75th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Communist Party of Australia, 1995

Rowan Cahill

Saturday, 30 October 1920; a sunny spring day in Sydney; and in a hall in Liverpool Street, 26 men and women met to help create the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). Seventy five years later, almost to the day, but this time on a hail and rain swept Sydney evening, 520 people gathered in a Marrickville reception room to commemorate that event and the movement it helped create.

The CPA however was no more, having officially wound up in 1991, its considerable assets held in trust by the Search Foundation to help finance a variety of humanist, left and progressive projects. Communism had declined internationally too, though not completely gone from the political map, and left behind a grab bag of positive achievements and a dreadful catalogue of negatives, steadily unfolding with the legitimisation of dissent and as archives open. So what was there to celebrate? The answer was 'the Australian experience'.

It was a strange occasion in some ways. We gathered to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the founding of a political party that no longer existed, and the contribution of that party to Australian history, society and culture - a contribution yet to be analysed in the fullest sense, though it exists in many bits and pieces (theses, books, journal articles, oral history recordings, memoirs etc) magnificently garnered in the resource bibliography 'Communism in Australia' compiled by Beverley Symons, Andrew Wells and Stuart Macintyre (National Library of Australia, 1994). It is a contribution, too, as yet unrecognised by mainstream Australian history, apart from the Party's reputation as a political nuisance and a focus for the Red Scare politics that were a feature of Australian political life for some fifty years.

Who were the 520 people? A vast cross section of what legendary left journalist Rupert Lockwood once called the largest political party in Australia, that is, former members of the CPA, and those like me whose lives had at one stage or another been significantly touched by the Party. There were people from all walks of life and of all ages, the oldest in their nineties. As one speaker remarked, looking around at the gathering, 'it seems that association with the party has been a recipe for longevity'. Taken out of context, however, that was not so; the death of journalist, activist, author Denis Freney, aged 58, earlier in the year, cast a pall over many, as did apologies from ill and nursing home domiciled comrades around the nation.

It was a night of speeches (by Laurie Aarons, Pat Elphinston, Judy Gillett, Stuart Macintyre, Tom McDonald, Pat Ranald, Don Syme, Beverley Symons),
songs (the Solidarity Choir, Jeannie Lewis), memories, and merriment. Old comrades embraced after decades of apartness; former schismatic foes admitted past mistakes and talked of the need for ‘a new party of the left’; there were expressions of regret that the Party had wound up, that there was no left newspaper like Tribune around any more, nor a theoretical journal like Australian Left Review; rank and file speakers recalled the commitment, humour, sacrifice and rewards of grass roots struggles for socialist values; and in the toilet, I overheard a couple of sozzled redneck comrades discuss the relative merits of favourite automatic weaponry.

It was a night of different histories: the mention of Dr. H.V. Evatt simultaneously drew applause from those who remembered, or had read about, him in the context of the 1950s when he was the enemy of Menzies and opponent of the 1950 Communist Dissolution Act, and boos and hisses from those who remembered him in the context of the bitter conflicts between the Chifley Government and the Party.

Speakers that night referred to the CPA as having ‘achieved results beyond its numerical size’; of having helped make Australia ‘a more democratic and just society’; of Party membership having been ‘a learning experience in an educational sense’; of the Party having given individuals ‘confidence and courage’; of the printed and spoken word being central parts of the Australian Communist experience; of the richness of struggle, comradeship, love, support and understanding one had found as a member of the CPA.

The image I held of the night came not long after 10.00 pm. During a moving rendition of The Internationale, as the Solidarity Choir led the gathering, the oldest comrades began to leave, veterans of countless local and national struggles and campaigns, erect as walking frames and sticks allowed, relatives and friends in support, eyesights dimmed, some tears, shuffling, stooped but unbowed. I was moved to tears.

I left with questions of the night. If this many people could gather for such an event and commemoration, could they also gather to create a new progressive outfit? What about a coalition like the Alliance alternative in Aotearoa/New Zealand? Too much to hope for? The party was dead; and its death ironically enabled the flow of memory and reconciliation, and affirmation of socialist vision. Create a new outfit, and would history be repeated? Would doctrinal zeal, schisms and egos compete for centre stage and stymie vision and purpose? Hail stopped my questions as I went into the night.

The Marrickville function was part of a variety of events commemorating the 75th Anniversary held around the nation in October and November 1995. I made it to two more functions.

Monday October 30 saw me jockeying in dodgem mean streets, the byways and delivery routes near the concrete overheads to Sydney’s central business district, momentarily lost behind the facades of Darling Harbour, unfamiliar with old stamping grounds after nearly 30 years
absence (gone were the railway yards and waterfronts), as I headed for the Tom Nelson Hall and the one time Sydney Branch office of the Waterside Workers' Federation (WWF), and an exhibition of CPA photographs, leaflets, pamphlets, posters, and other memorabilia from 75 years of campaigns and achievements.

An audience of 90 or so gathered for the opening of this week-long exhibition. The speakers were Communist veterans: Mona Brand, Vera Deacon, Della Elliott, and Len Fox. They reminisced about the Party, some memories going back to the early 1930s; they spoke of the positive feelings and warmth generated by party life as comrades worked together for a common cause; of there having been commitment and humour, pointing out that party life was not 'a grey serious business at all'. And there was the belief there were more positives than negatives in Australian Communist history; and affirmation that the future demands a co-operative, socialist society.

From this occasion I drew strength. It was wonderful to hear and see veterans, still thinking, creative, and optimistic, angry but able to laugh; while the historical display made me yearn and hope for a permanent Labour History museum, sometime in the future, where the contributions of the labour and left radical movements to Australian society and culture could be recognised.

Ten days later I was back there again, this time with 100 people at a dinner to celebrate the CPA's foundation and honour maritime veterans of the party, a function organised by the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) and various socialist groupings within that union. The speakers were all key people, past and present, in the maritime labour movement: Harry Black, John Coombs, Robert Coombs, Paddy Crumlin, Jim Donovan, Pat Geraghty, Don Henderson, Taff Sweetensen.

The context should be explained as this gave the evening its undercurrents. The date was 9 November 1995. Within the seamen's division of the MUA there was turmoil and some violence over leadership issues, a conflict which reminded me historically of Seamen's Union (SUA) political styles of the 1920s and 30s. In the wider union movement the Australian Council of Trades Union was finally planning an all-out assault against the mining company CRA over the issues of individual contracts and de-unionisation of the workforce.

While the speakers affirmed 'the need for organisation against predatory capitalism', the relevance of trade unionism, and the need to keep alive the history and achievements of the CPA and the Communist influenced unions (of which the SUA and WWF, amalgamated in 1993 to form the MUA, were 'lighthouse' examples), there were also expressions of pessimism, and the feeling that maybe the capitalists were in danger of getting the upper hand.
I later sought out one of the speakers, Don Henderson, a former leader of the Firemen and Deckhands’ Union of NSW (which amalgamated with the SUA in 1993). His quiet, reflective words about industrial struggle had reached out to me. We talked, and I paraphrase: We learn from history, but it is not sacrosanct. Mistakes were made in the past, and will be made in the future. We cannot hold onto the past; we cannot bind generations to it. Industrially each generation creates its own response to situations, given the circumstances and contexts of the time. Industrial struggle is like a Shakespearian play; the script remains the same - what changes are the players, focus, and interpretation.

So ended an interesting fortnight. What impressed me most about the celebrations had been the rank and file recollections and reflections, and the historical exhibition. To me these demonstrated that the strength of the CPA, its heart and soul, had been the rank and file, those who had organised and campaigned locally in the suburbs, and in the factories, mines, ships, wharves ...

Hopefully a future Party history will be able to go beyond the leaders and the Central Committee and the ideologies, and reaching ‘below’, capture the rich human dimensions that were obviously there.