

THE
COMMONWEAL

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NEW ZEALAND FEDERATION OF SOCIALIST SOCIETIES
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EDITORIAL

MARTIN CRICK

Since the last edition of *Commonweal* we have had two events of major significance here in Aotearoa/New Zealand; the Federation of Socialist Societies first Annual Conference, held in Christchurch over Labour weekend 2023, and a general election. The former was a huge success, the latter a disaster for any left-leaning voter as we saw the worst defeat of any sitting government since the introduction of MMP in 1996. A 23% swing against Labour saw the party reduced from 65 seats to 34. Some slight consolation perhaps in the increased representation of the Greens and Te Pati Maori, both standing on platforms well to the left of Labour economically, but offset by the election of what one commentator has described as ‘a hard right, racist, climate denying, beneficiary bashing Government’, a coalition of National, ACT and New Zealand First. Let’s stay with the positive to begin with.

Our conference was undeniably a success, over 50 members attending. It provided an opportunity for comrades from across the country to debate, discuss, and of course to socialise. As we are not a political party we had no standing orders, no agenda manipulations, no stage managing of the event. What we did have, after brief reports from our constituent societies, were several thought-provoking and insightful contributions from speakers who sought to both educate and enthuse the audience. Outstanding in this respect was keynote speaker, Daniel Lopez of the Victorian socialists. Daniel, in describing the growth of their organisation, raised some very real questions for us about how

we organise and where we should direct our efforts. In a second contribution he discussed the life and work of Hungarian revolutionary György Lukács, who was, I suspect, new or relatively new to many of us. A double act from Joe Hendren and Quentin Findlay introduced us to the work of New Zealand socialist, nationalist, and republican Bruce Jesson, whilst a panel on *Socialism and the Arts* provoked lively discussion.

The conference sessions on Lukács and Jesson aroused so much interest that I invited Daniel and Joe to contribute articles to this edition of *Commonweal*. We also have the second part of Victor Billor’s very personal history of the Alliance Party. All three of these should give us considerable pause for thought. Victor argues, quite rightly, that the absence of a socialist party, ‘or even a serious, principled social-democratic party with a working-class focus’, is a ‘stunning vacancy at the heart of New Zealand politics.’ ‘Where are the socialists?’, he asks. Bruce Jesson, over 30 years ago, was saying that the Labour Party was not reformable, and that what was needed was an ‘uncompromising left-wing critique’ of the party. Both he and Victor argue that socialists must engage in electoral politics and here Daniel would concur: ‘its hard to see’, he says, ‘how a socialist party will ever be able to lead millions of people without engaging in parliamentary politics.’ Some members, I know, will disagree. Victor, in discussing his electoral forays, says that his aim was to get noticed and to insert some socialist policies into the campaigns. So, we are the socialists, few in number. How



do we get noticed? How do we put socialism back onto the agenda of New Zealand politics? Responses to any or all of these three articles would be welcomed for the next edition.

There is another aspect to socialist activity which comes across starkly in Victor's account of his Alliance years, and it will be recognisable to those of us who have been members of various left-wing groupings over the years. Politics becomes your life, hope burns eternal, until it turns to despair, to disillusion, years of frenetic activity lead to fatigue, both physical and mental, and eventually to burnout. His tales of in-fighting and faction forming are all too familiar. He has been pleasantly surprised to find a home in the Socialist Society, along with other ex-Alliance comrades. Whatever decisions we make, whatever path we take, we must continue to welcome socialists

of all persuasions, to ensure discussions remain fraternal, that disagreements are tolerated indeed welcomed.

And so to the new government, and perhaps as importantly the demise of Labour. It is very clear, after the first 100 days, that what we have got is a hard-right coalition, committed to neo-liberal and austerity politics. In spite of warnings from just about every economic commentator, the IMF, and the Treasury, the government intends to go ahead with tax cuts, which will undoubtedly lead to higher inflation and heap even more misery on the working class. Meanwhile landlords wait for their \$2.9 billion tax break!!! We have already seen over 1,000 job losses in the public sector, with more to come, and cuts to benefits, including those for the disabled. Chris Bishop has announced the phasing out of emergency motel accommodation for the homeless;

**MARTIN CRICK AND
NICK ROBINSON AT
THE PRE-
CONFERENCE
LAUNCH OF THE
OCTOBER 2024
COMMONWEAL
CANTERBURY SOCIALIST
SOCIETY**

where are they supposed to go?? Free school meals for those who need them? A waste of money according to David Seymour. Fair Pay Agreements—gone! The 90-day trial period for workers is back.

Any progress on conservation measures and climate change seems to have been ruled out. In sinking the Kermadec Marine Sanctuary Shane Jones said that ‘We’re not going to have the Kermadecs commandeered by a whole lot of test tube watching white coat scientists.’ His focus is on driving export-led growth by making the most of New Zealand’s natural resources, and he is seeking advice on opening up the area for seabed mining. Jones of course has close links with the fishing industry, and New Zealand First gets a considerable amount of funding from fishing companies. Hence, they want to protect the rights of New Zealand fishing boats to carry out bottom trawling in the South Pacific. He also has close links to mining companies, and they must be rubbing their hands together with glee at the Fast Track Approvals Bill, which will allow businesses to bypass the Resource Management Act with little scrutiny or accountability.

Corporate cronyism is flourishing—former National Government Finance Minister Steven Joyce has been appointed to chair the new government’s ‘expert advisory panel’ on infrastructure, at a fee of \$4000 per day, making him New Zealand’s highest paid public servant. His company ‘Joyce Advisory’ is employed by an array of businesses, many of which have a close relationship to the National Party under Christopher Luxon. He is famously favourable to road building and against investing in rail infrastructure. Former National Party leader Simon Bridges has been appointed chair of the New Zealand Transport Agency Board, in spite of the fact that he also chairs three lobby groups

representing private sector transport interests. There are others. In most countries this would not be allowed; there are rules against the ‘revolving door’ which normally prevent politicians or senior officials from leaving office and going straight into work for industries they used to regulate. But not in New Zealand!!

And then there is David Seymour’s Treaty Principles Bill. Bryce Edwards has asked if New Zealand is experiencing a ‘Trexite’ backlash akin to Brexit in the UK? A 20-year campaign to leave the EU got there in the end!! Seymour protests that his bill is all about democracy, that modern interpretations of the Treaty are turning New Zealand into an ethnostate with different rights for different races. Whilst Luxon and Peters are unlikely to support the Bill past the select committee stage polls suggest a great deal of support for a referendum on the Treaty, and Seymour’s strategy is clearly aimed at consolidating and growing ACT’s electoral support. He says he is responding to divisions in society but in fact, like all good populists, he is both causing and exploiting them.

The government appears to be edging towards a huge shift in New Zealand’s foreign policy too, away from its traditional independent policy based on non-nuclear security and closer ties with the Pacific. The decision to provide intelligence support for the US and UK airstrikes on the Houthis in Yemen, a retaliation for their attacks on shipping carrying arms and other supplies to Israel, is highly symbolic. Winston Peters has said that this has nothing to do with Gaza, a ridiculous statement. The government has also expressed interest in joining the second pillar of the AUKUS security pact. AUKUS is currently a trilateral security pact between Australia, the UK and the USA which involves sharing advanced

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SOUL-SEARCHING
TAKING PLACE’**

technologies and nuclear- powered submarines. Its rationale is that China is a very real and immediate threat to security in the Indo-Pacific region. Although the second pillar does not involve the sharing of nuclear technology there are very real fears that this is the first step on the way to such an end, and many Pacific nations could see this as a retreat back into the 'anglosphere'.

On Palestine John Minto, National Chair of the PNSA, has called out what he calls the 'Janus-faced performance' of Winston Peters when speaking to the United Nations General Assembly. Whilst condemning the war on Gaza there and urging Israel to recognise its obligations under international law, at home the government still flatly refuses to call for an immediate and permanent cease fire, or to reinstate funding for UNRWA, or to grant humanitarian visas for Palestinians with families in New Zealand. Many comrades, here and around the world, are supporting the Palestinian cause by attending the weekly demonstrations and other events around the country, and we must continue to do so in order to build the pressure on the government. The Canterbury Socialist Society at its recent monthly educational event, hosted speakers from the solidarity campaign for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The PFLP is a socialist resistance movement, which argues for a one-state, a secular and socialist state, solution to the conflict, something I am sure none of us would disagree with. However, we were reported as promoting a terrorist organisation, subjected to vicious online trolling and threats, and condemnation by the Jewish Council of New Zealand. Thankfully the threats amounted to nothing on the night, but it is a reminder that identifying

as socialists and supporters of Palestine is not without its risks.

A grim picture and grim prospects ahead. But what of the opposition, more specifically the Labour Party? In spite of the scale of their defeat there seems to be no great soul-searching taking place within the Labour Party. Opposition is defined as criticising government policies without articulating what Labour would offer in their place. Jacinda Ardern promised to be 'transformational' yet her government neither identified its priorities nor offered a coherent view of what it wanted. It frittered away the power and opportunity that the voters gave Labour in 2020 to break up the monopolies and vested interests that dominate the economic landscape, and it refused to introduce wealth taxes which would have allowed it to tackle inequality and address the infrastructure issues plaguing New Zealand. Instead, she asked us to 'be kind'. Ironically, former Labour Finance Minister Grant Robertson, in his valedictory speech, finally endorsed a capital gains or wealth tax. 'New Zealand's tax system', he said, is unfair and unbalanced. We are almost alone in the OECD in terms of not properly taxing assets and wealth in some form. Our current system entrenches inequality.' No shit Sherlock!!! Why didn't you do something about it?? The probable answer is to be found in the leadership of the party, wedded to focus groups and the polls, scared of doing anything which might frighten away voters—that worked well didn't it?

Nothing has changed. Chris Trotter has called Labour the 'hollow party', dominated by 'uninspiring Wellington career bureaucrats.' (*New Zealand Politics Daily* 30 January 2024) However, that criticism could be levelled at politicians from all parties. A recent 'MP Career Report of New Zealand's 54th Parliament',

a triennial study (The Blackland PR Firm, in Bryce Edwards, *The Democracy Project*, 3 April), argues that MPs have become more and more homogenous, that parliament is increasingly becoming a place for the affluent. It demonstrates that MPs generally start life in relatively wealthy families, that they go to higher socio-economic schools and almost always to university, then into professional jobs, often associated with working for the government. 'This increases the potential that they would not appreciate the concerns of many voters...their frame of reference and concern for the content of legislation will differ from many voters...' Thus, the Labour Party has become detached from its traditional working-class base, many of whom now vote for parties of the right, and it has lost its ideological compass.

What is to be done? What can we socialists do? Martyn Bradbury says that we need an urgent political summit of the left to work out how we collectively resist. (*Daily Blog*, 11 March) But what and where is the left he refers to? He identifies the CTU, Greenpeace, Auckland Action Against Poverty, the Child Poverty Action Group (*Daily Blog*, 17 March) Is that really a viable opposition of the left?

Chloe Swarbrick has stated her intention for the Green Party to replace the Labour Party as **the** left-wing party in New Zealand. Victor Billot thinks not! 'Its an ideologically, culturally and historically distinct movement. In 2024 it has become even more a vehicle for identity politics and inner-city hipsters...they have become a repository for disillusioned left-liberal voters having a temporary "rage quit" on the Labour Party.' However, in the last issue of *Commonweal* Green Party candidate Francisco Hernandez made a strong case for socialists to join the Greens. Again, responses in the next issue would be welcome.

If you enjoy reading the articles on Lukács and Jesson then how about further contributions on key thinkers in our movement? Luxemburg, Gramsci anyone? More book, film and music reviews too please. The circulation of *Commonweal* is increasing steadily, attendances at our events likewise, so we are getting noticed! I hope that when I am writing for the next issue our second annual conference will be locked in for Wellington, and that I will see many of you there.

Fraternally,
Martin Crick

Errata:

Apologies to our readers for the following errors in Issue 4 of *Commonweal*

- p.41, Dispatches From Exile - the author is Hayden Taylor, not Haydn.
- p.47, Hayden Taylor is at the William Morris Pub in Hammersmith, London, not Merton Abbey Mills.
- p.50, The title should have read The New Zealand Socialist Party First Annual Conference 1908, not The New Zealand Party.
- p.58, The author of *El Cid* is Byron Clark not Byron Kerr
- p.63, Margaret Lovell-Smith has asked me to point out that in my review of her book *I Don't Believe in Murder: Standing Up For Peace in World War 1 Canterbury* it would have been more accurate to say that Canterbury Museum consulted Voices Against War about a *conscientious objection component in their World War 1 exhibition*.

REPORTS

HAYLEY ROUD

Canterbury Socialist Society

Canterbury's activity between editions 3 and 4 of *Commonweal* were described as steady. In contrast, it's fair to say that the last six months has varied between frenetic activity and quiet stretches. Perhaps the most demanding event the Canterbury Socialist Society has attempted to date was the Federation's first National Conference over Labour weekend. The effort was well worth it, with over 50 members attending, connections

strengthened between members based throughout the country, confirmation that we'd correctly identified keynote speaker Daniel Lopez as a kindred spirit, and taking the first steps in the electoral project that will continue in parallel to but separate from the Society.

Only three weeks after conference CSS were back at the Loons for a benefit concert for Palestine. This was another huge organising effort in a short amount of time, with six musical acts donating their time and talents. The event raised over \$5000 for the Red Crescent.

November also saw our last educational event of the year, with member Byron Clark speaking about the fringe far right in New Zealand politics. Another

**MEMBERS MEET
AT THEIR ANNUAL
GENERAL MEETING**

CANTERBURY
SOCIALIST SOCIETY



successful year was capped by a second sell-out quiz—*A Very Merry Quizmas*—once again hosted by the Canterbury quiz mistresses. And of course, one of our few members-only events, a Christmas party, graciously hosted by Tom.

We have been absolutely spoilt in hosting Paris Marx again in 2024. This was a bonus talk in February about the radical philosophies of Silicon Valley. Paris's talk was also an opportunity for us to test a new venue—a community hall in an inner suburb rather than our usual home in a central city bar. For our scheduled February event we welcomed another guest speaker, Mãia Abraham, in conversation with executive member Sionainn Byrnes for another instalment in our '101' series—*Colonisation 101*. Sionainn has been particularly busy, continuing to produce monthly episodes of *The End of History*, and in March running a two-part writing workshop. The first session was on procedural writing, the second part was on persuasive writing. The workshops were well attended, and the consensus among attendees is that they were beneficial and further workshops would be welcome.

Our educational events in March and April were given by members Amelia Byrnes on *Photography, Politics, and Gender: the photography of Kati Horna*, to mark Women's Day, and John Edmundson and Paul Hopkinson launching their campaign in solidarity with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

Finally, some members of the current CSS executive are planning an excursion over to Blackball to participate in May Day festivities this year. Such a trip has been contemplated for a few years, so is an eagerly anticipated occasion to make connections with neighbours to the west. As we look ahead to the next six months there will no doubt be some milestones for the organisation—notably we are now nearing 100 paid members in Canterbury, and 200 paid members in the Federation as a whole. We hope to continue to be a place that can regroup experienced socialists who have found themselves without a political home, as well as new layers of sympathisers looking for a space where they can cut their teeth.

ANGUS CROWE

Wellington Socialist Society

Firstly, I'd like to extend our gratitude again to our friends in the Canterbury Socialist Society for putting on a great conference and being such generous hosts in October.

The last six months or so have been a busy period for the Wellington Socialist Society. I'll (try) to briefly recap some of

our recent activities. By my count we've hosted or been involved in twelve events since the last issue of *The Commonweal*—five regular monthly events, two 'one-off' events outside our regular cycle, two Little Red Reading Group sessions, two film screenings, and one online seminar.

October's 'Election Night Watch Party' event was a rather jovial and well attended affair, all things considered.

November's panel, *Lives in the Labour Movement*, featured Peter Clayworth, David Grant, and Rebecca Macfie profiling figures they have written about and researched—Pat Hickey, Jim

Anderton, and Helen Kelly, respectively. Kudos to the esteemed member who came up with the idea and moderated.

In December we hosted Danyl McLauchlan for the talk *It's Not You, It's Me: Seeing the Real Problems in New Zealand Politics*. Danyl was very clear that he wouldn't ascribe to a socialist politics (I believe he said he may be the most right-wing person to talk at a WSS event), but I think he shares one of our broad concerns—why does it seem like nothing works in the political economy of Aotearoa? If anything, I'd argue that Danyl doesn't go far enough in his critique. Technocracy needs to be overcome, or limited in the extreme, rather than rearranging the deck chairs in ways that will just breed new forms of graft.

February saw us once again host Paris Marx to discuss *'Our New Prometheans' and the radical philosophies of tech elites*. The beliefs and ideologies of Silicon Valley leaders—techno-optimism, TESCREAL (transhumanism, extropianism, singularitarianism, cosmism, rationalism, effective altruism, and long-termism), etc—proved to be an interesting gateway into the real issues around tech; what it means for labour relations, how it operates under less favourable economic conditions, and the links between tech and far-right politics. I think it also says a lot about the Federation that Paris reached out to us again and let us know he is in the country and keen to do further events with us.

In March Nikau Wi Neera hosted Tony Simpson for the thought provoking *Waitangi—Colonial Capital Comes to New Zealand*. If I understood correctly, Tony demonstrated that the story we are often told about the Treaty, (and I use the English here as Tony came at it from the point of view of the Treaty's Pākehā whakapapa), which emphasises the

benevolence, if not outright foresight, of the Crown in presenting the Treaty to Māori to head-off the challenge of the New Zealand Company is false. Instead, when you look at the individuals involved, you come to realise they were all playing for the same team—that of Empire and capital. I'd recommend members watch the livestream (or YouTube video once that goes up) for a full elaboration. Thanks again to Nikau who did a fantastic job hosting.

The first of our 'one-off' events was in November when we finally managed to pin down Chlöe Swarbrick to reflect on her recent win again in Auckland Central and provide some 'hot takes' about the election and the direction she sees parliamentary politics going in the coming years. Interestingly, she articulated something I've now heard quite a bit from Green's MPs and members since—that the Green Party can overtake Labour and become the dominant force on the left in Aotearoa. It's a provocation worth considering. I could see the Greens consolidating their current urban seats and possibly winning more in Auckland, Christchurch, and Dunedin. But could they win, say, Rimutaka? It seems to me that the party needs to go beyond slogans ('good, green jobs') and put a programme on the table for work, material growth, and wellbeing that appeals to a much wider swathe of the population, otherwise the current Labour strongholds outside the core urban areas could just as easily go National.

On March 27th we partnered with the Wellington Trades Hall to host the inaugural Ernie Abbott Memorial Lecture. The initial idea was to establish something akin to the CSS Fred Evans Memorial Lecture. However, unlike Evans, there are still people around who knew Ernie and whose lives were profoundly impacted by that day. Once

'... SOME MILESTONES FOR THE ORGANISATION—NOTABLY WE ARE NOW NEARING 100 PAID MEMBERS IN CANTERBURY, AND 200 PAID MEMBERS IN THE FEDERATION AS A WHOLE'



**PETER CRANNEY
SPEAKS AT THE
ERNIE ABBOTT
MEMORIAL
LECTURE**

WELLINGTON
SOCIALIST SOCIETY

we started having conversations with those people it became clear that doing an event focused on the bombing, and held on the day of the 40th anniversary, would be fitting for this inaugural event. Over 60 people gathered at Trades Hall on the day. Graeme Clarke, president of Wellington Trades Hall, welcomed attendees and the event itself was commemorated with a minute's silence at 5:19pm, the time the bomb exploded. We then watched Vanguard Films' *The Hatred Campaign*, which provides context for the event and features interviews with a number of trade union officials and delegates. This was followed by comments from Hazel Armstrong, Peter Cranny, and Toby Boraman. Hazel, who was an organiser in the Caretakers and Cleaners Union at the time, showed us some wonderful photographs from her collection which documented the various campaigns the union ran and highlighted the prominence of

Pasifika and Māori women in the union movement in the 70s and 80s. Peter offered his reflections on the bombing and its effects, and enjoined us to remember but also to carry on the fight for freedom and dignity. Toby then provided further context, positioning the bombing within a high point of union and workers' activity but also of reaction, such as the 1981 'Kiwis Care' march. Thank you once again to all those involved in making this event happen. I think we can be really proud as an organisation of how it panned out; it seems like another way we are slowly building the mana of WSS within the broader left milieu in Wellington.

We've also convened two sessions for the Little Red Reading Group: Jackson on the *Crisis in the University* in October, and Angus on *Inflation 101* in March. Tom and Jackson have hosted two film screenings at 19 Garrett St: *The Dupes* (1972) in November, which is based

on Ghassan Kanafani's novel *Men in the Sun*, and the classic *Utu* (1983) in March. I'm keen to see how this side of things develops in the coming months. And of course, our member in (self-imposed) exile, Hayden Taylor, organised a successful online seminar *Capital After COVID* with the Marxist economist Michael Roberts in January. It was great to hear Roberts elaborate on this long depression thesis and remind us of the centrality of profitability to the capitalist world system.

Lastly on the organisational front, I'm pleased to say WSS has ticked over 50 members (53 at the time of writing), including 10 or so in the last few months. We are planning to hold a members' social event in April specifically for new members as a meet-and-greet. Of course

all members are welcome, including any Federation members from out of town who happen to be in the capital.

Finally, we have also formed a sub-committee to organise a second Federation-wide conference in Wellington over Labour weekend 2024. It's still early days, but we wish the subcommittee every success in raising the high bar set in Christchurch. As one CSS member said recently: 'it's not a competition (it is)'.

As I said, it has been a busy few months, but also extremely rewarding and we've got a number of irons in the fire moving forward.

In solidarity,
Angus & the WSS Executive Committee.

GARETH MCMULLEN

Otago Socialist Society

Otago Socialist Society has been rather more dormant than its larger siblings in Canterbury and Wellington, although we certainly haven't frozen in the deep South's meagre Summer.

We were very pleased to have worked with the local branch of the Palestine Solidarity Network Aotearoa (PSNA) to present a screening of *Five Broken Cameras* in February. The documentary follows the people of the West Bank village of Bil'in from the mid 2000s to 2010s fighting the confiscation of their farmland during Israeli construction of the West Bank Separation Barrier (or Apartheid Wall, as many Palestinians call it). This extremely moving film brought

to life what we are often reminded of at solidarity demonstrations: that the present campaign of ethnic cleansing against Palestinians did not start on October 7th 2023. We had a full house of over 100 in attendance at the All Saints Church hall, and this was a wonderful opportunity to build connections with the local Palestinian community, PSNA activists, and the crowds of people turning up to show solidarity with the Palestinian cause every Saturday.

Our mailing list and membership continue to grow steadily. By the time this issue of *Commonweal* hits the presses we will have held our first (and likely not our last) walking tour of sites around our beautiful Ōtepoti that are of significance for local socialist and labour history. We plan to publish a guide to these sites in the next issue of *Commonweal*, and we hope other NZFSS organizations consider following our pivot toward travel guide writing.







DANIEL LOPEZ

Why Read Lukács Today?

Daniel Lopez is a Commissioning Editor for Jacobin magazine and the author of Lukács: Praxis and the Absolute (Haymarket, 2020).

The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society. The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.

—Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*

Despite Marx's famous third thesis on Feuerbach, Marxists have perpetually found ourselves in the position of would-be educator to the workers' movement. Prior to the end of capitalism and the construction of a socialist society, could it be otherwise? Yet, presuming we agree with Marx's thesis, the questions arise: *what* should we learn from revolutionary practice and *how* should we learn it?

The most sectarian Marxists—be they Trotskyists, Maoists or whatever—defend Marx's insight, but without seriously applying it to themselves. Once,

there was something to learn, but now, they've learned it—which is why their bookshelves rarely change. Or, if sectarian Marxists concede that there is something yet to be learned, it's usually just the empirical details of whatever situation or campaign they find themselves in. And once they've mastered these facts, it's relatively simple to fit them into a pre-determined political schematic, usually referred to as 'lessons of history.' The result of this procedure, suffice to say, involves neither learning nor revolutionary practice. The educators refuse to become the educated; their theory becomes ossified, nostalgic, and dogmatic.

In contradistinction, every Marxist movement that has changed the world has, as part of the process, transformed its outlook; they have allowed themselves to be educated by the political practice of the workers' movement. Fair and well—but what, precisely, does this mean? In the 20th century, Marxism undoubtedly developed as a result of the Russian Revolution, which saw workers' councils establish themselves as a government, clarified the organisational implications of the divide between reformists and revolutionaries, and called for an updated theory of imperialism and national liberation. But it's not as though delegations of workers presented these breakthroughs to the Central Committee of the Bolsheviks. Rather, the Bolsheviks developed Marxism by working through problems posed by class struggle and revolution. But for socialists in the West today, this is hardly an option, given the absence of revolution and, more importantly, the lack of mass socialist organisation.

It might seem that the best recourse is to return to the history books—if we can't lead a revolution, we may as well learn from those who did. The first problem with a history-centric approach,

GYÖRGY LUKÁCS
LUKÁCS ARCHIVE
INTERNATIONAL
FOUNDATION

PRESUMING
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TIONARY
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however, is that even if we can make some generalizations about revolution or class struggle, history does not repeat itself. There will always be something new to comprehend. The second, more serious problem is that there is an unconscious bias in how we approach history; a tendency that Nietzsche referred to as 'monumental history' in the second of his *Untimely Meditations*. Insofar as we look to history to address a political lack that exists in the present, we unknowingly project our present realities into history. This is why, in the various histories of the Russian Revolution written by members of Trotskyist sects, Lenin always seems to resemble the leader of the sect in question.

So how do we break out of paradox? Simply put, before we can be educated by revolutionary practice, we must educate ourselves. This requires theory. And the most profound theoretical answer to the question that was posed at the beginning of this article is to be found in Georg Lukács's 1923 masterpiece, *History and Class Consciousness*.

Capitalism and Law

Lukács wrote *History and Class Consciousness* in response to a profound problem that confronted the European communist movement: Namely, no one knew how to adapt the experience of Bolshevism to other countries.

Of course, Lukács was not the only communist leader to face this problem—Leon Trotsky, Antonio Gramsci and others also attempted their own answers. But what marks Lukács's answer out from the others is that it was more profoundly philosophical, and therefore more readily universalizable. Of course, there's no

substitute for reading Lukács himself. But, as the point of this article is to persuade you to do so, we'll illustrate the point by discussing one chapter of *History and Class Consciousness* entitled 'Legality and Illegality', which is both accessible and an excellent example of the way that Lukács related theory to practice.

'Legality and Illegality' is dedicated to explaining the attitude a communist party should take towards the law. The most obvious alternatives—uphold the law or break the law—are obviously simplistic and will not suit all circumstances. As Lukács notes, a 'party may be opportunistic even to the point of total betrayal and yet find itself on occasion forced into illegality'—and indeed, this was the case in Germany after 1933, when the German Social Democratic Party found itself banned despite its loyal adherence to the law.¹ 'On the other hand,' Lukács continues, 'it is possible to imagine a situation in which the most revolutionary and most uncompromising Communist Party may be able to function for a time under conditions of almost complete legality.'² This is largely the situation communists face in Western countries today. We dream of overthrowing the state, as meanwhile the state lazily surveils us, knowing very well that the far left isn't anything to worry about.

To decide on a practical policy towards the law, two things are needed. Firstly, good strategy must be informed by a detailed and concrete understanding of the political situation. We will return to this point later. Secondly—and this is also the key to the first—we need a sound theory of the law and capitalism.

The starting point is what Lukács refers to as *immediacy* or *facticity*, namely,

1 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Merlin, 1971) p. 256.

2 Ibid.

the everyday reality and appearance of capitalist society. Quoting Engels, Lukács observes that under capitalism,

*... the organs of authority harmonise to such an extent with the (economic) laws governing men's lives, or seem so overwhelmingly superior that men experience them as natural forces, as the necessary environment for their existence. As a result they submit to them freely. (Which is not to say that they approve of them)*³

On this analysis, the law and state are *naturalised*, and consequently they appear inescapable and unquestionable, while the violent force underpinning the state and justice system seems legitimate and non-arbitrary. In part, this is because the state structures cohering society are inherited from history and are largely insulated from change by their own mechanisms and logics, which systematically exclude the majority from meaningful democratic control. As a result, most of the time, most people consent to their domination.

Indeed, this reality is a large part of what makes reformism persuasive. It's obviously plausible to propose changing some laws for the better, but it's much less plausible to propose a fundamental transformation of the economic and legal foundation of society. 'Property law is a bourgeois social construct!' you might insist to a security guard after being caught shoplifting. Of course, you'd be right. But precisely because neither you, nor the security guard, nor anyone else in the supermarket had much to do with making the law, it seems completely beyond our control and inviolable. 'Tell it



**LUKÁCS'S HISTORY
AND CLASS
CONSCIOUSNESS
(1923)**

to the judge,' the security guard replies—and even if he's wrong, theoretically, the way of the world is on his side.

Lukács called this phenomenon *reification*, namely, a situation in which human social relationships are estranged from their historical, human origins and come to dominate us. Something similar also occurred in pre-capitalist societies—after all, humans also created gods, kings, and emperors, before allowing themselves to be dominated by them. But as Lukács observed elsewhere in *History and Class Consciousness*, reification under capitalism is different because it is a *formally rational* system of exploitation. To be clear, as a whole, capitalism is irrational, as can be seen in crisis, war, climate breakdown or any number of other disasters. But because capitalists accumulate value primarily by producing and exchanging commodities on the market, rationalising the process of production and exchange boosts efficiency. And, at the same time, capitalists benefit from a legal and political system that is

3 Ibid, p. 257.

predictable, uniform, and that ensures they treat each other as legal equals. This is why, within its own set of presuppositions which are irrational and unequal in practice, the law is rational and impartial. Indeed, under capitalism, in contrast with pre-capitalist societies, we have a legal code that applies universally, irrespective of differences in wealth—and it's precisely this *abstract* equality that conceals the systematically unequal operation of law under capitalism. It's just as illegal for a billionaire to pinch a \$10 block of cheese from the supermarket as it is for you.

For many working class or oppressed people, the just or fair appearance of law is broken by experience. But although this kind of experience may constitute a step forward with respect to naïve fetishism of the law, it is not an adequate foundation for a critique of the law. As Lukács observes, citing Dostoyevsky's reminiscences of exile in Siberia,

*... every criminal feels himself to be guilty (without necessarily feeling any remorse); he understands with perfect clarity that he has broken laws that are no less valid for him than for everyone else. And these laws retain their validity even when personal motives or the force of circumstances have induced him to violate them.*⁴

Or, to put it more simply—the prisons are full of people who have both experienced the injustice of law and who have broken the law. But the prisons are not full of communists. We might say that crime violates capitalist legality in practice, but

not in principle, that is, not in theory. By contrast, while contemporary socialist practice may challenge this or that injustice—by protesting, striking and so on—nothing we do challenges capitalism as a whole. Our theory, on the other hand, does. And this is what distinguishes Marxism, as a worldview. Our starting point is thoroughgoing rejection of the whole of bourgeois society and legality; in Lukács's language, this is the *intellectual negation* of the immediacy of capitalism.

Now if by some miracle the majority of the working class were to wake up tomorrow with a detailed understanding of Marx's *Capital*, the intellectual negation of capitalism would quickly become the *actual* and *practical* negation of capitalism, namely, socialist revolution. But as Lukács also points out, outside of eras of deep historic crisis—what he calls the *actuality of revolution*—most people will not break with the ways of thinking they have inherited from capitalism or with the reified social relationships and attendant practices that maintain it day to day, like going to work or paying too much for a block of cheese.

This has implications for Marxist theory itself. As Lukács writes, in such situations of relative stability, Marxist theory will 'think out what is merely a tendency and take it to its logical conclusion, converting it into what reality ought to be and then opposing this "true" reality to the "false" reality of what actually exists.'⁵ This will inevitably be a minority endeavour for a long time because, as Lukács continues,

⁴ Ibid, p. 260.

⁵ Ibid, p. 257.

... even those groups and masses whose class situation gives them a direct interest, only free themselves inwardly from the old order during (and very often only after) a revolution. They need the evidence of their own eyes to tell them which society really conforms to their interests before they can free themselves inwardly from the old order.⁶

Theory and Practice

These kinds of observations are typical of Lukács's 1920s writing, which was dedicated to understanding and overcoming the divide between the minority of communists and the rest of the working class. To Lukács, understanding and solving the divide between theory and practice was the key—and before it was possible to consider the working class as a whole, it was necessary for Marxists to clarify their own theory and practice.

The starting point, as we have seen, is one in which Marxists are a minority and are consequently limited to the intellectual negation of capitalism. This makes our theory necessarily utopian and abstract. As Lukács wrote, quoting Marx,

In order to understand a particular historical age we must go beyond its outer limits.' When this dictum is applied to an understanding of the present this entails a quite extraordinary effort. It meant that the whole economic, social and cultural environment must be subjected

to critical scrutiny. And the decisive aspect of this scrutiny, its Archimedean point from which alone all these phenomena can be understood, can be no more than an aspiration with which to confront the reality of the present; that is to say it remains after all something "unreal", a "mere theory".⁷

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Lukács argued that practice—the experience of actual class struggle—was the antidote to the 'unreality' of Marxist theory. However, in order to contribute meaningfully to practice, Marxists need large-scale socialist organisation. To build that, we need a kind of theory that can overcome its own abstractness, and go on to ground concrete, practical initiatives.

The question of law is also relevant here. Because Marxists have already rejected bourgeois law wholesale, however, there's less danger of reformism. Rather, when Marxists find themselves in a minority, the dialectically opposed mistake is often more of a danger. Lukács terms this the *romanticism of illegality*. For Lukács, this approach valorises illegality, sometimes to the point of condemning all non-illegal political practice as inherently collaborationist. As he argues, it is both a necessary starting point for revolutionary movements and a barrier to their growth and success.

Those who romanticise illegality almost always do so on a moralistic basis while refusing to acknowledge the reality of the state or the fact that the vast majority of people—on whose behalf they may claim to fight—do not share their rejection of law. This is why,

'PROPERTY LAW IS A BOURGEOIS SOCIAL CONSTRUCT! YOU MIGHT INSIST TO A SECURITY GUARD AFTER BEING CAUGHT SHOPLIFTING.'

6 Ibid, p. 258.

7 Ibid, p. 261.

although the specifics of such arguments might be correct, they remain abstract and incapable of informing practice effectively. For example, in Australia and Aotearoa, it would be quite right to say that the state, courts and parliament are colonial institutions and that they replicate a racist and exploitative logic. However, to conclude from this that contesting elections would reinforce settler-capitalism and racism is to raise an abstract, moralistic barrier to necessary political practice. After all, it's hard to see how a socialist party will ever be able to lead millions of people without engaging in parliamentary politics.

Most of the time, the romanticism of illegality is all talk. Anarchists might paste up cute posters calling on people to kill cops, but let's see them actually have a go. And when the romanticism of illegality *does* attempt to transform words into deeds, the state almost always wins very quickly, usually with disastrous implications for the broader left and the workers movement. For Lukács, the core of the problem is that the romanticism of illegality secretly fetishises the law and the state. Wherever '... it is resolved to break the law with a grand gesture,' he argues, 'this suggests that the law has preserved its authority—admittedly in an inverted form—that it is still in a position *inwardly* to influence one's actions and that a genuine, inner emancipation has not yet occurred.'⁸ That is to say, just as an undergraduate atheist betrays an ongoing fascination with God by constantly seeking to refute his existence, whoever romanticises illegality betrays their fetishism of the law and their inability to perceive the real strength of the state, both ideological and physical. As Lukács explains,

*The disease itself is the inability to see the state as nothing more than a power factor. ... For by surrounding illegal means and methods of struggle with a certain aura, by conferring upon them a special, revolutionary "authenticity", one endows the existing state with a certain legal validity, with a more than just empirical existence. For to rebel against the law qua law, to prefer certain actions because they are illegal, implies for anyone who so acts that the law has retained its binding validity.'*⁹

By contrast, Lukács suggests that the Marxist critique of the state leads to a non-moralistic strategic outlook, in which communists view the choice between legality and illegality as a matter of indifference and expedience. 'The risk of breaking the law,' he writes, 'should not be regarded any differently than the risk of missing a train connection when on an important journey.'¹⁰

Revolutionary Practice

Despite having rejected both the fetishism of legality and its antinomy, the romanticism of illegality, we're still on the terrain of theory. And for Marxists, as Lukács insisted, theory 'cannot be of the abstract kind that remains in one's head ... it must be knowledge that has become flesh of one's flesh and blood of one's blood; to use Marx's phrase, it must be "practical critical activity."' And this is where things

8 Ibid, p. 263.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.



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become more challenging, especially for Marxists today.

What we need to do is to connect theory with practice. And to fully understand how Lukács did this, it's necessary to turn to one of the foundations of his philosophy generally overlooked by academic commentators—namely, the practice he was involved in, as a leader of the Hungarian Communist Party. The best single source for this is Michael Löwy's book *Georg Lukács: from Romanticism to Bolshevism*. However, we needn't summarize Lukács's whole political career to make the point. Rather, a bit of background and a few key anecdotes will help.

From 1919 until the end of the 1920s, Lukács served as a member of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Communist Party (HCP). Especially during the early 1920s, he gained a reputation as an ultra-left communist, largely because he published articles arguing against standing candidates in parliamentary elections or participating in trade unions, and in favour of 'offensive' tactics he believed would hasten the success of revolution. Nevertheless, when it came to Hungary, Lukács was not an ultra-left. To the contrary, he regularly favoured far more concrete, grounded and realistic strategies. Given the defeat of the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic and the subsequent dictatorship of Miklós Horthy, this was crucial.

In those years, the Central Committee of the HCP was split between a faction led by Béla Kun, who often enjoyed the support of Moscow, and a faction jointly led by Lukács and Jenő Landler, an experienced trade union leader. Béla Kun's name will be familiar to students of early Comintern history. For those who haven't come across it before, however, suffice to say the only good

thing to be said about Béla Kun is that he recruited Lukács. In short, Kun was a cynical, short-sighted, careerist bureaucrat who knew how to use ultra-left language to justify whatever factional manoeuvre he thought might be advantageous to him. At one point Lukács even gathered evidence that Kun was using bribery as a tool to build his leadership clique.

In order to rebuild the Hungarian Communist Party, Lukács and Landler had to sideline Béla Kun's faction and win the party to a more concrete and grounded strategy. And this conflict played out over a number of issues. For example, as Lukács recounts in his autobiography, during the early 1920s, the HCP debated the question of union dues. At the time, the Hungarian Communist Party was illegal and forced to operate underground. Anyone outed as a communist risked jail. The Social Democratic Party and trade unions, however, were not illegal. Of course, HCP members were also union members. But the issue was that in Hungary, as was the case in many countries, unions reserved a portion of members' dues and passed them on to the Social Democratic Party.

Béla Kun's faction argued that it was unprincipled for dues paid by Hungarian Communist Party members to go towards the Social Democratic Party and tried to push through party rules requiring members to opt out of these contributions. In Lukács and Landler's view, this would have been a disaster. At worst, it would force communists to expose themselves and risk jail. And at best, even if HCP members managed to avoid jail, refusing to allow their union dues to fund the Social Democratic Party would mean losing rights to attend meetings, to speak and to vote. It would have denied communists access to one of the only political

spaces left, and one where their critique of social democracy was most relevant.

In the abstract, Béla Kun was right to point towards the fundamental incompatibility between social democracy and Marxism, and to insist that communists attempt to win leadership of the workers' movement away from social democrats. But to proceed immediately from this general theoretical perspective to an intransigent policy and obviously impractical policy was, in Lukács and Landler's view, irresponsible and dangerous. We could call Kun's approach the 'romanticism of revolutionary purity.' In protest of the proposal, Lukács and Landler threatened to split the party and staged a walkout at a Central Committee meeting where Kun hoped to pass the policy. In so doing, they undoubtedly helped to avoid a situation in which potentially thousands of communists would be asked to sacrifice the legal cover gained by membership of unions and, indirectly, the social democratic party.

Landler and Lukács's point, of course, was not to fetishize legality and less still to defend social democracy. Rather, as Lukács argued in *History and Class Consciousness*, communists ought to be prepared to work legally or illegally as the situation demands, and in fact experience in both were crucial to developing a mass communist party capable of leading a socialist transformation. 'For the proletariat can only be liberated from its dependence upon the life-forms created by capitalism,' he explained, 'when it has learnt to act without these life forms inwardly influencing its actions. As motive forces they must sink to the status of matters of complete indifference.'¹¹

But what does this have to do with revolutionary practice? In Lukács's work, *praxis* refers to conscious and socially transformative activity, which occurs when theory and practice unite, overcoming the deficiencies of both in isolation. In short, without theory, practice is blind. And without practice, theory is abstract and utopian. And because Lukács recognized this, his philosophy of praxis was rigorously radical, non-dogmatic and practice-oriented. This was why he turned to Hegel; he understood, as Hegel also did, that to arrive at the truth, it's necessary to overcome abstraction.¹² And overcoming abstraction means developing theory that can reflect on itself critically—namely, *philosophy*.

Although our situation is a far cry from the one that Lukács faced in the early 1920s, this is why his philosophy is worth our time and attention. Of course, theory can't substitute for practice. But by helping us tear down the reified and abstract forms of thought we inherit from history, society and from the socialist movement itself, Lukács's philosophy of praxis can help us develop self-critical Marxist theory that is capable of generating concrete and grounded strategies that can help our movement develop beyond moralism, abstraction, dogmatism and sectarianism. And this will be necessary to rebuilding large scale socialist organisation. That is to say, Marxists must allow themselves to be educated—if not yet by revolutionary practice, then first by philosophy.

11 Ibid, p. 264.

12 The essay 'Who Thinks Abstractly?' by Hegel is an excellent illustration of this point. It's readily available online and you will be delighted to know that it's written in very straight-forward language. If you only read one thing by Hegel, this should be it.



JOE HENDREN

Bruce Jesson: Socialist, Nationalist and Republican (1944–1999)

From 1984 to c1993, the Minister of Finance appeared to be running the country. The neo-liberal free market agenda of Roger Douglas and Ruth Richardson dominated New Zealand politics. While much of the media acquiesced to this agenda, Bruce Jesson emerged as one of the most informed critics of the 'New Right' in a New Zealand context. Jesson's endeavours reached culmination in his final book, *Only their purpose is mad* (1999), where Jesson looked to Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) to illustrate how free market capitalism is 'highly rational in the methods it uses but is ultimately deranged in the purposes to which it puts them'¹. Underpinned by a deep understanding of New Zealand history and Marxist literature, Bruce Jesson engaged with the social, cultural, and political life of New Zealand, as a socialist, a nationalist, and a republican.

In the interests of brevity and space, this article will focus on Jesson's advocacy of a New Zealand republic, his engagement with Marxism, and his insightful analysis of New Zealand capitalism.

Emphasis will be placed on his earlier works, with the aim of providing valuable context to complement the reading of *Only their purpose is mad*. I will also consider Jesson's assessments of the state of the political left and hope to demonstrate the relevance of Jesson's work to the left today.

A Marxist Becomes an Ardent Republican

The son of a freezing worker, Bruce Jesson first engaged with Marxist ideas as a Christchurch Boys' High student, around Year 11. This included the Communist Party of New Zealand publication, *People's Voice*, and the left wing New Zealand Journal *Monthly Review*, leading Jesson to adopt a Marxism that was 'materialist' and 'activist'.² From 1965 onwards Jesson adopted a more independent path, publishing a pamphlet with fellow Marxist Jack Sturt, *Traitors to class and country: A study of the conservative left*. Jesson and Sturt³ saw a contradiction between New Zealand's dependence on Britain and the possibility of the working class achieving and holding state power. They argued achieving independence from Britain must be the first goal, if necessary, uniting with other patriotic elements in New Zealand to do so. This view was challenged by representatives of the Trotskyist tradition such as the Socialist Action League, who denied that foreign capital was worse than New Zealand capital.⁴

1 Jesson, B. (1999a). *'Only their purpose is mad'*. Dunmore Press.

2 Sharp, A. (2005). 'Bruce Jesson: The making of a patriot'. In A. Sharp (Ed.), *To build a nation: Collected writings 1975–1999* (pp. 13–36). Penguin.

3 Jesson, B., & Sturt, J. (1965). *Traitors to class and country: A study of the conservative left*. Workers Action Movement.

4 Locke, K. (1976). 'The Campaign Against Foreign Control: Is it progressive?' In *Red papers on New Zealand*. Marxist Publishing Group.

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Jesson and Sturt, echoing other Marxist theories of 'two stage revolution', argued that a national democratic revolution needs to occur before a socialist revolution can be successful. Even social democrats have reasons to believe national sovereignty is a requirement before even moderate progressive change can happen. The exchange crisis of 1938–1939 provides a pertinent example. Despite New Zealand's Labour Government being re-elected in 1938 with a healthy majority, the City of London and a conservative British Government refused to roll over historical government debt. There were strong suggestions their real target was Labour's proposed system of import controls and plans for a more generous welfare system.^{5,6} To Jesson New Zealand remained a British colony, forever dependent and subjected to the whims of London's investors.⁷

From 1975 to 1984 Robert Muldoon dominated New Zealand politics as both Prime Minister and Minister of Finance:

Muldoon is controversial for his personality more than anything else. People argue about what they think he is: opponents get hysterical (liberals always get hysterical) and accuse him of fascism and racism; supporters think that he is a strong man, destined to deliver us from economic depression and

*industrial lawlessness. The more controversy there is about him, the more his politics is obscured.*⁸

Muldoon expresses, transparently, the feelings of the business community in a belligerent mood. (op. cit.)

Muldoon also expressed a strong sentimental attachment to England. Jesson notes Muldoon's statement:

*No EEC [European Economic Community] and no British or New Zealand Government will break the ties that bind us to the lands from which we came. The difference between the 'white' commonwealth and the remainder is not the colour of our skin but our country of origin.*⁹

Jesson utilised his historical knowledge and the historical method articulated by Georg W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx to become a sharp political commentator, making several accurate predictions. Nearly a year before the pivotal 1984 election, Jesson astutely observed that 'Labour's economic criticisms of Muldoon come right from the textbook... Labour is committed to a Right-wing course when it gains power, simply by having accepted the terms of the economic debate that dominates New Zealand politics.'¹⁰ While Jesson predicted Labour would lurch to the right in government, it is

5 Sinclair, K. (1976). *Walter Nash*. Auckland University Press; New York.

6 Sutch, W. B. (1966). *The quest for security in New Zealand 1840 to 1966*. Oxford University Press.

7 Jesson, B., & Sturt, J. (1966). *Te Tao (The Spear)*. Workers Action Movement.

8 Jesson, B. (1975, September). 'The demolition of Robert Muldoon'. *The Republican*, 9.

9 Muldoon, R. D. (1974). *The rise and fall of a young Turk*. A. H. & A. W. Reed.

10 Jesson, B. (1983b, September). 'The Labour Party—Where have all the workers gone?' *The Republican*, 47, 12–18.

also fair to say even he did not foresee the magnitude of change ushered in by the Fourth Labour Government (1984-1990). However, considering Jesson's⁸ critique of the free marketeers as early as 1975, when their influence was relatively marginal, Jesson was well placed to provide insightful commentary.

In seeking to explain the ideological push of free market economics in New Zealand in 1986, Jesson looked to Marx and Hungarian Marxist George Lukács and their discussion of false consciousness.

*This is particularly relevant to our present political situation. New Zealand is being inundated with ideas about the marketplace and so on, that amount to a mystified view of social reality. Yet mystified or not, these ideas are an actual political force*¹¹.

During the 1970s and 1980s under Muldoon and the Fourth Labour Government New Zealand had an elected but autocratic character to its government. Muldoon had too few checks on his personal power, whereas the Fourth Labour Government abused the wide and arbitrary power of cabinet to push through its free market agenda. I think this influenced Jesson's belief that while New Zealand remained a constitutional monarchy the country would continue to be governed on monarchic, rather than democratic lines. In his self-published journal, *The Republican*, which he began from 1974, Jesson advocated for New Zealand to become a republic, free from economic, social, and sentimental ties with Britain. Later he extended this

analysis to also consider the relationship of New Zealand to the global economy. A few months before his untimely death in 1999, Jesson¹² wrote that 'the need for a New Zealand nationalism was a logical need, rather than a felt need. More than anything it is an economic need bought on by the stresses of globalisation'.

A Skilled and Informed Political Commentator

The Republican became a 'magazine of left-wing analysis and discussion', attracting contributions from several authors, and gaining influence well beyond its immediate circulation. Broader topics included debates over the Treaty of Waitangi and Māori/Pākehā relations. Jesson had a huge amount of respect and empathy with Māori, whom he regarded as the original republicans in New Zealand. He recognised that the passions inflamed by the race relations debate were usually Pākehā ones and suggested this had more to do with the Pākehā psyche than anything to do with Māori. Jesson's contributions remain a fascinating read.

There are threads of continuity running through the history of changing attitudes and the one that concerns us here is the tradition of humanitarian concern that has accompanied the history of colonial and racial oppression in New Zealand. Essentially this tradition is religious...Although it requires political involvement, the motivation of this tradition

11 Jesson, B. (1986, March). 'The changing face of New Zealand capitalism'. *The Republican*, 58.

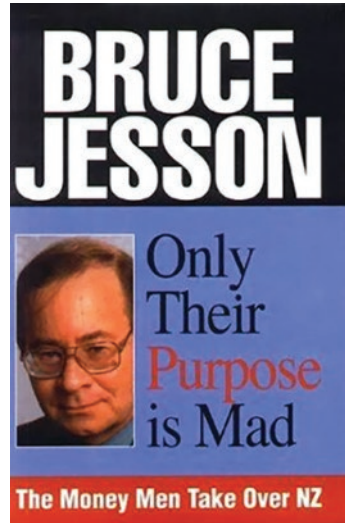
12 Jesson, B. (1999b). 'To build a nation'. *New Zealand Political Review*, 8(2), 24-33.

is not political but moral, and has never coped adequately with political reality. Its concerns are sin and atonement. Its function has been that of the guilty conscience of Pākehā society.¹³

Jesson's critical method also allowed him to predict when political changes could have wider implications. Following the 1984 election, the briefings provided by Treasury to the incoming government acted as a key influence on its free-market direction. Analysing these documents in July 1985, Jesson recognised that the unfolding logic of the free-market approach advocated by Treasury would also have to apply to the most basic market of all, for labour.

'This is one issue a Labour government will have problems dealing to, but it mightn't matter because there is a political logic operating here. A one-term Labour government deals with the sectors such as farming, that National can't touch. And then National returns as the natural governing party, and completes the process by devastating the union movement'.¹⁴

National returned to government in 1990 and passed the Employment Contracts Act the following year. While Jesson got several important predictions right, he could also admit when he got things wrong. Encouraged by Winston Peters' efforts in the mid-1990s to expose the fraudulent corporate tax scams at the



heart of the Winebox Inquiry, Jesson became very enamoured with New Zealand First in the early half of 1996, and failed to predict that Peters would form a centre-right coalition with National following the 1996 election. In *The Jester Steals The Crown* Jesson freely admits his mistake, and predicts the National-NZ First government will end in tears.¹⁵ That prediction turns out to be accurate.

From the 1970s Jesson also undertook a close study of the structure of capitalism in New Zealand, leaving him ideally placed to analyse the significant upheaval of business that occurred in the 1980s, as family-owned firms gave way to large corporate focused entities, and the focus of the economy moved from the productive sectors to finance. In the same way Marx used the capitalist press as an authoritative source for his critique of capitalism, Jesson spent many hours studying the business press and the paper

**BRUCE JESSON'S
ONLY THEIR
PURPOSE IS MAD**
DUNMORE PRESS 1999

13 Jesson, B. (1983a, July). 'A legacy of colonialist guilt'. *The Republican*, 47, 2–3, 20.

14 Jesson, B. (1985, July). 'Rogernomics and the socialist alternative.' *The Republican*, 55.

15 Jesson, B. (1997b). 'The jester steals the crown'. *New Zealand Political Review*, 6(1), 12–17.

records at the New Zealand Companies Office to analyse company structures and their relationships to the business elite. His analyses of the evolving dynamics of wealth and influence in New Zealand culminated in two books, *The Fletcher Challenge* (1980) and *Behind the Mirror Glass* (1987).

To give an example of how these kinds of analyses can be put into practice, I found Jesson's example to be particularly helpful in my work as a trade union researcher, where the union sought to understand the industries it organised in, and to identify potential areas of leverage for bargaining. Thankfully, by the time I undertook my research, the Companies Office records were available online.

The Republican also allowed Jesson to incorporate influences from his own reading, thereby introducing his New Zealand audience to the work of the Frankfurt School of Western Marxism, Antonio Gramsci and Lukács. Jesson sought to separate himself from both the 'vulgar' Marxists who he considered to be anti-intellectual and out of touch, and the social liberals who he saw as unserious—motivated less by politics but by moral and humanitarian concerns. This led Jesson to describe himself as part of the 'independent left', made up of those critical of capitalism but not a member of the Labour party or involved in the sectarian communist scene. Jesson's wish to separate himself from a Leninism he saw as 'an action-oriented, grossly simplified version of Marxism'¹⁶ is likely to have led him to describe himself as an 'Hegelian', rather than a 'Marxist'. While

I have never found Hegel that easy to understand, I have often found it useful to consider Jesson's work alongside the work of the philosopher Tom Rockmore¹⁷, who interprets Marx as a Hegelian philosopher.

Jesson on the Left

According to Jesson, both the Labour Party and New Zealand's radical movements 'absorbed the anti-intellectualism of New Zealand's pioneering colonial heritage. Action and theory are commonly regarded as opposites or at least as alternatives. Action is preferred for being practical and showing commitment; whereas theory is disparaged as indulgent, elitist and removed from reality.'¹⁰ This could be considered alongside Marx's¹⁸ famous quote 'The philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.' Rather than being seen as a break with philosophy or as a rationale to dissuade intellectual pursuits, Marx's use of the semicolon here can be interpreted as 'and' rather than 'or'. Seeking an independent political and intellectual culture, Jesson called on socialists to become intellectuals and engage critically with the social, cultural and political life of the times². This included applying the critical philosophy to an analysis of the political left to identify any weaknesses. Such criticism was not always welcomed and contributed to Jesson being somewhat of an outsider. New Zealand as a society often rewards conformity, as Jesson himself noted.

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16 Jesson, B. (1984, August). 'Reconsidering Marxism'. *The Republican*, 51, 4–10.

17 Rockmore, T. (2002). *Marx after Marxism: The philosophy of Karl Marx*. Blackwell Publishers.

18 Marx, K. (1969). 'Theses on Feuerbach'. In *Marx/Engels selected works* (Vol. 1, pp. 13–15). Progress Publishers. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>

Jesson believed the political left needed to pay more attention to economics:

Ironically enough, the New Right mirrors Marxism in its thinking.

Like Marx, the New Right sees society as being organised along economic lines. However, although there are one or two very good leftwing economists, the Left as a whole has a mental block about economics, and evaluates economic arguments from a social and moral point of view. There is some validity to this approach—even the New Right realises that there is a moral dimension to the economy—but it is totally insufficient. By flinching from the economic argument, the Left refuses to contest the New Right on its own ground and thereby concedes the intellectual battle¹⁹.

In *Looking at The Labour Party: Where Have All The Workers Gone?* in September 1983, Jesson looked at some of the choices facing those who wished to be politically active among the Left.

Many radicals find substitutes for effective political involvement in the unions, and in the Communist sects where they aggregate their impotence. Others drift towards the Labour Party, either as individuals or groups (the former Socialist

Action League), in search of a realistic political vehicle for their liberal and humanitarian aims. Then they find themselves in a project that is doubly reformist—reforming the Labour Party in the hope it will become a reformist party. This blurring between Labour and radicalism in New Zealand means there is an immediate need for an uncompromising Leftwing critique of the Labour Party.¹⁰

Jesson wrote the following in December 1991:

Some gullible people in union and liberal circles still believe that Labour is reformable and that it might shift back to the Left. However this would be a bad thing in itself as it would demonstrate once again Labour is a party of expediency with no firm principles of either Left or Right.²⁰

Jesson was also critical of the focus of the 'protest movement' on 'overseas issues' such as Vietnam and South Africa, issues he saw as only appealing to an educated minority with a liberal and Christian conscience. He warned that the Left could find itself distracted away from the big questions by 'liberal' causes such as conservation and nuclear ship visits. He also noted that these issues tended to build the Labour Party instead of strengthening the Left. This is likely to be an expression of Jesson's disappointment

JESSON'S
CALL FOR 'AN
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WAS IN 1983

19 Jesson, B. (1997a). 'Condition terminal'. *New Zealand Political Review*, 6(4), 25–35.

20 Jesson, B. (1991, December). 'The birth of the Alliance'. *The Republican*, 73, 1

at the failure of the New Zealand Left to take up the issues he saw as more important—republicanism and forming a challenge to the dominant Right-wing vision of New Zealand's future.

While Jesson is right to warn the Left not to get distracted from its larger aims, I think he underestimates the degree to which these 'liberal' issues have contributed to a more independent identity for New Zealand²¹. The ban on nuclear ship visits led to New Zealand being freed of the neo-colonial trappings of the 1950s' vintage ANZUS Treaty (a military alliance with the US and Australia), and the nuclear free policy became a cornerstone of a more independent foreign policy.

On several occasions Jesson admits he is prone to exaggeration. Others have noted he can be excessively pessimistic and negative²². While I agree with Jesson that anti-intellectualism runs deep in New Zealand society, perhaps Jesson could have paid more attention to the intellectual culture that did exist, even if this culture was underdeveloped. In my PhD I identify a distinct political culture on the left centred around Jesson's hometown of Christchurch. This nurtured, among other things, a publishing base for influential left-wing journals such as *Tomorrow*, *Monthly Review* and *Foreign*.²³ That said, it should also be remembered that Jesson as a political writer often aimed to get a reaction. His friend Peter Lee notes that many of his pieces were 'designed to goad a politician at a specific moment, to try to

influence them to shift their ground and change course'.²⁴

A quarter century after his death, Bruce Jesson remains one of New Zealand's most important left-wing thinkers, with a contribution distinguished by its originality and requisite attention to theory. Jesson defended the role of the intellectual, laying a challenge to New Zealand's underlying culture of anti-intellectualism, while at the same time retaining a writing style accessible to a general audience. In 1975, while assessing the political personality of Robert Muldoon, Jesson⁸ noted a 'timelessness about New Zealand politics' and suggested not much had changed politically in New Zealand since the 1950s. While New Zealand subsequently did see significant political change, particularly through the 1980s, I still think Jesson's observation holds true in a different sense. As a historical writer Jesson's work helps to highlight how present political issues and personalities have echoes in the past. Indeed, aspects of Jesson's characterisation of Muldoon in 1975 could also apply to other National Party leaders, including Don Brash, John Key and perhaps even Chris Luxon. Additionally, many would suggest that Jesson's call for 'an immediate need for an uncompromising left-wing critique of the Labour Party' is as relevant today as it was in 1983, with many activists questioning if Labour is at all reformable as an effective vehicle of centre-left politics.

21 Hendren, J. (2006, August). Review: 'To build a nation: Collected writings of Bruce Jesson 1975-1999'. *Foreign Control Watchdog*, 106.

22 Horton, M. (1999, August). 'Obituary: Bruce Jesson'. *Foreign Control Watchdog*, 91, 19–21.

23 Hendren, J. (2022). Assessing the Impact of National Political Civil Society Organisations in New Zealand: A Case Study of the Campaign Against Foreign Control of Aotearoa (CAFCFA) [Doctoral thesis, The University of Auckland]. <https://hdl.handle.net/2292/61257>

24 Lee, P. (2005). 'Thoughts among the ruin'. In A. Sharp (Ed.), *To build a nation: Collected writings 1975-1999* (pp. 355–366). Penguin.



VICTOR BILLOT

The Alliance— a political tragedy, Part II.

The previous instalment of my personal history of the Alliance in the October 2023 edition of *The Commonwealth* discussed the ‘first three acts’ of the political tragedy that is the Alliance Party.

The first act saw the dramatic events of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the Labour Party split and the NewLabour Party (NLP), under the leadership of Jim Anderton, emerged as the torch bearer of the left. The second act was the formation of the multi-party Alliance (including the NLP and the Greens) and its challenge to the Labour/National duopoly. The third was the entry of the Alliance into Parliament in substantial numbers in the



post-MMP 1996 election, the coalition Government the Alliance formed as a junior partner to Labour in 1999, and its subsequent catastrophic failure to survive even one term in Government. The 'fourth act' which I will discuss now is 'life after Parliament.'

During the years following the 2002 election the damaged remnants of the Alliance attempted unsuccessfully to rebuild. Despite the best (even heroic) efforts of many, the party instead gradually faded into oblivion. This process took a while. I devoted over a decade of my life to trying to keep the dream alive. Looking back it was perhaps a fool's mission, driven

by a refusal to face facts. My view was that keeping a flame alive would one day reignite and bring the vibrant movement I had known back to life. There's a song 'It Was' by the legendary Dunedin band The Verlaines on their classic album *Some Disenchanted Evening*. It has an evocative line—'he mistook the dawn for the sun as it was going down.' A bit close to the bone perhaps. Many of those who abandoned the Alliance (or who tried to scuttle it on their way out) said those of us who stuck around were misguided bitter-enders at best. There may be an element of truth to this. However, despite the failure of the Alliance, those who abandoned it also

**ALLIANCE PARTY
NATIONAL
COUNCIL MAY 2005
FEATURING NZFSS
MEMBERS
JOE HENDREN,
PAUL PIESSE &
QUENTIN FINDLAY
ALLIANCE NZ**

failed to build a viable political vehicle, or simply threw their lot in with the established parties. What follows is an impressionistic account. A proper history of the Alliance would be a worthy project, but this is not it. I'm still too emotionally attached to it all to be even vaguely objective.

Life in the Capital

The 2000–2001 period was where the Alliance had started to go seriously off track. The party had become professionalised. There were paid staff and machinations going on behind the scenes at Parliament, garbled accounts of which filtered down to the minions like me in the 'outer party'. It seemed the closer the Alliance got to power, the more it slipped away from what it was about. On the way up the Alliance had been authentic if nothing else. But now it was failing on the one hand to be a radical movement holding Labour to account, or on the other the successful political machine of the domineering but effective Jim Anderton. Jim and others often talked about the 'realism' necessary for effective politics. The cliché was to 'build your paths where the people walk.' Of course, if Jim had followed his own harsh pragmatism and treated getting/holding power as the be all and end all of politics, he would have never stood up to the Rogernomes in the Fourth Labour Government and walked away to start a new party.

This period has been covered in a number of other memoirs and biographies of the main players, so I won't expand on it here. I wasn't a main player—I wasn't even a minor player. My view is a worm's eye one. In 2001, when all this went down, I was living in Wellington and attending the meetings of the small Johnsonville branch.

I used to drive up from town in my Toyota with three young women about my age (one of whom, Rebecca Matthews, is a Labour councillor for the Wellington City Council these days). We were all dedicated and active members. The Johnsonville branch was held at the home of a retired working class couple. There were usually a few others there, including a public servant in the health system and a convivial elderly Irish guy Patrick, who described himself as anarchist. This was not inaccurate. Patrick and the health-care guy had a long running feud about tobacco policy—Patrick was a smoker and claimed banning cigarettes would take away the last small pleasure from the oppressed workers. This was a classic example of the middle class, rational, and socially improving outlook versus the old school world of pints and ciggies. Debates would rage. It was democracy in action—inefficient, a little eccentric, often funny. I miss it.

In 2002 I stepped back and (briefly) resigned my membership as I was at journalism school and was interning at Newstalk ZB at the press gallery. I had a vague idea this might be a career option. The experience was a good one in that it convinced me Parliament is basically a negative place which has little to do with democracy. I was working in a tiny, cluttered office. Barry Soper (yes, him) was in charge, and he had been there forever, even twenty years ago. Say what you like about Barry, he took pity on a hopeless case. I had turned up to work in smart casual which was not going to cut the Parliamentary dress code. Barry donated to me his spare formal wear which was hanging in a tiny cupboard which doubled as a recording studio. It was a monumentally hideous 1980s olive green zoot suit with enormous lapels. It made me look

like a cross between a member of Split Enz and a budget rate mafia informer.

I wandered around Parliament feeling like an inmate in a giant asylum. In the next seat of the tiny office was Corin Dann, who was obviously going places even at that point, busily tapping at his screen. I met a few other denizens—including the former TV newsreader turned libertarian advocate Lindsay Perigo, whose persona as a writer was aggressive and acidic. Off the page he seemed friendly and low key. One day I had the opportunity to stop Steve Maharey on his way into a cabinet meeting with a question. He grinned and gave me my big break with a quick response into my microphone. The other press gallery hacks looked on at my presumptuous standup interview with the Minister. When we were walking back to the office Barry congratulated me. ‘That was good how you asked that question’, he said, ‘but you asked the wrong question.’ He gave me a nice reference when I left. On my first day I had walked up the path to the Beehive with a sense of manifest destiny. Finally, after frittering away my twenties, I had ‘arrived’. By the end of my internship I realised that this was not a place I had any connection with. It felt like the opposite of the hall meetings and doorstep conversations, the protests and pickets, the lounges and flats and pubs where discussions were thrashed out. It felt, despite the grand corridors and aura of power, like a bit of a shithole. Despite all this, I maintained (and still maintain) my belief that a serious socialist party has to seek representation at all levels of the existing imperfect democratic structures, while remaining critical of their limitations.

Around this time, I had also found work with the Waterfront Workers Union as a campaign organiser in Port Chalmers at the tail end of a nasty industrial dispute. Although I arrived a bit late to be of much

use, this proved to be a life-changing decision. The wharfies were in the process of amalgamating with the Seafarers Union, and after my role ended I talked my way into a permanent job—and with a break of a few years have ended up spending the last two decades working for the Maritime Union. Ironically, I think I have had far more impact on politics with union work than through actual political parties, but that is a story for another day.

Exit stage left

On election night 2002, I’d headed up with my friends to an election night party up the back of Aro Valley. A mobile call came through to someone in the car from Gerard Hehir, a longstanding Alliance organiser. The numbers in Laila Harre’s electorate of Waitakere were not looking good. It was apparent the Alliance was not going to make it back into Parliament.

Laila had been our one chance—she was popular, youthful and charismatic, the natural choice for a new leader. But the damage done by the split had been too great. The Alliance fell far short of the 5% threshold to get list candidates elected (closer to 1%). The last roll of the dice of getting Laila across the line in an electorate had failed. The Alliance was out of Parliament. It was a strange night and depressing, obviously. I was in a fatalistic mood and one of my old comrades got upset with my resigned attitude. The collapse of the Alliance was overshadowed naturally by the resounding return of the Helen Clark Labour Government, and the drubbing of the Bill English led National opposition. The Greens made it back in, as well as Jim Anderton and one of his loyal sidekicks.

Jim had won the battle and lost the war (I suppose you could argue that the Alliance had lost the battle and the

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war). He had quelled the rebellion of the left in the Alliance and seen us off. But his purpose now was unclear apart from making up the numbers for Helen Clark. He spent his remaining time in Parliament as a kind of pointless satellite to Labour. He had come home in a sense. I always felt his decision had been a psychological one as much as a political one.

For me, the idea of the Labour Party being a 'home' was impossible. I had spent over a decade witnessing their perfidy at first hand, all the bullshitting, and the legacy of Rogernomics which the Labour Party still to this day places a cone of silence over.

He mistook the dawn for the sun going down

Not long after the election defeat, there was a national conference in Wellington at the Tinakori Bridge Club. This was not on the scale of the old time Alliance conferences, which were attended by hundreds in giant venues. However, there was still a good chunk of seasoned activists, ex-MPs, and members. The people with initiative and campaigning skills had largely stuck with the Alliance. Jim tended to attract people more comfortable with being told what to do. I went away thinking there was a future, and a road back. There were a lot of younger members still involved. The youth branch had the cringey name of Staunch Alliance, but it in fact lived up to its macho name and staunchly stuck with the Alliance.

In 2003 I moved back to my hometown of Dunedin for good. We had a solid and active branch, smaller but still viable. Regular attendees included academics, some retired people, union types, and a few colourful and occasionally frustrating

characters. All the decent union organisers and delegates in Dunedin seemed to be in the Alliance at this point. They only drifted off later on. Part of the problem here perhaps was the Alliance had never had a particularly strong ideology of what it was about, which meant that when the chips were down, people didn't have a clear analysis or plan to fall back on, and just reacted emotionally. On the national scene, things were starting to unravel. The movers and shakers seemed to be looking for short cuts back to power.

Laila had remained as co-leader, but it seemed her heart was not in it. Matt McCarten had become the other co-leader after years of remarkable successes as Alliance President. However, along with his UNITE Union activities, he and other key party activists in Auckland were engaging with the new Māori Party, at that stage led by ex-Labour Party Minister, Tariana Turia. The Māori Party had grown out of the movement against the Foreshore and Seabed legislation, one of Helen Clark's rare missteps.

There was a strong push for the Alliance to get in behind this growing new party. It was always unclear whether the strategy was to merge into them or leverage them as an ally to help us get back in the game. I was dubious about how the process was playing out. Once again, it seemed like the people 'on the inside' were busy making the calls and sidelining the actual membership. I was dubious about becoming a clip-on to a party based around ethnic identity. There was no intrinsic left-wing component. I thought there might well be a place for a Māori Party but I didn't want to be part of it. The signs were there that Tariana was about cutting deals with whoever would 'deliver' for Māori. Even if the support was largely coming from marginalised people,



it didn't follow that policies would align with socialist values.

Things seemed to rapidly go downhill. There was a personalised and ugly fight going on via email groups. Factions formed, and more and more people just started to walk away. I was told by a newly arrived German guy called Norbert, who had been an Alliance member for a relatively brief time, that I was racist and didn't understand Māori issues. Naturally I offered my own thoughts back in an equally frank manner. It was not a positive environment. Clear communication and democratic processes were not in evidence. There were arguments and accusations about missing sound gear, about financial support to the Māori Party. By the end of 2004 the key leadership walked.

Matt McCarten told the media after his resignation that the Alliance

was finished. Jim had said much the same thing. Once again the bottom had been smashed out of the Alliance boat by those who had spent years building it up. It seemed people in leadership positions had a sense of ownership of the Alliance, and when they didn't get their way, they would make sure they did some damage before leaving via the exit.

My process of disillusionment was fairly advanced by now. I had seen several waves of people I had regarded with respect and even awe turn on their own supporters, the people who had backed them and lifted them up. I'm sure people on the other side have a different story. But I was shocked at how the talk of 'unity' and 'solidarity' so beloved of the socialist left was thrown out the window, and how sharp dealing seemed to be the way things were done. Perhaps it was a lesson I needed

**2008 ALLIANCE
CANDIDATES
ANDREW
MCKENZIE,
VICTOR BILLOT,
SARITA DIVIS AND
KAY MURRAY
ALLIANCE NZ**

to learn. It certainly made me suspicious of the hierarchies that seemed to establish themselves in organisations supposedly dedicated to equality.

The Alliance had basically lost its entire Auckland base. There were still functional branches in Christchurch and Dunedin. Two union organizers were elected as co-leaders—Jill Ovens (from the Service and Food Workers Union, now part of E Tū) and Paul Piesse, from the SLGOU. Later on, Kay Murray in Dunedin and Andrew McKenzie in Christchurch filled the co-leadership positions, and I even had a brief turn myself.

On the campaign trail

The Alliance stood in the 2005, 2008 and 2011 elections, with a limited number of electorate candidates but a full party list. During that time, our share of the party vote was minute and never grew.

The Alliance had gone into the 2005 election in battered shape. The two South Island branches in Christchurch and Dunedin were still functional with some solid and talented activists. Elsewhere the numbers were too small. Ideologically, the party was now more coherent (I am struggling to find positives here.) It basically comprised the remaining left wingers of the NewLabour Party from fifteen years earlier. People like Len Richards and Bob van Ruyseveldt in Auckland, Professor Jim Flynn in Dunedin, and a good crew of Christchurch activists (several of whom are now CSS comrades). Julie Fairey, now a Labour city councillor in Auckland, was on the party list. I stood in Dunedin North, my first experience, and polled a modest 270 candidate votes. Our overall list vote was so small as to be off the charts. It was worse than I had expected.

However, the campaign had been something of a revelation. I realised I was not too bad at campaigning. I had picked up some public speaking skills, and knew how to talk into a microphone from my years playing in punk rock bands. It's amazing how this one very basic skill is something that a lot of rookie candidates simply don't have the first idea of. I gained a reputation for being the loudest speaker on the meeting circuit and adopted an old school soapbox persona. I was probably quite annoying, however my goal was simple—to get noticed, and to insert some socialist policies into the election campaign, even if on a small scale. My media background helped, and I started making regular appearances on the local TV and radio.

Moreover, I was motivated. I was angry at the state of New Zealand and what I saw as a compromised Labour Government, that had held on to the core of the neo-liberal policies of National we had fought so hard against. I was also angry at the mainstream union leadership that had cravenly fallen into line behind the same ideas, even though I was forced to get along with them. The Maritime Union was a curious situation for me—it was technically affiliated to the Labour Party, yet it seemed more like a difficult marriage than a love match. MUNZ tolerated socialist dissent in its ranks and appreciated robust debate, unlike some other Unions where being critical of Labour basically made you persona non grata.

FIRST (as the NDU evolved into) and UNITE remained outside the Labour tent. The public sector unions were officially politically neutral, but their leadership tended to be centrists in lock step with the Labour establishment. My first campaign did gain a high profile locally—I was either up against

Labour candidates who were planning to sleepwalk to victory, or token National candidates who might as well have been cardboard cutouts. They didn't seem particularly political, in fact seemed to prefer avoiding talking about politics. There were professional politicians, MPs who were efficient and business like, and who obviously had little interest in politics as a tool for social change. Elections were obviously an inconvenience. Pete Hodgson, the local Labour MP, was slightly more of a character. He would get frustrated with dumb questions at public meetings, and snarl at audience members. He made little or no effort to come across as a jovial man of the people, yet election after election he would be returned with a large majority. In the 1990s Jim Flynn had come close to knocking him off his perch. Hodgson was equally exasperated and amused by my class struggle invective. He told me I was like some cloth cap unionist out of the 1970s. It was not a compliment, but I took it as one. The second group were the conviction candidates—everyday people who had come out of the woodwork to express their principles and stand on their beliefs, often for minor parties. Many had a whiff of eccentricity. The religious ones were worst. The local Destiny candidate was thick as a plank and tried to threaten me for making fun of Brian Tamaki. I just grinned at him. Another was a fundamentalist Catholic who had his own one-man political party. He used to send me lengthy hand written letters, disproving my atheism through the arguments of St Thomas Aquinas. I ended up quite enjoying his company at campaign meetings, as his views were essentially mediaeval and used to outrage the liberals. He was obviously very intelligent, but completely mad.

Other candidates were paper candidates for minor parties, just carrying the

flag. There was one candidate for United Future who hated public speaking, yet turned up to all meetings to give a painful and fumbling presentation. One night at the Coronation Hall *Meet the Candidates* event, after we agreed on some random point during the speeches, I made a joke that we could go into coalition together. The audience laughed, but I saw a flash of horror in his eyes that perhaps I was serious, and he had somehow entangled his party with a communist in Dunedin.

Actually, I had great respect for people who were well out of their comfort zone yet turned up to do their best. I find speaking easy—I enjoy it—and large audiences do not faze me. But we all have something we are afraid of. I am terrified of heights. So I appreciate the feeling of dread that must come over those who are terrified of public speaking.

After the 2005 experience the Alliance had a brief period with no leaders, to focus on getting back in the game. In 2006 there was a very small conference in Wellington (I remember Don Franks came along and played some songs on his guitar for us.) I was elected as Party President with a plan to try and reboot the party and I took my job quite seriously. The Alliance received a little media coverage, largely from me working my contacts, and occasionally appeared at the bottom end of opinion polls. One issue we got some national coverage for was when I criticised Air New Zealand for paying their Chinese resident cabin crew less than their New Zealand ones. But generally it was an uphill battle.

The membership hovered around the 500 mark but most were paper members. Maybe 10% were active. I managed to sign up quite a few maritime unionists, but they were really doing it mainly as a favour for me, or to get me to leave them alone. I addressed Maritime

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Union stopwork meetings in Auckland, Wellington, and Port Chalmers, and received branch donations of several thousand dollars. I thought this was good going, given the Union was a Labour Party affiliate. No doubt the Labour Party people would have screamed in horror if they had found out about it.

In the end, despite all the work, the 2008 election was a repeat performance of 2005. Nationally the vote was about the same. I increased my vote as an electorate candidate in Dunedin North in 2008 to 448 votes, which was still hardly impressive, although better than any other Alliance candidates.

Drinking at the Last Chance Saloon

The one last chance we had of getting back to Parliament was an interesting story.

Prior to the 2011 election, a former MP reappeared on the scene. Kevin Campbell had served as an Alliance list MP from 1999–2002 in the coalition Government. He was a former policeman of all things, and had become a community lawyer in Christchurch. He was very much in the Anderton mode in his personal beliefs, a practicing Catholic of the ‘social justice’ mode. I remember him once asking at a conference for people to stop calling each other comrade as it would alienate people (he was probably right.) He was close to Jim but had walked away after the Alliance collapse in 2002. We had a distant family connection, and I had actually met him through this. He was itching to have another crack at Parliament. I liked Kevin a lot as a person—he was a genuinely nice guy, probably too nice for politics, as he always saw the best in people. But we did not share identical political ideologies. He was a social conservative on moral issues,

and a principled social democrat on economic issues. He genuinely believed the Alliance was necessary to create a more humane society.

One area where I disagreed with Kevin was his belief that the Labour Party could be convinced they needed a junior coalition partner, and that the Alliance could play that role again. Fat chance! The Labour Party is far less pragmatic than National, who kept ACT on life support for years. Labour have a ferocious patch protection mentality, that is strangely out of sync with their weak and co-opted political positions. Besides which, they already had the Greens.

Kevin ran in Wigram in 2011 and got 793 electorate votes, far behind the Labour candidate Megan Woods (an Anderton protégé) and her National competitor. Once again, a bit like me in Dunedin, Kevin had collected personal votes rather than party votes. In a sense, that was the last test. Could a credible figure like Kevin, a well-known and popular local identity with wide networks and previous experience in Government, lead a left-wing voice back into Parliament? The answer was no.

After three elections outside Parliament the Alliance was very much a spent force. After ten years of heavy and constant involvement, and over twenty years of membership, I drifted away. I was washed up. The Alliance formally deregistered as a political party with the Electoral Commission at its own request on 26 May 2015. There was some confusion that this meant the Alliance was gone. But the deregistration was required because the party no longer had 500 financial members. It meant the Alliance was ineligible for running a party list, but there is nothing stopping a non-registered party from having electorate candidates in elections. The party was never dissolved

and continued on for a few years in a kind of dormant mode. But my active involvement was over.

Where are they now?

A few of the most well-known figures from the Alliance experience have ended up at the heart of the political establishment, former Labour Government Minister Willie Jackson, for example, who stuck with the Alliance for a while after the split in 2002. He is one of the few modern day Labour people who actually came out of a working class milieu. Ironically, he came into the Alliance via Mana Motuhake, a kind of precursor to Te Pati Māori. He certainly has had an impact with his role in the Māori caucus and the co-Governance debate. Compare the massive shift in Māori politics in the last twenty years to the absolute silent wasteland of class politics in New Zealand.

Others have bounced around the unions and politics on curious trajectories. Laila Harre was one example, and so was Matt McCarten. Both very talented individuals who nonetheless seem to have failed to effect change (I'm not saying anyone else has—it may be that change is no longer possible by people doing 'stuff', and that it requires some massive outside cataclysm.) Matt ended up working for Labour Party leader David Cunliffe at one stage, which was quite mind boggling.

Another long time Alliance activist Jill Ovens ended up setting up the TERF-aligned Womens Rights Party at the 2023 election, after years with Labour (the WRP did even worse than the Alliance.)

Many of the general Alliance membership drifted back to Labour or went to the Greens. Many just vanished from politics. Of course, the generation who were middle aged when the Alliance started are now either retired or dead.

Other names crop up now and then in various roles. A lot of us had positions in the unions, either as active members or organisers, despite the fact that the unions tend to be dominated by Labour Party mandarins. Robert Reid was President of FIRST Union for many years, which grew out of the NDU (which had Labour, Alliance and communist factions when I worked for them in the 1990s.) One time Dunedin Alliance activist Sam Huggard later served as Secretary of the Council of Trade Unions.

Others have made their way into academia, Māori politics, and some just ended up making peace with the system and became managers, businesspeople, and senior public servants. Former Alliance staffer Bryce Edwards is now a high-profile political analyst and academic in Wellington. Others returned to private lives and normal existence. Some became active in other forms—long-time Dunedin Alliance member Jen Olsen was recently charged after peaceful civil disobedience in environmental campaigns. And some have reappeared in the Socialist Society, including old comrades such as Quentin Findlay, Chris Ford, Paul Piesse, Denis O'Connor and more.

What's left?

So, what was the impact of the Alliance? Was it a waste of time, a flawed but worthy venture, or a success? I would argue the second point. Labour parties throughout the English-speaking world went through a transformational process over the last decades of the 20th century. The NewLabour Party and then the Alliance in New Zealand pursued a brief and spirited fight to maintain social-democratic policies against the global power of capital and its local lieutenants. The

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Alliance halted the rightward drift of New Zealand politics—of this I am sure. But a rightward drift had already occurred, and the Alliance never had the numbers to move New Zealand back onto a more leftward trajectory. We were locked into a particular future, which we now find ourselves living in.

MMP had a similar effect. By permitting smaller parties such as the Alliance and New Zealand First into the system, MMP ended the possibility of radical change occurring through elections in New Zealand, either back to the left or further to the right. But the horse had already bolted, so MMP had the perverse effect of locking in the anti-democratic capitalist shock therapy of the 1980s and 1990s.

‘Capitalist realism’ had become established and the damage had been done. National and Labour have both rolled back to a more centrist mode in the last twenty years. Labour has even made small concessions, but when push comes to shove (such as capital gains taxes) it makes it plain that ‘transformation’ is no more than a marketing buzz word. On the other side, Sir John Key was a classic example of a leader of a status quo, managerial, in his own words ‘relaxed’ type of right wing Government. He made jokes about Kiwis being socialists at heart. All the heavy lifting had been done, and it was just a case of maintaining the steady extraction of surplus value from the working class for the rest of eternity.

But if the Alliance was ultimately a failure, those who derided or dumped the Alliance did not have the magic answers either. Jim Anderton’s post-Alliance vehicle was known as the ‘Progressive Coalition’ (it included the Democrats) and it then changed its name to the Progressive Party after the Democrats jumped ship. In 2005 it was

embarrassingly renamed Jim Anderton’s Progressive Party, just in case anyone had any doubts about who was in charge. Jim hung around as a lone operator, a Labour MP in all but name, easily winning his Wigram electorate as a popular local MP until he retired in 2011. But the party vote slowly evaporated and the Progressives deregistered in 2012.

Despite the fact I grudgingly vote for them these days, the Greens are (evidently) a ‘green’ party. It’s an ideologically, culturally and historically distinct movement. In 2024 it has become even more a vehicle for identity politics and inner city hipsters. The sad case of Golriz Ghahraman, whose career ended after shoplifting high end frocks from a central Auckland boutique, seemed to be something of a grim metaphor. The last big Green scandal had seen Meteria Turei being overly honest about her past efforts to survive on a benefit.

The days of Rod Donald, Sue Bradford, Jeanette Fitzsimons and even Nandor Tanczos are long gone. I felt like they were political relatives—the new generation I don’t feel the same affinity to. That said, the Greens are the closest to what the Alliance was. I know plenty of Greens who I have a lot of time for—and of course we have a number of Greens in the Socialist Society. Still, I have never felt moved to join the Greens myself. Their recent performance makes me feel even less enthusiastic. They have become a repository for disillusioned left-liberal voters having a temporary ‘rage quit’ on the Labour Party. On the other side, a strong argument was made in the last *Commonweal* by Green candidate Francisco Hernandez for socialists to involve themselves with the Green Party rather than reinvent the wheel.

I suppose you could say the Greens are at least semi-functional, which is an



achievement in itself on the left of New Zealand politics.

One of the weirdest developments of the last three decades was the Internet–Mana movement. After the big fight with the pro-Māori Party faction in the Alliance in 2004, the Māori Party under Tariana Turia’s leadership did end up throwing its lot in with National in Government in 2008—not that anyone admitted getting that particular strategy wrong. Tariana Turia herself is now long gone from Parliament but has made a number of bizarre claims in recent years.

Of course there is not enough room here to cover all the subsequent developments, but in brief the Māori Party split and the more radical faction became the Mana Party. Quite a few ex-Alliance people got involved as well as a lot of the revolutionary socialist groups. The idea was that Mana and its leader Hone Harawira were going to form the basis of a radical left movement. Hone was genuinely on the side of the marginalised and downtrodden but his politics were all over the place and he obviously had his own priorities. I was sceptical and

believed Mana would never become a major player as it was a largely regional, obviously ethnic-based phenomenon. Hone Harawira was an acquired taste and would never cross over into appealing to most people. However, the few left wingers still around were largely absorbed into the Mana project, and this contributed to preventing any prospect of the Alliance rebuilding. We all know how it ended!

In 2014 the New Zealand domiciled German IT entrepreneur Kim Dot Com became a booster for an ‘Internet Party’, promoting a kind of high tech utopianism. Dot Com himself owned a mansion and a collection of high end sports cars, had made large donations to John Banks’s mayoral campaign, and in 2012 had been arrested in a massive raid by armed police on his home on behalf of the FBI who were pursuing him for racketeering, copyright infringement and conspiracy to commit money laundering. Things took a turn for the bizarre when in a carefully stage managed ‘big reveal’, Laila Harre was presented as the new leader of the Internet Party, looking like a Blakes Seven actor in some futuristic publicity shots.

LEAPFROG (2014)
TOM SCOTT

An ‘alliance’ between the Internet Party and the Mana Party then contested the 2014 election on a joint party list. The campaign was a high profile disaster. Hone Harawira lost his seat, Laila Harre resigned as Internet Party leader, and Kim Dot Com resumed his attempts to avoid extradition to the USA for alleged international cybercrime. If the collapse of the Alliance had been history as tragedy, then the implosion of Internet–Mana was farce. It severely damaged the credibility of all involved. The question of why politically savvy leftists became embroiled in an adventure with a sketchy and large living fat cat like Dot Com still mystifies me to this day. It is a telling reflection on the degeneration of the political left.

Phoenix or dodo?

So much for the various attempts to reignite a radical left in 21st century New Zealand. It often occurs to me that the people who had been in the Alliance, once united under the banner of a common cause that posed a major challenge to the establishment, then spent the next twenty years divided, scattered, and making little difference, or actively harming the cause. I find the absence of a socialist party or even a serious, principled social-democratic party with a working class focus to be a stunning vacancy at the heart of New Zealand politics. Where are the socialists?

I am constantly reminded how I belong to a statistically insignificant minority. The New Zealand socialist today is a rare bird—endangered—perhaps as doomed as the dodo. The isolation and tiny scale of our small time movement creates an unhealthy environment. A few abrasive personalities litigating ancient grievances often create a poor impression for those looking for answers. Politics, like religion, can attract troubled

people whose issues are personal as well as political.

The reality is, even in a left leaning city like Dunedin, I would guess my friendly tradie neighbours with their utes and Saturday barbies will vote National (the neighbours on the other side are old punk rockers so possibly more on my end of the spectrum.)

Most people in New Zealand passively go along with capitalism. They see politics through an emotional lens, with odd prejudices and little consistency. That is the ones who think about it at all. A large minority support the National Party. A good minority support ACT or NZ First (a few of the old school Alliance types I knew drifted towards Winston.)

A large group, mainly in the lower socio-economic groups, do not understand politics, have no interest, think it’s ‘all bullshit’ (understandable) and hate politicians. Others do not pay any attention; they are just not interested in something that appears to have no relevance. You might as well be talking about the business affairs of Martians. Some people have such pressing problems in their lives they don’t have the time or energy to pay attention. They are fatalistic or realistic, in that they correctly guess they are not important in the scheme of things.

These people—the vast majority—outnumber socialists a hundred to one at best. Probably more like a thousand to one. If we had one person out of every thousand New Zealanders join the Socialist Society, we’d have five thousand members. Probably a similar size to the Destiny Church.

Even so, the appearance of the Socialist Society has been something of a surprise to me. It evokes mixed feelings. Hope can have a bittersweet taste. I have found a political home for now and find myself impressed with the spirit of

openness and respectful debate (and the organisation). I have even been reunited with past Alliance and revolutionary socialist people, some of whom I had disagreements with in the past. Time has given us new perspectives and perhaps the hard experiences have improved us in some ways.

I joined the NewLabour Party in May 1989—a founding member. Apart from a brief period I remained an NLP and then Alliance member since that time. I was part of a small group who were there at the dramatic beginning and the quiet, sad end.

The political is personal

Politics is about public life at heart. But every political experience is also a personal journey, and every personal journey is different. I sank countless hours of unpaid work into the Alliance, along with many others. This ranged from the dreary (printing forms, licking stamps) to the interesting (TV interviews, making election videos, designing and editing manifestos.) I debated, I argued in pubs, I sat in draughty halls, I went on inspiring marches, I sat on stalls and wrote letters to the editor (the sign of a true obsessive). I was fortunate in that I had a sympathetic employer for much of the time. However, for all the effort, the thing that wore me down the most was the growing sense of being on the outside. Up to 1999, although I was merely an active grassroots member, it felt like change was possible—we were the underdog, but what a fight! After the 2002 catastrophe, it was a long decade of relentless disappointment and struggle. Without sounding too much of a hippy, it became exhausting and degrading on a spiritual level. Personally, on top of life with a young family, it was

too much. I eventually became clinically depressed, in a dim and dark place for several years. I was on medication and functioned but it was a bad situation. Other things were going on in my life, but the negative influence of politics added to the weight. I note I am not talking about the remaining few comrades in the Alliance at this time, most of whom were very good people, but just the relentless trajectory of doom. It became hard not to be embittered and it was a long road back. The depression faded but it left its mark and I manage my life a lot more carefully these days. I will never be able to return to the level of involvement I had. For one, I'm now middle aged, with teenagers in the house. I used to wonder why there were young people and old people at meetings, but very few middle-aged people. Now I know why—they have gone to bed. But more seriously, I still suffer from some low level political trauma. I can't bear to watch debates on TV. On election night, I stay home and pay no attention, and read about the results in the morning. I find attending meetings stressful and unpleasant. I have no patience for the inevitable cranks, or the time wasted on trivial discussions, which are an intrinsic part of inclusive democracy, but also the flaw.

My political views have remained entirely consistent for my adult life—I still see myself as a democratic socialist, a 'reformist in a hurry', with a vaguely Marxist view of history. But my ability to take part in practical politics is limited.

I guess if there is any lesson to offer from this, it is my entirely non-original advice to young people—pace yourself, look after yourself, and keep your friends close. And be aware the people who get you running around to deliver leaflets one day, can quite easily be doing a hatchet job on you the next.

TOM ROUD

Musings on the 'EV Revolution' and Machine Time

Walking home recently through a warehousing and distribution part of central Christchurch I noticed something through an open roller door. Row after row, layered vertically too, of bright orange hireable e-scooters. Though it lacked the identifiable smell of a mammalian corpse, I was reminded immediately of hanging pig carcasses. I despise these things, there's no way around it. Faux-convenient urban litter.

Nonetheless, there is something to be teased out from a close consideration of this particular commodity-cum-service. What does it say about how we currently live? What assumptions are baked into the very existence of the App-accessible hireable by-the-minute e-scooter that, at best, sits awkwardly in the way of pedestrians trying to get about their day or accidentally runs them over? At worst they tend to end up clogging the already polluted urban waterway generously referred to as a river.

Machine Time

I am not some caricature of a Luddite, frothing at the mouth in disdain for complex machinery, swinging a bone-club like an Age of Empires villager, incandescent with rage at the march of progress. The development of machinery, the improvement upon nature through the ingenuity of the human race and human intellect is an incredible thing.

Its capacity to alleviate drudgery has realised merely a fraction of the potential contained in even current technological advancements—let alone the possibilities of future innovations. The misapplication, however, or the maladaptive application of machine-thinking, of machine-time, due to the usefulness of the machine is something that deserves derision.

In a seminal article in the year 2000, almost a quarter of a century ago, Wendell Berry (that perennial irritant of both the left and right) wrote powerfully about the way the application of machinery can assert itself over the labourer in a way that makes labour intolerable. The machine can operate at a pace, a scale, an accuracy that is impossible for a human being to achieve. A machine does not need to sleep (charging docks excluded). To allow this incessant thrum to determine the pace of life for human beings, mere creatures that we are, is a miserable prospect.

To draw from an entirely different source, Dick Gaughan's recording of Ed Pickford's Workers Song articulates the idea quite well:

*In the factories and mills, in the
shipyards and mines
We've often been told to keep up
with the times
For our skills are not needed,
they've streamlined the job
And with slide rule and stop-
watch our pride they have robbed.*

While we have spent some centuries debating over the length of the working day, the pace of work within that working day, most of human existence has not been so constrained. Instead, for the vast majority of recorded history labour was determined by necessity in the first instance with extraction of surplus being



separate—and surprisingly transparent—with *corvée* and similar systems. Machine efficiency, speed, and accuracy may result in a consistency of outputs—but the unintended alienation of toil from anything like meaningful and useful work that both Karl Marx and William Morris have expounded upon does not need repeating.

Elemental Marxism posits that the development of machinery is a constitutive part of the struggle between classes under capitalism. The working class seek to have their labour power compensated for the best possible price, while capitalists seek to reduce overall costs in order to maintain rates of profit when the

commodities produced in their industries are sold on the market. One avenue for the capitalist to reduce costs is through the innovation of machinery, mechanisation of labour, and automation in some cases. This ‘fixed capital’ may contribute to this goal in a variety of ways—reducing labour costs, increasing output through speed or intensity of work, and occasionally by turning the complex work of a craftsman into discrete and repetitive tasks that could be performed by largely untrained and cheaper labour.

While the application of machinery may be used to undermine the immediate interests of workers, and increase their rate

E-SCOOTER WASTE
RADIO NEW ZEALAND

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ACTIVITY

of exploitation, it also elevates the class struggle in general as workers respond by organising themselves to protect their interests on a now adjusted terrain. In this sense, for Marxism, the development of technology in the productive forces plays a progressive role towards the eventual emancipation of labour, though this is cold comfort to workers tossed out of employment in the meantime.

What is less clear to me is whether this principle holds generally, or in perpetuity, so long as capitalism survives. Does every innovation in technology proceed in this arguably progressive dynamic? Plenty of socialist thinkers have considered capitalism overripe for replacement for over a century—some even striking a fairly distinct periodisation and identifying the end of capitalism's progressive historic role as coinciding with the First World War. Whether or not such definite claims are accurate there is a poetry to it—capitalism bled out at the Somme, and we live in its steadily decaying corpse. The development of the e-scooter does not seem like evidence against this proposition.

E-Scooter Delenda Est

Researchers have estimated that the impact of a hireable e-scooter is, mile for mile, the equivalent of a hybrid car.

Assuming a total e-scooter lifespan of two years, the carbon impact of the manufacture and use of an e-scooter is worse than a privately owned fully electric automobile, as the latter has a significantly longer lifespan. Reports from our own country had the lifespan at more like six months, and anyone paying attention to a city where the powers that be have allowed these pointless devices to proliferate will be well aware that we are long past the first or second generation of units.

The logistical absurdity of these e-scooters becomes obvious if we take a moment to consider it. Every night, in a relatively small city like Christchurch, a couple of thousand e-scooters are collected in cars and trucks and taken to charge. Then, early in the morning, they're delivered all over the city ready for another trip. This process, the very pleasant sounding 'share providing,' proves to be extraordinarily wasteful.

The optimistic techno-urbanist liberal might protest now: what about the car trips saved? Alas they will be disappointed. Further studies indicate that only a minority of trips on e-scooters replace motor vehicle trips. More often they provide an alternative to a completely different social ill, a malignancy in our culture that plunders the environment and our health—walking. Yes, it's the humble stumble, bumble, ramble, and amble that is being so futuristically abolished with the advent of a precision, share-provided, lithium and lead-acid powered alternative. In a society that worries itself about sedentarism we've developed a marvellous way for you to pay for the pleasure of avoiding activity.

The electrification of vehicles has been heralded as a way to reduce carbon emissions and mitigate the worst of the climate chaos on the horizon. This is not entirely convincing, given that the same rare earth materials are used and the environmental damage caused by the batteries is similar, but there is at least some argument for it as an improvement when comparing apples to apples—like an electric car against an internal combustion personal vehicle. This is because what is being replaced is comparable, or near equivalent. E-bikes are perhaps more similar to e-scooters in that they replace extremely low carbon activity with something much more resource intensive.

E-bikes do, however, massively increase the usefulness and distance of travel for many who may use them—either by assisting with a longer commute than one would take on a regular bike, or allowing for considerably larger weight loads to be transported than on a conventional bike.

Compare the e-scooter again—what vehicle is it replacing? The ubiquity of adult-sized push scooters? No such situation existed. The e-scooter has induced its own demand in a way that can only be seen as increasing the use of resources. They are, in fact, so impractical that *The Spinoff* in 2023 published an article with advice on how not to come careening off them—after a short spate of MPs looking quite foolish. Unlike the author of that piece, however, I do not have any longing for a world where e-scooters are even more prevalent.

The Efficiency Cult

Teasing out why the e-scooter has drawn my ire has taken a bit of rumination. The final piece in this bitter puzzle comes down to the contemporary obsession with efficiency. I do not mean to sound contradictory here—I've already mentioned how the efficiency of this particular e-vehicle is largely illusory. What I mean is the obsession with optimising the use of people's time. The e-scooter contains a promise that it can help you fit 'more' into a day. By reducing the time it takes to walk from one place to another an urban office worker may be able to get to even more supposedly important meetings in a day. Not only that, you can squeeze in a coffee with a friend, nip down to the gym before having to head home and take care of domestic tasks, in short—you can be incredibly efficient.

What is lost here is that this optimisation of an individual's time is

a salve that mitigates the way in which the expectation of increased leisure time for working people has been abandoned. You've got to fit things in because, no matter what extraordinary machinery is invented to multiply the forces of production, we simply cannot have that translate into more free time. Rather than having time to take it easy, to pursue whatever activity outside the workplace that you see fit, you've got to squeeze it in—and these convenient and quick pieces of soon-to-be-garbage are here to help.

Writing in the online blog *The Real Movement* a thinker with the nom de plume Jehu presented their main claim quite simply: 'Communism is free time and nothing else!'. For Jehu the demand for the transition from capitalism to communism could be made quite simply—we will reduce the working week by one day each year, for five years. Perhaps Jehu is being a bit optimistic about a timeline—but they do have a point. The fight to reduce the working day has basically been abandoned, and instead we live with a cult of speed. This frenetic way of being is sold as freedom, but ties us to a system of permanent domination by machine time on the one hand, and the needs of a capitalist market on the other.

One may, perhaps rightly, consider this characterisation of the e-scooter as a harbinger/representative of everything wrong with modern society a little strained. Nonetheless, when considering the deleterious ecological impact of this largely frivolous technology I wonder if it might be simpler for those considering hiring them to just cut out the middleman—take the scooter on a short trip to the seaside and beat an endangered seabird to death.

THE FIGHT TO
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CULT OF SPEED

SIOBHAN HARTLEY

Why I Am A Socialist

While I am not well read on socialism, it is glaringly obvious to me that capitalism has been and remains an outstanding dismal failure for the majority of humanity and other life on earth.

Colonialism, imperialism, oppression, marginalisation, injustice, war, environmental degradation and exploitation for the many, wealth and power for the elite few. I was somewhat aware of these facts growing up in a working class Irish family. My father Brian emigrated from the Falls Road, Belfast, Northern Ireland in 1963. My mother Bernadette grew up in Addington, Christchurch. I eventually understood that my father came from a place of political struggle and war and while political discussion was limited when I was a child, I have clear memories of social justice being an important value to our family.

Dad had been a rugby player, so it was interesting to me when in the winter of 1981 there was much national discussion about the tour of the Springboks. When I asked my parents about this they encouraged me to read about South Africa and to make my own decision. I decided that I was vehemently opposed to apartheid and the Springbok tour and so embarked on my first political protest. The rallies and marches introduced me to the powerful voice of an organised collective.

In 1982, aged 15, I took the opportunity to travel to Northern Ireland and live with my Dad's family for a year. I lived with my uncle, who was a member of Sinn Féin. Whilst there I was exposed to much political debate, listened to the singing of

Fenian songs in the clubs, and experienced life under an occupying military force. I connected with my heritage and my family's participation in the struggle for a socialist united Ireland. In all of this my old Granny Hilda was the most influential. I spent many happy days listening to her oral history of family and the occupied six counties of Ulster.

Fast forward to the late 90s and back in New Zealand after 10 years in Sydney, married and with 3 young children, I enrolled at Canterbury University. Anthropology 101 was one of the three papers I completed and it opened my mind to the many diverse ways societies are organised.

After some years as a single parent struggling on the benefit and part-time work, I returned to full-time employment the same year Sionainn started university. I have always been a member of a union and noticed the precarious position of employees that were not. My three young adult children were now in jobs where union membership appeared not to be encouraged, and where conditions were questionable. We had many discussions on this and other political issues and I have been informed and educated by their experiences.

In 2014 I became a union delegate and since then I have been on our wage negotiation bargaining team and participated in workplace complaint processes. In my experience workers are regularly micromanaged, undermined, and undervalued.

So for me, Socialism is the only rational and positive solution to worker's rights, the self-determination of colonised and marginalised peoples, nonhuman and environmental protection, and the unequal distribution of wealth in our world.

**ACROSS:
THE NOTION OF
ASKING MEMBERS
TO DESCRIBE HOW
AND WHY THEY
BECAME A SOCIAL-
IST WAS INSPIRED
BY WILLIAM
MORRIS'S ACCOUNT
OF HIS CONVERSION
TO SOCIALISM,
FIRST PUBLISHED
IN JUSTICE, THE
NEWSPAPER OF THE
SOCIAL
DEMOCRATIC
FEDERATION, ON
16TH JUNE 1894,
AND LATER AS A
PAMPHLET**

Hevey.
HOW I BECAME A SOCIALIST.



WILLIAM MORRIS.

[Price One Penny.]

OUR HISTORY

MARTIN CRICK

Socialist Sunday Schools

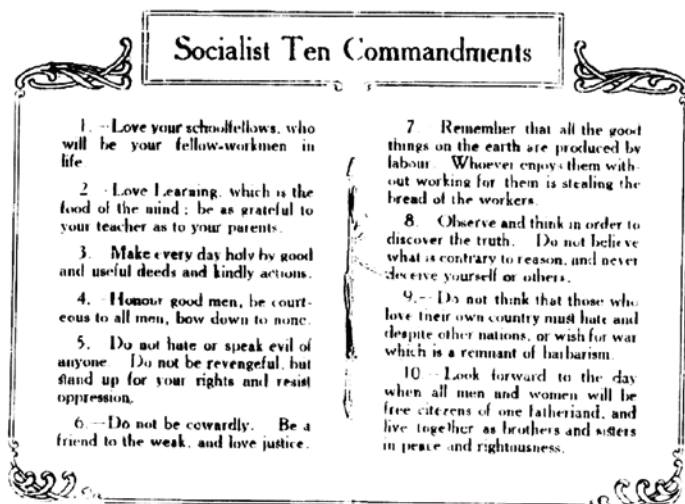
The earliest use of secular Sunday schools by the radical movement began in Great Britain in the early 1830s amongst adherents of Robert Owen and Chartism. They operated until the 1850s and then disappeared with the decline of the early radical movement. Prior to 1870 Christian Sunday Schools provided some of the only educational opportunities for working-class children. Often associated with non-conformist churches they instructed children in the basic tenets of religion alongside basic literacy and numeracy. After the National Education Act of 1870, which introduced a system of compulsory education, often under the auspices of the Church of England, Sunday schools focused almost exclusively on instilling Christian ethics and upon moral education.

The exposure of many of the early leaders of the growing labour movement to this Sunday school system, and to the rote learning and what they saw as the indoctrination of the new national school system, led to a movement to establish secular schools to teach the values of socialism, to explain socialist ideas and labour theories in simple terms for a child audience. I suppose one could equate this with the Jesuit idea of ‘Give me a child until he is 7, and I will give you a man.’ The first Socialist Sunday School

in Great Britain was established by Mary Gray, a member of the Social Democratic Federation, in Battersea, London in November 1892. Twenty years later there were approximately 120 schools throughout the country, and by 1912 over 200. A National Council of British Socialist Sunday Schools was established in 1909 and prepared a manual for the use of teachers. Publications included *The Young Socialist* and the *Socialist Sunday School Hymn Book*.

The SSS leadership maintained that public education should be secular, and the schools’ teachings were free of religious content. However, perhaps due to the religious environment of many early labour leaders, the schools made extensive use of the language of Christian ethical teachings. Thus, writing in *The Young Socialist*, one leader of the movement, Archie McArthur, said that the aim of any young socialist should be to ‘build up the City of Love in our own hearts and so, by and by, help to build it up in the world.’ In addition to the hymn book schools also taught the *Socialist Ten Commandments*.

This reflected the largely ethical nature of the early British socialist movement. A typical meeting might include singing, a short lecture on an ethical or moral issue, and the recitation of an ‘Aspiration’. Schools also organised sports teams, orchestras and libraries. Parents joined too and some schools even conducted secular/socialist weddings. Inevitably they encountered opposition, being accused of blasphemy and ‘perverting the minds of the young people of the country with their political and



anti-religious doctrines and teachings.' In 1907 the London County Council evicted 5 branches from their hired school buildings and in 1927 Fulham Council refused to let the local school meet on Sundays because it was of a 'non-theological' character.

There was criticism on the left too, some arguing that they should focus on economic theory rather than moral development. After the First World War the newly-formed Communist Party of Great Britain rejected the schools. Increasing attacks on their quasi-religious nature, and the onset of the Great Depression further weakened the movement, and although some schools struggled on into the 1960s it eventually faded away.

The Socialist Sunday Schools had an impact upon many leading figures in the labour movement and they were evidence of the breadth of the early labour movement, and of the major role the Left played in community life. Whilst socialism is often seen as based primarily upon economic theory there is a long tradition of thinkers who promoted more spiritual

notions of community and fraternity as the key to a better world. One such of course was William Morris, who argued strongly that a successful revolution must be as much a moral revolution as an economic one.

Socialist Sunday schools also operated in other countries, notably the USA, but also in Australia, Canada, Hungary, Belgium, Switzerland and here in New Zealand.

Socialist Sunday Schools in New Zealand

Although Socialist Sunday Schools arrived in New Zealand much later than elsewhere, the press had already shown considerable interest in their operation in the UK and evinced considerable hostility to them. An editorial in the *Auckland Star* is not untypical. Socialism, it said, refused to accord respect to either constitutional or religious authority, and Socialist Sunday Schools preached 'the



The Young Comrade

Vol 2. No. 2.

Blackball N.S. 1st. August 1928.

One Penny.

WHAT IS

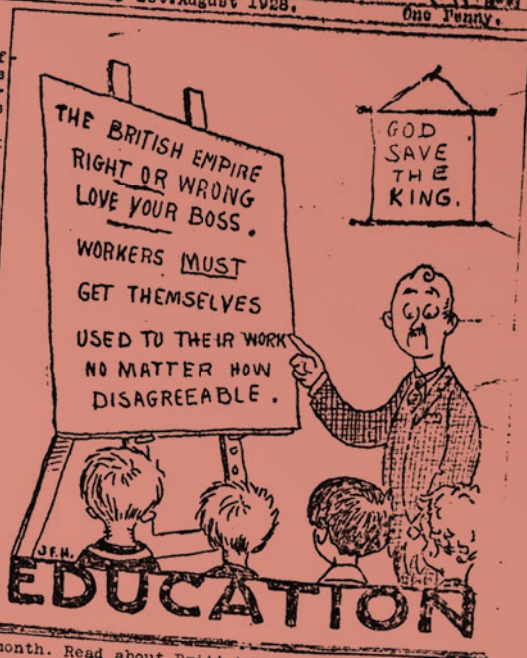
THE BRITISH EMPIRE?

"The British Empire, before all the world, stands for fair dealing and protecting of weaker nations. Workers must get themselves used to their work no matter how disagreeable or evil the conditions. They must be loyal to their country to the end".

The above choice bits are the main ideas in an article in "National Education" Dec. 1927, called "For Civic Pride-Training Our Youth".

How was the British Empire built up? By fair dealing? By protecting weaker nations? No!

The British Empire was built up and is kept going by force, i.e. guns, warships, navies, armies. Great empires are built up so that weaker nations can be robbed. How does Great Britain rule India? With brutal terror. Read the reports of the strikes in Bombay and Calcutta and of the shooting of the Indian workers who are on strike against wages of less than 23 per month. Read about British battleships steaming to Egypt to blow things to pieces if the Egyptians don't "behave", i.e. stay in the empire. You know the workers are robbed of the things they make, the coal they dig, in New Zealand. Well, things are much worse for the workers in other parts of the British Empire. The empire was built up by robbery, slaughter, and violence, and is kept together by the same means.



doctrines of a violent social revolution' in their catechism. This publication was a 'deliberate incitation to revolution and anarchy, robbery and murder.' (5 September 1907, p.4)

The first Socialist Sunday School in New Zealand was established by the Socialist Party in Dunedin in 1908, operating out of The Trades Hall. The *Evening Star* reported at some length about what was taught in the school (7 September 1908, p.6):

It was explained that the children would not be taught anything about the hereafter, about which they had no definite knowledge, but they would be taught how to live and be happy, and that the best way to be happy was to make other people happy... They would teach them that the world had sufficient to satisfy the needs of all, and that when they grew up they must fight to remove wrongs that prevented people from being happy and contented and loving one another. They would have placed before them all the great thoughts from every thinker and would be taught to be guided by reason. The scholars saluted the Red Flag, which they were told was the symbol of Humanity, Love, Peace, Order, and Truth.

The Dunedin Socialist Sunday School was clearly firmly in the ethical tradition of its counterparts in the UK. The *New Zealand Times* suggested at the end of the year that the movement was spreading rapidly, with Auckland now also established and Wellington due to open early in the New

Year. The paper also printed the *Socialist 10 Commandments* for the information of its readers. (12 December 1908, p.5) Wellington did indeed commence operations in February 1909, with classes taking place in the Socialist Hall in Manners Street. However, that was the extent of this 'rapid' growth, and no further Socialist Sunday Schools were reported until February 1912, when the *Maoriland Worker* informed its readers that one had been formed at Waihi (16 February 1912, p.1) and that it was 'making great headway' (19 April 1912, p.12). Later in the year, during the great Waihi miners' strike, the Waihi Socialist Sunday School was brought to the attention of Premier Massey in the House of Representatives. He was told that 'an alleged Socialist Sunday School' was being conducted in Waihi by an American, who had told his students that it was in the 'workers' interest to do as much damage as possible to their employers' property.' This American was probably the Canadian Wobbly (member of the IWW) John Benjamin King. 'Could he not be deported?' asked Representative A. Harris of Waiwaka. Clearly the Waihi school was preaching a much more militant brand of socialism than those elsewhere. The Waihi school did not survive the strike, and there is little evidence to suggest that Dunedin and Wellington were long-lived either. The Auckland Socialist Sunday School, however, was still thriving in 1913, and the press was still attacking the movement. In Socialist Sunday Schools, said the *Inangahua Times*, 'the gospel of hate is being systematically taught by Socialists to children' (11 November 1913, p.3) whilst the *Grey River Argus* said they were preaching 'the religion of disobedience.' (19 February 1914, p.2) The outbreak of World War 1 led to the cessation of all SSS activity.

ACROSS:
THE YOUNG
COMRADE (1928)
 ALEXANDER TURNBULL
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IT IS HARDLY
SURPRISING
THAT ONE
NEWSPAPER
REPORTED SOME
'CRANKY-HEADED
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THEIR PUPILS
TO REFUSE
COMPULSORY
MILITARY
TRAINING

In the aftermath of the war three Socialist Sunday Schools emerged. The first was in Christchurch, where the anti-war/anti-conscription movement had been strongest. Indeed, conscientious objectors were prominent in the teaching there, and the Head of the School was the Reverend J.H.G. Chapple, immortalised as *Plumb* in the novel by Maurice Gee. The school was launched in January 1918 and it is hardly surprising that one newspaper reported some 'cranky-headed socialists' were teaching their pupils to refuse compulsory military training. When two of them did so as it was 'contrary to their religion' their request for exemption was turned down, as the Socialist Sunday School was deemed an educational not a religious institution. (*New Zealand Truth*, 9 December 1922, p.7) Chapple explained the work of the School thus:

'...we have no bible teaching, he said, and we put Socialist teaching in the place of religious teaching...So-called Socialist ideals are in the very best sense religious. Teach them how to think and not what to think...On all sides enlightened Catholics and Protestants alike are dubious about the prevailing superstitions indoctrinated into the minds of their children, and in the Socialist Sunday School they could both find a common meeting place.'

(*Manawatu Evening Standard*, 8 September 1919, p.4)

Chapple courted further controversy at a May Day meeting in Christchurch in 1925, when he said he 'would as soon pray for a weasel as a king', which of course gave further ammunition to critics of

the schools. The Christchurch School broke new ground with the publication of its own newspaper, *The International Sunbeam*, in June 1923, to counteract what it called the 'untruthful statements' being made about the Socialist Sunday School movement. In November 1924 it reported that the senior class was having lectures on psycho-analysis, and that it had debated the suggestion 'That a change to a better order of society cannot come about except through the use of force.' A new idea was mooted, 'because it makes you think, and when you begin to THINK you become dangerous to the system under which we live.' This idea was to write a question on the board for pupils to respond to, questions such as 'What would I do if I was Prime Minister?', 'What would I do with £100,000 for public benefit?'

Auckland commenced operations in May 1920, and during the May Day celebrations in 1923 proclaimed that it had carried out the first baby dedication (a substitute for a christening) in New Zealand, although this was common practice in the UK and other socialist schools. The Palmerston North Socialist Sunday School was opened in September 1920. On the occasion of its first anniversary it reported that:

'Every Sunday the Sunbeams have the glorious gospel of Socialism explained to them...

We emphasise the spirit of internationalism...Socialist songs are sung every Sunday, the "Red Flag" never being omitted...we have just started the teaching of the international language—Esperanto.'

(*Maoriland Worker*, 14 December 1921, p.5)

Other subjects taught included astronomy and evolution, whilst younger children focused on play, for example modelling with plasticine. The ethos of the three schools can be seen in the declaration read out at the start of each meeting:

*'We desire to be just and loving
to all men and women, to
work together as brothers and
sisters, to be kind to every living
creature, and to help to form a
new society with Justice for its
foundation and love for its law.'*

Three Socialist Sunday Schools, and yet in the early and mid-1920s they were subjected to a huge amount of press vitriol and a concerted campaign of vilification by organisations such as The Welfare League, The Political Reform League, the Orange Lodge, and even the National Council of Women. They were accused of blasphemy, of irreligion, of 'pacifist lunacy', of filling the minds of the young with communist ideas. Under much cover of sentimental talk, said one newspaper, they were inculcating class hatred. According to the *Hawera and Normanby Star* they were 'a very serious menace to the Empire and a very direct challenge to the very foundations of civilisation.' (3 August 1922, p.4) A widely distributed pamphlet, *Warring against Christianity*, argued that 'true Britishers' were proud that their nation had been built upon the foundations of Christianity. 'Our forefathers', it proclaimed, 'had fought many bloody battles for the cause of righteousness', but Socialist Sunday Schools 'will assuredly make for the destruction of modern government and the fabric of modern society.' The schools and their teachers were compared to lepers, to the typhus bacillus, and to the bubonic plague.

Why was such an insignificant movement subjected to such abuse? The reason was clearly rising support for the Labour Party. The campaign was a deliberate attempt, and particularly during election campaigns, to smear the Labour Party and discredit it in the eyes of the public, even though the Party was in no way connected to the Socialist School movement. The Reverend Leonard Isitt, Liberal MP for Christchurch North, admitted as much when he urged his fellow Liberal and also Reform MPs to wake up before it was too late and counteract the propaganda of organisations such as the Socialist Sunday Schools. In May 1921 the Minister of Education, C.J. Parr, ordered compulsory weekly flag-saluting in schools in order, he said, to counter disruptive influences such as the Socialist Sunday Schools. There are two clear examples of this smear campaign. First, the aforementioned pamphlet, *Warring Against Christianity*, was published by the *Newsletter* in Wellington, which claimed to be the organ of the Reform Party. Ted Howard, Labour MP for Christchurch South, raised the matter of its circulation during a Dunedin North by-election in the House of Representatives, calling it a 'disgrace to politics.' Secondly the Grand Master of the Orange Order, the Reverend G. Knowles Smith, speaking at a Grand Orange Lodge meeting in Auckland Town Hall early in 1912, accused teachers at the Auckland Socialist Sunday School of a 'blasphemous parody' of the hymn *Onward Christian Soldiers*, quoting the following verse:

*Onward Christian Soldiers,
duty's call is plain,
Slay your Christian brothers, or
yourselves be slain,
Pulpiteers are spouting*

*effervescent will,
In the name of Christ they call
you to rob, and rape, and kill.*

This was, in fact, nowhere to be found in any New Zealand Socialist Schools' hymn book. It was taken from that of the Sydney Socialist Sunday School hymn book, a school run under the auspices of the Communist Party, and analogous to the proletarian Sunday schools of the Communist Party in the UK. This was a deliberate attempt to connect the Labour Party to Socialist Sunday Schools and thus to the Communist Party.

Unfortunately, they had an effect. The Palmerston North School was forced to close its doors at the end of 1922 after a concerted campaign of opposition. Auckland continued, but there is no report of activity after the mid-1920s. Only Christchurch survived into the 1930s. A correspondent to the *Press* suggested that 'The whole world is surely suffering enough without the rising generation being instructed how to sing the "Red Flag" and to carry out "the duty of children to destroy the present-day economic condition."' (3 June 1932, p.13) The *Auckland Star* reported in May 1932 that it had been re-launched by the Socialist Party there as the Socialist Guild of Youth, the reason given that it wished to avoid any confusion with the church Sunday Schools. (31 May 1932) However, there is one school that I have not mentioned, one that was distinctly different to the other, ethical socialist schools, avowedly and proudly communist, and that was the Blackball Socialist Sunday School.

Young Comrades— The Blackball Socialist Sunday School.¹

The Communist Party of New Zealand had moved its headquarters to the coal fields of the West Coast, to Blackball, in 1925. Blackball, scene of the famous 'crib strike' of 1908 and birthplace of the 'Red Feds', was the home of Bill Balderstone, a radical trade unionist and Communist Party member. Communists and socialists alike saw teachers and schools as purveyors of capitalist ideology, and in 1927 they organised a children's league, 'The Young Comrades.' It was modelled on the Socialist Sunday School and met at the home of Bill and Annie Balderstone on Wednesday evenings and Sunday afternoons. Unlike its counterparts in Auckland, Palmerston North and Christchurch, however, it preached class war.

The organisation produced a newspaper, *The Young Comrade*, which certainly ran from July 1927 until March 1929², and which children sold for a penny before Sunday evening cinema shows and outside the Miners' Hall after union meetings. Copies also circulated in Auckland. The objective of the paper was to help children 'pick out the lies and to recognise the truth in the daily newspapers.' (*The Young Comrade* 1 December 1928, p.1) It presented communism as a superior form of social organisation, comparing 'village life' in New Zealand and Russia. The November 1927 issue was advertised as a 6-page special edition

1 Much of the material below is taken from Len Richardson, *Coal, Class and Community: The United Mineworkers of New Zealand 1880-1960*, Auckland University Press, (1995), pp.210-212.

2 The 7 existing issues of *The Young Comrade* are in the George Griffin Papers in the Alexander Turnbull Library, 86-043-2/03



**A GROUP OF
COMMUNIST
PARTY MEMBERS
FROM THE WEST
COAST, 1922, ON
ST PATRICKS DAY.
L-R JACK DOYLE,
ALEX GALBRAITH,
NORMAN
JEFFRIES, CROFTS
(BLACKBALL),
ANGUS MCLAGAN**

ALEXANDER
TURNBULL
LIBRARY

'News from Workers' Russia'. Imperialism, with its constant search for new markets, represented capitalism driving on towards its inevitable collapse, and New Zealand's subjugation of Samoa was used as an example. Capitalism's unceasing search for profit was seen as the cause of the relentless misery of the workplace. One correspondent, signing himself 'Yours for the revolt, Jack Wild', complained about an education system which forced him to salute the Union Jack. He urged young comrades to set aside a day every year and refuse to go to school 'as a protest against the system that forces us to leave school and go to work when we are 14.' (*Sun*, 12 June 1929, p.1)³ In particular the paper mounted an unceasing campaign against militarism, attacking Anzac Day as a glorification of war, and the Boy Scouts as a blatant attempt to prepare the young for war. Letters were exchanged with young comrades in Britain, Australia

and Russia. All members wore red badges with the hammer and sickle, and the last extant issue of the paper reported that they were planning to adopt a navy-blue uniform with red necktie like the Pioneers in Russia.

Socialist Sunday Schools were a very minor and relatively short-lived phenomenon in New Zealand. With the exception of Blackball, they followed the ethical tradition of those in Great Britain. Whilst they were established to counter what socialists saw as the capitalist and religious propaganda of the state school classrooms, they also attempted to offer a broader and more interesting curriculum to their students. They were part of the socialist attempt to create an alternative, all-embracing community life for their members and their families. The violent opposition they aroused here demonstrated just how much of a threat to 'traditional values' they were perceived to be.

3 This letter is not in any of the surviving issues of *The Young Comrade* so it either appeared in a missing issue OR it suggests that there were further issues after March 1929

REVIEW

BYRON CLARK

Fargo's fifth season gave us a villain straight out of Alt-America

Over the last decade and across five seasons (each with its own set of characters but taking place in the same shared continuity) Noah Hawley's *Fargo*, based on the 1996 Coen brothers movie of the same name, has given us some great antagonists. In the first season, it was a mysterious hitman played brilliantly by Billy Bob Thornton, and season 3 introduced us to V. M. Varga, portrayed by the British actor David Thewlis, who personified a particularly predatory form of finance capitalism. The show's fifth season brought us Roy Tillman, played by Jon Hamm, a character whose archetype has long existed in the vast expanse of the United States between the coastal cities where most television and movies are set, now being depicted on screen after the last few years of political upheaval have brought that archetype to the fore.

'In the old days, a character like Roy, who is a Bible-quoting, constitutional sheriff, you wouldn't have seen him as a square conservative, moral majority,' Hawley told *The LA Times*¹ But I think

what we learned during the Trump era is that we live in 'Tiger King' America now'.

So what exactly is a 'constitutional sheriff'? The concept has its roots in the Posse Comitatus movement which emerged in the late 1960s in response to federal civil rights legislation. The name comes from the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878, which removed the military from regular civil law enforcement following the civil war and the reconstruction era. In his 2017 book *'Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump'* David Neiwert described the ideology of the Posse Comitatus movement:

It was openly bigoted, and promoted conspiracy theories that Jews were a nefarious presence scheming to enslave white people. Its primary goal was to take away the government's ability to enforce civil rights laws. This led to its main focus being a kind of radical localism based on the power of a county sheriff, or other law officer, to conscript any able-bodied man to form a posse and assist him in keeping the peace or to pursue and arrest a felon.

As the moment evolved it dropped most of the overt racism and antisemitism. It went on to influence patriot militias and 'sovereign citizens', a group of people who, via misinterpretations of historical legal texts,

1 <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2023-11-22/noah-hawley-fargo-season-5>



believe themselves not subject to the law. In 2009 Richard Mack, a former sheriff, published *The County Sheriff: America's Last Hope* which portrayed county sheriffs as the 'last line of defense' against tyrannical government. Two years later he founded the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association (CSPOA). He also sits on the board of the Oath Keepers, a far-right militia whose founder Stewart Rhodes was last year sentenced to 18 years in prison for his role in the insurrection that took place in Washington DC on January 6 2021.

Each season of *Fargo* has taken place in a different time period, spanning from the 1950s to the early 2010s. Season 5 is set in 2019, allowing the story to be as contemporary as possible without having to account for the COVID pandemic

and the resulting societal changes that occurred in the early 2020s. '[T]he violent outsider driven by extremist views and hate-filled philosophies, is everywhere now' wrote Hawley in *The Atlantic*² several months before *Fargo's* 5th season aired. 'Incel spree-killers and race-war propagators. Young white men radicalized and weaponized. They are the children of the Unabomber, each with his own self-aggrandizing manifesto.'

Roy Tillman is the villain, but his character sees himself as the hero. A lawman trying to do what's right by the US constitution and the Christian bible, up against the tyranny of the federal government. 'No myth has a greater hold over the American imagination than the Myth of the Reluctant Hero', writes Hawley. 'He is John Wayne, Gary Cooper,

**STEWART RHODES
(RIGHT) MEETS
WITH ENRIQUE
TARRIO (CENTER)
OF THE PROUD BOYS
ON JANUARY 5 2021**

2 <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/01/fargo-creator-american-culture-politics-wild-west/672237/>



**SHERIFF ROY
TILLMAN**
FX NETWORK

Clint Eastwood. He is John Wick, Jack Reacher, Captain America. A man who tries to live a peaceful life until the world forces him into violence.’

That myth of the frontier hero, the vigilante hero, permeates American culture. ‘This is why Trump’s face is on Rambo’s body,’ says Hawley. ‘Who was Rambo if not a reluctant hero trying to live a life of peace? But the system—small-town cops with their rules and laws—wouldn’t leave him alone. So he did what he had to do, which was destroy the system that oppressed him.’

Rambo belongs to a genre that Michael Parenti called ‘the Reaganite Cinema,’ named for the man whose CV includes both ‘Western movie actor’ and ‘President of the United States’. The first Rambo film sees Vietnam war veteran

John Rambo getting in a scrape with a local sheriff (evidently not one of the “constitutional” variety) which triggers memories of the war, causing Rambo to go on a rampage against the police and the National Guard.

Fargo refuses to let the audience see Tillman as a hero. In the penultimate episode, carloads of militia members converge on Tillman’s property with the soundtrack playing the Village People’s ‘YMCA’. The 70’s disco hit appears an odd choice here, except that the song has in the 21st century taken on a bizarre change in meaning; used by Donald Trump at campaign rallies, and later blasted at the Michigan State Capitol³ while it was occupied by heavily armed militia members calling on Governor

3 <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/research/spotlight-research/why-donald-trump-dancing-ymca>

Gretchen Whitmer to end the state's COVID lockdown.

On screen the militia has arrived as the FBI is about to surround the property, mirroring real life incidents such as the 2014 standoff at the Bundy ranch in Nevada,⁴ where a rancher's dispute with the government over cattle grazing rules escalated to the point where Stewart Rhodes and the Oath Keepers had arrived ready to back up Ammon Bundy in an armed conflict with the forces of the federal government. (Daryl Johnson, a former senior domestic terrorism analyst at Department of Homeland Security, has said there is 'a straight line that you can draw' from the Bundy standoff to the insurrection on January 6 2021).

'Are you Hitler at the Reichstag or Hitler in the bunker?' Tillman's father-in-law, the leader of the far-right militia, asks him as the federal agents amass outside the property. Recapping the episode for the *New York Times*,⁵ Scott Tobias describes Tillman as 'cowboy Hitler', if you're still rooting for Roy at this point, that's who you're behind. Tillman, who has already been shown to be a domestic abuser, is now also shown to be weak and cowardly. 'Roy has always been Hitler in the bunker' writes Tobias. 'He has been cosplaying Ammon Bundy for votes, money and unchecked power, but sometimes an actor immerses himself too deeply into a role. And now he has the feds surrounding his ranch.'

In this season of *Fargo* the heroes are the federal agents. 'I feel compelled to champion the system of justice, not the exploits of a single person' wrote Hawley in his *Atlantic* piece,⁶ to spotlight the

collective efforts of a team of hardworking public servants putting in the hours, solving the cases, bringing the wicked to account. In the real world this is how the peace is kept, how rules and laws are written and enforced.'

It's an imperfect viewpoint to put across as a theme. The armed forces of the state have throughout US history been wielded against civil rights activists, native Americans and the political left, and the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and countless other unarmed African Americans by police in recent times led to protests and calls to defund city police forces throughout the country. The cop-who-plays-by-his-own-rules character of so many Reaganite cinema action movies may now be passé, but the cops following the rules are still acting within a set of rules established largely to protect the existing social order.

This reality isn't entirely unacknowledged by *Fargo* however. Alongside Tillman, one of the most interesting new characters is Lorraine Lyon, the new mother-in-law of the ex-wife Tillman spends much of the season pursuing. Lyon is the CEO of Redemption Services, a debt recovery company that has made her exceedingly wealthy. Unlike the ideology that drives Tillman, Lyon is driven primarily by class interests. 'Her politics Noah and I did talk about' Jennifer Jason Leigh, the actress portraying her, told *Vulture*.⁶

*A lot of times with companies,
you want politicians who are
going to be on your side with the*

4 <https://abcnews.go.com/US/standoff-nevada-years-ago-set-militia-movement-crash/story?id=82051940>

5 <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/09/arts/television/fargo-recap-episode-9.html>

6 <https://www.vulture.com/article/fargo-jennifer-jason-leigh-lorraine-finale-ending-interview.html>

rules. There's so much corruption involved. She wants people that she could pay off and are leaning to her side. Knowing where she stands is important, but her politics aren't based on a worldview. They're more based on her pocketbook and her business.

When the two characters meet Lyon looks down on Tillman and his 'constitutional sheriff' ideology, describing him as wanting all power and no responsibility, 'like a baby'. The influence on this dialogue is suggested in Hawley's *Atlantic* article, where he writes of noticing while on a road trip that vehicles displaying the American flag seemed less likely to adhere to the rules of the road. 'As if the performance of patriotism frees one from responsibility, not just to the law, but to other people.' He quotes the journalist Sebastian Junger who argues that 'The idea that we can enjoy the benefits of society while owing nothing in return is literally infantile. Only children owe nothing.'

While Tillman sees his elected position in law enforcement as giving licence to be a law unto himself, Lyon sees her position as a billionaire, and her willingness to use both strategic political donations, and the power that having someone indebted to you gives you over them, allowing her to sit outside of the law entirely. 'What is your function?' she asks a Minnesota Police Deputy in her office.

The police. I mean, why do we need you? Except as a tool to keep a certain element in line. To separate those who have money, class, intellect from those who don't. You're

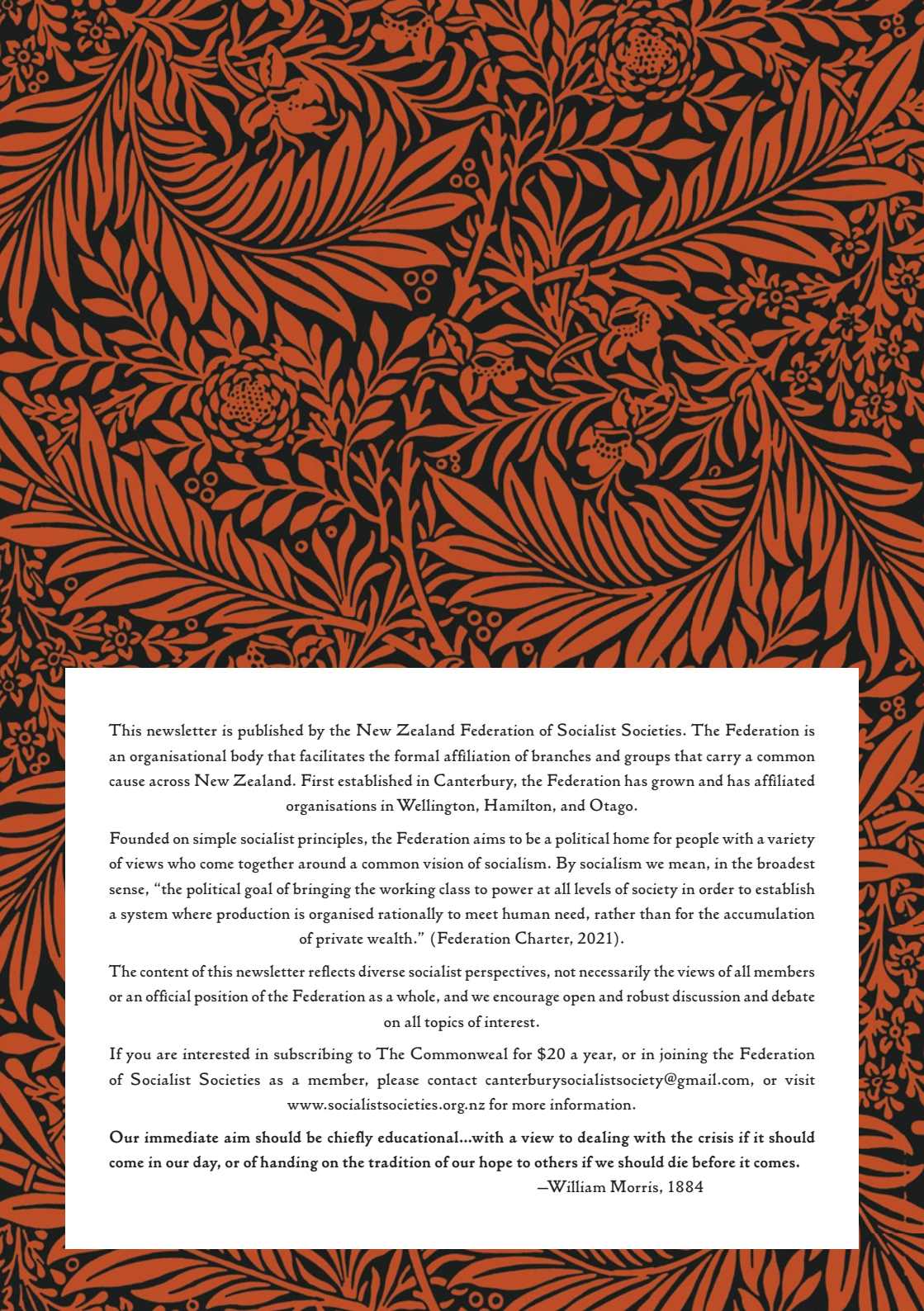
gatekeepers, standing outside the walls, keeping the rabble from getting in. But in here, inside these walls, you have no function. You should remember that.

While initially seeing her daughter-in-law Dot (Juno Temple) as a 'low-rent skirt', marrying her extremely polite but not exactly intellectual son for the future inheritance, Lorraine grows to become her greatest ally in Dot's domestic violence revenge narrative.

The story raises an interesting thought experiment for viewers of an anti-Fascist and anti-capitalist worldview. Is the existing order, with its unequal wealth and political corruption that gives disproportionate power to the Lorraine Lyons of this world, at least preferable to the social order that would exist if power were handed to -or taken by- the constitutional sheriffs and far-right militias who, as I write, are making their way to Texas to 'defend' the border from an 'invasion' of migrants?⁷ Perhaps even the FBI, though certainly not the do-gooder civil servants *Fargo* depicts them as, are at the least a 'lesser evil' to what the alternative could be. It was after all the FBI who took down Stewart Rhodes, not the street level anti-fascist movement. In fact, were the antifascist movement to practise their own form of vigilante justice, America's heavily armed far-right, itching for violence against the left as well as their federal government, would no doubt respond in kind. It's a complex world right now (especially in the United States) and Hawley has done a decent job of depicting it on screen.

Fargo is streaming on *Hulu* in the USA, and on *Neon* in New Zealand.

7 <https://www.wired.com/story/extremists-far-right-armed-convoy-texas-border/>



This newsletter is published by the New Zealand Federation of Socialist Societies. The Federation is an organisational body that facilitates the formal affiliation of branches and groups that carry a common cause across New Zealand. First established in Canterbury, the Federation has grown and has affiliated organisations in Wellington, Hamilton, and Otago.

Founded on simple socialist principles, the Federation aims to be a political home for people with a variety of views who come together around a common vision of socialism. By socialism we mean, in the broadest sense, “the political goal of bringing the working class to power at all levels of society in order to establish a system where production is organised rationally to meet human need, rather than for the accumulation of private wealth.” (Federation Charter, 2021).

The content of this newsletter reflects diverse socialist perspectives, not necessarily the views of all members or an official position of the Federation as a whole, and we encourage open and robust discussion and debate on all topics of interest.

If you are interested in subscribing to *The Commonweal* for \$20 a year, or in joining the Federation of Socialist Societies as a member, please contact canterburysocialistsociety@gmail.com, or visit www.socialistsocieties.org.nz for more information.

Our immediate aim should be chiefly educational...with a view to dealing with the crisis if it should come in our day, or of handing on the tradition of our hope to others if we should die before it comes.

—William Morris, 1884