

The Party Question: Why the twentieth century turned out to be a mistake

Andy Blunden - February 2026

It is widely accepted that it is an essential premise of Marx's theory that Socialism must have a Party as its vehicle. I do not accept this claim. To explain why I will briefly review the historical record, review the present-day political terrain on the Left in the light of this premise, and the social terrain as a whole in the light of the present day labour process, and suggest an alternative view.

The Pre-history of the Revolutionary Party

Marx and Engels wrote the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* for the Communist League. There was no party called "The Communist Party." The Communist League, founded in 1847, was a small organisation whose constitution was modelled on that of an 18th century secret society like the Freemasons. Despite the threat of state repression, Marx and Engels worked to turn the League around and make it a more suitable vehicle for a modern political movement. The political *sociétés* (usually translated as "clubs") of the French Revolutionary period were secret societies of the type on which the Communist League was modelled. The "Communist Party" on the other hand was understood more in the way we understand "the Left" today, rather than an organisation with a membership list. Marx intervened in the revolutions of 1848 by printing and distributing the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* daily, financially supported by shareholders, with the aid of an editorial board and informal supporters acting as distributors.

In the UK, the Whigs and Tories were parties more in the modern sense, but oriented exclusively toward parliamentary representation without any active branches with a real internal life. Until 1884, British workers did not have the vote at all, and their only avenue for political activity was to attend the hustings and sign petitions. The National Charter Association was founded in 1838 for precisely these purposes, and neither planned nor agitated for revolution. The NCA borrowed its structure from the Methodist Church and was in turn a model for later Social Democratic parties and trade unions. However, its vibrant internal democratic activity was made illegal and brutally suppressed. By the time of the Communist League, the NCA was in its dying days as the British bourgeoisie blocked the road for any political organisation or parliamentary participation by the working class.

The two different models of organisation in the workers movement at this time, secret society and political party, were dictated by severe repression of all political organisation among the working class. Marx and Engels looked to the model of the NCA, so far as possible given the threat of state repression.

By the 1860s, the franchise was being gradually expanded in Britain and trade unions were increasingly tolerated, now preferred by employers to their employees organising in secret. The International Workingmen's Association, was founded in 1864, mainly by the London Trades Council, and was the first mass working class organisation that Marx was part of creating. Under Marx's leadership, the International was based on the principles of solidarity and self-

emancipation of the working class and was very loose in its attitude to membership – whole unions could join *en bloc*. It was not involved in elections and did not foment revolutionary activity, being exclusively involved in industrial activity and education, organically embedded in the industrial working class of Europe. The International played next to no role in the Paris Commune and it declined. This did not stop Marx and Engels working like Trojans, studying, writing, publishing and occasionally lecturing with audiences provided by and through the International.

In the 1880s and the decades following Marx's death, large masses of unskilled workers (i.e., workers outside the apprenticeship system) formed trade unions, and in Europe and later Britain, workers swelled the ranks of parliamentary parties which formed the Second International. Engels died in 1895, never having joined even the Independent Labour Party, let alone the Labour Party.

The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) originated in the Gotha Congress where Lassalle's ADAV and Bebel Liebknecht's SDAP merged in 1875. The workers had the vote in Germany and Marx's Secretary, Kautsky, believed that the SPD, which held the loyalties of the vast mass of the organised working class, would inevitably win a majority in parliament and legislate Socialism. Marx maintained a comradely but critical attitude to these parties from exile until his death in 1883.

In Russia, the workers formed Soviets in 1905, a different kind of political organisation based on workplace, and members of the RSDLP participated in the Soviets alongside the entire politically active section of the Russian working class, as well as in the limited franchise offered in Russian Duma. The vision Lenin formulated was for a Revolution led by the Soviets. As it turned out, a majority within the Soviets was not found ready and able to lead a seizure of State power, and the Bolsheviks did this on their own, successfully winning the leadership of the workers' movement and bypassing the Soviets. The Bolsheviks knew, from that moment on, that either they would conquer and hold power in Russia until the European workers came to their aid, or they would all be shot.

Colonial and early 20th century Australia had several small Marxist groups, and in 1891 the Australian Labor Party was founded following the near-Civil War following the shearers' strike. The Victorian Socialist Party¹ (1906-1932) was active in the trade unions, founding the local branch of the IWW, and worked inside the Labor Party and was very popular among the working class of Melbourne. But it was a very small group.

At this point then, the predominant form of political organisation in the workers' movement was in large formations which were organic parts of the class itself, in which various political factions participated. But the Soviets or Labour and Social Democratic parties existed independently of the Marxists; they were not the creation of Marxists.

Under Tsarist rule, the Bolsheviks could have no illusion in the parliamentary road, but universal suffrage was established by the February 1917 revolution and the Bolsheviks, as was their way, seized the opportunity for legal political organising. In the aftermath of the defeat of Tsarist forces in the War, the Bolshevik wing of the RSDLP seized power on behalf of the Soviets, and founded

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victorian_Socialist_Party

a Soviet Republic. Notwithstanding the centrality of the Soviets, it was the Bolshevik *Party* which led the Revolution at the head of the Soviets, and their place as leaders of the Revolution was formalised in changing their name to the “Communist Party.”

Thus it happened that the Communist Party was the leader of the October 1917 Revolution, established the Comintern and set up Communist Parties on the model of the soon-Stalinised ruling Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The Comintern could not will into existence the Soviets which had made the Russian Revolution. The Australian Communist Party was founded in 1920, though not fully integrated into the Comintern for a number of years, which was achieved mainly thanks to the “Third Period” policies of Stalin which appealed to an already-existing ultraleft faction in the Australian labour movement. The small Marxist groups which had been active before 1920 withered away leaving the leadership of the workers’ movement to the overlapping membership of the trade unions, the ALP and the CPA. This formation largely remained in place, like in other countries, until the 1960s. Only the Communist Party saw itself as a vehicle for Social Revolution and Marxist ideas.

Reviewing the work of the Comintern: all the parties which made revolutions during the period when the Comintern was interested in making revolutions at all were subordinate organs of the Comintern, interested neither in Socialism nor Revolution. What made the Chinese Revolution was an army, an army of peasants led by intellectuals and workers loyal to the Comintern, taken out of the cities where they had a base of their own and sent to the countryside to work with peasants. This was not a political party. The revolution in Yugoslavia was likewise made by a partisan army, in this case largely without the assistance of the Comintern. Otherwise, all the overturns made in Europe were the result of the military conquests of the Soviet Army. Subsequent “revolutions” in African and Latin America were made by guerrilla armies, not political parties, with the material aid of either China or the USSR, as rival quasi-colonial powers.

The CPA was at times more radical than its Comintern directives demanded, and it could be said that the Communist Party of Australia was the most successful revolutionary party in Australian history. At the end of the War, in which the Soviet Union was an ally of Australia against Nazi Germany and bearing the brunt of the fighting, the Communist Party had a very high standing. Its membership was estimated at 22,000 in a population of 7.5 million, and had a large faction in the trade unions, holding 8 of the 18 seats on the ACTU General Council. It could therefore truly be said to be the organic leadership of the Australian working class, even though its policies were controlled day-by-day from Moscow. During the period when it was an effective leadership in the Australian working class it was being directed by foreigners. It should be noted that only once has a member of the Communist Party ever been elected to Parliament at State or Federal level (Fred Paterson, member of the Queensland Legislative Assembly, 1944-1950). It has always been the case that Australian workers are happy to have communists leading their trade unions, but not in charge of the government.

Then came the Cold War.

Not only did the Cold War bring political suppression and victimisation to members of the Communist Party in Australia, in combination with the postwar boom, it produced distinctly unfavourable social conditions for communism.

The foreign policies of the Soviet Union were positively *not* looking for revolution in the advanced capitalist countries. While continuing to defend their positions in the unions, the CPA put its head down.

Especially after the defeat of the Miners' strike in 1949, despite the defeat of Menzies' attempt to ban the Communist Party again by a referendum, under the ceaseless attacks of McCarthyism, the Communist Party of Australia became virtually invisible in public life. They retained important positions in the trade unions despite the efforts of B.A. Santamaria's Groupers, but otherwise it was The Union of Australia Women, campaigning against war, folk music clubs and Progress Associations in the suburbs. The Communist Party still had in its ranks most of the Left literary and intellectual elite in Australia, but generally they were for all intents and purposes secret members.

The Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 and Khrushchev's speech at the 20th Congress separated the best of the intelligentsia from the CPA. Only the "tankies" remained, that is, those communists who supported Socialism by tanks. In 1964, the Maoists split from the CPA forming the CPA(M-L) and the Maoists did manage to find a base amongst the students

Just as millions of young people were being thrown into political activity in the Anti-Vietnam War Movement, even though the CPA was the only Party leading the first protests against the War and conscription, the CPA still looked like a quaint old person's society. The more so because the labour process had already changed, and the Communists who controlled unions like the Building Workers, Plumbers and Electricians, were no longer at the heart of the emerging new working class. Long before the election of the Whitlam government and free higher education, the percentage of the working population with university qualifications was exploding.

The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, however, led to a split in which those supporting the Soviet invasion split to form the SPA. The split in the CPA reflected the changes in the labour process underway and the character of the youth who entered radical politics. These were not the children of blue collar workers following their parents into blue collar jobs and blue collar unions. Just as the Labour Party was increasingly dominated by the professional classes, revolutionary politics was resonating with university students who, for example, were outraged at the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

The whole nature of the labour process was changing and the radical youth reflected the new social layer required by this new labour process. Change in the nature of work accelerated in the 1970s, leading to a marginalisation of the blue collar workers in the political life of the country. In the 1980s, The Communist Party was not culturally equipped to absorb the new generation of young communists, and it declined just as the tide of 1960s radicalism ebbed, with few of its members under 70 years of age.

In 1991, the remaining CPA wound itself up and launched the New Left Party, which never worked out a program, and lived only long enough to wind itself up 1993. The assets of the CPA were left to the SEARCH Foundation which operates as a kind of left-leaning charity, distributing funds to Left causes, and is managed by ex-members of Left parties. The SPA took the name of the CPA and now forms a part of the ecosystem of small communist groups in Australia, with broadly the same policies they all share.

In 1972, as the result of an intervention by the SWP in the U.S., the DSP was founded, acting as cheer leaders for liberation movements in the Asia-Pacific region. The Socialist Workers Action Group was founded about the same time. This was an entirely parasitic formation that lived by co-opting the most radical wing of the leadership of social struggles. Also founded around the same time was the Socialist Labour League, as the Australia wing of Healy's group in the UK. None of the Trotskyist groups had roots in Australia. There were Trotskyists in Australia, Ted Tripp in Melbourne and Bob Gould in Sydney, but the groups founded in 1972 were essentially foreign implants. Ever since, the Left in Australia has had the character of being a side-effect of Leftism in the UK and USA.

In all, the Left in Australia still somewhat resembles the Australian Left as it was in Australia prior to the October 1917 Revolution, differing only by the larger number of Left groups competing for a larger population of non-ALP socialists.

This is the sense in which I say that the twentieth century turned out to be a mistake.

Apart from October 1917, political parties have not made revolutions. Revolutions have been made by armies of one kind or another. Political parties have been part of opinion formation and the political education of the masses, but they have not actually made a revolution. Parties are governments-in-waiting, and whether the road to power is a parliamentary election or a military conquest will determine the nature of the formation which makes claim to being a "party." Although parties may be a factor in opinion formation, generally speaking the job of opinion formation is the work of *social movements*.

The degeneration of the Soviet Union is much more to do with factors outside of the control of the revolutionaries themselves – the invasion of the USSR by seven imperialist armies and the subsequent political and economic isolation of the Revolution in a country which was already devastated by war and in any case, 95% peasants and landlords.

But in all other cases, where states were created by victorious armies, the nature of the states which resulted were unattractive to anyone enjoying a reasonable standard of living, a voice in political life and social peace. Granted that many avoided the worst features of neo-liberal capitalism but they did so at the expense of social and economic development and the normal kind of freedoms enjoyed in the capitalist world.

Leaders that come to power by the sword tend to rule by the sword. Daniel Ortega, the leader who seized power in Nicaragua in 1979 was a hero of the Left (and even today has a cheer squad in Melbourne) for his daring overthrow of the dictator Somoza who had ruled Nicaragua by torture. Ortega is still in power 47 years later thanks to the same torture chambers used by Somosa. Not all national liberation leaders are equal, but Ortega is far from untypical.

The political landscape as it is in Australia today

If you live in a country like Australia where universal suffrage is in place and is implemented fairly, then you should know that changing government policy is not achieved by changing the government but by changing the opinions of the voters, notwithstanding that governments do do a lot of things which their

voters hate. The general rule is: don't try and persuade the politicians, persuade their voters.

Of course, without universal suffrage the same would apply, but only the franchised section of the population have a say.

Generally speaking, the class that controls civil society controls government, and this is more true than the converse, i.e., controlling government does not necessarily bring with it control of public opinion, even though governments do hold many powerful levers to control public opinion and the government can determine activity in civil society even in the face of public hostility. Were it not that capital rules on the global scale, then formally, nothing would prevent a parliamentary government like that in Australia from legislating Socialism. Governments try to underplay their own power. The state budget constitutes 45% of GDP in OECD countries and has a monopoly on the use of force and an exclusive right to raise taxes. Whenever there is a crisis in capital, Mr. Moneybags comes running to the State to bail him out. However, on the international domain, the Australian government is nothing. Hundreds of billions to trillions of dollars are turned over every day on Wall Street. If Socialism comes to Australia it will come as an integral part of world Socialism, no other way. But this is far from ruling out a significant contribution by people in Australia.

Capital has at its disposal vast means for the control of public opinion. The capitalists own the means of communication and collectively determine in large measure the content of all public communication through their ownership of industry, property and money. They teach the working population "common sense" by controlling the experiences people have in their working life as employees and by means of the laws of economics which are but the ideal form of the bourgeoisie and saturate the cultural atmosphere with advertisements and all kinds of diversion.

The *Communist Manifesto* (Marx, 1848) said: "the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class to *win the battle of democracy*." This first step remains before us. We know all the advantages the bourgeoisie has in "the battle of democracy," but the working people also have advantages, above all the advantage of numbers.

Whatever the barriers to winning the battle of democracy, these are basically the same barriers which bar the way to social revolution. There is no way of bypassing public opinion. A social revolution cannot be made without the support of the overwhelming majority of the politically active population.

However, not every Socialist is concerned with changing government or changing government policy. Having the long view, some Socialists work to bring about Socialism at some future time, and in their view governments have little to contribute to this future Socialism. They claim that Socialism can only arrive via socialist revolution because the capitalists will relinquish their property only in the face of overwhelming force. While the government formally has the capacity to expropriate capital, the enormous power of capital, in the world economy and domestically, is manifested everyday experience. In the 125 years of universal suffrage in Australia, elected governments have never had the power or the will to expropriate capital. (The Atlee Labour government in the UK, 1945-1950, did carry out extensive nationalisation of industry when

political and economic conditions made that possible. Nye Bevan nationalised the entire health industry making every doctor in the country suddenly an employee of the government. Imagine that!). *Therefore*, the leadership of the Revolution and the readiness of the working class for revolution, must be prepared in advance. The preparation for a violent revolution is a task quite distinct from the task of improving life under capitalism. Thus the dichotomy: Reform or Revolution. As Marx noted in the 1872 Preface to the *Manifesto*: “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.” This is true.

The preparation for a future revolution is conceived by the parties on the Left in terms of the size and influence of the revolutionary party which has grown from the presently-existing embryo, and will seize power on behalf of the working class, having transformed itself into the organic leadership of the working class. It is presumed that one of the 20-odd little Revolutionary Parties will grow larger, prove its superiority to all its competitors and lead the Revolution. I wonder how many members they will have at that time. Will they have more than the 22,000 the CPA had in 1945? I doubt it.

As a result, the explicitly political landscape is inhabited by three types of animal: (1) political parties, governments-in-waiting oriented towards winning elections, subject to public opinion, and implementing their program through the state apparatus; (2) revolutionary groups propagating the conception of socialist revolution and preparing the general staff of a future revolutionary army; (3) social movements working at changing public opinion on specific issues with the aim of forcing governments to act on these issues by convincing the voters. Social movements are frequently active in dealing with the issue themselves, but are not interested in becoming a government either by voting or by revolution. Although there are hybrids (such as the trade unions which are institutionalised social movements), these tasks are more or less mutually exclusive, and the organisations are generally clear about their *raison d'être*.

This does not deny the parasitic position of the various Left groups in relation to the social movements which have long been fields for the recruitment of the most militant or the most disappointed of activists in the social movements.

No one today seriously repeats the slogan “After them, us” by which German Communists in the 1930s expressed the belief that life would be so terrible under the Nazis that people would vote for the Communists after suffering a bout of the Nazis. But further than this, there is such a thing as what Nancy Fraser (2003) calls “non-reformist reforms,” that is, measures which can win widespread support on their own merit here and now, but at the same time actually improve the self-confidence, unity and fighting capacity of the working class. The abolition of all anti-union laws, the guarantee of access to the best possible quality of education and health services improve the prospects for a successful and lasting social revolution, even though they militate against the *immediate stimulus* to endure the civil war which will ultimately be needed to defend these conditions. It is generally the *taking away* of some benefit, rather than a long-held desire for that benefit, which stimulates the masses into political action, so this makes sense. Some benefits, like a good public health system, are *extremely* difficult to take away from people who have once enjoyed it. Ask the Australian Liberal Party.

In any case, any Socialist, whether or not they believe that social revolution is necessary to achieve Socialism, is duty bound to work for such reforms. Not all reforms which are on the whole welcome amongst workers have this character. For example, measures which aim to foster small business and self-employment may improve life under capitalism for some, but they complicate the road to Socialism.

Andy Fleming's substack², enumerates 20 groups dedicated to preparing for social revolution in Australia, even before he gets to the "see also." The largest, and evidently "most successful" of these is the latest version of Tony Cliff's tendency now known as Socialist Alternative (SAlt), which split from the now-defunct ISO in 1995.

On their webpage³, SAlt make it clear that socialist revolution is unlikely to break out in Australia.

"It is much more likely that revolution will wash onto our shores only after major revolutionary waves appear in other parts of the world and global capitalism is beginning to falter, throwing our own society into turmoil—making existing problems worse, exposing new ones, while inspiring people to do something about them by following the lead of people overseas. ...

"When it does, the question will not be, "Can it happen here?" The question will be, "How can we win?"

"The answer to that will depend to a large degree on how many people have already been trained as activists and know how to organise people, how many people have studied other revolutions and their dynamics and can apply the lessons learned by millions of people in previous attempts to change the world, how many people understand the ways different social classes mobilise to defend their interests. In short, it will depend on how organised our side is."

The above verges on the self-evident. If there was a revolution originating in Australia, it would be easily crushed by international capital. Undoubtedly if and when there is a revolution in Australia it would arise only as a part of an enormous social crisis originating outside Australia's borders. But this actually tells us nothing to justify the project of revolutionary groups who deceive themselves into believing that it is *they* who are preparing the revolutionary general staff for the future social revolution. I'll return to this, but they are right when they say "In short, it will depend on how organised our side is."

But this is the *raison d'être* of SAlt: to train the activists and organise in preparation for the revolutionary upsurge that will surely follow a revolution overseas. (which is an interesting variant of the DSP's *raison d'être* which was to lend aid to revolutions overseas). Whatever they say, everyone knows that SAlt has no real interest in the actual aim of *any* project in which they participate, and why would we think that building Socialism would be an exception?

² Andy Fleming (AKA "Slackbastard") <https://slackbastard.anarchobase.com/?p=52946>

³ Ben Hillier "Could there be a revolution in Australia?" *Red Flag* <https://redflag.org.au/article/could-there-be-revolution-australia/>

SAlt originates from a group expelled from the ISO in 1995. Contrary to the ISO whose practice consistently exhibited this lack of interest in the actual goals of any campaign they participated in, SAlt claim that they practise “a combination of arguing principled socialist politics and involving ourselves wholeheartedly in the campaigns that emerged” (Armstrong 2010). So they claim.

The following excerpts cited below are taken from an authoritative reflection of the historical origins of SAlt by Mick Armstrong in 2010⁴.

[Because of the deteriorating combativity of the workers' movement,] New recruits, if they are to remain actively involved and be confident to recruit other people, have to be politically convinced through serious discussion, political branch meetings and reading groups, combined with well thought-out interventions into whatever struggles and debates that arise.... for a socialist group of a few hundred to operate successfully it needs to understand that it is nowhere near to being a mass party that can lead any significant layer of workers in struggle. Instead it has to be clear that it is reliant on its ideas to influence relatively small numbers of people. ... With over 100 student activists we have by far the largest base of any left group on the university campuses and at the same time we have gradually built up a layer of members who are activists in a range of trade unions ... We were even more right to resist the fantasy that in the space of a few short years a couple of hundred socialists could by an act of will and organisational quick fixes decisively break out and achieve a mass working-class following. With the ISO defunct, the challenge facing us in Socialist Alternative is to take the next step forward and begin to lay the basis for a serious current in the working class based on the politics of international socialism.

Even more now than in 2010, SAlt is the largest of the groups on the Left in Australia, but there is not the slightest sign of them “breaking out” with a mass working class following. They have a smattering of members that retained their membership after leaving university and are now in their trade unions, and at the time of writing. Via the Victorian Socialists SAlt have only one single local government position, but won 4% of votes to retain their deposit in one Region with a progressive, largely blue-collar and/or immigrant population. Their state-wide level of support in Victoria has been around 1% in general elections and went as high as 2% in selected local government elections. Victorian Socialists election platforms are firmly within the bounds of “reformism,” addressing the present-day consciousness of the most politically active sections of the population, more or less the same menu of policies offered by the Greens. But the Greens do not pretend to be anything other than a party whose *raison d'être* is to put good people into Parliament. SAlt on the other hand are pretending to be Bolsheviks.

Judged by active membership numbers and election results, SAlt are dwarfed by the Australian Greens who get about 12.5% of the vote nationally and hold 33 Lower House seats at state, 11 seats in the Federal Senate, and only one federal

⁴ Mick Armstrong “The origins of Socialist Alternative: summing up the debate” *Marxist Left Review* (2010) <https://marxistleftreview.org/articles/the-origins-of-socialist-alternative-summing-up-the-debate/>

Lower House seat currently, though it was as high as six, and more than 100 local government seats. If SAlt gets a much smaller support than the Greens, it is *not* because they are too radical. It is something else. For one, the voters take the Greens' platform at face value, whereas *everyone knows* that the Victorian Socialists are putting forward policies which they believe will get a vote, and *not* policies they actually believe in. Given the minimal impact that SAlt has on the consciousness of the wider population it is fair to suppose that the vote they get is mainly a response to the word "Socialist" on the ballot paper. If the standing of the word "Socialist" in Australia has fallen to a level where it is preferred by only about 1% of the broad voting population, this alone is evidence that SAlt's preparation for the coming socialist revolution has not been successful so far.

Armstrong's critique of SAlt's predecessor, ISO, hinges mainly on the ISO's inability to take the temperature of the working class and disorienting their membership with over-ambitious hyperactivism on the basis of delusions of the approaching "break out." Recognising that a revolutionary crisis was not itself going to sustain the revolutionary consciousness of their members, Armstrong advises more attention to education of members in socialist ideas, as opposed to over-ambitious and invariably disappointing activism. However, Armstrong defends ISO against charges of "the idea that selling a socialist paper, arguing for socialist ways to build a campaign, and recruiting activists were sectarian 'raiding' – the classic red-baiting phrase of reformists."

It is very clear that SAlt continues the practices referred to here. Countless times I have been involved in some campaign alongside other workers when a group of young "socialists" from SAlt or some other "revolutionary group" turn up with copies of their paper under their arm and possibly carrying banners or placards bearing the party's logo. Workers always politely welcome the offers of support, but it is patently obvious to all that these young fishers are here to recruit, sell papers and in one way or another increase the size and influence of their group, and have little if any belief in or commitment to the actual aims of the campaign.

In his historical review Armstrong constantly refers to membership numbers and paper sales as metrics of the success or otherwise of the group. This is consistent with their self-conception that they are building the general staff of a future revolutionary army but is utterly at odds with any idea that the role of SAlt is to advance the struggle for Socialism as it is here and now – indeed such an aim is nonsense except insofar as it swells the ranks of the Party.

The idea that a person may be hostile to SAlt and go on to be a good fighter for Socialism is inconceivable for them. A contradiction in terms. But in fact it is exactly here that SAlt may be making its useful contribution to Socialism in Australia.

Nothing in this entire historical review made any reference to a *campaign success* which SAlt can claim as its achievement. "Participation" in campaigns is obviously (both in Armstrong's article and in the practice of SAlt) a *technique* which is subordinate to the objective of swelling the ranks of the Party. The metrics of success are membership numbers, attendance at Party events and sales of Party publications.

Any business person or public servant should know that it is the remuneration structure which is the chief factor determining a company's success. The

company's mission statement plays little role. If they are enforced, the KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) may play a role – how many papers sold, how many members recruited, etc.

The aim of SAlt is to build SAlt. It is literally self-serving; it exists for itself.

And this is a negative with respect to the campaigns and organisations in which SAlt intervenes. Armstrong writes:

Student union officers have to be won to revolutionary politics, be subject to the discipline of the organisation and publicly identify as socialists – selling Socialist Alternative magazine and so on.

To the contrary Trotsky wrote:

In the trade unions, the Communists, of course, submit to the discipline of the party, no matter what posts they occupy. This does not exclude but *presupposes their submission to trade union discipline*. In other words, *the party does not impose upon them any line of conduct that contradicts the state of mind or the opinion of the majority of the members of the trade unions. ... (Communism and Syndicalism, Trotsky, 1929, my emphasis⁵)*

So when SAlt happens to recruit a genuine fighter in some campaign or union, their first task is to eradicate their sensitivity to the state of mind of the masses and any impulse to submit to the discipline of the masses, and ultimately to turn them into a party operative dedicated to the KPIs of SAlt.

From 1973 to 1985 I was a loyal member of Gerry Healy's Workers Revolutionary Party in the UK and was guilty of all the errors I have just attributed to ISO and SAlt and more. Millions of young middle-class people have been drawn into such projects over the past 50 years and I was no different. Except that in supporting the expulsion of Gerry Healy in 1985, I did take genuine responsibility for my own political actions and have ever since subjected my political activity to on-going self-criticism. From 1985 to some time in the 1990s (I don't remember exactly) I worked on building a small "revolutionary group." However, our KPIs were never the number of members recruited or the number of papers sold or attendance at our very occasional events (unsurprising then that these groups had a short life-span), but solely the success of our contributions to campaigns and unions and the progress of our process of self-clarification.

In 1993, I wrote *Stalinism: Its Origin & Future*⁶, which was the beginning of my political reorientation, and from 1997, while continuing with my trade union duties, I helped build the Marxists Internet Archive, devoted my time to study, and organised "Hegel Summer Schools" which continued until 2011. From 2006, personal circumstances prevented me from any involvement in meetings and I henceforth devoted myself solely to reading and writing. In 2019, now free of responsibilities as carer for my partner, but aged 74, I limited myself to very modest activity as a member of the local branch of the Australian Greens.

In summary, while SAlt are doubtless correct that social revolution will come to Australia as part of a worldwide crisis and the prospects of Socialism in Australia will depend, on one hand, on events beyond our control outside our

⁵ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/unions/index.htm>

⁶ <https://www.marxists.org/subject/stalinism/origins-future/index.htm>

own borders, and on the other hand, on the readiness of the working class in Australia to take state power and abolish capital.

However, the very last thing the Australian working class will need at *that* crucial moment is a party which suffers from the illusion that it has inherited the right to lead the revolution and take state power “on behalf of the working class,” while continuing to orient itself to KPIs reflecting its own power and influence at the expense of the success of the Revolution. Whatever policy such a “revolutionary” government implemented, the move from universal suffrage in a parliamentary system to rule by a small party constituting itself as the leadership of one class in society (especially a class with which it has little organic connection), is socially and politically a big step backwards. This would be true even if SAlt “broke out” into a million-strong party. But that’s never going to happen in any case. And there is no evidence to believe otherwise.

The Next Revolution

All the above is preparation for my claim that a revolutionary party which could not win a majority in a fair election based on universal suffrage could not win the leadership of the vast majority of the working people. Further, I claim that to make a socialist revolution requires not just the support but the active participation of the vast majority of the working and politically active population. The seizure of state power by one party as the organic leadership of just one class in society, and not the vast majority, would inevitably lead to a tyranny, as has in the past.

Here I must clarify what I mean by “one class.” I agree with Zinoviev when he said that a Party is part of a class. In modern Australia the overwhelming majority of the working population earn their living from their own labour. Thanks to the cunning of the Hawke/Keating government, most of us will depend on the fact that the standard of living we enjoy in the last several decades of our life will be thanks to our Superannuation. “Superannuation” is in effect compulsory savings. But in the immediate sense it entails living off the proceeds of capital. By this means the Social Democrats of the ALP have very explicitly tied the fate of workers to the welfare of capital. This is clearly one of those reforms which is *not* a “non-reformist reform.” It materially improves the living standards of the working class while tying workers to the fate of capital. Witness the problems the state is having in France in raising the retirement age! In Australia, on the other hand, workers are relatively unconcerned about the official retirement age. Here, raising the retirement age, rather than robbing you of your pension is simply continuing to swell your savings.

See the way Marx talks about class in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* - the political terrain is populated by myriad subjects formed by age cohort, occupation, nationality, political opinion, employment and size of capital. There is nothing of the “two great classes” here; dozens of different classes figure in his analysis of the revolutionary events of the 1850s in France. If Australia comes to Socialism it will be through the fruitful collaboration of many sections of the working class – industrial workers, knowledge workers, agricultural workers as well as professionals, teachers, nurses and so on – together with public servants and small business people. Look at Minneapolis! an entire city united against the state. Nothing to do with the labour movement.

In the crisis created by the defeat of Russian forces by Germany, the Bolsheviks, after winning only about 25% of seats in Constituent Assembly convened by the broadest suffrage in history to that date, dissolved the Assembly by force and made Revolution at the head of the Soviets. Even *with* the Soviets, this is precisely the scenario which I claim can only lead to tyranny, let alone without Soviets. The Bolsheviks really had no choice because the alternative to Revolution was most likely the firing squad. The reasons for the terrible degeneration of the Soviet government are complex, but I will only say that today and in any future conjuncture, we live in a completely different world, and a century of trying to emulate the Bolsheviks has been fruitless and Lenin insisted it would be in his famous pamphlet on the “Infantile Disorder.” I do not propose to justify my view of the prospects for Socialism on the experience of the October Revolution.

I agree, however, that a socialist revolution in Australia presupposes an enormous and doubtless worldwide social and economic crisis, a situation in which events are inclined to move very fast. So it may well be that such a revolution may be in defiance of a parliamentary majority, but only because of *the rapid pace of events*, and *not* because the revolutionaries cannot command a majority! Bob Hawke’s demand in November 1975 that the workers wait for the election and not launch a general strike immediately on Kerr’s constitutional coup made the point; this passivity led to a landslide victory for Malcolm Fraser⁷.

The working class in Australia today is no longer the industrial working class which Marxist theory presupposed. The membership of the trade unions would at first glance seem to be a rational and objective estimate of what is meant by “the working class” but union density is about 13% at the moment and the great majority of these union members are in state-funded occupations in administration, education, caring as well as very weak unions in sales and finance. The blue collar tradespeople and operatives are negligible numerically, even though their social significance exceeds their numerical representation. CFMEU and MUA⁸ notwithstanding, the majority of employees in the private sector are not union members. Those blue collar workers will necessarily play the most important role in a future revolution. If you were on the gate of Patrick’s in April 1998, you will never forget the power of the unionised industrial workers in Australia! That’s 28 years ago now, but my guess is that that potential is still there. They will always be the shock troops of the Revolution in Australia. But let’s not get carried away. They are a small minority.

But quite frankly, a working population, with the degree of social solidarity which is objectively manifested in the Australian trade union movement, is not ready for social revolution! We communists have a long way to go to “win the battle of democracy,” which, if social revolution is to be achieved will be marked by truly mass membership of the unions (or some new formation which might overtake our unions) across both the public and private sectors, and large and lively social movements and political groups such that the majority of the

⁷ The Prime Minister of Australia from the (conservative) Liberal party, 1975-1983

⁸ The Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), and the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA)

population is *actually engaged in the political process*. Achieving a support of the vast majority for a socialist revolution would then be just a matter of winning the argument. If the situation calls for it, then we can do it!

On the other hand, a government which had taken power from a government with an electoral mandate from the vast majority, but which failed to have the active support from the vast majority (and could therefore not win an election if one were called that day) simply could not run the country. Perhaps they could occupy public buildings and make a lot of noise, but they could not run the country. You can't run this country from Government House even with a well-armed police force.

In 1926, the TUC shut down the British economy; the government refused its demands. The TUC then had no choice but to call off the strike and go back to work, for the only alternative was to seize state power which lay prostrate before them. The TUC was neither willing nor able to transform itself into a government. If they were unwilling in 1926 in Britain, the unions are certainly unprepared to take power today, and the complexity of the economy is now of an entirely different order!

It takes almost the entire population to run the country. It's not as if the boss of a car factory can be pushed aside and everyone goes on as before, doubly so in the event of an international economic crisis. The economy is far too complex for any kind of command economy to step into its place. A revolutionary government will have to carry with it the consent and active support of the vast majority just to keep bread on the table.

This is reflected in the fact that big corporations like Ford Motor are not the "commanding heights" they used to be. Family businesses like corner shops are also a thing of the past. The typical capitalist business today is the franchise. The manager of a Macdonald's outlet is also the owner of the business. But in reality they are a paid operative of what is essentially *finance capital*. The productive capitalist company, the family business and the party are all creatures of the twentieth century.

Just as it is said that the parliamentary democracy is the ideal state form for capitalism, the ideal state for the fostering of an anti-capitalist revolution is a parliamentary democracy supplemented by thoroughgoing democratic intervention and control in every aspect of social life to an extent which would make Parliament redundant. Insofar as revolutionary socialists want to do their best to prepare for a future social revolution, the best we can do is foster participation in economic, political and social life by the largest possible number of people, using whatever avenues open up to accustom people to take responsibility for running this or that area of public life where they find themselves.

At the same time, support "non-reformist reforms," such as protecting and extending the ABC⁹, restricting so far as possible the capitalist media, expanding education and ensuring the greatest possible level of participation. Etc.

⁹ The Australian Broadcasting Corporation - the public broadcast network.

What should Socialists Do Then?

From the above the reader might make the mistake of thinking that I have argued against Socialist organisation. Not so! All I have argued against is the project of building here-and-now organisations which take themselves to be the general staff of a future social revolution which will happen as a result of indeterminate external events at an indeterminate time in the future.

The diversity of such pretenders which has persisted throughout my entire life is surely the *reduction ad absurdum* of this conception.

On the other hand, diversity is both a reality and a benefit. Diversity of opinion and activities needs to be given recognition and harnessed as an indicator of the potential for the world to be other than it is.

Socialists most certainly should be active. When I published my first effort at putting my own thoughts into print, *Beyond Betrayal*¹⁰, as a member of a tiny organisation called Communist Intervention, back in 1991, I proposed the following lines of activity:

- publication of magazines, papers and journals
- leading struggles
- creating works of art: “books, plays and films, paintings and other works of art with the potential for making real changes in how people understand the world.”
- being a model “publicly expressing the outlook of a revolutionary Marxist; a journalist, not writing Marxist political criticism, but working within the restrictions of the bourgeois media; a lawyer or academic, side by side with first class professional work, championing causes, defending cases.”

I haven't materially changed that view in the 35 years since, though I could probably add to the list.

Once the absurdity of preparing the “embryo of the revolutionary party” an indefinite time in advance is recognised, the diversity of claimants to the mantle becomes a benefit not a parody. Discussion thrives on diversity.

¹⁰ Available here <https://www.ethicalpolitics.org/ablunden/pdfs/beyond-betrayal.pdf>