A MAJOR TURNING POINT

Roger Coates

As specific partial struggles against Fraser (Medibank, unemployment, the government's general economic policy, the media, Aboriginal rights, education, etc.) have occurred, they have pointed up what made possible the coup that brought him to office - the constitutional and political system itself. And now, debate and action are developing around the state. At no time before in Australian history has the state been brought under such sharp scrutiny, a scrutiny which is essential for the development of socialist consciousness on a significant scale.

At the present time, radical democratic demands are being put forward. A broadly based movement is developing, with some emphasis at first on obtaining Kerr's resignation, but going beyond this to initiate a people's convention to democratise the constitution. Issues commonly overlooked, for example, that the formal Australian state organisation is a monarchy, are being canvassed. The pervasive assumption that Australia is a democratic state is being questioned. 'How democratic?' is being asked.

THE DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT

The movement cuts across class lines and conventional party allegiances but seems to have as its solid core left and progressive members of the Labor Party. But because of the movement's force, and no doubt for party tactical reasons, sections of the parliamentary Labor Party and the Labor Party right wing have been active. The communist left, too, has participated in the formation and activism of the movement. As yet it is a citizens' movement and the trade unions, as such, have not been strongly represented. Above all, the main characteristic is one of serious concern spanning a broad spectrum of outlooks and opinions.

Nor should this surprise us. Many people have spoken of their feelings after Whitlam's sacking. Not only was there revulsion and despair, but many showed the deepest concern at the blatant absolutism of Kerr's action; here was a fundamental challenge to the democratic feeling of most Australians. People were left wondering what they could do; Citizens for Democracy originating in the great Sydney Town Hall meeting last year now seems the answer. Those looking for leadership responded to the initiative of two very different writers: Donald Horne and Frank Hardy.

That movement has now moved past mere protest although protest will remain an essential ingredient. Attention is focused on the incomplete nature of Australian democracy. There is a strong feeling that the constitutional system must be democratic (what's more, be seen to be democratic) and to guarantee that the people's democratic rights cannot be annulled by the stroke of a vice-regal pen. Many believe that Australia must become truly a social democracy; some believe in socialist democracy.

Australia is a more democratic state than many other national states. Some formal, but nevertheless vital, historic advances were made in the political-electoral system -
the secret ballot, compulsory voting, electoral offices and rolls, etc. Australian women were among the first women to win the vote. The Australian state emerged from the British imperial system of which it was once just an appendage, and the modern British system itself evolved from the English Revolution - the Great Rebellion against the government of Charles I. But this democratic revolution was incomplete. (The November 11 coup has shown just how incomplete.)

There is a fairly widespread attitude among sections of the left that constitutionalism doesn't matter, that parliaments, constitutions, etc. are at best an irrelevance, and there is a view that the whole thing is a sham. These feelings are understandable because there is much that is archaic and pointless about the procedures and ritual of the political-legal framework of the state. Many ordinary citizens feel angry about structures which appear to serve no useful purpose except to frustrate their wishes.

The short answer to this is that, despite their shortcomings, the structures are important. In discussion about such things as the office of Governor-General, the existence and/or the powers of the Senate, or electoral reform, people sometimes express disdain for this or that aspect of the matter. But they may express, too, a serious and heartfelt view that there should be some sort of Head of State, with very limited powers, or they may express a view that there should be no Head of State at all. Similar considerations arise about the Senate: it is not a States' House, and never was; it shouldn't have the power to withhold supply and defer money Bills generally; it should be abolished, but perhaps it should remain as a House of Review, with very limited powers to delay legislation for an appropriately reasonable period of time, say, three months - this in order to use a part of the parliamentary institution as a safeguard against an abuse of power.

A doctrinaire view is that none of this has real meaning, that we are in a simple stimulus/response situation; the ruling class, which is some sort of permanent conspiracy, merely feeds orders in one end of the machine and parliamentary-government-judiciary, etc. issues decisions at the other end. As with many broad statements, there is some truth in this view of society. Ultimately this may be the situation, but this conception omits so much of the detail that it can become a misleading caricature of reality and a self-defeating political philosophy. If we are objective about Australian society we must acknowledge that there are already many political and constitutional checks and balances which have been established by people's action. Today's working class, a continually changing social group, is the heir to a rich tradition, shaped by many struggles in which gains have been made and new demands, as yet unrealised, expressed. In large part, any political strategy which doesn't acknowledge this is doomed to futility.

November 11 was a major turning point in Australian history. Issues which had been in the air for decades, largely unheeded, became part of political reality. Tens of thousands of people began to ask: 'What is it all about?' A remarkably broad spectrum of ideologues got into action, and it is becoming clearer that the representatives of the ruling class may not have fully appreciated the Pandora's box they were opening. They are now trying to put the genie back, launching counter proposals to divert the movement, or put themselves at its head.

Having said this, there hardly seems any need to ask whether communists should participate in such a movement or whether it is important for communist aims. Perhaps paradoxically, though, the question is necessary because the Communist Party today is itself in a fairly broad alliance of the revolutionary left, accommodating a number of contending currents each maintaining that its view is the one which holds out the most worthwhile approach to revolution: all in the context of a small party, and one which not totally unsympathetic outsiders see as probably misguided, even a hindrance, to progressive issues.

November 11, it is therefore necessary to say, was of great relevance to communist aims. The issues go straight to the heart of an Australian revolutionary strategy. The problem of which path to follow is posed. What is the importance of the democratic struggle, the completion of the democratic
revolution, to the struggle for socialism? How do particular forms of the democratic struggle impinge on the struggle for state power? Do the forms of state power matter, and if so, how much? What are the most likely developments which will cause the working class and progressive people to challenge the hegemony of the capitalist class? All these are critical questions which communists have been debating for several years.

HEGEMONY

Capitalist hegemony is a complex of many influences - economic, social, political, cultural and intellectual. Through an intricate pattern of pressures, the fulcrum moves constantly; the capitalist class rules and seeks to dominate all aspects of society. In striving to develop a counter-hegemony, the revolutionary workers and their allies must try to infuse all struggles, especially the most basic economic, political and social struggles with a consciousness-raising component, which demands a high degree of intellectual competence and skill in argument and organisation. Such struggles are, sometimes, conducted directly; at other times they are more subtle and indirect, but the constant aim should always be to develop some element of a counter-hegemony against the hegemony of the capitalist ruling class. This aim should never be taken lightly because the very power of the capitalist class, and its almost infinite capacity for manoeuvre, can hardly be over-estimated.

A counter-hegemony is a long term strategy. It depends on an all-round understanding of capitalism, developing an all-embracing, anti-capitalist program, affording the opportunity for effective action, eroding the capitalist hegemony at every opportunity. Because of the variety of bourgeois resources, especially the backstop of habitual thought and the extraordinarily powerful pull of personal gain, the process of developing a counter hegemony cannot but be a see-sawing, guerrilla-like struggle. But the aim must stay in sharp focus - to make gains and consolidate the inroads into capitalist-held territory.

Ideological and political debate are basic to the process. The ideological debate which surrounds every sort of issue ultimately determines the revolutionary value of the struggle around the issue. The injection of revolutionary ideas follows from well researched, well thought-out views, perhaps best developed in the context of a general program or specific policies following from an overview of the whole situation.

THE STATE

Central to developing a socialist counter-hegemony is the mounting of an attack on bourgeois state power which is the lynch-pin holding the capitalist hegemony together.
In developing struggle in which one part of the capitalist hegemony is challenged (for example, the struggle for workers’ control), the way the action will impinge on state power needs to be consciously taken into account. In any considerable workers’ struggle, the boss quickly invokes the political, legal and police powers of the state, and the more direct the struggle, the more likely the capitalist class is to draw on every trick in the book, especially police and court action. Workers’ actions, launched without sufficient regard for the likely use of state power, ignore the need to fight consciously against the powers of the state. Ultimately, of course, individual struggles are generalised, gathered up into an overall framework, the sort of situation we saw in 1974-75 when the party struggle assumed such great significance. The ruling class went to great lengths and took great risks to prise the hands of the Labor Party from the part of the state on which they had some sort of grip.

The nature of the struggle against bourgeois state power requires a good deal of careful examination. Often, in discussions of revolution, the struggle against state power is seen as a climactic struggle, perhaps best expressed in such slogans as “Smash the state power”. In a near revolutionary situation this sort of slogan may be appropriate but in just about all other conditions it is likely to do more harm than good. What such slogans, and their conceptual framework, tend to convey is that all change is sudden, that revolutionary change somehow just occurs. There is here an implication that new societies will come all at once, and that economic-social struggles are enough to bring us to this point.

The study of revolution does not readily sustain this view. Many examples are available but in one reasonably relevant case, there were some important changes in the British Parliament in the fifty or sixty years before Charles I, in August 1642, raised the Royal Standard at Nottingham against the parliamentary majority, thus formalising a state of civil war. Some of the more important of these were the change in the character of the Speakership of the House of Commons from a servant of the Crown to the mouthpiece of the Commons against the royal prerogative, the struggle for parliamentary free speech and the evolution of the Committee of the Whole House, which changed dramatically the nature of parliamentary debate, bringing more and more conflict with the crown. There were similar changes in the law (especially the Common Law) and the courts, and all these changes occurred as the formal expression of economic, social, religious and intellectual movements which were gradually bringing a fundamental shift in social and political power to the bourgeoisie, a shift capped by the civil wars (1642-47), the trial and execution of the king and the founding of the republican Commonwealth (1699).

A strategy for an attack on bourgeois state power will involve an activist involvement in constitutional and political reform, an involvement firmly based on a transitional policy. Only in this way is it possible to raise public awareness about the state and demonstrate the connection and interplay between the economic-social and the political-constitutional. Before any party can attain a really revolutionary posture, it needs to have a broad working model of its stance on a large number of questions essential to the breaking down of capitalist state power. In Australian conditions, the opportunity to accomplish this has always existed but the task has never been adequately tackled. No revolutionary group has ever really tried to come to grips with the full magnitude of such an undertaking. One difficulty has been the belief of Australians, with few exceptions, in the democratic nature of their society. A more powerful reason lies in the praxis in Australia of the revolutionary workers.

**THE PRAXIS OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY**

The Communist Party of Australia (CPA) has had the greatest influence on the development of revolutionary thought in Australia, and it continues much from the common tradition of Australian radicals and revolutionaries, dating back nearly a century. This tradition is, broadly, a mix of three strands: doctrinaire socialism, parliamentary socialism and revolutionary/militant trade unionism. Rarely do these elements appear in a more or less pure form, but undoubtedly they can be isolated and identified to varying degrees in individuals and organisations.
Putting it very briefly, and oversimplifying, all these strands coalesced in the broad coalition of the Labor Party in the 1890s, with the parliamentarists powerful, but never completely dominant. Almost as soon as some sort of unity was established, the uneasy alliance (not well based in a comprehensive theory) fractured, with the revolutionary parliamentary socialists then the revolutionary unionists going it alone.

To a greater or lesser degree the three strands have run through the CPA too, but the doctrinaire socialist and revolutionary unionist strands have been upper-most. In particular, the CPA has been a ‘trade unionist’ party, the strongest influence coming from the industrial unionist/quasi-syndicalist hegemony established at the party’s foundation in 1920. This doctrine had to be only a little adjusted to harmonise with a simplified Leninism (more or less in the style adopted by Stalin).

Apart from the positive, but often over-emphasised results of this orientation-working class ties, strong on economic issues - the CPA’s praxis has been skewed so that a critical gap between the development of the working class as an economic/social class and its development as a political class exists. (Roughly, I think, this is a way of putting Marx’s well-known distinction - a class-in-itself, a class-for-itself). In the model that has dominated CPA thinking for decades no full appreciation of this gap has emerged, in spite of short periods (1937 - 44, 1965-70) when it seemed it might. Unless and until there is a full realisation of the nature of this problem, the task of redeveloping a counter-hegemony in relation to the state will remain largely in the realm of rhetoric.

THE AREA OF STRUGGLE

There is, of course, always a general many-sided oppositional struggle, and revolutionaries must at least try to keep abreast of all the issues and all the action (a counsel of perfection). Getting priorities right is one of the hardest problems to solve, but for a revolutionary political party seeking to politicise workers and others, a prime consideration must be recognition that most issues involve governments, bureaucracies, policing agencies, and other state institutions. And matters of government, political parties, constitutional and administrative affairs, demand primarily a political orientation.

Our predictive power about the evolution of political revolution must remain fairly circumscribed. It is just possible a socialist Australia may come through trade union action or workers' councils based on the workplaces, in something like the way Russian soviets developed. It is possible that development will parallel that of other countries going through a socialist revolution - China, Yugoslavia, Cuba, Vietnam - but it is more likely that in Australia, change will occur in harmony with an established democratic tradition, the existence of representative parliamentary institutions and a multi-party political system.

The political-constitutional crisis of 1975 draws our attention to the issue of political rights, changes and reforms. The collective consciousness is already partially aware at this level. Communists need to formulate and advance their ideas on the nature of the political system: federalism, upper houses, control of taxation and government finances, vice-regal institutions, fair electoral arrangements, a bill of rights, the form of the state system, etc. Opportunities abound for serious propaganda, agitation and action. The mobilisation of different forces in a broad extra-parliamentary movement for constitutional and political reform is possible. Change, outside and inside parliament, may follow. In such action it is reasonable to expect a growing awareness of the ultimate in interdependence of social, economic and political objectives. But such an interdependence should not be seen as a simple mechanism in which political change is secondary. A political orientation is needed. Such an approach offers the possibility of a significant rise in public acceptance of the need for breaking-down capitalist hegemony, especially in the key area of the state. With this consciousness, and only with this consciousness, can we envisage a real advance in the direction of socialism.

- Roger Coates.