

Ken Gott: the fashioning of an activist. BY JOHN MCLAREN

During the 1940s Melbourne University Labor Club and the university branch of the Communist Party provided a training ground for many of the intellectuals who remained active on the left for the next forty years. Ken Gott, who became one of the leadership group in both, was one of the few who actually came from a working class background. After graduating, he worked at various unskilled jobs, as well as doing casual work for the Melbourne Herald and some research for trade unions, before going in 1950 to Prague, where he became head of the weekly news service of the International Union of Students. After his return to Melbourne, he followed a career as a journalist, working first for West Australian Newspapers and assisting the Communist Party press, and eventually becoming Asian Editor of Business Week and then Managing Director of Business Asia. He finished his career back in Australia working for CRA as personal assistant to Sir Maurice Mawby. He had left the Communist Party following the suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956, was active in subverting Communist efforts to manipulate the Peace Congress in 1959, and continued throughout his career to undertake research on behalf of the Labor Party. One of his most effective publications, and still germane, is Voices of Hate, a precisely documented study of the League of Rights and its methods.

At one level, Gott's career presents a chronicle of movement from hard left to secure right, yet his letters and publications reveal an underlying consistency of principle, perhaps best described as a passion for justice, a belief in liberty and an intolerance for pretension, social or intellectual. That this consistency expressed itself differently, and apparently inconsistently, at different times in his life is due to changing historical circumstances and to the change in his perception of social and political structures. Donald Sassoon has percipiently attributed the postwar successes of Communist Parties in the west to their records

✓
of wartime resistance and to the example of the Soviet Union's victorious struggle against Nazism. Their subsequent decline during the Cold War was partly due to the breakup of the anti-fascist alliance and partly to the example of the Soviet's peacetime conduct.¹ Gott's earlier political career was a precise response to these events. To interpret it solely in these terms would, however, be reductive to the point of distortion. It is of equal interest to trace how his personality, the atmosphere of Melbourne University and its Labor Club, and chance personal relationships ^{also} fashioned his political character.

influence (?)

example/
conduct
not an
event

After schooling at Melbourne High, where he gained outstanding results in his Leaving Honours (university entrance) year, Gott pursued an academically erratic course at the university, where after first year his results failed to match the abilities attributed to him by his contemporaries. He was an accomplished debater, and his friend, George Odgers, later to become known for his work as a military journalist and historian, warned him that he was in danger of becoming a mere political demagogue.² As a student, however, he was less a public figure on the left than were contemporaries like Arthur Burns, Geoff Serle or Ian Turner. His interests lay more with journalism, commentary and organisational work. He joined the Party at about the same time he left school, and served it assiduously, yet, like his immediate contemporaries at university, his education eventually separated him decisively from the class that commanded his allegiance.

Gott grew up in Brunswick, sharing the enthusiasms of his time. Although he was an enthusiastic follower of the Richmond Football Club, its ground was too distant for his parents to allow him to go there unaccompanied. So he more often watched Fitzroy at their Brunswick Street Oval, which he could get to simply by tram. Here, in the years 1934 to 1936, he saw the great Hayden Bunton, recalling later that he remembered no other player with his "quick-footed agility".

~~Pa?~~ (I needed to turn the page!)

symptomatic
Gott?

At times, he seemed like a synthesis of football and ballet. Quick, elusive, even slippery at times. I thought the secret of his success was his ability to keep out of trouble — to miss the charges and the shirt-fronts by intelligent anticipation and quick movement.

← Like the pre-war Bradman, he seemed a class apart ...

← Dyer and Bentley and Judkins and Geddes and Zeche were great; and the Coventry bros were still around Collingwood. But nobody has proved so memorable to me as Hayden Bunton.³

Thus early he formed his enthusiasm for popular Australian heroes and his admiration for excellence in performance. ^① Nevertheless, ASIO reported that he was "a brilliant type ... affected by a certain independence of thought."⁴ ^②

Are ① and ② in tension with other as 'n' box' suggests?

Although this independence led him early into the Communist Party, it frequently made his comrades uncomfortable. As a wartime student, he suffered from a certain guilt as his friends, voluntarily or otherwise, disappeared into the forces or directed labour. At the end of his first year of study, in 1941, he with most of his contemporaries went into camp at Puckapunyal with the Melbourne University Rifles.⁵ Their training commenced on the same day that Japan attacked Pearl Harbour, and many remained in the army for the war's duration. Gott, however, returned to the university. While in camp he had received word from his mother that he had obtained a first in Economics, a second in History, and a third in Geography, and he was later officially informed that he had been nominated as one of the students allowed to continue their studies. In his second year of studies he threw himself enthusiastically into politics and journalism, becoming editor of Farrago, working diligently in the Labor Club, and helping to organize students to go fruit-picking during the long vacation as their contribution to the war effort and to their own sustenance. His student

activities led him into trouble with the university, and his fruitpicking caused problems with the Party.

When at the end of 1942, Gott's academic results reflected the diversion of his energies to other areas, the Dean of Commerce, Dr. G.A. Woods, not the most inspiring of lecturers, notified Gott that his enrolment for the following year would be restricted to four subjects, rather than the six that was the normal load in the faculty. When, however, he arrived at the lectures, Woods informed him publically that he had been excluded by order of the Professorial Board, and that he had no right even to attend lectures. This decision in turn had been conveyed to the manpower authorities, making him liable to conscription for military service or civilian employment. Gott formally appealed against his exclusion, citing the contradictory advice he had been given and the lack of any opportunity to state his case. He acknowledged that his work on Farrago had distracted him from his studies, explained that he had already resigned from the editorship, and agreed to devote himself assiduously to his studies. The suspension was lifted, on condition that he convinced the Vice-Chancellor, J.D.G. Medley, that he would work conscientiously, but the restriction on his enrolment remained. Although he remained as active as ever in student politics, and continued to write for Farrago, he apparently satisfied Medley with his academic dedication. Although during this year he was declared medically unfit for enlistment in the army, he remained subject to manpower direction, and was therefore vulnerable to attempts by the university to exclude him from study.⁶

At the end of 1943 Gott had insufficient subjects to graduate in Commerce, but his results were good enough to allow him to transfer to Arts Honours. Now, however, another problem arose, for he had studied no language other than English. His friends made various attempts to enable him to study for French 1A – the traditional escape for students in this condition – but there is no record that he ever passed. He did, however, graduate with third-

class honours in Arts, with a first in the History of Economics.⁷ Apart from some necessary labouring jobs, he thereafter pursued a career as journalist and researcher.

His conflict with the Party arose from less tangible evidence and was less conclusive. In February, 1944, he received a letter from the branch secretary, Gwen Fong, saying that they had received alarming reports of his conduct in Mooroopna, where, after twice contriving to get himself dismissed by local orchardists, he was now believed to have moved into the Cricketers' Arms Hotel and to be drinking excessively. This, she complained, "this will give country people wrong impression of Communists and Labor Club members." Worse, it contradicted Party policy. "As C[ommunist]s we are in full support of the war, & of any measures we can take to further the war effort - your alleged behaviour does not seem to indicate your implementation of this policy." She went on to explain the procedures he should follow in order to keep Party support. "If conditions were bad enough to justify your measure in getting yourself sacked at 2 places, & if no steps could be taken to better conditions, & thus be able to continue working there, then we support your moves. But if this is not so, then we must condemn your actions." Her letter then places his conduct in the context of the distrust that traditional Party workers felt towards students and intellectuals who failed to uphold proper standards of morality. She points out that, as Communists, they must show the people their ability to practise what we preach. His conduct seems justification of the belief that "Left means loose!" and is a further symptom of the bad impression which the Labor Club, and Gott, as a known Communist, have throughout the past year been giving to outsiders. She complains that "Our prestige is not of the best - and your actions & those of the above I have mentioned (J.N., J.P., D.B[radley] and R.M[ortimer] are not doing anything to allay or correct it." As a Party member of long-standing, his behaviour does not seem to us to be justified."

Now, more than at any time, she argues, they should be working to gain the confidence and support of the workers, to achieve a united front, and the affiliation of the Communist Party

Without being
the main
point(s), could
this be
slightly
shortened
(and
shortened)?

with the ALP, the implementation of which she foresees as one of the most momentous events in the history of the Australian labour movement.⁸

This complaint caused great hilarity among Gott's friends, as well as some curiosity about where it might have originated. The work of fruit-picking was certainly seen as important for the war effort, as Ray Marginson was to note when he stood for election to the Students' Representative Council. Although it was in many respects an extension of student life, it also provided a welcome break from study, with time for swimming, walking and cycling. Some were encouraged by the thought of other activities. One anonymous correspondent noted that Rex Mortimer had been cheered by the prospects of 'black velvet'. Gott had more lofty ambitions. The previous summer he had written to his friend Nancy Fletcher, that "This is almost the perfect life; these few weeks will probably endear Shepparton to me for the rest of my life. ... The town is small without being too small; the surrounding country is delightful for walks - or cycling; the river provides excellent swimming." He noted that the town offered plenty to anyone interested in politics - growers squealing about labour shortage, ultimatums from canneries, union protests, press statements and counterstatements and a host of people with interesting tales to tell. But his political work prevented him taking literary advantage of the opportunities. The sheer mass of Party work took enormous amounts of time and correspondence. Members had taken a duplicator with them, and were able to procure enough paper to produce a local issue of the Labor Club magazine "Shop", to which Gott contributed a scandal page. He determined however that in the future he would spend much less time on this writing and more on agit-prop work. His aim was to bring party policy before the entire population of Shepparton, to letter-box every home in the town."⁹

will think
self-evident
to most
readers?

The Party, or the Labor Club, was also active in promoting cultural life for the student pickers. A musical evening at Canberra House attracted sixty people, prompting the comment

[Handwritten signature]

that "Classical music is a need of a great number of students here and the L.C. in satisfying that need has done a lot to improve its prestige." He explained that it was the only university club active in the town,, although the Student Christian Movement intended to hold meetings soon. The Labor Club co-operated with them as much as possible, giving them a section of their own in "Shop" and use of the duplicator.

Life was not however all politics and culture. In the same letter Gott describes for Nancy a Saturday afternoon binge, with Dorothy Painter, Alan McBriar, Alan Kellock, Beth Noye and Dorothy Jordan:

...it was a lovely afternoon; time has rarely passed so pleasantly. We had about half-a-dozen each, which was just sufficient to give me that lazy contented feeling without any of the grotesque ideas and plans which infest a mind disordered by too much grog. I'm inclined to think the best way is to drink long and slowly and so avoid the stage of singing, shouting and other forms of public irresponsibility.

But their drinking was limited by early closing, and, after a futile attempt to get a hotel meal in Shepparton, they crossed the river to Mooroopna, where bottles were available at all hours. This gave them a view of the other side of small town life.

Mac [Whyte] and I walked into the Royal Mail, the most evil of the 3 pubs. there about 8.30.. Unsqueamish tho' I am at the sight of degradation and even tho' I have always had a certain fascination in seamy joints, the scene in the Royal Mail upset me. Everyone was drunk in the ill lit room, several appeared to be half-wits, the prostitute proprietress was just about to go to bed with a client. We got our 4 bottles of beer and left.

Later vacation stints in the bush were less happy. The great expectations for Party work, organizing among workers and students, were disappointed. Rather, fruitpicking involved hard labour, poor conditions and boredom, with the ever-present difficulties of

obtaining sufficient tobacco. This reduced his zeal, and in combination with a decline in the numbers of fellow students working as pickers, probably led to the events that prompted Gwen Fong's complaint.

Gott's correspondents assured him that this complaint was caused more by the secretary's anxiety than any real concern. One, describing his own difficulties chairing the meeting, included a satire that illuminates the contemporary attitudes to women.

Here's to our Secretary Fong

Her breasts I cannot feel, sir.

But it seems as if

They're underneath

A plate of half-inch steel, sir ---¹⁰

During discussion at the meeting, most members seem to have dismissed the whole affair as trivial. Bernie Rechter commented that he would have behaved in exactly the same way, except that he needed the cash. Nevertheless, Gott took it seriously enough to lodge a full explanation, in which he commended the branch for its zeal and assured them that if the charges had been accurate he would have upheld its action. However, he assures them that his conduct had been misrepresented. He had contrived to be sacked by one orchardist, as conditions were intolerable. He had left employment by the second only after discharging his obligations and in order to start work at the cannery, where a vacancy had arisen. He admits that he is not moved solely by ideological zeal, but needs the money, explaining that his "poverty makes it imperative that I further the world anti-fascist struggle by lifting 32,000 cans per day in a Mooroopna factory." Finally, he remarks that the remark about "organizing the students in this area is laughable. There are six left at Pullars and one more at this pub", and generously suggests that "Should the matter require further clarification you could ring the pub, before ten to eight in the morning."¹¹

you realise
he's still
alive + well
(in mess)?

intended
any irony
in this?

ful?

Despite his delight in grog and bawdy, Gott seems to have been quite a proper young man. Ian Turner has written that, although the student Communists "worked and struggled together, certainly, but ... also talked and studied and ate and drank and slept and lived together", and "weren't puritanical", they were "mostly monogamous". There was therefore probably no irony in Gott's assurance to the branch that he was as anxious as any member to dispel the idea that "left means loose". In fact his dedication to the cause led his friend George Odgers to write from a camp somewhere in the north of Australia to warn him against losing touch with wider life through his "liking for Labour clubs and societies & newspaper polemics," and advised him to become a more integrated personality by tempering his pursuit of economic truth and allowing himself some time for the pursuit women. But then, Odgers was at this time, along with some 20,000 of his fellow soldiers, cut off from women to such an extent that he assured Gott that "any female coming within 200 yards would be in grave physical danger."¹²

Despite their belief in the Party, Gott and his contemporaries were by no means unquestioning zealots. He probably shared many of the attitudes of his friend Noel Ebbels, later to become one of the leading ideologues at the university. During the war, however, Ebbels allowed his membership to lapse along with his enthusiasm. "I have dropped out of the party," he wrote. "Probably on account of this I'm now being vilified by some of my erstwhile friends." However that aspect of it is just too bad. I decided it was utterly ridiculous to continue to belong to the party when I think that in many ways its conduct and approach to things is quite foolish. You no doubt would not consider this justification for walking out. However in the C.P. it's all or nothing - you can't be a part time supporter." In another, probably later, letter, Ebbels shared more of his doubts with Gott, whom he apparently found a sympathetic correspondent.

Your letter arrived yesterday You can't imagine the kick I got out of it. I had read a couple of letters from "friends" and the old morale was never lower when I came to yours. Thank God there is still somebody who hasn't made a religion of his philosophy. When I came to one letter which concluded "May you become imbued with the spirit of the immortal Karl" the absolute necessity of retaining one's sense of humour has never been more apparent. Must we all be so bloody earnest and fanatical? I'm afraid it is essential I for one can't make the grade & the sooner I get out the better.

Your remarks on Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony controversy throw some light on a Bulletin cartoon I saw some months ago. I had hoped as usual their propaganda was exaggerated but apparently the worst is true - the infallibles have become music critics as well. Of course as you point out the announcements are not "ex cathedra" but they indicate which way the wind is blowing. A super papal infallibility rationalized by a materialist philosophy is certainly a novelty ... This attitude was certainly not shared by the more zealous comrades, one of whom had rebuked Ebbels for his criticism of the leadership.

... We have, I think, always adopted a somewhat cynical attitude to the decisions and activities of the great and near great, and I still fondly believe that we have kept our heads. I was unwise enough to suggest this to Elsie - the result was a very strongly worded reply. Elsie says that cynicism is merely a self-defence for people who are sure there is something wrong but haven't a solution - if one disagrees with what is done one should offer constructive criticism, not mock other peoples' ideas. Since this overlooks the fact that one of the best forms of argument is mockery, especially in a movement where arguments seem to be weighed by the status of the person who produces them rather than by their inherent value. I'm afraid Elsie views

Sic
or ago ?

3rd slot
used previous page
- 'doctrinaire' ?

interesting
point ?

Gott (previous stuff is Ebbels)

us as people who consider themselves making a generous gesture to the proletariat; though why the capacity to see the humorous side of people who in many cases would not be listened to if they were not treated as "ones having authority" should be taken as evidence of this I can't imagine.¹³

nor

Although he could tolerate it, neither boozy companions, ideological zeal or poverty could make Mooroopna attractive. His relief was palpable when he was able to write to Nancy Fletcher with the news that "I'll be out of Mooroopna in the next few days and treading once again my beloved haunts -- the Chung Wah, the 330 section of the Pub., Disney's, the Caf. and the refund section of the Taxation Department." However, the threat of manpower direction continued to lie over him as he contemplated the fate of his colleagues. "... Gravel, Ramsey, Nethercote, Whyte, ... and the other numerous personalities [are] are receiving the attention of the manpower. A purge is proceeding." Not all suffered equally. "The undeserving Whyte has put up the best resistance - he is working in Munition Supply Labs. Ginter and Gravel are at Wagga in Army and RAAF respectively. Ramsey and Nethercote have apparently just disappeared." Women were not exempt, as his friend Jean Muir had been excluded for the duration and "now picks pears for a crust." Unlike Gott, she made a virtue of hardship and tried to persuade him to do likewise. "Jean tried to talk me into abandoning Shop for a year and becoming a seasonal worker, wandering about Australia." He was not ready for such sacrifice. "Next December yes, but not at present if I can help it. But if I am cast out this is the life! Will you darn my socks if I pass through Camperdown?" His compensation was that the unworthy were also being persecuted. "The only spectacle in all this humourless harassing of examination victims that does not move me to the uttermost depths of pity and indignation are the reports of Edwards being bombarded with CCC call-ups whilst Prof. Gibson pulls ineffectual strings, which, like his logic, seem to end in circles...."¹⁴ Edwards, who had earlier offered Gott much serious advice about politics and

consider deleting

presumably Ralph's father.

word(s) missing

life, had won the exhibition in Philosophy, but government policy was to refuse all requests to undertake postgraduate studies in the arts.

Despite his undertaking to the Vice-Chancellor, Gott continued to follow his passion for journalism. He continued to write for Farrago ^{and} was its Chief-of-Staff in 1946, edited Student News, the long-planned and ~~as~~ frequently deferred journal of the National Union of Australian University Students, and in 1946, edited the Melbourne University Magazine in 1947. In 1944 he became university correspondent for the Melbourne Herald, a job that required him to speak to the Chief of Staff each morning to plan his day's rounds, and in 1946, after graduating, he applied, unsuccessfully, for a permanent job with the Herald on what was then known as its literary staff. He did however, supplement his meagre resources with casual work proofreading and compiling sports reports for Saturday's Herald, which then did an amazingly efficient job in bringing out final results each week over a whole range of sports not long after the matches finished.

Gott's personal correspondents during his university days included several women who would apparently have been happy to share their lives with his, but he formed no single attachment until he and Beth Noye came together in 1946. Beth is one of the strongest personalities to emerge from this period. Although usually known by her maiden name of Noye, she had married Bill Serpell, an airman who went missing in action over India in the last year of the war. A brilliant science student, she was also known as an ideologue, a writer of witty songs and revues, and, like Ken, a gossip. Ken, writing to her of the activities in Mooroopna that led to Gwen Fong's inquisition, described another incident, actually fictitious, where he and others had supposedly filled a can with Darveniza's wine and sent it off along the conveyor belt to be sealed and boiled with the other cans of fruit, only to have it explode and wreck the boiling vat. Beth's immediate response was to analyse the reasons this ^{within the Party?} should respond differently from the others. She also, despite Ken's injunction to secrecy, ^{ambiguous}

shared the story with others, including Dorothy Painter, who immediately reported this back to Ken with the implication that Beth was out to discredit him. But Dorothy was probably in love with Ken. Certainly, Beth responded to some communication she had received from Ken with the cryptic cry, "What have I done to deserve this? Someone's been pulling your leg. Or didn't I tell you I told the Exec. that you'd ruined [Dorothy] Painter?" signing off, "Yours heartbrokenly, Beth." Later, when Ken and Beth were engaged, he wrote to Beth that Painter sneered at any mention of Beth's name, commenting that "I could never adequately describe the concentrated sneer and hatred which she managed to instil into her pronunciation of your monosyllabic Christian name. It always makes me want to strike her down in her tracks."¹⁵ Whatever her feelings at this time, after the deaths of first her husband and then her mother, it was Ken who came to her support. The letters they exchanged in 1948 after she sailed to further her studies in London show the depths of their attachment.

After Beth's departure for London, Ken wrote to her almost daily, in letters that both express his passion and provide a continuing commentary on Australian politics. For some months, he worked a twelve-hour shift at the Creamota grain mills as he tried to save towards his fare to London. Here he came to see, like Ian Turner in the railway workshops, that his education had left an unbridgeable gap between him and the ordinary workers in the factory.

Their work was the basis of their life, his a temporary expedience, and consequently "you are a centre of curiosity; they watch you to see if you measure up to their vague preconceptions. More important you're an 'outsider' - not of the working class. Incompetence or slacking that would go unnoticed in anyone else is eagerly spotted and talked about." Some of his fellow students did nothing to further their reputation. "Steve did nothing to bring us into disrepute, though his lordly walk and manner of speech is still talked about. But bloody John B--- took a job there, didn't turn up on the first day, came for the second day when he nearly got "a punch on the bloody nose" for giving cheek to a chap, and didn't ever turn up." Others treated the

mill merely as a place to earn easy money, sleeping on their shift, letting down the other workers, and defiling the produce when they did not get their way. Such was Gott's annoyance with this behaviour that he resolved to disown any further students who appeared to seek work. The work itself was both tiring and dangerous, and he complained that often on finishing he was too tired either to write to Beth or to engage in any party work.¹⁶

In his letters Gott noted the rising tides of anti-Communism and general intolerance. With the ending of the struggle between the democracies and Soviet Russia against fascism, described by Eric Hobsbawm as an international ideological civil war between enlightenment and illiberalism, and its succession by the Cold War between capitalism and communism, rifts again appeared in civil society within Australia.¹⁷ For many on the left, the Catholic church was central to this reaction. While Wilfred Kent Hughes, "the fascist without a shirt", undermined the growing interest in Soviet and social realist films by banning them from the Victorian State Film Centre, and thus from distribution to schools and film societies, the Catholic church supported his moves to remove the secular provision from the state education act. Gott noted that this move generated organised opposition not only from rationalists and progressive educationalists, but from those who simply "just hate the Catholics". The distrust of the church extended to a distrust of the migrants then starting to arrive in Australia from among the displaced peoples of eastern Europe. Many of them, Gott wrote, were both anti-Soviet and anti-Semitic, they declined to join unions, and there were fears that they would be used as strike-breakers. He was unable to extend any sympathy to their complaints that the government was squandering their talents by forcing them to work as labourers whatever their previous qualifications. With scant regard to the circumstances of their emigration, he dismissed their complaints on the grounds that they had known the conditions before they had come.¹⁸

When?
in what capacity?
ASFL
film?

within Aust?

I'm fairly
certain of
this.

When?
State
Holloway
Gott?

was he also
a CP
position?
or was
Gott
'out of step'
(not shuffling?)

refers to?

Leaving
with you,
in late 40s,
- doubtful

Meanwhile, the church, in the form of Catholic Action, was actively stepping up its campaign against communist and leftist influence in both universities and the wider labour movement. Gott noted that, although the 1948 ALP Easter conference avoided a split, it was nevertheless filled with anti-communist vitriol and finally endorsed the Industrial Groups that, through the influence of the Movement, had been established to fight communists in the unions.

of the Vic Branch
of the ALP
or Federal?

[The] ALP did not split at its Easter conference. It was one orgy of red-baiting from beginning to end ... Calwell complained that too many ALP members were spending all their time attacking communism when they should be attacking capitalism. This enraged Keon and he had a go at Calwell. Chifley spoke about increased production, but did not attack the reds - Consequently the papers attacked him for his sin of omission ...

But the ALP's re-affirmation of its policy in regard to industrial groups while not splitting the Labor Party is constantly splitting the Labor Movement. Already a third of Victorian trade unionists are not affiliated to the ALP (the figure is Fitz[patrick]'s) and the right-wing policy is having the effect of more and more unions cancelling their affiliation. ...

The struggle between Left and Right will now shift to the Trades Hall Council where 30 unions (Left-Right-Centre) are demanding a change in the basis of representation ...

At the same time, the Country Party was placing pressure on the Victorian government to ban the Communist Party, and an illegal radio station, claiming to represent ex-servicemen, was making intermittent broadcasts of anti-communist propaganda in Melbourne.¹⁹

A more immediate cause of excitement was the move by Catholic Action to take over the Labor Club by way of its branch at the Mildura extension of the university, which had

do you
know anything
more of
him?
was the
Association
(Blanny)
involved?

been captured by an apparent alliance of “Catholic Action and FREEMASONS ... The latter have formed a ‘Fraternal Society’ at Mildura and readily joined hands with their traditional enemies the Catholics to smash the left... The usual larrikin stunts - throwing rolls of toilet paper (one with a large brick inside) etc.” The occasion was the decision of the Labor Club to affiliate with the Eureka Youth League. This decision was made at the ultimate behest of the Communist Party executive as part of a strategy to achieve a unity of workers and students, and was vigorously opposed by non-party members in the club. In forcing it through against this opposition, Party members departed from their usual policy of using their numbers to build consensus around Party policies rather than imposing them by mere majority. This action was to lead in the following year to the split in the club, the establishment of a separate ALP Club, and the loss of left supremacy in student affairs. The immediate action, to expel the Mildura branch, only concealed the wound.²⁰

C ?

At the federal level, the Liberal opposition sought to exploit rising anti-communist sentiments by censuring the Labor government for its supposed failure to take sufficiently strong action against the Party. ~~Gott~~ After hearing “the tail-end of Menzies’ speech” ^{Gott} heard the beginning of the Prime Minister’s reply, and was entranced by Chifley’s defence of liberal principles:

there are times when I just love that man’s voice and this was one of them. Rarely has he spoken better. He refused point blank to outlaw any political philosophy; he said (and with considerable feeling) that in Europe millions had turned to communism because for centuries they had known nothing but misery and oppression; he then went on the offensive and bashed the opposition for wanting to curtail freedom of speech...²¹

The international pressures on Chifley, however, together with the increasing intransigence of Communist policies at home, were to impel him towards actions that led to a breach between

the government and left movements, so that by the end of the following year Gott, from London, was applauding the Australian Labour movement for the vigour of its opposition to the Labor government.

This change in his attitudes was probably due largely to his separation from Australia and from the supportive but broad environment he had enjoyed at the university and within the Labor Club. Although he was a part of the leadership group that came from the Party and answered to its discipline, the club involved him in working with people across the whole spectrum of the left. One of the democratic socialist members of the club, Netta Burns, had earlier summed up its importance to its members when, in 1946, she wrote through Ken Gott to its members:

As I am destined to be a floating member for a year at least, I should like to record my sorrow on missing one of the pleasantest features of Branch life - the really genuine comradeship that's existed. Despite sporadic brawls and slanders, there wasn't one among you whom I didn't respect greatly. I've made a tremendous number of friends in the University Branch, and I'm sure I'll never meet better ones or more generous. Those who have known me well and for some time will know that my eulogies are not exaggerations.²²

Although employed at Myers in 1947, Gott maintained the breadth of his contacts by editing the Melbourne University Magazine, but the work at Creamota removed him from all but the Party. His letters come to lack the scepticism shown in his earlier exchanges with Ebbels, and he comes to accept totally the Party line. When he arrived in England, although he worked for the Communist Party of Great Britain, he found himself completely out of sympathy with its supportive attitude to the British Labor government, and started to look longingly towards Australia, where he felt that the real struggle against capitalism was taking place. He found the British, even on the left, patronising and completely uninterested in anything that was

Gott also influenced by the CPA line of his -
pure were sharp exchanges of letters b/t
Tennant/Murphy and Gott/Pollitt on his
in 1948.

to my
pedantic mind
this is too sweeping/
generalised
- given the
context.
He's unrealistic
to sharp
division
within the
Labor/TV
movement.

happening in Australia. At the Budapest Peace Festival in 1949 he found the British delegates combined "reactionary politics with boorish ill-mannered behaviour". He observed that that the Australian government was encouraging both racism and militarism, the first through Calwell's "filthy" speeches and the second through the construction of rocket ranges and the development of the Snowy Mountains scheme "to tap the waters to produce power for war industries in inland N.S.W." Nonetheless, he believed that the success of the peace movement in establishing a mass base and the militant action of the unions over both their own wages and conditions and such issues as Indonesia was furthering the class struggle.²³ Above all, however, he was attracted to eastern Europe, where he believed the Peoples' Democracies were truly building inclusive and just socialist societies. From Budapest, he wrote of the tremendous reception given to foreign delegates both at the official welcomes and by ordinary people they met in the trains. The spectacles of popular dance and music offered a convincing contrast to the dreariness of postwar London and of commodified popular entertainment. From London, he wrote to his comrades Ian and Amirah Turner, "Don't you envy some of the Eastern countries when you realise that they're completely free from the curse of social democracy?" From 1949 he was able to obtain a job in Prague, where Noel Ebbels was now in charge of the International Union of Students secretariat.²⁴ His time in the Peoples Democracy was both to offer further excitement and to begin his journey to disillusion. But for the time, although he noted the shortages even of basic household supplies,²⁵ and the constant inefficiencies of the bureaucracy, for the time of his stay his ideological armament proved sufficient to protect his belief in the ability of socialism to build a world of peace and justice.

¹¹ Donald Sassoon, One Hundred Years of Socialism: the west European left in the twentieth century. London: Fontana, 1997 [1996], pp.96-97. Sassoon pithily sums up his analysis: "The principal cause for the popularity of communism in the West was the Soviet Union – also the principle cause for its subsequent unpopularity."

probably
reference to
his 'concentration
camp' speech in the
Dome...

needs to be
synthesised
and
contextualised
a little more

A great read - very
enjoyable. Publication
would depend on
the intended
audience.
If intended
for students
would

- ² Gott papers, State Library of Victoria, mss 13047, Box 3769, / 9, George Odgers to KD Gott, 31.12.42.
- ³ Turner papers, National Library of Australia, mss 6206, Box 110/16, KD Gott to Ian Turner, 17.9.73.
- ⁴ Commonwealth Archives, ASIO file 180, on Ian Turner.
- ⁵ Ian Turner, 'My Long March', in *Room for Manoeuvre*, edited by Leonie Sandercock and Stephen Murray-Smith, Richmond, Vic.: Drummond 1982, p. 111.
- ⁶ Gott papers, Box 3769/9: University of Melbourne Registrar to KD Gott, 6.5.42; medical certificate, 10.5.43; telegram to V 158372 Gott, HQ, MUR, Bonegilla, from his mother, 31 Dec 41.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, Box 3769/9, 9 Mar 43 - GL Wood, Dean of Commerce, to KDG, notifying him that "I have decided that you will be limited to four subjects in 1943," and that, as he has not been included in the quota for Economics and Commerce for 1943 'there is no guarantee that you will be allowed by the authorities to complete your University year.'; 15 April 43, University Registrar to KDG: "In view of your unsatisfactory performance in ... 1943, it has been decided to exclude you from the course for the duration of the war." Explains that this is in accordance with government policy, and will be communicated to the Manpower authorities; 7 May 43 Registrar to KDG - appeal will be considered; 24.5.43, typescript copy of appeal against above decision; (page 1 missing); 28 May 43, Registrar to KDG, notifying him that following his appearance before a committee of the Faculty of Commerce and the professorial Board, exclusion has been lifted by enrolment limited to four subjects and subject to his "satisfying the Vice-Chancellor that you will devote your full time and attention to these studies in the University." Final results in attachment to a letter to Chief of Staff, Melbourne *Herald*, 16.8.46. This letter also notes that he edited *Farrago* during 1942 and 1943, and *Student News* (the NUAUS paper) in 1946.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, Box 3769/9, Gwen Fong to KD Gott, 3.2.44.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, Box 3769/9, KDG to Nancy [Fletcher], undated, but apparently summer vacation, 1942-43.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Box 3769/9, D. Bradley to KD Gott, no date.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, Box 3769/9, KD Gott to branch executive, n.d. In a letter about this matter to Dorothy Painter, KDG claims that his letter to the branch was "facetious".
- ¹² *Ibid.*, Box 3769/9, George Odgers to KD Gott, 31.12.42.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, Box 3769/11, undated, presumably 1944-45, Noel [Ebbels?] to KDG, from New Guinea and from New Hebrides.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Box 3769/9, KDG to Nancy [Fletcher], 23 Feb 43, from Mooroopna.
- ¹⁵ ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Box 3769/11, Beth to KDG, n.d.; Box 3770/1, KDG to Beth, 3 Feb 46. In an undated letter to Dorothy Painter, KDG claims that the incident he had described to Beth was fictitious, but sounded sufficiently truthful to convince her.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3770/1, KDG to Beth Gott, 4 Mar 48.
- ¹⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: the short twentieth century 1914-1991*, London: Abacus, 1995, p. 144.
- ¹⁸ Gott papers, 3770/1, KDG to Beth Gott, 23.6.48, 23.3.48, 29.4.48.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3770/1, KDG to Beth Gott, 4.4.48, 7.4.48, 4.5.48. The term Catholic Action was generally used on the left to describe action undertaken by Catholics as part of the clandestine organisation run by BA Santamaria, now more usually, and accurately, referred to as the Movement. I use the former term where it appears in the documents. The Movement was formed in 1941 from pre-existing Catholic Action and Campion Society groups. See Val Noone, *Disturbing the War*, Richmond, Vic.: Spectrum, 1993, p. 30.
- ²⁰ Gott papers, 3770/1, KDG to Beth Gott, 4.4.48.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 3770/1, KDG to Beth Gott, 11.4.48.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 3769/11, Netta Burns to Labor Club per Ken Gott, 13.2.46.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 3770/4, KDG to Beth Gott, n.d., from Prague [1949]; 17.9.49.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3770/4, KDG from Budapest to Beth Gott in London, n.d.; notes for speech delivered by KDG to the congress on behalf of Australian delegates; 3770/3, KDG to Ian and Amirah Turner, from London, December, presumably 1948.
- ²⁵ Gott's responses to the countries of eastern Europe are contained in Gott papers, Box 3770, File 2.