Name of the Rose, which I've been waiting to borrow for three years. After seeing the film, I rushed out for my own copy and didn't put it down for two days. It's such a dense, scholarly work about the struggle for the control of knowledge in the late Dark Ages, but works equally as a thriller. It certainly changed my mind about semioticians — or at least one of them.

I'm almost as passionate about Nancy Corbett's novel Floating, set simultaneously in eighteenth century Japan and contemporary Sydney. Basically, it's about three-way relationships in both societies and how they're handled. Don't be put off by the terrible reviews.

I'm just starting Marilyn Lake's evocative history of soldier settlement in Victoria, The Limits of Hope, which I originally read in thesis form. It's a magnificent contribution to our understanding of our past and is unique in that it will please both the RSL and marxist feminists. Marilyn is currently laid up with a broken leg and I've just bought her a copy of Marion Zimmer Bradley's 1,000-page epic, The Mists of Avalon, to aid the healing process. It's a compelling reworking of the Arthurian legend from the women's viewpoint and is essentially a tale (a very long tale) about the struggle between matriarchal religion and patriarchal Christianity in early Britain. While I was reading it, I had the most wonderful dreams and it seemed to tap my sub-conscious in a way I don't understand.

I've also enjoyed Jennifer Dabs' novel about growing up Catholic and female in the 'fifties in Melbourne — Beyond Redemption. The theme has been done to death but her book is a lot better than most.

Juliet Mitchell's and Ann Oakley's edited collection What is Feminism? is one of the more interesting feminist collections to come out lately and I'd really recommend it to anyone who wanted a comprehensive account of feminist debates over the past ten years. Most of the chapters address the central contradiction between "equality" arguments and "difference" arguments.

For light reading, I've whipped through the usual number of thrillers, but I'd especially recommend these from the feminist genre: Mary Wings' She Came Too Late; Gillian Slovo Death by Analysis; and Rebecca O'Rourke Jumping the Cracks. Rita Mae Brown's High Hearts is also a rollicking read if you're prepared to suspend belief and any historical
knowledge about the Civil War.

Recently, I borrowed my young friend Jessie’s copy of Astrid Lindgren’s *Pippi Longstocking*, a book about a very bold, very strong and very independent Swedish girl who lives by herself and does amazing things. If only they’d had books like this when I was seven! At least we can now make do with Kaz Cooke’s wonderfully funny (and ideologically sound) *A Modern Girl’s Guide to Everything*. Good advice on everything from broken hearts to injured hands.

**Sean Kidney**
Redfern Legal Centre, Sydney

In general, I’m not good at finishing books off. I tend to dip in and out of them, which means I have a chaotic pile of 10 or 15 books beside my bed at the moment, all “being read”. The pile includes: *An Actor Prepares*, by Constantin Stanislavsky. A very interesting book about acting method. It’s really about communicating in a very broad sense, with lots of lessons for publishing, journalism, TV, etc. *The Treasury Line*, by Greg Whitwell. Quite a well-written history of the federal Treasury — interesting background to all the Canberra economics gospel of the moment. *

*What a Way to Run a Railroad*, by Landry, Morley, Southwood and Wright. Billed as an “analysis of radical failure”, it looks at the lessons to be learnt from the history of various radical businesses (left journals in particular) set up in the UK during the ’70s, i.e. why they failed. I’d recommend it to anyone involved in left organisations. *Love and War in the Apennines*, by Eric Newby. I’ve actually finished this one! A very enjoyable reminiscence about hiding out in the mountains of Italy in WW2. I’ve been reading his *Traveller’s Tales* selections as well, mainly as a book to take on bushwalks and read out aloud, around the campfire; classic pages about travelling in Antarctica or Africa or outback Australia.

*Innovation and Entrepreneurship* by Peter Drucker. Drucker is a chief guru of Business Management, one of the first people to teach management as a skill. Normally, I’ve found his books a bit dry, but I’m enjoying reading this one and am learning lots. Of interest is that Drucker also turns his attention in this book to public and community agencies. *Moving Left*, edited by David McKnight. Definitely a book to dip into rather than read (some of the contributions seem a bit tired), but I’m still working my way through it. *The Road Less Travelled*, by M Scott Peck. A psycho-therapist talking about his work (very much written as “talk” rather than a “read”, if that makes sense at all). About love, happiness, pain, emotional growth, etc. etc. I got a lot out of it. (Another one I’ve actually finished.) *Pictures on a Page — photojournalism, graphics and picture editing* by Harold Evans. To my mind the best book ever written on the topic. No mush, just solid examples. His book on newspaper editing is great, too.

*Looking Forward to Better Health* by the Better Health Commission (Vol 1). Sounds dry? Well, yes, it is, but it’s still the blueprint for development of health services in Australia (federally, anyway) and very interesting for that. *Corporation Man* by Anthony Jay. Jay’s thesis is that effective organisational structures in western society are those that mirror prehistoric village and hunting structures. He was one of the earlier writers (1963) to push the idea of worker teams as being the best way to organise businesses. It’s a very interesting book and easy to relate to. (Jay has gone on to use his understanding of organisations as co-author of the BBC’s *Yes Minister.*) A book to savour.

**Eric Aarons**
Former Communist Party national official, Sculptor and writer

I have read more books than usual in the last three months; partly because I had some given to me for my 68th birthday, and partly because I had some lent and recommended to me. (In general, I find it harder these days to come by books that really interest me.)

These were: *The Long March*, by Harrison E. Salisbury; *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende; *Coffy Mahony and Other Stories* by Henry Handel Richardson; *A Long Time Dying* by Olga Masters; *The Public Culture* by Donald Horne; *Ever Since Darwin* and *The Panda’s Thumb* by Stephen Jay Gould; *Daughters of the Dreaming* by Diane Bell; *The Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*; and *The Boy Adeodatus* by Bernard Smith.

I have also restudied the first chapter of *Capital* in which Marx reveals the crucial nature (in his opinion) of the two-fold nature of the labour embodied in commodities — a question I believe has an unexpected, though intimate, connection with socialist experience and “socialist renewal”. I intend to write about this at some length at a later date ...

**Colin Mercer**
Cultural Studies Lecturer, Griffith Uni, Qld

My most recommended book from recent reading is *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, by Robert Darnton. It takes its title from one of the chapters: “Workers Revolt: the Great Cat Massacre of the Rue St. Severin”. This recounts an obscure event in early nineteenth century
Feminists Take Stock

WHAT IS FEMINISM?
edited by Juliet Mitchell
and Ann Oakley (Blackwell 1986), $18.95.
Reviewed by JANNA THOMPSON.

After several decades of the women's movement it seems appropriate to evaluate our position: to examine accomplishments and failures, reassess the ideas and ideals which sparked the rebirth of feminism, to consider where we are going and what problems have arisen. The motivation behind What is Feminism? was, presumably, to make such an evaluation, and this is what the title of the book leads us to expect.

The editors admit in their introduction that the book did not develop as they planned and that many women who were expected to contribute did not do so. The end result is a hodge-podge of articles of uneven quality with few indications of an underlying theme. Many of the contributions are worth reading, but the reader who expects a systematic discussion of where feminism is at and what it has come to mean will be disappointed.

The contributions which most directly address the question posed by the title are generally disappointing. Rosalind Delmar in

"What is Feminism?" regards it as anomalous that feminism, which purports to speak for all women, is itself so divided, but she gets no further than to wonder (in the new language of deconstruction) if women form a coherent political or social grouping. Juliet Mitchell in "Reflections on Twenty Years of Feminism" (a paper which she read on her last visit to Australia) considers whether changes favourable to women in the workforce aren't in reality part of the process of capitalist restructuring. Perhaps women are being used once more as shock troops to soften up the labour force for a new development in capitalism. Her thesis is provocative since it suggests that feminists have been playing into the hands of capitalism; but the social theory on which it depends is not articulated and her arguments are therefore difficult to get a grip on.

In "Feminist Theory and Feminist Movements", Nancy Cott discusses the opposition between feminism a movement for individual freedom and as a movement which emphasizes the ways in which women's needs and lives are different from those of men. This opposition has appeared in previous women's movements but, after pointing this out, Cott has little to say about it. Dale Spender's "What is Feminism?" is simply one more account of 'how feminism changed my life'.

By far the best theoretical contribution is Judith Stacey's "Are Feminists Afraid to Leave the Home?" (the original version appeared in Feminist Studies in 1985). She critiques the recent view of Germain Greer, Betty Friedan and Jean Bethke Elshtain, which she labels "conservative, pro-family feminism", and considers why some feminists have found them attractive and what this reveals about the inadequacies in the feminism of the '60s and '70s.

The other articles in the book are about specific social institutions — welfare, unions, health care, the law, science — and where feminists in various parts of the English-speaking world stand in relation to them. Of these, I found most interesting Heather Jan Maroney's "Feminism at Work". Her discussion of the growing militancy of women workers in Canada and attempts by women to work within unions suggests interesting parallels with what is happening in Australia.

People interested in feminism are bound to find some articles in the book useful or thought-provoking. What is doubtful is whether it's worth paying almost $20 for a book which has no good reason for existing.

JANNA THOMPSON teaches philosophy at La Trobe University.
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