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New Songs

Changed, changed utterly... has to be the verdict on UK perspectives following Tony Blair’s departure. W. B. Yeats’ words were for the Irish Easter Rising of 1916, but apply no less today. Terrible beauties are once more being born, without the violence of those times, yet just as irreversibly: in Scotland most obviously, and also in Wales, Northern Ireland and (I suspect) soon in England itself. As I speak, the leader of the Scottish National Party is setting up the first democratically elected government ever, in Edinburgh. Plaid Cymru, the corresponding Welsh national movement, is pondering its decisive role in the Welsh Assembly. In both countries the New Labour Party that effectively kept the Kingdom united has been resoundingly defeated. And as everybody knows, Gerry Adams and the Reverend Ian Paisley have reached an agreement on running the odd jurisdiction of Northern Ireland. Simultaneously Blair has been succeeded by Gordon Brown as UK Premier — another Scot, but as different from SNP leader Salmond as can be imagined. Fiercely devoted to maintenance of the Union, Brown couldn’t even bring himself to phone Salmond with standard, formal congratulations on his victory. Such rigidity derives from weakness, not strength — that is, from popular resentment all over Britain at the ongoing defeat in Iraq, and the subservience to Washington which led to it. Thus the earthquake will be followed by prolonged constitutional strife within the British family: nothing like business as usual, more of a tense, even Shakespearean prelude to the next UK general election in 2008 or 2009.

Strangely enough, most opinion in the 85 per cent English majority appears indifferent to the threat of break-up, with a surprising number actually in favour. No, it’s the transnational and self-consciously British elite that remains dead set against it. That is, the direct political heirs of Empire and Commonwealth, among whom Scots, Welsh and Ulstermen are if anything over-represented. In this sense Brown has a very large London court of officials, representatives, general secretaries, high commissioners and culture-pundits who can’t help project-

Green Lessons from Labor’s Past

In this midden of warm faces and freezing backs.
Sing me your songs in the speech of timber and horse.

Tom Nairn

Over their political career the Australian Greens have suffered hostility not just from right-wing commentators but from what counts as the left wing of the commentariat. After the 2004 federal election Shaun Carney complained that Bob Brown had not been suitably saddened by Mark Latham’s defeat. Transfixed by nostalgia for Whitlam or the glory days of Keating’s late 1980s press conferences the Labor-voting media have been preoccupied by Labor’s post-1996 woes and largely indifferent to the rise of the Greens. This is despite the fact that the Greens have overturned what seemed an iron law of Australian politics: Labor’s electoral hegemony on the Left. Radical liberalism, agrarian populism and communism all posed significant electoral challenges to overseas social democracy but here labourism was unchallenged.
The 2006 Victorian election was a major political breakthrough for the Greens with over ten per cent of the state-wide vote and three seats in the Legislative Council. The Greens became a major Victorian political force at the 2001 federal election in the aftermath of the Tampa-inspired revolt of left-wing voters against Labor. But the Greens had to endure almost five frustrating years until their electoral support was translated into parliamentary representation. The success of the Greens now means that they face new challenges. If they are to achieve their more ambitious goals of social transformation they need to increase their support substantially. Their current plateau of ten percent in most states will ensure some Legislative Council seats, and if lucky an occasional lower house victory, but even a slight variation in their support could see their parliamentary representation collapse. A slight decline in Western Australian Green support at the 2005 state election saw Green representation fall from five to two Legislative Councillors. Even where the Greens have been able to secure Legislative Council seats their influence is limited. Labor governments can always look lightward to the Liberals, Nationals or even such oddities of their creation such as Family First or the DLP. The personal preference of many is social transformation, based on shared memories of student politics co-operation in the 1990s.

In the long run any prospect of the Greens establishing a reliable base in the Legislative Assemblies, which would enable them to exercise real influence on government, will require a substantial increase in their overall vote. To achieve such an increase the Greens will have to go to the next level in their battle with Labor. Yet so far Labor has comprehensively out-maneuvred the Greens, who have had to fight for every seat whilst political curiosities such as the DLP or Family First ride into parliament on Labor’s coat tails. The Greens’ political difficulties were apparent at the Victorian state election where they went backwards in key Legislative Assembly seats. As always the Greens pointed to the dishonesty of their political opponents: Labor’s claim that the Greens had directed preferences to the Liberals. But the Greens are vulnerable to this attack precisely because so much of their support is drawn from ‘soft Labor’ voters. They have been reluctant to admit that many of their potential voters are looking for a force to keep Labor honest.

The Greens confront the dilemma that the infant Labor party faced in the late nineteenth century. Then Labor found that the Left of the political spectrum was occupied by a pre-existing political force; the radical liberalism of Alfred Deakin and others. In its early days Labor stormed into parliament on the back of a radical minority social movement, the great strikes of the late nineteenth century were the equivalent of the wilderness preservation battles of the 1970s and 1980s; Labor saw seats in parliament as a means to an end rather than an end in themselves. However the new Labor MPs found themselves trapped in a left-wing ghetto. Many workers remained loyal to the traditions of nineteenth-century liberalism. Labor’s vote stagnated or declined. It took time for Labor to develop a twofold strategy that combined policy pragmatism with strategic radicalism. On one hand the party replaced the foggy and utopian classless socialism of its early years with a cohesive suite of policies, such as tariff protection, industrial arbitration, and populist nationalism that appealed to the real needs of working-class voters. But this willingness to compromise with public opinion on policy was combined with a strategic radicalism. Labor recognised that its long-run political success was dependent on the destruction of liberalism. Within Labor, party activists forced their leaders to aggressively challenge Deakinite liberals at every turn and to contest their claims to be the true representatives of the Left. By 1910 Labor had driven from politics the gifted and admirable men of nineteenth-century liberalism such as Deakin, Higgins and Isaacs. It now seems inconceivable that the Greens could ever replace Labor as the dominant party of the Left, but no one in 1885 would have predicted that within 25 years a Labor party would not only have emerged but replaced liberalism as the sole occupant of the Left of the political spectrum. It is difficult to see the Greens ever supplanting Labor but even if they aspire only to exercise real influence on a Labor government they need to break open Labor’s core support. The past history of Labor’s rise to power suggests that this would require the Greens to both develop policies that can appeal to a broader mass of current Labor supporters, rather than just a left-wing minority, and a commitment towards building Green electoral support beyond the inner city.

Yet fortunately for Labor there is little sign that the Greens would follow such a road, which has been taken with electoral success by some European political forces such as the Dutch Socialist Party. Their focus is clearly on mopping up the remnants of the inner city left vote in pursuit of the modest goal of one or two lower house electorates. In pursuit they continue to espouse a well-honed formula of wilderness politics and cultural leftism, now bolstered by opposition to the coal industry. Federal Labor’s comically enthusiastic drive for the centre may assist the Greens to make further inroads into Labor support among the trade union Left (coalminers excluded), that section of the radical milieu that has remained most loyal to Labor. Yet patronage from the remaining outposts of the old industrial left offers little guidance on how to appeal to a largely female and suburban working class, among whom the few remaining union members are mostly shop assistants. At the recent NSW state election the Green vote remained stagnant despite the widely acknowledged poor performance of the state Labor government. At the 2003 NSW election the NSW Greens broke free of the micro-party pack when they won two Legislative Council seats but a breakthrough repeated is not a breakthrough but stagnation. Despite the widely acknowledged poor performance of the NSW Labor government the Greens merely held their 2003 vote at the 2007 election. The new federal Australian national and state elections may be a similar story. Those likely to play the highest price are Labor’s working-class supporters marooned in the party’s rotten boroughs.

Geoff Robinson

Dream Large

The crosshairs pivot, bringing the target into focus. Seconds later the earth jolts as the building explodes into smithereens. It’s the kind of footage that US military commandos show at briefing sessions to boast the smarts of smart bombs. In this case, though, it’s part of the University of Melbourne’s ‘Dream Large’ advertising campaign.

In the university’s version, the question “Can you see peace?” is plastered across the image of the destroyed building, suggesting that a degree from the revamped University of Melbourne