

What's Left?

THANK YOU ANDREW for that stimulating introduction, and thank you ladies and gentlemen (if I may use such a disreputably bourgeois mode of address at a gathering such as this) for coming along this evening to hear the third Bruce Jesson Memorial Lecture.

As Andrew Sharp has told you, my first encounter with Bruce Jesson was at a seminar organised by the Robert Stout Research Centre in Wellington. The paper which he delivered that day reflected all the qualities that I later came to admire most about Bruce Jesson, both as a writer and as a friend. It was clearly argued in the plain, unvarnished, but immensely strong vocabulary of everyday English – that wonderfully democratic style which George Orwell recommended to the Left – but which so few of us have ever mastered. It was also unsparing in its analysis – owing nothing to partisan loyalties or employer prejudices. And, most importantly, it delivered its conclusions fearlessly and without flinching.

Bruce Jesson was that rare intellectual who insisted upon gathering and analysing the evidence before forming an opinion – and who had the courage to back his own judgement. In doing so Bruce demonstrated the truly radical character of rational thought. I remember him telling me once that this was the quality he most admired in the writings of Karl Marx – not the revolutionary fervour, but the analytical rigour.

I regret to say that, on that first occasion, my reaction to Bruce Jesson's paper was all-too-typical of the New Zealand Left - I was outraged that his hard-headed empirically-derived conclusions entirely failed to match my idealistic expectations. But that was Bruce. More than any other individual on the New Zealand Left he epitomised Antonio Gramsci's grim dictum: "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will."

Like Gramsci, Bruce understood that in order to act effectively one must first see clearly. He also understood that the perceptions of the Left – especially the New Zealand Left -are notoriously unreliable. Because we believe so passionately that justice *should* be done, we all-too-easily - and all-too-often - fall into the trap of assuming that justice *will* be done.

I will always be indebted to Bruce Jesson for showing me that the socialist's true vocation lies in teaching first himself – and then others - how to *get justice done*.

DELIVERING SOCIAL JUSTICE used to be the Left's stock-in-trade. Whether it be the eight-hour-day, votes for women, state housing, social security or full-employment, there was something reassuringly tangible and practical about the Left's agenda. And it wasn't hard to sell. To the exploited and exhausted wage

worker the idea of an eight-hour day pretty much sold itself. To that half the population excluded from the franchise, the right to participate in the political life of the nation could only be denied at the cost of simultaneously denying their own humanity. To the rack-rented slum dweller, the sturdy state house seemed the living embodiment of social justice – socialism in weather-board and tile, as solid and as permanent as Bakelite and brick.

This was a Left that could command majorities – in unions, in parties, in councils and – yes – even in parliaments. They called themselves socialists and social democrats because they envisioned a society in which the people would exercise political power not just in the narrow sense of electing representatives to sit on this council or in that parliament, but in the much broader sense of determining collectively and directly how they should work - and what they should make – and for whom?

While the liberals contented themselves with miniature portraits of the sovereign individual, the socialists claimed the whole of society for their canvas. Arguing, as Hilary Clinton would later declare, that it takes a village to raise a child. And that the struggle to make a whole human being – which some call freedom - is always and everywhere a collective struggle. Because no one can ever be truly whole – or truly free - on their own. Because Liberty unextended is Liberty denied. Because human beings are social beings – and if there is no such thing as society, then there can be no such thing as humanity.

Such was the rhetoric of international socialism in its heyday; in those halcyon years before the outbreak of the First World War, when the Second Socialist International preached brotherhood, peace and progress in the great “commonwealth of toil” that was to be.

It was a time of intellectual ferment, of constant and illuminating debate, of confidence that socialism and science were marching in step towards the same future. It was a time when superstition was called superstition. When the cruel practices and benighted traditions of humanity’s infancy were exposed and excoriated. When the prospect of emancipation, of liberation, presented itself – like a bright vista glimpsed briefly from a high hill - to the whole human family.

Freedom was the prize. Not just the freedom from class and colonial and sexual oppression – the freedom of the bent body to rise and stand up straight. But freedom for minds - twisted by lies. Freedom for souls - stunted by fear.

In the world-wide congress that international socialism would make possible, all peoples would come together - and no one would be left behind.

THEN WAR CAME and the grand vision failed.

Perhaps the only man in Europe who could have rallied the working classes of the combatants to resistance – the indomitable Jean Jaurés – was shot to death as he sat sipping cognac in a Parisian café. As the news of his death spread through the neighbourhoods of the Parisian poor, his socialist followers shrugged - as only the French can shrug: *Jaurés mort. Il est guerre.* Jaurés is dead. So it is war.

Nationalism trumped socialism in those sunny August days – as the rulers of Europe so fervently hoped that it would. For the next four years the hope and courage of what was the world's first – and possibly also its last - socialist generation was turned against itself in a frenzied orgy of killing.

The consequences are with us still. For rising out of the carnage, looking down upon the squalid wreckage of Europe with a basilisk glare, came Lenin's Bolsheviks. Bolshevism was socialism in arms. Socialism stripped of its warmth, and its joy, and its boundless, reckless optimism. The Bolshevik leader, the brilliant Vladimir Lenin, had sent his Russian socialists to boot camp - where he taught them discipline and obedience. Lenin had not surrendered to nationalism in 1914. Lenin was Jaurés without the shrug, without the laughter, without the pity.

Lenin and his comrades took that miraculous spring of February 1917 - when the Cossacks finally learned that they had more in common with the seekers of bread than the wielders of whips; when the workers in the factories realised that their judgements were as good – if not better – than their masters; when Russian women claimed not only the right to vote, but the right to child-care, and birth control and abortion – they took it, and they destroyed it. With the forces of reaction knocking at their gates, Lenin and his comrades took the great rollicking puppy that was the people's revolution, and in the snows of November snapped the collar of a new political orthodoxy around its too trusting neck.

Marxism-Leninism – elitist in principle, authoritarian in practice, and preaching a political economy borrowed wholesale from the German Jewish industrialist, Walter Rathenau, whose state-administered version of capitalism had underpinned Imperial Germany's war effort, rapidly became the unchallengeable template of revolutionary socialism in the 20th century. Except that it was now dubbed “communism” - so as to distinguish it from the despised reformism of social democracy.

So now there were two Lefts. Revolutionaries and Reformists. Communists and Socialists.

ENTERING INTO THE WORLD of left-wing politics as a lad of fifteen, I soon learned to distinguish between the two. The communists were cool and condescending. In appearance they tended towards the thin and angular. Many wore leather jackets and steel-rimmed spectacles. Some had been invited to the USSR - more had toured the Peoples Republic of China. They talked about revolutionary justice and the dictatorship of the proletariat. The effect was altogether dramatic and very attractive. To my youthful eyes, they looked and behaved like the ideological shock-troops of a vast international army, driven forward by the impetus of world historical forces and the mysterious promptings of dialectical materialism.

The socialists were altogether different. They tended to be fatter and rounder. They didn't wear leather jackets. They shouted you jugs of beer and told hilarious stories about National Party MPs. You shouted them jugs of beer and they told hilarious stories about Labour Party MPs. They were members of trade unions. They belonged to the working class. They knew absolutely nothing about dialectical materialism - but they knew a huge amount about the cities they lived in. They could tell you which streets voted Labour and which streets favoured the Nats. They could fill in a canvassing sheet, and knew how to organise an election-day system. They didn't want a revolution. They wanted Labour to win.

I WANTED BOTH.

Of course the communists insisted that social-democracy and revolutionary change were mutually exclusive. The capitalist state had to be smashed, they said, before a socialist state could come into being.

Well I can't say that I ever much cared for the idea of smashing the state. The historian in me kept objecting that states are not abstract things – they are composed of very real human beings. Which meant that the communist injunction to smash the state was really nothing more than an invitation to smash all the people who disagreed with you.

Left-wing social-democrats have been wrestling with the historical legacy of Marxism-Leninism long before Martin Amis made it fashionable. The idea of becoming one of History's earthly apostles – freed from all the normal social and political restraints – has always exerted a powerful fascination. To wipe humanity's slate clean and begin again; to abolish the past; has always been the greatest of temptations. Thus did Mephistopheles whisper to Faustus. Thus did republican virtue seduce Robespierre. Thus did the dialectic corrupt Lenin and Stalin – and Trotsky too.

For what all the fine phrases came down to in the end were a windowless basement cell and a pair of bloodstained bootcaps. Or, to a hastily dug trench in a silent forest at dawn. Or, to a nameless grave in the featureless tundra beyond the perimeter wire of the gulag.

As that stubborn old social democrat Karl Kautsky warned Lenin at the very beginning of the Soviet Experiment: Ends do not justify means – means become ends.

And so, at least for me, it could only ever be Labour. Better by far to accept responsibility for the tawdry misdemeanours of social democracy, than to spend the rest of my life excusing the huge historical crimes of Marxism-Leninism. Not that I was satisfied with Labour as it was – an, old, tired party going through the motions of electoral politics and living off past glories.

I used to shock my party comrades by telling them that I had joined Labour in the same spirit as Alec Guinness joined the Tsar's armies in *Doctor Zhivago*. Those of you who have seen the movie will recall the scene. The crowds cheering the soldiers as they march through the streets of St Petersburg – volunteers falling in behind as the young women throw flowers. Alec Guinness – who played the role of Zhivago's brother – the Bolshevik agitator – joins the marching column with a cynical smile. Shrewdly aware of what lies in wait for these eager idealists, he lets the congratulatory flowers fall from his hand.

I would also remind them of the words of their new, young president, Jim Anderton, who advised his party's youthful activists to “always build your footpaths where the people walk”.

BUT THERE WAS ANOTHER REASON for taking refuge in the Labour Party – and that was because by the early 1980s the extra-parliamentary Left had become an increasingly difficult and destructive environment in which to operate.

The extraordinary upheavals that accompanied the 1981 Springbok Tour – far from binding the extra-parliamentary Left into a stronger and more coherent whole – produced precisely the opposite effect. Communists and socialists alike found themselves assailed by those late arrivals on the left-wing block – the New Social Movements.

Lesbian Separatist Feminism and Maori Nationalism – the key driving forces of what came to be known as “identity politics” – were driving huge wedges into the Left. Splitting up the small communist parties, sundering decades-old alliances between the intellectual Left and the trade union movement, leaving in their wake the tragic wreckage of personal and political relationships.

This was the time when working-class playwright Mervyn Thompson, was abducted in the dead of night by a gang of separatist vigilantes, physically assaulted, branded a rapist and left tied to a tree. Did the intellectual left rise to his defence? They did not. Did the trade unions defend their own? They did not.

I remember being told of the bitter debate in the Wellington Trades Council over whether the unions should stand behind a boycott of Thompson's plays by members of Actors Equity. Of how the Chairman of the Council, a working-class scouse from Liverpool by the name of Pat Kelly, watched, with tears in his eyes, tears in his eyes, as the Workers Communist League and their hangers-on threw their weight behind the politically correct actors - instead of the correct political principle.

I remember how an emotionally shattered Mervyn Thompson left Auckland for Christchurch and the relative safety of the South Island.

I remember how the separatists cheered.

Even in Dunedin, dear old social-democratic Dunedin – where for years the Left had worked and played together without worrying too much about which political party one belonged to - felt the sting of this virulent new strain of sectarianism. I well recall the night a hard-core band of Maori Nationalists hi-jacked an anti-nuclear march - to the utter consternation and confusion of the two thousand or so Dunedinites who had come out to protest the presence of the USS Schofield at Port Chalmers. I also remember hearing of the ugly scenes at the de-briefing one week later, when a veteran of the US civil rights struggle of the 1960s – a person who had risked the attentions of billy clubs and fire-hoses and the Ku Klux Klan – was forced to endure chants of racist, racist, racist, for daring to challenge the right of a minority to impose its agenda on the majority.

It was a scoundrel time. When the repellent tactics of a bigoted, elitist, ideologically driven minority drove all but the hardiest souls from radical left-wing politics. We must be grateful that Bruce and Joce Jesson were sufficiently thick-skinned to provide a record of those awful years in the pages of *The Republican*. Future historians will read those issues with wonder. And those who today lament the fact that so many young women feel obliged to preface their remarks with the words “I'm not a feminist” should perhaps recall the image of Mervyn Thompson tied to his tree. Just as those who wonder how the police could outnumber protesters at the APEC meeting in Auckland in 1998, when tens of thousands of protesters helped to shut down the WTO meeting in Seattle in 1999, should give some thought to how difficult it is to build any mass movement in this country when confronted with the separatist political agenda of *tinu rangatiratanga*.

It is easy to forget that it was the Left - not the Right – who pioneered the tactics of “crash on through” in the 1980s. So, should we really be surprised at how easily the Rogernomics Revolution swept through the professional middle classes? When we recall how accustomed they had already become to being told that this was no longer acceptable, and that was no longer possible, by groups of self-appointed political commissars - is it really any wonder that they succumbed so quickly to the new managerialism? And is it really so strange that

the neo-liberal assault on New Zealand was launched from the parliamentary wing of the Labour movement?

In a very real and alarming sense, the Rogernomes were a mutant species of right-wing Leninists. Their revolution was made possible – like the Bolshevik's – by a coup d'état, from the top down, without a popular mandate, and over the strenuous objections of the very people in whose name they were purporting to act. Certainly, I was not surprised when so many of the new identity politicians – far from criticising the havoc Rogernomics was causing amongst working class New Zealanders – actually climbed aboard the New Right's gravy train. After all, identity has never been a problem for capitalism – which cares much less about the race and gender of the exploiters than it does about whether the exploitation for which they are responsible is being successfully carried out. Indeed, the practical application of “identity politics” seemed to make Capitalism's job easier rather than harder.

As Cybele Locke – almost reluctantly – concludes in her essay entitled *Organising the Unemployed: The Politics of Gender, Culture and Class in the 1980s and 1990s* – just published in Pat Maloney and Kerry Taylor's *On the Left*, the adoption of the New Social Movement's “non-hierarchical” organising structures fatally weakened the New Zealand Left at a critical time. As Locke ruefully admits: “Maori unemployed formed their own political structure within Te Roopu Rawakore, allowing Maori to organise separately but alongside Pakeha unemployed. This permitted Maori to discuss unemployment issues within the wider Maori agenda of ‘*tino rangatiratanga*’. However, when more attention was given to Maori and Pakeha caucus time than to setting the agenda of the whole movement, the leadership became paralysed and ineffective.”

Or, as Naomi Klein – writing from a slightly different perspective in *No Logo* - points out: “The backlash that identity politics inspired did a pretty good job of masking for us the fact that many of our demands for better representation were quickly accommodated by marketers, media makers and pop culture producers alike – though perhaps not for the reasons we had hoped ... we found out that our sworn enemies in the mainstream ... didn't fear and loathe us but actually thought we were sort of interesting ... our insistence on extreme sexual and racial identities made for great brand content and niche marketing strategies. If diversity is what we wanted, the brands seemed to be saying, then diversity is exactly what we would get.”

And so, as the identity politicians rode off into the sunset with the post-modernists (whose nihilistic ethical relativism was so ideally suited to their needs) the bruised and battered remnants of social democracy fought each other to a stand-still in the Labour Party.

IN A CURIOUS WAY, the ethical arguments enlisted by both the moderate and radical factions of Labour had much to recommend them. Both sides loathed the neo-liberal cuckoos which had taken up residence in Labour's nest, and both were absolutely determined to be rid of them. But the moderate faction was convinced that the Rogernomes could only be defeated slowly, in three-year campaigns, by means of the party's candidate selection processes. To that end, they argued, it was vital that the radicals and moderates, together, retain control of the party – even if that meant tolerating Rogernomics in the short term.

The radicals, of course, argued that the Rogernomes must be confronted and routed sooner rather than later – lest the damage their policies were inflicting on working people should permanently undermine the political and economic strength of the labour movement. When the radical Left's attempt to re-install Jim Anderton as Labour President was thwarted by the Moderates in 1988, a split in Labour became inevitable. I am firmly of the view that the radicals' decision to form the NewLabour Party was the right one. Defending social-democratic principles behind closed doors could never hope to keep working people engaged in the political process. And, as Karl Kautsky pointed out, a willingness to constantly compromise one's principles leads inevitably to the modification – and, ultimately, to the corruption – of those principles.

The image I use to illustrate this process is drawn from another political movie; an adaptation of Howard Spring's famous novel *Fame is the Spur* - based on the life of the infamous Labour politician, Ramsay MacDonald. At his election rallies the movie hero is fond of brandishing a dragoon's sabre from the infamous Peterloo Massacre. At the climax of his speech, he draws the weapon from its scabbard as proof that Labour will always be there to defend the rights of working people. But, as the years pass and the compromises multiply, the hero forgets all about his famous electoral prop. Eventually, of course, the moment of crisis comes and he remembers the Peterloo sabre. Proudly he raises the political relic above his head for all the crowd to see, but as he goes to unsheathe the bright sword of socialist defence, he finds that he cannot do it. So many years have passed since it was drawn forth that the blade has rusted to the scabbard.

It was thanks to NewLabour, and later to the Alliance, that the sword of social-democracy did not sleep in the Left's hand. And not just the sword of social-democracy. For a word or two must here be spared for the Greens. Political scientists puzzle over the Green phenomenon - uncertain of where to place it on the ideological spectrum. To them I say this: cast an eye at the paintings and woodcuts of Walter Crane, or read the curious novels of William Morris. For it is in Morris's artisan socialism; and in slogans like Crane's "The plough is a better backbone than the factory." that we find the historical forebears of the Greens. By their love of the land, and of nature unspoiled, the Greens place themselves squarely in the revolutionary Romantic tradition. Think of Blake's *Jerusalem*, of all those "dark satanic mills" corrupting England's "green and pleasant land" and you have the very essence of Green politics.

In this they identify themselves as the brothers and sisters of early 19th Century socialism - of that youthful and robust socialist movement that flourished before an endless succession of dour trade union secretaries and snobbish Fabians squeezed the life out of it. Squeezed it – but never quite killed it. For did not the tens of thousands of working people who gathered outside Transport House in 1945, to celebrate Labour’s landslide victory, sing Blake’s *Jerusalem* until they were hoarse? And is it not still the task of all who call themselves socialists to build that shining city? For, has not the wheel of history come full circle? Are we not standing, upon the threshold of the 21st century, where the socialists stood one hundred years ago? Freed at last from the long nightmare of Lenin and Stalin and Trotsky and Mao; released from the sticky webs of identity politics and its stultifying political correctness; is it not time to re-dedicate ourselves to the priorities of a truly majoritarian socialism.

YES, IT IS.

But first – like Bruce Jesson - we must face the facts. And the facts are these. The New Zealand working class and its greatest political achievement – the Welfare State – were smashed to pieces in the 1980s and early 1990s. That much, most progressive New Zealanders can agree on.

But, what is much harder to swallow is that the prime architects and beneficiaries of those extraordinarily destructive years – the local representatives of international finance capital, and the transnational corporations which now dominate the New Zealand economy – could never have done what they did without the active and enthusiastic collaboration of the professional middle class.

I have never subscribed to the theory that the middle class is a force for moderation and rationality. On the contrary, I endorse the thinking of Walden Bello, who, while acknowledging the role of the CIA in the coup that toppled the Chilean socialist, Salvador Allende’s, Popular Unity government, reveals - in the latest issue of the *New Left Review* - that he puts “equal, if not greater, weight on domestic class forces in explaining the consolidation of the anti-Allende bloc.” He says that his experience of the Chilean counter-revolution gave him “a healthy scepticism – running clean against much standard American political science on developing countries – about the democratic role of the middle class. I could see that this was a very ambivalent layer.”

My own experience in the Labour Party convinces me that he is right. Between 1983 and 1989 I was a member of Dunedin’s Castle Street Branch of the Labour Party – the university branch founded by Austin Mitchell in the 1960s. Castle Street had a reputation for being a radical branch, but when the left-wing members of Castle Street started organising against Rogernomics all hell broke loose. The liberal academics that had formerly dominated the branch hissed and

spat at our “trade union tactics”, branded us “cloth caps” and refused to be bound by the will of the majority.

The same process was at work throughout the Labour Movement - where whole layers of working class leadership were being quietly – and in a few cases noisily – shunted aside. It had begun in the Parliamentary Labour Party as far back as the 1970s, but by the end of the 1980s virtually the entire Labour Party organisation, and whole swathes of the trade union movement, had fallen victim to the same relentless forces of what was called “professionalisation”.

In reality, however, what we were witnessing was a middle class takeover of the movement. The nadir came in 1991 when the cream of the New Zealand working class rose up in revolt against Bill Birch’s Employment Contracts Act. I am reliably informed that the National Party was prepared – nay, expected – to have to concede as many as a third of the Bill’s clauses in the face of a trade union fightback. But thanks to the PSA, the PPTA, the NZEI, the Nurses Union, and those aristocrats of labour in the Engineers Union, Bill Birch didn’t lose even one.

True to his Socialist Unity Party heritage, Ken Douglas preferred to keep control of the losing side, rather than lose control of the winning side, and, backed by his middle class union allies, refused to authorise a general strike – thereby condemning eight out of every ten workers to a future without union representation. Today, if you are not an employee of the state, or a large manufacturing concern, your chances of being covered by a collective contract are less than five percent.

But, in trashing the working class for the ripe plums of the new managerial revolution, the New Zealand middle class also trashed the key collective mechanisms for the transmission of class advantage – most particularly fully publicly subsidised tertiary education.

Still burdened with Rogernomes, Labour was in no position to offer political leadership to either workers or their middle class managers. It was the Alliance that kept the flame of social democracy alive through the long dark night of the 1990s, and it was the Alliance that eventually proved to Labour that it could not govern New Zealand until it made a genuine attempt to restore some dignity and strength to working class New Zealanders. Without the Alliance, Labour would have had no programme worth speaking of to place before the voters in the 1999 election.

The great tragedy of the past three years has been Labour’s inability to recognise its enormous debt to the Alliance, and the Alliance’s failure to define a constructive role for itself within the constraints of government under the Westminster System. The Alliance Left’s decision to make their stand on Afghanistan was, in my estimation, misguided. In the wake of September 11, New Zealanders by and large supported the United States “War Against

Terrorism”, and were comfortable with the Government’s dispatch of SAS troops to help hunt down al Qaida. But, that said, I cannot forgive Jim Anderton for using their resistance as an excuse to destroy his own party. That was an unconscionable act, the ramifications of which we still cannot fully appreciate. And Helen Clark’s refusal to step in and heal the split was a short-sighted as it was self-interested. History will condemn them both.

The working class of this country will benefit from having Laila Harré in the Nurses Union, and Matt McCarten back in the field, organising a union for low-paid workers, but by God it would have benefited much more from having them in Parliament.

BECAUSE THERE IS STILL SO MUCH TO DO.

One in three New Zealand children are living in poverty, and one in five New Zealand families face material hardship. With eight out of every ten workers not represented by a trade union, we are still a very long way from even beginning to exercise democracy in the workplace. We have a government that is hell-bent on signing up to free trade agreements that will lower our living standards, damage our environment and limit our sovereignty. The moratorium on genetically engineered organisms has less than twelve months left to run.

Working class New Zealanders – of all colours and cultures – need more and better publicly funded education and health services, more state houses, and more police officers who are less interested in what they smoke than they are in curbing family violence and building safe urban communities. Refurbishing New Zealand’s crumbling infrastructure can only be achieved by utilising the collective resources of the state – not through bogus public-private partnerships. Re-nationalisation of the railways is an urgent priority. And we must stop arguing about immigration and develop instead a viable population strategy. New Zealand desperately needs more children - so let’s stop talking about family values and start talking about valued families.

We also need to talk about constitutional change. We need to learn from the Alliance’s struggle against the Westminster tradition. But, most of all, we need to finish what Bruce Jesson started. New Zealand must become a republic.

I do not believe that the Labour Party – alone – is capable of implementing this agenda. I know that the Greens are ready to assist, but I fear that their constituency is too frail to bear the burden of building a progressive future unaided. That puts the onus upon what remains of the Alliance to do all that it can to re-enter the parliamentary fray. And the onus upon all of us who share their social-democratic vision to get stuck in and help them do it.

BUT UNTIL THAT HAPPENS, my answer to the question: “What’s Left?” must be this. An idea. A memory. A bright vista glimpsed briefly from a high hill. It is liberty extended. It is justice being done. It is seeing someone lying on the road and not passing by on the other side. It is signing a petition, participating a street march, and standing on a picket line. It is joining a progressive political party.

And, in the dangerous months that lie ahead, I believe it means standing up and being counted as one of the millions of people around the world determined to prevent a rebirth of naked Western imperialism. The people of Iraq have already sustained a million casualties through the imposition of UN sanctions. Dear God – have they not suffered enough for the sins of Saddam Hussein?! Ending unnecessary suffering.

Ah, yes. The Left remains what it has always been – what it always will be: the collective cry of humankind for right to be done and wrong to be vanquished. And the strength of the Left waxes and wanes in accordance with each individual’s conviction that such a goal is worthy of their effort.

Bruce Jesson’s pessimistic intellect would almost certainly have told him that the Left in New Zealand is finished. That through a poisonous mixture of elitism, sectarianism, political ineptitude and betrayal, it has handed over the future to the forces of greed and violence. But I am not so gloomy. Indeed I am optimistic. Because New Zealanders are full of surprises.

A Frenchman visiting these shores one hundred years ago described us as socialists without doctrines. Looking back at the havoc that doctrines have wreaked in the course of the past, sad century, I find that observation curiously heartening. Perhaps it is our fate to be socialists of the heart and not of the head.

If so, I – for one – will be well content.

ENDS