
DON'T VOTE

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The words underlined were were so highlighted in a copy of this paper tendered to the Supreme Court of Victoria by the Australian Electoral Commission as 'exhibit REM-1' in support of restraining orders to suppress the proposed campaign. Presumably the AEC was especially concerned at the threat to 'marginal ALP held seats'. (25 June 1987, proceedings number 2335).

Introduction

A 'Don't Vote' campaign is being launched with the declared aim of bringing down the Labor Government. This is primarily an electoral tactic and does not claim to solve any wider strategic problem than what to do at election time. This electoral tactic obviously contradicts the tactic of joining the ALP and fighting to make it more left wing, although many who have joined the ALP and have fought to make it more left wing may find themselves attracted to it. The 'don't vote' tactic also partly contradicts and partly overlaps with the tactic of running alternative candidates.

The problem we face is that views to the left of the ALP Government are at present completely marginal and irrelevant in Australian politics. We can say what we like, but nobody really needs to listen. This is not the result of any conspiracy by our opponents, but reflects the overall bankruptcy of 'left' ideologies, not only in Australia, but throughout the western world. We do not at present have any clear vision of what kind of society we want, let alone a strategy for getting there. Nor do we even have any adequate analysis of the society we are living in or the forces at work within it. That necessarily leaves us in a passive position where we cannot take any significant positive initiatives.

This means that leaving aside the fake left, or 'pinks', who participate in mainstream politics as liberals or conservatives, the left currently has no role in mainstream politics. Our political

discussions generally revolve around what stand to take, rather than how to achieve any concrete political objective. We are engaged in propaganda, and rather dull propaganda at that, rather than politics. That problem cannot be resolved by any electoral tactic, including a 'Don't Vote' campaign. But any electoral tactic we do adopt should at least start from a recognition of the real situation and contribute towards ending that situation. As a minimum, it should aim to achieve some concrete political objective that furthers the goal of establishing the left as an independent political force able to influence mainstream politics in accordance with its own program and strategy.

The concrete political objective of a 'Don't Vote' campaign, is to bring down the present ALP Government, which in practice means replacing it with a Liberal or Liberal/National Coalition Government. It is not a 'protest' vote and would not be aimed at Labor party strongholds. It would be concentrated in marginal Labor held seats and the measure of its success would be the number of seats that it cost the ALP.

That is clearly a concrete political objective, but is it feasible, and would it further the goal of establishing the left as an independent force able to influence mainstream politics in accordance with its own program and strategy? How on earth could the election of an even more reactionary Government than the ALP actually benefit the left?

Before considering that in detail, let us examine the main alternative proposals.

Joining The ALP

The tactic of joining the ALP presumably has as its concrete political objective, turning the ALP into a substantially different kind of political party, which would then implement left policies. An obvious problem is that this tactic has been tried many times before and is still being tried now, with no signs of success. Even the more limited objective of splitting the ALP to provide a substantial base for a new party has got precisely nowhere.

The repeated failure of this tactic is not accidental and is not the result of too few people giving it a try. The tactic has failed in the past, is failing now, and will fail in the future, because it does not

recognise reality, although its advocates often claim to be more 'practical' than others on the left.

The reality is that the ALP is and always has been a liberal capitalist party. People join it and vote for it because they believe, and correctly believe, that social progress is possible within the present capitalist social system and that the ALP is more liberal and progressive than its conservative opponents. The ALP is not 'betraying' its socialist principles, it never had any. If the ALP is now becoming a conservative party rather than a liberal and progressive party, that is a problem for its liberal and progressive supporters, a problem for the 'pinks', not a problem for the left.

In a bourgeois democratic society, progressive liberals have a perfect right to form progressive liberal parties, just as conservatives have a perfect right to form conservative parties. It is fundamentally undemocratic and elitist for people who claim to be on the left to try and take over the political party of an entirely different political tendency. Genuine ALP supporters naturally resent these attempts at manipulation and defend their party and its liberal capitalist principles against alien intruders.

The result is a massive diversion of energy with people who claim to be on the left actually spending all their time 'getting the numbers' at meetings attended only by themselves and their opponents, instead of engaging in real politics out among the people. In many respects the ALP is not really a political party, because it does not go out to the people and try to win them to its principles. It is just an electoral machine striving to 'get the numbers' at election time. But this applies even more to the ALP left than to the party generally. While many in the ALP left are also involved in social movements outside the ALP, their participation in the ALP does not strengthen that. It provides another, more comfortable world, where getting some resolution adopted or defeated in some party organisation, or taking a 'principled' stand against their opponents who win the numbers, makes it easier to avoid facing up to the fact that they are unable to actually convince anybody inside or outside that world to change their views about anything.

Given the absence of any organised left movement with a real mass base at present, it may not be surprising that the ALP left finds their world more comfortable than the bitter recognition of the left's isolation and impotence. But it remains an entirely

unreal world completely divorced from real struggle and real politics.

If by some miracle the ALP left was one day to actually 'get the numbers', the only result would be that genuine ALP supporters would regroup in a different organisation with the same mass base. More likely if there was the slightest danger of a 'left' takeover, there would be a development like the formation of the Social-Democratic Party in Britain, and consequent return of the British Labour Party towards its traditional liberal progressive or 'Laborist' principles.

The point is that people are not so stupid as the ALP left imagines. ALP voters do not support their party out of blind organisational loyalty but because they agree with it, or at least prefer it to its opponents. When the left does develop a vision of the kind of society it wants, its strategy must be based on winning people to that vision through their own experience of struggle. The sort of social change we want requires a high level of consciousness from large masses of people who will transform society while transforming themselves. It can only be achieved if that consciousness is raised, not by taking over organisations that reflect their existing level of consciousness.

If any sort of social change could be achieved by infiltrating and taking over an existing mainstream party, it would not be a progressive change but a victory for manipulation by bureaucratic manipulators.

Running Alternative Candidates

Undoubtedly there will be more alternative candidates at future elections, whether there is also a 'Don't Vote' campaign or not. In the medium term we can expect the eventual formation of a new mainstream party as far to the left of the ALP as the Australia Party or even the Liberal Party is to its right, which is not all that far. Perhaps it will be something like the 'Greens' in West Germany or perhaps it will result from a split with conservatives in the ALP.

This could be of some benefit in opening up the political situation and setting the stage for greater instability and further developments. But running candidates or forming new parties could not at present further the goal of establishing the left as an

independent political force able to influence mainstream politics in accordance with its own program and strategy.

This is because the crisis of the left is a crisis of reformism and any new political party or tendency formed now could only be a reformist party or tendency, not a revolutionary one. It would not be an independent political force with its own program and strategy and it would have little influence on mainstream politics.

Reformism, as opposed to liberalism, asserts that social progress within capitalism is not enough, and the capitalist system itself must be transformed, legally, gradually and peacefully, into some sort of socialist system not based on wage labour and the private ownership of the means of production.

The reason liberal parties like the ALP, the U.S. Democratic Party and the various European Social-Democratic parties are strong, while reformist parties are weak or non-existent, is that reformism is not a realistic, practical prospect in advanced capitalist societies, while liberalism, like conservatism, is perfectly realistic and practical. Historically, reformism has capitulated to liberalism and any new reformist tendency would have to do the same. The Democratic Party is supported by reformists in the U.S.A. for much the same reasons that the ALP is supported by reformists in Australia – reformism has been unable to sustain an electorally significant party of its own.

The problems we face in advanced capitalist societies all revolve around the fact that they are advanced capitalist societies. It is the mode of production based on private property and wage labor that has to be changed and that requires a social revolution in which the class that produces the wealth seizes power and uses that power to take the wealth from those that own it and to abolish wage labor. Taking the wealth from those that own it is not something that can be achieved peacefully and legally through such measures as taxation and nationalization. Taking people's property is stealing, which is a very serious crime. They would certainly call the police and if it was happening on a large scale or with Government connivance they would call the army. After all, what are the police and the army for if they are not to prevent wholesale stealing of private property?

As long as a minority ruling class owns the means of production, infringement of its property rights can only result in the economy

jamming up and going into deeper crisis – if such attempts are not treated as criminal and suppressed by armed force as in Chile. The ‘property question’ is not on the agenda in mainstream politics precisely because deep down people know that it cannot be resolved peacefully, gradually and legally. That is why reformist parties attract little support and an important reason why the left, which has not advanced beyond reformism, has basically gone from crisis to collapse.

Of course at present revolution is just as unrealistic and impractical as reformism, and revolutionary ideas have even less support than reformist ideas. But that simply confirms that any new party or tendency that could be formed now would not be revolutionary. It does not prove that revolution will remain impractical and unrealistic as the crisis of capitalism deepens and the currently dominant political forces exhaust their potential.

When we do have a clear vision of the kind of society we want and a strategy for getting there, it will have to be a revolutionary vision and a revolutionary strategy. When a revolutionary party is eventually formed it will certainly need to be involved in electoral tactics as in every other arena of struggle. But every previous attempt to establish a revolutionary party in an advanced capitalist society has failed, and in particular those parties that have developed successful electoral tactics have without exception ceased to be revolutionary. Nobody is seriously attempting to establish a revolutionary party in Australia at present and those that pretend to be are just posturing.

Meanwhile running alternative candidates without a revolutionary party will not achieve any worthwhile political objective because it avoids facing up to the fact that we don’t have a vision and don’t have a strategy. Whatever platforms the alternative candidates run on, nobody will seriously believe, including the candidates themselves, that society really could be transformed according to their platforms. They will simply be another form of protest propaganda rather than a serious political intervention aimed at a concrete practical objective.

To the extent that alternative candidates withhold their preferences from the ALP, their campaign will overlap with the ‘Don’t Vote’ campaign and contribute to the same practical political objective – bringing down the ALP Government and replacing it with a Liberal/National Government. To this extent

they will be open to exactly the same objections from ALP supporters as the 'Don't Vote' campaign itself – namely that the opposition is worse than the Government and they are helping it to get in.

But they will have less impact in overcoming these objections than the 'Don't Vote' campaign because they will tend to be campaigning for the quite unrealistic prospect of electing the alternative candidates, rather than for the more controversial, but also more practical objective of bringing down the ALP Government, and will therefore not be answering the doubts of their potential supporters. Moreover most alternative candidates will tend to run in Labor strongholds or for the Senate as a 'protest' vote rather than in marginal electorates where they could actually cost the ALP some seats.

To the extent that alternative candidates direct their preferences to the ALP, or fail to direct them away from it, their only impact on the actual results of the election will be to confirm the ALP in office. Without actually campaigning to bring the ALP down, people who believe the ALP is better than the Opposition will continue to give their preferences to the ALP whether they 'protest' or not. Thus alternative candidates will not establish a force politically independent of the ALP, but will confirm again that there is no such force.

Bringing Down The ALP Government

There is no basis yet for a new party that could agree on a platform, whether reformist or revolutionary, to seriously challenge the ALP directly. But a much lower level of unity and organisation is all that would be required to challenge the ALP indirectly through a 'Don't Vote' campaign. The Nuclear Disarmament Party has shown that very significant numbers are already sufficiently alienated from the ALP to break from it when the issue at stake is not whether the Liberal Party could come into office. Even if the numbers who are not intimidated by the prospect of a Liberal Government are much smaller, they could easily be sufficient to cost the ALP a few marginal seats and thereby cost it office. Large numbers already voted informal where NDP candidates were not available in the last national election, even without an organised campaign, and this could not have been just because ALP supporters are too stupid to be able to

understand the ballot paper, as claimed by their 'leaders'. Quite small numbers would be sufficient to tip the balance in marginal seats.

At public meetings of People Against ID Numbers and the People's Tax Summit, proposals to run 'Don't Vote' campaigns in marginal ALP seats have been adopted overwhelmingly. The main opposition came from a handful of 'Communist' and 'Marxist-Leninist' supporters, and not from ALP supporters. At the recent Mayday march, leaflets advocating the 'Don't Vote' campaign were generally well received. The only difficulty was that some people would not take them because they were headed 'How to vote LABOR' so they thought they would not be interested! A number of social movements are finding that the direct enemy oppressing them is the ALP Government rather than the 'New Right' and there seems to be a mood developing favourable to bringing that government down. The 'New Right' itself, seems to be largely a reaction to the Liberal Party's great difficulty distinguishing itself from the ALP and the view that there is little to choose between the Government and Opposition is now commonplace. Many ALP supporters are looking for ways to show their disapproval of Government policy.

Thus whether or not it is desirable, the objective of bringing down the ALP Government is at least feasible, unlike the objectives of turning the ALP into a left party or electing alternative candidates. This in itself establishes the basis for a very different kind of campaign from the usual left 'protests' that are not expected to achieve any particular concrete objective.

There is considerable scope for raising the slogan 'Bring Down the ALP Government' in all sorts of extra-Parliamentary social movements and not just in the electoral 'Don't Vote' campaign. This would sharpen up any struggle in which it was raised by clearly identifying the Government as an enemy to be defeated rather than a friend being petitioned.

Whether this feasible objective is achieved or not, merely attempting it would be a significant breakthrough from the present political climate. Just raising the banner of a left tendency explicitly hostile to the ALP rather than tacitly aligned with it, could in itself alter the terms of political debate in Australia.

With all the traditional 'left' tendencies now engaged in frantic ecumenical activity rather similar to the Christian churches, it is about time for some atheists to point out that the decline of the 'left', like the decline of Christianity, is due to its bankruptcy and will not be reversed by ecumenical unity. A real debate, over a concrete political initiative, will do far more to clarify where people really stand and what is wrong with where we stand, than any amount of propaganda about things we all agree with, or disputes about events in the past history of other countries.

The principal objection to the 'Don't Vote' campaign is simply that the Opposition is worse than the Government and would be the immediate beneficiaries of bringing down the Government. That objection is not easily answered, and its strength is the reason why we can only expect a fairly small minority to support the 'Don't Vote' position initially.

But it is a objection that can be answered and the process of answering it, and forcing ALP supporters and other 'pinks' to justify their position will in fact be the main benefit of the campaign. The numbers of people who become convinced that the differences between the ALP and the Opposition are not significant enough to justify actually supporting a reactionary conservative ALP Government can only grow in the course of this debate. There is no chance that we would come out of it with less support than we went in with.

The other main objection will be that it is a purely negative, destructive campaign that does not present any positive alternative to the ALP and again highlights the fact that the left has no serious program of its own. That too is an actual advantage. We can only frankly admit the charge and it is essential that we do frankly admit the real situation in order to change it. We cannot develop a vision of the kind of society we want or a strategy for getting there until everybody has clearly understood that we really don't have one at present. At least we can get across the idea that there is a force in Australian politics, capable of influencing actual events, whose politics are not expressed by the ALP or the opposition and that wants to develop such a vision and such a strategy.

This would suit the interests of both those who want to build a new reformist party and those who would eventually like to see a revolutionary communist party emerge. An essential

precondition for either is that significant numbers of people declare their political independence from liberalism by refusing to support the ALP merely because it is more liberal or less conservative than the Liberal Party.

If the ALP is brought down simply by the bankruptcy of its own policies, we will probably see another period of the 'left' pretending that all the problems of capitalist economic crisis can be blamed on 'Howard' just as they were previously blamed on 'Fraser' and are starting to be blamed on 'Hawke'. (Indeed organisers of the 'Broad Left' conference have already started pretending that various attacks on existing conditions result from pressure by the 'New Right', conveniently ignoring the fact that the Government which is carrying out these attacks is their own).

If a 'Don't Vote' campaign is partly responsible for Labor's fall, the same nonsense will emerge, but it may be much weaker. There is a real difference between the atmosphere that would result from the Opposition being elected because the pendulum has swung back to conservatism, and that which would result from them being elected because a new force has emerged to the left of the ALP and hostile to it.

Certainly there would be a real polarisation on the left and thus some opportunity for the political situation to open up and new tendencies to emerge. With all the ALP supporters and other 'pinks' screaming 'treachery' and desperately trying to convince people that the differences between the ALP and the Liberal Party are terribly important, there would be some scope for genuine ideological confrontation instead of the boring futility of most political discussions at present.

As for the effect on conditions generally, it is not a matter of advocating 'the worse the better', but of recognising that it is the level of people's struggle that determines what Governments can get away with.

In some areas, such as social welfare, the Opposition will undoubtedly be worse than the ALP, but the resistance to their policies may also be stronger and better organised. Perhaps some funding of community groups would be slashed more savagely than they are by the ALP. But the Liberal Party would also fund community groups for the same reason that the ALP does – to

keep people off the streets and divert them from building a genuinely independent movement. The left was much stronger during the anti-Vietnam protests before the Whitlam Government, without any funding, than it has been since. It may not be such a bad thing if some of the 'pinks' did have their funding slashed.

In other areas, such as attacks on unions and ID cards, the Opposition would have much less possibility of succeeding with reactionary policies than the ALP does. In many areas, like foreign policy, there would be no noticeable difference because let's face it, despite all the ravings from the ALP left, the Opposition are not fascists but just conservatives like the ALP. Whatever the overall balance sheet, the mere assertion that there is a left, politically independent of the ALP and able to influence events by its own strategies, would outweigh any possible disadvantages. We don't have that now and we need it desperately.

Afterword

The above paper is over seven years old but I still can't see anything wrong with it. Am I in a time warp or does the current political situation in Australia (with the names of a few politicians etc changed), really call for an identical analysis and tactical proposals to those I put forward seven years ago? If I got it wrong, I would like to see my errors explained and alternative proposals for electoral tactics put forward. If I got it right, how come there hasn't been much action on these proposals over seven years? In either case, why hasn't there been some noticeable change in relevant aspects of the political situation over seven years, or if there has been, why haven't I noticed it?

It seems to me that the ALP Government at least is still seriously concerned about the potential damage that could be inflicted on it by these proposals, and has good reason to be. It 'won' the March 1993 Federal Elections by a total margin of less than 2000 votes after dishonestly sneaking legislation through Parliament during the end of session rush to prohibit advocacy of an informal vote. Without that legislation, the minimal publicity that even a piss weak campaign could have obtained in the mass media would certainly have been enough to influence more than a couple of

thousand ALP voters in marginal seats and therefore enough to have cost them the election. If there had been a more vigorous campaign and significant numbers of people had been able to make an issue of the ban itself, the ALP would have been defeated despite (or partly because of) that legislation (s 329A of the Commonwealth Electoral Act).

Challenges to the constitutional validity of s 329A and of the rigged elections that were 'won' using it are currently wending their way through the High Court but won't be resolved until 1994. However there hasn't been much mobilization about the quite outrageous attack on basic democratic rights involved in threatening six months gaol for advocating a lawful vote and 'winning' an election by those means.

Nor was there much mobilization in 1987 when the ALP Government's Australian Electoral Commission stooges claimed it was illegal to advocate an informal vote even though there was no legislation to back them up. As a result they got away with effectively fining Harry van Moorst \$12,000 for exercising his right to campaign against all candidates in the 1987 election, by threatening to sell his house to pay for court costs from resisting their injunction. (The court rejected the AEC's demand for an injunction restraining advocacy of an informal vote, but granted an injunction against advocating no vote at all, with costs, on the basis that a 'Don't Vote' campaign might encourage voters not to comply with Australia's compulsory voting laws, even though the campaign was urging voters to turn up and record their informal votes rather than staying at home apathetically. Subsequent campaigns were renamed 'Vote Informal' to avoid any possible confusion on this point – so the ALP brought in s 329A to make that illegal – and similar State legislation in South Australia.)

A vigorous effort could have brought the Government down already. Even a minimal effort now could make them pay dearly and help ensure their defeat in the next elections (which may not be a full three years away). It would also help consolidate democratic rights and involve people concerned about the ALP's increasingly vicious attacks on those rights. Anyone interested in helping should contact the Vote Informal Campaign, 111 Bradley Grove, Mitchell Park, SA 5043 (phone 08 374 1446).

I would also appreciate it if somebody not interested in helping could explain just why this doesn't grab them. Why is there only a

(small) functioning campaign in Adelaide now and nothing in Melbourne where activity was strongest in 1987? Are \$12,000 fines and threats of six months gaol for exercising elementary democratic rights not worth bothering about? Is fear of the Coalition deeper now that it was in 1987? Or is it just general demobilization and demoralization?