

SOCIALISM AND LABOUR: AN AUSTRALIAN STRATEGY

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Pamphleteering is a neglected art. Not the least of the virtues of Bob Connell's 'Socialism and Labor' is that it reminds us of the need to make explicit and generally available ideas and analyses which at present are the property of only a few committed socialists. Connell has given us a brilliantly lucid, compact and persuasive outline sketch of what a socialistic programme in Australia today should look like, why such a programme is essential, and how popular support for the transition might be built.

He explains capitalism's inherently exploitative nature, and thus rejects piecemeal and minor reforms which amount to nothing more than 'liberal-capitalist tidying-up'. 'Revolutionary reforms' are needed instead, those 'that do not stabilize the system, that cannot be contained within its logic, and which therefore continue to set up pressure for change in society'.

The essence of his socialism is expressed in five key values: social equality, cooperation, liberty, reason and direct democracy. In unfolding the ideas of direct democracy and liberty he explicitly strikes at the popular and entrenched misconception which sees socialism as little more than nationalizing everything under stifling bureaucracies. At the same time it leads him to strike against the Labor Party's exclusive preoccupation with parliamentary politics, preferring that such activities be nothing more than a necessary adjunct to mass-mobilization through grass-roots, every-day campaigns. I welcome too his invoking 'reason' in support of the socialist cause — it's an 'old-fashioned' turn, as he says, but one which we must make our own if we are to begin creating a counter-hegemony. Perhaps equally important is his reminder that 'to be reasonable does not mean to be "moderate"'.

What is striking when all this has been said is his continuing faith in the ALP as the agent of this process of change and the likely bearer of his values. It is almost as if he were unaware of the generations of committed socialists who have fought Connell's fight inside the ALP since its birth and who have been absorbed and/or broken in the struggle. He acknowledges that the reforms introduced by the Whitlam Government, even in those heady, early days, were mostly of the cosmetic or 'tidying-up' kind, but simply continues to hope for something better in the future. And while, as mentioned, he advocates mass-mobilization and grass-roots politics with force and concern, he doesn't go as far as calling on his Party to formulate practical programmes along those lines. It's hard to see any large parts of the Party machinery which might have responded.

It is on this score, of the appropriateness of the ALP to his goals, that debate with Connell's very useful and welcome pamphlet might begin.

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