

The left alternative in Australia?

Roger Clarke reviews

'Beyond Labor and Liberal', edited by Robert Leach

THIS book investigates the possibility of forming a centre-left Australian alliance as an alternative to both the Labor Party and the Liberal Party. The need for such an alliance is attributed to the globalisation of capital, which has undermined the compromise between white, male labour and national capital in Australia. The new order of global capitalism will continue to oppress women and indigenous peoples, while no longer needing to compromise with the unions. All those excluded by the new world order therefore need to form a broad alliance. The New Zealand Alliance, formed in 1991, now includes New Labour (a left split from the NZ Labour Party), Mana Motuhake (Maori sovereignty), Greens, Democrats (formerly Social Credit) and Liberals (a small split from the National Party). The NZ Alliance is given as an example of what might be achieved in Australia.

According to the editor, the proposed alliance implies a restructuring of the Australian left: "In order to have an Alliance of parties, there must be parties to ally with. The first step must be the organisation of a single, democratic party of the labour left." Leach then asserts: "The ALP Socialist Left, unlike those in NZ, will not leave the ALP despite all the defeats, insults and policy reversals that the ALP right heaps upon them." This (clairvoyant?) forecast reduces the proposed left party to being an amalgamation of individuals and groups who have already retired hurt from the fight for socialist ideas within the ALP.

Penelope Whitney's chapter on the NZ Alliance contains some useful information on the formation of the New Labour Party. The NZ Labour left also suffered defeats and insults, but they did not meekly give up: "In 1987, Anderton [the future New Labour leader] established the Economic Policy Network (EPN). Through mailings from his office, and network meetings before party conferences, the EPN challenged Labour's positioning towards the right and debated alternatives. It defended public ownership, progressive taxation, and government intervention in the economy, with a major goal of full employment." The EPN, renamed the Labour Policy Network (LPN), became an unofficial faction within the NZ Labour Party.

Even when he was suspended from the Labour caucus for refusing to vote for the sale of the Bank of NZ, Anderton still did not resign. Party policy was opposed to asset sales and Anderton successfully argued that his suspension for defending party policy

was unconstitutional. When he did leave (in 1989) it was after consultation with other activists, prompted by plummeting membership: "Anderton held a series of meetings throughout the country with people in the Labour Party, mainly in the LPN. 'He asked us, do we stay or go?', recalls Matt Robson, current NLP president. The majority felt they had no option but to leave."

The New Labour Party, formed within a month of Anderton's announcement of his resignation, is therefore the product of a determined struggle within the old Labour Party. Unfortunately, the Australian contributors to this book show little interest in conducting a similar struggle within the ALP. How then will a "single, democratic party of the labour left" emerge?

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The most plausible answer is given by Howard Guille — it will emerge with the support of unions not affiliated to the ALP. Yet Guille himself is not convinced: "there is a very strong culture within unions that, however bad the ALP becomes, the other side is even worse". This culture is persuasive, Guille argues, "because of the absence of any progressive alternative". We are left with the perspective of forming another trade union based party, when the ALP does finally become indistinguishable from the Liberals. Reasonable enough as a contingency plan for the future; useless as a guide to action now.

Frank Stillwell revisits the attempt, initiated by the self-dissolved Communist Party of Australia and beginning in 1989, to construct a New Left Party. The NLP was wound up in 1992 and replaced by Left Connection, a loose "network" rather than a party. Stillwell's post-mortem attributes to the NLP a break with democratic centralism [interpreted as being incompatible with openness and tolerance] in favour of "post-modernist politics emphasising diversity, decentralisation and difference." But the constitution of the New Left Party declared membership of any other Left political party, after a trial period, to be incompatible with membership of the NLP. Another NLP limit on postmodernist diversity is hinted at by Stillwell's claim that some of the social movements "have direct experience of the adverse effects of entrism by the trotskyst sects".

Jim Falk discusses the genuinely post-modernist Rainbow Alliance, which was

formed in 1987 as a "multi-issue political movement" rather than a political party. The Rainbow Alliance hoped to "reshape the context within which the various political parties acted and reacted". Again there is a post-mortem on why these hopes were not realised. Falk claims the labour movement has lost its potential to envisage an alternative society. His reasons are: "market principles have by now infiltrated and gained ideological ascendancy in the political process in which the unions engage" and "the unions find themselves in a fairly desperate struggle for long-term survival, in which anything beyond immediate concerns must take second place". These are compelling reasons for socialists to combine ideological class struggle with participation in the battle for the immediate concerns of the trade unions. Here they are offered as reasons for abandoning the labour movement. Independent socialist Phil Cleary contradicts Leach's dictum that an alliance must be an alliance of parties. "For now, I don't believe that the alternative is a new party. In the short term, an Alliance of independents, or of independents and Greens, is more feasible". Similarly, Drew Hutton of the Greens pursues the idea of an alliance between the Democrats and Greens — an alliance of parties, but without the left-wing party that Leach says must be formed as a first step. In both of these variants, the Alliance would be composed entirely of individuals or parties who are not answerable to any specifically working class organisations.

The Australian Democrats quite explicitly do not identify with the struggle of organised labour against capital. Democrat leader Cheryl Kernot and Tony Walters write: "While the Democrats do not subscribe to much of the left's rhetoric on the dichotomy between capital and labour, we do share many of Leach's concerns with the processes and outcomes of economic rationalist ideology." Their chapter discusses the unsuccessful negotiations with the Greens for an electoral alliance. Kernot and Walters are unfazed; they claim that the Democrats are the already existing green-progressive alternative to Labor and the Liberals.

This anti-climactic conclusion is a result of the way the questions of a new party and alliances are posed in this book. For many of the contributors, the purpose of an alliance is just to be vaguely "progressive"; the participation of a working class party in the alliance is seen as desirable, but not essential. Therefore, as a call to action, the book is unconvincing. Possibly the book was intended simply as a survey of centre-left responses to the idea of an Australian alliance; if so, the survey would have been more informative if the ALP Socialist Left and other organised socialist groups had been offered an opportunity to speak for themselves. ■