

PLATYPUS PANEL - The ALP and the Left - 14 November 2021

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People on the left have always had an ambivalent relationship with the ALP, however, they are always happy when they win elections and downcast when they lose. There is a perception that their policies are more progressive and favorable to the working class and low income earners.

I think the left and the ALP were furthest apart in the late 1960s. I don't remember the ALP having any presence in the radical youth movement of that period. And I seem to recall the ALP denounced Monash students for their aid to the NLF campaign. The NLF was the National Liberation Front in Vietnam. In fact Bob Hawke was on the University Council and was decidedly unhelpful.

Back when virtually all blue collar workers voted labor, a common view was that the ALP was the party of the working class and therefore it had to be supported. I never understood what that meant but anyway it has become pretty irrelevant because blue collar workers are now just as likely to vote for the Coalition.

I don't know if they still do but I recall people citing Lenin favoring the election of the British Labour Party because it would expose the party in the eyes of workers. Lenin took this position when the British communist party was trying to lure away politically advanced workers from the Labor Party at a time when it was sounding very socialist, back in the early 1920s. This is not at all relevant in the present context either in Britain or Australia. Although it was perhaps relevant under Jeremy Corbyn. In the case of the ALP the only people who think it is on the radical left are those on the political right, and of course they don't vote for it for that very reason.

On domestic issues the left has mainly differed from the ALP by being more militantly reformist than the ALP, demanding more government funding for this and that, and bemoaning the ALP's shift to a less interventionist economic policy. It criticizes the ALP for betraying its own reformism. The left becomes what it wants the ALP to be. On international issues the left has differed far more from the ALP for good or ill, often expressing solidarity with all sorts of strange people.

"Labor to power with socialist policies" is a slogan that I recall. I don't know if anyone still uses it. If it is, I think it could cause confusion. If by socialism you mean what happens after the revolution then nothing you do under capitalism can be socialist. It also seems to suggest that socialism could be achieved without a revolution that seizes power from the bourgeoisie.

Let's now look at the Whitlam era which has a special place in left mythology. People like to describe the sacking of Whitlam on November 11 1975 by the Governor-General as a coup. At the time I took that view and went along with all the conspiracy theories. However, I was later persuaded that this was pretty much a load of nonsense.

You had a government that came across as incompetent. It was going through an economic rough patch and of course was blamed for this. In fact, I don't think any Western government that went to the polls in 1975 managed to survive. The Coalition blocked supply in the Senate to force a general election. This was against convention but not illegal. Whitlam refused to let the people decide by calling a general election so John Kerr had to step in and do it for him. The Coalition then won by the biggest landslide ever. End of story.

The changes from the Whitlam years were generally not undone. If you look at areas like health care, education, Indigenous affairs, multiculturalism, arts and culture. I am not saying everything is wonderful but they are generally no worse. The big exception is free tertiary education but that was eliminated by the Labor Government of Paul Keating.

The Whitlam Government was also quick off the mark in recognizing China. Unlike the Coalition they were not left flatfooted when the Americans changed their China policy. Whitlam visited China while still in opposition and prior to Henry Kissinger. The ALP had adopted a policy of recognition back in 1955 and they established diplomatic relations within three weeks of coming into office

The ALP, of course, were not perturbed by the counter-revolution in China after Mao's death. And this was shared by most of the left including most so-called Maoists. In fact you still have people who refuse to recognize the obvious fact that the regime is totally nasty and reactionary and needs to be overthrown by a democratic revolution just like all the other tyrannies in the world such as those in Egypt, Iran, Cuba et cetera..

I think the fact that the ALP now is no more reformist and no less conservative than the Coalition creates an opportunity for the left to become the party of reform.

However, for this to occur it would have to be far more grounded than it is. Policies would have to be based on thorough investigation of the facts and really get into specific detail. They would also have to stand the test of scrutiny.

What I am saying is that you would have to go way beyond the knowledge needed when all you are doing is expressing outrage and engaging in virtue signaling. Also policies would not be vague sentences in a leaflet that you hand out at election time. They would be things you are constantly discussing out there in the community and developing.

By developing our ability to put up policies to solve problems in the here and now, we would also in the process be preparing ourselves to run a revolutionary government.

Also I think we should have a special interest in reforms that serve the aims of the revolution. These are ones that provide a better starting point for transforming society after the revolution.

One of these that particularly strikes me is in the area of education. At the moment about 20 percent of the people leaving the school system have learnt virtually nothing. This is a problem because after the revolution you don't want to find yourself with a large section of the proletariat who are at a low cultural and educational level. It would cause lots of extra difficulties. This is also an important area for closing the gap between indigenous people and the rest of society.

Continuing to sort out relations between the sexes is another important area. It is critical if you are trying to create a new society based on mutual regard rather than exploitation. In this area I was struck by a particularly detailed proposal for paternity leave coming from the Grattan Institute. This could significantly increase the role of fathers in child rearing.

The Grattan Institute is a politically centrist think tank in Melbourne and I reckon they could be a bit of a role model for the left when it comes to the work they put into their policy proposals. I am not suggesting that you should always agree with them but I certainly recommend that you have a look at their stuff. They bring out reports and then they publicize them through press releases, seminars and podcasts. Recently they have done a lot of work on net zero by 2050 that I think is worth a look.