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.

Perhaps the most tantalising suggestion concerning the new face of Labor in the 'eighties lies on the terrain of the international comparison. Surveying the state of the left worldwide a few years ago, the Swedish social scientist Goran Therborn contrasted the prevailing atmosphere of defeat and gloom with what he saw as the solid growth of labor movements and parties over the preceding decade. He asked by what paradox was it that the left seemed more on the defensive worldwide than in living memory when many of the trends in advanced capitalist democracies at least (entrenched welfare states, growing trade union movements, expanding bodies of waged public sector employees) seemed to be in the left's favour.

While Therborn's relative optimism may already seem an anachronism, the question is still a valid one. And it is worthwhile noting that the worldwide picture of advance and setback for social democratic and left parties has some interesting patterns in terms of the evolution of Australian Labor.

In some countries, of course, the 1980s has been an unqualified disaster area. In the UK there have been three elections since 1979; each has seen Labour record a lower percentage of votes cast than any since the catastrophic election of 1931, over half a century ago. In the 1983 elections fewer than forty percent of trade union members actually voted Labour, and less than half of the unemployed. Nor at present does there appear any serious signs of revival despite a more unified party and a (relatively) more popular leadership. In the US, of course, even mildly progressive politics now seems off-limits come presidential election time: the Democratic Party, under three successively more moderate presidential contenders has lost by record margins each time.

Michael Dukakis spent much of the 1988 election time denying his palpable "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 sphere 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
Nostalgia for the 'traditional' ALP: the ABC TV series True Believers.

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 of feminism struggles over twenty years and more, and which the massive social changes of the last 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 accustomed 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 not surprise us. 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


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