

Notes of interview with Bill and Dorothy Irwin
Perth, 10 August 1985

Interview with Don Grant and John McLaren

In 1956, Bill and Dorothy Irwin used to walk around the streets of Parkville each night discussing whether they should leave the Communist Party in the light of Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin at the twentieth congress; whether such an act would be one of cowardice or conscience. This shows the quality commitment which the Party was able to attract and which it was now discarding.

It was a difficult time for all members of the Party. Reactions to the speech varied. The Melbourne Herald at that time was publishing the foreign affairs review of the New York Times, and so it got the full report, but people in Sydney still had nothing, and when Sharkey was asked about it he claimed it was a forgery. When Jim Staples heard of this he got hold of a copy and roneoed it and started distributing copies. When Sharkey heard of this he and another heavy turned up at Staples flat and, finding nobody at home, forced the door and seized the remaining copies. Staples was later made to give an undertaking that he would cease distributing the speech. Staples was already worrying about leaving the Party, and the incident undermined his trust in the Party.

By now Outlook had been started in Sydney by Helen Palmer, and Ken Gott was distributing it in Melbourne, where things were much more difficult because the Hillites were in charge. Then, one evening there was a meeting of a number of journalist members, and there was an unannounced visit by Frank Johnson, branch president and close ally of Ted Hill. Then Johnson announced that he wanted the branch to pass a motion expelling Ken Gott. Bill Irwin protested, pointing out that Ken had given years of service to the Party, and now they wanted to expell him for distributing Outlook. He asked whether before considering the motion they could read Outlook. Johnson said no. Gott then gave an undertaking that he would cease distributing Outlook. Irwin asked, "Will that satisfy you?" Johnson said no, he still wanted Ken expelled. So a printer present moved the motion, but it lapsed for want of a seconder, and Johnson rose in a fury and left with his mate. A couple of weeks later Ken was expelled by the higher levels of the Party.

Shortly after this Ian Turner was also expelled. When Stephen Murray-Smith heard of this he went to the Party office in a rage. Ted Hill said nothing, so Stephen wrote out his own resignation. A few days later he met Judah Waten in the street, and was told, "We're going to pour a bucket of shit over you."

Bill said he has always found it difficult to forgive Judah for his conduct at this time, and for his blindness to rising anti-semitism in the USSR. He said that of course Stephen is a very forgiving man, and forgave Judah, "but we are always slower to forgive insults to our friends."

Katherine Susannah Prichard remained a party member, but was very unhappy about the expulsions. When the Control Commission told Bill that he would

be "happier out of the Party", an edict was issued that Party members were not to talk to the Irwins. KSP refused to observe this embargo, and instead sent a note saying "Let us not contend together." Nevertheless, their relationships with her were different from that time. Bill and Dorothy were never formally expelled.

The Control Commission interviewed Bill Irwin three times - they asked questions, took notes for later use, but entered into no discussion. Bill was told he could discuss within his branch matters on which he disagreed with the Party leadership, but could not go to any other branch and talk about the issues. When he asked whether, if he met another Party member in the street he could raise such matters, there was no reply

Many writers such as Alan Marshall were sympathetic to the Party, but never became Party members. Marshall once told Irwin, "Realist writing is out of date now"; he was following the Party line, but himself was a social realist rather than a political activist he was not an ideologue, but a democrat. Non-Party members of 'front' organisations worked with members because of their common interest in socialism. There was no feeling among Party members that they were using or manipulating these people. The Party recognised that it was very useful that leaders of such bodies as the Peace Council were not Party members, but he had no experience of these people being cynically used.

In 1936 Bill Irwin became assistant editor and leader writer for the new editor of the News. Throughout his career he was assisted and protected within the organisation by his friend Jim Macartney, who eventually became Managing Director of West Australian newspapers. When Franco launched his attack on the Spanish government, Irwin was told to write the feature article. He wrote it in terms of a plain man's guide to Spain, using Gunther's Inside Europe and the Encyclopedia Britannica as his main sources, as at the time he knew nothing of Spain. The following Friday the local Catholic newspaper, The REcord, had a full page spread attacking this under the heading, 'Daily News lies and slander about Spain', and the News was forced to publish an article giving the alternative point of view.

At the time of the Miners' strike in 1949 Party members generally believed that Australia was ready for revolution - Duncan Clark, a minor functionary, said that Australia was only five years away from Communist control. They did not accept Chifley as a working class leader because they followed Lenin's 1912 line that the ALP existed to make capitalism operate better. Asked why the CP lost touch, Irwin said that the Party was predominantly working class in NSW, had many intellectuals in Victoria and WA - intellectuals were very important during the years of illegality, because they had organising skills. Bill himself ran the Workers' Star in WA during these years - on one occasion security arrested him in the News offices, but found nothing. The day the Star was banned, Bill had just been made acting editor of News while Macartney was temporarily absent, against the wishes of Board member C>P>Smith. That day the Star was banned, and the News devoted its front page to the fact. The next day Bill was called before the board to explain this serious 'error of judgement' - it had been his day off, and the page was designed by the chief sub.

In the 1950s the Party was preoccupied with the pressures emanating from Menzies. The list of names he read out in Parliament included names of non-members; Bill, by now WA correspondent in the Melbourne Herald offices, took up a petition on the matter but encountered hostility.

When Bill was appointed WA correspondent in Melbourne in 1948 - he was told had been groomed for editor of the News, but could not be given it because he would not change his leftwing views - he was sent to Melbourne because he was an embarrassment in WA. For six weeks he could not start his job because Murdoch would not allow him into the building. He eventually got admission when he produced the reference he had been given by the AAP head in New York, Geoff Tebbutt, when Irwin finished his stint there in 1947. This praised his objectivity. Irwin threatened to visit every newspaper in Australia to tell them how Murdoch was attempting to destroy the professional career of a man whose editor had written this of him. He then got a message back from Macartney telling him to start work at the Herald on Monday, and when later he paid his respects to Murdoch he found him quite affable and he never had any further trouble from him.

Career - New York, 1944-47; Perth, 1947; Melbourne, 1948-65

Murdoch had attempted to stop Irwin going to New York. He had already had great trouble getting a visa - he had to fill in one form, on his next visit to the US consulate in Perth was told that he would have to fill in another - this was 17 feet long - then had to get three leading Perth identities to vouch for him - he went back to his cobbers from Hale - then had to get another three to vouch for them. Then word came that they were to proceed to Melbourne immediately, as they had a place on a ship. They made another visit to the consulate, the consul was away on a picnic, and the acting consul stamped their papers. He found out later that he was an Australian and had become fed up with the way the Americans had been mucking the Irwins around.

Meanwhile, Murdoch had seen Irwin's name as AAP appointee to New York, and called a special meeting of all directors to have it reversed. By then however Irwin was on the ship, and Macartney was able to have the decision upheld in the light of the difficulties they had already had.

While in New York, Irwin lived in the Bowery with the organiser of New Masses, which at that time had a higher per head circulation in Australia than in USA. "When I was in New York I had to decide whether I was going to be a cleanskin or not, and I thought, well, bugger it!" We never had in trouble while we were in New York - we took part in demonstrations, even marched on May Day, which was not the thing to do if you're trying to avoid trouble, - we never had the slightest trouble. I even got called up for the US army.

The trouble with the Herald was because ASIO or the Catholic action put me in. For six weeks not a bastard would come to talk to us - that showed how frightened they were.

When Ken Gott returned from Prague, he was completely penniless, and had to borrow money to exist. He finally got a job with Reuters on the financial side - then Irwin needed an assistant and put his name forward - - there was some delay, but it eventually came through and then there was not further trouble. He was so broke that all his shirt collars were frayed. and Irwin was able to find him a job as his assistant.

When Bill and Dorothy had filled in the US visa application they had acknowledged that they had been members of front organisations - Bill had been president of the Eureka Youth League, Dorothy secretary of another front, the ModernWomen's Club, but they refused to admit Party membership " - some moral problems about that, but we didn't think - bugger it, we felt we were insulted by the bloody Americans, wanting to know our politics - it was just like a Jew in USSR would be absolutely right in lying to the KGB".

When he got tired of his reporting, he worked for a time reporting to Macartney direct on the power struggles and policy changes going on in the eastern states media companies.

During period of illegality party work became virtually a fulltime occupation - he was on fifteen committees, Dorothy on a similar number - "We had to make appointments to see each other" - your typewriter becomes hot after one use, it's dangerous to use. A party carpenter built a space under their house to hide typewriters and silk-screen and every bloody thing under the sun. It's terribly nerve-wracking.

The Worker's Star came to me by devious means - Dorothy and I would type it out and make it up. They raided us once, arrested me in the middle of the newsroom. There were three of them - one was Richards, who later on became important in the Petrov business. They asked was he a Communist, he denied it, so they let him go. He was called on to explain to the Board of Directors, there was a bit of a row, some wanted to sack him, but they did nothing. There was a six months penalty for possessing a copy of the Star.

Vic and Joan Williams were not married at the time - she was married at the time to Pete Thomas: he wrote economic articles for Tribune - who owns Mt Isa and that sort of thing. They were both activists - unfortunately she backs the Australian Socialist Party - she's a great person, but not very friendly to Bill at the moment, because they know he's critical of Russia. He admires her very much for her staunchness and courage.