

Political parties in contemporary
Australian fiction:
Stephen Sewell's *The Blind Giant is Dancing*,
George Papaellinas's *No* and
Alan Wearne's *The Nightmarkets*

Dr Rodney Smith

Government and International Relations
University of Sydney

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Abstract

In the last two decades, Australian major political parties, like those in other western democracies, have faced a number of serious problems. These include challenges to the relevance of their traditional ideologies and institutional support bases, slipping memberships and rank and file participation, declining party identification, an erosion of confidence in majoritarian party government and the rise of new parties and social movements. This paper explores the ways in which these sorts of problems are treated in three contemporary works of Australian fiction: Stephen Sewell's play *The Blind Giant is Dancing* (1985), Alan Wearne's verse novel *The Nightmarkets* (1986) and George Papaellinas' novel *No* (1997). As with other areas of politics, the study of literary fiction illuminates political parties in ways that compliment traditional political science approaches and suggests new ways of thinking about the problems parties face.

The three works discussed here explore the connections between internal party politics and wider political, social and economic structures. Sewell's depiction of the inner politics of a social democratic party suggests the impossibility of the ALP to challenge effectively patriarchal capitalism. Papaellinas focuses on Labor, class and ethnicity at a local level, linking the displacement of immigrant workers and members of the underclass from Labor branch politics to their more general public marginalisation. Wearne explores the possibilities of party politics after the dismissal of the reformist Whitlam Government, pessimistically suggesting that neither the major parties nor a new centre party provide avenues for meaningful commitment. Each work highlights alternatives to the failures of party politics, including protest (Sewell), drugs, music, sex and writing (Wearne) and crime and silence (Papaellinas); however, none of these is depicted as constituting effective political action.

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The three works discussed here explore the connections between internal party politics and wider political, social and economic structures. Sewell's depiction of the inner politics of a social democratic party suggests the impossibility of an effective Labor response to patriarchal capitalism. Papaellinas focuses on Labor, class and ethnicity at a local level, linking the displacement of immigrant workers and members of the underclass from Labor branch politics to their more general public marginalisation. Wearne explores wider possibilities of party politics after the dismissal of the reformist Whitlam Government. The Liberals' best days are past them and a new centre party is the plaything of its leader. Wearne suggests that patient social democracy is Labor's only viable response to the 1975 dismissal. Each work highlights alternatives to the failures of party politics, including protest (Sewell), drugs, music, sex and writing (Wearne) and crime and silence (Papaellinas). None of these is endorsed as constituting effective political action.

Labor in *The Blind Giant is Dancing*

Written when Sewell was a Marxist, much of *Blind Giant is Dancing* explores the corrupt interior of the 'Social Democratic' Party.¹ The Social Democrats are in office at state level, as was Neville Wran's Labor Government in New South Wales when Sewell's play was written. The NSW branch of the ALP was in the middle of intense factional conflict, particularly around its inner-west Sydney branches. The branch-stacking, ballot-rigging, bashings, allegations of corruption and other criminal activities found in the play all have analogies in that period of New South Wales ALP history (Wheelwright 1983; Steketee and Cockburn 1986; Leigh 2000). On a broader, more structural level, Sewell draws on the massive unemployment of the early 1980s (particularly redundancies in the steel industry as companies like BHP restructured), the limiting effects of the ALP-ACTU Accords on workers' abilities to act against unemployment and wage erosion, the power of multinational corporations over Australian government policy, and Australia's strategic relationships with the United States. As Sewell (1985: v) has protested, the characters in the play are not directly identifiable with NSW Labor figures such as Wran or John Ducker, but the analogies outlined above suggest that the play's reception by audiences – particularly during its 1984 and 1995 Sydney seasons – would be as a more or less successful critique of contemporaneous Australian Labor Party politics and political culture (see, for example, Byrnes 1984, Fitzpatrick 1988: 531; Hoad 1995).

Factional politics and corruption

At its most superficial level, *Blind Giant* enacts the corrupt tactics of a dominant Right faction under serious threat from the 'Militant Left'. The Right, represented by Party Secretary Michael Wells, first attempts to discredit Militant Left leader Fitzgerald as a KGB agent (12).² A Left organiser is bashed (26). Left branch records are seized by the Right-dominated Rules Committee in search of irregularities (24, 25). Fitzgerald forges an alliance with Charlie Palmer, a criminal businessman who holds the balance of votes on the Rules Committee, to avoid exposure of these irregularities; however, this gives Wells further ammunition against Fitzgerald. Wells tries to buy off Fitzgerald with a safe seat. When Fitzgerald refuses the offer, Wells threatens to expose his dealings with Palmer to the Party Executive (81-5). Finally, thugs attempt to bash Fitzgerald (125).

As this escalation of Right tactics occurs, Allen's political morality and openness to corrupt tactics changes. When he first learns of the Rules Committee investigation, Fitzgerald resists the urgings of Ramon – an activist who was tortured under Pinochet – that he turn to Palmer for help (28):

Allen: He's a criminal, Ramon. What sort of credibility – By what right could we claim to represent an alternative--?

Ramon: If we don't do it, we'll be back where we were three years ago.

Allen: If we do we might as well have never started.

Ramon: That's exactly the way I feel. I should never have wasted my time in this bullshit bourgeois party!

[A slight pause.]

Allen: There's such a thing as principle.

As the struggle with the Right intensifies, Allen gradually repudiates this early position in word and deed. He does a deal with Palmer, attempts to persuade Rose Draper, a financial journalist, to run a story based on flimsy evidence that Wells is involved in drug dealing, and instigates branch-stacking and illegal searches of police records (28-30, 52, 89-91, 94, 113). By the end of the play, he has used his (mis)information about Wells to discredit him and to assume the Party Secretaryship.

Allen's transformation demonstrates, although in quite a different way than he intended, one of his early statements against Ramon (28): 'There can't be any conflict between our political aims and our morality.' As Allen's political aims change from overthrowing capitalism, to overthrowing Wells, to leading the Party himself, his morality is duly transformed. Importantly, *Blind Giant* does not depict merely the Right, or even the Party, as corrupt and corrupting. Allen is not corrupted simply because he pursued Party politics rather than some other endeavour. He could easily have become the cynical and materialistic merchant banker that Bob Lang, his one-time friend from university days, has become. The Party is just part of the overarching structure of corrupting capitalism.

Intellectual politics and the seductions of the system

In a similar way, the Faustian contract that Allen makes when he changes from revolutionary gadfly to party power-broker is not made with a particular person at all. Although Palmer and Wells and Rose all tempt Allen with the promise of power, it is

ultimately capitalism itself that is presented as buying Allen's soul. In return for understanding the system as it is and gaining power within it, he must give up his ideas of changing it. From the beginning of the play, Allen wants above all to understand the nature of the system and, in consequence, what political action is possible. By understanding the system, he believes he can will changes to it (34).

Allen's approach to political action is thus both highly intellectualised and individualistic. When Rose asks why he is a Marxist, Allen replies (52), '... because I've got enough intellectual integrity to recognise the most elementary facts about how this society works.' In the same way, his initial conflict with Wells over the Left branches immediately pushes him back to work on the abstract transformation problem within Marxist economics, the topic of his long abandoned thesis. Underlining this point, Sewell has him play computer chess while he works on the problem (31). Later, when Ramon argues that socialism is within sight, Allen responds (76), 'Do you think we're ready for the tasks of socialism?'. In contrast to Ramon and Allen's brother Bruce (see below), Allen attempts to work through all the implications of any action before he takes it.

Intellectualism leads Allen to abandon hope of change because although he can see how the system works and what its consequences are, he is unable to envisage a way of changing it that the system cannot defeat. Like the chess computer, the system can respond to counter any line of attack. This countering occurs in two ways. The first is that all obvious forms of political action are blocked. Efforts by Social Democratic governments to change policy are blocked by overseas and domestic investment decisions (39-44). Attempts to rouse Australians to political protest are blocked by deep passivity and conservatism in the political culture (45). For similar reasons, Left candidates are defeated at the polls(23). The incompleteness of Allen's critique of capitalist politics – knowing the problems but not knowing how to solve them – is well illustrated by his disjointed argument with Wells at Bob's party (23):

Wells: There's a real problem here for people like you, isn't there, Allen? The people you regard as totally corrupt and incompetent keep winning the elections, while the faultless voice of reason and morality keeps forfeiting its money to the Electoral Office. What's your theory on that?

Allen: What's yours?

Wells: I'm quite happy to say the voters are as thick as bricks, but I don't think that'd rest well on your mantle.

Allen: Do you know how many unemployed there are in the country now, Mike? How much industry is being destroyed? How many homeless there are? Do you know what the suicide rate is?

Unable to answer Wells on the apparent impossibility of changing the system through electoral means, Allen immediately moves the debate away from this crucial question onto safer ground – his critique of the current system and its consequences on people's lives.

The second way the system blocks change is by confusing perceptions of reality. On one level, the play makes this point by constantly inserting doubts about characters, their motives and the veracity of their statements. Rose Draper best exemplifies this. Is she really just a business journalist? If so, why is she helping the critic of capitalism Allen to bring down the ostensibly pro-business Wells? If not, who is she working for? Is the information she gives Allen that links Wells to drug importation genuine? If not, why does it appear to be confirmed by Allen's own investigations? If so, why does she seem reluctant to publish it? Was she lying when she claimed to love Allen? If so, why does she kill herself after she thinks she has destroyed him? If not, why did she destroy him? These sorts of questions are strategically crucial for political actors wanting to change the system, or even to resist it in minor ways. For political actors who accept the system and its attendant constraints and corruption, they become much less significant. The plans for a United States takeover of Austeel provide an example of this. For Wells, who opposes the takeover to try to shore up his position within the Party and the electorate, understanding the plans is vital. He passes them to the economist Lang for analysis. Lang, in turn, offers them to Allen as ammunition, who is unconcerned. Having predicted some kind of takeover, convinced of the inevitability of capitalism and now on the verge of removing Wells, Allen no longer cares about the implications of the plan (112):

Bob: What can I do?

Allen: Nothing. You're right. There's nothing you can do.

Bob: I brought it to you.

Allen: I don't want it.

Bob: They're going to close the place down, Allen. They'll import everything. We won't have a manufacturing sector left.

Allen: That's capitalism.

At another level, *Blind Giant* suggests, in the manner of some accounts of hegemony, that the system prevents people from recognising their real interests and identities. The identities and interests they do recognise and value are distorted ones. The point of Louise's argument with Allen's mother Eileen is that Eileen's religion, marriage and domestic life have blinded her to her true interests (68):

Louise: Do you feel real standing under those icons?

Eileen: They're only pictures, Louise.

Louise: And a house, and a garden, and children?

Eileen: Any woman wants those things. It's only natural.

Ramon has similar arguments with the steel-workers, particularly those like Allen's father Doug, whose sense of dignity, pride in their work and masculinist independence prevent them from acknowledging that the company uses them like 'animals' (106-8). As Allen says, 'It's perfect. Capitalism creates us in its own image.' (97)

If the system distorts perceptions of interests and identities so successfully and completely, however, it makes it impossible for those who want to change the system to know which of their felt interests and values are authentic ones on which they should act. This intractable dilemma characterises much of Allen and Louise's thinking about politics, and particularly marks the conflicts between them throughout the play (71):

Louise: What are we socialists for?

Allen: Not to terrorise people out of their customs.

Louise: What? The family? The church? Militarism? They're all going to be in place after the revolution.

Allen: What have we got to offer instead? Do you see our relationship as a happy alternative to offer the people?

Louise: I won't be emotionally blackmailed by you!

Allen: Has socialism brought every worthwhile value into the world?

Louise: What could you possibly find valuable in that voodoo bag of misogyny and sado-masochism?

Allen: Christianity gave me my first experience of morality!

The Althusserian response to this difficulty, popular at the time Sewell wrote *Blind Giant*, was to argue that a firm grasp of Marxist science allowed people to break through this dilemma, to see from a vantage-point outside the structure (see, for example, Althusser 1971). As has already been suggested, Allen's attempts in this direction fail. Louise is equally unsuccessful from the perspective of her feminist critique of society (73). There is no vantage-point in *Blind Giant* external to capitalism or patriarchy that can validate particular values or actions.³

Ultimately, then, political change cannot come from within the party system. How it can come at all is left somewhat unclear in *Blind Giant*, but clues are given (Fitzpatrick 1988: 532). Change originates, in terms reminiscent of Marcuse (1972: Ch. 10), from those who

are so marginalised that they are not required or able to reflect on whether their needs are authentic or not. Ramon verbalises this position in his optimism about the people's capacity to make a new society (76):

'You'll be surprised when you see the people's strength! They don't know what it is like to live like free men and women; they'll shake heaven and hell when they get up to dance.

All that is needed is some stimulus to set this blind giant dancing.⁴ Unemployment is the stimulus, producing an uprising against the Social Democratic Government and a demand for revolutionary change. Sewell presents this changed outlook in a very straightforward way. When faced with unemployment the workers, previously unconvinced by Ramon's arguments, strike and demonstrate against the Government and Allen. Allen's brother Bruce, formerly as conservative as their father, is one of them. In Scenes Twelve and Thirteen of Act Two their political trajectories cross, Allen moving toward an intellectually worked out and willed individual power within the system, and Bruce toward an undefined and thus blind collective power with other workers (74-7). By the final scene, Bruce is leading the demonstrators against Allen.

Techniques in *Blind Giant*

The character twinning of Allen with his brother Bruce is a central technique in *Blind Giant*. Their different trajectories mark the consequences of entering the thrall of institutional power and escaping from it. The play's Mephistophelian motif also emphasises Allen's incapacity for successful leftist political manoeuvre (Fitzpatrick 1983: 147). Some of Sewell's stage devices also emphasise the lack of effective choice available to characters. These include his use of many short, cross-cutting cinematic scenes. These follow each other so quickly that the possibility of alternative action and reflection is lost in the drive they create (Fitzpatrick 1983: 146; Radice 1991: 162; Bramwell 1999:186).

Some of these short scenes – nightmarish glimpses of a wider society of homeless mothers, drunk evangelists, bashed derelicts and the like – emphasise the seriousness of power and its consequences. This seriousness is also emphasised by the scale of the play and by the language of Sewell's characters. They speak with very little intended humour (Fitzgerald 1983: 148). Almost all their speech in the play oscillates between a raw cynicism, ideological certainty and desperate pleading.

Sewell's melodramatic representation of politics alienated some audiences, particularly during the play's first run (Archer 1984-85; Hoad 1995). Some critics attempted to soften the confrontation of the play's politics by denying its structural critique of Labor in power and seeing corruption as simply residing in Sewell's characters (see, for example, Hoad 1995). Others did so by arguing that the play merely raises 'dilemmas' of leftist involvement in the Labor Party (Archer 1984-85). The literary techniques employed by Sewell, however, indicate that such attempted amelioration is contrary to the spirit of the play. Rather than working within the ALP, *Blind Giant* directs its audiences to abandon social democratic party politics and to have, in Sewell's words, the 'courage and strength' to throw themselves against such parties (xiii).

Labor in *No*

Like *Blind Giant*, *No* depicts the Labor Party and the wider labour movement as riven by factional, ideological, gender and class conflict, often violently expressed. *No* emphasises ethnicity as a further line of division within the Party. Unlike *Blind Giant*, the Labor politics in *No* is focused entirely on the local community level. Decisions of the Party's parliamentary wing and central executive are external forces that have important effects on *No*'s characters but they are beyond those characters' control. The combination of central decision-making by the Party and shifts in local power have taken the local ALP branches from the hands of the local migrant workers and left them in the control of the anglo-celtic middle class.

The novel observes these conflicts and shifts through the eyes of Lucky (Lakis), a teenage second generation Greek Australian imprisoned for trashing a pub. In the past, his father has been a local labour organiser, bringing fellow Greeks to the Party. His older sister Angie has also been an active socialist within the Party and is a union organiser among migrant clothing workers. Along with other older Greeks like Blue, they became disillusioned by Labor's shift to the right, the Accord and head office intervention in a local preselection conflict. If the older characters have lost faith in Labor, Lucky and his younger friends Larpa and Cindy never had it. They are alienated from Labor and politics in general.

Labor clientalism and the power of 'Skips'

The migrant experience of Lucky's father is central to his initial attraction to and later disillusionment with Labor. Labor is the closest thing Australia has to a mainstream socialist party but, more importantly, it provided him and other Greek migrants with a foothold in a hostile and humiliating Australian society. Escaping civil war against the monarchists in Greece, Lucky's father encounters hostility from Australian 'Skips'. In his first encounter with Australian society, he is thrown overboard after mistakenly buying ginger beer instead of beer for crew of his ship in Freemantle (307-32).

The Labor movement allows Lucky's father to build a power base against this hostility. In classic patron-client exchanges, he delivers members and votes for the Labor Party, partly by getting fellow Greek men into blue collar jobs like welding and getting them union positions and partly by being active in the local community (see Zappalà 1998). His favourite trick is strolling beside people, apparently just having a chat while he builds his networks and support. The public spaces of work and the street are thus crucial to his power. Others benefit from his organising but so does Lucky's father. He becomes a big man in the community, literally as well as politically (291, 335-6, 395, 399).

No suggests two limitations to this clientalism. The first is that as migrant communities become economically diverse, the demands of ethnicity and of class may conflict, leaving local political patrons like Lucky's father without room to manoeuvre. Papaellinas graphically depicts this conflict in the incident that leads to the splitting of Lucky's family. Lucky's mother supervises a clothing factory owned by Johnny, a friend of Lucky's father. One boiling afternoon, she leads her ethnically diverse group of female workers out from the factory onto the footpath, where they demand fans before they will resume work. A Vietnamese worker dumps a rubbish bin over the owner and in the melee that follows, Lucky's father beats up his wife (472-82). Lucky's father has responded to the demands of ethnic solidarity and masculinity rather than those of the workers he has worked to support. He suffers a breakdown, his stature physically shrinks, and for years he withdraws to his house (292). When he is eventually reunited with his wife and daughter, it is in a suburb far away. In contrast to his old public role, his interests are now limited to tending their garden (483).

Second, clientalism allows the anglo-celtic Party leadership to manage and cordon off the presence and concerns of Greek and other ethnic minority communities from real power within the ALP. Each ethnic minority has its branch meeting on a different night, reducing the risk of conflict between their members but also reducing the possibility that those

minorities will unite against the 'skips' in the Party (438-9, 443-7). Angie discovers this strategy of cordoning off troublesome minority concerns at her first (and virtually her last) Young Labor meeting. After an anglo-Australian youth has moved motions of solidarity with the Timorese and Bouganville, Angie moves a motion in solidarity with the Greeks against the Macedonians. At first her motion is ignored. When she persists, a blond tells her: 'The greek-speaking branch of the Party meets on Tuesdays here ... This is Wednesday' (435). A similar strategy unfolds when the Party's head office uses a factionalised preselection contest between two Greek candidates as a pretext to install a 'skip' candidate, a party researcher with no links to the local community (451-5).⁵

The Accord and the demobilisation of the local labour movement

While other authors such as Alan Wearne view Whitlam's 1975 dismissal as the end of Labor's shining promise (see below), for Papaellinas the turning point seems to have been the Accords struck between the ALP and the trade unions in the early 1980s. As in *Blind Giant*, the Accords are crucial in *No* partly because they represent Labor's general turning to the right under Bob Hawke and Paul Keating. Papaellinas also focuses on the ways in which the Accords undermined local links between labour activists and workers.⁶ Because the ACTU leadership has agreed to wage restraint, local organisers like Lucky's father cannot offer workers the prospect of wage increases in return for industrial action. The promised trade off for wage restraint is more jobs and employment security but these do not materialise. The old male welders and even some of the union employees lose their jobs to cheaper labour (339-43), while the women work precariously for eighty cents an hour in clothing sweatshops (408). For *Blue*, the Hawke rhetoric of consensus has a grim meaning, 'What [consensus] means is Blue, just fucking disappear, ay. And don't make no fucking noise about it either' (268; see also 281).

Without local bonds of work to hold them together and give them dignity, the welders are reduced to a quarrelling group of drunks. They engage in endless if sporadic arguments about whether and why the Party has betrayed them (34-5). They are incapable of political action beyond belligerent challenges to Mug, 'the very big booj' (52), the new owner of the King William, who has taken over not just their pub but also their local Labor branch.

The bourgeois occupation of public space

The takeover of the local Labor branch by what Lucky calls 'the booj' is part of a wider occupation of working class public space in the novel by the bourgeoisie. The Party meets in the pub, allowing Mug to control physically who can enter and who is excluded (276-7). The language of party meetings is no longer working class but saturated by the middle class rhetoric of 'reconciliation', 'republic' and 'consensus' (267, 295).

The King William Hotel symbolises both Labor's abandoning of workers' interests to court business and its limited acceptance of ethnic minorities. Mug is happy for Lucky, Blue, Acca and George to drink in his pub during the day. At six, however, he puts up the prices and changes the décor to suit the young professionals and businesspeople whom he wants to attract. He expects his poorer customers to leave so that the yuppies can feel comfortable (53-4). In a variation of the middle class linguistic domination of Party meetings, Mug has changed the name of the pub to 'The Bill', simultaneously appropriating an imagined working class informality while alienating his working class drinkers who have always known the pub as the King William (53). Working class violence is also displaced by middle class violence in the form of the pub's weekly sado-masochistic Sulphur Club. In a rare piece of humour, Lucky comments: 'we'd have belted them up for half of the price that it costed in there' (54-6).

This bourgeois occupation does not occur easily. Examples of resistance occur throughout *No*. Lucky refuses to speak, not because he is dumb but as a form of resistance. Lucky's aboriginal friend Larpa disrupts a meeting on reconciliation and Mabo by demanding 'Youse pay the rent now! Go on then! Cut the crap!' (298). Given his aboriginality, Larpa's demands cannot easily be dismissed and they disrupt the confident flow of the speaker on stage, before Larpa and Lucky are ejected from the meeting (295-301). On another occasion, Blue refuses to leave the pub at changeover time, demanding that he be served and provided an old bar towel left in place (62-78). To the bemusement of the gathering yuppies, he shouts: 'I won my right to a towel on the bar when I'm drinking!' (67). The paralleling of party politics and wider public life here is clear. Removed from the pub, Blue sets up a permanent camp in a nearby park, taunting Mug with browneyes whenever he arrives at work (267-70). Lucky destroys a yuppie customer's flat and belongings and later smashes and burns down the pub.⁷

'No' as the informal politics of resistance

These often violent examples of resistance are costly to the resisters. Blue's assaults on Mug end with him running into the pub crazed and naked, having stabbed himself in the ear and eye (345-6). Lucky himself is caught, beaten by the police and imprisoned (357-60). He has already covered himself in tattoos as a 'no', a warning to 'the booj' to keep away (181). While in his cell, he wears only his own excrement (5-6). When Angie visits him and promises a reunion with his family when he is released, Lucky utters his only spoken word during the whole novel: 'No' (493).

In contrast to his father and sister, who have attempted to resist a hostile society via formal collective political action, Lucky pursues purely informal modes of resistance. He participates in no formal institutions and relationships, relying instead for his needs on his own strength and his friends. His resistance is cheating the system and its constraints. He lives in squats and derelict public housing without paying rent (109-110, 198-9), and steals rather than going on the dole or working for a wage. In Lucky's eyes, his actions are on a par with those of the bourgeois society: 'Look, I didn't need their charity. Cos I had a job, I was a thief. They just didn't much like the job that I had, that's all' (138). The real thieves are the bourgeoisie (174-5, 274). 'The booj' also commit other unpunished crimes, like the sexual torture and killing of a street kid (202-12). Lucky is truly blissful only when he is away from the wider world, lying curled up on a mattress with Larpa and Cindy (131-2, 146-74).

No makes no clear judgement about whether Lucky's individualistic resistance is more or less successful than his father's and sister's collective political strategy. By the end of the novel, Lucky is alone, separated from his family and friends (287). Even in prison, Lucky believes that he lives life on his own terms, but the novel suggests that he is delusional (3-7). Neither he nor his family have found ways to fight a racist, class-divided and hostile society without themselves being deeply damaged.

Techniques in *No*

Papaellinas writes out of two traditions of political fiction – Australian and Greek. The leftist stance of the novel is found not just in its critique of the ALP but also the passages in which Lucky's father's fights monarchists and British troops during the Greek civil war of

the 1940s.⁸ In order to sustain his bleak treatment of Australian politics, Papaellinas adopts two main literary techniques. The first is his repeated use of confrontingly violent and visceral language and imagery. This technique is similar to Sewell's in *Blind Giant*, except that where Sewell relies on stage effects to convey violence, Papaellinas uses extended descriptions of fights, defilement and destruction. One example, already mentioned, is the passage in which Lucky follows a female yuppie home from the pub, knocks her unconscious and then breaks or defiles every piece of her property (139-46). The sustained violence of *No* challenges the related positions that Australian society contains no real oppositions and that politics is merely talk (or text) without real effects. The imagery in *No* reasserts the bodily physical and psychological consequences of political conflict.

As with *Blind Giant*, the risk here is that readers will dismiss *No*'s critique of politics as melodramatic and Lucky as simply a thug. Papaellinas's second technique – filtering all the novel's dialogue and events through the mind of Lucky – works against this. Lucky may only speak one word aloud; however, the only access readers have to his story is through his thoughts. Although alternative voices ostensibly define the novel's three main sections – 'Lucky', 'Blue' and 'Angie' – Lucky's voice always dominates. Lucky is aware of the power of language – see, for example, his distinctions between 'Greek', 'ethnic' and 'wog' (92) – and he uses this power to interpret, qualify and counter the perspectives, arguments and narratives of other characters. Lucky's version of events is always to the fore, leaving little purchase to construct other more 'reasonable' accounts of politics from within the novel. Towards the end of the novel, for example, Angie tells Lucky she is thinking of becoming active in the ALP again (441-2). Lucky's filtering of Angie's speech renders it tentative and confused, undercutting its capacity to establish an alternative political action to Lucky's own.

Political parties in *The Nightmarkets*

The treatment of political parties in Alan Wearne's verse-novel *The Nightmarkets* is more comprehensive than it is in *Blind Giant* or *No*. While *Blind Giant* and *No* focus on Labor, *The Nightmarkets* deals with the Liberal Party and a Democrat look-alike as well as Labor. The action of the novel primarily occurs in Melbourne during the 1970s, particularly the period after Gough Whitlam's dismissal in 1975.

The parties do not compete directly as organisations in *The Nightmarkets*. Instead, they are linked in various ways by the central characters whose ten verse monologues comprise the

novel. Robert Metcalfe, a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War, is a Victorian state Labor candidate. He obtains material on the corrupt practices of a Liberal Minister and passes this to his brother, Ian. Ian writes an expose in an alternative left-wing newspaper, *The Hummer*, run by his former girlfriend Sue Dobson. The resulting scandal prompts high profile federal minister John McTaggart, already disaffected with the Liberal Party, to resign and form the New Progress Party. McTaggart, the son of Elise and Jack, was born and raised in the Liberal 'Tribe'. Jack died in office as one of Menzies' ministers, while Elise has worked tirelessly within the Liberal organisation.

Setting up his new party, John hires Sue Dobson to write his biography. The two become lovers. John also hires Ian Metcalfe to investigate the murder of a hostess working at The Crystal Palace, a classy brothel, believing the murder may be linked to business and political corruption. Ian visits the brothel and strikes up a friendship with Terri Lockhart, another hostesses. His research comes to nothing. McTaggart sacks Ian, who goes off to write campaign material for his brother Robert. McTaggart ends his relationship with Sue and her work on his biography after she becomes pregnant to him. He publicly announces he will marry a Malaysian born and educated party researcher, Veronica Lim. The novel concludes on Victorian election night before the result of Robert Metcalfe's campaign is known.

The Liberals and nostalgia

Critical discussions of nostalgia in *The Nightmarkets* have focused on Wearne's apparent nostalgia for the Whitlam era (see below). The most unambiguous nostalgia in the novel, however, is expressed by the current and former Liberal Party stalwarts Elise McTaggart, Molly Crawford and John McTaggart. Wearne strengthens this nostalgia by giving these characters voices without satirising them or their values.

At the centre of their nostalgia is 'The Tribe', Molly's term for the Liberal social and political milieu of the Menzies era (231). This milieu was held together by tight bonds of family and friendship. These bonds allow The Tribe's members little room for individuality, as the inevitability of Elise's marriage to Jack and the well-charted course of John's upbringing, schooling, wedding (complete with Menzies leading the toasts) and entry into politics suggest (232-4, 258-9). Before his wartime death, The Tribe is even confident that Elise's brother Keith, rakish and flirting with communism, will return to its ways. They approve him '... the way you would approve an actor playing a good if

slightly seedy role. Yes, you'd certainly applaud at curtain time. But, then, expect he'd turn out just like you and your friends' (231). This confidence extends to the electorate. Jack McTaggart and other Liberal leaders only have to address a crowd of wayward voters for them to see the truth of Liberal values and policies (267).

By the 1970s, however, The Tribe no longer has the same cohesion and sway. While John McTaggart's defection from the Liberals is the most damaging to the Party, it has followed others (264). Wearne depicts the break-up of The Tribe through changing family patterns. Liberal stalwarts like Molly and Elise are dying without being replaced by a new generation of party activists. Molly seems to have no children. While Elise married into the Liberal fold, her daughter Fiona's latest marriage is to a Russian émigré hairdresser. John's Menzies-blessed marriage has dissolved and he is now marrying into a different tribe (245-6). His own adult children appear uninterested in politics (268-9).

The Tribe's dissolution parallels a growing diversity and unpredictability within the Australian electorate. Again, the weakening of family bonds is crucial: 'From now on women *won't* be coat-tailing hubby into the polling booth and *we'll* be the losers' (264). John reflects of his father's generation of politicians that '(t)heir crime was the excellence of their professional example, leaving me beached on some high-minded headland, seeing our nation divide again into these other, mediocre tribes...' (232). The old Liberal political values and style do not speak successfully to the new plurality of tribes. Perhaps more seriously, the earlier easy success of the Liberal model has blocked John (and by extension the Liberal Party) from imagining new ways of successfully connecting with voters.

What is left of the Liberals 'after the Tribe' (227)? In the absence of positive values, they have been reduced to an anti-Labor party (264) run by professional image makers (267).⁹ The Party's current parliamentary representatives are presented as anachronistic and corrupt. Robert Metcalfe's Liberal opponent 'Paul Edward Wiltshire Davison, QC, MP' is the former (103), while 'The Porker' is both:

After a generation The Porker had become clumsy;
Our archetypical local boss, his grip for detail
Blurred. Those sly populist rants seemed
Cold-war mantras now. Here was a slowing target... (22).

The Porker's company, Wombat Nominees, has benefited from public housing deals he has approved as Victorian Minister for Lands (29-32, 36). Coupled with the lack of effective Liberal public values, The Porker's graft signifies a party that exists for the private benefit of its elite members (43).

Despite the fact that the Liberal Party remains in government federally and in Victoria at the end of *The Nightmarkets*, Wearne depicts it as a party without a future (264, 268).

New progress and political trust

If the Liberal Party is a party of the past, New Progress appears, at least superficially, like the party of the future. As several commentators have noted, the New Progress Party is loosely modelled on the Australian Democrats. John McTaggart combines elements of Liberal defector and first Democrat leader Don Chipp with other Liberal figures like Andrew Peacock and Malcolm Fraser (see, for example, Page 1987: 63; Liddlelow: 109-110; Craven 1987: 417; Craven 1995: 8). McTaggart's barnstorming tour of Australia recalls Chipp's 1977 tour to build support for what became the Australian Democrats (see Chipp and Larkin, 1978: 189-209; Warhurst 1997). The mix of energy and naivety that Sue Dobson encounters in this new 'radical' centre party also evokes the Democrats' early days:

Out on the verandah
I met their new Honourable Member for Jacaranda
Chatted him up, a mildly greenie dentist: ruddy, hoarse
From too much rum and speeches: 'So you're the girl who charts our
Amazing course?'
And later, how very Queensland too, produced his harmonica
For all to join in 'Happy Birthday' ... (218, see also 76).

New Progress is electorally successful (far more so than the Democrats), winning six House of Representatives by-elections in its first three years and gaining 'a dozen' defections from the Liberals (36, 216, 218, 270). Despite these signs of success, Wearne casts doubt on the promise of New Progress, suggesting that it acts ultimately as a vehicle for McTaggart's ambitions.

One area of doubt concerns the party's structure. Very little organisation intervenes between New Progress as 'a movement of very normal Australians' (42) and the leader McTaggart. Unlike the Australian Democrats, whose constitution promises extensive member participation in leadership and policy decisions, New Progress appears to be a top-down organisation directed by McTaggart.¹⁰ Of the New Progress Party's twenty or so MPs, Wearne gives only McTaggart a name. His leadership is based on charisma – 'that aura a celebrity can bless on [supporters] plodding minor lives' (247) – rather than the legal-rationality of party rules. McTaggart relies on a small group of advisers for political

and policy advice (57-8) and uses his private wealth to hire and fire others like Ian and Sue (95-6). When McTaggart offers Sue the opportunity to draft the Party's women's policy, their exchange indicates that the party membership's policy role is to endorse whatever stance McTaggart takes:

... John phoned and suggested
a week away to help in drafting
the New Progress women's policy. I tried diversions:
'Surely that's the job for New Progress women?'
'It's my convention speech. New Progress people
will decide' (65).

The suggestion throughout *The Nightmarkets* is that without McTaggart, the New Progress Party would not survive.

The values and policies of New Progress form a second area of doubt. New Progress is vague about its values and policies, which McTaggart terms 'centre' or 'non-left radical' (35, 76, see also 58, 237-8, 246). Rival politicians like Robert dismiss New Progress as 'The trendiest of trendies' (77, see also 223), while Ian doubts that New Progress radicalism really stands for anything (76). At least for the moment, trust in McTaggart prevents such realisations from being more widespread among voters:

...'Trust' is one of McTaggart's favourite words: a bud curled
ready for blossoming as success! To the accompanying ooh n' ahs of his clique:
disaffected middle Australia (91).

Nonetheless, throughout *The Nightmarkets*, Wearne implies that middle Australian voters' trust in McTaggart may wear thin and they may demand more in terms of committed policy direction than he can supply. The genuineness of McTaggart's claims to radical values are questioned by his long years of standard Liberal rhetoric and service, including a stint as acting Minister for External Affairs responsible for the draft (34, 219). McTaggart himself seems unsure whether he has changed, or has just remained the same while his former party has changed.

McTaggart's relationship with Sue provides the strongest clue that he is not to be trusted. Despite McTaggart's confidence that he relates more deeply to women than to men (247-8), he is revealed as incapable of discussing Sue's pregnancy and the future of their relationship meaningfully. She complains: 'your quota of platitudes seems endless, quit wooing with them please. I'm not a swinging voter' (219). A little later, she 'saw a landslide defeat if the effort of your concern was party politics' (220). Sue concludes by

taking up McTaggart's rhetoric of trust: 'How would I trust to trust your babble or my own?' (220). Sue's use of the language of electoral politics is significant in exposing McTaggart's opportunistic and untrustworthy approach to their relationship. Seemingly incapable of genuine emotion, McTaggart adopts a stance dictated by political survival and advantage. If voters also begin to see him in this way, New Progress is in trouble. If they do not, Wearne seems to suggest their trust in New Progress as a party of genuinely held alternative values is misplaced.

Labor and the patience of social democracy

Gough Whitlam and his dismissal are pivotal to the politics of *The Nightmarkets* (Craven 1987: 411; Rodriguez 1987: 49; James 47-8). Eden Liddelow (1987: 107) claims plausibly that Whitlam is the novel's only hero. From its characters' late 1970s perspectives, however, the guise in which Whitlam necessarily appears is the *fallen* hero, already cut down by his political opponents:

'We've no Gough now. That big clever man who strode and quipped throughout, trying to make Australia fitter for the bright boys and girls, and any they wished to help and protect (22, see also 9, 13 and 35).

Moreover, although Wearne finished writing his novel in a period when Labor again governed nationally and in Victoria, he refuses to let this knowledge enter the novel. In *The Nightmarkets*, Labor has only one brief period in office in thirty years.

This deliberately bleak presentation of Labor's outlook raises serious questions about the point of ALP activism. Wearne's representation of the workings of the Party seems designed to reinforce these questions. In contrast to the deep class, ideological and ethnic conflicts within Labor depicted by Sewell and Papaellinas, Wearne's Labor Party of the same period is a homogenous and tranquil organisation. Wearne's two main Labor figures, Rob Metcalfe and Frank Sutcliffe, are both male, anglo-Australian, suburban and middle class.¹¹ Both belong to the Moderate faction, which holds sway over the Party.

Robert Metcalfe's account of the Party's National Conference in Adelaide, at which he is an alternative delegate, confirms the placid and ritualised nature of Labor politics (103-35). Although the Moderates 'must prepare for shocks the left could spring, once the keynote address is digested', no drama ensues. Metcalfe sits through the session, 'a proxy-Frank,

just raising my hand' (121). Metcalfe is largely absent from the rest of the conference, following proceedings via the television news while pursuing an affair with Lola Wilson, a radio journalist whom he has just met. The only open conflict at conference comes from outside, when a street theatre group – 'moans! hessian! face paint!' – invades the conference hall (123). Wearne contrasts the routine dullness of the conference both with the excitement of Robert's affair and with the 'plot crazed' paranoia of the satirical figure Sutcliffe, in whose imagination the conference is a labyrinthine struggle between the Moderates and the left (130).

Wearne's characters respond to Whitlam's dismissal and the post-Whitlam Labor Party in a range of ways, many of which involve distancing themselves from Labor. They pursue Marxist or more generally leftist political activism, produce alternative media and artwork to attack the Coalition government, exile themselves to Europe, work for the New Progress Party, or withdraw, politically numbed, to pursue sex, drugs and music (9-11, 23, 58, 110, 123, 140, 147-8, 253). None of these alternatives is presented in wholly positive terms, and the political alternatives are mostly presented negatively. The limitations of New Progress have been discussed above. 'Macca', the main Marxist character, is satirised throughout the novel (33; see Gelder 1988: 556). The leftist 'Alliance' seems little more than an endless series of debates and fund-raisers. *The Hummer*, despite its coup against The Porker, peters out a month later (141).

Given this representation of the Labor Party and alternative left politics, Wearne might be read as directing readers toward an antipolitical stance in which Labor and leftist groups can do nothing against the power of capital.¹² Such a reading of *The Nightmarkets* would, however, be mistaken. Wearne confronts the conflict between capital and Labor directly in several passages, including the following:

... Today, free-market yobbos taunt us to
try again
on Gough's long haul. The rich,
their sucks, seem perpetual (Australia remaining their say-so), ever
poised to smash what we've tried before, they've smashed before,
(all of which
were only beginnings).
So? We begin. Swamps may be barrelled, French removed from a laundry, Gough
absolved,
I elected, but wealth's smug power and contempt remain.
Those winnings
that count continue right
into infinite sequels. What we hope to trust / will always oppose, framed

our past and frames our future. The fight is the cause
is the fight...(109).

This passage suggests that Labor's approach to politics should neither be to expect a decisive victory over capital nor to retreat into 'Labor's favourite topics: hard luck and we-wuz-robbery' (29). Instead, Labor must be a stoic party, patiently opposing capital, fighting for its values and starting over when it is defeated (113).

Robert Metcalfe personifies this patient approach (10). He has never been an ideologue, in the sense of understanding his political actions within an all-embracing worldview or movement. Metcalfe confounded attempts by the left and right to give ideological meaning to his conscientious objection (5-6, 124-5), just as he fends off Sutcliffe's attempts to draw him deeper into the Moderate fold. For Metcalfe, politics requires collective action but it stems from profoundly personal principles. Unlike Allen Fitzgerald in *Blind Giant*, the impossibility of a revolutionary blow against capitalism does not propel him into corrupt power-seeking. Instead of Fitzgerald's complex economic models, Metcalfe has '(o)n his clipboard an agenda. In order, one to nine, allocating tasks; ticked off till six' (77). As an alternative to revolutionary hopes or Labor defeatism, *The Nightmarkets* suggests a patient 'social democratic' gradualism based on principled action (125).

Techniques in *The Nightmarkets*

When *The Nightmarkets* appeared, it drew much critical attention due to the unusualness of its form – a verse-novel employing a range of poetic styles (see, for example, Forbes 1987; Carter 1987; Pollnitz 1987; Liddelow 1987; Leonard 1987; Tasker 1987; Craven 1987; Davidson 1988; Anderson 1992).¹³ As Page (1987: 62) argues, the verse-novel is a 'paradoxical' form: 'From a novel we expect amplitude; from poetry compression'. Wearne combines both (see also Carter 1987; Duwell 1998a). His use of poetry is an important technique for presenting politics as pluralist, open-ended and lacking ideological keys (see Carter 1987; Duwell 1998a; and, more negatively, Gelder 1988: 555). Rather than providing the narrative progression expected of a normal novel, Wearne's ten poetic monologues repeatedly view the same events from different perspectives (Leonard 1987: 120; Page 1987: 62). Narrative elements that might have provided another novel with the key to interpreting its politics are repeatedly decentred. The Porker's corruption is revealed at the start and the investigation at the Crystal Palace peters out.¹⁴ We don't learn whether the New Progress Party transforms party politics or whether Robert Metcalfe

wins his seat. Rather than providing the narrative clues for understanding politics, they are simply part of characters' stories, with no clear beginnings and endings. Similarly, although the title 'the nightmarkets' might suggest a guiding metaphor for Wearne's novel – politics as prostitution – this metaphor sits very lightly over its episodes and characters.¹⁵

A related technique is the way Wearne uses different language styles and poetic modes to vary his characters' voices (see, for example, Forbes 1987; Liddelow 1987). In the most comprehensive analysis of this feature of Wearne's text, Megan Tasker notes, for example, the contrast between the 'far-fetched, comic' rhymes of the bohemian Ian Metcalfe with the 'tightness and discipline' of Robert's syllabic verse structure. She also argues persuasively that variations in this structure indicate developments in and threats to Robert's political career (1988: 124-5). When Kevin Hart (1987: 107-8) complains of Wearne's 'prolixity', particularly in the speeches of the McTaggarts and Robert Metcalfe – 'it's hard not to think of these characters as windbags' – he seems to have missed Wearne's point. Politics is, as all three characters know, about endless speech-making.

Allowing a range of characters to speak in their own voices emphasises the pluralism of *The Nightmarket's* politics. As Gelder (1988) argues, however, only some characters are given direct voice, allowing Wearne to narrow the political possibilities suggested by the novel. 'Macca' the Marxist, for example, only ever speaks through others. Wearne also guides readers' responses to political options through his controlled use of satire. The consistent satirising of particular characters – The Porker from the Liberals, Sutcliffe from Labor, the ordinary supporters from New Progress – helps identify pathologies within their parties.

A final literary technique worth noting is the grounding of Wearne's characters in very specific Melbourne places (Craven 1987, 1995; Duwell 1998a, 1998b). Their locations ground their politics. McTaggart cannot break free from the values of Koornung, his country seat, while the political differences between the Metcalfe brothers might be explained by the fact that Robert remained in the suburban Blackburn of his childhood while Ian left for the inner city. Wearne's celebration of the suburbs throughout *The Nightmarkets* strengthens the claim for positively evaluating Robert Metcalfe's suburban social democratic patience (see Gerster 1990: 573-4).

Conclusion

The three works of literary fiction discussed in this paper allow us to explore the interactions between parties, their members, supporters and other citizens in ways not possible using standard political science approaches such as survey research and institutional histories. In different ways, all three fill out our understanding of the dynamics behind the recent challenges to Australian political parties.

Most of the focus in these works is on the Labor Party. In *Blind Giant*, the Labor Party cannot successfully combat the power of capital. Left-wing members of the Party who engage in such combat will be broken or corrupted. The understanding of Labor in *No* is similar. Papaellinas also suggests that Labor's capacity to resist capital has become much weaker since the 1980s, when the Accords and the middle-classing of the Party eroded the possibility of working class resistance through local ethnic, neighbourhood and workplace solidarity. Both of these works thus contain strong antipolitical themes. Although neither author offers retreat to the consolations of a happy private realm as an alternative to the public sphere, both present political action as damaging and probably futile (see Schedler 1997).

The Nightmarkets is more pluralistic and its depiction of Labor more positive. Despite the lost promise of the Whitlam era. Wearne presents the possibility that although capital is powerful, Labor's task remains patient pursuit of social democratic policies. *The Nightmarkets* is mostly populated by young middle class suburban characters, who may be able to afford such patience more easily than the characters of *Blind Giant* and *No*.

The Nightmarkets also gives the Liberals and centre minority parties serious attention. Wearne treats the three parties somewhat differently. The Liberal Party is in decline because of its inability to cope with social diversification since the Menzies period, leaving the party in the hands of corrupt opportunists. While the New Progress Party successfully mobilises disenchanted voters from 'middle Australia', it lacks the coherent principles that will sustain it as more than a protest party. Ultimately, it is little more than an electoral vehicle for its founder McTaggart's ambitions.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Sewell has since renounced his Marxism. See Hunter (1989) and Glover (1993).
- ² Page numbers without further bibliographical details indicate passages from the main work of literary fiction being discussed in the section of the paper.
- ³ Sewell's 1985 'Introduction' to the play suggested that he did not intend to present this view (see 1985: v-xiv). In a later interview he acknowledged that this was in fact the logic of the play, a logic to which he no longer subscribed (see Hunter 1989: 39-42).
- ⁴ Ramon's speech is the most direct reference in the text to the title of the play. An alternative interpretation of the title is that the capitalist system itself is the blind giant.
- ⁵ Papaellinas (1986) explores other anglo-Australian controlling of Greekness in his earlier story 'Into a Further Dimension'.
- ⁶ This argument is common in leftist academic critiques of the Accords. See, for example, Bramble 1996. For one reply to such critiques, see Manning 1996.
- ⁷ Compare the destruction of the local pub in David Ireland's *Glass Canoe* (1982).
- ⁸ On the political character of contemporary Greek fiction and the role of the civil war in that fiction, see Spilias (1994).
- ⁹ Depictions of the Liberal Party as simply anti-Labor have been long familiar in Australian political science. See, for example, Jaensch (1996) and Mayer's much earlier (1967) critique of such depictions. The idea of western political parties as electoral professional parties in which power centres on media experts, advertisers, pollsters and other image makers has been most clearly articulated by Panebianco (1988).
- ¹⁰ The Democrats' participatory promise is not always met in practice (see Ward 1997).
- ¹¹ As Indyk (2001: 5) notes of Wearne's later verse-novel *The Lovemakers* (2001), all of Wearne's characters are anglo-celtic Australians.
- ¹² On 'antipolitics', see Schedler (1997).
- ¹³ Most of this attention was positive. For exceptions, see Pollnitz 1987 and James 1992: 47-8.
- ¹⁴ Compare Andrew McGahan's novel of political corruption in Queensland, *Last Drinks* (2000).
- ¹⁵ Craven (1987: 417) argues for the centrality of 'the nightmarkets' metaphor to the novel.