Malcolm Salmon interviews Wilfred Burchett

Wilfred Burchett, Australia's most famous journalist, was in Paris covering the talks between the United States and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam when Malcolm Salmon was there for Tribune. In this interview Burchett assesses Australian foreign policy, the Paris talks and likely developments in Vietnam. He explains why the Australian government continues to refuse him his passport.

SALMON: Could you describe the beginnings and development of your stand of opposition to the policy line of Australian Governments towards Asia?

BURCHETT: The beginning goes back to the strike of the wharfies against loading pig-iron to Japan, in the late thirties, the attitude of the government of the day in giving moral and economic support to Japan in its war of aggression against China. It seemed to me that the wharfies displayed not only a higher spirit of morality in refusing to nourish the Japanese war machine so clearly engaged in a monstrous war of aggression, but also a higher political understanding in recognising the danger for Australia inherent in that aggression.

Later, when Prime Minister Menzies took the initiative at a British Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference in demanding that the Burma Road—China's only lifeline still open to the Western world—should be closed, because the fact of its existence offended Japan, I was convinced that the then government was on a suicidal course as far as Australia itself was concerned. Appeasement of Japan I considered not only the height of immorality, but the height of political folly. It is worth remembering that this appeasement by the then Menzies Government continued virtually until the eve of Japan's entry into World War II.

It was not by accident that one of my first journalistic efforts was to visit New Caledonia early in 1941 to write some articles warning about Japanese activities there and the inherent dangers in this for Australia. Following this I went up the Burma Road—reopened despite Menzies' objections, because of American pressure—and was actually in Chungking, then the capital of the China of the Kuomintang, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. My first book (about New Caledonia) appeared a day or two before Pearl Harbor. New Caledonia was almost immediately occupied by American troops and the danger to Australia temporarily averted.
Australian policy in Asia, especially South-east Asia, is based on supporting the most reactionary Quisling-type government which represents in general nothing except United States interests. Australian policy is to jump into every war on the side of such reactionary forces to repress the resistance forces supported by the people. This was true in Korea and Malaysia. It was not Menzies' fault that Australia did not intervene on the side of the French in the latter's "dirty war" in Indochina. During the 1954 Geneva Conference, External Affairs Minister Casey offered six battalions of Australian troops as part of an international force of intervention against the Viet Minh. (The only other "power" to offer troops was US-occupied South Korea, and the plan had to be abandoned. But the intention was there, the offer made without the Australian people even being informed.) Today, in America's "dirty war" against the Vietnamese people, the Australian battalions are there, in defence of the Quisling regime, hated by the Vietnamese people, despised throughout the world, incapable, like the regime in South Korea, of holding power for 24 hours without an American army of occupation. The Australian Government still pretends that the Chiang Kai-shek clique on Taiwan represent the 700 million Chinese people. A radical change of Australian policy towards Asia is needed; a correct appreciation of the real, stable, forces of progress and stability. For a start Australia should make a clean break with US policy in Asia, pull her troops out of South Vietnam, establish diplomatic relations with China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and get ready to recognise a real government of national union which will eventually be formed in South Vietnam. Policies should be based on authentic national interests and not on those of the tiny, but influential group of Australian capitalists who are prepared to spend any quantity of Asian and Australian blood in defending their mines in Thailand, Malaysia and elsewhere.

S: How do you see a successful end to the Vietnamese people's struggle affecting a) the South-east Asian scene, and b) the world scene?

B: A successful end to the Vietnam people's struggle would transform the South-east Asian scene. It is already evident that the South Vietnam National Front for Liberation and its allies are going to win and a government of broad national union will be established pursuing a policy of neutrality in international affairs. Excellent good-neighborly relations will be established immediately with neutral Cambodia—in fact such relations already exist between Cambodia and the NFL. An end of the war in South Vietnam would immediately create the necessary conditions to stabilise the situation in Laos and make workable the three-way neutral coalition government envisaged under the 1962 agreements on Laos. These
agreements were never in fact implemented because of US interven­
tion in South Vietnam and the waging of “special war” in Laos.
(It must not be forgotten that the US Command was established
in Saigon in February 1962 a few months before the Agreements
on Laos were concluded and CIA planes were already dropping
US-trained and armed commando groups into the Pathet Lao
areas before the ink was dry on the 1962 Agreements.) South Viet­
nam, Laos and Cambodia would be stable, neutral states, linked
by common foreign policies, by their Buddhism and even to a
certain extent by the influence of French culture.

Relations between them and the DRVN and through the DRVN
with the rest of the socialist world would be close and friendly. The
existence of this bloc of Buddhist, neutralist countries would exer­
cise great influence on Thailand where resentment against Ameri­
can occupation has already reached boiling point and where neutral­
ist ideas have become extremely popular among intellectuals and
even in certain circles within the administration.

The sample of what “liberation” and “defence of freedom”
American style means as illustrated in South Vietnam will make
any other South-east Asian country with anything resembling a
national government, think not twice but two thousand times before
getting involved in anything that could open the way to great-power
intervention again.

Once the war in South Vietnam is settled, one could imagine a
bloc of mutually friendly, neutral Buddhist states extending from
South Vietnam through to Burma, developing mutually advantag­
esous trade and economic relations. The existence of such a bloc
would prove a powerful source of attraction to Malaysia also,
turning that country’s thoughts inward to Asia instead of outward
to the West. The anti-US demonstrations in Malaysia, sparked by
opposition to the war in Vietnam, show that nationalist, pro-Asian
and progressive sentiments there are on the increase.

As for the world scene, the fact that 31 million Vietnamese have
stood up to the Western world’s mightiest economic and military
power will give a fillip to independence movements throughout
the rest of the Third World. It is possible also that the shattering
lesson the USA has been given in Vietnam will make any future
American administration for a generation hesitant to plunge into
any more such neo-colonialist wars. The illusion that the USA
can play the role of world super-gendarme has been shattered
in the jungle and rice fields of South Vietnam. The lessons from
all this will not be lost on the peoples of Latin America and Africa
where there is a great thirst among nationalist and patriotic
elements to learn from the Vietnamese experience.
S: Concerning the official conversations in Paris between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the USA, you are on record as saying (interview with Peter Smark, The Australian) that “the most important thing was that the two sides had agreed to sit down together.” Could you amplify this?

B: Had Washington been winning the war—had General Westmoreland driven the NFL forces into a corner and been just about to deal the “decisive blow”, there would obviously be no talks going on in Paris. If North Vietnam was at its last gasp, communications hopelessly disrupted, the economy in ruins, industry and agriculture at a standstill, it is obvious also that there would be no talks in Paris. The Pentagon would insist on pushing ahead to administer the “coup de grace”. But the fact is that in the South, the Americans have been pushed on to the defensive. Their forces have completely lost control of the countryside and are pinned down in their bases and cities. The North has more than held out. Communications work splendidly with thousands of miles of roads and hundreds of bridges more than when the war started. Decentralised industry is now producing in the mountains and jungles, agricultural production continues to go up because of remarkable increases in per-acre yields. Bombing attacks of a scale unprecedented in military history have been absorbed by North Vietnam, but people continue to live, to work and to fight with undiminished courage and determination. Morale is higher than I have ever known it just because the people know they have taken on the greatest imperialist power and beaten it.

It is because there are some glimmerings in Washington that this is the real situation, that there are talks in Paris. This is the main reason for my remark that “the most important thing is that the two sides had agreed to sit down together.” Added to this is my experience of the 1954 talks in Geneva and the 1951-52 talks in Kaesong-Panmunjon to arrange a Korean ceasefire, that once such talks have started, they usually go on to their logical conclusion—a settlement.

S: Could you describe the political complexion of the coalition government of South Vietnam likely to emerge from the present conflict (in the broadest terms of course)?

B: The NFL officially speak of a “coalition government of broad national union”, and this is just what they have in mind. NFL support for the new Alliance of Nationalist, Democratic and Peace Forces formed immediately after the Tet offensive early this year is in line with this concept. Members of the Alliance’s Central Committee thus far named are very well-known Saigon and Hue intellectuals, lawyers, doctors, journalists—some of them very well-to-do incidentally, but all people of prestige, known for their political
and moral integrity. One could imagine a coalition formed between the NFL, the Alliance and other patriotic elements or individuals, who may come forward later, or who have already come forward but for security reasons still remain anonymous. Such a coalition government, if one studies the NFL and the Alliance programs would be comprised of the broadest possible spectrum. Within the Central Committee of the NFL for instance, one finds revolutionary elements, one finds Buddhists and Catholics, representatives of the national minorities, members of the urban bourgeoisie as well as the workers and peasants. It represents the greatest expression of national unity that has ever existed in South Vietnam. US policy has been to set the Catholics and Buddhists at each other’s throats—as the French did in their time. NFL policy has been to bring them together. US policy was to set the Vietnamese in the plains against the national minorities in the highlands. NFL policy has been to unite them. US policy has been to set the townspeople against the peasants. NFL policy has been to unite them. NFL and DRVN support for the alliance shows also that they both foster the maximum of national and political harmony. The future coalition government will obviously reflect just this.

S: Do you see a lengthy period of separation of the two Vietnams following an end to the war?

B: This is obviously something that only the Vietnamese people can decide. For the foreseeable future, however, I think there will be two Vietnams, each with its complete autonomy in internal and external affairs. But there will probably be some sort of Coordinating Committee comprised of an equal number of persons nominated by each of the two governments, to arrange day-to-day questions such as trade, post and telegraph communications, travel, cultural exchanges, etc.

S: There is speculation that a “second front” in Asia could emerge in Korea. What is your view?

B: I think this is something that has to be watched extremely carefully. Certainly, when the USA started its war of intervention in South Vietnam, and even as late as 1965 when the bombings of North Vietnam started, the overall US plans called for re-starting the Korean war. There is strong documentary evidence of this. At that time the Pentagon was under the illusion that US forces would speedily “clean up” the guerrillas in South Vietnam and would then push on to the North, at the same time reopening a “second front” in Korea. These concepts have been shattered by the heroic and eminently successful resistance of the Vietnamese people in the South as in the North. But there are other plans, of which I became aware when I was in Korea last year, closely connected with a whole series of US-staged
provocations in and around the Military Demarcation Line, and along the North Korean coast — the sort of incidents that led to the Pueblo affair. These seemed aimed at the very minimum at opening up a “second front” as a pretext for putting into effect secret clauses of the Japan-South Korea treaty and bringing Japanese occupation troops into South Korea. Again at a “minimum” this would release more South Korean divisions for service in South Vietnam. At something more than a “minimum” a Japanese army would spearhead an invasion of North Korea. As “bait” for all this, Japanese bankers and industrialists have been given unprecedented facilities for investing in South Korea on the sort of scale that recalls the days when Korea was a Japanese colony. Events in Korea should be watched with utmost vigilance.

S: The public movement against Australia’s participation in the Vietnam war is the number one new political fact in the country. Having observed the anti-Vietnam war movement in various countries, have you any comment on what you know of the Australian movement?

B: I know only what I read in the newspapers — and complaints that news about this movement is almost completely suppressed in the newspapers — what I receive in letters from friends, and the sort of appreciation given by my Vietnamese friends, similar to Mr. Nguyen Than Le’s reply to your question on this point at a recent press conference here in Paris. The anti-war movement in Australia is highly esteemed by my Vietnamese friends in Hanoi and within the NFL. This is not only a source of moral satisfaction because of the support for Vietnam, but because it confirms the long-standing internationalist position of the Vietnamese revolutionary movement that a distinction must be made between the people of a country waging war in Vietnam and the reactionary governments in power which are responsible.

I would like to stress also that public action, especially in countries like Australia which have troops in South Vietnam, can play a vital role in making the Paris talks successful, perhaps shortening them and thus the war. Now, when the talks have started, public pressure is more valuable than ever, especially at this moment when the talks on substantive matters are held up because of the refusal of the USA to halt the bombings of North Vietnam.

S: Would you care to say something about the attitude of the Australian Government in denying your legal right to an Australian passport?
B: By refusing me for over 13 years my Australian passport, the Australian Government is guilty of an act of political vindictiveness almost without precedent. I was born in Australia, my father was born in Australia, my grand-father (on my father's side) arrived in Australia at the age of eight. My eldest son was born in Australia. At the time of the births of my three other children, I have tried to have them registered as Australian citizens. This also has been refused. To the best of my knowledge the Australian Government has tried to bring pressure to bear on the British Government to add to my difficulties in obtaining a British passport.

The fundamental reasons for this have to do with my answer to the first of your questions. For the past quarter of a century I have opposed Australian policy in South-east Asia and if it does not change, I hope to continue opposing it for the next quarter of a century. In fact, by refusing me my passport, the Australian Government covers itself with ridicule in those many countries of the world where I am well enough known to travel on my visiting card.

For 13 years my professional activities have been gravely hampered by the lack of a proper passport. However, when I looked at one the other day and saw the list of countries to which I could not use an Australian passport to travel, I began to wonder whether my professional activities would not be hampered even more if I did have such a document which would prevent me travelling to North Korea, North Vietnam and other countries to which I need access as an acknowledged Asian specialist. My North Vietnamese laissez-pass, is simply inscribed "valid for all countries in Europe, Asia and Africa" and I can have an endorsement any time I want it "and all other countries in the world."