Jennifer Clark finds clues in the Library's collections to a shift in Australian political consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1964, Robert McDonald, President of the National Union of Australian University Students (NUAUS), described the period from 1950 to 1959 as 'the most inactive, apathetic and self-centred that Australian Universities have known'. 'By contrast,' he added 'the last four and a half years have witnessed a striking and ever more rapid changing of the attitudes of students' (MS2412). The change that McDonald identified became even more apparent as the 1960s and 1970s progressed. He was speaking of a revival in the political life of the universities made possible by the rise of the New Left.

The first understanding of the New Left in Australia came from reading and reproducing British work and then recasting the ideas in an Australian context. New Left thought is found in a few seminal books, but mostly in political journals, newspapers and university publications. The history and ideas of the New Left in Australia and its international origins are scattered through the diverse collections of the National Library. Hunting for the New Left means sifting through a variety of sources, looking for clues to a shifting political consciousness.

The place to start the search is with American sociologist C. Wright Mills, whose main writing career spanned the 12 years before his death in 1962, aged 46. He wrote White Collar in 1951, The Power Elite in 1956, The Sociological Imagination in 1959, and then published the pamphlet The Causes of World War Three in 1958. Communist English historian E.P. Thompson published the first British New Left text called Out of Apathy in 1957, and established The New Reasoner as a New Left journal in the same year. The interest in the new political perspective was continued and diversified by a younger wave in the pages of the Universities & Left Review (also begun in 1957 at Oxford University) and, by 1960, in the New Left Review.

English radicals such as Thompson sought to navigate an alternative path through postwar and Cold War political divisions, between the failures of Stalinism and the excesses of capitalism. In Australia, university students and followers of Gough Whitlam's Labor Party were attracted by the same ideas. Local commentators knew that the philosophies of the British New Left would quickly come to Australia. The Australian socialist journal, Outlook, established in 1957, fed on the intellectual offerings of the British New Left, publishing British material as separate discussion pamphlets and as journal articles.

Although linked to socialism, the New Left rejected its Stalinist form and instead moved out from humanism to find politics outside parties, outside traditional divisions and outside conventional issues. This resulted in the politicisation of a wide range of issues and conditions, some of which were previously poorly represented on the political agenda. The New Left was concerned with education, urban renewal, peace...
and disarmament, housing, racism, environmental degradation, culture and art, as well as renewing a traditional interest in poverty, unemployment, and workplace exploitation. The New Left saw politics as an essentially moral philosophy rather than an economic one.

The New Left was always seen as a movement about ideas, perhaps because of its intellectual origins or perhaps because it failed to gather an organisational structure and never became a separate political party. It may be argued that the New Left did not even have a platform but rather pursued principles. The New Left drew support from groups within and well outside traditional parties, and was, in some ways, impossibly diverse and uncoordinated, although, at the same time, existing left-of-centre parties remained naturally attracted.

The New Left recognised the power and impact of the individual in bringing about social change. Human agency was all important. To this end, the New Left was liberalisation in philosophy, advocating freedom from political oppression and release from cultural strictures. Its apologists saw human potential to create, nurture and improve a society fettered by prejudice, custom, law and habit. To liberate the individual would be to free society and to reach the inherent opportunities of socialism. Most importantly, because in the 1960s politics developed a strong social and cultural dimension associated with the growth of personal autonomy, the role of the individual in the process of reform became seminal.

For all the shortcomings of the New Left and its international variations, it is no exaggeration to say that its attempt to recast political drama led to the formation of a new political mind that underpinned the 1960s experience. The New Left changed politics in the 1960s and beyond, by moving away from prescriptive party dogma that focused on industrial and economic issues and held meaning for a discontented and antagonised working class. In contrast, the New Left greatly appealed to youth because it drew from non-political groups, and because it advocated individual agency. Australia was perched on the edge of a population bubble in the late 1950s and early 1960s. There seemed to be an identifiable disquiet among young people searching for ways to make sense of, and give value to, their society. They found the reform potential of the New Left exciting.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Alan Barcan, academic and former student radical, and economist Helen Hughes, began to discuss the implications of the New Left for Australian political life. They both realised that prosperity demanded a new form of left-wing politics. Alan Barcan particularly pointed to social and economic indicators, such as high employment, pursuit of wealth and the increasing interest in cultural concerns, as reasons why socialism failed to stir the imagination and why political life lacked passion and commitment. He saw similar features in postwar Australia underscored by economic stability and the rise of a white-collar working class. Helen Hughes, writing in Outlook (1960), knew that if the Australian Labor Party was waiting for economic downturn to bring electoral victory it was mistaken. The New Left did not rely on economic conditions to stimulate political interest, rather it emphasised the political nature of life in general.

This sense of the political life fitted well with the view of the 1960s as the beginning of something new. In his inaugural address, United States President John F. Kennedy used the word 'new' six times, as well as 'anew', 'renew' and 'begin' twice each. That sense of embarkation is an important element in understanding the milieu of the 1960s and the new interest in politics. By 1960 in Britain, the United States and Australia, journalists, political
analysts, students and intellectuals began to talk about the possibility of individual liberation as a form of awakening or realisation. E.P. Thompson talked about the age as the beginning of a socialist humanist society.

So it was by the early 1960s that a small group of university students was prepared to act and think independently to introduce other Australian students to the ideas of the New Left and the practices of politics in action. Commentators talked of a 'new spirit' evident in student life. Students began to talk about themselves as important to the political system, and how, because of their privileged position, they were better placed than others in the community to identify injustice and to speak against it, and that the very nature of the university experience should encourage their free and frank debate of issues.

Evidence of the impact of New Left thinking and the sense of embarkation is consequently found in student newspapers, especially Farrago (University of Melbourne), Tharunka (University of New South Wales) and Honi Soit (University of Sydney). In these pages are the records of student demonstrations and 'rags', that is, those events where authority was reversed in a good-humoured and usually non-threatening way. At the same time, there is occasional evidence in these papers that students did believe they were heading into new political waters. The earlier demonstrations, usually for moral causes such as anti-apartheid, were supported by a strange coalition of clubs and societies with a political but not doctrinaire edge. Socialist assessment of the anti-apartheid demonstrations was mixed. Without a condemnation of capitalism, the results were pronounced disappointing. The authorities thought they knew what was feeding the demonstrations. At a protest against apartheid in 1963 in Melbourne, security guards at the International Trade Fair confiscated placards, took down names, searched bags and seized copies of Outlook. Although a revolution for the Old Left was nowhere in sight, apartheid stirred a political conscience in the 'quality of life' New Left sense.

The hunt for the New Left inevitably leads to the papers of the Australian Union of Students. Here are the discussions, the minutes of meetings and the records of clubs and societies that reflected and debated the ideas of the New Left. It is this collection that holds the assessment of Robert McDonald, quoted at the beginning of this article, that political life was changing in the universities.

If there was a revival in politics at universities in the early 1960s, it was much more than simply an increase in membership of political clubs. The revival was a subtle shift in political focus and intensity that occurred simultaneously in a number of interrelated areas of student life. Intellectually, the rise of the New Left in Britain, the United States and Europe had an impact on political thought in Australian universities. The importance of human agency in social change and the lifestyle angle of humanist socialism held appeal for a new generation of students. At the same time, race emerged as an issue that focused attention on the liberationist philosophy of the New Left and questions of equity and human rights.

Students may have provided practical demonstrations of New Left ideas and devoured the scattered literature, but the consolidation of the New Left and its translation into government policy did not come about until 1972 when Gough Whitlam, as leader of the Labor Party, announced 'It's Time!'

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