##### Essay from theme:

##### The Communist Party of Australia

It has been generally accepted that the events at the ninth annual conference of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) in 1929, resulting in a change of leadership and the ousting of the “right-wing deviationists”, were a turning point in its history. The incidents which surrounded the 1929 conference, the characterisation of the leading players, the role of the Communist International (Comintern), and the estimation of its outcome have been variously interpreted but none doubt its significance. The period has been covered by a number of writers but the material recently made available by the Comintern Archives in Moscow may serve to illuminate the story further.

One of the main issues discussed by those who have dealt with this period has been the significance of the intervention by the Executive Committee of the Communist International (hereafter known as the ECCI) prior to and on the eve of the ninth conference. Opinions on this matter may be coloured by hindsight and one's own leanings. J.D. Blake has made the point that it is easy to use documented evidence to prove a certain case and filter out (albeit unconsciously) evidence which does not fit the pattern. In making judgments on the role of the Comintern and on its effect on the policies of the CPA this is particularly evident. The Comintern has been perceived as an alien organisation subversively interfering with Australian politics by some, and as an embodiment of working class international solidarity transcending national barriers by others. Present day knowledge of Stalin's domination of the Comintern from 1929 can also distort our perceptions of the way it was seen then. In writing a history of the Communist Party, the position taken by Lance Sharkey, one of the central figures in opposition to the Kavanagh leadership, is that the ECCI intervention was vitally necessary in order to overcome what he considered to be the right-wing opportunism of the Central Committee Executive (CEC) if the CPA was to develop as an independent force. In this he is supported by Ernie Campbell in his analysis of the period. Jack Blake judges the differences between the antagonists as "not so fundamental as they were later made to appear" but sees the intervention by the ECCI as the factor which turned the scale in favour of the opposition “at least at the top”. Alastair Davidson's view is that the opposition gained the ascendancy over the leadership as a result of support gained by appeals to both the ECCI and the rank and file resulting in the defeat of the leadership at the ninth conference. Tom O'Lincoln asserts that with Soviet backing the opposition's victory was assured, while Peter Morrison rejects the view that the CPA was a tool of the Comintern. He states that the defeat of the Kavanagh leadership at the conference was a direct result of the experience of the CPA in Australia with the Sydney-based national leadership finding itself out of step with its state constituents. The ECCI was merely “a pawn” in the game.

In reviewing the role played by the ECCI in the 1929 events it is also important to note that the nature of the relationship between the Comintern and the CPA changed over time. Following the recognition of the CPA in August 1922 as the affiliate of the Communist International (Cl), contact was for several years via the colonial department of the British section, and by 1928 through the secretariat of the CI's Anglo-American Section. These early years were difficult ones for the new party. After the poor showing in the 1925 NSW state elections Guido Baracchi, editor of The Communist, had (unsuccessfully) proposed the liquidation of the CPA. In 1926 Jock Garden, secretary of the NSW Labor Council, left the party also believing the CPA had no future. Both Barrachi and Garden were formally expelled by the CPA at its sixth annual conference in December 1926. Garden and his supporters in the trade unions moved away from the CPA and began to work with the Lang-led Labor Party in New South Wales. With the Party membership depleted, Tom Wright, general secretary of the CPA since 1924, made several pleas in the mid-1920s to the ECCI for assistance.

One consequence was that in 1926 Hector Ross, CPA executive member, went to the USSR for discussion with the Comintern, and in the following year Wright himself was able to spend the months from August to October in Moscow, where, through the agency of the British section, he had extended meetings with other members of the ECCI, including Bukharin (general-secretary of the Communist International). Among the main issues discussed were Australia's development towards an independent capitalist country, mass immigration; the “White Australia Policy”; and also the relationship between the CPA and the ALP, a subject which was to present difficulties for the CPA during its entire existence.

These meetings resulted in what became known as the October resolution which clearly stated that, “If time is not yet ripe for revolutionary mass actions ... [then] ... revolutionary propaganda and agitation must be made the centre of gravity for the Communist Party.” The aim of the propaganda was to popularise “this platform among as many left labor organisations as possible”. It concluded that “the coming years will show whether it's possible to create such a real Labor Party through coming years with the struggle and victory of a Left opposition into the ranks of the present Labor Party, or whether it will be necessary for the Left unions to found a new Party for this purpose. Obviously the Communist Party at that time, with the ECCI's agreement, still hoped to transform the Labor Party by working with its left-wing and the resolution, while stressing its independent role, represented the CPA as an outside pressure group rather than as a mass revolutionary party.

As a result of Wright's visit in 1927, an Englishman stationed in Moscow as part of the British section, H.W.R. Robson, visited Australia under the pseudonym Murray, and attended one of the sessions of the seventh annual conference in December 1927, a conference which was divided on its attitude to the Labor Party. As a result of the divisions, four members of the Central Executive Committee (CEC) Jack Ryan, Norman Jeffery, Esmonde Higgins, (Editor of *Tbe Workers' Weekly*) and Lance Sharkey had been removed as “rightists” by those who supported Jack Kavanagh, chairman of the CPA since 1925. Robson, concerned about the issue, returned to Moscow several months later accompanied by Herbert Moxon, Queensland organiser, member of the executive of the CPA's Central Committee, and at this time, a strong supporter of Jack Kavanagh. Moxon's Queensland base is important; the relations between the CPA and the ALP in Queensland were to be central to the issues to be discussed at the ECCI meetings in 1928.

In Queensland there was increasing dissatisfaction amongst workers with William McCormack, the Labor Premier. In 1927 he had supported the use of “scab” labour during the South Johnstone Mill and Cane sugar-cane industry strike, which lasted from May to September, and during the ensuing lock-out of the railway workers who refused to handle “black” sugar. With the Labor Party in Queensland so right-wing, there was a strong likelihood of a left-wing ALP breakaway, a proposal already made by the Australian Railways Union. The CPA had won a great deal of approval for its militant stand in both the sugar and railway disputes, and saw that this was the time to oppose the right-wing Labor candidates in the coming state elections. By standing candidates the CPA hoped to be seen as a real alternative, not merely a pressure group. As this was a sharp shift away from previous approaches to the ALP, and as divisions already existed about how to approach the ALP in general, the CPA welcomed the opportunity to discuss the question with the ECCI.

It is necessary to study the international background against which Wright's efforts to achieve closer contact with the ECCI were showing results. The improved communication took place in the period when Stalin, general-secretary of the CPSU, had turned his attention to wresting the leadership of the Communist International from Bukharin, who was now his main threat within the CPSU leadership. There was a fierce struggle for theoretical ascendancy being waged between the two.

The battle centred around the nature of the “third period” as classified by the Comintern. The first had been the period of the revolutionary crisis of capitalism between 1917 and 1923, followed by the second, “the period of temporary stabilisation of capitalism” and the development of united front policies with social-democrats. The “third period”, proclaimed by the ECCI in February 1928 dealt with the issue of the stability or instability of capitalism. Bukharin considered that western capitalism would stabilise itself on a higher technological and organisational level and that revolutionary upheavals would come in the west from “external contradictions” such as imperialist war rather than from internal crises. Stalin's supporters, on the other hand, proclaimed that, as S.F. Cohen puts it “advanced capitalist societies, from Germany to the United States were on the eve of profound internal crises and revolutionary upheavals”.

These two different analyses led to two different approaches to social democracy. Bukharin advocated a united front between social-democracy and the revolutionary movement; he urged a united front from below, less unity at top levels, and the strengthening of the independent Communist Parties. Stalin, on the other hand, saw social-democrats as “social fascists” a term first espoused and then dropped by Zinoviev in 1924. Fascism, a fairly new phenomenon, was the name given to the organisation and principles of Mussolini's anti-semitic and anti-communist nationalist party, founded in 1919 in Italy. Later, Nazism, under Hitler was to adopt the same principles. Under the term “social fascist” social democracy and fascism were described as “twins”. Bourgeois democracy, according to Stalin, maintained its power only with the support of the social-democrats, who aided the capitalist offensive against the workers in periods of decline. According to Richard Dixon, a long-time president of the CPA, Stalin virtually identified the bourgeois form of capitalist class rule with fascism. Since social democracy was dependent on the system of bourgeois democracy it had no role to play in the struggle against fascism. Stalin's policy meant that Communist Parties everywhere were expected to refuse to work with social democrats, destroy reformist influence, and thereby win the leadership of the working-class in the struggle for revolution, seen as being on the immediate agenda. In addition, and more ominously, Communist Parties should purge from their ranks those “rightwing deviationists” who advocated working with social democracy. In the new circumstances they were now the main danger within.

#### The Queensland Resolution

Prior to the ECCI discussions with the Australians in April 1928, preliminary skirmishes between Stalin's and Bukharin's supporters had already taken place at an ECCI meeting in February and at the Fourth Congress of the Red International Labor Unions (RILU). On 20th April when the ECCI met to discuss the Australian question, divisions as to the general line would have existed (at least covertly). Bukharin was present at the discussion. Likewise, both sides of the argument in the CPA over its policy in relation to the ALP were represented. In addition to H.W.R. Robson and Herbert Moxon, there were two of the four CPA members who had been removed from the CEC as “rightists” at the 1927 annual conference. These were, jack Ryan, research officer of the Sydney Labor Council, and Norman Jeffery former CPA organiser in Queensland. Both Ryan and Jeffery were returning from the 4th Congress of RILU, which they had attended as delegates of the NSW Labor Council.”

Prior to this meeting the protagonists had been given the opportunity to present their views about the ALP in written form to the Anglo-American Secretariat. Moxon, as representative of the CEC, detailed the differences and attacked both Ryan and Jeffery on a number of issues but chiefly with submerging the Party in their mass activity and as being more concerned with working with the leadership of the ALP than with the rank and file. He concluded, “The majority of the Australian Party is looking to the ECCI to give a decisive ruling in connection with the faction fight.”

Both Ryan and Jeffery had produced a comprehensive report explaining their viewpoint in which they gave the history of the CPA's attitude to the united front since 1921 when “The CP under instructions from the CI adopted the policy of "working from within' [the ALP] with the object of ousting the reformist leaders'. They dealt with 1924 when members of the Communist Party were banned from membership in the ALP at Lang's instigation and the consequent campaign in 1925 to demand the right of unions to delegate Communist Party members to ALP conferences if they so chose. According to Ryan and Jeffery the fight in the ALP had now (1927-28) changed its form. Instead of it being a clear cut issue between the reactionary rightwing and the militant left wing, led by the Communist Party and putting forward CP demands, it had developed into a struggle for control between the reactionary right-wing politicians and the trade-unions allied with some politicians. The second were as nearly reactionary as the first'. They stated that this was where they quarrelled with the majority of the executive of the Party. The CE C decided not to support either side and they (Ryan and Jeffery) opposed this stand, arguing that, 'whether the trade-unions were to control the ALP or not was a matter of concern to the working class, therefore we, [the CPA] could not isolate ourselves from such a struggle.' They reminded the ECCI that the policy put forward by the minority at the 1927 CPA conference was strictly in conformity with the thesis from the CI of organising the left wing in the Labor Party to challenge its leadership on the basis of “a programme of immediate economic demands” and was drawn up with Robson's help.

Robson, in presenting the report at the meeting on April 20th, was critical of the poor organisation of the CPA. He did point out, though, that the membership, only 250 when Tom Wright was in Moscow in 1927, had doubled in less than six months due to the role played by CPA members in the sugar strike in South Johnstone. His view was that the Party's weakness stemmed from divisions in the Central Executive of the CPA on how to deal with the anti-communist attitude of the ALP leaders, and argued that the ALP move to the right called for sharper criticism from the CPA. This applied particularly to Queensland (where an election was due) with the open desertion of the workers by the Labor Government.

After the presentation of Robson's report, the ECCI placed Willie Gallagher (Communist Party of Great Britain representative) in charge of a committee, which included members of the Political Secretariat of the ECCI, together with Robson, Moxon, Jeffery and Ryan, to recommend a policy for the CPA. At the insistence of Petrovsky (CPSU representative on the ECCI) the resolution took up the question of the Labor Party. Within days, the committee put its resolution to the Comintern's Political Secretariat and it was endorsed by the ECCI on 27th April, 1928. While referring to the earlier October 1927 resolution which had envisaged the possibility of having to support a left opposition within the Labor Party the new resolution dealt particularly with the McCormack Labor Government. The Communist Party was to take the lead in the forthcoming Queensland state elections drawing in the masses by adopting the following procedure:

1. In some constituencies left-wing ALP candidates were to stand and would have specially created workers' electoral committees to support them.

2. In all other constituencies a clear campaign against the McCormack Labor Party was to be conducted. Labor Party candidates were to be pressed to repudiate their past policy and to support working class demands. If they refused, workers were to be asked not to vote for them but to make their reason for withdrawing support quite clear. Opposition was to be against persons not the Labor Party itself.

3. Three or four Communist candidates were to stand in carefully selected constituencies.

This document, to be known as the Queensland resolution, did not yet embody Stalin's 'social fascist' line. It was a composite of the 1927 October resolution, the CPA's militant approach to the ALP Queensland Government in Queensland and the new line which was emerging internationally. The resolution was brought back to Australia by Jeffery, was endorsed unanimously by the CEC on 12 July 192 8, except for section 25 which stated that the creation of the left-wing inside the Labor Party should be carried out organisationally along the same lines as used in the formation of the left-wing inside the trade-unions, a proposal already contained in the l927 October resolution. The reason given, and accepted by the Anglo-American Secretariat, was that the Party was 'too weak to make this work'. The campaign for the coming state election in Queensland was then initiated accordingly. The discussions with the ECCI in 192 8 were not seen in Australia as 'interference', but were welcomed by most as an indication that the CPA was indeed an integral part of the Communist International. Wright, as general-secretary, regarded the discussions around the Queensland resolution as the ECCI's first serious consideration of the Australian situation.

The great distance between the Moscow headquarters of the ECCI and Sydney, the home of the CPA's Central Committee, exacerbated by the “artificially imposed tyranny of distance” caused by the political censorship of the Bruce/Page Government which banned material arriving from the USSR meant that, as Margaret Sampson puts it, “the Party was largely ignorant of the battles being fought within the Comintern and the CPSU over Stalinisation”. Those who were in Moscow at the time of the April discussion may have had some knowledge of the divisions. Jack Ryan was not impressed with some of the Comintern personnel he worked with while in Moscow and according to Edna Ryan was beginning to have some doubts about the way it functioned. Esmonde Higgins, editor of The Workers' Weekly and CPA delegate to the VIth Comintern Congress in August 1928, had some idea of the CI conflicts. Though he arrived in Moscow too late to participate in decision making at the Congress, he must have been aware of the situation between Stalin and Bukharin as it had been widely discussed among delegates. Compromises had been exacted from Bukharin at the Congress. He had conceded that social democracy had 'social fascist tendencies' but added 'it would be foolish to lump social democracy together with fascism.' He had also conceded that 'the right deviation now represents the central danger.' Stalin had won the debate over the 'third period' though it was to be another year before the significance of this victory was to penetrate through to the sections of the Comintern. Even the resolutions passed after 'hard-fought compromises' still reflected Bukharin's policies.

Higgins gave a glowing report of the Comintern's Fourth Congress at the CPA's eighth annual conference in Sydney, December 1928 remarking that 'We glory in the fact that we are an International Party ... Decisions are arrived at the instance of representations of these parties and always with their advice.' During the conference, Higgins was the main speaker for a resolution entitled, “The Struggle Against Labor Party Reformism” which said that the ALP was increasingly identifying itself with the openly reactionary aims of the employers and that as the CPA was the only party of Australia 'coming out as an independent revolutionary force we must energetically endeavour to capture the leadership of the Australian workers from the reformists. 'In elections the call was no longer ‘Vote Labor but Vote for the Revolutionary Workers' candidates’ (CPA or left-wing candidates).”

It is interesting to note that left-wing ALP candidates were still included. Supporting the resolution, Wright added “that if left-wing organisations do come into existence, that we ourselves shall be on good terms with them” and “we must be careful not to isolate ourselves from them by ill-considered attacks”. J.B. Miles, representing Queensland, agreed with this to some extent but he considered that 'lf it is going to be necessary to have left-wing electoral committees let us have them, but we must realise that after the elections these committees must go out of existence, or otherwise we are going to build up a second reformist party.' Lance Sharkey, who had been voted out as a rightist' at the 1927 annual conference, in supporting the resolution emphasised that it was a new policy and further that “Although a lot of people are in the habit of declaiming that Australia is a different country from others ... the development of the ALP here is similar to development of Social Democratic Parties in other countries.”

This resolution was much more general in its criticism of the ALP than had been the Queensland resolution and aroused Jeffery's suspicions. Having attended the Comintern discussions he stated, “lt is apparent to me that the Committee [which drew up the resolution] intends the Queensland tactic to be applied to the whole of Australia” and that he did not think this was correct. Higgins replied that there was no reason to make an absolute distinction between Queensland and the rest of Australia and said it was “time we adopted a new line”.

Jack Kavanagh, leader of the CPA since his arrival from Canada in 1925, and the centre of the coming storm, was now a candidate member of the ECCI as a result of Higgins recommendations on his behalf while at the Cl Congress. In addition the CEC had been asked to send a formal request to the ECCI that Kavanagh be invited to Moscow for a period as an official representative on the Comintern Executive. It has been suggested by several writers that Kavanagh was either reluctant to go to Moscow or that he tended to disregard Comintern policies. On the contrary, David Akers records that in 1921, while a member of the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC), Kavanagh had argued the case for affiliation to the Comintern, and had led a left-wing faction out of the SPC into the Workers' Party of Canada, (WPC) which was the legal face of the underground Communist Party of Canada (CPC), already affiliated with the Communist International. He supported the Comintern but it was his interpretation of the united front which caused difficulties for him with both the ECCI and the CPC on several occasions. Kavanagh accused the Canadian party of interpreting the united front as working with the trade-union bureaucracy in 1922 and questioned the affiliation of the CPC with the Canadian Labor Party in 1924 for fear it meant submerging the communist party. Kavanagh considered CPC independence was essential and that the united front meant working with the rank and file of the Labor Party to strengthen its policies the united front from below a view similar to that taken by Bukharin in the “third period” debate. At this time, and on this issue, he stood to the left of Canadian party policy.

Therefore it appears that Kavanagh was not opposed to the Comintern as has been suggested but did not consider that ECCI directives were to be accepted without question. In addition, he had always insisted, as explained by Sampson, that the differences between Australia and the rest of the world were as important as their similarities in determining strategy, which inevitably led him into disagreement with the Comintern's Third Period policy. A close friend of the Kavanaghs, Edna Ryan, insists that he wanted to go to Moscow for discussion with the ECCI but was never issued an invitation, the reason for which was never explained. Clearly, lack of personal contact with the ECCI would have contributed to his failure to understand that the Comintern was becoming more authoritative in its relationships with affiliated parties and that its policies had taken a sharp turn to the left.

Just as he had done earlier in the Canadian situation, Kavanagh had taken a strong stand against the submergence of CPA members within the Labor Party in 1926 and 1927 and had insisted that all communists in the ALP and in trade-unions declare their communist membership, even though there was the possibility of victimisation in some cases. He was an organiser for the NSW Labour Council and widely recognised as communist. In the present situation he considered that each situation should be examined separately and that the Queensland resolution did not necessarily apply to the whole of Australia. He regarded himself as a “Leninist” and would have scorned the term “rightist” as applying in his case.

The resolution on the ALP at the 1928 eighth annual conference of the CPA was passed with few delegates understanding its wider significance as part of a common trend within the communist parties affiliated to the Comintern, to strengthen their organisations in preparation for coming revolutions and to regard reformist parties as enemies. In fact the general political resolution, passed at the eighth conference, specifically stated that, “But while in principle there cannot be, and the CP does not allow, any two interpretations of the nature and role of the ALP... it would indeed be a mistake, and unforgivable, for the CP to apply mechanically and blindly the same tactics in the various states”. The differences of opinion on whether or not the Queensland resolution should apply generally was not resolved. A degree of unity was achieved at the 1928 conference in that Sharkey, Ryan, Higgins and Jeffery were elected once more to a 10 member CEC.

After the conference, the campaign around the Queensland elections, supported by all CEC, members, was renewed with vigour with J.B. Miles and E.C. Tripp standing as communist candidates in the electorates of Brisbane and Mundingburra, respectively. Left-wing candidates stood in Townsville, Fortitude Valley and in Paddington. The elections were held on 11 May 1929 and with only 40 per cent of the vote, Labor lost office after 14 years. The communist and left-wing team polled 3194 votes with E.C. Tripp, who was well-known as a militant in the Australian Railways Union in northern Queensland, polling 1137 votes against the Labor Party candidate's 4995 in Mundingburra. Fred Paterson, a left-wing candidate, who had organised actively for the locked-out railways workers, polled 1418 and the Labor candidate, 3518. In both these electorates only two candidates stood and the informal vote was high, 492 (Mundingburra) and 539 (Paddington), indicating a disinclination for either candidate. Even so, the result was seen as a great improvement on the 1925 NSW state elections where all six Communist candidates lost their deposits, the highest result being for Jock Garden with 317 votes. It was concluded that where communists and left-wingers were in the forefront of actions taken to defend the situation for the working class their votes would increase.

The situation had worsened for Australian workers. The economy had entered a deep depression and unemployment was increasing. The defeat of the waterside workers in 1929 was followed by the timber workers strike against judge Lukin's award in the Commonwealth Arbitration Court, which abolished the 44 hour week for that industry. The strike widened, with members of the Militant Minority Movement (a communist initiative) taking an active part. The strike was finally defeated in October. By then the furore over the owners' lock-out of miners in the northern coalfields was at its height. When the prosecution of mine-owner John Brown was withdrawn (because of his refusal to negotiate if it wasn't), the resultant outcry ended with the Commonwealth Arbitration Court being discredited. The Maritime Industries Bill, introduced by Prime Minister Bruce, in order to hand back the responsibility for arbitration to the States, was defeated and a new federal election was called. The date set for the election was October 12th.

During 1929 debate continued on the question of relations with the ALP. As the argument proceeded and increased in intensity, lines hardened and the debate polarised. Allegiances had changed since 1927. Supporting the application of the line adopted in Queensland to the ALP as a whole were Sharkey, Moxon and Miles (who was not at that time on the CEC). Opposing it were Kavanagh (CPA chairman), Wright (CPA secretary), Ross, Ryan and Jeffery. Esmonde Higgins wavered, not sure of his position.

The CEC decision on the federal elections brought matters to a head. Despite the strong conviction by many that the policy which had been so successful in Queensland should also apply federally, the CEC on 15th September 1929 decided to support the Labor Party to oust Bruce, while promoting an independent Party policy. The CEC policy was at first agreed to by Sharkey, an executive member, who had disagreed with Moxon's view that if there were no Communist candidates the electors should be asked to vote informal but almost immediately Sharkey withdrew his support for the resolution. With Moxon he sent a cable to the Anglo-American Bureau, ECCI, on 18 September, criticising the CEC decision.26

On receipt of the cable, a Comintern Commission was established in Moscow on 20 September to examine the Australian question. Its first task was to cable the CEC, insisting they stand candidates in line with Comintern policy.

Clayton (almost certainly a pseudonym for E.C. Tripp), was in Moscow to attend a Lenin school and was invited to participate in several of the meetings. He argued for the Moxon/Sharkey position, explaining to the Commission that because Australia was divided into five States with a Federal body a tendency existed to see the Labor Party as six different parties. The Queensland resolution drawn up when the Australian representative was in Moscow last time was intended for the CPA in Queensland. Now conditions had changed, with the Labor Party joining with the capitalist class in attacking waterside workers around Australia to lower their conditions. He explained further, that the CEC's case was based on the argument that the CPA would appear as splitting the working class vote, and secondly, that the party was too weak to stand candidates.

The ECCI cable was received on 26 September and a CEC meeting was held the same evening which reaffirmed its original decision defeating a Moxon/Sharkey resolution to stand candidates in selected electorates. Wright cabled the ECCI, “Rush elections October l2 - organisational difficulties prevent Party candidates - consider informal vote inapplicable - advancing same policy Federal elections November last with independent platform”. The ECCI sent a reply on September 29 insisting on policy contained in its previous cable.

On receiving this, Wright sent a written report on October 2 in which he complained bitterly about the factionalism of Moxon and Sharkey. This letter explained that the CPA's policy was to run an independent campaign disassociating the CPA from Labor Party policies, but also to support the Labor Party in the elections in order to defeat the Nationals. He cited the fact that the Nationalist Government now in power in Queensland had cancelled all awards for rural workers, with the implication that conditions, while bad when McCormack was Premier, were worse under the new government and further, he said, “the Nationalist government is preparing to follow the same example”. Wright explained that, “Because of the great variation in the character and organisation of the various state branches of the Labor Party and the varying extent of the disillusionment with Labor governments experienced by the masses, it is obvious that the Communist Party cannot have one uniform tactic to be applied in elections throughout Australia.” Enclosed with the report were the two letters addressed to the CEC and the ECCI written by Moxon and Sharkey on 22nd September, criticising the executive policy at length.

While this correspondence was still on its way, Moxon and Sharkey sent yet another telegram on 8 October: “Our motion that Comintern instructions be operated on received no support Central Committee”, which prompted the ECCI to cable Wright “Awaiting confirmation our telegram.” The general-secretary replied “Acknowledge cablegrams, report dispatched.” On October 21, the CEC was to censure Moxon and Sharkey for their factionalism, which involved circulating Cl documents and cables before CC members had seen them. The ECCI had followed their brief cable with another worded on October 18 at a meeting when Clayton (Tripp) was again present, stating, “that a victory for the Labor Party would strengthen illusions among the masses of workers and encourage liquidationist tendencies among Party members” and affirming once again that it was the duty of the Party to stand independent candidates. The same cable reported that an Open Letter from the Cl to the CPA was being sent, and it should be distributed for discussion before the ninth annual conference to be held in December. After delay, the cable was shown to the Central Committee and circularised among the Party groups.

#### The Open Letter

The Open Letter, written 13 October 1929, began “This is not the first time that the Communist International occupies itself with the Australian Question” and mentioned the 1927 visit of Robson and the 1928 “so-called Queensland Resolution”. It continued, “This time the immediate cause for consideration ... was the decision to support the Labor Party in the Federal elections.” The Letter proceeded to deal with the “third period”, the radicalisation of the working class and the “Right Deviation”, stating: “The question as to whether Australian capitalism will succeed in its plans to subjugate the working class or whether the working class will assume the counter-offensive and develop its revolutionary struggle against capitalism will depend on the ability and determination of the CP to organise and lead the counter-offensive ... This has not been the case until now. The Party has been slow in learning from the experience of the British, German, and French working class and from events in Australia proper. The important decisions of the Sixth World Congress and the Tenth Plenum of the Cl as well as the decisions of the Fourth RILU Congress seem to have been neglected by the CPA.”

It went on. “Even at its conference of December 1928, the Party could not give a proper political estimate of the Labor Party or define its fundamentally social-fascist character, its aggressively counter-revolutionary role in the present situation” and further, “apparently the Party regards itself as being merely a propagandist body and as a sort of adjunct to the Labor Party”. The Open Letter then emphasised the need for a Communist Party to “assert itself as the only true working class Party” and “to conduct open warfare against the Party of class collaboration”.

There was much agitation to have the Letter published in the CPA's newspaper, The Workers' Weekly, where it finally appeared on 6 December. The CEC took the opportunity to write again to the Comintern Executive on 16 December, replying in detail to the Open Letter, maintaining that the leadership “accepts without reservation the need to intensify and clarify the struggle against reformism” and this issue will be “the concern of our ninth conference”. In making criticisms of the Open Letter, the CEC, via Tom Wright, made the point that the present situation was seen as much sharper but not ripe for revolution. Wright pointed out that notes had been left with the Comintern by Higgins in September 1928 to the effect that the “time had come to emerge from the propaganda stage” as suggested in discussions with the ECCI in April but that no reply had been received. Further, he referred back to the resolution on the Labor Party adopted at the December 1928 conference, “no word of criticism came from you, and, even in the Open Letter, apart from reference to one passage in the conference resolution you express no opinion on the decisions of a year ago”. He concluded that if the CPA leadership had made mistakes, so had the ECCI because it had not raised any criticism at the time.

Very few in the CPA realised how fundamental were the changes in the policies emanating from the Comintern. With the defeat of Bukharin, Stalin had succeeded in redefining Third Period policies to mean that capitalist stabilisation was at an end and that revolutionary situations were now certain in Western capitalist countries. Social fascists were now the main enemy. Not understanding what had happened, most of the CPA leadership were bewildered at the advice they were now being given. They were also angry, and simply disagreed. They saw it as important to have the ALP, not the Nationalist Party in power. Indeed, the Labor Party under James Scullin, had succeeded in the October 1929 federal elections in defeating the Nationalist Country Party Coalition. Those, on the other hand, who were impatient with what they perceived as the CEC's slowness in developing an independent CPA campaign, were reinforced by the new Comintern line. The relative inexperience of the Australian communists, the inherent leftism of many of its members, and the feeling that they had been betrayed by the Labor Party, made the Comintern's new appraisal of social democrats as “social fascists” an attractive alternative to the old united front policies. The belief that revolution was already on the agenda was a huge incentive to those who believed in the socialist goal.

The new Comintern line appeared to be correct not only within the Australian context but world-wide. The Wall Street crash in October 1929 did indeed seem to herald the complete collapse of capitalism. As Friedrich I. Firsov, Doctor of Science of History, put it to me in Moscow in November, 1990: “It appeared as if Stalin was right and that capitalism wouldn't develop any further, but events took a different direction. It was a deep crisis but not one that would bring about the end of capitalism. It was one of many crises - but still just one. The crisis was solved in other ways than by proletarian revolution. In Germany it was solved by the totalitarian regime of Hitler. Other capitalist countries took different paths, for example, the welfare state and in the USA by Roosevelt's New Deal.”

Peter Morrison gives as one of the reasons for the differences which developed so strongly in 1929, the different experiences of the Labor Party in different states. The Commonwealth at this time was only 28 years old, and a great deal of power lay with the states. There was a continuing possibility of state breakaways within the Labor Party, and state ALP branches were not always obedient to the national body when developing policy. Federally, the Labor Party had not been in power since 1916, and so had no record on national issues by which it could be judged by the working class, a point made by Tom Wright in his defence of CEC policies in The Workers' Weekly on 1 November 1929. Now that Scullin was Prime Minister there would be opportunity to do so.

Within the CPA too there was state rivalry. This was mainly between Queensland and NSW, Victoria and the other states being less important at that time. These two States had quite different experiences with the Labor Party. The improved vote for the CPA in Queensland, which had a right-wing Labor Government for 14 years, no doubt convinced the party members of that state that the new policy was correct. The lack of similar experience in NSW, which had had a Nationalist Party government since the defeat of Lang in 1927 probably affected the opinion of NSW Party members. These different perceptions of the ALP produced Kavanagh's more cautious view, now branded as “exceptionalism”, that each state should be considered separately.

By December, discontent with CEC policies had reached a peak. After the Open Letter was finally published in*The Workers' Weekly* on 6 December, open debate on the contentious issues was encouraged in its columns. As this debate continued, the lock-out in the Northern coalfields was reaching a dangerous climax. The NSW state government had sent in non-union labour, and a confrontation between the police and the locked-out miners led to the death of a miner on 16 December. The combined effect of this event, *The Workers' Weekly* debate, and the CI's Open Letter was a situation where rank and file support was swinging in favour of the minority on the CEC. To add to all this, another telegram had arrived on 16 December from the ECCI to be read at the ninth conference denouncing the “opportunist attitude” of the present policy and supporting the opposition's attitude as “perfectly sound and necessary”. Clayton (Tripp) and Walters (who had recently arrived to attend the Lenin school) were both at the meeting in Moscow where the contents of the telegram were decided. It was signed by Colon, Thaelman, Semard, Kuusinen and Pollitt.

The cable added fuel to the fire and it was in a mood for confrontation that the delegates began the ninth annual conference on 26 December. The struggle within the CPA until this point had been sharp, but it is very doubtful whether without the requested Comintern intervention, and the importance placed on the Comintern judgment by the Australian communists, it would have been conducted with so much intolerance and bitterness. Allegiance to the Comintern meant that those who disagreed with the “new line” were stigmatised as traitors to the working class. This process of stigmatisation in itself was not foreign to socialist politics. What was new was the belief that there was one path and one path only, and the situation where open disagreement could result in permanent ostracism. Thus it was the opposition's own attitude to the Comintern that created what Higgins described as “the poisonous atmosphere” within which the ninth annual conference took place.

#### The Ninth Annual Conference of the CPA

The discussion at the ninth conference (26-31 December 1929), the decisions it made, and the change in leadership were a turning point in CPA history. Both sides presented their case. Kavanagh, in the chair, referred to the sharp differences of opinion in his opening address, declaring these needed to be “thrashed out at this conference”. The decisions would be binding. He also reiterated that his own position was that “the central task of the Party is to assert its claim to independent leadership of the working class against capitalism and its reformist allies”. Tom Wright followed, giving the Central Committee report, outlining its policy on the Federal elections; he included acceptance of the fact that the majority opposed the CEC's policy on the Federal elections, and that this view was confirmed by the CI.

Herbert Moxon led the attack with a minority report on the second day of the Conference, dealing with the timber strike and the failure to get party groups into activity, the tardiness about the coal lockout, and the policy for the federal elections, charging the CC leadership with “right deviation” and “new guardism”. He gave details of the exchanges between the ECCI and the CPA and called for the conference to lift the censure on Moxon and Sharkey, which had been imposed in October, endorse the Open Letter of the CI, and realise it in practice. Kavanagh objected to this report indicating it was full of inaccuracies and should be placed before the delegates for discussion, but apparently this was not agreed to.

In the third session of the conference on Friday 28 December, immediately after the cable from the ECCI was read, Hector Ross weighed into the debate. He claimed that there had been “a whole mass of misrepresentations and exaggerations” and the debate on both sides had been waged “on a very low level indeed” but he supported the CEC position on the elections. In his analysis of the ninth conference, Morrison found that only the Sydney delegates, excluding Hetty Weitzel (representing the Women's Section) and Anne Isaacs, (YCL representative), supported Kavanagh, while all the states and both northern and southern districts of NSW were opposed to him. In a relatively small conference, Moxon, with nine representatives from Queensland, was able to control the final result.

Following Ross, speaker after speaker supported the minority position. These included Lance Sharkey, Jack Miles, Ted Docker, Bill Orr, Andy Barras, Len Varty and Jack Simpson, Mick Loughran and Richard Walker. Those under attack responded, several making the point that the differences of opinion were merely a pretext f or other motives. Kavanagh stated that the mainspring of the opposition was based on “an opportunist desire for control of the Communist Party”. Jack Ryan replied to the accusation of “right deviation”. Over the year, he said, many had been seen as suffering from it; Sharkey himself “was bumped off the CEC in 1927” as a right winger. The opposition was “utilising a certain situation on the CEC to capitalise in order to get control of the organisation”. Mocking their extremism he said, “I am a treacherous betrayer of the working class because I supported the policy of the CEC in the federal elections.”

Higgins and Jeffery had both changed their minds. Higgins recognised that the line adopted had been a mistake while Jeffery accepted the criticism that the CEC suffered from a right deviation and that “not one member of the whole CC should stand for the CE ... I stand behind CI discipline”. Joe Shelley was in a “quandary”; he argued that had it not been for the definite instructions of the CI the logical target of criticism would have been the decision made by the eighth conference in 1928 where the majority of delegates had made it clear that the Queensland resolution was not to apply generally. However, he said, “there was no excuse for the CC to adopt the attitude it did”. After the debate on the second day of the conference the result was a foregone conclusion. All those on the old CEC who had supported Kavanagh, except Esmonde Higgins whose stand had been equivocal, were voted out of office. The Moxon/Sharkey faction had won.

State and personal rivalries no doubt fuelled the fire, but in examining the material from the Comintern Archives together with evidence from Australian sources it is apparent that, rather than being a mere “pawn” in the game, the Comintern had been the deciding factor in defeating the former leadership. The ECCI had not issued directives from afar of its own volition, but had been very willing to intervene when it was requested to do so. Notwithstanding the bitter antagonism of Moxon towards the majority of the old CEC, it was not chiefly for narrow political gain that he and Sharkey had taken this action. The overriding concern was commitment to ideological unanimity with the Comintern. One of the first acts of the new leadership was to cable the ECCI on 30 December 1929, “offering unswerving loyalty to the new line”.

When all the tumult and the shouting had died away the CPA was profoundly changed. Some consider that the changes were necessary and beneficial, opening the way for the changes in policy and methods of work which led to an impressive growth for the CPA in the period of the great mass movements of the thirties. These gains were made, according to those who hold this view, in spite of the negative effect of the “social fascist” line in the years immediately following the conference. It is doubtful that the gains outweighed the losses. It is possible, as suggested by Blake, that without the sharp polarisation of viewpoint, aggravated by the ECCI intervention, a different and more representative CEC may have been elected. That is conjecture only, but what stands out clearly is that after the 1929 ninth annual conference something precious had disappeared. This was the atmosphere described by Edna Ryan when she referred to the CPA premises of the 1920s as “an open academy” – “it didn't occur to us at the time that we were enjoying liberty of thought and expression, but there was no hushing and stifling, no fear of being accused if one proposed a tactic or an idea”. Though the new leadership set out with courage and vigour to win support for the new line the free-ranging debate and discussion of the twenties under Kavanagh's leadership was gone. Now there was one correct line and to depart from it unless one indulged in self-criticism meant ostracism and possible expulsion.

#### Notes

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