Bob Hawke is now the most successful leader in the ALP's history. Labor has probably never before appeared to the general public to be so competent in government; so in command of the political agenda (whatever we might think); or so united. Its relationship to the trade union movement is more secure than that of Chifley in the 'forties, and certainly more so than that of Whitlam in the 'seventies. There appears to be an abundance of political talent in each of the various wings of the parliamentary party, and Labor possesses an electoral machine the envy of its rivals. On all of these counts, its future looks rosy.

It is important to stress this picture, however limited and one-sided it may be because, over the next three years, the left outside the ALP runs the serious risk of becoming detached from the world view of the body politic altogether, and lapsing into a kind of principled monasticism. At the root of it is probably our inability to admit, even to ourselves, that a Labor government — even this Labor government — could govern with a strategy deeply inimical to almost everything we believe in, and yet become a resounding success. There are always those, of course, who will argue that Labor's new face is precisely why it has succeeded because it has pursued policies "functional to capitalism", and is thus functional to capitalism too. But a simple right turn has rarely been the saviour of Labor or social-democratic governments anywhere in the past; and "functionality to capitalism" is one of those circular arguments which never really proves anything. Clearly, if Labor has been
successful, there are more complex reasons involved.

It's an old saw on the left that the crux of socialist strategy in this country lies in its analysis and understanding of the ALP. Yet, over the last four years, much of the left has simply ceased analysing the ALP in any sober way at all, resorting instead to what was described in the last issue of ALR as the "culture of betrayal": while other parts have quietly and pragmatically, but without any wider analysis, got on with accommodating themselves to it.

Part of the reason for this probably lies in a refusal to acknowledge our own complicity in the ideological processes at work in the political arena. There's been no shortage of clear and vocal criticism from the left of the positions taken up by the government over the last four years — much of it well-directed and often hard-hitting. What's been absent, however, is even the smallest recognition of the left's own responsibility for this situation — meaning the absence of any credible alternative program of the kind which could be implemented successfully if the left were suddenly and unexpectedly thrust into government tomorrow. Rather, the left has tended to act as if we had a ready-made and widely agreed program somewhere in the backs of our heads, just waiting to leap out. The reality, of course, is rather different. And the consequence has been that the Hawke-Keating position in the ALP has been able to act as if, in Margaret Thatcher's immortal words, "There Is No Alternative."

One of the keys to the government's success remains, as it has been from the start, its successful engagement with the trade union movement — an engagement which, as I've tried to argue elsewhere (Australian Society, June), succeeded also in redefining the terms of the relationship between the ALP in government and the union movement. This is why (among other reasons) it is vital for forward looking elements in the left to make up their minds once and for all what they really think of the kind of strategy outlined in Australia Reconstructed. It's vital, not least because, while at least the terms of the ongoing bargain between the ACTU and the government are fairly clear, the left's attitude towards the thinking of the more advanced sections of the trade union movement remains hopelessly ambivalent. And, while this hardly requires that the left accept or reject such a strategy en bloc — if, indeed, that were possible — it does suggest that we at least have to be clear what we think about it. At stake is not only our conception of "the economy", but our entire strategy in the field of social policy as well.

The campaign

A great deal of newsprint and videotape was expended during the election campaign on the theme of what an unremarkable election it was. What needs to be pointed out, particularly from the point of view of analysis from the left, is that the campaign had some rather novel features which say a good deal about the changing face of Labor.

One highly significant feature of the campaign was the constituencies targeted by Labor, and the way in which they were addressed. For once, there was no pretense of tailoring the entire appeal to that entity known as "middle Australia", with its well-known propensity to social conservatism, personal self-interest, and little else. Now women, 25-40, with the key emphasis on those either in or aspiring to be in the labour market, were the acknowledged major "target audience" — followed by, in rough chronological order during the campaign, welfare recipients, those concerned about the environment, and (in a last-minute attack of nerves), Labor's "traditional constituencies", via Paul Keating's robust verbal assault on the Money Power, in the incongruous manner of his one-time mentor, Jack Lang.

Of course, the sincerity of all this should not be taken too seriously. Neither Senator Richardson's sudden conversion to environmentalism, nor the Prime Minister's equally improbable discovery of a kind of makeshift charity-style affirmative action in his new ministry, was regarded with more than mild amusement by most. Nor have welfare recipients or the "traditional constituencies" (or at least Labor activists) been too mollycoddled since the election by Senator Walsh's macho posturing on welfare expenditure, or the ceremonial opening of the Great Privatisation Debate by Mr. Hawke.

Nevertheless, the difference in style is significant; particularly in the light of the opportunism of the opposition's campaign, with its none-too-subtle revival of what the Liberals presumably regard as their sure-fire last-ditch "fistful of dollars" approach. Labor's campaign was intended to be "statesmanlike" — and, aside from Paul Keating's characteristically cynical hospital-bed poses, it mostly was. A team of ministers, each with his (in the curious absence of Susan Ryan) individual message of responsibility and restraint, replaced the happy-go-lucky prime ministerial vignettes of yesteryear. To the extent that this did reflect a genuine "image" of the government's broader social and economic approach (whatever we may think of that), we should hardly quibble with it. "Image" politics has been much maligned lately. But, as Stuart Hall recently observed, images are not trivial things: "In and through them, fundamental political questions are being posed and argued through". And, in fact, it was the "style" more than the "substance" of the election campaign which revealed some of the newer trends in the ALP.

What Labor's election campaign made clear, in short, was that it has adapted itself very successfully to an era in which the socially-based political loyalties of the past count for a good deal less, and "ideological" appeals based upon identification with certain broad systems of values a good deal more, than previously. The lesson of the decline of British Labour is that the traditional core of the working
class itself has become so differentiated and diverse that the "reliable" core is shrinking in numbers and significance. Hence the concern in the ALP's campaign for, on the one hand, broad "national" appeals to togetherness and self-sacrifice; and, on the other, for more differentiated appeals to the various, sometimes contradictory, elements in people's political outlook. Ironically, this phenomenon is one of which many on the left have been aware for a number of years — but without the opportunity to translate it onto the national stage. Now Labor, in its own fashion, has done just that.

Where now?

Clearly, the most significant battle ahead for the left, both inside and outside the ALP, over the next few months, is the Great Privatisation Debate launched personally by the Prime Minister himself in August. It is significant above and beyond its strict economic and political importance, for two — on the face of it, contradictory — reasons.

The first is that the question of public ownership and the public sector has long been an Achilles heel of the left. Margaret Thatcher built her political creed on the identification of existing state-run enterprises with socialist values and with the welfare state; and on the counterposed images of plurality and freedom of choice in the private sector. And, indeed, the left very rarely takes the trouble to try to articulate any cogent reasons why public utilities, as opposed to residual services or health or welfare provision, should be in the public sector. As with our alleged economic strategy, we often vaguely assume that the rationale for state-owned utilities is sitting fully-formed in the backs of our heads — when, in fact, in the contemporary context, it is a case still very much waiting to be constructed.

There are a number of reasons for this, but the most obvious is the understandable ambivalence many people on the left feel for the role of the state in general. On the one hand, there is the conception of the welfare state as an "island of socialism in a sea of capitalism" (in Barry Hindess' phrase); or again, the venerable notion that socialism will come via the piecemeal socialisation of the "commanding heights", rather like a dripping tap — although few on the left would consciously assent to this as a viable or popular road to social transformation nowadays. On the other, there is a strong sense of the alienating features of centralised bureaucracies — particularly among people in the community sector with experience of more participatory forms of provision. Moreover, there is no sense in which public ownership is felt to be an integral part of a strategy for social change. In public, it is pointed out defensively that the same utilities in private hands would lead to even larger monopolies. But few positive arguments spring easily to mind.

At the same time, there can be little doubt that within the labour movement privatisation will be a deeply felt emotional issue, the like of which has not yet been seen in the life of the Hawke government. There has been enormous disillusion within and without the ALP over the drift of government policy these last four years, and a few instances — such as uranium sales, or ESL — which have crystallised these sentiments for a moment into near-rebellion. But the privatisation debate seems, somehow, to serve as a point of convergence for all the misgivings, all the slow ebb of principle, emanating from diverse directions since 1983.

In a sense, this is ironic: after all, few in the ALP seriously regard the socialisation objective as any kind of feasible priority; and many other measures in the field of social policy have created immeasurably more pain in the lives of actual living people than the sale of Australian Airlines would ever be likely to do. Ultimately, however, it may be the difficult area of principle, of the often intangible but deeply-felt springs of political commitment itself, which may prove to be the battleground at this crucial point in the policy of evolution of the government. An important part of this, too, is a sense of history: privatisation is a very tangible means of rolling back the welfare-state compromise of the latter forties. In Britain in the 1950s, Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell, having successfully "revised" priorities in practice across the spectrum, moved to modify the socialisation objective in the Labour Party's constitution. Suddenly, right and left, trade unions and party branches, found themselves more or less united on a question of little practical substance but immense emotional significance for the very self-definition of their political commitment. While the privatisation debate is of much more than emotional significance, Mr. Hawke could well find that he has committed a Gaitskell.

On the other hand, it may equally well be the left's last chance to affect seriously the direction of the Hawke government. If the left is unable to argue its case in such a way as to redefine the public ownership question in terms of actual priorities in the lived experience of real people — priorities which nowadays include not only welfare and security, but also a more self-confident sense of citizens' rights and of the responsiveness of social and economic institutions to people's needs — then it will have abdicated much of the terrain of social policy as well. Mr. Hawke has set the terms of the debate adroitly: "We can only go forward as a party if we hold our principles not as items of blind faith but as relevant and effective means to achieve our goals". The left cannot afford not to take up the challenge. But if, in the process, blind faith is the first casualty, it will be no great tragedy.

DAVID BURCHELL co-ordinates ALR.