Greening Medicine

Most people still consider alternative therapies to contemporary western medical treatments as their last resort. They have been shunted from specialist to specialist, run the gamut of tests, been operated on or prescribed a course of drugs, but they are still in pain or beleaguered by illness. The state of their bodies not their minds leads them to the naturopath’s door, the osteopath’s surgery, the masseuse’s or the acupuncturist’s table.

And often they come in for the quick fix. Their faces fall when they hear that it requires more than a couple of treatments to buffer (not necessarily cure) the body against years of abuse or the generally deleterious effects of prolonged, if not severe, ill-health. And they may be asked to consider the harmful effects of their lifestyle.

In the last few years, however, there has been a subtle shift in the general public’s perception of these ‘alternatives’. Like the environment, our bodies are seen to need more protection. Instead of meeting health crises - heart attack, high blood pressure, kidney failure, liver disease, cancer - with higher and higher technology, we are looking at how to prevent them from occurring in the first place. The concept of prevention is greening medicine.

General attitudes to diet, for example, have almost been revolutionised. These days, any food advertising worth its salt will claim its product is ‘natural’. ‘No preservatives’ and ‘no artificial flavouring’ are also writ large. The sugar industry is cashing in its crop with a series of ads set to convince us it's as natural as... sunshine. Not surprisingly, these advertisers do not point out that the snakes infesting sugar cane fields, plants like the deadly nightshades, or diseases like syphilis are also natural. No Nature, like greed, is good.

Of course it’s not only big business that simplifies and romanticises this thing called Nature. Many practitioners themselves are just as culpable, if not necessarily as cynical. They are well placed within that European tradition of thought which deifies Nature as both pure and artless, complemented by a yearning for the simpler values of a supposed past when culture was not so alienated from its natural base. Nature is therefore perceived as a haven from an over-sophisticated and increasingly decadent civilisation (read science).

Science, in both medicine and industry, has unfortunately done quite enough to deserve this demonic character, as well as fattening itself on the privileges accorded it by twentieth century western society. Gone are the glorious days of discovering penicillin: instead, thalidomide has grabbed the public imagination. In this context, it is easy to see why so many equate natural with safe. In doing so, however, they fail to consider that herbs can also produce their own ill-effects if not properly prescribed. Effective treatment from a herbalist requires skill. It is not magic. Meanwhile, health food shops and clinics providing ‘natural’ treatments are popping up faster than mushrooms in the forest of high technology. Some are making a considerable profit.

While this mythology of the natural is sustained, both inside and outside the industry, little progress or development within these alternative sciences will eventuate. There is a tendency among the practitioners of what’s known as Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) - which includes the use of herbs, acupuncture and massage - to revere tradition at the expense of change (a problem not uncommon to other modalities as well), and East in defiance of West. But there are also practitioners and researchers who are working with what they recognise to be an exciting but limited, often self-contradictory, set of precepts.

These internal contradictions result from additions and alterations over thousands of years as well as the various social and political views which inform TCM theory. Describing the body’s workings as an analogue of an emperor state is loaded. Yet that is precisely one image of the body at work in TCM. Literally, the body politic. Knowing that helps to inform the parameters for contemporary research, and helps researchers to reap the benefits of discoveries or insights from another culture, discipline or time without being tied to them. And without losing the benefits of ‘modern science’.

It is also important to recognise that the alternatives are not a coherent body of philosophy or practice: not as ‘holistic’ as the body they all supposedly contemplate. (Holistic medicine views the body as a whole rather than as the sum of its parts, which is generally perceived by holistic practitioners to be the downfall of the highly specialised practices of twentieth century western medicine.) They come from a wide variety of traditions, both European and Asian. Some are as old as the hills, others are recent innovations. Any genuine assessment of their relative worth needs to be made on an individual basis, now that the general challenge to western medicine has been made and broad similarities noted.

Still the hype continues, and ultimately it is damaging. Perhaps faith has always been supremely marketable, and it could be that society in general is looking for a new faith, something to replace the science that can no longer so confidently claim to have the answers for everything.

There is another way to look at it, however, suggested by the strong interest shown by young and politicised women (as both users and practitioners) in these alternative sciences. Western medicine has certainly let women down, particularly in its high-handed approach to their sexuality. And not just in the individual surgeries of male doctors, but also in its theories of the female body and psyche. Another body politic.

Other perceptions of the body, as well as the equitable atmosphere in which they are often practised - something western medical practitioners could easily take a lesson in - do offer real alternatives.

Not the least of which means women being able to claim more control over their bodies and more responsibility for their health.

It is not that these alternatives have the answer (the problem of what’s natural is also here), but at the moment they certainly allow more room for negotiation.

Lyndell Fairleigh
Going Green, Buying Brown

Try as I might, I haven't quite fathomed the logic of the slogan printed on a brown paper bag in which were wrapped goods I recently bought from a health food shop: "Today's paper bag is tomorrow's tree - recycling for the future". But at least you can agree with the sentiment - and it marks the significant return of the brown paper bag, after years of being marginalised by plastic.

Paper bags aren't the only things going brown. It started in the 'seventies with rice, sugar, bread and pasta. In the health conscious aftermath of hippiedom, everything started turning brown. And although some of us have now lost interest in wholemeal croissants, and raw sugar has been a veritable scam, the interest in wholemeal croissants, and raw sugar has been a veritable scam, the significant return of the brown paper bag, after years of being marginalised by plastic.

It's been good preparation for the 'eighties. In the last year, with astonishing rapidity, shoppers have been targeted with one newly brown, unbleached product after another. Toilet paper, sanitary pads, stationary and even coffee filters, have all acquired what Sancella, manufacturers of sanitary pads and pantyliners, have described as a 'not unattractive manilla folder sort of color'.

The reason for all this is simple: dioxins. Dioxins are the waste-product of the chlorine bleaching process used in paper production. They're highly toxic, as anyone who followed the Wesley Vale pulp mill battle in Tasmania earlier this year will be aware. Unbleached paper products are easier on the environment and less hazardous to human health.

Accompanying the trend towards un-

Guides For a Green Decade

Most of the literature available for consumers on environmental issues has been published by consumer and environmental groups, but the Victorian government deserves a green medal for their environmental campaigning. The Environment Protection Authority has released a guide to recycling and domestic waste management, and publishes monthly Green Spot information bulletins to promote environmentally sound products and practices. It is available from the Bookshop Information Centre, Ministry for Planning & Environment, 477 Collins St Melbourne 3000, Ph. (03)628.5061.

101 Ways to Protect Our Environment, by Frank Ryan & Stephen Ray, published by The Victorian Ministry for Planning and Environment and The Victorian Association for Environmental Education - Easy to follow booklet aimed at kids and households, promoting ways to recycle, re-use and reduce waste.

Australian Non-Buyers Guide, available from PO Box 368 Lismore NSW 2480. An aid to ethical boycott shopping. Details what companies have involvement in nuclear industry, South Africa, etc.

It's Easy Being Green, by Rob Gell & Rosslyn Beeby, McCulloch Publishing, $12.95. Fairly detailed guide to environmental practices in homes, on the farm & in workplaces - for example energy efficient building.

Personal Action Guide for the Earth, published by the Commission For The Future, 1989, Available from the Australian Council for Overseas Aid, GPO Box 1562, Canberra, ACT, 2601. - short but comprehensive guide to environmentally friendly action, with useful contact list in the back and brief guide to further reading.

The Green Consumer Guide, John Elkington & Julia Hailes, with CHOICE magazine and the Australian Conservation Foundation, Penguin, $14.99. The most detailed guide available. Well researched and takes into account both environmental and social responsibility (ie. 40% of our orange juice is imported concentrate from Brazil, where deforestation is actually encouraged by the government). Includes a useful section on alternative holidays and gifts.
only a partial solution - environmentalists advocate a return to more permanent containers like shopping trolleys, re-usable glass bottles and BYO cup, plate and cutlery.

This is quite a lifestyle change and may well be resisted in a world now used to the convenience of throwaways. Nor is it as simple as it might appear. If we really did replace all plastic containers with glass or cardboard, that’s a lot of containers. It will still be a strain on resources. Can recycling, if fully implemented, cope with the sheer volume of our consumer goods? And it’s important that recycling processes be truly environmentally friendly and don’t use too much energy or generate noxious wastes.

There are plenty of difficult questions, but it is a less hazardous direction than the one we have been going in until now. And that will mean some unpalatable challenges for industries which make big bucks out of disposable items and packaging.

Ironically - but perhaps it indicates where the contradictions lie in the greening of industry - ‘friendly’ products like unbleached loo-paper are sometimes packaged in plastic. There are some green initiatives that the industries concerned will fight tooth and claw. A deposit legislation and recycling conference in Melbourne last September proposed the elimination of brand name bottles from the market place. You can imagine how Coca Cola would respond to that.

The lobbying campaign set in motion by that conference for deposit legislation and the reintroduction of milk bottles is typical of environmental organisations’ determination that government should shoulder responsibility for change. Being an environmentally friendly consumer is of little use if government isn’t keeping tabs on industrial practices, and actively promoting green objectives - from buying 100% recycled paper to enacting deposit legislation.

That said, if you place environmental friendliness alongside social responsibility, the political implications for industry of changing consumer patterns are undeniable. Progressive people have for years been putting their money where their mouth is and buying goods through alternative trade agencies like CAA Trading or Peacemeal Products and boycotting companies like Nestlé.

If you cast an eye over supermarket shelves you’ll realise just how little you know about almost everything you buy - batteries, tampons, popper-style drink containers, paint, dishwashing liquid - and it becomes rather frightening.

A plethora of booklets and guides aiming to answer such concerns are now being published on the subject of green consumerism and, while the advice may be useful though often fairly superficial, at heart their message is extremely radical: Question everything you buy - what are the raw materials, are they a non-renewable resource, does it contain possibly toxic compounds, how is it produced, what is the packaging made of and is it necessary, what happens to the product and the packaging when you throw it away, and - do you really need it?

Ultimately, there should be no consumer item that we need view with suspicion. And that will indeed be a radical change.

Jess Walker

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Curtains For Communism?

Nineteen-eighty began with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the birth, some months later, of Solidarity in Poland. The 'eighties have ended with the triumph of Solidarity and the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan.

In 1980, Brezhnev seemed at the peak of his power and his arrogance when he and a few cronies decided to invade Afghanistan. Today, Afghanistan is devastated, an estimated million are dead and many millions more maimed or are refugees. It was indeed the Soviet 'Vietnam' and the repercussions are still being felt.

When I spoke to Solidarity activists in Warsaw in 1981, some compromise between the reform wing of the communist party and Solidarity could have reversed the economic crisis which was bad, but not irreversible. Instead, under direct threat from Brezhnev of invasion, the rulers imposed martial law. Today, the Polish economy is near collapse, perhaps beyond redemption. It suffers from hyper-inflation on a scale reminiscent of Germany before the rise of Hitler. Today the US dollar is the only real currency in the country.

The crisis in the Soviet Union is only slightly less severe. Although its per capita international debt is not large, it requires 75% of Soviet hard currency earnings to service it. Unless something is done, and quickly, the USSR could soon slip into hyper-inflation, as the printing presses churn out even more paper roubles.

Glasnost has allowed the truth, or much of it, to emerge, yet die-hard bureaucrats still hold much power and are able to frustrate even the most pressing reforms.

The Soviet people today have lost their fear, but not their cynicism. Until they have some real, material and moral reasons to work, the system will continue to slide into chaos. Huge quantities of food rot through lack of transport and processing facilities, while the shops are empty. The Soviet Union would have no need to spend invaluable hard currency on food imports if so much of its own crop was not wasted. Yet huge sums are wasted on huge old-style stalinist constructions. The centralised bureaucracy is criminally inefficient to a degree beyond comprehension.

It should be no surprise that the frustrated anger of Soviet working people is being expressed through nationalism. Facing seemingly insurmountable problems, the easiest target is a local national minority or Moscow as the centre of power. The various republics and the regions within the huge Russian Federation desperately need economic autonomy, as well as cultural and national rights.
Is it the end of ‘communism as we know it’? Hopefully, because the communism inherited from Stalin and Brezhnev has never been more bankrupt. Hungary shows the way - the self-abolition of the ‘communist party’, carried to power by Khrushchev’s tanks, and now transformed into something between social democracy and a socialist party of a new type.

The other nations of eastern Europe and the USSR itself will have to follow the Hungarian example. Otherwise, a little down the track, they may well feel obliged to turn to the ‘Tiananmen option’ which East Germany’s Honecker was toying with prior to his recent sudden departure.

Many, including many communists, throughout the USSR and Eastern Europe now look to social democracy, particularly to the Swedish variety. But Sweden is clearly far from ideal, particularly given the large multinationals which dominate much of its economy. However, its social welfare system, the willingness of the State to intervene in decision-making, and its lively democratic framework with strong socially progressive institutions are all understandably attractive.

Few question that the Soviet and East European economies desperately need a strong dose of competition and private enterprise, with real prices and real money. They do not need huge multinational corporations bred from the centralised bureaucratic monopolies. The transition to this new sort of ‘mixed economy’ in which the socially-owned and co-operatively run enterprises will be much more powerful than in the West, but forced to compete on the market, will not be easy.

As Hungary and Yugoslavia have shown, half measures can also be disastrous. The state needs to develop new, indirect mechanisms for economic control after allowing the market to become the dominant force. Such indirect mechanisms are familiar to those in the West - control through taxation, incentives, legal sanctions, strategic state investment and import and foreign borrowing controls.

The implications for western socialists and communists is clear. Looking back on the ’eighties in Eastern Europe, the first half dominated by Brezhnev and his cronies, the second by an embattled Gorbachev, one can be confident that whatever the nineties hold, even if a Brezhnev clone once more takes power in Moscow, the old system has most definitely entered its death agony.

If western socialism is not to enter its death agony too, much old dross in our heads must be cleaned out. That does not mean socialists must become social democrats, but rather ‘socialists of a new type’, working for a mixed economy in which the socially-owned, co-operatively run sector is dominant but under pressure from the private sector in a market economy.

Denis Freney
Book Wars

The recent Prices Surveillance Authority (PSA) Report on book prices in Australia seems to be the best news our free marketeers have had in quite a while. P P McGuinness in The Australian hailed it as "an excellent example of straightforward applied economic analysis", delighting in its attack on "the cosy deals of the British publishing trade".

The report recommends the establishment of a totally open market for books in Australia by abolishing the territorial copyright laws which have forced booksellers to buy overseas publications through local branches of the British publishers who hold the copyright in this country.

Supporters of the report are hailing it as a new dawn for the Australian book buyer. We are promised a flood of books from all over the world, at prices up to a third lower than we are paying now.

British publishers will no longer be able to exploit their monopoly. Because of competition they will not be able to continue charging more for their books here than they do in Britain, the US, or even Canada, and they will have to get books here, especially new releases, far more quickly than they do now.

Some of this is accurate. There are plenty of examples of publishers protected in their incompetence and greed by the shield of territorial copyright. We do have to wait an outrageous length of time for some new books, and do pay excessive prices for a lot of them.

The publishers and distributors responsible deserve to have a bomb put under them. The PSA recommendations could have effects far beyond that, however. Like most of the deregulation we have seen in recent years, the costs could substantially outweigh the benefits.

Book prices in Australia would come down if there were open competition between British and American publishers trying to sell different editions of the same book. But that is not the direction in which the publishing industry is going.

There has been a spate of takeovers and mergers in the last decade with the rapid emergence of huge international publishing houses, often linked to major media empires. These corporations are geared to produce what has been called the 'world book', which they can sell under different imprints in different parts of the English-speaking world. In the industry which is emerging there will not be any difference in ownership of British or US rights, at least on major publications.

Penguin Australia, for example, might choose to sell either the British or American edition here, but there will be no company marketing the alternative, so what will set the price?

The PSA describes the present situation: "Books are priced according to what consumers will pay. In Australia, the market will pay highly and books are priced accordingly."

Deregulation will not change this. There will be skirmishes for a while, till the major publishers settle on who is going to market which edition when there is a difference in ownership between British and American rights. But, in the long run, new Penguins, or Picadors, or whatever US imprints become common here, will be priced within a dollar or so of each other. And they will still be well above the comparable British or American prices.

Individual bookshops will be able to buy other editions direct from overseas, but will have to do so through wholesalers. They are unlikely to be able to sell substantially cheaper, especially on major titles.

There would be a price difference on shorter print-run titles, where the US price is usually much lower. The advantage to the Australian reader might not be what it seems, though.

One of the real dangers of the open market is that publishers operating in Australia will stop promoting or even stocking such titles since they cannot guarantee that bookshops will buy through them rather than import directly.

This would apply in particular to most progressive publications. The only shops through which they would be readily available would be those involved in direct importation. Smaller independent bookshops, even if they want to carry a reasonable range of books on social and political issues, or even good contemporary fiction, would find it extremely difficult to obtain anything other than the latest Stephen King or Virginia Andrews.

Most probably lack the capital to buy directly from overseas and would be under considerable pressure to transform themselves into newsagency-style outlets for the limited range of 'big' books readily available through Australian suppliers. That is a serious threat to the diversity of ideas and information available to Australian readers.

The big university and college bookshops, along with some specialist booksellers, have been the most vocal in support of the PSA recommendations. Surveys of the membership of the Australian Booksellers Association, which is largely composed of smaller independent booksellers, show a different feeling. Most support careful reform of the existing system. There is a deep suspicion that deregulation will not benefit them or their customers.

The open market is also a threat to Australian authors. The PSA is apparently confident that its recommendations would have little effect, but local publishers have pointed out that there would be no incentive to publish Australian fiction. It is only when authors reach the prominence of Elizabeth Jolley or Peter Carey that their books sell well enough to be profitable, and by then there are overseas editions of their books which could be imported to undercut the local publisher.

There is considerable pressure on the federal government to adopt the PSA recommendations. Rupert Murdoch's buying spree at home and abroad in recent years has given News Limited control of perhaps a third of the turnover of the Australian book trade, and his companies are geared up for the new world of book selling. The danger is that this new world may see books marketed in the same way as cans of dog food, with about the same regard for the quality of what is contained in the wrapping.

Ken Norling
A Deaf Ear

On a cold winter's afternoon at the University of Western Sydney, Kingswood, the Leader of the NSW Opposition, Bob Carr, met the young people of NSW. The meeting was designed to make sure that "the breadth and depth of knowledge and experience in the community" reached the ALP; to go to the next state election with a Youth Policy "relevant to existing and future needs". Or so the preceding publicity hype had claimed.

The event was part of a program initiated by Labor to assist it in developing the sort of policies that could see it returned to government in NSW. Almost a year after the disastrous defeat of the Unsworth government in March 1988, Bob Carr's revamped opposition had launched the campaign to take the ALP back to an electorate which had shunned it, and cut a swathe through its parliamentary ranks.

The campaign, "Labor Listens", was to develop consultative mechanisms to allow the NSW Labor Party to create a more relevant and electorally viable policy platform. This campaign was based on the recognition that the current structure of the party does little to allow real input into policy development. "Labor Listens" was seen as a chance to polish up an image tarnished by the all too frequent indiscretions of officers of the NSW branch. It also feeds into the process of self-appraisal of the party begun with the establishment of an internal Commission of Review after the 1988 election defeat.

Yet, from the conduct of the initial stages of this process, it would appear that little has been done to encourage the party to "listen" to its own members, let alone the rest of the community. The Kingswood encounter seemed designed merely to enable Carr and other members of the Opposition front bench to present the party's existing priorities on youth policy in the run-up to the next state election. None of the principal participants in the forum was actually present when workshops reported back to the group as a whole - presumably the time when the issues young people felt important would be raised.

The ALP in New South Wales appears to have taken little heed, and learned less, from the experience of a similar review process undertaken by the British Labour Party over the last eighteen months. The British "Labour Listens" campaign, launched by party leader Neil Kinnock in early 1988, provides a poignant example of the potential pitfalls associated with a review process which remains remote from the party's rank and file.

In many respects both "Labour Listens" and the concomitant Policy Review were authentic attempts to confront the reality of the British Labour Party's disastrous defeats at the hands of Margaret Thatcher. The Labour Party in Britain has spent more than ten years in the political wilderness. The 1983 poll of 27.6% was the worst since 1931. Britain's "Labour Listens" was designed to inform the Policy Review and to turn the party outwards from talking among itself to talking to the general community.

Criticism of the process from within the party was almost immediate, and ranged from those who saw the whole review as a managed consultation with a predetermined agenda, to those who viewed it as a vehicle for the wholesale
revision of the party into a sort of pale pink version of the SDP. Groupings within the party, most notably that section of the Left identified with Tony Benn, opted out of the whole review process altogether.

Perhaps more constructive analysis of the "Labour Listens" campaign came from the New Statesman & Society which concluded that "the Labour Listens campaign and policy review are now being pressed into service to the same end - to keep active members of the party quiet while crucial decisions are being made in their name".

Still, it remains important to be sympathetic to the British experience in order to prevent the ALP from becoming bogged in the same political potholes. For the Commission of Review or "Labor Listens" to be effective they must be taken seriously by the powers that be in the ALP - they must involve real consultation with party members and the community, and a real commitment to implement the radical machinery and policy changes that both these groups are clearly calling for. It is unfortunate and disheartening that this would not appear to be the case.

The prevailing attitude towards the Commission of Review exemplifies the misguided arrogance for which the Right 'machine' has become renowned. Most political organisations would take it as self-evident that a regular medium for information and discussion is imperative in maintaining communication among party members. Unfortunately, in the last few years the ALP in NSW has had no regular journal, and those which it has produced (such as the inappropriately entitled The Radical) were clearly lessons in how not to organise a political publication. The revamped Labor Times, a monthly journal arising out of the Commission of Review's recognition of the need for a comprehensive program of communication, will hopefully fill that gap.

But the final report of the Commission of Review also fails to address adequately the serious question of party membership. No mention is made of the quite alarming decline in membership which has occurred in recent years, and the reasons behind it.

The Commission of Review begrudgingly acknowledges the fact that at both federal and state level Labor governments perennially ignore the party's established policy and suffer significant electoral difficulties as a consequence. The committee's final report does make constructive suggestions regarding policy development, but fails to tackle this crucial issue.

Other omissions from the report are equally surprising. The Commission of Review makes absolutely no mention of young people in the ALP, or of the need to review the structure of its youth wing, the Young Labor Council. Yet, almost immediately after the ALP State Conference in June this year - before any of the initiatives of the Commission of Review were adopted - the Administrative Committee of the NSW branch set in train radical changes to the structure of the Young Labor Council. The ALP in NSW, it seems, is more interested in ousting the often critical Young Labor, and thus jeopardising the already precarious youth support for the party, than attracting more support from young people.

If Labor is to regain government in NSW, the complacency of the head office 'machine' will have to be addressed. Allegations of impropriety have already been responsible for the development of a public perception that the NSW branch of the ALP is both corrupt and inept, and make processes like the Commission of Review and "Labor Listens" all the more imperative.

Let's hope the Labor Party can approach the Review, if not with open arms, then at least with open ears.

Michael Dwyer.