

The Rainbow Alliance Reshaping the Political Agenda

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Over the last couple of weeks the Rainbow Alliance has been getting quite a lot of publicity — as part of the lead-up to today's formal launch. Looking back over it, there seem to have been two central themes that the media have wished to pursue — or two central kinds of criticism that have been levelled against us.

The first theme is exemplified by the question which came from all quarters: 'How do you expect to be able to do anything about the issues which concern you if you do not stand candidates at elections? if you are not a proper political party?' The second major theme that has emerged is closely linked to the first. This is the suggestion that the Rainbow Alliance is a group of well-meaning innocents capable only of generating a politics of the 'warm inner glow' — making pious statements about how the world ought to be a better place, largely in order to make *ourselves* feel better.

Now I think that this line of criticism is not confined to those who feel threatened by the Alliance's development — and I would like to take this opportunity to respond to it — particularly since I think that it is here that we have something important and new to say. I would like to point out, in passing, that none of this criticism is aimed at the values and objectives we have identified in our Charter — no one has said to us "Oh, no one is interested in all that", or "You've got it all wrong — people won't support those kinds of ideas — they wouldn't want to live in the kind of society you hope to achieve". All the criticism is aimed at our methods — or supposed lack of them — and I think this says a great deal about the extreme cynicism and pessimism that dominates the political culture.

By the by, I think we *are* a bit too middle class, and that is something we must and will tackle. We are not, however, too male, and that's a start — and we are committed to the idea of not being too white.

All right — are we just about giving ourselves a warm inner glow? The answer comes in several parts.

The Rainbow Alliance is not a Pressure Group

One of the things that brings many of us to the Rainbow Alliance is the desire to move beyond being part of a 'pressure group'. I do not at all wish to downplay the importance and influence of pressure group activity, but it can rarely tackle the source of the problem. Saving the Franklin left the destructive forces intact, though it undoubtedly gave heart to those opposing the Wesley Vale pup mill. The trouble with being part of a pressure group is that it leaves you on the outside in important ways. You are easy to label, and easy to marginalise.

There is another curious feature of being identified as part of particular pressure groups — and that is the way it is easy to suggest that your views are extreme — or those of a minority. Labelling someone a feminist

conveniently evades the fact that so called feminist concerns with male violence, family poverty, child care are the concerns of the vast majority of women. In the same way, being labelled a member of PND somehow suggests a minority status even though majority public opinion has been shifted round to PND positions on key disarmament issues. You would never know this from mainstream political debate.

It Is About Connecting Issues

But how are we to be more than a vast agglomerate of pressure groups each with their own warm inner glow? (Incidentally we hope that there will be some warm inner glowing in all of this — part of our attempt to redesign the political landscape is the desire to make politics pleasurable not simply a duty — like handing out how to vote cards). What we are *not*, however, is a rest home for worn out activists who want to avoid big overall questions — or for those who don't like disagreement — or who think consensus means finding the lowest common denominator. One of the most important things that the Rainbow Alliance seeks to do is to integrate the diverse issues that concern people today into a new critical framework, from which we can set about 'Re-making Australia'. In this process we have *already* encountered serious disagreements — and there are surely going to be many more. The way we think about our separate concerns may well have to be reorganised as a result — as we face up to the way it affects and is affected by other concerns.

To give a more concrete example — the demand for full employment — which we support — must be spelt out in terms that recognise women's working needs as *equally* important — their concern with shorter working hours for *both* parents so they can share in child-rearing and domestic work, for example. Full employment cannot be assumed to mean a 40 hour week with overtime if it is to be a demand that women as well as men support. To give another, more familiar example, the potential conflict between environmentalists and trade unions must be addressed from the word go — once they meet at the site of protest, each chained to *their* 'interest', it is too late for serious negotiation.

A corollary of all this is that we will not be content with simply making demands on the existing economic and political system — demands which often have real costs attached to them — but rather we will be spelling out how we think they should be paid for. We might all agree that we want to see more public funds spent on public transport, urban renewal that serves the interests of urban residents — but are we all in favour of higher and much more progressive taxes?

I do *not* mean to suggest that the Rainbow Alliance is going to become a fully integrated, consistent political movement overnight — on the contrary we are resisting the pressure to have a position on everything at once.

What much of this means is that we are in the business of trying to redefine political debate and activity — by removing the focus on elections and concentrating on all the different ways in which individuals and social groups attempt to influence the public world, by taking up the feminist challenge which insists that the private or personal is also political.

Rejecting the Logic of the World Market

Now this term 'redefining the terms of political debate' sounds splendid in theory. But there are also compelling practical reasons for insisting on its necessity. Above all it is an essential response to the trend which has been visible for the past 10 to 15 years for the boundaries of 'legitimate' political debate to be drawn increasingly narrowly. I'm referring to the increasingly common economic framework adopted by all major parties — and the *domination of economics* — of what Ted Wheelwright aptly calls a new economic 'theology' taught in seminaries, called universities and colleges. By this I am referring to the new dominant view which treats the global economic market as a given to which all local interests must, however regretfully, be subordinated.

There was a particularly explicit illustration of the consequences of this kind of thinking in yesterday's *Age*, in the *Saturday Extra* section, covering the debate about the 'redevelopment' of St Kilda. In it Mr Rod Thorley, the architect overseeing one of the most controversial developments said: "I suppose I represent the new breed of people coming into St Kilda with my BMW. The area is changing whether St Kilda people like it or not. *There are such things as market forces, you know.* Blue collar workers are leaving St Kilda and the white collars are moving in, that's just the reality, we live in a free society, a democratic commercial society. It's very hard to legislate for the poor". I find it hard to believe that he really suggested that everyone who thought differently should go and live in Russia. He clearly has not heard of glasnost and perestroika!

Mr Thorley may seem extreme — but it is exactly the same kind of thinking which requires us to regret any decline in the level of unemployment because of the unfortunate effect it is likely to have on our balance of trade — through creating 'too much demand for imported goods'. It is exactly the same kind of thinking that requires us to export uranium — and ensures that the South Australian Labor government develops Roxby Downs. It is pressure to export (in order to pay for our imports) which lies behind attempts to water down safeguards on mining, and which demands that we accept so called small quantities of dioxin from Wesley Vale. There is no end to these examples — and they are examples not of the corruption of individuals, but more importantly of the overwhelming logic of the market. They *are* logical in this important sense.

The Labor government insists that we submit ourselves to the imperatives of the competitive global market place — and it is our refusal to do so that renders us 'utopian', unrealistic and irresponsible. Now I think that these criticisms strike a chord in the wider community, including those who are sympathetic to our goals. People no longer believe there is any such thing as a free lunch. And they are right. It is *not* enough for us to have a shopping list of demands — we have to have some idea about how they are to be paid for — similarly, we must not only resist Mr Thorley in St Kilda, but put forward more far-reaching reforms to ensure that democratic

planning mechanisms — 'regulations' in other words — are permanently in place. And this is going to require a thorough-going alternative to the economics of the free market — and also a thorough-going alternative to the centrally planned bureaucratic economics of the Eastern bloc.

Setting a New Agenda

What we need — and what the Rainbow Alliance hopes to achieve is a dramatic enlargement of the terms of political debate — not in unrealistic ways — but rather by allowing us to break out of the narrow choices which we are presently offered, with the development of a longer-term and fundamental option for radical change. We are not starting from scratch — we have a pretty good idea what is wrong with undemocratic centralised planning; we know that high degrees of public regulation can go hand in hand with low levels of unemployment, and the provision of a wide range of high quality public services, outside the marketplace.

I was urged by some to provide a simple guide to what the Rainbow Alliance could achieve in the coming year — to keep the troops happy, or the show on the road. But I can't — and it would be insulting to you. What I would rather say is that we are here for the long haul. We are not a pressure group which will disappear after one or two limited victories, or when we all suffer activist's burn out. Our impetus should not depend on successful demonstrations or an agenda of disasters set for us by the forces that are orchestrating the disasters. Like the other major political parties we hope to become embedded in the political scene — but unlike them, our purpose is to radically transform it.