

# discussion

John Senny's book *Comrades Come Rally* has created considerable interest in the Labor Movement in Melbourne. In general, it has made a contribution not only to the history of the Communist Party of Australia, but also to enhancing the reputation of the CPA in the minds of many members of the ALP. That, at any rate, has been my experience.

But I would like to comment on some of the matters raised by Eric Aarons in his review in ALR No. 66. In particular, I wish to contribute a point of view on the split which led to the formation of the SPA.

Was this split inevitable? My view, for what it is worth, is that some people in the CPA would not have been able to accept the growing independent and critical attitudes towards the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and would have left the Party. But it seems to me that this is not the main point.

The thing which concerns me (and John Senny too, I think) was that a split was regarded as desirable by the majority on leading CPA bodies at the time.

Thus Eric Aarons, in my opinion, misses the point when he concedes "excesses". An excess is a departure from a main orientation. In the case of the split with the SPA, it was the orientation towards a split that was wrong.

It was believed that those holding an "opposition" viewpoint constituted a dead weight or worse on the Party, and that the sooner they got out and formed their own outfit the better.

I believe that these attitudes were mistaken for the following main reasons:

1. They took little or no account that people's attitudes can change — perhaps not 180 degrees, but to some extent. After all, nearly all members of the Party holding the majority viewpoint had changed their view on the USSR and pretty rapidly at that. Our Party was relatively late in responding to the 1956 events and many changes came with a rush.

I recall the issue of *Tribune* in November 1967 when Lloyd Churchward wrote an article critical of Soviet democracy. Most leading members of the Party were at least a little outraged. In fact, Laurie Carmichael — in Moscow at the time — was the joint author along with Pat Clancy of a stiff reply to Churchward. But, to his great credit, Laurie Carmichael changed his view. Was it unreasonable to expect others to do the same, especially after the dust settled a little on 1968?

2. That while some people may not change

their view of the USSR very much (if at all), they may still retain a belief in a united party, able to act coherently in Australian conditions. Such people would see how disastrous a split could be in reducing the effectiveness and standing of the Party to which they had devoted a large part of their lives.

There are a number of such people who play a creditable part in the CPA today. There could have been more.

I attended several recent CPA branch meetings at the time of the trials of "dissidents" in the USSR and met a few people in this category. There were some sharp political exchanges on the above issue, but they did not dominate the meetings. All those who had a contrary view to mine were to one extent or another engaged in Party work.

If indeed a split was inevitable in the early 1970s, then the question was: Would there emerge another Party with the numbers and the cadre force with ability and mass connections to be an effective political force to rival and harrass the CPA and be an effective funnel for overseas influence? The CPA's desire for a split ensured a positive answer to this question. We became the assistant recruiting agents for the SPA.

But worse was to come after the split with the SPA, that is, the prospect of a split between those with the "good riddance" attitude and those who opposed it. Some of the exponents of "good riddance" seemed quite calm and fatalistic about such a prospect.

3. A split develops a momentum of its own, accentuating attitudes rather than moderating them. Both sides of the split feel the need to justify themselves. The person with some doubts about Soviet policy but with reservations about the CPA tends to become under the conditions of a split a last-ditch defender of the indefensible aspects of the USSR.

As John Halfpenny has pointed out, many members of the SPA privately express criticisms of the USSR but take a different attitude in public.

In a different way, the CPA has not succeeded yet in coming to terms with the Soviet reality or in developing the ongoing debate necessary for such a process.

Both these phenomena are to be explained largely by the split and the bad atmosphere.

Apart from that, the sag in morale following a split (which we all under-estimated, in my opinion) caused many people on both sides to drop out of political life.

In any case, I believe John Senny's book and Eric Aaron's review will stimulate further consideration of this period of CPA history.

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