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“We All Make Mistakes”: the Communist Party of Australia and Khrushchev’s Secret Speech, 1956

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This article examines the impact of the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). Specifically it focuses on the reverberations of Khrushchev’s “secret speech” within the CPA leadership for the first six months of 1956. It argues that, in contrast to the received wisdom, the response of the leadership was characterised by confusion rather than consistency, division rather than unanimity. This had implications for CPA members as they struggled to come to terms with the line of the leadership and the authenticity or otherwise of the *New York Times* version of Khrushchev’s speech.

The words of [Khrushchev’s] speech were like bullets, and each found its place in the hearts of the veteran Communists. Tears streamed down the faces of men and women who had spent forty or more years, their whole adult lives, in the movement [...].¹

For this American communist, along with many thousands of his comrades around the world, 1956 was a turning point.² For Communist Party leaders, it presented an opportunity to review past approaches and rethink future strategies. They missed this opportunity. For rank-and-file communists, 1956 forced a re-evaluation of their faith in the communist project and their loyalty to the Party. They had to decide whether that faith and loyalty outweighed their sense of disillusionment and betrayal. For some, “we kept silence. We believed that Communism had a vitality and a moral vigour that would triumph over the brutality and intellectual dishonesty that had undermined it.”³ Many others spoke out: “I insisted that there was no future for the party unless it confronted [the] truth.”⁴ That “truth” was revealed in February 1956 when the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), Nikita Khrushchev, denounced Stalin in a “secret speech” to a closed session of delegates to the Twentieth Congress of CPSU. Khrushchev revealed to dumbstruck delegates that, instead of the wise and beneficent object of their adulation, Stalin was a bloodthirsty criminal responsible for systematic physical and psychological terror.

Within the Soviet Union, only a brief summary of the speech was published, but even the abbreviated version was a shock; it was “like the explosion of a neutron

¹ Steve Nelson, cited in Albert Fried, ed., *Communism in America: A History in Documents* (New York, 1997), pp. 394-5.

² See *The Anti-Stalin Campaign and International Communism: A Selection of Documents* (New York, 1956), for reactions from the French, Italian, British and United States communist parties.

³ Zoe O’Leary, *The Desolate Market: a Biography of Eric Lambert* (Sydney, 1974), p. 67.

⁴ Leonie Sandercock and Stephen Murray-Smith, eds, *Ian Turner: Room for Manoeuvre. Writings on History, Politics, Ideas and Play* (Melbourne, 1982), p. 143.

bomb”.⁵ Within Eastern European “satellite” countries that had been subject to Soviet dominance since the end of the Second World War, the time seemed ripe to challenge the legitimacy of Soviet rule and Stalinist structures. In both Poland and Hungary defiance was expressed openly although resolved differently: the first through compromise; the second through brutal repression. Within communist parties throughout the world the impact was profound and its effects convulsive. This article focuses on the early impact of the speech on the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) and, in doing so, challenges accepted interpretations about how the speech was received and handled by the leadership. Necessarily, therefore, Australian communists’ responses to the Soviet invasion of Hungary in November 1956 are beyond the scope of this article.

While the international literature on 1956 is becoming increasingly rich,⁶ examination on its impact on the CPA is insubstantial and uneven. Autobiographical accounts do provide insights into the personal price paid by members, but normally are deficient in detailed discussion of the actions taken by the leadership.⁷ Indeed, Gibson’s account is one of the very few autobiographical works to discuss the impact of Khrushchev’s revelations in any depth.⁸ Notwithstanding some examination of “the

⁵ Zhores A. Medvedev and Roy A. Medvedev, *The Unknown Stalin* (London, 2006), p. 98.

⁶ On the Communist Party of Great Britain, for example, see Francis Beckett, *Enemy Within: The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party* (London, 1995); British and Irish Communist Organisation, *The Cult of the Individual. (The Controversy Within British Communism 1956-58)* (Belfast, 1975); John Callaghan, *Cold War, Crisis and Conflict: The History of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1951-68* (London, 2003); Doris Lessing, *Walking in the Shade* (London, 1997); Alison Macleod, *The Death of Uncle Joe* (Suffolk, 1997); Ralph Miliband and John Saville, eds, *The Socialist Register 1976* (London, 1976), pp. 1-57 (contains three relevant chapters: John Saville, “The Twentieth Congress and the British Communist Party”; Malcolm MacEwen, “The Day the Party had to Stop”; Margot Heinemann, “1956 and the Communist Party”); Carol Thornton and Willie Thompson, “Scottish Communists, 1956-57”, *Science and Society*, Vol. 6, 1 (1967), pp. 68-93; Willie Thompson, “A Revealing Document”, *Communist History Network Newsletter*, No. 16 (Spring 2004); Willie Thompson, *The Good Old Cause: British Communism 1920-1991* (London, 1992).

⁷ See Eric Aarons, *What’s Left: Memoirs of an Australian Communist* (Ringwood, 1993), pp. 115-9; Audrey Blake, *A Proletarian Life* (Melbourne, 1984), p. 55; Len Fox, *Australians on the Left* (Sydney, 1996), pp. 164-5; Dorothy Hewett, *Wild Card: An Autobiography 1923-1958* (Penguin, 1990), p. 233; Amirah Inglis, *The Hammer and the Sickle and the Washing Up* (Melbourne, 1995), pp. 139-42; Geoff McDonald, *Australia at Stake* (Melbourne, 1977), pp. 113-20; Keith McEwan, *Once a Jolly Comrade* (Brisbane, 1966), pp. 87-91; Roger Millis, *Serpent’s Tooth: An Autobiographical Novel* (Ringwood, 1984), pp. 209-10; Bernie Taft, *Crossing the Party Line: Memoirs of Bernie Taft* (Melbourne, 1994), p. 92. Several memoirs completely bypass 1956; these include Oriel Gray, *Exit Left: Memoirs of a Scarlet Woman* (Melbourne, 1985); Itzhak Gust, *Such Was Life: A Jumping Narrative from Radom to Melbourne* (Melbourne, 2004); Audrey Johnson, *Bread and Roses* (Sydney, 1990); Stan Moran, *Reminiscences of a Rebel* (Sydney, 1979); Bernice Morris, *Between the Lines* (Melbourne, 1988); Jim Moss, *Sound of Trumpets* (Adelaide, 1985); [Fred Paterson], *Fred Paterson: A Personal History* (Brisbane, 1994); Edgar Ross, *Of Storm and Struggle: Pages from Labour History* (Sydney, 1982).

⁸ Ralph Gibson, *The Fight Goes On: A Picture of Australia and the World in Two Post-War Decades* (Melbourne, 1987), pp. 206-13. It is discussed far more briefly in his earlier *My Years in the Communist Party* (Melbourne, 1966), pp. 219-20. Except for George Peterson, none of the numerous Communist Party members from the 1950s interviewed by Ken Mansell in the early 1980s makes any reference to 1956; see Mitchell Library [henceforth ML] OH 202/1-74. For the Peterson interview (28 April 1983) — “I can say my political education began in 1956 [...]” — see ML OH 202/39.

intellectuals" who left or who were expelled,⁹ biographical writings focus on the events of 1956 primarily within the context of individuals' lives, and are necessarily framed narrowly with 1956 treated, at best, cursorily.¹⁰

The scholarly literature on the CPA and 1956 and the CPA is similarly slight and lacks sustained analysis. The refusal of the CPA to permit significant discussion of the "secret speech" is mirrored by the paucity of scholarly efforts to examine its impact on the Party. One of the standard histories of the CPA is by Alistair Davidson, but his discussion of 1956 is fleeting.¹¹ Robin Gollan's *Revolutionaries and Reformists* stops at 1955, Tom O'Lincoln's *Into the Mainstream* bypasses 1956, and it is unlikely that Macintyre's second volume of *The Reds*, which will cover the 1950s, will appear before 2008. Only W.J. Brown's highly partisan history of the Communist Party discusses the leadership's reactions in 1956.¹² There is, in short, a significant historiographical void.

The accepted view in the extant literature has been that the CPA leadership persistently suppressed debate about the content of Khrushchev's "secret speech". As Terry Irving recently commented: "Denying the authenticity of the speech, the Australian party's Stalinist leadership had resisted demands for open discussion and sharing of knowledge in the Party."¹³ According to McLaren, "[u]ntil July 1956, the Party leadership refused [...] to allow internal debate",¹⁴ while Davidson maintains that the leadership "persisted" in maintaining throughout 1956 the falsity of the reported "secret speech".¹⁵ This view permeates memoirs, biographies and historians' accounts; it is not inaccurate but tells only half the story. This article will tell the other half.

A close re-examination of 1956 reveals that the *eventual* reaction of the CPA was, indeed, to stifle discussion both of the "secret speech" and its implications for the Communist movement. However, the *initial* reaction of the leaders was less decisive. This article will argue that it is mistaken to suggest that a consistent and vigorous campaign against open discussion was maintained by the leadership from the outset. What emerges from a close reading of sources is a leadership response that was fluctuating and confused. There were fundamental contradictions between the approach being recommended by the leadership and the actions they took themselves; between what was being argued at the different levels in the organisation; and between the

⁹ John McLaren, *Free Radicals Of the Left in Postwar Melbourne* (Melbourne, 2003), pp. 133-7; Laura Mitchell, "Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' and its impact on intellectuals in the Communist Party of Australia", Honours Thesis, University of Melbourne, 2000.

¹⁰ See, for example, Pauline Armstrong, *Frank Hardy and the Making of Power Without Glory* (Melbourne, 2000), p. 164; Peter Cook, *Red Barrister: A Biography of Ted Laurie QC* (Melbourne, 1994), pp. 124-5; Carole Ferrier, *Jean Devanny: Romantic Revolutionary* (Melbourne, 1999), p. 282; Hall Greenland, *Red Hot: The Life and Times of Nick Origlass* (Sydney, 1998), p. 222; O'Leary, *The Desolate Market*, pp. 65-8; John Sendy, *Ralph Gibson: An Extraordinary Communist* (Melbourne, 1988), pp. 124, 127.

¹¹ Alistair Davidson, *The Communist Party in Australia: a Short History* (Stanford, 1969), p. 119.

¹² Robin Gollan, *Revolutionaries and Reformists: Communism and the Australian Labour Movement 1920-1955* (Canberra, 1975); Tom O'Lincoln, *Into the Mainstream: The Decline of Australian Communism* (Sydney, 1985); W.J. Brown, *The Communist Movement and Australia* (Sydney, 1986), pp. 230-6.

¹³ Terry Irving, "ASIO and the Labour History Society: An Incident in 1964", *The Hummer*, Vol. 4, 1 (Summer 2003-04), p. 31.

¹⁴ McLaren, *Free Radicals*, pp. 133-4.

¹⁵ Davidson, *The Communist Party in Australia*, p. 119. For a similar view see also Alan Barcan, *The Socialist Left In Australia: 1949-1959* (Sydney, 1960), p. 11.

approaches and attitudes of various members of the Party leadership. Up until the middle of the year, sections of the CPA leadership did attempt to engage members in discussion. But overall, the leadership response best can be characterised as directionless. The following discussion explores these contradictions prior to the release of a CPSU statement in July, which “officially” acknowledged Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin, and seeks to present an alternative view of how the CPA leadership responded to members’ concerns. After the CPSU statement, the leadership was then in a stronger position to determine its approach, which became more hardline, intolerant and consistent.¹⁶ This approach became even more entrenched once the Secretary of the Victorian branch and Central Committee Secretariat member, E.F. Hill, returned from China in late September.¹⁷ By then the historiographical consensus — as encapsulated by Irving’s remark — is applicable.

Firstly, some background to the “secret speech”. The death of Joseph Stalin in March 1953 created a power vacuum within the Soviet Union. The political manoeuvring within the USSR from then until February 1956, when Khrushchev denounced Stalin, was dominated by the struggle for power between four individuals: Malenkov, Beria, Molotov and Khrushchev. Not dissimilar from Stalin’s rise to power in the 1920s, Khrushchev’s ascendancy was assisted by others under-estimating him and marked by a rapid assertion of control. On the surface there were expressions of loyalty to the policies of Stalin but underlying this apparent continuity significant changes were occurring. During 1953, for example, Beria organised an exhibition for Central Committee members, where some of the exhibits were tapes of Stalin’s conversations with members of the Secret Police. These tapes clearly demonstrated Stalin’s role in arresting innocent Party officials and led to the freeing of the accused professors arrested as part of the “Doctor’s Plot”.¹⁸

Shifts were also occurring publicly — shifts that the CPA was either unaware of or chose to ignore, making it especially unprepared for 1956. Articles appeared in *Pravda* that argued that Marxism-Leninism, which favoured collective leadership, was incongruent with the “cult of the individual”. According to Service, “the barely disguised object of such commentary was Stalin”.¹⁹ This paralleled changes on the cultural and social front. Khrushchev slowly began a process of relaxing censorship within the USSR and gradually began encouraging the educated to begin independent thinking.²⁰ This was exemplified by the publication of Ilya Ehrenburg’s, *The Thaw*, which confronted the problems faced by administrators and intellectuals under Stalin; it reportedly caused a “sensation” amongst those who read it.²¹ Such reforms commenced soon after Stalin’s death. Although subtle rather than fundamental, they were undoubtedly harbingers of what was to unfold on that fateful evening in February 1956.

¹⁶ This interpretation was confirmed by Eric Aarons during an interview 30 May 2002, Sydney (but not in his *What’s Left*).

¹⁷ According to Inglis (*Hammer and Sickle*, p. 140), Hill “issued instructions on the correct method of handling [the revelations]”.

¹⁸ Robert Service, *A History of Twentieth Century Russia* (London, 1988), p. 332. See also Louis Rapoport, *Stalin’s War against the Jews: the Doctors’ Plot and the Soviet Solution* (New York, 1990).

¹⁹ Service, *History of Twentieth Century Russia*, p. 332.

²⁰ Alec Nove, *Stalinism and After* (London, 1975), p. 129.

²¹ Service, *History of Twentieth Century Russia*, p. 335.

Theoretically the ruling body of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the party congress was normally a ceremonial and legitimising event. The Twentieth Party Congress, however, held in Moscow in February 1956, was a watershed in the history of international communism and the Cold War.²² Khrushchev's secret speech was delivered in the middle of the night of 24-25 February to a closed session of the congress from which all fraternal delegates of foreign parties were excluded.²³ The decision to make a dramatic denunciation of Stalin's reputation was made largely by Khrushchev himself. It was opposed by the overwhelming majority of the presidium, which prevented the incorporation of the speech into Khrushchev's formal, open report. They were far more comfortable with the speech Molotov had proposed for the Congress: "Stalin the Continuer of Lenin's work".²⁴ Khrushchev confined himself to Stalin's use of terror against "loyal communists" after 1934. Stalin's "violations of socialist legality" — the term "crimes" was avoided — was restricted to abuses against the party elite. Khrushchev also spoke approvingly of Stalin's struggle against Trotskyist and Bukharinist "oppositionists" in the 1920s and during the industrialisation drive. Khrushchev did not question the one-party system, land collectivisation or the command economy. He remained committed to the structures of the Soviet state; only distortions needed to be rectified.

Despite these limitations, the secret speech was a bombshell. Khrushchev exposed the mechanism of terror and the system of arbitrary rule that had dominated the country for thirty years. He cited dozens of documents and a wealth of detail to reveal the brutal character of the terror. One document, read aloud, was the letter by Eikhe, a member of the Politburo, whose spine was broken by his interrogator. Khrushchev showed that the history of the party under Stalin consisted of criminal acts including the "suicide" of Ordzhonikidze and the assassination of Kirov; lawless mass deportations of non-Russian peoples; political errors such as the breach with Yugoslavia; incompetent leadership, demonstrated by the vulnerability of Russia to German attack in 1941; the methodical falsification of history written by Stalin himself or at his direction; and the replacement of the Leninist principle of collective leadership with the "cult of the personality". In short, Khrushchev punctured the mystical aura that surrounded Stalin. Delegates were stunned: "[s]ome rejoiced. Some wept, for they had sincerely worshipped Stalin. Some, relieved at the end of despotic terror, were alarmed: could the resultant shockwaves be controlled?"²⁵ Others were indignant.²⁶

Although selected "fraternal delegates" to the Congress, who were given the opportunity to read Khrushchev's report inside the Kremlin soon after it was delivered, were warned of its "top secret" status, it did not remain secret for long. Quite deliberately, it would seem, Khrushchev made little attempt to embargo the disclosure

²² There are innumerable accounts of the Twentieth Party Congress. For a recent, balanced analysis of the genesis, contents and impact of Khrushchev's speech, see Medvedev and Medvedev, *The Unknown Stalin*, ch. 4.

²³ See Nikita Khrushchev, "On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences: Report delivered to the 20th Congress of the CPSU on 25 February 1956" in T.H. Rigby, ed., *The Stalin Dictatorship: Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" and Other Documents* (Sydney, 1968), pp. 23-84.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Nove, *Stalinism and After*, p. 131.

²⁶ For example, one Congress delegate angrily queried what Khrushchev was doing while Stalin was committing these crimes against the Russian people; "Khrushchev snapped, 'Who said that?' Silence. 'Well', he replied, 'that is what I was doing too, keeping silent.'" Cited in Nove, *Stalinism and After*, p. 134.

of its contents. On 1 March 1956 the text of the speech was distributed to senior members of the CPSU Central Committee and a week later several thousand copies of the report in the form of a booklet with a red jacket and with its “top secret” stamp removed, was distributed to all regional, city and district committees of the CPSU throughout the Soviet Union. Khrushchev also sent copies to leaders of certain foreign communist parties.²⁷ One of those leaders was Wladyslaw Gomulka. A high-ranking member of the Communist Party of the United States, Morris Childs, who attended the Congress as a foreign delegate, was on friendly terms with Gomulka and stopped in Warsaw *en route* home. Gomulka gave him a copy of the speech. Childs was also a double-agent, working for the FBI and codenamed “Agent 58”. It was he who passed his copy to the FBI, which forwarded it to the US State Department.²⁸ Once its authenticity was confirmed it was then “leaked” to the *New York Times*, which published it in full in June 1956.²⁹

Prior to 1956, the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) had withstood several lacerating Cold War assaults. These included the bitter general coal strike in 1949, interpreted by the Chifley Labor Government as a “communist conspiracy”; the prolonged publicity and Victorian Royal Commission following the defection and “revelations” of former communist leader, Cecil Sharpley, throughout the second half of 1949; the sustained but ultimately unsuccessful attempts by the Menzies Government to ban the Communist Party through legislation and referendum (1950-51); and the heated atmosphere in 1954 surrounding the Petrov defection and the subsequent Royal Commission into Communism. Consequently, communists felt increasingly isolated, suspicious and besieged — a feeling that persisted through to the traumatic year, 1956.³⁰ As J.D. Blake commented, these conditions “led to a defensive spirit among some Party members, linked with a turning inwards for the comfort of being among like-minded people”.³¹ This response was understandable. It was not only the legal existence of the CPA under threat. Its strength in the trade unions was being eroded by the anti-communist Industrial Groups; its “front” organisations such as the Australian Peace Council, and the Party itself, were deeply penetrated by the security services, which bred intense but justified paranoia; and the CPA leadership was involved in a convulsive inner-party struggle, which saw the elevation of E.F. Hill to the Central Committee Secretariat.³² Diminished morale was echoed by falling

²⁷ Max Adereth, *The French Communist Party: A Critical History (1920 -1984): from Comintern to ‘the Colours of France’* (Manchester, 1984), p. 228; Service, *History of Twentieth Century Russia*, p. 341. E.F. Hill was certainly privy to a copy; according to Ralph Gibson, “I know the CPSU tried to get the ‘secret’ report into the hands of fraternal delegates of whom Ted Hill was one”. Correspondence, Ralph Gibson to Jack Blake, 9 October 1986, ML MSS 5971/1/13.

²⁸ John Barron, *Operation Solo: the FBI’s man in the Kremlin* (Washington, 1996), p. 54. Childs, then, was the “confidential source” to which the State Department referred in the prefatory statement to its release of the document; see *The Anti-Stalin Campaign*, p. 2.

²⁹ See *New York Times*, 5 June 1956, p. 6. There is some dispute about how the speech travelled its circuitous route to the *New York Times*. Assertions have ranged from the CIA obtaining a copy of the speech from the Israeli government to Khrushchev deliberately leaking the text to a Western correspondent through the channel of a former KGB official, Kostya Orlov. For the latter possibility, see Martin Walker, *The Cold War: A History* (Toronto, 1994), p. 105.

³⁰ For perhaps the best general account of this period, see Gollan, *Revolutionaries and Reformists*, pp. 255-84.

³¹ *Communist Review*, September 1956, p. 302.

³² See Phillip Deery, “The Sickle and the Scythe: Jack Blake and Communist Party ‘Consolidation’, 1949-56”, *Labour History*, No.80 (2001), pp. 215-23.

commitment: by the end of 1955 Party membership had dropped to fewer than six thousand. Thus, like many other Western communist parties, the CPA was neither sufficiently resilient nor confident nor free from internal conflict to confront the cataclysmic challenges emanating from the Soviet Union in 1956.

Within the CPA, initial discussion of the Twentieth Congress deflected attention from the revelations concerning Stalin. In one of the first reports on the Congress, in late February 1956, the general secretary, L.L. Sharkey, referred very briefly to the "secret speech".³³ A *Tribune* article — sub-headed "Trying to Confuse" — discussed the positive messages emerging from the Congress, one of which was the Soviet message of peace, which Sharkey introduced as a "theoretical proposition of the first importance". He referred to the term "cult of the individual", but emphasised that Khrushchev had not attributed the emergence of the cult solely to Stalin, and that the cult of the individual was presented as a party mistake, one of a number criticised at the Congress.³⁴ This was the extent of his analysis on the topic.

On 13 March 1956 a Communist Party talk was given on a Sydney radio station about the "secret speech", undoubtedly in an attempt to quell rumours about its content. Part of the transcript of the broadcast read:

After a very careful study of the reports, I have no hesitation in saying the daily press reports of this conference [Twentieth Party Congress] were complete fantasies, wishful thinking and downright distortions of the truth. Only people bent on deliberately attempting to hide the truth could draw such conclusions as these published in the daily press.³⁵

Sharkey adopted a more direct approach concerning the "capitalist lies" about Stalin one week later. He argued that because the Soviet Union was making so many great advances in so many areas, the capitalist world felt threatened. Thus, the capitalist press was concentrating on the lies about Stalin and not on other positive aspects of the Congress.³⁶ One of the "lies" Sharkey referred to was the allegation (by Politbureau member Anastas Mikoyan) that Stalin was a "tyrant". His discussion was located within an editorial titled "Khrushchev on the Need for Worker Unity" — unlikely to satisfy *Tribune* readers looking for illumination of the "cult of the individual". Only much later did a Central Committee member realise that, even at this early stage, "Sharkey knew the facts and insisted on their denial".³⁷

Although reference to the Twentieth Congress sought to divert attention from the "secret speech", one of the earliest public discussions conducted by the CPA leadership concerning Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin suggested a more open approach. A meeting of CPA functionaries was held at the New Theatre in Melbourne on 26 March 1956. There was no report of the meeting in the *Guardian*, the *Tribune*, or the *Communist Review*, but the proceedings were reported by an Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) informant within the Communist Party. While many ASIO reports, particularly dossiers compiled on individuals, must be read with considerable scepticism and often "against the grain",³⁸ there would appear to be little

³³ *Tribune*, 29 February 1956, p. 2

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ "Soviet Union and Socialism", Talk No. 10, 13 March 1956, in "Voice of the Countryside" series, CPA Radio Broadcasts — 1953-1966, ML MSS 5021 93 (155).

³⁶ *Tribune* 21 March 1956, p. 2.

³⁷ Correspondence, Ralph Gibson to Jack Blake, 9 October 1986, ML MSS 5971/1/13.

³⁸ See, for example, Fiona Capp, *Writers Defiled: Security Surveillance of Australian Authors and Intellectuals 1920-1960* (Melbourne, 1993), chs 1-2.

basis for disputing the general veracity of its straightforward reporting of communists' statements at internal Party meetings.³⁹ Sharkey addressed the meeting and focused initially on the positive messages arising from the Twentieth Congress. He then shifted his address to the attacks being made against Stalin.

It was true that prior to the Nineteenth Congress of the CPSU, there had arisen in the Soviet Union a cult of individualism. The cult had evil effects on the progress of the Soviet Union and communism in general. It caused harm in the organisation of the party as it tended to stifle criticism and veered to hero worship.⁴⁰

Sharkey stated that the cult led to a lack of collective leadership and to Stalin making decisions instead of the Central Committee. Unlike his appraisal in the Party press, his comments here specifically linked Stalin to the cult and acknowledged its negative impact. He also admitted that Stalin, at times, had been wrong; his greatest mistake was not heeding warnings in 1941 and by insisting that Germany would not invade the Soviet Union. However, Sharkey then attempted to diminish the importance of this by commenting: "we all make mistakes".⁴¹

Sharkey made no attempt to detail the accusations contained in the "secret speech", but instead warned that questions being asked by some members concerning how the cult had been allowed to develop in the CPSU were dangerous. He equated their questions with those being asked by the daily press, and emphasised that this approach would not be tolerated by the Party and would be stamped out ruthlessly. At the end of the session Sharkey refused to answer any questions from the audience. Sharkey's ambivalent attitude towards discussing the "secret speech" — acknowledging the cult and Stalin's mistakes, yet attempting to contain open debate — is suggestive of an uncertainty within the leadership over how to best present the issue to the party membership. As another ASIO report noted, CPA leaders were "striving desperately to get clarity to the rank and file on the line they should present to the public".⁴²

As we shall see, the more defiant response from rank-and-file communists occurred only after the *New York Times* published the "secret speech" in mid-1956. In NSW, such dissidents included Ken Buckley, Elaine Bryant, Miriam Dixson, Robin Gollan, Bob Gould, Peter Hamilton, Dorothy Hewett, David Martin, John Malos, Helen Palmer, George Peterson, Jim Staples, Bob Walshe, Anne and John Warren, and Edgar Waters.⁴³ That is not to say that inner doubts or dissenting opinions were not harboured

³⁹ "Notes from meeting at New Theatre, Melbourne, 26 March 1956", National Archives of Australia, ACT [henceforth NAA], A6119, Item 316.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² "New South Wales Communist Party Twentieth Congress – Stalin", 14 April 1956, NAA A6119, Item 344. This paralleled the "sharp" inner-party debates within the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) occurring at this same time. Max Adereth, *Line of March: an Historical and Critical Analysis of British Communism* (London, 1994), p. 18. Handwritten notes (by James Klugmann) attached to the Minutes of the Executive Committee Meeting of the CPGB on 12-13 May 1956, referred to the "free and hardhitting discussion" that occurred. CPGB archives, Executive Committee Minutes and Papers, 1943-1991, National Museum of Labour History, Manchester, CP/CENT/EC/03/24. See also Beckett, *Enemy Within*, p. 131; Callaghan, *Cold War, Crisis and Conflict*, p. 63.

⁴³ See Elaine Bryant, "1956: A Personal Account", *The Hummer*, Vol. 3, 10 (Winter 2003), pp. 7-13; Bob Gould, "The Communist Party in Australian Life", *Labor Review*, No. 34 (2001), pp. 20-38; Hewett, *Wild Card*, p. 249; "John Paul Malos", NAA A6122, Item 1420 and A6119, Item 2296, and "Comment by ASIO Case Officer", NAA A6122, Item 575; interview with Jim Staples, 28 May

nor questions asked in private or at branch meetings before that date (implied above by Sharkey); merely that there is almost no available evidence from that time of such open dissent.⁴⁴ This is in contrast, for example, with testimony that the British Communist Party's *Daily Worker* was being "flooded" with letters from rank-and-file members at this early stage (March 1956).⁴⁵

Over the following three weeks, from late March to mid-April, inconsistencies in approach within the leadership became more evident. Eric Aarons, a member of the Central Committee of the CPA, responded to a question on whether the political line of the Party had ever been incorrect in the *Tribune's* "Question Box" segment.⁴⁶ His response referred to several instances, such as the attitude towards the onset of the Second World War in 1939, and the stance adopted by "right opportunists" for several years prior to 1929. He outlined how both errors had been corrected, the first after only a few weeks and the second due to Sharkey, Miles and Dixon re-establishing the correct line. He also highlighted examples where wrong ideas had exerted a powerful influence on the Party. These included the proposal to dissolve the Party and join Labor in 1926; the struggle against Lang in the 1930s; and the left sectarian approach taken between 1949 and 1951 that was remedied by the Party Consolidation statement.⁴⁷ He also suggested that mistakes had been made by individuals, including himself. However, the focus must be on the attitude adopted towards these mistakes, not the mistakes themselves.⁴⁸ He outlined two possible reactions. The first was that some members, whose attachment to the Party was not strong, would use the occurrence of these mistakes as an excuse to leave, instead of staying and trying to rectify the problem. The second was taken by those whose view of the Party was so idealistic that they could never accept that the Party was incorrect and would therefore become despondent and confused when mistakes are revealed. He then explained the Party's attitude: it would adopt a "self critical approach", whereby errors were disclosed, causes identified and action taken to prevent repetition.⁴⁹

Aarons' response to this simple question, at this stage of the unfurling of the revelations about Stalin, can reasonably be interpreted as a way of guiding members with the means to understanding Khrushchev's revelations and as a reassurance that the Party would tackle the issue thoroughly. This was consistent with the Central Committee's call for "frank discussion throughout the Party as soon as the first reports

2002; Bob Walshe, "1956, that 'Secret Speech', and Reverberations in Sydney", *The Hummer*, Vol. 3, 10 (Winter 2003), pp. 1-7; interview with Anne and John Warren, 18 November 2003. The majority of these dissidents were, to use the most commonly applied and sometimes pejorative term, "intellectuals" inasmuch as they tended to have a professional more than proletarian background. Most left the Party after Hungary. See Cook, *Red Barrister*, p. 123; Davidson, *The Communist Party of Australia*, p. 119; Gibson, *My Years*, pp. 219-20.

⁴⁴ There are, however, implied suggestions of dissent at a meeting of eighty members of the City and Balmain Branches on 4 April 1956, attended, again, by an ASIO informant. See "New South Wales Meeting of Comrades from the City and Balmain Sections of the CPA", 4 April 1956, NAA A6122, Item 596.

⁴⁵ MacEwen, "The Day the Party Had to Stop" in Miliband and Saville, *Socialist Register 1976*, pp. 25-6. This is confirmed by another *Daily Worker* staff member, who estimated that 500 letters were received "about Stalin" and only fifty about other issues. Macleod, *The Death of Uncle Joe*, p. 75.

⁴⁶ *Tribune*, 27 March 1956.

⁴⁷ Deery, "The Sickle and the Scythe", pp. 215-23.

⁴⁸ *Tribune*, 27 March 1956.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

from the 20th Congress reached Australia”.⁵⁰ However, when compared with Sharkey’s approach to discussing the issue at the New Theatre, Aarons’ *Tribune* piece points to a lack co-ordination between the leadership over the “correct” line being presented to members.⁵¹

Sharkey’s ambivalence towards criticism of the Party was clearly demonstrated a few days later in *Tribune*. He supported Aarons’ discussion by highlighting the importance of listening to criticism for the further strengthening of the Party.⁵² He also stated that the repudiation of the “cult of the individual” was an important outcome of the Twentieth Congress. Sharkey informed readers that “despite his great services to communism, as a result of the Cult, Stalin began to place himself above the Party and the Central Committee”. However, in the same article, Sharkey commented that the “great liars of the millionaire press” — by claiming Stalin was a monster, Khrushchev had been in tears, and delegates at the Congress had fainted — had deliberately misrepresented the Twentieth Congress. Sharkey described these accounts as a “hell’s brew from the sewers of the gutter press”.⁵³

Sharkey’s approach to discussion of the Congress since February had not, therefore, followed one trajectory. Nor was it congruent with Aarons’ approach. Initially, unlike Aarons, he had attempted to denounce the reporting of the “secret speech” as lies, but then had conceded that Stalin had made some errors that had been antithetical to the spirit of Marxism-Leninism. At the same time he launched a vitriolic attack on the capitalist press for the “lies” they had been printing.⁵⁴ Later, Sharkey highlighted the importance of criticism and self-criticism being further developed within the Party and of members’ ideas being listened to: “This Party will be strengthened, as Lenin taught, by the merciless criticism of weaknesses and by learning from its past mistakes.”⁵⁵ Sharkey’s articles were never specific in detailing what he endorsed and what he denounced as “lies”. From his *Tribune* article readers may have assumed Stalin’s only crime was that he “placed himself above the Party and the Central Committee”. The differences between Sharkey’s and Aarons’ assessments of the Twentieth Congress highlights a lack of unanimity within the Party’s leadership in response to Khrushchev’s speech. Further differences become evident when we consider the position of Ted Hill.

In April 1956 E.F. Hill, Victorian Party secretary and Central Committee secretariat member, was still in the Soviet Union. He had attended the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU as the sole Australian delegate. According to Gibson, Moscow then regarded Hill as “their particular friend”.⁵⁶ In a *Tribune* report Hill discussed the magnificent progress of the Soviet Union and depicted an environment where people were working together to achieve great things.⁵⁷ He compared the “magnificent material” being published by Soviet papers with the “sordid rubbish that passes as news in our

⁵⁰ “Sydney Committee Resolution on Cult of the Individual” [nd], Kenneth Gott papers, Victorian State Library [henceforth VSL], MS 13047, Box 3768/7.

⁵¹ There are no CPA Central Committee or Political Committee records available from this period to ascertain the timing, frequency or agenda of inner-Party meetings to discuss the issue.

⁵² *Tribune*, 4 April 1956, p. 2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ In his memoirs, Gibson characterised Sharkey’s attempt to refute the reporting of the daily press at this time as a “rather deceptive argument”. Gibson, *The Fight Goes On*, p. 212.

⁵⁵ *Tribune*, 4 April 1956, p. 1.

⁵⁶ Letter, Gibson to Jack Blake, p. 2, 9 October 1986, ML MSS 5971/1/13.

⁵⁷ *Tribune*, 4 April 1956, p. 6.

country". Although he made an oblique reference to the spirit of criticism and self-criticism that had run through the entire Congress, he made no reference to the "secret speech" or the revelations concerning Stalin. Despite Sharkey commenting on the cult of the individual and Khrushchev's revelations regarding Stalin, Hill remained silent.⁵⁸

His exhortation of the CPSU and Soviet achievements was out of step with the discussion being held within the CPA at the time. Hill was certainly aware that the "secret speech" contained information that threatened traditional views of Stalin.⁵⁹ However, he was unwilling to share this information openly with his Australian comrades. Privately, it was a different matter. He sent a letter, most likely in April, to the Central Committee Secretariat that in turn was circulated to Central Committee members. The letter, which accompanied a copy of Khrushchev's speech, stated that "this version of the Khrushchev report was ninety-nine percent correct but that there was no need to take much notice of the report because it was expected that the Molotov-Malenkov group would soon oust Khrushchev from the leadership".⁶⁰ Eric Aarons was one who did not concur, for he *did* "take much notice" of Khrushchev's denunciation and sought a broader and more systematic analysis.

In May 1956, in an article for the *Communist Review*, Aarons argued that the Twentieth Congress had highlighted weaknesses in the ideological work of the Communist movement; this necessitated discussion of its significance for the CPA.⁶¹ He attempted to link the messages from the Congress to Australian conditions by identifying a tendency within the Party for dogmatic thinking and an over-zealous application of rules without consideration of some of the broader issues. He suggested that a proper study of the cult meant that its impact must be recognised within an Australian context. He illustrated this by stating that if a particular leader were considered to be a "fount of wisdom", then his comments on issues would become the solution. But this absolved the need for others to think.⁶² Considering the articles and comments made up until this point by Hill and Sharkey, Aarons' comments reflected a more critical appraisal of the impact of the cult.

Aarons also gave a series of lectures on the decisions of the Twentieth Congress, which were held at the CPA headquarters at 40 Market Street in Sydney. If the detailed notes taken from these lectures by an ASIO field officer are reliable, it would appear that Aarons was again relatively candid regarding the impact of the cult and was specific in linking Stalin to the cult and its development.⁶³ He attempted to answer some members' concerns by explaining how the "great man theory" had meant that no one could criticise Stalin because it would be taken as a personal affront. Aarons explicitly referred to Stalin's abuses: "His terrible misuse of power is indicated by the treatment of the Polish Secretary of the Party [...]" He then explained how Gomulka had been framed — there being no proof of accusations — and jailed until after Stalin's death. He also referred to the "monstrous forms" of justice that had been perpetrated against comrades within the Party. Moreover, Aarons did not steer clear of criticising Soviet policy. The incorrectness of Stalin's theory, he stated, regarding the

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Undated typed document, J.D. Blake papers, ML MSS 5971/1/10, Box 1/3, folder titled "Consolidation etc".

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Eric Aarons, "The Congress and Ideological Work", *Communist Review*, May 1956, pp. 146-50.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ "Final lecture on 20th Congress of C.P.S.U.", 11 May 1956, NAA, A6119, Item 331.

intensification of class struggle had resulted in the Soviet Union pursuing approaches that had “retarded public education”. He discussed the external factors that had intensified the arbitrary power of Stalin which made it impossible to expose the cult short of civil war. Unlike Sharkey’s meetings to date, after Aarons’ lectures there was extended discussion in which members were “reluctant to accept as gospel any propositions from the 20th Congress or from any of the current lecturers without searching, critical discussion and questioning”.⁶⁴ While Aarons was one CPA leader who was prepared to address the membership and allow time for questions and debate, often he lacked answers for all the questions and, in some cases, accusations.⁶⁵ Significantly Aarons’ contributions to the “secret speech” debate, via the *Communist Review* and his lectures, were far less vacillating in the months following the Congress than those of Sharkey.

Yet, at this moment — in late May — Sharkey chose to be either less disingenuous or more pragmatic. By now, members of Political Committee had access to the “secret speech”, thanks to Hill. According to J.D. Blake:

One copy of the speech was circulated to each member of the Political Committee in turn with instructions that it was to be read in the Party headquarters, initialised by each member and then handed in.⁶⁶

Sharkey wrote that that the liquidation of the cult was an important result of the Twentieth Congress.⁶⁷ This contrasted with his previous efforts to emphasise the positive messages of the Congress prior to referring to Stalin. Now, he stated, the cult had led to “arbitrary, one-sided and incorrect decisions”, and that Stalin had made “grievous errors”.⁶⁸ He also connected the cult to Australia, where there had been an “unthinking acceptance of views of Party leaders and a timidity in putting forward differing views”. He concluded by asserting that the destruction of the cult was a great service to socialism. Arguably, this represented an attempt to circumvent political damage within the Party by offering, in effect, a partial *mea culpa*: acknowledging the cult of the individual and recognising the need for corrective self-criticism.

On 5 June 1956 the *New York Times* printed a full transcript of Khrushchev’s “secret speech”.⁶⁹ *Tribune* responded with a small, page one article, “Still More Speculation About Stalin”, which questioned the authenticity of the speech.⁷⁰ Soon after, a meeting was held at the New Theatre in Melbourne apparently in response to members’ concerns about its contents. There is no record of this meeting, but Bruce Armstrong, a Party member, attended.⁷¹ Key leaders of the Victorian branch Executive were present including Ralph Gibson, the main spokesperson. An especially outspoken member of the Victorian branch, Stephen Murray-Smith,⁷² stood up, waved a copy of the report in

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Simon Max and Bernie Rosen made extended contributions to the robust debate. *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Undated typed document, J.D. Blake papers, ML MSS 5971/1/10 Box 1/3. Amirah Inglis also recalled that Hill wrote to the Party leadership from Moscow, warning them of the allegations that had been made about Stalin. Inglis, *The Hammer and the Sickle*, p. 141

⁶⁷ *Tribune*, 30 May, 1956, p. 16.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 16.

⁶⁹ *New York Times*, 5 June 1956, p. 6.

⁷⁰ *Tribune*, 13 June 1956, p. 1.

⁷¹ Interview with Bruce Armstrong, 25 April 2001, Melbourne.

⁷² Murray-Smith resigned from the CPA in July 1958, immediately after his close friend, Ian Turner, was expelled. See McLaren, *Free Radicals*, pp. 136-7; Fox, *Australians on the Left*, pp. 104-5.

his hand, claimed that it was authentic and requested that Gibson speak to it. Gibson's response was, for him, unusual. He remained seated, looked at the floor and displayed no reaction: he had nothing to say.⁷³ Despite Gibson's silence, the printing of the speech marked a turning point in how the leadership would now react. Aarons recalled reading the speech whilst at a Party school in Queensland, and remembered being convinced:

I felt that it had to be true, you know. The way it was put together and the facts that it mentioned [...] It couldn't have been made up or invented by the CIA. It read true and anyone else also must have realised it was true but then the issue was, how should we respond?⁷⁴

But he also foreshadowed the approach CPA leaders would take for much of the remainder of 1956: if they were to accept the *New York Times* version as genuine they would expose themselves open to attack from "every quarter".⁷⁵ One quarter, as we shall see, was from within the ranks of the Communist Party.

The Political Committee of the CPA issued a response to the *New York Times* publication on 20 June. It stated that the revelation of the cult was a courageous act and pointed out that no capitalist government had ever revealed its own mistakes.⁷⁶ Following a similar path to Aarons and, to a lesser extent, Sharkey, the Political Committee was relatively candid in its admissions. It expressed surprise not only that Stalin had fostered the cult but also that, in the latter part of Stalin's life, contradictions existed between his practice and fundamental Marxist-Leninist principles. The Political Committee statement then outlined how the cult had affected the Party: there had been tendencies to exaggerate praise of individual party members and, although the leaders had not encouraged this, they had not fully understood the harmful significance of this practice, and so had not corrected it.⁷⁷ Additionally, the statement acknowledged that inflexibility in defending the viewpoint of the Soviet Union had led to the alienation of some members. The Political Committee emphasised that it intended to take steps to remedy this. Importantly, it called on the membership to continue discussion on the Twentieth Congress and the application of its findings to the CPA. This message was reinforced in the 4 July edition of *Tribune* where details concerning the location of abridged versions of the "secret speech" and other key speeches made at the Congress were published. Members were encouraged to purchase and read these in order to gain a full understanding of what was stated by Khrushchev and to promote thorough, informed discussions.⁷⁸ While it was prepared to make a forthright statement on the cult of the individual and encouraged members to discuss it, it refused to take that next step and admit the possibility that the capitalist press, in the form of the *New York Times*, had printed an accurate version of the speech.

Although the leadership knew that the *New York Times* report was, to use Dixon's telling phrase, "substantially correct",⁷⁹ there was considerable passionate debate between leaders and members within the Party over its authenticity. On a cold June

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Interview with Eric Aarons, 30 May 2002, Sydney.

⁷⁵ Aarons, *What's Left*, p. 116.

⁷⁶ *Tribune*, 20 June 1956, p. 2.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Tribune*, 4 July 1956, p. 10.

⁷⁹ Cited in "John Paul Malos", 3 October 1956, NAA A6119, Item 575. This was later echoed by Ted Hill; at a meeting of selected cadres, of whom Ian Turner was one, Hill stated that the document was "basically authentic". Sandercock and Murray-Smith, *Ian Turner: Room for Manoeuvre*, p. 142.

evening Jim Staples, a solicitor in the Attorney-General's Department, visited R.D. (Bob) Walshe, a schoolteacher and recently elected delegate to the New South Wales State conference from the Como branch. Staples carried a copy of the international edition of the *New York Times* dated 10 June 1956 — which he customarily bought for its coverage of world news — and asked Walshe to read it: “Jim talked to my wife Pat while I read rapidly for over an hour. When I looked up I said, ‘I reckon this is fair dinkum’. Jim was in no doubt — and we talked through until two in the morning.”⁸⁰ Thereafter, Walshe raised the issue in his Como branch, where the copy of the speech was “passed around and keenly discussed”, and at the New South Wales State Conference, where his efforts were stymied by the Party leadership.⁸¹

At a meeting of the West Sydney section of the CPA, an ASIO informant detailed a heated discussion between John Malos, a science student at Sydney University and a member of the Sydney University branch of the CPA, and Adam Ogston, a Central Committee member.⁸² Malos claimed that he had obtained a copy of the report (most likely from Staples) which he had transmitted to other members in order to initiate discussions. Ogston denied outright the veracity of the *New York Times* report and attacked Malos for disseminating it. Ogston claimed that if the question were discussed too openly it would split the Party from top to bottom, as had been the case in America and Italy. Malos and Ogston continued to argue over the authenticity of the *New York Times* publication. Malos claimed that he had a contact within the New Zealand Party who had been present at the Twentieth Congress and who had advised Malos that the *New York Times* version was accurate. Malos believed that Ogston's attitude was typical of other CPA leaders who were trying to restrict discussion as they were anxious to suppress their past errors. Ogston's attitude to discussion within the Branch differed substantially from the attitude embodied in the Political Committee statement.

Another member who believed the *New York Times* version to be authentic was Bob Gould. He vividly recalled a cadres' meeting in William Street, Sydney, chaired by Bernie Rosen, the East Sydney section secretary, when “150 of us crammed in to listen to a predictably three-hour long address” by Central Committee member, J.R. Hughes.⁸³ One rank-and-file member, Peter Hamilton, requested Hughes to confirm that the document was accurate. Hamilton knew this to be the case since the New Zealand delegate to the Twentieth Congress and the general secretary of the New Zealand Communist Party, Vic Wilcox, had stopped off in Sydney on his way home. He met with members of the CPA leadership, informing them of the accuracy of the document.⁸⁴ Wilcox had also met with a communist friend of Hamilton's providing

⁸⁰ Walshe, “1956”, pp. 2-3. When Amirah Inglis read it, she was “hit between the eyes”. Inglis, *Hammer and Sickle*, p. 139.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4. Denis Freney incorrectly asserts that Walshe had obtained copies of the secret speech from the United States Consulate. Denis Freney, *A Map of Days: Life on the Left* (Melbourne, 1991), p. 86.

⁸² “John Paul Malos”, 3 October 1956, NAA A6119, Item 575.

⁸³ The following is based on Bob Gould, “The Communist Party in Australian Life”, *Labor Review*, No. 34 (2001), pp. 20-38; <<http://members.optushome.com.au/spainter/CPA.html>> (accessed 8 December 2006).

⁸⁴ See S.W. Scott, *Rebel in a Wrong Cause* (Auckland, 1960), pp. 206-8. According to Scott, Wilcox acknowledged both the authenticity of Khrushchev's report and the United States State Department translation of his speech to Scott personally and to meetings of Party members. According to Taylor, Wilcox also “conveyed the view [to CPA leaders] of the Chinese Communist Party that too much open discussion had been allowed by the CPNZ leadership”. Kerry Taylor, “Wilcox, Victor George

him with the same information. Hamilton, however, had been sworn to secrecy. When, therefore, Hughes responded with a vitriolic attack on the *New York Times* as a purveyor of "filthy lies" about the working class and its struggles, he felt unable to react. Hughes, according to Gould, "performed like a silver-tongued Jesuit", and in a tirade that lasted over ten minutes, used the opportunity to mobilise the loyalty of the audience against critics and sceptics of the Party.

Despite the Party leadership's awareness of the content of the speech prior to its publication in the *New York Times*, once released, its attempts to paint it as a State Department forgery further alienated some members.⁸⁵ It was this denial that prompted an indignant Jim Staples to laboriously type, roneo and distribute 500 copies of the article.⁸⁶ Subsequently he composed an explosive ten-page document, "Statement on the Attitude of the Central Committee, Communist Party of Australia, to the Stalin issue",⁸⁷ which precipitated his expulsion. According to an ASIO informant, Central Committee member Hughes told E.W. Campbell that a source of weakness in the Party was that members had tended to be inward looking and intent on maintaining a defensive position.⁸⁸ It was, of course, the leadership that was "inward looking" and "defensive", not recalcitrant members.

Different approaches by the Central Committee Secretariat — the highest decision-making body within the CPA — were also evident at a cadres' meeting in mid June. Aarons recalled that Richard Dixon, the CPA general president, addressed the meeting, and spoke in such a way as to indicate the Party should have some discussion about the "Stalin issue".⁸⁹ This was congruent with recent articles published in the Party press, which encouraged discussion and even provided a list of documents members should purchase from the Pioneer Bookshop in order to inform debate.⁹⁰ According to Aarons, "[d]iscussion was proceeding critically, but quite seriously and soberly, when Lance Sharkey entered, chastised the meeting for verging on becoming anti-Soviet and effectively put an end to the proceedings".⁹¹ Aarons recalled that Sharkey's "clamping down" approach was not appreciated by Dixon.⁹² Such lack of unanimity at the leadership level lends weight to the argument that confusion, not consistency, was predominant.

The position of CPA leaders changed significantly over the five months between February and June 1956. Staples was correct to note, on 2 July 1956, that their response was one of "indecision and procrastination".⁹³ Sharkey presented a different approach to the Stalin question every couple of weeks. Initially, he dismissed the

1912-1989", entry in *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography Volume Five (1941-1960)* (Wellington, 2003).

⁸⁵ See Bryant, "1956", p. 8; Cook, *Red Barrister*, p. 122; Millis, *Serpent's Tooth*, p. 209; Walshe, "1956", p. 3.

⁸⁶ Interview with Jim Staples, 28 May 2002; J. Staples, "Khrushchev on Stalin", MSS 2398 ADD-ON 813, Box KV7903.

⁸⁷ This document is located in the Gott papers, VSL, MS 13047 Box 3768/7.

⁸⁸ "New South Wales Communist Party of Australia State Conference", 4 November 1956, NAA A6119, Item 344. See also the self-critical "Sydney Committee Resolution on Cult of Individual" [nd], Gott Papers, VSL MS 13047, Box 3768/7.

⁸⁹ Interview with Eric Aarons, 30 May 2002, Sydney.

⁹⁰ *Tribune*, 4 July, p. 10.

⁹¹ Eric Aarons, "Remember and Reflecting: 1956", *The Hummer*, Vol. 3, 10 (Winter 2003), p. 15.

⁹² Interview with Eric Aarons, 30 May 2002, Sydney.

⁹³ J. Staples, "Statement on the Attitude of the Central Committee, Communist Party of Australia, to the Stalin issue", p. 2, Gott papers, VSL, MS 13047 Box 3768/7.

denunciation of Stalin as capitalist press lies in late February, admitted there had been a breach of Marxist-Leninist theory within the CPSU leadership in March, then conceded that Stalin had been involved to some extent, but not to the extent reported by the capitalist press, in April. Such a variety of positions adopted within a short space of time suggests a leadership uncertain of the direction it should be taking, and dealing with situations as they arose in an improvised manner. The Political Committee then appeared to assume authority over the reporting on the issue with the release of its statement in late June. Its approach was to admit that the CPA had been misled by Stalin and to encourage members to discuss the issue. To this extent, it favoured a more “open” position and emphasised the importance of criticism and self-criticism. However, on another level it, too, was contradictory in that it was not prepared to acknowledge that the *New York Times*’ version of the speech was fundamentally correct. In addition, Sharkey’s refutation of Dixon’s encouragement of discussion at the cadres’ meeting further underlined the lack of leadership consensus.⁹⁴ For Gibson, the leadership had a choice between “fragmentary, confused, sectional discussions” on the one hand and, on the other, analysis that was “well informed and organised with the view to getting the clearest possible conclusions”. Gibson added: “I am afraid we chose the former.”⁹⁵

The historiographical consensus has portrayed the leadership of the Communist Party as unswervingly denying the “secret speech” had taken place and stifling all efforts to discuss its contents. This is an overly simplistic interpretation. It does not reflect the indecisiveness, confusion and disunity that marked the leadership’s response until mid-1956. Contrary to previous judgements, this article has argued that the leadership of the CPA adopted a vacillating, varied and occasionally duplicitous approach to handling the repercussions of Khrushchev’s speech. However, after the release of the CPSU statement in July and the return of Hill from China in late September,⁹⁶ the Party’s leadership adopted what has become the customary interpretation: it consistently silenced discussion, suffocated debate and began expelling the more outspoken members. Thereafter, the Communist Party struggled to free itself from its Stalinist shackles and its decline as an effective force in Australian politics accelerated.

⁹⁴ Central Committee member, J.D. Blake, also strongly opposed the suppression of debate about the “secret speech”. Blake, *Proletarian Life*, p. 55.

⁹⁵ Gibson, *The Fight Goes On*, p. 212. Staples’ interpretation of why the leadership had such difficulty accepting and dealing with this challenge was characteristically iconoclastic: the leaders then were working class people who were clever and capable, but they were poorly educated. Interview with Jim Staples, 28 May 2002.

⁹⁶ According to Jack Blake, Hill subsequently gave a “distorted version” of the Twentieth Congress and it was this version that was “endorsed by the Central Committee of our Party in November 1956”. [J.D. Blake], “Contribution pre-Congress Discussion” [nd 1964?], ML MSS 5971 ADD-ON 2087/1.