CITIZENS and Democrats

In recent years the claims of citizenship have ranked highly in the catalogue of Left values worldwide. Yet Australian Labor has had little or nothing to say about the citizenship debate. Peter Beilharz argues that the problem lies in the evolution of labourism itself. The answer may be a reconstructed and revitalised social democracy.

What has happened to marxism, politics, democracy and socialism? With the fall of the Wall, the collapse of communism and the increasing sense that the present is history, the temptation is to forget that marxism was in crisis from at least the late 1970s.

A number of particular factors were evidently at work then; the collapse of Eurocommunism and the hopes for union of the Left in France, interminable wranglings in the British Labour Party, the emergence of Green politics, the work of André Gorz and Rudolf Bahro, the continuing feminist critique of marxism, the parting of ways between marxism and feminism, the explosive work of Foucault among them. One key book in this process of dissolution was Nicos Poulantzas' last work, State, Power, Socialism (1978). Poulantzas, like the Spanish Eurocommunist Fernando Claudin, broke away from classical marxism exactly on the grounds that marxism had very little to say about politics, or more particularly about democracy.

The fall of the Wall, in this sense, is the consolidation of this process of dissolution and rethinking: not its beginning. The realisation that marxism had no real theory of politics preceded the recent, apocalyptic events across central and eastern Europe. Gramsci, of course, anticipated some of these difficulties by rejecting the idea of proletarian socialism and arguing for the necessity of class alliances, eschewing the developmental tales of earlier marxism. In reformist ways, the necessity of class alliances was also the premise of two of the proudest moments in modern labour politics—the Attlee government in Britain between 1945 and 1951, and the Whitlam government in Australia, 1972-1975. The relationship between class and politics, however, has always been a major problems for socialists, whether revolutionary or reformist. The Bolsheviks, and those who might still long for them, could indeed argue that they had politics sorted out—what was missing from Marx's theory, they would argue, was not a theory of politics but a theory of the party. Politics was really the business of the party. Enter Lenin—for his sole contribution to marxist theory was the postulate of the vanguard party; most other parts
of Leninism are borrowed directly from Marx or Kautsky, or Hobson or Helvetius.

Today, most of us are past vanguards, if stuck with mass parties. We're stuck, in addition, with parliament. Those among us who maintain closer ties to class politics probably still persist in viewing parliament as a bad joke (there's no denying that it can be a joke). But as Marxism has come apart, some others among us have come to similar conclusions from a different direction. For, from the early 80s on, many Marxists gave up their formal associations with communism and realigned with the heir apparent, the new hope, the new ALP, Accord unsheathed and at the ready.

Now, in the 90s, labour politics seems to have become a laughing stock—but that, again, is the recent turn. The problem which precedes it is that the labour tradition, like the Marxist tradition, is big on class and short on politics.

None of this is to say that class is insignificant, let alone redundant. It stares us in the face every day of our lives, and especially in periods of depression. The problem with class politics, however, is that it immediately identifies questions of our goals—the good society, however imagined—with questions of interests. This hits an old knee-jerk in Australian political culture, where politics has always, historically, been identified with producer groups,
whether business, unions or agriculture. Thus politics in Australia has always been dominated by economics—and politics has come to be identified as the pursuit of group or class economic self-interest by other means. Class politics has worked against the development of civic culture.

If we reject the more abstract utopianism of, say, Lenin’s *The State and Revolution*, where the ‘good’ society is staffed exclusively by male comrades, proletarians—if we accept difference, and accept the fact that the society of the future will still have classes and competing interests—then the question becomes, how can we get beyond the ‘politics’ of self-interest? One way to begin to follow this line of possibility is to imagine the denizens of the future not as comrades or proletarians all but as citizens. This is an old way of thinking, which harks back to Aristotle and, more radically, was a cornerstone of the hopes of the French Revolution. The argument is simple. Persons in a society, conceived as a community, have rights and duties by virtue of their membership—their physical presence—in that society. Rights and duties are integral to persons, but not as capitalists or unionists, rather as just persons. Class inequality is by no means ignored in arguments for citizenship. Rather, it is recognised as a structural fact, the consequences of which might be modified by a polity which endeavours to pursue equality as a goal, rather than to identify the good society with the interests of the workers—as Marxism does—or with the interests of capital—as conservative animals.

Arguments for citizenship in Australia have barely taken off yet. The arguments got further, for a spell, in Britain, where in the 1880s a three-cornered battle took place between Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal/Social Democrats over what citizenship meant and which party could best help to foster it. There was a fascinating moment which saw the political philosopher and advocate of citizenship Raymond Plant writing speeches for Neil Kinnock, and the historian David Marquand publishing his brilliant study of *The Unprincipled Society*—a title echoing Tawney’s classic critique of Britain as *The Acquisitive Society* (1930). It seemed then that there might be some chance to establish a public space in which argument could proceed about the permanence of property, the desirability of democracy and the necessity of tension between them.

Modern arguments about citizenship were revived in the 1980s by ‘new liberals’ such as TH Green in exactly this kind of context—one in which poverty was recognised as a major social obstacle to the development of individuals, and where property was acknowledged as a substantial impediment to the lives of those who existed without it, or with only their labour power to sell.

Given that we are bound by traditions, our typical response to the situation of hiatus or crisis is to look back, to attempt to recover arguments and sources from earlier moments. We all do this—whether conservatives, Catholics, socialists, feminists or libertarians—for we all live in history, carry with us notions of the past, like the collective unconscious. Thus Marxists return to their precedents and pasts—a positive process, for there is much to learn from pragmatic Marxists such as Kautsky, who understood very well what conservative animals we are, and how difficult and uncontrollable attempts to change the world are. However, it’s also worth turning to other traditions which Marxists have self-righteously spurned, such as Fabianism, Guild Socialism, and co-operation. But these are all largely other people’s pasts. What of our own, in Australia?

As I have suggested above, the biggest obstacle here is to be found in the limits of Australian labourism itself. As the term suggests, labourism is an explicit and wilful transference of economic concerns into political demands. If we define politics as the open-ended process of contingent compromise between groups and persons marked by difference with the aim of social and individual elevation, then labourism has no politics at all. The closest we get, perhaps, is the foggy-headed evangelism of Chifley’s ‘light on the hill’, or Whitlam’s meritocratic impulses to elevation through education and health care support.

Labour’s politics since the 1890s have been caught up with the pursuit of state power and representation in its own interests. The strongest symbol of this is the trend which can be called state experimentalism. The question of the state and its role in recent Australian history is an intriguing one, especially because everybody agrees that the state has been central but no one has really explained the specific content of Labor’s statism. For labour statism, indeed, has largely been pragmatic. When we read, for example, Evatt’s biography of W A Holman, *Australian Labour Leader* (1942), we get a sense of civilising purpose or progressivism, but only an instrumental defence of statism; the state is merely the means to pursue economic development, to combat unemployment, to provide cheap foodstuffs through state butcher-shops and so on. Visiting German Social Democrats, convinced of the superiority of their own tradition, scoffed at such turn-of-the-century exercises in state provision. This was not socialism. And probably they were right. For the real achievement of German Social Democracy—classical Marxism after Marx and Engels—was the creation not of a state within a state but of a society within a society, a set of social relations which could support and protect them from Junker capitalism, if not from nascent reaction in the 1930s. And the Social Democrats managed this even though they had no word for citizenship. Citizens were defined in German as Bürger, simultaneously citizens and bourgeois, there being no word which suggested the possibility of separating the two.

So we’re back, again, to the problem of property and citizenship. Ever since socialists have been prepared to make peace with markets and money rather than slogans about their abolition, the issue of property has loomed larger on the Left. Indeed, the earlier Labour Left was haunted by the image of yeoman socialists, envisaging the good society as one back on the land; ‘three acres and a cow’ or something a little more ambitious than that. Suburbanism, in a sense, became a half-urbanised version of that dream—the quarter-acre, perhaps, and a Victoria instead of the cow. Yet Leftists have often got no further than this on the issue of property, except perhaps to acknowledge the legitimacy of having a crack at running a takeaway...
shop or something like that. To put it in economic terms, the Left has never really been able to address the issue of entrepreneurship, let alone to provide an alternative vision of how economic life might be organised.

There are, however, others within Australian history who accepted the rights of property but argued that for rights, there were also duties. The most obvious figure here is H B Higgins, whose 1907 Harvester judgment can be criticised from various perspectives, but not this one. Higgins' view was plain: no duties, no rights. Capital had no god-given right to existence or valorisation outside its social context and responsibilities; if it could not offer decent wages, for example, it should not operate in a particular industry at all.

Higgins, together with others such as Walter Murdoch and Alfred Deakin, represented the legacy of colonial liberalism into the early 20th century. As Stuart Macintyre shows in his recent *A Colonial Liberalism*, this positive approach to citizenship was earlier pioneered by men like Charles Pearson, George Higinbotham and David Syme. There are parallel feminist stories about women such as Rose Scott and Catherine Helen Spence. Each of Macintyre's trio was in a different way dedicated to the development of the public sphere: Syme and Higinbotham via the print form, Higinbotham via the law and in parliament, Pearson in education. The concept of citizenship in their hands was active, rather than passive—it involved duties as well as rights—even if it nevertheless was constrained by Victorian ideas of race and gender. Their predilections may have been white and patriarchal, but at least they worked for a politics of public purpose.

They were followed, in turn, by other radicals and new liberals who can for convenience be grouped together as the WEA liberals, for they worked in and around that fascinating but oft-maligned institution, the Workers' Educational Association. They included among their number figures such as H C Coombs, GV Portus, W G K Duncan and Meredith Atkinson. Their project was to enable the pursuit of citizenship through community education, and in this they took a very different approach to citizenship or welfare than did the state experimentalists. They could argue in defence of state provision when it could be seen to enable participation, but not for its own sake; their orientation was, at least until the 1940s, local rather than national. Put in different terms, theirs was not a socialism of the stomach, but an argument that individual, group, and community were all deeply in need of spiritual development.

The consequences of my argument are clear. Neither marxism nor labourism have ever been strong on democracy or on citizenship. In the larger, global case of marxism the implication is that marxism's relation to liberalism in general, and to radical or new liberalism in particular, needs to be reassessed completely. For whatever the flaws of liberalism—including its own failure to be sufficiently democratic—liberalism has taken democracy much more seriously than marxism ever has. In the local, immediate case, labourism has failed to develop strongly political or democratic credentials because its purview has been exactly that of the socialism of the stomach. I do not mean this judgment to be dismissive, but simply critical. The Australian labour tradition can legitimately make all kinds of noble claims about its travails, but they have been conducted within the horizons of this kind of imagination.

It follows from this, too, that it is time to acknowledge that the stronger arguments for citizenship in recent Australian history have been advanced not by labour but by those often chastised or stigmatised as 'friends of labour', people like Higgins who actively worked with labour, but were not of it, and others like the WEA intellectuals who did not even think in terms of the cause of labour so much as the prospects of the community. Labour has had its closer friends who argued for citizenship: Evatt, before he joined the ALP, while he was a student of Francis Anderson at the University of Sydney; Whitlam, who in some ways sought to bend the ALP in communitarian and national directions into the 1970s through schemes such as the Australian Assistance Plan and Medibank. On the whole, Labor's legislative mindset has been closer to that of state experimentalism, viewing individuals as comrades or subjects rather than as citizens.

But this, too, brings us to another difficulty—the way in which arguments for citizenship were then garnered by the other bunch who drew on liberalism, the nascent Liberal Party of R G Menzies. Throughout the postwar period two
different but related processes have made it even more difficult to argue for citizenship than it may previously have been. The first is the conservative appropriation of the idea of citizenship and its reduction to the trivia of flag-saluting and tree-planting. The second is the increasing social acceptance that citizenship was only about rights and not duties, about welfare provision rather than political or social participation.

All of this helps to explain why arguments for citizenship have had such little hearing in Australia of late. Citizenship can too easily be mocked, as a token of puritan morality and imperial bootlicking. Moreover, the fundamental reliance of both marxism and labourism on the language of class means that the idea of citizenship can easily be ridiculed and rejected as incapable of addressing or transcending the brutal realities of class inequality and oppression. This is a pyrrhic victory for marxism and imperial bootlicking. Moreover, the fundamental critique of corporatism which was directed against the ALP-ACTU Accord in the 80s. Arguments against corporatism pointed primarily to the problem of exclusion—that social contracts are envisaged as deals between peak representatives of producer groups which therefore reconstitute citizens as producers and ignore and exclude citizens who are not constituted as authorised producers.

What has shifted, in this argument, is the implicit alliance between the critics of corporatism and the revolutionary marxist critics of class collaborationism. Through the 70s and into the 80s, corporatism was viewed largely as social democracy's attempt to geld the labour movement by incorporating it into the state. Once we transcend those notions of the working class as a redemptive actor, we are also bound to rethink the idea of social contracts and the issue of social belonging. It's also timely, in this context, to rethink the legacy of the social-democratic tradition itself, for social democracy after World War Two also came to accept passive ideas of provision rather than active conceptions of citizenship.

The defence of citizenship is entirely compatible with the critique of corporatism and also with the defence of class compromise. The idea of socialism, indeed, remains inconceivable without the idea of class alliance. The difference today is that class alliances cannot any longer be privileged over other forms of political liaison. The process within which the Left is living is, in a certain sense, a return to the social democratic tradition which was elbowed out of the main light by the incredible popularity of communism after the October Revolution, the Depression and the Great Patriotic War. Socialism is now being reconstituted as part of the democratic project, returning to broader questions of equality, democracy and participation. The liberal and socialist streams which ran in separate directions out of the French Revolution are now entering a process of renegotiation.

This is not to suggest that humanity is back where modernity started, nor that modernity has so far provided us with all the bits which we need to create a better future. This is no more likely than the prospect of resolving the mess theoretically by scotch taping together Marx, Mary Daly and Lyotard. Distressed as we may feel, these are interesting times to be alive—fearsome, and yet challenging. The prospects for the future may appear to be modest, but they are more challenging than anything we have encountered since the 60s.

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