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CORRESPONDENCE: ALR, PO Box A247, Sydney South 2000. PHONE: (02) 281 7668; (02) 281 2899. FAX: (02) 281 2897.  
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Danube Blues

The eastern contours of Europe’s new order have become a little clearer recently. For the first time in the Soviet-led trading bloc’s 40-year history, Comecon’s Eastern European members have come together demanding either the organisation’s radical overhaul - or its dissolution.

A meeting of the seven Warsaw Pact countries, plus Vietnam, Cuba and Mongolia, in mid-January underlined the tensions implicit in the former allies’ divergent - and competing - reform courses. “Comecon must change or die”, warned the Hungarian Prime Minister, openly contesting Moscow’s position that the bloc, as well as the Warsaw Pact, are key to European stability. The Third World countries’ objections were casually dismissed.

“Comecon is an obsolete organisation,” said the Romanian representative. “It has never worked and it doesn’t work now.” The system of bloc trading, they asserted, had paralysed competition and held back technical development while creating poverty and shortages in member countries. The delegates resolved gradually to adopt hard currency accounting and world prices, reforging trade contracts on a bilateral basis.

Without consulting member states, Stalin created the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance in 1949 to counter the West’s Marshall Plan. In theory, the body was based on ‘mutual aid’ and socialist principles such as the common ownership of the means of production and the integration of social and economic policy. In fact, the bloc operated as a Soviet-run monopoly which imposed lopsided trade agreements and production plans on Eastern Europe to Soviet gain.

Designed to protect the East from Western competition, Stalin’s fabricated ‘socialism in one bloc’ was nevertheless subservient to the global capitalist market, falling ever behind the West in its isolation.

Trade within Comecon is carried out in transferable roubles, a unit of accounting rather than a convertible currency, set up specifically for intra-bloc trade. Most trade actually occurs on a barter basis - Soviet energy and raw materials in exchange for low-quality Eastern European manufactured goods. At its best, the system accelerated the industrialisation of near-feudal peasant societies like Bulgaria. For Vietnam, Cuba and Mongolia which joined in the ‘sixties and ‘seventies (Yugoslavia has special status) the bloc offered markets for their sub-standard goods and access to imports at below market prices. In Eastern Europe, single factories were able to produce enormous quantities of mediocre, uniform goods at prices that its partners could never afford from the West.

At the same time, the implementation of the Stalinist model of development generated the conditions that have led to popular resistance from 1953 to the present. Rather than tangible benefits, workers saw only fewer consumer goods and chronic shortages. Even trade within the bloc never worked efficiently. The transfer of technology which was not sold, but given at cost, blocked its movement. Since the late ‘seventies, trade within Comecon has stagnated even further, while trade with the West has grown. Their guaranteed markets, rouble-based value relations and anachronistic industries now leave the bloc members decades behind the West in their effort to compete on the world market. However, the implications of an over-hasty transfer have since forced the six to rethink the maverick charges they made in January. “The transition has to be gradual to take into account balance of payment shifts and other negative aspects,” said the Bulgarian Deputy Prime Minister. “We are looking for a soft landing and not a hard landing.”

Hungarian economists checked their calculators to discover that trade in fully convertible currency would cost their economy $1.5 billion next year. The Soviet Union, keen on the prospect of selling oil and coal at world prices, shifted its position, pressing for the introduction of hard currency trading as early as 1991. Soviet energy at market prices would cost Eastern Europe an additional $10 billion a year, not to mention the losses industry would suffer without the Soviet market. The Eastern European countries still do half to three-quarters of their export business within the bloc.

At the cutting edge of market reform, Hungary’s and Poland’s economic woes attest to the difficulties in store for the region. At the IMF’s behest, the Solidarity government is implementing weekly currency devaluations which have fuelled hyperinflation (450% last year) and record unemployment.

With wages frozen, the standard of living is expected to drop by 20% this year. In Hungary, where a third of the population already lives at or below the poverty line, food and housing costs jumped 35% on January 1. Under the country’s rapid integration policy, aimed at attracting foreign investment, inflation is expected to more than double the government’s initial 19.5% estimate.

Criticism of the tough measures, rare at first, has begun to mount. The drive to boost competition was supposed to benefit the consumer, says Hungarian economist Imre Vöröss, but “the ‘liberalised’ prices move only in one direction - upwards. It proceeds unbridled without the slightest analysis of the economic conditions necessary for it.”

“Without genuine competition, liberal prices are just a present to the supply side, and the piper is paid by the consumer. In a clearly monopolistic way, prices are simply agreed upon by the producers.”
In recent weeks, trade unions have started to grumble, threatening strikes if pension and wage compensation - not part of the IMF program - is not swiftly instituted. Although over a million Poles could be unemployed this year, the government has prepared a social security net for only 400,000. The farmers' union, Rural Solidarity, warned parliament that the austerity program would cause major agricultural strikes if farms were not given special credit terms.

Their reform courses lock the Eastern Europeans into competition for Western aid and investment, but their existing relations are still vital to their economic survival. Although still vague, several proposals for Central European corridors and bilateral coordination, exclusive of the Soviet Union, are under discussion. Their goal is not new blocs, but flexible, cooperative trade alliances designed to offset the blow of integration, as well as provide some protection, however minimal, against the potential economic might of a united Germany.

Old grudges over sour business deals and minority questions are being patched up. Prague and Warsaw linked the krone and zloty in January, bypassing the rouble. In February, Hungary and Poland established a joint bank to facilitate trade in non-rouble exchange. Budapest also announced that it would cut exports to the Soviet Union this year by 20% and indicated its interest in bilateral trade with the Baltic states. All three are now working on the total withdrawal of Soviet forces from their territory, possibly by 1991.

A rehabilitation of a regional Danube-Adriatic-Alps confederation between Warsaw Pact member Hungary, neutral Austria, non-aligned Yugoslavia and NATO member Italy is also in the works. The "common economic zone" would reforge historic trade links which once connected Western Hungary, Slovenia, lower Austria and the Italian Alps. The three countries might also join forces to reduce military-related nuclear activities, ban chemical weapons and jointly cut military expenditures.

The pacts alone, however, cannot deter the threat of political instability as austerity courses take full effect. The people of Central and Eastern Europe have found their voice, and goodwill toward reformers has already grown thin. Strikes and popular protest may slow the pace of marketisation, but neither trade unions nor opposition parties offer a political alternative. The hardship ahead for Eastern Europe is now only a question of magnitude.

Paul Hockenos - a freelance journalist living in Budapest.

Penny O'Donnell is a freelance journalist in Managua, Nicaragua. She spoke to Mike Ticher about the future following the recent elections there.

The atmosphere is just extraordinary at the moment. The determination and energy among Sandinista supporters and their incredibly strong fighting spirit is more reminiscent of the insurrectionary period than of a defeated political party. It's a very interesting time because the victory of the UNO has been marked by a notable absence of celebration among its supporters.

The feeling among the Sandinistas now is that while they've lost the majority they are still the major political force in the country because they are the only single party that has 40% of the vote. The Coalition is made up of fourteen different parties which basically agreed only on one thing - that Violeta Chamorro should be the candidate in the election.

Chamorro has to deal with two main factions in trying to hold the Coalition together. One is aligned to a group around Alfredo César, who used to be in the political directorate of the Contras and was also the head of the banking system under the Sandinista government in the early years.

He's the CIA's man here but he's also much more pragmatic than the sort of loony right element of the UNO, which includes people like the vice-president, Virílgo Godoy. They are much more interested in sweeping the Sandinistas completely out of power and reversing all the decrees made by the Sandinistas, with the exception of Decree no.3, which was the expropriation of Somoza's property.

In response to this threat to the achievements of the present revolution, the Sandinistas' position is that the election has been held in a constitutional framework and that the transition of power will happen constitutionally. The constitution main-
tains the army and the Ministry of the Interior intact, which essentially means that it allows the FSLN to maintain its dominance of those institutions. Whether it will be able to do so in practice is now one of the most important political issues.

The FSLN's political demands now are simply that the new government should do what it said it would do, principally in the economic field; that the boycott be lifted; that the Contras be demobilised; and that people's living standards be raised immediately. The opposition's economic plan envisages an almost instant reactivation of the economy; and if it doesn't occur, their support will become disillusioned very quickly.

Another major question which overshadows the political debate is, of course, the future of the Contras. The conciliatory image which Chamorro has so far presented to the outside world on this issue is highly misleading. Immediately after the election, she sent a delegation to Honduras to talk to the Contras, supposedly to insist that they demobilise. But when this delegation arrived and were questioned by the Honduran press, they maintained that they were there simply to make a courtesy call and were not asking the Contras to do anything.

Few people believe that UNO will be able to control the Contras. Certainly, their capacity to do so will depend entirely on the United States. The Americans themselves, although delighted at the election result, haven't got an easy situation on their hands. The most reliable indicator of their position now will be their attitude towards the Contras. The prospects for their demobilisation are not encouraging at this stage.

The outcome of these two situations - the FSLN's determination to maintain control of the security forces and UNO's lack of political mastery over the Contras - is almost certain to be an upsurge in violence in general, and the formation of rightwing paramilitary death squads in particular. People fear a return to killing and torture as the pro-Contra forces attempt to take power away from the army.

So the transition may produce a functioning government but, at the same time, there seems likely to be an enormous amount of violence and terror. In the best of worlds Nicaragua might end up like Costa Rica, with a bit more social consciousness and a bit more of a social program than most other Central American countries. But a more realistic possibility is that we're heading for a situation similar to that of El Salvador.

Together with the obvious physical threat to Nicaragua, which the Contras will represent if the US fails to restrain them, is the more insidious cultural domination. This is an incredibly politicised society, but it is about to undergo a massive and radical change (in the media for example) and a huge influx of American culture, clothes, customs, habits, food, etc, which will suffocate what has been an incredibly strong and vivid political culture.

This process may not be a deliberate strategy, but it will be the inevitable result of the opening-up of the economy to private enterprise, and American ideology. For example, the message that's coming from Washington now is that it's not even a matter of handing over the army, but of disbanding the army. Why would Nicaragua need an army? It's exactly the same process as in Panama, one of their first decisions was to disband the army so that there will never again be a military force in Panama that can defend itself against the United States. And that's basically the object of American policy here too.

Nicaragua is already changing. Exiles are starting to arrive.

For example, on the front page of La Prensa, which is the UNO newspaper, it was reported only two weeks after the election that the ex-director of one of the television channels had arrived to say that he'd returned to reclaim his TV station which had been taken from him in 1979.

He expects that the law of private property will be respected and the government will give him back his television station.

It's hard to see what the Sandinistas can do to resist these forces. Historically, events have caught up with Nicaragua. In some ways it resembled the kind of revolutionary society we all thought might happen in the 'sixties, but which in the 'eighties is thought of as slightly fantastic.

Now that reality has caught up, it's going to be very interesting to see what a revolutionary party, which won its way through a guerrilla war, can do in what is essentially going to be an ideological battle.
How Green was my ballot

"Yes, we can print in green ink on recycled paper" (pre-election sign in Sydney printers).

While the environment is nearer the top of the political agenda than ever before, voters wishing to register a 'green' vote in the election had no clear choice of candidates. The bewildering array of alliances, grouplets and individuals which stood for both the Senate and the House of Representatives had few major policy differences, but their failure to unite on a common tactical approach led to widespread confusion and unnecessary duplication of resources.

This failure was highlighted by the decision of the mainstream environmental organisations to put the bulk of their support behind the Democrats (except in Western Australia and Tasmania), and to recommend the direction of preferences to the ALP, rather than supporting green candidates. Nowhere were the splits between the 'Peak Groups' (the Australian Conservation Foundation, The Wilderness Society, the Nature Conservation Council and the Total Environment Centre) and green candidates deeper or more damaging than in NSW, with no less than five 'green' Senate tickets.

Many of the problems in NSW arise from the fact that the name 'Greens' is registered with a particular group which has failed to agree on strategy with the Peak Groups and some of the other candidates. The Sydney Greens, who say they got sole rights to the name "quite by accident", are led by ex-ALP Leichhardt councillor Tony Harris and Hall Greenland.

Together with the Democratic Socialist Party (formerly the Socialist Workers Party), the Aboriginal Land Council and the remnants of the Nuclear Disarmament Party (led by Robert Wood), they formed the Green Alliance, which stood candidates for 9 lower house seats and ran a Senate ticket. All candidates calling themselves Green (with the exception of Green Independents) were related to, or sanctioned by, this group.

The other Senate tickets were the Irina Dunn Environment Independents (Dunn, Harry Recher and Peter Prineas); Robert Wood (NDP); the Gruen Party (a bizarre collection of rural environmentalists claiming descent from German Baptist settlers in Australia); and the Democrats.

Despite the claim by Dunn's office during the campaign (echoed by almost all the other groups) that "there is an amazing amount of unity on the ground", there was nevertheless considerable bitterness about the lack of cohesion among green groups. The three significant players were the Peak Groups (whose membership dwarfs all the others put together), the Sydney Greens and Dunn's group. Naturally, each had a different perspective on the reasons for the failure to present a united front.

Hall Greenland of the Sydney Greens said that unity in the future will be a question of "the Peak Groups being prepared to accept a democratic set-up" and reforming what he describes as their "top-down" structure. His view was echoed by Deborah Brooks, campaign co-ordinator for Dunn's group, who saw "formal executive bodies (making) decisions without consulting the membership".

Feelings ran equally as high in the other direction. Jeff Angel of the Total Environment Centre characterised the 'democracy' of the Green Alliance as "making up policy at public meetings" and was highly critical of their "amateur" approach to campaigning: "The green movement has to appeal to a much broader base of people than the established leftwing vote in the state. The Green Alliance has no bloody idea how to reach those people. All they were offering us was failure and defeat."

The same conflict was also evident over the conditional support of the Peak Groups for the ALP. Sue Salmon of the ACF was at pains to deny that the relationship was a close one: "The
ALP is by no means what we want, and we have had enormous rows with the government. However, the reality is that we're going to have one or other of the two main parties in power and therefore we have to make an effort, through the distribution of preferences, to achieve what is best for the environment."

The furore over the decision of the Green Alliance to stand a candidate in Jeannette McHugh's marginal seat of Phillip further soured their relationship with the ALP. Their original choice as candidate, June Cassidy, withdrew after alleging harassment and intimidation from what Greenland described as “ALP supporters” who “disfigured and distorted” the debate at meetings of the Eastern Suburbs Greens, the local group connected to the Sydney Greens.

The situation had a certain irony, with the Green Alliance groups (including the DSP) complaining of infiltration of the Eastern Suburbs Greens and the stacking of meetings by “anti-Green” forces (i.e. ALP supporters). Certainly the democratic credentials of the Green Alliance were called seriously into question by the Eastern Suburbs Greens, the local group connected to the Sydney Greens.

The situation is further complicated by the stance of the Irina Dunn group. They confessed to “disappointment” over the decision of the Peak Groups, finding it “slightly odd in many ways”. There’s little doubt that the diplomatic choice of words covered stronger feelings. On the other hand, their generally good relations with the Green Alliance (they swapped preferences for the Senate) were tempered by the personal history of Dunn and Robert Wood from the NDP days when Dunn filled Wood’s Senate seat after he was disqualified from office.

For the future, they feel that “the broader conservation movement, not just the ACF and Wilderness Society, is going to have to think about what it’s doing. If you wait for total unity before supporting green candidates, you’ll wait until the year 2001.” Prospects for that unity certainly do not look promising. “The higher the overall green vote in this election, the better the chances of unity next time”, according to Judy Lambert of the Wilderness Society. But of course that equation works equally well the other way round - a united voice is surely a precondition for maximising the green vote.

Many echoed Jeff Angel’s hope that “after the election people will realise that it’s ridiculous to be disunited”, but the question is, on whose terms will they be united? If no acceptable compromise can be found, at this crucial time for green politics, the real loser will be the environment itself. As Angel puts it: “we simply can’t afford to stuff up the next three years of environmental politics in Australia”.

Mike Ticher

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I hate Clive James. Smart arse, bald, self-obsessed, self-indulgent. Clive James. Be bitchy. Think about it. Well, he's fat and bald. No, that's not really bitchy. Not enough. OK, let's think about what he's done, then we can be really bitchy. Well...

Well, he was the seminal television critic, the first person to review the crap; he reads difficult Russian novels in the original (does he avoid the easy ones?); he has written memoirs, novels, essays, collections of criticisms and, and then there's the TV. Chat shows, documentaries, interviews, schmointerviews.

I'm beginning to think that being bitchy about what he's done isn't such a good idea. So look. Why do I hate him?

What's he remembered for? Laughing at stupid Japanese folk doing stupid things on stupid Japanese programs. Drinking 480 pints of water and not being allowed to have a piss. Pissing ourselves. Because it's funny. It may be a touch racist (I don't think it is, but there you go) but it's funny. Idiot television is idiot television and laughing at it is laughing at idiot television. Moaning about racism is simply missing the point.

We can probably get more mileage from the sexist angle. Those leering, lecherous things like '...and the calendar girls' and '...meets Hugh Hefner' can't be dismissed as an old man's fantasy easily enough. But if he spends every waking moment telling (yelling) about how smart he is, then, well, it's not really on.

Be honest. This I can cope with. Maybe I shouldn't, but I can. So I ask my friends. 'Clive James. What do you think?' And they all hate him. All of them. 'Oh, he's very clever', they say. But they all hate him.

There's that word. The key word. Clever. The smug, unctuous dever-ness. Everyone else has a chat show and you know why the guests are there. It's a sales gig. Fine. Our Clive has a chat show and who does he have on? Chomsky, Sontag and Steiner. And why? Anything to sell? Yes, Clive's brain. They're there to sell him. And I keep seeing these large subtitles flashing (sneering) across the screen:

I am very dever.
I am deverer than you. You are not very dever.'

The books. Take the first novel, Beautiful Creatures - can't imagine why it was called that. A fairly workman-like sub-Martin Amis-type effort. But are we content with that? No, we're not. Tacked on the end there's a month-long appendix telling you what it all means. Explaining all the references. Really. Who cares? But he's popular with the people who really count. The punters. Why? Is it something to do with the way he looks? Be honest. He doesn't look good. He looks bald and fat. He doesn't sound good. He sounds smug and self-satisfied. But still, it's there. He's popular. So why?

Remember that Jane Fonda thing? Her sitting there (looking like she does) saying how age is kinder to men than women. Him sitting there (looking like he does) agreeing. An in-joke, a wry laugh. And who did we laugh with? We laughed with him because we all look like him. Not her.

The thing with Clive James is that, well, there are two things. The punters thing is that he's funny. He sets himself up and he entertains. They like him.

The writers/critics thing is that they want to be him. To write books and TV programs and really bad poems called things like Charles Charming something or other beginning with a 'c' (because it's always alliterative) and novels and all those other things. And they want to get away with it. Why him? Why does he get away with it? Why not me? He's fat and bald and ugly. I'm not.

So is that it? Everybody hates him because they want to be him? And everyone who doesn't hate him watches him. Is that it? (Forget the books. I honestly can't imagine who reads his books. Honestly.)

OK. Be bitchy. Let's try some of those oh-so-witty putdowns, like that famous one: he looks like a condom full of peanuts. No, I can't even do that. He'd do it better. But OK, let's try this. He's a fat, ugly bastard. We're really getting into this now. We could go for fat and bald in one almighty putdown. I hate Clive James. Smart arse, bald, self-obsessed, self-indulgent. And I haven't even mentioned the word jealous. Not once.

Jeremy Novick.
(Courtesy Marxism Today.)
Henhouse blues

Most humans in our society have a relationship with another species at some time in their lives - a dear dog, a loved cat, even a cuddled duck. They are affectionately recalled with misty eyes and it can be among the most life enhancing experiences we ever know. This is not the case with chickens.

Cows, horses even sheep, will come to recognise and be agreeable to their human keepers. Of all domestic creatures, the chicken is the one that never got used to it. A chicken, even one raised by hand from its first tottering hop out of the shell, will have daily hysteric at your approach. It will never be pleased to see you, nor display recognition of any kind. Sometimes it will go even further - keep over and stick its feet in the air permanently for no discernible reason. Hen husbandry - or wifery - therefore, is probably the least of the modern chicken's worries. Factory farming methods probably decree a slit throat or preventative drug dose, rather than a Vaseline-covered finger - which is the real problem with food as a profit-based industry: there's simply no room for humanity as a quality of civilised people, as well as for people themselves. There's absolutely no room for humane people when it comes to the production of cheap eggs, cheap barbecued chook, cheap hamburgers - and the profits that go with them. Perhaps the hen has the gift - terrible gift - of prescience. Perhaps Animal Farm was all wrong: it was the hen who really saw the shape of things to come in the relationship between animal and human. Suddenly being egg-bound begins to look logical.

Betty Macdonald wrote what must be the definitive account of life with hens in her 'fifties classic The Egg and I, and what she said then holds good today. Her chickens - or rather, her husband Bob's chickens - drove her to despair because of the entirely frustrating reality of being involved with them. It was impossible, she reckoned, to become close to a chicken, to ever really regret wringing its neck.

Even baby chicks turn out to have no redeeming qualities beyond their appearance. For those whose knowledge of chicks is confined to non-crucifictory Easter cards, it should be noted that these cute yellow fluffballs love to make a heap of themselves in a corner of their warm, cosy brooder house and suffocate one another to death as quickly as possible. They can also peck to death a weakling or odd one out without a backward cheep - hence the term pecking order, by the way. They are curious creatures.

That chickens do have sensibilities somewhere in their feathery heads is evident from their distress at being kept in battery conditions: they get depressed and quickly suicidal.

It certainly doesn't explain their attraction - why so many people, year after year, used to chuck in good jobs and blow the super on their dream of keeping chooks in some idyllic country setting. It isn't to get away from the stress associated with city living, that's for sure. Keeping chickens is likely to send a decent person round the bend or into the far reaches of psychopathy almost as quickly as having a 110 decibel weekend reggae pool party next door.

Poultry care is not for the faint-hearted. Many years ago, my aunt Leila, - who actually never wanted to keep chickens, but never mind, uncle Ben did (which is usually the way of it) - sat at our breakfast table one morning reading bits from the Min. of Ag. pamphlet on the happy hen and how to recognise it and keep it that way. There were all sorts of helpful hints on mites and lice - which chickens love to infest themselves with - basically requiring henhouse hygiene routines which made Matron Sloane's operating theatre scrub-up look slovenly.

Then there was the care of baby chicks: make as warm and comfortable as possible, feed them frequently with delicious bran mash, make sure they have fresh water to drink ... and, as already stated, a significant percentage of the little dears will form a rugby scrum of the good old neck-breaking style, others will choke on mash, while even more will drown themselves - which is why you keep having to refresh the water by fishing out small limp carcasses.

But aunt Leila had kept the best bit to last. It is a piece of information that remains vivid in my memory to this day: if the hen should become egg-bound, wrote the helpful Min. of Ag. person, immediate action is necessary if the bird is not to be lost. Take the bird under one arm and with the forefinger of the free hand, rub the vent with Vaseline to facilitate passage of the egg.

Getting up before dawn six days a week to tend to suicidal and unfriendly hens was one thing, getting up before-before dawn on the seventh day to bring the eggs into town was another, but the last straw for aunt Leila was vent rubbing. Her career as a reluctant chicken farmer came to an end shortly afterwards.

Except for the minority of 'happy hens' who run free to kill themselves at leisure, being egg-bound is probably the least of the modern chicken's worries. Factory farming methods probably decree a slit throat or preventative drug dose, rather than a Vaseline-covered finger - which is the real problem with food as a profit-based industry: there's simply no room for humanity. And that goes for humanity as a quality of civilised people, as well as for people themselves. There's absolutely no room for humane people when it comes to the production of cheap eggs, cheap barbecued chook, cheap hamburgers - and the profits that go with them. Perhaps the hen has the gift - terrible gift - of prescience. Perhaps Animal Farm was all wrong: it was the hen who really saw the shape of things to come in the relationship between animal and human. Suddenly being egg-bound begins to look logical.

Diana Simmonds
reflections on the upheavals

Bob Carr was in central Europe last Christmas. This is an exclusive extract from his diary reflections on the upheavals there, on socialism, and on social democracy.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23

"The stars are being taken down," says our guide as we stand in a street near the Hungarian parliament. "They're coming off all the buildings. It's considered inappropriate to have the symbol of one party displayed in a multi-party state."

The new communist leaderships in Europe want to talk about their break with old Stalinist structures and methods. The revolution is more profound than that. It is that Leninism is being abandoned, especially that most basic promulgation of the man who brought "barrack room discipline" to socialism: the concept of the one-party state.

In another Budapest street a three-storey, 17-room building was once a district headquarters of Hungary's single-ruling party, the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. The communists now call them themselves the Hungarian Socialist Party and permit 40 other parties to register. One of the largest, the Social Democrats, has inherited the district headquarters, although they don't know how long they'll be able to keep it.

What does a social democrat stand for in Hungary at this time?

The woman who answers the question is Anna Petrasovits, an economics lecturer and the party president.

"Hungary is an underdeveloped country and not part of Europe," she says. "So a lot of the jobs we face would have been undertaken by liberals in the West. Only massive privatisation can save Hungary. The country at this stage can do nothing else but adopt the views of the banks."

She says there's a danger that the necessary program will lead to "pauperisation" and strikes. The people are exhausted and apathetic. The threat to democracy will not come from communists. Nor from a Thatcherite, free market Right.

"The Right in central Europe has not been in favour of free markets. It has been in favour of autarchy. The peasant movement has been a prey to fundamentalism. It talks of a third way to development. This simply means Latin Americanisation. Peronism."

There are Hungarian elections in March and the Social Democrats have, they claim, 15,000 members. They speculate about getting 30% of the vote and argue that they enjoy useful name recognition. But they have no money for posters, telephones, printing.

We talk election techniques, direct mail for example. But they are given no list of voters, they have no computers and it takes up to ten days to deliver a letter in Budapest.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24

At present the Hungarian economy is locked into zero growth, 19% inflation (on official figures) and rising unemployment.

"We are the first of the socialist countries to accept unemployment," says Dr Peter Szerdahelyi, state secretary of National Planning.

"It will be a decade before people will be able to enjoy the fruits - that is before we don't have to restrict domestic consumption to pay debts."

A stock market opens next year. The government will introduce a bill providing full private property rights. The government will also guarantee investors the right to take out profits in hard currency.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 25

Yesterday we caught a taxi to an outer suburb of Budapest to meet Janos Vargha, a biologist who, in 1980, warned of ecological disasters on the Danube if plans for two dams went ahead. He was the first citizen to defy the post-1956 regime and his organisation, the Danube Circle, forced the pace of change in Hungary. Again, green politics takes on East European communism, although Vargha told us it was less potent here than in Czechoslovakia or the Baltic states.

Sitting in his very basic booklined home he outlined the special problems a communist regime causes the environment. Industry remains technologically crude. Hungarian steel-making requires four times as much energy as Japanese. Ecology barely developed because science remained under the control of the Communist Party. Basic environmental texts - The Silent Spring, for example - were not distributed. "The effect was that environmental activity was paralysed," Vargha said.

Now the new political parties in Hungary are developing green policies. Vargha is associated with the Free Democrats and is critical of the Hungarian Green Party which he sees as too close to the communists.

I asked, "Are they marxist?"

"No," he says. "It's many years since any political leaders in Hungary even referred to marxism...it's an unuseful theory to manage our life. It's an artificial construction."
There's no third way. We have to go back to find the spontaneous flow of history. Capitalism is not an artificial construction but part of that spontaneous flow.

In the days we've been in Hungary local television has been taken over by the fall of the Ceaucescu regime in Romania. Change continues everywhere: a radical budget in Poland, expulsion of old-time communists in Czechoslovakia, Lithuanian communists voting for independence.

What better way of seeing East European communism than as “an artificial construction” interrupting the flow of history? And now, appropriately, being dismantled?

We fly to Prague. The trip from the airport to the city takes us past a modern, well designed building set back from the highway. It's called the Hotel Praha and is reserved for high party officials. Our contact has heard each room has a spa bath with 50 air vents. Stories about the luxury of the hotel abound and explain the hostility the regime attracts. Every day, we are told by someone else, the hotel staff prepares elaborate lunches, whether party officials turn up or not. The Czech communist officials also have their country villas.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 26

Civic Forum has taken over in the building of the Czech-Soviet Friendship Society, just off Wenceslas Square. In the window three videos broadcast footage of the 1968 Soviet invasion. A crowd builds up and the broadcast switches to the police clashes with protesters on November 17, the event that triggered the crisis.

Inside it resembles the headquarters of the Australian anti-Vietnam movement: student scruffiness, paper cups, busy self-importance. A functionary explains why the movement insisted on Havel for the national presidency over Alexander Dubcek. Havel, he said, had been fighting for the last ten years when Dubcek had not been heard of. Besides, Dubcek is or was a communist.

The underground is plastered with political posters and the commuters are reading the fresh ones. This is a country in ferment.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 27

"Welcome to Prague, especially at a time when we're opening our city to the world and ourselves," declares our host. A desperate attempt to ingratiating, I wonder? The small, dark intense man is Dr Peter Nebesky, one of five deputy mayors. His straight-backed, snappy authoritarian style has Central Committee stamped all over it. Who does he think he's fooling?

It turns out Dr Nebesky is a leader of the Czech People's Party, something of a christian democratic party which holds two out of 246 seats on the city council. As in other communist states here there are front parties that declare their "non-antagonism" to the marxists and enable the communists to say they govern in coalition.

The Czech People's Party is such a party...except that earlier this month, in the general political excitement, it claims it flexed its once-atrophied political muscles. Dr Nebesky became deputy mayor and says he is busy lifting restrictions on religion. "Freedom arrived here overnight," he says. Has his party been compromised by its association with communists? He claims a record of resistance - in helping the children of dissidents win access to university, for example.

There is a whiff of the interim about the deputy mayor, but with an estimated six million believers in a population of 15 million there must be some kind of christian democratic base. Godless communism has left Prague with more architectural and sculptural symbols of baroque catholicism than any city outside Italy.

In Prague's National Gallery we inspect what Czech's boast is the world's largest collection of Gothic art. Czech painting skipped the Renaissance: Gothic blossomed into Baroque when the religious wars slackened. Gallery director Dr Jiri Kotalik is a bear-like man with clicking teeth who's known as 'The Stalin of Fine Art'. He mentions he's recently met an Australian of importance. He can't recall the name but recollects UNESCO, Paris and...the Australian National Gallery? Yes, we know who you mean. Some consider him the greatest living Australian, I tell Dr Kotalik.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 28

Over breakfast we meet the future president's brother, Ivan Havel.

With Havel we meet Miroslav Jirasek, a social democrat who worked in the chancellery of Presidet Benes, the last non-communist president, and who was imprisoned between 1950 and 1960. He describes the experience as "terrible". He was made to work in uranium mines. This took place during the period which my brochure from the Klement Gottwald Museum describes as "the building of the foundations of socialism". The brochure says the 'fifties saw "democratisation of culture, education and science"'.

Later in the day we see workers putting up scaffolding for Havel's inauguration. The democrats here and in Hungary now face oppressive responsibility. The transition to democratic societies - resuming the "spontaneous flow of history" - means allowing the public clash of interests so long subsumed under one-party rule. I hope the disillusionment is not too quick in coming. But when it arrives the people can criticise their leaders and vote them out. That simple truth is the measure of the East European revolution.

BOB CARR leader of the NSW parliamentary Opposition
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WOMBS for RENT

Scientists argue that the surrogacy debate has been sensationalised. Janet Wright responds that ‘baby-selling’ is simply an accurate description of a horribly sensational reality. Women’s wombs are up for rent, and scientists are playing the landlords. She scrutinises the government’s draft report.

If truth is the first casualty of war, the English language is the first casualty of dishonest intention - especially by scientists. The CIA, for example, tends not to kill people, though someone it doesn’t like may be “terminated with extreme prejudice”. Scientists are prime offenders with language designed not only to mystify and intimidate but to hide ugly realities: “terminate” is vivisectionists’ jargon. Women on in-vitro fertilisation programs who find they are expecting sextuplets may be offered not selective abortion but “pregnancy reduction”.

Language is an early casualty of the National Bioethics Consultative Committee (NBCC) draft report on surrogacy, and the ethics don’t look too healthy either.

What do we call it if a woman becomes pregnant in order to give away her baby when it’s born, either free of charge or in return for money? The reproductive technologists and their supporters including, apparently, the NBCC (which reports to the Social Security Minister), call it “surrogacy”. Total surrogacy if the woman was implanted with another woman’s fertilised egg, partial surrogacy if she became pregnant using donated sperm.

Since a surrogate, according to the Macquarie Dictionary, is a deputy or substitute, the concept of being a partial surrogate is as nonsensical as, say, being nearly pregnant or slightly dead. “Total surrogacy” doesn’t have much more going for it presuming, as it does, that providing original genetic material makes one a mother while nurturing an embryo in one’s body and giving birth does not.

I’m unwilling to use the term “surrogacy” for this procedure, but since it’s widely known by that name - already a victory for the baby trade advocates - I’ll use it for convenience. Let’s remain clear that the woman may be a surrogate wife, the scientists may be surrogate gods, but a woman is not the surrogate mother of the child she bears.

But if you start from the premise that a woman isn’t necessarily the mother of the child she gives birth to, it becomes easier to break down public opposition to child-selling. It’s not being sold, you see. It’s being given to its rightful owners or “commissioning parents”.

The concept has a long history both in theory (Plato considered the mother was simply a receptacle in which a man’s child gestated) and in practice (the NBCC quotes biblical precedents for men fathering children on their
The report quotes biblical precedents for men fathering children on their slaves to give to their infertile wives so that men could have legitimate heirs.

slaves to give to their infertile wives so the men could have legitimate heirs). But it is generally condemned in 20th Century liberal democracies.

The NBCC co-opts legal terminology when it claims surrogacy is not child-selling. A child is not a piece of property, they say, therefore it cannot be sold. Nice principle, but faulty logic. It means the sale is illegal, not that it didn’t happen. The sale of children is specifically outlawed under Australia’s adoption laws but even so-called ‘altruistic’ surrogacy, in which the birth-mother does not receive payment, is on shaky legal ground, since adopting parents are meant to be chosen by social service agencies on the grounds of their suitability, not because the birthmother has nominated them.

It’s the same kind of word-game, with implicit attitudes towards the value of women and children, that made rape in marriage a legal impossibility until recently. Not because anyone thought it didn’t happen, but because the law held that, just as a man could not steal what he already owned, intercourse with his wife could not be a rape. This is a particularly relevant example since one pro-surrogacy argument is that if the man of the ‘commissioning’ couple donated the sperm the child belongs to him anyway. So, just as the, er, thing with the pilots is not a dispute, the exchange of money for a baby is not a sale.

This ugly element of selling human beings is not the only disturbing aspect of the drive to legitimise surrogacy. It’s just one of the best examples of obfuscation in the NBCC report and in most literature supporting this branch of private enterprise. Supporters are at pains to convince us that the process is a benefit to all the adults involved—a much-wanted child for the commissioning couple and either an income or a warm inner glow for the birthmother. The child itself is simply a product. In fact, the NBCC turns child welfare legislation on its head by proclaiming that the interests of the child are not paramount—a bold and shockingly honest statement.

It’s no news that scientific language is used to mystify rather than enlighten. Elitist groups like to make their occupation seem much too difficult for ordinary people, hence the use of jargon in many areas. But mystifying language is particularly useful when one has something to hide, as in this case. “Commercial surrogacy” means the sale of children and “altruistic surrogacy” means the production of children to be given away.

Like all pro-surrogacy literature, the NBCC report claims to support women’s right to use their bodies as they please. Other commentators have noted that the most vociferous supporters of our right to do harmful and degrading work for someone else’s benefit tend to vanish when we’re demanding, say, affirmative action or work-based child care.

There’s no discussion of the pressures on women, either the emotional blackmail to have a child for an infertile relative or the far more common economic desperation that drives women to sell their children. Nor are the harmful after-effects even glanced at in the report despite plentiful documented evidence from the US where commercial sur-
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Crime, Shame and Reintegration

JOHN BRAITHWAITE
Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University

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ALR: APRIL 1990
rogacy is big business. Finally, the report mentions women who have given up their children for adoption (and suffered a phenomenal range of grief- or guilt-related traumas for decades after), only to dismiss the idea that anything similar would happen to women who conceive deliberately in order to give the child up. So much for the role of the woman as service-provider.

Public opinion worldwide seems to be strongly opposed to commercial surrogacy and, at best, dubious about the unpaid version. The scientists clearly need to win some support for continued public funding of their reproductive technology experiments since they have proved so colorously unsuccessful in creating children. (Less than 10% of women on in-vitro fertilisation programs give birth to a healthy child, and many of those women had already had children naturally.) But, in the absence of any real public demand, why is the NBCC rushing to promote “surrogacy”?

There’s no hurry to have the law clarified since the practice is not widespread in Australia and, anyway, can easily be covered by existing adoption laws. The only urgency is if one is eager to reverse present trends and have it legalised. Which raises the question of whether the NBCC knew before looking at any evidence that it wanted surrogacy legalised. And, if so, why is this report being presented as an unbiased inquiry?

The writers of the report say they wish to promote uniform legislation, but their report is the first major note of discord, since all the states and territories have either passed or are considering laws against surrogacy (in keeping with the international trend). In fact, the report is riddled with inconsistencies, which is surprising when you look at the number of academic heavyweights involved.

Insisting that the woman is only a surrogate mother to her child, the report claims this does not make her a mere container, just as a kidney donor is not just a repository for bodily spare parts. The obvious difference is that people may not, in Australia, be paid for their blood or organs, nor can people grow kidneys specifically to sell or donate them. Are the authors suggesting we should be able to? They refer to the foetus’ “gestation of choice”, though they have the grace to put this in inverted commas. Whose choice are we talking about?

The report claims commercial surrogacy does not mean renting out one’s womb or selling a child, since “a woman who agrees for payment to gestate a child for another may very well have altruistic motives even though she receives payment for her services”. So may a plumber or grocer, but does that mean they’re not selling their goods or services?

The report goes on to tie itself in even wilder knots: “The fact that a woman is paid for her gestatory services does not in itself imply she is selling her gestational functions.” She’s either paid for her labour or she isn’t selling it, but the authors can’t have both at once.

The report makes huge assumptions and presents them, without any backing, as fact. For example, the authors claim it is “paradoxical” to say it might be against a child’s best interests to be brought into being. Why is this paradoxical? Are we to presume any kind of existence is necessarily better than none? No answer.

In fact, there’s at times an air of desperation about the report as it clutches at such verbal straws, or claims surrogacy should be legalised since people will do it anyway - an equally good argument for legalising shoplifting.

Members of the Association of Relinquishing Mothers (ARMS) and women who once worked as ‘surrogates’ have warned of the psychological consequences of giving up children, whether deliberately conceived or adopted out after an accidental pregnancy, and of adverse effects on the children. The results (documented by Robin Winkler in the early ‘80s) include grief that increases instead of fading over the years, inability to bond with other adults or with subsequent children, guilt, anxiety, excessive fear that any future children will die or suffer in some other way as “punishment” of the mother and even, ironically, infertility. The NBCC recommends legalising surrogacy in the absence of any evidence that it is harmful - ignoring the evidence of these women and of researchers into adoption.

Public policy on other breakthroughs such as new drugs is to keep them off the market until they can be proved harmless. Why, then, does the NBCC want surrogacy, considered to be a medical technique, allowed when, even according to the committee’s own report, it has not been proved harmless? If, on the other hand, surrogacy is seen as a social issue, why does the NBCC wish to legalise something which is not being requested by any great number of people, and which is, indeed, widely disapproved of?

Our society at present accords women more dignity than to be used as containers, and it does not allow the sale of children, however hedged around by legal and scientific jargon. When did we reach a point at which it became acceptable to discuss the pros and cons of selling children, or of renting out one’s reproductive system as a career option? Did it start when men were invited to ‘donate’ their sperm for a few dollars to cover travel expenses? Or when reproductive technology found ever more invasive surgery and powerful drugs to put the creation of human life into a laboratory technician’s hands? Or when we allowed bioethicists such as Professor Max Charlesworth of the NBCC to say the question is not whether experiments could be carried out on human embryos, but only under what conditions they could be carried out? (From his Boyer Lecture, ABC Radio, Nov 12, 1989.) Subtle changes, always pushing the boundaries of what can be done to human beings.

Scientists and their supporters try to co-opt the English language by saying expressions like ‘baby-selling’ and ‘rented womb’ are tabloid-style sensationalism. Unfortunately, they seem like accurate descriptions of a horribly sensational reality.

Let the Bioethics Committee know what you think: NBCC, Department of Community Services and Health, GPO Box 9848, Adelaide 5001.

JANET WRIGHT is a freelance journalist.
The debate over tariffs and industry policy is back on the agenda. Free market orthodoxy is under fire. But the Left's accustomed apologetic protectionism will not be enough to meet the challenge, argues Sue McCreadie.

The agenda for trade and industry policy is now being set for the 'nineties. A spate of recent reports from high-flying consultants and advisers has set the scene for a revival of the old debate between free traders and protectionists. At the same time, the recent period of modest intervention is under scrutiny and its less than spectacular results have sparked a newer debate over the merits of 'level playing fields'.

At the forefront of the call for free trade and level playing fields was the report by Ross Garnaut on *Australia and the North East Asian Ascendancy* with its astonishing advocacy of zero protection by the year 2000. The choice of date is, by his own admission, "symbolic" - no economic rationale is offered.

Garnaut hopes to bring the "great monuments to our protectionist past" crashing to the ground. The greatest of these monuments is the Textile, Clothing and Footwear "anomaly" - hence his call for the current TCF Plan to be cut short by three years and phasing down of protection to be accelerated.

Garnaut claims liberalisation and integration with the North East Asian dynamos by the turn of the century will net us an extra $20 billion in exports to the region. It all seems very bold and futuristic. However, his vision of our role in the world smacks of old formulas. Australia's future, according to Garnaut, lies in exports of mineral resources, services (tourism and education) and early stage processing. Notwithstanding some lip-service to development of Elaborately Transformed Manufactured Exports there is no analysis of this fastest growing area of the world trade.

In this sense Garnaut echoes the old policy establishments such as the Industries Assistance Commission (IAC) and Treasury, with their implicit conviction that Australian manufacturing can never develop a comparative advantage. This philosophy sits well with vested interests such as the National Farmers Federation and the mining sector which claim to bear the costs of manufacturing protection. But its implementation would leave us in a weak trading position in relation to North East Asia, especially Japan.

Again echoing the IAC and Treasury, Garnaut is a firm advocate of the level playing fields philosophy. Rather than an industry policy based on "fine intervention", his preference is for "macro-industry policy for strengthening competitiveness". The latter turns out to be an amalgam of privatisation and deregulation including acceleration of waterfront reform, private investment in ports and some private generation of electricity.
Garnaut's main protagonists in the debate are the consultants Pappas Carter/Telesis, who were commissioned by the Australian Manufacturing Council late last year to report on the future of Australian manufacturing in the 1990s.

The Pappas team are no friends of old-style protection or regulation. However, they do point out that the international playing field is not level but tilted by the assistance and protection which other countries offer their manufacturing industries.

Hence, the removal of protection and deregulation won't of itself remove the disadvantages we face. It will simply leave us more exposed to these adverse slopes. "Weak industries may wither as their protection is reduced while competitive adversity will allow few new traded manufacturing industries to replace them."

The commitment to manufacturing is more than vested interests or nostalgia. As the Pappas team points out: "No other country of significant size has been able to sustain a high standard of living over a long period without a strong manufacturing base." It queries whether tourism and education (Garnaut’s growth areas) could ever expand to fill the gap if we let our manufacturing decline further.

The general thrust of the Pappas project will be to promote "strategic trade policy". This requires that assistance be targeted, either to whole industries or for niche markets, rather than across the board.

The past seven years of government policy have seen elements of both the above trends. Despite the Coalition's free trade bluster it has been the Hawke government which has taken the boldest steps in dismantling protection, with the current round of tariff cuts (1989-92) representing a 30% reduction.

At the same time, reduced protection has been accompanied by the introduction or continuation of positive assistance measures such as export and research and development subsidies, the Offsets and Partnerships programs and, most notably, a number of tripartite sectoral plans. But recent years have seen a retreat from tripartism, and fiscal restraint has brought pressure for cuts to the industry policy budget.

The rise of the level playing fields philosophy to the status of "dominant paradigm" in Canberra, along with the VEDC and 'WA Inc' disasters, has now made the notion of 'picking winners' distinctly unfashionable. It was no surprise, then, that Hawke promptly poured cold water on the Pappas' call for more government intervention.

Yet, for the government's critics it has already gone too far. Opponents of strategic trade policy see it as merely a more sophisticated version of the old protectionism. The challenge has come from predictable quarters of the IAC and Treasury.

According to the IAC, "positive assistance" measures, like traditional forms of protection, favour some recipients at the expense of others. More fundamentally, it argues that gains from tariff reform will be undermined if tariffs are replaced by alternative assistance measures.

Coalition industry policy for this election mirrored this
IAC/Treasury philosophy, incorporating promises to move away from industry specific programs and to end disparities in assistance. In essence, this means manufacturing is to operate with diminishing government assistance. The Coalition's substitute for an industry policy is a predictable brew of reduced protection labour market deregulation, wage cutting, and reform of the transport and the waterfront.

All this supposes that the problems of Australian manufacturing are reducible to costs.

But, as the advocates of strategic trade policy point out, the world is dominated by tariff and non-tariff barriers and subsidies to export industries. Australia also faces natural disadvantages due to remoteness, lack of economies of scale and a commodity-driven exchange rate. These are all givens.

But equally important are homespun problems. We face managerial incompetence, aversion to risk, lack of skill and knowhow, and an absence of networks between firms. The challenge for the Left is to define and advance its own agenda in this area. But where does the Left stand on the key issues?

Among the non-union Left, two opposing views have co-existed in the past. A minority of the Left has always opposed protection on 'internationalist' grounds. Protection was based on an unholy alliance between labour and capital, and pitted workers in different countries against each other. As such, it was regarded as chauvinistic and detrimental to working class solidarity.

However, the majority of the Left has tended towards support for protectionism and has favoured a self-sufficient model of the economy which maximised import substitution (and thereby minimised the traded goods sector).

The Hawke government's drive to modernise and internationalise the Australian economy through reduced protection and export-led growth is therefore anathema to much of the Left. A decade ago it would have been anathema, too, to the unions. Traditionally, unions supported tariffs almost unreservedly. The logic went like this: higher protection meant higher profits, which provided the scope for higher wages.

Indeed, the link between wages and protection goes to the genesis of the wage-fixing system. The Excise Tariff Act of 1906 attempted to make exemptions from tariffs on inputs contingent on the paying of a "fair and reasonable wage". The Industrial Commission was subsequently asked to rule on what was a "fair and reasonable wage", a request which resulted in the famous Harvester judgment inaugurating the basic wage. The Excise Tariff Act, having served a useful role, was later overturned and one of the problems unions have faced ever since is that, while higher protection makes higher wages possible, the link was never cemented.

Since the 'seventies, the emphasis has shifted from wages to job security. The rise of the Newly Industrialising Countries (NICs) meant that tariffs and quotas were seen as necessary to protect local industry against unfair competition from sweated labour. But unions were often accused of merely being adjuncts to employers in their clamour for more protection.

To add insult to injury, manufacturers abused protection. It has now become something of a cliche that Australian manufacturing became inward-looking and ossified, with poor investment levels, appalling management practices and an absence of innovation.

For these reasons, union thinking on trade and industry policy has undergone something of a revolution in recent times. ACTU defence of old-style protection ended with the advent of the Accord and, in its place, came support for planned restructuring in the context of greater integration into the world economy. But what does this mean for manufacturing in general, and the TCF industries in particular? Are they, as Garnaut would have it, merely a relic from our protectionist past?

The clothing and footwear sectors in particular are widely considered a 'sunset industry' with little future in countries like Australia. Labour costs are seen as the central focus of competition and providing developing countries with an insurmountable comparative advantage. The industry's opponents implicitly believe that the resources would be better employed elsewhere. The industry itself, like its opponents, sees no alternative to protection or decline.

But, in a number of ways, protection has not necessarily served the industry well. For one thing, flat penalty rates have been applied to out-of-quota imports, which have afforded greatest quota protection to the low-cost end of the market. That is the end which is most price sensitive and hence most vulnerable to competition from low-wage countries.

This has directed the industry into non-competitive areas. It has encouraged an obsession with price- and cost-cutting and a lack of attention to non-price factors such as lead times, fashionability, quality and marketing. This type of protection went hand-in-hand with Taylorism, with long production runs and high segmentation of task. This in turn condemned workers to repetitive, narrowly skilled jobs.

In male-dominated industries, strong bargaining power and trade demarcations meant that the mass production formula has been compatible with reasonable wages. However, in female-dominated areas such as clothing it
has gone hand-in-hand with undervaluation of women’s work and low pay. This means that the industries had the luxury of double protection: tariffs and low wages. The image of the industries is poor.

But recent changes in both consumption and production have opened up new possibilities for the sun to rise again for TCF industries in advanced industrialised countries. The break-up of the mass market by new production techniques and more diversified consumer tastes means that long-run mass-produced goods are no longer what’s required. There are many niche markets to be catered for. Quality and fashion are increasingly important. Retailers are demanding shorter runs and shorter lead times. All this places a premium on non-price factors: design, flexibility and marketing. On the production side, revolutions in technology and work methods make shorter runs and shorter lead times possible.

All these factors tilt the balance of competitive advantage for many types of garments away from low-wage developing countries where lead times are too long and the costs of holding inventory too high. Above all, in terms of servicing the home market, physical proximity is becoming very important.

Even so, it is unlikely that TCF could survive without some protection in the foreseeable future. Zero protection is a recipe for annihilating the industries. And while the current phase-out of quotas may stimulate restructuring, this, in itself, is not enough. The TCF Plan recognises this by providing a ‘positive assistance’ package.

It is on the delivery of the latter that manufacturers in TCF and other industries part company with the unions. Employers still prefer their handouts with ‘no strings’. But surely if anything is to be learned from past industry assistance, it is that assistance without strings doesn’t deliver the goods.

The real problem is that, for decades, there were no conditions imposed on beneficiaries of protection: no requirements to modernise equipment, to invest in R&D and training, to adopt enlightened management practices, or provide decent wages and conditions. The union movement has argued for assistance to be made public and its delivery tied to workplace consultation on investment, training and work organisation. In that way it provides unions and workers with a lever against management and creates an internal catalyst for change, i.e. the workers themselves.

The current revival of the debate opens up new opportunities for the Left to influence the policy agenda. But the Left agenda for industry development also needs to go beyond mere defence of ‘strategic trade policy’ and address wider social concerns. Different trade and industry policies have different gender outcomes. The most highly protected industries are those with the highest concentration of women workers. Without adequate labour adjustment policies these workers will at best be transferred to insecure, low-paid and menial jobs in the service sector; at worst they will join the dole queues. Present income support for retraining is inadequate and regional policy is next to non-existent.

Industry policy needs to be integrated with environmental goals. The new ‘conserver economics’ championed by parts of the green movement in many ways echoes simplistic old Left formulas for self-sufficiency. Of course, ‘conserver economics’ goes further, with calls for no growth, de-industrialisation and cuts to both consumption and production. Industry policy is unfashionable in such circles and labour and capital are seen as equally part of the ‘old order’.

Unless we can unhitch growth from environmental damage, the tension between adding value to production and protecting the environment will be unresolvable. New forms of incentives and intervention are required to encourage the development of products and processes which are more environmentally friendly.

Trade and industry policy also needs to be more internationalist. Unions have pointed out that consumers don’t have an innate right to the fruits of sweated Third World labour. But, in the past, Australian unions have found themselves at odds with Third World counterparts due to their defence of protection. New ways are needed to extend solidarity to exploited workers in these countries. Certainly, neither the old left support for Fortress Australia nor a spurious free trade internationalism is an adequate response in the late twentieth century.

SUE McCREADIE is national economic research officer for the TCF unions in Sydney.
Labor's record fourth win was a cliffhanger. Dennis Altman argues that it underlines Labor's considerable resilience as a political force. David Burchell takes issue with the explanations of electoral disenchantment. And Queensland ALP campaign manager Wayne Swan is interviewed on the significance of a complex poll.

**With TEETH intact**

The election was 'a kick in the teeth' for Labor. Or was it? Dennis Altman argues that it demonstrates Labor's success in adapting to a changing political universe.

In Steven Eldred Grigg's novel Oracles and Miracles, set in New Zealand in the 'thirties, one character says: "We didn't expect much from the Labour government and of course our expectations were richly fulfilled." But her family voted Labour nonetheless.

That might summarise the attitude of most of us who filled in our ballots for Labor this time. The government won because of its ability to hold together two crucial groups: the traditional Labor working class and the new middle class, that fairly well educated, largely salaried section of the population who make up an increasing segment of the Australian population. The rise of this middle class, as against the self-employed and small business people who are so important in the Liberal Party is one of the reasons for the success of Labor over the past ten years.

As the election campaign wound up, old class loyalties seemed to surface in ways that we had been told are long out of date. The Prime Minister invoked traditional images...
of the Labor Party as the party of fairness and equality as against the conservative bastions of privilege, and Liberal preoccupation with the capital gains tax gave some credibility to this distinction.

As the Democrats sought to position themselves on the Left, despite their refusal to follow the logic of this in their distribution of preferences, Hawke and Keating stressed that the old divisions between the parties of capital and labour were still relevant. This election the Prime Minister put himself forward, not as the friend of Abeles, Murdoch and 'Bondy', but as the true leader of 'the people', with a continuing concern for equity and social justice.

The great success of the Hawke government - a success unmatched in our history, and indeed in the history of all but a few northern European countries - is to have established a party based on the trade unions and the moderate Left as the dominant political force in Australia. To do this required the jettisoning of a great deal of old Labor myths and shibboleths. But in a period when new right conservatism seemed dominant in many other western countries this was by no means an unimportant achievement.

The Labor Party of Hawke and Keating is different from that of Curtin and Chifley, even from that of Whitlam and Cairns, but so too is Australia. Those who bemoan the collapse of Labor traditions ignore the ways in which our society has changed: the impact of massive immigration, women's assertion, environmental issues, the economic boom in the Eastern Pacific, have introduced new restraints and new possibilities. There are many reasons to be critical of much of what this government has done, but there would be even more had they not recognised the very different environment in which they need operate.

The very success of seven years of deregulation and restructuring perhaps allowed for a new rhetoric of compassion, just as George Bush promised to make Reagan's American a gentler, kinder nation. The party which had deregulated much of the economy now promised to stand fast against the deregulation and privatisation of Peacock, Howard and Stone, even though the Liberals promised to take the economy further and faster along the Keating track.

A cynical view would say that the ALP was, again, misleading the public and hiding the reality that a Labor government would do nothing to reverse existing inequalities. This is the 'Tweedledum and Tweedledee' theory of Australian parties (ironically one of the authors of that description, Bob Catley, was the Labor candidate for Adelaide). A variation holds that the major difference between the two parties is their attitude to the union movement, a choice, if not an inconsiderable one, between co-option and confrontation.

Labor ministers would take considerable exception to these views, and in a sense they would be right. Despite their determination to restructure the economy, a surprising number of the Hawke government's policies have, in fact, been about equity, even when the government has seemed callous and uncaring, as in their treatment of the young unemployed.
I don’t buy the media line that the solutions of free market economics are the only responsible possibility for Australia. Had we regulated foreign exchange dealings more severely, for example, the national deficit might currently be much less of a problem. Nonetheless, it is difficult to cling to the idea, which seems to fascinate the Democrats at the moment, that a small and dependent economy such as ours can insulate itself from the workings of the global market-place. The Accord, the introduction of Medicare, expanded school places, some support for women’s issues, and at least some of the welfare reforms of the Hawke government have meant that most Australians have been better protected from the vagaries of international capitalism than is true in many other countries.

This seems a prescription for a very limited sort of politics: can we expect no more from our governments than a few bandaids for those who are dumped by cyclones? Is Labor bound to do more than preside over the adjustment of Australia to the needs of international capitalism?

A romantic Left has increasingly come to argue that social democracy is irrelevant to the modern world, that the assumptions about economic growth and development which make expanded welfare possible, are themselves what need to be questioned. I strongly agree with the latter part of this statement. But I would argue that in the years to come we will need social democratic solutions more, rather than less. That is, we need to encourage collective solutions rather than individual ones if we are to deal with the implications of ecological decline.

In an era when the planned economies of Eastern Europe lie shattered and the media proclaims the final victory of the market, it may seem difficult to develop policies which seek to use the regulatory powers of the state. Yet in practical, as distinct from ideological, terms there is evidence that the demand for new government initiatives is growing. In both Britain and the United States one sees a growing resistance to cuts in government services in health and welfare, and a new commitment to public transport as necessary to curb the excesses of the motor car. Even in Australia there is a growing realisation that the dream of every family owning their own house and garden means expanding urban areas and stretching public services in ways that have considerable social costs.

We should not underestimate the effects on domestic politics of the democratic revolutions - in Eastern Europe, Chile, South Africa - which have shaken old alignments, and opened up possibilities unimaginable even a year ago. The end of the Cold war can unfreeze many of the fixed assumptions of post-war politics, and allow for a period of political innovation. Far from the fall of the Berlin Wall meaning the end of ideology, it means in fact the opening up of new areas for political debate in which the me-first individualism of Reagan and Thatcher comes to seem as irrelevant as the tyrannies of East Germany and Romania.

Unlike the 1980’s this decade promises to be a good one for the Left: internationally the rapid move to detente can only help the forces of change, while domestically the conservative parties will go through a long period of soul searching and realignment. The electoral support for the Democrats and the Greens suggests there is a larger constituency for radical change than seemed true several years ago.

The challenge for the next Labor government is whether they can combine economic realism with sufficient imagination to embark on the sort of genuine reconstruction which would go beyond the stress on productivity and exports of the past seven years. Increased productivity is important, but it seems to have become a new cargo cult, without sufficient questions being asked as to the costs and benefits of immediate economic growth. I suspect that increasingly Australians are willing to demand more change - and to pay the price this demands - than the politicians recognise. The government is starting to recognise this in environmental concerns. Its attitude to urban planning, to education (where Dawkins has pursued both commendable aims of greater access and extraordinarily reactionary programs of centralisation and bureaucratisation), to Aborigines (all but ignored in the campaign) will all test its ability to look beyond the balance sheet.

The temptation for those on the Left to give up on the Labor Party has been considerable over the past seven years. For reasons I’ve argued elsewhere this seems to me to be a mistake; an electorally successful Labor Party is a prerequisite but not a sufficient condition for real change. The challenge for an intelligent Left is to convince enough of the electorate of the justice of its demands for the ALP to find it politically attractive to implement them. Not since the period leading up to Whitlam’s election in 1972, referred to by Donald Horne as “the time of hope”, has the Left enjoyed such an opportunity to influence the long term political agenda.

DENIS ALTMAN is director at the Institute for Social Justice and Human Rights at La Trobe University, Melbourne.

**COMING-UP IN ALR**

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The PARTY game

It was the election of a 'disenchanted' electorate. Not for decades had so many voters given the major parties the cold shoulder. But why? David Burchell argues that some media and Left analyses were right off track.

Three years ago before the last federal election, in an article in Australian Society, 'Parties under Siege', I argued that the major parties were felt to no longer 'represent' their constituencies in the way they once had: "the ties of appeal between party and supporter had become perilously thin". Certainly the place of the major parties as major parties was not under serious threat. But what was a matter for serious discussion was that "what we are seeing at present is a serious bout of refashioning and realignment of the stuff of party politics in this country such as has not been seen in this country since the Second World War".

If the article raised interest in thinking circles back in 1987, I certainly never heard of it. Yet now the 'crisis of the major parties' has been the leitmotif of the entire 1990 election campaign. One could be forgiven for thinking that the media had no other intellectual tool with which to make sense of events throughout the entire six weeks since mid-February. Feature article after feature article in the quality dailies reiterated the theme of 'disillusionment' with the major parties, almost as if that in itself sufficed as political analysis of the campaign.

There is little doubt over the level of unhappiness in the electorate over the choices it faced in this election. The oft-cited opinion poll in the Sydney Sun Herald in the second week of the campaign which claimed that a third of all voters were 'swingers' was a little dodgy - but the trend was unmistakable. Never since the days of the DLP had so few voters indicated their allegiance to one or other of the major party groupings. Where media analysis, like much analysis on the Left, went seriously astray was over the origins of this disillusionment, its objects and its implications for the party system.

In the first instance, both the media and large sections of the Left were complicit in a subtle slippage, an intellectual sleight of hand. For the hard Left the formula is a ritual: there is disillusionment in the electorate because there is no choice between the parties. Labor has become (or always was) simply a 'second capitalist party', carrying out the bidding of multinational capital. Its reformist project (not that the hard Left ever supported that even when it was supposed to have existed) has been abandoned. This, we are told, is the politics of Tweedledum/Tweedledee.

It is worthwhile pausing to consider that the Coalition, had they been elected, were either publicly committed to or strongly implicated in all of the following: dismantling Medicare, privatising all significant public enterprises, privatising childcare, rerouting superannuation, gutting the wages system, mining Kakadu, cutting off the dole after nine months and winding back the small progress made by Aboriginal people these last seven years. This is not the stuff of Tweedledum/Tweedledee politics.

That image is an old theme on the Left. It had great currency during the Whitlam years (though few will admit to such sentiments now!), but of course even stronger sentiments were voiced during the Chifley years, and in the 'thirties, especially by Communists. In every significant period of Labor rule, in other words, some left critics have purported to find no real difference between the major parties. It could be said that social-democratic governments by their nature always disappoint: but certainly they always disappoint those who have, or claim to have, millenarian expectations of them.

As for the media, it had a particular sympathy with the cynicism in the electorate - not least because it mirrored the media's cynicism about the electoral process. To a large extent this is self-inflicted. The media has created the media
caravan, the doorstep interview, the five-second grab, and now appears to feel imprisoned by its own inventions. Whatever may have been claimed in editorial copy, there was no shortage of issues in this campaign - though the structure of media commentary now is such that it is very difficult to highlight issues unless issues come, in readily-packaged form, from the parties themselves.

Again, the cynicism of the media, like that of the electorate to some extent, reflected the complexity and often the drabness of the issues: interest rates which no-one can seriously claim to bring down by much, an intractable national debt and a highly complex wages policy debate hardly have the same ring as the Great Anti-Communist Crusade of Menzies in the 'fifties. But while the issues have become more complex, and the electorate more sceptical of economic 'quick fixes', media election coverage has tended to become much more electronically-centred, and thus almost inevitably more trivial. The paradox strains the fabric of electoral politics as traditionally understood.

However, while all of this may go some way towards denting some of the cosy orthodoxies currently abroad in the media and on the Left, it still fails to answer the question: why are people disenchanted with the major party groupings? And, more to the point, why both party groupings?

One part of the answer is clearly the spectre of diminished expectations. In the 'forties, each party could point to clear visions of the future which could be inferred, in shorthand form, from their political programs. For Labor it was a mixed economy with regulation and significant public ownership, and a welfare state somewhat on the European model.

For the Liberal/Country parties it was the spectacle of economic freedom and opportunity based upon a humanised free market, as opposed to the 'socialistic' claims of its opponents. Of course, in reality Labor's achievements were less grand, and the Coalition mostly limited itself to managing the post-1945 compromise in a rather more conservative manner. But the dreams were at least coherent and credible, and in theory were able to be achieved within the life of a few parliaments.

The comparison with the political landscape of 1990 is stark. The major economic lesson of the 'thirties was (or seemed to be) of the ability of national economies to reflate in the teeth of global austerity and fiscal conservatism. The lesson of the 'eighties is of the virtual impossibility of such an occurrence today. And worldwide the grand claims of the Left and social democratic parties of the 'forties lie in tatters. The old regulatory regime of the 'forties, the old model of public ownership, the old welfare state model -
all have taken a hammering in the last decade. And no radical and credible alternatives have taken their place.

At the same time the vision of the Right is more fragmented and ambiguous than it was in 1945, or even a decade ago. The New Right, that ghastly spectre of the ‘eighties, has in a few countries taken hold of the reins, but in very few actually taken hold of the agenda. Radical solutions from the Right seemed credible a decade ago, when national economies like those of Britain and the US were manifestly ailing and prime targets for a ‘short, sharp shock’. But today, after the monetarist electrodes have been removed, the patient’s condition seems far less radically altered than the Right had hoped. It is now a matter for debate in Britain, for instance, whether Thatcherism ever really controlled the agenda in the manner then suggested by more forward-thinking elements on the Left. And in Australia, as the Liberals’ decision to retread Peacock showed, the radical Right prescription for the ‘eighties too has taken a bit of a beating.

On both sides of politics, then, there is a perceptible absence of overarching vision such as animated in particular the post-war years. Indeed, where such visions exist, on both Right and Left, they tend to go hand in hand with economic ‘hard-thinking’ rather than grand social ideals. Award restructuring and superannuation are not populist rallying cries. Nor, for that matter, are ‘labour market deregulation’ and ‘microeconomic reform’. Of course, this doesn’t signal ‘the end of ideology’, as recent revivals of the concept might claim: ideological as well as political conflict is alive and well. But its technical, even technocratic, expressions today hardly serve to embed it in the popular imagination.

This is in one sense what it means to say that the parties no longer ‘represent’ their constituencies. There was a time when, however fitfully, the economic and social program of Labor and the Left spoke to many people as being the natural program of an economic class. To others, the program of the Right represented a supra-class national harmony based on the right-to-rule of a homogeneous elite. Neither of these propositions makes much sense today. What ever claims socialism had to be the ‘natural’ cause of ‘the working class’ lost its last shred of credibility with the ignominious collapse of Eastern European puppet regimes.

Nor does ‘Accord politics’, with its national, hegemonic aspirations, look like the program of a specific and identifiable class - particularly when it explicitly involves restoring profit share at the expense of wages. In this climate the only thing ultimately ensuring that certain people become ‘natural’ Labor voters (let alone ‘natural’ socialists) is family custom or tradition. At the same time the Right seems more palpably than ever in the grip of particular ‘special interests’: after all, not even small business (let alone the CAI or MTIA) can agree on backing a Liberal/National election campaign!

Of course, these trends are not exactly new. After all, it was the Whitlam government which first made a decisive break with the class-corporate politics of the old-style ALP. And the crisis of direction in the Liberal Party could at a pinch be said to go back to the chaotic Holt-Gorton-McMahon years, when the party seemed torn between small-l liberalism and a rerun of Menzies-style conservatism. The Fraser years, that oasis in the unhappy last two decades of the Coalition, in retrospect look very much like a pale imitation of the Menzies years with the difference being that, rather than managing growing prosperity, Fraser managed industrial decline.

What makes the phenomenon much more acute today is the pervasive lack of conviction in the ability of any government to rescue us from the spectre of slow, drawn-out industrial decline, with its ‘banana republic’ accompaniments of falling living standards and marginalisation within the world economy.

In that sense the vote for small parties and independents and the Greens and Democrats was not so much a vote against the major parties qua parties, but against ‘government’ itself. One strongly suspects that had the Democrats miraculously found themselves holding the balance of power in the House of Representatives after this election, and thus involved in the business of governing, their current popularity would fall correspondingly as a result. Likewise, a significant element in the appeal of the various Green electoral options at the present time is their perception as being ‘outside the political system’, and particularly outside the all-pervasive economic ground rules of debate.

To a large extent, then, the current political air of disillusionment is negative in origin, and those on the Left who take it as a starting-point for radical advance will probably find themselves quickly disappointed. The fact that the electorate is unimpressed by the mainstream political options does not mean that it is about to leap into the arms of snake-oil salespeople either of the Left or the Right. But the present moment does have another, much more positive, face for the Left. Who would have thought ten years ago, for instance, that we would see an election fought out over the terrain of childcare and green politics?

That a dear plurality of voters believes the environment to be the most significant issue at the present time in itself suggests that the political tide has turned rather strongly from the exceedingly narrow economic agenda of the last decade. Rather than arguing for ‘more and bigger’ from a relatively static economic cake, the Left might do better to focus on widening this agenda further. If the economic debate can embrace environmental sustainability, for instance, why can it not incorporate the economic and territorial needs of Aboriginal people (as it has, for instance, for Maori people in New Zealand)?

On the whole, the prospect for progressive causes seems brighter now than after any of the previous three elections of the Hawke era. That this is not paying dividends for the Left suggests that perhaps the Left has not yet freed itself sufficiently from the straitjacket of a previous era. It should not mean that we need subside into despondency and despair. Nor, for that matter, should it lead us to seek succour from the prevailing disenchchantment with the political process - a disenchantment which ultimately can only bode ill for any democratic project.
Wayne Swan was campaign director for the ALP in the Queensland election victory in December, which was widely regarded as Labor’s most professional campaign. In the federal election he helped organise the national campaign. He spoke from Queensland to David Burchell the day following the election.

It looks like the great escape.
I don’t know about that. It was an election the Liberal Party always could have won, and they lost. It doesn’t say a lot for the conservative side of politics in Australia.

The most remarkable thing seems to be that outside Victoria the Labor losses were fewer than most people were expecting.

I don’t think anyone was surprised by that. Victoria was always a problem. There was an expectation that we could win seats in Queensland, and we’ve probably won two.

But even in Western Australia, while there are some extremely close results, the damage does seem to be quite small.

It was very much an election which concentrated on leadership. And I think overwhelmingly people preferred Hawke to Peacock. It was as simple as that.

Some would argue that state issues were the most important factors.

Clearly they were important, and they had a very bad effect in Victoria. There’s no doubt about that. Otherwise why didn’t the swing occur in other states?

Likewise it seems Labor’s overall share of the vote nationally has fallen considerably, but also so have the National Party.

It hasn’t fallen considerably.

The primary vote has.

There was obviously a strong trend towards minor parties. If you look at the two-party preferred votes in Queensland, we increased our votes in all our sitting seats. Our primary vote fell one or two percent, but you expect that when there are more candidates. So I don’t know that the primary argument works. I think on a two party preferred basis you’ll probably find if you disaggregated the vote from Victoria, that the Labor vote would be up.

On election night it was quite evident that scrutineers’ reports were considerably more reliable than the computer estimates. Likewise during the election campaign, it seemed clear that the parties’ own qualitative polling was much more reliable than the results of the major public polls.

The public polls were wrong all the way through the campaign. The parties simply employ more sophisticated polling techniques.

Was it the interest rates election?
Interests rates were obviously very important. But obviously homebuyers weren’t convinced the Coalition could do any better. Even in the mortgage belt seats there weren’t big swings in Queensland.

As predicted, Democrats and Greens played an important role. But did Labor lose any votes through leakages from the smaller parties?

Obviously we lost votes, but it seems they all came back to us in preferences. There were clearly quite a lot of disaffected Labor Party people, traditional Labor voters, who parked themselves in the Democrats and then came back.

Was it an election between Joh Bjelke-Petersen and John Cain? Obviously Queensland was the saviour for the ALP.

I think it’s a bit more than that. The ALP in Queensland has been putting itself back together in a very effective way for well over two years. I think we’re now really seeing the benefits from that. People don’t move to you if they don’t think you’re a real alternative. And people obviously do see us as the most serious alternative in Queensland. Joh Bjelke-Petersen might be able to be blamed for some of the reasons why they’re on the nose in Queensland, but it doesn’t necessarily explain why the vote didn’t go to the Liberals.
Another obvious thing is the resilience of the Labor vote in marginal seats; even in Western Australia there was remarkable resilience.

Yes, I agree. It was indeed remarkable.

So does that suggest that Labor is the ‘natural party of government’ now?

No, I don’t think anyone’s the natural party of government in Australia. The two-party system is clearly breaking down. The party who will win elections in Australia in the years to come will be the party which is most credible, which is the best organised, with the best leadership.

So this isn’t a one-off result for Democrats and Independents?

They’ll come and go. I don’t know that this establishes any particular trend in that sense. But I do think the traditional voting patterns are breaking down, and it’s affecting the Liberal Party as much as the Labor Party.

Does this mean in the long term Labor might have to establish some closer relations with the Democrats?

I don’t know about that. It’s not the Democrats as such. The pool of non-swinging voters is just getting smaller all the time. And that affects both parties.

Obviously there are particular political reasons for that in the short-term. People are discouraged by the apparent inability of the parties to promise big reductions in interest rates, for instance. But over the long term are there underlying social trends?

Yes, I think so. There have been changes in the forms of political communications. People’s politics aren’t transmitted as much through the family as through the television set. Traditional family patterns aren’t what they were. People are exposed to a much wider range of influences in terms of their political behaviour. And the electorate’s more educated so it becomes more discerning.

Once upon a time you could stand outside a polling booth and more or less predict how people were going to vote by how they looked. These days it would be extremely difficult to do that, and in some parts of Australia it would be impossible.

That’s right.

But in some other countries that sort of process has been taken to sound the death-knell for the old labour and social democratic parties, at least in their traditional forms. That obviously hasn’t been the case here.

These processes are eroding traditional allegiances, certainly. But they’re eroding the traditional base of the other parties at the same rate. Ultimately it’s simply a case of which is the better led and which is the better organised.

Yet the Labor heartlands have traditionally been more homogeneous than the Liberal heartlands, surely. So one might expect that Labor’s support over the long term might be at more risk.

You might think that from living in Sydney. But that’s certainly not the case in states like Queensland and Western Australia.
Well, in NSW I tend to think of Wollongong and Newcastle as traditional Labor heartlands. Yet that seems to be a less automatic connection than previously.

Well, we’ve got different Labor heartlands, and I don’t think it’s been a big problem.

What should Labor be doing over the long term to try to ensure that these trends run in Labor’s favour?

I suppose it’s the old balancing act, really. It simply can’t let itself become too dogmatic or out of touch with the community.

But it used to be that someone would instinctively say ‘I’m a Labor man’ or ‘I’m a Labor woman’. May it not be that in the future you won’t see commitment of that type or of that order?

I don’t think so. You’ve got a different society, haven’t you? Things will never be the way they were, say, thirty years ago. There aren’t as many people in blue collars. But it doesn’t mean to say that you won’t have a white-collar Labor man or woman.

The whole theme of the media coverage was that the major parties were on the nose. And the buzz word was disenchantment.

Yes, it was true, although I don’t think it was as big a trend as they said. And also I think it reflected how disenchanted they themselves were in media.

But what was it precisely that people were disenchanted with? That wasn’t always made nearly so clear in the media account.

Exactly. And because it was partly their own view which they were projecting onto the electorate. A lot of people obviously would have liked Labor to say, ‘The country’s stuffed, but this is the way we’re going to fix it up’. But it just wasn’t possible to provide answers like that.

The Age ran an interesting piece where the reporter went to a qualitative market research session, and asked people if they thought politicians were telling the truth about Australia’s plight. They said no. He asked did they think the leaders should come out and say, ‘Look, Australia’s going down the gurgler and we don’t have any simple answers’. They said yes. He asked what they thought would happen to the first party to say that. They said: oh, they’d lose, of course...

Exactly. And that’s the typical swinging voter: a mass of contradictions. That’s why politicians are pretty reflective of the electorate. They tend to reflect the consciousness of the average swinging voter.

People now are writing off the National Party federally. After the Queensland election you cautioned against writing them off too quickly. What do you think now?

Yes, they’re in deep trouble. Obviously Queensland is a different case because of the decentralised nature of the state. And they’re still the major conservative party here. But after the federal result you might even have to think twice about that, because they’ve probably only got three out of twenty-four seats. They’re certainly never going to be what they once were.

So is the only sensible option for the Coalition to become one party?

Yes, I’m sure it’s the obvious option. But, then, I don’t think the Liberal Party would want them.

Several things struck me about the campaign. It seemed clear from quite early on that Labor was trying strongly to differentiate itself from the Coalition: by presenting an image of plain speaking and caution on economic promises; and over values. It was quite a while since I’d heard Paul Keating getting stuck into elements of business the way he did in this campaign. And Bob Hawke stressed social justice theme more prominently than previously. Was that a deliberate strategy?

I don’t know that it was a conscious strategy. However, we certainly did try to avoid too much rhetoric because the electorate was obviously pretty cynical. I think it was important to draw the basic distinction in values between the parties as we did. That’s why Medicare was so important as a theme.

And the capital gains tax. For a while it looked like a loser, yet Labor persisted.

Well, it was certainly better than talking about interest rates!

What influence did the campaign have?

I though the Liberals could have won the election if they’d won the campaign. Yet they lost the campaign. And, first and foremost, they lost it because they didn’t judge the public mood; and they didn’t judge the right themes.

People repeatedly said that there was something about Andrew Peacock they weren’t happy with.

They could have coped with that. Peacock was certainly their biggest liability, but I still believe they could have won if they’d constructed their campaign properly, which they didn’t. People didn’t believe they had the answers, so they certainly shouldn’t have been trying to tell them that they did. They would have been more effective if they’d simply said: ‘Throw them out; it’s time for a change’.

They did seem to be highlighting their weakest point. That’s exactly the point. That was the fundamental failure of their campaign. They spent the whole campaign illustrating to people why they shouldn’t vote for them.

But was there another side to Peacock’s low credibility? When people say they don’t like particular politicians it’s probably partly about personalities; but it’s surely also about what they exemplify about the party’s policies and image. Peacock couldn’t explain things, but he wasn’t given much to explain. It wasn’t just his vagueness that hindered his ability to explain their industrial relations policy or their health policy.

And that came through to the electorate as a lack of substance.

So: Labor’s won a clear majority?

I think so. Yes.
Your chance to win either a $600 bicycle or $300 worth of free books is nearly over. Our competition ends on April 30 and the winner’s name will be drawn at the ALR editorial office on May 1. So take advantage of our generosity quickly - before time runs out - but even if you don’t win a prize you will still get a year’s worth of thought-provoking, humorous, controversial copies of Australian Left Review - and that can’t be bad.
Commentators of all persuasions agree that Australia will probably get a consumption tax before long. Both major parties are thought privately to endorse the idea, though they publicly disowned it in the campaign. Peter Groenewegen is a longtime left advocate of the consumption tax road. Here he argues that it’s time the Left made up its mind on the issue.

Despite its massive defeat at the National Taxation Summit in 1985 the issue of broad-based consumption taxation continues to resurface in Australian economic policy debate. Many of its former opponents at the Tax Summit now support the notion of broad-based consumption taxation, reflecting the changing economic circumstances of the intervening five years.

Its importance as a source of revenue for financing public expenditure growth is increasingly being appreciated in the post-Summit era by those who do not think that a small public sector is a good public sector. The revenue potential of a value-added tax for financing much-needed expansion in some social welfare spending is well understood by those, such as ACOSS, whose requests for such additional spending have been rebuffed on the ground that income tax rates need to fall.

The recent changes of mind on the issue on the part of some on the Left in part reflect the major error in the Draft White Paper on Tax Reform which the government issued on the subject back in 1985, and which then helped rob the idea of support. In short, the White Paper planned to introduce broad-based consumption taxation by a hybrid retail tax which was unable effectively to eliminate producer goods from the tax base, instead of going the generally preferred value added tax route.

If we do require a consumption tax to expand social spending, then a value-added tax rather than a retail sales tax should be supported by the Left, since the latter cannot...
easily generate substantial revenue. A retail sales tax is, therefore, generally supported by those wishing to seek restraints on public sector growth.

Since 1985 the documentation in support of the superiority of value added tax has increased substantially. In addition, New Zealand’s introduction of value added tax under the more neutral title, Goods and Services Tax, has greatly allayed the fears of many observers about its supposed detrimental consequences - fears largely derived from the often fictitious accounts of the horrors of the British experience in the early 1970s.

Changed perceptions of the relevance of broad-based consumption tax reform, together with greater appreciation of the importance of choosing the right instrument by which to effect it, make a re-examination of its advantages and disadvantages timely in the present straitened fiscal circumstances. Such a re-examination is particularly important on the Left, since myths have tended to predominate over realism in left debate on tax issues - though of course the Right is by no means immune to such mythologies. For those unable to cast their minds back to Joh’s infatuation with the Laffer Curve then being pushed by leading sections of the stockbroker fraternity, aspects of the Coalition’s election campaign tax policy will provide plenty of examples of wishful and inaccurate thinking on the tax front.

It is also worthy of note that neither the Coalition nor the Labor government in Canberra is currently willing to nail the consumption tax flag to their policy mast, irrespective of the many advantages which are said to flow from such an initiative by tax analysts across the political spectrum. This, in itself, is a salutary warning that the consumption tax debate is too complex politically and economically to be dismissed simply as a conservative sleight of hand.

Many of the arguments in favour, as well as the disadvantages, of broad-based consumption taxes were discussed in the Draft White Paper released by the federal government at the time of the Tax Summit. It may be useful to reiterate those official arguments as a starting point for discussion.

Firstly, a broad-based consumption tax would enable some rationalisation of Australia’s existing indirect taxes on goods and services. In the context of the economic and political difficulties associated with the personal income tax and the high marginal tax rates which were then in force, a broad-based consumption tax would, it was argued, ensure that income which avoided or evaded income tax would bear some tax liability when spent.

At the same time, the reduction in marginal income tax rates allowed by the revenue from such a broad-based consumption tax would, in turn, reduce incentives to avoid or evade income tax. Furthermore, because a consumption tax does not affect interest income and therefore has a neutral effect on present consumption and saving (unlike the double impact on savings associated with the personal income tax) a consumption tax regime is conducive to increased personal income tax levels and hence more favourable to economic growth. This last point has become
more important recently, given the general personal savings crisis identified in Australia by many commentators.

Further, a broad-based tax covering all consumption at a uniform rate is more administratively efficient in that it requires fewer resources for the Australian Tax Office to assess and collect, and its operations are less costly for the firms which collect it on behalf of the government.

Such an approach to implementing the tax likewise creates less distortion on the consumption decisions of individuals and households because it does not interfere with the relative prices of consumption goods - a characteristic which, in addition, increases horizontal equity or the equality of treatment to taxpayers in equal circumstances.

This claim to fairness on the part of a broad-based consumption tax has been much misunderstood. It needs to be understood that selective sales taxes of the type currently used in Australia fail to treat people with similar incomes equally because of differences in their consumption patterns.

Leaving aside the deliberate discrimination introduced by extra heavy taxation of tobacco products, alcoholic beverages and motor fuels - a situation not likely to be abandoned when a broad-based consumption tax is introduced - the current wholesale sales tax by its rates and its exemptions discriminates between users of various products.

A passion for crystallised fruit as against fresh fruit incurs a sales tax liability in Australia. Ending a meal with cheese rather than with after-dinner mints escapes such tax liability, while those preferring artificial flowers to natural flowers have to pay sales tax for indulging this taste. More generally, those preferring to read books for relaxation are not sales-taxed on their leisure requirements, while those whose hobby is photography are taxed at the maximum rate.

Apart from the penalties imposed on taste by selective as against broad-based consumption taxation, selective taxes like Australia's wholesale sales tax impose penalties on activities, a form of discrimination which broad-based consumption taxes avoid.

By concentrating on commodities sold at wholesale and exempting most services, the existing consumption tax regime discriminates against the manufacturing sector. Supporters of a strong manufacturing sector for Australia should therefore push for a broad-based tax on consumption which can effectively tax services.

The current sales tax regime likewise favours imported over domestically-produced goods, since the valuation procedures tend to understate the value of imports relative to equivalent goods produced domestically. This is despite the 20% valuation surcharge imposed on imports to prevent this tax preference to importers. Exporters, on the other hand, although not required to pay sales tax on the value of goods exported, may pay sales tax on inputs used in the production of those goods, for which they obtain no exemption. Hence costs are higher than they would be, and goods therefore are less competitive in overseas markets under a selective sales tax of the Australian variety than with a broad-based consumption tax like value-added tax.

Another advantage of broad-based consumption taxation is the simplification of the existing tax structure, particularly if this tax reform is implemented with the cooperation of state governments, and leads to replacing a number of so-called 'nuisance' taxes.

Last, but not least, as a partial substitute for income tax, a broad-based consumption tax can impose tax liability on non-residents on short-term visits to Australia who, generally speaking, are not liable to Australian income tax but whose personal consumption spending would be comprehensively taxed under a consumption tax regime. Given the growing importance of the tourist industry (despite the current problems created by the domestic airline dispute) broad-based consumption tax may help to spread the tax burden relative to the benefits of public services enjoyed. Australia's current sales tax, rebatable on items for export purchased by short-term visitors, does not often fall on general purchases by such visitors, like meals or other personal services and entertainment. In short, the advantages of moving to broad-based consumption taxation have expanded rather than diminished since 1985.

One major reason for the rejection of the broad-based consumption tax strategy at the Tax Summit in 1985 was the perception that it would tend to hit low income groups and other underprivileged people relatively harder than the well-to-do. The reason for this perception is quite straightforward. Consumption declines with levels of income so that a uniform rate on consumption spending falls proportionately relative to income as that income rises: a clear sign of a regressive tax.

A low to medium income family with dependent children which consumes all, if not more, than its regular income - by borrowing or by running down past savings - at best pays a rate on consumption in terms of income equivalent to an income tax rate. If the household temporarily consumes more than its income, its situation deteriorates. A high income family, even with many dependent children, consumes considerably less than its income: hence its consumption tax rate in terms of income falls considerably below the equivalent income tax rate.

This problem can be redressed in several ways. One suggestion which surfaced both before and during the Tax Summit was to target consumption taxation to luxury goods and exempt all necessary consumption items. European consumption tax experience, as well as Australian economic research, suggested that this would transform a regressive tax switch to something approximating proportionality in tax burdens if not progressivity.

The difficulty with this procedure is partly administrative. Exemptions and multiple rates impose substantial additional costs on tax administrations and taxpayers which are of no benefit to the community. More importantly, the task of classification which this type of tax regime imposes is endless, since yesterday's luxuries have a habit
"The derelict keeping warm with a flagon of sweet muscat pays more tax than the well-heeled consumer of Grange Hermitage."

of becoming today's necessities as living standards rise over time and costs fall with the extension of production associated with a growing market.

Furthermore, and often irrespective of incomes, one household's luxury is another's necessity, hence the arbitrary selection of goods for one or the other category imposes penalties on consumption, preferences which often are only imprecisely related to taxable capacity differences.

The exemption of food items in general makes it difficult to differentiate, for tax purposes, King Island Brie from Kraft cheddar, imported pate from Vegemite. Likewise, blanket exemptions of clothing eliminates tax liability for an outfit from Best and Less or Fosseys as well as the finest in designer clothing purchases from the most exclusive boutique. Hence, blanket exemptions of items like food and clothing impose the same inequities which an excuse on wine used to inflict on the derelict keeping warm with a flagon of sweet muscat, who paid more tax than the well-heeled consumer of Grange Hermitage.

The best response to the adverse distributional consequences of consumption taxation is to be found outside the tax system. This was first realised by Denmark when it introduced a single rate value added tax with few exemptions, and later by the Australian government in the broad-based consumption tax policy option put before the Tax Summit.

The answer? Compensate those disadvantaged by a move towards general or broad-based consumption taxation for their loss of real income implied in this change, as long as their situation actually warrants it. Such compensation can either be provided by additional increases in social security benefits, automatic if these are indexed to changes in the official cost of living estimates, or by targeting concomitant income tax cuts in such a way that they proportionately benefit low income taxpayers.

A comprehensive compensation package was devised by Treasury in consultation with the Social Security Department at the time of the 1985 broad-based consumption tax proposal.

This was found wanting, however, on a number of counts. One criticism was that its concentration on compensation in terms of losses in current income reflected the fact that low income families with dependent children may finance high consumption levels during this stage of their lives by going into debt. Compensation arrangements which fail to account for this possibility leave such people and households worse off.

Data on consumption patterns of Australian households suggests that consumption spending often exceeds income in low income households with dependent children and among the aged, some of whom are not covered by social security payments.

Any package of compensation for a move towards broad-based consumption taxation should reflect this, and also take into account other criticism of the 1988 compensation package designed by the government. The fact has to be faced, however, that administrative complexity
prevents design of a compensation package which will meet every eventuality.

At the same time, distributional consequences at the top end of the income scale should not be ignored. Although a broad-base consumption tax may raise the amount of tax paid by high income groups who at present have substantial opportunities for tax avoidance, this by itself will not ensure overall progressivity of the tax structure after the change.

Achieving this requires supplementary wealth taxation either in the form of reintroduced death duties, or regular wealth ownership taxes of the type levied in various OECD countries, or a combination of both. Effective exemption from saving for many would otherwise generate too much wealth inequality. Apart from the adverse distributional consequences of a broad-based consumption tax policy, critics have raised the potentially adverse macro-economic consequences on inflation, economic activity levels and employment opportunities.

Some adverse consequences on the price level are inevitable if a consumption tax is indeed to be introduced, but they need not become long term if neutralised in a once-and-for-all price change. However, this requires that income groups other than social security beneficiaries meet every eventuality.

Even then, a once-and-for-all inflation change can cause havoc in financial markets in an open economy like Australia with its unrestricted foreign exchange and capital transactions. The precise inflation effect of a broad-based consumption tax is not easy to estimate, depending as it does on the rate at which it is to be imposed and the taxes which it is going to replace. The 12.5% tax proposed in 1985, which was intended to replace completely the wholesale sales tax, was estimated to induce a jump in the price level of approximately 6-7%.

More important fears were expressed about the income effects of the policy as a result of its tendency to depress aggregate demand in the economy. A revenue neutral package which lowers income taxes and restores the lost revenue by a uniform consumption tax would, it was argued, lead to a reduction in demand. This in turn would lead to substantially lower levels of economic activity and thereby to significantly higher unemployment.

However, most of the modelling carried out on this before the Tax Summit exaggerated this effect. Analysis prepared by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research for the ACTU and the government at the time of the Summit showed that if the package proposed by the government was implemented as planned, it would have minimal adverse income and employment effects. This was because much of the impact on demand from the tax switch was offset by increased demand from the compensation package. In short, if adequate compensation for the real income losses imposed on disadvantaged groups had been provided, the adverse effects for which the policy was criticised at the Summit would have been averted. If implemented in a well-designed policy package, the benefits of broad-based consumption taxes in terms of horizontal equity and neutrality can be reaped without distributional inequity or adverse effects on growth and employment.

As the Draft White Paper also indicated in 1985, a broad-based consumption tax strategy could be implemented by a variety of tax instruments of which extending the wholesale sales tax, introducing a retail sales tax or using a value added tax were the three options considered.

A more extensive wholesale sales tax of the type currently in use in Australia is not a strong starter in this context. It cannot tax services, has administrative problems in determining sales values which favour certain sections of business over others, and is therefore technically inferior for the task.

On the other hand a retail sales tax which, in theory, can tax all consumption transactions at the retail level is theoretically equivalent to a value added tax which effectively does the same. The difference between these two instruments - and one with quite significant practical consequences - is that the retail sales tax is levied at the single stage of retail only while the value added tax is imposed at all stages of the productive chain with tax levied on the sales (output) of each firm offset by the tax paid on its inputs.

This method of assessment and collection of a value added tax, known as the invoice method, cumbersome though it seems at first sight, is in fact the source of its superiority over the retail sales tax. Rather than being collected in one go at the retail stage like a retail sales tax, the value added tax is gradually paid on the value added (sales less purchases) over all stages of production. Hence, small service providers at the retail level could be exempted but still pay tax on the inputs required for their industry which has already been collected at a previous stage of production.

Likewise, the fact that all producers and sellers feature twice in the tax transaction framework as purchasers (entitling them to tax credits) and sellers (making them liable to tax payments) provides a mechanism for keeping them honest since their tax liabilities, as tax credits for others, provide a useful opportunity for cross-checking. Thus a value added tax is more difficult to evade than a retail sales tax. Furthermore, value added tax can more easily provide rebates for tax paid on inputs which, after all, is a feature inherent in its method of collection and which is particularly useful for effective exemption of export industries from the tax.

A value added tax was not proposed in Australia in 1985 because it was believed it would take too long to introduce, was too complex for taxpayers, particularly in small business, relative to retail sales tax and, from British experience, would be too politically unpopular. Introduction of the Goods and Services Tax in New Zealand suggests that these beliefs rested on rather poor foundations. In short, a value added tax is now generally regarded as the best way for implementing a broad-based consumption tax.
There is one further option. With the current high interest in consumption tax as a vehicle to enhance personal saving, the Monash Centre for Policy Studies has revived the notion of a direct consumption tax. This simply exempts all income devoted to saving or investment from taxation, hence, by definition, taxing all outlays on consumption expenditure. To be consistent, all expenditures such as the running down of cash balances and bank deposits, is counted with consumption spending and hence liable for taxation. This form of expenditure taxation has the advantage that it can be applied at progressive rates, with rates for high consumption spenders capable, in principle, of exceeding 100%.

Although, at first sight, these are attractive features of this type of tax, its real administrative complexities have meant that no actual tax administration has been willing to implement it. In practice, it adds to all the complexities of income tax administration the difficulties of defining saving (or investment) spending which, if not carefully done, create all sorts of avoidance opportunities for the rich. Indirect consumption taxation is therefore the invariably preferred route by actual tax administrations from which to reap the benefits of broad-based consumption taxation.

A consumption tax is not a panacea for Australia’s economic ills, as some have portrayed it - if only because of its influence on personal savings. Nevertheless it can undoubtedly be a useful tax reform if implemented in a package of carefully designed income tax cuts and compensation for the disadvantaged, and if it is supplemented with appropriate wealth tax forms.

Most of its benefits in reality arise from eliminating distortions inherent in the current system of wholesale sales tax giving preference to services relative to manufactured goods, and to importers as against exporters. While there may be benefits for growth from the encouragement of savings, such benefits are easily overstated, particularly in the current panic about levels of savings in Australia.

Broad-based consumption taxation, in short, is a useful tax reform option for the rationalisation of Australia’s current indirect taxes - taxes which are clearly less efficient and horizontally equitable. These benefits in themselves make the policy worth pursuing, and not one to be dismissed out of hand by the Left - even if some of its current and past advocates may have rather different reasons for pursuing it.

PETER GROENEWEGEN is Professor of Economics at Sydney University. Responses to this article will appear in upcoming issues of ALR.
GROPING for POWER

The parties have become ad agency 'products'. But does election advertising actually work? Jane Inglis talked to Brian Slapp.

Q: How much have the major parties spent on this election campaign?
A: A lot.
Q: Did it pay off?
A: Probably not.
Q: Who's a pretty boy, then?
A: A hawke, or maybe a peacock - depends.

Ask a reasonable question and get a generic answer. It's all in the packaging and advertising - or perhaps it isn't, depends on how one looks at it, really.

Australian election campaigns may not be as long as US elections (about a year there) or as costly; but we do seem to have an awful lot of them and the notion of a slick, quick sell, particularly on TV, is becoming de rigueur. But does it really work, as politicians and their political machines would like to believe, and ad agencies would like them to believe?

The non-specific answer is - it depends. Like all advertising it is simply selling a product, though there are pitfalls in that exercise. Unlike other products, for example, this one (the politician and political party) is on public view, 'working' as it were, for anywhere between 18 months to three years between ad campaigns.

What does an advertising person think of political ad campaigns? Now for some specific answers.

Brian Slapp (formerly a creative director with advertising multinational Ogilvy and Mather) highlights the last point as one of the pitfalls in ad campaigns - the difference between TV editorials and ads. In editorials the public sees the politician in a news clip or interviewed on a current affairs program being questioned on issues of concern to the public, providing (or attempting to provide) answers and information, with all their individual mannerism and quirks.

And this is the case during the period of government between election campaigns. In an election campaign ad, of one or two minutes, the public sees "this magically transformed person with much better grooming and make up in a totally different presentation". They look "false" because they are transformed "into totally artificial entities", Slapp says.

"I think it works against them because they are so glib, so slick. They're obviously contrived. These are people who are not being seen in their natural habitat or in their natural manner and mood. They're obviously scripted. Very few of them feel comfortable or believable when reading a script. And I think people have been exposed to enough TV advertising to be very cynical about it."

Not to mention being groped by Andrew Peacock. He did it in the Liberals' ads, and liked it so much he kept on doing it on his walkabout campaign trail. What sort of message, indeed, would the electorate get about a Liberal government from that?

Apart from false and real images of politicians which vary in editorial appearances and ads, Slapp points to the different message the public receives - the difference in information, or lack thereof. "Invariably the TV editorial is far more probing and far more in depth that TV commercials can ever expect to be. That is where you're really going to get any information, and when you see a TV commercial juxtaposed with that, all it does is highlight the shallowness and glib nature of the TV commercials." Not to mention the disingenuity of the politicians and their campaign directors regarding the intelligence of the voting public.

It's what you say, how much you say about it and where you say it.

The major parties concentrated on the economy during the election. A sign, perhaps, of an increasingly economic literate public. But, as Slapp points out, "the electorate's main concern is how the economy affects them personally in their daily lives", yet the
Slapp is referring to the difference between TV ads and print media ads - and the Liberals' Q & A ads in particular. Slapp believes that one ought to provide the potential buyer/voter with information (albeit cleverly, interestingly and briefly presented) in order to make their decision. The Liberals placed full page, broadsheet sized ads in major dailies with "probably a hundred words on the page".

He thought the graphic was quite clever, but the message didn't deliver and it should have. "While ever it's factual and educational and informative, and really is relevant, I believe people will read it. People who are really concerned. And I suggest that that's probably who the swinging voters are. They wouldn't be swinging voters if they didn't give a bugger who was in power."

Of course, as Slapp admits, there is the possibility that the lack of information is intentional, particularly if the politicians don't have much to say; or in the case of Peacock and sums of more than three figures, the party would prefer he didn't say much at all of substance.

Of course, a rather costly factor in all this is the endless opinion polls the parties and other institutions carry out. There must be a lot of very tired polled people in market research land. Perhaps they could apply for a special exemption for registering their opinion yet again on election day. But, better yet, perhaps one of the parties should invent its own Max Headroom to barrack for a political candidate tied to a TV network and win or lose according to the ratings. Wandin Valley would be simply overrun by tanned and blow-dried pollies.
The POST-MODERN Conditioner

From Vidal Sassoon to Redken, the post-modern invasion of private life has Michael Dwyer in a lather.

More than anything else, post-modernism has had an unsettling effect on my ablutions. Jean-Francois Lyotard certainly has a lot to answer for.

As an adolescent I revelled in the simple pleasures offered by the suburban family bathroom. A leisurely bath in a hot, brimming tub; a half hour of blissful solitude as I thumbed through tattered, dog-eared copies of New Statesman and other mildly radical foreign journals. I even enjoyed my newly acquired ritual of shaving.

Now, confront me with the eclecticism of an Alessandro Mendini designed bidet and I simply bind up—what Freud and his acolytes would have quaintly diagnosed as a case of infantile anal retention. Studio Alchimia design simply plays havoc with my bowels.

I find that I can no longer wash my hair with any sense of propriety. The bathroom cabinet in my house confronts me daily with a myriad of disconcerting labels (seemingly my flatmate's sole contribution, bills aside, to the collective expenditure of our household). I am beginning to confuse whether a label is a signifiant or a signifie, let alone understand the semiological relationship between the packaging and what is actually inside the bottle. It's back to Eco, I suppose.

The Vidal Sassoon conditioner invariably evokes an array of perturbing vignettes. It is difficult seriously to apply to your scalp something which sounds like a rather silly amalgam of the names of various post-war novelists and political commentators.

Lathering up, I am alternately reminded of Gore Vidal and the bite and flair of American literature over the last forty years, or of Donald Sassoon's eulogies to the pragmatism of the self-styled Peppones of the Italian Communist Party. The slightly off-pink colour of most of the bottles which clutter the bathroom shelves is therefore perhaps rather appropriate. The Redken container is quite naturally a more astringent hue, although I always thought Livingstone went into the House of Commons, not cosmetics.

The further recesses of the cabinet reveal more contemporary, and fashionably French, intellectual trends. After all, marxism or any philosophy with even the faintest hint of crimson is definitely no longer de rigueur in our ivory towers, let alone our marble effect bathrooms. Take down the Che poster from behind the toilet door. Socialism is passé even to the armchair revolutionaries who began to inhabit the university common rooms after the rebellious year of 1968.

Body Shop is obviously a translation from the French of Foucault's posthumously published treatise on aerobics and the culture of the modern gym. Hmm, perhaps the hair-care equivalent of Derrida's concept of différence.

It certainly makes me want to defer and differ to a cheaper brand. And the list goes on. Gone is the generic bathroom anthropology of yesteryear. In its place we have Henri Palmolive, famed at the École Normale Supérieure for his stunning work on the semiological implications of tribal deodorising rituals. What you thought you did in the privacy of your own bathroom becomes the template of all subsequent global human behaviour.

Of course, I realise the psychological implications of this sort of absurdist name-association. Or I hope I do. An analysis by Lacan would undoubtedly reveal it was some mix-up in my mirror stage formation, and all this nonsense therefore was a reflection on me (sorry Jacques, that should be a reflection on the function of "I").

Which probably means that Heidegger really had nothing to do with the manufacture of soap. Not directly at any rate.

I am not ashamed to admit that I felt comfortable and secure with modernism. Certainly, I had my doubts about structuralism but, well, didn't
everyone? In spite (or perhaps because) of his oh so clever critics, I always thought that E P Thompson was on the right track when it came to the pondering about of the French intelligentsia. Thompson is not what you would describe as a philosopher’s philosopher. He calls a spade a spade, and accordingly Althusser a “freak of intellectual fashion”. I suppose that the most practical approach to my predicament, if I ever want to regain some sense of normality in the bathroom, is to stop trying to take post-modernism seriously. Boyd Tonkin, in a book review last year in New Statesman & Society (May, 1989) adopts an appropriately condescending attitude to the whole scene. Tonkin suggests that post-modernism “thrive among loose definitions and messy data”. He claims it is ultimately “just a weary late modernism that owes more to the moustache Marcel Duchamp scrawled on the Mona Lisa than to the grand designs of a Pound or a Picasso”. The correct approach is, therefore, to treat post-modernism, along with other phenomena like David Frost or flared trousers, as just a temporary cultural aberration. After all, when you look with any depth at the subject, or at least its foremost philosophical exponents, it is at best slightly amusing, and at worst rather ridiculous.

The whole French intellectual tradition from the structuralists onwards is rich with the bile of scientificty, anti-humanism and anti-historicism. Far be it for me to suggest that this can lead to life-style problems, but just look at the facts. Louis Althusser may well have been la plus grande intelligence metaphysique that Jean Lacroix ever taught, but that didn’t really help his wife. Helene Althusser was found dead in the couple’s flat in the rue d’Ulm in November 1980. In a state of complete delirium, Althusser confessed to strangling her. A magistrate subsequently found him to be, in legal parlance, “unfit to plead”.

Other heroes of the post-war French intelligentsia fare little better. Any self-respecting Australian academic with a normally developed and healthy cultural cringe would know the details. Roland Barthes, a leading structuralist theoretician and another progenitor to the post-modern condition, died after being run over by the French equivalent of a Mr Whippy ice-cream van.

The untimely, and some would not hesitate to say unfortunate, demise of Michel Foucault, was also shrouded in peculiar and still generally un-revealed circumstances. By 1970 Foucault had earned sufficient reputation to be awarded a personal chair at the College de France. Yet, he failed to produce the imposing corpus of work hinted at in the first volume of Histoire de la sexualité. In hindsight, his propbosed Les Pervs would have probably made an interesting (and illuminating?) read.

The deconstructionists seem to have similar problems with life in the academic fast lane.

The deconstructionists seem to have similar problems with life in the academic fast lane. Jacques Derrida’s critique of the persistence of a metaphysics of presence in Western thought did little to help with the more physical charge of possession of drugs in the Eastern bloc (Czechoslovakia).

It would also appear that it is not only the French who develop these sorts of life-style problems, but anyone even slightly tainted with a Gallic brush. The Greek philosopher Nicol Poulantzas obviously suffered as a result of reading a little too much of this French structuralist and post-structuralist theory in its original. Faced with the prospect of a lifetime studying this sort of circunlocutional drivel, he took the easy way out and hung himself.

While, in the 1960s and 1970s, a sort of chic gauchisme was the intellectual vogue, our post-modern age has thrown up more unlikely, and more worrying, cultural heroes. Any sort of progressive or marxist thought has been summarily dismissed, and replaced with the proto-fascist Dogma of philosophers like Nietzsche. The ‘crisis of representation’ in Western thought of which post-modernism is the most succinct and sustained example, has led to an apoplexy of our philosophical traditions. The intellectually conceived among us may find this smart or trendy but, personally, I think it warrants a little more concern.

I am not openly hostile to all that post-modernism has to offer. Clio is more enjoyable, albeit expensive, to read than Cleo. Some of its other manifestations would also appear to be inescapable. It seems not unlikely that we will all be living both with it, and within it, for a considerable period of time. It is interesting to note that Craig McGregor, one of four judges for the annual awards of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, estimated that three-quarters of this year’s entries were essentially post-modern or influenced by post-modern ideas.

Rather, it is the underlying and spurious premises of this type of designer philosophy which allay my sensibilities. Post-modernism ultimately leaves us with nothing to believe in - no prospect of human progress. It is a system of thought which flourishes in negation. More or less cutting off your philosophical nose to spite your face.

The pervasive intrusion of post-modern ideas into all aspects of thought is not something which we can hope will inevitably subside, but only makes more pressing the need for stout defence. I can’t speak for anyone else, but I know that I will certainly continue to read Das Kapital in the bath.

MICHAEL DWYER is not a contemporary French philosopher.
Obvously the environment's been flavour of the month recently. What were you trying to do in *A Question of Survival* which might distinguish it from the rash of media environment coverage?

Although the environment has been covered by many programs before, what hasn't been done is getting beyond the chasing of chainsaws and the sludge file coverage, to looking at the entire problem. Current affairs has been very good at focussing on the end result: the toxic waste that comes out of factories and where it's being dumped, the cutting down of trees. But it hasn't put it into perspective. What we've been trying to do is say that mainstream thought has got to adapt to environmental logic. We can no longer just base our decisions on economic logic. It's got to be a logic that includes some of the environmental factors and imperatives which are imposing themselves on us.

How easy is it to be dispassionate in looking at the issue given that the environment is such an emotive topic?

*A Question of Survival* sprang out of the TV science unit - the unit which normally produces *Quantum* and similar programs. This helped us to take some of the emotionalism out of the debate and look things from a scientific perspective. I was an ordinary current affairs journalist when I began working for the ABC. When I came to *A Question of Survival*, I didn't come with any preconceived notions in mind or any real desire to preach. But when you step back and look at the scientific point of view, when you allow these facts to mount up, when you see exactly what's being said by everybody and start looking into the basis on which they're saying things, it becomes very clear that it is important, that it is something that needs to be said. And it's a story that's, by and large, not being tackled by a lot of the mainstream media who often reduce environmental stories back to stories about conflict between interest groups or about who's going to win the next election.

Do you find that the eight minute quota for each story is enough?

The difficulty with all the stories that we've covered so far is that there hasn't been enough time to go into all the complexities. I went to the Solomon Islands to do one of our first stories on the logging of rainforests there. The person who owns the company carrying out the logging is a Queenslander. Two of his former employees are involved either in the provincial or national government. I put it to one of them that he had a conflict of interest between the people he was representing in government and accepting money on a consultancy basis from the timber company. He answered that yes, he was wearing two hats, but he didn't see that as a conflict of interest. That was an angle that we would have liked to explore in much more detail but, because of time, we had to let it go.

Also in that particular story, there was the issue of Third World development and the conflicts that the villagers face which would have been useful to bring out...

The individual people there are faced with so many dilemmas. And we could only begin to explore some of these problems. For example, they hold land in common in the Solomon Islands - a joint land ownership system. When you start introducing money into the economy it breaks down the land ownership system, and it also breaks down customs. And when you destroy the customs you're changing the way in which people live, not only because they can no longer live off the land but also because their society begins to breaks down. We just couldn't possibly cover that in the format available.

Issues like the greenhouse effect, for example, create an enormous amount of controversy. Most
people agree that it exists, but the extent of it is hotly disputed. How do you, coming from the ABC science unit, decide who to believe?

Most of the time we've tried to follow the mainstream of scientific thought. We haven't done that exclusively; for example, we ran a story on solar power, and the scientific community is far from united about the effectiveness of solar power. So we spoke to a professor who has been working on solar power for the last 20 years and tried to put his work in context. We simply indicated where there are scientific doubts, and let individuals make up their own minds. If there is a wild claim that can't be substantiated, we don't use it. If it's a contentious claim but a significant body of scientific opinion believes in it then we'll put it forward, but we'll also balance it with other people who don't think the same way.

How did you decide on the balance of local and international issues?

Obviously, we tried to give the program an Australian flavour. That's why, for example, there isn't a story about acid rain. There is scientific argument about whether or not acid rain is seriously affecting Australia. So we decided to leave that issue, whereas anyone who is doing it from the point of view of an American or European program would have had to cover that issue because it's vital there. In the case of the Solomons Islands logging story, we could have gone to Sarawak or Borneo or the Amazon - the story's the same in each case. But because this was at Australia's back door, because it's been done by Australians, because the logs are coming back to Australia, hopefully people will notice that and will see the relevance and importance for an Australian audience.

Do you think there is a future for a series of this kind as a permanent fixture - one which perhaps also has more of a current affairs component?

Yes. Quantum is doing a certain amount from a different direction. Countrywide looks at issues like soil degradation - possibly the worst problem that we face at the moment in Australia - as well as urban and transport issues. And the 7:30 Report looks at the Green parties and the rise of the green movement. Where there's a gap is that no-one's bringing these separate strands together. Environmental issues are still perceived as being, if you like, one government minister's portfolio. Really, they're part of everybody's portfolio. There is definitely a gap in the market there and I wouldn't be surprised if we see some of the commercials trying to pick up the idea.

You come from a current affairs background. Would you say you've been converted through working on this program?

I'm always wary of any journalist who says they are converted, because we are trying to retain an objective approach. But it's certainly fair to say that all of us have now seen the importance of it, and that we are doing something that we believe is a contribution to that. We have differences among ourselves about the best way to approach the issues, but we are agreed about the importance of at least addressing them.

Is there likely to be a second series?

The second series all depends on reaction from the audience and how well we've done our job. We see no reason why there shouldn't be, because the issues are there and the interest is there. I suppose the question is whether or not we've done our job in interpreting them.

JESS WALKER is a Sydney freelance journalist writing about environmental issues.
For over 60 years lucky people have been winning little gold statues. Adrienne McRibbon looks at the history of the Oscars and this year's crop.

It all started back in 1929 when, on May 19 in the Blossom Room of the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, Douglas Fairbanks presented 12 awards - the first Academy Awards presentation. Janet Gaynor, who won the first ever Best Actress award, commented: "As you danced you saw the most important people in Hollywood whirling past you".

This first presentation was more like a private party presented by The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. It was only open to Academy members - no press, no audience. For the 1989 awards (presented last month, on March 27) there will be at least 22 awards and six special awards handed out by a multitude of presenters and seen by millions worldwide.

Since 1929 there have been controversies, startling omissions, continual surprises and an ever-growing media attention to an event that is, in itself, a business. (Receiving an Oscar can add huge returns at the box office.) As far back as the 'thirties people both inside the industry as well as commentators were learning not to take this event too seriously.

In 1931 Helen Hayes won Best Actress for a contrived tearjerker called The Sin of Madelon Claudet. This prompted Irving Thalberg (considered the boy genius of Hollywood), when considering whether to put another tearjerker into production, to say "Let's face it, we win Academy Awards with crap like Madelon Claudet". The controversy over art versus commercial crap reigns to this day.

In 1934 the statuette was 'officially' given the name Oscar. When the Academy's librarian first saw the statue she claimed "it looks like uncle Oscar". This was considered a derogatory term until Walt Disney used the name in his speech, when winning the award for the creation of Mickey Mouse. The name stuck.

By 1940 an innovation had been introduced which, like the name Oscar, continues to the present day. All the surprise of the Awards having been lost when they were mistakenly published early one year, the Academy introduced the sealed envelope. It heightened the suspense and put in motion a ritual seen at almost every award ceremony.

In 1943 the Awards became a more public affair, the private industry party was coming to an end. 1944 saw the Awards broadcast in their entirety across America. The presentation had moved to the famous Grauman's Chinese Theatre.

The Awards have grown, been refined, categories added and taken away until we have what is seen televised across the globe every year, to a seemingly ever-expanding audience.

There have always been more serious issues raised than the presentation format. During the 'fifties considerable ramifications arose over blacklisted writers being nominated. Carl Foreman was nominated for his script of High Noon. However, by the night of the Awards, in 1952, he had moved to England, considered unemployable whether he won or not. Foreman was not the only writer affected by the blacklist. The consequences were felt in Hollywood for many years.

In 1958 George Seaton, President of the Academy, announced that there would be no commercial interruptions to the ceremony, as the industry itself was sponsoring the show. Not surprisingly, this announcement gained more applause than any winner. (Consider watching the Awards without commercial interruptions today!)

There are, of course, as many fascinating details to recount about the Awards as there have been about the ceremonies: certainly every year has something to remember it by. What has been this year's moment?

The Best Film award of 1989 was really a tussle between three films: Driving Miss Daisy, with nine nominations in all; Born on the 4th of July, a total of eight nominations; and Dead Poets' Society, with four nominations. Despite Daisy gaining nine nominations, including Best Film, for some inexplicable reason director Bruce Beresford missed out on a Best Director nomination. A totally illogical move.

If the film can garner so much credit and its three lead actors are all nominated, it stands to reason that much of the credit must go to the director. It's not as if Beresford is
Steven Spielberg, who the Academy seems to openly dislike.

Still, there was one Australian director in the running. The Best Director award was a close competition between Peter Weir and Oliver Stone. It was a very slim chance that either of the Britons, actor/director Kenneth Branagh or Jim Sheridan, were likely to go home with an Oscar. And Woody Allen is always a long shot, playing his clarinet in New York the night of the ceremonies.

The actor stakes this time had a couple of landmarks. Two black actors were nominated - Morgan Freeman for Best Actor in Driving Miss Daisy and Denzel Washington, for Best Supporting Actor in Glory. Glory is an ideologically sound film about the American Civil War with a predominantly black cast. Washington’s graduation from TV to features combined with the content of the film would have stood him in good stead, as much to award the film as the actor. There was, of course, Marlon Brando in A Dry White Season, another ideologically sound film about South Africa.

But the last time Brando won an award (for The Godfather), he sent an Indian woman to announce that he could not accept the award because of the treatment of Indians by Hollywood!

The other landmark was Kenneth Branagh’s achievement of simultaneously being nominated as Best Actor/Best Director in the same year for the same film. This phenomenon has happened only three times: Orson Welles for Citizen Kane, Woody Allen for Annie Hall and Warren Beatty for Reds. Branagh had only a slight chance to succeed in either category, especially with Tom Cruise as competition for Best Actor in Born on the 4th of July.

America’s attitude to the Vietnam conflict was almost a guarantee for Born to win a number of awards. Director Oliver Stone has become the new liberal conscience filmmaker of the day. (It is unfortunate that his films are so over-rated, because of their content.)

In the Best Actress category the real choice was between Michelle Pfeiffer for The Fabulous Baker Boys and Jessica Tandy in Daisy. Tandy has sentiment on her side because she has been around as an actress for a long time.

One category that never receives the attention it should is the documentary. An Oscar can mean a great deal - for example whether the film will be seen outside America. None of the nominated films this year have had a release in Australia. It is therefore hard to speculate on the most deserving. The other category that often remains an enigma (as to what shaped the voters’ choice) is the Best Foreign Language Film. The main competition was between Cinema Paradiso, from Italy, and the magnificent bio-pic Camille Claudel. Cinema Paradiso is a wonderful film, has the added advantage of being very sentimental, and its topic is cinema itself.

The bottom line in the race for Oscars is that the technical awards are more likely to go to those who genuinely deserve them, without other factors being a consideration. It can make a real difference, in the documentary and short categories, to a career and getting another film off the ground.

With actors, directors, best films, music, etc., while the competition may be real to each individual nominated, to us the audience, it is more a case of who we like the best and whether the Academy will agree with our choice.

ADRIENNE MCKIBBINS is a freelance film writer/researcher, and regular contributor to Filmnews. She also produces and presents On Screen, a radio program on cinema on 2SER-FM, Sundays at 2pm.

ALR: APRIL 1990

In the note of warning which prefaces his latest book, Ideas for a Nation, Donald Horne recommends “a cheerful (but intelligent) Australian superficiality” in considering the role of ideas in national life.

What he means by this is amplified in a later chapter where, suggesting that the Australian reputation for superficiality should be intellectualised, he argues for a style of thinking that will be satisfied with the flat complexity of the surface of things. Such thinking, he argues, would limit itself to the pragmatic concerns of ‘what’ questions, secure in the knowledge that they are invariably more intelligent than the contrived profundities of ‘why’ questions.

Nor, he suggests, should the pragmatist who is concerned with such matters be too serious; a degree of playfulness and ironic distancing is always to be recommended. And she or he might just as well be cheerful.

Much of this - a nationalised version of Brecht’s advocacy of crude-thinking - is conceived as a largely well-directed polemic against 1970s-style leftist obscurantism. Yet it also serves to set the scene for the final section of Ideas for a Nation. Here, in response to that most pragmatic of questions - What is to be done? - Horne addresses the question of Australia’s future by raising a set of disconnected and incomplete observations, thoughts and interrogations. Rather than distracting attention by attempting to be too coherent, as he puts it, his purpose is merely “to throw up some ideas”.

The ideas are advanced in a manner which - and, again, Brecht springs to mind - invites the reader merely to consider them. Advanced not as theses which have to be elaborately argued and justified, the ideas are offered as simply ‘good to think with’. And should the reader disagree, well, that’s fine. Advanced as they are with the lightness of the ironist, not even Horne commits himself to the last-ditch defence of any of his ideas. Except, that is, for one: the conviction that ideas matter and that, as the primary agencies of change, they are especially important for nations.

This, in a nutshell, is the message of the book: that nations can be changed and that ideas are among the primary instruments of their transformation. It is thus that Horne, speculating on the forms in which the bicentenary of federation might be celebrated in 2001, closes on an optimistic note. Anticipating that, by then, republicanism will have triumphed, and sexism and racism banished - and offering this vision as a contrast to the doleful rhetorics of empire, race and sex which have marred past Australian celebrations - Horne’s wager is that good ideas for the nation will win out over bad ones.

Yet Ideas for a Nation is not an especially nationalist book. Indeed, Horne’s investment in the nation is largely a pragmatic one: he recognises the importance of nationalist feelings and sentiments simply because they are there. Taking issue with those critics who contend that transnational economic relations have diminished the force of nationalism, Horne contends that such critiques “require tunnel vision of demanding intensity” - citing recent developments in Eastern Europe to support his case. Horne, then, does not spiritualise nationalist sentiments but, rather, in recognising their considerable social force, stresses their role in establishing programs for action.

Shaped by its formation as a modern industrial nation of colonial origins, much of Australian society and culture, Horne argues, can be understood as a response to circumstances Australia has shared with other nations.

Even where a trait might be claimed as specific to Australia, this is not because it partakes of some general national characteristic, but is rather due to the particular circumstances prevailing in specific sectors of Australian society. There is not, then, as others have argued, a distinctive Australian accent. There are things Australian - but they are not all Australian in the same way.

In this respect, Ideas for a Nation turns out to be something of a graveyard for ideas of the nation as Horne puts more than one national holy cow - mateship, for example - through the mill of a critical denationalising argument. Nor is the future Horne wishes for Australia a particularly nationalistic one. Rather, his ambition is that Australia should be foremost among nations in its advocacy and implementation of the principles of liberalism, humanism, democracy and the Enlightenment. Its nationalism, he also suggests, should be cosmopolitan in its promotion of a multicultural pluralism and diversity.

There is, in this regard, a symbiosis between the book’s argument and its form. For it is clearly Horne’s view that the more questions of nation are posed with the sort of intellectualised superficiality, ironic playfulness and optimistic cheerfulness he recommends - as opposed to deep rumination on the national geist - the more likely we are to arrive at the destination he would have us reach.

On both counts Ideas for a Nation is welcome. As 1988 fades into memory and 2001 looms over the horizon, Horne has usefully sought to set the agenda for the debates which will, no doubt, grow apace as the prospect of both the millennium and the anniversary of federation draws closer. He has also, in his advocacy of a relaxed and somewhat detached approach, suggested a productive manner of conducting those debates.

This is enough for a book to accomplish; and it might have been ac-
The evidence of the 'eighties is that huge overseas borrowings since financial deregulation have fueled expansion, and that only 40 cents in every dollar of profit was invested in productive assets. Stutchbury seems to believe that the Accord aim of reducing inflation has been achieved - a rate of 7.8% is hardly a success.

The profits have been largely wasted in speculation and conspicuous consumption. On the political description I think he's right. Most ACTU officers believe in conservative economics, that one person's pay rise is another's job, that the wage increases gained in 1981 caused a recession in 1982. And most ACTU officers have worked closely with Keating to allow the big transfer of wealth from wages to profits.

But the obvious economic disaster created by the deregulated speculative splurge of the '80s ought to suggest that the theory used by Keating and his admirers is wrong. A Left review should say more than the obvious - that a wage/tax deal will be used by Labor in the elections and point towards a wages, tax and economic policy that can work for the majority of Australians.

Even less should it blandly suggest that we all agree with old-fashioned economic theory which so blatantly serves the interest of capital, and which rules that organised workers or community organisations have no role to play in the allocation of resources and the distribution of the benefits of economic activity. Had we got a Liberal government it would have been a clear test of the theory that wage cuts encourage bosses to hire more workers, to produce more wealth for all!

As it is workers will have to fight harder to ensure productive, ecologically-sound investment and a boost in social resources to ensure long-term economic viability.

Peter Murphy
Surry Hills, NSW.
CONSUMING PASSIONS

CD or not CD?

Sydney seems to have as many specialist record shops as Melbourne has specialist bookshops. Two of the best are side by side in the Town Hall Arcade, under Sydney Town Hall.

At Shop 19 is Michaels Music Room, among whose 8,000 titles there isn't one record - like most classical music shops these days it's compact discs (CDs) only, plus a few cassettes.

Ms McPhee, who runs Michaels, says they stocked records until 1989 but they were selling so few by then that they could no longer justify the space. While the classical music fans did go off records, she also believes that the recording companies killed off the LP. They stopped releasing new recordings on LP and pushed up the prices for LP titles. By the time the average classical LP cost $20 and CDs were only $25, no-one wanted LPs any more.

Michaels has a well-informed, helpful staff and a superb range of music. Their phone number is (02) 267 1351.

But if you prefer Cats to Chopin and Showboat to Stravinsky, then you try next door, at shop 20. Ava and Susan's specialises in musical and movie soundtracks and nostalgia - and is the only shop in Australia that does.

While I was talking to Barry Stahl, who runs the shop, Nancy Hayes, the star of 42nd Street, rang to ask for a record and Barry, of course, agreed to take it 'round to the theatre and leave at the box office for her. It's that kind of service that has made the shop - and its mail order service - world famous.

Ava and Susan's still sells lots of LPs. They've had to let the little silver discs in, but are still restricting them to a couple of racks. Stahl, too, is certain that the LP is being killed off. His CDs cost about $26 on average, while the LPs have crept up to $19.

The Prices Surveillance Authority (PSA) is currently investigating Australian record and CD prices and, inevitably, some people are arguing that a complete deregulation of imports would bring down prices.

None of the specialist shops like the idea. Much of their range is too specialised to be in direct competition with cheap imports. A shop like Ava and Susan's earns it's bread and butter from the big selling soundtrack hits, like Les Misérables and Chess. If the mainstream chain stores all have cut-price import copies on sale, they'll take a lot of the specialist's turnover.

Barry Stahl is certainly not panicking, but he's not overjoyed by the prospect of deregulation. If it does come, he's concerned that no specialist will be able to match the clout wielded by the big chains, who will undercut the independent shops on most top-selling titles. While it might mean cheap best-sellers for the mass market, the specialist shops may gradually disappear and with them, the range of music they sell.

Ava and Susan's is absolutely unbeatable in its field and the shop's atmosphere is terrific. It's phone number is (02) 264 3179, or you can fax your mail order requirements on (02) 264 3177.

Sydney's ultimate specialist music shop would have to be Folkways, at 282 Oxford Street, Paddington. They have over 40,000 titles in stock and offer a mail order service that covers the globe.

Folkways was built on the belief that there's more to music than the Top 40 - especially when the Top 40 was dominated by British and US music. Australian music of every kind is thier speciality and they'll sell it to you seven days a week, up until 9pm on weekdays, or 6pm at weekends.

Their stock also covers everything from Brecht to the blues, Inti-Illimani to songs of the Spanish Civil War, Woody Guthrie to the Watergate hearings.

Warren Fahey, who gives his job title as "chief larrkkin", reckons that the stock is now about 50% LPs, with the remainder being half CDs and half cassettes. But he also feels that CDs are gradually taking over and has noticed that more and more of the more obscure titles they stock are now being released (or re-released) only on CD and cassette.

Fahey is deeply sceptical of the PSA's investigation into record prices. He shares Barry Stahl's concerns about keeping the independent retailers afloat but - since Folkways is also the home of the Larrikin recording label - he's also worried about how independent Australian labels and wholesalers will survive deregulation. A small company like Larrikin may not be able to keep up in an import-based price-cutting war with the multinational major labels. While Fahey has no doubt that cheaper records would be better for everyone he's certain that they'd mean fewer Australian records and fewer specialist shops.

Folkways' policy has always been to refuse to stock sexist or racist material and they've even given up plastic bags in favor of paper ones. Wrap up warm when you shop at there - its customers are so cool you may catch a chill while shopping, but the staff are eager to help. Their phone number is (02) 361 3980.

Jim Endersby
A foreign threat?

On March 8, the Sydney Morning Herald plastered a story across page one reporting fears by MPs that they may be sitting in parliament illegally. Sydney lawyer, Mr George Turner, threatened to test in the High Court a little-known provision of the Constitution which appears to bar anyone with dual citizenship from sitting in parliament.

At least nine have formally renounced their dual citizenship including Peter Baldwin, David Bedall, Carolyn Jakobsen, Lewis Kent and Chris Puplick. Quite an achievement, but who is George Turner?

According to the SMH, he is a councillor on Sydney’s Strathfield Council. He also led a Senate team in the March election under the banner ‘Independent EFF’ - the EFF standing for Enterprise, Freedom and Family. But Loose Cannon has done some digging.

George V Turner, a member of the lunar right, heads a whacky crew called the Anti-Treason Co-ordinate, which leads the fight against Fabians, fluoridation, marxists, satanists and supporters of world government. It warns of world dictatorship, which leads the fight against MPs who owe allegiance to foreign powers.

It asked: “Why are all political parties and the news media united in this dangerous conspiracy to mislead the people of Australia? Why are we subjected to foreign-made laws?

“Selling eggs outside the Egg Board is severely punished. National betrayal is a greater crime than murder.

“Does the law now apply only to the people and not the government? This is just a little of the story of treachery and deceit being practised today.”

Just before the SMH story, George Turner addressed a rather peculiar meeting at the Estonian Club in Sydney’s Surry Hills.

The meeting was one of a series called by the Conservative Speakers Club whose literature notes that it is “an educational division of the Australian League of Rights”.

Berry bails out

The union movement has lost an articulate and thoughtful official, Peter Berry, secretary of the ACT branch of the Building Workers Industrial Union. Many predicted a great future for the 37-year old. But an interview in the Bulletin last September would not have endeared him to some trade union officials.

His main message was far removed from the optimistic rhetoric which union leaders are wont to disperse to their members. Unions faced a declining future, he argued, because of changes in the composition of the workforce due to technology. They had to deliver far better services to members and “market” themselves to women and young people using modern techniques.

He also said: “It is at the union office level where the ignorance and apathy is greatest - where people don’t want to understand. They are still living in the ‘fifties when craft unionism covered 59% of the workforce.”

And on opposition to amalgamation: “If we were to go from 300 to 20 unions overnight, there would be 280 union secretaries who would have to surrender the Amex card and the keys to the Commodore.”

Back to the ‘fifties

The pre-election issue of the Clerks Union magazine The Clerk put some noses badly out of joint in the upper reaches of the ALP and union movement, according to Loose Cannon’s sources.

In a rambling and almost incoherent editorial, FCU national president John Maynes got stuck into Medicare and the health system generally.

What Maynes describes as “the so-called health scheme” is, he says, “a scandal”, with waste and inefficiency in government expenditure where the public come last”.

Maynes’ analysis of the Hawke government is truly sophisticated: “it suffers because of a lack of real opposition and the dominance of the Left in its ranks.” Other articles had veiled attacks on the Labor government’s tax and family policies. Just the thing when Labor faced its most difficult election since 1983.

Elsewhere, the pre-election issue of The Clerk has the smell of the ‘fifties: Laurie Short (I thought he was in the FIA?) inveighs against “the hard Left”, and an anonymous article recalls the glory days when Maynes and the boys kicked out the Commies in the clerks in 1952. Another article on Hawke’s attack on the Left was so good they used it twice.

Trouble is, even The Clerk lets slip what a lousy union the FCU is. In an article on the 3% super payment it admits: “Some unionists are only now receiving award rights to super when others received the same benefits in 1987.”

But then the FCU has for decades doubled as a sheltered workshop for incompetent and conservative union officials.
Mary Hartman Five Point Plan For Getting a Boy or a Girl, Depending on Your Sexual Preference. This has been turning to the question of many of my patients about to come around again, the warm covers on rainy Sundays is and the time for snuggling under As the weather begins to cool, Hello patients, back-breaking work out in the field. This plan is based upon years of academic ivory tower. Not at all! 'nineties! I want to assure you that that something we all need in the 'seventies one-night stand. What you want in the 'nineties, with AIDS and herpes and privatisation, is ongoing commitment. And so you need to know their mind. Now, if you discover during dinner that you don’t like their mind, there’s no harm done. Just part company as friends. But if you do like their mind, you are now ready for Step Three.

STEP THREE is my favourite step. It’s my own innovation. Step Three is a simple flamboyant romantic gesture. For example, why not send a telegram, “Lovely night. Love Mary.”

But sometimes, patients, I wonder if you can go past chocolates and flowers when it comes to Step Three. I think perhaps the women’s movement threw the baby out with the bathwater when they shied away from such gestures in the early years.

The simple fact of the matter is that women love chocolates and flowers, and chaps aren’t known to knock them back either. But use your own discretion. The simple aim is to send a clear message of sexual interest.

So to STEP FOUR. And again we see the exciting participation of the object. Because, after they receive your flowers or whatever - any ambiguity which existed during the dinner evaporates.

Now they know exactly what is going on and, in a flush of excitement, they ring you to initiate the next date. Thus they share the responsibility for sexual initiation, reducing your level of anxiety. Here are a few words of guidance for this all-important second date.

I recommend that you go somewhere which offers the opportunity for physical relief. Perhaps a walk on the beach (cliches can be fun). Or perhaps you could walk a dog around the grounds of a large psychiatric hospital. Or go to a dance. Most important of all, you drive the car on the night, because it will give you that all-important sense of power and control which is necessary to reduce anxiety.

On this second social encounter you must remember to touch the object as often as possible, even if apparently inadvertently. I personally recommend that, early on in the evening, you look the object right in the eye and say something like, “We’re going to get off together tonight, aren’t we?” or “Let’s fuck” or whatever is appropriate to your social context. The object will laugh nervously, not unlike yourself. But you’ll have got it off your chest and you won’t have to spend the whole night worrying about when it’s finally going to be said.

STEP FIVE, of course, is IT. We don’t give detailed information about it. Other health professionals cover that area, and we don’t like to interfere in the way the market, sorry, the profession, has been divided up.

Just one final word of warning. If you do find yourself late one night sitting in a car with an object and you hear yourself saying something really pathetic like, “Can I come inside for coffee?” for God’s sake, DON’T DRINK COFFEE! If you do, your tension will rocket into a ball of anxiety in your stomach.

As soon as you get inside the object’s front door, grab them and kiss them as quickly and as hard as you can!

Send your problems to Dr Hartman’s secretary, Julie McCrossin, c/o ALR.
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