A member of the commission which drafted the Communist Party’s Charter of Democratic Rights gives his views on the issues under debate. This article is based on a contribution made at a recent conference of the Communist Party in South Australia.

THE PUBLICATION of the Communist Party's draft Charter of Democratic Rights has sparked considerable discussion both in the Party and outside it. The Charter is but a first draft. Many valuable suggestions have been made for additions, deletions and clarifications. I stress the importance of such suggestions; but here I want to deal with some broad questions.

What is democracy? It is said that capitalist democracy is freedom for the capitalists to exploit and socialist democracy is democracy for the working masses. Things are more complex than this. “Democracy” as a word is used to describe a particular type of capitalist state; it is also a word which has associations with man’s struggle to control his affairs, express his ideas, have equality of opportunity with others, form trade unions, etc. We commonly, and I think correctly, say of some legislation (e.g., much of the legislation introduced by the recent South Australian Labor Government) that it is “democratic”, and of other legislation that it is “undemocratic”, although neither may touch the foundations of capitalism.

Society, under the impetus of the struggle of oppressed classes and groups, has evolved institutions and rights that are said to be democratic — the right to vote, the right to hold a religious point of view, the right to refute religion, the right of opinion and of publication, of industrial activity, of sex and racial equality. The best of the non-socialists have struggled to defend and advance such concepts of democracy and we owe them a great debt. Socialists take the matter further by declaring that the greatest and fundamental denial of democracy lies in the ownership by one class of the means of production and the exclusion of the exploited classes from the control of such means of production. Class society is incompatible with genuine democracy.
The Charter, in my view, properly and clearly takes up these two aspects of democracy in terms that are Australian. It points up the monopoly domination of the economy, and places the ending of this domination and the creation of social ownership as the central issue, but at the same time it stresses the great importance of democratic institutions and the extension of democratic rights and practices for the struggle of the working class and progressive people under capitalism and for the strengthening and consolidation of socialism.

It is said by some that the Charter raises to a principle the possibility of peaceful transition to socialism. I think that the language of the draft is open to criticism on this point, but I do not think that the Drafting Committee intended to express other than the decision of the last Congress of the Party. The draft does not say and never intended that the struggle for socialism would not be accompanied by violence from the ruling class. Obviously along the way there will be big demonstrations, great strikes, marches, tremendous gatherings and obviously there will be clashes and obviously in some situations reactionary forces will resort to violence. What our Congress said is that in the conditions in Australia and in the world there is the distinct possibility that the transition can be peaceful in that armed uprising against the capitalist state will not be either necessary or desirable.

Years ago the gathering of the 81 Communist and Workers Parties expressed support for this contention.

But some comrades say, or argue as if this is a possibility, but only one possibility, and that the other should be put with equal emphasis. In my view this is wrong. We are for a peaceful transition in the sense I speak of not only because violence is at the best a necessary evil but because the concept of peaceful transition accords with the wishes and aspirations of those who in our country tend towards change, it accords with our own ideas and above everything else because it assists in developing and consolidating as actual forces for social progress those forces in the nation which can potentially bring about fundamental change.

And these forces for change are enormously broad. We do not and never have conceived of the revolutionary struggle as one between just the capitalist class and the industrial working class. The Communist Party's Program has for years placed the monopoly sections of capital as the target of the revolutionary movement in our country and has envisaged almost all other class forces as able to play some positive part (but of course some much more so than others).
The developments of our times extend, not restrict this possibility. Once capitalism was progressive. It had great reserves of strength amongst the people. Small-scale production was prevalent; small capitalists were numerous; the capitalists educated a minority who were close to them; they developed cities, transport, broke down the old restrictions, opened new horizons, capitalism developed the nation and the capitalists appeared as the standard bearers of the nation. Of course this stage of capitalism is long past, but the positions of strength of the capitalist class amongst the people are only slowly eroded.

Today things are different. Increasing monopolisation places power in fewer and fewer hands increasingly remote from the people as a whole. The percentage of employed persons rises, the whole work force requires a higher standard of education, the most educated people are no longer, in the same proportion at least, close to capital; and capital itself is no longer identified with the nation but increasingly with sell out on the one hand or obliteration on the other, of national interest.

Monopoly capital has largely lost and increasingly loses its bases of support amongst the people and is thereby vulnerable at every point. The motor car industry can be exposed for its profiteering at the expense of the consumer, which is the nation; for its exploitation of its own workers; for its domination by foreign capital; and for its pressure to make the private motor vehicle the unit of transport so that much of the argument about transport development, community planning, etc., involves the role of motor vehicle, oil and other monopoly industries.

Every facet of the struggle against monopoly involves questions of democracy. In specifically marxist terms the relations of production are being increasingly socialised, increasing numbers of people of diverse occupations are being drawn into the social process of production but their lives, both as producers and socially, are dominated by fewer monopoly groups. The whole struggle is against the monopolisation of power, for the democratisation of economic and social life.

If we want to help to develop these broad political forces in the struggle against monopoly the Communist Party must speak to them in words which they understand and with policies and perspectives they can approve. It is said that to put the problem this way is to forget about the working class. This is wrong in my view. All the developments I speak of affect the working class itself; expanding it, educating it, changing its productive activity.
This changing working class is now, and will remain this side of socialism, an exploited class, and this aspect of its reality will determine its main social, political and economic activity. But because its way of living and working will be somewhat different, it will approach its problems somewhat differently. Not to see the changes and make our own changes would not be to fight for the working class, but to fail it.

It has been suggested that the concepts of the Draft Charter reject revolution, and if adopted, would obliterate any real difference with the ALP. (This point of view is expressed within the Party and from outside, e.g., by Dr. Charlesworth in Tribune). I think this viewpoint is based upon the misconception sometimes expressed in the saying “the ALP believes in evolution, the CP in revolution”. The real position is that marxists believe that development takes place both in nature and society by the combination of gradual evolutionary change and rapid revolutionary change, whilst reformism, certainly in practice and mainly in theory too, limits its concept of change to evolutionary change. This is the essence of the difference, not the concept of revolution in the sense of blood and violence. The Charter calls for a decisive and fundamental change in the ownership of the monopolies and thus maintains our independent revolutionary position.

Another great watershed difference with reformism is the communist view that the masses make their own history — reliance on the activity of the masses as against relying mainly or solely on leaders. Here again the Charter makes the position clear. In this context I refer to the criticism that the Charter places undue reliance on parliaments and parliamentary struggle. In my view what the Charter does is to raise to its proper position in the Australian setting the question of our established institutions.

It is crucial that we learn from the Soviet Union and other socialist countries that everything of value from the past must be preserved and built upon. The tradition of elective representative institutions is strong in our land; we must build on our traditions. In Russia the first Duma was won from the Czar in 1905 and in 1917 the institution meant literally nothing to the vast majority; but in England men fought for the principle of the Parliament against despotic power 300 years ago (and particularly the men of the cities — the small producers, the tradesmen, the working class); the Chartist movement fought for the reform of the Parliament and gained to its petition the signatures of more than half the adult population of the country; the diggers at Eureka took up arms for the principle of representative Government; the battlers of the Australian 90’s formed the ALP to secure working class
representation in Parliament; perhaps the most widespread and sustained political movement of our Australian history was for Federation, with a corresponding Federal Parliament; the biggest political movement in South Australia since the war has been for electoral reform. Our people accept and will defend Parliamentary representative institutions.

The Parliamentary struggle is not the essence of the struggle — the essence is the activity, striving and effort of the mass of the people — but the essence finds part of its expression in the struggle for election to and for policies to be expressed within the Parliaments; and around the issues in the Parliaments great mass movements are possible.

I turn to one last criticism of the Charter. It is said that the Charter forgets basic marxism in suggesting that in a socialist Australia there should be freedom of speech and association for citizens who hold anti-socialist opinion without breaching the socialist law. I think that on this point we need more thought and fewer slogans. We need to study the writings of great marxists on this point in their historical context. Every State is a dictatorship of a class or classes. A Socialist Australia will be that. But classes exercise their rule in various ways. There is no end to forms, the only principle is that the leading class uses its leading position to consolidate and protect its position. Class rule does not necessarily imply total or even widespread censorship; it does not necessarily imply the suppression of opposition, organisation or representation. We have in Australia the dictatorship of monopoly capital, but that does not mean obliteration of opposition.

The Charter aims at setting down the communists' concept of a socialist Australia. We ought to say boldly and clearly that we are for the right of dissent. Maybe foreign pressures or foreign intervention, or activity against the socialist law from within, will force temporary and partial departures from this principle. If it be so the progressive people will recognise the source and cause of the departure. But for us the guiding principle is the extension and flowering of democracy, both because this agrees with all our aims and because it agrees with the traditions and thinking of the mass of the Australian people without whose active support a socialist Australia is quite impossible.