Good Evans?

For over ten years, Australia has had a particular interest in the plight of Cambodia. In 1979-80, Australians donated more per capita than any other country to the international relief campaign there, after the overthrow of Pol Pot’s genocidal Khmer Rouge regime by the Vietnamese army.

Both the Governor-General, Bill Hayden, and the Opposition Leader, Andrew Peacock, have taken strong public positions in opposition to the Khmer Rouge. As Foreign Minister in 1986, Hayden called for the Khmer Rouge to be tried by an international tribunal. Peacock, who resigned as foreign minister in 1981 over the Fraser government’s diplomatic support for the Khmer Rouge, continues to support the proposal for a World Court case against them. The Australian section of the International Commission of Jurists recommends such legal action. Two thousand Cambodian refugees around the world and three thousand Australians have signed petitions supporting the idea. The Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans, is considering it. Only the Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, like his allies in Washington and Beijing, adamantly rejects the proposal that Australia take a strong stand against the Khmer Rouge.

There is considerable community support in Australia for concerted steps to reduce the power of the Khmer Rouge and help thwart their attempt to retake power in Cambodia. It is in Australia’s interest to take them. It is not in Australia’s interest to pander either to US obsessions with Vietnam or to China’s regional ambitions.

Here are some things Australia could do:

- Recognise the State of Cambodia and establish an embassy and a normal bilateral aid program in Phnom Penh. And restore normal bilateral aid as promised to Vietnam, now that it has withdrawn its troops (and advisors) from Cambodia; Italy has already done this, and urges other nations to do the same.
- Offer to resettle in Australia some of the 300,000 Cambodian ‘displaced persons’ now held captive in camps in Thailand by the Khmer Rouge and their allies, encourage other Western nations to do so as well, and encourage Thailand to allow those refugees who wish to return to Cambodia to go home.

If Australia were to take these steps, the Khmer Rouge’s international prestige and political power would suffer significantly. China, Thailand and other countries which support the Khmer Rouge, as well as Cambodians allied to them like Prince Sihanouk, would be made aware that at least one country in the region is prepared to act against the Khmer Rouge. Thailand’s civilian Prime Minister Chatchai Choonhavan would be more confident about the backing he would receive if he tried to deny the Khmer Rouge crucial supplies and sanctuary.

It was only last November that Foreign Minister Evans dropped his support (which it must be said Hayden had never shared) for inclusion of the Khmer Rouge in a future Cambodian government. Evans announced this the day after John Pilger’s documentary film, Cambodia Year Ten, was shown on Australian television. The film had highlighted the plight of Cambodia under Khmer Rouge attack and the West’s political support for the Khmer Rouge.

Evans’ new proposal followed concessions by the British government after the earlier showing of Pilger’s film in the UK. But it was a decided improvement. All other Western countries except for Sweden and Finland continued to support the inclusion of the Khmer Rouge in government, even before consulting the Cambodian people through general elections.

The United States’ Assistant Secretary of State Richard Solomon, for instance, concedes that there is “tension ... between our moral position ... and looking for ways to deal with the reality of the situation”. Thus the US claims that it opposes the Khmer Rouge, while insisting that these genocidists be included as full partners in a new Cambodian regime. China, for its part, has threatened Prince Sihanouk that it would ‘fight’ him if he abandoned his alliance with the Khmer Rouge.

In this context, the Evans plan of November 23 was a breath of hope. The Australian Foreign Minister proposed that the Khmer Rouge be excluded, and that Pol Pot and his allies vacate the UN’s Cambodia seat which they currently occupy. However, in return, he suggested that the...
opponents of genocide should also be excluded. A UN administration (and 5,000 to 7,000 peace-keeping troops) should take over power from Hun Sen’s government, which currently rules the State of Cambodia but is recognised only by the Soviet bloc and India.

This proposal has gained significant approval and, at the time of writing, is about to be considered by the UN Security Council. The major obstacle there is China’s veto power. But there are two further hurdles. Firstly, the Khmer Rouge cannot be removed from the UN seat unwillingly (and there is no reason for them to vacate it willingly), except by conviction in the World Court for genocide. Filing such a case thus seems a necessary precondition for the Evans plan to succeed.

Secondly, even ‘success’ could degenerate into tragedy. UN troops could not hold the country against a Khmer Rouge insurgency. The only army that can defeat the Khmer Rouge is the Cambodian one loyal to Hun Sen’s government. But the Evans plan is to deprive this army of the government it is fighting for.

A more sensible policy is to stop the Khmer Rouge bullets before they are fired. All military and other supplies to the Khmer Rouge must be cut off. Here Thailand is the key, for it passes on Chinese arms and ammunition to the genocidists, and still provides them with the sanctuary that enabled them to escape destruction by the Vietnamese army from 1979 to 1989. Contrary to what Evans argues (without fear of contradiction by a poorly informed press), if Thailand were to deny these supplies and sanctuary to China’s allies, China could do little for them.

Thailand currently has two policies on Cambodia. This situation is quite similar to World War Two, when the pro-Japanese militarist dictator Phibun coexisted with the democratic socialist regent Pridi, allowing Thailand to change sides as smoothly as possible when the outcome of the war became clear.

Today, Thailand’s Foreign Minister is Air Marshal Siddhi Savetsila, a pro-Chinese militarist who has been the major regional backer of the Pol Pot forces for ten years, providing diplomatic cover for the revival of their genocidal threat to Cambodia.

The second Thai policy is that of the new civilian Prime Minister. Sensing advantage to Thailand’s burgeoning economy, Chatchai wants to turn neighbouring Indochina “from a battleground into a trading ground”. He has hosted several visits by Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen. But, according to the Far Eastern Economic Review last September, “Thai officials believe that, despite its publicly expressed revulsion towards the Khmer Rouge, the US has been quietly aiding the Khmer Rouge war effort for several years”. One senior Thai official said: "We would like to see a lead against the Khmer Rouge taken by the US before we close the Chinese supply route."

The first non-communist journalist to be based in Phnom Penh, Kawi Chongkittavon of the Bangkok Nation, has recently called for Thailand to bite the bullet and give recognition and "solid support" to the Hun Sen government in the interests of Thai-Cambodian relations, to prevent an anti-Thai backlash in Phnom Penh. "Thailand needs Hun Sen as much as he needs Thailand," says Chongkittavon. Bangkok should end its 'fence-sitting'.

But Indonesia, too, is following a two-track policy on Cambodia. While independently pursuing better relations with Vietnam, in ASEAN forums, Indonesia still goes along with the shrill anti-Vietnamese rhetoric of Singapore and its US mentors, including calls for the Khmer Rouge to be restored to positions of power.

That is why the Paris negotiations broke down last August. The diplomatic paralysis hides the prospect of another confrontation in Cambodia which could affect the whole region. But even if the Evans plan founders as well, there is plenty Australia can still do. The fate of millions of Cambodians hangs in the balance.

Ben Kiernan
Shooting the Messenger

Until recently the NSW Labor Council, like the NSW ALP, was considered the jewel in the crown of Australia's labour movement Right. But just as the reputation of the NSW ALP was severely dented by Labor's massive defeat in the 1988 state election, the NSW Labor Council's grip on union politics has started to fracture, even without serious challenge from the Left.

Thus the setting for the extraordinary revelations of December, when a breathtaking document prepared by two young likely lads from the council's staff turned out to have been distributed (albeit in a different, sanitised form) with blessings from Labor Council secretary Michael Easson. The document was prepared by Labor Council organiser Michael Costa and industrial officer Mark Duffy, then two bright young things of the NSW Labor Right.

Among other things, it declared the federal government electoral outcome to be a failure, the Labor Council moribund, centralised wage-fixing a loser, union amalgamations a mirage, the state ALP 'strategically bankrupt', the NSW Liberal government a swinging success, and single-union enterprise agreements (outside the centralised wage-fixing system) the way of the future.

Small wonder, then, that Easson at first labelled the document the 'naive and ludicrous' views of two junior officers. Small wonder, as well, at his discomfort over the revelation that his own office distributed numerous copies of an abridged version to media commentators; or, even more bizarrely, that Duffy facilitated the leaking of the full document to a Canberra businessman who, in turn, passed it on to the Liberal Party.

Of course, the media had a field day. An edited version of the full document with most (though not all) of the offending passages was published in The Australian. And, after escaping the sack for co-authoring the document, Duffy (though not Costa) was finally sacked for leaking it, whereupon he let off an astonishing tirade to the press which inter alia compared a recent speech of Bill Kelty to the Nuremburg rallies.

Yet amid all the sound and fury, the real significance of the episode seemed to slip by. For the media the story lay in Easson's discomfiture and in the criticisms of the Accord and federal Labor. For the Left, it was a great opportunity to take some potshots at the Right's dented authority. A few on the Left chortled at how closely the document's criticisms of centralised wage-fixing resembled those of latterday left critics of the Accord. And the debate around the Sussex Street headquarters seemed to revolve around how to sack the hapless authors, rather than upon the arguments of the document itself.

Yet almost nobody thought to ask one or two simple questions. How plausible was the strategy for unionism presented by the document - one which was to bypass the ACTU and the 'solidaristic' framework of the Accord? And was it just the opinions of two enfants terribles, or did it mirror the instincts of wider forces in the union movement about life under a Coalition government?

The answer seems fairly clear. In fact the document did present a coherent strategy for the union movement. Indeed, it could even be argued that it's the only coherent alternative around to the Accord strategy. Even more significantly, it is a strategy which might well appeal to both of what could be called the 'outside left' and 'outside right' of the union movement. For the focus of the document's tactical armoury is on wages policy, and in particular on the current bugbear of the loss of real living standards by union members under the Accord.

Yet the document claims not to oppose the intention of the Accord strategy per se, but rather its ability to carry out its intentions. Industry restructuring is occurring too slowly or not at all, it argues, and the Accord's focus on
award restructuring is not helping. Instead, it argues for the market-oriented perspective of the NSW Liberal government (and the federal Coalition), with its emphasis on enterprise bargaining and single-union agreements outside the wages system.

Of course, ACTU policy has advanced at such a pace that many on the Left might reply righteousness 'so what's new?'. Both enterprise bargaining and single-union agreements on so-called 'greenfield' (new construction) sites have been endorsed by senior union figures such as Kelty and Tom McDonald in recent weeks. But the key to the document's strategy (as to Mr Greiner's), is in bypassing a centralised wages policy and national trade union organisation altogether. And in a very populist cause. "If the BCA is right a 25% productivity wage rise is out there to be taken", the document notes. "Why should we not indicate on behalf of workers in NSW that we are interested in winning for our members a share of this?"

Of course, winning pay rises of such an order would require abandoning any pretence of the union movement's solidaristic principles. And doubtless they would be available only to unions with the appropriate 'muscle'. Individual unions could find themselves bargaining conditions away against one another for the right to coverage in greenfield locations, on the model of the EEPTU in Britain.

But under a federal Coalition government, with the centralised wage-fixing system reduced at best to a residual role for 'second-class' unions, the attractions of such a strategy for parts of the union movement, both Left and Right, would be great. And the legacy of six years of the Accord could be washed away almost overnight.

All of which suggests that, in focussing on the sins of Messrs Costa and Duffy, the Left may have been shooting the messenger. And also that much more hangs on the outcome of the federal election in March or May than some on the Left are willing to admit.

David Burchell

ABC Radio's Pierre Vicary was in Romania for the dramatic events of December. He spoke from Zagreb to ALR's Mike Ticher in mid-January.

Just before Christmas, the contrast of Romania to other Eastern European countries was very marked - it seemed there really had been a revolution. Elsewhere, change had seemed to take a more bureaucratic form - the various ruling parties had simply admitted that things couldn't go on the way they had. In Romania, however, when you went into the buildings of authority you felt that a popular revolution was in progress.

That feeling has stayed with me. Nevertheless, the impression is that the Romanian people are very ambivalent about the National Salvation Front. There is a feeling that the revolution has been hijacked - that Communist Party apparatchiks have managed to keep control by painting themselves in different colours. Many of those running the country today are people who did very well under the old regime, though not necessarily in the immediate past when many were in disgrace. I also felt the news was being manipulated and that a lot of things had happened long before we were told about them. The impression, which was shared by quite a few other foreign journalists, was that somebody was pulling the wool over our eyes.

The students, in particular, feel betrayed because they were the ones who actually put their bodies in front of the tanks to make the revolution, and now they feel that revolution's been hijacked. Indeed, that was the emotional reaction of most Romanians I spoke to. However, the problem is that when Ceaucescu's rule collapsed there were no structures to replace it. Thus it was more or less inevitable that the apparatchiks would fill the vacuum.

The opposition groups are in a very
difficult position in preparing for the elections, if, as seems likely, they are held too early. Under ‘normal’ circumstances the various opposition groups ought to do fairly well. But what complicates the situation is that the Salvation Front is as much in command as was the former dictatorship. They control all the media and all public appointments, and they’re making decisions by decree. In a country that has been controlled so closely for so long, the media is absolutely critical.

When I was there, the Peasants Party - one of the resurrected pre-war parties - had just been given a house to operate from, but they had no phones or equipment and no access to media of any sort. If the elections are held too early - and the opposition would prefer some time after July - my suspicion is that the candidates sponsored by the Salvation Front will romp it in, simply because the opposition groups aren’t organised enough to campaign effectively.

The economic signals from the Salvation Front are ambiguous. Initially, they abolished food rationing and emptied all the specialist government stores of ‘luxury’ goods - people were saying that it was the first time in over ten years that they had seen coffee on sale at local prices. But then, because of the heavy snows, they had to reimpose rationing; not, they said, because there wasn’t enough food, but because it couldn’t be distributed around the country fast enough.

Whether that was true or whether it was just a ploy I’m not sure, but rationing is certainly now back in place. On the other hand, some Salvation Front leaders I spoke to in Craiova told me they thought they could stabilise the food situation within two months. The food problem in Romania isn’t a result of inadequate production so much as the fact that Ceaucescu was exporting large quantities for hard currency in order to pay off the country’s foreign debt. Nevertheless, that prediction seems extremely optimistic.

Equally pressing, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, is the national question. There are fears that the Hungarians might form their own political party, although I suspect they are unfounded. I don’t think it is a chauvinistic question in the way that it is on the Soviet (Moldavian) border, or that the Hungarians will be interested in secession. The Hungarians want to ensure that they will never again suffer as they did under Ceaucescu. A couple of the Hungarian members of the Salvation Front have already said that they want special laws guaranteeing the rights of minorities.

The fact that the revolution started in Timisoara and that the Hungarians were in the forefront of the opposition means that there is still a lot of goodwill towards them, even though the old hatreds are still in place. Those divisions are very real, and were intensified by the fact that Ceaucescu played so heavily on them.

The nationalities problem has, of course, now become the biggest danger to the forces unleashed by Gorbachev throughout Eastern Europe. I think he is well aware of that danger, but he had no choice. The only way he could save any form of socialism in Eastern Europe was to take that risk, which he has, and he is clearly prepared to see it through.

With elections due in virtually every Eastern European country in the first half of this year, and the development and exacerbation of the national problems, 1990 really is going to be the turning point both for perestroika and reform in Eastern Europe.

I think we’re looking at a very difficult and potentially dangerous next 12 months.

After the Party

It might seem more than a little presumptuous to compare the events of the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of Australia last December with some of the earth-shattering decisions taken by ruling parties in Eastern Europe over the past six months.

After all, how many Australians would even care either way whether the CPA existed or not? For any who doubted it, the miniscule impact of the congress on Australian politics was amply demonstrated by the tone of the reports in the papers which treated it as little more than a political freak show, a chance to poke fun at the remnants of the once-feared CPA.

Nevertheless, the recent cataclysms of Czechoslovakia and East Germany hung heavily over the proceedings in Sydney. There was a perceptible sense of embarrassment from many speakers at the prospect of remaining attached to the name (although not necessarily the policies) of the Communist Party at a time when that name had all too obviously become a byword among the mass of people in the ‘socialist’ countries for corruption, tyranny and despotism. Although it may not be an image which would be readily understood in Prague or Sofia, the mood was perhaps best captured by the Victorian delegate who implored congress to “catch the wave and not be dumped by history”.

In Australian terms, catching the wave means, in stark terms, winding down the CPA and encouraging the membership to involve themselves in the New Left Party process. The National Committee motion recommending this course of action was passed by a majority of almost three to one. Effectively disbanding the party to which many had committed so much of their lives cannot have been a decision taken lightly. However, the atmosphere was, perhaps surprisingly, less one of a wake for the CP than one of rejuvenation and even relief at being able to direct all energies into the NLP.
One of the most noticeable, and impressive, aspects of this was that it was not the older members who resisted the inevitable. Instead, they seemed almost more impatient than most to put the CP out of its misery. One Sydney delegate and long-time member declared that, regardless of any decisions that congress might make, the CPA "has been winding down for years" and that members should "not allow it to drag on and on, growing less and less relevant".

The grim extent of that irrelevancy was made only too plain by the membership figures detailed in reports from each state. Delegates from Western Australia, Tasmania, South Australia and Victoria all made the point without sentiment that while CP membership had declined to utterly feeble proportions, the advent of the NLP had already reinvigorated activity on the Left, involving far more people, including many ex-CP members. To an outsider like myself, this evidence of the true state of party activity added more than a touch of the ridiculous to the arguments of the party's 'left' opposition that the CP could still retain a useful role in Australian politics.

By contrast, the honesty of most delegates as to the party's standing was startling and refreshing, and it was impossible not to be struck by the similarity in tone with the frank admissions wrung from party officials in Eastern Europe. There was little talk of 'errors' in the past, or other familiar euphemisms.

One South Australian delegate confessed that now, at last, she felt free to speak her mind "without fear of being branded a revisionist". "We can pray all we like that the CP is going to be a viable organisation in building socialism in Australia," said another, "but it's just not true." The CP is "finished" and "no longer acceptable". Such was the candour that it was tempting to recall the new mood in the GDR following Honecker's downfall.

Fortunately the recent history of the CPA is more mundane, but nevertheless it has reached the same point of no return as its East German counterpart. "We all have doubts about the NLP," as one West Australian delegate put it, "but there can be no doubts about the CP." The most eloquent of the supporters of the National Committee agreed that the CPA "no longer embodies that breadth and depth of wisdom to be effective politically. Maybe the NLP won't have it either," she said, "but it has 100% more chance."

It was perhaps this prospect of getting involved in the NLP which encouraged so many delegates to speak so openly. Far from closing off options for political action, the end of the CPA in fact was perceived to be a beginning. The spirit of openness and goodwill in the NLP process so far was noted by many.

It should be said that not all delegates agreed with this assessment. However, their arguments relied almost exclusively on doubts about the future of the NLP, rather than confidence in that of the CPA. The most curious aspect of the debate was the almost complete absence of ideological, as opposed to tactical, argument from the 'left' opposition. Where were the passionate renunciations of the bourgeois liberals who were betraying the Australian working class? That there were none, even as the party voted to end its own existence, is itself surely another indication of the devastating effect of the bankruptcy of traditional ruling communist parties in Eastern Europe. Even the word 'marxism', in the past a bone of contention within the CPA, barely rated a mention.

In retrospect, the winding up of the CPA as we enter the 1990s will seem not only natural, but inevitable. For many, such a moment is already long overdue. One Sydney delegate spoke for them and for the majority of congress when he concluded that "we should be proud to say that an era is ending and we're looking forward to the future". If that future is to hold the prospect of a left party which will command respect among Australian people, there could be no better way to start than the rejection of self-delusion which was the most lasting impression of this decisive, if not quite last, congress of the CPA.

Mike Ticher