Andrew Taylor/Fairfax Photo Library

Labor without class:
The gentrification of the ALP

By Michael Thompson

Pluto Press

working class man

Andrew Leigh

O ver the past decade, Labor's legacy has been variously critiqued and re-interpreted. Triggered in part by the 100th anniversary of the ALP, the late-1980s and early-1990s witnessed a wave of books analysing the government of Bob Hawke against the legacy of labourism, and finding it wanting.[1] Labor, they proclaimed, had betrayed its own values in general, and the legacy of HV Evatt and Gough Whitlam in particular. Predictably, these works were accompanied by a spate of others arguing that the Labor tradition was safe in the hands of its leaders, who were simply applying the principles of yore to present realities.[2]

Many of this first wave of critiques and counter-critiques used as their touchstone for traditional labourism a paragraph from a speech that Prime Minister Ben Chifley delivered to the ALP conference in 1949.

"I try to think of the labour movement, not as putting

Andrew Leigh is an adviser to Senator Peter Cook, as Michael Thompson once was.

an extra sixpence into someone's pocket, or making somebody Prime Minister or Premier, but as a movement bringing something better to the people, better standards of living, greater happiness to the mass of people. We have a great objective – the light on the hill – which we aim to reach by working for the betterment of mankind not only here but anywhere we may give a helping hand. If it were not for that, the labour movement would not be worth fighting for."

Appropriately enough, Michael Thompson identifies the 50th anniversary of Chifley's speech as the rationale for his contribution to what may well amount to a second wave of critiques of Labor's direction. Thompson's opening words are: "I wrote this book because I am angered at the hijacking of the Australian Labor Party – and because I could not let the fiftieth anniversary of Ben Chifley's 'light on the hill' speech pass without voicing my feelings."

Thompson's thesis differs fundamentally from the first wave of critiques. He argues that Labor lost federal office in 1996 because the working class deserted it, disgusted by its preoccupation with Aborigines, women and the environment. He contends that the betrayal of ordinary working-class people began under the Whitlam Government, and was subsequently perpetuated by the governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating. If it is to win the next election, the ALP must return to its true legacy – that of Ben Chifley and Arthur Calwell.

One of the problems that is immediately apparent, however, is Thompson's failure to define what he means by the "working class". After all, 150 years after the publication of the *Communist Manifesto*, there is certainly no shortage of literature on the topic.[3] But the closest that Thompson comes is in the Preface, where he outlines his own working class credentials – that he was born in the Balmain/Rozelle area, left school early, travelled around Australia and the world and worked as a builder's labourer – before going on to study economics and law, and work as a political adviser and consultant to a law firm. Hardly a stereotypical member of the working class, one might have thought. Yet through the remainder of the book, the working class are implicitly defined in turn by their occupation, income levels, cultural values and political beliefs – according to what best suits the author's argument.

Notwithstanding this definitional difficulty, part of Thompson's thesis is correct. If "working class" is defined to mean those in manual occupations, Labor lost a large portion of its working class vote at the 1996 election. The extent of this collapse is identified in a forthcoming work by John Warhurst and Andrew Parkin – *Machine Politics: The Australian Labor Party on the Eve of the Year 2000*. Using data from the 1996 Australian Electoral Survey, Warhurst and Parkin found that while the ALP vote fell by 2 per cent among non-manual workers (from 38 per cent to 36 per cent), it dropped by a massive 15 per cent among manual workers (from 59 per cent to 44 per cent). Thus the Alford index of class voting (the percentage of manuals voting Labor minus the percentage of non-

manuals voting Labor) fell to just 8 percent, the first single-figure result ever recorded.

Instead of outlining these simple facts, however, Thompson tries to prove his case in a rather more prolix manner. He begins by quoting extensively[4] from an article by Antony Green, which claimed that Labor lost the 1996 election not because manual workers failed to vote for it, but because it was deserted by some of its more weakly committed supporters, and the vast majority of those who stated no party affiliation.[5] Thompson attacks Green's main arguments, then attempts to make his point by quoting former Liberal Party Federal Director Andrew Robb and unnamed media commentators. Political spin and enigmatic anecdotes make a poor substitute for hard data.

Yet the fact remains that there is a kernel of truth in this book. A large part of Labor's electoral demise in 1996 was due to its desertion by manual workers. But from this, Thompson leaps to two conclusions. First, because Labor lost in 1996, the Hawke and Keating Governments' policies on feminism, environmentalism and race must have been to the detriment of the working class. Secondly, if Labor is to win the next federal election, it must concentrate on winning back the manual workers that it lost in 1996.

The first relies on a particularly narrow view of what constitutes a working class voter. Under any definition of "working class", many are women, and benefited from the Jobs, Education and Training Scheme, the Basic Parenting Allowance and additional child care places. Some are concerned with the environment, and benefited from the billion trees program and controls on ozone-depleting substances. Another group is Aboriginal, and benefited from the Native Title Act and targeted labour market programs. Yet Thompson's working-class voters apparently do not fall into any of these categories.

Secondly, the fact that Labor needs to win a higher share of the "working class" vote does not necessarily mean that it must do so by concentrating on class issues. True, the 1998 election only saw Labor increase its share of the manual vote by 2 per cent (from 44 per cent to 46 per cent). However, the fact that more working-class votes must be won does not automatically mean that the solution is to target class issues. Increasingly, the extent to which voters use their class as an electoral cue has weakened.[6] Thompson ridicules Lindsay Tanner for pointing out the rising importance of postmaterialist values, but the statistical trends are unmistakable.[7]

The trend in Australia away from class as an electoral cue simply mirrors a worldwide tendency. The changing nature of work and values, accelerated by the large-scale entry of women into the workforce, have fundamentally redrawn the electoral map. According to British sociologist Anthony Giddens: "In virtually all Western countries voting no longer fits class lines, and has shifted from a left/right polarization to a more complex picture. The economic axis that used to separate voters into 'socialist' and 'capitalist' positions has much lower salience, while the contrasts of libertarian versus authoritarian, and 'modern' versus 'traditionalist', have grown. Other, more contingent influences – such as leadership style – have become more important than they used to be."

Feminist, environmental and race issues not only contributed to the betterment of the lives of working people – they also matter to voters. For Labor to shift focus from these issues would be to ignore their growing electoral importance both here and overseas. For a Chinese-born Australian, who owns some shares, installs computers for a living, and surfs the Internet in the evening, her status as a manual worker is hardly likely to determine how she votes. Yet not only does she represent the type of voter that Labor must win if it is to form government federally, she is also one of the "mass of people" to whom Ben Chifley referred in 1949.

One of the more troubling elements of reading *Labor without class* is the frequency and vehemence of the personal attacks – on Marian Sawer, Stuart Macintyre and Lindsay Tanner, among others. In the Preface, Thompson thanks local councillor and journalist Paddy McGuinness for his encouragement and comments. It seems, however, that he has also picked up something of McGuinness's *ad hominem* style of writing.

There are also some factual errors. Thompson asserts that Australia was a more equal society in 1993-94 than it was in 1981-82. In fact, the most reliable measure of income inequality, the Gini Coefficient, rose from 0.40 to 0.44 over this period – signifying a 10 per cent increase in inequality. He claims that the Whitlam Government's abolition of university fees did not increase the numbers of poor students attending university. Yet studies conducted in 1974-76 showed that were it not for the abolition of fees and the introduction of means-tested assistance, between 10 per cent and 20 per cent of students would have been forced to defer enrolment or not enrol at all.[8] The fact that his source in both cases is former Governor-General Bill Hayden does not absolve him of the responsibility to check such straightforward points.

At times, reading Thompson's book can feel like listening to a bar-room speech, with the orator occasionally pausing to pick up a book from the pile on the bar behind him, read a slab of text, and embark on another blistering attack. By the end, it erupts into full-blown bombast, as he denounces the mysterious "Committee" allegedly responsible for the transformation of the ALP.

Alas, Mr Thompson, there is no "Committee", though perhaps things would be simpler for all of us if there was. Like the British Labour Party and the American Democratic Party (though you don't mention them), the ALP has learned that it must adapt or die. Globalisation, the Internet, post-Fordism and social capital (though you don't mention them) are all ideas that are forcing a fundamental rethinking of what it means to be a social democrat. This isn't an abandonment of our values, it's the best way to serve them. Ben Chifley wouldn't have had it any other way.

Footnotes p40

footnotes and references

history ain't history

1 Stuart Macintyre, "The genie and the bottle: putting history back into the school curriculum", Australian Journal of Education, vol. 41, no. 2 (August 1997), pp. 189-98.

2 Hank Nelson, 'The Gatekeepers', Australian Historical Association Bulletin, no. 68, September 1991, p. 16; Etherington and Stannage, So you want to study ... History.

3 Russel Ward, The Australian Legend (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1958); the significance of this work was assessed in a special issue of Historical Studies, vol. 18, no. 71 (October 1978).

4 Anne Summers, Damned Whores and God's Police: The Colonization of Women in Australia (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1975); the impact of this and other feminist histories of the 1970s was assessed in a special issue of Australian Historical Studies, vol. 27, no. 106 (April 1996).

5 C.M.H. Clark, A History of Australia (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1962-87). Noteworthy in the voluminous literature on Clark are Carl Bridge (ed.), Manning Clark: Essays on His Place in History (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1994) and Stephen Holt, A Short History of Manning Clark (St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1999).

6 Meaghan Morris, 'A question of Cultural Studies', in Deryck Schreuder (ed.), The Humanities and a Creative Nation (Canberra: Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1995), p. 154.

7 A.B. Facey, A Fortunate Life (Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1981); see J.B. Hirst, The World of Albert Facey (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992).

8 Sally Morgan, My Place (Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987). A critical appraisal of the book by Bain Attwood, "Portrait of an Aboriginal as an Artist: Sally Morgan and the Construction of Aboriginality", Australian Historical Studies, vol. 25, no. 99 (October 1992), pp. 302-18, was followed by further discussion in the following issue.

9 The range of this literature can be suggested by the entry for "Novels" by Peter Pierce in Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre (eds), The Oxford Companion to Australian History (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 472.

10 As noted in the entries by Ina Bertrand on "Historical Film" and Graeme Turner on "Historical Television" in Davison, Hirst and Macintyre (eds), The Oxford Companion to Australian History, pp. 251-3, 633-5.

11 K.S Inglis, Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape (Ringwood, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1998); see Beryl Henderson (ed.), Monuments and Memorials (Sydney: Royal Australian Historical Society, 1988).

12 Alan D. Gilbert and K.S. Inglis (gen eds), Australians: A Historical Library. 5 vols: Australians to 1788, Australians 1838, Australians 1888, Australians 1938, Australians from 1939 (Broadway, NSW: Fairfax, Syme and Weldon Associates, 1987); Frank Crowley and Peter Spearritt (gen. eds), Australians: A Historical Library. 5 vols: A Historical Atlas, A Historical Dictionary, Events and Places, Historical Statistics, A Guide to Sources (Broadway, NSW: Fairfax, Syme and Weldon Associates, 1987).

13 Oliver MacDonagh, "The Making of Australians: A Historical Library, A Personal Retrospect", in Australians: The Guide and Index (Sydney: Fairfax, Syme and Weldon Associates, 1987), pp. 1-9.

14 Keith Windschuttle, The Killing of History: How a discipline is being murdered by literary critics and social theorists (Sydney: Macleay Press, 1994).

15 Inga Clendinnen, The Aztecs: An Interpretation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Greg Dening, Mr Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power and Theatre on the Bounty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Paul Carter, The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History (London: Faber, 1987) and Living in a New Country: History, Travelling and Language (London: Faber, 1992).

16 Windschuttle, op. cit., p. 6.

historians contemplate

1 Paul Bourke, "Some institutional and theoretical problems: conversations among historians". Edited version of the Presidential Address to the Australian Historical Association Annual Meeting, Perth, Sept. 1995, Australian Historical Association Bulletin, No. 78/79, Dec. 1994/April 1995, pp. 2-3.

2 Bourke, p. 6.

3 Geoffrey Bolton, "History in Australia: the prospect in 1995", Australian Historical Association Bulletin, No. 78/79. Dec. 1994/April 1995, p. 10. This was an address to Australian Academy of the Social Sciences and was reported in The Australian 28 Sept. 1994.

4 Stuart Macintyre, "Discipline Review: History", Australian Historical Association Bulletin, Dec. 1996, pp. 3-4.

5 Macintyre, pp. 5-6.

6 Norman Etherington, "The Historical Profession in Our Universities: Trends and Prospects", Presidential address to the 1996 Conference of the Australian Historical Association, AHA Bulletin, Dec. 1996.

7 Richard Broome, "History's Fading Star", AHA Bulletin, Dec. 1995, p. 2.

8 Broome, pp. 2-3.

9 Ryan, pp. 41-42.

11 Ann Curthoys, "Ivory tower as transmitter", Arena Magazine, Aug.-Sept. 1995, p. 40.

11 Brett, p. 49.

12 Etherington, p. 40.

13 Ryan, p. 41.

14 Curthoys, "Thinking About History", AHA Bulletin No. 83. Dec. 1996, p. 26.

15 R. Manne, The Way We Live Now: The Controversies of the Nineties, 1998, p. 259, cited Ryan, p. 43.

don't depend on IT

Baase, S. (1997) A Gift of Fire: Social, Legal and Ethical Issues of Computing, Prentice-Hall Inc., Upper Saddle River, New Jersey.

Bell, G. and Gray, J. (1997) The revolution yet to happen. In P. Denning and R. Metcalfe (eds.) Beyond Calculation: The Next Fifty Years of Computing, Springer-Verlag, New York.

Boal, I. (1995) A flow of monsters. In J. Brook and I. Boal (eds.) Resisting the Virtual Life: the Culture and Politics of Information,

Browning, J. and Reiss, S. (1998) Encyclopedia of the new economy, Wired, March, April, May.

Brynjolfsson, E. and Hitt, L. (1998) Beyond the productivity paradox, Communications of the ACM, Vol.41, No.8, pp.49-55.

Cohen, F. (1995) Protection and Security on the Information Superhighway, John Wiley and Sons, New York.

Freedman, D. and Mann, C. (1997) At Large: the Strange Case of the World's Biggest Internet Invasion, Simon and Schuster, New York.

Graham-Rowe, D. (1999) To the virtual barricades, New Scientist, 18th September, pp.18-9.

Henning, K. (1998) The Digital Enterprise, Century/Random House, London.

Kobrin, S. (1997) Electronic cash and the end of national markets, Foreign Policy, Summer.

Mowshowitz, A. (1997) Virtual feudalism. In P. Denning and R. Metcalfe (eds.) Beyond Calculation: The Next Fifty Years of Computing, Springer-Verlag, New York.

New Scientist (1999) The worms that turned, 19th June, p3.

Rochlin, G. (1997) Trapped in the Net, Princeton U.P., Princeton, New Jersey.

Thurow, L, (1996) The Future of Capitalism, Allen and Unwin, Sydney.

Wade, R. (1999) The coming fight over capital flows, Foreign Policy, Winter 1998-99, pp.41-54.

Wiener, L. (1993) Digital Woes, Addison-Wesley, Reading, Mass.

World Bank (1999) World Development Indicators 1998/99. Also earlier editions. World Bank, Washington, DC.

working class man

1 Jaensch, D, The Hawke-Keating Hijack: The ALP in Transition, 1989, Sydney, Allen and Unwin; Johnson, C, The Labor Legacy: Curtin, Chifley, Whitlam, Hawke, 1989, Sydney, Allen and Unwin; Maddox, G, The Hawke Government and Labor Tradition, Ringwood, Penguin; Beilharz, P, Transforming Labor: Labour Tradition and the Labor Decade in Australia, 1994, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press. The 1980s and 1990s saw labour parties everywhere struggling over questions of identity and history. In a comparative analysis of social democratic parties, Frances Fox Piven attributes this to "the impact of shifts in the world economy on their constituencies, infrastructures, and intellectual moorings": Piven, F, "The Decline of Labor Parties: An Overview" in Piven, F (ed), Labor Parties in Postindustrial Societies, 1991, Cambridge, Polity Press, 9

2 Keating, P, "Traditions of Labor in Power" in Traditions for Reform in New South Wales: Labor History Essays, 1987, Sydney, Pluto Press; McMullin, R, The Light on the Hill: The Australian Labor Party 1891-1991, 1992, Melbourne, Oxford University Press; McMullan, B, "A Sense of Ownership" in Burchell, D and Mathews, R (eds), Labor's Troubled Times, 1991, Sydney, Pluto Press, 63-70.

3 One of the chief questions is whether class is to be determined by objective means (such as the individual's proximity to the means of production) or self-identification. But as Bob Connell and Terry Irving have pointed out, class is a relationship as well as a category, and conceptions of it must not ignore the role of vehicles for collective action, such as unions and political parties: Connell, R and Irving, T, Class structure in Australian history: Poverty and progress, 2nd ed, Melbourne, Longman Cheshire, 1992, 4-6.

4 Indeed, around 20% of this slim volume consists of quotations.

5 Green, A, "The Battler and the Ballot Boxes", AQ: Journal of Contemporary Analysis, Sept-Oct 1997, 7-8

6 McAllister, I and Bean, C, "Long-term electoral trends and the 1996 election" in C Bean, S Bennett, M Simms and J Warhurst (eds) The Politics of Retribution: The 1996 Australian federal election, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1997, 186; Nieuwbeerta, P and Ultee, W, "Class voting in Western industrialised countries, 1945-1990: Systematizing and testing explanations", 1999, European Journal of Political Research, No 35, 123.

7 Tanner, L, "Building an inclusive society" in Jungwirth, G, Labor Essays 1997: Renewing and Revitalising Labor, Sydney, Pluto Press, 69; Tanner, L, Open Australia, 1999, Sydney, Pluto Press, 24, 193; Inglehart, R and Abramson, P, Value Change in Global Perspective, 1995, Ann Arbor, Michigan University Press; Inglehart, R, Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Societies, 1997, Princeton, Princeton University Press; Fukuyama, F, The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order, 1999, London, Profile Books, 56-57.

8 Noran, C and Kelly, D, The Social Composition of Tertiary Students in Australia and the Effect of the Abolition of Fees, 1976, Sydney, Tertiary Education Research Centre, 11; D Anderson, R Boven, P Fensham and J Powell, Students in Australian Higher Education: A Study of Their Social Composition Since the Abolition of Fees, 1980, Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service, 191.