A member of the Editorial Board of ALR makes an analysis of the program of political action introduced by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in April. This document has evoked considerable response in that country and a multitude of reactions throughout the world.

THE ACTION PROGRAM of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, adopted in April this year, is a most important document. This is so despite modifications that may be made following further deliberations, or as a result of a shifting balance of political forces within the country. The Program is notable first of all for its tone, for the way it faces questions as they actually present themselves. There is nothing irrelevant, false or diversionary, nothing which could in effect or by design seek to shift the ground by raising other questions which, however important in themselves, are not really at issue. The Program, in its English translation, is a 90 page booklet of about 25,000 words. Since it is, unfortunately, not yet readily available in Australia, I have quoted extensively from the document so that readers will have some opportunity to check their interpretation with my own.

Major questions dealt with include the functions of the Communist Party in a more or less developed socialist society, the diversity in the social composition of that society, the need for prevention of a monopoly or over-concentration of power, and how to actually advance democracy in such a society. By confronting such issues, the Program, if successfully carried out, as now seems well within the realm of possibility, may prove to be of world significance, however much it is a specifically Czechoslovak document laying no claim to universality.

The Program, is of course, the result of the accumulation of twenty years' experience of socialism. But it is above all a response to an acute crisis, which is no doubt one of the reasons that the issues were confronted "head on". They had to be; procrastination would perhaps have rendered the crisis unresolvable by political

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processes within the framework of socialism. It is not the main purpose of this article to contest critics from within socialist ranks of the measures taken by the new leadership. But surely, if these critics are realistic they must ask themselves what produced the crisis, and what would have been the results of the only other alternative — "more of the same". The Program states that the society was making headway with great difficulty, with fateful delay and with moral political defects in human relations. Quite naturally, apprehensions arose about socialism, about its human mission, about its human features. Some people became demoralised, others lost perspective. (p.11).

It goes on to speak of the inability of the Party to eliminate in practice what it had previously verbally condemned, and that this undermines the people's confidence in the Party being, in fact, able to change this situation, and old tensions and political nervous strain are again raised and revived. (p.28)

The crisis was both economic and political, with a natural mutual reinforcement of these two sides. But the Program holds that the key to solution lies in changes in the political superstructure, changes to accord with the needs of economic development of a modern industrial state, with the need for advance of democracy, with a resurrection and enhancement of socialist humanism and concern with the individual. Within this again, the role of the Communist Party, how it is to be conceived and discharged in present conditions is seen as fundamental.

Of course the previous conception of the role of the Party resulted in large measure from the pressing needs of the times — the fight against the bourgeoisie and struggle for consolidation of power, the heightening of international tensions of the cold war, etc. The particular influences of Stalinism are left aside here for reasons of space, although it is to be remarked that the Program declares:

The leading bodies and institutes of the Party and the State of that time are fully responsible for that acceptance (of Stalinist practices and conceptions) (p.6).

The resultant was that political relations were more or less designedly built up as instruments for carrying out decisions of the centre, and when times changed this was continued. The crucial point is not so much whether decisions were passed down (decisions of central governments once arrived at necessarily are "passed down"), but rather that the system and conceptions which had been built up "hardly ever made it at all possible for the decision itself to be the outcome of a democratic procedure." (p. 27).

Seeing itself as the instrument of rule of the working class, the Party concentrated a monopoly of actual power in its hands.
Certain forms and procedures were retained, but served more to conceal the actual state of affairs. For example, in the parliament (as elsewhere) there was an "unconvincing unanimity concealing factual differences in opinions and attitudes of the deputies." (p. 41).

The Party became a sort of universal caretaker or stern parent, to which everything controversial had to be referred for final decision. There was an unofficial "cadre ceiling", a limit to the positions to which non-members could rise. Within the Party a comparable atmosphere prevailed.

Now, the role of the Party is conceived in the following terms: As a representative of the interests of the most progressive part of all the State — and thus also representative of the perspective aims of the society — the Party cannot represent the entire scale of social interests. The political expression of the many-sided interests of the society is the whole National Front, as an expression of the unity of the social strata, groups of interests and of the nations and nationalities of this society. The Party does not want to, and will not take the place of social organisations, but, on the contrary, it must take care that their initiative and political responsibility for the unity of the society is revived and flourishes. The role of the Party is to seek such a way of satisfying the various interests which would not jeopardise the perspective interests of the society as a whole, but which would promote them and create new progressive interests. The Party policy must not lead to non-communists getting the impression that their rights and freedom are limited by the role of the Party. On the contrary, they must see in the activity of the Party a guarantee of their rights, freedom and interests. We want, and shall achieve, a state of affairs when the Party right at basic organisation level, will have informal, natural authority based upon its working and managing ability and the moral qualities of communist functionaries. Within the framework of democratic rules of a socialist state, communists must over and over again strive for the voluntary support of the majority of the people for the Party line. It is necessary to alter Party resolutions and directives if they fail to express correctly the needs and possibilities of the whole society. (p.23, emphasis added)

Performing such a role requires a corresponding inner Party life: Only down-to-earth discussion and exchange of views can be the pre-condition for responsible deciding of collective bodies. Confrontation of views is an essential expression of a multilateral responsible attempt to find the best solution, to advance the new against the obsolete. Each member of the Party and Party bodies has not only the right, but the duty to act according to his conscience, with initiative, criticism, with different views on the matter in question, to oppose any functionary. This practice must become deeply rooted if the Party is to avoid subjectivism in its activity. It is impermissible to restrict communists in these rights, to create an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion of those around who voice different opinions, to persecute the minority under any pretext — as has happened in the past. The Party, however, cannot abandon the principle of requiring the fulfilling of resolutions once they are approved. (pp. 24-25)

Social diversity and social unity

The Program points to the diversity of socialist society, to its various social and political segments and the relations between
them. It recognises that socialist society does not become more and more homogeneous (which at least some of us had thought before), and that social unity, although possible in a way quite impossible in capitalist society with its basic class divisions and exploitation, is by no means a smooth and automatic process.

This recognition has a decisive bearing on the conception of the political system and the nature of the economic plan:
The different interests and needs of people not foreseen by the system of directive decision-making were taken as an undesirable obstacle and not as new needs of the life of people which have to be respected by politics. That was why the often well-meant words of “an increase in the people’s participation in management” could not help, as in time this “participation of the people” came to mean chiefly help in carrying out orders and not in settling the correctness of the decisions. (p.27)

Decision-making about the plan and the economic policy of the State must be both a process of mutual confrontation and harmonisation of different interests — i.e. the interests of enterprises, consumers, employees; different social groups of the population, nations, etc. — and a process of a suitable combination of view of the long-term development of the economy and its immediate prosperity. (p.57)

Socialism can only flourish if scope is given for the assertion of the various interests of the people, and on this basis the unity of all workers will be brought about democratically. This is the main source of free social activity and development of the socialist system. (p.14)

It is not necessary to go into detail here concerning the various social groupings within socialist society, but the approach to youth is worth mentioning. The concentration is not on what the previous generation (of revolutionaries, and people generally) has given them — significant as that is — but on what they have been denying them:

Shortcomings and mistakes in political, economic and cultural life, just as in human relations, affect the young person especially strongly; contradictions between words and deeds, lack of frankness, phrasemongering, bureaucracy, attempts to settle everything from a position of power — these deformations of socialist life most painfully affect students, young workers and agricultural workers, arousing in them the feeling that it is not their work, their efforts which are decisive for their own future life. (pp.17-18)

The diversity is recognised as reflected in the National Front, a coalition of parties with their own independent rights. But it does not end there:

Socialist state power cannot be monopolised either by a single party, or by a coalition of parties. It must be open to all political organisations of the people. (p.3)

And besides political organisations, all forms of voluntary organisations, special interest associations, societies, etc., are to be fully protected in their rights, and pursuit of their objectives in the interests of their members.
Moral and material incentives

In its economic measures the Program raises most important questions, much discussed of late in the socialist world, concerning moral and material factors. It should be noted that this discussion of the relative merits and respective weights of material and moral incentives is confined to socialism. Under capitalism the latter arise either not at all or only marginally in the main areas of economic activity, and usually in a distorted way in other fields. This is yet another expression of the crisis of capitalism, for the demand or yearning for a moral incentive, for a human interest in the work in which one is engaged, for an end to alienation, is a central issue in the ideology and politics of today.

It by no means follows from this that virtually sole reliance on moral incentives as advocated in China in particular, and rejection of the use of economic measures as a “return to capitalism” is well-founded, or signifies a “more socialist” orientation. What is ignored in this approach is the intimate relation which exists between the two. This relation exists at various levels. It is indeed difficult for the human being to develop fully under conditions of deprivation. Poor housing, precarious transport, poor quality goods and services, lack of cultural standard in living environment and so on affect precisely the human, moral factor. True, the human spirit can soar above these things to great achievements, and is enormously admired when it does so. But it is quite different when the “moral factor” is called on as an excuse for bad leadership and management which inflicts deprivation which is unnecessary, could be avoided, and has been promised to be overcome.

It should also be realised that economic categories are an expression of relations between human beings. For example, exchange value under simple commodity production reflects the equality and mutual inter-dependence of producers of different commodities needed for life. With suitable modifications this applies also in relations between associated producers under socialism. In the absence of objective criteria, backwardness and deformations remain concealed, at the expense of all. But “it is not possible to blunt economic policy forever by taking from those who work well and giving to those who work badly.” (p. 49).

Furthermore, the problem of material and moral incentives changes with the development of the economy. With a primitive level of production forces the consequence of good or bad, enthusiastic or apathetic work is often clearly apparent. The result is fairly directly linked with the effort put into achieving it. However, with growing sophistication, complex integration of an economy, and modification in a thousand ways by price policy, taxes, sub-
sides, etc., it is less and less possible to define directly the relationship between input and output. And when good and bad work, whether at the work bench or in management, is not differentiated, it becomes increasingly difficult to point to positive results flowing from moral incentive, and still more to maintain that incentive.

Use of both national and international markets are involved in this, as they are able to provide the most objective available measure of the effectiveness of work performed. The market serves another purpose in that, with the relations of exploitation and private monopoly domination absent the market, because it is not subject to arbitrary direction from on top, can become a means to “ensure a marked superiority of the interests of citizens as consumers and sovereign bearers of the economic movement.” (p. 57).

As to the economic plan, it will “cease to be an instrument for issuing orders”, and become instead an instrument enabling society to find the most suitable long-range trends of its development by scientific methods; a change from an instrument designed to enforce subjectively determined material proportions into a program of economic policy. (p.48)

Development of democracy

The whole document breathes the spirit of democracy, and indeed may be summed up in the words used (p.5) “. . . our present aim of democratising the socialist order.” This is to be seen at one level in the correction of more obvious defects (to say they are more obvious is no way to minimise their importance). Some issues have already been touched on concerning the role of the Party, the rights of other parties and voluntary organisations. Division and limitation of power is taken as a basic principle, including, for example, that in disputes including the rights of government and its bodies the basic guarantee of legality is proceedings in court which are independent of political factors and are bound only by law, (and) to guarantee the full independence of barristers and solicitors from state bodies. (p.45)

The State Security Service is to be purely for the purpose of defending the state from the activities of enemy centres abroad, and every citizen who has not been culpable in this respect must know with certainty that his political convictions and opinions, his personal beliefs and activities cannot be the object of attention of the bodies of the State Security Service. (p.44)

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In particular the main responsibility for investigation is to be passed on to courts of law, prison administration is to be entirely separated, and administration of the press law, state archives, etc., are to be handed over to other state bodies (the Security Service had gradually taken over such powers).
There will be a press law which will guarantee a virtually unfettered flow of information, comment and discussion in all the mass media (already apparently operating in practice), and any restrictions are to be clearly specified in law and not left to arbitrary interpretation. The same principle to apply in dealings between state bodies and individual citizens and organisations. Freedom of speech and association, freedom of religion, freedom to travel, and to stay abroad for any period, and various other kinds of individual rights are to be guaranteed in a new Constitution to be drawn up.

At all levels of decision the principle will be that not just proposals will be up for decision, but alternatives, expertly substantiated will be offered for appraisal. This, together with the other measures and a free flow of information will help to ensure that decision making comes to life, and gets away from anonymity and formalism.

Fears have been expressed by communists in many places that these freedoms will be seized upon by class enemies and turned against socialism. The Program replies:

The Party realises that ideological antagonists of socialism may try to abuse the process of democratisation. At the present stage of development and under the conditions of our country, we insist on the principle that bourgeois ideology can be challenged only in open ideological struggle before all of the people. It is possible to win over people for the ideas and policy of the Party only by struggle based on the practical activity of communists for the benefit of the people, on truthful and complete information, and on scientific analysis. We trust that in such a struggle, all sections of our society will contribute actively towards the victory of truth, which is on the side of socialism (p. 93).

All the above and other democratic rights mentioned in the Program will ensure a great development of democracy, and in a far more meaningful way than under capitalism where such rights may exist to varying degrees, but even then are often severely limited or sometimes entirely negated by the concentration of economic power in private hands, and the class amalgam based on this of leading figures in government, administration, military and judiciary and in the mass media.

In elaborating these democratic rights and freedom of political opinion and expression, the Program does not accept a Government-Opposition division of political life as either appropriate, having in mind Czech history and present conditions, or as the be all and end all of democracy, as it is presented by supporters of capitalism. Such a set-up is one way in which hypocrisy in public life and struggle for power for its own sake is encouraged and promoted.

The Program probes deeper questions of democracy, confronting issues of further economic development and humanisation of life
in a modern industrial society. Freed from the incubus of private ownership, they have a base from which to go forward, now they have made up their mind to it, in a way that is impossible under capitalism. To do so has been demonstrated as entirely necessary and eminently desirable.

This is shown in all spheres. If "directive" planning and administration has proved impossible to continue, then a broad scope for social initiative, frank exchange of views, and democratisation of the whole social and political system becomes virtually the condition of the dynamics of socialist society. (p.8)

"Subservience, obedience and even kowtowing to higher ups" were appreciated under the directive system rather than "independence, diligence, expertise and the initiative of the people" (p. 10), but these latter qualities are precisely what is essential under the alternative, for that alternative can only be proper development of autonomy and self-management in enterprises, as elsewhere.

This necessity for enhancing the autonomy of socialist enterprises is common to and has been recognised by most of the socialist countries, though not in all have the consequences for the political and ideological superstructure been fully faced up to. But it would be strange marxism which held that the "necessary conformity" of the economic base and the superstructure (a main tenet of "historical materialism") ceased to operate when capitalism was overthrown.

Under advanced capitalism, the nature of the modern productive forces also demands "autonomy" of enterprises and J. K. Galbraith in his book The New Industrial State repeatedly reverts to this question. But of course such "autonomy" is basically different because of private ownership, different both in relation to other enterprises and to the state, and within the enterprise itself, being possible of application only at management level and not with the work-force generally because the basic relation is one of exploitation. Here socialism has the opportunity — it also has the need, for its own development, as we have seen — to really show its superiority at a higher level than hitherto.

The economic reform will increasingly push whole working teams of socialist enterprises into positions in which they will feel directly the consequence of both the good and bad management of enterprises. . . . therefore . . . the whole working team which bears the consequences should also be able to influence the management of the enterprise . . . managers and head executives . . . would be accountable to these bodies for the overall results of their work . . . These bodies would be formed by elected representatives of the working team and by representatives of certain components outside the enterprise (scientific and professional bodies seem to be included here) ensuring the influence of the interests of the entire society and an expert and qualified level of decision-making . . . (p.51)
A Statute dealing with the many complicated problems which will arise concerning the democratic control and responsibilities of the various components of these management bodies is to be drawn up.

It is interesting to note that the trade unions are not proposed to directly participate in these bodies, but are urged to enhance and concentrate on their role of protecting the interests of the workers which not infrequently, in the previous set-up, conflicted with their support for directives under the plan and their performance of some state functions (control of some labor legislation e.g.). But even socialist economy places working people into a position in which it is necessary to defend human, social and other interests in an organised way. (p.52)

The central feature of what is called the scientific and industrial revolution can perhaps be reasonably well summed up as meaning a new level of science and its application in industry and other fields.

Just now, at the beginning of the scientific-technological revolution in the world, the social position of science is changing considerably. Its application in the entire life of society is becoming the basic condition for the intensive development of the economy, care for man and his living environment, culture of the society and growth of the personality, modern methods of management and administration, the development of relations between people . . . (pp.71-72)

This has many implications, including the need for professional autonomy to assist in achieving the application of scientific, objective standards, and in ensuring freedom of science and scientific personnel, including in the social sciences.

If the social sciences are really to become an official instrument of scientific self-cognition of socialist society, it is necessary to respect the principles of their internal life. (While assisting their development the Party) does not interfere with the process of creative scientific work and in this respect relies on the initiative and social responsibility of scientists themselves. (p.73)

Other implications are for education, which receives considerable attention in the Program, especially as regards quality and the role of school and university administration on a democratic basis with adequate autonomy and student participation.

The importance of culture in the modern industrial state is seen, as is the freedom necessary for its flowering.

The arts and culture are not a mere decoration of economic and political life, . . . if culture lags behind, it retards the progress of policy and economy, democracy and freedom, development of man and human relations. (p.79)

It is necessary to overcome a narrowed understanding of the social and human function of culture and art, over-estimation of their ideological and political role and underestimation of their basic general cultural and aesthetic tasks in the transformation of man and his world. The Party will guard and safeguard both the freedom of artistic work and the right to make works of art accessible. (p.80)
While in the Program the emphasis is by far on the side of democracy, autonomy and individual freedom, the problem of getting a fusion of these with the overall social needs and more long range development is raised repeatedly. There is not the airy dismissal of this problem to be found frequently today, an understandable over-reaction though it may be to the problems of the "mass society."

This often takes the form of struggle against institutions as such, or the establishment of "counter-institutions" which may have a certain role to play as leavening, but is peripheral to the main problem which is how to humanise and democratise the institutions themselves, which are an inevitable concomitant of our present stage of scientific, technical and cultural development. Says the Program:

simplified ideas as if (our goals) could be attained by underrating and decrying the administrative machinery in general, were rather detrimental in the past. (p.43)

Such problems as ensuring both the necessary safeguards to officials in their functions and the necessary replacement of officials is also posed (p. 43). What the Program in fact is setting out to do is to attack the problem right at its heart. Whatever degree of success is achieved will act as an enormously powerful world influence.

As the name Action Program conveys, this is not primarily or even mainly a theoretical document. But this is at present no defect. What is required is to do, to break with the old, to introduce the practice of democracy, to bridge the gap between words and deeds, aspirations and results. To the extent that this is done it will stimulate creativity in all directions, not least in the theoretical field. The Action Program is based on principle, on a theory, on an ideology, which will be further greatly elaborated and developed. One awaits the opening of the 14th Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia on September 9 with great interest.