Our last issue

Many readers have sent us messages regretting our closure, and we thank them warmly for their interest and understanding, as for their support over many years.

Few have had a chance to spell out their answers to our questions about the future of the Left, though several have said they would like to do so if there were time. Unfortunately time is what we cannot offer.

We will, however, be remaining in existence as a group for the time being, and can be found at the same address (Box H159, PO, Australian Square, Sydney 2000). We hope that readers will continue to keep in touch with us, as we will with them, and will let us know their ideas about future possibilities.

Meanwhile we thought our best final contribution would be a retrospect on the political era in which OUTLOOK has been in existence, and we invited Ian Turner to make it. What he has to say has relevance if there were time. Unfortunately time is what we cannot offer.

OUTLOOK

An Independent Socialist Journal


OUTLOOK is a forum for fact, thought and opinion in the cause of socialism in Australia. Views of individual contributors are not necessarily those of OUTLOOK.

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How to review over thirteen years, 82 issues, of Outlook? What it has said, what it has meant, what it has accomplished? To run through the file — from the first roughly printed sixteen pages (June-July 1957), which opened with the optimism of ‘Socialism is again becoming a live issue in Australia’, to this issue which will, unhappily, close the file — is to have an overview of a long chapter in the life of a generation and one stratum of Australian radical intellectuals, to confront again their preoccupations and their practice, their hopes and their fears, their attempts to find a ‘self-definition’ and a new faith. But I should say ‘us’ rather than ‘their’, for I am part of this generation and this stratum, and Outlook is part of my political and intellectual autobiography; so perhaps I can best do the job I have to do in personal terms.

The Outlook generation was born in the 1920s, into a world where those who had survived the shambles of World War I had resurrected the ability to hope. But hope died many deaths — in 1929, with the Wall Street crash; in 1933, with Hitler; in 1935, in Abyssinia; we found them in the ‘vanguard of the working class’, the Communist Party. We were, I suppose, revolutionary romantics, so we looked for a utopia which would prefigure our future; we found it in the USSR and, later, in China.

It was a total commitment, surviving Stalin’s bloody purges, the ‘expulsion’ of Tito as a Trotskyist agent of US imperialism, the blood-letting in Eastern Europe, the intellectual thuggery of Zhzhnovism. It not only survived but was strengthened by the feeling of embattled isolation engendered by the anti-communist hysteria of World War II had resurrected the ability to hope. But hope died many deaths — in 1929, with the Wall Street crash; in 1933, with Hitler; in 1935, in Abyssinia; we found them in the ‘vanguard of the working class’, the Communist Party. We were, I suppose, revolutionary romantics, so we looked for a utopia which would prefigure our future; we found it in the USSR and, later, in China.

We were intellectuals, so we sought a theory of society which would define our present condition and teach us how to transcend it; we found it in Marxism. We were activists, so we sought the means of maximising our political potential; we found them in the ‘vanguard’ of the working class’, the Communist Party. We were, I suppose, revolutionary romantics, so we looked for a utopia which would prefigure our future; we found it in the USSR and, later, in China.

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We had been tempered in the struggle, and, as Communists, we were part not only of a world movement but of a world-wide family which had humanity and truth and history on its side.

Then, in 1956, came the one piece of evidence we could not set aside — Khrushchev’s secret report to the 20th Congress of the CPSU. Our minds had to some extent been ready to receive it by the Soviet revolution and by the tentative rehabilitations of the victims of the East European purges, and by the indications — even from Communist sources — that the dictatorship was not well built for the 20th Congress; but this was the moment of truth. I remember buying a copy of the New York Times; when contained the report, taking it to a cafe and reading it with the sickening conviction, not only that this was an authentic document, but that what Khrushchev had said was in essence true. I was booked to speak that night on communism to a youth group of a suburban Presbyterian Church, still in Khrushchev’s still, through a lame defence of the principles of communism, if not its practice.

It was the attitude to truth, the response to a self-evidently authentic document, which forced the intellectuals to reconsider their relationship to the Communist Party. In Sydney, a group of comrades, many of whom were later involved with Outlook, produced an ‘underground’ edition of the Khrushchev speech, and were expelled from the Party for their trouble. In Melbourne, my closest party associates and I circulated the document as widely as we could and tried to insist that it be discussed. Ted Hill, then Victorian secretary and one of the Australian CP representatives at the 20th Congress, told a meeting of selected cadres that the document was basically authentic; but the party leaders allowed their rank and file members to believe that it was a State Department forgery. I remember a series of long and bitter discussions with one member of the Victorian Executive who, I later emerged, had some sympathy for my position) in which I insisted that there was no future for the Party unless it confronted this truth, and he argued that it must avoid its opportune time.

Then, late in 1956, this first crack in the Communist monolith became a yawning gulf with the revolt of the Polish and Hungarian Communists and workers against Soviet hegemony. The responses were virtually predetermined. For the party hierarchy, the revolt represented the decisive challenge to their power and to the meaning of their lives. For those of us who had, however reluctantly, accepted Stalinism, Poland and Hungary were the inevitable consequence of what we now identified as Stalinism.

These were traumatic months. Within the context of our faith and our commitment, we were confronting the question posed by Kirillow in The Possessed: ‘If the laws of nature did not spare even him, have not spared even their miracle and made even him alive in a lie and die for a lie, then all the planet is a lie and rests on a lie and on mockery... What is there to live for?’ Some did die, and some went out of their minds. But the party leaders allowed their rank and file members to believe that it was a State Department forgery. I remember a series of long and bitter discussions with one member of the Victorian Executive who, I later emerged, had some sympathy for my position) in which I insisted that there was no future for the Party unless it confronted this truth, and he argued that it must avoid its opportune time.

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It was a threefold process: to redefine one’s attitude to the world communist movement; to restate the meaning of socialism; and to orientate ourselves to the Australian radical and labour movements. For two
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comment on national and (increasingly) international thinking. Predictably, we met with apathy, suspicion and hostility. I remember, at an Outlook symposium on New Guinea which Gough Whitlam attended, asking the ALP Deputy Leader (as he then was) why the party hadn't adopted the policy we were advocating. Whitlam replied that, while he agreed with the policy, the climate wasn't right — that the party didn't adopt the policy we were advocating.

In retrospect, the turning point for Outlook, its third editorial, was 1965. The journal had always been ambivalent towards Labor — recognising the limitations of a mass reformist party, but hoping that something could be done to stiffen it. But then came the aggressive American intervention in Vietnam, followed closely by Australia's kickstart token gesture, which drew an equivocal Labor response. From its earliest issues, Outlook had responded sympathetically to the Third World revolution; now, it rightly recognised the American-Australian intervention in Vietnam as a domestic occasion. In an important editorial, "Can Labor Lead?" (No. 4, 1965), Outlook said:

What people are looking for is leadership based not on expediency but on principle, political maturity and humanity. Leadership involves taking the initiative, not being ham-strung by operating within the frame of reference chosen by the Government. Labor must seize this opportunity to question the basic assumptions on which the Government's foreign policy rests, to break out of the sterile anti-communist rut into which we have been led and to work out new and constructive ways in which to react to the Asian revolution. That kind of leadership doesn't have to be excited to get. But opportunity does not knock twice.

The ALP was slow to respond to opportunity's knock, and Outlook revealed its special trusts in two events of increasingly critical of Labor's hesitations, its seeming concessions to electoral expediency — particularly after the election of Gough Whitlam as the leader of the Federal Party. The journal's point of focus moved away from the nature of contemporary Australian society, its concerns of the trade unions and professional associations, and which we would have consolidated and given cohesion to rational inquiry and to pushing inquiry to its limits, but, after a decade or more, definition was what we needed if we were to continue.

And, finally, we did not back our ideas with organisational activity, for the Labour movement, to critical socialist comment on national and (increasingly) international affairs; its emphasis was now on the timely-arriving sectional or ad hoc campaign organisations, civil liberties, anti-Vietnam, the student movement. And, reflecting the new interest in Third World political and Maoist doctrine aroused by Vietnam, for a year or more Outlook was dominated by a fierce doctrinal debate on the Left and the organs of popular protest. For thirteen years, Outlook had been a significant element in the vanguard, standing on the ground of socialist humanism; is there anything that can take its place?

What did we achieve? First — and in some ways most importantly, at least for the individuals immediately concerned — Outlook provided a refuge, a place for many of us to examine, and to look, our worries of 1956, to regain our intellectual and emotional health and vigour, to come back fighting. Without Outlook, as it was by Helen Palmer's humanity, tolerance and