



# Some Problems With the Practice of New Politics

Bob James

**This is a time of re-assessment. In Australia, the Bicentennial sparked some re-appraisal of the nature of white settlement, and anti-Bicentennial activities insisted that there were alternatives to celebrating the invasion. Gorbachev's Russia has experienced the first contested election for 70 years, and throughout the so-called Communist world, discussions have broken out in an unprecedented way about past practices. Capitalism's dismal record over more than 200 years is not yet being questioned directly in our de-regulating world, but even so there are some signs that debates of previous years are being renewed. But which previous debates are the relevant ones?**

Sydney University recently had a recycling awareness week, and the sewerage schemes of Francis Sutton are being dusted off to aid beach clean-ups. The 21st anniversary of Paris 1968 was recently recorded by stalwarts, and even more quaintly the Australian Labor Party is funding Defence Minister Kim Beazley's return to **Boy's Own** gunboat heroics and parading a 19th-century belief in the parallel interests of capital and labour.

The capacity to learn from the past depends on lots of things. I want to dwell on the question of problem-solving, for it seems to me that if we can't get 'the problem' right, and I would argue that we haven't, we can't possibly get the solution right.

Getting environmental concerns onto the popular media and the agenda of national politics is a huge step forward, as is the recognition that such concerns are basically political. But how well understood is politics? How many people understand that there are different kinds of politics?

Calling oneself an environmentalist doesn't make us into one, any more than disillusion with the established political parties will, on its own, produce a change for the better. If we are simply after cleaner air, cleaner soil and more whales, we may slow capitalism down, but we won't stop it, and by definition we won't end war, social injustice, cyclical poverty or the arms race. We won't even stop new right industrialist Hugh Morgan quoting redneck Earth-Firster Dave Foreman as the archetypal 'greenie', and we may end with a stronger, more seductive system of social control, simply because the investment analysts mouth the rhetoric of concern.

The lack of peace and the existence of environmental degradation are not 'the problem'. They are signs of more deeply-seated difficulties. Neither is 'capitalism' the best way to characterise 'the problem'. The violence in China does not flow from communism, even Stalinism, though Stalinists have a great deal to answer for. Similarly an obsession with

'freedom' is of little importance or consequence, simply because the word is too vague and too much energy is needed to clarify what it means or could mean. I don't believe words like 'social justice' or 'social responsibility' are sufficiently clear either to be the basis for forming groups determined to change things. The social alternative agenda has to revolve not around 'growth', and not around 'environmental consequences', but around the question of power. The key to that is not words at all, but what people **do** in their practice; that is, the key is organisation. But it is organisation that is least likely to be talked about, and even less likely to be talked about are the connections between organisation, problem-solving, defensive reactions and conflict resolution.<sup>1</sup>

Jo Valentine remarked recently how stunned she was to find just how adversarial, hierarchic and male-dominated Federal Parliament was. Are we prepared to face up to the fact that Amnesty International and Greenpeace are extraordinarily hierarchic and clearly dominated by males? Beyond questions of gender, the executive, 'professional' types harass the 'field workers' about productivity and the virtue of killing oneself for the cause. 'The workers' often delude themselves they have only two choices: martyrdom

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or guilt. This pattern of hierarchic discrimination is repeating itself in new 'green' organisations around Australia.

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The evidence indicates that we only **know** how to do the old politics. Lessons are there to be learnt from our very obvious failures, but are we prepared to undertake seriously the problem-solving involved? To begin with, are we seriously prepared to undertake a check to see how much what we call 'progressive' is really still imbued with the old way of doing things, and therefore cannot possibly enable us to escape from the old traps?

Take the case of the Nuclear Disarmament Party (NDP). Committed to allowing anyone who called themselves a member through the door, it practised an idealism which was simply no match for an organised group with a plan and determination to carry it through. No doubt the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) members believed their ideas enhanced those of the NDP, but the rightness or wrongness of the ideas was not the crucial issue. The issue was and is, how well does the theory fit the practice, and vice versa. The leadership of the NDP did not resolve the contradiction involved in trying to be both 'insiders' and 'outsiders', that is, how to participate in a competitive system while being opposed to that system. The SWP had no problem, they decided long ago they were competitors and adopted a form of hierarchical organisation to match their capitalist opponents.

It's not surprising that the Chinese leadership can accommodate economic reforms involving joint enterprise deals with Western entrepreneurs, but not accommodate power reforms. This is the dilemma of the Marxist option in Australia. Attempts to establish a new Party to the Left stagger on, with claims about openness and participatory democracy, but scratch any of the issued documents, and you'll find a commitment clearly in place to an organisational structure that isn't new.

The philosophy which produced the old parties of the Left contains the same unexamined platitudes masquerading as ideas and the same class-struggle dogma masquerading as social analysis. Though the individual organisers are probably sincere, as a group they have not seen that 'open' politics requires a break with class-struggle, us and them politics. Not because class-struggle ideas were wrong, or even that they are now outdated. But because they were a response to old politics, constructed by people who remained within and who attempted to gain respectability for the downtrodden within the old politics and class-struggle **practice**. These people's documents, actions or conflict resolutions were necessarily adversarial, hierarchical and male-dominated.

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**How well does the theory fit the practice.**

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There is only a difference in degree, I believe, among the politics of Napoleon, Bismarck and Deng Xiaoping, those of the New Left of the 60's and 70's and, say, those of Jim Cairns, Jim Percy or Bob Brown. How far have 1989 groups travelled from the devalued past?

More importantly, how do they or we measure the distance? For a start, calling oneself 'Green' or 'Anarchist' or 'non-hierarchical' is neither here nor there.

The Greens in Tasmania may very well be poised to repeat the failure of the NDP, and for that matter the failure of the original Australian Labor Party (ALP) in the 1891 New South Wales Parliament. Those ALP idealists and opportunists also attempted to extract the best deal from the two established groups already in Parliament and found that, when a carefully-worded motion was put almost on the first day of sittings, their alleged solidarity and unanimity collapsed and they were unable to function thereafter in accordance with their chosen philosophy. Because they assumed that their success depended absolutely on unity, they had no methods for coping with the unforeseen, in particular with the inevitable conflict within their own ranks. They quickly became a hostage to other

people's agendas. The Tasmanian Greens are apparently making the same mistake, most obviously by letting Bob Brown be created as 'leader' and thus allowing themselves to be talked into the position of being a single group with a single policy. Once that idea is created any simple difference of opinion is turned into or becomes a crisis, and is seen as involving a loss of credibility.

Take the case of Jim Cairns and Mt Oak: a long-running saga, now bogged down in endless litigation brought by the Cairns-Morosi consortium attempting to evict the family of communal settlers whose physical and emotional energies have been returning that land to some degree of health since Junie Morosi, over 10 years ago, insisted that it was sufficiently overgrazed and dry to be a real test of 'alternative' people. The Cairns/Morosi connection claims that the new settlers are acting contrary to the spirit supposedly enshrined in Down-To-Earth philosophy of 'free land', yet it is the new settlers who have been threatened, beaten and dragged through the bourgeois courts they cannot afford, and it is the new settlers who have attempted negotiation and reconciliation, not the erstwhile and self-proclaimed leaders of 'alternative' Australia.

The alternative community is scattered and splintered, and not all bits of it are prepared to talk to the other bits. From time to time we hear the call for everyone to get together in one organisation. It's my view that attempts to establish unity across the mass of alternative groups are more dangerous than fragmentation. Such attempts are part of the 'old politics', not part of the new. I feel we must develop personal and group capacities to cope with differences. Within our organisations we must develop ways to deal creatively with failure, with conflict and with defensive reactions that must follow inevitably from the honouring of diversity. Rather than see 'personality clashes' as the end of an organisation and as unhealthy 'bourgeois individualism', they must be seen as rags of the past concealing a healthy beginning which nevertheless needs a lot of work.

I'm suggesting 'the problem' is the basically psychological one of insecure persons having an overwhelming need to 'belong', to be seen

as respectable, and therefore not to be rejected as outsiders. If in control of some point of power, such persons, especially but not only male, will lash out, not simply to maintain that position, but in order not to be seen as weak and therefore expose their insecurity. (This is not the whole story, of course. I know of strong people within hierarchies who do what they can to introduce changes towards democratisation. Such people are heroes of the social revolution, but often burn out un-noticed and un-acknowledged.)

I'm suggesting that we need to encourage, indeed celebrate conflict, not suppress it, in order to learn to deal creatively and non-violently with it. We need to feel the freedom to shout and yell at one another in order, if that's what it takes, to think more clearly. Nevertheless, we need to accept **publicly** the responsibility for our actions, including shouting and yelling if that's involved. And we need to be prepared to **insist publicly** that all others do likewise, a requirement which may involve finding new methods to incorporate that insistence.

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### **We need to encourage, indeed celebrate conflict.**

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I realise appearing to condone shouting and yelling is contentious, that it raises images of standover fathers, drunken husbands and attempts to dominate generally. But what I've written here is not intended to encourage unequal power relations, but in fact the opposite. Violence is not conflict, it's an attempt to end conflict, by shutting the other person/side up, usually by someone who is feeling less powerful. Verbal outbursts **can** be attempts to dominate, but they can also be simple expressions of enthusiasm. What's important is the difference in expectations of the parties involved, and again that's precisely why sensitivity to process is paramount.

Organisationally, we need to be prepared to choose whether we are outsiders or insiders, and if outsiders, we must take seriously the need to create a whole new culture, from membership criteria, to festivals and celebrations, to ways of living together. We must be stricter about what we believe in, not going for the lowest common

denominator. It's not a matter of being tolerant. Tolerance or otherwise will show in how we respond to differences. We must be prepared to set out essentials, rather than look for false consensus and false solidarity just so we can feel better.

Membership criteria are especially important. A lack of concern for entry requirements, as at the Jura Anarchist Bookshop Collective, to take one example, prevents development of strengths and forces compromise. Vagueness of principle and unwillingness to talk process issues through serve to protect the emotional cripple in all of us, and can allow, even encourage, very defensive personalities to become leading figures. Again, this is not something that is unique to any one group or organisation, but rather a widespread sign of the 'old' continuing inside the supposedly 'new'. Membership criteria are not there to exclude people, though they have that effect. They are there to make a bridge from ideals to the real world, and prevent those ideals forming the mush of pragmatism. They are there to insist on standards of practice inside the group, without which there is no way of telling what the group actually and actively believes.

Thus, I'm arguing that the **process** by which people try changing the world is more important than whether they achieve a particular blueprint, since if we don't change our process we will not achieve any new world. Indeed, I would argue that non-hierarchical process needs putting on the agenda in place of such blueprints, and that process is the blueprint. There is no guaranteed or previously determined outcome, for willingness to engage with other persons and with conflicting opinions involves taking risks, scorning a need for a secured outcome. But to avoid being accused of vagueness of principle I'll provide my rule-of-thumb for determining success or failure: the goal of non-hierarchical process is the distribution, to the maximum degree possible, of decision-making power, and thus reducing the power-relationship as close as possible to equality. Since this requires the stronger at present being weaker and the weaker at present being stronger, it's easy to see that there are many paths likely to be suggested, and that we haven't yet begun to address **seriously** what's involved. I say again

that arguing on paper the relative merits of Gandhian democracy, or anarchism, or demarchy is at best a tiny first(?) step.

In short, **discussing** alternative structures or having alternative visions is irrelevant — these are just words which in themselves can be more trouble than help. Let me be clearly understood — worker democracy, community self-management, delegate systems, local autonomy, etc. are all worth trying and have had to be thought up before they could be tried. But trying to convince others of their worth or telling people what they 'should' do are just other results of the alienation that the current system produces. It's the doing that counts, but doing it does not include achieving it because we cannot plan for arrival, though many try. We can, I believe, only plan for the journey, and few are doing this.

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Doing 'new politics' cannot involve **doing** worker democracy, etc., because we don't know how. We know what the words are, but not the action. And in the particular case of non-hierarchical politics, doing it involves accepting that the process of working out how to do it is more important than the result. If new politics is perceived as a result, as a structure that is drawn up on paper and pushed through at a meeting and then through Corporate Affairs or wherever, then the point has been missed, yet again.

New politics is a different method involving a **learning** about consensus, problem-solving, tolerance and empowerment. It does require skills like facilitation, public speaking, cleaning gutters and bush-fire control, but unless one's psychology is such that self-examination is on the agenda as well, and unless the tell-tale signs of 'old politics' are things that can be put onto the agenda without fissuring the group, then those very things will gradually re-assert themselves and take the group back to square one.

There are two clearly different directions from which people approach non-hierarchical philosophies (the

same attitude-split pervades mainstream politics too). Depending on one's view of 'human nature', philosophies are seen as preventing the manifestation of negative human traits or as enabling and encouraging positive human characteristics to flower, free from constraints.

One key and unfortunate consequence of setting up groups on the basis of apparent agreement about goals is that quite incompatible approaches attempt to co-exist, usually with destructive results, if only because the two philosophic approaches demand quite different approaches to organisation, to action and to conflict resolution.

What I take from history is that radicals and reformers have, by and large, been trying to solve the wrong problem. They haven't recognised that a new politics has to be taught, that it doesn't just happen, but that in teaching, the teachers have to lay themselves

open to admitting that they don't know the answers, only the questions which seem to them to be in need of asking.

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For very many reasons, as many historians have shown, Australians crave a strong, centralised state to solve their problems and to dispense justice. This attitude is pervasive — it's in school practices, it's in the media approach to issues, it's not absurd to say that it's in the drinking water. 'New politics' involves a breaking with what is a psychological dependence on gurus setting out guidelines to allegedly predictable outcomes — a breaking that can only be achieved by a profound, personal examination and re-appraisal.

#### END NOTE

1. I am assuming in this particular article, that (a) other contributors to this issue are describing alternative forms of society-wide organisation (such as demarchy) and that (b) readers of **Social Alternatives** have either already read about such systems or know how to find books about them. I am not concerned here to try to convince readers that there are better ways to live together. Neither am I interested in debating the pros and cons of purely speculative notions. This is because there is a much more pressing and immediate problem.

When I say organisation is the least likely thing to be talked about, I am referring to the organisation of the group of people who try to go beyond the words, who try to get from here to the desired alternative. Inside such groups there is very little talk of and very little awareness of how personal practice determines the success or failure of the attempt. The extension of this is that the repeated and inevitable decline, failure, loss of will, and disillusion has meant that the problems involved have not been put on **public agendas** and successes made more likely. Wonderful ideas about re-organising the larger society are of no value in such a situation.

### ASK ME NO QUESTIONS

The Child asked me:  
Mummy, how does a flower work?  
I tried to tell him but  
He pulled my rose to pieces  
Examining  
And wept  
Finding there was no more flower.

The Man asked me:  
Darling, how much do you love me?  
I tried to tell him but  
He pulled my heart to pieces  
Scrutinising  
And wept  
Finding there was no more love.

Julia Irwin

### THE CITADEL

Brick by brick and stone by stone  
I built it, high and higher  
Buttressed, walled and castellated  
Fortified and pallisaded  
From winter's sharpest hour.

Turret, moat and barbican  
I built it, firm and strong  
I, recluse and solitary  
Against the world's hostility  
The contumely of spring.

Now, secure, impregnable,  
Unhazarded, invariable,  
I await the one who must  
Turn my citadel to dust.

Julia Irwin