Since we are supposed, in this session, to be discussing the consequences of November 11 last, let me suggest for a start that at least one of the consequences has been very beneficial indeed. For almost the first time in recent Australian history it has become possible, in ordinary discourse, to speak of the ruling class without being accused of polemical extravagance, cheap rhetorical trickery or vulgar marxism.

Kerr’s action, so plainly linked to advice (or should it be urging?) from the Chief Justice, made it quite plain to many previously purblind people that the privileges, prerogatives and powers of the ruling class were from now on to be considered as written explicitly into the Constitution. There was no longer any discreet pretence that political behavior was ultimately controlled by convention or democratic practice. And I think we should beware of arguments, even now sponsored by some legalists on the left, that Kerr’s action was in essence a betrayal of the intentions of the Founding Fathers. In my view, Kerr’s action carried out those intentions with a clarity and ruthlessness of purpose that the so-called Founding Fathers (who were, for the most part, a ripe old bourgeois bunch of political scallywags, scoundrels, hypocrites, careerists, tainted idealists and bargain-basement visionaries) would have commended. Make no mistake: the Constitution was devised to protect the interests, property, business and commerce of the ruling class. Significantly, about the only freedom it guarantees is the freedom of interstate trade. I see no point, therefore, in waxing sentimental about our inglorious Founding Fathers or in ascribing to them motives and virtues which they never possessed.
Nor do I see any point in weighing the question of whether Kerr was correctly using his powers or whether those powers actually exist. What we should remember is that powers exist when they are effectively used and there is no doubt that the powers of the Governor-General's office have been, as it were, proven by Kerr's action - and I must add, by Whitlam's failure to take any immediate counter-measures. The time for Whitlam to have acted was when Kerr handed him the dismissal notice. What would have happened if Whitlam had refused to accept it - if, after looking at it, he had torn it up? Would Kerr, as commander-in-chief, have called out the defence forces? Or would he have retreated from any assertion of his supposedly constitutional powers? But the fact is that Kerr knew his man: he knew that Whitlam was a legalist; he knew that Whitlam believed in the sanctity of high office, in procedural propriety and in pieces of paper bearing the appropriate bureaucratic stamp: and above all he knew that Whitlam, by wilfully sacking or demoting nearly all his most senior ministers, had isolated himself within the government and now stood alone, unguarded and vulnerable, at the head of a squabbling, morale-shaken and disintegrating party. Kerr probably never would have risked withdrawing the Prime Minister's commission if Whitlam had come to him that morning as the leader of a solid and united party, accompanied by a ministerial group of, say, Cairns, Connor and Cameron. As it was, Whitlam had virtually set himself up to be knocked off.

"Maintain your rage", said Whitlam, who might have done better to exhibit some rage when confronted by the Governor-General. And if there is to be any continuing expression of rage, it needs to be directed not only against the Governor-General and the monarchical principle which he enshrines but against the ruling class conspiracy of which the Governor-General's coup was the culmination. The threat to democratic rights emanates, as always, from the ruling class, and one of our tasks in the immediate future should be to identify its elements, expose its contradictions and attack its weaknesses. The events of November 11 destroyed, once and for all I hope, the myth of Australia as some vast, amorphous middle class presided over by benevolent political, social, industrial arbitrators allotting us higher or lower incomes according to merit, luck and the size of the national cake. Yet when one tries to specify the source and nature of these threats to democratic rights, one succumbs to an awful sense of deja vu, as though Australia was back in the 'fifties, 'sixties and early 'seventies, as though the Labor government had never happened. And this is not precisely because the conservative coalition is dismantling Labor's reforms; it is rather because those reforms scarcely altered social and economic relations in any fundamental way. The changes have been mostly cultural and ideological - that is to say, superstructural. Of course these changes in consciousness, with consequent changes in values, have had some effect on relations in the workplaces and on social relations generally. For example, the granting of maternity leave to women in the Commonwealth Public Service, regardless of whether the woman can show a marriage certificate, represents a change in the status of women that is both economic and cultural, both structural and superstructural. But the broad proposition remains: that partly because of obstructive tactics by the Senate majority, partly because of the Labor government's own backsliding and temporising, and partly because of the lack of ideological drive in the Labor platform as a whole, there has been remarkably little progress towards socialist objectives. Socialism, indeed, was never really on Labor's agenda; its programs were essentially (and contradictorily) posited on the well-being and survival of liberal capitalism; it was preoccupied for most of its term with welfare, community improvement and quality-of-life schemes as if its sole aim was to bring stability to the existing system; and in its final year it even became, paradoxically and tragically, the party of unemployment. As a result, the conservative coalition is now in a position to turn back the clock, to cancel out the limited and temporary advances of 1972-75, to pursue with some vigor its policies of reaction and regression.

I am dwelling for so long on these aspects of Labor's period in office because there will presumably be Labor governments in the future - that is to say, governments representing a loose and uneasy coalition of anti-capitalist groupings, some only anti-capitalist within the system and intent merely on extracting a fair deal from
capitalism others more explicitly and militantly anti-capitalist, seeking the hegemony of the working class. We have to learn from the mistakes of 1972-75 if there is to be any hope of taking this nation towards independence in its external postures, and towards socialism in its internal arrangements. The point hardly needs to be emphasised that the thrust externally towards independence must correspond with the thrust internally towards socialism. And just as the Whitlam government was hedged about with ambiguity, tentativeness and pusillanimity in its attempts to reform the economy and control the bureaucracy, so it was in its attempts to adopt an independent stance in the world. After the Terrigal Conference of February 1975 (which I once inadvertently, through a slip of the tongue, christened the Terrible Conference) it was no longer possible to treat very seriously Whitlam's professed concern with non-alignment. I believe that he was sincerely anxious to move into a new set of foreign relations; but the truth is that the Terrigal Conference wiped out, so to speak, the Lima Conference of 1974. Terrigal marked, if I may put the matter pejoratively, a surrender to General Motors and the American Chamber of Commerce; it was a declaration of non-independence from the demands of capital, especially international capital.

From that moment, the intra-government, intra-party rot took hold; and there was brutal contradiction between the scattered protestations of independence in foreign affairs and the actuality of dependence, alignment, even alliance in domestic affairs. This contradiction was soon manifested in the conduct of foreign affairs, particularly in the attitude towards Timor and, in a lesser-publicised case, the DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea). I cite the instance of the DPRK because it is a country I know fairly well and for which I have some affection and admiration. Also it is a country which has tried to make a social philosophy out of self-reliance and non-alignment; and nothing, not even the rationalisation that in its geographical situation as between the USSR and China it had no other option, not even its inability to send out news releases in decent comprehensible English, can take away from that remarkable achievement. Now Australia had recognised the DPRK and exchanged ambassadors owing largely I think, to the personal intervention of Dr
Cairns with the Prime Minister. I am open to correction on this assumption, but it was certainly Cairns who cornered Whitlam into meeting and talking with the DPRK’s first big political delegation to Australia. Not much has been said about the reasons for the sudden exodus of the DPRK embassy staff just a few days before Kerr’s constitutional coup. There were news stories about a smashed car and about one-upmanship by the South Koreans in Canberra, but hardly any mention of what was fundamentally disturbing the DPRK - Australia’s shilly-shallying in the United Nations on the question of the withdrawal of US troops from the Korean peninsula. During 1975, coinciding with the deterioration in government control over the bureaucracy, there was a resurgence within the Foreign Affairs Department of pro-American thinking: the old diplomatic warriors of the Cold War and Vietnam once again smelt blood, the Labor Party’s blood, and the Australian Ambassador to the UN decided of his own volition to continue supporting the US presence in Korea. He was eventually instructed to abstain on the crucial division, but the damage had been done with the Koreans - and anyway, the interim Fraser government soon gave him the go-ahead to vote as he had originally planned. This is perhaps not the whole background, and probably the Koreans in Canberra were too quick to anger and impatience, too unaccustomed to the pious prevarications of Western diplomacy, but even so much as is known or can be deduced from those strange events hardly backs up any notion that the Labor government was deeply attached to concepts (let alone doctrines) of independence. The lesson is that, if you surrender to General Motors in the domestic economy, then you will inevitably surrender to the US State Department on issues affecting the Korean peninsula.

Instead of dealing with threats to democratic rights and social development, following on November 11 last, I seem to be travelling backwards from November 11 and talking, at least tangentially, about the Labor government’s failure to secure democratic rights and social development. But he who moves forward without knowing and remembering the condition of the soil from whence he has come will ultimately get caught in quicksand. And I simply do not believe that the world changed on November 11. I believe that Kerr is dangerously vain and, as I wrote at the time, if not clinically insane then mad nor-nor-west. I believe, as I have indicated, that there was a confluence or conjunction, even a conspiracy of extraparliamentary forces on the right which manipulated the downfall of the Labor government. I take no credit for prophesying to a meeting of CICD in September 1974 that something of this sort was bound to happen, because the signs were already visible at that time and the campaign of denigration was gathering pace. I believe, too, that November 11 was a defeat for the left, though not a cataclysmic one, taking into account that experiments in social democracy usually end as a defeat for the left. We should have anticipated no other result - and if that sounds fatuous, there is at least one person here who will testify to my deep sense of gloom and foreboding on the night of the election victory in December 1972. So why am I expected to examine threats arising particularly from November 11? Probably because, although the threats may not have changed in character since the late ’sixties and early ’seventies, they have now acquired what might be called an imminence. November 11 changed not the threats; it changed our consciousness of those threats.

A list of threats tends to be a string of platitudes: unemployment is a threat because it robs people of the right to work; tightening of the national education budget is a threat because it restricts the right to knowledge; the virtual abolition of Medibank is a threat because it consolidates the perquisites of the bourgeoisie and denies these same advantages to the working class. And if I leaf through my last book, especially the speeches and articles from the 1960s, I can abstract from it an impressive catalogue of threats which still have relevance: high expenditure on military hardware, foreign military bases on the Australian mainland, a sellout of mineral resources to foreign countries, the grip of multinational combines either directly or through compradore companies, military alliances like the ANZUS treaty (a treaty which memorialises, so to speak, Australia’s response to the Korean war). The words “foreign” and “military” keep recurring, for these are key words in the political dictionary of a dependent nation. The threats from racism have not receded much since those days,
either, especially for the aborigines. Then there are threats which have already materialised into government attacks on basic rights or freedoms; the right to organise labor (i.e. the right to form and run trade unions); the right to withdraw labor (i.e. the right to strike); the right to receive information (i.e. the right to uncensored news and comment); the right to express opinion (i.e. the right to publish or demonstrate).

I must even confess to a grudging admiration for the way in which Fraser, with an ideological decisiveness that Whitlam never showed, has honed in on the national radio and television service. His avowed aim is the "depoliticisation of broadcasting, by which he means intensifying, solidifying and making irreversible its bourgeoisification. I would never pretend that the ABC is anything but a pillar of the Establishment, busy essentially with the propagation of bourgeois tastes, opinions and values. There is an important sense in which even the more radically oriented programs of, say, my own department serve this purpose either by drawing attention away from the generally conservative and sometimes downright reactionary bias impacted in most of the ABC's news, information and comment, or by giving the ABC an opportunity, when attacked for intellectual rigidity and dead-handedness, to point to its own democratic tolerance, liberalism and fair-mindedness. Yet, whatever its failures, absurdities and pomposities, however much it embodies (or perhaps embalms) the cultural gentility, political timidity and moral hypocrisy of Australian life, the ABC has been gradually moving since about 1970 towards a more pluralistic program output, one which expresses a wider range than ever before of ideas and cultural fashions; towards a devolution of control, a breaking down of authoritarian and hierarchical control, in actual program production; and and towards a rejection of stylistic influences from the BBC and the US networks. It is these trends which Fraser finds offensive and which he is obviously determined to stifle, by appointing a chairman in his own ideological image, by encouraging ABC management to use the iron heel, and probably by introducing bureaucratic machinery to incorporate the national service more firmly in the commercial system.

In this scheme of things, the public sector would play only a supportive role to the private sector, looking after such minority concerns as religious broadcasts, rural broadcasts, schools broadcasts and high culture broadcasts, which the commercial stations avoid as unprofitable yet which appear to assist in maintaining bourgeois health and stability. Increasingly, too, the ABC would become an outlet for, say, Time-Life interpretations of the history of Europe (as in a recent television series, "The Mighty Continent"), for dramatised, romanticised, bowdlerised political and sociological sagas from the BBC, and for so-called international productions of cops and robbers stories with US film outfits. Thus would the ABC pursue its sanctified task of propping up the superstructure and contributing, in the expectation of the Fraser government, to capitalist longevity. Meanwhile, the commercial stations could stay full throttle on exploiting the vulgarity and hysteria of the commodity culture and on making the world safe for selling merchandise. And there is hardly need to add that, in this set of circumstances, RCA (just to take one example) would continue to flourish and expand as a rent-collector for television satellite relays and overseas voice circuits, as a supplier and purveyor of films and gramophone records, and as an investor in Australian manufacturing and media companies.

What I am trying to say is that for all the ABC's grotesqueries and inadequacies, it deserves to be recognised as the only media instrumentality to which the Australian people still have some right of access. I am not claiming that it is owned or controlled by the people in any politically meaningful sense; but its responsibilities to opposition parties and its susceptibilities to pressure groups have made it more diverse in its representation of interests, tastes and opinions than most other media institutions. And the degree of political consciousness among the staff just about reflects what is to be found in the populace at large. The ABC has become, indeed, a useful barometer of the political climate; and the battles now being fought in and around the ABC (like this week's blackout by the Women's Co-operative of a management-censored program) give some indication of the sort of conflicts that will probably occur in bigger
public arenas. Let it not be thought that I am prophesying a vanguard function for the ABC - but, partly in justification of this excursion into its complexities and permutations, I would remind you of one fundamental strategic mistake made by the French students and workers in May 1968. They took over the Odeon Theatre as a platform for their keynote speeches, primarily because it was the site of so much of the nation's cultural heritage and thus seemed historically appropriate. They would have been far wiser, of course, to have taken over national radio and television.

The reasons for discussing the ABC is not to make a diversion but to ask a question: which institutions or groupings in this present social formation can we expect to create a consciousness of the need for national independence? If we were to think only of media institutions, the picture is rather bleak. Beyond the ABC, with its limited horizons and capacities, the commercial monopoly of Fairfax, Murdoch, the Melbourne Herald and Packer is as entrenched as ever, and its connections with the electronics industry (in which there is a strong foreign component) has been if anything strengthened. Murdoch is practising a form of media imperialism which infuses his Australian papers, by processes of cultural feedback and merging, with political values borrowed from his British and American newspapers. Book publishing, except for a few (a declining few) Australian houses, has been steadily absorbed into empires headquartered in London and New York. And when, not many years ago, RCA bought Random House and CBS acquired McGraw-Hill in order to establish dominance in the text-book business, it signalled an ominous stage in the reach of the media monopolists towards global control of education - not just classroom or lecture-room teaching but the dissemination and inculcation of values through radio and television entertainment.

But we must not despair, because the main impetus for an awareness of the meaning and necessity of national independence will not come from the press and from broadcasting - which are, after all, only secondary agents of change. The primary agent of change is still the working class - and in effect this means at the moment the vanguard trade unions. Even to properly interpret what is happening in the media, one should not merely read the newspapers, listen to the radio or watch television, one must also assess the situation in the media unions or on the shop floor of media institutions. The ABC has to be judged, for example, not so much by its programs as by the attacks on authoritarianism, hierarchism, careerism and censorship coming from its employees. The press likewise has to be looked at in the context of worker unrest, particularly among printers faced with job obsolescence and unemployment, and in the context too of a widening assertion of journalistic dignity and integrity.

We as a movement can find our base, our constituency, only in the working class - and at present only in the unions specifically. Independence in foreign affairs is virtually unattainable unless workers themselves have achieved a substantial measure of social and economic independence, of control over their own industrial conditions and their own social relations. To call for an independent stance externally is, as I suggested earlier, meaningless without a corresponding campaign for the independence of the working class internally from the constrictions and humiliations of capital. This is not to rubbish the idea national independence and non-alignment; it is to locate a source of strength for the achievement of national independence in a working class conscious of its own independence - a class both in itself and for itself. There are undoubtedly threats to democratic rights in this country, and it is not beyond possibility that Australia could sink into the human degradation, moral infamy and judicial violence of, say, Brazil - a country with which we are sometimes compared in terms of resources and where social development involves the jailing and torture of dissenters, the suppression of free speech and open demonstrations, the secret execution of left-wing academics and journalists, the persecution of communists and radical catholics alike. But the main threat is that we may not fully understand or sufficiently believe in our own potential for independence, class independence as well as independence in foreign relations. If, as a result of November 11, 1975, Australians can now talk about the power of the ruling class, they should also begin to talk about the power of the working class.