

I

Around midnight at Moore Park on 25 November 2007, while I was outside the pub where the 2SER/*New Matilda* election party was partying very happily indeed having a smoke, I observed a fleeting meteorological moment. There was – out of the dark – a sudden downpour of rain. It was as if the heavens were signalling the great events that were transpiring across the land. A metaphorical breaking of the Howardian drought.

The next day, there was a sort of gloomy cloud hanging oppressively over Sydney. Walking along Circular Quay and looking over the Harbour to Kirribilli, I felt as if a certain resident hadn't quite grasped the exact nature of the catastrophe that had overtaken him. It was as if John Howard loomed large above us still, reluctant to move, casting a glum shadow over the hungover brows of those who'd worked for – and willed – his exit.

II

If the Howard years were characterised by a certain narrowing of national horizons, it wasn't particular or limited to the triumph of alleged practicality over the demonic and despised symbolism, but also extended to the man's opponents. Whether Howard was particularly mendacious might be a matter for some dispute, but there was a good reason why he was dubbed "Honest John". It seemed, though, that his resolute attempts to cast politics as a morality play – deserving and undeserving poor, good and evil and so on - were mirrored in the responses of those who didn't catch the Howard hugging vibe. I never thought Malcolm Fraser – as PM – was a stunning exemplar of political virtue, but his exasperation at the cravenness of the manipulative bag of tricks Howard carried wherever he went surely struck a chord.

A political critique in ethical terms has its grave limitations. Whatever Howard's manifold sins were, and they were many, it seemed that the vision of what would replace him was stuck at the point of righteous anger – replace him. But then what? A kinder, gentler Australia? A lot of the touch button issues of what passed for left discourse in Howard's nation were liberal ones – which gripped a certain imaginary just as the actually existing small l liberals were either cast out of the party or turned into vampiric caricatures before our eyes. But concerns over refugees, rights and reconciliation – vital as all three are – really did beg the question of what a post-Howardian Australia would look like. Nicer and more decent is no doubt good, but it won't cut the political mustard. The shuffling of the Democrats off the political stage of history, lamentable as it is in many ways, demonstrates that in spades.

The "Your Rights at Work" campaign was a different kettle of fish. It had – perforce – greater resonance with those electors who needed to be convinced that a PM who'd take ideology a "bridge too far" really couldn't be trusted to understand their day to day lived reality, and worse, had just handed the boss a free kick. The campaign – as the ACTU knew – would have gone nowhere had it been one for union recognition. But as an effort that connected with real water cooler concerns, and walked in lockstep with Kevin Rudd's economic populism, it proved that the "fair go" hadn't entirely lost its electoral punch. Though John Howard, when he found it convenient to paint refugees as "queue jumpers" also knew something about the Australian

political psyche, even as he promptly forgot it again in the service of a smaller, narrower turf in the suburbs of our national imagination. Post 2004, at the latest, he'd not just lost touch, but lost his touch.

Howard's other nemesis – climate change – was another issue which resonated. And another issue which had him wedged on the side of the captains of industry, who, if the truth be told, really aren't the natural pin up kids of the Antipodean political thatere.

What does this have to do with “re-imagining the good society”? Two things, at least.

The first is that you have to play on the cultural terrain that you're given. John Howard knew how to “dance with the one that brung ya”, in LBJ's down home Texan expression, for a while. Derided for his white picket vision by Paul Keating, he ended up looking a lot more contemporary than PJK himself, whose parliamentary rhetoric stamped him as a politician somehow out of place and shaped by an earlier generation. But the times stopped suiting Howard, even as Keating's Zegna suit lost its lustre after the bacon was brought home.

Bob Carr nailed the explanation for Howard's loss beautifully when he wrote that his hubristic fall was tied up with mistaking the nonsense his Praetorian guard of culture warriors wrote and rewrote and endlessly recited for the wisdom of the common person.

The corollary of all this is that the punditariat's foil – the latte left so-called – were also under a certain misapprehension. Outside legal circles, and some parts of the professional classes, what we might dub procedural liberalism has never had much of a constituency in Australian politics. Either sociologically or ideationally. So it took material and post-material issues – workers' rights and climate change – to bring Howard down. “Howard's lies”, for what it's worth, didn't matter much til he lied about things that did resonate.

Secondly, good little cultural Gramscian of the right as he once was, Little Johnny did have a vision of what he wanted the country to be. The absence of a vision that resonates from the amalgam of liberal issues and the exhaustion of the resources of the democratic socialist project both necessitate revisioning of the good society by the Australian left. That's if we want to continue to exist, firstly, and secondly, if we want to do more than toss a few ideas into the 2020 mix.

But before we return to the eternal question – “what is to be done?” – we need to flick the switch from the local to the global. And from the last decade or so to the broader sweep of history.

III

The “end of history” proclaimed by Francis Fukuyama in 1989 was a euphemism for an “end of the left”. Liberal democracy, it was claimed, had triumphed everywhere, at least tendentially, and the rest of time would just be a matter of its final victory being consummated. As Alex Callinicos noted some time later, this ideological theme was actually taken most seriously on the left – and particularly on the post-Marxist left, despite its gestation in the corridors of the American

“foreign policy community” and the seminar rooms of neo-con academe. Leaving aside the fact that Fukuyama, like his master Leo Strauss, is best understood as having coded a hidden message somewhere in the bottle of triumphalism, he was onto something sociologically. The end of Soviet Marxism as a form of rule ushered in the age of globalisation – and it’s still with us, even if it hides its true form behind the smokescreen of imperialist war and the ghostly revenant of Empire.

Viewed from the (ad)vantage point of the *longue durée*, what’s significant about the end of the “short twentieth century” – to adopt Eric Hobsbawm’s periodisation – is the enormous effort that’s gone into closing down the sense of other possible futures. Postmodernism, as Fredric Jameson has argued, is best understood as the “cultural dominant of late capitalism”, a way of living and being which relentlessly focuses on the now and sees the future only in terms of calculations of profit and loss from the play of signs and commodities that put the immaterial back into materialism. The discrediting of Karl Marx’ legacy, as well as the justified discredit accruing to the global politics that claimed lineage from him, creates a blindness to the realities in which we live. And the slogan – and the practice – “there is no alternative” – has a cruel effect on the imagination, and thus on the realm of what is feasible politically.

There is justice in the critique – associated with Karl Popper and Friedrich von Hayek – of Soviet Marxism as a species of eschatological utopianism that deformed history. But the implication that utopia itself is dangerous is not one that the left should draw. The idea of a “realistic utopia” – often associated with Jewish thinkers of the early to mid 20th century such as Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin - is enjoying a justified revival. As Russell Jacoby has argued, the reticence about pre-empting the shape of the future – such being the moment in time through which the Messiah might slip through unannounced - engendered a powerful form of thought – a praxis which always had an eye to what was to come, and which recognised an ever present responsibility to the defeated and oppressed dead. Redemption – now and in a future in the process of becoming – was the hope of a heartless world even in the most dire and dark of ages.

The “end of history” discourse does real work in the world. Constraint is happily or unhappily accepted by social democrats. No longer is it possible to envisage a different society. The revisionists of post-War British Labour, such as Tony Crosland, still envisaged their practice as transformational – a mixed economy, to be sure, but a step on the way to a different society which would in a real sense be a socialist one. Reformist governments and movements were in for a series of shocks, but the greatest shock is a loss of the ability to see the world differently and to imagine what is nascent growing to fruition. Neoliberalism has won by colonising the imagination.

In the current global conjuncture, the left needs to recognise two facts. The first, as Perry Anderson argues in a recent *New Left Review*, is the total defeat of the social democratic project in economic terms. It makes no particular difference in this sense – materially – that we now have a Labor government in Australia because this defeat is a global one, signalled by the absence of any plausible alternative to neoliberal globalisation. Talk of Tobin taxes is just tinkering, even if it would be very radical in practice. The lack of any unifying political alternative is the killer. If we can’t recognise that, we may as well give up the ghost.

In talking of economic defeat, I don't mean that redistribution or welfarism is no longer possible, though I'm also far from convinced that Howard's fiscal profligacy or the failure of neoliberal regimes to make much dent in the public sector share of GDP is some sort of victory, except in the most defensive terms. It much more likely represents a combination of electoral calculation and a recognition that - in the absence of American style ideology and culture - there are limits in terms of maintaining basic social cohesion that neoliberalism confronts at its peril. What I do mean is that the twin objectives of harnessing the forces of production to fundamentally social goals and exerting any sort of wide-ranging and deeply democratic control over the economy are dead.

The second datum is that what currently exists has its limits. The ecological limits to going on as we are are now starkly outlined. But – as the current financial crisis shows – there are also limits to the degree that financialisation acts as a safety valve. Marx, of course, in a certain mood, was fulsome in his wonder at the ability of capitalism to reinvent itself. But Schumpeter may have nailed it with his concept of “creative destruction”. There are limits to the degree to which capitalism – at least in its current form – is capable of recreating itself without too much destruction, and again climate change is the obvious threat on the horizon. But, along with land, the other two of Karl Polanyi's three factors of production – labour and money, also have tendential limits. It's to the great credit of the sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein to have realised this, and to have spelled out the limits to capital's reign which are becoming clearer as we understand the globally integrated nature of production and consumption. Nothing lasts for ever – no state, no social formation, no world economy. But as Marx knew, the alternative to capitalism is not just socialism. It may also be barbarism.

That's not to force a choice between capitalism and socialism. Myself, I'd prefer social democracy understood in a much broader sense than some of its historical avatars suggest. But it is to remark that we stand at a time in history which is of great significance as a period of transition. The choices made now will shape the future, as the climate change debate teaches. “Re-imagining the good society”, now, is not a luxury but a necessity because action will be futile or counter-productive if not directed towards a future that exists in imagination.

IV

The dissolution of the Communist Party of Australia was a significant milestone in Australian politics. Although there is much resonant and interesting literature around in the form of memoir and biography, and a fair share of institutional history, Alastair Davidson is surely right in the latest number of *Overland* to gesture towards the under-theorisation of the CPA's significance for the contours of the field of Australian political praxis. As with the broader predicament of the left globally, signalled by the sort of “end of history” and “globalisation” talk that sprung up like mushrooms from the fertile field of the Velvet revolutions and their Soviet sequel I've been talking about, the Antipodean connection remains fallow ground for political theorising. There was real significance in the continued existence of a political party – with intellectual and labour

movement links if not electoral success – at least formally to the left of the ALP. And its end was an ending that also changed things.

It coincided with what at the time many saw as the mainstreaming of the union movement as a policy actor. “Sweden in the South Pacific” may have sunk like a stone with *Australia Reconstructed* disappearing into the corridors of Treasury, never to be sighted again. But the impetus the loose coalition of unionists (many affiliated with the CPA), academics and policy actors brought to these debates looked set to carry on – with the effective marginalisation of the AIRC and the According to Bill Kelty of a metaphorical seat at the Cabinet table. But this was a false dawn.

As the Keating era slumbered towards its inevitable end, the managers of discontent ended up not being able to manage the discontent of workers with unions and the government’s embrace, and somehow, the fundamental shift of the labour market foundations all the restructuring had set in train escaped the attention of the captains of the Corporatist Titanic as their troops began to founder on the rocks of a globalising economy.

So – for the Labor left – we’re all Lindsay Tanners now. Except for that odd detour into Lathamism – the Third Way rendered relevant (supposedly) in impenetrable pseudo-Hegelian prose and eventually distilled into a few soundbites which signally failed to cut through, as they say. Iron Mark’s handshake was just too boofy and threatening for all the quasi-authoritarianism of communitarianism, Australian Labor style, to sneak through under the radar as the bright picture of a happy Green Valley it was meant to portray.

The years of opposition were wasted ones for Labor – and not just because of all the leadership instability and the tactical incompetence so embarrassingly on show. More important in the longer term was a total failure of vision. Not just the “vision thing” Kim Beazley could never articulate in words of less than five syllables, but of some idea as to what the light might look like when the hill was climbed. When you compare the debate over the socialist objective in the early 80s and the thinking distilled and debated in tomes such as *Labor Essays* and John Mathews’ *Moving Left* and the pages of *Arena* to what passed for long term strategic thought in the Howard era. Well, you join the dots.

When Keating crashed rather than crashed through, the union movement was preoccupied with urgent questions of its own survival, and the intellectuals were kicked into touch by the crash tackle of the culture wars. The left – to the degree that it survived (and everything about John Howard’s project was designed to dig its grave, in a broad sense to make collective action appear fruitless) - was on the back foot. The symptoms of this were written in the public debate for all to see, and I’ve sketched them briefly in this paper. It’s no reflection whatever on the resolute will and the courage in dark times of those who fought in the trenches to facilitate Howard’s end to say that longer term goals slipped by the wayside, but that critique still has force, and it’s the absence of rethinking that we’re confronted with now.

So what are we left with in the dawning of the Rudd era? Nothing could be more misguided than the op/ed pages and blog thread argy-bargy over how “the left” will regard Kevin08, Kevin09,

and so on through what any intelligent eye can perceive is a vista that may well stretch out to the horizon of the *annus mirabilis*, 2020 of summiteering fame. It's based on two false premises (at least). First, that the left can be identified with the figures the culture warriors love to hate – “the luvvies”, Robert Manne, David Marr and all that crew. And secondly that there is a coherent left vision against which the achievements of the Kevinistas can be assessed and ticked off – no doubt according to one of the metrics beloved of our model managerialist PM. It also presumes that Kevin Rudd knows where he's taking us, and though parts of his diagnosis are flawed, David Burchell is surely a little bit right that there's little sense of over-riding direction from the top – at least in terms of a unified narrative about where all of us are heading.

I say “a little bit right” because it's clear, I think, that Kevin Rudd does have a degree of programmatic vision, and even one with an ideological twist. To what degree his version of the trajectory of “Christian socialism” is correct historically is a moot question, and as he's really talking about a personal credo, to go looking beyond his words for a living stream of ideas and action would be an unprofitable detour. His invocation of Dietrich Boenhoffer really goes to the personal ethic of courage, and that's why he's proving to be in some ways a more interesting and bold leader than many of us may have suspected. But careful attention to his deeds as well as his words suggests that he's motivated by a fairly traditional concept of equality of opportunity – and there are resonances of Wilsonism as well as Blairism in his vision of an Australia “of all the talents”. He's not so much concerned with debates about private and public, but if he'd been educated by the Jesuits privately, he might recall the axiom “to will the ends is to will the means”.

It may be useful to remember, just in passing, Geoff Dow's formulation of social democracy as the advance of decommodification – a neat way of matching ends and means.

And that's where we return to attempt to square the circle technocratically. The 2020 summit is a useful metonym. Rudd is concerned at the sclerotic nature of the advice received from the bureaucracy, and he calls in the “best and brightest” to allow a thousand policy flowers to bloom. Leave aside the politics. What we're seeing here is something of a rerun – not of Bob Hawke, but of Tony Blair. A leader elected with a good idea of how to win power, but aside from a sort of supply side Reichian economic program that's already looking outmoded as global capital runs into heavy weather, not a lot else. The solution? Why, ideas, of course!

It's not, of course, that ideas are a bad thing. But the organisation of the summit resembles that of the bureaucratic state for a reason – bright ideas slotted into neat departmental boxes, and a personnel of compartmentalised and departmentalised experts reflecting the division of labour within academia and the policy domains that stand out on a flat terrain like the silos of proverbial consultant speak. It's for the hyperactive PM, one presumes, to totalise and unify, but in the meantime what we have is experts in x with ideas about how to improve x. There's little sense of political will – presumably political feasibility is the province of another department of state – Hawker Britton – and little sense of politics at all. Evidence-based policy, we're told, is the stuff of data analysis and it's best to keep that nasty beast – politics – well out of the picture. Well, maybe. Unless you actually want to lead the show somewhere or other, mobilise people and involve the vast majority of the non-expert and the non-Professariat.

It's a good way to take both the social and the democracy out of social democracy, and well intentioned as such talkfests no doubt are, they have little to do with charting a participatory path forward to 2020. Or whenever. What's missing from the big picture is any real attempt to grasp the dimensions of Australian society in 2008 let alone 2020. Just as academics are incited by the culture of managerialism and performativity to focus on big picture grant dollars rather than theorising about where we're all heading, so too does the managerial manna descend from Kevin heaven – most definitely from above. Remembering again the debate that took place around *Australia Reconstructed*, it would be difficult to espy anything similar today. The role of intellectuals, neoliberal style, is definitely to manage their own patch or pitch, and not to question the Captain's direction for the boat.

Perhaps we need to en-vision a bit more of the ideology thing, and supplement that with the analysis thing, and – unfashionable word alert – organise.

V

So where to from here?

We need to recognise that imagination and organisation need to walk hand in hand. A sociological analysis of the basis for a revitalised Australian left might prove a dispiriting exercise. Merely asserting that collective action has a purpose and can do good is itself a political act these days. But we should realise that the party's over, or at least that the party form is over.

Leaving aside the obvious pathologies of the Leninist party form, Immanuel Wallerstein has a good explanation for why – the parties of the Socialist International – and their counterparts in liberation movements in the post-colonial world failed. They failed for two reasons – the first being their success in building a welfare state, or in building state institutions. If the economic crisis of the 1970s taught us anything, it should have taught us both that welfarism in the absence of democratic participation is insufficient and that there are limits to the size and scope of state power in a capitalist economy. And so there should be – and that's not a pro-market argument.

The desires and dreams unleashed by the cultural revolutions of the 1960s are unable to be realised either through statism or through democratic centralism of any ideological stripe. Although left and right are positional rather than essential concepts, the late Italian political philosopher Norberto Bobbio got it right when he argued that the left always gave priority to solidarity and equality over liberty in the trio of Enlightenment political virtues. But he also, and very crucially, emphasised that true liberty is only possible through equality and solidarity – something that the social democratic tradition at its best understood well.

Some of what was worthwhile in the Blairite rethinking of social democracy was a return to its associational roots – unfortunately swamped by the soundbitten moral certainties of communitarianism. There is a lot still to be learned from the legitimate desires of many for autonomy and self-determination, and a lot to be learned from those social movements – such as feminism - which have given these desires a structural embodiment.

Organisationally, while a greater openness to debate within the Labor left would be a good thing, it's not the ballgame by any stretch of the imagination. There are big issues around whether the connection between the labour movement and the Labor party is a good thing, and while I have a view on this, I won't presume to adjudicate this debate in a paper such as this. I do want to observe that both the Green and labour movements have at least the promise of broadening a conversation outwards into the wider community, and that, as with my general argument, we're best off thinking about what's already there – working with the grain - rather than succumbing to organisation mania. There are real problems with the bureaucratisation of social and political movements which shouldn't be downplayed, but while they don't provide a panacea, there are also real possibilities both in terms of the formation of a critical and engaged digital public sphere and in community campaigning. In many ways, both are yet very far from being utilised to their full potential.

Finally, we need to start thinking again about our answer to the perennial political question – “how are we to live well?”... And we need to think about this question dialectically both locally and globally. Part of the reason why “Sweden in the South Pacific” went awry, and also the reason why the culture wars in Australia were largely illusory, is that neither tacked closely enough to the realities of our culture. A condition of possibility for re-envisioning a good society is an analysis of actually existing society. Though there are some excellent building blocks around – I think, for instance, of Frank Stilwell and Kirrily Jordan's excellent mapping of inequality in *Who Gets What?* – the parcellisation of expertise in the performance driven academic division of labour and the short horizons of political and cultural commentary leave the theoretical cupboard threadbare. We need bolder debates. We need to remember that although the point is to change the world, not understand it, we won't get anywhere if we don't understand it. A different form of cultural studies than that currently practiced in the academy is required – a cultural studies practiced in forums such as this, and in the left and social movements themselves. But, as I'm suggesting with my remarks on realistic utopias, this colonisation of the public sphere by the bureaucratic and technocratic rationalities of late modernity needs countering by a really counter-hegemonic discourse, and democratic style of thinking.

So, should slogans be what you require: “Always historicise!” (in the words of Fredric Jameson), “Try to totalise!” might be good starting points – and much less arcane than they sound, because the work of imagining and creating is inseparable from the work of thinking and organising – dialectics, in short.

The left needs to look beyond the electoral horizon, and in the broader scheme of things, Kevin Rudd's ascendancy needs to be understood as shifting the limits of what's possible and sayable rather than as an end in itself. What the left needs to re-learn to do is to think in long terms. That's how imagination and action entwine in order to spin a thread that leads to a future web that becomes feasible. And we need to remember the stakes of that future, because decisions made now are going to have far-reaching effects at a time of transition – a time that has great promise but also carries in its train an ever more real threat of ruin for this planet.

