Democracy and the Communist Party

THE great issues of our times demand that marxists revitalise their analysis of economic, philosophic and political questions. Such revitalisation is not yet sufficiently reflected in Communist Party organisations despite relevant decisions by leading committees. The necessity for it is even contested by a few communists, only dimly visualised by many and demonstrated in practical terms by all too few.

There are suspicions that attempts to develop Marxism to keep pace with modern world developments may constitute a "watering down" of revolutionary principles. This suspicion is perhaps understandable because over a long period development of Marxism was too often seen as the province of a chosen few leaders (and in the Soviet Union for many years, even of one man) and efforts from "below" often resulted in "back of the axe" treatment for the would-be theoreticians or critics.

Some young members are critical of the Party with such complaints as: —

The Party is austere and puritanical. Many members are uncritical and dogmatic. Branch meetings are marked by lack of lively discussion on political issues.

These unpalatable charges have some validity. Any such weaknesses will be eradicated to the degree that communists overcome theoretical sterility, subject past and present work to searching scrutiny, increasingly throw
Marxism into the battleground of Australian ideas, improve study of the facts of Australian reality, familiarise ourselves with modern ideological trends in the community (contesting them and learning from them), and engage in political activity at all levels in the community.

The dust should be shaken off the textbooks. Lubrication must be provided for minds clogged with the formulas of yesteryear. Semblances of self-satisfaction with years of relative political isolation have to be overcome.

Marxism must be seen for what it is, a living, dialectical guide to action, the avowed enemy of stuffiness, dogmatism and bigotry.

These questions relate to some degree to problems of democratic procedures in the Communist Party and of party life.

The subject of democracy in the Communist Party has always evoked wide divergences of opinion. It is belittled by many people on the leftwing of politics, denounced as non-existent by enemies and proclaimed by many communists as perfect.

The subject has been analysed infrequently by communists over decades. However, the exigencies of party activity and life today and the problems of the world communist movement necessitates more thorough examination.

This article is but an attempt to open up the question in the hope of provoking comment and discussion which may prove helpful to the Communist Party in preparing its National Congress in 1967.

"Communism is not a phenomenon without parallel in the world's history. It is based on a particular view of world history and the meaning of life that is shared by many who are not communists. It has one feature, however, which, unlike its view of history and life, is wrong and evil in itself. To be a communist a person is expected to commit himself completely to the party, to submerge himself in the party's doctrine and discipline and to surrender his own personal judgement". (Dr. J. F. Cairns — "Living With Asia". P. 169-170).

Dr. Cairns' view is widespread and contains some truth and much falsehood. It reflects the persistent propaganda which emanates from ruling class hatred of the united and cohesive nature of the Communist Party. It
is based too, presumably, upon the practices of membership and leadership under the worst periods of the distortion of Marxist principles in the Stalin era in the Soviet Union, and in present-day China.

Communists are expected to commit themselves to the Communist Party in much the same way as Dr. Cairns commits himself to the Australian Labor Party, that is, to be a loyal, thinking, active member, prepared to make sacrifices if circumstances call for them.

Because of relative political unpopularity, smaller numbers and a high degree of dedication to working class causes, Australian communists perhaps have required to be made of sterner stuff than members of some other political parties.

Dedicated communists may have wives or husbands, beget children, tend gardens, go to the beach, etc., just as Labor men or Liberals do. The difference lies in different political beliefs.

Narrowminded and fanatical communists exist as do narrowminded and fanatical A.L.P. members or Liberals, serving as a similar source of embarrassment for their party.

Certainly communists are expected to understand the party's doctrine and observe discipline. Unfortunately, there are communists who do submerge themselves in the party's doctrines and in the party as such; who read only Communist Party literature, become conservative and unthinking, complacently believing that Marxism has the complete answer to each and every problem, viewing society and politics in terms of pure blacks and whites. This is due to an inadequate grasp of the essence of the doctrine to which they believe they are adhering.

Concerning the question of surrendering personal judgments raised by Dr. Cairns, it requires personal judgment to join any political party; perhaps more so to join one which has not as yet a mass following. Rather than desiring the surrender of personal judgment, Communist Party members are required to exercise that quality constantly.

Nonetheless under Stalin, Mao Tse-tung and others, practices grew up in various Communist Parties which tended to deny some of the rights and personal judgments of communists. These practices are being fought against and remedied, to one degree or another, in most Communist Parties today. This is certainly so in the Com-
The conception and practice, developed by Stalin, of the Communist Party as a monolithic organisation, lies at the basis of these errors.

A monolith is one edifice from top to bottom, a solid unchanging formation. A critical look at such a theory, let alone examination of the results it has produced, reveal its fallacy. The "monolithic" theory of the party organisation was a grand distortion of Marxist principles and a negation of materialist dialectics. It demanded unanimity on all questions, whereas unanimity is necessary only on basic aims and principles in specific circumstances. It eroded initiative, creative thinking and discussion, instituting a long period of theoretical stultification in the communist movement.

The "monolithic" conception has little in common with the principle of democratic centralism upon which the organisation of the Communist Party is based.

Democratic centralism does not mean an "awful lot of centralism and not much democracy". It means the free discussion of ideas concluding with decisions on policy and activity and the implementation of these decisions. It also must ensure the rights of dissenters, and an end to attitudes of suspicion, and gestures of retaliation against members who feel constrained to disagree or challenge majority viewpoints.

Freedom to vote against decisions and to reserve opinions, whilst adhering to the majority will, must be an inviolable right in the Communist Party, and furthermore a right whose exercise is regarded as a perfectly natural thing.

This does not necessitate anarchic situations. True democracy means full rights to debate. Debate in the party, however, should be free from insult, innuendo and smart-alec attempts to belittle those who fail to see the logic of the particular case. Debate is needed to clarify ideas, with the aim of reaching unity in decision and action. This is essential to achieve activisation of the party, to maintain it as a fighting revolutionary party of the working people.
About two years ago a sincere communist resigned his membership, declaring his dissatisfaction with democratic life in the Communist Party, claiming that groups and factions should have the right to operate.

This view is held by many friends of the communist position. It deserves some discussion. On an abstract plane it may seem justified, but from the standpoint of practical work the problem is more complex.

The only really factional group the writer has experienced was led by E. F. Hill in Victoria in 1962-63. The Hill group created a second centre of leadership in the Communist Party in Victoria, held separate meetings, published and circulated documents, flouted Conference and Committee decisions, and ignored the fact that their political position was overwhelmingly rejected by the membership of the Victorian organisation following prolonged debate in which they exercised full right of expression.

This unusual situation was tolerated for eighteen months during which Hill and his colleagues refused point blank to heed the majority. The Hill group operated as a party within a party until mid-1963, when most of his followers resigned and several were expelled.

Should such a faction be allowed freedom to operate in the Communist Party? Surely any person seriously contemplating a revolutionary change in the social order understands that such activities would make a mockery of democracy, render impotent political action and destroy the party.

However, fear of groups and factions has sometimes led to a situation in which anyone strenuously expressing opposition or doubt about the policies of leading committees was willy-nilly suspected of factionalism and disruption, thereby impeding the thrashing out of political or theoretical problems. This applied particularly to the last 20 years of Salin's leadership in the C.P.S.U. with serious consequences for world communism.

When groups and factions in the Russian Communist Party were banned in 1921 the resolution adopted (formulated by Lenin) specifically made provision for democratic discussion of the party problems.

"The analysis of the general line of the party, the estimate of its practical experience, the verification of the fulfilment of its decisions, the study of methods
of rectifying errors, etc., must under no circumstances be submitted for preliminary discussion to groups formed on the basis of "platforms", etc., but must in all cases be submitted for discussion directly to all the members of the party. For this purpose, the Congress orders that the Discussion Bulletin and special symposiums be published more regularly, and that unceasing efforts be made to ensure that criticism shall be concentrated on essentials and not assume a form capable of assisting the class enemies of the proletariat" (emphasis added).

(Resolution, 10th Congress, R.C.P., 1921.)

The emphasised parts of this decision were largely ignored in later years.

Discussing the question of groups and factions, the Central Committee of the Italian Communist Party had the following to say:

"The organisation of groups within the party may in some cases be a form of internal dialectics and democracy. We do not believe, however, that it is the most favourable form for the circulation and comparison of ideas. Experience demonstrates that organised groups crystallise differences, tie the freedom of each one of us, transform creative debate into a group struggle for power. In a party which is not socially and politically homogeneous, such as the Christian Democratic Party, probably the only dialectics possible is that of groups. The situation in our party is different as it is ideologically, politically and socially homogeneous, and democratic life in it is now far more real and vast than in any other party."

(Foreign Bulletin I.C.P. No. 2, 1965.)

Freedom of debate, freedom to criticise is fully possible without the formation of groups and factions. It is necessary to do more to make the possibility a natural and everyday occurrence, thereby leading to greater unity, vitality and theoretical clarification.

One practical problem facing the Communist Party is that of overcoming a certain lack of vitality which characterises party congresses and conferences. While these important gatherings have sporadically improved over recent years, and provide much inspiration and many interesting reports and speeches, the criticism
relates to a tendency to formalism, to proceed only along well beaten paths.

Questions in dispute are sometimes relegated to the background, and concentration on vital matters is often impeded by the determination of delegates (and organisers) to see that everything receives attention and no subject goes unmentioned.

This sometimes leads to congresses and conferences becoming stereotyped affairs, scarcely befitting a revolutionary organisation which challenges capitalist society and aims to present the path forward to profound social change.

Congresses certainly should analyse the international and Australian political scene and the relative strategic and tactical considerations. Concentration on, and resolution of, particular political, ideological and theoretical problems, however, needs to become more a part of congress procedure with the agenda arranged so that there is time for the necessary debate on such questions. The subjects for such special treatment could be indicated by the Central Committee and/or by the membership in the pre-congress discussion.

Another procedure could be the circulation of amendments to the draft documents and resolutions coming from branches, sections and state organisations to all delegates prior to the Congress assembling.

Some method of making these known to all party members prior to the Congress could also be considered. Such methods may stimulate interest and discussion, thereby placing greater responsibility on the Congress and its delegates to resolve questions in a satisfactory fashion.

One proposition, often put forward, is that only resolutions from branches be discussed, seriatim, in the style of A.L.P. Conferences. For many reasons this does not seem to be suitable. However, improvement of our congresses, conferences and meetings is a matter requiring creative thinking and discussion.

K. S. Karol, in an article "Reflections on the People's Democracies" appearing in the "Socialist Register 1965", in discussing party democracy, suggests four steps to improve the position.

1. The first step "must surely be the recognition of the right of every member to question publicly the
wisdom of the decisions taken at the summit. This is obviously impossible so long as the expressions of such disagreements are treated as acts of indiscipline, and even of treason, rather than as a means of encouraging explanations and of promoting discussion”.

2. “It does not seem desirable to have the immense majority of the delegates to Party Congresses selected from among the full-time members of the Party apparatus. It would be much more rational for such permanent officials to present their reports before an audience genuinely free to judge their actions and equally free to withdraw their mandate from them”.

3. “The divergences which occur frequently among the leaders surely need to be discussed publicly instead of being resolved in private committees”.

4. “A system of rotation in the leading organs of the Communist Party would seem of crucial importance”. (Ibid.)

Karol goes on to write: “It is true that democracy does entail risks. But it is not clear why debate between men who share the same basic ideas and who have the same aspirations should necessarily lead to an uncontrollable struggle and even to splits. After all, since so much is being said about a return to Leninism it might be useful to remember that in Lenin’s time, and despite civil war, communists used to argue about their differences in public”. (Ibid.)

These views are quoted here, not because the writer necessarily agrees with them, but because they are widely held in one form or another.

What attitude should communists take to such propositions? Classify them out of hand as outrageous revisionist nonsense? Or treat them as a contribution to the discussion of the problems relating to the democratic life of the Communist Parties which history has placed on the agenda? It must be borne in mind that the parties in the people’s democracies of Eastern Europe, governing parties, operate in conditions vastly different from our own, thus making the implementation of at least some of the suggestions virtually impossible in our party.
The question of democracy in the party, the way the party conducts its business, is not solved for all time. There have been weaknesses revealed which require much more thought and analysis in the years ahead.

The chief organisational principles of the Russian Party were formulated at its Second Congress in 1903 and are outlined in “What is to be Done” and “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back”.

They were formulated during a near revolutionary situation and during the depths of Tsarist autocracy. “in an atmosphere of almost universal political discontent, in conditions which require complete secrecy in our work, in conditions which require the concentration of the greater part of our activities in narrow, underground circles and even meetings with individual persons. . .” (Lenin at 2nd Congress 1903.)

The organisational principles there laid down have been followed by most Communist Parties very closely. While the general principles seem correct, flexibility in their application to time, place and conditions has been lacking.

It seems apparent, for example, that Lenin's following assertion was valid for Russia at the time.

“. . . that in a country with an autocratic government, the more we restrict the membership of this organisation to persons who are engaged in revolutionary activities as a profession and who have been professionally trained in the art of combating the political police, the more difficult will it be to catch the organisation” (emphasis added).

(“What is to be Done”.)

But there has been a tendency to copy it in situations where it was patently invalid. It is possibly responsible for too narrow and dogmatic a view of who is “good enough” to be a party member in present-day Australia.

Marxism, however, is the enemy of dogmatism of all kinds, whether in respect of theory, politics or organisations.

In developing the whole fabric of party life and activity, there is the need for study and re-study of the Marxist classical writings, but there is the necessity also to develop and apply Marxism to the modern, changing, Australian circumstances.