The overall theme of these Roundtables is ‘left renewal’. Responding to that I will argue:

- Drop once and for all the socialist goals, the utopian dreams, the manipulative theoretical modes, and the petty team spirit and group think.

- Recognise the positive core of the tradition we have come from which is the values. Value those values all the more in a society which for 25 years has been dominated by a rhetoric which disguises the undermining of values or explicitly attacks them in favour of a claimed faceless rationality.

- Drop the terms ‘left’ and ‘progressive’. The first is totally compromised with authoritarianism and totalitarianism. The second is misleading since much of what we do defends against invidious reform and change.

- Instead identify ourselves as part of civil society and replace left style with practical modes appropriate to that civil society.

- Social democracy self-immolated in the flames of market ideology. The ALP is using manipulative language, like ‘working families’, and language, such as ‘social inclusion’ and ‘social exclusion’, which can be used either manipulatively or to advance social justice. It is up to us to push the interpretations which will recover social democracy.

Our values

Last year I did an online exhibition for the University of Queensland Library on New Left activism on that campus. At the launch of that exhibition I concluded my speech by saying of the New Left; we should keep a few of their ideas, drop the many wrong-headed ideas, but keep all their values.

What values were they? They were fairly simple and they still essentially make up the common charter of Green parties around the world. The Port Huron Statement of the US SDS
for example valued: peace and non-violence, social justice, including international justice, participatory democracy, community politics, reform of working life, life values as against bureaucratic and technocratic coldness, anti-imperialism, nuclear disarmament, and so on.

I also said that what we now need above all is to recover and renew their commitment and fighting spirit – and these are also values. In the exhibition I described those like this:

“There was in the early movement something like a combination of the Christian requirement to give witness, the existentialist project to create personal meaning in life by responsible action, and a humanistic motive against inaction whilst others suffered.”

The New Left was very hands-on. It was action oriented and about immediate change, not just in protest, but in reform.

The old left had characterised the essence of leftism, as distinct from other political traditions, as an emphasis on equality and redistribution. So for example, compared to liberalism, they might say the prime thing is getting social justice right and freedom and democracy will follow, whereas some liberals might say the opposite. The New Left restored the balance. Basically its values were evenly distributed across liberty, equality and fraternity. Democracy and liberal values were not secondary.

Two things happened after that. On the one hand democratic values and a commitment to reform were undermined essentially by ideological thinking. On the other hand, the values were enriched by feminism and the gay, black, and environmental social movements.

**The Good Society**

My answer to the question about what society those values entail, what is the ‘Good Society’, in sum, is:

This society. What we have around us now. Parliamentary democracy, market capitalism, government regulation, liberal or Enlightenment values, human rights, civil liberties, social welfare, the secular state, the rule of law, checks and balances, the separation of powers, and civil society.

But clearly not all is well. So foreshadowing what I will say on the next topic, ‘Obstacles’, along with our self-created obstacles, I am also going address just one macro obstacle – the degeneration of public debate.

With that in mind I want to expand on two points:

First, amongst ‘liberal values’ I want to emphasise those which are not necessarily made programmatic in statements of human rights, bills of rights, or in the workings of democracy. I mean those such as tolerance, civility, reasonableness, a capacity for restraint and neutrality, and an effort to keep rationality at the front of public debate. I include in those, and some would not, a valuing of protest, and the option for civil disobedience. Whilst acknowledging the bedrock of morality and its vitality in motivating action and the rebellious spirit, I think we should all be held to the same liberal values, whether in protest action, policy debate, or in formal politics. They are distinctly lacking in all those forums.
Secondly I want to fill out what I mean by ‘civil society’. It is made up of citizens as individuals, in groups, and in organisations, in independent action outside, but also toward, the formal institutions of society. That term, by the way, brings in another major stream of ideas – the Eastern European dissident movements. I think we have not learnt as much from them as we could have. The Polish dissident Adam Michnik (of KOR fame – the Workers’ Defence Committee that was instrumental in inspiring Solidarity) attributes the revival of the Enlightenment term ‘civil society’ to Vaclav Havel, Czech dissident and later president of Czechoslovakia and then the Czech Republic. Those movements developed various principles of action to make that civil society politically effective, for example, a concept of the self-limiting ‘revolution’, the idea that social movements would adopt reasonable restraint in their rhetoric and action in order to be successful, and in order to open opportunities for governments to compromise.

[By the way, I think civil society is a better term than ‘Third sector' which seems to imply only organisations. I think it is important to include in the concept the individual actions of citizens qua citizens as well. The woolly term ‘Community’ is drained of any specific meaning.]

So when I talk about the ‘Good Society’ as this society we have now, and when I list its features and include ‘civil society’ amongst those I am thinking in particular of how the new left ‘seeded’, or implanted, society. This is so in all the initially marginal causes that are now fairly uncontroversial parts of mainstream agendas. But equally significant is the rich and complex civil society that has been created. Some of the people from that civil society are down at the 2020 Summit today.

Obstacles

It is clear that policy-making processes and public debate have become stultified, fractious and formulaic. So I am looking for renewed effort to make parliaments genuine bodies for debate and policy making. That requires changes to electoral systems, to parliamentary procedures, to party practices and culture, to the dominance of the executive, electoral funding, and more. I think we should all be contributing to those changes. I would recommend to everyone Harry Evans’ chapter in Robert Manne’s book Dear Mr. Rudd but what he misses entirely is the circuit breaking role of proportional representation. It is time for everyone to begin arguing for this.

But what about our self-created obstacles?

We need to commit to reforming this society. That makes it easier to see the values we share with non-political Australians. This is a point David McKnight makes strongly in his excellent book Beyond right and left and in his Sydney SEARCH Roundtable speech. But leftist style is very sticky and when David says this in his speech:

“….certain forces have a logic of their own. They impose themselves on events regardless. Things are forced to change. ……. Those who do not have a stake in the present, but who have a vision of the future which is both principled and pragmatic can have enormous influence.”

I think it is an instance of how hard it can be to shake off that reliance on big, determining forces and that self-excluding, marginalising left habit.
I would say instead that we have a stake in this society – clearly, it is the only society, the only world, we can have a stake in, so why not? The more we accept that, the more genuine our efforts will be taken to be by ordinary citizens, and the less we will engage in deterministic displacement fantasies.

Earlier I mentioned the degeneration of the New Left. Several things contributed to the loss of its humanistic and reformist élan. In the US and Australia a primary cause was the dominance of Vietnam and the draft. The scale of violence of that war distorted the pattern of activism. Anti-systemic rhetoric intensified. Increasingly, everything was analysed as inherent to ‘the system’, such that the only meaningful form of action was deemed to be its overthrow. Even the counter-culture adopted a kind of militant bohemianism that totally condemned ‘straight’ society. A style of foot-stamping egotism ensued. Everything spiralled as the defeatism of this culture led to people lashing out at each other. Only the renewed reformism of the ‘rights’ movements, led by feminism, returned health to the movement.

But still today we have people arguing from anti-systemic and utopian premises and calling for an overthrow of the relations from which this society functions. Post-modernism is just another version of this. Post-modernism denies legitimacy to values, individuals and institutions. Ultimate cynicism is a form of self-inflation and a rationale for abstaining. Reverse utopianism makes the same statement as utopianism – ‘how pure I am!’’. Neither leads to any meaningful agenda. The proponents are mostly happy to remain academic. They are not genuine political actors. Others really care about the bleeding crowd, but when they try to reach for modes of action they are always reformist, as they must be. Michnik writes; “Solidarity was an anti-utopian movement…We reject the belief in a political utopia. We know our future is an imperfect society, a society of ordinary people and ordinary conflicts.”

Secondly we need to give up ideology, entirely in my view, but certainly at least as a means of communication, as an argument, justification or rationale for a given proposal. Ideology separates you from ordinary people. Even feminism, which began with a direct contact with the problems of women and set up new institutions based around their real lives, eventually lost that common touch and now finds itself having to be re-balanced toward that lived reality by writers like Anne Manne. The loss of contact came about through over-theorisation and the dead hand of ideology.

The essence of ideology is that separation from real lives. So it has to reach for props to make it seem dynamic and relevant. All sorts of structuralist, historicist, economistic, determinist, and theoretical leftism is designed to tell people ‘A must lead to B, must lead to C, so you must think this and you must not say that’. It becomes a form of intellectual bullying. The left is just as guilty as Margaret Thatcher of the “There is no alternative” approach. Ecological issues can also be unhelpfully framed in this way. The answer to the question ‘Is capitalism sustainable?’ is pretty much ‘Well, we damn well ought to make sure it is!’.

Just to expand on this last issue for a moment. A lot of leftists think that climate change means they can keep on as before, that they can sit on their hands while enjoying capitalism’s discomfiture over climate change, that this is some kind of delivery mechanism for social reform. It requires a lot more human intervention than that. There are even US government and military players who are considering engineering the planet’s atmosphere with sulphur to offset climate change, so as to avoid facing detailed and complex responses (see ABC RN Background Briefing 6/4/08). It requires concerted policy responses and action by us to get solutions up.
Thirdly, the left is guilty of insufferable moralistic, superior and competitive ‘team spirit’. The worst of this is the willingness to rationalise mass murder and human rights abuses to ‘hold the party line’. The left has lost all respect because of its apparent opportunistic attitude to the key values of democracy, which really irks those of us who have always been vocal in our condemnation of the authoritarian and totalitarian streams of leftism. But the damage is done. This disenchantment is renewed when we see leftists being morally blind to the horror of child abuse, and playing down the need for action like (if not exactly like) Howard’s intervention, or dismissing the arguments of people like Marcia Langton, Noel Pearson and doctors and other workers in indigenous communities. This obtuseness comes from putting the party line ahead of simple human responsiveness. Leftist group-think imposes a deadening speech control and kills any genuine free-thinking spirit.

‘Socialism’ is dead just because of its association with totalitarianism, but people still play with socialist fantasy and will not freely acknowledge that life is too various for any core economic mechanism other than the market. There was resistance from some quarters in the Greens to acknowledging in Greens’ policy that a market was a key element of our society. The acknowledgement got up, though in watered down form. Back in March I attended a left forum on the Rudd government at which a speaker said “I don’t think we can address the market in Rudd’s first term. Maybe over thirty years.” I looked around and was staggered to see most of the audience seemed to take this seriously. The speaker then went on to give a very pragmatic and useful outline of some policy issues as if he had never contemplated a non-market future, though some of the questions he got were clearly motivated by concern at his un-comradely abandonment of the ‘real issue’. Between laughing or crying I chose to laugh.

Finally, as far as the ‘left’ broadly considered is concerned, we saw the Hawke-Keating government sweep market fundamentalism through society. Market fundamentalism denies the value base of any given part of society and substitutes it with market derived values. Social democracy was dissolved in this process. There is an interchange between the British Labour Party and our ALP in developing a rhetoric which can go in two ways, the undermining of justice as a social goal, or an attempt to deepen the ‘equality’ in equality of opportunity. Some of the language I have already mentioned, ‘social inclusion’ etc, has been used to broker new efforts at social justice in countries like New Zealand, France, Ireland, and, yes, the UK, where there has been a very significant reduction in child poverty. On the latter from the ALP we have only seen Hawke-ian crocodile tears. But in the UK such language has also been used to deny social justice goals.

Civil society needs to get organised to push the ALP in the right direction. Are we going to sit on our hands again, as we more or less did during the Hawke-Keating time?

**What might we do to overcome obstacles?**

Civil society needs some self-recognition and mutual appreciation. I am wondering if we can have a bit more mutually created impact. How? I wonder. Could we create neutral ground where a set of values and goals, not comprehensive or complete across the field of values – just core, can be recognised and agreed upon? Could we create spaces free of ideology, philosophy and religion, which, by definition, divide us. From that neutral base, regardless of our individual, party or group variations, our different priorities, could we all contribute to pragmatic social policies and proposals, until we have packages we can take somewhere?
What could SEARCH do in this regard? I suspect there is space for a new think tank to achieve those ends. I think it is time for us to initiate some inquiries and write some reports. If I had my way any such moves would need to be preceded by discussions to establish the right spirit. I do not think of them as yet another instance of the predictable to and fro such as goes on between Quadrant, CIS, IPA rightists and the left. I would hope for a different spirit to emerge which looks for a real policy debate.