A DEMOCRATIC RIGHT

An examination of some of the facts of the growth of "big brother", of invasions of privacy and the threats to democracy from this quarter in our society.

ARTICLE 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims: "No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honor and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks."

The ultimate in lack of privacy is fascism, where one's every word, one's attitude, one's outspoken thoughts even are brought under the scrutiny of a police state; when even one's children can incriminate. A precedent for this category in this country is set within the activities of the unspeakables, the unknowables of the Security Service. These individuals carry out their invidious "duties" — reading private letters, eavesdropping on personal telephone conversations and so on. They possibly excuse their consciences with that ambiguous word "patriotism", an anachronism if ever there was one in this international nuclear age. Their patriotism is obviously not available for the human race.

It may be of interest to consider the need for personal privacy in primitive communal societies and indeed whether it was necessary. But when one thinks of the need for communal activity in order to exist, the under population and the wide, empty world, it could have little relevance to society today. Under capitalism there is no denying that the loss of privacy is another stress on working people. It is an obvious goal for those who amass money to buy a degree of privacy. The weight of pressure for a safe conformity, for status at least equal to one's neighbor, militates against individual privacy and it is increasingly difficult to be an individual in our urban society. Hollywood and Royal personages have demonstrated by fisticuffs, water hoses and even gunshot their desires for privacy in their lives. Those with developed independent talent call on great resources of determination to attain a degree of privacy within the public relations field. A cause of
stress according to medical pundits is the lack of personal privacy in great cities. Anyone subjected to the stress of public transport and in sharing high density workplaces may agree.

An aspect of privacy affecting working people is the employment application, particularly where there are a number of expected applicants. This scrutiny is not often extended when applicants are sparse. For appointments at managerial and professional levels the extensive questionnaire of the American corporations is used. The responses are analysed by industrial psychologists and then applicants must pass prior processing through the superfluities of the growing employment agency and management consultant industry. In engaging the "lower orders" employers pry to a far lesser extent, not for reasons of sensibility, but because lower orders can be dispensed with or replaced in rapid turnover.

It is interesting to note that Religion has been dropped as a query on most employment forms. This may be due to the fact that it is recognised, in general, that Church attenders are a small minority nowadays, and stated religion affiliations are no criteria for the attitudes desired by employers — diligence, loyalty, honesty, for example. There was a time not so long ago when discrimination against Catholics was quite openly evident in the classified ads., and Catholics either overtly or covertly retaliated by barring Protestants in their establishments. Probably, this is rare today except maybe covertly in some Departments of the Public Service directed mainly against members of the Masonic Lodge or against those of the Faith.

Usually included is a query related to the private lives of individuals as to hobbies. This exercises the imagination of many a worker. As a general principle, it is helpful to pretend the adoption of a hobby related in a practical sense to the position — model trains for toy manufacturers or the railways, stock car racing for a motor mechanic's job. An insight into the leisure habits of personnel officers could help. For example, if most of them play the status game of golf, then golfing would seem a good hobby to improve one's chances. Then again there is the question of previous occupation. It is not a good thing to extend the imagination in this direction as the potential employer could well telephone a previous employer for the inside information to believe the fine reference extended the employee. These employment forms are a source of ironic amusement to applicants, a test of their imaginative skill.

In the State Public Service, at least, the progressive elements of Labor have introduced alleviating factors for reports on employees. Reports must be attested to by personal signature. One depart-
mental head answered the query concerning personality for all his underlings with the word "outstanding," and it flattered many a one until they found it applied to all. He had a sense of the dignity of the individual. The procedure in the Public Service does not apply to bank officers, as The Australian on 2.11.68 revealed. Secret dossiers are compiled to be consulted for promotions. One officer, it was alleged, could not obtain a transfer convenient to his home as his dossier revealed that many years before he had seduced the girl next door. He had subsequently married the girl and produced a family of six children in the intervening years, but it made no difference to the evidence in the dossier.

Blacklisting of the courageous militant in industry is a threat to human rights, which not only affects the man who takes a stand for his fellow workers but visits his sins upon his family. The means of effectively defeating this practice by employers still needs to be established. The professional who takes a stand for humanity — unpopular with the establishment — may be denied the right to apply his professional knowledge, his creative abilities. Academic freedom does not extend far at the appointment level. Again another blacklisting for posterity is the credit rating system, when an individual may find himself suffering temporary hardship and unable to meet some HP debt.

Another aspect relating to personal privacy is the medical report. It is incumbent on doctors, if they do not want serious trouble, to respect the privacy of their paying patients. This means nothing to employers, who pay medical men to subject employees to medical inspection. The results are not available to the personnel examined but are passed on to their employers. On this basis workers are denied or offered employment, whether their specific condition meets the physical demand of the jobs offered or whether this is open to argument. To what extent doctors actually do, in practice, respect the privacy of their patients is a matter of conjecture. It should be recognised as a gross invasion of privacy if information by a paying patient is obtained by any other individual.

There is the question of privacy in suburbia. The increasing alienation, the competitiveness of social life, the growing emphasis on conformity, results in a number attempting to live vicariously — as it was to watch that the Joneses next door do not surpass. It is an aspect of the quality of life under capitalism. These types of individuals often have neither the means nor the inclination to compete, they have not the courage to flout conformity, or the growing authoritarianism of their jobs makes them timid in relation to really living a life of some originality. The opportunities for
community life in many suburbs offer little, unless one is sports minded (bowls, golf, tennis) or drinks or gambles excessively (hotels, clubs, etc.). Of those clubs based on charity and status such as Lions, Apex, View, Masonic Lodge, it could be queried whether they offer a basic communal aim for a community. Perhaps the P. & Cs., Progress Associations and the like are the best avenues for the development of individual sublimation, to escape vicarious living.

Big brother is still with us. Reviled by marxists, the work of George Orwell, whatever its anti-socialist motivations, gave essential warnings in this day and age in all social areas. It is clear that the attitude of “the establishment knows best”, the compilation of the dossier, not only can be used against those who would commit illegal criminal acts and who would endanger national security, but against those who might threaten the establishment in challenging the validity of particular laws; who would criticise the quality of democracy, both in respect to its formal statement and its actual practice; against those who threaten the splitting asunder of a hard shell of bureaucracy; even against those who would withhold their support, who as it were “harbored dissident ideas”.

The diversity of individuals in this complex industrial age has been related to the many skills and aptitudes demanded for a range of activities in industrial, scientific and cultural fields. It ill befits those who would call themselves socialists to think that people, as individuals, can be moulded into cast iron ideas of a conformity which fits some current or outmoded or incorrect line of political ideology. Rather it should be accepted that individuals are individual with differing talents and personalities to offer. Their talents and personalities are their own and, within considerations of maturity and development, the richest gifts they have to offer. Unless they are outright supporters of reaction, are security pimps, warmongers, neo-fascist or completely authoritarian in outlook, why should they not be accepted for what they have to offer? Dialectical theory teaches that people are not fixed and immutable. They change with environmental experience; those who cease developing are left behind at some stage or another and this is their problem.

In the sense of democracy for the individual many doubtful attitudes have been heretofore accepted by socialists. In the current ideology of certain Chinese Communists people are expected to deny their emotions, their private morality, to meet a conformist rigid line. This attitude seems to arise from an approach to marxism as a religion, a dogma, which must subordinate humanity to its precepts, rather than flexible scientific method which can be
amended or developed as the course of life alters. There was a period here when some communists would not take a step in their private lives — for marriage, separation, divorce, home ownership, employment, etc. — without consulting Big Brother official. This had the attendant dangers of disillusionment as has been illustrated, when the advice so gratuitously given did not fit the peculiarly individual circumstances of the seeker.

Privacy in the practice of morality and in the area of one's emotional life, within an accepted sphere of state legality and society writ large, needs to be delineated as broadly a democratic right. It is not the function of socialists to sit in judgment of their fellows or prescribe set laws in this sense. In any case it is relatively impossible under the confused values of capitalism. People should have a measure of privacy in their lives, solving personal problems as well they might, accepting or rejecting withal the proffered hand of sympathetic help.

Humanist thought is again running strongly through socialist theory, and is particularly stressed in the proclamations of the Czech socialists. This surge augurs well for the advancement of socialist democracy as applied to individual freedom, and in this age of alienation and anti-humanism is tremendously important in the outlook of socialists. There will always be public condemnation of the flouting of traditional morality. It is with relief that "the oldies" can see "the kids" adopting a critical view to bigotry and narrowness everywhere. Socialists should guard the rights of citizens to live out their lives with a degree of personal privacy. It is a democratic right to be fought for and preserved.