Socialism and the ALP Left

THE FEDERAL TAKE-OVER of the Victorian Labor Party, inspired by rightwing policies, ruling class desires and the ambitions of attaining electoral victory at any cost, has proved a grand failure, irrespective of what occurs in the next weeks.

The interventionists had a completely unreal estimate of the situation in Victoria and have proved quite unequal to the job undertaken. They in no way realised the depth of support for Hartley, Hogg and their colleagues. Estimating that Hartley, Hogg & Co. would have only a handful of supporters faced with strong-arm tactics, they to a large degree were paralysed by the strength and full-blooded nature of the opposition and defiance which they confronted from a membership sickened by the traditional parliamentary antics of a Whitlam and the hare-brained, opportunist, power-game manoeuvrings of a Cameron.

The idea of reforming the ALP to enhance its 1972 electoral prospects by eliminating "the madmen of Victoria" in exchange for some curbing of the rightwing dominance in NSW was swallowed readily by sundry opportunistic, unprincipled "left wingers" in NSW and Victoria obsessed with positions and "power" and with achieving the "advance" of electing a Labor Government under Whitlam. The "Mad Hatters tea party" of Broken Hill was followed by the circus-style orgy of the Travel Lodge Motel in the

John Sendy is Victorian Secretary of the Communist Party.
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full glare of television cameras and the shoddy backroom dealings of the dimly lit Chinese cafes of Sydney.

After the massive intervention in Victoria the whole game was revealed by the Federal Executive's attitude to NSW. Faced with the stark revelations of the Burns' report which either categorically stated or strongly implied the stacking and rigging of Conferences, financial malpractices, unprincipled pre-selection procedures, manipulation of rules, dominance by outside secret organisations, etc., all of which made the Victorian "crimes" pale into insignificance, the Federal Executive, in majority, virtually threw out the findings and suggestions of its Federal President.

Hence the ALP is again in crisis—a crisis of perhaps a new kind—which will unfold in a more advanced political situation requiring thought and analysis by all revolutionaries and radicals. However, the purpose of this article is merely to make some comments on the position of the various leftwing or left of centre (in a broad ALP context) sections of the ALP.

The overwhelming number of Labor Party members and supporters who claim any allegiance to socialism are hooked on parliamentarism and the idea of winning "power" in elections as the road of advance to socialism. This has applied both to the opportunist reformers and to the more militant leftwingers. The idea that the way forward to socialism lies through election of ALP Governments which can take steps, even under such leaders as Whitlam, to weaken the hold of capitalism and gradually enhance the prospects of a new society, holds tremendous sway with socialists in the Labor Party despite the fact that this mirage disappears with every experience of Labor Governments in office. Likewise the view that the Labor Party can be "changed", can become really principled, anti-capitalist and socialist, persists despite all historical experience to the contrary.

In Australia today significant newer forces are emerging as ALP leaders. We have people such as Hawke, Dunstan, Young, Holding and Burns who while perhaps varying in their political approaches, ambitions and degrees of sincerity, have a general concept for the ALP. They desire a modernised, larger party, left of centre, in the Australian political context (but not too left of centre) projecting a somewhat radical image, manned by more capable and younger people. While regarding rank and file control as something of a political joke they desire a democratic party but not so democratic as to "get out of hand". They want a party which will appeal more to the youthful majority who may not be unionists so much as in the past; a party which fits into
the bourgeois scheme of the two-party system; a party which
could gain office and proceed to "sensibly" and "humanely" set
about gradually reforming the capitalist system in the direction
of some sort of vague socialism; a radical with-it party yet tradi-
tionally social-democratic and therefore thoroughly opportunistic.
Perhaps the greatest bulk of Labor Party leftwingers identify in
reality with these concepts.

Undoubtedly the most articulate and sophisticated argument for
a mass consensus Labor Party as being the vehicle for socialist
change in Australia was presented by Ian Turner last October in
the article "What Kind of Party do we want?" (Labor Times,

Despite Turner's praiseworthy motivations, obvious sincerity
and ability to present a theoretical view, his thesis amounts to
little more than a classical reformist position. In arguing that
the ALP must be a "mass" party, rather than a "vanguard" one,
Turner is bedevilled by the problem of the ALP achieving office,
or "effective political power" as he repeatedly calls it. How
Whitlam, Beasley and Cameron straddling the Treasury benches
would constitute "effective political power" is not argued. Nor
could Turner argue that it would, for election of the Labor Party
as at present operative would leave "effective political power"
precisely in the hands of those who hold it now.

Referring to the contradictions in the ALP, Turner states that
the party has always found it "difficult to reconcile these contra-
dictory interests" and that "it has always had to try to find the
balance in the interests of achieving parliamentary office"
(emphasis added). This is precisely the point! What kind of
policies would the ALP enact? While introducing certain limited
reforms in social services and perhaps in foreign policy it would
strive to maintain the status quo and prove itself as being of no
serious danger to the interests of the main sections of the ruling
class, the middle class, Uncle Tom Cobley and all but the most
reactionary forces in this country and overseas so as to ensure
its re-election at subsequent ballots. In this connection Turner's
view is not so different from the young reformer section (referred
to above) and in part at least conforms to the Whitlam strategy
as described by Robert Murray:

He was faced with the choice of leading a united party destined never to
win office — and therefore unlikely to stay united — or fighting the left to
recreate an electorally successful left of centre party dominated by its Parlia-

While Turner calls for socialism — "democratic socialism, a
decentralised economy and society based on workers' control and
popular control” — his process of achieving socialism is based on the idea that the ALP MUST get office and MUST present the policies and image which will get it there and MUST more seriously set out to create a “mass socialist consciousness”. How on earth this heterogeneous mass party of consensus — a consensus of non-socialists, anti-socialists and socialists — will promote a mass socialist consciousness is not stated.

Geoff McDonald, hero of the Travel Lodge Motel and the court room, unwittingly emphasises this point as follows:

There are, admittedly, within the ALP varying and different attitudes towards socialism. Some see socialism as a more urgent question, others see it as a philosophy of politics and some see socialism as a question to be introduced piecemeal and some merely look to certain reforms that can be introduced within the system. But within it all they have an idealism and an approach to life which makes them a party suitable to the situation in Australia and reflective of the sentiments and egalitarianism of the Australian people. (Geoff McDonald, The Labor Movement and Democracy pamphlet issued in reply to The Communist View of the ALP Crisis, CPA publication, September 1970 Melbourne).

Can one imagine the Labor Party winning office and Whitlam and Barnard joining with Stone and Ducker to proselytize for socialism let alone attempting to lead and encourage the kind of mass disenchantment with capitalism and mass adherence to the aim of ending its rule? Who in the ALP appear as even remote possibilities to strive to engender socialist ideas and tactics except the very people and forces which Whitlam, Cameron and Co. are trying to eliminate by their intervention in Victoria?

Furthermore, if election of Labor Governments requires maintaining the “consensus” in the party and keeping the “balance”, or in other words holding a nice centrist position, keeping the socialist objective a well-kept secret and sacrificing principle for expediency, how then can one possibly expect it to operate in a socialist position at a later stage?

Hence Turner’s view that the ALP is the vehicle for the advance of socialism in Australia I believe to be quite erroneous. The somewhat different views of Fourth Internationalists, for example those expressed by G. Tighe (ALR, No. 27) likewise fail to offer a solution to these problems. Erroneous, too, are all concepts of socialism lying through the election of Labor Governments or of parliamentarism in general. Lenin, in 1920, referring to the vicissitudes of working class and social democratic parliamentary work wrote that

the most shameless careerism, the bourgeois utilisation of parliamentary seats, glaringly reformist perversion of parliamentary activity and vulgar petty-bourgeois conservatism are all unquestionably common and prevalent
features engendered everywhere by capitalism, not only outside but also within the working class movement. (V. I. Lenin, Collected Works, Vol. 31, p. 114. Progress Publications Moscow).

The question of why socialists and leftwing activists (who probably number several thousand——variously orientated) remain in the ALP and occupy themselves with the forlorn hope of changing it in a socialist direction is a pertinent one today. The reasons can be set out as follows:

1. Most ALP socialists retain an allegiance to parliamentarism. They state their preference for a “democratic” rather than a “revolutionary” path to socialism, falsely equating democracy with the ballot box and revolution with anti-democracy, hence, despite adhering to socialism, naively placing their faith in reformistic approaches. Many would agree with Dr. J. F. Cairns’ assessment that

“Australians do not need a revolution” and that “the labor movement must adhere to its traditional support for rational and peaceful political methods of securing economic and social change” (J. F. Cairns, Living with Asia, Lansdowne Press, Melbourne, p.175).

The remarks of John Saville on the British Labor Party are pertinent to the situation of the left in Australia.

The myths and illusions concerning the Labor Party have an extraordinary tenacity. The first is the conviction that a numerical majority in Parliament is all that is needed given good-will and political purpose, to shift the direction in which society is travelling towards socialist goals; a belief based upon the assumption, whether explicit or not, that the owners of property will allow themselves to be legislated out of existence without a major struggle.

The second is the belief of left wing activists, ever since the establishment of the Labor Party, that the Party can be transformed into an instrument of socialist purpose which, on achieving office, could set about the structural alterations in British society necessary to realise a socialist commonwealth. Party militants have always appreciated the non-socialist origins of the Labor Party, but this has never altered their conviction that continuous effort would bring about the conversion of the Labor Party to a firm socialist commitment. What was needed was more intensive work at constituency level: the winning of positions in the local hierarchies: the acceptance by local parties of socialist aims: the victory of socialist resolutions at national conferences and above all, since the Parliamentary Labor Party was to be the main vehicle for socialist advance, the acceptance of left wing candidates for parliamentary elections.

Despite betrayals by its leaders ,the electoral disasters of 1931 and the 1950s, the permanent minority of the Left on the national executive, it has been the renewed confidence of each generation of Labor militants that has kept the Party alive all these years. The facts of life have been against them but their self-sacrificing work has ensured the continuation of the party as a major force in local and national politics. It cannot be too strongly emphasised that faith in the parliamentary road to socialism occupies a central position in the collective consciousness of the British labor movement; and as acceptable strategy it has survived, and is surviving, all demonstrations of its irre-

2. The Socialist left in the ALP, despite its frustrations and disappointments, its severe criticisms of the ALP and the cynicism with which it frequently views the ALP sees NO ALTERNATIVE to working within the Labor Party. As again John Saville puts it in respect to the British Labor Party:

The Labor Party still commands an extraordinary allegiance, even from those who have lost all faith in its socialist potential. There is no easy and obvious political alternative and it is this which holds so many back from making the decisive break. (ibid).

This point is illustrated in Victoria where following the 1955 split in the ALP and the adoption of more leftwing stances by the Victorian Labor Party organisation, and following the various splits and crises in the world communist movement, hundreds of ex-communists found their way into the ALP in dissatisfaction with the possibilities for advance of the CPA, considering that the ALP constituted a more meaningful organisation (whatever its weaknesses) with real mass support and possibilities.

3. Even some of the most militant of the socialist left in the ALP retain the hope that the party can in fact be transformed into a principled socialist party, provided they work hard enough — this hope despite all history and all history of betrayals. Each new situation seems to rekindle that aim and hope.

Many social-democratic parties of Europe originated as marxist parties and evolved to parties of the purely ALP type as they are today. Not so the ALP, which was formed in the 1890s to become the political mouthpiece of a trade union movement faced with a deteriorating economic situation, which wanted to repeal the bad laws. So the ALP has remained, losing something of its "closeness" to and identification with the unions in the process. It adopted its socialisation of industry platform in words in 1921 as a response to the Russian Revolution and the formation of the CPA but has never regarded it as more than an embarrassment to be played down or "forgotten".

Traditionally the ALP left has been consistently reformist and gradualist rather than lickspittles for the ruling class, vaguely socialist rather than revolutionary, or anti-reactionary rather than socialist. Its principal spokesmen have rarely been more than merely leftwing in the broadest sense.

However the left in Victoria at the present time comprise an interesting and significant phenomenon. The history of the three great ALP schisms of the past with Hughes (1st world war), Lyons (1930s) and the Groupers (1950s) arose on the basis of the above-
mentioned adopting extreme rightwing policies. The present crisis has occurred because of the more leftwing attitudes of the Victorians. Indeed when confronted with Federal intervention the Victorian leftwing rather than capitulating or running for cover, opted for more boldly elucidating their leftwing and socialist positions and fighting intervention on that basis — certainly a qualitatively new phenomenon for the ALP! Furthermore it is receiving mass support from the membership. The Hartley-Hogg forces seized the time of undemocratic and unpopular Federal intervention to promote a struggle for democracy in the party and for a more challenging anti-capitalist, extra-parliamentary, and more pronounced socialist-inclined program than has been witnessed in the ALP for generations — this at a time when there is an escalation of leftwing movements of all kinds and a pronounced anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist trend among the nation's youth. The fact that the present struggles are exhibiting new features is, incidentally, an additional factor refuting the proclaimed Hill-Maoist view that the more left ALP leaders and members are, the more dangerous they are to the working class.

Why is the current leftwing struggle in Victoria exhibiting qualitatively new features? Several reasons readily come to mind.

1. The 1955 split saw the clearing out of the most substantial rightwing elements from the ALP. This was peculiar to Victoria because the split with the groupers was very much more pronounced in that State.

2. The fact that the groupers had largely controlled the Victorian branch prior to the split in 1955 required a tremendous rallying of the more leftwing and militant ALP members in Victoria to resurrect the ALP organisation and wage the fight against the groupers and then the DLP.

3. This necessitated a greater involvement in ALP affairs of leftwing unionists than had operated hitherto and a vow on their part to the effect that never again would the rightwing gain dominance in Victorian ALP affairs.

4. The split saw the emergence of Jim Cairns as member for Yarra, defeating the DLP man Keon. Cairns has exercised a considerable influence on Victorian political ideology and action. Certainly a man of principle in Federal Parliament is rare if not unique. While Cairns is not a revolutionary, his contribution to the anti-Vietnam war effort and to making politics an affair of the people and of the streets has been possibly monumental in terms of any other approach historically.

5. The aforementioned large numbers of ex-CPA members who gravitated to the ALP, most retaining their socialist leanings and many aspects of their CPA training certainly strengthened the
ALP left. While not all have remained in the leftwing camp most have.

6. A large number of the cadres of the present left in Victoria are products of the Victorian Labor College, an organisation under the patronage of Ted Tripp and under the influence of marxist and trotskyist teachings which has had an inordinate (in terms of its size) influence in the labor movement in Victoria. (Note: These influences and teachings are worthy of a study by some enterprising student of the labor movement.)

Most of these circumstances are not apparent in other States. In addition, the present struggle has developed in a situation when big mass movements of various kinds (Vietnam, conscription, education, etc.) are developing with the mass of participants being outside the ALP and traditional political structures, when there is a growing disillusionment with parliamentarism upon which the ALP is based, and when there is a substantial international challenge to traditional reformist politics and politicking.

The left in Victoria, in preparation for the January 30 meeting of rank and file ALP members, and a future State Conference, have presented a platform which, while being contradictory in many aspects, is an advanced position for the ALP. It emphasises as key objectives peace, democracy and socialism. It speaks of the emancipation of man, the ending of alienation, direct action, workers' control as opposed to workers' participation, and opposition to, and direct action against, unjust imperialist wars "in recognition of the fact that the workers of all countries have a common identity in overthrowing exploitation".

Such approaches, however limited, combined with vigorously expressed opposition to the confining of ALP activity largely to parliamentary manoeuvring, give the current Victorian left a qualitatively new look. There is a genuine and developing socialist trend. Yet what of its possibilities for consolidation and success?

Maintenance and development of their position makes virtually impossible any long period of even bitter co-existence with Whitlam and the rightwing politicians and trade union bureaucrats so powerfully entrenched in the ALP structure. In addition there is the complexity of the ALP power structure referred to by Robert Murray which "covering so many interests and so apt to touch off power struggles" has "a stultifying effect" in that it discourages "change and individuality". (See The Split, p.6.) Furthermore, the propensities for compromise in the ALP (including the left) are traditional and very strong. Illusions about the "possibilities"
of reformism, as outlined above, are the strongest ideological factors dominating the outlook of the bulk of supporters of the present Victorian leftwing leaders.

For such a genuine socialist left to survive as a force for any length of time within the ALP it would have to be organised so as to constitute a party within a party — a difficult situation — which would only be the precursor to having affiliation ended anyway. Presumably hope and inspiration for this new leftwing arises on the basis of the new situation in Australian politics — the big mass movements with masses of youth demanding and enacting the politics of resistance, confrontation and militancy in a way unknown before, substantial challenges to parliamentarism as a method to achieve fundamental change, and the need for the ALP to take account of these developments. However within this political context the idea of a genuine socialist left remaining within the ALP and gradually succeeding in transforming it into a fighting socialist party appears as even more utopian than it did hitherto. For the rising storm of youthful radicalism is precisely against the compromises, the manoeuvres and wheeler-dealing associated with the traditional political parties and for a more fundamental challenge to the actions of imperialism and the values of capitalist society.

The ALP as a structure, and in ideology, is a reformist party offering itself as the alternative Government of Australia, the second line administration of capitalism, a role accepted by the overwhelming bulk of the members, as well as by the leadership. Criticising the British Communist Party's *British Road to Socialism*, Bill Warren makes some interesting comments, of interest to Australians, on the British Labor Party.

Suffice it to say that far from being a potentially socialist party, the Labor Party is a structure for fighting elections to provide personnel to run the capitalist state at national and local levels in such a way as to integrate the most advanced sections of the working class into the capitalist system. Further, the provision of such personnel has as a quid pro quo a local and national system of institutionalised patronage. Nor is it only a small number of leaders who are right wing — the party down to its lowest levels is pre-dominantly right wing. Neither is the Labor Party democratic since the Government or the Parliamentary Labor Party decides policy.

Moreover, the Labor Party operates at all levels to dampen the class struggle as far as this manifests itself in the form of direct action and initiative from below. The role of the Labor left has been to maintain the Labor Party's hegemony over the class-conscious sections of the working class and in doing so it provides necessary ideological support to maintain the electoral success which ensures the continued dominance of the right. A mass movement cannot change the Labor Party except by destroying it. The strategic task of the revolutionary left is thus not to change the Labor Party but to detach it from its working-class support. (Bill Warren, "The Programme of the CPGB — A Critique", *New Left Review* No. 63 p. 86).
Yet Humphrey McQueen is undoubtedly correct when he claims that every socialist must confront the question of the ALP, that the ALP “cannot be ignored in any revolutionary socialist strategy”. (Humphrey McQueen, “Laborism and Socialism”, *The Australian New Left* edit. Richard Gordon. Heinemann, Melbourne p. 43.)

This piece of advice needs to be learnt by many of the youthful revolutionaries. Irrelevant it may be as a socialist force but from the point of view of support and allegiance from many socialists, potential revolutionaries and militant blue and white collar workers the ALP is by no means irrelevant. These forces have to be prised away from its influence before fundamental social change can be won and this task must be confronted by serious revolutionaries. Snobbishness on the part of youthful revolutionaries is hard to sustain in the light of the many on the student and academic left today who only yesterday were members of the ALP ritualistically handing out how-to-vote cards and working for the return of a Calwell or Whitlam Government! This illustrates that revolutionaries cannot ignore possibilities for change and that masses of people can “become transformed so that instead of merely desiring some greater or lesser reforms they are prepared to take decisive action to change the whole social system.” *(Statement of Aims, Communist Party of Australia, 22nd Congress, March 1970, p. 26.)*

Therefore the young radical/revolutionary attitude, so prevalent, that the ALP is irrelevant, that revolutionaries should have no truck with it, should not support the return of Labor Governments and indeed should in no way even participate in parliamentary activity, contesting elections, etc., is incorrect and should be combated. Lenin’s references to such attitudes in an earlier and foreign context are still noteworthy today:

> The childishness of those who “repudiate” participation in parliament consists in their thinking it possible to “solve” the difficult problem of combating bourgeois-democratic influences within the working class movement in such a “simple”, “easy”, allegedly revolutionary manner, whereas they are actually merely running away from their own shadows, only closing their eyes to difficulties and trying to shrug them off with mere words”. (V. I. Lenin, ibid., p. 114).

Some comments on the Communist Party approach to the ALP seem necessary at this stage. The present split in the CPA centres on this question to quite some degree. The Australian Socialist grouping are increasingly hostile to the CPA on the basis of it being “pseudo-left”, too critical of the ALP (Note: The Australian Socialist group regard it as commonplace and correct to speak of unity “with the ALP”, i.e. with Whitlam, Ducker and Dunstan and all, yet mention of anarchists, libertarians, Trotskyists, or Maoists evokes responses of derision and anger), and departs
from consistent, principled efforts to build unity between Communist and A.L.P. forces at all levels on all possible issues of common agreement, as the main basis of a wide anti-monopoly front . . . (Declaration, Socialist Publications, Sydney 1970 p. 4. Emphasis added).

This approach continues the generally accepted view within the CPA of the late fifties and early sixties, and reflects both the incorrect strategy involved in such a stance and inability to adjust to changed situations. Twenty years ago nearly all the socialists (and militants) were members or supporters of the CPA or ALP. Today the majority are not. Twenty years ago most meaningful and militant campaigns on living standards, democracy, peace, etc., were initiated by CPA members or policies. Today such campaigns for various reforms so frequently arise spontaneously on a larger scale. This seems to indicate that communists should not see themselves so much as initiators of reform movements (which the past situation made necessary) as being activists and ideologists aiming to exert political and theoretical influence, explanation and direction for these movements in order to advance the socialist and revolutionary potential of them.

Today the problems of the ALP, while very important, are by no means the cardinal question that they used to be, because of the proliferation of leftwing struggle, forces and potential outside the existing political parties. Traditionally socialist strategy (hardly existing outside the CPA) has been built around the existence of the ALP, a large reformist party receiving the support of a majority of the working class, the second party of the two-party system of our brand of parliamentary democracy. This in a situation where the CPA was small, other revolutionary groupings virtually non-existent, the student and youth movement unknown and leftwing academics largely silent — a vastly different situation from today.

In this situation the CPA's attitudes to the ALP and the united front in general tended to comprise a defensive rather than an offensive position and were frequently designed to avoid or overcome isolation, or to develop in broadest terms, the struggles for reforms and campaigns which were most frequently slow to develop and hard to sustain.

If such tactics were correct before they are not today. Over the years the CPA tended to veer from positions of sectarian abuse and hard-line inflexible confrontation towards the ALP to the extremes of a "soft-line" and only a mildly critical approach. Unity for the sake of developing some campaigns for reforms assumed too great an importance. Andre Gorz has commented:

The fact that social-democratic leaders and socialist forces may find themselves in agreement on the necessity of certain reforms must never be allowed
to confuse the basic difference between their respective goals and perspectives. If a socialist strategy of reforms is to be possible, this basic difference must not be masked, nor dismissed to a lower level by practical agreements at the summit. On the contrary, it must be placed at the centre of political debate. If not, the socialist movement, by seeming to give a totally unmerited "socialist" warrant to the social-democratic leaders through tactical agreements at the summit, will have prepared the rout in ideological and political confusion of the whole of the working class movement and particularly of its avant-garde. (Andre Gorz: "Reform and Revolution", Socialist Register, 1968 p. 113).

While agreement at the "summit" in the Australian context was not a factor, the above assessment could perhaps apply fairly accurately to failings of the CPA particularly during the sixties. In addition the CPA for long years has been particularly remiss in criticising the ALP left. The attitude to this whole problem became one outstanding reason for the CPA's lack of attraction to the radical youth and young socialists.

Perhaps the CPA in its currently more realistic and advanced policies in a new political situation still adheres to a sort of ambivalent attitude towards the ALP — on the one hand holding the view that the ALP cannot be "changed" and on the other encouraging the left in the ALP to make the attempt. For there to be any substantial development of the socialist and revolutionary movement in Australia it would seem several difficult processes would have to take place.

Firstly, the ALP socialist left would have to abandon its habitual yearnings after reformist solutions and possibilities and be prepared for a different and more arduous existence.

Secondly, the CPA's evolution to more revolutionary positions and to rejuvenation would have to have greater success. The attitudes of perhaps a majority of its members seeing it as "a homeland, a refuge and a source of moral comfort" and "the effectiveness and radiance of the party" being "of less account than its homogeneity" would have to be changed. (Andre Gorz, ibid., p. 138.)

Thirdly, the more realistic and less naive and romantic of the youthful revolutionaries would have to realise more deeply than they do now that people have to be "won" to a socialist position rather than "bludgeoned" into it and that this whole process may necessitate varied and complex tactics, campaigning and activities at all levels perhaps over a very long period of time.

Should such processes be accomplished with any degree of success the possibility for some newer and more attractive formation, marxist, militant and revolutionary, may become a possibility.