Interview with Wilfred Burchett

Five years separates the first interview granted to ALR by famed Australian journalist, Wilfred Burchett, from the one which appears below.

Tribune writer, Malcolm Salmon, who conducted the first interview, here asks Burchett to update his comments on the situation in Indochina, and in Australian politics, in the light of the history-making events of the past half-decade.

The interview was recorded in Sydney, April 6, 1973, during Burchett’s most recent visit to Australia.

1. In an interview you gave me in Paris in 1968 (ALR, No. 5, 1968) you made the following recommendation in relation to Australian policy towards Asia: “For a start Australia should make a clean break with US policy in Asia, pull her troops out of South Vietnam, establish diplomatic relations with China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and get ready to recognise a real government of national union which will eventually be formed in South Vietnam. Policies should be based on authentic national interests and not on those of the tiny, but influential group of Australian capitalists who are prepared to spend any quantity of Asian and Australian blood in defending their mines in Thailand, Malaysia, and elsewhere.”

In what terms would you update this comment in light of the first four months of the Whitlam Government?

BURCHETT: As for the first part of the question about Australia’s pulling out of South Vietnam, this was done, of course, before the Whitlam Government came to power, and it was an example of what can be achieved when public opinion really starts moving. I think it was a most remarkable achievement that the previous government knew it would have absolutely no hope of facing an electoral contest with any chance of success while Australian troops were in South Vietnam. That is because people went into the streets and made that very clear to the government.

This is a factor which has been recognised by the leadership of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. In my most recent visit, Prime Minister Pham Van Dong made a point of this, suggesting that there must be some rather special quality, some special form of political consciousness, among the Australian people, in that, despite the type of government, despite the special relationship Australia had with the United States, a movement of such dimensions was possible and could actually have forced the reactionary government of the day to change its policy.

I think if that same mobilisation of public opinion could be brought about now to achieve recognition of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam, then this would be an excellent thing and would be based on what are really the authentic national interests of Australia.

The situation is different from what it was the last time we discussed the matter. An agreement on re-establishing peace in Vietnam was signed on January 27, 1973, and among the elements of this agreement is the emergence of the PRG as one of the two legitimate governments of South Vietnam.

I think that the Whitlam Government has made a good start on the job of carving out an independent foreign policy for Australia, and one oriented on Asia. An independent foreign policy is good, but I think it also has to be a progressive foreign policy. For Australia to exert the sort of influence it could exert in Indochina, I think the Whitlam Government has to go several steps further.

It is very good that the government has recognised the People’s Republic of China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. It would be even better if it recognised the PRG of South Vietnam and the Royal Government of National Union of Cambodia.

The very fact that Australian blood was wrongly spilt in Vietnam gives Australia the right to demand that the agreement to end the war should be very strictly implemented. In other words, I think that Australia has a legitimate stake in insisting on the strictest carrying-out of the agreement to end the war.

To give a concrete example of this: one of the essential elements of that agreement is the setting up of a
National Council of Reconciliation and National Concord. This National Council is to comprise three equal parts, drawn from the PRG, from the present Saigon regime, and from the Third Force which was not allied with one side or the other during the war. The task of the Council is to facilitate the implementation of the agreement and, especially, those clauses providing for democratic freedoms. Also — and this is perhaps the most important task of the Council — it has to arrange mutually acceptable conditions for the holding of elections in South Vietnam which would be controlled by the International Commission of Supervision and Control. The setting-up of the Council is being prevented because the Thieu dictatorship in Saigon has arrested scores of thousands of those people who could be categorised as the Third Force element, which was intended to be a bridge between the opposing sides in the war. Immediately following the publication on October 26, 1972, of the draft agreement to end the war, in which the role of the Third Force was clearly stated, Thieu launched his military-police machine of repression against these Third Force, or neutralist, elements. Within three weeks, more than 40,000 of them were arrested, according to official figures put out by the Saigon government. Since then, the arrests have gone on, and the general estimate is that well over 100,000 people belonging to the Third Force category have been arrested, adding to those arrested over the years from 1954 onwards, most of whom were suspected of sympathies with the NLF, and some of whom were arrested merely on the grounds that they were activists in the war against the French. Thus, the total number of political prisoners in South Vietnam today is somewhere close to 300,000, according to the best estimates one can find among the South Vietnamese exiles in Paris.

Now, apart from the sheer injustice of the arrests of those hundreds of thousands of people for political reasons, the fact is that the agreement itself cannot be implemented as long as these people are in the jails and concentration camps. Here is a grave impediment to the implementation of the agreement. Given Australia's past involvement in the war, it seems to me that the Whitlam Government could legitimately protest about this impediment to the carrying-out of the agreement, and demand that that section of the agreement which provides for the release of all political prisoners within three months of the signing of the agreement — in effect, by the end of April — should be strictly observed. It is quite clear that the elections as provided for in the agreement simply cannot be carried out while these people remain in prison. The PRG has made it clear that it is quite impossible to hold elections under these conditions. So there is something that the Whitlam Government could take up. In any case, the Australian national interest is best served by a stable peace in Vietnam and in Indochina. Even regardless of the former Australian involvement in the war, the Australian government has every right to raise its voice and put pressure on the US as well as on the Saigon government to demand the strictest execution of the agreement, which is a very good one on paper.

2. How do you assess the alternation of thinly veiled threats of resumed bombing and soothing diplomatic noises which seems to characterise Nixon Administration attitudes to the Vietnam settlement at the present time?

BURCHETT: It is rather difficult to know what, in fact, is in the mind of “Tricky Dick,” Richard Nixon. This has been a problem right from the beginning of his Administration as far as the Vietnam struggle is concerned. It is possible that all these threats are part of the business of a mighty imperialist power moving out after having had a defeat inflicted upon it once again by the peasant armies of Asia, and that Nixon wants to give the impression that this is all a very controlled operation, and is something decided on by the free will of the Nixon Administration. Of course, it is absolutely typical of the bullying sort of attitude the American government has adopted since the beginning of their involvement in Vietnam. Threats and bribes are the ordinary currency that they use in their dealings with other countries. I think only time will tell to what extent these are threats and to what extent bluff. But if they are threats, their value is depreciated once they have been employed. If Nixon wasn't able to break the will or even influence the policy of the DRV during the 12 days of B52 bombing raids over Hanoi in December, then it is difficult to see how he can think these threats are going to have any effect now. It is not the first time, of course, that the US Administration has presented its defeats as some sort of victory. I think the real situation has perhaps been best characterised by Kissinger. In an article in the January 1969 issue of the American quarterly, Foreign Affairs, Kissinger wrote that for the United States not to win such a war as they were engaged in Vietnam was, in fact, to lose it, and for partisan armies not to lose a war against a country like the United States was, in fact, to win it. I think that will be history's judgment of what has gone on.

It is a very bitter pill for Nixon and the Pentagon to have to swallow, and I think the fact that they have had to swallow it explains some of the off-stage noises they are making while they are in fact in the process of pulling out.

3. What do you see as the main lines of action that the Australian anti-war forces can take in the new political conditions in the country to influence US policy in the direction of fully honoring the political provisions of the Vietnam settlement?

BURCHETT: One thing is that those political provisions should be quite carefully studied, and pressure put on for their full and scrupulous implementation. The section dealing with democratic freedoms is terribly important. This sort of democratic freedom was promised under the 1954 Geneva Agreement — that is to say, no reprisals against former adversaries, no political discrimination, and the normal sort of democratic liberties by which people are enabled to make free choices. These democratic freedoms have never existed in South Vietnam, certainly not since 1954. The only place
where they were to be found was in those areas controlled in the old days by the Viet Minh and in this most recent war by the NLF. So it is essential that these political conditions embodied in the agreement should be met.

Among concrete lines of action, as I said before, is the exercise of pressure to ensure that Australia does recognise the PRG diplomatically. In my view, the Australian anti-war movement should also take up with the utmost urgency the question of the release of the political prisoners. It is also necessary to ensure that the Australian government makes a serious contribution to the reconstruction in Vietnam.

It should be added that for such a contribution to be effective, the government must have its own relationships with the PRG, otherwise official governmental aid is going to be channelled through the present Saigon government, which means that it will never be effective, that 90 percent of it will end up in the pockets of people like Thieu and his generals and the comprador-type capitalists who have been generated by Thieu and by the handling of American dollar "aid."

Just for the sheer practical purpose of ensuring that Australian governmental aid is effective, it is absolutely essential that the PRG be recognised and that bilateral agreements be entered into by the Australian government and the PRG, and bilateral talks held on what sort of aid is necessary, what the amounts are going to be, and so on.

I believe there should also be an Australian contribution to the reconstruction of North Vietnam. That too must be the subject of bilateral arrangements.

Australia should not get bogged down in any kind of great multinational organisation over which neither the Vietnamese nor the Australian people would have any control. I think this whole question of aid has to be studied very carefully together with the recipients, the representatives of the PRG and the DRV.

4. The Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Japan, in a statement on the January 27 Vietnam settlement, has said that the Vietnamese liberation forces would have secured "an earlier and a better settlement" had it not been for the divisions between the Soviet Union and China. Would you comment on this?

BURCHETT: The divisions between the Soviet Union and China obviously had a negative effect on the whole conduct of the war in Vietnam. Things would obviously have been simpler had these divisions not existed.

But on the question of the settlement, I think that the settlement, the agreement to end the war and re-establish peace in Vietnam, is one which was envisaged from the beginning by both the DRV and the NLF. That is to say, it is a logical development of the first position taken by Prime Minister Pham Van Dong in April, 1965, when he set forth the five conditions under which a negotiated agreement could be envisaged. That is, it had to be an agreement based on the 1954 Geneva Agreement, it had to be based on the recognition that the US was an aggressor and that the US had to withdraw its forces completely from South Vietnam.

The agreement is absolutely in accordance with the aims of the NLF as defined for me very soon after the foundation of the Front by President Nguyen Huu Tho.

He told me that the NLF was fighting to create the conditions under which the South Vietnamese people could decide their own future without foreign interference, and that the NLF did not demand any exclusive position either in waging the struggle or in deciding the future of South Vietnam. Their role was to create the conditions under which the South Vietnamese people could settle their own affairs. Well, the agreement embodies that.

Every move, every negotiating position throughout the more than four years of negotiations in Paris was a steady development and further defining of those fundamental provisions.

So I don’t think that a better settlement could have been obtained than this agreement.

5. The experience of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam over recent decades has been of such a unique character that it would seem inevitable that it will produce new variants both in the form of socialist society that will henceforth be built in the DRV, and in socialist foreign policy. Could you comment on this?

BURCHETT: I think this is correct: new variants of socialism have been produced during the actual struggle. The very fact that right at the beginning of the bombings the leadership in the DRV decided that they were going to decentralise the economy, to make every region as far as possible economically autonomous, make the provinces economically autonomous, make even the districts economically autonomous, is evidence of this. All this entails a great decentralisation not only of the economy, but of administration as well. It entailed a great deal of grassroots democracy, of people running their own affairs at the level at which they were functioning. It has been an experiment in the greater democratisation of society forced on by wartime conditions. But the experiment has been successful beyond the dreams of the leadership. Very valuable lessons and conclusions have been drawn from it. The people ran their own affairs and they ran them well. They exhibited a sense of national unity and purpose, a capacity for self-discipline, and proved that even at the smallest units of economic organisation they could run their own affairs with a maximum application of democratic forms.

As to the form of socialist society that is to be built up again in the DRV, in my own discussions with Prime Minister Pham Van Dong he said that the DRV was going to be original, it was not going to copy anybody else. They were taking into consideration now in planning reconstruction the essential ingredients that went to form the quality of man, of society, of life, and that these were by no means to be expressed purely in material terms. He said that, of course, living conditions had to be very greatly improved, but that there was a threshold beyond the purely material side of...
things that had to be taken into consideration. I am quite certain that just as the Vietnamese people have astounded the world in the qualities shown in their combat, in what was perhaps the greatest trial in the whole history of the Vietnamese nation, they are going to surprise us again in their approach to reconstruction and the type of socialist society they will build up in the future.

One of the features of this society will, I believe, be that women will play a relatively more prominent part in public affairs than is to be observed in most societies. This again will be a phenomenon largely produced by the war experience, in which women have played an absolutely crucial role, taking over, for example, virtually the entire work of agricultural production to free men for the front.

In South Vietnam, there are entire detachments of the PRG armed forces made up exclusively of women. The fact that women occupy the posts of Foreign Minister of the PRG (Nguyen Thi Binh) and Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the PRG armed forces (Nguyen Thi Dinh) is more than symbolic: it is an accurate reflection of the role of women in Vietnam's historic war experience.

As far as foreign policy is concerned, they considered also from the beginning that in correctly performing their national task, in defending their own socialist motherland, and in lending help to their compatriots in the south, they were not only fulfilling their national obligations but their internationalist duties as well. They have a very, very strong sense of socialist internationalism, something which was inculcated in the Vietnamese people from the beginning by President Ho Chi Minh.

I think that in his Testament Ho Chi Minh has laid down the broad lines to guide the Vietnamese people in their approach to their position within the international socialist community and the outside world in general. President Ho's Testament has become an absolute blueprint not only for the leadership, not only for the continuators of the policies formulated and defined by Ho Chi Minh, but also a blueprint for action for the whole of the Vietnamese people.

Ho Chi Minh of course -- and this is expressed in his Testament -- always hoped that the struggle of the Vietnamese people would contribute to lessening the dissensions in the socialist world. In several conversations which I had with him, he expressed this hope. He said that as far as the DRV was concerned, they would never do anything which would sharpen the differences and would do everything possible to lessen them. He put it in these words in his Testament:

"As a man who has devoted his whole life to the revolution, I feel all the prouder at the growth of the international communist and workers' movement, and all the more pained at the current discord among the fraternal Parties."

"I hope that our Party will do its best to contribute effectively to the restoration of unity among the fraternal Parties on the basis of Marxism-Leninnism and proletarian internationalism, in a way which conforms with both reason and sentiment."

"I am firmly confident that the fraternal Parties and countries will have to unite again."

Of Vietnam's place in the world, he said: "The US imperialists will certainly have to quit. Our Fatherland will certainly be reunited. Our fellow-countrymen in the South and in the North will certainly be reunited under the same roof. We, a small nation, will have earned the signal honor of defeating, through heroic struggle, two big imperialisms -- the French and the American -- and of making a worthy contribution to the world national-liberation movement."

6. You have often emphasised on your current visit the differences between the situation in Cambodia, where war is continuing, and South Vietnam and Laos, where at least the form of a settlement has been achieved. Would you comment further on this?

BURCHETT: The situation is different in Cambodia. Cambodia also has a long history, but it is a history of unity, especially in times of trouble. The fact that they have existed as a nation for some 2000 years, and that Sihanouk, for example, is the most recent in a long and unbroken line of some 84 monarchs, represent evidence of the continuity of Cambodian statehood and history. In times of war and strife, there has always been a great degree of national unity going from the peasantry through to the monarchy, and including the Buddhist hierarchy as a very important factor.

Cambodia is a relatively small country sandwiched between two traditionally hostile neighbors, Thailand and Vietnam. In the old days, it was the Cham empire in Vietnam that threatened Cambodia with extinction and in later periods there were continuing invasions from Thailand. This history has created a national consciousness for unity, for sinking even class differences when the nation is in peril. This national consciousness for unity has been very much to the fore in the present situation. One of the apparent aims of the US in overthrowing Sihanouk was to divide Cambodia up along the Mekong River, with the part west of the Mekong to go to Thailand and the part east to go to South Vietnam. After Sihanouk was overthrown and the invasion took place, a start was actually made to incorporate Cambodian territory into South Vietnam. For instance, some of the eastern provinces closest to Saigon -- Prey Vieng and Svay Rieng -- were actually incorporated into the administration and postal districts of South Vietnam. The ferry-crossing town of Neak Luong, about 40 miles east of Phnom Penh, was completely occupied by South Vietnamese troops and was popularly -- or vulgarly -- known by South Vietnamese as "little Saigon."

This is one of the sources of the strength of the National United Front headed by Sihanouk, and enthusiastically supported by what are known as the Khmers Rouges, and, within the Khmers Rouges, by what is in fact the Cambodian Communist Party, the People's Party, or Pracheachon.

You have this absolutely solid front of unity which includes all sections of the population. At the present time, the NUF controls at least 85 per cent, probably
90 per cent, of the entire territory of Cambodia, including vast areas where there is not a single trace of the Lon Nol administration. The situation is different from South Vietnam in that the NUF controls many provincial capitals and district centres. The fact that the decision was taken in late February this year to move that half of the resistance government, the Royal Government of National Union, which has been based in Peking, on to Cambodian territory, to join up with the other half which has been based in the jungle since the beginning of the resistance war, is a sign of the confidence and strength of the Cambodian resistance forces.

Henceforth, the whole government will be based on Cambodian territory and Sihanouk himself plans an extended visit to the liberated zones. (The fact that the visit had taken place was announced a few days after this interview. M.S.) He will then take off on a Head of State visit to African countries as a preparatory move to Cambodia's participation in the summit meeting of non-aligned States in Algiers in September.

At the time when Malcolm and I are discussing the matter, the war in Cambodia is kept going exclusively due to the intervention of US air power. After the bombing of Lon Nol's palace on March 17, Lon Nol had to ground his own air force. He put under house arrest his co-plotters in the coup which overthrew Sihanouk, including Sirik Matak, who was No. 2 man in the conspiracy. He also arrested hundreds of journalists and political personalities, and followed this up by arresting 50 of the country's foremost astrologers, because they were predicting the end of the Lon Nol regime by the end of April.

All these things are symptomatic of the complete isolation of Lon Nol and emphasise the fact that he represents nothing except the United States.

The future in Cambodia will be that of a Left-of-Centre neutralist regime, much further to the Left than before. Sihanouk himself does not intend to play a political role. He says that the young, the "pure," the Leftists, who essentially directed the resistance war will have the right to direct the country afterwards. Sihanouk will remain as titular Head of State, as an honored patriot who defended the essential interests of the country, kept it out of war as long as he was in power, defended its neutrality, refused to enter into SEATO or permit the establishment of US bases on Cambodian soil, and in so doing rendered very important services to the national liberation struggle over the frontiers in South Vietnam.

The development of the war in Indochina has had precisely the opposite effect to that intended by the United States. Because of the very fact that the US extended its activity to the four elements within the Indochina peninsula -- that is to say, the air war of destruction against North Vietnam, the ground war in South Vietnam, the invasion of Cambodia and the CIA-directed operations in Laos -- the unity of the peoples of Indochina has been forged more strongly than ever before. This was expressed very clearly by the summit conference of the peoples of Indochina in April, 1970, shortly after the overthrow of Sihanouk, and has led to a coordination of efforts, to a comrade ship of arms, to a unity of the Indochinese peoples, which is of historic importance. Its full weight will only be appreciated as the future unfolds. What is certain is that we are going to have Left-of-Centre regimes in South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos cooperating with each other and with socialist North Vietnam in a regional community which will be politically the exact opposite of what US strategy set out to achieve.

Pham Van Dong on Women’s Role

The following comment on the role of women in the Vietnam war, and on the more general question of women's liberation, was made by Democratic Republic of Vietnam Prime Minister, Pham Van Dong, in the Danish newspaper “Information” on May 19, 1972. The Prime Minister was being interviewed by the paper’s correspondent, Vagn Sondergaard. He said: “Throughout our entire history, women have played a decisive role. Our women are admirable. They cultivate the land; they take part in the struggle; and they take care of the children. Our constitution provides for equality between men and women, and if we are not able to bring about such equality, we will not be able to build a socialist society either. But there are still many difficulties. Full equality on the economic and political level is one thing, but the way things are done in the home is quite another. In many of the societies where women have achieved political and economic rights there are women who are extremely capable and knowledgeable who nonetheless feel in an inferior position in relation to men. This means that a struggle must also be carried out through which women can gain self-confidence and self-respect. There are still Vietnamese homes in which the man makes decisions affecting his wife or their children, but this is a problem that our women are paying very close attention to. They are because they are taking part in work on all three fronts. Our women work harder than the men all day long. They carry out the most difficult work. If you compare the work and productivity of men and women, you will find that it is women who contribute the most. They are thus also the ones who are producing the conditions for full equality. Your women are correct to maintain that the struggle for women’s liberation must be carried out along with the economic, political and cultural struggle. Women’s liberation does not automatically come about with the taking control of the means of production. The struggle for women’s liberation cannot be separated from the remaining part of the struggle, and everyone must take part in it. One can certainly not be a revolutionary without always keeping this in mind.”