

# A critique of the writings of Murray Smith on broad left parties

[Mick Armstrong, *Marxist Left Review*, No. 7, Summer 2014.]

What should be the strategic orientation of socialists to broad left parties? This has been one of the most important debates amongst socialists internationally over the last decade and a half. Murray Smith has been one of the most prolific writers on this question in the English language. In Australia his articles have been extensively published on the *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* website associated with *Green Left Weekly* and Socialist Alliance. So it is worth seriously engaging with his views.

Murray Smith, who is currently based in Luxembourg, is a former member of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) and subsequently of the French Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), which played the leading role in the formation of the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA). He supported the forces that split from the NPA to join the Left Front, which stood Jean-Luc Melenchon of the Left Party in the 2012 French Presidential elections. The Left Front includes a variety of small radical groups as well as Melenchon's Left Party, but its overwhelmingly dominant component is the French Communist Party (PCF).

## A mistaken starting point

Over the last decade there has been a marked evolution of Murray Smith's views on the broad left party question. In my view this evolution unfortunately has not been a positive one. In his early writings, despite the significant criticisms I will make of them, he clearly saw himself as a revolutionary Marxist. In May 2001 he wrote:

The central task facing socialists and more specifically Marxists today is to rebuild mass working class parties to resist neo-liberal globalisation and the capitalist offensive, to rehabilitate the perspective of socialism and to move from resistance to overthrowing capitalism ... We put forward the basic ideas of revolutionary Marxism. And those ideas can begin to win a mass audience today if we can express them in a way which is understandable by ordinary people.<sup>1</sup>

This last sentence, however, points to a problem with his analysis at that time. He had an excessively optimistic (in retrospect a wildly overblown) assessment of the possibility of a socialist breakthrough in the advanced capitalist countries at the beginning of this century. This hyped up assessment was coloured in part by the emergence of the anti-globalisation movement in Europe which unfortunately proved short-lived. But he also argued that there was a marked rise underway in the level of working class struggle that would reshape the political environment. In a 2002 article, "Where is the SWP going?", he claimed:

The revival of industrial struggle in Britain and internationally is incontestable, and certainly much less embryonic than it was a year ago ...

Today we have a developing political radicalisation, expressed not only through the anti-globalisation movement but through growing rejection of free-market ideology in the working class and even sections of the middle classes. We also have a rising curve of workers' struggles. These are international trends of which Britain is not the most advanced example. Nevertheless the direction in which things are moving is clear, in terms of the anti-globalisation movement and in particular the anti-war movement, and of developments in the workplaces and in the unions.<sup>2</sup>

This seriously mistaken assessment of the political situation underpinned his over-grand

expectations for the growth and favourable political evolution of the SSP (of which he was then a leading member) and of other broad left party formations of the time, such as Communist Refoundation in Italy (with which he was very favourably impressed) and the Socialist Alliance in England. In that 2002 article, Murray Smith essentially viewed the SSP and Communist Refoundation as being revolutionary parties, or at least evolving in that direction. Yet within a few years his triumphalist assessments had turned to water. The SSP had torn itself apart. Communist Refoundation had moved sharply to the right and had consequently been abandoned by the mass of its working class supporters, and the English Socialist Alliance was no more.

Murray Smith was far from being the only socialist at that time to put forward a seriously mistaken assessment of the political situation. In Australia in the 1990s and early 2000s the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), reflecting the general perspective of the International Socialist Tendency of which it was a part, had developed a super-heated analysis of the state of the class struggle and the possibilities of rapid growth.<sup>3</sup> This pattern was replicated in numerous countries. These seriously mistaken assessments in a whole series of cases had markedly negative consequences, leading to crises in a number of socialist organisations with in turn splits and demoralisation, or alternatively to a gradual shift to the right.

In Murray Smith's case, however, there was more to it than simply a mistaken analysis of the state of the class struggle and the degree of radicalisation in society. His overblown assessment of the immediate political opportunities for Marxists was in part premised on a broader analysis of the whole framework of politics that was highly misleading. For over a decade he has written off the social democratic/Labor parties as finished in terms of influence over the working class.

He argues that the Labor parties are now outright capitalist parties virtually equivalent to the Tories in Britain or the Liberal Party in Australia and in no sense part of the working class movement. This in my view is a mistaken over-reaction to the marked rightward evolution of the Labor parties over the last three decades and reflects in part a considerable misreading of how radical these parties were prior to World War II.<sup>4</sup> However, Murray Smith goes much further than simply declaring that the Labor parties are now outright bourgeois parties. In a 2003 article, "The broad party, the revolutionary party and the united front", he wrote: "It is the alienation of the Labour Party and similar parties elsewhere from their traditional membership and electorate that makes it both necessary and possible to build new socialist parties that can acquire a mass character."<sup>5</sup> He then went on to essentially write off reformism as a force in the working class movement because of the social democratic parties' capitulation to neoliberalism:

For many years reformism was completely dominant and revolutionary organisations existed as a minority. The possibility of building mass parties to the left of the reformist parties did not exist, so long as workers followed those parties. It exists now.<sup>6</sup>

But what this leaves out is the state of the class struggle and the degree of radicalisation in broad layers of the working class. The possibility of building mass parties genuinely to the left of the reformist parties will only exist if there is a mass working class radicalisation. Simple alienation from the social democratic parties is not sufficient, if workers aren't moving to the left. It can just lead to a withdrawal from politics, a turn to exotic populist alternatives or to the right. The marked decline in working class membership and involvement in the Labor parties is something of a two-edged sword for revolutionaries. In the pre-World War II years the reformist parties' mass working class membership was one of the factors that opened up the possibility of major ruptures and splits when they decisively

betrayed workers' interests. These ruptures — for example in Australia the World War I conscription crisis and the struggle over the Premiers' Plan during the Depression — created real opportunities for socialists to build a mass alternative, if they had had the politics to rise to the challenge and were tactically capable and experienced enough to pursue a nuanced united front approach to these parties, in particular to their left wing.

Elsewhere in the same 2003 article Murray Smith wrote:

[I]t is not an exaggeration to say that we can “skip over” the traditional parties of the working class, which means that the united front is not posed today in the form that it was in 1922, and indeed much later. To mobilise workers and youth today there is no need to propose united fronts to the Labour Party or the French Socialist and Communist parties, because first of all they have themselves very little ability to mobilise and secondly they are not capable of using their authority as in the past to block workers' struggles, to demobilise.<sup>7</sup>

This is an absurd position. The winding up of the massive union campaign against the Howard government's WorkChoices legislation in the lead-up to the 2007 Australian elections and its transformation into a “vote Labor” campaign reflects the enduring capacity of the alliance between the ALP and the union bureaucracy to demobilise working-class struggle. Similarly in France the Socialist Party under François Hollande managed to very temporarily re-invent itself with a somewhat more left wing face in the lead-up to the April 2012 presidential elections, and to co-opt and demobilise important layers of workers. On the other hand after the elections the French Communist Party played an important mobilising role in the mass protests against austerity, demonstrating the continuing relevancy and necessity of revolutionaries adopting a united front approach in regard to the PCF.

Overall Murray Smith has a profound misunderstanding of the nature and influence of reformism in the working class movement. He argues in effect that organised reformism can only have a serious and ongoing mass base in a period like the post-war boom when Labor parties could deliver important reforms. Thus in his 2007 article, “The Radical Left in Western Europe”, he argued:

The traditional parties kept the support of the working class because they were able to deliver. Reformist consciousness is not “natural” for workers.<sup>8</sup>

In the Australian case, the ALP was out of government from 1949 until the end of 1972 — the overwhelming bulk of the post-war boom years. So it could not possibly have maintained its base by actually delivering reforms. But leaving that aside, it is far from being the case that it was only during the post-war boom or in other periods of economic expansion that the ALP had mass working class support. Just think of the enormous working class mobilisation in support of the demagogic NSW Labor premier Jack Lang during the 1930s Depression, or the popularity of the Curtin wartime Labor government, which endures to this day despite its austerity program and its betrayal of Labor principle by introducing conscription.

Indeed, prior to World War II the ALP had a much larger and considerably more active working-class membership than during the post-war boom. Well before Labor's turn to neoliberalism there had been a marked retreat from direct working class involvement in the party. Even at an electoral level Labor's failure to win office for almost the entire period confirms the fact that the boom years were far from being Labor's golden years. During the boom most workers voted Labor (or for the anti-communist breakaway, the Democratic Labor Party) but they were much less likely to join it or to rely on it to deliver improved living standards. Instead, in the late 1960s “reformism from below” emerged as

workers in key industries, such as the metal trades, took advantage of their strengthened industrial bargaining position to win extensive gains at a job level.

A further problem is that Murray Smith too much treats organised reformism as something that has to be embodied in parties similar to the ALP. In countries like Australia the union bureaucracy is arguably a more important organised reformist force than the ALP, in terms of its influence over the core sections of the working class. Indeed, it is the union bureaucracy that created and long propped up the ALP and British Labour. Despite the erosion of union membership the union bureaucracy still has a major impact on working class consciousness and mobilisation — again witness the scale of the mobilisations against WorkChoices.

In any case, the existence of reformism does not simply depend on the existence of organised reformist forces, parties, trade unions or whatever. It arises from the very nature of working class existence under capitalism. Workers have a contradictory life experience. On the one hand, the fact that they are dominated and ruled over by the bosses, the police, government bureaucrats and their ilk leads to feelings of submission. On the other hand their exploitation can lead to flare-ups of resistance.

Thus there is an ongoing flux in workers' ideas. Most workers accept many of the ideas of the system — as Karl Marx famously put it, the ruling ideas of any society are the ideas of the ruling class. But workers would also like to see some improvements in their lives. Consequently most workers most of the time have some sort of reformist consciousness. Workers are not born reformists and reformist consciousness may not be “natural” for workers, to use Murray Smith's words, but there is a real material basis in the life experience of workers that leads them to be open to accepting reformist ideas. This means there is always, short of enormous revolutionary upheavals, a potential mass base for reformist politics. Reformism does not have to be created by reformist organisations. It is the line of least resistance, particularly in the advanced capitalist countries.

The task for revolutionaries then is not just to fight the reformist parties and trade union leaders, though that is vital, but to fight the reformist ideas dominant amongst most workers. This is very important because if workers are to make a socialist revolution they have to be conscious of what they are doing. The emancipation of the working class is their self-emancipation. Workers can't be liberated by a left government, no matter how radical. Workers have to do it themselves which means in turn that they need to consciously break with reformism. Of course, the depth of understanding will vary enormously amongst the workers who make a revolution; a minority will be more advanced than others. Nonetheless for a revolution to succeed the mass of workers need to be clear on the basics of the class war.

However, revolutionaries need to understand that any successful struggle against reformism involves much more than the basic task of, propagandising for socialist ideas. The hold of reformist ideas over the mass of the working class will not be overcome by the preaching of revolutionary ideas, no matter how tirelessly or systematically, by a socialist party. The masses need to change themselves via their own self-activity and experience, that is, by involvement in mass struggles. Lenin summed up the transformative role of mass struggle this way:

The real education of the masses can never be separated from their independent political, and especially revolutionary, struggle ... Only struggle discloses to [the exploited class] the magnitude of its own power, widens its horizon, enhances its abilities, clarifies its mind, forges its will.<sup>9</sup>

That in turn points to the necessity of revolutionaries actively engaging in struggle alongside

workers influenced by reformist ideas and proving the superiority of a revolutionary approach in practice. The united front strategy is the embodiment of this approach.

It is not just when the barricades go up that the difference between reformist and revolutionary politics matters. Revolutionary politics are a guide to socialists' immediate practice today. What the Hungarian Marxist theorist Georg Lukacs referred to as the "actuality of revolution" means that the goal of socialist revolution guides Marxists' day to day practice.<sup>10</sup> In every struggle Marxists want to see our side make the most advances possible. We want to take it to the limit. We want to strengthen working class organisation for future battles. We want to educate all around us in the lessons of the battle — the role of the media, the police, politicians, union officials, middle class forces and so on. We are not for accepting shoddy compromises. We see every struggle as part of a broader revolutionary project.

None of this means that revolutionary Marxists should rule out being actively involved in building broad left parties like SYRIZA in Greece. Far from it. The dramatic rise of SYRIZA was undoubtedly a step forward for the resistance to austerity. However, that does not mean that the differences between the various political currents in SYRIZA are a minor matter. Revolutionaries have to have their eyes wide open when they operate in broad left parties like SYRIZA. Such parties are a political battleground. The July 2013 SYRIZA conference, at which the leadership went on a frontal offensive against the revolutionary components of SYRIZA, dramatically confirmed this.<sup>11</sup>

In 2003 Murray Smith wrote:

We never said that "the distinction between reform and revolution is no longer operative in modern politics". What we do say is that at this stage of the struggle the dividing line in the working class movement is between those who accept capitalism and all that goes with it and those who take an anti-capitalist position. And that we unite people on that basis and then deal with the issues as they are posed concretely.<sup>12</sup>

This simply fudges the issue and leads to a lack of clarity. People with all sorts of perspectives and political orientations can say they reject capitalism. The anti-capitalist label tells you little about what people really stand for or the role they will play in any specific struggle. Many of the prominent leaders of the Occupy Melbourne movement in 2011 would have described themselves as anti-capitalist, but that did not stop them from playing a very destructive role in the movement, especially after the police attack on 21 October that forcibly evicted the occupiers from the City Square. In part because of their obsession with "process" over the need to mobilise the maximum forces to resist the police attack, they were incapable of seizing the moment and what had been a promising movement quickly disintegrated.

Similarly the leadership grouping in SYRIZA around Alexis Tsipras would have undoubtedly described themselves as anti-capitalist. That has not stopped them from making all sorts of political concessions to the powers that be as the prospect of forming a government became a more immediate proposition - all justified on the basis of political realism. Militant workers who join SYRIZA are in a very different category. Many of them can potentially be won to a revolutionary stance, particularly if the radicalisation in Greek society intensifies. Nonetheless, they have to be won to revolutionary politics. There is nothing automatic about it, and that will entail a political fight with the non-revolutionary forces in SYRIZA, including those who still proclaim themselves to be anti-capitalist.

## **A qualitative degeneration towards left reformism**

As I stated at the start, for all the problems with Murray Smith's early writings on broad left parties he clearly saw himself as a revolutionary Marxist. In his 2003 article, "The broad party, the revolutionary party and the united front", he wrote: "I am convinced that the role of revolutionary Marxists today is to build broad socialist parties while defending their own Marxist positions within them."<sup>13</sup> His more recent writings reflect a qualitative shift to the right towards a left reformist stance. This is reflected in his changing criteria for assessing the success of the various broad left parties that he promotes. His criteria have increasingly become their votes in parliamentary elections and their institutional gains — not the struggles they have led or initiated, not their ability to defend working class interests, not their concerted stands for political principle nor the influence of revolutionary ideas amongst their membership.

In the 2007 article he began to downplay the importance of mass struggle compared to parliamentary elections. Discussing the "no" vote in the 2005 referendum on the European constitution in France and the Netherlands and the 8.7 per cent vote for Die Linke in the German elections of September that year he argued:

What worried our rulers is that both of these events were political. Because, contrary to the ultra-left rhetoric that still marks some of the revolutionary Left, what worries the enemy is not only, or even especially, resistance on a social level. They are used to strikes and demonstrations in protest at this or that measure. Except in exceptional cases they carry on regardless. We occasionally win battles, up to now they have been winning the war.<sup>14</sup>

This mirrors the standard reformist narrative which separates "economics" (the industrial struggle) from "politics" (parliamentary activity). It is absurd to argue that voting in a referendum or parliamentary election is more "political" or more important for the class struggle than engaging in a mass strike or a defiant demonstration against austerity measures. Quite the reverse. As Lenin famously argued in his pamphlet "*Left Wing*" *Communism: an infantile disorder*, a polemic against genuine ultralefts who opposed in principle standing in bourgeois elections, "a big strike, for instance, is more important than parliamentary activity at *all* times, and not only during a revolution or in a revolutionary situation."<sup>15</sup>

It is also totally incorrect to argue that austerity measures are more likely to be reversed by referendum results or electoral victories than by mass struggle. Unless there is a marked rise in the level of social struggle any victories we have in a referendum or an election campaign will be quickly neutralised or frittered away. That is exactly what has happened. The victory in the 2005 referendum campaign did not put an end to the neoliberal offensive in France which has continued first under Sarkozy and now under Hollande. Nor did the 8.7 per cent vote for Die Linke in 2005 lead to any let up in the drive by the German bourgeoisie to force down wages and impose more insecure working conditions. Indeed, its greater relative success in cutting wages has been one of the main factors improving the competitive position of German capitalism in recent years. Similarly the fantastic electoral results for SYRIZA, while a very important step forward for the struggle in Greece, did not halt the austerity drive that is destroying the lives of a whole generation of Greek workers.

Of course, in an era in which the Western bourgeoisie is determined to drive through neoliberal "reforms", we are not going to turn the tide through one-off protests or even the occasional general strike. There is going to have to be an intense radicalisation and the level of resistance is going to have to rise to something approaching pre-revolutionary levels to force a sustained retreat by the bourgeoisie. Even if a radical left government is elected, it will be unable to carry through serious pro-working class reforms unless there is a tremendous social mobilisation to counter intense ruling class sabotage. Ultimately the only guarantee of ending the neoliberal era and "winning the war" is by overthrowing the whole social order.

Another problem with his 2007 article is that Murray Smith makes much too sharp a divide between the adherents of parties like the ALP, which are committed to neoliberalism, and “the Left that refuses the neo-liberal consensus, and which goes all the way from revolutionaries to honest reformists who think it is possible to go back to a more humane Welfare State type of capitalism without challenging the foundations of the system, that is, it encompasses both anti-capitalists and anti-liberals, and shades between the two.”<sup>16</sup>

Any close examination of the historical record soon reveals that the “honest reformists” have been no more reliable defenders of working-class interests than today’s generation of ALP politicians. Just a few notorious examples serve to make the point. James Scullin was an openly declared socialist. He had moved the adoption of the ALP’s Socialist Objective. This did not prevent him, as Prime Minister during the Great Depression, from imposing the Premiers’ Plan, which slashed living standards. John Curtin’s wartime government was packed with self-declared socialists and radicals like Eddie Ward, Don Cameron, Frank Brennan, E.J. Holloway, Arthur Calwell and the one-time Marxist and anti-conscription campaigner, Curtin himself. Yet, while war profiteers made hay, Labor’s working class supporters endured military and industrial conscription and stringent austerity measures. Then it was the turn of Ben Chifley’s government, containing most of the self-same socialists and radicals, to send in the troops to crush the 1949 coal strike! Then came the turn of “the darling of the left”, Jim Cairns, who had played a key role in the anti-Vietnam War movement and tirelessly proclaimed his socialist credentials and distaste for capitalism. In response to the onset of economic crisis in 1974, Cairns, as deputy Prime Minister and Treasurer in the Whitlam government, demanded wage cuts from workers while handing out massive subsidies to the bosses.

Internationally the pattern has been identical - whether it be the German Social Democratic Party voting to endorse the war in 1914, the appalling betrayals of Ramsay MacDonald’s British Labour government during the Depression or the French Socialist Party presiding over France’s colonial war in Algeria.

It is not simply the onset of neoliberalism that has led reformist parties to bow to the wishes of the powers that be and abandon working class interests. It flows from the very logic of reformism. Australia is a classic case study of this process. One of the reasons that the end of the post-war boom can misleadingly appear to be such a decisive turning point in the evolution of social democracy internationally is that very few countries, other than Australia and to a considerably lesser extent Britain and New Zealand, had both mass reformist parties and parliamentary democratic regimes for the entire twentieth century. In countries like Spain, Germany, Greece, Portugal, Austria, Italy, Japan and Brazil, long periods of fascist or authoritarian rule meant that the reformist parties were not put to the test and could maintain a more left profile, whereas the ALP formed the world’s first social democratic government in 1904 and was elected again in 1910 and 1914. Consequently the “honest reformists” were put to the test much earlier.

Once in government, whether led by “honest reformists” or Blairite neoliberals, the social democrats are trapped. Either they run the system on behalf of the capitalists and thus bow to their dictates to maintain profits and contain working class unrest, or they mobilise their supporters to decisively confront capital. The latter option means open class war and a preparedness to employ revolutionary measures. Precisely because they are reformists, this is an approach they are not prepared to countenance. In times of relative capitalist prosperity, the reformists have some space to perform a balancing act between the two great classes in society, but if they are in office in times of war or economic crisis there is little room to manoeuvre. If they prevaricate or are unable because of the strength of working

class resistance to meet the demands of the bourgeoisie and carry through a resolute and concerted attack on their working class supporters, they are driven from office or overthrown in a coup. That is precisely what happened to Gough Whitlam in 1975 and Jack Lang in the 1930s. Whitlam's moderate reforming government was overthrown in the Kerr Coup because it was unable, because of the scale of working class mobilisation, to carry out the shift from Keynesianism to neoliberalism as abruptly as the Australian ruling class, panicked by the ending of the post-war boom, demanded.

Well before they form a government the reformists come under enormous pressure to accommodate to the norms of the bourgeois political system. These pressures and inducements take varied forms. They include outright bribery and corruption (which is far from uncommon), the pressure to form unsavoury alliances to gain a seat or to tone down policies to win votes or avoid unfavourable media coverage, the impact on erstwhile radicals of the material benefits of a comfortable parliamentary lifestyle, and their political inability to stand up to the powerful ideological argument that they have to respect "our democratic institutions" and behave "responsibly". In the Australian case the accommodation to bourgeois respectability by the "honest reformists" came very early. It was leading figures from the Australian Socialist League, such as George Black and William Holman, who led the charge to back away from central elements of Labor's platform and to not support workers in struggle. As early as 1895 the future NSW Premier Holman proclaimed that Labor "has officially nothing to do with unionism".<sup>17</sup>

### **Blurring the distinction between left reformism and revolution**

In his May 2013 article, "The real European left stands up", Murray Smith states that because there has never been a successful revolution in an advanced Western country, socialists can't have a blueprint. As far as it goes that is true. But this does not prevent Murray Smith from presenting his own blueprint:

They [revolutions] will certainly involve a combination of mass mobilisations and battles on the electoral terrain and in parliamentary institutions. That will involve in particular winning a majority in elections based on universal suffrage, and not only once. In fact it is difficult to see a revolutionary process that does not involve a left alliance winning an election ...

Rather than establishing an *a priori* cleavage between reformists and revolutionaries it is better to look at what anti-capitalist measures a left government should take and how, how to mobilise support for them, how to counter economic sabotage and political pressures from the right etc.<sup>18</sup>

This is a pretty standard left reformist narrative that focuses on change via a left government in a bourgeois parliament. There is no reference here to workers having to have their own organisations of mass democracy - workers' councils, soviets or factory committees. A mass movement is invoked, but its central role is to back up and defend a left government, not to take power directly into its own hands via an insurrectionary uprising. Murray Smith makes no reference to the likelihood of a left government betraying its working class supporters and consequently to the need for workers to build their own independent organisations and to be prepared to act independently of any left government.

This is not even a very radical left reformist perspective. For unlike numerous left reformists historically, Murray Smith does not even argue for the need to combine bourgeois parliamentary forms of government with workers' councils in a system of dual power. On top of that, he states that it is not sufficient for a left government to win a bourgeois parliamentary election once: it would have to keep on winning them. This compares

decidedly unfavourably with the approach of the ALP Socialisation Units of the 1930s which had their “Three-Year Plan” of transition to socialism adopted by the NSW ALP’s 1931 Easter Conference.<sup>19</sup> Other radical left reformists have gone further in seeing the futility of trying to achieve fundamental change via bourgeois parliaments. Here are two fairly typical statements by the powerful Victorian Socialist Left faction of the ALP in 1970:

Parliament serves their purposes as a gesture to democracy, giving the adult population a chance every three years to place a “1” in a square in what in practice is a complete contradiction of real democratic participation. However Parliament is merely a stage on which the shadow of democracy is silhouetted. The substance of control is found in the boardrooms of the major companies, where representatives of the 7 percent determine the policies which serve their interests.

Western society will have to go through radical changes to survive ... These changes will not occur ... by voluntary means. The controllers of society will not retire gracefully from the scene but will fight to hang on to their power. It is doubtful that any political party acting only through the parliamentary system will be able to have any real effect.<sup>20</sup>

Does Murray Smith really think that the ruling class would allow a genuinely radical left government that was determined to abolish capitalist rule to stay in office and keep winning elections? Has he not heard of Pinochet in Chile? And remember that Salvador Allende’s Popular Unity government that was brutally overthrown by Pinochet’s military coup was in practice a relatively moderate reformist government which was far from moving to uproot capitalism and establish socialism. Similarly in Australia in November 1975 the mildly reforming Whitlam government was overthrown by the Kerr Coup.

In a previous article in 2012, “France: The Rise of the Left Front”, Murray Smith essentially dismisses the differences between revolutionary and reformist politics as meaningless:

Liegard [one of the leaders of the right wing of the NPA] is quite clearly right, and what he says punches a hole in the idea that there are “strategic differences” between the NPA and the Left Front. If you don’t have a strategy how can you have strategic differences? You can of course have concrete differences; you can also have ideological generalizations and preconceptions which do not take you very far. Does the Left Front itself have a worked-out strategy and program? Not at this stage. But it has a definite anti-capitalist objective and a practice that combines electoral campaigns and work in representative institutions with extra-parliamentary mobilisations.<sup>21</sup>

This is nonsense. Using Murray Smith’s criterion, there was no “strategic or meaningful distinction in the 1960s and 1970s in Australia between the revolutionary left and the ALP. On the one hand the revolutionary left did not have a clearly worked out strategy for overthrowing Australian capitalism. There was no way it could have developed one given its small size and social weight. On the other hand the ALP had not just a definite anti-capitalist objective but an explicitly socialist objective and it too had “a practice that combined electoral campaigns and work in representative institutions with extra-parliamentary mobilisations”. And you would be flat out establishing a case that the practice of the Left Front in France today is to the left of the Victorian ALP of the late 1960s and early 1970s when it played a prominent role in the anti-Vietnam War movement.

Increasingly these days Murray Smith goes out of his way to prettify the approach of the various broad left parties in Europe such as Die Linke in Germany, Communist Refoundation in Italy and even the PCF. In “The real European left stands up”, he writes of all of them that “the objective of going beyond capitalism and of a socialist society is not in doubt”. And then after quoting from the PCF’s political resolution, he declares that “the aim of

replacing capitalism rather than reforming it is shared by other parties”.<sup>22</sup>

In the case of Die Linke in Germany, which is no more than a run of the mill left reformist party that does not lead struggles outside parliament, this is a ridiculous statement. In East Germany, where Die Linke has its strongest base, it has an entrenched bureaucratic apparatus inherited from the old East German ruling Stalinist party that would be quite happy to play its part in managing German capitalism, and does so in various local governments. This does not rule out the possibility of revolutionary groups being active within Die Linke, but it would be extremely disorienting for them to do so with the expectation that Die Linke could be transformed into anything approaching a revolutionary party.

As for Communist Refoundation, which Murray Smith argues “remains the starting point” for rebuilding the left in Italy,<sup>23</sup> it was put to the test of practice when it joined the social-liberal Prodi government from 2006 to 2008 and sold out its working class supporters by supporting austerity and the imperialist war in Afghanistan. Based on this track record it is simply absurd to assert as Murray Smith does that “the objective of going beyond capitalism and of a socialist society is not in doubt” in the case of Communist Refoundation. Communist Refoundation’s rhetorical commitment to going beyond capitalism is as meaningful as the ALP’s one time commitment to the Socialist Objective.

Turning to the PCF, where is the clear evidence that it “has now pretty thoroughly settled its accounts with Stalinism” as Murray Smith confidently asserts?<sup>24</sup> The PCF may no longer be a cheer leader for Stalin or Brezhnev, but it has not broken with the class collaborationist politics that have been the hallmark of Stalinism ever since the Popular Front of the 1930s. As recently as 1997-2002 the PCF participated in a neoliberal government. Moreover it allows its MPs autonomy to vote for whatever reactionary position they desire, including racist attacks on Muslims and opposition to same-sex marriage. At a local level, the numerous councils it controls, thanks to an alliance with the Socialist Party, implement anything but radical policies. Most recently the PCF has caused a furore inside the Left Front by deciding to run on the Socialist Party’s ticket for the March 2014 municipal elections in Paris, rather than on a Left Front ticket.

As for the PCF’s 2013 political resolution, which Murray Smith praises, let’s look at what it actually states: “That is why we talk about revolution. A social, citizens’, peaceful, democratic revolution.”<sup>25</sup> A peaceful, citizens’ revolution! How is this markedly different from, let alone an improvement upon, what the Communist Parties were saying back in the 1950s with their talk of “peaceful transition” and the notorious British road to socialism? It is no more radical than the Communist Party of Australia’s program, *Australia’s way forward*, published in 1964 when it was still a hardline pro-Moscow Stalinist outfit. In that 1964 program the CPA proclaimed its support for “a revolutionary social change” and for “exposing the true nature of reformism ... and replacing it by a revolutionary socialist conviction”. In terms of the role of the working class, the CPA’s 1964 program was clearer than that of the PCF today. It proclaimed that socialism “can be achieved only through struggle - the struggle of the working class”. As for its attitude to parliament, it stated, “The Communist Party regards Parliament and parliamentary election campaigns as ... remaining secondary to the active struggles of the people themselves.”<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

Based in part on a serious misassessment of the balance of class forces and the degree of working class radicalisation in the early 2000s, Murray Smith elaborated a highly optimistic scenario of rapidly developing broad left parties opening up the space for revolutionary

advance in the major Western capitalist countries. Underpinning this misassessment of the political possibilities was an erroneous theoretical analysis of the nature of reformism. Murray Smith downplayed the impact of reformist ideas on the mass of workers and wrote off the ongoing influence of the mainstream reformist organisations, going so far as to proclaim that “it is not an exaggeration to say that we can ‘skip over’ the traditional parties of the working class”.<sup>27</sup> This in turn led him to dismiss the necessity of revolutionaries adopting a united front approach to the mainstream reformist parties.

Over the last decade, however, he has considerably lowered his sights and made substantial adaptations to a left reformist approach. As early as 2007, he began to downplay the importance of mass struggle outside parliament compared to electoral interventions. He subscribed to the mainstream reformist discourse of separating “politics” from “economics” and redefined “politics” to mean primarily electoral campaigning or other forms of institutional involvement. He increasingly fudged the distinction between reformist and revolutionary politics, arguing that the strategic differences between reformists and revolutionaries are today meaningless or non-existent.

In his May 2013 article, “The real European left stands up”, he posits a left government, rather than the autonomous action of the working class, as *the* force for a fundamental transformation of society. He argues that the key task for socialists is to rally behind a left government, which in his view will have to win office more than once in bourgeois parliamentary elections. Neither in that article nor in his other recent writings does he raise the need for workers to establish their own independent organisations — workers’ councils, strike committees or soviets — initially as a counter-power to the bourgeois parliament and state and eventually as the means for their democratic rule over the whole of society. By the standards of radical left reformists of the past, who argued for some sort of combination of soviets and parliament, Murray Smith’s recent writings have elaborated a quite moderate perspective.

In essence then Murray Smith, though not openly acknowledging it, has abandoned his earlier standpoint of seeing the building of mass working class parties as a means

to resist neo-liberal globalisation and the capitalist offensive, to rehabilitate the perspective of socialism and to move from resistance to overthrowing capitalism. We put forward the basic ideas of revolutionary Marxism. And those ideas can begin to win a mass audience today.<sup>28</sup>

Instead he has come to see broad left parties, dominated by non-revolutionary forces, such as the Left Front in France or SYRIZA in Greece, as the instruments for successfully challenging capitalist rule.

## Notes

1. Smith, 2001.
2. Smith, 2002.
3. See Armstrong, 2010; Percy, 2013.
4. For a more detailed discussion of these issues see Armstrong and Bramble, 2007, Bramble and Kuhn, 2011 and Hillier, 2011.
5. Smith, 2003.
6. Smith, 2003.

7. Smith, 2003.
8. Smith, 2007.
9. Lenin, 1964.
10. Lukacs, 1977.
11. Petrou, 2013; Armstrong, 2013; Kouvelakis, 2013.
12. Smith, 2003.
13. Smith, 2003.
14. Smith, 2007.
15. Lenin, 1993, p. 71.
16. Smith, 2007.
17. Nairn, 1973, p. 134.
18. Smith, 2013.
19. Cooksey, 1976.
20. Quoted in Oakley, 2012, p. 81.
21. Smith, 2012.
22. Smith, 2013.
23. Smith, 2013.
24. Smith, 2012.
25. Smith, 2013.
26. Communist Party of Australia, 1964, pp. 55-64.
27. Smith, 2003.
28. Smith, 2001.

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