# The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia)—Part 9

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The World Socialist Web Site has published The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia). The document was adopted unanimously at the party's founding congress in Sydney on January 21–25. (See: "Socialist Equality Party (Australia) holds founding Congress"). (Click here for Parts 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11)

## The split in the International Committee

225. In January 1985 the 10<sup>th</sup> Congress of the ICFI was held in London. This was the first congress to be convened following the theoretical and political criticisms raised by David North of Healy and the WRP. In its statement How the Workers Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism 1973-1985 [hereafter How the WRP] the International Committee explained that two interconnected facts dominated proceedings, although neither was discussed. "The first was the devastating political crisis within the WRP. The second was the suppression of the political differences which had arisen within the IC during the previous three years. The political degeneration of the WRP was at the heart of the crisis inside the IC. Not only had the British section abandoned its responsibility to provide theoretical, political and organisational leadership to the world movement; it was now the main source of revisionist politics and disorientation within the ICFI. Its work inside the IC had assumed the character of a world-wide wrecking operation."[85] The congress document was a travesty of Marxist analysis, program and principles, and the proceedings were dominated by a series of calculated provocations, orchestrated by the Healy-Banda-Slaughter clique, to prevent any discussion on the political situation confronting the ICFI and its sections.

226. Within months, however, the long-brewing crisis inside the WRP erupted to the surface, in a form that underscored the depth of the party's political degeneration. On July 1, 1985 Healy's long-time personal secretary deserted, leaving behind a letter detailing his abuse, over a protracted period, of a large number of female party cadres. Despite the explosive consequences of the revelations within the British section, the WRP leadership sought to cover them up within the IC. In August, an SLL delegation attended an IC meeting, convened to hear a report on a financial crisis in the WRP, which was falsely attributed to new tax levies. The IC sections were called upon to pledge tens of thousands of dollars, which they duly did. Not a mention was made of the turmoil raging inside the WRP.

227. It was not until October 12, 1985, after charges for Healy's expulsion had already been laid by the WRP central committee, that the SLL leadership first heard of the crisis. Under the leadership of Nick Beams, elected as national secretary six months earlier, the SLL political committee responded by sending a letter to IC secretary Cliff Slaughter, insisting that the only principled way to proceed was to convene an emergency meeting of the ICFI in London to hear a report on the political situation in the WRP and assess the charges against Healy. After subsequently learning that Healy had already been expelled, Beams travelled immediately to London, and arranged for the RCL's national secretary Keerthi Balasuriya to do likewise.

228. There was a profound political significance to this response. In 1953, when the Fourth International was threatened with liquidation at the hands of the Pabloites, the capitulation of Origlass to immense national pressures, generated by the post-war stabilisation, resulted in the destruction of the Trotskyist movement in Australia. In 1985, the decision of Beams and the SLL Political Committee that he travel to the UK, based on the understanding of the need to uphold and defend the political authority of the international movement, contributed to the renewal of the struggle for Trotskyism in the IC and the SLL.

229. Once in London, as the IC's resolution *How the WRP* explained: "The scene which the IC delegates confronted as they assembled ...for an emergency meeting defies description. What had appeared to be a smoothly running machine had exploded and was discharging red-hot fragments in all directions. ... The terrible political degeneration of the WRP under Healy was mirrored most clearly in the political bewilderment and disorientation of those whom he had supposedly trained." [86]

230. The political and theoretical critique prepared by David North between 1982 and 1985, in advance of this explosion, created the conditions for the IC delegates to come to rapid agreement that the source of Healy's corrupt practices and the WRP's collapse was the "ever more explicit separation of the practical and organisational gains of the Trotskyist movement in Britain from the historically and internationally grounded struggles against Stalinism and revisionism from which these achievements arose." The October 25 "Resolution of the ICFI on the Crisis of the British Section" emphasised that all the IC sections "were formed as a result of the struggle by the British comrades against the attempt of Pabloite revisionism to liquidate Trotskyism". Determined to reground the work of the British section on Trotskyist foundations after more than a decade of unrestrained nationalism and opportunism, the IC resolved to expel Healy and insisted on "the re-registration of the membership of the WRP on the basis of an explicit recognition of the political authority of the ICFI and the subordination of the British section

to its decisions."[87]

231. The circulation of David North's documents, which had from 1982 been suppressed by the WRP leadership, and the IC's October 1985 resolutions on the crisis in the WRP, produced a sharp political polarisation within the SLL. Opposed class tendencies that had co-existed uneasily for years, under conditions of the suppression of political clarification within the world movement, quickly crystallised into two deeply opposed factions—an alignment that was to remain virtually unchanged over the next four months. The majority, led by Beams, upheld the political authority of the ICFI as the continuity of the Fourth International, on the basis of its struggle against Stalinism and Pabloite revisionism, and sought to clarify the fundamental political, historical and theoretical issues involved in the WRP's degeneration. The minority insisted that the crisis was not political, but a product of Healy's abandonment of "revolutionary morality"; that the other IC sections, including the Australian, were "equally degenerate"; that the struggle against Pabloism was "factional"; and that the IC had no political authority over the WRP or any other section.

232. On December 16, 1985, the IC received a report from its control commission, established to investigate the WRP's dealings with various regimes in the Middle East. It found that, behind the back of the ICFI, the WRP had carried out an historic betrayal, consisting of "the complete abandonment of the theory of permanent revolution, resulting in the pursuit of unprincipled relations with sections of the colonial bourgeoisie in return for money." The resolution called for the immediate suspension of the WRP as the British section of the ICFI, with an emergency conference of the ICFI to determine its future relationship following the WRP's 8th Congress in March 1986. A resolution of the Workers League central committee of December 22, 1985, explained that this action was required "by the fact that an objective investigation, conducted by the International Control Commission, has exposed a betrayal of Trotskyism. This betrayal was carried out under conditions in which the leaders of the WRP systematically deceived the International Committee. The exposure of this situation does not permit a 'business as usual' position. New and principled relations must be established between the WRP and the International Committee. The suspension of the WRP is the first decisive step towards establishing such relations." All the WRP delegates at the meeting, with the exception of David Hyland, who had formed an internationalist minority in support of the IC, voted against the resolution.[88]

233. The IC's suspension of the WRP was a critical and defining act. Through it, the world party reasserted its political authority and the centrality of the internationalist principles and programmatic heritage of the Trotskyist movement. It underscored that there would be no compromise on these fundamental questions and, in that way, established the conditions to clarify and overcome the crisis.

234. The suspension of the WRP created a frenzy of nationalist hostility within the SLL minority. A motion declaring the SLL's support for the actions of the IC became the key issue of contention at a special party conference from December 27, 1985 to January 3, 1986. The minority's position, based on arguments advanced by Slaughter, that the IC had no political authority, had been answered in a powerful and comprehensive letter from the Workers League Political Committee to the Central Committee of the WRP on December 11: "Unfortunately, after years of systematic miseducation under Healy, there are many comrades within the leadership of the WRP who view the International Committee with contempt, and consider the appeals of the IC for genuine collaboration and consultation as an unwarranted intrusion into the life of the British

section. References to the 'subordination of the WRP to the International Committee' evoke a hostile response from some comrades. Of course we are not dealing with the subjective weaknesses of individual members. The existence of powerful nationalist tendencies within the WRP is a political reflection of the historical development of the working class in the oldest imperialist country. Insofar as they are recognised and consciously fought these tendencies can be overcome, and the responsibility for waging this struggle falls upon the leadership of the Workers Revolutionary Party. The great danger that we now confront is that anti-internationalism is being encouraged by the leadership. The national autonomy of the Workers Revolutionary Party is being counterposed to the authority of the International Committee as the leading body of the World Party of Socialist Revolution. This is the real meaning of Slaughter's assertion, in his letter to North, that 'Internationalism consists precisely of laying down ... class lines and fighting them through.' But by what processes are these 'class lines' determined? Does it require the existence of the Fourth International? Comrade Slaughter suggests-and this is the explicit content of his entire letter-that any national organisation can rise to the level of internationalism by establishing, on its own, the 'class lines and fighting them through'."[89]

235. The letter went on to pinpoint the class origins of Slaughter's position: "Compare Comrade Slaughter's definition of internationalism ('laying down class lines and fighting them through') with that of Trotsky: 'Internationalism is no abstract principle but a theoretical and practical reflection of the character of world economy, of the world development of productive forces and the world scale of the class struggle.' Herein lies the foundation of proletarian internationalism and the necessity of its organised expression in the World Party of Socialist Revolution. No national organisation, no matter how loudly it proclaims its adherence to Marxism, can develop and maintain a revolutionary perspective except through constant contact and collaboration with international co-thinkers. Democratic centralism is an essential component of that collaboration. The statutes of the Communist International, far from being mere 'forms', were indissolubly connected with the transition from free competition capitalism to imperialism, the historical development of the proletariat and the international struggle against the social-democratic and reformist agencies of imperialism within the workers' movement. They established the forms through which the ideological and programmatic homogeneity of the revolutionary movement was to be sustained. This has been incorporated into the Statutes of the Fourth International. Those who rail against the subordination of national sections to the international movement upon which these statutes insist ignore the fact that the price of 'independence' is subordination to the pressures of the national bourgeoisie and world imperialism."[90]

236. The argument advanced by Slaughter, and his supporters in the SLL minority, that the sections of the IC shared responsibility for the WRP's betrayal and were "equally degenerate", constituted yet another attempt to create confusion and prevent the membership from taking a stand for internationalism and the political authority of the IC. Healy's alliances with various Arab bourgeois regimes, which were kept secret from the IC, were made on behalf of the WRP central committee, not the IC. The other sections did not betray their Trotskyist principles in return for cash. At the conclusion of the special conference, the SLL membership voted by a two-to-one majority to support the IC's suspension of the WRP

237. On January 26, 1986 the WRP central committee explicitly repudiated its support for the IC resolutions of October 25, 1985, which

had called for the re-registration of its members on the basis of recognising the political authority of the ICFI. A meeting of the SLL's central committee on February 1–2 declared that this repudiation was the outcome of the "persistent opposition by the majority of the WRP leadership to the fight waged by the IC to reestablish the British section on the fundamental principles of Trotskyism following the split with Healy." The central committee decided that it would hold a party congress in April stipulating that membership of the SLL required recognition of the political authority of the ICFI.

238. At the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of the WRP, held on February 8, 1986, the pro-IC minority was excluded by police. The congress, which had been preceded by the publication in *Workers Press* of a document by Michael Banda, calling for the burial of the ICFI, carried a resolution declaring that "the International Committee of the Fourth International does not represent the continuity of the Fourth International founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938." The congress resolution signified a definitive split between the WRP majority and the IC.

239. At a special conference called by the SLL in March, the majority upheld the authority of the ICFI while the minority declared its support for the Slaughter-led WRP, and quit the party the following day. The stand taken by the SLL majority established definitively that, despite the many difficulties confronted by the section from the time of its foundation—the nationalist pressures associated with Australian exceptionalism and isolation; the turn by the WRP leadership towards national opportunism; the lack of a unified international perspective to guide its work—the party's political foundations, grounded on the historic struggles waged by the ICFI in 1953 and 1963 against Pabloism, and commitment to the internationalist principles of Trotskyism, had remained firm. It was precisely these foundations that enabled the SLL majority to collaborate with its co-thinkers around the world to defend the IC and to defeat the petty-bourgeois, liquidationist tendency within its own ranks.

240. For the anti-IC tendencies, not least in the SLL, the crisis in the WRP became the pretext for a repudiation of the struggle for Marxism in the working class. Their "renunciationism" was bound up with broader social processes. It coincided with the defeat of the miners' strike, an event that shook the WRP to its foundations. As David North wrote in The Heritage We Defend: A contribution to the history of the Fourth International: "In October 1985, the pent-up resentments of the middle class exploded inside the WRP. Disillusioned and bitter, fed up with years of hard work which had produced no rewards, dissatisfied with their personal situations, anxious to make up for lost time, and simply sick and tired of all talk of revolution, the subjective rage of these middle-class forces-led by a motley crew of semi-retired university lecturers-was translated politically into liquidationism. Precisely because its source lay not only in the subjective errors of the WRP leadership, but more fundamentally in objective changes in class relations, the skepticism which swept through large sections of the party was the expression of a powerful social tendency within the Workers Revolutionary Party."[91]

241. Similar processes were underway in Australia, where the defeat of the British miners' strike also had a significant impact. The high-point of the upsurge of the working class in 1974–75 and the movement responsible for the ousting of the Fraser government in 1982–83 had passed. Strikes were proving increasingly ineffective, defeated by a collaboration between the trade union bureaucracy and the Labor government that the working class was unable to overcome, no matter how militant its struggles. Sections of the once-radicalised middle classes were shifting to the right. At the very time the SLL minority was renouncing the political authority of the ICFI as the world party of

socialist revolution, the Pabloite Socialist Workers Party which, little more than a decade before, had claimed to be the genuine continuity of the Fourth International, was openly renouncing Trotskyism. According to the SWP, "[I]f the idea of a centralised international revolutionary organisation led to tragedy in the case of the Third International, in the case of the Fourth International it became a farce." The outlook of all these tendencies was articulated by a leading CPA Stalinist, who declared that "various Australian Marxists" had begun to "come to terms with some Australian realities", and drew the conclusion that "we have to be in the actual political processes and forget about a great day which will never come." These were the social moods that found their expression in the SLL minority's denunciation of the ICFI.

242. The SLL's former national secretary, Jim Mulgrew, supported the SLL minority in the 1985–86 split. In the founding of the SLL and its first years, Mulgrew played, along with Nick Beams, a critical role. By the mid-1970s, however, he had begun adapting to the rightward movement of sections of the middle class, and by the early 1980s had gathered around himself a right-wing milieu that was deeply hostile to the principles and program of the IC. The growth of opportunism in the leadership of the WRP certainly contributed to his political degeneration, but Mulgrew had the opportunity, in the struggle of 1985–86, to take a different course. The greater the political clarity, however, the more hostile he became. Demonstrating the class basis of his political opposition, Mulgrew broke with Trotskyism in early 1986, declaring that the ICFI could "go into the rubbish bin of history". Five years later, at a public forum in 1991, he declared that Trotsky had been wrong to found the Fourth International, and later applied to join the Labor Party.

243. In the final analysis, the protracted nationalist degeneration of the WRP was an outcome of the unfavourable balance of class forces on an international scale. For many years, especially after the SWP's reunification with Pabloism in 1963 and the OCI's break with Marxism, the British Trotskyists stood virtually alone in their defence of the program and heritage of the Fourth International. It was their political stand that was responsible for the development of new sections of the ICFI. Tragically, however, the lack of experienced co-thinkers in other parts of the world, a consequence of the destruction of Trotskyist cadres by Pabloism, took a heavy toll. Under these difficult objective conditions, Healy came to view the development of the party in Britain as the key to the growth of the ICFI. As The Historical & International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party noted: "Thus, over time, the forms and habits of work assumed an increasingly nationalistic coloration. What was, in fact, a temporary relation of political forces—one which imparted to the work in Britain an overwhelming weight within the International Committee—was apotheosized into an increasingly nationalistic conception of the relationship between the SLL/WRP and the Fourth International." The WRP became increasingly indifferent to the political experiences and problems of other sections, viewing the ICFI as "little more than an adjunct to its own British-based organization."[92]

244. The collapse of the WRP was ultimately rooted in the contradiction between an increasingly entrenched nationalist approach, and the objective economic, social and political processes associated with the globalisation of production. It was part of a broader crisis affecting all the national-based parties and organisations in the workers' movement—the Stalinist and social democratic parties as well as the trade unions.

245. At the same time: "The opposition of the Workers League to the national opportunism of the WRP was in theoretical alignment with social and economic processes that were already in an advanced stage of development, and which were about to blow apart the existing structures

and relations of world politics. To the extent that large sections of the international cadre had been drawn to the ICFI in the 1960s and early 1970s on the basis of the British Trotskyists' defence of the internationalist perspective of Permanent Revolution, the criticisms advanced by the Workers League, once they became widely known in the international movement, found overwhelming support. It was this that accounted for the relatively rapid political realignment that took place within the International Committee in the autumn of 1985. It established a new basis for the work of the international movement. The subsequent development of the ICFI was the conscious response of the Marxist vanguard to the new economic and political situation. The reorientation of the movement was based on a systematic struggle against all forms of nationalism, a reorientation that was inextricably tied to the development of an international perspective. All opportunism is ultimately rooted in definite forms of national adaptation. In the struggle against other tendencies and within its own organization, the ICFI reasserted the conceptions developed in their highest form by Trotsky-the primacy of the global developments of world capitalism over the particular manifestations in any given nation-state, and the primacy of international strategy over national tactics."[93]

# The aftermath of the 1985-86 split

246. The defeat of the national opportunists in the split of 1985–86 opened a new era in the history of the Fourth International. The victory of the internationalists signified a shift in the international balance of forces in the post-war struggle against opportunism. In the final analysis, Pabloism rested upon the domination of Stalinism over the workers' movement. But as the struggle within the IC was underway, the Stalinist apparatus was descending into a state of terminal decline, culminating in the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991—an event that changed the entire structure of world politics.

247. The split in the International Committee was the most comprehensive in the history of the Fourth International. The statements, documents and analyses published by the IC, most notably *How the WRP Betrayed Trotskyism 1973–1985*, *The ICFI Defends Trotskyism 1982–1986*, and *The Heritage We Defend* by David North, laid the foundation for the training and education of the international cadre, and for overcoming the impact of the degeneration of the WRP in all the sections of the IC.

248. In the Australian section, the split revealed that the principled foundations of the SLL had remained intact. Throughout its history, the party had schooled its membership in the lessons of the ICFI's struggles against Pabloism. The continued emphasis on the historical experiences of the Trotskyist movement was a critical antidote to the WRP's opportunism, despite the impact of the WRP leadership's attacks on the SLL and its political line. It was this that enabled the party to defeat the liquidationist tendency that emerged within its own ranks.

249. The victory of the internationalists in the IC and in the SLL established the basis for the resolution of longstanding political problems that had not only plagued the SLL, but had dominated the Australian labor movement from its earliest days. The new IC leadership, led by David North and the Workers League, established an unprecedented level of international collaboration, creating the conditions for the sections to overcome the powerful pressures generated by the national milieu within

each country.

250. The IC statement of October 1986 on the political line of the SLL contained critical insights for the development of the work of the Australian section. Failing to develop a unified international analysis and perspective, based on a thoroughgoing review of the experiences of the working class, the WRP, from the early 1970s onwards, promoted instead the concept of the "undefeated nature of the working class." This concept, as the IC statement explained, constituted a "repudiation of the most fundamental scientific conceptions and principles upon which Trotskyism is based." "In the course of the 1970s," it continued, "the WRP sought to make 'the undefeated nature of the working class'-not the crisis of revolutionary leadership—the central axis of work of the International Committee. What was, in reality, an essentially conjunctural assessment of the workers' movement, was made an abstract (i.e., devoid of historical content) universal principle from which the perspective of the ICFI in every country was to be derived. This is absolutely contrary to the method of Marxism. A correct definition of the 'nature' of the working class can only be derived from the historical analysis of its unique position in the capitalist mode of production, which establishes that the modern proletariat is, as the bearer of new and higher social relations of production, the gravedigger of bourgeois society, i.e., that it is a revolutionary class. It is the recognition of this 'nature' of the proletariat that provides the Marxist party, regardless of the ebbs and flows of the class struggle, its central axis. This axis cannot be replaced with the evaluation of the immediate circumstances which confront the proletariat. Whether the proletariat is 'defeated' or 'undefeated' may affect the tactics of the revolutionary party: it cannot alter its fundamental principles and its central historical prognosis."

251. The statement explained that this concept had been at the centre of the opportunist twists and turns of Healy and the WRP leadership. "For Healy ... the 'undefeated nature of the working class' became a substitute for all historical analysis and served as the point of departure for an opportunist redefinition of the tasks of the International Committee. Each and every experience of the working class was taken as a fresh verification of the 'undefeated nature of the working class.' The successful replacement of strikers by scabs, the installation of a military junta, the expulsion of the PLO from Lebanon, the Iran-Iraq war, the election of Thatcher, etc.: the essence of all these developments was the same 'undefeated nature of the working class.' The resolution of the crisis of revolutionary leadership was divested of its real Trotskyist content, and was reinterpreted to mean that the sections of the ICFI had to do nothing more than express the constantly changing forms in which the 'undefeated nature' was spontaneously manifesting itself. In other words, the line of the ICFI sections was to be based on purely conjunctural considerations worked out through the medium of 'dialectical' cognition. The test of the political line was utterly opportunist: the magnitude of the practical results it produced. What concerned Healy was not the correspondence of the political line to the historical interests of the working class, but rather the realization of immediate organizational gains. Thus, emphasis was placed not upon the winning of the vanguard of the working class to Trotskyism, but rather on acquiring, without the necessary preparatory work, a mass paper membership."

252. The statement continued: "Inasmuch as this method glorified empirical adaptation to conjunctural conditions, the work of sections was deprived of any stabilizing historical axis. In some sections, such as the Workers League and the Revolutionary Communist League, the existence of definite programmatic traditions derived from the long history of Trotskyism in the United States and Sri Lanka, provided a counter-weight to the unrestrained tactical opportunism advocated by the WRP. The

comrades of the SLL, through no fault of their own, had to work out their perspectives without the benefit of firmly established traditions, and it is this—under conditions of systematic sabotage by the WRP—that has made the development of a clear political line toward the vexed problem of Social Democracy so difficult."

253. The consequences of the opportunist conceptions advanced by the WRP gave rise to a tendency, within the Australian section, to belittle the struggle for socialist consciousness in the working class and to replace the ongoing assimilation and review of the strategic experiences of the party and the working class with an emphasis on activism. Under conditions where work on international perspectives had been abandoned by the WRP from the early 1970s onwards, this led to a tendency to separate the immediate tactics developed by the party from its overall strategy, i.e., the independent mobilisation of the working class on the perspective of world socialist revolution.

254. In many ways, in the absence of an ongoing collaboration with the international movement, the difficulties of the SLL in relation to the "vexed problem of Social Democracy" replicated those that had faced the Communist Party in its first years, and the early Trotskyist movement: a tendency, on the one hand, towards syndicalism—to adapt to the spontaneous militancy of the working class by simply raising more militant slogans and ignoring the necessity for a political struggle—and on the other, during periods of relative quiescence in the working class, towards parliamentarism—directing political demands to the parliamentary "lefts", rather than seeking to develop the political struggle of the working class around demands aimed at exposing the Laborites and their left-talking centrist apologists, and assisting the working class to break from them.

255. In January 1987, the SLL central committee advanced a new political line aimed at the political education of the working class through the exposure of the Labor 'lefts". The SLL raised the demand, directed toward the most advanced sections of the working class, for the convening of an emergency Labor Party conference to carry out the sacking of the Hawke-Keating right wing from the Labor Party and to demand that the "lefts" form a workers' government to carry out socialist policies. The aim of this tactic was to provide a principled platform from which to fight for the mobilisation of the working class in a struggle against the attacks of the Labor government. It provided a bridge between the ongoing struggles of the working class and the establishment of socialism and workers' power. Against any conception that the formation of a government by the Labor "lefts" represented some sort of necessary stage on the way to a workers' government and socialism, the tactic sought to provide a means to fight for the historic tasks of the working class within the given political situation.

256. As Trotsky had explained in the Transitional Program, the demand systematically addressed to the existing leaderships of the working class that they "break with the bourgeoisie" and "enter upon the road of struggle" for a workers' government was an "extremely important weapon" for exposing their treacherous character. And so it proved in this case. Advanced under conditions of mounting opposition in the working class to the pro-market policies of the Labor government, the SLL's policies won support and a new level of respect from important layers of workers and youth. The publication of the central committee statement, however, drew hysterical opposition from the "lefts" because it exposed their demagogic claims of "opposition" to the government as nothing but a cover for a refusal to fight the Hawke-Keating right wing.

To be continued

### Footnotes:

- 85. Fourth International, vol. 13, no. 1, 1986, p. 109. [back]
- 86. Ibid., p. 114. [back]
- 87. Fourth International, vol. 13. no. 2, 1986, pp. 50–51. [back]
- 88. Ibid., pp. 103-104. [back]
- 89. Ibid., p. 77. [back]
- 90. Ibid., pp. 77-78. [back]
- 91. The Heritage We Defend, op. cit., pp. 14–15. [back]
- 92. The Historical & International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party, op. cit., p. 124. [back]
- 93. Ibid., p. 125–126. [back]



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