Deutschmark Über Alles

A string of streets in suburban Berlin tells the story of the stark differences in economic and political life which have developed between the eastern and western sectors of Germany after 40 years of separation. A walk along any of these streets which, for nearly 40 years, were divided by the Berlin Wall and the yawning gap between the economic prosperity of what was once West Germany and East Germany becomes clear. At the western end of the streets, salaries are between four and six times the salaries of those who lived in the East.

While the residents at the eastern end shovel brown coal for heating, further down the street on the western end all the apartment buildings are centrally heated. The residents of the west glide along the streets in their sleek German saloons. Those from the east splatter along in foul-smelling Trabants which, in some cases, they have waited for more than ten years before delivery. At the western end, renovations are almost a part of life. At the other end of the street, the paint is peeling off and the buildings are dilapidated and in a state of total disrepair. Several families still share the same bathroom.

Bridging the gap has become the prime consideration of German politics rising above all other issues as the country prepares for the first all-German elections since Hitler grabbed power in 1933.

The revolution which began in the streets of large East German cities over a year ago and which eventually swept the inflexible, corrupt communist system from power has now been co-opted by the mainstream of German politics. With unemployment soaring in the east, and the cost of unification now starting to move out of control, those from the west want the incorporation of the east achieved with the minimum of fuss and cost. For those from the east it is about achieving a standard of life equivalent to the west with all the consumer symbols of prosperity and the regeneration of industry and the creation of jobs.

This is despite very clear signs that many from the east are feeling the pressure of being part of an historic experiment which has totally reconstructed their lives and their economy. Nearly two generations of Germans grew up under the communist regime of the former East Germany. In a very short period of time they have moved from communism to capitalism, losing their jobs, military, police, schools, flags, traditions and, to some, their national identity. Even the churches are being merged with those in the west. Teachers are being retrained and many public officials have been dismissed. Those who were once in positions of authority in the east and who moved to the west have found themselves at the bottom of the pecking order again. Those that stayed are more often now at home unemployed. Many in mid-career or older believe they will never adjust.

Doctors in both the east and west have been flooded with new patients who have felt the strain of adjusting to the new life in western consumerist culture. Employees in the west complain that workers from the east show very little initiative. In communist East Germany it was not unusual for a working day to begin about 8 am and to peter out by about lunch time with the afternoon spent queuing for basic items or carrying out administrative tasks.

As the morale in the east sinks, there are yearnings for aspects of life under the former regime. Not the corruption, or the constant secret police surveillance, or the lies or the lack of consumer goods, but the less complicated and less competitive life where the state ensured job security. And, as a consequence, careers were less important to families and friends.

In a West German television poll 78% of East Germans queried said they expected to be second-class citizens in the new Germany for a long time. As the euphoria over the unification fades and tensions between the ‘Ossies’ and ‘Wessies’ have increased, those from the east have found themselves defending what they thought was good about life in the east. A network of generous state benefits and childcare facilities meant that more than 90% of working age were able to work in full-time employment.

By the end of the year nearly a quarter of the workforce in the east could be unemployed. And already unemployment is claiming more women than men. There is now 56% unemployment among women compared with 44% among men.

The lavish range of support was to help try to improve East Germany’s poor birth rate. But East German law also permitted any woman to have an abortion during the first three months of pregnancy. In West Germany women had to justify having an abortion on medical and social grounds before a panel of doctors, or run the risk of both patient and doctor ending up in court.

In the haste to create the new Germany, abortion law reform along with some of the more difficult questions of unification, such as moving the seat of government from Bonn to Berlin, have been essentially placed on the backburner until after the December election.

Whatever their anxieties, no one is about to give up their new life of freedom and access to an apparent cornucopia of consumer goods. Most expect that, in the long run, their financial status will improve. Now they have to wait for the second Ger-
man economic miracle to deliver a new era of prosperity.

Once the Berlin Wall was breached, the aspiration of the original leaders of the 1989 revolution to reshape the German state into a 'new', 'true' and 'genuine' socialist state were quickly pushed aside by the stampede into the west for a taste of life which had been denied to them for 40 years.

Ironically, it was the short, stooped, stocky figure of Gregor Gysi, who took over the mantle of leader of the disgraced East German communists and who, in the final days of East Germany, seems to be the only one defending the interests of the 16 million East Germans. He consistently tried to protect the social benefits of East Germans and argued for a better deal under unification. Mr Gysi has transformed the former communists, renaming them the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). Up until recently the party was facing a doubtful future. However, changes to Germany's electoral laws aimed at protecting smaller parties is likely to help the PDS back into parliament in the next few years.

Germany's governing right-of-centre coalition led by Chancellor Helmut Kohl has turned the 1989 revolution into a successful populist movement which should guarantee it a triumphal win in December. Eighteen months ago, with the German economy becoming sluggish and the opposition Social Democratic Party (SPD) rising in the opinion polls, Mr Kohl's future appeared uncertain. Now the best that the SPD can possibly hope for is not to be completely crushed in the elections by the Christian Democratic-dominated coalition.

At the recent elections in East Germany, held to create five new states to draw the east into Germany's federal system, Mr Kohl's Christian Democrats won four out of five of the states. His party seems well on the way to victory in the December elections.

The SPD's candidate for the post of chancellor, the premier of the state of Saarland, Mr Oskar Lafontaine, is regarded with increasing doubt by party members and supporters because of his shifting position on unification. His constant comments about the cost of drawing the two Germanys together have also made him unpopular in the east.

The SPD's strong stance on the environment is of little consequence at present to an electorate in the west which is preoccupied with achieving the smoothest possible run to unification and an electorate in the east which is still somewhat immature and not fully versed in the questions of the environment. Except, of course, a fear that a sceptical stance on the environment might have an adverse impact on jobs.

This year's unification elections are likely to mark the end, at least in its present form, of the world's most prominent environmental party, Germany's Greens. The left of German politics is running out of steam. The end of the Cold War has cut the ground from under its feet. There are unlikely to be any more confrontations over missile placements, as there were during the last decade. The Greens remain opposed to Germany's membership of NATO. But neutrality is hardly stirring. Especially during periods of such upheaval and with so many distractions.

Teachers in the east say that while school life is more relaxed these days they are concerned about discipline and an increase in truancy. The call of free enterprise is apparently too great for many as often these truant pupils are found in the local market selling goods from behind a stall.

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New Walls

Before the sun drops behind the sprawling Wedding steelworks next door, an aggressive jockeying begins for places in the queue outside the Authority for Foreign Nationalities in the new united Berlin. By daybreak, the makeshift tents disappear from the factory’s refuse lot and a line of 400 dishevelled bodies weaves its way through the rows of metal partitions.

The refugees from Iran and Lebanon, Turkey and Angola, Bulgaria and Romania hope that that day they will receive an asylum application, the first hurdle to taking up residence in Germany.

Throughout the old Federal Republic (FRG), the lines, tent camps and dark-skinned families huddled in train stations attest to the new wave of immigration that has hit the country. The heightened disparity between North and South, and the fall of the walls in Eastern Europe have produced a record influx of political and economic refugees. While the vast majority of the nearly one million newcomers over the last year were German or ethnic German, the movement of people from the East — particularly Poles, Romanians and Gypsies — has been met with an ugly popular resentment in both German states. Bonn and its Central European allies have countered with new walls of their own to shut out their eastern neighbours. Less than a year after the fall of the Berlin Wall, GDR soldiers physically patrol the country’s eastern border. In September, 1500 Austrian soldiers were assigned to enlist the Czechs and the Slovaks in their campaign. At the Hungarian-Slovak border, east Europeans — and Gypsies above all — must have what the border troopers on duty determine is the proper amount of western currency to pass through the country. Transit visas for Turks have also been restricted. The Prague government, warned the Bavarian Interior Minister Eduard Stoiber, must “be very clear that fitting into the West European community also demands respect for the interests of one’s neighbours. The Czechoslovaks’ all-inclusive policy of giving so-called transit visas to hundreds of Turks and other foreigners does not serve those interests.” Prague got the message and the barriers went up almost immediately. Austrian and Czechoslovak border guards now work hand-in-hand with those from united Germany.

The tortuous procedure for gaining asylum is one of the more subtle barriers for potential immigrants. On the Democratic Republic (GDR)-Czech frontier, GDR soldiers physically evicted all Balkan peoples without hard currency. In September, 1500 Austrian soldiers were assigned to patrol the country’s eastern border. Rather than serve as a dumping ground for the West’s unwanted guests, Prague too has tightened its visa requirements, forcing the easterners back on Hungary. Along the ever more militarised Mediterranean frontier the domino pattern is also clear: those countries that don’t block passage into the EC will have to deal with the refugees themselves.

As long as the cold war reigned, the western countries boasted that they were the sanctuaries for communism’s oppressed. Eastern block people were almost automatically granted political asylum. Any citizen from the East could receive a 30-day tourist visa to West Berlin. Austria cultivated its reputation as the international capital of the world’s refugees. Now, with certain exceptions, the East Europeans fall under the category of economic, rather than political refugees. While the courts eventually deny most applicants political asylum, once they petition for the status they may live in Germany on a state social allowance until their case is adjudicated. Even if turned down, the majority of refugees are granted official visas to stay on in the country. In the meantime, they exist on the fringes of society. Gypsies in tent camps in the Saarland, Poles, Romanians and Third World people picking up an under-the-table work or selling cigarettes in subway stops. In the early 60s virtually all applicants were granted political asylum; in 1985 29% of applicants qualified; and last year the figure stood at 3.3%.

On 1 September, the 51st anniversary of Nazi Germany’s invasion of Poland, Bonn and the allied powers in West Berlin ended the city’s special status for East Europeans. Potential visitors from east of the Elbe now require either hotel reservations, an unspecified sum of hard currency or an invitation to cross the German borders. The Poles, explained Witold Kaminski of the Polish Social Service Office in West Berlin, feel that “through Solidarity in 1980 we gave the initial impetus to the revolutions in eastern Europe. We wanted to come back to Europe and now the door of the European house is being slammed in our face.” The insensitive date of the restrictions, he told the Berlin Tageszeitung, only rubbed salt in the Polish people’s wounds. (See Matters Arising in this issue for an interview with Taz’s editor.)

Above the objection of President Vaclav Havel, the West has managed to enlist the Czechs and the Slovaks in their campaign. At the Hungarian-Slovak border, east Europeans — and Gypsies above all — must have what the border troopers on duty determine is the proper amount of western currency to pass through the country. Transit visas for Turks have also been restricted. The Prague government, warned the Bavarian Interior Minister Eduard Stoiber, must “be very clear that fitting into the West European community also demands respect for the interests of one’s neighbours. The Czechoslovaks’ all-inclusive policy of giving so-called transit visas to hundreds of Turks and other foreigners does not serve those interests.” Prague got the message and the barriers went up almost immediately. Austrian and Czechoslovak border guards now work hand-in-hand with those from united Germany.

The Hungarian press reacted with indignation to its neighbours’ moves. The tiny country of 10 million people now has over 100,000 foreigners — mostly Romanians — living illegally there. On its southern border Yugoslavia requires proof of at least $200 for visas. “Now that we in Eastern Europe can finally travel,” wrote the Budapest daily Magyar Nemzet, “we see that there are in fact insurmountable borders between the peoples of Europe — those of affluence.”
The stopgap measures to seal borders only suppress and aggravate the contradictions inherent in the lopsided distribution of global wealth, the real source of the immigration swell.

The failure to confront the North-South and East-West splits on an all-Europe, much less international scale, has left the retreat into the exclusive structures of nationalism the simplest option. The much-heralded fall of internal borders within the EC in 1992 has only forced its frontier states to thicken the external boundaries. The EC countries will only drop their own borders when the community assures its hermetic enclosure with fully coordinated policies regarding visas, asylum policy and immigration laws.

That these restrictions will also affect a certain category of tourists and seasonal workers is just one of the intended side effects. The restrictive policies serve equally to foster the nationalist and Eurocentric chauvinism that can justify the disparity of the economic status quo.

Until the concept of the modern nation-state is itself redefined, its mechanisms will perpetuate the inequalities inherent in its logic as well as that of the international economic order.

For the present, its structures provide the world's prosperous with their best defence against the world's have-nots. The Eastern Europeans' painful transition to market economies and the break-up of the Soviet Union will present its neighbours with a flood of refugees on another scale entirely. Fortress Europe must dig in for the long siege ahead.

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It has been pretty clear for a while now that turning radio station JJJ into a national youth network is not going well.

A staff split was a painful but necessary step towards any attempt to rectify things, so the recent staff sackings were a logical and necessary management process. The remaining problem is that the wrong people lost their jobs. The people who should have been sacked are the ABC radio managers responsible for the station, and the senior programmers at JJJ itself.

Sacking popular, knowledgeable and talented announcers when it is programming and management who have been letting the side down was so transparent an act of bureaucratic scapegoating that it drew a huge response at a public meeting at Sydney Town Hall, and an historic occupation of the studios.

The rhetoric of most of the disgruntled listeners called for a return to the status quo ante, namely the full reinstatement of announcers Tony Biggs, Amanda Colinge, Tim Ritchie, Mark Dodgson and Andy Glitre. What is even more worrying than their thankless dismissal is that there is really no place for them to go in the rest of the ABC. ABC radio has excellent programs and caters to some audiences extremely well, but has nothing at all to offer people in their 20s and 30s with a refined taste for contemporary music and culture. This is an audience which is knowledgeable, culturally educated and ignored - or worse. So while the public meeting had a futile, nostalgic rhetoric about it, this cultural constituency has every right to feel hard done by.

Speaking of rhetoric, JJJ now talks about catering for a 'youth market' between the ages of 15-24, which is absurd. Somewhere smack in the middle of that age bracket is a major rite of passage: leaving school and often home as well, starting work or tertiary education. There is no such thing as a homogenous or continuous 'youth market' in this age range. School-age 'youth' tend to behave culturally quite differently from post-school 'youth'. School-age culture has a greater tendency to homogeneity, with the formation of peer group identity through collective consumption. This important phase of cultural education is also characterised by a rapid turnover. Kylie Minogue might be huge one season, due to the peer identity effect, and non-existent the next.

By contrast, post-school youth culture consists these days of a diverse range of micro-cultures. The identity-effect appears mostly much looser and a little more difference and distinction is tolerated between formations of taste. This more subtle and diverse kind of youth culture is built on the learning experience involved in the previous one. Because post-school youth culture tolerates more diversity, it is possible for a radio station with a minority share of this audience still to have a significant impact.

Triple J was at its best when it catered to knowledgeable post-school subcultures, particularly the indie Australian rock, hard rock, dance music and black music formations. It is now trying its best to offend all of them by throwing bits of each together in a program format which is trying to be homogenous but ends up jarringly awful to all. Worse, it is trying to shift to a younger audience, but without the resources and promotion of a commercial station.

One either has to go for all of the school age 'market' or none of it. There is considerably less room for minority taste in the cultural behaviour in that group and, consequently, not much scope for a minority station. Indeed, the school age listeners JJJ has always had are mostly attracted to it by the perception that it is a more 'mature' cultural outlet than commercial pop pap.

The rhetoric of the management hacks defending JJJ and the nostalgic and disenfranchised inner city scene seems misplaced. The strongest argument that can be made draws from an even more hard-headed rhetoric than the vacuity of 'ratings, ratings, ratings'. Triple J should not be viewed as a service to a numerical mass of consumers - a ridiculous view for a station not selling advertising anyway. Triple J should be seen as having a vital contribution to make, not to the consumption of music, but to the production of it.

Music, as Austrade is well aware, is a successful Australian export industry, not to mention one which replaces imports with locally made product. The
music business has grown in Australia and, in particular, Sydney through plentiful venues for live acts and good distribution for recorded product. There is something seriously deficient in the understanding of culture and cultural policy at the ABC. The commercial stations have done little for Australian music besides comply, barely, with local content guidelines. JJJ, on the other hand, has actively promoted it. Midnight Oil, INXS, Hunters and Collectors, Paul Kelly, Hoodoo Gurus, The Triffids, The Go Betweens and many other top quality acts which have gone on to international success in some measure all got support from JJJ, often at a crucial early stage. Without that sort of support the domestic industry, to say nothing of Australian musical culture, will be lacking an important tool for nurturing talent of the finest quality.

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Private Waters

The British Labour Party has been grappling with its attitude towards privatisation ever since Maggie Thatcher started the world-wide fad for flogging public enterprises a decade ago.

But the question it faces as the Opposition party is the reverse of that confronting the Australian Labor Party.

"It has to decide whether it wants to renationalise anything," said Patricia Hewitt, social policy adviser to Neil Kinnock, the British Opposition leader.

Ms Hewitt, the Australian born and raised daughter of former Canberra mandarin Sir Lenox, visited Australia recently for the Evatt Foundation conference on the future of the labour movement.

Formerly Mr Kinnock's press secretary, she is now deputy director of a new British leftwing think-tank, the Social Policy Institute.

She said that ten years ago most of the British Labour Party was committed to renationalising all the industries Thatcher privatised. As well, the party's left wing coined the slogan "renationalisation with compensation".

Thatcher's 'shareholding democracy' was always more hype than reality in its long-term achievement. But enough ordinary folk have made a killing by buying and selling their British Gas, Telecom, and other shares, to be alarmed by the Labour Party's threat.

Labour has abandoned its 'no compensation' talk. It has faced instead the mounting costs of renationalising the ever-lengthening list of privatised enterprises. "Therefore the party had to be clear about its priorities - why it wanted something in the state sector and whether it wanted 100% ownership," said Ms Hewitt.

Its first priority has become the privatised water companies - water being the 'classic natural monopoly'. But to buy back all the water shares at current market price would cost $6 billion. Labour has decided to begin with strong regulation of the water companies, instead. In the end "this might work well enough to make ownership less important," Ms Hewitt said. However, the party is formally committed to buying back the shares in blocks till it builds up a significant holding.

The second priority is to renationalise the national electricity grid but to allow different production companies to feed into the grid itself.

As for British Telecom, the government retains a 49% share but this is expected to fall to 33% by the time Labour would have a chance to govern. Using dividends from its shareholding to build up dominance in Telecom is one ploy Labour is considering. "But even at 33% that might give a Labour government a significant degree of control," Ms Hewitt said. "Given other claims on limited resources that might be enough."

The massive cost of renationalisation is not the only reason Labour has reversed its earlier policies. Some of the privatised industries are performing well enough. The privatised National Freight Company, the subject of a worker/management buyout is, according to Ms Hewitt, "immensely successful and employees have done brilliantly".

Even Telecom is now performing better after a barrage of complaints in the first two years of privatisation. It had been fortunate to reap the benefit of major public investment in new equipment just before privatisation.

More than the privatisation of the industries themselves, what irks Labour most is the use to which the booty has been put. It is here the ALP privatisation policy diverges from the Thatcher model and why Ms Hewitt thinks Australians are mistaken to think we are experiencing a dose of Thatcherism.

"Apart from their intense belief that government can do almost nothing and the market can do almost anything, the main reason the Tories sold off the public enterprises was to pay for tax cuts to the rich," Ms Hewitt said.

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