

Joint Party discussions between the CPA (M-L) and CPA 18 September 1982

Present: CPA (M-L) Ted Hill, Charlie McCaffrey, Marcus Clayton

CPA Bernie Taft, Mark Taft, Rob Durbridge

Ted Hill gave the others a copy of the prepared introductory remarks. He then read the remarks aloud. It was agreed that there should be questions.

B. Taft: In reference to specific problems re independence and the connections between those problems and economic questions, you pinpoint the struggle against the U.S. as the main danger, that is, U.S. corporations, etc. Then you mention the USSR in the global sphere.

I think you put that differently at the History Conference. How do you now see the role of the US viz a viz the USSR?

Hill: I don't know if I put it in a different way at the History Conference.

I don't think there is any cut and dried answer to many of these questions.

Where I say that the USSR is the global threat to independence, we say that the USSR is the expanding imperialist power and the US is declining. Thus the USSR is the main threat to the independence of all countries – including Australia. But the immediate “occupier” of Australia is the US. From time to time we have erred in not paying sufficient attention to that. These matters are relative.

I would like to hear some views from your side on the USSR. I have the impression that there would be a substantial difference in this matter.

We see the USSR as similar to the fascists in the pre-World War II days.

In the immediate sense in Australia, we concentrate a lot of attention on the US and we also pay attention to its global features. It is aggressive, a recent example being Lebanon.

Durbridge: While we might, we do, disagree with your assessment of the international situation, I find a great deal of agreement with the principles you have enunciated in regard to relations between Parties.

What factors have influenced your views there?

Hill: Very many factors.

First, if you think of the Third Communist International. In its initial phases, I think it did a great deal of good in introducing Communist ideas to many people. But even in those early phases, the International's understanding of democratic centralism was that it meant directions from the central body, so that the Australian Party, the French Communist Party, etc, were subject to the International. In reality, the Comintern could not have understood the conditions in the given countries.

Then came a “dictatorial” phase with the CPSU under Stalin dictating much more emphatically “the line”. Instead of an Australian policy, there was a Soviet policy. That, perhaps, is a slight exaggeration.

Then the Comintern disbanded in 1943 and the Cominform operated in the same way, with the CPSU directing policy. Subsequently, the CPSU fulfilled the same role. Through all this, there was some independence of the Australian Party.

The misconception in Australia of the Comintern and the CPSU made it almost impossible in the Australian Party as it then was to solve the problems of the mid-1950s.

I refer to Stalin’s speech in 1929 entitled “The right deviation in the CPSU”. That speech virtually demanded changes in the leadership in certain Communist parties. That is the type of situation which manifested itself quite strongly in Australia. In 1929, the leadership of the Australian Party changed at Comintern direction. I say this though I still have respect for Sharkey and though I was part of the change in that I became later part of that leadership.

It was because that type of situation had evolved that when the differences arose in 1956, they were almost impossible to solve within the type of Party structure that then existed.

M. Taft: I note you say in the document that socialism as an immediate objective is premature. We would agree. Then you talk of immediate and intermediate objectives. You lay great stress on independence and sovereignty. Our Congress documents agree.

How precisely do you see the socialist objective and those intermediate phases and, more precisely, how does one lead to the other?

Hill: There was much I would agree with in your draft documents, but I would disagree with some. They seemed to emphasise the question of socialism too much. This matter is bound up with the Comintern’s conception of a universal demand for socialism – one should read Stalin’s speech I referred to earlier and the letter to the Australian Party which is reproduced in Sharkey’s history of the Australian Party.

We believe that conception was quite inappropriate to Australian conditions. Going back to what Lenin wrote on Australia in 1913 – there was a lot in that which was correct. Sharkey said that the ALP had run its course, said the Communist Party in Australia was now fulfilling Lenin’s forecast that the liberal labour party was giving way to a socialist labour party.

I think Lenin was saying that there had to be a bourgeois liberal democratic party to get rid of colonial relics, we see that movement as ultimately merging with the struggle for socialism – as a democratic movement leading to independence from the US and through that to socialism.

We believe that striking a blow against the US weakens them. Eventually the US or other imperialism will interfere with armed force – then a more acute phase occurs. That we regard as the next phase which emerges from and is influenced by the previous phase. The goal moves from a wider one in the earlier phase to the narrower goal of socialism in the later phase.

I have learnt to be very careful in spelling out these matters in a mechanical way – it is a vision or maybe better put, a general perspective.

M. Taft: I appreciate your concern in stating too rigidly these matters. But you refer a great deal to national independence and sovereignty, you refer to united campaigning against the US, and you then say that big business has formed alliances with US companies.

What alliances can be forged in the struggle for national independence and sovereignty?
What about unity with capital, in view of that goal.

Hill: This involves the question of allies and the breadth of people involved in struggle.

We say the potential unity is very wide. In the first place, there are the workers (industrial workers) and other working people, then through middle sections of society to sections of the capitalists.

Take the example of BHP. We say they are bastards, but there is an element of “Australianism” in it even though it is one of the biggest compradors, with its link to Exxon. Take the big retail monopolies – they are threatened by US companies, but they are also frightened of the workers. Within the ALP there is a big sentiment for independence. There are quite a large number of prominent personalities who have patriotic sentiments.

We think a lot more working out of all this is necessary.

B. Taft: I have two queries re the ALP. First, on p. 11 of the document you say that because of history in Australia, it is difficult for there to be formal agreement between the Communists and the ALP. That seems to suggest that if it were possible it would be good – ie formal agreement with the ALP leadership.

Secondly, you make the comment that the ALP rank and file are moving to the left, while the ALP leadership is moving to the right. How do you see that? Who is the rank and file of the ALP? What are the expressions of the leadership’s move to the right.

Hill: Going back to the last question, in the evolution of the capitalist class, there have been changes in position and emphasis which can be exploited.

In relation to the ALP, it is necessary to look at history. In the early 1920s there was affiliation of the Communist Party to the ALP. Then there was disaffiliation. Then, over a period, a great animosity developed until there was proscription of the Communist Party and its “front” groups and individual Communists.

Then prior to World War II, there were two formal applications of the Communist Party for ALP affiliation that were rather summarily rejected. This has basically remained the situation.

As a matter of fact, the Communist Party was too left; there was the over-emphasis on socialism. The bourgeoisie has built up a formidable bogey about the Communists on this question. There is, therefore, a considerable obstacle to unity.

A substantial de facto relationship exists, however, between Communists and the ALP.

The move to the right by the ALP leaders. At the last national conference, my view is that the ALP leaders, including both Hayden and Hawke, shifted position to the right in a formal and avowed sense. The ALP leadership shifted position to accord with what it perceived as electoral advantage – eg on the issues of capital gains tax and uranium, but also in a general view of the conference.

But ALP activists began to move to the left because of depression and world wide problems. They expect much more from the ALP than it can give, in view of its role in administering capitalism (eg the actions of the NSW and Cain Labor governments which are part of the move to the right).

ALP leaders as a whole (though not necessarily all) do not have any concept of resting on the people.

McCaffrey: Are we all of the opinion that every ways and means possible should be looked at towards the goal of unity?

B. Taft: The introductory document raises many matters. Many of the views we share, some we do not.

We share the view that the character of the relations between Communist Parties and with like parties should be one of independence. We have been involved in that struggle for some time. We determine to the best of our ability what is best in Australia's conditions.

You talk of there being no place for a central body. We would agree and go further and say there is no model for socialism, though we can learn from all.

We agree that the existence of different Communist groups in Australia has had and has a very negative influence in relation to the influence of Communism on working people. We share your experience of that.

Another aspect which has contributed to that problem has been the divisions which have arisen in the world movement– eg the Sino-Soviet split.

In our view the practice of the socialist countries, eg lack of democratic liberties, also reduces significantly the appeal of Communism to the peoples of countries such as Australia. The absence of some of those liberties which exist in the West, however distorted, is significant - eg freedom to travel, to express differing views, to decide every three years which group will exploit them.

What can one do practically? Given objective factors, the need in Australia is to bring about greater unity and cohesion of the left, or to reduce the public image of the left as splintered and fighting among themselves. The history of concentrating fire on those closest is wrong and extremely damaging. Exploration of unity, particularly with those of Marxist views, is positive.

We have closer relations with some of the “dissidents” in the SPA – not organisationally, but on day-to-day work. (There is still a fundamental difference re the USSR). For example, Clancy and his group are breaking away. In our view, that group has on local issues views

not dissimilar from us, or you. We find some common ground. It is not the main emphasis of our work but we thin it, though, useful. There is some degree of unity. It is part of a common process.

We perhaps see the left of the ALP as a very important, decisive area of unity in some respects. We see those who are pro-socialist and Marxist-oriented, who are in favour of fundamental social changes, as very important, especially in view of how the masses see the ALP.

We think that today's discussions fit into a broader perspective of healing those breaches which can be so without papering over differences.

Hill: What do you conceive as the left of the ALP?

B. Taft: Some sections of the Socialist Left do have in many cases a muddled conception of socialism, a desire to move towards socialism; parliament advancing, but not being necessarily determinative of, the causes. We see as important those sections that have a mass orientation, ie mobilising the people.

For example, we played a big part in the Victorian October mobilisation which involved us in working with the ALP in extra-parliamentary activity.

Hill: The conception of the Socialist Left is of an organised Victorian group. It seems to me that has its importance, but the conception of the socialist trend in the ALP is far broader than the Victorian Socialist Left. The Socialist Left has a certain danger; it is a semi-rigid organisation, having features characteristic of the Communist Party in its old days. My point is that our view is that it is necessary to develop a wider conception.

B. Taft: I agree about their rigidity and I agree that the concept of socialism extends well beyond them. Certainly it is not confined to Victoria. There are some of the centre of the ALP who are good and conversely, the rigidity of some in the Socialist Left is damaging.

M. Taft: One of the costs of democratisation of the ALP has been that the left is less able to discuss matters with all other sections. Some of the rigidity is from formalisation factors themselves.

Also, on a national scale, the strength of the left of the ALP varies in force from one State to another. The Victorian Socialist Left is different from the NSW Steering Committee. In some States, those who call themselves socialist end up in the centre as reformers of capitalism removed from the operational group with which they are associated.

We recognise the complexity of the ALP and we try to associate with as broad as possible a membership. We also appeal for unity falling short of socialist objectives, eg on democratic questions which are central issues at this stage. Therefore narrowing of the movement should be avoided.

Hill: The existence of the Socialist Left, especially in Victoria, postulates socialism as its immediate objective more than us or you. That is divisive in the community. Nationalism is being abandoned by the leaders but not the members of the ALP.

Can the Socialist Left be shifted from its rigidity?

Durbridge: That depends on objective conditions. They wear socialism as the badge of their faction. They don't look at the forces necessary to bring socialism about. For example, on the issue of uranium. It seems to me that for all the problems re the new policy, it hadn't been thought out how the old policy would have been worked out.

In relation to the question of socialism, there has been terrible sectarianism. Most of the leadership now emerging in our Party did not play a part in those disputes. We are trying to develop a less moralist, and more realist view of existing socialism and how it may change. While older comrades see those who left as betraying socialism, etc we are trying to look at why the USSR and other existing socialism, is like it is.

The basis is that socialism happened in backward countries rather than in Europe. That marred existing socialism.

We are critical of Soviet society, its lack of democracy and its hegemony with imperial designs. But we differ in regard to the term "imperialist" if that means capitalism has been restored. We say that privileges and power are concentrated in an elite, but that there are not the market forces, etc of capitalism. We cannot call it an imperialist power in the same sense as the US. But we do not resile from the strongest criticism of its activities in Eastern Europe and the world.

Then there are the other socialist countries. Take Vietnam. We have had a long involvement with the Vietnamese revolution. Our attachment with that Party is very deep and was strengthened in the anti-war movement. The Vietnamese have shown a deep desire for independence – in the distant past there was China, then the US and now the Soviet Union. We want to maintain relations with them so as not to leave them to the Soviet camp. We support their Kampuchean action in a qualified way - we say Vietnam's existence was threatened but we said they should leave quickly. Some of us criticised our support for that Vietnamese action and some criticised the qualified nature of our support. We support the inviolability of a Communist Party's right to determine its own existence. We said its borders were threatened.

Ours is a very strong position on this matter. We disagreed with the Northern invasion. We don't believe Vietnam should intrude into China, nor vice versa. We do not thin China's existence was threatened.

In regard to the global question on one hand and the national on the other. We do not characterize the USSR as globally aggressive. We say its action are motivated by defensive, yet imperial, motives. We say that here in Australia, the US is the main danger, both militarily and to all Australians.

B. Taft: Our positions don't follow clear patterns. For example, we have good relations with the Vietnamese Party, but criticism is involved – eg, we find Vietnam's vitriolic criticism of China repugnant. We are guided by principles, but take things as they arise.

We therefore want relations with all socialist countries, including the USSR, China and Vietnam. We have something of the approach of the Italians in a general sense. We believe there is benefit in mutual exchange. Talking is better, even if there is strong disagreement, as long as something can be gained.

McCaffrey: Let's get down to tin tacs. We must do so for the sake of the younger comrades of both our Parties.

Take the teachers' election in SA of a few weeks ago. A CPA bloke stood (who was nominated by a Trotskyite) and so did a bloke from the CPA (M-L). As far as I could tell, there was no real difference at all between them, yet they were opposed to each other in the election

Could we come to some agreement to overcome the antagonism which exists in so many fields? We can go a long way towards facilitating much work which can be done in a united way. . I have been looking forward to this discussion. Any advance, if only minimal, would be great.

We should deal with the immediate questions of Australia. Could we have some declaration on what we Communists agree, no matter what Party we belong to? Let us deal with domestic rather than international matters.

M Taft: For our part we are keen to establish with all forces where possible the closest working relations. I agree with the principles set out in the introductory document.

For example, in the commentary on our joint statement with the SPA, it was said that there should be independence and we may have differing views, but that should not interfere with expanding unity. We place a lot of stress on that.

As to what form a closer relationship would take, that is a matter we need to discuss.

In the introductory document, the relationship is discussed between the socialist objective and the issue of independence and sovereignty, which latter issue is said to be broadly-based and extends beyond those avowedly socialist.

We talk of radical reform within capitalism bringing closer the socialist objective. This is rather than the old division between the bourgeois democratic and socialist revolutions. You talk of phases. We agree with that – it is a series of events. We say that those who say that reforms of capitalism aid capitalism are wrong.

We say that the socialist objective has to be explained not just by comparing socialism and capitalism. We say that certain demands within capitalism strengthen the demand for socialism, make socialism more likely and strengthen the levers of forces for socialism.

We distinguish struggles which we say aid capitalism. For example, wage struggles of airline pilots. These are struggles to get the goodies within capitalism.

In contrast, expanding ownership of Australian resources, unions having more say re investment and employment, companies receiving tariff protection having to make employment guarantees – we say those sort of demands strengthen the socialist objective.

We say we should not defer the raising of the socialist objective in a merely propaganda way. Certain reforms of capitalism have the seeds of socialism within them. For example, employment guarantees such as proper notice, those sort of actions strengthen the socialist objective, lead in a socialist direction.

In campaigning for national sovereignty and independence we say that the character and content of the demands raised are important. For example, in supporting BHP's tariff application, we'd want concessions from BHP.

There is the aspect of the integration of Australian capitalism with overseas capitalism. The question of the national bourgeoisie is confused: some are comprador, some not.

In fighting for independence, we say one shouldn't say it's easy or desirable to unite with a unified national bourgeois grouping – we say that doesn't exist.

So our demands involve alliances but have the content of helping the socialist objective.

In summary, there are some differences between our views of independence and sovereignty.

B. Taft: The emphasis should be on those things upon which we agree, but that does not effect exploring and clarifying our respective positions.

Hill: Let us take the trade unions. A whole bad situation has developed. For example, the NSW wharfies situation. There you have the terms CPA, CPA (M-L), SPA and Trotskyite. Also, in the BLF, there are Gallagher and Munday. There are many other instances.

Every effort should be made to reach a more balanced position. I disagreed with Carmichael and Halfpenny's statement on the ALP leadership issue.

On day to day questions, in regard to contesting union positions, discussion could take place.

I think though that underlying this is a different conception. We have a more vertical structure – you have a situation where everyone knows everyone. Whether we have a candidate in an election may not be known. Where it can be resolved, it should be.

Getting back to the ALP Socialist Left, can we reach some agreement to influence the people concerned to have a different approach?

There seems to be a series of questions involved. A mechanism can be set up and there can be discussions from time to time. Questions should be taken up. For example, Aarons and I had discussions in relation to a history conference. Then you went ahead alone. Aarons later agreed that that was an error. Perhaps in future that may be avoided. Even as difficult a problem as the Gallagher/Munday business may possibly be able to be resolved. There will be a getting together of our members anyway.

Dealing with Vietnam. Your pre-conference documents said that the Vietnam/China situation was akin to that of USSR/Afghanistan. We have a very different conception re Vietnam.

In 1960, Vietnam put forward the proposal for a federation of Indo-Chinese Parties. Pol Pot said it was part of an imperialist scheme.

We say Vietnam is expansionary and is in the Soviet camp.

We say the USSR is imperialist. We can leave that to one side. Vietnam concerns us more. China said that there had been border invasions. The Chinese went in and withdrew as they said they would. That is a very different situation to those in Afghanistan and Kampuchea.

But there are more immediate problems. How is this all to be worked out?

Some of our comrades have had some informal discussions with the SPA people. We may go further – as you have – in that process.

We seem to have reached “strenuous agreement” in general. No doubt shades of difference will remain. There seem to be less problems than one might have thought.

In the unions. I question the history of having a whole series of open “Communist” officials. It is far in advance of the people. It tends to further rather narrow Party political purposes.

In relation to a public statement arising out of today’s discussions, we have no authority to make or agree to such a statement. We would like to have an exchange of opinion amongst ourselves.

Durbridge: Re the trade unions. We have had to make our position clear with the SPA. On the other hand, I think you recognise the dangers of imposition of views on the unions.

We should be very careful in this matter; mistakes have been made in the past. Trade unions must be controlled by their members and any influence should be from within rather than from without.

In that light we can have discussions, but it has to be left up to the unions concerned. There can be no imposition of a “deal at the top”.

It would be good if you can talk to the SPA too.

Nothing destroys Communism more than the charge of manipulation behind closed doors.

I think the situation in the BLF is hopeless; it is trapped by its own inertia.

We were critical of the public statements you mentioned made at the time of the ALP leadership battle.

In relation to the SPA, our relationship has not gone very deep and is mainly at the national level, and also in Sydney. The contact is infrequent and on certain issues. We have not merged in any way.

The division within the SPA is getting greater and greater. Our relations are mainly with the union officials of the breakaway group.

Hill: Do you conceive your Party’s position overall as closer to us than to the SPA?

Durbridge: I find the principles in the introductory document are those we have come to but to which the SPA leadership has not, especially in relation to a world centre direction and style of work in mass organisations.

Perhaps those points are not so true of the breakaway group. They object to orders from the Party centre, both to orders and the repugnant method of giving them, and the uncritical attitude to the Soviet Union.

Hill: What is the CPSU's attitude?

Durbridge: They know the extent of the disintegration and they appear to be following the traditional group.

M. Taft: We have found difficulties in our discussions with the SPA – their expectations of us carrying out our beliefs are different from reality. For example, we could not tell Munday not to have a court-controlled ballot, though that is our opinion.

B. Taft: You referred to Gallagher and Munday's strong and not particularly disciplined views. Why isn't Gallagher answering some of the public allegations – they damage the image of trade unions.

Hill: In the first place we are not going to interfere in the internal affairs of the BLF. I would agree with Rob Durbridge that the unions must decide their attitude and we can have discussions with them.

We say that the attacks on the BLF and the Painters and Dockers are attacks on the whole working class. We believe a Crimes Commission would be used in the same way.

Whatever those unions had done, it would not deflect the thrust of that attack.

There is the question of whether you should attend a Commission. I've always questioned going along. Everything is loaded against you. Much more effective not to go. That is reflected in Commissioners almost pleading for the unions concerned to appear.

There is some suggestion that the ALP leaders will be blown up in this whole thing. Let's suppose it ended up like the Petrov Commission. Should none go? I've always questioned the Party going to a Commission.

In relation to the substance of the allegations, Gallagher paid a substantial sum for his builders but did take favours. I disagree with that without repudiating Gallagher.

This business has a long history in the trade unions. But a person in Gallagher's position has to be scrupulously careful.

Re the relation with Munday, I've never discussed it with them. But I can't see why we can't do something. Of course we can't make undertakings for them.

In the old history of the Party there was the most ridiculous influence in the trade unions by those who knew nothing about it. Perhaps we could use our influence to resolve differences amicably, though of course we can't direct.

Perhaps we can reach general agreement on seizure of the leadership, the left of the ALP, the SPA and a public statement.

It has been important to comb over the differences. It all has a bearing on it. These things, however, are more incidental than years ago.

Let us agree on permanent, intermittent content.

McCaffrey: In the past it has been seen as a mortal sin for CPA and CPA (M-L) members even to have discussions. We can remove that atmosphere. Nine times out of ten there is in fact no disagreement.

Durbridge: Neither are we empowered to make any public statement.

But for me, I feel it would be much more powerful if the whole Communist movement including the SPA, made a statement in a very general way on the current circumstances and working for the workers.

B. Taft: Clearly we agree to have consultations.

In relation to a public statement, I don't know exactly what that would involve.

Re the Socialist Left, we seem to have similar views, but what do you have in mind?

Hill: I think Rob Durbridge's idea is a good one.

But even if we just said we had had discussions which explored establishing unity on given questions and exploring question of further unifying forces, it would be good.

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B. Taft: What will be the mechanism of our consultations?

Hill: You and me to retain contact.

McCaffrey: What about elsewhere?

B. Taft: We will report back to our leading bodies and see what we can do.

Durbridge: There seems to be informal contact in Sydney around the building unions.

Hill: In relation to a statement, for our part, we have made public statements saying that efforts must be put into building unity. We have made ideological preparation. My 1980 statement seems pretty well consistent with our present position.

Perhaps we'll each report back to our bodies. The it could be publicly announced that we have had discussions on a number of questions and have reached agreement on some, that they have been very helpful and that we have arranged to continue contact.

B. Taft: We'd agree to put such a proposition to our executive. What about the Socialist Left?

Hill: It requires more detailed discussion and further discussions.

McCaffrey: The animosity has to be overcome. There should be a feeling of respect. It is a fundamental question. The hard things that were said have left a residue. It affects young people. It should be cleared away.

Hill: In our respective journals, more attention could be paid to this matter. Perhaps there could be a systematic approach. Perhaps publication of the material of the other. Perhaps Bernie Taft and I could discuss this.

Durbridge: After the SPA/CPA joint statement, we went out and clarified it and said we were not submerging the differences between the Parties, but where cooperation was possible, it would be good.

B. Taft: We could each draft a statement and compare.

Hill: Have you got relations with the Socialist Workers Party?

B. Taft: We have avoided it.

Hill: I don't think some of them are so bad.

M. Taft: We've had discussions on particular things with SWP members, but not the leaders, especially re Newcastle steel industry.

We've worked with them on certain Aboriginal solidarity questions.

We've tried to make informal moves.

B. Taft: What's Langer's position now?

Hill: There was a great deal of hostility towards him. I think much more should be done to talk to him in a cooperative way. However, it is hard to get anyone who was associated with him to talk to him.

Durbridge: I met him recently. He seemed lost, cynical. His position seemed to be that one should commence armed struggle.