

LIBERAL PARTY A.C.T. SENATOR - GARY HUMPHRIES ON COMMUNISM

Tuesday, 10 October 2006 SENATE CHAMBER

Communism - SENATOR GARY HUMPHRIES (Liberal Senator for the Australian Capital Territory) (10.30 pm)

I rise tonight to speak in the adjournment debate about the influence of communism in Australian society today. This is a topic that has receded greatly in importance since the end of the Cold War a decade and a half ago. Indeed, some would see it as an arcane issue, with more of a historical flavour, and less a subject of contemporary relevance.

Sadly, events of this week in North Korea have reminded us that in some parts of the world the ideology which at first fascinated and then repelled 20th century mankind still holds sway. Communist dictatorships remain—six at last count.

More disturbingly however, it appears that there are still pockets of Australian society that flirt with an ideology which is linked directly with the deaths of over 82 SENATE Tuesday, 10 October 2006 CHAMBER 100 million people.

The fear of a communist takeover in Australia subsided long ago. And probably the real high watermark of communist influence in Australia was the late 1940s. As a result, communism is no longer an issue in contemporary political debate in this country.

It is now generally accepted by the mainstream Left—which includes, I am sure, most of those opposite—that the market operating within a liberal democratic political system is the best generator of higher material living standards and human happiness. The collapse of communist regimes, and subsequent acknowledgement of their atrocities and abysmal standards of living, was a wake-up call to most of the mainstream Left who harboured residual sympathy for communism and other extreme ideologies.

There remain, however, those that look at left wing dictatorships through rose coloured glasses, with Cuba in particular being held up as an example of a so-called workers paradise. The reality is quite different, but rather than quote from what the Left would classify as the usual suspects I have chosen to quote the opinion of a scrupulously independent human rights commentator.

According to Amnesty International, in March 2006 there were 72 prisoners of conscience in Cuba. Their crime? Simply criticising the government of Cuba. In July 2005, around 20 people were detained while commemorating the tugboat disaster of 1994, in which 35 people were killed while attempting to flee Cuba when their boat was reportedly rammed by Cuban authorities. In that same month around 30 people were arrested as they tried to participate in a peaceful demonstration outside the French embassy in Havana to demand the release of political prisoners in Cuba.

According to Human Rights Watch: Cuba remains a Latin American anomaly: an undemocratic government that represses nearly all forms of political dissent. President Fidel Castro, now in his forty-seventh year in power, shows no willingness to consider even minor reforms. Instead, his government continues to enforce political conformity using criminal prosecutions, long-and-short-term detentions, mob harassment, police warnings, surveillance, house arrests, travel restrictions, and politically-motivated dismissals from employment.

The end result is that Cubans are systematically denied basic rights to free expression, association, assembly, privacy, movement, and due process of law. These human rights violations have been occurring since the Castro dictatorship's inception.

Yet, as was the case with Stalin, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Pol Pot and countless others, there remain people who believe a higher purpose is served by erecting an idealized facade on a brutal regime and excusing those excesses which, from time to time, come to light.

For these people it is a case of the end justifying the means. Tragically, in the case of communism, the means has meant the end for millions of people.

It appears that Castro's cheer squad in Australia is not limited to the Democratic Socialist Party, or DSP, and its youth wing, Resistance. An article on 26 July this year in the DSP's newspaper Green Left Weekly reported that a Cuban parliamentarian, Ms Gilda Chacon, was touring Australia with the 'support of a number of unions, in particular the Construction Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU)'.

According to the article, it was the Western Australian branch of the CFMEU that sponsored this trip which was basically a public relations excursion on behalf of the Castro dictatorship. In other words, a major donor to the Australian Labor Party is attempting to cultivate favourable public opinion for a regime which has an appalling human rights record and, incidentally, has fairly substantially destroyed Cuba's economy.

Indeed, it is not going too far to suggest that the CFMEU is promoting the Cuban dictatorship as preferable to Australia's liberal democracy, evidently having no problem with a constitution that allows the jailing of people for simply criticising the government.

Is it just the Western Australian branch of the CFMEU that is flirting with this latter day exposition of communism? Unfortunately it is not.

The New South Wales branch of the CFMEU is encouraging its members to purchase a book, ironically titled Cuba: Beyond Our Dream - a classic piece of Castro propaganda. According to the CFMEU advertisement you can purchase this book at the New South Wales CFMEU head office in Lidcombe for \$20.

Who authorised this advertisement? It was one Andrew Ferguson, who is the secretary of the New South Wales CFMEU and also a Labor powerbroker and, incidentally, the brother of federal Labor MPs Martin and Laurie Ferguson.

Presumably, Mr Ferguson had no problems with the CFMEU Lidcombe office hosting the 2005 congress of the Communist Party of Australia. Is Mr Ferguson aware that on its website the CFMEU boasts of its affiliation with Amnesty International, the same group which has described Cuba as a country with 'fundamental freedoms still under attack'?

Perhaps Amnesty might care to discuss that matter with Mr Ferguson. The WA branch of the CFMEU has recently demonstrated what can happen when a union is taken over by militants.

A high-profile example is the Perth to Mandurah railway project, which has been plagued by CFMEU rorting, costing companies and taxpayers millions of dollars.

In February and March this year the union defied an order of the independent umpire, the Industrial Relations Commission—which of course was much defended by the union movement during the debate on the Work Choices legislation—to return to work.

As a result, 107 Western Australian construction workers are facing fines and the CFMEU is being sued by the contractor for up to \$15 million for delays to the project.

I do not know what role communist ideology is playing in these militant activities, but its promotion cannot be conducive to the issues that matter most to 21st century Australians: industrial harmony, jobs growth and value for money for taxpayers. Fidel Castro said: 'Condemn me—it does not matter. History will absolve me.'

Possibly it will, but I suspect that on the scales of history the price paid in blood to achieve and maintain the socialist paradises will make such a verdict problematic. Most of the world is now capable of a dispassionate assessment of the role of communism and, in particular, to recognise its failings in human rights terms.

Evidently, bodies like the CFMEU, a major donor to the Australian Labor Party, are a little way yet from that enlightened state. I call on members of the Australian Senate, in particularly those opposite in this chamber, to set themselves apart from this adulation of a failed, corrupt regime motivated by an ideology which took a shocking toll on human life throughout the 20th century.