

Australia: “Lefts” sign-up with Rudd Labor

Richard Phillips, Laura Tiernan
25 February 2008

In the past week, Australia’s liberal opinion-makers, along with various “radicals”, have engaged in an orgy of praise for Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and his government’s formal apology on February 13 to the Aboriginal stolen generations.

Within hours of the “sorry” speech, Graham Ring, writing for the “independent” online publication *New Matilda*, declared that “[T]he stunning symbolism of the apology has lifted the spirits of the country, and the possibility of a real and lasting reconciliation with Indigenous Australia is tantalisingly close.”

“Australia has been waiting desperately for a leader to stand tall and come clean,” he continued, “so that we can move on as a nation, free of the skeletons of the last century.” Rudd had now “lifted the nation’s burden. Tears of joy are being shed and great things seem possible,” Ring concluded.

Hall Greenland, journalist, publisher and ALP “left”, repeated these gushing accolades in the American-based publication *Counterpunch*.

There was a “quiet, genuine eloquence” about the sorry speech, Greenland enthused. “Australia’s new Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, went up onto the mountain and delivered.... [I]t was social democracy’s finest hour”.

The event, Greenland added, would “for many kids be like the day of the moon landing”. “It means these rising generations will inherit an Australia, which has, if not a clean sheet, then at least an honest one. Yes, Rudd and his government have other mountains to climb, but at inspirational moments like this they have raised the hope, and more importantly the belief, that these mountains can be climbed too.”

Not to be outdone, liberal commentator Phillip Adams in last week’s *Weekend Australian Magazine* underscored the extent of the shift underway. Adams confessed that during last year’s election he had portrayed Rudd as “an economic and cultural conservative”. But now, Adams opined, the new prime minister was “nothing like Howard.” Rudd was a “man of intellect”, “a man of compassion” and a political leader “prepared to say that word that Howard loathed. Sorry.

“For the first time in years, Australians are thinking,” he concluded. “It’s a phenomenon we haven’t seen since [Labor PM] Keating. We’re thinking republic. We’re thinking human rights and social justice. So I’m sorry for fibbing. Rudd isn’t remotely like Howard.”

What is to account for these accolades?

Kevin Rudd’s formal apology to the stolen generations was a highly conscious political act. It tapped into a deeply-felt popular sentiment that the government had to publicly acknowledge the crimes committed against Australia’s indigenous people. But the speech was not aimed at redressing these issues—after all, the Labor government maintains the former coalition government’s military intervention in the Northern Territory, which has stripped thousands of Aborigines of welfare payments and other basic democratic rights.

Above all the “sorry speech” was designed to create a base of

support for Rudd’s government among more privileged sections of the petty-bourgeoisie—especially its official opinion-makers—and to sow confusion among ordinary people about its real agenda. Its aim was to divert the significant and growing leftward shift among masses of working people back behind Labor.

Swept to power on November 24, Rudd’s government was the beneficiary of a deeply-felt anti-Howard vote—a repudiation of Howard’s support for the Iraq war, the politics of racist scape-goating and lies, and his imposition of free-market policies.

Labor neither wanted nor encouraged these sentiments. In fact, the chief feature of last year’s election campaign was the bi-partisanship championed by Kevin Rudd on every significant policy question—from his “rock solid commitment” to the US alliance and his self-professed mantle as “economic conservative”, through to Julia Gillard’s declaration that unlawful strike action would be met with “strike-breaking”.

Up until the apology speech, “Team Rudd” was the object of public suspicion and a good measure of disgust over its “me-tooism”. And with interest rates rising to new highs and fallout from the US subprime crisis gripping financial markets, the new PM’s talk about “economic pain” and “tough times” ahead doubtless deepened these sentiments.

As Rudd and his ministers returned from their Christmas break, a January 25 editorial in Rupert Murdoch’s *Australian* spelt out, in no uncertain terms, the tasks facing the new government: “*The Australian* was a harsh critic of the Howard government’s economic policies ...[and] throughout last year, we encouraged Kevin Rudd to attack the Howard government from the Right ... Now, in government, Mr Rudd and Wayne Swann must deliver.”

At the start of 2008 the new Labor government confronted two salient political facts: on the one hand demands from the ruling elite for a major assault on government spending and welfare, and for labour market “discipline” and reform. But at the same time it confronted a public mood directly opposed to any such program. Rudd’s speech to the stolen generations, accompanied by a massive public relations exercise, can only be understood within this context.

In their unanimous support for Rudd’s apology, the liberal left and its allies have come forward to repackage Labor, right at the point where it is preparing a major assault on the social position of the working class.

This process was acknowledged last week by Rod Cameron, a well-known Labor Party pollster and strategist. The effusive support for the “sorry” speech, Cameron told Melbourne’s *Age* newspaper, represented a significant achievement, because Rudd had “won the loyalty of an influential and noisy constituency—the elites who had grown so dispirited under Howard, yet remained sceptical of Rudd and his display of ‘me-tooism’ throughout last year.”

“[Labor] will always remember this moment and be grateful for it.

He silenced them, in effect, and bought a huge amount of political capital,” Cameron said.

The “noisy constituency” to which Cameron refers is that well-heeled layer of small ‘l’ liberal opinion-makers who supported the Keating Labor government’s “Big Vision” items, including Reconciliation and the Republic, during the early to mid-1990s, while it simultaneously savaged working class living standards. Now they have handed Rudd the necessary “political capital”, in the form of the befuddlement of the critical faculties of working people, which will be used to deepen the agenda of pro-market reform pioneered by the Hawke-Keating Labor governments.

If these social layers were “dispirited” under Howard, it was because they regarded Coalition policy—including its repeated appeals to racist ideology—as unnecessarily divisive and harmful to Australia’s national image abroad. With Labor back in office and a formal apology to the stolen generations beamed across the world, they feel they can once more hold their heads high.

But the recasting of Labor’s image requires support, not simply from a Phillip Adams or a Hall Greenland. It needs the backing of those nominally socialist organisations and so-called radicals whose essential function is to block any independent challenge to Labor from the working class.

Leading the charge was the life-long Pabloite Bob Gould. (Michel Pablo, secretary of the Fourth International in early 1950s, attacked the basic foundations of the Trotskyist movement. He maintained that the socialist revolution would not develop through an independent movement of the working class led by the Fourth International but by pressuring the existing parties and organisations. In Australia this meant that the struggle for socialism had to proceed through the confines of the Labor Party).

Gould claimed on his web site on February 14 that the prime minister’s speech was “spectacular”, “moving” and “impeccably sensitive”. The “very act of delivering the apology in forthright terms,” he wrote, “reflects an extraordinary change in Australian politics.”

“The manifest reality,” Gould insisted, is that “Rudd and the members of the new government are the heroes and heroines of the hour, particularly to indigenous people. Anyone on the left who fails to notice this is politically blind.”

Gould attacked the *World Socialist Web Site* over its exposure of the political agenda behind the Rudd government’s apology. In a statement that registered the abject abandonment of Gould and every section of the “left” to bourgeois public opinion, Gould declared that the WSWS, “appears to be an outfit that doesn’t watch television and wouldn’t know a representative of indigenous Australia if it fell over one.”

Gould’s positions were mirrored by the Democratic Socialist Perspective and its *Green Left Weekly*, which described Rudd’s apology as “moving”, “powerful” and “lack[ing] the weasel words that are usually associated with politicians.”

The *Green Left Weekly* endorsed Rudd’s invitation to Opposition leader Brendan Nelson that he join a bipartisan indigenous policy “war-cabinet” to improve housing in the Northern Territory, a proposal it claimed would “go some way to making the apology more than just symbolism.”

Gould immediately praised these comments. This sort of reportage, he wrote, was a “breath of fresh air” and provided “sensible comprehensive coverage of the issues without any sanctimonious finger-wagging”. In other words, it is impermissible for “socialists” to

offer the slightest criticism of the Rudd government.

The last time the liberals and so-called “left” came together to universally praise the actions of an Australian government was in September 1999. Those now praising Rudd are the same forces that held demonstrations and protests throughout the country to demand the Howard government dispatch Australian troops to East Timor. And like today, they played upon the emotions and political naiveté of ordinary people—seeking to divert them behind the requirements of the ruling class.

The military, declared the liberals and lefts, would stop the bloodshed in East Timor. And when Australian troops were deployed, they claimed this proved that mass protest could force the government to act “against its own best interests”. Eight years later, the Australian military is still there, the Australian government has successfully “negotiated” to claim the lion’s share of East Timor’s natural resources, and the East Timorese masses face ongoing social disaster.

Rudd’s apology and the effusive support from the lefts indicates that Australia’s ruling elite has undertaken a definite tactical shift.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Russian Marxist Vladimir Lenin explained that “All oppressing classes stand in need of two social functions to safeguard their rule: the function of the hangman and the function of the priest. The hangman is required to quell the protests and the indignation of the oppressed; the priest is required to console the oppressed, to depict to them the prospects of their sufferings and sacrifices being mitigated ... while preserving class rule, and thereby to reconcile them to class rule, win them away from revolutionary action, undermine their revolutionary spirit and destroy their revolutionary determination.”

Rudd’s February 13 speech had precisely this “priestly function”—with a coalition of liberals, lefts and radicals, playing the role of incense-bearers, spreading illusions that mass pressure would compel Labor to act in the interests of Aborigines and other sections of the working class.

The promotion of the Rudd Labor government by the entire fraternity of “lefts” constitutes nothing less than a defence of capitalism, the system responsible for the countless crimes committed against Australia’s indigenous people. The task before genuine socialists is to develop an independent political movement aimed at abolishing this system. This means, above all, encouraging the capacity of workers and young people for critical political thought. Socialists teach the proletariat to look behind and beyond the honeyed phrases of capitalist governments and their political publicists, and to seek out the truth.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact