Jim Cairns and Bill Hartley
—an Interview

What overall effect will the actions of the Federal ALP Executive in Victoria and NSW have upon the ALP?

Dr. Jim Cairns: It is not yet possible to say what overall effect the actions of the Federal ALP Executive in Victoria and NSW will have upon the ALP. In each State a group — called ‘right’ in NSW and ‘left’ in Victoria — had obtained control of the Branch and was unwilling to give a fair go to those who disagreed with them. The position was worse in NSW, but the Federal Executive acted as if it was worse in Victoria. At present it appears that more change as a result of Federal Executive action will take place in Victoria than in NSW. The position in NSW is still very obscure. But in Victoria it is likely that the ‘left’ wing group, which had full control before September 1970, will perhaps have a majority in 1971 but that others will share perhaps as much as 45 per cent of the elected offices.

Mr. Bill Hartley: You have to answer the question differently for each State. In NSW there was no meaningful intervention. I don’t see any substantial changes occurring in that State. Undoubtedly the system of proportional representation will give the so-called left faction minority representation in NSW. The only thing that is clearly apparent in the differences in the situation in New South Wales and Victoria is that in NSW whatever action was taken, and it was quite limited, was taken for a very good reason in the face of very serious complaints, while in Victoria it was taken for very little or no reason on the basis of complaints which didn’t have any substance in fact. I think one of the most fundamental outcomes of the intervention
in Victoria has been that it has released a number of people who were associated with the left wing in the past to re-think the future of the party in ideological terms. It has led to the development of the socialist left. Of course, it has also led to a fundamental re-grouping in this State. It has indicated some shortcomings in the previous Victorian Executives which were prisoners of the system of the limitations imposed on it by being tied substantially to the interests of fairly conservative parliamentary parties.

A number of members of the Executive who previously had left wing associations have collaborated in securing intervention, others by their acquiescence have allowed intervention to work. It is obvious that out of this there is going to be a fundamental reassessment of the position of the most active Labor Party people in Victoria. Out of it will grow an effective socialist force although I doubt whether it will initially be a majority force in the Victorian ALP.

Do you see prospects for further splits in the ALP? Will the strongly differentiated groupings in the ALP, assisted by the provision for proportional representation, lead to entrenched factional activities making further splits more likely?

Cairns:
Proportional representation will not create factions; it will allow factions to have representation. Splits are not a result of factions; they are a result of a situation in which factions are kept apart and cannot meet together to have to argue out their positions within the constitutional framework, or they are the result of a total absence of representation of one faction. It appears likely that proportional voting, allowing the factions to be represented, will create a situation in which the factions can meet and argue out their positions. I would expect that factions will continue but that splits would be less likely. Splits, however, are inevitable if differences between factions are irreconcilable. Should a situation arise where differences are irreconcilable then no system, proportional or otherwise, will prevent splits. My experience is that differences are more often the result of personalities and personal group loyalties than they are the result of differences over ideology or principle.

Hartley:
Factional activities, of course, have always been characteristic of the Australian Labor Party. The ALP is a broad coalition of
various forces who for various reasons associate with the labor movement. But I think we have to look at the character of proportional representation voting. It is likely to lead to a proliferation of groupings in the party and it is not necessary for various factions to make their alliances in advance. My own view, and I'm quite closely associated with the socialist left, is that we ought to be an independent group taking pretty much a vanguard political line and creating a frame of reference whereby the others have all got to make up their minds whether they are going to support us or not. There is a likelihood of not two groupings, but of several groupings under this system in the two States where it is going to apply. I don't think that this necessarily means that it is going to heighten the prospect in the future of splits in the ALP. What it will do is to make it even more clear to the public and the electorate at large there is a fairly solid disparity of viewpoints in the party.

What prospects are there for the ALP left wing to win the leadership of the ALP Federally, and what policy differences do you think would be likely to eventuate if this occurred?

Cairns:
The ALP left wing has a very good chance of winning Federal Conference and Executive leadership of the ALP. Among the changes in policy this would bring are:

1. An end to the principle that the US alliance is crucial, and a beginning of support for the 'human rights' revolution around the world most often expressed in the national liberation movements.

2. Positive economic institutions under the control of parliament would be developed.

3. Emphasis would be given to workers' democracy, student democracy and many other forms of democratic government within economic and social groupings would take place. Trade unions would become more democratically active and far less bureaucratic.

4. New emphasis would be given to civil rights — freedom to think, speak, write and behave culturally. In some instances the government would assist people to inquire and research and to publish far in advance of anything contemplated up to now. This would mean a curtailment of the powers of security and other police engaged in political or cultural intimidation and restriction and of magistrates, many of whom possess no judicial qualities at all and are merely policemen without a uniform.
Hartley:
I can't see that there is a very good prospect of anyone taking a strong socialist position winning leadership of the Federal Parliamentary ALP. But there is a prospect for an influential socialist point of view to continue to have some influence in the party, although it is at a fairly low ebb at the moment, particularly within the Parliamentary party, and it may take us time to regain influence. Nevertheless I think that the dynamic lies with the left; it is quite capable of putting forward policy alternatives which will have a great deal of appeal.

Do you regard the ALP as a vehicle for socialist change in Australia?

Cairns:
I regard the ALP as a vehicle for socialist change in Australia. This involves many things but among them are the fact that if it is a vehicle for socialist change then it must not be alone a party campaigning for support of those whose opinions are taken as they exist. It must also be a party to educate and change opinion towards socialism. Socialism is, of course, not what happens when a group of people who call themselves, or who are, Marxists obtain power, nor is it the control of the economy by the State. Socialism is a high level of democracy in each and every economic and social unit of which the society concerned consists. Socialism can be won by winning democracy in each of these units and by socialists winning power in the State.

But both social democrats and Leninists have made the mistake of believing that all they need to do to establish socialism is to win control of the State. If social democrats do this, merely by winning elections, they will have very little power at all because most of the power which they will have to deal with is in the economy and not in the State. If Leninists merely determine to win control of the State in advanced capitalism by revolution, it is highly improbably that they will win in any foreseeable time or circumstances. Socialism has to be worked for and won in the factories, schools, universities and everywhere where decisions are made which affect the lives of our people.

Hartley:
A vehicle for socialist change may be going a little too far in some respects, but looking at other parties in the political spectrum that are not functioning as parliamentary parties, like the Communist Party say, one has to evaluate whether it would be more
useful to be a genuine socialist party or be within a parliamentary structure as a socialist wing. One would have to create a list of debits and credits to see whether it would be more effective to occupy a forward position without parliamentary representation or to function within a mass party like the ALP. People in the ALP have considered from time to time whether or not a left party of a vanguard type would be effective. But I think the general decision which has been made is to work within the structure of a party geared predominantly to the parliamentary system and to change its priorities.

As socialists, do you consider that revolutionary changes are necessary in Australia in order to establish a socialist society?

Cairns:
To establish socialism in Australia a revolution would be necessary, but the belief that socialism can be established in Australia by force is utopian and mistaken. Contemporary Australian society is so acquisitive, violent and uncooperative that the change necessary to establish socialism would be so great that it could not be other than revolutionary. But socialism could not be established quickly by force. In the event of some quick change of State power by force there would be little change in the mass of the people and in society. It would still be the same society and it would have to be changed afterwards. The danger would be that any group that would obtain power by force quickly would not be capable of changing society into a humane, free, cooperative one. It is better not to take the risk and to work for socialist changes in every organ of society every day of our lives.

Hartley:
Of course the answer to that is yes. In context it is necessary to define what one would mean by revolutionary changes. Our commitment is to peace, democracy and socialism and using democratic connotation we would be looking for the sort of revolution that would have a popular electoral basis and would not be a revolution of a military or a violent type which could result in a dictatorship of the proletariat. I would be looking to the sort of revolutionary changes which would set up in Australia, as the result of fairly extensive nationalisation of some of the major private enterprises in the country domestically and overseas owned, a very considerable public sector of activity where most of the socially useful role of industry would be allocated. There would be room for a continuing private sector in Australia as well, and there would be room for a third sector with a fusion of both public
and private participation. However it is necessary to look at an extensive program of nationalisation, not necessarily of expropriation, but I think ways can be found to fund the takeover of enterprises, particularly foreign enterprises in Australia, which don't make an immediate drain on our capital resources. It is going to be very necessary too to adopt a fundamental attitude to some of the problems of society, like pollution, housing, transport and urban planning.

In the foreign policy field I feel that there can almost be a complete revolution in thinking. Socialists in the party have got to specifically contest any policy set-up whereby we give any allegiance at all to the American line, particularly in view of their continuing role in Asia. I think that we have to be explicitly anti-imperialist both in the military and economic sense and that this has to be articulated. I think that the whole field of Government policy and administration, particularly in most of the areas of federal jurisdiction, are capable of being virtually turned about in order to establish a more socially useful government, as an aim to obtaining a more socialist orientated society. Yes, what we would be envisaging is basically a revolution although a democratic revolution in this country.

What do you think is the reason why a majority of young radicals and activists are rejecting the traditional parliamentary parties?

Cairns:
In the past a great deal of emphasis has been placed upon Parliament (especially the State, and it is easy to think of Parliament or the Government as the State) as the sole or main base of power. This emphasis has been given as much by Marxist-Leninists as by social democrats. They have differed mainly about how they would get control of the State.

In recent years it has again been realised that the State in an advanced capitalist economy is only one of the bases of power, and if it is 'taken over' and the other power bases left as they are, they will be able to neutralise or throw out those who have taken over the State, especially if it is through traditional parliamentary methods. It is of vast importance to realise that the State in an advanced capitalist economy is not the only or main base of power and that if power is to be won it has to be won in many places not just in the State. But the reaction of the young radicals and activists has gone much too far. They correctly see that the State is not the only or main base of power but they are acting now as if it had no power at all. It is of great importance
to see that as many socialists as possible go into Parliaments and win control of the State if they can. It is a serious mistake to think that the State can be smashed, or power won in the streets by almost unarmed people with no experience or inclination for fighting. It is of vast importance to advance socialist thinking and socialist power everywhere, continuously and, of course, the State or Parliament or the Government must be one of those places.

Hartley:
I think that resistance to the established parliamentary parties goes further than even the majority of the young radicals. There are fairly active signs that the community generally is dissatisfied with the form and character of the established parties and this is indicated by the substantial votes for the minority parties in recent elections. This pattern has been building up over the past two or three years.

On the specific questions of the young radicals and activists, it isn’t easy for somebody like myself to tune in completely with their thinking. I consider myself fairly radical and socialistically orientated, but I am continually surprised by the whole nature of their dialogue and the very fundamental nature of their approach to society. It is sometimes even difficult for older people to understand just precisely what they have in mind for society in general or for the re-organisation of universities, but it is pretty clear that they are re-thinking things in very fundamental terms and that the traditional parliamentary parties certainly are not satisfying them. Of course they are entitled to be very cynical about the role of politicians and parliamentary parties. They believe direct action is going to achieve results of a more relevant character than may be obtainable through the more traditional means, either through the ballot box or in the parliaments. I think too, that the Vietnam war has affected very greatly the thinking of young people and particularly young students who are informed about the issues involved in Indo-China. Certainly they are dissatisfied with the performances of their government over the issue of Vietnam, and I think that they are very dissatisfied with the backing and filling of parties like the ALP on the issue.

However I believe that in the left of the Labor Party within the broad coalition which is the ALP there is effective room for real work which may influence the course of community, social and government action. I hope that the Labor Party could be regarded as having its doors open to the left and to everybody who wants to put a radical viewpoint, and particularly the students, and the younger radicals in society. I don’t think we can finally answer that question until we can see the course of the development which started in Victoria.