



VICTORIA UNIVERSITY
MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

The End of an Affair: Intellectuals and the Communist Party 1956 - 1959

This is the Published version of the following publication

McLaren, John (2003) *The End of an Affair: Intellectuals and the Communist Party 1956 - 1959*. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 27 (78). pp. 71-82. ISSN 1444-3058

The publisher's official version can be found at
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14443050309387872>
Note that access to this version may require subscription.

Downloaded from VU Research Repository <https://vuir.vu.edu.au/436/>

The End of an Affair: intellectuals and the Communist Party, 1956-59

Here—like a fighter plane, his petrol spent, But
straining dauntless towards a friendly drome

Whilst all his victories yet blaze in air—
Here at the dawn-lit first perimeter
Of Communism Uncle Joe reached home.

John Manifold, Overland 7, 1956.

At least as far back as the seventeenth century, left-wing politics have been characterised by bitter internecine disputation and disruption. Stuart Macintyre has shown how the founding meeting of the Communist Party of Australia in April 1920 was itself part of a squabble going on between elements of the Australian Socialist Party and associates of the NSW Labor College. The Party supposedly formed at this meeting had split into two by December in the same year.¹

Earlier splits in the Communist Party, in Australia and Europe, were usually the consequence of either an intra-Party power struggle or personal disillusion with the Party.² The resignations and expulsions that occurred in the Australian Party between 1956 and 1958 however differed from these earlier splits. The people who left the Party at this time were not seeking power within it, and were not disillusioned with communism as such. Indeed in many cases they renewed their commitment to its aims. Rather, they were responding to international events by attempting to redefine the nature of the Communist movement.

At the beginning of 1956, Nikita Khrushchev, in a speech delivered to a closed session of the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, denounced the crimes of Stalin and revealed the truth of the regime he now headed. At first Party officials, in Australia and elsewhere, denied the existence of the speech. When the text was published in the United States, Party officials, they denounced it as a fabrication of the Americans. Then they explained the crimes as errors brought about by the cult of the individual. But the emergence of the speech into public consciousness and the discussions of Party members destroyed for ever the claims of the Soviet Party to moral leadership of socialist and progressive forces.

The uprising in Hungary in the following October, its bitter suppression by Soviet forces, and the murder of its leader, Imre Nagy, completed the disillusion. For another thirty years, as the brief light of Khrushchev was followed by the long dreariness of Brezhnev, and the Siberian gulags continued to receive their human cargoes, the Cold War fumbled on, but it was now merely a contest of rival powers. Intellectuals and freethinkers around the world left the Party, or transferred their allegiance and hopes to Peking. In Europe, the Berlin Wall and the fence across Germany stood as symbols of evil, but in the west the leading role of Communist

Parties in the labour movement was eroded, and many struggled towards the new expressions of socialist democracy known Euro-Communism.

In Australia, in July 1956, John Manifold still celebrated the victories of Communism in his 'Red Rosary', published in the literary journal Overland. Its twelve poems commemorate such heroes and events as Bolivar liberating Haiti in 1817, the successive uprisings of the Parisians, the miners' revolt at the Eureka Stockade, victory over fascism in Europe, and Easter Week in Dublin, 1916. The sequence revolves around the seventh poem, 'Death of Stalin', which portrays Stalin as author of victory in peace and war, uniting in himself the revolutionary history of humankind and the times and places of the vast realm whose peoples had built the first communist society. The splendour of his penultimate line thuds into the false homeliness of the last. The contrast ironically and unwittingly foreshadows the gap that was to open between the vast hopes that had been placed on Stalin and the truth emerging about the real nature of his tyranny and the state that made it possible. By 1967, Overland was publishing Dorothy Hewett's 'Hidden Journey', where the poet tries to come to terms with the deception that had been practised on her, and her wilful blindness that saw but would not see:

In 1952, in the year of Stalin, I came to Russia,
And saw the flowers growing out of the blinkers on my eyes,
Saw the statues in the squares with their heads blown off,
The stumps in their thick stone necks stuffed up with roses.³

This essay examines the personal journeys made by many Australian intellectuals between these two points, and to show the price they paid for their commitment and its loss.

I

Many activists in the Communist Party of Australia have since explained how they accepted the claims of Party officials that Khrushchev's so-called secret speech was a fabrication. Their acceptance is easier to understand when we reflect that the only official report they would have seen was the official report Khrushchev delivered at the Congress. This was translated and published by the Foreign Languages Press in Moscow, and follows the traditional pattern of Party statements, making great claims of progress in all fields, noting a few failings of bureaucracy or zeal, and calling on the membership to renew their efforts to eliminate these faults and continue the great work of building socialism.¹² It specifically notes some failures in Khrushchev's own field of agriculture, but it also praises the success of the Party in uniting behind the leadership after Stalin's death. Only the most determined sceptic might have noticed that Lenin rather than Stalin is praised as the fount of all wisdom, but this could be easily dismissed as the tactic of a new leader establishing his own authority within the Party tradition. Even the condemnation of Beria fits this pattern:

The imperialists had placed special hopes in their old agent, Beria, who had perfidiously wound his way into leading posts in the Party and the Government. The Central Committee resolutely put an end to the criminal conspiracy of that dangerous enemy and his accomplices. (pp. 118-19.)

Even the explanation that Beria and his associates were a “gang of contemptible traitors” who had “fabricated false evidence against honest leading workers and rank and file Soviet citizens” pp. 119, 112) would not shock members accustomed to show trials where hitherto admired leaders were suddenly found guilty of betraying the Party.

The so-called secret speech is however utterly convincing, and constitutes a thorough repudiation of all the Party faithful had been expected to believe for so many years.¹³ Khrushchev attacks not simply leading members of the Party, but Stalin himself: the Great Helmsman, saviour of the Revolution and war hero. Using Lenin as the standard of proper Party procedures and conduct, Khrushchev argues that Stalin, after initially giving a positive lead during the revolution, the Civil War and the early fight for socialism, has betrayed everything Marx, Lenin and the Party stood for. He indicts Stalin for fabricating evidence against innocent leaders in the series of show trials that began in the thirties, for leaving the nation unprepared for the German invasion and deserting its military during the war, for deporting whole peoples without any justification, and for concentrating all power in his own hands at the cost of the party and its collective leadership. In short, he has been responsible for “grave perversions of party principles, of party democracy, of revolutionary legality.” The Central committee, he explains, has resolved to lay the facts before the Congress because “not all ... fully realize fully the political consequences resulting from the cult of the individual, and ... the accumulation of immense and limitless power in the hands of one person ...”(pp. 7-8)

This was a challenge to Party leadership everywhere, but those who followed the Party line saw the issue as a question of loyalty and discipline. John Sedy accepted that the reports of the “secret speech” were substantially accurate, but believed that, to prevent a wholesale exodus from the Party, the speech should not be circulated among members.¹⁴ His criticism of the Party leadership was that it acted too precipitately against dissidents when the contents of the speech did become known. He did however harbour doubts about the simplistic attitude of Ralph Gibson that “whatever assists forward the struggle for socialism is good and whatever hinders it is bad.” Gibson himself claimed to respect those who left the Party over the Hungarian issue (although Sedy doubts this), and to have followed too rigid a line towards independent thinkers, but on the whole he accepted the outcome of events in Hungary, claiming that the Kadar government was the most popular the country had ever had.¹⁵ Eric Aarons, despite some doubts, accepted the necessity of getting on with the job of Party work.¹⁶ Keith McEwen felt it ushered in a period of bitterness that developed his doubts about the Party leadership, but for the time he too, like Aarons, remained within the Party.¹⁷ These accounts all emphasise the strategic effects on the Australian Party of Khrushchev’s speech and the Soviet invasion of Hungary, although McEwen

also notes the personal costs paid by those who left: “To be outcast by the Party into a hostile environment, perhaps subjected to party reprisals and the hatred of their former comrades is seen as a terrible fate to be avoided at all costs.”¹⁸ John Senny feared general discussion would lead to a wholesale exodus from the Party¹⁹

Although this did not happen, there was a significant departure of intellectuals—Ralph Gibson estimates that one hundred members, mostly intellectuals, all left over the issue. He dismissed those who left as having lost sight of “the deep contradictions within the capitalist system that doom it to final defeat”.²⁰

Even the published accounts of those who left the Party at the time deal only cursorily with the emotional effects and the need for a radical realignment of their whole politics.²¹ Ian Turner wrote of the ideological adjustments required to bring him to the point of leaving: “to redefine one’s attitude to the world communist movement; to restate the meaning of socialism; and to assert a new relationship to the Australian radical and labour movements.”²² Audrey Blake published her 1966 letter of resignation, in which she not only explains the reasons that had led her to her decision, but also provides a generous vision of an alternative and inclusive movement for socialism.²³ It is in the personal papers and the letters they exchanged at the time that we find a much more dramatic account of the relationship between the personal and the public in their commitments to socialism and the Communist Party as the vehicle for a socialist Australia. These suggest that the split in the Communist Party, rather than being an internal affair, marked the end of any single vision of a socialist future.

The split set intellectuals against officials. Several courted expulsion by circulating Khrushchev’s speech or by setting up new forums for discussion. Sydney Central Committee member Eddie Roe explained to Dorothy Hewett that “these comrades have been with us for a long time, but now the time has come to say ‘good-bye’; our paths divide—they to move back into the ranks of the capitalist class they never really abandoned, we to go on together to fight in the great struggles that lie ahead, the struggles of the working class of Australia against monopoly, for jobs, socialism and world peace.”²⁴ Leading officials like Lance Sharkey in Sydney and Ted Hill in Melbourne believed in the necessity of a global Party united under an unquestioned leader. Their refusal to allow Party debate on Khrushchev’s conclusions, or even to acknowledge his speech, was due not only to their instinct for secrecy and control. It arose from their inability to accept his premises. Alastair Davidson suggests that these unresolved disputes led eventually to the 1962 split into separate Parties with competing allegiances to the Moscow and Peking.²⁵

Many members who resigned or were expelled at this time found that the necessity of coming to their own conclusions outside Party directions was in itself liberating. After the final break with the Party, David Martin wrote to Murray-Smith that “for the the first time we, communists, are in a majority and free to express ourselves. So there is hope and no need for discouragement.”²⁶ Ken Gott later recalled this period as intellectually one of the most stimulating of his life. “One was fighting to learn the truth, and in the process fighting one’s way out of a closed system which made it impossible to recognise truth—and which denied that objective truth existed, or was a

good thing even if it did exist.”²⁷

The truth was as painful as it was liberating, for it faced these activists with the fact that the cause they had committed their lives to contradicted the ideals that had led them to it. As Zoe O’Leary wrote, “the greatest nightmare of all was the disclosure that it had not been the enemy armies of war nor the class enemy that had been persecuted, vilified and murdered: but tried and trusted comrades.”²⁸

Jim Staples in Sydney, after reading Khrushchev’s secret speech in the weekly edition of The New York Times, wrote to the Party Executive, calling for full discussion in the Party press. In Melbourne, Gott acted similarly, without success. Staples and Brian Walsh, secretary of the Sydney University branch of the Party and a leading member of the Labor Club, a hardliner who was becoming disillusioned with the confusion between the Peace Movement and Soviet foreign policy, decided to reproduce it and circulate it among Party members. Walsh accepted the need to discuss the document, but withdrew from the project when Staples insisted on its authenticity. Staples went ahead and printed 500 copies with the assistance of his business partner, Gordon Barton, a member of the Liberal Party. A Party member did the typing, Staples paid for the paper, and the artist Rod Shaw designed the cover Ken Gott circulated the speech in Melbourne, and early in 1957 Stephen Murray-Smith joined with them in an attempt to start a debate within the party.²⁹ In July 1956 the Party did publish the response of the CPSU to ‘The Stalin Question’ as a special supplement to Tribune. This attributed the problem to “the cult of the individual”, which it hopefully condemned as an “aberration”. Meanwhile, the Executive refused to publish “misinformed or misleading material” like the statement by Staples, and promised to discuss his errors with him.³⁰ Ted Hill successfully moved at an Executive meeting that the speech not be discussed within the Party. Hill characterised the dissidents as a noisy minority who had never been genuine Marxist-Leninists—a claim Turner agreed was not entirely unfair. But Turner also held that the real motivation was to ensure that the leadership maintained its power over the Party. Their control of the Party was in reality at no time in danger, for the dissidents were at all times a minority of intellectuals who were not even organised as a faction.³¹

Hungary was the crucial factor in moving Ken Gott into opposition to the Party. Huddled over an inadequate short-wave wireless set, hoping that “real communists would turn back the Red Army,” he agonised over the fate of the Hungarian friends he had met during his time in Europe.

A crushing sense of inadequacy comes down on me, even now, when I think of Hungary and the events there late in 1956. The uprising of the youth, the intellectuals and the workers of Budapest was in the name of Communism and against the Red Army. I had friends there, like Tibor Meray the journalist and novelist, and without being told I knew which side of the barricades they were on ... Hungary had revealed Communism in its most macabre and sadistic mood—the Rajk frame-up. Later it was to be the setting for the ultimate in treachery—when Nagy was lured from the Yugoslav

Embassy with the promise of a safe conduct and was taken away and shot by the Russians.

By this time I was doing what I could to help any Hungarian Olympic team members who wanted to seek political asylum in Australia ...³²

The refusal to allow full discussion on Stalin had left the Party in poor shape to respond to events in Hungary. The most public disenchantment came from Eric Lambert, who had remained in England after the Helsinki Peace Conference. He travelled from London to Budapest to see for himself the reality of the Russian invasion, and returned disconsolate. He published his denunciation in the conservative Sydney Daily Telegraph, and was duly vilified by Party members for giving comfort to the enemy. It was even suggested that he had not actually gone to Hungary. In a letter to Murray-Smith, David Martin refuted this allegation, stating that he had met Lambert in Hungary during the uprising. However, he doubted his reliability. "as a factual observer." Martin acknowledged that there had been "bloody and ugly fighting," but denied that any of the outrages Lambert claimed had occurred. The top priority, he believed, was to preserve what remained of a socialist foundation in Hungary, and to find out how "the fascists got their chance". The former regime was partly responsible, as it had allowed industrialisation to advance too rapidly, and had violated "inner-party democracy". The first Soviet invasion had been a mistake – the workers' councils who had provided the backbone of the rising were genuine, and the revolution was not fascist. However, he justified the later military action as a response to foreign intervention that threatened Soviet interests.³³

This view was widely shared. The Melbourne University branch of the Party, apparently at Ken Gott's instigation, circulated an unsigned circular calling on the Political Committee of the Party to discuss the matter.³⁴ The branch wrote to the Political Committee of the CPA condemning the Soviet response to events in Poland and Hungary as a "mistake". "We feel," it insisted, politely but firmly, "that the CPSU may have acted incorrectly in interrupting a meeting of the central committee of the Polish United Workers' Party and attacking sections of the Polish press in Pravda, and that the Soviet government may have made a grave error when it responded to Nagy's request for Soviet military aid in the Hungarian revolt." It concluded with a request that the political or central committee discuss these matter and inform this branch of the results of the discussions. The executive responded by commencing attempts to have Gott expelled.³⁵

The editors of both Tribune in Sydney and the Guardian in Melbourne refused to publish correspondence from the dissidents. A letter to Gott on behalf of the Guardian noted that a "small but vocal group" was trying "to create freedom for factional groupings within our Party." This group had established a Socialist Forum, which Party members were instructed not to support.³⁶ The Party's response to these developments appeared as a statement published in the Melbourne Guardian reporting the expulsion of Ian Turner. The statement, from the state committee, reported an outbreak of revisionism among some Party members, and their challenge to the principles of democratic centralism. It insisted that "the Communist Party ... is based upon the utmost democracy for its members, majority decisions prevailing, all

committees and positions being elective and decisions of higher committees being binding on lower committees,” and condemned the equation of the Soviet Union and the U.S.A. as military aggressors. “The facts show, of course, that precisely because of its Socialism, the Soviet Union pursues a peace policy which accords with the interests of all humanity, and the U.S. pursues an aggressive war policy, determined by the expansionist needs of its gigantic monopolies.” It claimed that after Turner and others who had been expelled had been given every chance to put their views to the Party, “in the process of democratic discussion, those views were overwhelmingly rejected.” The Party, it reiterated, “cannot, and will not tolerate the propagation of these views [inside its ranks], nor their dissemination amongst people who are nominally Communists.”³⁷

The probable author of this statement was Ted Hill, who later, after first obtaining approval from Peking, later led his own faction out of the Party to establish the Maoist Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist).³⁸

II

Growing up in interwar Europe, the writer David Martin had been forced to choose between the right and the left, and having chosen, was able to suppress his doubts for twenty years. Now he sought comfort and guidance from Murray-Smith, who could only respond by expressing his own worries and small consolations:

When & if you are in extremis please remember that there are others in the water too; and no matter how pressing or deep one’s own problem, there is never a time when solidarity is a shrunken cicada-case of a concept. At the moment, like you, I feel I am wandering and lonely. Partly I am glad I feel like that. We all should, sometimes, & some of us should now. Then partly I feel that there are jobs worth doing yet, a hundred little jobs that we who are humanists must keep on with and on with. I am sometimes angry if I feel deserted when it is my extremity as well as others. I need help. I represent no ‘establishment’. Whether or not you want my sympathy, help or suggestions, I want yours.

Now, at “a time when the challenge to socialist humanism has never been more insidious” he exhorted Martin to carry out the duty of the intellectual and write.³⁹

Martin did this, getting on with his novels, stories, essays and newspaper columns. He even came to look at Stalin dispassionately, acknowledging his wartime achievements as well as his monstrous betrayals. But it was only many years later that he recognised his own self-deception, the willing belief that had made him complicit in the betrayals.

I bloody well knew (in my bones, and various other departments) what went on in Spain. I knew it in the Kibbutz in ‘36, reading the New Leader; I knew it in Spain, seeing something of what André Marty was up to with his execution squads, and how consistently we lied about the anarchists; I knew it from the writing of honourable

dissidents, from the behaviour of our own little Stalins here, etc etc etc etc etc. Khrushchev's revelations were not so very revelatory to me . . . And yet the official admission nearly finished me off. Why? Basically, I suppose, because the "faith" ingredient is so strong ... in me, in all human beings. I deduce from its universal strength that it must be almost a basic human instinct sort of thing ... But still, very bad and deplorable! If man cannot learn to act faithfully without "faith", then there is little collective hope for him, because in the end "faith" always leads back (or forward) to oppression. You can do the most appalling things in the name of the very noblest faith.⁴⁰

By this time, he had abandoned his faith not only in Communism, but in the faith in human perfectibility that sustains it. "Oh, hell!" he continued, "Down with the Rousseau-Christian-Libertarian-Marxist bullshit about a 'new man'." This implied a rejection of the fundamental Marxist belief that social being determines consciousness. As this belief became doctrine, it justified Stalinist tyranny by shifting the blame for any shortcomings in the economy or society from the system itself, and the opportunities it gave for bungling and tyranny, from the system itself to individuals in whom a pre-revolutionary consciousness supposedly lived on. Martin came to recognise that "That's where half the misery begins, with this back-to-the-womb yearning for a living, warm, succourant, revolutionary newness of life!" Now, he saw the longing for a new kind of humanity as a refusal of life and its basic animality. Socialism, like art or literature, he decided, depended on gazing at life steadfastly and making the best of it. He was able to reach this conclusion only after a long struggle to free himself both from the dogma that concealed the truth of experience and from the idealism that produced the dogma. After the crisis of 1956 he saw that the left needed to abandon monolithic structures and find new organisational forms that would still be militant and linked with the actual proletariat, but would also be "more moral and profoundly humanist." For the moment, however, he was tired of the struggle, and needed to recover himself in readiness for the time when he would be "in the ring again with everybody else," although knowing more clearly what the fight was really about. His personal struggle was nothing less than a fight to recover the core of his artistic being, "the most painful battle to find again the innermost springs of my creativeness."⁴¹

A year later, when Murray-Smith and Turner left the Party, Martin found himself once more invigorated for the political struggle. "I am taking the first opportunity," he wrote, "of being able to write to send you both greetings and solidarity."⁴² Ian Turner recognised in him the incurable romantic. "David is, whether he wears the label or not, a revolutionary romantic. The revolution around the corner – Cuba, Congo, Algeria, even Bolivia – the further the corner the better – is always the one that is going to work. At last Atlantis. And if not this revolution ... than all we must do is isolate the opportunities and start again." Turner recognised that this quality was common to the intellectuals who had rallied to Communism after the war. They were "optimistic pessimists," knowing, despite the dogma, that "no revolution will work, ever, because you can't change human nature. (Excuse me while I count my red

rosary.)” The excitement, the flame that kept their idealism alive, even against the rigidity of the leadership, was the revolution itself. “What follows the revolution is ashes, but the revolution is fire.” This led him to accept the “politics of permanent protest”, a position close to the one reached by Camus in The Rebel. But Turner also saw the need for “a new Marxism founded on what is; a new understanding of what is possible, based on the important moral protests – because these are the levers which will move our society; and a new alignment which ... recognises a community of protesters, from Moscow to Melbourne – they are all our people.”⁴³

In 1961 Martin published an essay on Stalin, which typically went against the grain in refusing to condemn him. Rather, he took aim at Stalin’s heirs, who were bent on vilifying him, removing his traces from history as they removed his corpse from mausoleum in Red Square, while concealing their own part in his history as well as their continuing enjoyment of his legacy. In this essay Martin explores his own memories of Stalin, back to when he read of him in a muddy dugout during the Spanish Civil War and heard his words after the Nazis invaded Russia. He remembers him both as the man who fashioned the future and as the tyrant who feared “the tempestuous, creative fire of the masses” whose energies he invoked. He remembers, too, the sycophancy that made Party members blind to his faults and oblivious to his tyranny. He concludes that Stalin “stood for the future, not the past; he helped the present to vanquish the past and at that point it vanquished him, and his memory threatens to become part of the bonfire.”⁴⁴

III

The immediate problem for those who left the Party was their relationship to their former comrades. For its part, the Party routinely accused them of peculation and sexual deviation, and instructed its members to have nothing to do with them. Some of those who had left became virulent anti-Communists, others tried to maintain friendly personal relations and to continue to work together for socialism by emphasising matters of agreement rather than of dispute. Gott insisted that the truth must be told.

Not all Party members found the events in Hungary disturbing. From Queensland, Jean Devanny sent Ian Turner a simple profession of faith:

Dear Ian ... This is for you personally ...

What nonsense is this, Ian, about your disagreeing with the policy over Hungary? Do you seriously suggest that Russia should permit the vultures of imperialism to roost on her doorstep? What is right, old chap, is what advances the cause of the international working class, what is wrong is what retard it.

You know what saved me, Ian. KNOWLEDGE OF THE CLASS STRUGGLE ...⁴⁵

The passion of Devanny’s letter shows the enormous faith she had invested in Communism and the Soviet Union. This same passion however led many members to believe that it was in fact the Soviet Union that had betrayed their faith. Eventually, over a thousand members either left of their own accord or were expelled.⁴⁶ For

many, the trauma of separation carried a heavy cost. Gott later recalled, "There was at least one suicide and several spectacular psychotic breakdowns directly attributable to these troubled times, as well as a lot of minor aberrational behaviour. (Some took to booze or scientology, others left their wives or rediscovered sex in different ways.)"⁴⁷

IV

The departure of so many was a blow to the intellectual strength of the Party, from which it never fully recovered, but it also left the departing members adrift politically and personally. As Turner recalled in a letter to his father-in-law, Itzhak Gust,

It might have been different if we (that is, the 1956-58 “revisionists”) had had an organisation. I remember being involved in a heated argument at your place soon after I was expelled ... What was I going to do? Join the Labor Party?—hard decision. I was right in joining the Labor party—there’s no way around that, unhappily. But what I didn’t yet realise was what the lack of a Marxist organisation would mean. The C.P. was out, of course; even if I hadn’t been expelled, I’d had a gut-full. I was, emotionally, totally unable to accept the attempt of the leadership to deny, to the members, the truth—or even the reality—of Khrushchev’s secret report. Bernie [Taft] tried to talk me out of that, saying we had to hasten slowly, but I had enough of the intellectual left in me to say that, if that was the truth (as I believed) we had to face it, & to analyse the consequences - including, as the final crunch, the rehabilitation of Trotsky. But the Trots were also out, because—although I came to accept a Trotskyite (or rather Deutscherite) analysis of the Soviet Union, I couldn’t accept their strategy. All that there was was a loose group of intellectuals, a handful in Melbourne & a handful in Sydney, gathered more or less around Outlook (all honour to Helen), but still much too loose to develop a new and systematic analysis. Today I think that we should have immediately founded a Socialist League. It would have been Marxist in orientation, revolutionary in perspective, and social-democratic in immediate, day-to-day practice ... I was in such a state of revulsion from my previous near-absolute certainty about what ought to be done that I was inhibited from acting by my own uncertainty.⁴⁸

His experience of the Party method of moving from abstract principles to current analysis had implanted in him a deep distrust of his ability as a theorist, and for the time he was content to take refuge in political pragmatism, in socialising and good fellowship, and in odd topics that caught his interest. Thus he consciously set himself against Lenin’s warning about Beethoven, which had always struck him as rather inhuman. He decided to escape from the tyranny of theory by a return to history and the fetishism of documents. He went back to the revolutionary movements of the nineteenth century and wrote a doctoral thesis, later a book, on industrial labour and politics in Australia from 1900 to 1921.

V

Although the Party press heaped vilified those who had deserted its ranks, the response from ordinary Party members was more mixed. An old comrade, Bernie Meyer, wrote to Murray-Smith expressing his understanding and inviting him to a

joint function to celebrate Bernie's birthday and to raise money for the Party. In response, Murray-Smith explained that he did not intend to divorce himself "from the millions of mankind struggling for socialism and a better life", but rather to work for the peace and cultural movements in an atmosphere not "stultified by increasingly bitter and dogmatic internal ideological arguments." Equally importantly, he was determined that his resignation would not affect his "relations which hundreds of comrades like yourself, which are very close and precious to me, and from which I draw strength and what knowledge of humanity I prize most."

Murray-Smith had however apparently moved well away from believing that revolution led by a vanguard party was the way to socialism, and had long since become, as he confessed to Staples, "a bourgeois constitutionalist."⁴⁹ His letter to Meyer shows the idealism and broad humanism that led to the belief that any socialist party must demonstrate the moral qualities of the society it aspires to realise.

The main things are that bitterness should not prevail, that comradeship would continue, that gossip and slanders should not circulate, that we should strive more than ever to understand and help each other.

I have found in conversation with hundreds of party members like yourself that there is not one issue on which we really disagree with each other; but when you get up top and involved in the apparatus, you know, these issues get blown up and magnified into enormities!

The Party's failures to realise its ideals in its own practice had, in his view, split it from the working class it purported to lead, but, despite everything, he remained confident in the future. "The breach is I hope in no sense unbridgeable, nor have my ideas altered from the ideas I have held for many years." He concluded by reasserting his belief in the historical inevitability of "a future socialist world of brotherhood."⁵⁰

While Bernie accepted these arguments, not all of his comrades were so understanding. One wrote, as much in anger as in sorrow, to say that of course he was distressed personally, but that, although he didn't want to preach, he wanted to say that his general imprecation to the left-wing intellectual was "For Christ's sake hang on to history." This in effect meant clinging to the Party leadership and the Party interpretation of events above all else. "Am I being trite." He wondered, "to suggest that your differences are not really those of principle but perhaps mainly of personalities? Is Ted Hill really such a bastard as a lot of you Melbournians say he is? When you say Turner has been provoked (and you also by implication) into expulsion resignation [sic] from the Party, are you not admitting that you have given away to a possible fault of your leadership in not correctly handling cadres? If this is so, is it not possible that you and Turner are adopting a disagreement in principle with the Party which places you in a position that you can no longer be members of the Party?"

The writer admits that he had taken much the same view as Murray-Smith about the Nagy execution, but after writing to a Social Democratic friend in Queensland on the subject he found himself ending not with a conclusion but a question: "Was the execution of Nagy necessary and essential to preserve the rule of Socialist forces in Hungary? You don't know the answer, neither do I, only history can

eventually tell us.” (I will add that, being partisans we must accept the stand-point of our side unless there is overwhelming evidence in rebuttal.)⁵¹

In reply, Murray-Smith explained that the rifts at the top of the Party prevented effective work at lower levels, including the cultural, and deplored the narrowness, ingrownness and bitterness that resulted. In a further letter, he explained that he thought he would join the Labor Party, where at least in working against one kind of tyranny he would not feel he “was working for another kind of society, with many marvellously good aspects, but carrying within it the seeds of another kind of tyranny.” In this spirit of co-operation he was even able to find kind words for Judah Waten, with whom he had engaged in “fascinatingly interesting discussions,” and had worked to organise a writers’ protest to the federal government about the Namatjira case. All this seemed much more important than “interminable dogmatic arguments on sterile phrases like “socialist realism”, by the side of which hagiological arguments of the mediaeval schoolmen on the subject of how many angels can stand on a pin’s head seem child’s play...” This did not mollify his correspondent, who as late as 1961 was still hoping that his lost leader would return. “Pity about you copulating with the A.L.P”, he wrote, “and not yet applying for re-admission to you know what—but still we can’t all be perfect I suppose.”⁵²

VI

The people whose lives are examined here were public intellectuals who have made significant contributions as writers and editors to the way we understand ourselves in relation to our past and to the world around us. Their eventual departure from the Communist Party highlights the strength of the ideals that had led them to it in the first place, but leaves open the question of how for so long they had been able to submit their intelligence to its inflexible and unimaginative bureaucracy. In part, their adherence was a product of their times. They grew up during the Great Depression and were young men and women during the Second World War. Most served in the military forces in the war against fascism and planned a peace that would establish free and just communities among all nations and peoples. Even after leaving the Party, they continued to seek the light on the hill that remains the elusive goal of socialists everywhere. Their time in the Communist party gave them discipline, but probably on balance diverted them from their political purpose.

Author: John McLaren is the author of Writing in Hope and Fear: postwar Australian literature as politics, and Consulting Editor of Overland and Emeritus Professor in the Faculty of Arts at Victoria University. This essay is based on work done for his book Free Radicals, a study of left-wing intellectuals in Melbourne after the second world war. This is due to be published later this year.

¹ Stuart Macintyre, The Reds: the Communist Party of Australia from Origins to Illegality, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1998, pp. 16-20, 53-54.

² The term 'Party' is used to refer to the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). Other national parties will be identified separately. The ideological conflicts within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and other national parties are discussed by Arthur Koestler, 'The God that Failed', in Bricks to Babylon, Random House, New York, 1980, pp. 145-218. Frank Hardy, in But the Dead Are Many, Bodley Head, Sydney, 1958, examines the same problems in the Australian Party. In Homage to Catalonia, Secker and Wqrburg, London, 1938, George Orwell describes the interaction between ideology and power struggles among Communists during the Spanish Civil War.

³ Dorothy Hewett, 'Hidden Journey', Overland 36, May 1967, p 5.

⁴ John Sendy, Comrades Come Rally: Recollections of an Australian Communist, Nelson, West Melbourne, 1978, pp. 100-102.

⁵ John Sendy, Ralph Gibson: An Extraordinary Communist: Melbourne: Ralph Gibson Biography Committee, 1988, pp. 122-7; Ralph Gibson, My Years in the Communist Party, International Bookshop, Melbourne, 1966, pp. 218-22.

⁶ Eric Aarons, What's Left?, Penguin Ringwood, 1993, pp. 119-21.

⁷ Keith McEwen, Once a Jolly Comrade, Jacaranda, Brisbane, 1966, p. 82-86.

⁸ McEwen, Once a Jolly Comrade, p. 118, 81.

⁹ Quoted in Sendy, Ralph Gibson, an extraordinary Communist, p. 122, from Sendy, Comrades Come Rally, p. 101.

¹⁰ Gibson, My Years in the Communist Party, 219-22.

¹¹ Stephen Murray-Smith, Indirections: a literary biography, Townsville: Foundation for Australian Literary Studies, 1981, p. 38; Ian Turner, 'My Long March', in Turner, Room for Manoeuvre, edited by Leonie Sandercock and Stephen Murray-Smith, Richmond: Drummond, 1982, pp. 140-41.; Keith McEwen, Once a Jolly Comrade, Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1966, p. 82-86.

¹² NK Khrushchov (sic), Report of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to the 20th Party Congress, Foreign Language Publishing House, Moscow, 1956.

¹³ References to Nikita S. Khrushchev, The Crimes of the Stalin Era: special report to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, closed session, February 24-25, 1956, New Leader, New York, n.d. Annotated by Boris I Nikolawsky, no translator given. The editing and notes suggest Trotskyist sympathies, but comparison with other versions suggests that the translation is reliable.

¹⁴ John Sendy, Comrades Come Rally: Recollections of an Australian Communist, Nelson, West Melbourne, 1978, pp. 100-102.

¹⁵ John Sendy, Ralph Gibson: An Extraordinary Communist: Melbourne: Ralph Gibson Biography Committee, 1988, pp. 122-7; Ralph Gibson, My Years in the Communist Party, International Bookshop, Melbourne, 1966, pp. 218-22.

¹⁶ Eric Aarons, What's Left?, Penguin Ringwood, 1993, pp. 119-21.

¹⁷ Keith McEwen, Once a Jolly Comrade, Jacaranda, Brisbane, 1966, p. 82-86.

¹⁸ McEwen, Once a Jolly Comrade, p. 118, 81.

¹⁹ Quoted in Sendy, Ralph Gibson, an extraordinary Communist, p. 122, from Sendy, Comrades Come Rally, p. 101.

²⁰ Gibson, My Years in the Communist Party, 219-22.

²¹ Stephen Murray-Smith, Indirections: a literary biography, Foundation for Australian Literary Studies, Townsville, 1981, p. 38; Ian Turner, 'My Long March', in Turner, Room for Manoeuvre, edited by Leonie Sandercock and Stephen Murray-Smith, Drummond, Richmond, Vic., 1982, pp. 140-41; Keith McEwen, Once a Jolly Comrade, Jacaranda, Brisbane, 1966, p. 82-86.

²² Turner, 'My Long March', p. 143.

²³ Audrey Blake, A Proletarian Life, Kibble Books, Malmesbury, Vic., n.d., pp. 97-101. Blake did however remain an apologist for the Soviet Union.

²⁴ Quotation from Dorothy Hewett, Wild Card: an autobiography 1923-1958, revised edition, Penguin, Ringwood, Vic., 1990. Turner's resignation, Guardian, Melbourne, 17.7.58; Murray-Smith's, Stephen

-
- Murray-Smith papers, State Library of Victoria (SLV), ms 8727, Box 6, SMS to 'Bernie', 29.7.58; Gott's, Ken Gott papers, SLV ms 13047, Box 3768/7, Gott to Helen Palmer, 30.7.58.
- ²⁵ Alastair Davidson, The Communist Party of Australia: a Short History, Stanford, California, 1969, pp. 103, 148-59.
- ²⁶ SMS ms, Box 184/1, DM to SMS, 19.8.58.
- ²⁷ Gott ms., Box 3802/4. KDG to Bill, 6.7.64.
- ²⁸ Zoe O'Leary, The Desolate Market: a biography of Eric Lambert, Edwards & Shaw, Sydney, 1974, p. 59.
- ²⁹ Gott ms, tape 823, conversation between KDG and Jim Staples, Hong Kong, 27.1.76.
- ³⁰ Gott ms, Box 3768/7, Staples to CPA, 22.6.56; statement by Staples, 2.7.56, and response from E.W. Campbell for CPA Executive; Tribune, 18.7.56.
- ³¹ SMS ms 198/4-1, Ian Turner, 'The Split in Australian Communism', undated typescript, draft of essay published in J.D.B. Miller and T.H. Rigby (eds). The Disintegrating Monolith: pluralist trends in the Communist world, Canberra: ANU, 1965, 149-164.
- ³² Gott ms, Box 3802/4, autobiographical writings, KDG to Bill, 6.7.64.
- ³³ Murray-Smith ms, 184/1, David Martin to SMS, c. 1956. In his autobiography, My Strange Friend, Pan Macmillan, Chippendale, NSW, 1991, Martin states that whether Lambert ever did go to Hungary remains a puzzle (p. 248). He had presumably forgotten his own encounter with him, which would have been merely an incident in that crowded and hazardous time.
- ³⁴ Gott ms, Box 3768/7, unsigned circular, 30.11.56. The document appears to have been typed on Gott's typewriter.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Gott ms, Box 3768/7, Duncan [Gillies] to KDG, with attachment from Charles Silver replying to Gott's arguments; 3802/4, autobiographical papers, 'The Forties';
- ³⁷ SMS ms, Box 141/1-2, clipping from Guardian, 17.7.58; IT to Editor, Tribune, denying that he or any of his associates gave any information to Melbourne Herald.
- ³⁸ Interview by JM with Cedric Ralph. Hill arranged for Ralph to travel to Beijing to ascertain the attitude of the Chinese to a possible split in Australia. He was informed that the Chinese leadership had no opinion on the desirability of a split, but would accept any decision of their Australian comrades.
- ³⁹ David Martin ms, NLA Box 6885, SMS to DM, 23.7.57
- ⁴⁰ John Morrison ms, NLA 4615/18, DM to John Morrison, 16/5/75
- ⁴¹ SMS ms 184/1, DM to SMS, 8.11.57 and 20.7.57.
- ⁴² SMS ms 184/1, DM to SMS, 19.8.58.
- ⁴³ SMS ms 196 5-1, IT to SMS, 5.1.61.
- ⁴⁴ David Martin, 'Purification', Overland 32, Dec. 1961, p. 44.
- ⁴⁵ Turner ms, Box 4, Jean Devanny to IT, n.d.
- ⁴⁶ Turner ms, Box 4-1, 'The Split in Australian Communism', undated ms.
- ⁴⁷ Gott ms, 3802/4, 'The Forties'.
- ⁴⁸ Ian Turner papers, NLA ms 6206, Box 108/6, IT to Itzhak Gust, nd, apparently after his appointment to Monash in 1964.
- ⁴⁹ Gott ms, Tape 823, conversation between Ken Gott and Jim Staples, Hong Kong, 27.1.76.
- ⁵⁰ SMS ms 6, SMS to Bernie [Meyer?], 24.7.58.
- ⁵¹ SMS ms 169/3-1, letter to SMS, 19.8.58.
- ⁵² SMS ms 169/3-1, letter to SMS, 8.6.60.