

Australia Needs a Political Alternative

Widespread discontent has arisen in Australia with both of the mainstream political parties. Many see that they can no longer properly represent them. In the last Federal elections about 20 per cent voted for parties and independents other than the Labor Party or the Liberal-National Party coalition. The Australian Democrats, independents, peace and green candidates were the main choice of those who were looking for alternative policies.

Since the last Federal elections, the policies pursued by the government have not altered for the better. The ALP leadership has shifted more to the right in both domestic and international affairs.

Conditions for the working people have worsened. Unemployment is rising. Health and educational services are deteriorating. Professional workers in education, science, culture and other fields are inevitably affected by the down-turn. Housing problems are acute. The farm crisis has become catastrophic. Many small businesses are in dire straits. Bankruptcies are growing rapidly and even big companies are going to the wall.

Despite the contribution that the government has made on some environmental issues, recent developments suggest that the Federal Government is moving away from previous commitments.

The Gulf War has shown more clearly than ever, the craven position of the Australian Government in the US alliance and the dangerous militarist course being followed. The militarisation now being accelerated will inevitably lead Australia into more military conflicts, both as part of the US alliance and in pursuit of the interests of the Australian big business investors in the region.

FORCES CAN WORK TOGETHER

But events show that these policies and their consequences are not being readily accepted by many people. The opposition to Australia's participation in the Gulf War and the strong actions by the environmental movement show this. Farmers are also holding demonstrations and protest meetings. Trade unions continue to take action on a variety of issues. There exists a widespread popular opinion which supports

progressive causes. Experience also shows that diverse political forces can work together for commonly held objectives. There are many issues around which cooperative work and activity already takes place.

The situation confirms that an alternative political force which commands substantial public support could be created. We believe that left, progressive and democratic political organisations and individuals could be brought together in unity just as they have been in the peace and environmental movements, in some trade unions and community organisations. Such a unity of forces would, however, not be limited to a single issue or even several issues but in support of a comprehensive political program.

A COALITION

No one political party represents all progressive opinion, nor is any one party able to command sufficient support to form an alternative government at Federal, State and local Council level. But a coalition could. Coalitions have proven to be effective and powerful and are capable of winning much support and generating enthusiasm.

The building of cooperation and the maintenance of unity calls for hard work by those involved, patience, tolerance and consensus, ruling out all attempts at dominance by one over others or using the coalition for some narrow advantage. The most successful coalitions in the peace and environmental movements and in other organisations in which diverse political forces cooperate show that these principles are the foundation of good results once the policy objectives have been agreed on.

There are some who adopt an attitude of opposition to all party political organisation. However, political parties are the traditional means by which groups of people in society band together in support of agreed upon policies. Parties are the most effective form of political combination, they are the best means of organising and bring greater consistency. This is not to under-rate the contribution that is made by independents from time to time. However, it is not possible to foresee a viable government made up of independents.

SIMILAR POLICY POSITIONS

There are already a large number of issues in connection with which there are similar or identical policy positions held by a number of existing political parties, independents, trade unions, other public organisations and single issue mass movements. In time a detailed program needs to be worked out by discussion among left/progressive organisations on economic and social questions, the environment, democratic and trade union rights, Aborigines, women, foreign policy, national independence, etc.

By forming a coalition these organisations can create the necessary alternative political force. It would be a peace and environment coalition, a social justice coalition, a coalition for democratic rights, a coalition for the Aborigines and ethnic migrant groups, a women's and youth coalition.

WIN GOVERNMENT

The aim of such a coalition is to win government so that its policies can be implemented. There have already been some recent examples of coalitions and alliances campaigning in elections and they have achieved some success. Senator Jo Vallentine was elected in WA by such a coalition. This needs to be expanded into an

Australia-wide network in support of agreed upon candidates in elections. Clearly identifiable coalition candidates could be selected which all participating organisations would agree to support. In between elections coalition activities should continue as success can only come by hard work over a period of time by the selected candidates and the participating political organisations.

Such a coalition must not see itself as being merely a ginger group pushing existing governments to implement better policies. Nor must it accept a position of being a collector of preferences for either of the main parties of the two party system.

While the question of preferences is important, the last Federal election saw the environmental and green parties being cynically used by the Labor Party leaders as the means by which disenchanted former voters of the Labor Party were channelled back into the Labor Party fold. As is well known, their preference votes were responsible for the re-election of the Hawke government.

Australia needs a political alternative. It can only be a coalition working together under a common policy banner. We recognise that such a concept needs much discussion and will take time.

The above statement was adopted by the Executive of the Socialist Party of Australia. We put it forward as part of the public discussion taking place about the crisis in Australia's political life and the way out of the situation in which the major parties are increasingly discredited.

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