Life Beyond The Fragments

Left renewal or pragmatic regroupment? The left is in a quandary. And the agenda continues to slip from our grasp. But Adam Farrar sees light at the end of the tunnel.

These are beginning to feel like heady times again. The Soviet Union is breaking out of its shell. School students are on the march in Sydney streets. Even the federal government has rediscovered social justice in an attempt to win back support. So why does it seem so hard for the left outside the ALP to emerge from this with a new, effective organisational form? Why is the new party or movement — which is so widely seen to be necessary — experiencing such a difficult birth?

That there is a difficulty is there for all to see in the short-lived bursts of enthusiasm for this or that option from one group or another. In the middle of all this turbulence a few more long-term attempts are still on their feet, but are clearly finding it very hard to wade forward.

The New Left Party Charter Process is one of these which shows just how hard the task has been. Since its disastrous conference in Melbourne last November (see ALR 104) the process has been struggling to find a new firm footing. Held seven months after the circulation of the Charter for a New Left Party, the conference held by the Rainbow Alliance in March this year, Alan Roberts described two processes which have marked attempts internationally to construct new forms of political organisation. One is the approach, exemplified in Australia by the Rainbow Alliance, which bypasses existing political groups “to unite under one political umbrella those already committed to oppositional activities through the various movements”. (The Rainbow Alliance is the only project which seems to be moving ahead reasonably smoothly despite a few doubts and difficult patches. But more of that later.)

Roberts’ other process is a “regroupment of the Left” forging links between existing groups or parties. He then goes on to describe the Charter as just such a regroupment between the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) and the SWP.

It’s a pity that such complete misunderstanding of the Charter process still has currency. But it is no real surprise because, underlying the SWP approach, was a belief that, despite the rhetoric, regroupment was precisely the “real agenda. The CPA members involved, on the other hand, were attempting something far more difficult. They were trying to create a new political form by fostering a process outside of the CPA into which, if the process was successful, the CPA might then choose to be dissolved.

As an aside, in this the CPA seems to have shown more understanding than the ALP Left which, at its pre-conference meeting with left unions, marred the otherwise very important decision to invite community groups from around the country, by all too often haranguing them about the need to help build the ALP. A rather more innovative approach has been the very successful Politics in the Park series of discussions at Sydney’s Harold Park Hotel, organised by some ALP Left members. All of this is evidence that the ALP, too, sees the need for renewal. But back to the Charter.

This clash of conceptions between the SWP and the CPA was, of course, a recipe for disaster. Caught in the middle were the 50 percent of those involved in the Charter and the conference who were in no party at all. In the eight months since the conference they have been the target of a bewildering paper war as the Charter began to move along two separate paths.

On the one hand, the most active independents, particularly in NSW, and the CPA (for the first time taking a decision as an organisation about the Charter) decided not to work on the Charter with the SWP. This meant a slow and uneven process of disentangling local groups from the activities and forums involving
SWP members. To add to the confusion, most groups continued to participate in an uncertain way in national Charter teleconferences organised by those (principally the SWP) who did not publicly accept that the Melbourne conference had been a complete failure.

The culmination of this second path was a national meeting at which the SWP argued successfully that a new left party was no longer possible and that a coalition of the left was the only option. This proposal dovetailed neatly with the recent revival of talks between the SWP and the main pro-Soviet party, the Socialist Party of Australia (SPA). A launch of this coalition is planned for later this year.

While this decision may have made the task of disentangling the two threads of the Charter easier, the remaining active independents and CPA participants were faced with the task of reactivating a process which had all but stalled. An informal regional meeting of NSW Charter groups in April proposed another national conference to do the job last year's Melbourne conference failed to do. But this time, a sense of urgency has meant that the conference will probably only go ahead if a clear statement of the aims of the new party can be agreed on and can attract enough endorsements to demonstrate its viability.

This sense of urgency does not only apply to Charter members. Within the CPA a growing number no longer believes the party can wait around for the Charter, and that the experiment with those outside the organised left should be given up. They, too, are beginning to feel that "regroupment" may be the only way to go.

The regroupment option is certainly on the agenda. Every left political organisation has now talked with a number of others, and cooperated on particular activities. As well as the SWP and the SPA "coalition of the left", the Association of Communist Unity (ACU) [a breakaway from the SPA based mainly in the BWIU] and the CPA have well established joint industrial meetings and have begun a series of joint seminars on developments in the Soviet Union and principles of socialist organisation.

While the latter may have little more than symbolic value, many in both organisations see the joint industrial work as the real test of whether there is a solid basis for unity. This is what might be called the pragmatist position in socialist reformation. Their opposition to regroupment proposals such as the SWP-SPA "coalition of the left" is about styles of work, not regroupment as such. In particular, they are opposed to the marginalised and oppositional approach of those groups. But if these pragmatists are to see the CPA and the ACU embrace more closely, they will have to overcome the resistance of strong groups within both organisations.
Within the ACU there are those who believe that the majority of the CPA have so clearly abandoned marxism-leninism and democratic centralism that unity is impossible. At the recent ACU conference they firmly put the brakes on any headlong rush towards the CPA. Some of this group have their eyes, instead, on attracting members of yet another group looking for a renewed socialist presence to an avowedly marxist-leninist party. This other group is the Socialist Network, a socialist presence to an avowedly marxist-leninist party. This other group is the Socialist Network, a loose organisation somewhat smaller than either the Charter or the Rainbow Alliance, the majority of whose members belong to a minority grouping within the CPA.

The Network was formed by people concerned that the search for a new party would abandon both an explicitly socialist identity and a marxist analysis. Some Network members have supported the SWP position in the Charter and the proposed Left Coalition; others are members of both the CPA and the ACU; while still others would prefer to see the CPA "rebuilt".

On the CPA side, the caution about regroupment with the ACU comes from those who are most concerned that the left needs a new political vision and organisational form. In this they are following a path which began with the adoption of the current CPA program in 1979. That program stressed most of the ingredients which have become the building blocks of most alternative left programs, from the left of the ALP to the Rainbow Alliance. In particular, it placed great emphasis on democratic participation in all areas of life including, of course, workplace self-management. It also recognised the central place of radical movements — most notably the women's and environment movements.

For the past decade, the CPA has doggedly followed wherever this path led — from debates about the prospects for socialism, through arguments (and initiatives) for socialist renewal, to a search for a new socialist party. Not surprisingly, many in the CPA see the regroupment option as the result of exhaustion, rather than any pioneering spirit. Equally reasonably, a good many people are asking whether, after all this time, this path is leading anywhere. Perhaps more important, the pragmatists argue, given that the pendulum of social responsiveness seems to be swinging back to the left, can we afford to let it swing by while we search for the right formulations?

This is a strong point. But what seems implicit in the position of the proponents of a "new vision" — and here we should include those in the CPA (including some supporters of the Network), independents in the Charter, and the members of the Rainbow Alliance — is a concern that judging the moment is a notoriously risky business; and we might do better to build a secure and long-term basis for radical social change into the future.

It would be a mistake to draw these lines too sharply. While many of these pragmatists active in the union movement base most judgments more on the commonsense of union or traditional left practice than on radical vision, this commonsense has proved itself well able to extend to building important and creative alliances such as the BWIU's work with community organisations and the Aboriginal movement. But the point remains that a left political organisation should be thinking far more seriously about a strategy for overall social change. Perhaps the most striking, and depressing, aspect of discussions among the orthodox left about the changes taking place in the Soviet Union and elsewhere in the socialist world, is that there has been absolutely no attempt to tease out their implications, either for our understanding of socialism or for our strategy for social change.

So once again we must ask why the left — those committed to a "new vision" — have made such heavy weather of launching a new party? The answer can only be found if we ask what is involved in building a new party outside existing left organisations.

There are a number of reasons why the new alternative is synonymous with this "externalist" approach. The main one is institutional rigidity. First, as can be seen from the competing views discussed so far, any attempts to build a coherent new approach from the ground up within an existing party, will not only be confronted with political or theoretical differences but with a history of old attachments which cannot be abandoned without serious organisational damage.

And these aren't just theoretical attachments. As many of the young new left activists and intellectuals who flooded into the CPA in the late '70s found, a coherent radical project (at that time a self-consciously marxist one) is also subject to organisational pressures, the demands of a "realism" built of a particular history of political and organisational experience. At the same time, this tension is not altogether absent in the externalist strategy. A concern on the part of some from political organisations that some proposals don't acknowledge practical constraints has played a role in adding to the frustrations of the Charter process.

A more obvious point is that such a project must draw on ideas which, precisely because they are different, exist outside the party. Finally, new ideas are not enough. There is more chance of new people joining an obviously new organisation, than of their joining a revamped old one, whatever the substance of the changes. Probably too much weight shouldn't be placed on this last point because the jury is still out on whether the problem of tiny membership, which has dogged all left organisations, is to be solved by a more united left presence (regroupment), or by a more effective organisational form or new vision.

But even if it is agreed that such an externalist strategy is needed, it is much less clear how to go about it. The Charter strategy may have stalled because it expected all those who answered the call for a new party to decide collectively what sort of party they wanted. If it is absurd to
Over the Rainbow

Up until now the new alignments on the left have produced little in the way of practical rethinking on programmatic and policy questions. An exception is New Economic Directions for Australia, a discussion paper produced by a number of leading members of the Rainbow Alliance, which appeared in April. 1

The document takes on the ambitious task of outlining a quite detailed set of proposals for a left economic policy over the short and medium, and long terms. But it also does more than this. It tries to outline a new vision of social provision and of the principles of society, involving a “new structure”. In this, understandably, it remains sketchy, although it undoubtedly takes much more seriously the question of values than most left economic documents.

The authors declare at the outset their intention to get beyond “the usually fragmented or poorly thought through shopping list of desires” (p. 1) which characterises much left thinking on economic and social transformation. Thus “the proposals must be seen as an interconnected package rather than a shopping list from which specific items can be selected in isolation” (p. 4).

The long-term vision is strong on principles: equality without uniformity; cultural diversity without structural inequality; ecological balance; democratic participation and planning. The economy is visualised in terms of four sectors: a “democratically controlled public” sector; a co-operative one; small business; and a “non-money exchange sector” (which remains somewhat vague). There is little or no thinking about the role of markets; indeed, the stress is on their limited significance (p. 8). In this, paradoxically, it exhibits less “new thinking” than some older parts of the left.

The short and medium term proposals are far more detailed. They include full employment over ten years; a Guaranteed Adequate Income (GAI) of 120% of the poverty line, targeted at the poorest 30 percent of the community; equal pay and universal access to child care; a radically progressive tax system (with a 65 percent top rate for personal incomes over $50,000); deregulation of the finance sector; and the abolition of ecologically unsound industries. Borrowed from Australia Reconstructed is the National Investment Fund (although, like other borrowings, this remains curiously unacknowledged).

The document acknowledges and tries to face up to some of the contradictions inherent in any set of proposals of this kind. For instance: it advocates full employment concurrently with a reduction in economic growth along ecological lines; settling for the compromise that this will be a different kind of growth. And it acknowledges that its hefty and detailed tax package and “massively increased public expenditure” will surely be met by strong political pressures.

In many respects the document has a surprisingly Keynesian flavour, and its authors are careful to outline a package of responses to expected inflationary pressures. Yet they have not much to say on the international constraints upon public-sector-led recoveries as exhibited in the French experience, and the document retains an ambivalent posture towards increased consumer demand per se. At one point (p. 24) it raises the question of wage restraint as a trade-off for the massive social package; elsewhere (p. 13) it advocates an immediate return to full wage indexation. And there are a few places where the puritanism of some economic thinking on the left bursts through (for instance, an odd proposal to ban market research for its alleged effect on election results [p. 53]).

Overall, however, New Economic Directions is easily the most sustained piece of economic thinking to come out of the new trends in the left. This makes all the more curious the absence of any sense of a strategic perspective such as might outline some of the responses to the economic destabilisation certain to accompany an economic program even half as ambitious as this one. Early on (p. 3) the authors disclaim this as independent of the task of developing an economic vision: but it is difficult to see how the two can be separated.

This same strategic vacuum lends a certain shapelessness to the proposals as a whole, since there is no yardstick (or set of them) for determining priorities within the grand plan. And it leads too to an eerie otherworldliness in trying to visualise their implementation: what are the wider social coalitions, and where are the best lines of advance, which can bring such a program to the light of day? How can the unions, for instance, be won to a program which seems to use them only in a very instrumental way?

To attempt an economic vision without an equally well-thought-out political vision might be construed as putting the cart before the horse. The document is, however, an important attempt at yoking the two, too often isolated, realms together.

David Burchell.

1. New Economic Directions for Australia: A Discussion Paper, prepared by John Wiseman, Lorrie Read, Joe Camilleri, Peter Christoff, Bob Reid-Smith, Ian Ward, Rob Watts and Boris Frankel; with comments and suggestions from Belinda Probert. Contact: John Wiseman, C/- Department of Social Work, Phillip Institute of Technology, Plenty Rd, Bundoora 3083.
draft a leaflet by committee, then it is impossible collectively to draft a political program. Too little attention was paid to how this could be achieved before the Charter was well under way.

But too little attention was also paid to who the constituency for a new party really was. The usual formula — "those on the left, not in any party" — might include all those who are disenchanted with Labor and in that sense is a constituency in search of a party, but it doesn't provide any political focus from which the project of a new party might be developed. A much tighter target group which has also been proposed is those activists, across all progressive movements, who are committed both to radical social change and to integrating the understandings and strategies of their movement with those of other movements. Identifying such a target group immediately sets the terms of the political, theoretical and organisational decisions that have to be reached.

Within the Charter and CPA this sort of question has been sidetracked by the red herring of how socialist a new party might be. The irony is that socialism is much less of a problem for most radical movement activists than movement politics is for many members of socialist organisations. Moreover, the immediate concern with radical social change is often stronger among movement activists, a feature which has attracted some of the most radical members of organisations like the CPA to work in them.

All these points are fairly well illustrated by the Rainbow Alliance. The Alliance chose a very carefully managed path. Activists were invited from selected areas and with particular expertise. As a result, the Alliance has gone public with a package of policies nearly developed, and a much clearer project for potential members to assess. There can also be little doubt about the socialist orientation of those so far seen (see box). The price it has paid is some impatience from those with a day-to-day involvement in various movements, some suspicion about the motives and aspirations of key players, and some difficulty in tapping a broad enough range of expertise. Significantly, labour movement expertise seems in short supply.

The only useful judgments about all these jostling strategies will be made retrospectively. But not all the cards are played yet. The CPA at least is having a shot at bringing some order into all this and, certainly, it is best placed to act as a broker between some of the key players. In the next few months it will try to build some consensus between individuals and organisations, including some (like the many ethnic political groups) who have so far been scarcely involved, as well as the existing Charter organisation.

It is certainly significant that the CPA is now throwing its organisational resources into the process rather than waiting to see what evolves. It provides the best chance of matching (and hopefully complementing) the managed development that the Rainbow Alliance has so far achieved. The much harder question is whether it will be able to find a balance between dealing with both existing organisations and the target group of independents in the movements, without tipping into mere regroupment.

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