

# THE FAMILY FILE

## MARK AARONS

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... a fascinating tale of love and passion, courage and perfidy, ambition and progressive politics. MICHAEL KIRBY



MATERIAL FROM THIS FILE HAS BEEN

In early 1965 at age thirteen, **MARK AARONS** came under the 'adverse notice' of **ASIO**, which opened volume one of his nine-volume security file. Mark was following in the footsteps of his father, Laurie Aarons, whose 85-volume file commenced in the early 1930s when he was fourteen.

For four generations the Aarons family were 'subversive revolutionaries', avowed communists who challenged the established constitutional order.

Having obtained access to his family's ASIO files – the largest collection in the nation's history – Mark Aarons combines their meticulous chronicles with his family's own accounts to tell a political tale of revolution and dissent, idealism and intrigue. It is also an intimate story of life under surveillance, a reflection on communism and its legacy, and on what it was to be a radical in Australia in eventful times.

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"THE FAMILY FILE is a fascinating tale of love and passion, courage and perfidy, ambition and progressive politics, told against a background of world and national events. There are lots of surprises, including the discovery of an unexpected supporter amongst Australian spy-catchers and a near-death confession of human love with the admission that much of the struggle involved the 'self-delusion of revolutionary heroism'. For every page that discloses the autocratic rule of Moscow and the despotism of its minions, there are many more stories of progressive politics in Australia: workers' rights, anti-apartheid, indigenous entitlements, feminism, opposition to the Vietnam War, green bans, East Timor independence, and Australian nationalism."—**THE HON. MICHAEL KIRBY**, AC CMG, Past Justice of the High Court of Australia

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Over the following year ASIO filed numerous intercept reports of our discussions of political activities, anxieties about schoolwork and teenage intimacies.

Just before my eighteenth birthday an ASIO agent reported:

With regard to Mark's C.P.A. membership Laurie stated recently that he had brought no pressure to bear for him to join and it was entirely on his own (Mark's) initiative that he did so.

The party's stance against the invasion of Czechoslovakia and Laurie's speech in Moscow in mid-1969 were defining moments in my youthful political development. I was proud of Laurie and Carol's stands, which I viscerally and intellectually knew were morally and politically correct.

So I followed my brothers into the CPA.

I was aware that Laurie and Carol were at loggerheads with Lee's parents, Bill and Freda. It did not affect us, however; Lee and I remained friends and I was always warmly welcomed in her home as she was in mine. I naively thought this would persist. She travelled overseas with her boyfriend in 1970, while I threw myself into politics at Macquarie University, forming the Socialist Club, becoming president of the Student Council, selling *Tribune* and organising around anti-war and Aboriginal causes. Our friendship continued from afar, including Lee sending me bootleg Bob Dylan records from London. When she returned our friendship resumed, but something had changed.

In 1972 ASIO filed a sharp exchange of letters between Brian and Lee in a university newspaper. Brian's criticism of the socialist countries, especially over the invasion of Czechoslovakia, prompted Lee to question his 'revolutionary' credentials. In Brian's riposte he asked her to indicate 'whether she supports the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the shooting of the Polish workers and the suppression of socialist democracy in the Soviet Union.' Her response evaded these questions, instead adopting neo-Stalinist slogans:

## T W E N T Y - O N E

Lee Brown and I were 'red-diaper babies'. That was how many of our members affectionately referred to the children of communists destined to inherit their parents' political genes. The Aarons and Browns shared friendship as well as ideological commitment. Lee and I followed our We were born in the watershed year of 1951, she at the end of May and I seven months later. By the early 1960s we were friends in the JEL with her in the Souths branch and me in Liverpool.

ASIO tracked our progress. An agent reported the JEL graduation ceremony on 16 October 1965 when we became pioneers, a Soviet term indicating promotion to a leadership position. ASIO recorded that we both attended an anti-Vietnam War demonstration in 1966, followed by numerous telephone-intercept and agent reports of our anti-war activities among high-school students. ASIO traced our close involvement through the Peace Ride to Canberra in 1968, the formation of the Secondary Students Educational Union, right up to the end of our school days in 1969 when my file had already reached 300 pages. In September 1968, ASIO also noted that we had inherited our parents' security consciousness about the telephone:

From his home during the above period, Mark ... contacted Lee ... and said he would like to discuss something political with her and arrangements were made to meet at the steps at St. James Station where they met for the demonstration the previous Friday night - at 1545 hours on Friday (27.9.68). It was suggested that they proceed and have a cup of coffee

Socialist countries naturally do make errors and therefore criticism and self-criticism will be forthcoming ...

I trust that Brian and I agree that the correct way forward is working to build international unity for socialism and peace. As we know this will only come about through a united international working class movement.

I could not conceive of someone of my age and experience supporting Moscow's policies. Friendship persisted, however, and I continued to visit Lee's home. This grew less frequent as I became more uncomfortable with the tenor of her politics. On a visit in early 1974 I mentioned that the ABC Radio National program *Lateline*, for which I worked as a producer, had interviewed Mick McGahey, a communist official of Britain's miners' union, about a strike that had brought down the Tory government. Lee's response convinced me that our friendship was finished, as she aggressively praised McGahey's endorsement of Moscow's invasion of Czechoslovakia.

I had discovered that personal friendships rarely bridge fundamental political disagreements. I only saw Lee again many years later. As ASIO recorded, she became a loyal SPA member until she left in the early 1980s together with the Clancy faction. She later joined the Greens and was elected to the New South Wales Legislative Council as Lee Rhiannon. We renewed our acquaintance there during my time as a senior environment adviser to Bob Carr's government, and traces of our friendship were rekindled.

ASIO did not record our falling-out but covered almost all my other activities. By the 1970s there was little that communists successfully hid from ASIO's surveillance, despite sometimes elaborate counter-measures. This is illustrated by our solidarity work with pro-independence forces in the Portuguese colony of East Timor. The CPA's role commenced soon after the collapse of Portugal's dictatorship in April 1974. In July José Ramos-Horta was dispatched by the fledgling forces that evolved into Fretilin (the

Revolutionary Front of Independent East Timor) to seek support in Australia.

One of Ramos-Horta's first stops was CPA headquarters where Laurie gave him a few hundred dollars. As Ramos-Horta amusingly recounted at Laurie's memorial service in 2005, he immediately spent it on Marxist tracts in the party's bookshop. Laurie also introduced him to communist union officials who supplied money and support. Australia's intelligence community took a close interest in these developments and in March 1975, ASIO provided a detailed account to the Defence Department's Joint Intelligence Organisation:

It appears that the C.P.A. first assumed an interest in the Independence Movement in East Timor after the visit to Australia in July, 1974, of Jose Ramos-Horta ... During the visit Ramos-Horta sought support for his movement from several bodies, including the C.P.A.

2. Following talks between the Australian Prime Minister and Indonesian Leaders, Ramos-Horta, fearing an imminent Indonesian invasion, wrote to the C.P.A. National Secretary, Laurence Aarons, requesting assistance from the C.P.A., including so it has been claimed, guerilla training. Ramos-Horta was probably encouraged by an earlier letter from Aarons indicating support for Timorese Independence.

3. Apparently Aarons ... expressed willingness to help ... early in October, an unspecified amount of money was sent to East Timor. Although the sender of the money is not known, C.P.A. National Committee Member and Party Journalist, Denis Freney, knew it was being sent and had been consulted about it.

Freney was the CPA's senior link to Fretilin. As ASIO reported, he visited Timor in October 1974, 'according to a senior party leader, for

liaison purposes.' He established links with Fretilin's leaders and upon his return formed the Campaign for an Independent East Timor (CIET). In late 1974 Freney requested my participation in the campaign, suggesting that I should accompany a delegation of unionists, aid workers and students and make a radio program about the situation in the colony. ASIO reported:

... in March, CIET organised the visit to East Timor of a seven-member delegation which proposed 'investigating allegations that Indonesia is planning an invasion of the country'. Two of the group, Keith Wilson and Mark Aarons, are prominent members of the C.P.A.

The delegation travelled widely, meeting key leaders and ordinary Timorese. Two things were clear: an overwhelming majority supported independence and Fretilin; and there was indeed an orchestrated Indonesian campaign to illegally seize the territory. Whitlam's policy encouraged Jakarta's belief that Australia would not resist its efforts to thwart a genuine decolonisation process.

On my return I continued to report events on ABC Radio National, culminating in Indonesia's full-scale invasion in December. In early 1976 I joined a small group of CPA members in organising an illegal two-way radio connection between the Northern Territory and Fretilin in Timor. In February I travelled to Darwin to assist Andrew Waterhouse. An old comrade from Macquarie University, Waterhouse was a technical genius who established an effective radio connection on the notoriously fickle single sideband wavelength. My initial job was to ferry him around and scurry up trees with antennas.

By mid-February, Freney was directing a nationwide operation. The key CPA figures in Darwin were Brian Manning, who had worked on the Gurindji campaign, and Warwick Neilley. ASIO looked askance at our activities, as seen in this telephone intercept report of late February:

Mark (AARONS) contacted Denis (Denis William FRENEY) with the following message:

"Lexicon 195, 31 162, 35 295, 45 42, 43. 17,44 84, 23f 202,4 119,18. 198, 15 64,11 320, 25. 316, 36 301, 12 18, 27 296, 4. End of message".

Mark asked Denis if he would 'call back'. Denis replied 'Yes, the usual number'. Mark said he would wait up for a while ...

To Record: Cont. use of code by Australian Supporters of Fretilin.

This was one of hundreds of similar reports during these years. At my suggestion, Denis adopted a simple code that entailed key members of the group using the same books (usually foreign-language dictionaries) and constructing messages using page and line-number references. We later discovered the code-breakers of the Defence Signals Directorate had quickly decrypted our messages. We did not rank with *Venona's* decrypts.

The Fretilin radio was transmitting accurate reports of Indonesian mass killings and other war crimes, which spurred our work. Money rapidly emerged as a major problem. In mid-March ASIO reported the visit of Fretilin leader Rogerio Lobato, who met with Freney and me. Our resources were running low; the party could hardly afford to fund its own activities, let alone sustain an extended radio operation. We discussed money with Lobato, a swaggering, corrupt operator who was later gaoled in Angola for diamond smuggling.

Fretilin's external leaders proposed a solution: the newly-independent ex-Portuguese colony of Mozambique was ruled by Frelimo, a Marxist liberation movement; it had inspired the formation of Fretilin and would finance the operation. ASIO picked up hints of this on 30 March when its Sydney office telexed headquarters:

... INFORMATION FROM QANTAS RE MARK AARONS AS FOLLOWS:-  
 AARONS BOOKED ON SOUTH AFRICAN AIRWAYS SPECIAL FLT. 2411 ETD 1300 31ST MARCH. DISEMBARKING MAURITIUS THEN EAST AFRICAN AIRWAYS FLT. 844 ON 1ST APRIL TO DAR-ES-SALAAM.

When I read my ASIO file I discovered that my destination was known even before I left:

IT IS PROBABLE THAT FROM TANZANIA AARONS WILL TRAVEL TO MOZAMBIQUE.

My ultimate destination had been revealed to only a handful of trusted party members including Libby Egging, the young woman with whom I lived. To evade surveillance I wrote down the details of my trip, showed Libby, then burned the note. I need not have bothered. The extent of ASIO's penetration of our operation is revealed in an extraordinarily detailed agent's report. This demonstrates that someone close to us was actually an ASIO plant. On 6 April, while I was still overseas, this agent supplied an accurate overview:

In a recent conversation Mark ... AARONS stated that he was going to Mozambique on Wednesday 31 March, 1970 to obtain \$40,000 from Fretilin to finance their expenses in Australia. He said the money will be brought back to Australia in travellers (sic) cheques and used exclusively for Fretilins (sic) benefit ...

In addition to knowing the precise details of my trip, the agent had a complete overview of the plans devised by CPA national industrial officer Joe Palmada to upgrade the operation in the Northern Territory by recruiting people not previously known to 'the security authorities

PALMADA indicated he has been seeking details about the current state of roads, caravan parks, tourist spots, and general lifestyle of the Northern Territory. He said the new operation would be based on a typical tourist group moving about the Territory in a caravan doing what the normal tourist does and thereby not attracting any unwelcome attention.

Palmada was a sometimes gruff but very astute organiser with a tough mind and practical approach to getting complicated jobs done. He was extremely security-conscious but failed to detect this agent, who reported on a secret meeting attended by Laurie, Palmada, Freney and Waterhouse soon after I had departed. This source was not only well placed to gather intelligence, but also had an accurate understanding of our motives:

Agent's Comments:

- (a) The new plan for the operation of the Fretilin radio in Darwin appears to be the result of collective thinking between Mark AARONS, Denis FRENEY, Laurie AARONS, Joe PALMADA, and Andrew WATERHOUSE.
- (b) The Party's involvement in East Timor is the result of a genuine desire to assist fraternal comrades in a revolutionary situation. They feel it is a unique situation for them and they are more than happy to assist Fretilin's forces in their revolutionary struggle against the Indonesian imperialists.
- (c) The Communist Party of Australia don't seem to be concerned with making political capital out of East Timor and/or Fretilin; they simply want to provide tangible material aid for the progressive Fretilin forces. To this end they are prepared to commit considerable resources to assisting Fretilin. It is probably true to say that the Communist Party of Australia's industrial and other activities have suffered because

of Laurie AARONS and Joe PALMADA's pre-occupation with Fretilin business.

After a brief stopover in Mauritius, I arrived in Mozambique's capital, Maputo, via Johannesburg. It was arranged that my passport would not be stamped either entering or exiting. I was taken to the Polana, a colonial-era hotel on the waterfront, and then met with Frelimo officials to arrange the transaction. Within a few days Frelimo had organised a cheque drawn against a New York account. I immediately flew to Dar es Salaam, accompanied by comrade Andrade, a Moscow-trained Frelimo militant whose job was to assist in cashing the cheque and purchasing traveller's cheques. On arrival he took me to the Hotel Kilimanjaro and said he would pick me up the next morning to arrange these transactions. I never saw him again.

After a couple of days I realised I was on my own. I located a bank several blocks away with a foreign-currency section on a mezzanine floor, accessed via a crazy spiral staircase. The bank was understandably suspicious of my New York-based cheque. I became dizzy scurrying up and down the spiral staircase from the main bank counter to the foreign-currency department, bouncing from one disbelieving teller to another. After a few days I despaired. My last attempt was inexplicably successful. The price I paid was a stamp in my passport documenting the transaction. My heart sank, but the die was cast. I spent several hours signing hundreds of traveller's cheques.

I flew home via Mumbai and Jakarta, with the cheques pinned in my inside coat pocket. Arriving at dawn in Mumbai I was unnerved by the haunted eyes of hundreds of fringe-dwellers living on the runway's edge. The Jakarta stopover was short but scary. Alighting from the plane my first sight was of armed Indonesian soldiers, the murderous enemy of my Timorese comrades. I did not breathe easily until the plane was back in the air.

ASIO had arranged my 'welcome home'. Two days after I left Sydney a telex was sent to ASIO headquarters:

#### IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT ON HIS RETURN AARONS BE SUBJECTED TO A COMPLETE CUSTOMS SEARCH.

This was just as thorough as Laurie's upon his return from Indonesia in 1954. Everything was taken out of my suitcase. Dirty socks and underpants were examined and the suitcase lining prodded for foreign objects. The silk-lined wooden box in which the hotel staff had placed the silver-woven breastplate I had bought Libby was cut open to ascertain if anything was hidden therein. But I was not requested to turn out my pockets. I could scarcely believe it when I was told to repack my scattered possessions and be on my way. It was over thirty years before I understood why.

In 1971 ASIO had debated whether to subject Laurie to a 'full body search' on his return from overseas. This proposal was rejected by ASIO's cautious legal officers who worried that if such a search proved unsuccessful it could set an unfortunate precedent. I was the beneficiary of this decision. Had I been forced to reveal the thick wad of traveller's cheques, I would have been in breach of currency importation regulations. It took many weeks, and dozens of banks, to cash them.

I then retired into the background but remained in close contact with Freney. I gradually became deeply worried about events inside Timor. Throughout 1976-77 the resistance retained the upper hand, despite Indonesia's overwhelming superiority. America's decision to supply sophisticated counter-insurgency and chemical weapons slowly turned the tide. Freney's news disturbed me, especially Fretilin's increasingly extreme declarations over the radio.

By mid-1977 it was clear that a fanatical group of Maoists had seized control of Fretilin's internal leadership. In September Freney published a speech by Lobato's brother, Nicolau, who led the resistance in a heroic stand against overwhelming odds. It was a violent denunciation of the president, Francisco Xavier do Amaral, as a 'traitor'. Nicolau's language mimicked Mao's Cultural Revolution, denouncing

Xavier and his supporters as 'lackeys of imperialism' and 'running dogs.' Even more chillingly, Lobato boasted of the severe treatment to which they had been subjected: 'confessions' had been 'dragged out' of them. Over the following year Lobato's Maoist invective grew more strident and I became increasingly concerned, sometimes arguing heatedly with Freney.

I felt that he had lost perspective. The more violent Lobato's denunciations became the more doubts I had, but Freney adamantly defended Fretilin's line. The ultimate 'plot' was 'uncovered' in October 1978, when Fretilin's interior minister, Alarico Fernandes, was denounced as a 'traitor.' Freney confided that he suspected Ramos Horta was Fernandes's co-conspirator in a scheme to collaborate with Jakarta. Freney then travelled to Mozambique to consult Fretilin's external leadership, which had illegally detained Ramos-Horta.

None of these paranoid claims was true. Fretilin's Maoist faction had unleashed a regime of terror against loyal patriots whose only 'crime' was to disagree with the absurd proposition that a Maoist revolution should be waged while fighting a war of liberation. Official inquiries after independence established that the Maoists had engaged in the brutal torture of hundreds of innocent victims; inhumane incarceration (often in cells dug in the ground); the institution of Maoist-style 'popular justice' in which crowds of Fretilin militants acted as prosecutor, jury and judge; and arbitrary executions carried out by senior Fretilin officials.

In 1978 I knew nothing of these crimes, but feared the worst. I knew and admired Xavier and Alarico and considered Ramos-Horta a good friend. I doubted they were traitors, although I continued to publicly defend Freney's line despite growing misgivings. I rationalised that the Indonesians were perpetrating horrific war crimes and that Fretilin's cause was just. The collapse of the resistance following Lobato's death in late 1978 was a catastrophe. It did not shake my belief in the justice of Timor's cause, but these developments had shaken my faith in both the CPA and Marxism.

These events coincided with a more complex process that evolved over several years, involving both domestic and international issues. For example, like other CPA members, I had uncritically supported Vietnam's communists. I had expected a different result after their victory. While I continued to marvel at their resilience against such odds, by 1978 I was disturbed at the 're-education camps', the flood of refugees in the first wave of 'boat people' and the Soviet Union's neo-Stalinist influence in the country's development. However, the dire predictions of a 'blood bath' did not eventuate.

My disquiet about trends in Vietnam was minor compared to events in neighbouring Cambodia. In mid-1976 I devoted forty-five minutes of Radio National airtime to two American authors who seemed to have a plausible explanation for the Khmer Rouge's forced evacuation of Phnom Penh. In 1977 credible reports of mass killings and starvation shook me to the core and by 1978 I was certain that a major crime against humanity was underway. I consoled myself that the Vietnamese by comparison were humane, their transgressions mild and their intervention had ended the Khmer Rouge's crimes.

The divisions inside the CPA played a major part in my political evolution. With John Sendy, Bernie Taft and Mavis Robertson advocating that the party should retreat from its previous positions on the international communist movement and the Soviet Union, I reacted even more stridently than Laurie. The party's break with Stalinism had been the key factor in my decision to join. I could not comprehend why such senior comrades, whom I admired greatly for their anti-Stalinist stance, now proposed retreat.

In 1974 I had written a caustic letter to *Tribune* in response to what I saw as Sendy's betrayal of the CPA's independence. Over the following years things deteriorated as the internal brawl intensified and my opposition to the Taft-Sendy-Robertson position hardened. In 1978 these fundamental disagreements were magnified by another event involving the Victorian party leaders.

In November 1976 I received two copies of *The Little Red Book* for



*Social Change*. Issued anonymously by 'Radical Activist Publications', it was styled after Mao's *Little Red Book*. I was puzzled because it was delivered to an address I did not use to receive mail. Its content sickened me, so I took it to Mavis Robertson, by then one of three joint CPA national secretaries who had replaced Laurie at the twenty-fifth congress in mid-1976. We agreed that it was surely the work of provocateurs or adventurists and *Tribune* promptly published a denunciation:

The second section of the booklet is devoted to outlining their own ideas of revolutionary practice, ranging from nuisance phone calls to armed robbery and sabotage.

In true amateur fashion they outline several extremely stupid and dangerous "guerrilla" activities. One suggestion, involving gas in air conditioning ducts, could well cause hundreds of deaths, even if done on a weekend as they suggest.

One incendiary mixture they suggest is highly explosive in confined spaces, but this is not mentioned ...

These booklets have been written and distributed anonymously. It is therefore possible they are the work of agents-provocateurs.

I agreed with this analysis. Then in mid-1977 a federal Liberal parliamentarian, Maurice Neil, falsely linked *Tribune* to the booklet; but in mid-1978 I was informed that a collective of Melbourne-based leftists active in the Committee for the Abolition of Political Police (CAPP) had written and distributed the booklet. CAPP specialised in exposing ASIO officers, lingering outside their headquarters, photographing and following officers home and harassing them. A number of CPA members, especially in Melbourne, worked in CAPP over several years.

According to my information, senior CPA members were involved in drafting and distributing the booklet, including the Victorian state secretary, Philip Herington. I found this unbelievable, as surely he would have informed the CPA national leadership in the wake of

*Tribune's* denunciation and Neil's attack. During a trip to Melbourne I visited Herington, who confirmed that he had indeed been part of an informal group of leftists, mostly CAPP activists, who had decided to publish a political manifesto. He explained that the group included several CPA members, but assured me that when he saw the draft he expressed his disagreement with the content and urged a rewrite. When it was not altered he said he withdrew from the project, but provided no explanation for not conveying his knowledge to the national leadership.

Returning to Sydney I raised the matter with the joint national secretaries, Mavis Robertson, Joe Palmada and Eric Aarons. In late August they convened a meeting with Bernie Taft, who was requested to investigate the matter. In late September I was shown his report in which he insisted that the booklet had never been discussed by the Victorian state executive because:

No one here regards it as a provocation, rather as a stupid expression of leftism, and not all that unusual; in fact, that is the reason it was never discussed at the Executive.

Some comrades were surprised at the sharp reaction to it in the *Tribune* article which seemed untypical. Some thought that we were in fact over-reacting by making more of it than it was.

I was bemused: how could the Victorians have remained silent in the face of such a dangerous booklet and now shrug it off as a minor incident, especially as they had previously strongly opposed 'ultra-left' policies? In early October I wrote to the joint national secretaries. I had reached a turning point and began by informing them that 'I have stopped labelling myself, over the past few years, as a Marxist,' before reiterating the booklet's contents:

1. Advocacy of the use of explosives, as long as you have access to experts who know how to use them.

2. Advocacy of chemical warfare, gases, defoliants etc in buildings and areas which could expose innocent people to harmful effects.

3. The inclusion of a list of individuals against whom these types of actions could/should be directed.

4. Advocacy of a theory of direct action (terrorism), posed against the more difficult and only path, of political education and political struggle, to bring about social change.

Whilst it may be easy to shrug these off as lunatic and phantasy (sic) leftism, it is extremely dangerous to turn a blind eye to the advocacy of terrorism and violence.

History has often shown these to be the work of provocateurs. Regardless of this, such actions objectively harm the revolutionary cause ...

At least two comrades (one of whom - Philip Herington - is quite senior in the Victorian organisation) knew of the origin of the work. 'Tribune' made the CPA's attitude quite clear. This in itself called for discussion at the Victorian Executive level. But for the CPA to have made a view known through our national newspaper, and for the Victorian comrades to have failed to raise their knowledge at a national level in the CPA discredits their political nous (sic) so badly, that I for one, find it difficult to trust the Victorian leadership ...

I was surprised to discover that ASIO did not even create a file on *The Little Red Book for Social Change*. The only indirect reference I found to this volatile debate inside the CPA was in an intercept report of a telephone conversation between Taft and another senior Victorian, Dave Davies, on 23 October 1978:

Bernie ... commented that he did not see much point in dragging him (Dave) in on the discussion on the Mark AARONS affair - Dave agreed and added he would probably get wild anyway - Bernie remarked that he did not want it to appear

that we are sort of ganging up on them - Dave replied - I think we want to appear that we are ignoring them - Bernie said that this was right.

Taft's dismissal of the matter as 'the Mark AARONS affair' was apparent from his demeanour at my final meeting as a CPA member. This occurred a few days later, attended by Robertson, Taft, Palmada, Eric and me. After a peremptory airing of the issue, Robertson made it clear that they would not take it further. She obviously was not impressed with my letter, declaring that they would destroy it and requesting that I do likewise with my copy.

It was the moment when I finally decided that I had no future in the party. I left the meeting disillusioned and did not renew my CPA membership, but had one last angry discussion with Eric. He revealed that Bernie's real concern was to not damage relations with members of the Victorian ALP Socialist Left, who had been involved in producing the booklet. I denounced this as political opportunism, but Eric explained that the situation inside the party was so delicate that there was nothing more he could do as pushing things could risk a further split. The Victorians had virtually seceded and Eric was balancing relations to preserve unity.

Irrationally, I blamed Eric and permafrost settled over our relationship, which only thawed fifteen years later. It was both a painful departure from party life, which had been central to my life for almost a decade, and an emotional wrench from what had been a warm uncle-nephew relationship.

In mid-2009 I recorded a conversation with Gerry Harant, one of several CPA members active in CAPP who had co-authored the booklet. Harant confirmed Herington's earlier account, claiming the booklet was meant to be 'half-serious, half-spoof,' but we 'wanted to make it clear that there are actions which are necessary and which are illegal and that the law itself is not just an ass, it's a very oppressive ass.' Harant was adamant that it was done in such a way that it would

automatically be connected with CAPP 'because we didn't want any body to get hurt by this and we would've thought that ASIO would have instantly connected it' to CAPP. ASIO did not make this connection, nor did most of the left.

Another CPA member who worked on the booklet, Lyn Hovey, told me she, like Herington, had been disturbed by its advocacy of the use of defoliants and concerned that the party would cop the blame for it. Despite Eric's determination to avoid a split with his Victorian comrades, it was inevitable. Taft's explanation of why they had ignored the booklet signalled what was coming: he would soon lead a sizeable section of the Victorian membership into the ALP in the last split before the Soviet Union collapsed along with the international communist movement that Taft had been so reluctant to divorce.

## TWENTY-TWO

The CPA's decline and ultimate demise was slow, almost imperceptible. When I left in 1978 I believed it would always exist as a revolutionary alternative to capitalism. I could not then see what soon became apparent: it was a shell of what it had been twenty years earlier, before the splits between the pro-Beijing and pro-Moscow Stalinists. This was rapidly followed by the emergence of three organised and bitterly opposed factions, which could not agree on ideology, strategy and tactics. The divisions of the 1970s tore the CPA apart as these tendencies put their own conceptions of socialism above the interests of the party as a whole. Membership continued to decline despite the broadly positive role played by the party in unions and mass movements, including the environment, feminism and gay and lesbian liberation.

Furthermore, fundamental changes made to the Australian economy and workforce during this period challenged the CPA's basic premises. The slow decline of unionism underlined the complexities of class structures that Eric had first perceived in the mid-1960s. Revolutionary conceptions of 'class warfare' between 'capitalists' and 'proletarians' became increasingly irrelevant to most Australians, leaving a vacuum in traditional left-wing politics. Communism's bankruptcy in the Soviet Union and China also undermined efforts to revive the socialist project. There were no models to inspire new generations.

The seeds of disintegration were sown in the early 1970s, first by the Taft-Sendy-Robertson group's desire to cling to the international communist movement and make concessions to Moscow, then over different approaches towards Gough Whitlam's government. Communist policy towards the ALP had long been vexed and in the 1970s