

FIN ON THE DRY SIDE

DAVID HEALD REPORTS TO THE ACTU John Hyde
 Over the past decade, for the first time this century, socialists/collectivists have lost the initiative---the ideas are coming from the economic libertarians, the dries or individualists.

The extent to which collectivism is out of vogue is made plain by a Labor Government contemplating the sale of Australian Airlines. Governments must follow public opinion!

Unions, less constrained by what the public thinks, are better able than politicians to try to change public opinion. During the West Australian and South Australian elections the unions ran expensive and sophisticated television campaigns against privatisation. Opinion polls taken by the Liberals on the day of the South Australian election show that the campaign did not have much affect on the public---only 2% of the public thought privatisation was a major issue and two-thirds of these voted Liberal. It nonetheless temporarily served the unions' purpose by terrifying the Liberal wimps.

It was at that time that the Australian Government Employment Section of the ACTU and some ACTU affiliates asked Mr David Heald from Glasgow University to tell them how barriers might be erected against any imitation of Thatcher's policies in Australia.

His report, 'Privatisation and Public Sector Reform in Australia: Regaining Control of the Agenda' treats public ownership, rather than community welfare, as the desired end. In this it is quite explicit, even deploring the fact that 'key ALP Cabinet ministers would test proposals (for example, tertiary fees) in terms of whether policies directly help poor people rather than in terms of system architecture.' That approach will not serve the unions' purpose; democratic governments will decide what is privatised and while they can mislead the public they cannot ignore the public's interests.

It is nonetheless a remarkably frank document. At one point it admonishes the teachers' unions to ask soul-searching questions about the role which issues other than funding play in enrollment drift. At another it describes the Two-Airline Agreement as 'indefenceable'. It writes of 'the fairly widespread spirit of resignation---sometimes even of defeatism' among those who would implement the report.

Although Heald thinks Hawke and the ACTU can avoid the fate of Callaghan and the TUC he sees 'disturbing parallels' between the United Kingdom in 1976 and Australia in 1986. These include:
 * Labor governments in dire economic trouble,
 * Neo-corporatist macro-economic strategies---the Accord and Social Contract---which generate allegations that the unions are running the country, (At another place Mr Heald writes, 'To the

extent that ACTU does exert significant political power through the accord, it is essentially one of political veto rather than of constructive initiative: such a position involves lost opportunities...')

* Radicalised Opposition policies which bear no relationship to past performance but the irony of this is not noticed because the Labor Government's actions and rhetoric give Opposition rhetoric credibility,

* Public opinion hostile to trade union and socialist values, and

* 'A complete loss of the intellectual agenda which is now penetrating through to the party political agenda...clearly both [UK and Australian] Labor Governments can be seen as drifting on agendas set by others....The New Right's agenda and policies cannot simply be dismissed as simplistic, idiotic and easily-refuted.'

The last point is a compliment to the handful of academics and think-tanks that set out to change public perceptions of big government. Heald adds that the most recent Nobel Prize was won by James Buchanan 'who represents the cutting edge of the academic New Right's attack on the "Leviathan State".'

He refers to the Center of Policy Studies (CoPS) at Monash University and The Center for Independent Studies as quality vehicles of the academic New Right playing a more traditional role than their counterparts in the UK. This is an interesting observation in view of the recent government decision to strip CoPS of its Center of Excellence grant. Mr Heald has no objection to the use of public monies for ideological debate: he says the 'Labor Resourcer' should 'accept public money where this fits with research and publication priorities.' Further, he finds it odd that so little is being done by Labor Governments to use the enormous resources of the bureaucracies to manage the political agenda. I think he is out of step with public opinion: the free world public do not like it when managing the political agenda becomes a bureaucratic responsibility. It is not clear that the back-handed compliment he pays the Australian Labor Party was intended.

'An important job [for Labor Resourcer] would be to build a data base and library of the New Right's organisations, personalities and policies. By computerisation, it would be possible to make such information available to subscribing unions.' A data base of personalities does not strike me as appropriate use of public monies nor do the BLF, BWIU, TWU, or Painters and Dockers strike me as safe repositories for that information.

Heald understands the influence of ideas. He recognises that the intellectual running will be made outside government; he even deplores the fact that ALP electoral success has sucked key individuals into the bureaucracy where they are effectively muzzled. He says, 'Because the battle outside is being decisively lost and the government is drifting to this external

agenda, serious thought should be given to pulling some of them out of the bureaucracy...'

The thrust of his recommendations is that collectivists must do everything in their power to recapture the political agenda from the economic libertarians in the 'New Right' think-tanks. In order to win he must demonstrate that his way is better than theirs in terms of community aspirations, such as liberty, equality and fraternity. I wish him luck but not a share of my taxes.

ENDS