JOHN Sendy's article, "Democracy and the Communist Party" (ALR No 1) was thoughtful and refreshingly candid in its treatment of a subject which has in the past notoriously been regarded as sensitive and even dangerous.

My main complaint about the article is that, having opened the gate on some radical views, he was rather shy of deciding his attitude to his guests. Thus he quotes four steps to improve Party democracy proposed by K. S. Karol and adds: "These views are quoted here, not because the writer necessarily agrees with them, but because they are widely held in one form or another."

The matter is left there. But surely we will not get far until we realise that general statements favoring greater Party democracy must be fortified by arguments for and against specific proposals to realise such an objective. We must be prepared to stick our necks out, to experiment, and to be wrong, if we are to make headway in what is a vital consideration for us.

This does not, of course, mean that we have to state an emphatic position on all propositions, but we have to examine their pros and cons. For example, I am genuinely torn on the question of the desirability of allowing groups or factions to operate within the Party. One thing that strikes me is that factions were outlawed in the Soviet party in 1921; in other words the Russian communists were able to make a revolution with a party that permitted factional organisation. This rather undermines John Sendy's contention that "such activities would make a mockery of democracy, render impotent political action and destroy the party."

One factor in the Russian situation was that the Party was united by the consciousness of having a tyrannical and oppressive enemy to overthrow; this undoubtedly tended to keep the actions of groups in the Party within bounds. Even then, however, as is well known, one group within the party went so far as to betray the party's plans for insurrection in October 1917; yet its members were treated with extraordinary leniency by Lenin and their action was not used at that time to outlaw factions.

Once tsarism was overthrown, I think it is true to say that the consensus within the party tended to weaken, and various fundamental disagreements came to the fore. These may in time have threatened the functioning of the party, but the question remains whether it was sufficient to outlaw factions, or whether it would not have been better to have placed definite limits upon their rights and activities, the transgression of which would have led to expulsion. But if this had been done, it would have been necessary to have catered for the existence of more than one party, since all the disputants were clearly united in wanting to build socialism. In the prevailing conditions of the Soviet Union, the banning of factions undoubtedly assisted Stalin to establish the monolithic framework which John Sendy rightly condemns.

The extent and forms of party democracy must be influenced to some extent by the conditions it works under, but in the past this correct principle has been applied in such a way as to
justify quite unnecessary and harmful restrictions upon party democracy. The party under capitalism always works in a hostile environment (at least so far as the State is concerned) but in Australia this hostility is heavily checked by the dedication of the vast majority of Australians to civil liberties. This makes it all the more necessary that the party go as far as possible in adopting those standards of political organisation which Australians consider normal. If our estimate were that the road to socialism in Australia would be through unavoidable violence against an intense repression, we would not pay too much attention to present conditions.

But this is not the conception contained in our program; it holds that the maintenance and extension of political democracy is both necessary and possible, and that this perspective offers a prospect of a transition to socialism through mass struggle.

We cannot isolate our concept of the party from our concept of social change, and there is no doubt that a significant widening of the forms of party democracy will contribute to the fulfilment of our program by making our party more acceptable to those outside our ranks who nevertheless share our basic aspirations.

If we look at the situation in Victoria during the struggle with the Hill group, then I think most of those who took part in the debates of that time will agree that it was the most stimulating and thought-provoking period we have known. The existence of the group, and its attack upon the whole range of party policies, necessitated a study and independent grasp of the basis of those policies such as "normal" times never provoke. In the end the group had to go—but was that because it was a faction, or because it was a faction which refused to acknowledge any loyalty to the party, its principles and majority decisions? In other words, I am inclined to think that the problem is not the existence of factions as such, but the definition of the limits within which they may function and the point at which the activities of factions cease to be compatible with party membership.

There is obviously much sense in the Italian statement quoted by John Sendy, to the effect that "organised groups crystallise differences, tie the freedom of each one of us, transform creative debate into a group struggle for power". On the other hand, however, it is true that the crystallisation of differences on important issues leads to the formation of groups, whether acknowledged or not, and their clandestine existence may do more harm to the party than their open functioning, especially since the very informality of factions tends to widen differences; alongside the principled issues of disagreement, there also develop suspicion, intrigue and bitterness fostered by the absence of an open outlet for party-wide discussion. In the end, difference easily becomes equated with treachery.

Perhaps I should add, in the light of unsought publicity I have received from The Bulletin and other well-wishers that I have no personal interest in the formation of a group, whether following an "Italian line" or otherwise. I am concerned, however, with the general problem, which I believe is much more complex than is generally recognised.
Karol's four points are well worthy of intensive examination. I can see no objection to the right of public party debate in reaching decisions, so long as the decisions are carried out and confidences are not breached, and indeed this, along with the public discussion of divergences among party leaders, seems to me to be vital to the functioning of an informed democracy within the party (and no democracy is really such unless it is informed). I do not think that Karol's point about the "immense majority of the delegates to Party Congresses (being) selected from among the fulltime members of the Party apparatus" applies to our party, though no doubt the system of election to conferences and congresses could be improved.

His final point—"a system of rotation in the leading organs of the Communist Party"—has a great deal of merit. It was attempted under the revised rules of the C.P.S.U. adopted while Krushchev was party secretary; I have never seen any study of its operation, but I believe it was never implemented to anything like its full extent.

It would be a much more difficult undertaking in a party working in our conditions, but this is no reason for ignoring it. There is within our party an unhealthy view that elected positions, and functionary posts, are or ought to be for life, and this needs to be eradicated. A stated term for presidents, vice-presidents and chairmen would be a good start.

REX MORTIMER.

JOHN SENDY in the A.L.R., June-July 1966, has made a valuable contribution to the present discussion on democracy in the Communist Party, although it should be added that this subject is also a vital one in relation to the internal functions of all organisations in the labor movement.

Whilst agreeing with the general trend of his suggestions, I think that greater clarity may be reached if it is first understood that the various sections of the Third International, including the Australian section, were expected to lean heavily on the Russian experience.

Both in their infant and formative years, this was done, not because of "pressure from Moscow", but from a natural eagerness to learn from the first victors in the struggle against capitalism. Such an attitude has many implications and applications, but in this discussion it requires a further study of the development of the idea of democratic centralism in the R.S.D.L.P. and Bolshevik parties in the period from 1903 to the thirties, when it crystallised out into the form now undergoing further change.

This requires an historical approach, whereas John Sendy's approach, in parts, zig-zags backwards and forwards in time—and also in place (Italy, East Europe, etc).

For example, the 1921 proposal by Lenin is used initially, although this was a later, 'tightened-up' version of democratic centralism, as is implied in the later quotation from K. S. Karol, a vital section of which is "... in Lenin's time, and despite civil war, communists used to argue about their differences in public."

In a very brief attempt to "sort it out", I would therefore suggest a brief chronology
of the development of democratic centralism over the decades:

1) 1903-1912: A statement of the basic principles, which were, in practice, not very much heeded in that the R.S.D.L.P. was rent down the middle into two factions, Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, whose differences were so great as to produce a decisive split.

2) 1912-1921 (to my mind the most significant period): A separate, Bolshevik party which built up the Russian and non-Russian working class revolutionary movement, successfully overcame the resistance of the tsarist secret police and state apparatus, social chauvinism, carried out a successful revolution, defeated the interventionist armies and welded together the republics which later became the Soviet Union.

All these victories have been recited countless times. I only emphasise them to underline K. S. Karol’s reference to the practice, under all these trying conditions, of a form of democratic centralism considerably more “liberal” than that at present practised in 1966 in parties in some advanced capitalist countries (whose working classes have some very open democratic traditions) under circumstances, international and local, far less grim than those of the Bolshevik Party in that earlier period.

3) 1921-1928: A “tightening up” of democratic centralism, though with certain, considerable freedom of discussion guaranteed, at a point in time marked by the Kronstadt meeting, the “unleashing” of N.E.P., national exhaustion and near-anarchy. Comrade Lenin’s final serious illness began early in this period. Considerable archive work in the Soviet Union may already indicate whether Lenin saw this “tightening up” as a temporary or permanent measure. At any rate, the insistence of dialectics on changed policies for different “conditions, time and place” does raise this speculation to the status of a serious question.

Not to be forgotten are Lenin’s worries about the fate of the Party following the elevation of Stalin to the General Secretaryship.

4) 1928-1953: In 1928, a year of general growth of a hard, dogmatic attitude on a variety of questions, the interpretation of democratic centralism was again “tightened-up”, following Stalin’s belief (originating in 1927, not 1937) that the longer the struggle proceeded, the fiercer it became.

Information on this in English is meagre, but the results are well known, i.e., insistence on “unanimous” decisions, strengthening the position of majorities by the extraction of abject recantations from dissenters, etc. All this makes unpalatable reading, but should by now be digested by communists everywhere.

Equally important was the disappearance of a certain freedom of the press—serious dissenting views were henceforth never printed—and a restriction of movement and speech by minorities in relation to the Party apparatus and meetings.

It is quite true that the “logical conclusion” of such tendencies as those expressed in John Sendy’s article is the appearance of full-blown factions, but like a lot of “logical conclusions” (such as the relation-
ship of imperialism to world war) it doesn’t necessarily reach such an extreme. It is just by permitting that much greater flexibility of which John Sendy writes that new factionalisms can be avoided.

The sad experience of the Hill interlude should be sufficient proof that the old hard line of opposing really free discussion, within the broad guide lines of a constitution, is no guarantee that factionalism will not break loose, one way or another.

Lastly, a more flexible democratic centralism should not be seen as a safety valve, permitting the Party more easily to retain intellectuals and “strange” would-be theoreticians of the rank and file who like to let off steam. Lasting benefit would come from the seriousness with which the Party-as-a-whole takes the various views put forward in the new climate. —S. C.

(Writers for the discussion pages are requested to keep their contributions as brief as possible, and in any case no more than 1000 words.—Ed.)

**COMMENTS**

“This is the latest in a series of moves by the party to adopt a soft-sell line”.

“Data”, Sydney Morning Herald 13.5.66

“The changing of the title of the Communist Review to Australian Left Review . . . demonstrates that the Mortimer faction is in the ascendancy.”

Bulletin 4.6.66

“Writing in the first issue of Australian Left Review . . . a prominent official of the Australian Communist Party has startled conservative members of the party hierarchy by suggesting that Marxists should get up to date in their thinking.”

“Australian” 22.6.66

“The claim of the ‘new’ journal to be ‘a marxist journal of information, analysis and discussion’ rings a little hollow—”

“Outlook” an Independent Socialist Journal, June, 1966

The Australian Left Review “catches a lot of people who don’t know any better, and enables those who do to affect a certain attitude of innocence.”

News Weekly 27.4.66

“The first issue of ‘Australian Left Review’ (June-July) 1966 contains interesting articles on Basic Wage ‘principles’, Changes in Modern Capitalism, the A.L.P. Crisis, Conscription, Drought, and Democracy in the Communist Party.

“The book reviews include important comments on Picasso and his art.”

Common Cause, 25.6.66

Party supporters ask: “How are we going to know what is party policy in this new magazine?”—G.B., Victoria.

(The Communist Party makes statements when it considers it necessary to define policy.—Ed.)

B. Taft’s article very good; W. A. Baker’s started well but ran out of steam.—R.K.

“We hope it won’t be too high-brow”—a plea coming in different forms from many quarters.