

Party formation and activity among workers during the Hawke and Keating governments

By Jonathan Strauss*

In the last decade, the Greens consolidated as the electoral alternative to the left of the Australian Labor Party. Earlier, however, during the 'long Labor decade'¹ of the Hawke and Keating governments, from 1983 to 1996, the varied efforts of thousands of people which went towards creating new parties culminated, after the Greens' formation at the start of the 1990s, in the party's relative stagnation for several years.

This paper uses data from nine surveys (including National Social Science Surveys (NSS) and Australian Electoral Studies (AES)),² federal election results,³ newspaper reports and interviews to show that in the long Labor decade many working class people rejected the ALP in favour of alternatives. This is how some who were involved understood the situation, too. For example, Chris Lloyd stated in 1990 that: 'objective conditions for a new organisation are excellent. The Labor Party's membership is declining ... There is an enormous electoral space out there for a party which is capable of coming to terms with the issues that matter to the people who vote in that space.'⁴

The paper will also show that those who spearheaded the new party activity had considerable differences, which they generally failed to resolve. Thus, much of the potential for political alternatives was temporarily exhausted.

Political science literature discusses party identification trends in the long Labor decade principally as a reactive 'dealignment' from the major political parties. The purported result is a protest vote, which is not directed by partisanship and focused on the Senate, and some shift from voting based upon occupation to voting based on issues raised by 'postmaterialist values'.⁵

This analysis distorts our understanding of the development of popular political consciousness - in particular, in the working class - in the long Labor decade. It presents people as 'naturally' identifying with one of the major parties. It also downplays the importance among these trends in party identification of shifts away from the ALP. That affected electoral results. More significantly, however, ALP identification was initially predominant among the workers who, through their activities in parties, unions, social movements and elections, made the working class an historical agent. So the reduced ALP partisanship was a major starting point for the changes that occurred in the workers' class political consciousness.

Two aspects about those developments are presented in this paper. Key trends in working class identification with and political engagement through the ALP, and identification with and voting for the Democrats, and for the NDP and Greens, are discussed. Within this, differences between the labour aristocracy, which is the stratum of workers who experience sustained advantageous conditions in the class struggle and, therefore, tend to engage in it more readily,⁶ and the rest of the working class, are considered. Illustrations of the dynamics involved in the attempts to form new parties are then presented.

Who belongs to the 'working class' and the 'labour aristocracy' might be considered problematic. Here, from a starting point that the working class includes all those who in their lifetime principally rely for subsistence on employment by another, this is resolved rather pragmatically. Generally, employment and occupation serve as proxies for the social relations involved. Survey respondents were not considered working class if they: identified as upper

class; stated they had significant supervisory responsibility; or indicated a background (sometimes, with regard to their spouse) of self-employment or of military, parliamentary, judicial, police or prison service employment. Administrative and managerial, professional and para-professional (except those in the female-dominated occupation of nursing), and metals, electrical, building and printing trades backgrounds are distinguished as labour aristocratic.⁷

Overall, identification with the ALP among workers was relatively stable until nearly the end of the long Labor decade (see Figure 1). A fall among labour aristocrats was at first largely balanced by the maintenance of support among other workers. The latter's identification dropped sharply before the 1996 election.⁸

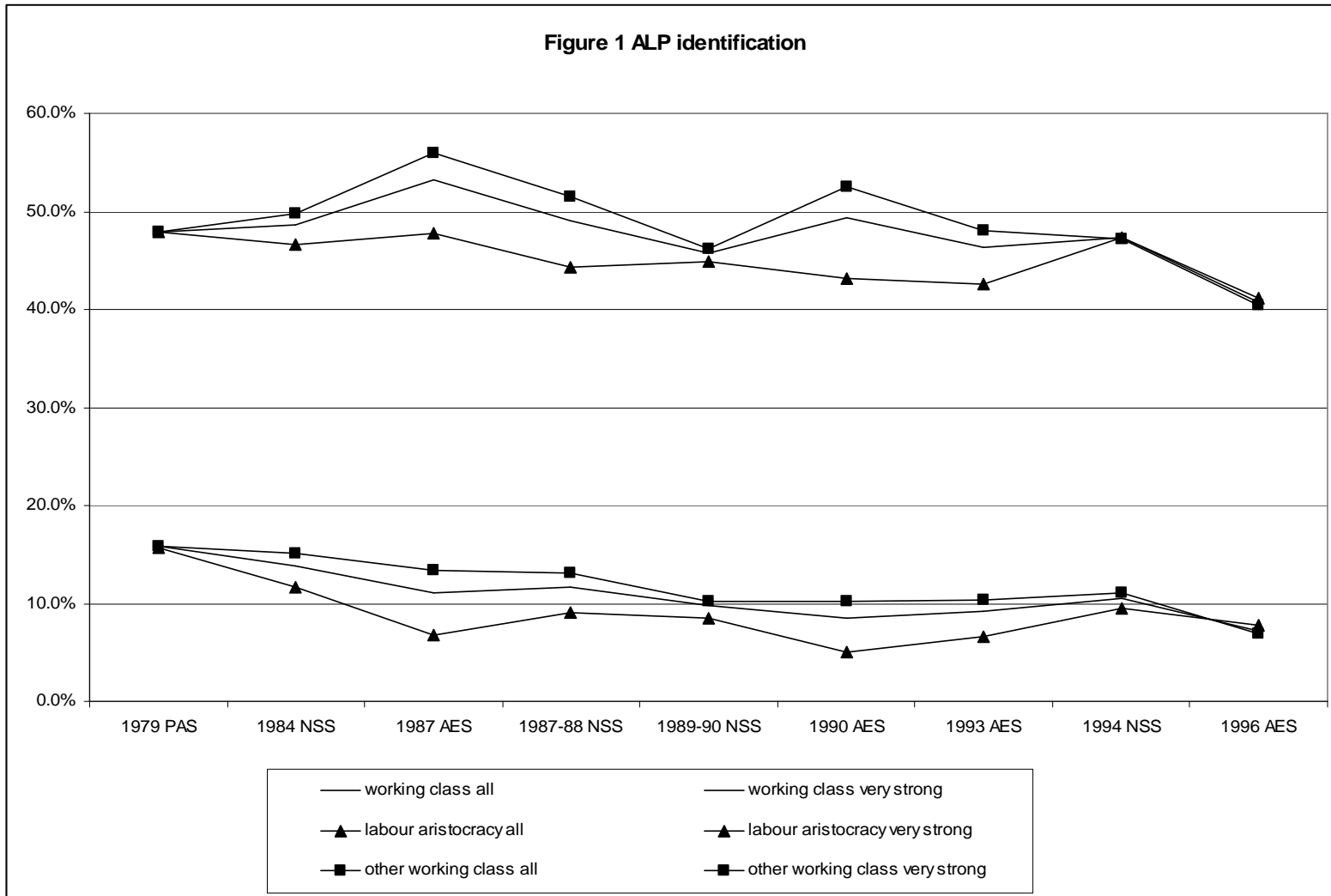
Very strong identification with the ALP in the working class dropped from more than 15 per cent at the end of the 1970s to 10 per cent or less, in the first half of the 1990s, and 7 per cent, in 1996. It fell first among labour aristocrats. The low point for public sector professionals came in the mid-1980s. In the 1990s, intense ALP partisanship increased among these workers. At the end of the 1980s, however, such identification among labour aristocratic tradespeople declined steeply, to rock bottom. Meanwhile, among the rest of the working class, there were sharp falls in very strong ALP identification in the late 1980s and after 1994.

Alongside the lower level of intense identification with the ALP, according to the surveys, were lower levels of participation in election campaigns by the party's identifiers and a weakening orientation to the ALP of those involved in social movement campaigning. The reduced activity was most prominent among the labour aristocracy, who before that had carried the bulk of the burden. By the 1990s, the more widespread but relatively private activity of persuasion had become overwhelmingly predominant as the form of participation in election campaigning: as a proportion of the working class, ALP identifiers who attended at least one event or engaged in party work were just one per cent or less. Very strong ALP identifiers became less likely to have been involved in demonstrations (the 1987 AES found this less likely than for the working class as a whole). ALP identifiers also originally dominated the ranks of social movement groups, but were scarcely one-fifth of environment group members by 1996. A result of the lack of mobilisation for the ALP in elections, as happened in 1996, but also, apparently, in 1990, was that the ALP lost the popular vote, and in 1996, government.

Many working class votes for the Australian Democrats, the main 'minor' party in the long Labor decade, constructed protest messages. Some came from weak ALP identifiers and those who did not identify with any party. Others came from labour aristocratic professionals and para-professionals, who tended to consider the Democrats an 'establishment' party,⁹ and who might also be expected to be relatively confident they could influence the political system. The brief leftward movement of the Democrats at the end of the 1980s, however, was combined with a rising party identification which was also spread more evenly throughout the working-class, and closer lower house and Senate votes.

Votes for the other nationally significant electoral formations of the period, the Nuclear Disarmament Party and the Greens, are even less likely to have been protest votes than Democrats' votes (see Table 1). The NDP 1984 Senate vote of 7.2 per cent (greatly understated in the 1984 NSS survey) nationally stands out as a dramatic break from established voting patterns. It came largely from those who had or still identified with the ALP, particularly among workers outside the labour aristocracy. Overall, labour aristocrats still gave the NDP greater support, yet they were not predominant as they were in the Democrats vote. Later, among the small number of working class supporters of the Greens,

Figure 1 ALP identification



Source: see endnote 1

identification was strong, at least initially. Also, the party's vote was relatively stable, and higher in the lower house than in the Senate in those seats it regularly contested.

Table 1 NDP and Greens working class support

Survey title	NSS	NSS	NSS	AES	NSS	AES
Survey year	1984	1987-88	1989-90	1990	1994	1996
Senate vote	3.4%	2.0%	2.5%	1.9%	3.6%	2.8%
<i>labour aristocracy</i>	4.3%	2.3%	3.1%	2.6%	4.6%	2.9%
- <i>professionals and para-professionals</i>	5.1%	2.6%	3.8%	2.9%		2.8%
- <i>tradespersons</i>	4.4%	2.9%	2.1%	2.5%		3.8%
<i>other working class</i>	2.9%	1.8%	2.3%	1.6%	3.0%	2.7%
Proportion of Senate vote from NDP and Green identifiers	1.2% ¹	3.7% ¹	13.7%	22.6%	19.6%	13.2%
very and fairly strong ALP identifiers	39.5%	40.7%	29.8%	19.4%	15.2%	15.8%
<i>labour aristocracy</i> ²	30.8%	27.3%	33.3%	28.6%	19.0%	5.9%
- <i>professionals and para-professionals</i> ²	40.0%	42.9%	40.7%	11.1%		9.1%
- <i>tradespersons</i> ²	12.5%	0.0%	14.3%	33.3%		0.0%
<i>other working class</i> ²	46.8%	50.0%	27.5%	11.8%	12.0%	23.8%

¹ Both these surveys found only about 0.1 per cent of respondents identified with the NDP. No survey tested identification with the NDP between the time of the 1984 federal election and the 1985 split in the party (see below). The 1986 CSA found about one-quarter of its respondents who intended to vote NDP in the Senate stated they were NDP supporters (who totalled 1.8 per cent of respondents).

² Read as: 'Among labour aristocrats/labour aristocratic professionals and para-professionals (that is, excluding nurses)/(metals, electrical, building and printing) tradespersons/other workers, the proportion of the NDP and/or Greens Senate vote from very or fairly strong ALP identifiers was ...'

Source: see endnote 1

Working class people's withdrawal of support from the ALP involved their varied efforts at political action which related to the formation of new parties. In this there was a potential for political realignment with regard to workers' class mobilisation. Significant examples of party activity are the rise and fall of the Nuclear Disarmament Party, the attempts to regroup and renew socialist forces, and the formation of the Greens.

The NDP grew rapidly from its foundation in June 1984 to its first national conference in April 1985. This growth had two bases. Many people involved in or supportive of the large peace and nuclear disarmament movement reacted affectively against the ALP ignoring movement demands such as closure of foreign military bases, prohibition of the stationing in or passage through Australia of nuclear weapons and immediate termination of uranium mining and export. The other was the potential the NDP, which had adopted these three demands as its platform, offered them to act.¹⁰

NDP members had various views about how to realise that potential. In particular, they disagreed about the significance of the party and what might aid or deter people's adherence and involvement in it.

Peter Garrett, the party's popular figurehead, asked 'How can you hold so firmly and so hard to a structure like a party?' He answered: 'I mean, it's not worthy of it.'¹¹ Jo Vallentine, the party's sole successful candidate in 1984, and others considered the party platform's implications fundamentally radical and the party unsustainable, but thought the NDP might be a useful short-term development towards a future 'green' party. Gillian Fisher, a NSW Senate candidate, was among the "middle-class professionals" who aimed "to establish the party's credibility in the wider community" and felt this would not happen if the party took a radical political approach, although she wanted the party's anti-nuclear focus.¹² Meanwhile party founder Michael Denborough believed the NDP as a single issue party could draw the greatest support on the issue. The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) members involved thought that that was how the political situation might eventually open up in the way they wanted. Conference organiser Jenny Cotterell saw the party 'as a means of achieving a tangible result' and looked forward to the conference to 'define what the party is on about'.¹³

The disagreement among NDP members about the party's functioning defined the party's split at its first national conference in April 1985. A group including Garrett, Vallentine and Fisher walked out when its proposal to use postal ballots alone to decide on the conference's recommendations was defeated. This group claimed that the conference was dominated by the SWP.

The remaining NDP leadership talked instead about how ALP rank-and-file members' experiences of not being listened to by that party's leadership contributed to the NDP's emergence. They wanted "a new type of party, in which the parliamentary representatives take note of the rank and file".¹⁴ They believed the walkout group's proposal threatened this aim. The various meeting and postal votes which followed showed a majority of the party's more active members, at least, agreed.¹⁵

The disagreements in the NDP may have been underpinned by differences between labour aristocratic professionals such as those Fisher describes, and others in the working class whom the party had brought into political activity. She suggests the former were "fairly comfortable with the machinery of elections and party politics" and vital to the party's initial success.¹⁶ However, the party had then attracted a relatively diverse working class membership and support base.

The NDP survived the split, but still declined. The party's internal development could not now produce a new party as an alternative to the ALP.

The difficulties and successes of subsequent new party projects also substantially followed from the extent to which the dynamics of affective reaction and potential for action came into play. For example, in the 1980s the largest socialist party was still the Communist Party. The CPA leadership critically supported the ALP government and the Accord. It also proposed 'socialist renewal' and had initiated, together with some independent activists, the "Charter process" for a new left party, which attempted the latter. Those who got involved in the Charter process in 1987, however, were the SWP, and also a few independent activists. They, together with the CPA's own left wing, sought an organisation which might oppose the government. The CPA and its supporters now balked. After the national Charter conference in November 1987, two groupings appeared. Each claimed the process' mantle, and then disappeared within a year.¹⁷

The Rainbow Alliance gathered together up to 1000 members. In its leadership were well-known left-wing activist intellectuals such as Joseph Camillieri. RA was conceived of as a political movement, however, much more than as a party. It worked on alternative policies and held large public meetings, but took from the middle of the 1980s to the early 1990s to

move from conception through discussion and organisation to electoral and other activity. By that time its momentum was largely lost.¹⁸

The Greens presents a more complex picture. In the mid-1980s, various attempts to organise green parties failed. Left behind was the Sydney Greens, which held the name under electoral registration laws, while Bob Brown led the Tasmanian “Green Independents” parliamentarians and Vallentine remained as an independent Senator. From 1988 to 1990, the Sydney Greens gave out use of the name to: green alliances in NSW, Vic, the ACT and SA; regional parties in NSW; parties in SA and WA (where it was then one of four groups, including Vallentine’s, which amalgamated to form the Greens WA); and the Queensland Green Network, in which the RA group leader, Drew Hutton, became the deputy registered officer.

The Greens appealed to many people because they rejected the Democrats’ deal making. The Greens WA Senators exemplified this by sticking to their stated positions in negotiations such as those about the 1993 Budget.

On the other hand, in 1990, when many environmentalists reacted against ALP government policies (particularly with regard to the logging of old-growth forests) by renewing the push for a national Greens party, those who had been attracted to the Greens by this political tradition’s radical elements were partly excluded from its formation. They were confronted by Brown, Hutton and others, who proposed the Greens become more centralised and proscribe members of other parties because, the latter believed, this would make the party more effective electorally.

The result was that after the national Greens were formed in 1992, the party needed to somewhat rebuild itself as an organic party, evolving out of community campaigns. Its support base had become narrower than the NDP’s. Still, the party survived its ‘dry years’ in the 1990s. In the Greens, as was true of the NDP, party activity was at least partly connected to social mobilisation in the working class.¹⁹

Many who were involved in these new party projects remained ambivalent about organising a strategic alternative to the existing “major party” framework. This was expressed in:

- Proposals for a platform that did not match the range of issues around which a large number of people were ready at that time to oppose the ALP government.
- Opposition to engaging in elections, when typically this was the political activity those workers who were abandoning the ALP were immediately familiar with.
- An approach to electoral success which suggested parliamentarians and other publicly prominent party figures, rather than the party members’ activity, should control a party’s development.

Also, new party proposals frequently reflected the circumstances and experiences of some states or regions, or of some organisations and networks, to the exclusion of others who could be involved.

This problem was compounded by, as John Baker noted with regard to the NDP, the Charter process and the Greens, some key organisers’ unwillingness to bury past differences and ‘lack of commitment to democratic principles’ in debating and voting on existing differences among all those willing to take part.²⁰ Thus, Boris Frankel’s question about “whether more patience, political insight and co-operation could have surmounted the [difficulties which] prevented a third political force from breaking the mould of party politics”²¹ seems apt. However, the circumstances which made a new party possible did not

necessarily provide an abundance of those qualities. The labour aristocracy was the stratum of the working class most heavily involved in rejecting the ALP and in the various new party projects. Its particular complex of interests is opposed to the radical nature of political action which is more broadly inclusive of the working class.

This paper has shown that during the long Labor decade of the Hawke and Keating governments, many working class people stopped strongly identifying with the ALP and considered their political alternatives. Participation in 'new' social movements often influenced this. These workers' actions reduced the organic support for the ALP. It also created the possibility, while such workers remained politically engaged, of a new left party emerging. However, until, in somewhat different circumstances, the Greens support consolidated from the late 1990s, this possibility was not substantially exploited. That was a failure, characterised by political confusion, exclusive attitudes and an undue emphasis on immediate results, of political action. These characteristics in working class politics are consequences of its domination by concern about the relative privileges of the labour aristocracy and the relationship of that working class stratum to the social order.

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1. Peter Beilharz, *Transforming Labor: Labour Tradition and the Labor Decade in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p. ix.

2. The survey data used in this paper has come through the Australian Social Science Data Archive from the original depositors of:

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- J. Kelley, Cushing, R.G. & Headey, B. Australian National Social Science Survey, 1984 [computer file]. Canberra: Australian Social Science Data Archive, The Australian National University, 1984. [1984 NSS]
- J. S. Western, et al. The Class Structure of Australia, 1986 [computer file]. Canberra: Australian Social Science Data Archive, The Australian National University, 1986. [1986 CSA]. Unlike the other surveys, this only questioned employed persons.
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Those who carried out the original analysis and collection of the data bear no responsibility for the further analysis and interpretation herein.

3. Australian Electoral Office, General election for the House of Representatives: result of count of first preference votes and distribution of preferences, 1983-84; Australian Electoral Office, The Senate election: result of count of first preference votes and distribution of surplus votes and preferences, 1983-84; Australian Electoral Commission, *Election statistics 1993, 1996, 1998* Australian Electoral Commission, 1999; Australian Electoral Commission, Election statistics, 1987-90.

4. Chris Lloyd, 'Accord in Discord', Australian Left Review, no. 119, July 1990, p. 13.

5. Elim Papadakis, *Politics and the Environment*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1993, p. 174; Murray Goot, 'Distrustful, disenchanted and disengaged? Public opinion on politics, politicians and the parties: an historical perspective', in David Burchell and Andrew Leigh (eds), *The prince's new clothes: why do Australians dislike*

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- their politicians?*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2002, pp. 39-43; Ian Marsh, 'Australia's political cartel? The major parties and the party system in an era of globalisation', in Ian Marsh (ed.), *Political Parties in Transition*, Sydney, The Federation Press, 2006, pp. 5-7; Mark Western and Bruce Tranter, 'Postmaterialist and economic voting in Australia, 1990-98', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 36, no. 3, November 2001, pp. 456-57.
6. See: Jonathan Strauss, 'Australian Working Class Political History: Towards a Reassessment', paper presented at Labour Traditions: The Tenth National Labour History Conference, Melbourne, 2007, pp. 198-99.
 7. The 1994 NSS used broader occupational categories. For that survey, nurses are included among professionals and para-professionals, and all trades are grouped as "skilled workers".
 8. Cf. Jeff Singleton, Paul Martyn and Ian Ward, 'Did the 1996 Federal Election See a Tactical Revolt against Labor? A Queensland Case-Study', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 33, no. 1, March 1998, p. 129. This notes 'there was a general revolt against the ALP among low income earning voters' (pp. 122-23).
 9. Malcolm Waters and Richard Volpato, 'Political Preference in the New Middle Class: A "Correspondence Analysis" of the Orientations of Australian Professional Workers', *Politics*, vol. 24, no. 1, May 1989, p. 24.
 10. Michael Denborough, Interview, 1994; Gillian Fisher, *Half-Life: The NDP: Peace, Protest and Party Politics*, State Library of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1995, pp. viii-xi, 4-5; Sian Prior, 'The Rise and Fall of the Nuclear Disarmament Party', *Social Alternatives*, vol. 6, no. 4, November 1987, p. 5-6; *Direct Action*, 1984-85.
 11. Prior, 'Rise and Fall', p. 9.
 12. Cf. Fisher, *Half-Life*, pp. 82-85, 96.
 13. Prior, 'Rise and Fall', pp. 6-10; Denborough, Interview; Jim Percy, *The ALP, the Nuclear Disarmament Party and the Elections*, Pathfinder Press (Australia), Sydney, 1984, pp. 24-25, 28; Marian Quigley, 'The Rise and Fall(?) of the Nuclear Disarmament Party', *Current Affairs Bulletin*, vol. 62, no. 11, April 1986, p. 15; Jo Vallentine, 'The Greening of the Peace Movement in Australia', *National Outlook*, September/October 1989, p. 9; Ramani De Silva 'Preparations of the NDP's First National Conference Well under Way', *Direct Action*, no. 517, March 27, 1985, p. 25.
 14. Ramani De Silva 'Nuclear Disarmament Party Walkout', *Direct Action*, no. 520, May 1, 1985, p. 3.
 15. Jonathan Goodfield, 'Pandas Leave the Swamp', *Chain Reaction*, no. 42-43, August 1985, p. 27; Fisher, *Half-Life*, pp. 66, 68-73; *Direct Action*, May-July 1985; *Peace Talk*, 1985.
 16. Fisher, *Half-Life*, p. 82.
 17. John Baker, "When Opportunities Went Begging", *Green Left Weekly*, February 28 1996, <http://www.greenleft.org.au/1996/221/14959>, accessed on February 10, 2009; Poynting, 'A New Left Party?' *Arena*, no. 88, 1989, pp. 42-44; Adam Farrar, 'Life Beyond the Fragments', *Australian Left Review*, no. 106, August-September, 1988, pp. 21-22; David Burchell, 'Party Games', *Australian Left Review*, no. 104, April-May 1988, pp. 6-7; Minutes of National Committee meeting held 13-15 Nov. 1987 in Sydney, Communist Party of Australia, series MSS 5021 add on 1936, file National Committee Minutes Reports 1987, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
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 19. Papadakis, *Politics and the Environment*, p. 194; Pat Brewer, Interview, 1994; Amanda Lohrey, 'Groundswell: The Rise of the Greens', *Quarterly Essay*, no. 8, 2002, pp. 2, 28-41, 65-73; Bob Brown, Interview, 1994; Maurice Sibelle, Interview, 1994; Tony Harris, *Basketweavers and True Believers: Making and Unmaking the Labor Left in Leichhardt Municipality, 1970-1991*, Leftbank Publishing, Sydney, 2007, pp. 200-07; *Direct Action*, 1989-90; *Green Left Weekly*, 1991-96.
 20. Baker, "When Opportunities Went Begging".
 21. Frankel, 'Radical Politics', p. 42.