THOROUGHLY

Modern

LABOR

It's fashionable to describe Labor's policies as a betrayal of past values: end of argument. But how does the government measure up against other social democratic regimes in the West? And why is it that Labor's new face seems to have marginalised its left critics? David Burchell ruminates.

In everyday discussion, as well as in the world of declarations and resolutions, it seems no exaggeration to say that the prime topic for discussion on the left over the last five years has been the nature of the federal ALP government. This makes it particularly surprising that so little of consequence appears to have been said about what, in the light of the common air of dismay over the direction of the government, exactly defines the new face of Labor in the 'eighties.

For some on the left, the ritual invocation of the world "betrayal" still suffices to explain the whole contemporary history of the ALP in government: an ironic fact, given that in the worldview of the ultra-left, the ALP is hardly thought to have ever embraced the ideals it is now accused of betraying. Yet even on the mainstream left, both inside and outside the ALP, anger seems to have largely substituted for analysis. And the role of the left as at least self-perceived by popular critics of federal Labor has not been aided by a blanket critique of Labor's entire program which insists at one point on the priority of the maintenance of real wages, at another on the plight of society's underclass, and at another again on the structure of manufacturing.

Add other concerns like the taxation system, tax cuts and, indeed, the public sector, and one has a pretty total rejection of the politics of Labor, 1980s-style. What one does not have, however, is an alternative which recognises the importance of priorities and the necessity of limited gains, and which also recognises that certain undoubtedly progressive objectives — such as real wage rises and lowered unemployment levels — are often, in the everyday reality of the capitalist economy, divergent or even contradictory aims.

If we wish to take a more sober look at what precisely Labor is and has come to stand for over the 1980s, there are several features worth considering — and none of them requires a rhetoric of "betrayal". An obvious one is the comparison with Labor's past, both in myth and in reality. How has Labor changed from the party of Curtin and Chifley; or, indeed (a less frequent comparison), of Scullin and Lang? What, if anything, is meant by the invocation of Labor's "traditional values" and voters? Another is the comparison with other labour and social democratic parties. How does Labor's evolution square with the fate of the reforming project and welfare states worldwide?

Again, what is the actual pattern of Labor's changing social support over the last twenty years, and what does this have to say both about its political character and its electoral successes and failures? And again, what is the nature of its political and ideological changes over the 'seventies and 'eighties, and particularly over the last five years? Is the party of Hawke and Keating really a "labour" party at all? What are we to make of "WA Inc" and its amazing alliances? Has Labor actually hijacked part of the New Right agenda?
Obviously there is no space in a brief survey like this to address questions like these in any depth. Yet it is certainly here, rather than in a generalised sense of outrage, that some of the keys to the puzzle of contemporary Labor are to be found.

Michael Dukakis spent much of the 1988 election time denying his palatable "liberal" credentials. Union membership in the USA will soon fall below 20 percent of the paid labour force; while consistently large pools of white blue-collar workers, once a backbone of the Democrats, have become enthusiastic Reaganites (and post-Reaganites).

As far as the more radical left parties are concerned, of course, the 'eighties have marked a nadir in post-war politics. The French Communist Party, once the country's largest party, has been reduced to little more than ten percent of the vote; the Spanish party has been almost annihilated; even the Italian party has suffered serious and possibly irrecoverable losses. The 'eighties has seen the virtual dissolution of what was once called the world communist movement.

In other places, however, the record of the 'eighties has been much more mixed. At the end of the decade the French Socialists seem to have fashioned a centre-left majority capable of withstanding, for the present, the swinging gales of French political life. The Spanish and Greek Socialists likewise have fashioned durable majorities around quite modest political objectives and highly volatile political bases often quite removed from their labour movements. And in Scandinavia a much more combative social democracy has held the line, even if the Swedish SAP, rather like the PCI, seems to have lost its momentum.

In between are important countries where the 'eighties have seen less change in the national political scheme than within the left itself. In West Germany a moderate conservatism nationally has masked a more aggressive Social Democratic Party spurred on by the Green threat (although the Greens themselves have more recently been on the wane). In Japan, as generally speaking in Italy, the post-war centrist compromise has continued relatively unaffected by the icy winds of the New Right elsewhere.

From the foregoing we can make one or two observations.

Where the left, or at least social democracy, has held the line or even flourished in the 'eighties, at least two ingredients have been present. First, it has flourished in most cases by virtue of new additions to its electoral base, rather than by stabilising that base itself. In 1987, British Labour painstakingly recovered much of its ground in its traditional constituencies; skilled and unskilled blue collar workers, and the unemployed. Yet its overall advance was insignificant. In the words of one commentator: "Labour has emerged stronger and more consolidated in a base which is too small to win from". Partly this was because of social trends in the electorate which are common worldwide, such as growth in the tertiary sector and white collar work generally. Partly it registered a geographical ghettoisation of British Labour within the declining regions of the country. Yet it also reflected new alignments within social classes more broadly: home owners versus tenants; those in growth industries versus those in declining ones; and a growing rift in social values between those nostalgic for an imagined secure past, and those on the fringes of society with less room for nostalgia.

The French Socialists, on the other hand, whatever their political shortcomings, have adopted a much more diverse electorate including prominently such disparate groups as professional workers, white collar workers, and those in the public sector; it is the PCF which has been reduced to a rump around the trade union movement. The same could be said of Spain and, to some extent, of Greece. This is not to say, of course, that social democratic parties can simply "exchange" one electorate for another; still less that the traditional base of social democratic parties in the ranks of organised labour has suddenly become irrelevant. Rather, success has tended to come where parties have yoked together very different social groups into political majorities around certain political projects or catcheries. (In Australia, this was the achievement of the Whitlam years in the ALP; obscured
though that may have been since by its unhappy denouement.)

The second factor is that where social democracy has appealed with success in the 'eighties, it has been less through an appeal to the old post-war welfare state compromise and more through carrying aloft the banner of modernity. Now, it may seem odd to raise an idea like modernity when much of the fashionable talk in the academy is of its demise. In using the words, I don’t mean it as a gloss on modernism — to be followed by “postmodernism”, or anything else. Rather, I mean to evoke the whole sense of “newness” of the era, from new forms of technology and new types and styles of industry, to new forms of culture and leisure: the kind of thing referred to by Stuart Hall in the last issue of ALR as “post-Fordism”. Most concretely, however, this sense of modernity, or modernisation, reveals itself in the political world as the vast contemporary economic changes worldwide which are shifting the weight of whole economies, and producing new alliances and new crises in the international field. From the decline in traditional manufacturing to the problem of international debt, to the internationalisation of national economies and the new world of international finance, the command of this sense of modernity has been the challenge of the social democratic parties.

For the most part they have responded by a technocratic appeal to the new sectors of the economy, at the expense of the old — as in France and Spain, and as with the Italian Socialists in their new centrist guise. Yet one thing is clear: where labour movements and parties have found themselves defending the old economic order alone, and being associated with the economy of the past, as in the UK, the result has been disaster.

It is not too much to say that this has been Paul Keating’s great achievement for the ALP — if achievement it is — in world terms: to win the mantle of modernisation for Labor. And indeed the antipodean labour parties have been in the forefront of this quest for a social democratic variant of modernity, in their usual nonideological style. This has been Australian Labor’s great vision in the ‘eighties: a solution to the economic problem of the day — the balance of payments — coupled with a vision for the modernisation of the economy proper. Of course, as we all know, the tools with which this vision has been carried out have often been those of orthodox conservatism. And the vision of a new, more competitive economy has not been accompanied by interventionist industry policies or financial policies. Yet the banner of “the new way” in 1989 certainly does have a Labor hue. When WA Premier Peter Dowding chose to define the recent election campaign as a choice between the future and the past, it was not merely the ghost of Brian Burke he was exorcising.

Where, on the other hand, Labor has willingly associated itself with the imagined past — with “traditional Labor values”, as the phrase goes — it has been a liability.
and it has signalled a conservative
turn on social issues. Take, for
instance, the construction placed
upon the concept by then-premier
Unsworth’s “back to basics” turn in
the last desperate moments of the ill-
fated NSW Labor government early
last year. And here the present
author’s analysis shortly after the
event still holds some interest:

The ALP’s loss of “traditional Labor
voters” during the election campaign
has been the leitmotif of media interpretation
of the election defeat in NSW. Like its
sister concept, “traditional Labor values”; it tends to work best as a solution
when it remains largely undefined.
But former premier Barrie Unsworth had
no doubt what it meant. His “back to
basics” theme in the campaign was a
concerted attempt to recover the social
and moral conservatism of “traditional
Labor” of the ‘fifties and earlier (or at
least what it was felt to have been).
Ironically, Labor’s “back to basics” rhetoric may reap a more conservative
moral agenda than even Mr Unsworth
was prepared to deal with.3

Lest it be thought that this was a
peculiarly antipodean (or even New
South Welsh) political phenomenon,
the following analysis by Stuart Hall
of British Labour’s 1987 election
campaign makes for an interesting
comparison.

In the weeks before the election, the
leadership cast its vote unflinchingly for
the “traditional image, in search of the
“traditional Labour voter” ... Everyone
understood that this was a code. It is a
code for “back to the respectable, moderate, trade unionist, male-
dominated working class”. Mr Kinnock
appeared as a manly “likely lad” who
owed everything to the welfare state. His
“familial” image carried not a single echo
or trace of feminist struggles over two
decades. The investment in “strong
leadership” and “ordinariness” carried
its own message. It signalled the
distancing of Labor from all those
“fringe issues” and a commitment to
routing labour political loyalties
exclusively through an identification
with the traditional culture of the left.4

Yet after the NSW election
debacle and, indeed, throughout
Labor’s troubles in 1988, the left in
Australia took up the “traditional Labor values” argument hook, line
and sinker. In doing so it allowed
itself to be cornered into its
acustomed role, not just as
“custodian of the national
conscience”, but as a representative
of the imagined values of the past.
Indeed, while Labor has been eager
for the laurels of modernisation, part
of the record of the last five years is of
the left’s willing assumption of the
mantle of the past, “traditional
Labor values” and all.

Paul Keating’s great
achievement — to win the
mantle of modernisation for Labor

No one on the left in 1983 could
reasonably have expected great
things in the social sphere from this
government. It came to power in the
atmosphere of considerable political
timidity: it very quickly retreated (as,
for instance, the French socialists
also retreated) from its early
“Keynesian” phase to more orthodox
conservative responses to Australia’s
serious economic malaise; it has not
challenged in any significant respect
the dominant wisdoms in
economic policy since. Yet within the
limited options exhibited by other
social-democratic parties around the
world, it has played its cards pretty
well. It has pursued the extension of
its political base — and not simply by
ignoring its “traditional” base, as the
compact with the ACTU is intended
to symbolise. And it has garnered the
fruits of a rhetoric and practice of
modernisation, in the process
denying the Thatcherite “The Future
is Conservative” option to the
opposition.

The fact that it has achieved
these aims without seriously
challenging the conservative “set” of
political and economic debate should
definitely not be misconstrued. Rather, it should
suggest the direction in which the left
both within and without the ALP
needs to go if it is to play a more
dynamic, combative role in
Australian political life, and avoid
total marginalisation in the field of
political debate.

And a key element in that
direction should be a rejection of the
politics of nostalgia, whether in its
right or leftwing versions. As David
McKnight argues above, there is probably a good deal of mileage for
the Liberals in a revivalist social
conservatism rather than the parched
terrain of economic liberalism where
the opposition has hitherto pitched
its tents. There is definitely no
mileage in a political nostalgia of the
left, whether it be disguised in the
terms of the Keynesian social and
economic compromise of the ’fifties
and ’sixties, or in a rather spurious
claim to the “traditional Labor
values” Labor is now supposed to
have betrayed.

Rather, the left has to resume its
own bout of perestroika, too long
delayed by the alibi of outrage over
Labor’s new face. It needs to
champion a sense of the future which
can engage on the terrain of
economic reconstruction and
renewal, in the debates around
Australia Reconstructed, over skills
formation, multiskilling, industry
restructuring and the like. And it also
needs a vision of Australian society
and its political concerns and values
which can take into account some of
the massive social changes of the last
twenty years and more, and which
doesn’t fall back on a misguided and
nostalgic view of the concerns of
“traditional Labor voters”. Perhaps
then it may at last be possible to
challenge with more confidence the
conservative fashion in political
debate which the federal
government’s characteristic
reactiveness and lack of campaigning
has so far failed to contest.

NOTES
1. Goran Therborn, “Prospects of Labor”,
2. Doreen Massey, “Heartlands of Defeat”,
3. “Now It’s Really Back to Basics”,

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ordinator.