Distant Fields


The debate about the way in which the left can renew its vitality and relevance in Australian politics is vigorous and continuing. In all of the various initiatives now begun — from the Charter Process to the Rainbow Alliance, to the various on-running debates within the leftwing parties — the phenomenon of the Green upsurge in Europe provides a challenge.

What are its implications for Australia? This is a burning question. However, before we can address it we need a clear-headed analysis of the phenomenon itself. It is in Werner Hulsberg's new book, The German Greens: A Social and Political Profile, that, at least for the case of West Germany, the first sober, politically sophisticated, and constructive response to this need appears.

Much of the book's strength lies in its examination of the specific character of the German Greens as a social movement. Hulsberg is rigorous in his insistence that this phenomenon can only be understood in its specific historical and political context. As he stresses:

The development of the Greens in West Germany did not begin with the formation of the Green Party. This is why the attempt by various clever people to import the West German model into their own country has failed so miserably.

Certainly, the danger of assuming that one thing in Germany means the same elsewhere is very clear. For example, in Germany, the attempt to form the Green Party (Die Grünen) almost failed because the Rainbow group took exception to the inclusion of a clause proscribing members of existing political parties. In Australia, the Rainbow Alliance is, in fact, the only initiative to enforce such a clause.

But while the specific context of the German phenomenon does differ in some striking respects, the similarities with the Australian political situation also strike some haunting chords. The hopes of much of the labour movement in post-war Germany lay in a thoroughgoing economic reform based on co-determination, self-management, the socialisation of key industries, a much greater role for the trade unions, extensive democratisation and a halt to German rearmament. As Hulsberg stresses, these hopes were not realised because of the integration of West Germany into the global policy of the West. Rather, the left faced "the tragedy of the integration of the West German working class into the capitalist system and the loss of its political strength". Despite some specifically German emphases, this does not seem so far from a description of what has happened in Australia.

In Germany the official organs of the labour movement were perhaps particularly slow to modify their uncritical support for technological progress, economic growth, and jobs at any price. However, while the labour movement extolled the virtues of the technological and economic fix, public opinion was swinging rapidly against traditional German values of obedience, subordination, order and hard work. In particular, as Hulsberg notes, since the middle of the 1960s the percentage of West German citizens who believed that technology is "a blessing" for humanity sank from 72 (in the 1960s) to 30 percent (in 1981), with decisive rejection of technology as "a curse" growing from three to thirteen percent in the same period.

It was in this period, also, that the phenomenon of the Greens flowered. Of course, it did not begin with the formation of the Green Party, but developed out of a process beginning much earlier. In the 1960s, Germany saw the mushrooming of thousands of citizen initiatives arising partly in reaction to the perceived failures of the labour movement and the increasingly doctrinaire leftwing sects to face a whole range of emerging problems. These initiatives coalesced around a more structural analysis in the early 1970s and, in particular, around opposition to nuclear power in the mid and late 1970s. Out of this there developed a resurgent opposition to nuclear weapons. This consolidated into an extra-parliamentary opposition and, finally, into the opposition within the federal parliament represented by the Green Party, and with some 5-7,000 elected representatives in local government.

Now the party oscillates within the agonising limits of the dilemma of having to be seen to be prepared to compromise and, at times, work with the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) in order not to lose out to it in the attraction of wayward SPD
supporters, on the one hand, and having to avoid being compromised that all sense of identity and purpose is lost, on the other.

What, then, is the political character of this Green Party? First, while it has its factions (polarising, for example, between the eco-socialists, eco-libertarians, the fundamentalists, and the real-politiks) it does maintain a unifying ethos of radicalism. First, its party organisation remains unconventional. More importantly, all currents share elements of a utopian vision of the future which involves a radical reshaping of the economic, technological and social order. There is also a common understanding that industrialisation is in crisis and that the current level of physical and social exploitation cannot continue for very long. Combined with this is the rhetoric of a politics based on a "new" ecological rationality. However, Hulsberg argues that this reflects the "old German romantic dream of a harmonious totality, but... ends up as a reactionary protest against disintegration, which swings back and forth between apocalyptic warnings and images of a mythological past". In any case, detailed analysis of what is actually a conglomerate of varied theoretical themes is perhaps diversionary. What matters is what these lead to in practice.

It is what is done now which, argues Hulsberg, is the most concrete test of the Greens' political character. Hulsberg uses this as a basis for intervening in the debate about "how red" are the Greens. In practice, he argues, the Greens take stands in the areas of traditional interest to the left, which are widely identified as being progressive in a leftwing sense. The Greens confront private ownership and the dominance of the free market, demand shorter working hours and different types of work, support union demands for a 35-hour week, support self-determination struggles in South Africa, Central America, and the South Pacific; struggle for the rights of national minorities in Germany; and against sexual oppression and the heavy-handed social control policies of the German state.

Thus the Greens combine traditional socialist concerns with a contemporary focus on the ecological crisis. This is no accident, argues Hulsberg: it is only when the new issues are related to the old social questions that a political dynamic and potential is created. The actual development of the Greens is a concrete proof of this. What does it all amount to? Hulsberg is clear in his assessment: "The Greens are an expression of the developing class struggle in Germany, a class struggle which is dominated principally by mass movements and directly political issues rather than by direct conflicts between capital and labour". Yet this conclusion may well be an overstatement. Yes, the Greens are producing a struggle which reacts against not only the effects, but also the social organisation of industrialised capitalism; but whether this is a "class struggle" is much less clear. The electoral base of the Greens remains generally middle and lower white collar, with a disproportionately high component of professionals. Recalling, in particular, the forcefully pro-nuclear policies and rallies of certain trade unions, the Greens remain keen to insulate themselves from the official organs of the labour movement and cut across the traditional class boundaries of German society.

Certainly, Hulsberg is right when he notes that the Green Party, as it exists now, is far from a purely ecological phenomenon. Indeed, he argues, those founders of the party who were not leftwing have now all left the party. And we can understand why Hulsberg chooses to conclude that:

The real contribution of the German Greens... is that they understood and grasped the ecological question not just as another question and not as a politically neutral task but rather as the decisive question, the acid test of leftwing politics.

Some will certainly question whether Hulsberg's apparent desire to place the Greens in an existing political box is particularly useful. Whether the Greens are to be described as fundamentally left with a new additional ecological extension, or something new but with a concern about economic and social exploitation, may seem a somewhat sterile debate. Yet, for those who consider themselves on the left, Hulsberg's conclusion that the Greens are closer to discovering in political practice what being "leftwing" should now mean, than the tradition representatives of the left, is not without challenge. Despite the many differences of the German context, that conclusion has challenging relevance for those who consider themselves on the left in Australia too.

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Petrov's Victims


Between the Lines traces the lives of four people innocently caught up in events reminiscent of 1984. Here, however, the characters and the events recalled are only too real. All that distinguished Dave and Bernice Morris from thousands of other Australians was their strong political convictions which amounted to a commitment to peace, justice, equity and political freedom. And it is these convictions and the desire to live them freely which became their undoing at a time when any shade of pink in one's political views was a source of suspicion.

The book is written in chronological order: from Bernice's young days in the bush in Victoria's isolated East Gippsland we follow her through her first conscious political awareness, her decision to join the Communist Party of
The Revolution Mislaid


Between October 1980 and March 1983, Raja Anwar found himself in Kabul's notorious Pulcharkhi prison. Before being released from this Afghan "lost luggage" facility, he was able to talk with the various factions of the Afghan revolution who populated the prison. The best place to write the inside story of the Afghan revolution was in its major prison, for that is where most of the revolution's sons and daughters ended up — if they were not executed.

Anwar is a Pakistani socialist, a former adviser on student affairs to Prime Minister Bhutto before the latter was overthrown and then executed by General Zia. He ended up a refugee in Kabul as an adviser to Bhutto's son. In time he fell out of favour with Karmal and his Soviet advisers and went to jail.

Anwar charts the basic outlines of the Afghan tragedy. The "revolution" in April 1978 was carried out by members of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) operating clandestinely inside the Afghan army and air force. The PDPA was composed of two bitterly warring factions — the Kalq and Parcham groups — which, within weeks, broke the fragile unity they had forged on Soviet insistence. The Parchamites, including Barbak Karmal, were sent into exile as ambassadors.

Then the Kalq faction split: Tariki was overthrown and finally killed by Amin. Amin, in turn, ruled for a brief three months, before being assassinated, Anwar claims, by Soviet troops when they "intervened" around Christmas 1979. All this occurred in a little over eighteen months. In that period, and after, the counter-revolutionary Mujaheddin managed to kill only three of the PDPA leaders — the inter-factional massacres accounted for many more.

The destruction of the Afghan revolution was undoubtedly, in large part, the responsibility of the Afghani revolutionaries themselves. While the PDPA proclaimed itself the vanguard of the working class, precious few workers were in its ranks, and none in its leadership. The working class itself was so small that it could only hope to hold power if it won support among the peasant masses. Yet the PDPA at the time of the revolution had no cells among the tribalised peasantry, nor did it have any serious analysis of the countryside where the vast majority of the people lived.

Anwar explains all this in agonising detail. Yet he does not hold that the revolution was doomed from the start. Due to the tribalised nature of Afghan society, the PDPA, which was by far the largest political party in the country (with the allegiance of the radical educated elite) was the only force that could have modernised this poorest of nations.

Thousands of the urbanised elite had been educated in the Soviet Union before the 1978 revolution,

Australia, and the years of struggle that followed the return of her husband from England where he spent some time during the war.

For many people the 1950s and 1960s were prosperous times, but for the Morris family it became a time of constant anxiety, years of struggle against a political life bent on ensuring the destruction of people with views opposed to those in power. The Morrices became the victims of years of conspiracy by ASIO which culminated in the Petrov affair in the mid-1950s. Although no charges were ever laid against Dave Morris or, for that matter, against anyone else facing the Royal Commission, the lives of the Morrices were shattered, their career prospects non-existent, their financial situation precarious.

In the late 1950s, desperate to find work, bitterly hurt by the injustice of what had happened, the whole family was on its way to China where they hoped to start their lives again in a better environment. Bernice vividly recalls her anguish at leaving her friends and family and disrupting her children's education, and the hopes she had when the final decision to leave was made.

The last chapter of the book deals with the ten or so years they spent in the USSR after, once again, their political views failed to coincide with the international political alliances of the day. No longer welcome in the country which had offered them refuge, the whole family once more started a "new life" in a totally foreign country. As the book unfolds its nightmarish sequences, one cannot help feeling the injustice and the waste of people's lives. Bernice's tone is devoid of bitterness and anger, and often suggests a sense of detachment from what happened so long ago.

The publication of Between the Lines could not have been more timely. When the whole country was gazing at its past from a very secure position, it was reassuring to pick up a book like this one which unashamedly speaks of a side of Australia which many people would conveniently like to tell us does not exist.
including a significant sector of the officer corps. Most had returned enamored of the Soviet way, imbued with the simplistic and elitist marxism espoused by the pre-Gorbachev ideologists.

In a society where tribalised social relations dominate the quasi-feudal economic relations, the PDPA leaders, Anwar argues, ignored the tribal overlay, seeing only a "classical" feudalism. They themselves, however, fell victim to those very tribalised relations. Regional allegiances determined inner factional loyalties within the party. Pushtunis became advocates of traditional Pushtu hegemony. Those from minority groups such as the Tadjiks pushed their own people's interests.

Yet their enemies were no less divided. Prior to December 1979, the Mujaheddin groups over the border in Pakistan were small, the support from the CIA and other reactionary forces relatively modest, and the military attacks, while troubling the regime, were no real threat to it.

Amin was always under threat — the blood feuds he had sown were festering away in the army. It was primarily for that reason that Amin asked for more Soviet troops in late November 1979: not to fight the guerrillas, but to garrison Kabul so that the Afghan army could be sent to the countryside to remove any chance of their staging a coup.

It was a fatal move, both for Amin and the revolution. Ten thousand Soviet troops arrived on December 23. On December 27, Amin was assassinated. Raja Anwar, drawing on conversations with Amin's widow and family, provides first-hand accounts of what happened.

On December 27, Amin and his wife had some close friends around for lunch. Amin was so fearful of assassination that he had installed Soviet cooks in his kitchen. As soon as they had finished, all those who had eaten fell unconscious. Amin's wife called Afghan doctors who gave antidotes and stomach wash.

A Soviet doctor was insistent that Amin should be taken to the hospital, but Afghan doctors opposed this, as Amin was showing good signs of recovery. Mrs Amin says the plan was to poison him, remove him to the Soviet hospital, give him treatment, then deliver him an ultimatum: resign in favor of Barbak Karmal — who had been flown in from exile by the Soviets — or face trial for Tariki's murder. Amin's recovery upset the plan.

At 6 pm the same day shells hit the building. Amin's military HQ told him that no Afghani troops had left their barracks. Amin did not believe them and rejected out of hand his HQ's explanation that he was under attack from "the friendly army" — Soviet troops.

Soviet Tajik troops appeared in the building calling "Amin, where are you? We have come to help". Amin's son, Abdul Rahman, welcomed them, thinking they had come to save Amin: "This way, come this way. This is where Amin is." Abdul Rahman was shot down by the Soviet troops who then hunted down Amin.

The Soviet leadership, even under glasnost, have never explained this series of events. As Anwar shows, the Soviet explanations given after the murder of Amin are mutually contradictory and have been replaced with silence over the past seven years. In any case, who actually pulled the trigger that killed Amin is, in a sense, irrelevant. He could not have been murdered without Soviet support and connivance.

Amin was no angel. He had himself assassinated many. Under the puppet Karmal regime brutalities and traditional torture which had marked the Tariki and Amin regimes were lessened under Soviet influence. Karmal, however, filled the prisons even more than Amin. Whatever Amin's crimes, nothing excuses a class warfare.

The Soviet leadership and its cohorts no doubt thought their intervention would be a "surgical operation", as Anwar claims. They would unite the remaining Kalq and Parcham forces in the PDPA, wipe out the guerrilla bands, supervise the economy and be able to withdraw their 10,000 troops in a few years. We now know how tragically they miscalculated.

Soviet intervention was a godsend to the reactionary rebels. A civil war had been transformed into a war of national liberation against a foreign invader. Moreover, the Afghan army began to crumble, as pro-Amin officers deserted to the guerrillas, abandoning their thin layer of marxism-leninism in the process.

Carter, and then Reagan, poured billions into the Mujaheddin and, as Anwar notes, Brezhnev saved the Pakistan dictator Zia, able for many years to benefit from Washington's largesse, as leader of a "frontline state" in the new Cold War.

Anwar shows no sympathy with the Mujaheddin nor their backers in Washington. One of the greatest tragedies perhaps for the future of this country is that the tribalised groupings have now been equipped with the most modern of weapons by the USA. It is easy to see the carnage that will result when these are used to settle the traditional blood feuds that are so much a part of the Afghan countryside. The paper-thin unity of the guerrilla groups, held together only by many millions of US dollars, will almost certainly collapse when the last Soviet soldier withdraws, while the Kabul regime is unlikely to survive.

Moreover, the guerrilla forces which are doing most of the fighting are small, tribal-village based units which owe allegiance to no one. The traditional chaos of the Afghan countryside, where the authority of Kabul was always at best tenuous, is likely to reach a qualitatively new level. Lebanon may well be small beer compared with Afghanistan in a few years' time.