

What is Labor Thinking?

Gary Johns

The dismal result for Labor at the 2004 election was easy to predict. The electorate was not about to swap the steady hand of an experienced leader for the volatile fist of a recent arrival. They did not even have to engage the issues, but if they had, they may have preferred the underlying theme of the Coalition—allowing people to find their own way, with backup from government—to Labor's Big Brother approach.

Now that the dust has settled, and Mark Latham has walked, what is Labor thinking? Judging from the Left's think-tanks—The Evatt Foundation, The Whitlam Institute, The Chifley Centre, The Hawke Centre (incorporating The Hawke Research Institute for Sustainable Societies), and The Australia Institute—one is tempted to conclude, 'not a lot'. The ACTU has its hands full with the impending wave of IR legislation, so there is no need at present to read its tea leaves.

There is, fortunately, some uncommon common sense coming out of The Fabian Society. For example, Bill Shorten, AWU national secretary, made the telling point at the post-election Fabian conference:

economic credibility is a gateway through which Labor must pass before it can bring its policy strengths in health and education to bear.

Further,

Labor's support has been increasingly confined to the Left intelligentsia with its post-Whitlam emphasis on progressive policies on the environment, refugees and multiculturalism. The policy priorities of the Left are not

wrong, but they have acquired a prominence that is now a barrier to Labor reconnecting with both its blue-collar base and middle Australia.

Although I cannot agree that the Left's priorities are correct, Shorten is certainly on the ball when it comes to the 'intelligentsia's' preoccupations. It

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was a view shared by Mark Latham before he became leader.

LEFT THINK TANKS

The Hawke Centre (or Institute—it is difficult to distinguish) is a place for a traditional whinge from public sector employees. Dr Rob Hattam from the School of Education, University of South Australia, for example, argues that 'the present schools policy focuses on parental choice ... not on how to ensure that schools work for all children'. He immediately contradicts this statement with a question, 'Why can't we have a policy that aims to make schools work for the least advantaged families?' The policy debate apparently ignores 'the urgent problems of youth alienation, teachers' heavy workload, and the need for curriculum reform and quality

professional development for teachers'. IPA colleague Kevin Donnelly is well placed to answer these questions, and his recent outing of the NSW English curriculum writer-as-left-politician (see Education Agenda in this issue) suggests that curriculum reform and inequality should never be mentioned in the one sentence. The distinct impression is that if only the educationally disadvantaged were taught more about 'power relations', they too could spend a life of bitterness as a teachers' union official.

In a similar vein, Dr Kay Price, Senior Lecturer in the School of Nursing and Midwifery, was surprised about the silence in the election campaign on how to meet 'the diverse and changing health care needs of our population'. Dr Price pointed out that 'social and health-related care for older people faces increasing problems due to the greater demands of an ageing population, nursing shortages and decreasing resources. How much [can] government fund, to meet the needs of all people?' Of need, there is no shortage! The Left really are 'glass half-empty people'. If there is a difference among Australians in standard of living, the Left will 'problematize' it, then blame the rich. At no point can the individual be given the dignity of making provision for himself or herself.

The Hawke Research Institute for Sustainable Societies (as if anyone would run one for an unsustainable society) is at the remote end of the spectrum. It specializes in Peace and conflict management studies, Social justice studies, Gender studies, and Reconciliation studies. These studies in how-to-be-resentful are a regular at the non-sandstone universities, mostly former teachers' colleges. They are the best argument for placing a far greater

emphasis on TAFE, a much larger constituency for Labor, but one that Labor has not spoken to, or of, since Whitlam became PM. If John Howard's entry into direct Commonwealth funding for new TAFE colleges takes off, it will just about seal Labor's fate as a mainstream political party.

Keep the post-material studies mentioned above for the mature-age students whose interests are not related to employment. The nonsense they learn should be confined to the dining table, not the workforce. They generally produce the sort of things recently overheard in a conversation between two 'well'-educated, well-off, Australian women. The teacher remarks to the psychiatrist, 'Australia is the worst country in the world in which to be poor'. The psychiatrist agrees wholeheartedly! There are two groups that would know the falsity of that proposition: the Australian poor and anyone other than the Left.

The Evatt Foundation is mainly controlled by the old Left in NSW (former Senator Bruce Childs and Hawke government minister Jeanette McHugh are still active). Among the output is the mandatory nod at the Kyoto Protocol, and joint projects with the Human Rights Council of Australia. These can be forgiven as a frolic, but the real worry is the lauding of a book by Edward Fullbrook, *A Guide to What's Wrong with Economics*. Featured on the Evatt Website, the book concludes, 'bad economics probably kills more people and causes more suffering than armaments'. It is arguable that centrally planned economies have been bad news, but of course, Fullbrook is not referring to those sorts of economists. No, he refers to 'many worldly and logical gaps in neo-classical economics, and also its hidden ideological agendas, its disregard for the environment and inability to consider economic issues in an ecological context, its habitual misuse of mathematics and statistics, its inability to address the major issues of globalization, its ethical cynicism concerning poverty, racism and sexism,

and its misrepresentation of economic history'. I trust the shadow Treasurer is listening!

There is, by the way, a revolt by French economics students against their economics teachers for teaching what they regard as 'autistic' economics! They are attacking economists who 'misunderstand' the real world. This from the people who gave us Michel Foucault's post-modern madness! As William Coleman (of *Exasperating Calculators* fame) described it, the attack on economics is so much 'ideology chasing'.

There is also Peace and Conflict Studies and Peace in West Papua, in other words, support for separatists using the apparently benign 'discourse' of peace dialogue, as if real interests and control over resources do not matter! Oxfam's view that poverty is more important than security is lauded, as is its solution: more aid and 'sustainable rural development'—that is, anti-development! Old colleague John Langmore, former MHR and now ILO liaison in New York, wades in with, 'poverty is a greater threat than terrorism'.

The Chifley Research Centre, chaired by Jenny Macklin MHR (the Deputy leader of the Labor Party), like the Whitlam Institute is, with great respect and judging from the output, pretty well defunct.

COMMON SENSE FROM THE FABIANS?

The white knight comes in the form of that old faithful, The Fabian Society. It assembled some steadier and more seasoned hands in a discussion entitled 'After the Deluge', to advise Labor at this time of despair in the ranks. John Button asks, 'Why the reluctance to have a forceful and well-articulated view on the future of the economy?' He argues that, 'While nearly all the economic commentators ... and even the Government, believe the Hawke Government's economic restructuring laid the foundations for Australia's current prosperity, the Parliamentary Labor

Party is not quite sure.'

Evan Thornley, proprietor of Pluto Press and research director for the Fabian Society was similarly inclined. 'Before we start worrying about whether our Intelligentsia is frightening the punters away with constant rattles about Iraq, asylum seekers, gay rights or forests, can we please make sure we can win the economic debate?'

Guy Rundle, co-editor of *Arena*, argued that

the defeat(s) mark(s) a final rejection of the 'suburban'—left coalition that has animated progressive politics for four decades ... When figures such as Whitlam welded these coalitions together, they managed to convince each side that their cultural differences could be subordinated to a common social—economic project. These ... differences are now felt sufficiently deeply by each group to make their dissolution difficult. Part of the reason for this is that both progressive parties have abandoned the sort of large-scale visionary project into which differences could be sunk.

Unfortunately Guy, the large-scale visionary projects are all on the other side!

Guy does understand, however, that 'the legalisation of gay marriage would displace the reproducing family as the core cultural institution' and that 'the legalisation of drug injecting rooms does challenge the basic cultural notion that we should strive for continence and self-possession as citizens'. He understands that these concerns are real and that unless Labor leaves them alone and re-enters the economic debate, it is doomed to be in Opposition forever.

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