



Building a New Left Party for Australia

NEW LEFT PARTY

TAKES OFF

The New Left Party is establishing itself around the country as the stories inside this edition of 'THE COMET' indicate. First proposals for the July Launching Conference are included (see 'Countdown for National Launch' page 5).

Local groups have started activities to build the process and have campaigns underway.

The rise of the Liberal Right and the Peacock Throne give the Left a little more time to get our act together.

So, welcome to THE COMET.

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Optimism follows loss of political virginity

I spent 10 years living isolated in the Dandernongs, bringing up two kids, locally involved and forming my political viewpoints. Two years ago I hit St Kilda, a single parent and a Marxist, enthusiastic about involvement with the political activities of the Left.

Soon after the New Left Charter leaflet was circulated and I was impressed by the structure and content of the proposed process. But at the charter conference in November 87, I felt that I lost my political virginity. As a consequence of this intense experience I felt disillusioned and pessimistic about left alliances.

Eighteen months on I have become reinvolved because the time has allowed me to re-evaluate my former position.

I feel that the shattering events of 87 have been positively significant and consequently useful. Also, none of the viable alternatives offer an unashamedly socialist perspective.

I'm still concerned about the role and position of independents within the process, but more importantly my optimism has been revived.

**JILL TOOVEY
MELBOURNE**

LETTERS

Creative & positive social vision

A new party of the left in Australia needs to provide a creative, positive and up-to-date social vision for the community which provides concrete means of dealing with every day issues. One of the reasons the left has lacked this approach in the past is that the left has been so fragmented. I have great hope that this process will pull together many people in progressive and left movements.

There is a spirit and cooperation and unity in the new left party process which should ensure its ongoing success.

**ANTHEA HOWARD
ADELAIDE**

Letters for The Comet should be no more than 100 words. Shorter letters would be preferred. All letters must be signed and the writer's name and address clearly written. A letter may be edited for reasons of space and clarity.

UPCOMING EVENTS:

MELBOURNE:

WOMEN'S COMMISSION: SEMINAR and OPEN DISCUSSION ON AWARD RESTRUCTURING:

Monday 5 June, Building Worker's Industrial Union, 500 Swanston Street 2nd floor, 6.30pm - 9.30pm dinner provided, \$5 or \$3 concession.

Martina Nightingale, union education officer and women's movement activist will introduce the session on award restructuring and how it affects women workers and low paid workers.

Restructuring changes will affect us all as workers and will bring about profound changes in the relationship between workers and management. It will mark a new era in wage fixing and wage rises.

Therefore it's important that women intervene before the agenda is firmly set to make sure that their interests are represented and forms of discrimination are addressed. SO! We welcome and urge ALL interested women to come along and join the discussion.

CHILDCARE AVAILABLE: Contact Katherine Goonan ph: 807 4318 or Louise Connor ph: 534 2736 by Friday 2 June

MELBOURNE:

Environment Discussion

Wednesday 31st May, 5.30 onwards.

Pat Clancy Hall, BWIU, 2nd Floor 500 Swanston St. Carlton South.

NOTICE:

Keep up with the latest... get the news & views in the New Left Party.... catch the Comet... the bulletin
Subscribe to your local group. For only \$10 (\$5 concession). Send to your regional NLP contact. See addresses & phone no.s this page.

DEADLINE:

Next issue - material to be in by June 1st. Send to:
P.O. Box 236 Collins St.
VIC. 3000. or fax to J.Gray
(03) 348 1794.

REGIONAL CONTACTS:

PERTH - c/- PO Box 541, Victoria Park. WA. 6100. Ph: Martha or Vic (09) 335 1928; Karl or Coryn (09) 361 6521.

ADELAIDE - PO Box 353, Hindmarsh, SA 5007. Ph: Barbara (08) 45 6228.

HOBART - c/- Post Office, Sandy Bay, Tas. 7005. Ph: Ian (002) 236032.

MELBOURNE - PO Box 236, Collins St. Vic 3000. Ph: Jil (03) 534 2172, Mike (03) 387 3239.

LA TROBE VALLEY - c/- PO Box 836, Morwell, Vic 3840. Ph: Peter or Rose (051) 691 665.

NSW ILLAWARRA - PO Box 1905, Wollongong, NSW 2500. Ph: Mike (042) 672 111 or Beverley (042) 284 997.

SYDNEY - GPO Box 1214, Sydney, NSW 2001. Ph: Frank (02) 660 2559, Joyce (02) 51 4748 or Audrey (02) 344 0566.

NSW BATHURST - PO Box 566, Bathurst, NSW 2795. Ph: Jane (063) 31 8964.

NSW HUNTER - PO Box 255, Merewether, NSW 2291. Ph: Greg (049) 61 1105.

BRISBANE - PO Box 1365, Fortitude Valley, QLD 4006. Ph: Bob (07) 844 8767.

Feature articles for The Comet should be no more than 400 words. Shorter articles would be preferred. All articles must be signed and the writer's name and address clearly written. A letter may be edited for reasons of space and clarity.

Adelaide bursts into song

It was with some apprehension that we wandered into the Upper Refectory at Adelaide University to attend the first public meeting of the New Left Party. We need not have worried about the daunting capacity of the empty room since it was not long before it began to feel small and crowded! Some 75 people (14 apologies) many of them familiar faces from the Charter process, the green movement, women's groups, students, unionists and many others were there.

Sing-Song Start

After much rearranging of chairs, Barbara Pocock and Jenny Allen-Bayes got the meeting off to a lively start with a rousing rendition of "Don't be too polite, girls". We were none too prepared for this...and were obviously not regular "church-goers" either. A report followed on the National Meeting of Sponsors and national developments in general.

Overview

Stephen Darley gave a lucid overview of the state of left politics and social movements in

S.A. Stephen stressed the importance of learning from the popular successes of these movements and identified community activity and local action as the key area. He called for a critical appraisal of left "thinking" and urged the participants to approach the work with an open mind.

Eight groups discussed Stephen's talk and the need for a new broad-based political organisation. Reports back showed that there was a diversity of policy interests. These are being collated but indications are that ecology (particularly the urban environment), local affairs, party structure/ideology, trade union links, housing, women, youth, culture and FUN!! were favoured as primary areas for the formulation of policy.

Housework

14 people were nominated and elected to form a co-ordinating committee to further the process of policy formation and be generally responsible for the housekeeping. Barbara was elected National Liaison Con-

tact Person and all in attendance were encouraged to write voluminously about themselves, their interests and skills.

Afterwards, friends, associates and strangers, young and old met and mingled, rounding off a productive evening which left all but a few feeling heartily inspired and determined to make it work this time.

The enthusiastic housekeepers quickly arranged a meeting held within a week of the public meeting. These details are included in the S.A. News.

Commissions

The Committee nominated the following areas for S.A. Commissions,

Environment

Contact

Ian Hunt (08) 2752054/2052 (W)

John Wishart (08) 45 6228 (H)

Stephen Darley (08) 49 6134 (H)

Women,

Contact Jenny Allen-Bayes

(08) 242 04493/ (08) 47 3300 (H)

Brisbane targets culture & fun

The Brisbane New Left Party group will be co-ordinating policy development on Art & Culture, and invites all participants in the new party process to make a contribution. Please write to us with your ideas, whether they can be specific areas that you think should be included, or of a more general nature.

We believe it's essential to involve people who work in community arts and theatre, play in bands, dance, paint, write, etc. The Communist Arts Group have offered to help by organising a forum in Brisbane which we hope will attract input from the artistic community.

CAG have been successfully organising political/cultural/social functions for many years, and have in their ranks some well

respected authors and artists who have contributed enormously to left culture in Queensland.

After the forum, a drafting committee will put together a draft policy document based on contributions from all sources.

Please send your contribution to:
NEW LEFT PARTY GROUP
P.O. BOX 1365
FORTITUDE VALLEY.
QLD. 4006.

May Day

The Brisbane Mayday celebrations gave us the first really good opportunity to distribute the 'Time to Act' statement widely.

It was the best Mayday march in 20 years and finished with a festival in Albert Park

instead of the usual drinking binge at the sterile old exhibition grounds. This meant that we were able to spend the afternoon talking to people from a range of organisations - cultural, environmental, solidarity groups etc. - who were invited to take part in the festival.

It's too early to know how many forms will be returned, but most of the people we spoke to appeared to be very interested, and we gained several new members on the spot.

The statements were handed out with a meeting notice attached for 9 May, so hopefully we will see some new faces at this meeting.

We will be holding a public meeting/media conference in the near future.

NLP blossoms in the Apple Isle

From a circulation list of more than 120 people a New Left Party group in Tasmania has had strong response from Deloraine, Hobart, the campus at the University of Tasmania and on the East Coast.

Groups in Deloraine and Hobart are being formed. Significant responses from older comrades show the red side of "Grey Power".

Left ALP members have supported a new party, while individually they intend to continue with the struggle inside the ALP.

The Hobart group is preparing a statement on the forthcoming State Election, focusing on what shape the government could take if Green independents hold the balance of power after May 13th.

THE COMET
was produced by
Rob Durbridge,
Caroline Milburn
and James Gray on
behalf of the New
Left Party National
Liaison Committee
from Melbourne.

Media blitz in W.A.

The New Left Party was launched publicly at a press conference on 13 April. The launch featured John Gandini, (E.T.U. State Secretary and President of the Trades and Labour Council), Claire Howell, (State Secretary of the Aust. Public Service Association and Jnr. Vice-President of the TLC), Bill Ethell, (Federal President of the Building Workers Union) and peace activist and film director Martha Ansara.

The story was covered by virtually every main media outlet in Perth. The WEST AUSTRALIAN, the main daily ran the story over two days and concentrated largely on disenchantment with the Labor Party. The WEST also reported Gandini who said "We are certainly not a breakaway from the Labor Party and we are certainly not anti-Labor. Wherever we put the Labor Party on the how-to-vote card, the conservative parties will be right at the bottom."

Media obsession with the New Left Party in narrow electoral terms was not shared by the more than 70 delegates at the Party's first conference the following weekend. At both plenary sessions and in workshops, participants discussed the educative, co-ordinating and policy-making roles of the Party in relation to mass movements and a range of actions for change.

Workshops were held on some of the topics outlined in the "Time to Act" document. The most popular were those on Aboriginal rights, national/economic sovereignty and

the environment. The final sessions were given over to reports from workshops and recommendations for the future.

Group Reports

The Union group looked at why people are leaving unions and the problem of loss of rank and file control. The need for a working group to consider unionists' role in the new party was agreed.

Theory and Practice group discussed forming an Educational Committee and a specific Womens' Education Group. The need to change point 13 in "Time to Act" to link Marxist analysis, Feminism, Environmentalism, Anti-racism etc better was accepted. Parliamentarism was also considered.

The Economic /Sovereignty workshop produced a clear report which concluded that policies for self-determination are urgently required, but that this is not possible within present political and military alignments. World economics and military spending need to be understood and the power of foreign capital curbed as a priority along with developing democratic, socially-useful economic policies within the limits of environmental and health considerations.

The Environment workshop was lively and recognised the need for policy which expresses the multi-dimensional nature of environmental concerns. Environment groups themselves could be involved in

policy development, as well as incorporating the perspectives of indigenous people. Policy should be pro-active with issues such as uranium mining, proposed petro-chemical and pulp projects and personal practices as components.

Aboriginal trade union activist Clarrie Isaacs produced a detailed and specific report from a workshop which involved a large proportion of activists around Aboriginal campaigns. Active support for claims on the old Swan Brewery site, a "Rock against Racism" approach and recognition by governments that all resources belong to Aboriginal people in the first instance leading to a proportion of the GNP to be returned to Aboriginal control. It was agreed that the Party should give top priority to issues put forward by Aboriginal people.

Housekeeping

Conference elected an interim committee of 14 (6 women and 1 Aboriginal person) to co-ordinate interest and area collectives, ensure the WA input into national Commissions, manage finances and encourage participation. Most participants declared for direct further involvement, some wished to be kept informed and some opted to remain in existing Left groups. This was an outcome which led to optimism in a conservative place like Perth.

Red Meets Green

On 15 March the NLP initiated a meeting with the Alternative Coalition, the Valentine peace group and some unions. This was very encouraging and has been followed up by better relations. We hope soon to directly involve environmental groups and unions to develop ways to bring environmental issues to union members in a number of ways.



If you agree "It's time to act" for a new party, SEND THIS FORM TO THE CONTACT ADDRESS NEAREST YOU

Name

Address

..... Post Code

Phone (H) (W)

I agree with the general aims and principles of the *Time to act* statement as the basis for forming a new party. I wish to participate in and/or be kept informed about the process of developing and launching the new party.

Signed Date

I enclose a donation of \$..... towards the costs of publicising and organising the process.

I can assist or would like to be involved in the following ways

If you wish, fill in any of the following details:

Occupation

Current industry/work

Involvement in progressive movements/campaigns, etc.

.....

.....

.....

Areas of policy interest

Member of political party/group: YES NO

Which one?

Skills that might assist the process:

.....

NLP bouyant on Melbourne's bayside

The "Time to Act" statement has been distributed widely throughout Victoria, at the Palm Sunday rally and via extensive mail-outs. So far over 50 response forms have been returned with over \$450 in donations. Sixty people attended the first general meeting on 12 April which considered suggestions from the National Sponsors meeting. Groups have been set up on most of the suggested policy commissions and Victoria has agreed to nationally coordinate commissions on multiculturalism and party strategy.

Commissions

A Labour issues group has met several times with more than 40 people attending. The group is planning discussions on developing more comprehensive left strategies for the trade union movement.

People from different ethnic communities have met to establish a new party group that will look at issues affecting migrant communities and how to attract those groups to the NLP.

In St Kilda, an inner bayside suburb a local group will get involved in St Kilda issues such as the present controversy over multi-million dollar high-rise development at the expense of low and middle income housing. The group has planned a public meeting in St Kilda on 30 May, with Jack Munday speaking on urban development issues.

A meeting of interested people in the La Trobe Valley/Gippsland area will be convened soon to plan activities.

Housekeeping

The general meeting set up a coordinating

group of commission convenors and other interested people. They have planned a public forum for 21 May. It will be in two parts - an introduction to the new left party process for newcomers and then the first in a series of forums on the major issues facing the left in the 90s. The first forum will address housing issues and hopefully it will create the basis for developing a comprehensive policy, including immediate activities on housing which can involve the new party.

Fundraising

A couple of theatre nights, a raffle, (first prize a trip for two on the ferry to Tasmania!) and a quiz night have been organised. The other major activity is publicising the party and trying to attract a broad range of people from different areas of work and act

Countdown for national launch

The Melbourne national meeting in April placed the Launching Conference preparations in the hands of NSW regional groups, in consultation with reps from groups outside NSW. A recent meeting of NSW groups established a Conference Preparatory Committee and proposed ideas for the event. The CPC will be Sydney-based with fortnightly meetings, while representatives of regional groups will meet monthly. Teleconferences may be needed to give interstate groups an input into decisions, and one national meeting is probable.

The committee can be contacted through the new office at Room 35A, Trades Hall, Goulburn St, Sydney. Any people who can help are most welcome and attend conference committee meetings, on the first and third Wednesdays every month, at 6pm.

The recent NSW groups meeting decided to send out a "working paper" of proposals, summarised here:

1. Conference goals; to build on the decisions of the sponsors, there are four main goals/roles,

- * promotional; to promote and publicise the "Time to Act" statement
- * policy; to commence discussion and work about specific policies, mostly through workshops which would take up at least half the conference time, and to set up policy commissions which would draft full policy statements for discussion leading up to the founding conference next year,
- * campaigns; to decide on a small number of campaigns/initiatives around some "linkingJ" issues of major concern, eg; housing and interest rates; the foreign debt; taking up in the white community the issue of black deaths in custody,
- * interim structures; to establish an interim party organisation which people could join and through which they could participate in formulating, discussing and deciding on poli-

cies, as well as in campaigns and activities, up to the founding conference.

2. Participation;

There was a long discussion about the linked questions of participation and voting at the conference. Several views and proposals were considered before a final consensus emerged. This was that participation should be open to anyone who signed the "Time to Act" statement before or at the conference, but that there should be a cut-off date prior to the conference for the purpose of allocating voting quotas to regional groups, (see next point). It was agreed that we should strive for the biggest possible attendance and participation in the conference from all centres, and that it should have cultural and "festive" aspects.

3. Voting

As agreed at the national sponsors meeting, there would be few issues requiring votes at the launching conference, and that most decisions would be by consensus if possible. However, some method of voting should be decided on in advance, to prevent misunderstanding or bad feelings arising at or after the conference if some important issues had to be voted upon.

This was particularly because Sydney and NSW would inevitably dominate numerically. Various principles and methods were canvassed, including proxy votes for interstate groups, weighted or plural voting to ensure Sydney participants did not dominate, and election of delegates from regional groups.

The final proposal was that a cutoff date should be set (eg 15 July), when each regional group would be allocated a number of votes in proportion to their number of signatories. Each group would then democratically decide how to allocate those votes to ensure that they fairly represented the make-up and views of those in the group.

What do women want - a vision for a new party?

Melbourne women's discussions centred on our vision for a new left party. There has been a remarkable degree of cohesion.

We've agreed the new party must break from existing parties, from their political practices, their structures, their images. We don't want a party which is male-dominated, inflexible and dogmatic. We don't want a party which is hierarchical, sectarian and narrow. We don't want a party which fails to take up everyday issues or makes it hard for people (especially women) to participate. We don't want a party based on the 'Big Bang' theory of revolution.

So what do women want? We want:

- An holistic approach - a party which makes the **connections** between people and social and economic structures, between 'the personal' and the political, between everyday issues (like life in the suburbs) and 'big' issues (like capitalism).
- A theory and practice which makes sense of the world for ordinary people and empowers them.
- At the policy level, feminist politics and must be integrated into all areas (econom-

ics, unionism...) and all structures. Equal recognition is needed for social, sexual and cultural issues.

- * Attention to a localised focus for political activity, particularly in the suburbs. The facility for members to participate at various levels of commitment, "from each according to their ability", "leadership" shouldn't necessarily go to those who can attend most meetings. If we're to be a mass party, we can't be a party of professional revolutionaries. Power and roles need to be shared.
- * Better ways of organising and of holding meetings - a less functional approach. Political activity can be combined with conviviality, ("socialism through socials").
- * A place for children and activities which pass on our political and cultural heritage.
- * A non-ageist approach.
- * A people-centred party which maximises compassion and the equality of relations between people,
- * An end to the invisibility of gays, lesbians and an emphasis on sexual politics; no set

expectations about men's or women's behaviour

- * A recognition that struggle transforms both the participants as well as the noble goal - that process is as important as the ultimate aim,
 - * A softer, more inviting public image - one which eschews the "clenched fist" approach to political iconography
 - * A new language. As well as avoiding the usual sexist epithets, we need to avoid terms like "penetrating the non-aligned left" and "raping the environment". Both of these were uttered (by men) at the national sponsor's meeting. We also need to avoid a hectoring, authoritarian style of speaking
 - * A name which symbolises a positive, pro-people approach. We thought that, so far, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, and the Rainbow Alliance have scooped the pool. Are we creative and committed enough to meet this challenge - and the others encapsulated in one vision of a new party
- Carmel Shute, (for the Melbourne Women's Group).**

INTERNATIONAL BOOKSHOP

MARKSISM GAY LIBERATION ENVIRONMENT

FEMINISM POLITICS

EDUCATION ECONOMICS

HISTORY

RECORDS MEDIA PSYCHOLOGY

THE INTERNATIONAL BOOKSHOP CARRIES AUSTRALIA'S LARGEST RANGE OF BOOKS ON POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES. **BOOK NEWS**, A QUARTERLY LIST OF NEW BOOKS IS AVAILABLE ON REQUEST. MAIL ORDER SERVICE PROVIDED. ALSO SECOND HAND LEFT BOOKS, JOURNALS, ETC.

2ND FLOOR 17 ELIZABETH STREET MELBOURNE 3000
TELEPHONE 03 614 2859

The Illawarra New Left Party Group (based in Wollongong, on the NSW South Coast) has been going for 18 months. However - like a lot of other groups around the country - we've had an upsurge since the issuing of the 'Time to Act' statement and we're now well and truly 'up and running.'

We've had 33 coupons in, with donations. These include the initial 15 people whose names are in the statement, and they represent a reasonably good cross-section across the broad left and areas of interest. However, it's a little early to gauge the potential of support in the Illawarra, as we've recently done a large mailout and the responses are not yet all back.

Our 10 May public launching will be ad-

ressed by Betty Hounslow and Frank Stilwell from Sydney plus local trade union activists Paul Matters and Mike Dwyer. We are anticipating a good roll-up (our original Public Launching of the Charter statement attracted some 180 people)..

The group of 15 initial sponsors has had a couple of meetings, including to discuss the report-back from the National Sponsors Meeting in Melbourne from our three representatives. In March we had a successful 'informal launching' of the statement, with a BBQ attended by about 50 people, which generated wider interest. At the same time, the local paper ran a good story, following the Sydney media conference, based on prominent Illawarra sponsors of the process.

Following our public meeting, we're planning regular sponsors meetings, open to all who have shown their support, and we're aiming to develop ways that people can become involved in the process. A decision as to whether we will take on co-ordinating the Policy Commission on Party Structures, will be made shortly. Over the next few months, we'll be working on the Launching Conference Organising Committee, with other NSW groups.

We are confident that the Group will grow and develop, and by the time of the July Conference, the Illawarra will be well-represented.

Beverley Symons

Signals from Sydney

The Sydney response so far from the Time To Act statement has been very encouraging. Over 200 signed forms have been returned and \$4500 in donations have been received. The Sydney working group has met regularly, a bulletin has been sent out and we have an office at the Sydney Trades Hall (room 35A, first floor, Box 19) for meetings.

The Sydney representatives on the National Liaison Committee are: Frank Stilwell, Tanya Ritchie, Brian Aarons, Jenepher Surbey, Tom McDonald, Sonia Laverty.

The Sydney group has produced a shortened version of the Time To Act statement for use in ethnic languages as separate leaflets or in ethnic newspapers and publications. A journalist has been commissioned

to write a brief story about the initiative for a new left party, suitable for ethnic language papers.

National Conference

Two initial conference preparatory committee meetings have been arranged in Sydney. A meeting of regional NSW representatives is planned for early May. Groups from Newcastle, Wollongong, Bathurst, the Blue Mountains and Sydney will attend. They will discuss the planned conference and draw up discussion plans. Likely conference venues could be Sydney University or the University of Technology (Ultimo).

Commissions

Sydney discussed the possibility of coordinating commissions on ecology, industrial/economic issues and social justice.

Central West jumps in

Fifteen people met in Bathurst to form an NLP branch. At least 15 more people have made donations. There are 30 people on the mailing list who want to be kept informed about developments. We set a monthly meeting date and an annual membership fee of \$20 with a negotiable fee for the non-waged. I hope we haven't jumped the gun!

Our supporters and members want action which represents what social justice and socialism is all about. We are going to approach the Trades and Labour Council, Community Aid Abroad and Bathurst Environment group to set up an action and resource centre. Many people are involved in a range of activities centering around peace, ecology, justice and equity and we want to have them involved with us on issues and campaigns.

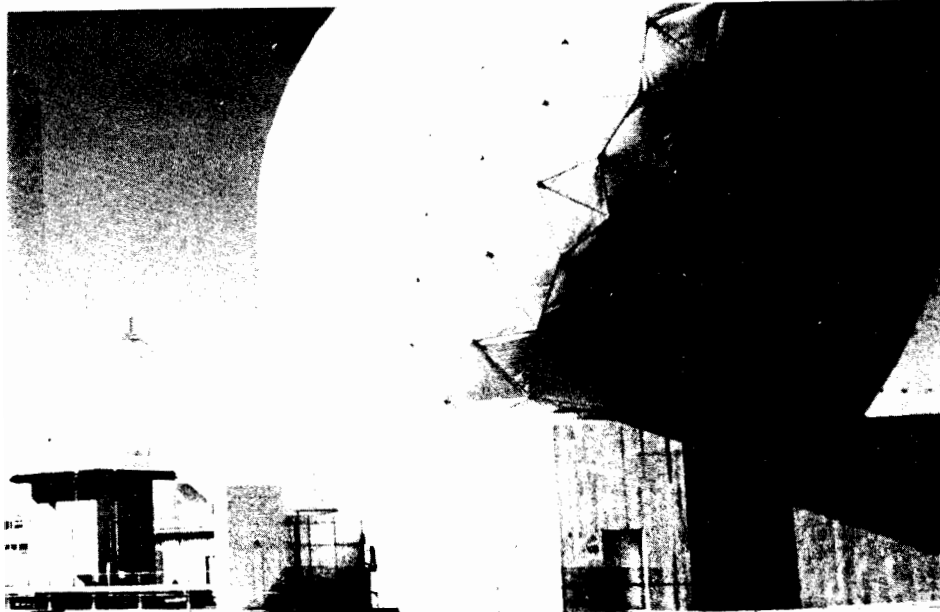
Recycling

Another practical venture will be a project recycling timber from building sites and the possibility of setting up a paper recycling group. We have a lot to learn from our supporters in Mudgee who supply the town with organic vegetables and unbleached paper. One of our Lithgow members is involved in a reverse garbage scheme.

Study Group

A Mitchell College student, one of our five convenors will invite some lecturers to set up a political discussion and study group. We will work on the social justice and environmental commissions. We have an enthusiastic group who want to lead by example and demystify socialism. A contribution to the NLP's name was People in the Environment Party (PEP).

Jane Dixon, co-convenor, Central West branch.



Politics for the caring middle-classes?

by Marian Aveling

As an event, the Rainbow Alliance's Victorian launch was a great success. About 800 people filled Parkville Pharmacy College on 16 April.

The Alliance announces itself as 'a political movement unlike anything previously attempted in this country.' The launch invitation stressed the diversity of the movement, addressing issues relating 'to women, Aboriginal rights, the environment, peace, poverty and civil liberties.' It also spoke of the movement's hope to create coherent links between these issues, 'to build bridges between people, issues and campaigns.'

Certainly the audience mirrored the diversity of the Alliance's rainbow symbol. Feminists in purple overalls mingled with respectable greenies from the suburbs, well-groomed swampies in postmodern black, rubbed shoulders with shaggy peace activists and people from housing collectives, Aboriginal sympathisers sported red and yellow tee-shirts, and a few hippies bravely matched grey hair and multicoloured Indian cottons. The only 'socially active group' conspicuous by its absence was 'the trade union movement' - the workers' presence was symbolic only, in the red on the left of the rainbow.

A participatory movement

So what does the Alliance offer as a way of unifying this diversity? Its Charter is eloquent and visionary:

"We propose to create a new stream in Australian political and social culture, a participatory movement of people and ideas capable of welding together the entire range of political, economic and social issues, and of speaking a new language that inspires trust and hope in the future."

Ok. So the movement is the message. But what exactly are the ideas that will weld together 'the entire range of political, economic and social issues?'

The speeches were not much help in answering this question. Joe Camilleri mounted an attack on the iron hand of economic theory, and proposed a 'tripartite economy' for a future Australia, with a large public

sector, a 'very small' business sector and a sector based on barter.

The Alliance's Charter which all intending members must endorse - pledges members to combat 'all forms of domination and exploitation which arise from inequalities based on race, class, gender or nation,' and 'the coercion of all inhumane and environmentally destructive technologies.'

The Charter identifies the cause of this exploitation as "a deep-rooted cultural, economic and political disorder characteristic of Western capitalist and other bureaucratic-technocratic societies.' Is this an idea that can weld together 'the entire range of political, economic and social issues'?' Among all those abstract nouns it's hard to find out who is doing the exploitation.

A Utopian vision

The movement's aims are admirable - co-operative living and working relationships, the ecological and social transformation of consumption and work, democratic economic decision-making, an ecologically sustainable economy, Aboriginal land rights and self-determination, constitutional reform to achieve civil rights and liberties, the elimination of 'all structures of inequality,' and an independent self-reliant foreign policy. The vision is truly Utopian; there are no means suggested for achieving this 'far-reaching transformation of Australian society' beyond mutual goodwill and democratic process.

It was the Alliance's chosen mode of decision making that made me decide not to sign the membership form and send in my \$60. The Charter carries a "Code of Ethics" which demands "a commitment to conflict resolution for all dealings between members".

"Conflict in any group or meeting of the Rainbow Alliance should be resolved by rational discussion. Where necessary an experienced facilitator may be appointed to assist in the rapid resolution of conflict. Conflicts are to remain within the organisation and to be resolved internally on the basis of frank, open and honest discussion."

The notion of "conflict resolution" (like "equality of access" and "social justice") assumes that all conflicts are resolvable to the mutual satisfaction of both parties. It denies the reality that conflicts based on the exploitation of one group by another - the conflicts of gender, class, race and nation - can only be justly resolved by the disempowering (hardly a rational exercise) of the groups doing the exploiting, the absent agents in the Charter. A powerful new politics, a true "building of new.....political space", must begin by recognising the differences between man and woman, skip and wog, capitalist and worker. It must accept and explain that while society may exploit all its members, some are more exploited than others.

Sustainable communities - or property values?

The Rainbow Alliance launch promised "policy ideas" and an "agenda of our political movement". The only concrete proposal offered was a campaign for "Sustainable communities" rising out of the charter "task" of "Building community", and fostering "communal ties at the local, regional and national levels". It seems that the most active levels of the Alliance are local residents groups, concerned with social and environmental issues and - let's admit it - property values.

And yet it would be a mistake to dismiss the Rainbow Alliance as merely a movement of middleclass professionals. Its central idea is powerful - that politics means "the empowerment of ordinary people in all aspects of their daily lives" and "the building of new living cultural and political space from which it will be possible to erode and eventually undermine structures of domination and inequality".

Arguably the people at the Rainbow launch have less need of that insight than do other less powerful groups in society. If the structures are to be undermined, the new politics will have to happen in deprived outer urban areas and their shape may be different there. But the Alliance's search for renewal is a beginning.