Balkans Backlash

Pierre Vicary is ABC Radio's correspondent in Zagreb, Yugoslavia. He spoke to ALR's Mike Ticher about the Yugoslav crisis in mid-February.

Every political issue in Yugoslavia at the moment is determined by the ideology of the two competing factions - the decentralists, who are mainly in Slovenia and Croatia, and the centralists - basically the Serbs.

The decentralists are saying that they would really like Yugoslavia to be almost like a confederation. Each republic would be almost totally self-contained, and would only give the federation certain powers - control of the army, a central bank, foreign policy - but all other political decisions would be made at the local level. Slovenia and Croatia have already gone a long way towards making that happen. There are multi-party elections in those two republics in April, and in both places the Communist Party could lose power.

One of the problems is that all the politicians are using nationalism in order to try and peddle their political wares, and in a multi-nation state like Yugoslavia that's extremely dangerous. This is particularly the case in Kosovo. Until last year, Kosovo was almost an independent province. As a result of changes in the constitution that were pushed through last March, Kosovo and Vojvodina have now come back under the control of Serbia. There is a crucial ideological division between the Serbian leadership, under hardline Stalinist Slobodan Milosevic, who want a hard line, and the Slovene and Croatian leadership, who say, as they do in everything else, that you've got to negotiate, have dialogue and allow a multi-party structure.

The latter argue that the hardline isn't working and cannot work - only 10% of Kosovo's population are Serbs or Montenegrins, there's no way that they can call the shots. And yet, the Serbian government in Belgrade says that they won't negotiate with the 2 million Albanians because they're all separatists! There's no way the Serbian leadership can negotiate, because their entire platform, the way they got power and hold power, is to insist on a hardline policy in Kosovo.

There is no doubt that the Serbs have not done very well out of the new Yugoslavia. Tito deliberately wanted to change the power balance because in the old Yugoslavia, under the King and later the dictator, the Serbs basically ran it, but I think he went too far, so that the Serbs really were disadvantaged.

And so initially, Milosevic's emphasis on Serbian nationalism was well-received. He is a very skilled populist and for a while he was widely supported, because it did appear that he was getting results. What's been happening over the last 3 months, is that more and more Serbs are now wondering where he's taking them. They accepted Milosevic because they thought it would help solve the Yugoslav problem, but now they feel that he is steering them to the edge of a civil war, which is definitely not what they want.

The contradictions between the Serbian leadership will become clearer and clearer. Sooner or later they're going to have to go to the polls, and I think that the Serbian people by then might have had enough. The European train is pulling out of the Yugoslav station, and if Yugoslavia doesn't jump on to that train pretty quickly it's going to be left in the mud with Turkey and Albania. A lot of intellectuals in Serbia are beginning to realise that now.

The situation is further complicated by developments within Albania itself. Things are definitely happening there, although not the rubbish that's been in the press. People aren't hanging from trees, there hasn't been a state of emergency or a popular uprising. Nevertheless, despite the country's reputation, the Albanians are very well-informed.

They can pick up Italian and Yugoslav TV, so they know what's going on outside and what perestroika's about. They want change, there's no doubt.

The Ramiz Alia leadership has been doing what it can in the last few months to make change possible - limited private enterprise is allowed, not at an individual level, but at the co-operative level. So even inside Albania there's change.

As yet, however, the reforms have not gone nearly far enough to encourage the Albanians in Kosovo to look towards incorporation into Albania as a realistic option in the short or medium term. On the surface, they say they want to stay inside Yugoslavia, but when you've had a few drinks with them and they open up to you, they say that in fact what they really want, ultimately, is a greater Albania. However, they certainly don't want to go out and join Albania at the moment, because whatever you say about Yugoslavia, they've provided their people with a higher standard of living than the Albanians on the other side of the border. It's as simple as that.

Yugoslavia's economic development is of course only relative - their economy has been in a real mess, and the steps taken to rectify that have left Milosevic in a rather uneasy position. At the end of December the federal government took some very, very radical decisions, they made the money convertible, and basically did everything possible to allow a market economy to function.

Serbia has had to go along with these economic changes. In theory, Milosevic says that he accepts them, that he is for a market economy. But his performance in other areas leaves one to wonder whether that's not just propaganda, because the changes that have been made in the Serbian economy have been mostly the results of changes in the Federal system. The Serbian government itself hasn't real-
ly done very much. The whole thing goes together, you can't have a market economy and a hardline centralist leadership.

These are the sort of contradictions which Yugoslavia is going to have to resolve quickly if it is to join the other Eastern European countries in achieving a workable political and economic system in the aftermath of communism.

Yugoslavia's unique decentralised structure and the perpetual nationalistic squabbling is now giving rise to a good deal of pessimism about its future. As a joke currently going the rounds puts it: "By the year 2000 there will be only seven countries left in Europe - and six of them will be in Yugoslavia".

Transports of Horror

Two catastrophic heavy vehicle accidents in the last five months have claimed more than forty lives and created a public realisation that something has gone badly wrong in the formulation and delivery of transport policy.

Exactly what might be wrong has prompted a large public debate; but after the initial shock over the scale of the carnage in the accidents at Cowper and Kempsey in NSW, only one notion appears to be rising to the top.

Driven by the well organised and powerful voice of the road lobby, an uneasy consensus seems to have been forged in the corridors of power that the main solution simply lies in the provision of greatly increased road funding. Thus, the apparent parameters of the problem have been reduced to questions of how much additional funding to provide and which level of government should provide it.

Of course, no one can deny that sections of the national road system have deteriorated rapidly during the 1980s and that additional funds are required to restore them to safe and serviceable levels. However, to define the current malaise as a simple function of inadequate road funding is to substitute a short term palliative for long term solutions to complex structural problems.

Heavy road freight and passenger transport has been growing exponentially to service the long distance markets, while rail services have been largely confined to medium distance haulage, mostly within state boundaries. It is only by examining and understanding the reasons for such a bizarre situation (which occurs in no other country to quite the same extent) that a basis for reformulating Australian land transport policy can be gained.

The most obvious reason is the federal structure of Australian rail systems; five rail systems currently interconnect, but each maintains its own (often incompatible) objectives and priorities.

Traditionally, the rail systems have been viewed by federal governments as state responsibilities (the Whitlam government was an exception) and this is reflected in the negligible financial support given by federal governments for national rail network development. The result has been a legacy of different track gauges, different rail system operational standards and communications systems, incompatible rolling stock between some states, steep gradients and restrictive tunnel and bridge clearances.

Not surprisingly, in the absence of federal government initiative, and faced with seemingly intractable coordination problems, as well as traditional state parochialism, rail systems have tended to maintain an insular focus on intra-state operations.

During the long post-war economic boom, interstate trade and long distance land transport in general came to assume much greater importance. Through the 1950s, growth in the long distance road freight industry promoted the development of fleet operations and freight forwarding.

A crucial factor consolidating the irrational structure of Australian land transport was a High Court case in 1954 (Hughes vs Vale) which effectively limited the capacity of states to levy road user charges on interstate trucks. Until 1979 (the Razorback blockade), the NSW government, for instance, never levied a charge of
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more than $10 per annum on an inter-state truck for fear of being 'taken to the cleaners' in the High Court. Accordingly, interstate trucking began to be heavily subsidised for the damage done to road systems, and to the extent of that subsidy provided a cheap and lucrative (if economically and socially irrational) form of inter-state transport for consignors. Through techniques such as 'border-hopping' trucks registered for inter-state work also became able to provide cheap rates for some long distance intra-state transport.

In 1963, the establishment of the Interstate Drivers Award provided another means of consolidating the dominance of trucking in long distance transport. While the award was intended to protect the wages of inter-state drivers, the key forwarding companies (TNT, Mayne Nickless, Brambles, etc) who were also the largest fleet operators, began to off-load large sections of their long distance truck fleets to individual operators. By sub-contracting freight work to individual owner-drivers, the freight forwarders could obviate the Interstate Drivers Award and achieve lower costs through their oligopolistic bargaining position relative to the disorganised long distance owner drivers.

By the 1980s, railway deficits were burgeoning; road systems were deteriorating faster than planners had expected; and, under economic pressure from freight forwarders, speeding, overloading, abuse of hours of service regulations and pill popping had become endemic among long distance owner drivers (a fact which has been noted in eight major federal and state government reports since 1970). However, rather than read the signals and take remedial action, the federal and most state governments embarked on a course which has only reinforced the absurd distribution of the land transport task.

Deregulation has been a key feature of the 1980s, opening up additional long distance freight and passenger traffic to road transport. Moreover, since 1974 the federal government has fully funded the national highway system and, while road funding has only increased marginally in real terms since that time, an increasing proportion of available funds has been channelled into national highways. Road vehicle mass limits have been increased by 10.5 tonnes since 1976. Speed limits for heavy vehicles have been increased from 80 kph to 100 kph in the last four years. Similarly, hours of driving limits have been progressively relaxed.

With such a diverse range of productivity palliatives, it is not surprising that the number of six axle trucks (the main substitute for rail) on the nation's roads more than doubled between 1979 and 1985, from 10,100 to 23,200; or that industry sources in the road coach industry talk proudly of the number of long distance road coaches more than tripling since 1980.

The price of the massive imbalance which governments have nurtured in land transport has now come home to roost in the form of unprecedented heavy vehicle road carnage; cross-subsidisation by car owners of heavy vehicle road damage which the Bureau of Transport Economics estimates at $15 billion per annum; financial hardship for a large number of long distance truck operators; a spiralling road maintenance and construction burden; and a national rail network which suffers from chronic federal government neglect.

Peter Ferris
This story is not so much about ideological differences as about the methods of organising for social change. If ideological differences have divided the ALP Left in NSW they seem to have been clouded by the angry, often bitter, number-crunching debate.

Since November 1989, events in the NSW ALP Left have gone from bad to worse. What is emerging are two separate entities. On one side the Socialist Left, a hard-core group committed to preserving and strengthening union representation on the Left; on the other, a more amorphous group known as the Labor Left. Already the dispute threatens to destabilise the Left’s control of one-third of the votes at the NSW ALP conference.

For now the victors in this strange battle are the Socialist Left which, at a tense meeting on November 10 last, in a 52/39 vote, managed to retain control of the Steering Committee, the former organisational centre of the ALP Left in NSW.

Irreconcilable differences have plagued the Steering Committee for years. More recently, the president-elect of the ACTU, Martin Ferguson, a leading figure in the breakaway group, has been portrayed in the mainstream media as locked in battle with George Campbell, national secretary of the powerful Amalgamated Metal Workers Union (AMWU), president of the old Steering Committee, and now president of the Socialist Left. Ferguson has lined up with two other leading Labor Party figures from the Labor Left grouping - deputy leader of the NSW Opposition, Dr Andrew Refshauge and Senator John Faulkner. Also included in the breakaway group is former NSW Minister for Education, Rodney Cavalier, who, while reluctant to speak publicly on behalf of a group that has no formal caucus, nevertheless has strong feelings about the necessity and reasoning for the split.

On the surface, the issues look cut and clear. At the November 10 meeting two opposing position papers were debated. One, drafted by Cavalier, was signed by the Miscellaneous Workers Union (FMWU) and represented the ideas of Faulkner - primarily to reform radically the constitution of the Steering Committee by abolishing the ‘feudal’ zoning system, replacing it with a much wider representative body called the Left Delegates Committee (LDC).

This meant the LDC would be open to all leftwing delegates elected from the branches, electorate councils and unions to the NSW ALP state conference. Faulkner argued this would allow three times as many party activists to participate in the Left’s main decision-making forum.

For the trade unionists in the Steering Committee, Faulkner’s proposals challenged their existing influence and attacked trade union representation in the ALP Left. George Campbell, while publicly calling for unity between the opposing groups, has clearly stated that the Socialist Left will be the major left group.

The second paper, put forward by AMWU assistant state secretary Doug Cameron, proposed to retain the existing Steering Committee zoning system which allows equal numbers of branch members and unionists, plus an 18-member executive. This was passed in principle and the newly-drafted constitution includes changes decided after the losers left the meeting - increasing union representation from 40% to 50%, proportional representation for elections and changing the name from Steering Committee to Socialist Left.

Anthony Albanese, assistant general secretary of the NSW ALP and a leading figure in the renamed Socialist Left, considers the split mainly a numbers struggle between two long-opposed groups within the NSW Left. “Despite all the rhetoric, this is about power and position, not about ideology, and it shows quite different attitudes to the trade union movement.”

Albanese defends the increased union share on the Socialist Left, arguing that it reflects more fairly the 60%/40% trade union/branch delegate grouping at the state conference. No matter that most of the unions support the ALP Right, because the long-term strategy of the Socialist Left is to work for leftwing control of the trade union movement.

The emphasis on increased trade union involvement in the socialist Left is beginning to show results. Since November at least three ‘uninvolved’ unions in NSW have made advances to join.

This approach is an anathema to the Labor Left which considers the major role of the Left to fight rightwing domination in the ALP using the Steering Committee as the means to that end. For Rodney Cavalier, the ALP Left has no separate means of existence other than as a faction of the Labor Party. “The tragedy of the former Steering Committee was it had a structure that failed to recognise the central role of conference delegates
and ultimately treated them with contempt.”

Faulkner admits that redefining the Left caucus to include only elected delegates to the state conference automatically disadvantages Left supporters in Right-controlled branches, some already dominant in the Steering Committee. Not only are they unlikely to be elected to the state conference, they would not be entitled to vote for positions and policy in the main Left decision-making forum. Faulkner argues this would result in renewed leftwing activism in these branches.

It is common knowledge that support for the ALP Left has been steadily diminishing in recent years. Disenchantment with the organisation and the divisive nature of the Steering Committee have been cited as the major reasons. While reluctant to be named until the split becomes more formalised, one such defector claims the tensions between the two Left factions meant most debate was about a struggle for control leaving the real issues on the back burner. “Ideology has not been to the fore in public disputes because there isn’t one.”

Whatever happens next it seems clear the exposed breach in the former Steering Committee will not easily heal. For some, that is a good thing, and they cite the consistent failure of attempted patch-ups. As this article went to press the breakaway group had not met to decide whether to formalise the split, and the extent of support for the Labor Left position is still unclear.

Meanwhile, some major questions remain unanswered. For instance, the position of the powerful ALP Right in NSW on the Left split is untested. According to some, the October state conference means an unavoidable humiliation for the Left - and will see an historic split Left vote. The Right domination of the ALP in NSW is near 70% - and still rising.

That none of the Labor Left nominated for positions to the Socialist Left suggests an intention to stand alone, though both sides say reconciliation has not been ruled out. Attempts in late January/early February to negotiate a settlement and divide up the top executive positions failed. There are indications that a compromise solution is still sought with initiatives from the uncommitted Building Workers Industrial Union fronted by acting state president Andrew Ferguson, brother of Martin. In the meantime it appears a sigh of relief at the finality of the split is being breathed by the star players on both sides.

Clare Curran

No island paradise

Since militant actions against the Bougainville Copper mineowners began 14 months ago, at least 60 people (both civilian and military) have been killed, more than 4,000 Bougainvilleanrs have been interned in ‘care centres’, and more than 1,500 detained for questioning. Some of those deaths occurred while in police custody, contributing to the level of fear on the island.

According to reports from the Catholic Bishop of Bougainville, Gregory Singki, 3,000 people have fled into the jungle as a result of raids by the army or riot squads.

The mine has closed, depleting the PNG government’s revenue by 40% and forcing the government to cut $A140 million from its budget. Bougainville has a certain amount of autonomy as a province within the PNG structure, but still depends upon financial support from the central PNG government.

In 1988 Francis Ona, leader of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, demanded $A13.7 billion in compensation from the mining company. (A 1974 agreement between the mine and the landowners gave the landowners 1.25% royalties. This was supposed to be renegotiated in 1981, but wasn’t.)

Ona has not only demanded compensation, but also expressed his deep concern over the environmental and social effects of the mine.

Bougainvilleanrs ethnically belong to the Solomon Islands, but nineteenth century colonialism destroyed this natural bond. The copper mine and its mining town were dominated by Papua New Guineans. A kidnapping, followed by an invasion?

The fact that Bougainvilleanrs have a matrilineal structure where land is passed on from mother to daughter has received little attention in this present stage of the struggle; but then, the original agreements in the sixties and seventies on royalties were carried out with the men of Bougainville.

But the crisis has taken on much broader, more tragic dimensions. At this stage the PNG government seems to be seeking a military solution to the crisis, declaring a state of emergency last June and with more than 1,500 troops on the island; and has called upon the Australian government to provide more military aid.

Last month the PNG cabinet approved an increase in its defence forces to 5,200 over the next four years, with the pressures on troops on Bougainville.

This year Australia provided $41 million and the 1990-91 amount will be boosted to $53 million, an increase of almost 30%. Helicopters, provided by Australia with the assurance that they would not be used as gunships, are reportedly being used as such.

Faced with an increasing economic crisis, the government’s militaristic stance combined with allegations of human rights abuses by security forces on the island does not augur well for a peaceful solution to the problem.

Jane Inglis