

Australia's new left party

Bob Leach is interim secretary of Australia's New Labour Party. A longstanding left activist, he was a member of the Australian Labor Party for 25 years to 1986. He spoke to Martin Thomas about the new party.

AUSTRALIA is different from the First World or core countries like Britain. Australia grew up in the 19th century under the aegis of the British Empire, and then as the Empire declined in the late 19th century, with German and American rivalry, the Brits became more inclined to change the nature of the dependency and allow a kinder social contract.

A social contract emerged based on white racism, awards [state-registered wage agreements] giving high wages to workers, and protection for local capitalism. Local capitalism was limited, with low-level technology, but the City of London was quite happy for colonial governments to borrow to set up a huge infrastructure and social services far in advance of England. Australia and New Zealand became the social laboratories of the British Empire.

All that has unravelled, with the UK moving into the European Community in 1972. Now Australia has a First World standard of living with a Third World economy, an economy based on raw materials exports.

Australia has had a petty bourgeois culture. The only time the Marxist sects have ever been able to break into its system was when it was breaking up — in the 1890s and in the 1930s, which was the only time when the Communist Party made any real inroads. Otherwise Deakinite state liberalism [after Alfred Deakin, the leading figure of Australian politics after 1901] has dominated.

The ALP has abandoned that Deakinite state liberalism. They're now social liberal, a party which believes in open markets but government intervention for those who fall by the wayside. There's not much difference between them and the Democrats.

At the same time capitalism is moving to a post-Fordist society, where twenty or so "global cities" are becoming communications centres and pivots for capital — and Sydney is one of them — as against the hinterland of the nation-state. The nation-state is cracking up.

There are different reactions to this, including Pauline Hanson here, Winston Peters in New Zealand, and Le Pen in France. But there is a big vacuum around the traditional social-democratic position. It's an ideal opportunity for left social-democrats, who have always been submerg'd by the right wing of the Labor

Party, to break out, as in New Zealand, and to come up with a new approach — by which I don't mean vanguard politics, or classic Leninist politics, but democratic politics. It's happening in New Zealand, in Mexico, and in the United States.

We need new allies in what Gramsci called the war of position. A Red-Green-Black alliance is the way forward in ex-colonial countries like Australia and New Zealand. I would suspect it is not as adaptable to core countries like Britain.

The Labor Party cannot fill the gap in politics. It is too much controlled by the right wing and by capital, bankrupt in ideas, and unable to ally with the Greens.

The New Labour Party has only been going three months, but input has been coming from students and unionists. We are already talking to the Greens and the Australian Indigenous People's Party. We need 500 members to register as a party under Australian law. We've got over 300 so far. We'll be pursuing civic action and electoral action, with civic action taking the brunt of it, campaigns against racism and for the preservation of the gains won by our ancestors, like the award system.

"Capitalism is triumphant and there is no other system to take its place. We either have democratic capitalism, or democratic socialism within capitalism, or we have a Blade Runner future — decay, underclass, crime..."

A lot of people who can't stand the Labor Party will still vote for them out of tradition. It's going to take a while to break through that.

Some left unions have shown interest in the New Labour Party. We hope to win over the unions from the ALP, though we're talking a long programme here, and we know we won't win them all. I think the unions are doomed to the ALP.

What we want now is to preserve the award system, introduce a new protectionism, preserve what is strong within the nation state against the World Trade Organisation and the transnational corporations.

Trade unions can fight global capitalism only through international labour links — bodies like the ILO, but that is terribly right-wing — and through national sovereignty.

Australia's minimum wage is about \$10.95 an hour. The Liberals argue that

because of that we have 10% unemployment. That's bullshit. If we had protectionism — a new protectionism based on ecology, opposition to child labour and prison labour, and demanding free trade unions — we would not have unemployment here.

Will the New Labour Party allow dual membership with other parties?

No. Why should we be the only party in Australia that allows dual membership? The DSP [the biggest far-left group in Australia] doesn't have dual membership. It's bullshit.

You talk of the Greens as possible allies. But in Queensland you have the Greens supporting the National Party [right wing] government...

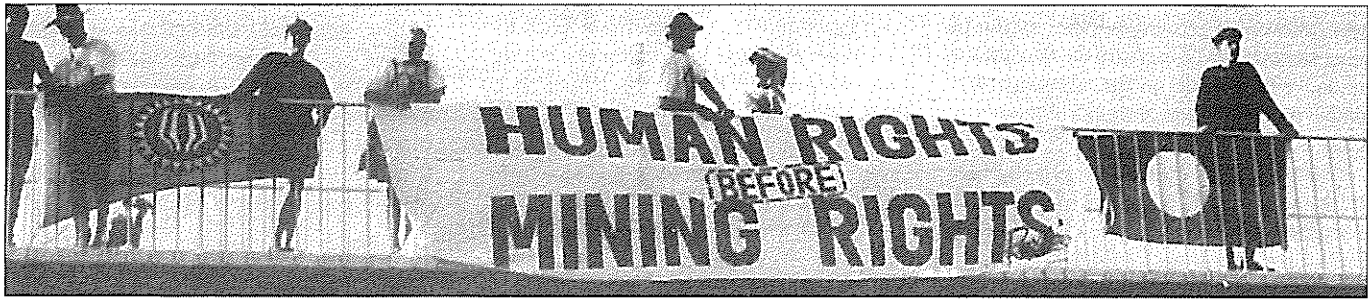
That shows how important it is to have them in alliance with a red party. The Greens are in the alliance in New Zealand.

Parties like New Labour in New Zealand and Rifondazione in Italy have had some success because they came out of long struggles in the old parties where they won over a large chunk of the activists, rather than a small group biving off and then asking the activists to join one by one. Otherwise you end up having neither the trade union based and established position of parties like the Labor Party, nor the radical programme and the energy of the revolutionary groups.

That's possible. But in Australia we're well received both by the unions and by what you call the revolutionary groups. We'll benefit electorally from the ALP's inexorable move to the right. It's more difficult in England because of first-past-the-post elections and non-compulsory voting.

It would be impossible, I think — and I've got 150 years of Australian history behind me — to interest Australian people in a revolutionary situation. Even Fred Paterson, who was elected as Australia's only Communist member of parliament, from Queensland, never pushed that line. He always pushed the democratic line.

Of course, you can't predict the future. Who would ever have dreamed that Communism would collapse as it did? Many Trotskyites said Stalinism was inherently flawed, and maybe they were right. I hope they feel happy about it, but what we've got now is a situation where capitalism is triumphant and there is no other system to take its place. We either have democratic capitalism, or democratic socialism within capitalism, or we have a Blade Runner future — decay, underclass, crime...



The anti-aboriginal backlash

By Rhodri Evans

BETWEEN 1910 and 1970, the Australian authorities forcibly removed one Aboriginal child in three from their parents. Ronald Wilson, the conservative and moderate author of the recent official report on these Stolen Children, describes the policy as genocide.

It was not mass murder, but the aim was to wipe out Australia's Aboriginal people, by forcibly assimilating some into white society and leaving the rest to die out in isolated and poor rural communities.

The stolen children, dumped with racist carers in orphanages and foster homes, were often beaten and sexually abused. They grew up twice as likely to get arrested and convicted, and three times as likely to be jailed, as Aboriginal children who remained with their parents. The psychic toll of the policy is a large part of the cause of the terrible rates today of ill-health, joblessness, and alcoholism among Aboriginals. Until 1967, Aboriginals were not even counted as human beings in Australia's censuses, let alone granted voting rights or equal pay.

Since then some things have changed. School history, which up to the 1960s dismissed the Aboriginal people as hopeless savages, now explains the achievements of their culture and describes the horrors of the white settlers' drive to clear the Aboriginals off the land, which in some areas was indeed genocide through mass murder. Ownership of some tourist sites has been returned by the government to the local Aboriginal communities. There are special programmes to increase the numbers of Aboriginals in higher education. An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission, ATSIC, with commissioners elected by the

Aboriginal communities, has been set up with funds for social projects in those communities.

But a backlash is developing. The loudest voice in the backlash is Pauline Hanson, a maverick MP elected in March 1996 who since April this year has been launching a new right-wing political party, One Nation — and getting about 10% support for it in opinion polls — but some of the quieter voices may be even more dangerous.

Conservative Prime Minister John Howard has refused to make any official apology to the stolen children and their families, saying it was all a long time ago and we must turn to the future... The same John Howard blocked the name Peace Park

"Until 1992, the assumption of Australian law was that this whole continent belonged to the first white settler to grab it."

for a new park dedicated to links between Canberra and a Japanese city, because of pressure from the Returned Servicemen's League, dissatisfied at the inadequacy of official Japanese government apologies for Japan's crimes in World War 2...

Besides, said Howard, apologising might open up the government to court claims for compensation.

He has cut ATSIC's budget by 40%. He has repeatedly attacked what he calls the "black armband view of history". He insists that white Australians should not feel guilty about their nation's past, as if that were what the argument is about, though in fact Aboriginal leaders have been explicit that confession of "guilt" is not what they want.

Labor leader Kim Beazley broke down in tears — reported even by sceptical observers to be genuine — as he protested in Parliament at Howard's attitude and made his apologies for the crimes of past Labor governments.

Yet, on another front of the backlash, more bound up with big business interests, Labor has gone along with Howard.

Until 1992, the assumption of Australian law was that this whole continent belonged to the first white settler to grab it. The Aboriginal people had no rights.

Then in the Mabo case of 1992, the High Court ruled that the Murray Islanders, off the coast of far north Queensland, held "native title" to their land. In 1993 the Labor government put through the Native Title Act, which laid down procedures for Aboriginal communities to claim "native title", but only to "crown" (government-owned) land, all other land being protected against claims.

Over 500 native title claims have been initiated since then, though only one has been granted. The law makes claims unlikely to succeed unless they are on vacant land.

The ruling set the National Farmers' Federation and the National Party (the rural-based junior party in the government coalition) agitating for a new law to "extinguish" native title on leased land. Without this, they said, hard-working farmers would risk losing all they had.

Howard has formulated a "ten point plan" which makes native title claims far more difficult to win and leaseholders effectively as secure as freeholders.

Despite Beazley's tears, Labor has given decisive support for the "ten points", through the backing for Howard from Australia's one Labor state government (in New South Wales) in the talks between the federal and state governments on the legislation.

This politicians' consensus reflects the fact that big business is heavily behind Howard on this issue, even though some vocal segments of the ruling class are more liberal. The leaseholders likely to gain most from the "ten points" are not small operators, but billionaires like Kerry Packer who own vast tracts of land. Their concern is not to be able to continue pasturing their sheep, but to be able to exploit new min-

eral finds ruthlessly and quickly without the long negotiations necessary on sites subject to native title claims — and, immediately, to see the cash value of their holdings increased.

Pauline Hanson is boosted by this big-business backlash, but represents something else besides. She is a former fish-and-chip shop owner, officially disowned by the Liberal Party for her anti-Aboriginal agitation just before the March 1996 federal election. Standing without Liberal opposition, she won a previously safe Labor seat.

On 11 April 1997 she launched her "One Nation Party". She has attracted huge crowds to her rallies in small towns in Queensland. It seems that her own electorate, Oxley, centred on the town of Ipswich, essentially an outlying depressed working-class suburb of Brisbane, is not typical of her base. She has not yet dared to attempt a rally in Melbourne, Sydney, or even Brisbane, and all her rallies in big cities have been heavily opposed.

In Newcastle, 4,000 people demonstrated and 2,000 attended an anti-Hanson concert while 1,200 came to her rally. In Perth, 2,000 protested outside a rally of 1,000 Hanson supporters. 500 protesters in Geelong, and 3,000 in Hobart, forced cancellation of the Hanson rallies in those cities. 1,000 demonstrated in Launceston outside a meeting of 500. In Adelaide, 1,000 anti-racists picketed 300 Hanson supporters, and 9,000 joined an anti-racist march.

In Ipswich itself, over 3,000 people joined a rally against racism on 25 May.

Hanson's message — that white Australia is being robbed by state handouts to Aboriginals, and swamped by Asian immigration — wins most support among older people in rural areas. Among high school students in a city like Brisbane, by contrast, she is almost universally hated as a "racist pig". As Noel Pearson puts it, "Old black Australia wants peace, young black Australia wants war; old white Australia wants war, and young white Australia wants peace... Those who most preach hatred, those most unwilling to compromise, are older white Australians".

Australia's population is and always has been concentrated in the cities strung round its coastline, most of which have in the last twenty or so years become very different from the White Australia of the 1950s and '60s. But the national myths and symbols — and many major industries — are based in the vast, thinly-populated hinterland, much of which is hundreds or thousands of miles away from any big city.

The Aboriginal people who live in the cities — about half of a total of 1.5% of the continent's population — are a poor but small, unghettoised, and even esteemed

part of a multicultural mix. In the bush it is different. Amid the vast emptiness, white and black stare at each across a huge social gulf. There are very few Asian immigrant s to these areas. Aboriginals are obvious and vulnerable scapegoats for growing economic tensions.

Older white people in rural areas, taught at school that the Aboriginal people were feckless nuisances, have seen the secure white Australia they knew 30 years ago ("relaxed and comfortable", as John Howard calls it in his pitch for the conservative vote) turned upside down by cuts in public service, railways, education, banks, the meat industry, and mining, and the loss of secure markets for Australia's agricultural exports.

The only way to stop them lashing out at scapegoats is to offer them real economic solutions, and sadly the Australian labour movement is not yet doing that.

AUSTRALIA'S far-right and fascist groups have latched on to Hanson's party to try to make it into an Australian equivalent of France's Front National, Italy's Alleanza Nazionale, or Austria's Freedom Party — a mass electoral party with a more-or-less respectable exterior and a hardline fascist core. Their immediate prospects are probably poor. Social decay and despair is less advanced in Australia than in Europe. The far right here is weaker and less coherent, as repeated crises inside and around the One Nation Party show. Hanson's electoral base is more scattered and elderly than the European far-right's.

John Howard trims his message to the 20% or so of Australians who are clearly racist — they are a big part of his electoral base and he does not want them going off to vote for Hanson — but the Australian ruling class is genuinely against Hanson. Jeff Kennett, state premier of Victoria and the most strident anti-union, pro-free-market politician in the country, has also been one of the loudest and sharpest voices against Hanson. Although the coalition government has cut immigrant numbers, it is still possible to hear from mainstream conservative politicians here arguments which in Europe come only from the revolutionary left — that immigration does not cause unemployment, and that it would not necessarily be any bad thing if the country came to have a majority of Asian origin.

Australian capitalists know that their future lies in trade with Asia, and they also know that the Australian economy cannot pull Asian capitalists into doing business with them by sheer economic weight in the way that the US or Japan can. They will not get the rich of Asia investing here, buying supplies here, taking holidays here, or

sending their children to be educated here, if those Asian rich see Australia as racist against them. Australian big business does not want its courtship of Asian capital disrupted by Australian rednecks any more than by Indonesian workers or East Timorese liberation fighters. Hanson is bad for trade!

However, there are no Aboriginal capitalists to placate. And the Aboriginal people — less numerous, more scattered, and much poorer than Australia's Asian immigrants — are more vulnerable targets for a racist offensive to secure its first successes.

Even limited successes for Hanson represent a real danger. They can be prevented — but only if the trade union and labour movement mobilises against her, with a positive social counter-programme and not an attempt to construct a great Popular Front with bishops, judges, Governors-General and trade-with-Asia anti-racists.

The militants

By Berthold Brecht

1st Man: Who are those people?

2nd Man: Not one of them
Cared only for himself
They ran without rest
To get bread for strangers.

1st Man: Why without bread?

2nd Man: The unjustman may cross the
street in the open
But the just man hides.

1st Man: What's being done to them?

2nd Man: Although they work for low
wages and are useful to many men
Not one of them lives the years of his
life
Eats his bread, dies contented
And is honourably buried, but
They end before their time
Struck down and trampled on and
heaped with shame.

1st Man: Why don't we ever hear about
them?

2nd Man: If you read in the papers that
certain criminals have been
Shot or thrown into prison, they are
the ones

1st Man: Will it always be like that?

2nd Man: No.
St. Joan of the Stockyards, Scene III