THE COMMUNIST PARTY’S draft Charter of Democratic Rights is an attempt to analyse briefly the essence of contemporary Australian democracy, to expound Communist views on democratic freedoms in a future Socialist Australia and to outline proposals around which campaigns for retention and extension of democratic rights in present capitalist society might be undertaken. The earnestness of the Communist Party in putting forward this program is emphasised by the fact that we are initiating both Party and public discussion of the draft before its finalisation later in the year. The purpose of this article is to discuss some peripheral questions of concern to some marxists and socialists.

Recently a Communist waterfront worker put it to me with some feeling, “Democracy might be a class question. But when we talk of democracy that’s what we’ve got to mean. If an author writes a book we don’t like or people refuse to toe our political line, that’s too bad. When we talk about bloody democracy that’s what we’ve got to mean — democracy — it’s as simple as that!” For most Australians it is as simple as that. The average person is little concerned with whether the democracy he desires is described as bourgeois or proletarian. He wants a fair go, with no one standing over him; to be able to speak up and say his piece; to pen a letter to the papers and have it published; to strike, if need be, without penalty; to write without being censored; to use his telephone without it being tapped; to be interviewed by the radio and television man and be able to criticise the government and the Prime Minister; to travel where his money and time allow him; to worship or not as his inclinations lead him. He remains quite unmoved (and even nonplussed) if told that there is no such thing as pure or absolute democracy. He wants what he calls “democracy” and worries little about the prefix.
All this is fair enough but unfortunately the whole problem of democracy in relation to its implementation is extremely complex.

The common or lexicographic meaning of “democracy” which it has had since the days of Athenian greatness is “government or rule by the people”. It refers, that is, to a method of governing, and does so by specifying who rules, or makes the binding policy decisions in a state. Any contemporary attempt at a definition will cause less confusion if it keeps close to this original meaning of “democracy”, given to it by long historical usage. (Henry B. Mayo An Introduction to Democratic Theory, New York Oxford University Press 1960, pp. 22-23)

Historically democracy has been associated with the concept of rule by the common people, against upper class privilege; a sort of levelling process and very much a class question. This was why it was feared for so long. For the idea of democracy carried with it the possibility of rule by the “unenlightened mob” with presumably dangers to the privilege, wealth and power of the educated and “enlightened” minority who comprised that section of the population best fitted to govern in the “interests” of the whole of society. Modern elitist theories which claim that a real mass-participating democratic system is virtually impossible in modern industrial society in fact adhere to similar views, though cloaking them in sophisticated language.

In ancient Greece and Rome democracy existed for the ruling class, was resisted in respect to the plebeians and unthought of regarding the slaves. In early capitalist days in England the franchise existed for the proprieted. Almost every concession in the direction of extending it to adult suffrage had to be fought for by the mass of the people over long years. To this day in Australia property qualifications are required in many states in respect to State Upper House and local government elections, and gerrymandering is still a feature of our society. In a reference to early capitalist society C. B. Macpherson writes:

There was, necessarily, great inequality, for you cannot have a capitalist market society unless some people have got accumulated capital and a great many others have none, or have so little that they cannot work on their own but have to offer their labor to others. This involves inequality in freedom of choice: all are free but some are freer than others. (C. B. Macpherson The Real World of Democracy, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1966, pp.1-2)

Capitalist democracy has its foundation in the revolutions in Britain and France in the 17th and 18th centuries. At that time the English and French commercial and industrial middle class were struggling for freedom from the oppressive restriction of feudal aristocratic rule — for the free movement of commerce and trade which required an end to the restrictions if they were to flourish. These revolutions were fought with popular support, for the purpose of ensuring the class rule of the rising bourgeois
class, in which the demands for political and religious freedoms played an important part. They were genuinely progressive movements forward in the march towards democracy. But ideas of democracy and freedom were essentially linked with those of property.

Marx dismissed the democracy of his day as "mere formal freedom". He was scarcely exaggerating. *Das Kapital* (the first volume) was published at Hamburg in 1867. This was the year of the Second Reform Bill which gave the vote to British householders who lived in their houses and paid the rates — adding about 1,353,000 voters to the electorates. Lord Cranbourne (later the great Lord Salisbury) called the Bill "a very dangerous experiment". He and two colleagues resigned from the Cabinet in protest. (Herbert Agar *The Perils of Democracy*, the Bodley Head. London 1965, p. 57)

The old argument that "the poorest he that is in England has a life to live as the richest he" hardly holds water when confronted with the realities of capitalist society. Irrespective of the franchise and of the tremendous importance of the franchise the wealthy are in the position of enormous privilege not only regarding material living but also in respect to their "say" in matters of government and power. Little thought is required to illustrate the advantages of the wealthy in present Australia in education, control of the mass media, political campaigning, influencing government decisions and generally in having a more direct hand on the power levers of society.

Our present Australian democracy while extended and refined by years of political struggle and usage is blighted by the monopoly capitalist system of private ownership and profit-making and carries with it the extreme danger of transforming the limited democracy we have won into a mirage as far as actual popular control is concerned and whittling away of even those democratic rights acquired over long decades. Current industrial penal legislation, the political amendments to the Crimes Act, telephone tapping, the concentration of more and more power at the executive levels of government and measures restrictive of free speech and assembly are evidence of these trends, while the unrest among teachers, pilots, postal workers and many professional workers frequently centres on overcoming the frustrations of having little influence in determining the policies and direction of their work or industry. Furthermore, the control over modern capitalist industry which has such influence and power in our community is certainly the reverse of democratic. Yet this aspect is the central issue for real extension of democracy.

In an article published in *Pravda* on January 3, 1919, Lenin advised the workers as follows:

*You must take advantage of bourgeois democracy, which, compared with feudalism, represents a great historical advance, but not for one minute must*
you forget the bourgeois character of this “democracy”, its conditional and limited character, never share the “superstitious belief” in the “state” and never forget that the state even in the most democratic republic . . . is simply a machine for the oppression of one class by another.

Present-day capitalist society, no matter how democratic respecting elective processes, has little chance of becoming a form of society and government which is inspired with the feeling and consciousness of the dignity of man. Neither the ideological veil of pluralist democracy nor the material veil of extravagant productivity alter the fact that in the realm of advanced capitalism the fate of man is determined by the aggressive and expansive apparatus of exploitation and the politics interwoven with it. The civic rights that are permitted and administered in this system of domination do not diminish the violence of an oppression which has made the world a hell. At the moment hell is concentrated on the battlefields of Vietnam and the other sacrificial lands of neo-colonialism.” (Herbert Marcuse “The Question of Revolution”, New Left Review No. 45, pp. 3-4)

The Argument About Peaceful Transition

Discussion of the possibility of peaceful transition to socialism, and the proposition that political opposition or political party opposition should be envisaged under socialism, usually arouses controversy among Communists and Marxists. It also evokes the charge of insincerity of the part of many opponents of socialism. The “doubting Thomases” on the Left usually present the following arguments. Peaceful transition is impossible because the ruling class will never relinquish wealth, power and privilege without resorting to violence. There has never been a peaceful transition to socialism in the past therefore why should it be deemed possible in the future? Look at the actions of the reactionary forces in Greece and Indonesia as well as in other countries in recent years. While democratic institutions in Australia may be more traditional the capitalist monopolies are more deeply entrenched than in most countries. The idea of peaceful transition goes against all the teachings of Marx, Engels and Lenin.

In discussing these assertions it should be clearly stated that socialism in Australia is undoubtedly a long way off and it would be a very foolish person indeed who would attempt to predict the exact way in which a socialist transformation will be consummated. (Perhaps even the main problem today is the doubt in so many minds as to whether such a prospect is real at all in Australian conditions. Certainly some of the left wing of Australian politics hold that pessimistic view.) Here, however, the discussion must centre not only on the desires of the Communists, but also on the possibilities that exist.

Firstly, the concept of a peaceful transition to socialism is not contrary to the teachings of the great theorists of marxism.
Such a possibility is referred to in the writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin in many well known passages. Nonetheless it is true that the main bulk of comment by these writers dealt with the other possibility. But surely one must evaluate the context in which such emphasis was laid.

Secondly, it is true that all socialist revolutions which have occurred have been marked by wars and violence either in the period just prior to, during or after the actual establishment of a socialist government. Such cases as San Marino and Kerala are left aside because the former is such a microscopic country and the latter only a part, a state, of a country. (The case of Kerala is extremely interesting in this context because whilst the socialist government elected in 1957 was removed by the central Nehru administration in 1959 a socialist government was overwhelmingly elected again in 1967. This is a point which could well be pondered by those who argue that "it can't happen"). It should be remembered, however, that in most of the countries where socialist revolutions have occurred the despotic character of the previous regimes invariably blocked the path to peaceful change. Furthermore, if one leaves aside the peculiarities of the case of East Germany, there has never been a socialist transformation in any advanced industrial capitalist state except Czechoslovakia, a fact necessitating the closest study by marxists.

The argument that the experience of the military coups in Indonesia and Greece demonstrate the impossibility of the peaceful road in countries such as ours is hard to sustain. Indonesia is a country emerging from feudal-colonialist domination; certainly in no way an advanced democratic industrial country. Furthermore, the September events in Indonesia, whatever the real truth of them, did involve armed action which was crushed by the rightwing generals. Greece has a history of reactionary militarist and fascist regimes and a history of invasion, civil war and violent political struggle. Furthermore, social revolution was not being attempted in either country at the time the militarists imposed their rule in order to thwart the progressive tendencies in the countries. However, the recent trend of events in both Greece and Indonesia make it difficult to foresee radical social change developing in a peaceful way in these countries. Additionally the phenomenon of defeat of attempted revolutions is not new. One need only recall the socialist revolution in France 1871 and in Hungary, Germany and Austria in 1918 and 1919. These were certainly armed uprisings, but they were still brutally crushed. Hence one can surely advance the view that armed and violent approaches to socialism are not guarantees of success any more than peaceful attempts.
Thirdly, some people on the left baulk at the suggestion that opposition be allowed freedom to propagate ideas and to organise under socialism. They fear opposition ideas and underestimate both the ability of a people freed from exploitation and the power of socialist ideas in such a situation. They fear the prospect of the mass media being open to varied ideas forgetting that any political, philosophical or economic theories will stagnate unless confronted with contention, opposition and debate. Communists, it is my contention, should be opposed to monopoly of ideas, to an “official” state ideology, under socialism, and to the outlawing of contrary opinion. The “hothouse” conditions of no opposition ideas being allowed is almost impossible to achieve in the first place and in the second if such is attempted marxism would eventually cease to be marxism or else be grotesquely distorted as happened under Stalin’s regime in the USSR. In a socialist society power would lie with the people who in huge majority supported socialist views in general terms at least.

Fourthly, any socialist transition automatically involves breaking the power of the capitalist class. The freedom of the owners and controllers of industry must inevitably be infringed in order to establish a socialist society because private ownership of the main means of production has to be replaced by public ownership. The enterprises of the capitalists have to be taken from them irrespective of whether the revolution is peaceful or violent. The social system is thus changed. This does not necessitate the chopping off of the capitalists’ heads or depriving them of voting or political rights. It means depriving them of their economic and political power and transferring that power to the people. Such a fundamental change in advanced democratic countries, such as Australia, may well occur over a prolonged period of intense mass political struggle and not necessarily in an abrupt “overnight” fashion as was the case in Russia. This would obviously depend upon the actual situation at the time, the balance of forces nationally and internationally, the depth and intensity of the mass movement for social change, the degree of isolation of the ruling circles and so on. And it must be recognised today that the capitalist and imperialist systems are minority systems in the world. The anti-colonial and socialist revolutions have substantially changed the face of the world in the past fifty years. While the strength of imperialism remains awesome in the fields of industry, wealth and weaponry, its strength of influence has suffered a tremendous decline. This applies also in its ability to dictate to progressive political regimes in smaller countries. The Vietnam conflict perhaps demonstrates this most clearly. While the Americans inflict frightful devastation on that
country, they are suffering colossal defeat as well as political isolation on a grand scale.

Lenin made some profound comments on such matters in the period following the 1917 revolution — comments which are frequently misconstrued or not fully understood.

If the exploiters are defeated in one country only — and this, of course is typical, since a simultaneous revolution in a number of countries is a rare exception, they still remain stronger than the exploited, for the international connections of the exploiters are enormous. (V. I. Lenin The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1950, pp. 49-50.)

It must be noted that Lenin uses the words *If the exploiters are defeated in one country only*. The implication is that his conclusion *may* well have been different if many countries were involved and presumably would have been different in this current world situation fifty years later.

No doubt in most socialist countries in the period since Lenin wrote, internal and external efforts at “restoration” have occurred. To take some specific examples. Internal efforts in China have been made but have been pathetically feeble. Likewise the external efforts, while still ominous, have so far proved abortive.

The 1956 Hungarian events are often quoted to prove the sustained power of counter-revolution. However despite the undoubted manipulations from external counter-revolutionary circles and the assertive actions of those inside the country, the facts seem to point to a firm basis of unrest and dissatisfaction with maladministration, government bureaucracy and dogmatic, undemocratic and harsh actions of the Communist authorities which assumed large proportions. Attempts to overthrow the Cuban socialist government have been undertaken by emigre Cuban forces in collusion with the United States. These have so far failed dismally. Cuba exists some 90 miles from the shores of the mightiest and most anti-Communist imperialist power which would dearly love to witness its demise, but such has not happened in the world of today. Of course if a socialist government, e.g., in China, Cuba or Vietnam idly stood by, unprepared and unarmed and without powerful allies, the results of such counter-revolutionary efforts both internal and external would well have been quite different; But such has not been the case nor is it conceivable in the future.

Lenin, in the statements above, is revealed at his brilliant best for while his estimation of the 1918 situation in respect to Russia was correct he also heralded the possibilities of circumstances where his criteria for Russia in 1918 would cease to apply. Yet even the most liberal bourgeois democracies, when hard pressed, frequently
resort to naked violence and terrorist methods in order to protect the capitalist system. This has been graphically demonstrated in recent times, for example in the USA in connection with the civil rights struggle and in West Germany in relation to student activities. No attempt is made here to predict whether a socialist transition will be peaceful or violent; only history will determine that. But whether it be peaceful or not, a tremendous mass struggle will be required.

Problems for Consideration

Many marxists have all too frequently ignored the differences between tsarist Russia and semi-colonial China where the most influential socialist revolutions have occurred, and such countries as Australia. The circumstances in these countries differed greatly from those existing in a highly advanced capitalist democracy like Australia. This problem has occupied marxists in all too little theoretical analysis. Such analysis is not the purpose here but some comments on the particular aspect of democracy seem appropriate.

The main works of Marx and Engels were written when capitalism was only in its earliest period of development in most countries. In continental Europe industrialisation occurred mainly in the last quarter of the century. Feudal regimes were still being toppled. Monopoly was in its infancy. The great bulk of populations in the "advanced" countries did not enjoy the democracy they do today. Notwithstanding the French revolution of 1789 ushering in the era of "liberty, equality and fraternity", up until 1848 only 200,000 French people had the right to vote out of a population of 30 million. Many historians indicate that Britain could hardly be called a democracy until 1918. Yet women received the franchise as late as 1928. Thus the works of Marx would hardly be expected to deal with many of the problems we face today. Nonetheless numerous observations which he and Engels made are worthy of note. In an article "The Chartists" published in the New York Daily Tribune, August 25, 1852 Marx wrote:

We now come to the Chartists, the politically active portion of the British working class. The six points of the Charter which they contend for contain nothing but the demand of Universal Suffrage, and of the conditions without which Universal Suffrage would be illusory for the working class; such as the ballot, payment of members, annual general elections. But Universal Suffrage is the equivalent of political power for the working class of England, where the proletariat forms the large majority of the population, where, in a long, though underground civil war, it has gained a clear consciousness of its positions as a class, and where even the rural districts know no longer any peasants, but only landlords, industrial capitalists (farmers) and hired laborers. The carrying of Universal Suffrage in England would, therefore, be a far more socialistic measure than anything which has been honored with that name on the Continent. Its inevitable result, here, is the political supremacy of the working class.
Marx was, of course, more than a little optimistic in relation to the rapidity of change. It also took long years before universal suffrage was enacted and it hasn’t as yet had the result of “the political supremacy of the working class.” However here was an indication of the trend of Marx’s thinking about the problem where political democracy was a possibility. In his introduction (written in 1895) to Marx’s *The Class Struggles in France 1848 to 1850*, Engels refers to the program of the French Workers’ Party. This program was drawn up by Jules Guesde and Paul Lafargue under the direct supervision of Marx in 1881. Engels indicates that the program referred to the franchise as having been “transformed from a means of deception, which it was heretofore, into an instrument of emancipation.”

It may be argued that Lenin in much of his theoretical work and in his practice saw the problem differently. But then Lenin was dealing in particular with a situation in which democracy was greatly limited, where there was no universal suffrage, and where representative institutions were not developed. Engels in the article referred to above outlines the way in which the German Social Democratic Party utilised the franchise and won considerable strength in the German parliaments towards the close of the last century.

With this successful utilisation of universal suffrage an entirely new mode of proletarian struggle came into operation, and this mode quickly developed further. *It was found that the state institutions, in which the rule of the bourgeoisie is organised, offer the working class still further opportunities to fight these very state institutions.* (Emphasis mine. J.S.)

It must be pointed out that the German Social Democratic Party later compromised its socialist and revolutionary position. Nevertheless this observation by Engels deserves serious consideration in the light of the developments in advanced democracies. It relates very closely to the attitude of, and problems posed by, Palmiro Togliatti on the eve of his death in 1964.

... there must be deeper reflection on the theme of the possibility of a peaceful road of access to socialism. This leads us to make clear what we understand by democracy in a bourgeois state, how one can extend the limits of liberty and of democratic institutions, and what are the most effective forms of participation for the working masses and the workers in economic and political life. Thus arises the question of the possibilities of the conquest of positions of power by the working class within a State that has not changed its character as a bourgeois State, and therefore, whether the struggle for a progressive transformation of this nature, from within, is possible. In countries where the Communist movement is becoming strong, such as in our country (and in France) this is the basic question that today arises in the political struggle. This leads, naturally, to a sharpening of this struggle and on it depend the future perspectives.” (Togliatti’s Memorandum, cited in the *Foreign Bulletin* of the Italian Communist Party, August-September 1964, page 75.)