

TOWARDS
A NEW PARTY OF THE LEFT

THE NEED FOR
A RENEWAL OF
PROGRESSIVE
POLITICS IN
AUSTRALIA
HAS NEVER
BEEN CLEARER
OR MORE
URGENT.

BUT HOW CAN IT
BE ACHIEVED?

THERE IS A GROWING FEELING
AMONGST MANY AUSTRALIANS
THAT THE TIME IS RIGHT TO FORM
A NEW AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL
PARTY OF A RADICALLY DIFFERENT
KIND.

Australia is a country rich in natural resources with at least 40,000 years of human occupation and culture. Yet the original occupants of the continent are now amongst the poorest and most dispossessed peoples in the world, and many of the more recent settlers face growing economic hardship and social injustice.

As a nation we are experiencing an upheaval in expectations and a changing place in the world. This shows up dramatically in our ballooning foreign debt, the downward pressure on living standards and our uneasy relations with other countries in our region.

Globally as well as nationally, there is a stark contrast between immense technological and productive capacity and the realities of poverty amid plenty; of squandered resources and environmental destruction; of discrimination, oppression and attacks on human rights and democracy; and the ever-present threat of nuclear holocaust.

While existing political institutions and parties seem incapable of responding effectively to social and economic realities, the New Right, playing on prejudice and promoting an aggressive individualism, has had an impact on the national political agenda far in excess of its actual support in the community. Its militant populism threatens to roll back the gains of the past twenty years by workers, women, Aborigines, migrants and environmentalists.

The rightward tilt in Australian politics is also reflected in the Bjelke-Petersen drive on Canberra and the ALP Right's dominance of Labor in government. This narrowing of political choice has left many Labor supporters and progressive people feeling betrayed, cynical and disenfranchised.

An alternative vision

In the face of these trends, the need for a movement to transform the inequalities of wealth and power in human relations and correct the imbalance between society and nature has never been greater. Thousands of Australians actively work for these goals, yet many feel isolated from each other and from their supporters in the community. For some time the Left has lacked an effective vehicle to develop and express its vision and values in ways that can reshape the political agenda.

Despite the difficulties of the present situation, the opportunity exists for the Left to break out from the margins of Australian politics and promote an alternative vision of Australia's future which is coherent, appealing and convincing. But to succeed, such a movement must not only develop effective policies but also a political culture, language and ways of organizing which relate to Australians today.

We propose that these issues become the focus of an organized series of consultations among supporters of progressive movements across the country. These could help to draw together the many

threads of discussion about a new politics of the Left already underway around Australia. Our aim in launching these consultations is to prepare the formation of a new Australian political party.

What do we stand for?

The program and policies of a new Left party must be democratically determined by its members. It would be wrong to pre-empt this process by putting forward detailed policies at this stage. Yet the task of bringing together all Australians who support this initiative requires a clear statement of what we stand for. We therefore offer the following six points as expressing the basic political commitment of the party we envisage and as the starting point for future policy development.

- 1.** The new party must, first and foremost, be committed to giving substance to Australian democracy, not only in politics but in all areas of economic, social and cultural life. This means expanding democratic participation in and control over policy-making, production, the allocation of resources and the provision of services from the level of the national economy right through to the workplace and the home. It also means replacing our federation of ex-colonies with a republic based on a single national parliament and regional administrations responsive to local needs. The expansion of democratic rights requires, by definition, limitations on the concentration of private wealth and power.
- 2.** A commitment to social justice and human liberation in public and private life, including equality of rights and opportunity for all Australians irrespective of age, gender, race, class, nationality or sexual preference. Basic to such a commitment is the elimination of poverty and equitable access to quality housing, education, childcare, healthcare and diverse cultural activities. It also requires specific action to counter discrimination embedded in our cultural, social and economic life.
- 3.** A firm undertaking to recognize the pre-existing sovereign rights of Aboriginal Australians and the legitimacy of their claims to self-determination and land rights.
- 4.** Acceptance of our collective responsibility to work to correct the dangerous imbalance between human society and the earth's environment. This entails not only conserving and enhancing natural environments and safeguarding endangered species. It also requires a fundamental rethinking of our relationship to other life forms and of the place of human society in the natural order.
- 5.** Economic and industry development policies which give a high priority to national economic and cultural independence, socially useful and environmentally responsible investment, social accountability for the use of productive resources, democracy in the workplace and the right of all Australians to stable, safe and satisfying work and an equitable standard of living.
- 6.** Independent, non-aligned foreign and defence policies embodying a commitment to international economic and political relations based on mutual respect, equity and the settling of disputes

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between nations by non-violent means. This entails support for complete nuclear disarmament, a massive global reduction in conventional military forces and solidarity with the struggles of oppressed peoples throughout the world for economic and social justice and national self-determination.

A new kind of politics

As well as developing policies to tackle the immediate problems facing the Australian people and nation, we believe a new party must express a fundamentally different approach to politics.

To win the confidence of concerned Australians any new party will need to demonstrate its rejection of the cynical expediency and manipulations of the major parties. It will need to show that it is open to the aspirations of those who care about social justice and human and environmental values. It will have to convince those shut out of the benefits of our society that it is genuine about the need for change.

Democratic self-management

Reform parties in Australia have generally advocated the strengthening of government authority to counter the excesses of private and corporate power. But this has led to new problems of inflexible, intrusive and often arbitrary bureaucracy and an alienating welfare state.

As a party of renewal and change, our vision of Australian society is not of a stronger and more centralized state. We believe our goal must be the devolution of power and responsibility to community and workplace level so that Australians can have a real say in the decisions that affect their everyday lives.

The party's commitment to democratic self-management would be embodied in its own organization and methods of work. It would respect the autonomy of other progressive parties and movements, seeking to co-operate with them around common policies and campaigns. It would also uphold the right of participation in a multi-party system by all parties committed to the democratic process.

Human and environmental needs

The new party will also be distinguished from the existing parties by its overall commitment to human and environmental needs, a commitment that will inform all areas of policy.

For example, developing an alternative economic strategy would be a priority for the party. But economic policy would serve social objectives rather than the pursuit of economic growth for its own sake, focussing on questions like: how can we best provide and care for our children? and how can we conserve and enhance our natural resources and the environment? Thus the goal of full employment would mean the right of all people to choose to contribute to society through satisfying paid employment. Childcare, equal pay, flexible work organization, equal employment opportunity, skill development and domestic work would then be seen as central to economic and industry policy, not just "add-ons".



HOWARD'S
A NEW PARTY OF THE LEFT

A mass movement for change

The party we envisage will reject both the simplistic electoral orientation of existing reformist parties and the crude sloganizing of some of the Left. To achieve its aims, it must be able to initiate and sustain a broadly-based mass movement for social change. In this sense, it will be a mass party.

If we are genuinely concerned to make changes that can open a window of hope to the future, it is particularly important that the new party win the support of movements whose critiques come to the heart of our social, political and economic order. We can offer real alternatives to the many problems that beset our society only in so far as we are informed by the insights of those forces in Australia that are challenging the status quo — the feminist, environmentalist, Aboriginal, migrant, anti-racist and other social movements, as well as the best traditions of the Australian socialist and labour movements. For these alternative visions of Australian society to capture the imagination of large numbers of Australians, they must be widely perceived as offering realistic solutions to everyday problems and concerns.

First steps

Many Left and progressive people are expressing a growing sense of urgency about the need for such a party. The issue is how to bring it about.

The purpose of this statement is to launch a broad process of discussions and consultations as the first concrete step towards forming a new party of the Left. The aim is to test the support for a new party and to establish agreement among interested participants on the party's basic aims, principles and methods.

To succeed, we will need the active and committed involvement of hundreds of people and the positive support of many more.

The process will require a range of activities and the input of many views, skills and talents. It will not be easy. But we can do it together if all those who support the project decide to get actively involved now and contribute to an on-going collective process. In particular, we ask for your views and suggestions on the following proposals.

We believe that the process, and all participants, should be guided by these principles:

- The process will be open to all those who support the aims set out in this charter and participation will be on the basis of mutual respect;
- Procedures will be adopted to encourage the active involvement of all interested people, including from traditionally under-represented groups; and to ensure that the process is co-ordinated by representative groups and committees;
- Existing groups and organizations will not attempt to dominate.

Consistent with these principles, different kinds of discussions, seminars and consultations will be needed to obtain the input of different constituencies.

In the first stage we believe the emphasis should be on local and regional discussions, including consultations involving activists in particular movements or areas of interest. Each centre and discussion group should determine its own process. However, some co-ordination at a national level will

be needed, for example, in order to assist communication and contacts between co-ordinating groups in each centre.

This first stage should conclude with a national meeting of representatives nominated from each centre. This meeting would summarize the outcome of the discussions and identify key issues as a focus for the next stage.

The second stage, we propose, should involve forming various commissions to prepare draft policy, program and organizational documents for discussion leading up to an inaugural national convention. These commissions would need to draw on the widest possible participation in their work, in line with the above principles. This stage would also involve a range of other activities to promote and develop the process towards a new party.

If you support the need for a new party of the Left and the broad principles and approach of this charter, we would like to hear from you. We also want any views and suggestions you have and we'd like you to actively join the preparatory work.

A coupon has been provided to assist your response. It allows you to signify your "in principle" agreement with this statement while in no way committing you to join any organization which might eventually emerge. We would welcome any views you may care to write at greater length.

You can indicate your interest and views by sending in the enclosed separate form, or by simply writing, to the centre nearest you.

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