

Communism, Security and the Cold War

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This article seeks to challenge the accepted interpretation of labor's anti-communism during the early years of the cold war. That interpretation assumes first, that the ALP was contaminated by a paranoid mentality and second, that the perception of a communist 'threat' can be dismissed as groundless. I contend that it is an anachronistic failure of empathy to reformulate intense apprehension about communism *then* into irrational fears *now* simply because threats, real or apparent, failed to materialise. By examining communists' policies, strategies and connections with the Soviet Union, and intelligence assessments about the communist party provided by the security services to the government, it is possible to understand more clearly government perceptions. Without necessarily endorsing such perceptions, they will be shown to be far less implausible and irrationally-based than is customarily believed. My focus is the Chifley government (1945-49).

In the winter of 1949, when the cold war was beginning to turn knuckles white with anxiety¹ in the west, the Chifley government embarked upon a savage campaign of strikebreaking. During a national coal strike, the full weaponry of the state was used: repressive legislation was passed, thousands of troops were mobilised, and a propaganda war was unleashed. Denunciation was vitriolic. Chifley told a labor gathering in Lithgow: 'this strike has been engineered by communists to destroy the arbitration system and wreck labor governments. If it is their intention to wage a callous war on the community, then it will be a case of boots and all. I will never bend my knee to this unwarranted display of brute force'.² The justification for this remarkable outburst from the revered, pipe-smoking Ben Chifley was simple: the strike was caused by the communist party of Australia (CPA) to undermine economic recovery, subvert social democracy and challenge the authority of the state. That the Australian coal strike coincided precisely with a London dock strike and a Canadian seamen's strike confirmed synchronisation in the timing, aims and methods of international communism.

The extent of CPA involvement in fomenting the dispute was, most likely, magnified by Chifley and his cabinet colleagues. Communists were far from peripheral to, but not the root source of, the strike.³ Yet evaluating the role of communists is not the central concern of this discussion; illuminating the perceptions of labor leaders is. Thus, this article is not interested in making judgements about *whether* the dispute was the product of communist machinations but on understanding *why* it was interpreted in that way. The strike is therefore used as a window into 'official' cold war attitudes towards the CPA.

The favoured explanation for Chifley's actions has centred on labor's fixation with cold war anti-communism. Generally, historians and commentators have interpreted the responses of the Chifley administration as a product of anti-communist paranoia which nurtured irrational fears, intemperate rhetoric and an excessive readiness to see conspiracies. Amongst those who have discussed the strike, there

exists an historiographical consensus that sees the 'red scare' atmosphere as crucial in encouraging cold war delusions in the over-heated minds of labor leaders. Commentators have referred to how far 'the Prime Minister was seized by cold war fever';⁴ how the ALP leadership was 'engaged in an anti-communist campaign' during the coal strike;⁵ how, in 1949, 'hysteria mounted within the [labor] party' accompanied by 'an atmosphere of paranoia ... within government circles';⁶ and how the milieu of 'premature McCarthyism' encouraged the Chifley government to 'characterise the [coal] strike as a communist plot'.⁷ This is consistent with a variety of studies that apply the phrase 'anti-communist hysteria' to the events of 1949.⁸

The argument advanced here is that Chifley was *not* severely infected with the cold war virus (that Senator McCarthy was soon to spread within the US) and therefore was *not* paranoid, hysterical or obsessional in his anti-communism. Instead, his words and deeds in mid-1949 were the result of a clear-headed and, in the context, understandable assessment of the communist party. That assessment was based primarily upon the words and deeds of the party itself. None of the above literature takes into sufficient account the role played by the communist party's own actions and policies in the late 1940s in mobilising 'official' anti-communist sentiment. It is to this role that we now turn.

From 1947, the communist party's policies and strategies towards the ALP moved quickly from conciliation to intransigence. Its previous position of enthusiastic support for the wartime Curtin government and qualified support for the postwar Chifley government was jettisoned. For the next three years and for the second time in its history, the policies of the party became inflexible, aggressive and inappropriate. They were also, to use communist vernacular, 'leftist'.⁹ The overriding source of this 'leftism' was the Soviet Union and, in particular, the cominform.¹⁰ With the establishment of the cominform at Szklarska, Poland, in September 1947, Moscow's near-absolute hegemony over the world communist movement, in limbo since the dissolution of the comintern in 1943, was re-asserted. At its inaugural conference, Andrei Zhdanov, the chief CPSU ideologist, promulgated the 'two camp' thesis by which the world was divided into two competing power blocs: one, peace-loving, led by the Soviet Union; the other, war-mongering, led by the United States. In accordance with the new cominform edict, the general secretary of the CPA argued that the Chifley government's foreign policy spelt involvement in the war plans of American imperialism and that HV Evatt, deputy prime minister and minister for external affairs, was 'the errand boy of the dollar'.¹¹

Throughout the following year, attacks on the ALP and the labor government intensified. In February 1948, the first central committee meeting after the establishment of the cominform was held. The national president, Richard Dixon, set the tone for subsequent communist activity. Because 'the class struggle [was] sharpening', he argued, 'the spirit of irreconcilability towards the class enemy must enter much more thoroughly into our work and discussions'.¹² The strategic concept guiding communist activity was elaborated by the party's organising secretary, JC Henry. 'All the conditions are maturing', Henry told the plenum, 'for a very big break with reformism on the part of the workers'.¹³ This mistaken belief, that workers were on the brink of severing their allegiance with the ALP, informed much of the discussion at the party's first postwar congress, the 15th national congress, held

three months later, in May 1948. This congress represented the penultimate stage in the movement towards the adoption of a 'left sectarian' policy. Its main elements were now clear: the time for the decisive contest for the leadership of the labor movement had arrived and an all-out offensive against labor's reformism was necessary. According to the national president, 'the ALP and reformist betrayers must be isolated and the communist party brought forward as the organiser of the people's struggle against reaction'.¹⁴ Should the government learn of these policies, which were articulated within closed sessions of CPA meetings, one could reasonably assume a similarly aggressive reaction.¹⁵

The CPA's tough and dogmatic attitude towards labor reached its apotheosis at a central committee meeting in February 1949, the last held before the coal strike. Only in minor details, it was argued, did the ALP differ from the liberal or country parties — all strove to 'promote monopoly and imperialist' policies. It was an illusion that the ALP was 'a lesser evil'. Labor leaders were not 'milk and water sentimental reformists', but 'definite allies of warmongers and imperialist aggressors'; they represented the 'poisonous plant' of social democracy which must be eliminated. Indeed, the general secretary, Lance Sharkey, used the language of high Stalinism to emphasise the main aim of the CPA: the immediate and decisive policy in the coming period, he stated in a telling phrase, was 'to liquidate reformism'. He then called on cadres to 'go out and tell the working class that we are the party of the working class'.¹⁶

If there were any doubts about the party's intention to challenge openly the ALP for the leadership of the working class movement and the allegiance of its supporters, they were cleared away by that February meeting. And if there were any communists whose perceptions were not blurred by the heavy mists of the cold war, they remained silent. To dissent publicly was tantamount to heresy. A few, however, may have recalled privately, and uneasily, the pre-cominform sentiments of one veteran party member:

if we were to come out, comrades, with a policy of saying 'No support for the ALP', or a negative attitude in that regard, this undoubtedly would not win support for the communist party, would not break down reformist illusions or engender revolutionary feelings among the masses, but would tend, if anything, to lead to the isolation of the communist party.¹⁷

That no communist chose to repeat these ominous, prophetic, words in 1949 was indicative of the degree to which party policy had changed and the dominance of those who espoused it. Guided by cominform perspectives, the CPA had moved to a position which made confrontation with the labor government virtually inescapable. The leadership's perceptions of what lay ahead — a sharpened class struggle, the treacherous role of reformism, the imminent collapse of capitalism (and each was inter-related) — prevented any retreat.¹⁸

In attempting to pose as a political alternative to the ALP, the CPA was faced with two problems: its lack of effective support outside trade unions and the dominance of reformist ideology within. The first meant that its spheres of action were circumscribed; the second that reformism could be successfully challenged only if

workers' illusion were pricked. The CPA held the view that the way to expose, isolate and ultimately defeat reformism — a prerequisite to the working class moving to its side — was through militant struggle in the trade union movement. Strikes with a political component would provide the key. Political strikes should demonstrate the bankruptcy of reformism, the limitations of arbitration and the role of the state. Dixon told the 15th national congress, 'there are strikes led by reformists and by some communist trade union officials which are conducted as purely economic strikes, and this is most unsatisfactory. We must aim in strike struggles ... to draw the masses ... to the side of the communist party'.¹⁹ From late 1947, the CPA leadership intensified its attack on 'economism' and instructed party trade union officials to take a bolder political stand in order that the level of workers' class understanding be raised.²⁰

In February 1949, Dixon again argued that strikes must become the basis of the masses rejecting reformism. Consequently, 'we must pay more attention to the organisation and development of strikes ... we must plan struggles, organise them, and carry them through in a really big way.'²¹ At the same party meeting, Edgar Ross, a member of the political committee, predicted an 'impending struggle in the coalfields' to be 'conducted under [our] political inspiration'.²² Again, the point needs to be made: should the Chifley government become aware of these developments in communist thinking and strategy, its readiness to interpret political intention as conspiratorial instigation becomes more comprehensible.

The altered CPA attitude towards trade union activity appeared vindicated by the experience of the 1948 Queensland railway strike, since it resulted in 'exposing the role of the capitalist state, the ALP and reformist leaders, and opening the way to the passing of the masses over to the side of the communist party'.²³ The optimistic lessons drawn from the railway strike shaped the strategy pursued at the time of the 1949 coal strike since the experience was a harbinger of future struggles: as Dixon stated, 'the capitalist state machine will be swung into action against the workers, reactionary laws will be used, the trade unions and the communist party will be attacked'. This would illuminate the political character of the strikes which, as a result, would assume 'great political importance'.²⁴ Dixon's estimation was accurate; the coal strike fulfilled his prophecy. But what neither he nor the party foresaw was the costly price of accuracy. The run-in to the coal strike has been dealt with in detail elsewhere;²⁵ suffice it to say here that the CPA entered 1949 in a confident and highly aggressive mood, utterly convinced that the labor leadership had become the pliant clay of local capitalism and international imperialism and therefore needed exposing and 'liquidating'. The realisation by many communists that this analysis was chimerical — of the late 1940s, one wrote: 'we ignored reality'²⁶ — lay in the unknowable future.

When Chifley wrote to an ALP member in Randwick during the coal strike that 'I am quite aware that the communist party is attacking myself and the government in every way possible',²⁷ his awareness was moulded by a variety of sources. These included readily available declarations of hostility in the communist press, personal attacks on Chifley by communists in his electorate,²⁸ and feedback from other members of the federal parliamentary labor party.²⁹ But it is arguable that the source most heavily relied upon was intelligence provided by the security services. The political

myopia that characterised the Australian security intelligence organisation (ASIO) under colonel Spry was latent or absent in 1949; indeed the first deputy director of ASIO and Chifley's first choice to head the organisation, RFB. ('Bob') Wake, was actually an ally of the ALP and on close terms with labor leaders.³⁰ One of Chifley's most frequent visitors during July 1949 was Mr Justice Reed, the freshly appointed director-general of security. He kept Chifley 'intimately informed' of CPA plans from reports received from under-cover security agents.³¹ These agents sent to the Canberra office of the commonwealth investigation service (CIS) a 'Weekly Summary of Policy and Industrial Trends of the Australian Communist Party'.³² But how much did the security services actually know about the political strategies and industrial policies of the CPA? If it can be demonstrated that their knowledge was both extensive and high-level, then a plausible argument emerges that Chifley's anti-communism, insofar as it was based on briefings from Reed, Wake and Longfield Lloyd, the CIS director, was not rooted in paranoia but derived from empirical evidence and 'inside' sources.

The 20-page 'Outline of Communist Activities', prepared by the special branch of the commonwealth investigation branch in conjunction with the directorate of military intelligence in May 1941, is ample testimony to the fact that the CPA had long been the object of systematic surveillance by the security services.³³ This was most likely stepped up after a cabinet decision in 1948 that communists 'be kept under the closest possible supervision'.³⁴ Of particular concern was communist activity in militant unions. Under the rubric of 'Industrial Intelligence', an updated outline of the functions of the 'Special Section' of the CIS in early 1949 noted: 'Undoubtedly [its] function would be to observe matters pertaining to industrial happenings which may lead to stoppages — minor and major — and complete stoppage of all industry'.³⁵ It would have been this special section on whom the director-general of security relied when reporting to Chifley about the general coal strike. Even a cursory glance of security files on individual communists reveals the wide scope and minutia of surveillance activities: the precise details of party members' movements by car, rail and air;³⁶ the refrigerator in the basement of JD Blake's Rose Bay flat;³⁷ the gold fillings in the teeth of a woman with whom Ernie Thornton, the powerful federal secretary of the ironworkers' union, was 'particularly intimate' in the late 1940s.³⁸

Surveillance, of course, yielded less valuable information than 'plants' and 'moles'. The CIS (and later ASIO) had extensively penetrated the communist-led unions and the communist party itself; their files contain frequent references to 'confidential', 'reliable', 'top secret', 'highly-placed' and 'delicate' sources. One leading communist, Rupert Lockwood, believed there was at least one agent who, in the late 1940s, was in the confidence of party leaders.³⁹ According to Chifley's private secretary, Sir Murray Tyrell, a 'mole' planted deep within the CPA would occasionally relay information directly by telephone to Chifley's office.⁴⁰ There is strong circumstantial evidence that a leading Melbourne communist and president of Australia-soviet house, John Rodgers, worked for the security services.⁴¹ It seems clear from one agent's report that he or she was on the central committee of the CPA.⁴² The work diaries for 1948 of the deputy director of the Queensland CIS, RFB Wake, refer regularly to an under cover agent, 'EO', inside a communist-led union,⁴³ while the former head of

ASIO's counter-espionage branch confirmed that many agents had joined the CPA prior to Menzies' attempts in 1950-51 to outlaw the communist party.⁴⁴

If any of these many agents knew of, and transmitted, any one of three pieces of information — the first, quite startling — which have recently emerged, then Chifley's depiction of the coal strike as a communist conspiracy becomes less far-fetched. First, according to the south coast district secretary of the CPA, one of the central committee secretariat members actually had developed a strategy to use the coal strike to bring on revolution in Australia; the plan 'involved "surrounding" Sydney with the militant working-class districts of Newcastle, the South Coast and Lithgow'.⁴⁵ Second, new research has revealed the extent of communist involvement in the coal strike. According to the communist barrister acting for the miners' federation, during secret negotiations to settle the coal strike, the CPA, for its own political reasons, directed that an offer from Chifley, which conceded all the miners' demands, be rejected. This historically significant detail remained unknown to all but a handful of communists (and possibly a highly placed 'mole') due to 'the barristers' ethic of confidentiality' which ensured it lay dormant for forty years.⁴⁶

The third piece of information comes from recently released security files and could throw new light on Chifley's perception of communist machinations. Chifley requested a private meeting, probably in the second week of the strike, with Jim Comerford, who, after the imprisonment of the miners' federation central executive, occupied the crucial position of acting general secretary of the union. The meeting was arranged on the assumption that Comerford was not a member of the communist party.⁴⁷ In May 1948, Comerford was admitted, briefly, to the Weston branch of the ALP and during the coal strike he consistently denied any membership of the CPA. The meeting with Chifley never eventuated. To this day, Comerford cannot understand Chifley's refusal to negotiate.⁴⁸ His security file provides us, perhaps, with a clue. In response to a CIS memo dated 6 July 1949, the NSW deputy director wrote:

A report received recently from a reliable source states that during a private conversation Comerford was asked whether he was a communist or an ALP supporter. Comerford is alleged to have replied that he was a communist and it suited his purpose to be recognised as an ALP supporter.⁴⁹

This was forwarded to the CIS director in Canberra and presumably, given its bearing on how Chifley would approach the strike, to the prime minister. Whether or not Comerford was, to use cold war argot, a fellow traveller or covert communist, is not the issue. The point, rather, is that he could easily have been perceived as one. There is evidence for such a perception in a 1947 leaflet, *Who is "Jimmy" Comerford? A Glance at his Record*; in a 1949 CIS detailed report setting out the political affiliations of trade union officials; in a 1950 ASIO report based on information 'received from a delicate source, whose word is beyond doubt'; in CPA documents seized during a security raid on the party's Sydney headquarters in which his name appeared in a photostat list of 'Party members attending CP of A schools'; in an invitation to attend a central committee plenum meeting (which he declined); and in an informant's report that he attended the CPA's Marx school from 23 May to 19 June 1953 where he stated he had been 'associated with the CPA since he was 16

years old'.⁵⁰ If Chifley were informed of the security service's assessment, which seems likely, his interpretation of communist duplicity rather than union spontaneity in the conduct of the coal strike is understandable.

What is definite is that the security services obtained much 'inside' information. This intelligence included notes of an address by R. Dixon to a 'closed' meeting of officials of the south coast district of the CPA in August 1947;⁵¹ a synopsis of the discussions at the 15th national congress relating to 'Trade Union Tasks';⁵² an internal document dated 12 July 1948 from the central committee secretariat instructing NSW district committees to 'make every strike' a means of 'draw[ing] the masses away from reformist influence and bring[ing] them over to the side of the communist party';⁵³ a speech by J.C. Henry to a political committee meeting in June 1949;⁵⁴ a central committee document entitled 'Statement of Work in the Factories' which contained the directive that it be circulated to 'Branch executives and higher Party functionaries only';⁵⁵ and the full verbatim minutes of a CPA 'fraction meeting' of the miners' federation.⁵⁶ From these and other sources,⁵⁷ we can safely conclude that the CIS, the attorney-general's department and the prime minister were intimately aware of those developments in party thinking in the late 1940s discussed earlier: its willingness to mimic Moscow, its desire to destroy the influence of reformism within the labor movement and its readiness to inject significant political dimensions into industrial disputes. Because the main source of this intelligence was the party itself — in effect, the evidence was self-incriminating — it was regarded as a reliable basis on which frame an understanding of CPA perspectives. If the integrity of these sources were then accepted (and no evidence has come to light that the party leadership stepped into that murky 'world of mirrors' whereby known informers were deliberately fed false information), we can conclude that cold war hysteria and paranoia were not primarily responsible, as the literature suggests, for the intense anxiety with which the stated intentions and anticipated role of communists were viewed.

Anxieties about industrial disruption for political ends were overlaid, during these years, with fears about both espionage and subversion. Chifley was alerted to the possibility of espionage when Sir Percy Sillitoe brought a small team from the soviet counter-intelligence section of MI5 to Australia for one of three trips in 1948-49.⁵⁸ Through a top secret operation code-named 'Venona' (but known as 'Black Jumbo' and 'Bride' to the British and American cryptographers respectively) which decoded intercepted soviet intelligence cables, the MI5 team identified high-level security leaks within Evatt's department of external affairs.⁵⁹ This operation became known simply as 'the case'. While the MI5 team was still in Australia, apparently, 'further code-breaks showed that the scale of soviet penetration was even greater than thought'.⁶⁰ Indeed, the release of one batch of Venona cables by the US national security agency in October 1996, confirms that a CPA central committee member, Walter Clayton, was closely linked to soviet intelligence throughout the 1940s.⁶¹ Chifley, we now know, was informed of 'The Case' in mid 1949 by the operational head of Australian security, Bob Wake; he agreed with Wake that it was 'a reasonable assumption' that there was some espionage activity in Australia.⁶² Thus, in the eyes of British and Australian intelligence, and probably Chifley and Evatt, there existed a small communist spy ring, not unlike that unraveled by Igor Gouzenko in Canada (which led to the arrests of British atomic physicists Allan Nunn May and Klaus

Fuchs). One consequence of Venona, 'the case', and the MI5 trips to Australia, was the establishment of ASIO by the Chifley government on 2 March 1949. The Australian high commissioner in London was quite correct in his assessment that the establishment of ASIO 'mark[ed] a change in government attitude that would have been inconceivable three years ago'.⁶³

Fears of subversion centred on the assumed loyalties of communists in the event of war. That the threat of war with the Soviet Union was more than hypothetical is underlined by a 1949 joint intelligence committee report on 'Strategic Planning in Relation to British Commonwealth Defence'. Marked 'Top Secret' it gave a remarkable if chilling assessment:

The ultimate object of soviet policy is the establishment of communism, directed from Moscow, throughout the world. The soviet's general war plan will be to fight a full scale aggressive war on her western and southern front with the object of overrunning Europe — including Great Britain ... Australia is most unlikely to be threatened by an active military fifth column in 1950. The main threat is from industrial strikes and stoppages inspired by a well organised communist party, working overtly or covertly ... acts of physical sabotage of vital industries and communications and within the armed services are a probability. It may be anticipated that espionage activities will continue and increase. The use of biological warfare is a possibility.⁶⁴

The possibility of 'acts of physical sabotage' was regarded with sufficient seriousness for both the CIS in the late 1940s and ASIO in the early 1950s to open files on the subject.⁶⁵ Nearly half a century on, such a response may seem excessive — until one learns that a group of CPA members planned, during the 1949 coal strike, to immobilise trains and dynamite the Hawkesbury railway tunnel to prevent 'scab' coal from reaching Sydney. According to the (then) Newcastle CPA district secretary, it was a member of the central committee secretariat, JC Henry, who advocated this action on the grounds that it would concentrate the class struggle.⁶⁶ The vice chief of the general staff (VCGS), lieutenant-general Sydney Rowell, in charge of 'Operation Excavate' (the deployment of troops to work the open cuts), believed there could be 'some attempt...made by communist infiltration to sabotage equipment'.⁶⁷ And it was during the coal strike that the first meeting of the internal security sub-committee of the department of defence, chaired by Spry, was held to discuss 'Measures required for the Protection of Key Points in Australia and its Territories against Subversive Activity and Espionage'.⁶⁸ Significantly, Chifley approved the formation of this sub-committee earlier in the year.⁶⁹

A far more serious concern was the question of communists in the Australian military forces(AMF). On 8 February 1949, the VCGS wrote to the secretary of the military board requesting discussion of the 'Danger of Communism to the AMF':

Bearing in mind that the loyalty of communists would be towards the USSR when the interests of that country clash with those of the British commonwealth, it must be anticipated that in the event of war, and in peace, the action of communists in the AMF would be directed towards assisting the USSR. The most profitable field for such action lies in the causing of unrest, the undermining of discipline, and the disclosing of defence information to the USSR.⁷⁰

This question was given a sharp relevance and immense prominence in March 1949. The general secretary of the CPA, Lance Sharkey, publicly stated: 'If in the pursuit of aggressors, the soviet troops came to Australia, the Australian working class would welcome them'.⁷¹ The issues of external threat and internal subversion coalesced. Chifley especially requested that the statement be examined for treason.⁷² As acting minister for defence in July 1949, Chifley also oversaw the issue of communism in the AMF and approved the recommendations of both Rowell and the military board that, *inter alia*, prohibited the enlistment of communists.⁷³

In foreign policy matters, Chifley tended to line up behind 'the Doc' — the minister for external affairs, HV Evatt — rather than the more imperial-minded department of defence.⁷⁴ Unlike the latter, Chifley was reluctant to involve Australia in an anti-soviet western alliance, pushed by the British foreign office, on the grounds that 'Australia may be well-placed to act as a mediator in the broader dispute between ... the western powers and the soviet'.⁷⁵ However, this difference in approach towards countering the Soviet Union did not lessen the virulence of Chifley's hostility towards the Soviet Union's supporters inside Australia. This point was acknowledged in May 1949 by the British high commissioner in New Zealand: he remarked that while Chifley was content to let Britain deal with those 'Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse' — the four external Russian columns — he was in fact ready 'to suppress the fifth column' inside Australia.⁷⁶

During the 1949 coal strike, Chifley's unyielding stand and robust actions rested on his estimation of a powerful communist party guided by Moscow, intent on undermining the labor party, the government and the economy. This assessment inflated the capacity and intention of the communist party, but was derived from the party's own policies and pronouncements, and confirmed by its own actions. The internal party document or the confidential report at a closed cadres' meeting was usually given a 'High Reliability' rating by security, so bold aims and brazen claims were generally accepted as fact. But given that communists were prominently involved in the strike; given that the communist party believed the time was ripe to challenge the labor party leadership; given their loyalty to a foreign power with whom war seemed imminent; and given some strong circumstantial evidence of their cooperation with soviet espionage operations, to see communism as a threat was not an irrational or hysterical response. The issue of communism, in short, was not concocted from cold war paranoia.

If we accept that labor's hostility to communism in the late forties was not primarily the product of paranoia, an important judgement must be made. What must be confronted is that the communist party itself was at least partially responsible for arousing passionate anti-communism. This is not a comfortable conclusion, especially for those who cling to the doctrine of communist innocence. To sidestep some of the grotesque communist behaviour in the early cold war years is to exonerate a party whose mindset and praxis were then deeply and thoroughly Stalinist. Although countless communists were inspired by noble causes to which they displayed a courageous and selfless commitment, their understandable devotion to the Soviet Union twisted a good fight into the service of a degenerate ideal. Communism was not the diabolical conspiracy of Moscow stooges engaged in systematic subversion, as portrayed by the cold warriors. But nor was it the unblemished expression of

indigenous revolutionary tradition, in which connections to Moscow were merely perfunctory, as portrayed by successive generations on the left. Thus, in response to new archival evidence, historians may draw conclusions about the communist party almost as harsh as those made by the Chifley government. In pursuing such a controversial issue, historians must confront cold war communism without sentiment, neither glorifying the communist project nor dancing on its grave.

Endnotes

- 1 Space prevents a discussion of the international cold war context; however, it is worth recalling one defining event, which resembled incipient war: the soviet imposition of the Berlin blockade (1948-49). It was broken, dramatically, by an airlift, to which Australia contributed, eleven months later. See Australian Archives, Canberra [hereafter AA (ACT)]: A2087/1, Item 4/61/AIR Pt.1 ('Operation Pelican).
- 2 *Western Times*, Bathurst, 4 July 1949, p. 2.
- 3 Robin Gollan has argued in *The Coalminers of New South Wales: A History of the Union, 1860-1960*, Melbourne, 1963, p. 233, that communist party policies were only the 'proximate cause' of the 1949 strike.
- 4 Tom Sheridan, *Division of Labor: Industrial Relations in the Chifley Years 1945-1949*, Melbourne, 1989, p. 311.
- 5 W.J. Brown, *The Communist Movement and Australia*, Sydney, 1986, p. 177.
- 6 Meredith Bergmann, 'Dress Rehearsal for the Cold War', in Ann Curthoys and John Merritt, *Australia's First Cold War: vol. 1 Society, Communism and Culture*, Sydney, 1984, pp. 75-6.
- 7 Jack McPhillips, 'Was the coal strike a communist plot?', transcript of address given to 75th Anniversary Conference of CPA, 'Socialism Today', Melbourne, 29 October 1995 (my thanks to Margaret Hutton for this reference).
- 8 Edgar Ross, *The Coal Front: An Account of the 1949 Coal Strike and the Issues It Raised*, Sydney, n.d., p. 88; E.A. Bacon, *Outline of the Post-war History of the Communist Party of Australia*, Brisbane, 1966, p. 17; Alastair Davidson, *The Communist Party of Australia: A Short History*, Stanford, 1969, p. 108; Audrey Johnson, *Fly a Rebel Flag: Bill Morrow, 1888-1980*, Melbourne, 1986, p. 189. This tendency becomes more pronounced in journalists' articles on the early cold war. For a recent example, in which the terms 'hysteria' and 'paranoia' are used axiomatically, see *The Age*, 19 November 1996, B section, p 3.
- 9 See L.H. Gould, *Marxist Glossary* Sydney, 1960, pp. 30-1. One of the best descriptions of the party's 'leftism' came from Ted Bacon, then a central committee member. In explaining 'dogmatic beliefs that did not accord with the realities of the time', Bacon stated: 'Sure that their outlook and proposals were what the working class and the nation needed, and distressed by the growing coldness of their reception, many communists began to seek refuge in sectarian bitterness'. E.A. Bacon, 'The Struggle for Unity in the Labor Movement in the Post-War Period' (paper delivered to symposia on the history of the CPA since World War 11), n.d., pp. 6-7. For a useful elaboration of what the word 'sectarian' involved for the CPA in the postwar period, see Alastair Davidson, *op. cit.*, p. 114.
- 10 Importantly, the ALP was convinced that the CPA took its lead from the cominform. In a pamphlet authorised by the general secretary of the ALP, P.J. Kennelly, it referred explicitly to an article in the *Communist Review* in which the CPA 'admits following the directions of the cominform'. See *Speak Up for Labor and Liberty*, Melbourne, March 1949, p. 2. Pamphlet in possession of the writer.
- 11 L.L. Sharkey, 'The Meaning of Dr. Evatt's Policy', *Communist Review*, December 1947, pp. 752-7.
- 12 Records of the communist party of Australia, 1920-1991, ML MSS 5021, ADD-ON 1936, 5(76), Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, Sydney (hereafter CPA Records): R. Dixon to central committee plenum, 20 February 1948.
- 13 CPA Records: J.C. Henry to central committee plenum, 22 February 1948, p. 8.

- 14 CPA Records: R. Dixon to 15th National Congress, 8 May 1948, p. 71.
- 15 As H.P. Lazzarini (labor MLA for Marrickville) stated rather luridly, 'Unless we take them by the throat they will take us by the throat in the near future. Let us make no mistake about that'. *NSW Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 188, 2 November 1948, p. 293.
- 16 See reports given by Dixon and L.L. Sharkey to central committee plenum, 18-20 February 1949.
- 17 CPA Records: E.J. Docker to political committee meeting, 16 March 1946, p. 3.
- 18 It was a measure of the CPA's flight from reality that the unremitting attacks to which it was increasingly subjected prompted neither modification nor re-evaluation but served to confirm the party of the correctness of its position and led to the adoption of even more extreme and self-defeating policies.
- 19 CPA Records: R. Dixon to 15th National Congress, 8 May 1948, p. 73.
- 20 Some veteran party union officials, such as Tom Wright, were a little slow to mend their ways. Wright was the long-standing federal president of the Sheet Metal Worker's Union, the secretary of the Communist Party from 1924 until removed under comintern pressure in December 1929, and was only very narrowly defeated by P.J. Clarey in the 1947 ballot for the presidency of the ACTU. In a highly revealing admonishment, Sharkey told him at an internal party meeting: 'Comrade Wright says he is too tied up with day to day matters in trade unions, but I think we shall have to change this approach on the part of Comrade Wright ... [He] is not just a leader of an important union, he is a member of the political committee of our party. It is not his function to go out collecting dues, but to give political leadership to his Union ... I think Comrade Wright should give more attention to these questions — we have waited a long time for him to do this'. CPA Records: L.L. Sharkey to political committee meeting, 11 January 1948, p. 2. By mid-1949, judging from a seven-page report to a political committee meeting on the eve of the coal strike, Tom Wright had swung into line. See AA (ACT): A6119/79 Item 749: 'Copy of document found at Marx House on 8/7/49'.
- 21 CPA Records: R. Dixon to Central Committee plenum, 18 February 1949.
- 22 Australian War Memorial Archives (hereafter AWM) 89: B.1 [18].
- 23 CPA Records: R. Dixon to 15th National Congress, pp. 71-3.
- 24 *Ibid.* For a detailed discussion of the Queensland strike see Douglas Blackmur, *Strikes: Causes, Conduct and Consequences*, Sydney, 1993, pp. 144-73. See pp. 181-5 for CPA assessments.
- 25 See Tom Sheridan, *op. cit.*, ch. 11; Phillip Deery (ed.), *Labor in Conflict. The 1949 Coal Strike*, Sydney, 1978, pp. 38-43.
- 26 Len Fox, *Broad Left, Narrow Left*, Sydney, 1982, p. 108.
- 27 AA (ACT): M1459/1, Item 21, Chifley to W.C. Higgs, 18 July 1949.
- 28 See, for example, Roger Millis, *Serpent's Tooth*, Ringwood, 1984, pp. 136-7.
- 29 L.F. Crisp, *The Australian Federal Labour Party, 1901-1951*, London, 1955, pp. 179-80. Crisp also provides a lucid discussion of the long-term hostility of the ALP towards the CPA stretching back to the latter's inception in 1920. For a full exposition of this point, see Louise Overacker, *The Australian Party System*, London, 1952, ch. 6.
- 30 R.F.B. Wake, typewritten 'Summary of discussion between the PM (Mr Chifley) and myself', n.d. [1949], in possession of his son, V.R. Wake (my thanks to him for a copy); David McKnight, *Australia's Spies and their Secrets*, Sydney, 1994, pp. 20-21, 303, n.5.
- 31 Sunday Herald, 17 July 1949, p. 7. These briefings may also have been associated with a massive raid of Marx House, the Party's Sydney headquarters, conducted by the security services on 8 July.
- 32 AA (ACT), A6122. Item 257. These CIS weekly reports continued at least until 1954, when their reliability was questioned by one influential departmental secretary. See AA (VIC): B142. Item SC1954/39, correspondence, F.A. Bland to K.H. Bailey, 21 May 1954.
- 33 AA (ACT), A6335/6. Item 6, 'Communist Activities, 1940-46'. For inter-war and wartime surveillance see also Frank Cain, *The Origins of Political Surveillance in Australia*, Sydney, 1983, ch. 7 and his *ASIO An Unofficial History*, Melbourne, 1994, pp. 10-12, 16-20.
- 34 AA (ACT): A2701 XR1, vol. 3, subject cards, 1941-49, Communist Activities, Cabinet decision, 5 April 1948.
- 35 AA (NSW) ST2476/22/2, "'Communism". Investigation Sections and other Miscellaneous Material, 1948-1950', Function No. 15.

- 36 See for example AA (ACT): A611. Item 164, 'Surveillance of persons believed to be engaged in subversive activities, 29 June 1949; AA(ACT): A6122/39. Item 1345, 'Movement of Communist Trade Union Officials', 20 February 1950; Aa(NSW): ST2476/22 Box 5, 'Interstate Movements of Trade Movement Officials', 12 April 1950.
- 37 AA(ACT): A6119 XR1. Item 124. In June 1950, it was noted that 'Blake is sick at the moment with T.B'. During 1949-50, Jack Blake was a member of the Secretariat of the CPA.
- 38 AA(ACT): A6119/37. Item 397.
- 39 Rupert Lockwood, 'Reflections on the 1949 Coal Strike', unpublished typescript, April 1974, p. 9.
- 40 Tom Sheridan, *op. cit.*, p. 370.
- 41 Conversations with Bernie Taft, 24 December 1996, 13 March 1997. In the late 1940s, Taft was the Victorian director of Marx school and a member of the Victorian state committee of the CPA. According to Taft, central committee members Ted Bacon and E.F (Ted) Hill had very strong suspicions about Rodgers.
- 42 AA(ACT): A6119/79, Item 1118, 'ASIO, NSW, Report No. 6512', dated 2 November 1953. The agent was present at a meeting of the central committee of the CPA on 16 October 1953; in what may have been an unsuccessful counter-measure by the secretariat against security penetration, the agent noted that 'few of the CC members were aware of the meeting until just before it started'.
- 43 Correspondence from Val Wake, who holds the diaries, 16 October 1996.
- 44 Michael Thwaites, *Truth Will Out: ASIO and the Petrovs*, Sydney, 1980, p. 40.
- 45 Eric Aarons, *What's Left? Memoirs of an Australian Communist*, Melbourne, 1993, p. 66.
- 46 Peter S. Cook, *Red Barrister: A Biography of Ted Laurie QC*, Melbourne, 1994, pp. 117-8. The communist barrister who confided in Laurie was Jack Sweeney, a future federal court judge. As a result of this incident he resigned from the CPA in 1950 and was 'bad-mouthed in party circles as a deserter'. His 'confidential knowledge' ethically constrained him from defending himself.
- 47 Interview with Jim Comerford, 15 May 1974.
- 48 Address to Forum on the 1949 coal strike, 25 June 1993, *3rd National Conference of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, Newcastle, 24-27 June 1993.
- 49 AA(ACT), A6119/2, Item 134.
- 50 See AA(ACT); A367/1, Item C93714; AA(ACT): A432/82, Item 1949/784; AA(ACT): A6119/2, Item 134; AA(ACT): A6119/79, Item 902, Report No.4911. Comerford was, in fact, a 'non-legal', covert member of the CPA; he revoked his membership in 1956 (confidential CPA source). It is therefore unsurprising that when interviewed by Tom Sheridan in May 1979, Comerford admitted to being influenced by Edgar Ross's 'tactical appreciations' during his time as acting general secretary. See Sheridan, *op. cit.*, p. 370, n. 84.
- 51 AA(ACT): A6122 XR1, Item 577.
- 52 AA(ACT): A6335/6, Item 29. Were the thirteenth task, to politicise union members through industrial struggle, to be read in conjunction with a speech by Edgar Ross, a political committee member, to a central committee meeting in February 1949, predicting 'an impending struggle in the coalfields' to be conducted 'under [our] political inspiration', evidence of communist complicity in the coal strike would have appeared overwhelming. See AWM 89: B.1 [18].
- 53 AA(ACT): A6122/30, Item 1076. This document was seized by the security services during their raid on Marx house on 8 July 1949. It formed part of a major ASIO report entitled 'Evidence of the Method of the Australian Communist Party Proposed and Practised to Achieve its Objective of Communism in Australia'.
- 54 AA(ACT): M1509/1, Item 11.
- 55 AA(ACT): A6112 XR1, Item 348.
- 56 AA(ACT): A6119/79, Item 902. More poignantly, perhaps, this file also contained a report that Idris Williams, the general president of the miners' federation, was reprimanded in January 1950 by the political committee of the CPA for excessive drinking, which again suggests a well-placed informant within the CPA. See also AA(ACT): M1501/1, Item 36.
- 57 See Michael Thwaites, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
- 58 According to one account, Chifley requested assistance from the Clement Attlee, the prime minister of Great Britain, who 'promptly dispatched' Sillitoe. Harvey Barnett, *Tale of the Scorpion*, Sydney, 1988, p. 6.

- 59 Robert Manne, *The Petrov Affair: Politics and Espionage*, Sydney, 1987, pp. 178-85; David McKnight, *op. cit.*, pp. 3, 17-18. For extensive descriptions of the Venona Operation, see Robert J. Lamphere and Tom Shachtman, *The FBI-KGB War: A Special Agent's Story*, New York, 1986, ch. 6 ('The Break') and Ernest Volkman and Blaine Baggett, *Secret Intelligence*, New York, 1989, ch. 4 ('Black Jumbo in the Ether'). The Venona documents were published by the national security agency on the internet; see <http://www.nsa.gov:8080/docs/venona/venona.html>.
- 60 Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB The Inside Story of its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev*, London, 1990, p. 308; Chapman Pincher, *Too Secret Too Long*, London, 1984, pp. 135-6.
- 61 See Christopher Henning, 'How Moscow's agents spied on Australia', *The Age*, 5 October 1996, p. 1; David McKnight, 'Reds under the bed', *SMH*, 5 October 1996, p. 30. For a contrary view, see Norman Abjorensen, 'Petrov spy affair was fake, says victim of inquiry witch-hunt', *Canberra Times*, 6 April 1997
- 62 R.F.B. Wake, 'Summary of a discussion between the PM (Mr Chifley) and myself', *op.cit.*
- 63 See public record office, Kew, London [hereafter PRO]: FO [foreign office] 1110/211, Despatch No. 423 of 8 November 1949 from E.J. Williams to commonwealth relations office, London, 'Communism in Australia', p. 7.
- 64 AA(ACT): A1068 T4, Item DL 47/5/1, joint intelligence committee appreciation No.6/1949, Annex, pp. 2, 19. In its central assumptions this report strongly resembled the 12 August 1949 memo from the British commanders-in-chief entitled 'Far East Strategy and Defence Policy'. See PRO: DEFE, 5/15. See also AA(VIC): MP 729/8, Item 37/432/62, 'Preparation of War Plans', codenamed phoenix one and pelican one, drawn up in 1949 by the military board of the Australian military forces.
- 65 AA(NSW): ST2476/11, Item N39629/352; AA(ACT): A6122, Item 409.
- 66 Interview with Laurie Aarons, 9 December 1993; Edgar Ross, *Of Storm and Struggle: Pages from Labor History*, Sydney, 1982, p. 102. Although a 'front-line activist' in the coal strike — one of the sharpest class battles in Australian history — for Ross, this intended act of sabotage was 'indelibly impressed on [his]memory'. A former communist recalled that during 'the tense situation at the time of the coal strike ... some of the gunmen associated with the waterfront were called in'. Keith McEwan, *Once a Jolly Comrade*, Brisbane, 1966, p. 20.
- 67 AA (VIC): MP729/8, Item 37/431/95, correspondence, Lieut-General Rowell to secretary, department of the army, 5 August 1949, department of the army classified correspondence files.
- 68 AA(ACT): A6122 XR1, Item 404, minutes of meeting, Victoria barracks, Melbourne, 7 July 1949.
- 69 AA(ACT): A1068/T4, Item DL47/1/26, report of joint planning committee attached to memorandum from joint intelligence committee, 1 March 1949, paragraph 6.
- 70 AA(ACT): A1209/23, Item 1957/4882. See also AWM 54: Item 883/2/104, memoranda from chief of general staff entitled 'Security within the AMF in Peace', 30 August, 22 November 1949,.
- 71 AA(ACT): A432, Item 1949/308. Apparently, one leading communist, Jack Henry, said that Sharkey's statement was so foolish that he deserved to be jailed. Interview with Laurie Aarons, 9 December 1993. Sharkey was charged, convicted and sentenced to three years' gaol, later reduced to eighteen months.
- 72 Meredith Burgmann, 'Dress Rehearsal for the Cold War' in Ann Curthoys and John Merritt (eds.), *op.cit.*, p. 76. See S. Ricketson, 'Liberal Law in a Repressive Age: Communism and the Law 1920-1950', *Monash University Law Review*, vol. 3, no. 2, November 1976, esp. pp.116-18, and Lawrence W. Maher, 'The Use and Abuse of Sedition', *Sydney Law Review*, vol. 14 (1992), pp. 301-4 for insightful discussions of the prosecution of Sharkey by the commonwealth government under the crimes act.
- 73 See correspondence re 'Communists in the Services' from Chifley, 21 July 1949, AA(ACT): A1209/23, Item 1957/4882.
- 74 The tension between defence and external affairs is detailed fully by David Lee in his *Search for Security: The Political Economy of Australia's Postwar Foreign and Defence Policy*, Canberra, 1995, ch. 3, and 'Britain and Australia's Defence Policy', *War and Society*, vol. 13, no. 1 (1995), pp. 61-80. See also Ken Buckley, Barbara Dale and Wayne Reynolds, *Doc Evatt*, (Melbourne, 1994), pp. 292-3, 417; C.W.P. Waters, 'Anglo-Australian Conflict over the Cold War: H.V. Evatt as President of the UN General Assembly, 1948-49', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth*

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History, vol. 22, no. 2 (May 1994), pp. 294-316, especially pp. 306-11. This tension was echoed in the Australian government's independent stance *vis a vis* Great Britain towards the cold war in Europe; this is well analysed by Christopher Waters in *The Empire Fractures: Anglo-Australian Conflict in the 1940s*, Melbourne, 1995, chs. 5-6.

75 PRO: PREM 8/787, cypher message, top secret and personal, Chifley to Attlee, 22 January 1948, p. 5.

76 PRO: FO 371/76375, W3519/21/68G, correspondence, UK high commissioner to commonwealth relations office, 20 May 1949.