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For some years there has been extensive media discussion, as well as a lot of media hype, about the greenhouse effect and the heating of the atmosphere. This year, with the unseasonably warm winter, it has become a commonplace of dinner party (or beach party) chit-chat.

But the effect has been known about in scientific circles for many years. Briefly, it refers to the fact that one gas in the earth's atmosphere, carbon dioxide, plays a major role in maintaining a particular global temperature and hence a particular quality of environment by trapping heat radiated from earth after it has been warmed by the sun's rays. Water vapour and now a few human-made gases play a similar role.

Examples of extreme conditions due to this effect often quoted are the very hot planet Venus with its large quantities of atmospheric carbon dioxide, and freezing Mars with practically none. However, in the current discussion, the term greenhouse effect usually refers to a warming-up process.

Unlike other greenhouse gases, carbon dioxide is constantly moving in and out of plants (the carbon cycle) as well as entering into their structure and being trapped permanently if the plant material is somehow buried and preserved.

This took place on a grand scale in swamps and shallow seas in hot steamy conditions in the northern hemisphere about 300 million years ago, and in the southern hemisphere (including Australia) a bit over 200 million years ago. The weight of all this material pushed the underlying strata into hollows and over subsequent millions of years great pressure and deep burial converted it into coal (from which oil and natural gas are also derived). A large part of the carbon in the carbon cycle has opted out, as it were — gone underground — and some is left in existing living things and circulating in and out of the atmosphere as carbon dioxide. So, in the popular sense, a negative greenhouse effect has taken place over millions of years and we now have, as a result of long gradual environmental change and biological evolution, a cooler, calmer world to live in.

But the introduction of coal-burning industry over the last two centuries has begun to reverse this process. Since the industrial revolution got into its stride the amount of atmospheric carbon dioxide has crept up (it was 300 parts per million in 1900, 345 in 1984). It is quite clear that the cause of the increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide is the burning of fossil fuel, helped along by wood burning and massive tropical deforestation.

In The Age Graeme O'Neill put it this way: "the world's industrial nations have been on an energy binge for more than a century, burning vast quantities of oil and coal" — a nice comment on the relentless dynamic of capitalism hotly pursued by the socialist countries. According to a US Department of Energy report, world energy consumption in 1900 was equivalent to 770 million tons of coal; in 1984 it was 9,000 million. And now the industrial giant, the People's Republic of China, with its vast coal resources, is just getting into its stride.

Some climatologists assert that, as a result, the world has warmed up in the last few decades — but only by a fraction of a degree centigrade. The main view among climatologists, however, appears to be that short-term fluctuations in world temperatures for other reasons make it impossible at present to be sure, but that the long-term probability is high, even allowing for counter-vailing effects. So the threat of widespread environmental change cannot be dismissed.

Proponents of change predict the following possibilities next century:
- Rising sea levels due to thermal expansion of seawater and later on due to glacial retreat and melting of the antarctic ice cap. This poses problems for people living at near to sea level: which is a challenge for us all. Half the territory of Bangladesh could disappear, for instance, and some Pacific islands completely.
- World wide alterations of climatic patterns, with some regions becoming hotter and drier and some hotter and wetter, resulting in widespread disruption of food production.

The implications for the coal industry are obvious, and we may also see all over the world quite new political and economic tensions and changes flowing from the problems thrown up. Already the US Department of Energy has set up a
Carbon Dioxide Research Division which has published reports on the effects of increasing atmospheric carbon dioxide on glaciers, ice sheets, sea level, vegetation, water resources, agriculture, fisheries, forests and human health.

This raises the question: should we immediately start taking action or should we wait and see? If we wait another decade or so then it will be that much too late; for even if it were possible to hold fossil fuel consumption to present levels it is estimated that the postulated rise in average world temperature would not level out for another thirty years at a peak that has not been reached in the last 6,000 years. We are talking about a possible temperature rise of only two or three degrees centigrade but this is enough, apparently, to cause far-reaching changes.

Probably the best first step would be to work for the utmost efficiency in fossil fuel use. It has been calculated that "a dollar invested in making electrical appliances more efficient displaces 50 kilowatts of coal-fired electricity". (New Scientist, 8 September, 1988). Some are advocating a switch to nuclear power, but this is quite unacceptable, given its intractable hazards.

A vast international reforestation program which, similarly to China's, aimed at soaking up and fixing as wood some of the offending carbon dioxide, would be of some help, but at present that seems implausible, in view of the speed with which tropical forests are being gutted. Temperate zone forests are in better shape but are threatened, particularly in northern Europe, by fossil fuel initiated pollution (acid rain).

The other line of attack is to develop renewable energy resources. The USA produces about a fifth of the world's greenhouse gases, but government reaction to this has been slow — apart from producing reports. However, there is now a private bill before Congress to spend $US450 million over 1991/92 on development of alternative renewable energy resources. Senator Norm Sanders, recently returned from the USA, was impressed by California's 17,000 windmills which, he says, produce as much power as Tasmania's hydroelectric system.

Alternative renewable energy resources here will remain marginal unless there is a large switch in research investment, deflecting the trend of growth-at-any-cost which has become a fundamental motor of socialist and capitalist economies alike over the last century.

Mal Andrews

Terry's Lessons

Since August, when the biggest rally seen in Sydney since the days of the Vietnam War signalled the breadth of opposition to the new government's education policies, the education debate in NSW has calmed down a little. This is probably good for the heart condition of NSW Education Minister Terry Metherell, who has been for some months undoubtedly the best-hated public figure in the state.

It is probably good news, too, for the government itself, since its new radical right moral agenda stretches far wider than simply education — and much of it seemed immobilised for the course of the protracted dispute. It may, however, have given Mr Greiner and his ministers cause to reflect on the riddle of political life which could turn what seemed the new government's strongest point of attack, the education system, into its greatest liability.

If there is a lesson to be learned from this unexpected turn of events, it is probably that the nature of the radical conservatism of today is a complex one, and also that the ideological terrain on which it wages its battles is a more uneven, contested one than we often realise.

Terry Metherell may well become a scapegoat for the problems of the all-out assault by the new NSW government in its first hundred days: it is rumoured that he may be reshuffled (and any reshuffle will undoubtedly be read as a demotion) by Premier Greiner as early as Christmas, or as late as next May. Yet it would be a mistake to think of the new education minister's spectacular misadventures as simply a symptom of (to borrow a Whitlamese analogy) too much too soon. Quite probably a more circumspect education minister could have avoided the spectacle of fifty thousand parents and teachers marching in defence of a state education system which, until recently, was assumed to be highly unpopular. But Dr Metherell's malaise is also symptomatic of some of the wider risks run by the new radical right agenda.

Put briefly, Dr Metherell's problem was that a populist appeal on education was followed by a highly directive, as well as technocratic, new education policy. Before the March elections (where Labor was decimated) the then opposition pledged itself to a "back to the three Rs" education policy, highlighting the perceived failures of the liberal educational regime of the past two decades. Immediately after the elections Dr Metherell began to construct a new education policy which entailed increasing the workloads of teachers and narrowing the range of the curriculum. Traded off against this was, among other things, an ambitious program of computer training in schools, designed to aid the increased vocationalisation of education.

But where the rhetoric of back-to-educational-basics had "spoken" to the public in the tones of liberation from the perhaps paternalistic liberal model, the government's practice signalled technocracy (computers before children), meanness (cost-cutting before educational standards) and authoritarianism (no consultation with parents or
schools). In consequence it was not merely teachers who were affronted by Dr Metherell's crusading zeal: the basically conservative parents and citizens associations found themselves, for the first time in their history, backing industrial action by teachers. And many individual parents followed suit.

This highlights two problems inherent in the new radical conservatism. One lies in its contradictory nature as, in Stuart Hall's words, an "authoritarian populism": on the one hand it speaks the language of liberation, and equates this with the workings of the free market: on the other it requires a "strong state" for its own ambitious program of conservative social engineering. The other lies in the nature of that populist appeal itself. Briefly, by going "outside" the traditional parameters of political debate, and by standing at once "in" and "against" the state, the radical conservatism, as it were, ups the ante of political conflict. By unhinging much of the currency of political debate from its traditional moorings, it creates a new volatility in the political landscape which is capable of rebounding on it. And this is precisely what his insistence on the role of the "strong state" did for Dr Metherell.

But what is most significant about the government's setbacks over education policy is that, in creating this volatile political atmosphere, it unleashed — against itself, as it happened — forces which were much wider than those which usually exhibit themselves in the course of "normal" political debate. Parents who may never have thought of themselves as "political" found themselves participating (or at the least supporting) a "political" demonstration. Labor has had little or no impact on the education debate: it does not even have an official education policy. Rather, Dr Metherell has taken the education out of the ramparts of parliament and into the byways of civil society.

Even if a short-term defeat can be turned to long-term advantage by the new government, the education malaise must surely have dented the myth of an unstoppable radical right agenda, and perhaps highlighted the best form of response to it — a broad alliance with the community as a whole, not a narrow defense based upon the Maginot Line of the labour movement.

David Burchell

The Salad Bowl Upturned

The publication of the report of the Committee to Advise on Australian Immigration Policy (CAAIP) — otherwise known as the FitzGerald Report — has turned out to be the first shot in an undeclared war not only over immigration policy, but over multiculturalism and, indeed, definitions of "Australianness" as well. In the process it has stirred up racist sentiment, perhaps fondly imagined by many to be a thing of the past.

Not since the Blainey debate of 1984 has the immigration issue been so vigorous, passionate and controversial. Ethnic affairs policy, under the rubric of multiculturalism, was strongly criticised by FitzGerald: "Of all the immigration issues," the report argued, "strong feelings about multiculturalism seem to extend most widely... Its laudable intentions have become obscured." Multiculturalism is described as "social engineering" which "discriminates against Australians". FitzGerald emphasised that "commitment to Australia" should be a requirement of residence here, with Australian citizenship the benchmark of this commitment, and recommended that non-citizens be refused access to some welfare payments.

The report has been a catalyst for the collapse of the bipartisan immigration consensus, which was an important foundation for the success of the postwar immigration program. Using FitzGerald's critique of multiculturalism as a springboard, federal opposition leader John Howard announced in August 1988 that opposition immigration policy will differ significantly from that of the ALP. Mr Howard "openly questioned the ability of Australians
to adjust to the rapid pace of Asianisation", and argued that "multiculturalism had left the country facing a "cultural identity crisis". In a similar vein, the National Party voted in favour of a decrease in the number of Asian migrants, and an increase in European migrants. The new immigration policy of the opposition Coalition is based on rejecting multiculturalism and introducing the option of reducing Asian immigration if "social cohesion" in Australia is threatened.

While there has been a strong consensus of opposition from the media to Howard's anti-Asian stance, the editorials of Australia's newspapers have accepted the FitzGerald Committee's critique of multiculturalism, as echoed by John Howard. Their alternative is "One Australia", with nationalism, citizenship and flag waving counterposed to "divisive" multiculturalism.

One key to the FitzGerald Committee's views about multiculturalism lies in the respect accorded to its critics:
The fact that multiculturalism is so linked in the public mind with immigration and that it is also perceived negatively, as sectional and divisive, cannot be ignored in the framing of immigration policies. In the immigration context, therefore, it would seem desirable that the voice of opposition to multiculturalism be taken seriously, not dismissed as simply the voice of extremism, or racism.

There is a major inconsistency in the CAAIP Report's treatment of the implications of public opinion for immigration policy. Where the opposition is to existing levels of immigration at times of high unemployment — and a recent consultancy report of public opinion by Murray Goot concludes that "there has been an unmistakable and quite dramatic rise in the number of people who feel that Australia ought to take no immigrants at all" — the FitzGerald Report overrides public opinion by recommending an increased immigration intake. However, when the issue is public opposition to multiculturalism — by no means as systematically established as opposition to immigration, but attributed to anonymous "dissident voices" — the CAAIP Committee recommends a backward step and capitulates to public opinion.

Another problem is the selective way FitzGerald presents the multiculturalism issue. For example, the submission of the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) is quoted in the CAAIP Report to support the view that multiculturalism is divisive. However, the major thrust of OMA's submission to the CAAIP Committee is clearly represented in its conclusion:

Although immigration policy should not be driven by multicultural considerations, it is impractical and counterproductive to follow a non-discriminatory immigration program without a domestic policy of multiculturalism.

This view of OMA is not represented in the CAAIP Report, inviting the criticism that the FitzGerald Committee selectively introduced negative views about multiculturalism.

FitzGerald concluded that multiculturalism "as a concept is not something with which many can identify". However, other than suggesting that this can change if the government affirms that it is "the Australian identity that matters most in Australia", the committee hasn't much to offer on this important issue. There is no alternative to multiculturalism — other than the "mainstreaming" of migrant services — and no guidelines to systematically improve public acceptance of it, other than promoting citizenship.

In order to get public opinion on the side of immigration, the FitzGerald Report suggested that citizenship be encouraged, with the big stick of restricting welfare and other benefits to entice the more than one million eligible non-citizens to formalise their ties to Australia. The report argued that "the social acceptance of immigration is symbolised in citizenship", though little evidence is presented to support this view.

The committee was vague on exactly which services should be denied to non-citizens. The CAAIP Report discussed the possibility that basic health and welfare benefits and entitlement, such as social security payments and access to Medicare, be denied to people who have become residentially qualified for citizenship but have themselves opted not to acquire it.

Clearly, the committee could not agree on this point, and it is said that earlier versions of the report were more draconian, suggesting that survival, as well as non-survival, benefits be withdrawn from non-citizens.

If the recommendations on citizenship were adopted, Australia would begin to imitate countries such as the United Kingdom and West Germany, where withdrawal of basic rights to migrants underlies an attempt by the state to isolate and marginalise unwanted migrants. This is a step backward from equality towards a system of citizens and the rest.

A corollary to the concerns of citizenship is the unambiguous view permeating the FitzGerald Report that postwar migrants were not sufficiently committed to Australian society. The report argued:

The social dimension requires a compact between immigrants and the country of immigration. It requires a commitment which must be two-way. Finding a proper balance of commitment is the essence of the social dimension.

The implication is that migrants have failed to fulfile their part of the "two-way commitment". This is seen most forcefully in the statements regarding Australian citizenship.

However, any assessment of the "proper balance" of commitment would, on the evidence of four decades of postwar immigration, conclude that it is the Australian-born, and the political institutions of Australian society, who must "lift their game" and carry out their part of the bargain in the commitment to make Australian society tolerant and based on social justice and equitable participation for all.

Jock Collins
The Dags of the Left

Diana Simmonds

The left, as we all know, is in retreat. The right — or the New Right — is in the ascendant. Indeed, to all intents and purposes, it has ascended.

It’s not so much that the New Right is right and the left is suddenly wrong, it’s more that the New Right has some style and excitement, as well as the occasional new thought — not including the ultra-stylish republished Ayn Rand — while the left, as ever, is wilfully, correctly, yawningly boring.

It’s not that this time in history is especially at fault. It’s been happening for a while: at least ten or fifteen years, but it has now reached crisis proportions.

The trouble is, the right is winning the battle for young hearts and minds in a way unprecedented since the ’30s, Oswald Mosley and the Bright Young Things, who thought he and Hitler were a good thing ... well, frighteningly chic, anyway.

Brideshead Revisited — the series — was the turning point for the emergence of the fashionable right. The Young Fogie was epitomised by the effete, world-weary young “heroes” of Waugh’s novel. The other, lesser, misanthropic Waugh has since found a new readership on the back of it — which is surely one of the worst results. Idealism gave way to Fair Isle pullovers and Oxford bags. It’s been downhill ever since, as the left staunchly insists on looking like a bad day at the Brotherhood of St. Laurence.

The matter of style and fashion, isn’t frippery, although serious types might choose to dismiss it as such — from the threadbare fastnesses of daggy old frocks and/or correctly straggly beards. Personal appearance — the choices made — are as significant in their refusals as they are in their actual statements. The state of one’s mind can be said to be indicated by the state of one’s desk, bedroom, kitchen: that is, a mess means a messy mind (or, alternatively, that one has better things to do with time), while a pristine state means an orderly mind — or not enough to do. Thus does outward appearance indicate something of what’s going on inside. And, by the state of many on the left, it is a sure sign of the mental decrepitude and hand-me-down thinking that continues to bog down any progress towards replying adequately to the surge of rightness which threatens to engulf us all.

It’s a pity that Marx isn’t alive today. He’d surely be the first to say “stuff Capital, that was okay then, interesting then. Now it’s twelve years to the year 2000 and what I wrote then is now a monumental period piece. Let it be. This is now, folks. Life isn’t a rehearsal. That play didn’t work. Let’s stop trying to rewrite it and fiddle with key scenes. Let’s write a new one”.

That brings me to the other most boring problem with the left: like the adherents of most hidebound and conservative religions, whether so-called Christian or marxist, many on the left are so terrified of letting go of comforting tracts and familiar disciples of dogma that they wouldn’t dare to take a look at a new thought if it ran up and bit them on the bum. This is a profoundly dreary state of affairs.

Marx, Gramsci and all that lot would be flattered, but surely very depressed, that their ideas have been turned into tablets of stone. Egotistical old bastards that they were, they would surely have expected something more than eternal Rubik-style rearrangements of old cubes of thought when, in this videocentric, post-capitalist world, a new game is called for.

Right now, all the old “isms” have had it, including capitalism, and there is little to be gained from picking over their husks. It takes a highly-skilled witchdoctor to glean real meaning from the entrails and, on present evidence, there isn’t one practising at the moment.

All the argument, debate and rereading in the world isn’t going to make any of it work. Remembrance of things past, for the moment, is as appetising and useful as a stale madeleine. Put it another way: we are nothing without history and without what has gone before, but we’re worse than nothing if we shackle ourselves to it — we’re dead.

Loving or loathing something or somebody — thought and thinker perhaps — is the way and meaning of life and advance. Nobody ever got anywhere by boring someone else to death — which is why so few people have read Capital Vol. 3.

The magnitude of the quantum leap that has to be made can be symbolised by one man and one fact about him: Alan Bond, official national hero number one, and his purchase of half the Chilean phone system.

It would have been as easy to pick Rupert Murdoch, absolute monarch of the most far-reaching empire the world has ever seen. Or Peter Abeles, a man who has the ear of the Prime Minister in this country while totally disrupting the mail service in the old country. Perhaps a nation born in criminality is bound to create the most successful criminal class ever known — and export it back to its origins! It’s a comical sight and would indeed be funny if it didn’t meant that, as a result, our global village is getting the business end of a very rough multinational pineapple.

The fact remains that, in view of the activities of these three alone, as Australians, we owe it to the rest of the world to do something about it. George Orwell, another writer of interesting history books, told us that absolute power corrupts absolutely. He wasn’t talking about national heroes numbers one, two and three ... but he might have been.

We must urgently seek the antithesis of that statement. As Marx once said: I have seen the future and I’m glad I’m dead.
The birth was in Bethlehem. The date was 28 May, 1968. There was a time when a birth in Bethlehem was considered newsworthy, but times have changed. The unique place and event have become cliched, history repeating itself first as farce, but then interminably diffused and deferred as soap opera. So Bethlehem becomes Bethlehem Hospital, Melbourne and the star in the East becomes Kylie Minogue.

May 1968 was a newsworthy month. The society of the spectacle was proclaimed by the situationists. Students and car workers mobilised on the streets of Paris, daubing slogans on the walls of the establishment: "Sous le pave, la plage!" — Under the pavement, the beach!

Down Under the pavements of Paris, if you dig far enough, there are indeed beaches — the antipodean beaches of Australia. A perfect location for the society of the spectacle, the politics of the body.

The revolutionaries of the sixties welcomed May '68 as a world-historical event, comparable in significance with the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. But just as the French Revolution ended in Napoleon's empire and then farcical repetition under Napoleon III, so the events of '68 were compromised. Culture and politics, fused into one critical mass during '68, were defused. The politics of ecstasy and bomb culture parted company. Dropouts became cultural entrepreneurs and political activists became professors of sociology.

Left to themselves, the people's culture maintained a lively interest in the body and spectacle, but not in politics and society. And Kylie Minogue, a child of '68, grew.

Did she revere Abbie Hoffman, Rudi Dutschke, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Richard Neville, Germaine Greer?

No, but she and her Melburnian schoolchums loved Abba, and her little life was changed when mum (Welsh ex-ballerina Carol) took her to see Olivia Newton-John in Grease.

This was the spectacle of the body that mobilised little Kylie: high energy wholesomeness, disco dancing, toothsome Australiana at large. She went on to score the part of Carla in The Sullivans at the age of eleven, followed by that of Charlotte in The Henderson Kids. Finally, she pupated, or pubertied, into Charlene in Neighbours.

Waiting only long enough to secure that passport to international adhom, a screen wedding, Kylie rips off her little pink cardi, piles her hair up through the brim of what might be the disco version of the Australian slouch hat, and appears winking winsomely in a little black dress to rip off 'sixties star Little Eva in Grease.

The child of '68 has come of age, and with the help of benevolent Uncle Rupert and his friends she's become the sign of '88. The global villagers are all Neighbours now, as the culture industry's integrated circuits reproduce Kylie on screen, in music, in magazines and on the lips of the whole world's pre-teens in the sacred time between school and tea.

But already Kylie has been out-Kylieed by The Comedy Company's Kylie Mole; a reproduction more original than the original, the revenge of the simulacrum.

Maryanne Fahey's roolia excellently Kylie Mole is the role model for Minogue, who now guests on The Comedy Company as Mole's friend Rebecca while Mole appears as herself on Perfect Match. And the role model for grade six primary school children isn't Minogue but Mole:

Teacher Colin Fletcher said: I think the reason the show took off so well was because we have a Kylie, Amanda and Dino in the class. I use the show in formal teaching because the kids are so tuned in. I think the kids can relate to Kylie Mole because she is such a real character. (Perth Sunday Times, 18.9.88.)

And the generation of '68 looks on, aghast, muttering mea culpa. Is this the reality they imagined, the society of the spectacle, the politics of the body?

Well, no, it isn't. "The Body" is another young Australian person who's electrifying the global image circuits just now. Her name is Elle Macpherson. Cleo readers voted Elle the No. 1 woman they would like to look like. She also has the No. 1 lifestyle, she's the No. 3 most glamorous woman in the world after Princess Diana and Joan Collins, and she's the No. 2 ultimate role model for women today after Jana Wendt. (Cleo, October 1988.)

And what about Kylie Minogue? She came top in one category. She's the No. 1 worst role model for women. Says Cleo: "Most respondents said they wanted to be smart rather than hanker after good looks."

Be smart. Remember what Marx wrote in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte about Kylie Minogue and the turntable revolutions of The Locomotion: "An entire people, which had imagined that by means of a revolution it had imparted to itself an accelerated power of motion, suddenly finds itself set back into a defunct epoch and ... the nation feels like a mad Englishman in Bedlam ..."

And so we're back to the defunct epoch of Stars in the East, for as everyone knows, "Bedlam" is a shortened form of Bethlehem Hospital.

John Hartley
Sufferers from mesothelioma, one of the three diseases caused by asbestos fibres, describe its symptoms as being like having one's lungs slowly filled with cement.

Asbestos has wrought havoc on the community, ruining lives and leading to agonising deaths. Its best-known victims are former workers at the mining towns of Wittenoom and Baryulgil. But all of us are exposed to asbestos in our daily lives.

To the hard left, it's another case of capitalist exploitation. To the industry, it was all a terrible case of bad luck.

People living in a contemporary urban environment cannot escape inhaling some asbestos fibre. Unlike many other hazardous substances, it affects people without regard for occupation and social status. In January 1980 it was revealed that asbestos insulation was used extensively throughout its structure. The cost of removal was not made public but the news caused something of an outcry in the UK, as much out of fear for the welfare of the Royal family as for the millions of pounds to be spent on removal during a period of economic recession. Asbestos had already been identified as a carcinogen at the time it was used in the Royal yacht, and it continued to be used widely throughout the next thirty years.

In 1985 The Canberra Times revealed that a large number of custom-built fire doors intended for the new Parliament House had been buried at the Gungahlin tip. When the doors arrived at the building site they were found to contain asbestos. The trade union in control of the site, the BLF, had rejected initial reassurances that the doors were asbestos-free and, after examination, it was discovered that over half of the consignment contained fibre. The doors were not returned to the manufacturer for fear that they would merely be resold to another, less discriminating, customer. They were trucked to the tip by the Department of Territories and buried using department equipment. The total cost of dumping the doors was in excess of $50,000. Without trade union intervention the new Parliament House would have resembled the original building which is so heavily insulated with asbestos as to make the costs of removal prohibitive. Now empty, it may remain a monument to asbestos' indiscriminate impact.

In the United States it is estimated that 250,000 people will die of asbestos-related disease by the turn of the century. This gives some
indication of the importance of the asbestos scandal and the havoc which the use of asbestos has wrought upon community health.

It also suggests that, in financial terms, the eventual cost will be extraordinary. In evidence given in February 1982 before a US Congressional inquiry, an insurance official told a House of Representatives Committee that product liability suits were likely to exceed US$38 billion. In the past six years those fears have been realised. More disturbing still is the prospect that the asbestos story will eventually be repeated in other industries which have manufactured carcinogenic products.

For more than a decade, asbestos has been a public issue in Australia. The Commonwealth government alone faces a potential bill of $9 billion for the removal of asbestos from public buildings and work has already been completed at a number of major sites including the former Commonwealth Centre in Melbourne. (Work on the old Parliament House in Canberra, estimated to cost $40 million for asbestos removal, has been put on the back burner for 12 months.) Australia’s leading property investor, the AMP Society, is also faced with the huge cost of removal from many of its most prestigious holdings. There are many casualties in the asbestos story, and they include two of this country’s largest corporations, CSR and James Hardie Industries.

The most publicised human casualties of the asbestos industry in Australia have been those men and women who have worked at the mining towns of Wittenoom in Western Australia and at Baryulgil in New South Wales. The casualties also include workers in plants manufacturing asbestos-based products, as well as those employed in that wide range of occupations where such products were used. While, in the past five years, a number of cases have been settled out of court, it is only since May this year that the tide has turned in favour of asbestos industry and in favour of those who have contracted asbestos-related diseases.

In the Victorian Supreme Court on 23 May this year a jury awarded Klaus Rabenalt a total of $676,000 in damages against his former employer Midalco, a fully-owned subsidiary of the conglomerate CSR. This sum included $250,000 set aside specifically to punish the company for its malpractice. It is the first time in Australian legal history that punitive damages have been awarded. At the age of 52, Rabenalt suffers from mesothelioma, a cancer for which there is no cure and no effective treatment. On average, a person suffering from mesothelioma has 18 months to live from the date of diagnosis.

Following Rabenalt’s victory, in the first week of August the West Australian Supreme Court awarded damages totalling $371,000 to Peter Hayes and Tim Barrow, both of whom, like Rabenalt, had worked for Midalco at Wittenoom. As with all cases defended by Midalco, the trial was protracted, eventually becoming the longest trial in WA legal history. Consequently, Peter Heys who, like Rabenalt and Barrow, suffered from meso-
Asbestos fibre causes three diseases: by 1930 the fibre was known to cause asbestosis, a serious disease of the lung, among men and women working in the industry. By 1948 it was known that asbestos can cause cancer of the lung; and finally, in 1955, a South African study of an asbestos mining community established that asbestos is the sole cause of a fatal cancer of the lining of the lung and abdominal cavity. That disease is mesothelioma. Unlike the first two diseases, mesothelioma is not dose-related and therefore it is not just an occupational disease, but threatens any person coming into contact with asbestos fibre. Mesothelioma has a latency period of up to forty years and can result from the most trivial exposure. Subsequent research into asbestos and human health has substantiated these early findings. There is no question that asbestos is a carcinogen, and no company has sought to base a legal defence in a case involving mesothelioma upon the issue of causality.

In assessing the behaviour of the industry, it is not sufficient merely to examine, as courts do, the publication dates of the major studies which proved the hazardous nature of asbestos or to map out the history of legislation regulating the asbestos mining and manufacturing industries.

To do so implies that the industry had no independent resources to monitor changes in the oral tradition among researchers which most certainly moved ahead of substantive published results. The industry had access to resources and to data denied independent researchers. One can only assume that physicians employed by firms such as CSR and James Hardie would have known more than other researchers, if only because of their strategic position. They knew who was working in the industry; they had access to the health records of those workers; they knew which parts of the productive process were the most dusty; they had access to dust count data, however imperfect, and they had access to oral evidence as to the fate of male and female employees who died from respiratory disease. This was true particularly in asbestos towns such as Wittenoom.

Despite these advantages, producers in Australia and in the United States have adopted the same stance regarding the question of foreseeability. Each has argued that the seminal studies by Merewether (1930, 1948), Wagner (1955) and Selikoff (1962) did not bring about an immediate change in medical orthodoxy, but were disputed within the profession for many years after their date of publication. Therefore, there was no onus upon the industry to adjust its hygiene practice in accordance with what was mere supposition. What the industries' spokespersons chose to obfuscate, however, is that this notion of medical orthodoxy is in effect a political concept. It is a concept that industry has used to diminish its level of responsibility.

Physicians working in London hospitals in the 1950s were well acquainted with an oral tradition which portrayed asbestos as a potent carcinogen. By 1955, Merewether's report was already six years old and the first cases of cancer of the lung from asbestos-weaving and fabricating industries were becoming visible. The industry refused to act, and in its defence now argues that there was no necessity for change because government authorities were satisfied that existing precautions were adequate. In the past decade, asbestos producers have sought to blame the imperfections of medical knowledge, the incompetence of government bodies and the physiologies of the victims themselves. And yet the industry was far better informed about existing medical knowledge than were the regulating authorities.

Two dominant interpretations are used to explain the asbestos story. From the fundamentalist left comes the idea that such tragedies arise because of a systematic and well-organised conspiracy within the industry. That conspiracy, supposedly, saw corporations suppress medical evidence proving asbestos was hazardous, so that high profits could be dragged from the suffering of workers and consumers alike. By neglecting to introduce adequate protection for its workforce, companies such as Midalco were able to reap higher and higher profits. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that either CSR or James Hardie ever succeeded in making money from their asbestos mines and, if any criticism is to be made of those firms, it is that they were incompetent rather than malevolent capitalists.

Industry itself explains events such as those at Wittenoom as being due to the fallibility of scientific knowledge. According to industry spokespeople, the identification of illness and hazard is achieved through specific technical advances. The moral imperative for dust control, or ventilation, or the provision of respirators, must come from the laboratory and not arise due to the fallibility of scientific work. Industry, so we are told, can only do what scientists advise, and the acceptance or rejection of that advice is determined solely by the weight of scientific evidence which is ethically neutral and unambiguous.

But there is a third and more sophisticated interpretation of the asbestos story. In this explanation such tragedies are seen to arise out of
In its defence, the asbestos industry has claimed to have been held captive by forces over which it had no control. Those forces are to be found in the process of production itself. Social philosophers such as Langdon Winner and Ivan Illich suppose that high technology generates a momentum of its own which imposes a specific and narrow range of social and cultural choices upon its inventors and users. This idea has been taken up, albeit reflexively, by industry apologists who claim that the technique of production enforces a kind of fate upon its users who, therefore, cannot be held responsible for the mistakes which the process precipitates. So it is with a sigh that spokespeople from James Hardie and Johns-Manville speak of the inadequacies of dust monitoring equipment, and ventilation systems, and the

A person suffering from mesothelioma has an average of eighteen months to live

imperfections in plant and machinery which always generated more dust than owners wanted. This idea is implicit in much of the rhetoric used by corporations in their defence of industrial disaster. The idea of autonomous technology appears as a kind of prevailing myth about the industrial process.

During the first decades of the present century public health programs designed to combat the spread of infectious diseases were introduced without any of the political resistance that has accompanied the struggle for controls over the use and dissemination of toxic substances. In the battles to control cholera, tuberculosis and, more recently, infantile paralysis, policy makers merely informed the public that there was a certain risk, and that particular measures were necessary to eliminate that risk. Legislators needed little encouragement to enforce such measures and there was no opposition. There were no vested interests standing to lose money or prestige or power from the elimination of those diseases.

The contrary has been true of every case involving government efforts to control carcinogens in the market place. The discovery of an association between a disease and a chemical product is a political act. Its creator and the knowledge itself are immediately embroiled in an environment where the virtues of honesty and objectivity are largely irrelevant. The mere design of the protocol for the study of an illness becomes controversial, and serves to polarise contesting parties on either side of what are simultaneously scientific and political debates. The politicisation of science is used by industry to immobilise opponents by excluding the victims and the public from participation in the debate. That exclusion is rarely, if ever, justified by the nature of the explanations involved, or by the methodology physicians use in researching diseases and their cause.

What needs to be done is to transfer the asbestos controversy into the public arena so that the issue is no longer seen or defined as a technical problem for experts in the legal, medical, technocratic and bureaucratic spheres to debate unhindered by an informed public. In the United States and in the UK, this process has already begun through pressure from litigation, and by the work of consumer and public interest groups. It has not been initiated by parliaments. Neither has the process been precipitated by industries' concern for the victims who, until recently, have been a scattered and politically insignificant group.

Perhaps the destruction of so many lives by asbestos fibre will force the community to realise that the public interest must rest with the public itself and not with industry, no matter how respectable its voice may appear to be.
Out of the Closet, Into the Nineties

For a decade, lesbian and gay male politics have been at arm's length. In the cold climate of the late Eighties, however, the threat of the moral right has provided much more of a shared agenda. In articles based on talks originally given at Sydney's Politics in the Pub, Lex Watson and Betty Hounslow report from the front...

Life After AIDS

AIDS is the greatest challenge to the gay male community, ever. But Lex Watson argues that it may have managed to do what two decades of gay politics have failed to do...

If you look at the history of gay politics and gay organisations in Australia, there was nothing prior to 1969. There were some organisations — the Council for Civil Liberties, for instance — which expressed a bit of an interest in homosexual law reform. That was the extent of it.

In 1969 a couple of organisations emerged which talked about what was then, I think, generally perceived — probably including in the gay male community, but certainly in the wider community — as the sole homosexual issue: law reform. It was a male, legal, political issue. Lots of other countries had had organisations devoted to law reform going back twenty, forty, fifty years. We came to that point in 1969.

But in 1970 gay liberation hit Australia — gay liberation which, as a term, came from America, from mid-1969 and Stonewall. Gay liberation said that the world was now different. We have to change in three ways, essentially. First of all, it said that our political agenda should be much wider than law reform, than just changing those areas of the Crimes Act which relate to male sexual offences. It said that there were other legal issues like discrimination which were important. But it also said that we needed to look at a very different style of politics. We needed to look beyond the traditional polite (and largely heterosexual-fronted) lobby groups. It was not simply a matter of a wider agenda: we needed to create a whole style — both of life and of politics — which was not part of the earlier gay politics. A lot of that drew on the experiences of sixties women's liberation and the black power movement in the States.

The third thing it said — and it's not unrelated to the first — is that we had to have a very different perspective on the world at large. We had to look at coalition-building, at a very different political analysis of the world, and we had to look at why this sort of oppression occurred as it did.

Thus, in Australia around 1970-71, when gay liberation emerged — and it came largely on the coattails of women's liberation — we started talking about a much wider political agenda, but also an agenda which was an attempt to locate gay and lesbian oppression within an analysis of the society at large. And this was, broadly speaking, a left agenda.

Two things need to be noted about that moment. The first is that the gay liberation movement in Australia in 1970-71 grew out of the political left; it did not grow out of the gay (essentially gay male)
subculture. It grew out of a political analysis, not from a subcultural need. That is not to say that a lot of gay men didn't feel the need for that analysis. It is not to say that, directly or indirectly, gay liberation didn't change the way in which people saw themselves, lived their politics, and responded politically to the outside world. But it is to say that it did not really draw a major response from the gay male subculture — from the men who went to the gay bars and dances, who were in the scene. I think it's fair to say (and this is dating myself) that I'm one of the very few people who was an activist in 1970-71 and who had had some significant experience of the gay subculture, the parties, the dances, the social groups, the bars, prior to 1970.

One of the ongoing themes of the gay male response through the 'seventies and into the 'eighties, has been the need to try to put gay politics and organisations, and our perspective as gay activists, together with the perceived needs of quite a large subculture, and to try to get the two sides to interact. We have tried to say: we are a political movement, a group of organisations (which nonetheless within those organisations have different perspectives) including church groups, more or less left political groups, and so on; and we want our concerns to be felt by, if you like, the potential constituency, to try to interact with them. Through the 'seventies and into the 'eighties, increasingly issues like law reform and anti-discrimination were recognised by the gay male subculture as legitimate political concerns to which they should be responding, and around which they should be active. Now, that wasn't easy, and it's not been particularly successful. As someone who's been involved in it, I'd have to say that I don't know that we've done a tremendously good job.

Through that period, however, one crucial thing happened organisationally. And that is that, across that period (and most particularly from 1975 on, although it goes back to 1970-71) we developed a gay press, essentially a gay male press. There was no gay press before. We've also developed some gay radio programs, a certain amount of exposure on mass television, and so on. So we now have a means of communication, at least to the subculture, one which has become a form of communication of politicisation, and some would say of radicalisation, which simply didn't exist prior to 1970. It has become a vital vehicle in the gay male community for organising, informing and — even where people only read it and don't do anything about it — a focus of human concern around gay issues.

Gay liberation grew out of the political left, not the gay subculture

In the early 'eighties one crucial thing happened to disturb this orderly process, alas — and it was AIDS. AIDS has fundamentally changed the style, the content and, indeed, the whole notion of gay male politics. And it has done something — unfortunately, as it happens, but nonetheless in a very real way — that nothing else in the gay community did. AIDS has been independent of class, and fundamentally independent of relationship with the subculture. It has affected all gay men in a way in which law reform, nice idea though it was (and much though I spent years doing it), didn't really do. Many gay people thought anti-discrimination was wonderful, many people felt more confident because of it, many people were very glad that they had it. But it didn't very often, directly and immediately, change their lives. AIDS has. And AIDS has consequentially rewritten the gay male political script in a way that nothing else has. Perhaps one could argue that the Mardi Gras in Sydney, as a gay community event, has come the closest to this far-reaching impact, but AIDS has a very particular resonance.

In 1983, when AIDS first became an issue, we formed in NSW something called the AIDS Action Committee. We rang up Laurie Brereton, the then Minister for Health in NSW. We said to him: AIDS is here; we want to come and talk to you about it because we want to be actively involved in the fight against it. He said come in. We sat around a table and talked about it. In formal terms, not all that much came out of it. But the bottom line was that the Minister had said, for the first time: I've opened my door: come in, sit down, let's talk about it. Twelve months later on, law reform. gay men were still standing on the footpath outside Parliament House, with the gates locked, jumping up and down, saying to the government: open the gates; we want to talk to you about law reform.

As it turned out, a month or so later we did get law reform, thanks to a private member's Bill. But the fact remains that, on AIDS, they had said, come in, let's talk about it, we'll deal with it. We'll incorporate you into — not co-opt you into — the discussion process and the decision-making process. Yet twelve months later they were still saying: we don't want to talk to you about law reform.

AIDS has done something which is quite unexpected in the normal perspective of gay politics. It has almost made gay politics respectable. Thank God, in a sense, that it has, because we are now part of a process of which we crucially need to be a part. Because if AIDS politics and AIDS policies are conducted without the formal, active and upfront involvement of gay men, and in particular the people who are infected with the virus, AIDS policy will fail. Bizarrely perhaps, in terms of our expectations, and bizarrely perhaps also in relation to the way in which governments have dealt with past epidemics, they have (the Wilson Tuckeys of this world notwithstanding) in fact recognised this — perhaps not as well as they should have, but they have recognised it.

Gay politics is now changed. We have government-funded gay-community-based organisations with budgets of half a million dollars a year. We are being involved in the education process. Crucial also is the fact that — notwithstanding that the
BETWEEN THE LINES

Bernice Morris

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odd journalist doesn’t want to know about this — the gay male community’s response to AIDS is recognised widely as being extraordinarily competent, well-based, energetic and successful.

AIDS has rewritten the script for virtually all of us as gay men who are active, for a couple of reasons. First of all, because it is overwhelmingly taking up the resources of those of us who are prepared to work in the gay community — notwithstanding the people involved in Mardi Gras, in the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, in the Immigration Task Force, and in other areas. The bulk of gay men who are politically active are working in AIDS.

Second, precisely because it doesn’t discriminate, as I mentioned earlier, AIDS has brought a very large number of gay men who have never been organisationally active before, into gay organisations — into the community support network, the Bobby Goldsmith Foundation, the AIDS Council of NSW, to name but a few. The fight against AIDS is getting a huge commitment in terms of time and involvement from very many gay men whose politics have never been left, whose politics still aren’t left, and who may well regard themselves as being apolitical. That has become an important factor in terms of the ongoing process of putting the community/subculture and the organisation/movement together.

Finally, at the end of it, AIDS has created the sense that the community at large, and politics at large, will never be able to talk about gay men, and probably homosexuality in the way they have before. Because gay men have been forced to come out, whether we wanted to or not, as part of the politics of AIDS, we are now in a position to say: we are on the agenda and there is no way that they can take us off it. We’re on the agenda because it’s recognised by government that we’re good at what we’re doing in the AIDS battle, that we’re indispensable in that battle and, because of that I don’t think that they will ever be able to force us back into the closet — which perhaps was not the case just seven years ago. AIDS has rewritten the script of gay politics. Who knows now what the rest of the story will be.

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Whatever Happened to the Personal?

Over the Eighties, lesbians seemed to retreat from the arena of personal sexual politics. Betty Hounslow wishes they hadn’t.

It’s virtually impossible to talk about lesbian politics or a lesbian movement because there are a myriad variants of lesbians and lesbianisms. There are the essentialists, the spiritualists, the separatists, the socialists, the non-feminists and the feminists — the list could go on.

Likewise, it is difficult to talk about a lesbian movement in the same way one can talk about a gay male movement. Lesbians, as a political force in the wider world, have been located both within the women’s liberation movement and within the original gay liberation movement. And they have been critical and defining influences on those movements. Sometimes they have been in both of them; sometimes they have absented themselves from the male gay liberation movement; and sometimes there have been lesbians in each arguing with those in the other camp that they shouldn’t be there at all. And all the time our autonomous lesbian movements have continued to operate.

So I have tried to confine my comments here to a kind of middle ground, to those areas where I think lesbians and gay men are starting to come together on political agendas.
and some of the elements we have in common, and in common with the left in general, in trying to think afresh about the arena of personal sexual politics. This convergence of interests, if such it is, comes at the end of a whole era where it was no longer proper to speak of gay politics as if that term absorbed both men and women. There has been an entire era in which symbolic name changes have been a very important thing. The Gay Counselling Service has become the Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service; the Gay Immigration Taskforce has become the Gay and Lesbian Immigration Taskforce; the Gay Rights Lobby has become the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby.

Nor has it been just a matter of semantics. That differentiation came out of a real differentiation which erupted in fairly bitter battles in the late 'seventies and early 'eighties, as gay men and lesbians trying to work together realised that they often had very different agendas and different ways of organising which made it extremely painful to try to maintain that coalition. Interestingly, however, in the last twelve months there has been a resurgence of coalition politics among gay men and lesbians. Most of the groups in the broader gay and lesbian community are now mixed groups and, while women are still a minority in many of those groups, they are no longer a powerless minority: we're no longer just addendums to organisations; we are critically and centrally placed within those organisations.

That change has not come about simply through a change of heart, or from a decision that we all want to give each other a second chance, or be nice to one another. Rather, it has come about because of some changes in the objective political situation, such that the political arena provides us with shared political agendas now, much more than in the early 'eighties. We've also had the benefit of the influence of our parallel movements in the United States and in Britain which have demonstrated the importance of coalition politics in fighting the conservative political and moral agendas of the 'eighties.

By coalition politics, incidentally, I mean not just combination with our gender counterparts, but also with the left in general, and the creation of links with anti-racist struggles and progressive movements across a broad spectrum. The upsurge of the New Right, and the election of the new government in New South Wales in particular, mean that the issues which we will have to fight will increasingly be shared issues between lesbians and gay men, and have shared agendas.

In New South Wales, the Festival of Light now yields much more power than before, and they are frankly trying to stifle homosexuality in all of its manifestations, trying to reproduce Thatcherism in NSW. And while the expressed justification for these attacks may be AIDS, their proposals would equally affect lesbians even though we are, of course, the lowest risk group.

There are the essentialists, the spiritualists, the separatists, the socialists, the non-feminists and the feminists...

Indeed, the Greiner government in NSW has its own conservative moral agenda, which is going to affect lesbians and gay men specifically as, indeed, a whole range of other groups — broadly speaking the disadvantaged groups in our community.

Again, the Victorian summary offences legislation was used recently to arrest and convict a woman for a sculpture in Mildura which had an explicitly lesbian text. It is worthy of note that in his summing up the magistrate explicitly referred to the problem as one of the "promotion of homosexuality" which should be stopped.

More generally, there will be problems with the continued funding of the few explicitly gay and lesbian autonomous services. In NSW there is now a tax on the 20-10 gay and lesbian youth refuge, with the suggestion that maybe the best thing for it would be for it to be brought under the umbrella of the Wesley Central Mission (the mind boggles).

Sympathetic bureaucrats are suggesting that women working in women's services should delete as many references as possible to the words "lesbian" and "feminist" in their submissions. And there will be funding problems with internal progressive units in government departments. Already the Anti-Discrimination Board is being starved of funds. The cuts in education in NSW will affect the non-sexist programs which are dear to the hearts of lesbians.

On the federal level there is also the question of immigration rights, the recognition that there are, in fact, gay and lesbian Australians who are unfortunate enough to fall in love with people of other nationalities, and who want to live together. The gay and lesbian immigration taskforce is, aside from the AIDS organisations, perhaps the largest and most flourishing gay or lesbian political organisation in Australia, with attendances at meetings in Sydney, for example, of seventy people a month. It's interesting that the taskforce has worked closely in coalition with other groups concerned about the upsurge of racism in the immigration debate, and has worked in organisations where, before, we would never have been invited, such as the new national immigration forum being convened by such respectable groups as the Australian Council of Churches and the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils.

All this suggests that there is likely to be a high visibility of the gay and lesbian movement in the next couple of years — probably much higher than in the recent past — which is not to say that this comparatively low profile of the movement should be confused with political inactivity. Lesbians and some gay men have been highly visible in a whole range of political issues and organisations over the last few years. In the January 26 march for Aboriginal sovereignty and land rights in Sydney, the gay contingent was large and the lesbian contingent was huge. We've seen lesbians and gay men active in solidarity struggles; lesbians have been key and critical
players in the peace movement, and in the education sphere. So there hasn’t been any let-up of specifically political activity by lesbians and progressive gay men.

Now, however, we will very likely see it supplemented by a much higher profile in the areas of explicitly homosexual and sexual politics.

And, indeed, it’s impossible to discuss the state of lesbian politics without raising the question of sexual politics. And here I’m bound to say that it seems to me, on both an individual and a collective basis, there’s been a retreat on the left from a scrutiny of personal sexual politics. One of the major breakthroughs of the women’s liberation movement and the gay liberation movement in the early ‘seventies was in deprivatising the area of sex and sexual relationships and bringing them into the arena of sexual politics. I sometimes wonder now where all of that energy has gone.

There are still pockets of men and women consciously or deliberately worrying the bone, especially among the younger generation of lesbians and feminists. But it seems that many of us who lived through the ‘seventies got a bit bruised and bloodied and battered in them. But I think that it is a problem. I think that we have lost that ground; I think that the conduct of sexual relationships, the conduct of our personal sexual politics, have become reprivatised in a way that I didn’t think would be possible after the ‘seventies. It hasn’t been reprivatised within the four walls of the family home, as was the case before, but within the comfortable circles of our small political and cultural tendencies.

I know that, within the lesbian movement, if we could characterise it as such, we had some dreadfully difficult debates in the early ‘eighties between lesbians and feminists with completely different views about that arena of sexual politics. We had major battles which focussed around issues like censorship and S&M and paedophilia, but which were really about the role of sex. How can you reconstruct your unconscious mind, which has been so deeply formed and scarred by this capitalist and patriarchal society? How much can you push the margins? What’s the boundary between pleasure and danger? Those were some of the questions we faced. We split over that, and ultimately we retreated into our own areas. Some focussed on the dangers of the sexual domain, and major campaigns against censorship, for example, and S&M. Other focussed on the pleasure idea of libertarian release, of a myriad forms of sexuality. And we’ve never brought the two sides together again.

It seems to me that gay men are precisely at that point now, too, because for the first time in their history, gay men are also faced with that ambiguity of sex — that it is both pleasure and danger. I hope that gay men will be able to hold those two poles together, and not split in the way in which the feminist movement split over those issues. We need to reopen the debate over sexual politics on that level, and not just stay in the safer domains where we can fight more easily around the issues that impinge on it, but which allow us to remain silent and reprivatised about the actual conduct of sexual relationships, the actual form of our sexual practices, and how these actually impinge upon our politics. How can our politics change them? And where our politics in fact are useless, and unable to change them, do we have to live with what we’ve got?

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These two articles were originally delivered as talks at Sydney’s “Politics in the Pub” series at the Harold Park Hotel in August.
A POPULAR PASSION

From Fats Waller to Slim Dusty, popular entertainment has made the world go round. The left has tended to view it with a jaundiced eye — sometimes celebrating it, more often damning it. Craig McGregor doesn't think either response is enough. Here he looks at what makes rocking around the clock tick.

When I first began writing about popular culture, instead of just living it, I was mainly concerned to defend it against the attacks of elitists, traditionalists and cultural authoritarians — and, to my surprise, some of the heaviest criticism came from the left.

I mean, here I was, this likely lad with impeccable lower-middle-class origins from Haberfield, where red brick bungs stared eyeless at each other across the canal that emptied into Iron Cove, and listening to Bessie Smith, Bunk Johnson, Jelly Roll Morton, Muddy Waters, Lightnin' Hopkins, Leadbelly, Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Elvis, the Beatles, Miles Davis, Cannonball Adderley and John Coltrane (is there a Great Tradition there?), surfing amid the bluebottles and inflated condoms at Bondi, drinking beer with my mates at the Golden Sheaf, playing footie, going to dances, chundering out the door of my FJ Holden, working and writing and getting married and having kids, seeing my Mum and brothers on Saturday and my Dad when I got up the coast to Forster on holidays, and here were Ian Turner and Allan Ashbolt and other left intellectuals attacking me, and my family, and my neighbours, in fact nearly everyone I knew, as mindless victims of consumer capitalism. Zombies. They didn't like our music, or our houses, or (apparently) the lives we led. It was the time of the great Alf controversy (Alf equals ocker), and Admass, and the Suburban Desert, and Barry Humphries' ultra-right caricatures of all who lived there, and intellectual despair at the Ugly Average Aussie. I mean, that was me.

It seemed like a betrayal, and, to a certain extent, it still does. The left stands for the rights, dignity, history, creativity, culture, ideals and infinite (and yet untested) possibilities of the common people, or it stands for nothing. But I have come to understand the emotion behind Ian Turner's and Allan Ashbolt's condemnation of how modern capitalism manipulates and distorts the great mass of people who comprise it, and why those on the left, as they grow older, become weary and even cynical about almost everything which occurs within the system. Nothing, it sometimes seems, short of revolution, will ever change it.

This confronts the left with a dilemma, because in condemning the system, and what it does to people, critics are almost forced to condemn the lives led by the great majority of people in Western capitalist countries such as Australia. Whereas, as I think I know from having lived most of my life in Australia (as well as some of it in England and the United States, where the workings of the power structure are much more nakedly exposed), the really surprising thing is the diversity, and richness, and imagination which people manage to bring to their lives despite the system.

Most lives, looked at close up, reveal profound and eternal meanings. These are expressed in a million subtle and unsusbtile ways: in love, work, families, sport, pop songs, parties, gardens, barbecues, pubs, races, weekends in the bush, Friday night at the club, Anzac Day, demos, strikes, jokes, yarns, Sundays in the car, births, fucks and death ... the entire galaxy of relationships, events and rituals we have come to call popular culture.

This is a wide definition of popular culture, of course; but it is, I think, the most sensible (and, lately, the most widely accepted) meaning of the term. It has both T.S. Eliot and Antonio Gramsci on its side, so it can't be bad. It includes rituals, activities, the "way of life" of a particular people in a particular culture, and where these (popular) activities shade off into (popular) arts, these are included too. Finally, it includes the products of the mass media: radio, TV, films, newspapers, cartoons, comics, pop music — what is called, often in derogatory terms, "mass culture". One way out of the leftist dilemma, of course, is to try to make a clear distinction between "mass culture", which can safely be regarded as the corrupt and manipulative fare purveyed by advertising agencies and media...
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KEITH WINDSCHUTTLE,

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owners, and “popular culture” which refers to the culture that people create for themselves and harks back to peasant and folk meanings of the term.

I don’t want to disregard the fact that there are two identifiable and important processes at work here: one in which people act, and one in which people are acted upon. But all our lives, of course, are a fusion of acting and being acted upon, and this applies to our culture as well; we both create it and have it created for us.

And it seems to me that, these days, the two processes are so interfused that we simply have to recognise that Coke ads and kids’ parodies of them, cricket on the beach and Packer’s televised circus, ocker’s party and Don’s party, the local pub rockers and the latest megabuck creation of LA’s rock industry, are all part of the cultural life of our time.

This conception tends to please neither the structuralists nor the post-structuralists, because it seems to move between Gramscian hegemonic analysis and what we might term a more pluralist, “postmodern” approach. But it recognises that, in the real world, this is the way it is. As Stuart Hall argues (in his essay “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular’”), at the heart of popular culture is a process of struggle, of contestation between the attempt to impose a cultural system upon working people and the resistance to it.

In the study of popular culture, we should always start here: with a double-stake in popular culture, the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it ... Popular culture is neither, in a “pure” sense, the popular traditions of resistance ... nor is it the forms which are superimposed on and over them. It is the ground on which the transformations are worked.

The word “popular”, in contemporary use, has both these meanings built into it. It can refer to cultural products like soaps, video clips, comics, films, and records which are consumed by masses of people and, to a greater or lesser extent, enjoyed by them; or it can refer to what are sometimes thought to be more “authentic” cultural forms, such as sport, folk music, hobbies, dancing, trade unions, the rituals and celebrations which are created by people for themselves. The contrast is between people as passive consumers and people as active creators, but the truth is that all people play both roles, often simultaneously.

This isn’t just having it both ways, it’s a recognition of the complexity of the cultural field. In Australia, especially, the mass media are crucial instruments by which the ruling elite maintains what Gramsci called its cultural (and therefore political) hegemony and manipulates the consent of the mass of people to a brutally unjust society. In this I agree with the general thesis advanced by such critics of the media as Humphrey McQueen: you don’t have to write for newspapers for very long before you realise how they not only censor what people can know but also define the very parameters of whatever political debate can take place.

As the late Alex Carey once said, ain’t much use having a two-party state if you’ve got a one-party press. Even where the mass media is not overtly political, its effects are political; as Elsaesser says of the cinema, it forms “an extensive and no doubt complex institution of socialisation and social control, i.e. an apparatus which manipulates consciousness, generated and maintained by concrete economic interests”. Marcuse argued that even where popular movements seem to be in clear opposition to the dominant (bourgeois) culture a “repressive tolerance” is at work which acts to subsume such opposition within the system.

But this dominance is never complete, and people employ a myriad of strategies to resist it and to create cultural and subcultural forms which express their own needs and meanings. The only way to resolve such theoretical questions is to look at concrete cases. Pop music, for instance, is the dominant popular art of our time. It’s an incredibly commercialised, manipulated music which fits precisely the marxist schema described earlier.

But it has to be remembered that rock, which is still at the core of contemporary pop music, was taken up by young people and became popular against the weight of the entire music industry, the mass media and the ruling culture. Like jazz before it, it is an exhilarating example of a genuinely popular art (created by and for the people) forcing its way through to a position of major importance in our culture — and, like film, transforming itself into high art. By the time we reach the songs of Bob Dylan, and freedom marches, and Black power, and Woodstock, and the anti-Vietnam war movement, and sexual liberation movements such as women’s liberation and gay liberation, together with the entire concept of a counter-culture, and the art, ceremony and iconography of them all, it’s clear that popular culture (expressed in these forms) comprises one of the most heartening phenomena of our time.

To narrow the argument again: rhythm-and-blues, and then rock ‘n’ roll, like jazz thirty years before them, dragged the mass media, protesting, along behind them. Ian Turner, who I remember used to defend jazz as a genuinely popular art of real merit while denigrating rock ‘n’ roll as a worthless commercial plot, finally changed his mind. Years before, Francis Newton (Eric Hobsbawm) had defined the way in which all commercial music depends for its vitality upon regular infusions of non-commercial (popular) musics; even in internationalised, mediaised, twentieth-century mass art, the energy comes from the people.

**Pop marxists**

The careers of some contemporary rock “superstars” illuminate the way these processes work. Sting, for instance, could be regarded as a typical rock industry figure, a somewhat manipulative musician who made an immense amount of money in a short time, turned himself into a film star, and began using his own life and his family as a suitable
subject for self-promotion. He was the focus of a very rich and very powerful part of the music business. Yet Sting's bitter-sweet songs often had a quite radical political content, dealing with everything from unemployed coalminers in Thatcher's Britain to the nuclear realities of the Cold War, and his messages were heightened by the video clips which encapsulated his songs; here, in the heart of the beast, was a political artist at work criticizing and commenting on the system of which he was a part.

Rock has been going for so long now that it has set up its own traditions which sometimes run quite counter to the music industry and its values. Bob Dylan, for instance, influenced an entire generation of singer-songwriters: Dire Strait's Mark Knopfler, whose songs veer between fierce working class satire and sentimental indulgence, is among them. And Knopfler had an impact upon such groups as The Style Council, which managed, incredibly enough, to top the charts with songs which are straight marxist propaganda while appearing to conform to (parody?) the rock industry's demands of style and presentation. The list could be taken over by the system; Elvis is the classic, and tragic, example. It is true that others are products of the entertainment industry and are packaged and promoted as such right from the start. In between, however, are infinite variations and permutations; the mass media is the site of constant cultural struggle/fusion/conflict/contradiction; any attempt to impose a theoretical grid which does not allow for this is doomed to be simply wrong.

Australian country music, to take another musical example, shows just how complex this process can be and how American cultural imperialism can be turned by a local culture to its own ends. It began as a quite blatant copy of American country-and-western music in its fairly debased and commercial post-Nashville forms, and as such can be seen as a subservient response to the economic power and cultural domination exercised by the US music industry over the Australian scene.

But the early Australian "hillbilly" singers soon began writing their own songs out of their own experience and with extraordinary rapidity created their own genre of country music. It dealt with the real concerns of country people and was closer in tone and feeling to the original Appalachian and Western songstreams of the United States folk culture than to the Nashville music which followed. Slim Dusty's first recorded song, *When the Rain Tumbles Down in July*, is virtually a list of evocative, highly charged bush images drawn directly from his own experience as Banjo Paterson had drawn from his. Their stage names still drew on America — Tex Morton, Buddy Williams, Slim Dusty — but their music was Australian. Often they drew on Australian folk songs and bush ballads; within a decade they had created an original bush music which elicited an enormous response from country people (it still does) and developed into a widespread popular culture of music, songs, ballads, jokes, travelling shows, radio programs and all the rest of it.

Since then, Australian country music has itself been steadily commercialised; EMI suddenly realised that Slim Dusty was selling more records than any other local or overseas artist, rock, pop or country; and country music, like its US counterpart, has become a staple music of an urban working class which has only residual links with the country. But the tremendous success of such songs as *The Pub With No Beer*, and of Gordon Kirkpatrick (Slim Dusty) himself, show that the tradition still has the power to throw up popular icons and images and artists who tap into some stream of the Australian experience and perform one of the crucial roles of popular culture; expressing that which others feel but cannot speak, or sing, or write.

If contemporary popular culture were simply the manipulative and coercive creation of our social controllers, one would have to explain two further phenomena. The first is the inability of the programmers to determine, finally, what will be popular and what won't. To use the pop music industry as an example again, reggae, punk rock and even disco and, more recently, hip-hop and "House" music became popular at grass roots level while the industry chiefs were trying to sell more easily packaged stuff; the same occurred earlier, with Dylan and the whole protest song movement, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, in fact, rock 'n' roll itself. Of course, the industry and media quickly seize upon and commercialise such movements; it is the familiar problem of the avant-garde being unable to keep ahead of the salesmen. But the popular arts never become completely manageable, as successive new movements prove.

The second phenomenon is the multiplicity of motives and interests, often conflicting, shown by those involved in the mass media. Even Australian newspapers, radio stations, TV stations, magazines, and so on, operate in a pluralistic situation. Many of their staff or those who write for them are actively opposed to the policies of the owners and use the mass media to promote counter-ideologies. The media are monopolistic, but not monolithic. (And though their owners can help create popular taste, they are also forced to respond to it; as in the music industry, the controllers are to a certain extent in the hands of the controlled.) Take one media institution, the ABC: despite its conservatisms, many of its programs are opposed to the dominant ideology; the ABC Staff Union, the Women's Broadcasting Cooperative, and some individual producers have real, if limited, power.

There are alternatives. Graffiti, yarns, jokes, bawdy ballads, children's rhymes, satirical songs, and so on, can all be seen as uncensored expressions of the popular imagination. A great deal of popular culture, from sport (surfing) to art (the local rock group) to lifestyle (criminals, cosmins, counterculturalists) to rituals (drugs, skinny dipping, orgies) exists in
defiance of, or in uneasy tension with, the dominant culture. But spray-pak graffiti on the factory wall is not a sufficient answer to the masked potency of the media, which is why the Labor Party’s refusal to confront the media monopolies and its softpedalling on alternative media such as FM stations, video centres, public broadcasting and public TV is so disheartening. Labor leaders like Bob Hawke and, earlier, Neville Wran try to buy off the media chains by deregulating them and granting them Lotto concessions and the like, but this sort of action simply increases the power of the groups that are historically opposed to the ALP. Short-term solutions, long-term defeats.

“Seeing into” culture

Before he died, Ian Turner gave a paper to the University of Exeter titled The Bastards from the Bush: Some Comments on Class and Culture which suggests an alternative to the condemnation by some critics of popular culture as “diversionary and escapist” and as operating “to create a false consciousness in the proletariat by means of the values it disseminates — that happiness can be achieved by individual success within a competitive, class-divided society, and measured in the material rewards of the consumer culture”.

In it Turner argues that the mode of production does not directly and immediately determine culture, but rather sets the limits within which the imagination can operate. From this, he moves on to a defence of both the insights and the “escapes” of the arts and entertainments, and adds “I believe that the imagination should stand in an alternative and critical relationship to the production process and to all existing power structures”. He even commends the counter-culture as lying outside and in opposition to the norms of the high culture of both the capitalist and communist worlds, and in that sense “popular”.

It’s a very clear and level-headed exposition of a position which Turner describes as “libertarian marxist”, and it escapes the anti-populist bias which I described at the beginning of this article. (It also demonstrates what a loss Ian Turner’s death is to us all.) Without leaping at this point into the high culture/popular culture debate, it seems to me that the distinction between the two is no longer as clear as it used to be, and that the traffic between them is usually beneficial. High culture is continually reinvigorated by popular culture. And the mass media, for all its faults, has made the most highly refined creations of Western elite culture accessible to a mass audience for the first time (one million reproductions of Andy Warhol’s Marilyn, da Vinci’s Mona Lisa, and Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony can’t be wrong).

Here were left intellectuals attacking me, and my family, and my neighbours, in fact nearly everyone I knew, as mindless victims of consumer capitalism. Zombies

It has been argued that such creations simply project the values of the exploitative societies they represent, but this is to misunderstand the way in which art can be a process of “seeing into” and “seeing through” the culture of the time, an imaginative mode which can be critical of, in opposition to, or transcend, the social/political superstructure. To use Turner’s language, art is never wholly and utterly conditioned by the dominant economic mode of the time. That’s one of the reasons we can feel optimistic about the evolution in contemporary society of a popular culture which is popularly created and expresses the life and aspirations of the common people.

Three contemporary examples of cultural phenomena confirm this general analysis. And, to make it difficult, I should begin with one which seems to be an absolutely straightforward case of cultural manipulation by the advertising industry. The NSW Tooheys TV ads which link beer to well-known sporting figures and to the Australian sporting ethos, have been phenomenally successful. The “I feel like a Tooheys” refrain has seeped into the consciousness of millions of consumers and has helped make Tooheys, once the underdog in the NSW beer industry, one of the most popular brands in the nation.

Now, undoubtedly one of the reasons this promotion has been so successful is that it has hooked onto an important and pervasive element in Australian life, namely the emotion people feel when they are involved in or watch some sort of sporting triumph. It can be an amazing Mark Ella manoeuvre, or an unexpected marathon win, or an underdog VFL team beating the competition leaders, or anything else which creates within us all that sense of tension, and excitement, and final release which makes almost any sport such a powerful mode of popular culture.

Tooheys has commercialised that emotion for its own purposes. But it’s important to realise that the power of the advertisement derives basically from the authentic sporting moment it recreates, rather than from the brand-name advertising content of the commercial. The media artists who create the ad have hooked on to something quite genuine, and though the purposes towards which the emotion has been used are trivial that does not mean the emotion itself has been invalidated.

In other words, in this concocted pop cultural form there remains enough of the sign’s original power to make it communicate with
a considerable degree of integrity; we
know, in our hearts, that what we are
seeing on the TV set is only a copy,
but it is a copy of something which
stirs and moves us, and if the copy is
communicates to us nonetheless.

But it is a copy of something which
We know the singer's emotion is
authentic behind it. At such times the
fake, but we also know the emotion
she, he is referring to is not, and if we
can feel our way through the facade
we can sometimes discover the
authentic behind it. At such times the
fake is transformed into a genuine

A somewhat similar process
occurs with those sentimental, banal
pop songs of the 'thirties and 'forties
which have become "standards" and
form the repertoire of singers and
easy listening stations all over the
world. For most of my life, I've
despised or ignored those songs
(Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Oscar
Hammerstein) as fake cultural
products which were mass-produced
in Tin Pan Alley just as Fords are
mass-produced at Broadmeadows.
For me, rock 'n' roll came as a blast
of fresh air: as Richard Goldstein
asked, how could we ever have
survived the 'sixties without Chuck
Berry and his gas stations, juke
boxes, schoolyards, teen queens, long
distance calls and V8 jalopies?

In the Australian colony, both
genera were imports, but at least the
second was real. Vicariously, my
brothers and I in Rose Bay lived out
the black rhythm-and-blues rebellion
against honky middle class culture,
just as Liverpool musicians did a few
years later (Roll Over, Beethoven in
thick Merseyside vowels). But
puzzling about it since, I've come to
realise that though the lyrics of the
old pop songs are almost invariably
corny and manipulative, their forms
encapsulate popular feelings and
emotions and, like the Tooheys ads,
hook onto genuine cultural
responses.

We know the singer's emotion is
fake, but we also know the emotion
she, he is referring to is not, and if we
can feel our way through the facade
we can sometimes discover the
authentic behind it. At such times the
fake is transformed into a genuine

form in its own right, has been a
significant part of rhythm-and-
blues, rock 'n' roll, boogie woogie,
jazz, and even contemporary funk.
And in each transmogrification it has
manifested much the same qualities
which have characterised the form
from the beginning.

What is absolutely unique to the
blues, and what has made so many
generations of people respond to it so
powerfully, is its synthesis of sorrow
and joy — a paradox which would be
almost inexplicable if we were not
aware of its social evolution. The
sorrow that characterises the blues is
derived from black slavery and the
work songs, laments, shouts, hollers,
urwhoollies, spirituals and moans
which were synthesised in the blues
form towards the end of the
nineteenth century.

But the blues can also be joyful,
a fierce act of affirmation in the face
of tragedy: as so many blues singers
have explained, they sing "to sing the
blues away", and those interlocked
emotions can be heard in the voice of
every major blues singer from Bessie
Smith to B.B. King. And, as Wilfrid
Mellers has argued in Music In A
New Found Land, in creating the
blues, the black American has
created a perfect artistic metaphor
for modern, alienated humanity:

(1) began as the music of a minority. This
minority, having nothing more to lose,
could accept its alienation and its
isolation for what they were, with a
desperate fortitude denied to the
members of an ostensibly prosperous
society. Yet in so doing this minority
could imbue its awareness of
dispossession with a universal
significance, making its melancholy serve
as a symbol of the alienation of modern,
urban man. D.H. Lawrence said that
humanity today is "like a great uprooted
tree"; and James Joyce made the hero of
his modern Odyssey a Jew. The
American Negro was literally uprooted
from his home...

The reason that the great mass
of people has responded so
instinctively to the blues in one or
other of its forms is that they have
found in the music of a dispossessed,
alienated, ex-slave race the exact
expression of their own dispossession,
alienation and industrial slavery.
Yet they, too, seek a way out. And so
in a modern blues such as B.B. King's
"That's Why I Sing the Blues", which
reached the top of the American
charts, there is a yearning, and yet an
optimism, an excitement which we
all respond to. It is our music that he
is singing.

Loving in vain

One Christmas holidays, in the
surblown heat of Byron Bay, the
young son of a friend was playing
around on guitar and trying to work
out the chords for Love in Vain. He
was trying to sing it too. When I
asked him why, he said it was because
it was the most moving love song he'd ever heard; he had just broken up with the woman he had been living with, after a long relationship. He had learnt the song from a Rolling Stones album, *Let it Bleed*, released back in 1969; but the Stones, of course, got it from Robert Johnson, the great Mississippi Delta blues singer who had recorded it at one of the only two recording sessions he made in 1937, before he died at the age of 20 — poisoned, the story is, by a jealous girlfriend. Not many country blues singers ever sang and wrote songs with the stark and primitive passion of Robert Johnson who, even on his rare recordings, seems to be a man possessed; and *Love in Vain* is an extraordinary song, based on the traditional 12-bar blues but altered by Johnson to become an almost Shakespearean outpouring of unrequited love, and crystallised in a form which is in many ways comparable to the Elizabethan sonnet. The last verse goes:

When that train left the station it had two lights on behind
When that train left the station it had two lights on behind
The blue one was my baby, and the red
one was my mind
When your love's in vain.

Johnson probably wrote that song, in the manner of Delta blues singers, from his own experience; there is a poetic veracity about it which we find in much great literature. He would have sung it at dances, in bars, on street corners to his own people before he recorded it, carrying out the immemorial role of minstrel. If ever there was a music of the people, by the people, for the people, this was it. Johnson's life as an itinerant black musician was, certainly, shaped in part by the dominant capitalist system; but many societies, capitalist and non-capitalist, seem to have equivalent bards, troubadours, and wandering minstrels.

When he recorded his songs for ARC, Johnson was being used by the record company which extracted a profit from his art, in typical capitalist fashion; yet the same system, without comprehending the cultural significance of what it was doing, distributed Johnson's records throughout the United States so that they became part of the popular culture of rural and urban black Americans and carried their messages and metaphors to a vastly wider audience than he would ever have reached in performing live in Mississippi.

More than thirty years later the Rolling Stones, a blues-based British rock band, included its own version of the song on one of its bestselling albums. The Stones, whose name is in itself an act of homage to one of Muddy Waters' most powerful blues, were no doubt as admiring of the song as everyone else who heard it; their version is quite faithful, in lyrics and tone, to Robert Johnson's original, through slowed down and made slightly more melodramatic. By this time the record industry was much more consciously and skilfully exploitative and the profits much larger; Johnson's song reached millions instead of thousands. Decca extracted its profit; the Stones, whose name is rock 'n' roll, extracted theirs; Johnson, who was dead, got nothing; but suddenly the world was given one of the great love songs of our time, a metaphor for all of us who have ever loved in vain, and which for my friend's son acted as both affirmation and catharsis.

In one sense the motives of the commercial system which made this possible are irrelevant; the cultural effect of its operations, in this case, has been the distribution throughout the entire Western world of a music which provides cultural meanings and insights for us all. The same happened with Dylan, the Beatles, black revolutionary music of the 'seventies, and the alternative musics (punk, reggae, hip hop, House) of our time. It's a good example, I think, of how capitalism can never entirely control the effects of its operations nor determine completely what happens to the culture it helps promote; art has a way of escaping the machinations of our merchandisers.

To return to specifics: my friend's son and his own mates now write their own songs and play them — not for some commercial purpose, but because it seems a good way to create music. It certainly is; it's what people have been doing for centuries. They write songs out of their own experience, for their own peers, in an attempt to synthesise that experience, in exactly the way Robert Johnson did. If they finally get their rock group off the ground they will become much more a part of the capitalist system than they are now, but hopefully they will be able to make use of it as much as the system makes use of them. In the meantime, in Byron Bay, Oztalia, a young man has been helped to understand his own life by a song recorded 45 years ago in a San Antonio hotel room by a black blues singer — who was exactly his own age.

That's one song, heard by one person, in one place. You could expand on it a millionfold, with similar built-in complexities. I suppose that's where the role of cultural criticism lies. Some of our popular culture is manipulative, mass media-ised, capitalised in the interests of a conservative hegemony. Some of it quite consciously criticises and resists that hegemony. And some of it struggles to be free of the system, grappling with the eternal questions which confront all societies and civilisations. Most of it is somewhere in between those three trig points, a mixture. That doesn't lead us to easy theoretical answers but it leads us closer to the truth.

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The New ROMANTICS

Parties, movements, coalitions — the left's realignment continues. And the catchcry is out for a new politics. But Jeffrey Minson argues that the new trends in the left can't succeed without a grip on political realism as well as a new vision.

It is a good bet that, within a year, at least one new radical political organisation will formally get off the ground in Australia.

If current tendencies in the Rainbow Alliance, the New Left Party Charter group, or even within the Communist Party of Australia are anything to go by, it (or they) will differ markedly from the traditional left parties, with a much stronger base in the social movements. It will not have much to do with insurrectionist marxist traditions of political analysis, rhetoric and party organisations, especially leninist, stalinist or trotskyist ones.

Nevertheless, reservations about the tag aside, one of its leading edges will be unmistakably socialist. A majority in all the above groups agree on the need for an extensive program of economic "socialisation" as a major precondition for social and environmental changes. Deep ecologists no less than trotskyists need not apply.

So advances have been made during this spate of new (non-insurrectionist) party-forming activity. If the trust and common ground built up so far can be sustained; if efforts to build norms of political conduct originating in the social movements into new organisational structures are successful; and if the interest in policy-formation is further developed, then the prospects for such a political organisation are, in many respects, quite bright. It should attract a far bigger membership than existing left parties. The old left's destructive centrifugal tendencies might be checked. The Australian Democrats might have a serious rival.

Yet there is still reason to doubt whether a social-movement-based party by itself could have more than nuisance value in the contemporary Australian political scene. These reasons will be stated shortly. But rather than justify this reservation at length, my main concern is to examine what I take to be a watershed in Australian progressive politics — one which, were we to learn from it, might prove that reservation unfounded.

This watershed is signalled by the publication this year of John Mathews' pamphlet A Culture of Power. Its interest lies first in its attempt to make the current ACTU strategy for industrial reconstruction the cornerstone of a broader social-democratic reformation. Second, in its attempt to marry Accord-style recipes for industrial democracy to a broader form of political democracy based on institutional recognition of pluralism. Third, in its attempt to wean leftists away from a purely oppositionalist ethos (a "culture of protest"). A framework is developed according to which policy is both informed by progressive principles and long-term goals while also being "grounded in the responsible exercise of power". A "culture of power" is envisaged that would be, one might say, pragmatic on principle.

But is this seeming reconciliation of opposites an organisational possibility or merely a philosophical one? The virtues and limitations of this kind of perspective can best be appreciated in the first instance by examining two characteristics of current left orthodoxy: an endemic utopianism and a related incapacity to be serious about pluralism.

The Culture of Protest

All political parties need values. Any progressive one needs a "vision": some set of principled, long-term objectives. If party-political practice is seen as the art of the possible, then commitments to currently unattainable goals are bound to look utopian in the simple sense of being idealistic. So utopianism is not a problem as such. The problems arise over the place of values in a progressive party's program, the choice of values, and the sort of utopianism to which it is committed. The brunt of my criticism is directed against the Romantic utopian stripe in left literature, conferences and meetings. Romantic philosophy treats politics not as the art of the possible, but as a vehicle for creative social or self-perfection. It is the elevation of magic to the status of a political art form.

Political Romanticism is apparent in a powerful tendency to view the social movements as the locus of all political virtue. The problem here is not the attempt to build on the social movements as such, but rather the tendency to identify them with their most radical, "communitarian" protest dimensions. Or, more precisely, with elements of those dimensions which seem most in keeping with Romantic ideals of creative self-activity and communal wholeness, such as "brainstorming" rituals. As if there were not less Romantic ways of fostering the confidence, capacities
and interest required for participating actively in meetings and conferences, such as the standing orders and chairing procedures evolved in the women's movement or aspects of the communist tradition of cadre education.

Romanticising the social movements veils their failures and successes alike. Has the women's movement, for instance, always evaded the snares of self-marginalisation associated with the "old" left: preaching to the converted, sectarianism, and allowing itself to be identified with a restricted "lifestyle"? The power-base and appeal of feminism has not been uniformly so restricted. Countless women — and men — who are unidentified with feminism as a political movement have incorporated feminist norms and expectations into their lives. Countless improvements in women's circumstances have depended on feminists' historical willingness to involve themselves, in an "official" capacity, in legal, trade union, business, health, media and other institutions.

Utopianism is also manifest in the privileged place of values in determining the longer-term vision of left political organisation. New Economic Directions for Australia, a recent discussion paper circulated by the Rainbow Alliance, perfectly exemplifies the widespread conviction that the first step for a new left party is to draw up a vision of an alternative society — a "non-capitalist, democratic, just and environmentally sustainable economy" — solely on the basis of a combination of labour and social movement ideals. Here Romanticism is not the only problem; nor is the paper's encouraging commitment to detailed policy construction a sufficient counterweight.

Reading through the program's "guessimates" on the number of full-time jobs per annum to be created (p.20) or the cost of its Guaranteed Adequate Income Scheme (pp.23-4) it is hard not to be reminded of Engels' observation in the Anti-Duhring on the classical utopian socialists' programs: "The more completely they were worked out in detail, the more they could not avoid drifting into pure fantasies". David Burchell's report on New Economic Directions (ALR 106) attributes what he, too, sees as its "eerie otherworldliness" to its failure to frame its vision with a political strategy. One factor contributing to this failure can be traced to an implication of this standard new left practice of elaborating its political vision on a solely ethical basis.

In the spirit of the "utopian socialists" Owen, Fourier and Saint-Simon, the need for a radical new order is based on an unqualified rejection of contemporary institutions: "existing planning and administrative structures are either positively hostile ... or lack the intellectual and organisational resources" to realise such an order (p. 46). The counterpart to making ethics the sole foundation and measure of a new order is the absence of any reference to established yet (potentially) progressive institutions which might serve as springboards from which a left alternative might take off. Consequently, the "realistic" division of the proposed program into "short" and "medium term" ingredients means little. How are even the "short-term" proposals in the blueprint supposed to get off the drawing board?

To this perennial question the non-insurrectionist left has a set answer: the election of a left government backed by an extra-parliamentary alliance of "popular" forces, with the capacity to legislate and implement the desired programmatic changes. Support for this position is almost inseparable from an uneasiness about powerful institutions and organised interests which are not amenable to democratic or legislative pressures. But what if this scenario and, consequently, New Economic Directions, were open to a quite different objection?

The conundrum about implementing a socialist "vision" arose from its utopian derivation from a purely ethical foundation. Apart from the institutional vacuum in which this places the program it also makes it incapable of acknowledging the pluralistic structure of modern liberal states. Not all the innumerable, overlapping, conflicting variety of public/private divisions characteristic of such societies are reducible to capitalist economic organisation. Many of the individual and associational freedoms associated with these divisions are highly desirable. Others simply have to be lived with. Among these can be included incommensurable differences in values and life-styles. This diversity is reflected in the multiplicity of reasons for which individuals support a given political party. In turn, this means that no elected party can assume to itself a mandate to implement its entire program. Electoral majorities are cobbled together on a patchwork basis quite incompatible with programmatic ambitions to transform society from top to bottom on the basis of a unitary ethos.

Taking pluralism seriously also means abandoning the left's favourite contrast between cooperation and competition as general principles of social organisation. A pluralistic socialist state may require not only political competition but also certain (regulated) forms of economic competition. Broadening its value-base might enable the left to canvass support among a broader constituency than the small band of left labour and social movement activists to whom this document is principally addressed.

None of these criticisms detracts from the interest of many of New Economic Directions' individual policy proposals themselves. But can this utopian style of political program (hardly unique to the Rainbow Alliance) be abandoned and pluralism embraced without capitulating to powermongering pragmatism? It is partly on the
supposition that these (idealistic, pragmatist) alternatives are not in fact exhaustive that A Culture of Power is staked.

Associtative democracy

Mathews describes his proposal as "a new paradigm of democratisation". By "paradigm" Mathews means "a framework for conceptual and practical work" which is "sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems... for practitioners to resolve" yet which "should provide us with a means of choosing between different strategic and tactical options for reaching quite different strategic goals" i.e. as capable of generating a coherent policy-package. Policy should be based not only — as in New Economic Directions — on ideals but also on a strategic understanding of the constraints and opportunities of the current situation. This both requires and limits the "open-endedness" of the framework, which insists on a (strategically justified) leading role for labour movement organisations. Yet determining the content of Labour Movement Goals in the Eighties (as the pamphlet is subtitled) cannot be the prerogative of the labour movement alone; whence the pluralistic orientation of his paradigm towards "the activities of autonomous associations of workers and citizens".

For Mathews, the primary political fact is the existence of a third-term Labor government which, having proven itself capable of "responsible" economic management, is in a position to initiate a politically acceptable reform program. The second ingredient of the current situation is the persistence, indeed the exacerbation under the Hawke government, of a deterioration in Australia's manufacturing performance (reflected in its balance of payments deficit). The third factor is the continuing presence of the New Right and its free-market and anti-union solutions to every economic problem.

Mathews concedes that, to an extent, some New Right views have become internalised within the ALP. The Accord provides the labour movement with the institutional leverage with which to constitute itself as this country's "leading force for social transformation". The ACTU's formal adoption of Australia Reconstructed at its 1987 Congress marks a significant shift on the union movement's part away from being a traditional locus of defensive protest.

Within the "culture of power" into which, according to Mathews, the labour movement is settling, democratisation of economic organisation has to be justified both on principle and on the grounds of its offering meaningful and practical solutions to currently intractable problems, notably Australia's declining international competitiveness and industrial investment levels. The paradigm of democratisation is thus required to serve two masters. It must make sense in mainstream (big business) economic terms. But it must also persuade left labour and social movement activists formed within a culture of protest that enough of their aspirations can be met by participating in a culture of power.

For this broad mobilisation of support to occur a long-term vision is required. This vision must also make sense in mainstream political and ethical terms. Above all, disaffection with centralised government administration coming from the left, right and centre of the political spectrum must be addressed. Only through the intervention of policies which don't require bureaucratic overseeing, high personal taxation and the sorts of centralised planning which are inimical to local initiatives, can the ethical-political ground be cut away from the New Right critique of all government economic interventions. Mathews' paradigm is accordingly geared to a "socialisation" of industry which is not predicated on its becoming a state monopoly.

Accordingly, three main targets are singled out for democratisation: work organisation, capital investment, and social security provision for unemployment.

How does the proposal on democratising work incorporate traditional labour movement goals into political "business-like" solutions to current economic problems? A hallmark of leading manufacturing sectors in many of the recently most successful national economies has been the displacement of an authoritarian "Fordist" management style by strategies of "flexible specialisation". As Ewer, Higgins and Stephens have argued in their Trade Unions and the Future of Australian Manufacturing, part of the key to competitive advantage in manufacturing lies not in state-of-the-art technology as such but in the quality of its "applied technique". What makes the competitive difference is an accumulation of refinements required to integrate the technology into a given production process. The "good business" side of the case for industrial democratis-
The democratisation of capital extends this argument. It would not require “bigger” government or high taxes; and would seek to go beyond influencing corporate behaviour from without by democratising the levels of internal corporate power. A wide range of policy instruments are canvassed: from changes to company law affecting director accountability, employee or trade union controlled investment funds, and worker directors to planning agreements embracing “good corporate citizen” guidelines on environmental, race and gender issues.

No matter how it is achieved, industrial restructuring will entail a net loss of jobs and of the expectation of full-time life-long employment for the whole adult population. The main thrust of Mathews’ “social policy” recommendations is to make welfare no longer a marginal cost incurred for “non-economic” reasons such as equity, which can be represented as only a “luxury” financed from resources “otherwise” available for economic development or private consumption. Instead, it is to become integral to national economic development. From workers’ point of view redundancy in the interest of economic “progress” is less unacceptable if they are financially cushioned from the effects of restructuring, retrained for new work and not stigmatised for not being in paid employment. It is in this new economic restructuring context that Mathews puts forward his version of a Guaranteed Minimum Income Scheme. The “democratic” dimension of this social policy presumably lies in its use of welfare to foster rather than to curtail workers’ statuses and capacities as “industrial citizens”.

At this juncture the proposals for industrial democratisation and related social policies are placed within the broader context of an “associative democracy”. This is derived from Paul Hirst’s revival of the early twentieth century associational socialist tradition. Originally, for example in G.D.H. Cole’s Guild Socialism Restated (1920), associationalism aimed at the displacement of “the state” by a society of producer’s associations. On the assumption of an underlying identity of (working class) interests, these associations could be left to manage themselves spontaneously. In Hirst’s version, the basic idea of a plurality of socially owned, democratically managed bodies with their own aims and ways of doing things is extended from factories to non-industrial associations.

Graham Richardson’s famous conversion to the environmental cause on the road to Kakadu

Moreover, associational democracy requires state interventions, e.g. public agencies to supervise associations backed by a constitutional “legal order”. The associationalist socialist state, however, “builds on — rather than negates — the plurality and diversity of western civil society, it enhances the powers of voluntary organisations and communities”. Presumably, this entails styles of state regulation and “action at a distance” which work neither by “rolling back the state” nor by excessive “nannying”. Pluralism requires the state to “build associations into its own order through representative and consultative mechanisms” to decentralise authority within the limits set by the need for a legal monopoly of force.

How does Mathews build this pluralistic view of socialist political objectives into his paradigm? Unfortunately the pamphlet mostly provides only the patchiest of indications. Firstly, unlike traditional left programs, Mathews is not committed to identifying the labour and social movements. The political logic of “associative democracy” requires both respecting the autonomy of workers’ and citizens’ associations and regulating them. Alliances between the various movements must accordingly be “constructed” with respect to limited issues and occasions, such as environmental policy on the timber industry or electoral pacts. Trade unions would, of course, be one such regulated “association” among others. The terms of the current Accord, Mathews suggests, could be widened to bring in social movement interests.

Secondly, associative democracy permits a principled but flexible attitude to the question of privatisation, on which a more developed case is made against blanket opposition and in favour of certain sorts of privatisation which don’t entail deregulation and which foster worker initiatives.

Thirdly, the associative paradigm requires political parties to accept pluralism to the point of giving up “the illusion of rule”. For reasons already discussed, party manifestos must rather be seen as ambit claims on the basis of which a government committed to pluralism plays a brokerage, orchestrating role, bargaining for co-operation in implementing its policies on the part of diverse or even opposing interests.

The ghost in the paradigm

Together with its advocacy of a culture of power, Mathews’ proposal for a progressive development of an Accord politics provides a measure of the distance the left has to travel in order to arrive at a vision of an achievable future. Mathews’ attempt to construct a new basis for an ALP, labour and social movement alliance by appropriating the associational model of democracy represents one of the few attempts on the Australian left to come to grips with the realities of pluralism.

However, it cannot be said that the innovative components of Mathews’ “vision” are always consistently sustained or developed. Many of the problems coalesce in the shades of the “old left” which hover over his attempt to broaden out the accord with a view to constructing
“an exceedingly broad coalition that will command support from a majority of the population, condemning the right to marginality”.

The vehicle imagined by Mathews for the hoped-for political settlement between the labour and social movements consists of a renegotiated Accord between the Labor Party, the ACTU and the social movements. Even if these social movements possessed integral organisational structures, the fact remains that such an expansion of parties to the Accord would place an impossible burden on it. How would the parties to it be determined? And what would be the consequences for the labour movement’s capacity to present a united front to employers in the relevant areas of industry policy, price-monitoring, superannuation, to say nothing of wage negotiations and so on, if these organisations are confronted not with the ACTU alone but a host of diverse bodies and interests?

The proposal for an expanded Accord is absurd for other reasons too. John Mathews is no different from many other left-thinking people in tacitly identifying the social movements entirely with “the culture of protest”. Environmentalists, for example, are said to be better at drawing attention to symptoms than to causes and cures and therefore need Labor to show them the way. As if environmentalism, no less than feminism — as pointed out earlier — did not already have a well-organised foot in the governmental door. As if Graham Richardson’s famous conversion to the cause on the road to Kakadu did not mark ALP recognition of the environment as a significant electoral issue. The “mansion” of government has many rooms, not to say states, ministries, commissions and tribunals. Why, then, privilege federal economic policy as the social movements’ sole point of entry? The answer possibly lies in unconstructed elements of Mathews’ Labor-left inheritance.

The proposal to lock the social movements and the labour movement into an all-embracing electoral and policy alliance with the ALP via an economic Accord is all too reminiscent of the “old left” fantasy of subsuming the social movements under an allegedly more fundamental socialist program. It is assumed that socialism is both consistent with all their values and objectives and provides all the material conditions for their realisation.

Claims that a socialist political program can address social movement demands might be more sympathetically received by the latter were they accompanied by recognition of the limitations of an Accord politics and its dependence on social movement support. The more ambitious policy aims of *Australia Reconstructed* reveal several such points of dependency for their realisation on a more diffuse cultural mobilisation of support and practical involvement. National economic regeneration depends on generating “a production culture and consciousness”.

This accent on the need to generate a productionist culture is not empty rhetoric. Flexibility in the face of technical restructuring, commitment to localised improvements, quality control, prompt delivery and workers’ capacity to engage in an informed way in industrial codetermination processes will remain a chimera, argues the document, if retraining is limited to technical on-the-job matters. Whence, for instance, the demand for paid leave for some employees for the purpose not only of retraining but of a more general social and civil education as well as general literacy and numeracy training, special courses for migrants and other disadvantaged groups.

Here is a clear point of entry for the women’s movement, for example, to argue (as Pat Ranald and Caroline King argued in *ALR* 105) that more union attention is required to the particular locations and skill-structure of women’s employment, e.g. to the non-vocational components of retraining.

The fact that the latter lies predominantly in the service sector in turn draws attention to the limits of seeking the galvanisation of popular commitment to a production culture. While there is a strong strategic case for placing industrial restructuring (and its social policy concomitants) at the forefront of socialist renewal, there is a further possibility which chimes in with recent leftist attention to issues of popular culture and “lifestyle”, namely the socialisation not of production as such but of economic consumption and its culture. While this cannot be pursued here, it points to yet another instance of the dependence of labour movement “strategic unionism” on other forces.

No doubt Mathews’ pamphlet will provoke numerous other objections. For example, to its under-estimation of both the depth of cynicism about the Accord among trade unionists, and the grip of political Romanticism on the left. One objection which, however, merely increases its relevance for a new left party is the incongruity of proposing a distinctly leftish program to a Labor party which is and always will be itself a coalition of left and right opinion. But then, part of the value of Mathews’ pamphlet is precisely its provocativeness, and nowhere more so than in the corrosive implications for political romanticism of its biting the bullet of pluralism. A pluralist socialism must be pragmatic on principle.

NOTE


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Welfare’s Losing Battles

In these pragmatic times welfare ideals have almost faded from view. According to Lois Bryson, it’s time to put together some coherent arguments for the welfare society, before it’s too late.

By international standards, historically Australia has shown only modest enthusiasm for welfare state provision. Indeed, we have been described as a “reluctant welfare state”, and today this reluctance has turned to outright hostility as even the modest existing levels of provision are revised and reduced.

Debate concerned with an expanded vision of welfare and the nature of citizenship has been effectively silenced by the intellectual hegemony of conservative economics and by the view that there is an urgent need to cut government expenditure. Budget surpluses, balance of payments, inflation, industry restructuring, privatisation and, to a lesser extent, unemployment dominate the agenda. To argue for left objectives in welfare is, according to current wisdom, to demonstrate a gross form of economic luddism.

When there is talk about the need to cut government expenditure, welfare is an easy target. Public opinion can be readily mobilised against welfare spending: the dole bludger image is a hardy perennial. Support for better provision is not so readily mobilised, at least partly because those most affected are not well placed for political action (unlike, for example, students and academics in the tertiary education debate).

Even bodies which usually act as critics, such as the Australian Council of Social Service, have abandoned the defence of broader and more progressive principles, and now are reduced to arguing only over “how much” within the framework set by government. And, while the ACTU’s document Australia Reconstructed represents a welcome joining of the debate on national objectives, its focus too is restricted to the more traditional industrial and economic matters. The debate about future societal objectives is everywhere framed within conservative parameters.

The Labor government takes refuge from critics of its eschewal of broad socialist principles in the odd feeble comment about social justice, in the fact that it has a target of “eliminating child poverty by 1990”, and that it has instituted the most comprehensive review of social security ever.

The goal of “eliminating child poverty”, even were it to be achieved, clearly represents only a limited aspect of social justice, while in the social security review, broader issues hardly get a sidelong glance. It has been a painstaking exercise to examine carefully the detail of the system of pensions and benefits and the needs of various special groups. For, while the information is potentially quite valuable, it is destined to finish up providing a firmer basis for more precise targeting.

The lack of coherent opposition to the direction of the debate about government spending is not entirely accounted for by the political swing to the right. It is also partly due to the fact that people on the left in Australia have not, historically, developed and promulgated alternative visions of a welfare society. Thus, given that we do have to crank up the debate, this is an opportune time to raise fundamental issues which have largely been ignored.

This leads to the question: how do we provide a systematic socialist vision of what we might term a welfare society to distinguish it from the more restricted notion of a welfare state? Clearly, ongoing debate is required, as the detail is complex, but an obvious starting point is the issue of universalism. This is a classic and fundamental term in the welfare lexicon — though to be of maximum use as a concept it must be conceived of more broadly than it has been to date.

A socialist vision of an equitable society involves universal full citizenship which, in turn, involves the universal availability of a reasonable level of economic support and services as well as the guarantee of a set of agreed rights. Universality is, however, completely off the political agenda at present, and has never been strongly argued for in the debates over welfare provision in Australia.

Children are more popular than welfare recipients

Here I want to tease out some of the complexities of the issue of universalism. To do this I will first consider the retreat from universalism in Australian welfare policy over recent years and focus on the problems raised by the principle of selectivity or targeting which has been favoured. Then I will consider the issue of universalism historically in relation to the Australian welfare state, a task which highlights some major shortcomings which are built into the current system. Finally, I shall draw together some of the implications of the discussion for the socialist project and sketch out some issues which need to be addressed.

While universalism is one logical pole in all debates about
welfare provision, it has not traditionally been an up-front political issue in Australia. From the time Australia opted for funding from government revenue rather than from a contributory scheme, for pensions and benefits, it has been largely taken for granted that total coverage is neither feasible nor necessary. Virtually all entitlements have been carefully hedged by eligibility requirements and means tests. Indeed, a Scandinavian social scientist has suggested that Australia is obsessed with statistics about poverty and poverty lines only because of its limited welfare coverage. When there are strict means tests, strict cut-off points are also required.

The exceptions to selective coverage have been two benefits related to the cost of raising children. The first was the “baby bonus”, a lump sum paid to defray the cost of the birth of children. It was instituted in 1912 and was not abandoned until 1978. The second was child endowment, now family allowance, which is paid to defray the cost of raising children. Instituted in 1941, its details have changed from time to time, but it was not until 1987 that it became means tested. The universalism of these two entitlements must be seen in the light of persistent pronatalism in Australia, where children are politically more popular than welfare recipients. Relative to some social security outlays the cost of the provisions has been quite low. Neither was introduced by a Labor government. Closer analysis of the history of these provisions would be informative for strategies to promote universal provisions.

Universalism as a principle did appear directly on the national political agenda during the ‘seventies when the Whitlam government was in power. For example, via the Poverty Inquiry, the issue of a guaranteed minimum income (GMI) was widely debated. Equal pay, the abandonment of the family wage principle, free tertiary education, a universal health service and the moves towards universal age pensions were promising reforms in the direction of greater and more equitable social expenditure. For the first time, the debate did start to address fundamental questions about universal conditions of employment, the social wage and citizenship. Given today’s drought, the period seems like a veritable oasis of political debate on the fundamental issues.

What, then, are the pros and cons of selectivity? On the pro side, the government sees the advantages of targeting to be that increased benefits can be channelled to the most needy, while keeping costs down. The government is keen to reduce the number that fall below the official poverty line, in its efforts to demonstrate some commitment to what are seen as traditional Labor principles. It wants to do this while still reducing welfare expenditure.

The simple logic that more can be done with less clearly gained dominance when a means test was applied to Family Allowance in 1987. Those earning over fifty thousand dollars were simply seen as not needing the money. The fact that the money saved will not necessarily be channelled to the poor was hardly raised, nor were other preferable methods of redistributing money towards those in need.

In addition to the cost-saving arguments for targeting, its proponents are worried about encouraging people to bludge on welfare, thus destroying work incentives. So, while only the most
extreme reject the view that because compassion must be shown, some welfare provision is necessary, many favour tight controls. The perennial cry of the Fred Niles of this world, for example, is that the supporting parent benefit encourages women to get pregnant so that they can live in comfort at the public's expense.

The following major arguments must be raised against selectivity and for a universalist approach.

- The most fundamental problem with selectivity is that it perpetuates the association between receipt of welfare and the stigma historically associated with charity and poverty. The more widely focused a provision, the more likely it will be seen as a right. A selective system divides the population into first and second (and sometimes third) class citizens.

- On the practical side, because a selective system is almost inevitably more complex, there is an increased likelihood of people not being aware of their entitlements. The quicker regulations change, the more likely this is to occur. The most needy are also the most likely to be poorly informed. Ideally, a universal system (such as encompassed by a GMI) would be simple and well publicised.

- With elaborate targeting there is increased risk of creating poverty traps. A poverty trap arises when people face economic penalties for increasing their income by even small amounts. For example a pension may be reduced by one dollar for every two of income earned over a certain low limit, producing an effective tax rate of 50 cents, or sometimes higher. Poverty traps hit hardest those with low earning capacity. Hence, women are particularly vulnerable.

- Another problem is that of maintaining the value and conditions of any benefit which is restricted to a narrowly targeted and powerless group. It is all too easy for governments to allow rates paid to decline through inflation if the political climate changes. A change of party in government can be crucial here. When the very poor finish up being the only group who receive a particular benefit, it is unlikely that they will have the organisational capacity or the clout to prevent the erosion of their entitlements. European countries which have best maintained their welfare systems through the current conservative economic climate seem to be those which have a wide spectrum of welfare state coverage and the support of the middle class.

- Experience with highly targeted job creation and training schemes raises questions about their effectiveness, questions which currently cannot be answered. However, it does suggest that the recent budget announcements of JET (Jobs, Education and Training for sole parents) and New-Start (for the long-term unemployed) need to be monitored carefully. The problematic nature of such schemes seems likely to be associated with narrow targeting and the lack of political clout of the target population.

- Topping up the wages of the working poor via their children, as with the Family Allowance Supplement (FAS), opens the way for employers to take government "top-up" money into account in wages determination. And here we are dealing with the most vulnerable workers who are not likely to be protected by strong unions. FAS does, nonetheless, have the advantage of recognising that wages may be inadequate, where the Henderson poverty line assumes basic wages rates to be adequate.

- The form of targeting involved in FAS also diverts attention from the universal principles underlying payments for children, and encourages the conviction that these are necessary only for the poor. Hence the principle of horizontal equity, whereby members of society with few financial obligations contribute to those with greater needs and obligations, is weakened. Since children, it is they who suffer most from the deflection away from more socialist responsibility for the care of children.

The government recognises some of these problems, such as lack of information and poverty traps, and is trying to alleviate them. However, in the long run, a more comprehensive system is likely to be the only way to overcome what are really the inherent problems of narrowly targetted systems.

When we look at the historical picture, it is clear that the idea of a welfare society has never been widely canvassed in Australia.

Early this century Australia did achieve something of a world reputation for progressive social policies, but this was largely through lack of substantial competition and through self-promotion. In any case, the early promise was not fulfilled. Again, when we look back we can see that the principles which were the very basis of the welfare state were fundamentally flawed. Only the welfare of some citizens was provided for — often meagrely. Despite the relatively early franchise for women, if we take industrial provisions and welfare together, we find that employed (non-Aboriginal) men were really the only group which achieved any protection.

The well-known Harvester Judgment of 1907 established a family wage to cater for a man, his wife and three children in frugal comfort. Women, even when they were family breadwinners, were paid generally at fifty percent of the male rate. Even men without dependants were paid the family wage unless they were Aboriginal. Many Aboriginal workers were paid only in meagre rations and, if they were paid at all, their rates were scandalously low.

The regulated wages system has been a major focus of political effort by the left, yet, as feminist analysis is now making abundantly clear, it has always favoured able-bodied white men and the new wage deals being negotiated by the ACTU perpetuate this.
Income security benefits have also historically been based on the idea of man as breadwinner, with woman as dependant and entitled to benefits not as an individual, but as mother or wife (or, in more recent non-sexist terminology, spouse — a change of term which nonetheless leaves the reality intact). A fundamentally universal approach would cease responding to people in terms of traditional family roles. The individual would be the basic unit of attention and work and income support would be locked together for all.

Another problematic aspect of selectivity is embedded in the term "welfare" itself. Welfare has historical links with charity and has persistently been used in a selective manner to refer only to transfers to the most needy, though the word can perfectly well embrace everyone. Even the entitlements of returned servicemen have been treated separately from traditional welfare payments (incidentally highlighting the advantages men have in being treated as first class citizens).

Where the wealthy benefit directly from state outlays, or indirectly from tax deductions, incentives, concessions or just having the opportunity to avoid paying taxes, these benefits are not treated as welfare or handouts. Many state-supported facilities, from national and international money markets and banking facilities through to snowfields and yacht marinas, disproportionately favour the wealthy. Such advantages are as much transfers from the public purse to the private wallet as an unemployment benefit.

A fundamental change in conceptualising the welfare state is needed. All transfers of benefits, including revenue forgone, must be counted in the welfare equation not just welfare for the poor. And this must be apportioned in terms of beneficiaries, not just considered in terms of gross outlays. Expenditure on, for example, age pensions looks very high but, then, the number of aged is high. The government loss in revenue to support, for example, oil exploration might seem small, yet when taken in conjunction with the number who will benefit directly from the profits this may well be unacceptably high. The terms selective and universal take on a slightly different meaning in this context.

The circumstances are not all against reclaiming at least some of the agenda. The continuing and increasing demand for women workers suggests they have a relatively secure place in the economy which may provide fertile ground for a move towards pay equity. The demand for women's labour bodes well for achieving increased provision of child care services, a crucial element of any agenda aimed at increased gender equality. And the smaller proportion of women outside the labour force reduces the pressure for traditional welfare support.

**Without a vision, we will finish up by default even more firmly in the thrall of conservative forces**

The trend to equal employment rates for men and women (something tipped to happen in the USA at the turn of the century) suggests we should consider the policy option of a contributory scheme to provide income security and, at the same time, rejoin the GMI debate. Some form of compulsory insurance has been the system adopted by most countries with well-developed welfare state provision, and there is much accumulated wisdom on the subject. In the past, because of men's and women's very different employment careers, contributory systems have perpetuated gender inequality. However, they have consistently proved more resistant to cutsbacks, while throwing into high relief the issue of those unable to work. Careful analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of contributory approaches is one of the steps towards an informed debate.

When there is payment at the point of service delivery, complex arrangements to assist a few needy people are developed, with all the negative consequences of selectivity already raised. People become unclear of their rights, are stigmatised and may be discouraged from applying for entitlements.

Payment through a taxation or contribution system tied to income to cover the cost of benefits and services is a far preferable system. Not only is it simple but, if adhered to systematically, allows for redistribution through progressive taxation rates and a claw-back of benefits according to means. The problem with such a system is that people are said to be unwilling to pay higher taxes, and we certainly have in Australia some unprepared to pay taxes at all.

Superficially, negative views about taxation appear an insurmountable barrier. But there has been much effort expended on making clear what benefits are to be gained from such a system or through the law to make progressivity work. There are many countries where much higher tax rates are tolerated because of recognised benefits.

Australia has suffered from a lack of a well-articulated welfare debate, firmly anchored to the left of the political spectrum. Over time, this gap has had a seriously erosive effect. Here, as in other countries affected by the worldwide political swing to the right, liberal gains are being lost and the premises of a more progressive debate are slipping from view. If we do not keep rehearsing the parameters of a socialist vision, then we will finish up by default even more firmly in the thrall of conservative forces, particularly given their far better access to the media and other ways (such as the education system) of disseminating political views.

While it is clear that we are not likely to be able to change the agenda quickly (let alone the world), we do need to make a start. In fact, not having a clearly articulated position which can be persuasively put, in itself is contributing to the current losses in the "welfare wars".

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The Road From Pol Pot

In August Vietnam announced the beginning of its withdrawal from Kampuchea. The country's long nightmare, which started with Pol Pot's accession after 1975, may at last be drawing to a close. Carlotta McIntosh travelled across a country slowly regaining its memory.

During the Pol Pot years, I learned to pretend that I knew nothing, saw nothing and heard nothing. Because I knew that to speak out, to be clever, was to die.” Thlang Sarun is a survivor from the three years, eight months and 20 days of the Khmer Rouge regime. Now the Kampuchean Chief of External Relations in the Vietnamese-backed Phnom Penh government, Sarun saw his family starve to death in a Cambodia that was once known as the rice bowl of Indochina. French speaking and university educated, Sarun is typical of the urban professionals of Kampuchea.

In 1975 the entire population of the capital, Phnom Penh, was forcibly evacuated by the People's National Liberation Armed Forces of Kampuchea. Sarun took along the family gold, but it wasn’t enough to save his brothers, a sister and his children from starvation before the Vietnamese army drove the Khmer Rouge forces to the Thai border in 1979.

At the Chamcar Mon State Palace, built for his guests by Prince Sihanouk, the Vice-president of the Council of Ministers, Chea Soth, told journalists of the “rebirth” of Kampuchea. “The people have something to eat, somewhere to sleep and they can move freely throughout the country,” he said. In answer to questions about the effect of the current drought, Soth said that Kampuchea is facing a rice deficit of 156,000 tons in 1988.

That evening, the tables in the palace dining hall were set with starched linen, silver cutlery and lavish plates of food — astonishing in a country where famine is imminent. Sarun recounted how, under Pol Pot, he was rationed to a spoonful of coffee a day, there was no rice except on holidays, and mostly he was forced to eat roots from the forest and to catch fish in the stream.

Soth invited journalists to “visit with their own eyes the free markets of Phnom Penh”. In Kampuchea today, provincial officials speak proudly about newly built schools and the increase in wet and dry rice production. The nightmare is in the past and yet the task of reconstruction is far from over. Famine waits patiently behind every rice paddy. Only fifty percent of the food target was reached in 1987; the rest was donated by Vietnam, the USSR and non-government agencies in the west.

The generous hospitality of our hosts can be easily mistaken for bad taste. How to explain to these representatives of the western media that you need help — without losing face? “Qu’est-ce-que sont les plus grands problemes dans la ville?” I ask in my best school-girl French. I am face to face with a thin middle-aged man, the editor of the newspaper Kampuchea. It is the children, he tells me. We have so many children's diseases. What, I said desperately, throwing all my good manners away, do you need most? He seemed stunned by my antipodean directness. I don’t know, but I will find out.

No one escapes the ritual visit to Tuol Sleng, the former headquarters of the infamous S21, the Khmer Rouge secret police. The former high school has been left almost as it was in 1979 when the S21 fled in disarray as the Vietnamese army pushed into Phnom Penh along with rebel remnants of the old Khmer Rouge forces. The barbed wire on the school verandahs serves as a reminder of the terrible atrocities that took place.

As resistance against Pol Pot’s experiment in social engineering grew, so did the power of the secret police. Opposition to Pol Pot's policies sparked a violent purge within the government itself. The Minister for Information in Pol Pot’s government confessed under torture at Tuol Sleng to being an agent of the KGB and the CIA.

It is Kampuchea’s Auschwitz. We are shown the room where the confessions of the accused were stored. More than ten thousand people entered Tuol Sleng, only eight are known to have survived. Similar death prisons were discovered around the country. Important prisoners were chained to the floor in tiny cells. Large black and white
The nightmare recedes: a Kampuchean soldier guards the road to Phnom Penh, photographs of mangled bodies hang beside the iron beds where suspected traitors were tortured. The piles of clothes, the water cure closet and the photographs of the hapless victims, their faces frozen with fear, combine to produce a feeling of deep depression. We are told that no one in Kampuchea during that time escaped without losing at least one member of their immediate family. Kampuchea never seem to tire of telling foreigners about the genocide. The repetition grates on one of the western journalists. "Why," he asks, "do they keep harping on this stuff. Everybody knows about Pol Pot."

The Mekong River crossing is hot, dust and crowds. Trucks loaded with supplies from Ho Chi Minh City queue up to cross the river. Above the levee a huge crowd throngs this busy trading point between Kampuchea and Vietnam. They watch us as we walk about waiting for the ferry. The soldiers keep the people back. A bus with produce on its roof gets a free ride change. A Kampuchean official hustles and we jump the queue of trucks waiting for a place on the ferry. The ferry carries cars, trucks, buses and passengers swiftly across the muddy but majestic Mekong.

First stop across the border at the town of Svay Rien, a formal press conference with provincial chief Mouk Sim, who speaks in Kampuchean that sounds like bursts of automatic gunfire. The interpreter yells through a loud hailer. Questions about the food crop, public programs, education, then a trip to the toilets, scented wet towels, coffee, soda water, and back to the buses. We learn that some of the Kampuchean officials are journalists. Gracefully they hand out lunch of cold chicken, fruit, bread and lukewarm beer.

The road from Svay Rien Province to Phnom Penh crosses the safest region of the country. The potholed surface of the narrow road makes progress slow. In the rainy season, large tracts of Kampuchea are covered with water. In January, the paddy fields are brown although some lie under water, evidence that the fragile system of dams and dykes is slowly being repaired. The irrigation system was extensively damaged by US bombing attacks aimed at flushing out Viet Cong guerrilla units during the 1970-75 pro-US Lon Nol government. After 1975, a whole class of professionals were killed or fled the country and Pol Pot's peasant engineers were ill-equipped to direct the necessary reconstruction. The houses, poor by Vietnamese standards, stand on poles; boats tied up below wait for the rains to release them. As our caravan passes by the people stare with amazement. We are a rare spectacle.

"Under Pol Pot the people were starving because they were not permitted to plant, but now they can plant and harvest their own food." In Ho Chi Minh City, the day before, the Kampuchean Deputy Foreign Minister's words raised intriguing questions about communism in Kampuchea today. If forced collectivisation has been abandoned, has the notion of co-operative production also been abandoned? Are Kampuchean peasants free to dispose of the fruits of their labour as they wish? Has the disastrous experience of Khmer Rouge communes completely erased any desire to experiment with communal farms? The brown paddy fields, partly under water, and fragile stilt houses surrounded by sugar palms give no answers to these questions.

Wheels are precious. Bicycles often carry two, three, or even four people each. The road is thick with traffic as peasants carry their wares to market. Trucks loaded with sacks and people on top trundle past towards the Vietnamese border. The black pyjamas of the Khmer Rouge are gone and, in their place, a riot of red and pink hats, woven Khmer headscarves and embroidered clothing enliven the dusty roadside. A Kampuchean journalist proudly dressed in a safari suit and wearing glasses tells us that such an outfit would have condemned him to death ten years ago.

The caravan stops. We scramble out to stretch our legs and take pictures. The Kampuchean soldiers spill out of the jeeps and stand guard. Slowly, children emerge from a nearby field. We watch and wave.
They advance slowly, their curiosity overcoming their shyness. They regard us gravely as we take pictures, but the unscheduled stop is not for your benefit. A journalist from Agence France Presse sustained a head wound when he stood up in the moving bus to get a better view of the countryside. As he is taken by ambulance to Phnom Penh, one old Indochina hand is heard to mutter, "Wait till he sees a Khmer hospital!"

Sarun tells me that there were no hospitals as such during the Pol Pot years. Young soldiers untrained in medicine improvised with natural cures, but they knew nothing of sterilisation so they often caused more illnesses than they cured. The denial of knowledge was a principle that all soon learned to obey. "One saw nothing, one heard nothing, one knew nothing." Sarun's knowledge of French could have put his life in extreme danger.

With crazy urgency we press on despite the objections of journalists who want to stop to take pictures of the terrain most heavily bombed during the final years of Nixon's presidency.

In the concrete pagoda palace of Chamcar Mon, long white tables bearing exquisite food have been laid out for the foreign guests. At one end an incredible moving sculpture of tropical fruit with blinking coloured lights adorns the wall. Cymbals and gongs fill the warm air of the outside theatre courtyard with the sounds of Cambodian culture. A special concert has begun. The extravagance of the Khmer costumes and dance celebrates the fabled Kampuchea of Angkor.

Ros Kosal is 23, a journalist with Pracheachon, a weekly newspaper of the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party. Before he reached fourteen, his parents and seven brothers were killed by the Khmer Rouge. His country has been at war since he was five years old. Government ministers and officials are often young, like Ros, or over fifty. Why, he asks, did no one come to help the Kampuchean people? I don't know the answer to that question. I only know that, even now, the trauma of Kampuchea remains in the bottom drawer, an illegitimate sub-text to our collective guilt about Indochina.

The next morning our scheduled stop at the old palace is cancelled. As our bus is about to leave the palace gates to take us to the airport, Ros is running, almost flying down the driveway, wearing an enormous smile on his face and waving a small piece of paper in his hand. It's my reply from the editor of the Kampuchea. It reads, in French: "Schoolbooks, coloured pencils, exercise books, powdered milk and compasses".

Angkor Wat. Built when the territory of Kampuchea stretched from deep inside Vietnam's present borders to well inside the current frontier with Thailand. A tangible sign that a long time ago Kampuchea was a rich and powerful country. The friezes worn shiny from the touch of human hands, the precious metals and priceless gems are long since gone. The paved corridors and inner hallways are concave with the footsteps of a thousand years of human passage. Desecrated statues are reminders of recent history.

The sound of distant gunfire tells us that we are near the border with Thailand. Most of the fighting in Kampuchea takes place near the border camps where the coalition troops of Norodom Sihanouk and the Khmer Rouge are based. Our guide tells us not to worry — it's just rifle practice.

As the Soviet piloted plane takes off from Siem Riep airport, it sways from left to right as if in a dog fight. The fancy flying is not meant to impress, it is simply standard procedure in case of Khmer Rouge attacks. Anti-aircraft guns on the tarmac are a reminder that, despite the imminent Vietnamese withdrawal, this still is a country at war. My Kampuchean guide explains that it's just a precaution. He is eager to practise his English. He had an Australian teacher of English before 1975 but, "my mind has been mixed up, I cannot remember his name".

CARLOTTA McINTOSH is a member of the Sydney ALR collective.
The Jackson Enigma

The hardest-working man-child in show business, who brings Pepsi to perestroika and gets paid in full. An overweaned child star who refuses to grow up, caught out in a fantasy world where his best friends are llamas and chimpanzees.

A modern musician in the expressive Afro-American tradition whose unreal abilities as a singer and performer place him in a class of his own. Which is the real Michael Jackson? Is there a real Michael Jackson?

As a phenomenon of '80s popular culture, Michael Jackson's stardom has attained a strange kind of hyper-reality. The image is everywhere, on billboards, badges and T-shirts, in adverts, newspapers and magazines: it's hard to believe there might be a real person at the centre of the mythology created around this multi-media mega "personality". But then Michael Jackson is also the product of a unique career in the modern entertainment industry which began at age six when he fronted his brothers in the Jackson Five. A family group (like many black American musical acts), the Jacksons were moulded and initially managed by their father Joe, who left his job in a mid-west steel town to promote them into Motown's premier teenybopper group.

I Want You Back, a Jackson Five hit from 1970, has recently been in the charts again, but Michael has moved on from his working-class roots in Gary, Indiana. Some 20 years later, receiving an award at the White House, it's not clear who was upstaging or outperforming whom: the Hollywood actor turned politician or the Boy Who Fell to Earth? Only in America perhaps, but if Jackson's life story (as told in Moonwalk, his autobiography) tells us how one black boy entered the American dream, the question is how
can he escape when it turns into a nightmare? His next tune for the Pepsi advertising campaign is called The Price of Fame — he should know.

As a key icon of the 80s the focus of mass attention is on Michael Jackson's face. The cute child all got up in gaudy flower-power gear grew up into an image of profoundly post-modern peculiarity. As a star of the second time around, Jackson has redesigned his image, creating a spectacle of sexual and racial ambiguity: is he masculine or feminine, child or adult, black or white? Does it make any difference anyway?

With its mask-like unreality, the changing racial/facial features of this image have generated endless commentary, stories and speculation about his "true" identity.

It is the ethnic indeterminacy — "He used to be black", as one 11-year-old fan said to me — that has captured the public imagination. It has been said that he's had plastic surgery to make himself look "more white", although he admits only to a couple of nose jobs and the insertion of a cleft chin: "I have never had my cheeks altered, nor have I had dermabrasion or a skin peel. It's my face and I know", he protests, pointing out that many white stars have had cosmetic surgery without provoking such a fuss. People have tended to respond to the results with bemused fascination or sheer horror.

Among some black people the apparent deracination of his identity is interpreted as more than a mere "sell out", it's seen as an expression of self-negation, a morbid desire to erase his blackness and "become white".

With each calibration of the visual signs of "race" (hair, skin, face) his image has acquired more gender instability, more androgyny. Many have noticed more than a passing resemblance to his one-time mentor at Motown — Diana Ross. The public persona of a non-threatening, neutralised Peter Pan figure is accompanied by the proliferation of quasi-psychiatric interpretations: "Mad, Bad or Sad?" as the tabloids ask. In his autobiography, Jackson himself exacerbates the mythology, portraying himself as the loneliest boy in the world, trapped in the tragic narrative of the child star, encapsulated in his poignant identification with Liz Taylor, Liza Minelli, Brook Shields and Tatum O'Neal: all born in a trunk, like himself.

Indeed, the show business environment in which he grew up was not that "normal". How many teenagers have a fear of being crushed by crowds of screaming fans, how many could wake up on Saturday morning, turn on the TV and say: "I'm a cartoon!? Jackson acknowledges that he has a problem about his identity, and yet this was brought on by one of the most ordinary rites of adolescence, acne. "I became subconsciously scared by this experience with my skin. I got very shy and my appearance began to depress me."

Alternatively, the strangeness of Michael Jackson’s looks may be evaluated as part of a calculated "crossover" marketing strategy. "He’s the youngest child I know and the oldest man I know", comments Quincy Jones, producer of Bad and Thriller — which remains the largest-selling LP in the history of pop. This comment alludes to another Michael Jackson behind the image, a person whose experience has equipped him with astute business sense about the machinations of corporate capital in the world of entertainment. As a perfectionist pop professional, Jackson’s ambiguous identity can be appreciated as a crafty piece of post-industrial design; the aesthetic reconstruction of his face promoting a sophisticated marketing strategy.

Capitalism has always had a weird relationship to black culture and its musical creativity. Popular entertainment has been dependent upon black innovation, yet black artists have rarely enjoyed the profits of their labour as the mass culture industries have been largely controlled by whites. The racial hierarchy of music markets creates a double bind in which “authentic” expression is marginalised (yet also exploited as a source of new sounds) while black artists who “cross over” from minority to mainstream audiences do so only by being a one-off novelty (reggae is still marketed in this way, as Aswad might tell you) fulfilling stereotypical images (Charlie Parker and Jimi Hendrix — the drug-wrecked genius “type”) or by adapting to mainstream norms (Nat King Cole or Diana Ross).

Jackson’s star-image incorporates a bit of all three played to the max and inflected with a concern for the visual look of things. Chuck Berry was a cross-over hit because, on radio, he “sounded white”. Michael Jackson, on the other hand, resembles Lena Horne or Dorothy Dandridge as black stars who negotiated their way into the mainstream by “looking white”. But unlike earlier generations of performers who were ruthless ripped off by Tin Pan Alley, he is in control of his own bank balance. Whereas Little Richard screams and shouts, quite rightly, about his overdue royalties, Jackson owns the publishing rights on The Beatles’ back-catalogue. To borrow a line from his sister Janet's record: “He's in control”, an ideal held dear by many of the British post-punk bands. It was in the early '80s when video became essential to the remapping of music markets that Jackson himself designed the corporate marketing campaign for Thriller.

As a soundscape, Thriller was designed so that every track could be released as a single, and each song appears to be targeted at a discrete generic market: ballads, disco, rock, pop, everything except country and western. But most of all it was the visual that mattered: the three videos — Billy Jean, Beat It and Thriller — were, he says: “All part of my original concept for the album. I was determined to present this music as visually as possible”. In the US each of the videos was played in heavy rotation on MTV and this was important as Jackson was the first black act to get over the
The real coup, however, was the mini-film for *Thriller*, directed by John Landis, which retains a world record for the biggest-selling music video. A pastiche of the B-movie horror genre, Jackson's enactment of the teenage werewolf transformation can be read as an allegory of the cosmetic reconstruction of his face, parodying the "horrified" reaction at his changing looks.

In the marketing of *Thriller* Jackson became the prototype for a new species of pop star in the '80s — the designer-hybrid. By dissolving rigid sexual and racial identities, his reconstituted image could take on a multiplicity of meanings for different markets. The essence of the designer-hybrid is to "play" with these identities so that the image will be whatever you want it to be.

The designer-hybrid aesthetic brings diverse ethnic audiences together as consumers but, unlike '60s bands like Sly and the Family Stone, there is no political ideology except that of multinational capitalism. Rigid ethnic identities, like national boundaries, hinder rather than help the free flow of cultural commodities — what better then than a design aesthetic that dissolves race, ethnicity and gender as fixed identities? This is not so hypothetical once we consider the way Michael Jackson's world tour follows the path of multinational capital. In recent years significant markets have developed in Latin America and South-East Asia. And Jackson's ambiguous star-image with its free-floating identity, can appeal to both.

Children form a large contingent of Jackson's fans and an important market segment as far as singles are concerned. His appeal here may be attributed less to the racial ambiguity than to the larger-than-life, cartoon-like fantasy figure that Jackson embodies. This is not to take a dim view of children consumers but to emphasise that, unlike art school-trained pop professionals, Jackson expresses himself through references to the visual culture of Hollywood. Given his experience, where else would such references come from?

The boy in the bubble assembles his iconography from the Hollyweird world of "that's entertainment". The fedora hat that stylises his dazzling "moonwalk" dance is pure Judy Garland and his book is dedicated to Fred Astaire. Jackson, it seems, has crossed over so far he's struggling to get back into the real world. And this is the real tragedy: his music has become boring and mechanical, his videos repetitive scenarios of masculine anxieties. In the meantime he's on permanent display at Madame Tussaud's and at Disneyland.

Ultimately, Michael Jackson is symptomatic of what has been described as the fragmentation of identity in post-modern consumer culture. On the one hand, there is a creeping smell of decay about his unreal image — a nagging question about how far he can go. On the other, there is something potentially subversive about the ethnic androgyny, something waiting to be politicised. And there is that undeniable talent, the sensual voice and the ethereal dancer, the lithe and graceful body in motion that promises the angelic reconciliation of the sexes.

*Roberta Mercer*

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**Hip Hop Shock**

When leading New York hip hop duo Public Enemy toured England in May, the fabled British tabloids almost lost their marbles. They and their fans were blamed for everything from the graffiti on the Underground to a novel form of mobile mass mugging known as “steaming”.

In the same month Run DMC, their stablemates on the premier hip hop record label Def Jam Records, were banned from performing at the Wembley Arena and a number of other major London music venues. “If you listen to the lyrics of hip hop,” claimed one Sergeant Steve Hill of Notting Hill police station, “they actually revere crime.” Like rock’n’roll in the ‘fifties and ‘sixties before it, hip hop became a bona fide moral panic.

Public Enemy won’t be touring Australia this year; perhaps not surprisingly. But Run DMC, undoubtedly the world’s number one hip hop act, will — in November.

And so will a star-studded line-up including Eric B and Rakim (fresh from a number one hit in the British Charts, Paid in Full) and Britain’s first homegrown hip hop star, Derek B. Australia may be about to join the hip hop panic.

Hip hop originated at the beginning of the decade in New York, most prominently on the records of the Sugarhill Gang, an all-black label whose most famous offspring was Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. Their singles “The Message”, “White Lines” (an anti-drugs anthem) and “New York New York” defined a hip hop — or, as it was then more widely known, rap — style. The keynote was the spoken vocals, rushed in a funky monotone which doubled as the rhythm while a bass and a drum machine thumped out a beat. On record, hip hop can be monotonous: the rhythm can become predictable; the beat is angry but often repetitive. On the dance floor the effect is different: the spoken lyrics strain against the beat, producing a sound so insistant yet complex that it takes a furious dance style to keep up with it. Hence the popularity of “breakdancing”, the street dance style which gained a certain voyeuristic celebrity in the early ‘eighties, particularly among tourists to North American cities.

Nowadays, hip hop has “crossed over” in the United States. Run DMC have become airplay material on AM radio: their first big hit, “Walk This Way”, was a tongue-in-cheek duet with heavy-metal veterans Aerosmith, calculated for appeal to Middle America. It was a shrewd gesture: hip hop’s bastions among black ghetto youth in some ways parallel the young blue-collar white male constituency of heavy metal (and Run DMC often borrow a kitschy version of heavy metal’s over-the-top bass guitar sound). Hip hop’s only white stars, the Beastie Boys, compromise between the two genres with a vocal delivery which can only be described as “spoiled brat”. Yet while heavy metal serves up stylised violent catharsis to its fans, the essence of hip hop’s style is cool. The video for “Walk This Way” proved the point: Aerosmith self-parodically thumped and shook their manes; Run DMC, in basic black, were coolly disdainful. For young New York blacks, hip hop is the New Style.

In Britain, and to a rather lesser extent in Australia, hip hop has made its entree in a very different context: the similarly style-conscious, but predominantly white, dance club scene. Here it has become one ingredient in a cocktail of musical styles ranging from the gay-scene-derived Hi NRG through to House music (originally from Chicago, but highly popular in England) and the currently fashionable Acid House (which borrows, as the name suggests, from psychedelia as well as the ‘eighties dance floor drug Ecstasy).

Recently, “Push It” by New York female hip hop stars
Salt'n'Pepa hit the mainstream charts in Australia; a sign of the growing sophistication of pop's wider public. “Push It” combined an aggressively self-confident female sexuality with a loping rhythm quite unlike hip hop's usual stabbing beat. It could be interpreted as a jaunty two-fingered riposte to the monotonous misogyny of the likes of Public Enemy — and it was eminently danceable.

Hip hop has made inroads, too, into the dance party scene, where the style-conscious young and gay scene collide. At Sydney's Darling Harbour and Hordern Pavilion, hip hop's heat has entered the repertoire of swirling rhythms suffusing the dusk-to-dawn dance floors. However, at the Eat Rat party which recently raised sizeable sums for Ethiopia in Sydney, hip hop's street-smart cynicism was upstaged by some of the sentiment older nostalgics suppose its generation to have abandoned. The most popular number of the night wasn’t by Salt'n'Pepa or Run DMC: it was the Special AKA’s “Free Nelson Mandela” — a song which hasn't been in the charts for quite a few years.

A.L.R's Dancefloor Selection:
1. Sxpress, Theme from Sxpress
2. Salt'n'Pepa, Push It
4. Bomb the Bass, Beat Dis
5. Eric B and Rakim, Paid In Full (The Coldcut Remix).

David Burchell

Interfacing for '88

Postmodernism or propaganda? When the Bicentennial Travelling Exhibition passed through Brisbane, Colin Mercer dropped by for a look.

"T"he drama, spectacle and wit of this Exhibition will heighten awareness of our national identity” says Melbourne architect Daryl Jackson, designer of the “Tent City” which is the Australian Bicentennial Exhibition (ABE). Rationalising the main “concept” of the exhibition as embodying the “atmosphere associated with the establishment of a settlement”, he explains that he “felt the concept should convey a sense of community that is part of the Australian psyche”. And then, “this ... emphasis on community and strong social networks is at the core of the Australian spirit of mateship”. This is a populist exhibition.

On a cold, windy and rainy day in Toowoomba, the “Garden City” of Queensland’s Darling Downs, it had all the appearance of a large country fair complete with local exhibits of arts and crafts, flower arrangements, a rather sad “living” exhibition of a dead local coal mine and so on. The main difference was the fleet of Kenworth Pantechinicos, the prime movers of this touring display of national icons and “concepts”. It’s a touchie-feelie exhibition. You don't just look, you interact. You don't walk through, you experience. The senior curator, Pete Emmett, formerly of the NSW Crafts Council and the Centre Gallery at The Rocks in Sydney, wants “to encourage visitors to ask themselves ‘Where do I stand?’ “ In a queue of about two hundred schoolchildren the question was sometimes redundant but, nonetheless, this made clear the essentially pedagogical nature of the exhibition. It’s a distinctively modern pedagogy: “it demanded an evocative and expressive approach, in preference to a documentary presentation.” (Emmett again.) And, in these terms, it works pretty well, notwithstanding the rate at which you are forced to move through the exhibits by the ushered flow of school kids.

There are six main exhibits — tent modules built around one of the pantechinicos — in the “National Arcade”. Each of these is structured around a theme — Journeys, Environment, Together, Identity, Today, Futures — and they are probably best described as a sort of anthropology of the present; the bits and pieces of national life that you would show to the proverbial Martian if asked to explain what Australia is. This is a moveable museum of national memory. And, to give due credit to the organisers and curators, the “selective historical remembrance” which has traditionally marked national exhibitions in Australia and elsewhere has been extended here to include some of those points of conflict which are frequently edited out. These include the themes of contact with Aboriginal culture and its effects, the emergence of the labour movement, women's rights, struggles over the environment, hard options in the development of new technologies and so on. All of this is ranged alongside the more official bric-a-brac of national history — relics from Captain Cook’s voyages (a telescope, two pairs of shoe buckles and a compass), copies of the Constitution, pictures of the 'anzacs, models of the new Parliament House and so on.

In between the indigenous and the official there is the crucial buffer zone of the popular: Ginger Meggs Chesty Bond, Ben Chifley's gardening hat, the FJ Holden, Ned Kelly's armour, Mo McCaughhey, Bunyip Bluegum, Dawn Fraser’s medal and the 1956 Olympic torch. All of this can be found in the identity exhibit, which I found the most interesting partly because it emphasises the ways in which forms of national and ethnic identity are consolidated at the level of popular culture. This is not a nationalist exhibit, but it does demonstrate how, in the formation of a national culture, anything, from a beer bottle to a sporting hero, is potential grist to the mill. We are not dealing with elaborated political philosophies
here but with the daily, repetitive and ephemeral forms of popular culture shaped and organised into icons of nationhood. It’s a useful reminder for those who are interested in reshaping the contours of national identity that nationalism is not just a hand-me-down intellectual movement but also has firm roots in the objects and symbols of popular experience. And, if this exhibit and the exhibition as a whole demonstrate one thing, appropriate to its nature as a museum form, then that is that the question of nationalism is as much an “anthropological” question as a political one. It is about the continuous and repetitive customs and rituals, the institutions, both public and private, which support those practices (the media, the family, the market) which make up what Benedict Anderson has called the “imagined community” of the nation.

All of the exhibits in the National Arcade, with the exception of Futures, have determined their forms of classification by starting from the familiar, the everyday and the ephemeral, building them up into particular arrangements which are, in the trendy language of the organisers, “concepts” or “themes” provided by even trendier sounding design companies like Upset Pty. Ltd., Audience Motivation Pty. Ltd., Sound Design Studio, Stage Arts Pty. Ltd. This gives some indication that the organisation of the ABE and its chosen forms of classification and emphasis are very much the products of a post-1960s generation of curators and cultural entrepreneurs.

Interaction and interface are the names of the game and it is especially clear here, given the level of private sector involvement, that (as Wendy McCarthy of the Bicentennial Authority said at the beginning of 1988) this is “not a party put on by the government”. This double distancing, both economic and ideological, from the “official nation” opens up some contradictions in the exhibition itself. On the one hand, there are some distinctive reminders of a Coca Cola concept of the community in a purely celebratory mode. On the other hand, though, there is sufficient flexibility in some of the exhibits to enable a more active and critical consideration of “Australianness” to take place. In the end, though, that will depend on what the local communities and, especially the schools, do with their day’s outing once the pantechnicons have moved on.

COLIN MERCER teaches in Humanities at Griffith University, Brisbane.

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Unbearably Kitsch


In Stephen Kaufman’s Unbearable Lightness of Being, Daniel Day Lewis, looking very different from the tough blond cockney role in My Beautiful Laundrette, cruises the pale corridors of hospitals and bath houses in pursuit of his major interest — women.

Like the book by Milan Kundera on which it is based, the film’s major preoccupation is with love relationships. The backdrop is Prague in the ‘60s, with its anti-fun communist officials. We are shown the thunderous tanks of Soviet occupation, public resistance, and the weary march of people fleeing the country.

Tomas and his two lovers, Tereza and Sabina, represent states of “being” in relation to their country. To Tereza, life is heavy and Czechoslovakia, which she describes as “the country of the weak”, is where she must belong. Tomas’ life is unbearably light. He is at first irresponsible and flighty: later he chooses heaviness, returns to his country, where he is not permitted to work again as a doctor and finds himself cleaning windows for influential people. Sabina, an artist, is the epitomy of lightness, and her choice of freedom is unbearable.

In the book, Kundera put it this way:

If every second of our lives recurs an infinite number of times, we are nailed to eternity as Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross. It is a terrifying prospect. In the world of eternal return the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make.

To Kundera, the heavier the burden, “the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become”. The absence of a burden causes “man” to “be lighter than air ... become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant”.

So which is better, lightness or heaviness? Lightly, Tomas writes an article for a newspaper comparing the Czech communists with Oedipus. When Oedipus discovered he had slept with his mother and killed his father, and had thus brought ruin on his country, he put out his eyes. Except, the communists say, we didn’t know, we were misled. They didn’t take responsibility. Following the Soviet occupation, Tomas is suspect and is asked to retract the article. (Officials tell him, come now, as a doctor, surely you don’t want us to put out our eyes?) When Tomas refuses to retract the article, he becomes heavy. He is no longer allowed to work as a doctor. As time
goes by, however, he becomes lighter — his job as a window cleaner relieves him of responsibilities.

The intricacies of the lightness/heaviness theme is not explained in the film. I doubt that anyone seeing the film who hasn't read the book would guess the meaning of the title.

Another theme in the film is that of “kitsch”. Kundera tells us in his book that “kitsch” is a German word which has entered all Western languages. He says its original metaphysical meaning “is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence”.

In the film Sabina says to her lover Franz that “everywhere music is becoming noise”. Banality conquers all. Dissent is suppressed. Kundera sees kitsch as “the essential ideal of all politicians and all political parties and movements”. To Kundera, political movements rest not so much on rational attitudes as on “the fantasies, images, words, and archetypes that come together to make up this or that political kitsch”. To Sabina, Tomas is “the opposite of kitsch”. She says to him that “... in the kingdom of kitsch, you would be a monster”.

Sabina’s horror of kitsch, of the “grand march” of “the raised fist”, is similar to Tereza’s nightmare/fantasy of other women at the swimming pool suddenly appearing naked. In the book there are corpses floating just below the surface of the water — the dream is reminiscent of a Holocaust scene of the extermination of Jews. In the film, Tereza’s vision of the naked, exercising women is part of the “erotica”.

A literary adaptation to film is always a problem. The result rarely seems to be satisfying. This film opts for “lightness” — the issues in Kundera’s book are superficially dealt with, their significance obscured.

The film is marketed for its “erotica”. It is described as “a lovers’ story”. The advertising shows Sabina in sexy underwear posed above a mirror. This is accurate enough, inasmuch as the film’s “erotica” pivots around the woman’s body as image of desire. It is wearisome, contrived stuff. Fragments of women’s bodies coyly beckon; the missionary position reigns supreme. In short, the film’s “erotica” is extremely kitsch.

**JANE SKELTON** is a Sydney writer.

### New Directions

**ANZUS: Australia’s Predicament in the Nuclear Age, Joseph A. Camilleri. (MacMillan, 1988.) $19.95.**


Reviewed by Peter Jones.

If the peace movement has achieved nothing else it has certainly raised public consciousness on issues pertaining to the nuclear arms race. There is now a market for books on subjects that previously would have been ignored: the victims of a deliberate bipartisan campaign to maintain a blanket of secrecy over both the long-term implications of the ANZUS Alliance signed in 1951 and the details of US bases in this country like Pine Gap.

Most Australians still seem to think that ANZUS is concerned with US support for Australia in the event of an external threat, although the government has always pointed out that this is not the case. Joe Camilleri sets out to look at the historical origins of ANZUS, and consider the arguments for and against the alliance. He then examines how the whole significance of ANZUS has changed with the evolution of US global and nuclear strategy — although the Australian public has never been encouraged to understand these developments.

Now that the heady days of the great marches are past, the peace movement is moving on to look at defence alternatives for Australia outside the ANZUS framework. Joe Camilleri explores some of these options, reflecting a similar school of thought now growing in Europe as the peace movement there begins to explore non-nuclear and non-provocative defence for a Europe beyond the blocs. Pacifists go one step further, with a strategy of disarmament that moves through non-alignment and non-provocative defence to social defence in conjunction with more emphasis on international conflict resolution using negotiation, arbitration and Third Party mediation.

In the meantime, it is important that the peace movement continues to focus on the demand for the removal of all US bases, principally because the process of realignment or an Australia beyond the blocs will mean an end to all foreign bases on Australian soil. We must be grateful to Des Ball for doing more than anyone else in Australia to lift the cloak of secrecy on the US bases in Australia even though, in his latest book on the subject, he calls for the Australian public to support Pine Gap. There are several more detailed articles refuting the arguments used by Des Ball to justify Pine Gap.

Principally, they point out that when Pine Gap was built there were no arms control agreements to verify; and that Australia should take part in international verification procedures through an international agreement and not simply on behalf of the United States. As for the other functions of Pine Gap, we can only speculate as no one will tell us what they are. The likelihood is that they are nothing to do with verification and if we did know what they were about, we would not want them.

**PETER JONES** works in the office of Senator JO Vallentine in Canberra.
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If Macrobiotic cuisine seems a contradiction in terms, the Iku take-away and restaurant in Sydney’s Glebe Pt Road might make you think again. A macrobiotic diet centres on grains and vegetables but not to the exclusion of animal food if desired. Put simply, each meal is a balance of foods categories as yin and yang. Close to Parramatta Rd, Sydney’s largest thoroughfare, Iku is perfectly placed for dropping in on your way into the city or grabbing a snack before taking a stroll up Glebe Pt Rd. You’ll have plenty of time to polish off a couple of rice balls, tofu fritters, musubi (rice wrapped in seaweed) or even a macroburger before entering the hallowed halls of Gleebooks. And no need to worry about the grease on your fingers either! But if you’re on your way back from Politics in the Pub at Glebe’s Harold Park Hotel, you might take the opportunity to sit down to a smoke-free meal. Whether you sit down or take-away, however, don’t miss sampling an Iku desert. There’s a variety of berry parfaits, trifles and cakes (including my own favorite, Bancha Tea Cake), served with lashings of a soy milk based cream. What’s more, while your taste buds are still tingling you’ll be spared that unpleasantly empty post-sugar sensation. If by this stage, what’s popularly known as ‘health food’ has taken your fancy then you might be tempted to call in at Russell’s Health Food Store, just a hundred metres down the road. Only health food junkies, however, throw pecuniary caution to the wind and enter there. The really healthy (to the purse) alternative would have to be the Wholesale Wholefoods Community Food Store behind the EPI centre on the corner of Enmore Rd and Philip St, Enmore (opposite to the Enmore Theatre). Open on Wednesday from 5.30pm-7pm and Saturday 10am-2pm the store offers wholesale foods at cheap prices and in the quantities you want. You just need to take your own bags and jars. Currently, the store is seeking two hundred foundation members to transform itself into a member’s co-operative trading on a full-time basis. The co-op aims to retail high quality whole foods, minimally packaged and processed, without profits in mind. For more info ring (02) 660 3839 or 558 4417.

Lyndell Fairleigh

In one of the more worthwhile celebratory occasions of 1988, Melbourne’s Lygon St Festa and Italian Arts Festival have combined to form the Melbourne Lygon Arts Festival, from October 15 till October 30. The festivities will be opened by the visiting Italian President, Mr Cossiga, and will feature dances, fashion parades, opera, street performances, painting exhibitions, sculpture and heaps of glorious food. Lygon Street itself will be transformed by canvas sets depicting Venice streetscapes (sans canal smells). A red-curtained arch will adorn the corner of Elgin and Lygon Streets, a Venetian piazza will face Queensbury Street, there will be a gondola-armed catwalk along Lygon Street for the fashion shows; and a mediaeval fair will feature fortune tellers, minstrels, conjurers and various rustic stalls. On the artistic side, the works of major Italian artist Remo Brindisi will be on display at the Balcony, Lygon Court until October 30. And for the politically or artistically curious the little-known paintings of the notorious right-wing political figure Gabriele D’Annuzio will be on show at the Tavern, Lygon Court, also until October 30. For more details, ring (03) 347 4465.

The US and British dance club scene (see pages 42-43) is firmly ensconced nowadays in the nightlife of Melbourne and Sydney. ALR’s danceclub selection this issue is as follows:

Melbourne:
Checkpoint Charlie, 143 Commercial Road, Prahran, Tues-Sun. On Tuesday nights CC now features a new club, Harlem to Havana, with musical styles ranging from Latin to Black, and a range of food from Cuba to New Orleans. ID’s Nitespot, 132 Greville Road, Prahran, Tues-Sun, $5. The musical menu is a veritable catalogue of late ‘80s chic: Acid House, Rare Groove, Classic Groove and hip hop. On Tuesday nights in October ID’s will be celebrating launches of the summer editions of Express, Tension and Cut magazines, for the painfully postmodern crowd.

Sydney:
The Site, 171 Victoria Street, Kings Cross. Mon to Sat. $5 cover Mon, Tues, Wed, Sat. $6 cover Thurs and Fri. On Monday nights experience the revival of the Decade That Taste Forgot, the Seventies, with the Madd Club and DJ Maynard. (Time to brush up on all the old Village People poses, though with company mercifully too young to remember them from the first time around). Friday night is Junkyard with DJ Scott Pullen and an artful blend of soul, House, reggae, hip hop and African. The Freezer, ex the Hip Hop Club, 11 Oxford Street, Paddington. Tues-Sun, $4 cover Thurs, $5 cover Fri and Sat. Sat night is hip hop night with much-vaunted DJ Pee Wee Ferris.
Spago, 238 Crown St, Darlinghurst. Wed-Sun. $5 cover Fri & Sat. A de rigeur blend of House and hip hop, with a hard edge.
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