Victorian Greens ...

Jack Mundey’s very good article in ALR 108 should, hopefully, stir things up in the cities. Jack justifiably criticises the failures and weaknesses of the left on the issues directly affecting the majority of the population.

However, I’m surprised he didn’t draw attention to some significant, important and, in some cases, successful work done in this field over the years.

For example, some well-known socialists in Victoria were battling on this front for many years. Ron Taylor was raising the issue in the Victorian Guardian and organising movements in the 40s. Later, the husband and wife team of Ruth and the late Maurie Crow really stirred thing up with their Plan for Melbourne.

The discussion and campaigns developed around their plan in the 60s and early 70s that led to the Greater Melbourne City Council adopting it as the Strategic Plan for the city and proceeding to implement it.

Moreover, this wasn’t a “Labor” Council, nor was it Labor in state government at the time.

The work of the Crows was honored by the award of one of the first “Robin Boyd Awards” in 1972 by the Royal Australian Institute of Architects and in 1973, the Town and Country Planning Association presented them with the Barrett Medal for Town Planning.

On another note, “turd” on Sydney beaches don’t cause enough stink to create city “greenies”, yet perhaps concern for their health will make them take up the issue of pesticides. Choice, March 1987, revealed that householders as a group used more per hectare than farmers, and abuse of enzyme poisons can explain a lot of chronic allergies and poor immunity evident today.

Vic Bird,
Forster, NSW.

Deepening Crisis ...

Congratulations on a great magazine. I’ve been enjoying recent issues and I’ve been struck not least of all by the letters. I agree with Jane Edwards (108) that ALR is not what it used to be, but then the times are not what they used to be either. ALR is, as Edwards says, now a popular left magazine. As the author, if I remember rightly, of the piece on Trotsky she recalls, I also remember the late 70s as a heyday; though as a reader, I also remember the decade prior as something special.

It seems reasonably clear that the late ’80s is a period of decline for the organised left. Internationally, the collapse of Eurocommunism, the experiences in Kampuchea, Afghanistan and Poland, locally, the emasculation of labour by the Hawke government, the generalised crisis of Marxism, the rise of the French post-this and post-that, all witness this historic condition. There can be no mistaking that we’re in a mess, and that the Marxisms inherited by the new left from the Third and Fourth Internationals are hopelessly moribund.

To say, in this context, however, that Marx and Gramsci are hopeless is altogether another thing. Hope, they offer us. The left may be decrepit, but Marx remains part of a critical tradition put to good use, for example, by Gail Reekie in her job on commodity fetishism in your pages, and Gramsci remains a source of insight shown abundantly by Stuart Hall in the article you reprint. It may be the circles I move in, but I haven’t been lectured lately (as Sue Buckingham [108] has) on the deepening crisis and the inevitability of socialism.

Nobody I know believes in the inevitability of socialism; people I know who work in welfare do, however, speak of the deepening crisis. Here it may simply be the case that they’re reading another very good magazine. Australian Society.

For if the left seems thinned in organisational terms, its number may these days simply be elsewhere. Wherever socialists are, they need to be acutely aware of the cultural, political and economic transformations of our age, they need to know about social theories about modernity ... and they need to recognise their own traditions and the values which inform them.

In short, ALR seems to me to pursue an appropriate strategy in that it recognises the nature of our times but doesn’t cut loose from the socialist values which lie at the heart of the traditions from which we’ve grown. Socialism has never been reducible to its organisational forms; this, in our context, remains one other, small source of hope. Socialists can’t afford to live for the present; they need, as William Morris understood, to seek to bridge past and future.

Peter Beilharz,
Northcote, Vic.

... and a bouquet

Thanks and congratulations to all associated with ALR. After a down period, it is improving with every issue. Despite a lot of reading, with weakening eyes, I look forward to every issue.

The last issue was particularly good reading. The Briefings on “The Year in Review” were short, snappy and spot on. The “Letter from Ephesus” was, as always, good, and such a change from the years of dreary self-righteous preaching. Long may Diana Simmonds flourish, despite the narks who have forgotten how to laugh. Jack Mundey’s article was timely and significant: the cities are a bigger and more difficult battle than caves, bats and rainforests.

Claude Jones,
Bardon, Qld.