LABOR POLITICS IN COBURG
1919-1940

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This thesis is presented for examination for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of History, University of Melbourne.

June 1978
This thesis is all my own work, contains no material published elsewhere except where due reference is made in the text and has not been used for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

[Signature]
I would like to thank Mrs. F. Riley for her permission to use the Minutes of the Coburg branch of the ALP which were until February 1978 contained in the closed section of the Riley Collection in the National Library of Australia. I also wish to acknowledge the assistance of Mrs. Louisa Hamilton and the many members of the Coburg ALP branch and former Labour Movement activists who so willingly put themselves at my disposal.
SYNOPSIS

This study examines the activities and attitudes of the Coburg branch of the ALP (Victorian Branch) over the years 1919 to 1940, with particular emphasis on relations between the branch and the Central Executive, and the political representatives of the area. Until the mid 1920's branch attention was focussed principally on local activities capitalising on the strengthening Labor vote in the district, but it was already an assertive and ambitious branch.

By the end of the decade the district was safe for Labor but success in municipal elections proved elusive and as the first signs of the depression appeared the branch came under the dominant influence of a group whose major concerns were international politics and socialism. Appalled at the performance of Labor Governments and radicalised by their experience of the depression the branch became extremely critical of Labor Party leadership and profoundly frustrated by its failure to provide opportunities for effective action - even to assist the unemployed. The leadership survived the crises of these years more or less intact but in the eyes of the Coburg branch it was seriously discredited. With the fall of Labor in Victoria the branch turned its attention to the Movement Against War and Fascism resulting in a series of escalating conflicts with the Central Executive which continued to moved towards the right throughout the thirties while the Coburg branch became more left-wing. In the polarisation of the ALP following the Spanish Civil War the Coburg branch became the focus of 'anti-Communist' forces whose dubious activities were more or less condoned by the Central Executive. Loyalty to the ALP however ran deep and it was not until the
Central Executive cancelled the pre-selection ballot for the State seat of Coburg in 1940 that a number of activists finally decided to challenge the Party by putting forward an 'independent' Labor candidate. Charles Mutton was successful and he held the seat until he was re-admitted to the ALP in 1956 and thereafter till he retired in 1967.
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Our strength is drawn from the great masses of the people - tens of thousands of men and women over the decades who have worked for the labour movement.

Be quite clear what you believe in and fight for it.

BEN CHIFLEY
When we first arrived in Coburg, I was depressed. It seemed such a dreary, indifferent, soulless habitat. But I was wrong. It was and remains the heartland of Australian radicalism. Doris Blackburn, the only woman ever to have a seat as an independent in Federal Parliament, still attends meetings here now and then. Its rhythm beats with a vigorous purpose, yet it is a place where factories hum in surprisingly quiet and leafy streets, divided by lanes that may keep a village atmosphere.1

Beneath the nostalgia and sentiment, David Martin has encapsulated the essential contrarities of Coburg. Had he lived in Coburg in the thirties and forties he might have been even more struck by them. This is not a study of Coburg, but of the ALP branch that was nurtured by and took sustenance from the Coburg community. It was a particularly enthusiastic and independent branch, consistently militant in its attitudes and by the 1930's surprisingly intellectual and international in its interests. It was also very purist, observing almost from the sidelines what it interpreted as a steady decline of the Party from its former high ideals while the Coburg Laborites valiantly tried to uphold them. After ten years of protest and escalating conflict, the cancellation of a pre-selection ballot in 1940 precipitated a crisis that split the local Labor organisations bitterly and irrevocably. The result was victory for an 'independent' Labor candidate, Charles Mutton, and Coburg's reputation for radicalism resides largely in the fact that it continued to support him for the next fifteen years until he was readmitted to the Party. Then in 1946, Doris Blackburn, a woman of

1 D. Martin, 'My Suburbs, Right or Wrong' Age, 28 January 1967.
independent and most radical views also defeated an official ALP candidate for her husband's former seat of Bourke. Both candidates occupied a position considerably to the left of the Victorian ALP at the time; the Coburg electorate was apparently prepared to support such views. The numbers involved in the branch in the years 1919-1940 were too small to provide a representative sample of the community but clearly, its particular style of politics was comfortable there.

There are other contrarities. Despite its rural character, until the end of the first world war, there was an active branch of the Labor Party in Coburg from 1902. As long as the district was represented by non-Labor politicians, much energy was absorbed by the tasks of organisation and electioneering. Situated just to the north of Melbourne's industrial suburb, Coburg became in time principally a working class, residential suburb and its Labor character strengthened steadily. By 1927 the Legislative Assembly seat of Coburg was safe for Labor, and yet the local Council remained beyond the reach of all but a handful of Labor candidates.

From 1919 to 1927, local and domestic matters dominated branch life. In this it was probably typical of branches in newly developing areas, but there was a quality of earnestness and ambitiousness that characterised all its undertakings while the purchase of a Hall in 1919 gave the branch a unique opportunity to develop a more complex organisation with something of the appeal of a club or a church rather than simply a party branch. It also encouraged a certain exclusiveness and cut off from access to real power or even very much effective participation within the structure of the Party, the branch could sustain its idealism and faith in the myths of the Movement virtually intact, foremost among these being the sovereignty of the rank and file. The Coburg,
branch in the 1920's saw itself as independent, very active and very progressive.

The performance of the Labor Governments in the depression and the leniency of the Central Executive (CE) to discipline the 'treacherous' politicians scandalised the Coburg branch which by the end of the 1920's had developed a quite distinctive character. While so many Labor leaders were frightened out of their sentimental socialism by the ravages of the years 1929-1933, the Coburg branch was substantially radicalised demanding either a real effort to use the powers of government in the interests of the workers or retreat in order to rebuild the Labour Movement. A programme of lectures conducted by the Victorian Labor College and a large number of Esperanto enthusiasts in the branch combined to produce a broader theoretical and international context within which to view the depression and it helped stave off threatening defeatism by providing a rationale for a vigorous propaganda campaign to 'enlighten' the community as to the origin of its plight and a way forward.

The branch pressed for a serious commitment to the Socialisation Objective as the basis for a dynamic, forward-looking programme and it was profoundly disturbed at the continued domination of the Party by what it considered a weak and discredited leadership. In the search for allies and effective action the branch became caught up in various organisations such as the International Class War Prisoners' Aid Society and the Friends of the Soviet Union (FOSU) and in 1933 it abandoned the abortive Socialisation Units in favour of involvement in the foundation of the Victorian Council Against War. It was a natural development from the branch's international interests that it should be among the tiny minority that saw early the threat that fascism presented to world peace. It became a closeknit clique tending toward fanaticism and as its horizons
widened from the cost of public transport and branch socials to world politics it went far beyond the limited perspectives of the Victorian ALP thus perpetuating its somewhat isolated position within the Party.

Communism within the ALP was always a 'fertile subject for irrationality and bad temper'² and from the early 1930's in Victoria there was a good deal of both as the Central Executive banned groups such as the FOSU to ALP members because they were allegedly Communist 'front' organisations and conflict between the CE and the Coburg branch intensified, but it was the Victorian Council Against War and Fascism that provoked the real crisis. The anti-war movement had come to vie seriously with the ALP for loyalty and the election of Maurice Blackburn, one of its most prestigious advocates and a particularly influential figure in the Labour Movement generally, as the member for Bourke in 1934 added a new element of personal loyalty. By 1935 the Labor Party leadership was moving steadily to the right, while the Coburg branch saw fewer and fewer reasons to reject the support of the Communists in the all important battle against racism. Blackburn and a number of leading branch personalities were expelled for defying the ban on the Victorian Council Against War and Fascism and the Coburg branch almost ceased to function throughout 1936.

The conflict had been one of both policy and organisation, but Blackburn and the branch believed that the Central Executive had preempted the authority of the rank and file; the problem was that a majority at Annual Conference was prepared to accept the CE's ban and after a year in the wilderness Blackburn sought re-admission without achieving anything by his gesture of defiance. Defiance, however, remained

the mood in the Coburg branch particularly as it became clear that a new force which would eventually lead to the Split of 1954-55 was on the move in Coburg, determined to oust Blackburn and the militants in Coburg. They took up the fight with almost religious zeal in a determination to 'Cleanse Our Party' and for the first time the 'numbers game' was played in Coburg. The 'old' left-wing group proved tactically superior but the Catholic group had the sympathetic ear of some of the most powerful men on the Central Executive.

A crisis was precipitated in 1940 following the death of the branch's founder, Frank Keane, who had represented the district in the State House since 1924, the Central Executive cancelled the pre-selection ballot and chose a young man from Glen Iris to contest the by-election. It was an act that seemed to strike at the very heart of the ideals of the Labour Movement, for pre-selection ballots enshrined the notion that the 'collective membership is sovereign'. Many Coburg Laborites felt that the time had come to take a stand against this dictatorial executive that had been misusing its delegated authority for too long. Charles Mutton offered to stand as an 'independent' candidate, confident in the belief that:

They may expel me from the party, but never from the Labour Movement.

and he was supported by a group led by Harold Nicholls in the hope that they would be the vanguard that would lead the Party back to 'true Labor principles'. Mutton won the by-election and continued to hold the seat against all comers, but he had to wait sixteen years until the Labour Movement was torn asunder before he was vindicated by re-admission.

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3 Title of a series of pamphlets issued by Mutton's supporters in 1940 and 41.
5 Sun, 19 July 1940
ASPECTS OF IDEOLOGY AND ORGANISATION IN THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY

From its very inception the Labor Party in Australia was dominated by an egalitarianism which found expression in an elaborate machinery designed to maximise the participation of members of affiliated trade unions and Party branches at all levels of decision-making and operation. In practice rank and file authority was often difficult to exercise decisively, but the sovereignty of the rank and file was a particularly potent myth of the Labour Movement, which could, when necessary, be appealed to as something higher than either unions or Party. Challenges to the Party leadership were usually couched in these terms but there were two problems: firstly it could always be argued that the Labour Movement had no way of expressing itself except via the official organisations and secondly, once the machinery of 'democracy' existed, it became very difficult, except in extreme cases, as with the Conscription Issue, to prove that the decisions of the Party were not the will of the rank and file as expressed by their representatives.

While the unions provided the Party with its major source of finance, it was the branches which performed most of the work of electioneering and propaganda. Organisationally, they were essential, but they were also significant as concrete expressions of the egalitarianism of the Labour Movement and through them the obligations as well as the rights of democratic organisation could be carried out. Most studies of the Labor Party to date have concentrated on policies and politicians or the complex inter-relationship between Party officials, politicians and the Trades Hall Councils rather than between the Executive and the branches. Still less attention has been paid to the functioning of the branches themselves.6 largely it seems due to a lack of evidence. Diverger has

6 One interesting study is I. WILSON, A study of Two Branches of the ALP: Fourth Year Honours Thesis 1956 Melbourne University Department of History
commented in his book *Political Parties* that

> It would be interesting to undertake a series of monographs on the life of a Socialist branch from its origins to the present day, 7

and this study is principally an attempt to provide a profile of an ALP branch in operation between the years 1919 and 1940. It is a perspective on Labor Party politics in Victoria 'from below' and the emphasis is on the relationship between the branch, Party officials and the parliamentary representatives of Coburg.

In the absence of any similar studies it is not possible to draw many definitive conclusions, but it does seem clear that the character of ALP branches varied in Victoria according to location and the personalities involved. Some branches, especially in rural areas, were little more than campaign committees, others basically a 'front' for some rising figure in the Labour Movement. The more valuable the political prizes to be divided up such as in Melbourne's inner industrial suburbs, the more likely there were to be 'ticket' branches consisting of names on a list to be mobilised for pre-selection ballots but the attention paid to the 'machine-style' politics of these suburbs has tended to obscure the fact that the great majority of branches carried out their functions relatively free of either 'bosses' or corruption. The branches in newer working class suburbs where Labor victories were not so certain functioned as social centres and 'talking shops' as well as organisational units and membership lists coincided fairly accurately with the number of active workers. The Coburg branch falls into this category. It also seems likely that branches in areas where Labor had no chances of electoral success were different again.

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tending to be the most 'intellectual' of the branches.

The problem of a political party which concerns itself with more than simply placing men in parliament is to keep its branches constructively occupied between elections and in 'blue-ribbon' seats the problem is even more acute. Participation in decision-making and the need for continuing propaganda to 'enlighten' the surrounding community partly fulfilled this role while the right of members to vote in pre-selection ballots was an important acknowledgement of local autonomy. Essentially the Party was to be de-centralised in order to maximise participation, but by the 1920's strong centralising tendencies were already at work and at least some of the tension between the Coburg branch and the CE can be attributed to resistance to this trend.

The loosely federated Party of the pre-war years only imperfectly solved the problem of offering effective participation and constructive activities to rank and file enthusiasts. One of these problems was that as an essentially pluralist Party it had to tolerate many shades of opinion some of which at times appeared electorally damaging. There were also short and long term interests to be balanced and the Party was pervaded by a kind of schizophrenia that was partly a question of factions, but more seriously, existed within most individuals themselves. There were few of sufficient intellectual stature or inclination to help resolve such apparent conflicts as that between the short term aims of unionism and the long term goals of socialism, or the problem of ends and means. As the Party grew larger it became more difficult to maintain cohesion between branches or contact between them and the officials. The Party became more centralised and more bureaucratic, accentuating the problem of harnessing rank and file energy.

In Victoria, where the Socialisation Objective sat very awkwardly on a
moderate leadership, it seems that the most active branches were often also the most left-wing and so branch restiveness was more often seen as an ideological than an organisational issue. Throughout the period between the wars several gestures were made at providing outlets for rank and file participation such as the Metropolitan Council and the Socialisation Units but none of them were very successful. It is too simplistic to blame rank and file apathy alone for this and a close study of some of these might provide some interesting insights into the way power was exercised in the Party.  

Despite a tendency to see disunity in the Labour Movement as more a consequence of organisational than ideological conflict, relations between the Coburg branch and the CE demonstrate the complex way in which the two factors were inter-connected. Murray, writing about the Split of 1954-57 made the useful observation that while it was about personalities rather than ideology, it was nevertheless ideology which formed the tense background against which this most complex and damaging of Australian schisms opened.

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8 D.W. Ranson, The Organisation of the ALP 1916-1941, PhD 1954 University of Melbourne (unpublished) p 222

9 One person interviewed for example, suggested that one faction even resorted to physical violence in order to sabotage the Metropolitan Council.

10 See for example J. Jupp, Australian Party Politics, Melbourne 1968 pp 74 and 94

and this study, despite its limited perspective, demonstrates the way in which the CE consistently forced the Party to consider what were essentially ideological issues as though they were simply matters of organisation and yet at the same time failed to offer legitimate organisational outlets for much of the energy that existed in branches like Coburg. The Coburg branch would have wholeheartedly agreed with V.G. Childe's lament that

> The Labor Party, starting with a band of inspired socialists degenerated into a vast machine for capturing political power.\(^{12}\)

for they believed in the myths of the Labour Movement, but even electoral success seemed beyond the Victorian ALP in the 1930's. Above all this study demonstrates a singular failure of leadership in this period to either inspire or organise the great reserves of energy that were potentially at the disposal of the Labour Movement. Indeed it seemed intent on driving much of it away. A possibly unique set of circumstances meant that the consequences in Coburg were dramatic but it seems very likely that elsewhere the drift was no less serious.

\(^{12}\) G.V. CHILDE, How Labor Governs, Melbourne 1964 p 219
Coburg in 1917 was part of the State Legislative Assembly seat of Essendon, which apart from the preceding three years had been a Liberal stronghold. As part of the large federal seat of Maribyrnong the district was represented by J.E. Fenton who had narrowly held the seat for Labor in the 1917 Conscription Election. It would be some years hence before the district was safe for Labor and decades before the local Council had a Labor majority, but a branch of the Victorian Political Labour Council had been established as early as 1902 by six 'advanced' unionists who met to talk politics outside Warren's Bakery on the corner of Bell Street and Sydney Road. Coburg at that stage was still a sleepy, rural community supplying fodder and foodstuffs to the Melbourne markets and its population was mostly small farmers and shopkeepers rather than the manual and industrial workers who would form the core of support for the newly formed Party, but experience of the previous decade had led these men to place their faith in the organisation of the working class and its representation in Parliament and perhaps their isolation made the need for association all the stronger. The structure of the new organisation was loose and democratic enough for such a gathering to constitute a 'branch' and they forwarded resolutions to the PLC, the Press, the local Council and so on. Little

1 See Essendon Gazette, 10 May 1917
2 Interview M. Dodds
3 See Appendix A
information about these men is available, but one of them, Frank Keane, a cooper and delegate of the Coopers' Union to the PLC, is to figure prominently in this study, representing the branch on the local Council for nine years and the district in the State Parliament from 1924 to his death in 1940. As to the others, it seems likely that E. Chambers, first secretary of the Clerks' Union would have been among them. Two others, Melan and Yonch, did not remain long in the district.

The branch functioned continuously from this time, an outpost in hostile territory until the 1920's. Moreover it was a long way from the centre of PLC and TUC activities which were dominated by people from the inner industrial suburbs. Keane unsuccessfully sought pre-selection for the State seat of Brunswick in 1909 when Frank Anstey resigned to go into federal politics and he was not able to oust W.A. Watt, the Victorian Premier, from Essendon in 1911 and 1913. Labor's first success in Essendon was the election of Maurice Blackburn in 1914 when Watt retired to enter federal politics. Due to the instability of Victorian politics, Blackburn had to recontest the seat within a few months and these two contests together were interesting in that the battle was presented almost purely in terms of Socialism versus Liberalism perhaps because Watt was a scion of Victorian Liberalism and Blackburn - former editor of the Socialist Party newspaper - was rapidly emerging a leading intellectual in the Victorian Labour Movement. His

4 Since Chambers was so prominent in the early years of the PLC and had been a Councillor in Coburg for one term in the 1890's it is unlikely that he would not have been among the first branch members.

5 Minutes of the Central Executive of the Victorian branch of the ALP held in the head office of the DLP, 569 Lonsdale Street Melbourne (VCE Minutes) 11 September 1969

6 Essendon Gazette 1 January 1914
   Essendon Gazette 22 January 1914
opponents delighted in stressing the dangers of this radical young man—all the more dangerous because he was an attractive and personally likeable candidate:

Liberals should be warned to set personal inclinations aside at this time. They cannot afford to give Mr. Blackburn a vote because he is a nice young fellow. A vote for Mr. Blackburn is a vote for advanced Socialism and a vote against Advanced Liberalism, and they were considerably shocked by his success.

Previous election figures indicated that the Labor vote in Coburg was strengthening so Blackburn had concentrated much of his campaigning there winning many life-long supporters among Coburg Laborites. The electorate however, had only temporarily shifted its allegiance and following an exceptionally unpleasant campaign embittered by war issues Blackburn was defeated in 1917 by Tommy Ryan. Seventeen years later however Blackburn would return to represent Coburg and Brunswick in the federal seat of Bourke, and in 1943 war issues would again cost him the seat.

Notwithstanding Blackburn's defeat the Labor vote continued to strengthen as Coburg developed rapidly after the war. The most significant feature of Coburg's new population was its homogeneity in age and socio-economic status and it is quite clear from the election results that a larger proportion of the new arrivals voted Labor than the older residents.

7 Argus, 17 July 1914
8 Essendon Gazette, 22 November 1917. Ryan was a former South Australian Labor politician who had followed Hughes into the new Nationalist Party.
9 See Appendix A
10 See Appendix B. Brunswick and Coburg Leader, 1 August 1919. "The Labor vote is very strong in Coburg as has been demonstrated recently in the parliamentary election".
The Coburg ALP branch also grew rapidly for not only was Coburg growing but this was a period of growth and expansion in the Labor Party as a whole.\textsuperscript{11} Some evidence of the growth of the branch can be derived from the data on new members nominated into the branch in the years for which these figures are available:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>New Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Attendance at meetings was good; Murphy claims, 'We often had one hundred at a meeting'\textsuperscript{13} whilst a branch report in 1930 noted 'at one time membership had been over three hundred'.\textsuperscript{14} It was common for all eligible members of a family to be active but there is no evidence to suggest that branch expansion was a result of local faction manoeuvring as Rawson suggests was the case in Richmond.\textsuperscript{15} The possession of a Hall provided the branch with an almost unique focus for activity.\textsuperscript{16} Purchased in 1919 for 300\textsuperscript{17} it enabled the branch to capitalise on the expansion

\textsuperscript{11} See D. RAWSON (1954) op.cit. pp 61-63

\textsuperscript{12} Minutes of the Coburg branch of the ALP, Riley Collection, Australian National Library. (CM) passim. Officials can be traced over the number of years that they held office and this indicates that there was a stable core of members while this growth was taking place, but it is not possible to tell whether there were losses of older members countering the growth somewhat. The increase in the number of official positions after 1922 is also an indication of expansion.

\textsuperscript{13} Interview, J. Murphy

\textsuperscript{14} CM, 28 July 1930

In 1925 at least 61 votes were cast for the executive positions

CM 19 January 1925

\textsuperscript{15} D. RAWSON, (1954) op.cit. p 61

\textsuperscript{16} The only other branches to have halls at any stage were Kingsville and Carlton. Interview, J. Brosnan

\textsuperscript{17} CM, 29 May 1919, for details of negotiations

CM, 26 May 1919 and 16 June 1919

Trustees Cr. P. Keane (Cooper), Messrs. Northausen, H. Nicholls, J.B. Nordam (grocer), W. Sewell (estate agent)

CM, 26 May 1920, officially named Labor Hall
of potential membership by diversifying its activities, and so acquire
many of the features of a club or even a church over and above its
political functions. The primary appeal of an ALP branch is to those
who are in sympathy with the aims and ideology of the Party, and who
gain satisfaction from working toward the realisation of Labor Party ideals.
These people provided an enthusiastic, dedicated and committed core, but
they were often too few in number to carry out all the associated tasks,
while membership dues were an essential source of branch revenue. The
Hall became a centre for social and educational as well as purely
political activities and it was, no doubt, the hope of branch leaders
that those who attended euchre parties would in time participate more
actively in branch debates, but in the meantime they were contributing
to branch funds and under an obligation to assist when large numbers of
workers were required. Moreover since euchre nights and dances were
not restricted to members, people could be invited along who might
otherwise have shied away from a political meeting and hence be brought
within the ambit of branch influence.

The development of this club-like atmosphere was perhaps of
special appeal to a newly settling population on the outskirts of
the city who were in need of social contacts and places to meet new
friends within the district. The Coburg branch comprised a very complex
set of relationships and many people devoted most of their free time

18 See M. DUVERGER, op. cit. pp 105-107 on 'Ancillary Groups'
19 Interviews, M. Dodds, A. C. Keane, J. Murphy
20 An interesting discussion of the kinds of incentives that attract
people into associations can be found in James Q. Wilson,
Political Organisation, New York 1973 Chapter three
to its activities for they saw the Labour Movement as a way of life. Unfortunately the branch was very much on the periphery of ALP activities and the self-sufficiency lent by the Hall accentuated a tendency to exclusiveness whilst creating unique problems of finance and management and at times conflict about the best allocation of limited human and financial resources.

The isolation of the branch was both geographical and psychological. In the 1920's Coburg was not only on the fringe of Melbourne's development, but the branch contained few prominent ALP figures to keep it in touch with central activities in an informal way. Moreover the branch was isolated within the two electorates of which it formed a part. The link with Essendon was unfortunate since the settled areas of these two districts were separated by quite some distance and there were few bridges across the Moonee Ponds Creek. There was little 'natural' association between the two areas and despite Coburg's growing strategic importance, the Essendon branches tended to dominate pre-selection ballots, delegates to Annual Conference and electoral decision-making. J.E. Fenton rarely visited the area perhaps prompting the agenda item submitted to the 1922 Annual Conference requesting that Members of Parliament have a 'centrally located office in the electorate to be manned at all times'. Under these circumstances the branch tended to become both aggrieved and self-centred and for some

21 In the year immediately after the war the branch numbered among its members two members of the CP, T.P. Holloway and the General Secretary, Arch Stewart. Early in the 1920's W.J. Duggan and G. McGowan both Union officials joined but Stewart and Holloway left the district.

22 See page 31

23 CM 29 April 1922. Immediately after his election in 1924 Keane attempted to have the office relocated in Coburg.
time concentrated a great deal of energy and resources on local activities and municipal politics.
CHAPTER TWO

‘INDOMITABLE PERSEVERANCE’ TO LITTLE AVAIL. The Coburg ALP Branch and Municipal Politics 1919-1926

For ten years after the War, the Coburg branch enthusiastically contested municipal elections, reflecting a major focus on 'bread and butter' issues. A principal reason for this was that in a growth situation there is an inevitable lag in the provision of services as resources are stretched beyond their limits. The branch therefore, was engaged in much 'progress association' activity especially since many of the old, established residents were far from welcoming to their new Labor voting neighbours. On the other hand the growth in the Labor vote offered hope of success at all levels of politics. It was not to be so, and it will be argued that the lack of access to power at the municipal level was significant in diverting branch attention to wider horizons by the end of the 1920's.

It was only at election time that the branch received any public prominence and despite the presence of Frank Keane as Labor Councillor from 1913-1922 and regular correspondence or deputations from the branch on such issues as roads, drains and streetlighting, there is little evidence to suggest that this ever represented anything more than nuisance value, though the branch was involved in the successful

1 One 'Ratpayerv desribed Coburg as 'the town of unmade streets and muckholes', Brunswick and Coburg Leader, 1 July 1919

2 An example of this is the refusal of the Pascoe Vale Progress Association to hear the Labor municipal candidates while welcoming the Nationalist candidates. CM 20 July 1925

3 This was further reduced when the local press ceased to take interest in municipal campaigns after 1924.

4 See for example Labor Call 22 March 1928 Report of 19 March Meeting of Coburg Branch
campaign to establish a municipal market and the Truby King Movement.\footnote{Minutes of Coburg Council 11 February 1920}

A public campaign organised on behalf of the wardens at Pentridge\footnote{CM 15 December 1919}

actually got the branch onto the front page of the local paper, though with characteristic disapproval of the 'political' character of the meeting:

\begin{quote}
At times the attempted escape of criminals, the understaffing of Pentridge, and underpayment and overwork of the warders was apparently lost sight of in the effort to emphasize the doctrine that there were only two classes in existence - the worker striving to better his conditions and that of his family and the capitalist engaged in exploiting the aforesaid worker.\footnote{CM 14 February 1921}
\end{quote}

Only one issue of a general community concern could the branch exercise any influence at all.

Economic issues were very much in the forefront of branch thinking when the cost of living was soaring, wages were depressed, unemployment apparently increasing again and the Government encouraging immigration.\footnote{CM 14 February 1921}

On this issue the branch was particularly frustrated with the CE's inactivity, despite several requests that at the very least a series of 'monster' protest meetings be organised.\footnote{CM 14 April, 8 September, 6 October 1919, 2 January 1920}

Another perennial source of discussion was the train and tram service to the City - timetables, cost of fares, the condition of the railway station, the need for a subway - striking indication of the dependence of Coburg residents on public transport. With a hostile Council and a Nationalist
State member who tended to neglect Coburg's interests, the branch was forced to direct much of its protest to the CS and PLP but the general attitude was that they should solve their own problems by better organisation to return Labor representatives. At the State level it would only be a matter of time before Coburg had a Labor representative, but success at municipal elections proved elusive, and even those Labor men who were elected from time to time found their scope for effective action severely limited by the entrenched prejudices of their fellow councillors. Frank Keane's three year battle to be elected Mayor serves as an illustration and provides important insights into one of Coburg's leading Laborites. Keane was re-elected for the third time in 1919 in an unusual election in that two sitting Councillors were defeated, running counter to the 'general tendency of Coburg people to forgive and forget and put the old 'uns back in'.

11 Brunswick and Coburg Leader, 6 July 1920.
'Coburg had gotten into a position of apathy begotten of hopelessness as regarded its requirements from the Government were concerned ...'

12 Keane topped the poll by one vote:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Councillor</th>
<th>Votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cr. F. Keane</td>
<td>855</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Brown</td>
<td>855</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. McDonald</td>
<td>838</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Nicholls</td>
<td>787</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. McAdam</td>
<td>740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cr. A. Bush</td>
<td>628</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cr. W. Jones</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Coburg Council Minutes. Voting was not preferential.

13 Brunswick and Coburg Leader, 29 August 1919
The election had been conducted in an atmosphere of discontent at a number of Council decisions regarding recreation reserves. Keane had opposed the sale of the reserve most vehemently against the other two Councillors and this was in line with the mood of the electorate.
Over the years Keane had acquired a degree of personal popularity:

Cr. Keane was greeted with rousing cheers, and it was evident that a large majority of the audience appreciated him. He spoke as he always does - clearly, distinctly and without the slightest attempt to curry favour with any section of the voters, though the leader was at some pains to stress that this was not because he was a Labor man:

Of course, he asked them to vote for him as one of the ALP, and not to regard him as Frank Keane. That is all nonsense and Cr. Keane ought to know it. It is Frank Keane, level-headed, straight and honest, and liked and respected by hundreds who differ totally with him in politics that the people vote for, and there are large numbers of voters other than Labor ones cast for the man whom people know does his best for all sections of the ratepayers.

In this climate, Keane's background and political stance naturally isolated him in the Council Chamber, and even after six years the non-Labor councillors would not wholeheartedly accept the legitimacy of his position. He was excluded from the clubby social atmosphere that enclosed the other councillors, a number of whom had held office for many years. The situation reached crisis point when Keane decided to seek election as Mayor.

Keane was not interested in the social obligations of the position, indeed he avoided most public functions, but on the principle of rotation usually observed it was his turn, and he had few allies in Council for his serious and dogmatic approach tended to alienate and embarrass his fellow Councillors. Unable to attend the afternoon meeting

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14 Brunswick and Coburg Leader, 29 August 1919
15 ibid. The paper consistently ignored his running mates
16 Interview, A.C. Keane, "M. Dodds
17 See e.g. Brunswick and Coburg Leader, 21 February 1919
Brunswick and Coburg Leader, 25 March 1920
at which the Mayor was traditionally elected he had left word with the Town Clerk that he was willing to accept nomination. The Council discussed his claim in terms to which Keane objected and at the next meeting he declared that

he took exception to the remark ... that he would not have the time to devote to the office. If that were so then the majority of Councillors, who were working men, were ineligible, and that were a peculiar position.

Less politely, he reminded the Council of Cr. Cash's arrival in the district as a tightrope walker with only one pair of trousers to his name. It was more than a personal snub, it was an insult to those whom Keane represented and the issue would continue to fester.

Keane was again passed over in 1920 and he protested at the 'cut and dried' method of election and criticised 'the action of certain councillors in connection with his claim for the position.' The Leader seized on Keane's absence from the election meeting suggesting that it was 'hardly conceivable that Cr. Keane should want the Council to call round and beg him to be Mayor,' which provoked Keane to take the matter outside the Council Chamber. In a letter to the Leader he asserted that in many suburbs the identity of the new mayor was known before the elections but in Coburg 'secrecy' prevailed and despite the fact the other councillors usually knew who was to be next Mayor, whenever Keane enquired he 'could never get any information'. Implying that his attendance at the meeting would have been pointless he concluded with characteristic

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18 Interview A.C. Keane
   His boss would not allow him the time off work
19 Brunswick and Coburg Leader, 17 October 1919
20 Interview, A.C. Keane
   M. Dodds
21 Minutes of the Coburg Council, 8 September 1920
22 Brunswick and Coburg Leader, 17 September 1920
... considering that I have been elected on three occasions by the ratepayers of Coburg, I feel that I have not had a fair deal, as I have never been offered a nomination for Mayor, while some councillors have occupied the position on several occasions. I think the real reason is that my position as representative of the Official Labor Party is the stumbling block.23

Keane was even more bitter in 1921 denouncing 'hole in the corner methods' and declaring 'it was not his intention to attend meetings to be humiliated', and he did not seek to continue his lonely campaign beyond 1922. He retired after nine years service without ever having chaired the key committees of Finance or Public Works let alone wear the mayoral robes and his parting words barely concealed his bitterness. Whilst he was leaving the Council with nothing but good feelings towards his colleagues, he desired to refer to one matter in which he considered he had never received fair treatment. He had never been offered the position of Mayor and he considered it the right of every Councillor to occupy this position irrespective of what his political views might be.25

His honest opinion of his colleagues was probably that expressed quite some years later when he referred to that type of small-minded anti-Labor men who for years had been members of the local Council.26

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23 Brunswick and Coburg Leader, 24 September 1920
24 Minutes of the Coburg Council, 7 September 1921
25 Brunswick and Coburg Leader, 1 September 1922
26 Labor Call, 30 April 1931
In the course of the dispute Keane had forfeited what little good will
the local press had been prepared to extend. In 1920 he had been
praised as

a good and useful addition to municipal
rank. He has gained the respect of his
colleagues for, though absolutely sincere
and uncompromising in regard to his political
faith, he is always game to work with his
fellow councillors for the benefit of the
town and if an idea is good he will support
it no matter from whom it emanates,27

but by 1922 he was described as having

no following whatever in the Coburg Council

... his general style of driving every
word home with a sledge hammer at Council
meetings is more likely to injure than to
assist a cause; people will not tolerate
much of that.28

All attempts to provide Keane with support in Council failed despite
valiant efforts. The branch campaigned to the limits of its resources,
earning praise from the local press which congratulated it on

... its indomitable perseverance.
Defeat does dishearten them. Every August
up come the three representatives of the
branch, ready to enter the contest with as
much vim and determination as their pre-
decessors,29

But little credit for the Labor Party. Labor Call regularly30 bemoaned
the failure of Coburg workers to 'rise to the occasion'. In 1922
it was particularly scathing:

Year after year there is an 'alleged'
afford to return a second to aid Cr.
Keane. Again and again the Labor

27 Brunswick and Coburg Leader, 20 August 1920
28 Brunswick and Coburg Leader, 21 July 1922
29 Brunswick and Coburg Leader, 20 August 1920
30 Labor Call, 1 September 1920
ratepayers are either 'doped' or they fail to appreciate the importance of the occasion and they simply don't roll up. If the real workers only rallied to the poll in Coburg there would be no question of the result even at municipal elections! But they don't! It's too much dashed trouble!31

The Minutes reveal that municipal campaigns in these years were well-organised and wholehearted. Candidates were leading branch personalities but they received little assistance from those who were only too willing to criticise.

The reason for branch persistence in the face of this defeat was a belief that even at a token level it was worth taking every available opportunity to put Labor's case to the people, to remind the electors that an alternative existed, and keep the sitting councillors from getting too complacent. In 1924 this persistence was rewarded for in a period of general upswing in Labor's fortunes throughout the State32 the aspirants for Nationalist Party nomination fell to wrangling publically amongst themselves:

An unfortunate dispute between Liberal aspirants for selection by the National Federation caused an unpleasantness of which the Labor Party took full advantage.33

It was an unprecedented success34 for all three Labor candidates were elected - W.J. Duggan of the Plumbers' Union, G. McGowan a journalist

31 Labor Call, 13 April 1922

32 Keane had won Essendon earlier in the year and Labor briefly took office under Prendergast.

33 Argus, 20 August 1924

24 Labor did well in all municipal elections. Labor Call, 4 September 1924
and union official and A. De Chene a cigar maker - representing a quite serious backlash against the blatant politicking and high-handed behaviour of which Keane had been a victim. Henceforward non-Labor councillors would treat their Labor opponents with a little more seriousness if not courtesy.

The sweeping success of 1924 was not to be repeated. When confronted with the 'principal issue' of 'whether Labor should gain further recognition' the majority of an increased turn-out in 1925 voted against Labor. Efforts in 1926 were doubled:

The keen interest that is manifesting itself in local municipal activities ... was demonstrated by a record attendance of members at the Labor Hall on Monday night, and there were some very promising signs before the election:

Letters and reports were received from several ratepayers offering their support which included several business people of the City who stated that they were of the opinion that a change of local municipal management was very necessary to the advancement of the suburb, while a letter from the residents of Hawthorn Street was presented as typical of statements heard on every hand that the present Council has treated the interests of the ratepayers in an indifferent manner.

35 Brunswick and Coburg Leader 28 August 1925
36 Labor Call, 24 June 1926
37 Labor Call, 10 June 1926
38 ibid.
Even Labor Call noted with approval the 'excellent propaganda with praiseworthy results educationally' but no Labor candidate was successful and the sitting Labor man were no less the victims of discrimination than Keane once confidence had been restored by the 1925 results. The report of one 'political fireworks display' can serve as an example:

When Cr. George Brown retired from the Council, the position of Chairman of the Public Works Committee became vacant. Cr. Duggan was appointed Acting Chairman and in the ordinary course of events in any decent and fair-minded municipal body would have been made Chairman when the vacancy was permanently filled. Not so however, for when the occasion came, Cr. Duggan was quietly put on one side and Cr. Richards was appointed.

This was so obviously a case of political bias that it lead to a very plain expression of feeling by Cr. Duggan and Cr. De Chene and there was created an unpleasant state of affairs which will take considerable time and tact to remove.

Once again the established principle of seniority had been set aside.

The Coburg branch considered it 'both mean and paltry' while Labor Call was particularly outraged by this snub delivered to one of the fastest rising stars in the Labour Movement. Within a few weeks Duggan was elected President of the THC, but the Nationalist councillors were once more lapsing into arrogant complacency and many in the Coburg branch began turning their attention to more fruitful activities. Municipal politics in Coburg remained bitter and unusually 'political', as the Age noted:

39 Labor Call, 2 September 1926
40 CM, 27 May 1926
41 Labor Call, 29 May 1926
42 Labor Call, 27 May 1926. Later in the year the branch again complained that it was Labor's turn for Mayor but that "Coburg Nationalist members ... determined to observe the rotation principle only so far as they themselves were concerned", Argus, 26 August 1926
43 See pp 59-64
Coburg is probably the only suburb in which the Nationalist Federation takes an active part in municipal campaigns. 44

Whatever the reasons for this, perhaps the sharpness of the conflict at this level made the branch more than usually anxious to see the Labor Party win an effective role at the higher levels of politics. There were many factors operating to exclude Labor candidates from the Council. Labor voters certainly were, on occasion, apathetic about municipal elections, or worse preferred 'independent' or 'ratepayers' candidates and 45 Labor Call cast some light on the problem when it suggested:

A plank in Labor's Platform which seems a big handicap to Laborites is the Unimproved Land Value Tax. The people are not yet educated up to this style of tax and are consequently afraid of it, though a referendum is provided. 46

but principally, all circumstances tended to favour the non-Labor candidate irrespective of policies or personalitics. First and foremost, plural voting gave the larger property owners a proportionately larger influence on the outcome of an election, in an electorate where the highest majority ever recorded by a Labor candidate was only 67.5%. Non-Labor candidates had all the advantages of wealth and reputation, not the least of these being time and a wide network of contacts. The

44 *Age*, 27 August 1926


"They vote Labor in State and Federal elections, but when you knock on their door at municipal election time they don't want to know you".

46 *Labor Call*, 3 September 1925

47 *Labor Call*, 9 August 1928 complained of "... the minority of capitalists who so manipulate the plural voting that Labor often finds itself defeated when victory really should be theirs."
entire burden of finance and organisation fell on the local branch, frequently to the extent of paying the candidates' deposits. The branch had no wealthy patrons and few candidates who could finance their own campaigns. Not only was there a tendency to return the sitting councillor but a strong preference for businessmen, in that the task of a councillor was seen as more managerial than political. A correspondent to the Leader summed up this attitude:

\[
\text{We know that the most reliable local councillors are businessmen who bud, blossom and advance with the town they love.}^{49}
\]

In a period of rapid growth, development and expanding rate revenue it was relatively easy for incumbent councillors to take the credit and present the voters with the option of replacing an apparently satisfactory manager of municipal affairs with a new and untried man. Municipal success, more than anything, was dependent upon the projection of an intensely personal image, the possession of a wide network of contacts within the district, and the good fortune to stand when a sitting councillor was retiring who would extend his patronage. This third factor was never available to Labor candidates, and only rarely were circumstances sufficiently favourable to overcome the natural bias against them. In the face of this situation the branch as a whole lost interest in municipal elections, though certain individuals remained keen, and it was not until the latter part of the 1930's when Coburg was divided into wards, thus improving Labor's chances, that interest was revived. Fortunately for branch morale, Labor fared much better in State and Federal elections.

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48 VCE Minutes, 15 July 1921. 1921 G. Bishop was refused an advance of £10 for the deposit so he could contest the election. Soon after the deposit was increased to £50.  
49 Brunswick and Coburg Leader, 5 August 1921
CHAPTER THREE

AN OLD "SLIDESHAMMER" GOES TO PARLIAMENT

Frank Keane wins the State Seat of Essendon 1924

The bitterness generated by the Conscription issue lingered for some time in the election battles for the State seat of Essendon. The particularly unpleasant campaign in which Blackburn had been defeated on account of his unpopular stand on the war left many Laborites longing for revenge. Some idea of the feeling can be gauged from a letter to him in 1917:

... The fools! It makes me sick that we return those we could well do without and turn down (even temporarily) the really straight men we so badly need. The galling point is that it's a lie that did the damage. They're crazy to "swap" you for - Ryan ..., but when I think of you I want to smash things ...

As long as Tommy Ryan, who enjoyed fanning the fires of partisanship, held the seat the campaigns remained bitter and personal but as an active and enthusiastic local member he rapidly built up a strong personal following by capitalising on the previous neglect of the area. In addition the poor relations between the Essendon and Coburg branches did not enhance Labor's chances against such a strong opponent, and it was not until 1924 that circumstances combined favourably to give Labor a victory. The Essendon Gazette noted ruefully that:

It has for some time been apparent that as our vacant spaces became filled it would become a difficult matter to hold Essendon as a Nationalist seat.

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1 See pp 132-146
2 Letter to M. Blackburn from Bertha Holmes, Friday 16 July 1924 in possession of Louisa Hamilton
2a See p 20
3 Essendon Gazette, 3 July 1924
but by 1924 the Victorian people were more than usually disillusioned with the blatant politicking of the non-Labour groups in Parliament. Writing of Victorian politics in general, Jean Holmes has suggested that in general all social interests shared in the administration of Victoria for quite lengthy periods but that:

When the Party shares diverged considerably
... the distribution of electoral boundaries was seriously challenged, resulting in a crisis of legitimacy for the electoral system.

1924 was a year in which the crisis of legitimacy was particularly acute and as usual it centred on the need for a redistribution. The defeat of Peacock's Redistribution Bill precipitated the election at which Labor gained an additional six seats. One of these was Essendon.

Keane's selection had prompted the usual complaints from the Essendon branch but he had many personal attributes that contributed to Labor's success, not the least of which was a capacity to defuse some of the tensions that had characterized the Essendon campaigns for so many years. Even then the Argus claimed that 'personal feeling was made the chief issue of the contest' but Keane's straightforward, grave and unpretentious demeanour coupled with a refusal to pander to any faction on the one hand or resort to the personal abuse that Ryan delighted in took much of the heat out of the campaign. Keane was uncompromising and dogmatic but it derived from a deep natural affinity with the people he desired to represent. The uncomplicated, almost simple-minded nature

4 J. Holmes, The Government of Victoria, Queensland 1976 p 84
5 There were four ministries in 1924. There had been no redistribution since 1903 and wide disparities had been apparent since World War I see J. Holmes, ibid. p 85
6 VCE Minutes, 30 May 1924. On most occasions when a Coburg member won pre-selection there were complaints from Essendon. See also VCE Minutes, 28 February 1914 and 7 May 1920. CM, 13 March 1922
7 Argus, 27 June 1924
of his position reduced tension among Labor supporters while personal
attack from his opponents tended to rebound on themselves in the context
of Keane's low-key, quietly confident campaign. His approach to the
campaign and his political style were clearly revealed at the Declaration
of the Poll:

Right from the inception of the campaign
he had felt optimistic. He recognised
the fact that a big "swing around" was taking
place for Labor all over the world and that
Essendon would be no exception to the rule.
He agreed with the previous speakers that
abuse of the defeated candidate would "cut
no ice". He was a proud man that night,
especially proud of the position they had
placed him in because he had endeavoured
to fight the contest in a fair and gentle-
ly manner. He regarded himself as merely
the mouthpiece of the Labor Party, and felt
that he had done little to deserve the
compliment the people of Essendon had paid him.

Keane had waited a long time to enter parliament, he was already sixty,
but until his death sixteen years later he would be numbered among those
members of parliament that Eggleston described as 'ordinary men ... chosen
by men because they were most like themselves'. In 1936 the re-
distribution was finally carried out and compulsory voting introduced.

Keane, naturally chose to stand for the newly created seat of Coburg
which he won comfortably. The new electorate was more or less coter-
minous with the municipal boundaries and its continued Labor character was
virtually assured.

8 It was noted of Keane in parliament on his death: "He was a good and
fair debator, able to take criticism and give it in return, without
engendering ill-feeling".
Victorian Parliamentary Debates, (VPD) Vol. 209 (1940) p 195

9 Essendon Gazette, 3 July 1924

10 F.W. EGGLESTON, The Victorian Parliament As I Knew It Confidential
Notes Part II p 22

11 Brunswick and Coburg Leader, 9 April 1924. The electorate commenced
south of Major Street, extended east to the Merri Creek and west to
Northumberland Road down to Gaffney Street and east of the Moonee Ponds
Creek to Moreland Road. It also took in North East Brunswick to the
north side of Albion Street.
CHAPTER FOUR

FRANK KEANE

Many men have the landlord off their
backs, many women have comfortable
homes, many children have a better
living standard because of the direct
and indirect work of Frank Keane.¹

Frank Keane was not a lead-line stealer, but a hard-working
and sincere backbencher who represented his constituents faithfully but
more especially the Labor voter. Keane was one of those who had joined
the Labor Party to help the Labor Party² and all his energy was at its
service, tending always to subordinate himself to the good of the cause.
Men such as Keane acted as valuable counterbalance to the Ansteys and
Blackburns whose exceptional qualities and aggressive individualism
combined to produce an explosive mixture of asset and liability to the Labour
Movement. Not that Keane was self-effacing:

Frank Keane was a man who did not vacillate –
he did not attempt to curry favour with
any man. 'There are my views', he would
say, and they were given in plain, straight
language. He cared not whether you liked
it or not – he did his duty as he saw it,³

or passive

He was ever a rebel – but a type of rebel
who won the admiration and respect of all
who came in contact with him because of
his courage in action and expression,⁴

but he did not polarize people or exacerbate factional conflict. His
aim was always to direct attention outwards to the enemy and as such
he was a major force in welding the Coburg ALP branch together. Keane

¹ Labor Call, 23 May 1940
² Interview E.W. Peters
³ Labor Call, 23 May 1940
⁴ ibid
was the archetypal Labor man, his background, his experience, his
demeanour and his commitment revealed him as an eminently trustworthy
representative of working people because he was so unequivocally a working
man.

Keane was born in Ballarat in the early 1860s, the oldest son
of Irish immigrant parents. His father was an invalid so circumstances
were hard but Keane did not regard them as exceptionally unfortunate. As
he remarked later, 'My father and mother were immigrants .... They
came here to "make good", and to some extent they did.' During his school
days he delivered morning and evening papers and he preferred shooting
rabbits to lessons, but like so many of his era he devoted much time in
adulthood to self-education. At twelve he was apprenticed to the trade
of cooping or 'putting a fence around beer'. It was a far from satisfactory experience for he learned to make only one kind of cask and no
theory, in poor conditions and for very low wages. What he did learn was
the need for organisation among working men and he rapidly became an
'advanced unionist'. In 1924 he could announce proudly to parliament:

I have been connected with trade unionism
for forty years and have played a fairly
strenuous part in the movement.

He also came to see himself as a Socialist although initially he had
followed the Liberal Party:

5 Interview, A.C. Keane
VPD, Vol. 209 (1940) p 195
6 VPD, Vol. 167 (1924) p 130
7 VPD, Vol. 170 (1925) p 2242
8 Interview, A.C. Keane
9 ibid.
VPD Vol. 209 (1940) p 195, "He read deeply ... "
10 VPD, Vol. 169 (1925) p 1262
11 Interview, A.C. Keane
M. Dodds
12 VPD, Vol. 167 (1924) p 1367
When I was a lad I used to follow the old Liberal Party in Ballarat ... They were men who did some good on behalf of the people of this country, but exposure to the social and economic analysis of the Socialist writers whose works were available in Australia in the 1880's and 1890's combined with the critical experience of the strikes and depression of the 1890's led him to the realisation that the alliance with Liberalism would not further the workers' interests in any fundamental way:

Nothing of a progressive nature was done on behalf of the working classes until they accepted the advice of Mr. Bruce Smith and sent into the Houses of Parliament of Australia, men who were prepared to represent their interests and to endeavour to give effect to their views in a constitutional manner.

The effect of the strikes and depression on a whole generation in terms of heightened consciousness cannot be over-emphasized. For men like Keane it consolidated a perception of class divisions within Victorian society, of a fundamental conflict of interest, and the need to give expression to this social and economic reality. Socialism was adopted as a catch phrase because it seemed not only to validate personal experience but to offer a way forward. Keane was not an intellectual, but he was a self-styled Socialist - educating his children as Socialists at the Socialist Sunday School, apparently abandoning the Catholicism of his parents.

Keane is interesting not only because of his central role in this particular study but because he was so typical. He was one of those whose beliefs and passions, even their misconceptions, became the touchstones of the Labour Movement. They tended to take for granted the efficacy of democratic forms and the capacity of ordinary men and women to control their destiny and create a 'new order' by simply combining their

13 VPD, Vol. 167 (1924) p 510
14 VPD, Vol. 168 (1924) p 1367
15 Interview, A.C. Keane
M. Dodds
strengths. Theirs was an abiding optimism that carried the Labour Movement at least as far as the depression of the 1930's.

Keane learnt from the confrontations of the 1920's a deep suspicion of the more affluent sections of society and an intransigence towards employers: 'I fight the employing class every time and all the time'. These attitudes did not soften with time and in parliament in the 1920's he not only refused to fraternise with the non-Labor politicians, but reserved his greatest scorn for those who tried to minimise the reality of class conflict. Typical was his response in 1930 to a remark that the Labor Party 'cannot claim a monopoly on the sympathy of the working classes' with a catalogue of his favourite hard-line, anti-working class statements:

Many years ago the Employers' Federation had as its paid secretary a man named Walpole ... (he) said that marriage, theatre parties and long beers were luxuries for which employers could not be expected to pay ... The late Mr. Appleton, when he was chairman of the Shipowners Federation, once remarked ... 'Oh, for the good old days when we could trice these fellows to the main mast and give them three dozen ... Sir George Reid once said, ... that Australia could never expect to be a prosperous manufacturing nation until it had a surplus of pauper labour on which to draw when it required. 16

In Keane's view:

If members of the Opposition were as honest as those men of past days, they would come out with language just as plain and blunt. 19

He undoubtedly preferred declared hostilities. Plain speaking and blunt himself he constantly taunted the glib 'so-called Liberals' with charges of hypocrisy:

if it were possible for some of the old pioneers to hear the utterances of the so-called Liberals or Nationalists they would turn in their graves. 20

16 VPD, Vol. 183 (1930) p 3320
17 VPD, Vol. 171 (1926) p 856, "As you know I never attend any of the big dinners ... I cannot do so when I know so much unemployment exists". Interview, A. Keane
18 VPD, Vol. 184 (1930) p 4681, see also VPD, Vol. 170 (1925) p 2015
19 ibid.
20 VPD, Vol. 167 (1924) p 510
but he had 'no quarrel' with those, such as the member for Rodney, who spoke 'his mind so plainly' when he declared that 'if the unemployed did not take what they were offered, they could starve'.

Experience of hardship and conflict had not produced a revolutionary. Men like Keane were not attracted by violent solutions. They remained committed to a democratic, evolutionary form of change. As Keane put it in a rare moment of eloquence:

In this state we realise that as we have the ballot there is no necessity for the bullet.

Keane's rejection of violence was related to a compassion for his fellow man. The underside of his intransigence was an anguished concern for the plight of the working man and his family, and it sprang from his own deep scarring, both as one of the unemployed:

... I walked the streets of Melbourne looking for a job. It used to be bad enough leaving home in the morning, but it was ten times harder coming home at night to face my wife and children with the comfortless news that I had found nothing to do,

and as one of those early unionists who were victimised for their early involvement in organisation:

He was a militant stalwart in those days when it was not easy to be a Trade Unionist - when to be so was to be a marked man. Frank Keane was often wronged for his outspoken claims for the removal of wrongs.

Keane himself recalled bitterly:

When I had to attend meetings of the Wages Board for the industry on which I was employed, I found that I had to fight my own employer in the interests of my fellow employees. It was not long before I found I was the subject of victimisation. This was because I had to stand up to my employer and fight on behalf of those whom I represented. I was told that I would never get a job again. I might add that I then took up a farming proposition in Gippsland and returned to Melbourne about two and a half years later. When I sought employment at my trade I was not treated even with ordinary civility.
Even as the Labour Movement itself made some progress, Keane's own personal experiences, such as his treatment at the hands of the Coburg Councillors were not such as to alter his attitudes and he relied more on experience than theory as a guide to political action:

By the experiences of the past we might gain a guide for the future in striving to achieve our objective.26

As to political action, despite the fact that he made moves to enter parliament as early as 190927, he remained ambivalent about its benefits and cynical of its operations: 'Parliament is the most hypocritical institution I have had anything to do with'.28 The performance of Labor in office only served to further disillusion him. Keane was unlucky in 1910 not to have succeeded to Frank Anstey as the member for Brunswick, but the honour went to a man who could finance his own campaign.29 He contested Essendon three times before the war and was far from disgraced in battles against W.A. Watt30, but he was, unfortunately, an old man by the time he entered parliament in 1924. His best years were already behind him.31

Keane never allowed his parliamentary duties to interfere with his 'live interest'32 in all Coburg branch activities. He attended regularly but did not seek to dominate - only once did he accept an executive position.33

26 Brunswick and Coburg Gazette 14 March 1930
27 See page 12
28 VPD, Vol. 171 (1926) p 1555
29 interview A. Keane E. Peters J. Jewell was a Brunswick Butcher.
30 See Appendix B
31 "I regret that this office came to him late in life, and that physical infirmity intervened and prevented the State from getting the full use of his best facilities and of his youthful vigour'. Labor Cell, 23 May 1940.
32 Coburg and Brunswick Gazette 28 June 1929
33 Branch President 1935
He became something of a branch patriarch, respected and deferred to, not only on account of his age, but because he was a pioneer, and 'old stalwart' of the Movement and never grew too self-important for the rank and file whose company he obviously preferred. As a politician he consulted with the branch about policy and legislation. He did not go as far as Charles Mutton would in the 1940's and institute quarterly electors' meetings, but he spent much time amongst his constituents and served their interests well. In the long run Keane's intransigence, his 'sledgehammer' style contributed to his trustworthiness and when during the depression his faith in the working man and the value of parliamentary action was badly shaken it was to have a very profound influence on the branch mentality.
CHAPTER FIVE

BRANCH LIFE 1919-1928

Despite the domination of branch affairs by 'bread and butter' issues in the first half of the 1920's, a large number in the branch considered themselves socialists - however imperfectly they understood what that meant and they were quick to express solidarity with the more militant sections of the Labour Movement such as the IWW 'Twelve'. There was also something of an intellectual strand developing via links with the VSP and significantly in terms of later developments there was much interest in Esperanto. Blackburn's editorship of Labor Call in 1919 and 1920 with its heavy concentration on international affairs and European Socialism was hailed as a 'significant improvement of reading matter in the journal'. It was not, however, until the late 1920's when the area had been consolidated for Labor that this emerged as a dominant strand in branch life.

In this period some signs of conflict with the organisational if not policy tendencies of the CE appear and they were important

1 J. Murphy, M. Dodds and A. Keane all stressed this point very strongly
2 CH, 11 August 1919
   CH, 28 July 1919 support for Tom Walsh of Seaman's Union
   CH, 6 October 1919 support for Richard Long imprisoned for flying the red flag
   CH, 2 June 1919 call for the release of Paul Freeman.
3 See Appendix E
   CH, 8 September 1919 correspondence with Secretary Coburg branch of ASP E. Smith
4 CH, 25 April, 9 May, 27 June 1921, 6 February 1922, 18 July 1924
   This is a period when the whole Labour Movement was excited by the progress of the Russian Revolution
5 CH, 17 March 1919. Two further letters of appreciation were sent:
   CH, 16 February and 13 December 1920
in developing aspects of branch mentality. The majority in the Coburg branch were idealists, deeply committed to the principles of egalitarianism that underpinned the Labour Movement more fundamentally than socialist ideas and they were quick to protest at the increasing domination of Party affairs that became apparent in the 1920's. The branch was apparently sensitive to what Rawson sees as a transfer of the control of the Party from a large and representative faction to a small oligarchic faction, or a tightening of control exercised by the Party's Executive over its politicians, constant organisational changes, even though no formal constitutional alterations were involved.

The branch was also frustrated by the increasing pragmatism of the ALP and its apparent timidity in a period when the PLP was making very little real progress; a feeling that would be accentuated by the performance of the Labor Governments during the depression. From its peripheral and somewhat isolated position it was relatively easy for the Coburg branch to over-simplify problems confronting the CE and frustration only served to increase their righteousness rather than understanding. Clearly communications between the CE and the branch were poor and this was made all the more serious by the relative lack of informal lines of communication such as senior party members and trade union officials in a branch provided.

Rawson has described the twenties as the 'Era of Organisation in Victoria' characterised by the 'Growth of the Machine'. Not only did the Party believe at this time 'that the real answer to its problems was to be found in better organisation', but it was the time when:

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6 This is reflected in motions such as complaints at the poor attendance of Labor politicians in the House of Representatives. CM, 5 December 1921, disgust at Labor politicians attending a welcome to Hughes CM, 15 September 1919 and a motion deploring the manipulation of a pre-selection ballot in order to get Ryan into Federal Parliament CM 13 October 1919
7 D. RAWSON (1954) op. cit. p 1
8 ibid. p 55
The stability of the Party machine was firmly established. Though rank and file membership was rapidly changing, the controlling group changed little and then rather because of death and age than any other factor.

The Coburg branch was not immune to this belief in organisation but there was some conflict as to who initiated and controlled it, the branch or the CE. Unlike the CE the Coburg branch executive was fluid and changing and at no stage dominated by 'prominent' figures such as politicians or union officials. If the membership was changing then the executive was changing in response.

At the organisational level the branch was very successful, and the new members were young and enthusiastic. Meetings were large with frequently up to one hundred present and the combination of this new vitality and the organisational skills and experience of the older members created a sense that there was no limit to the achievements possible. The branch was very 'ambitious' and very demanding of its members but at the same time the CE was reducing the scope for branch initiated activities and in effect beginning to bottle up some of the energy resources that had been the great strength of the ALP before the Conscription Split. Quite obviously much of the branch's expansion was only partly due to any special effort on its part, since the suburb was growing and the adoption of the

9 D. RAWSON (1954) op.cit. p 1
10 See e.g. CM, 6 February 1922
CM, 13 September 1919
CM, 21 February 1920
Dyer won a gold medal for nominating the most members (55) within the Essendon electorate.
11 See Appendix C
At no point in the whole twenty years of the study was the same person President for two consecutive years and it was rare for a Secretary to hold his position for more than three years. New people entered the executive every year. See Appendix C
12 Interview, J. Murphy, A.C. Keane, M. Dodds
13 Interview, J. Murphy
Socialisation Objective preceded a general upswing of support for the Party. Nevertheless the Coburg branch with its Hall filled to capacity was more than a little pleased with itself and this tended toward righteousness when, for example, Labor Call criticised its lack of success at municipal elections or suggested that the branches would not really be well organised until inner suburban officials moved out:

As unionists and secretaries move into the new suburbs and join up with the local ALP branch, they generally put more life into the Movement, and also encourage the old battlers who have been holding the fort for years.

A degree of branch restiveness was revealed by a strong endorsement of a move to reorganise the basis for election to Annual Conference and its delegate to vote against the increase in membership fees and the appointment of an Organising Secretary. In the event, Mrs. Mary Rogers was appointed Organising Secretary and she visited Coburg in May and reported:

I worked in Coburg and Moreland for the Melbourne North election, but with the exception of three or four men, this big subdivision has no workers, and needs a lot of work put into it to make it safe for Labor. I was obliged to take some of our women workers from Richmond to get this place canvassed. The results were considered good. I also had an afternoon women's meeting in the Coburg Hall and it was a great success.

14 See p. 24
15 Labor Call, 15 November 1923
16 This may well have been related to problems with the Essendon branch
17 CM, 3 April 1922
18 VCE Minutes, 27 July 1922
The enigma lies in Mrs. Rogers' inability to locate or mobilise the 19 large number of active ALP members in the district, so active in fact that nominations for municipal candidates had been called at the exceptionally early date of March. In February the branch had established a 'ways and means' committee to organise these elections, instituted speakers' classes and Pleasant Sunday Afternoons and determined to:

take a more active part in all functions of a public character as a means of bringing the Party before the people. 21

At the broader level the branch was advocating periodic meetings of Labor Councillors 22 and even Labor Call ran a substantial report on the branch's suggestions put to the Coburg Council on the 'Housing Problem'; 23 the lack of co-operation with Mrs. Rogers, therefore, needs some explaining.

Firstly, not only was Mrs. Rogers the embodiment of moves to tighten centralised control and hence an unwelcome intruder, but she herself was closely connected with Richmond Labor politics, notorious for its corruption and 'Tammany Hall' style operations. Whatever her personal credentials were, she was one of the group that was thought to have undue and highly suspect influence over the CE and the PLP. Secondly the branch presumably resented the implications that it could not adequately

19 Branch officials alone numbered twenty.
20 Brunswick and Coburg Leader, 24 March 1922
21 CM, 6 February and 20 February 1922
22 CM, 3 April 1922
23 Labor Call, 20 July 1922
organise its own area. Thirdly the branch was well aware of its insignificance in the Melbourne North Province, 24 pre-selections were invariably dominated by candidates from the inner suburbs. The two sitting representatives, Beckett and Kiernan, were both associated with John Wren, 25 though this is not mentioned so much to imply any exceptional degree of corruption but to emphasise that the style of politics in these areas was very different from that in places like Coburg and Preston. Both representatives appear to have ignored the branch altogether 26 until January 1922 when Beckett finally paid the branch a visit. He apologised for his previous neglect, answered criticism and promised to address the branch at any time', and significantly he congratulated the members on their 'lively interest' in affairs. 27 Apparently Coburg branch members were not inclined to rally to Mrs. Rogers and she may not have improved things by her willingness to call in outside workers.

24 This encompassed virtually all the north-eastern suburbs so the branch was even more removed from mainstream activity than in Essendon or Maribyrnong.

25 Beckett was a business partner in some of Wren's sporting ventures. Kiernan, a furniture shop proprietor, was linked to Wren by all interviewees familiar with this period, though they fell out later.

26 CM, 11 October 1920, an example of the impersonal relations with Beckett provided by a letter from his secretary requesting the branch to submit four names so that they could be invited to a social function. The branch took no action. See also VCE Minutes, 12 May 1916 where Coburg branch complained that Beckett had offered £100 towards the campaign if a particular candidate was selected.

27 CM, 23 January 1922
Later relations with Beckett were good and he took over the mortgage on the Hall
As far as can be determined, until the mid-twenties the branch executive comprised representatives of what could be termed the older and, in many cases, the first generation of Laborites in the district.  

The ranks of the branch, on the other hand, were being swelled by the young men and women who were moving into the district, and it was no doubt they had moved into the less developed area, who initiated many of the 'local' discussions. 29 This is not to suggest any conflict, rather the older members had their enthusiasm renewed by the injection of vigour that came with a rapidly expanding branch.

The successes of 1924 mark the high point of the 1920's for the Coburg branch which entered a phase of consolidation and stability following the rapid expansion of the early 1920's. The Hall had been renovated 30 and extended, the membership lists were long and recruitment still a fruitful exercise. Optimism and confidence were high and there were signs that the inward perspective was giving way to a desire for greater and more effective communication and interaction with the Labour Movement. The branch rapidly widened its horizons. The establishment of a Library 31, the appointment of a press correspondent, a drive to recruit one hundred subscribers to Labor Call and the regular submission of reports to that journal were all symptomatic 32. The spirit pervading

28 In the interview J. Murphy, who was vice-president in 1925 and a young man described the executive as "old men".

29 J. Murphy gave very much this impression and he is still very proud of the way he started a tiny progress association and got the road made to his house and a park established.

30 CM, 9 and 16 February 1925

31 CM, 30 November 1925. Keane donated 50 books, McBratny 12. Hansard and Labor Call were to be taken regularly. The branch also suggested an inter-branch cricket tournament and enthusiastically supported the "Metropolitan Council". Labor Call, 13 August 1925. In February 1925 the branch had 2,000 letterheads printed. CM, 15 February 1926

32 Labor Call, 13 August 1925
the branch was reflected in these reports. The two extracts below are typical:

Week by week membership of this branch is surely increasing. Perhaps by some new adherent to Labor's claims or maybe the return of an old comrade who cannot resist the growing urge of the cause which is ever beckoning him on. With an ever increasing attendance, a multiplying membership, the good order, enthusiasm and harmony of its members, one does feel and an impression grows that there is a genuine revival with the Movement and with it a return to the fighting spirit of old. Every Monday night meeting brings with it some new feature of Labor's cause. A promise of co-operation here, or the rendering of practical sympathy there.

The keen interest by members in the development of the branch, their willingness to share in the work of promoting its many activities and the unabated enthusiasm which manifests itself in the carrying out of this labour of love was very pronounced at the last two weekly meetings.

Phrases such as 'intense enthusiasm', 'fighting spirit' and 'harmony and unity' figures prominently in reports throughout the whole of this period and even the growing realisation that the success of 1924 was not to be repeated in municipal elections scarcely dimmed this optimism:

Members seemed somewhat perturbed at Labor's non-success ... but the indomitable spirit of Labor knows no defeat. Its recent failure is only fleeting and will be the harbinger of inspiration for its adherents to rise to an intense and more enthusiastic effort.

33 Labor Call, 25 February 1926
34 Labor Call, 25 March 1926
35 Labor Call, 6 May 1925
Jock Hay had been defeated in a by-election.
Significantly in this period the rank and file of the branch and the branch as rank and file of the Party began to adopt a noticeably more independent position and sought a greater degree of participation. A larger core of people engaged consistently in discussions which was directly facilitated by the frequency of meetings (every Monday night) allowing for the rapid disposal of routine matters and adequate time for general business and discussion of motions from the floor. In particular the views and behaviour of various branch notables such as Keane, Duggan and Randles were subjected to close, critical scrutiny as well as the leadership of the Party at all levels. Duggan, in particular, was censured on several occasions for his role in Council and a letter sent by him to the Age in November 1925 generated a heated and bitter debate which culminated in a motion prohibiting branch members from entering 'into a newspaper controversy unless authorised by the branch'. In the same spirit was an attempt by the branch to instruct the delegate to Annual Conference on how to vote. Perhaps most revealing was the quality of a lengthy debate on the Labor Ministry's proposal to lengthen the term of apprenticeship, during which Monks encapsulated the branch mentality:

... it was well to let the Labor Party know that there were intelligent critics behind them on vital questions. Propaganda was the life and soul of any political movement and it was up to the members of the branch to speak out and create the right spirit abroad.

The relocation in 1922 of the greater portion of settled Coburg (south

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36 For example CM, 21 September 1925. Duggan called to account for his vote in support of a rate increase.

37 CM, 30 November 1925.

38 Although the delegate, Harold Nicholls, was a Coburg member, the branch could not instruct him since he was technically the delegate of the State Electorate Council.

39 Labor Call, 27 October 1927.
of Bell Street) in the federal seat of Bourke held by the 'silver-tongued' Frank Anstey revitalised the branch's interest in the federal sphere and enabled it to take advantage of its closer natural ties with Brunswick. Anstey was a more frequent visitor than Fenton to the branch which initiated an attempt to establish some kind of permanent body to co-ordinate activities and promote closer co-operation within the Bourke electorate.

Early in 1926 the branch reported proudly:

A conference between this and the Brunswick branch has been organised with a view to starting a campaign of Labor propaganda throughout the Bourke electorate. Committees will be formed which will specialise in the particular subject allotted to them until a thorough sifting out of the best ways and means of featuring the whole scheme has been reached. This will then be submitted to the branches for adoption. Then the real work of publicity and activity will follow.

This conference determined to arrange fortnightly Friday night street corner meetings and discussion nights but it does not appear to have been particularly successful.

In itself however, the attempt is interesting, not only because it was the first of a number of such attempts - all of which created conflict with the CE - but for the insight it provides into the Coburg branch mentality. The move was partly related to the need for Coburg Laborites to assert themselves within the new electorate and thereby head off the possibility that the strong, long established Brunswick branches would dominate electoral organisation the way Essendon had done in Essendon and

40 Argus, 7 January 1922
41 Labor Call, 4 February 1926
42 The first topic was 'Immigration', Labor Call, 4 February 1926
There was also an element of brash arrogance derived largely from the branch's excess energy and under-utilised enthusiasm which had persuaded the members that they could and ought to inject more life into the electorate which appeared rather staid and complacent. The Labor vote was much stronger in Brunswick so Labor men more easily rose to prominent positions in local Progress Associations, Sporting Clubs etc. and there was often a Labor majority on the Council. Laborites were largely excluded from such spheres in Coburg and this may have contributed to the desire to intensify ALP activity in the area. Finally, this attempt reveals both the branch's initiative and its pervading concern to step up propaganda activities. Both were to remain persistent features of the branch for the whole period under study.

The sporadic attempts by the branch to organise a more permanent local structure throughout the inter-war years seem to spring from a desire for more decentralisation within the party structure. At a time when central control was being appreciably tightened and the increased size of the Party reduced the likely effectiveness of any one branch, the Coburg branch was investigating ways of increasing local autonomy in organisation and policy formation. While the State electorate was the basis for party organisation, the federal electorate offered the possibility of a quite substantial organisational unit if unionists as well as party members in the area were involved, and as such could wield quite substantial influence.

Moreover, within it, and individual branch would have more scope, a louder voice and more interaction in contrast to the situation where no-one seemed to notice the Coburg branch except when it lost municipal elections.

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43 The problem was however, there was no federal body to which it could appeal directly.
The mid-twenties saw a general increase in the tempo of all branch activities and the social life which catered for all members of the family become nearly as demanding as political activities. The attendance at these functions could be as high as six hundred and were important in providing a considerable revenue for the branch. Participation in these activities was presented as a serious obligation. Members were exhorted to attend in terms of 'putting their shoulders to the wheel' and such constant association strengthened the club-like atmosphere and made the branch a very close-knit group of people connected by a complex network of relationships only some of which were political in origin. They also continued to serve a recruiting function:

One of the chief means of meeting members and prospective members is our social evenings. Throughout last year (1925) they were a financial and social success.

For a period in the mid 1920's the branch became absorbed with the problems of unemployment and union related activities perhaps reflecting the number of union officials then regularly attending meetings, but as economic conditions improved the branch turned its attention to more purely political issues. This was also facilitated

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44 For example, a "Novelty Night" held in Coburg Town Hall. Labor Call, 30 July 1925
Brunswick and Coburg Leader, 19 March 1926
250 at Reunion Social.

45 Labor Call, 3 May 1928
see also Labor Call, 6 May 1926

46 Labor Call, 4 February 1926


48 E.g. the 1926 Referendum Proposal
Labor Call, 24 June and 8 July 1926
by the long overdue State redistribution \(^{49}\) which gave the branch a considerable degree of local autonomy but in an area that required only minimal effort to hold it for Labor.\(^{50}\) It was also clear by 1927 that the municipal council was a lost cause and not many members of the branch were willing to dissipate their energies in such a limited sphere of activity. In the second half of the decade a group of people emerge as influential leaders of opinion and action who remain active until, in some cases, at least the 1940's. With their emergence the militancy of the branch took a more directed form which by the mid 1930's was to become a running battle with the CE.

From 1927 on a marked restiveness can be detected in the branch records\(^{51}\) and by 1928 this had gained momentum. More and more correspondence to the CE is couched in terms of demands, for example in May the CE was asked whether it 'ever intend[ed] to start a campaign to get amendments to the Arbitration Act'\(^{52}\) and later in the year the CE was told that it should instruct Labor candidates and other speakers during the federal election campaign to refrain from ridiculing prominent industrial leaders when addressing the electors and that more time be devoted to telling them of the legislation enacted by the Bruce-Page Government for the purpose of smashing unionism.\(^{53}\)

There is also some evidence that the branch was dissatisfied with the CE's moderate position and while it enthusiastically supported the ACTU's affiliation with the Pan Pacific Secretariat\(^{54}\) it demanded an explanation from the CE as to why it had refused 'financial assistance to Miss M. Heagney on her Pan Pacific Mission'. The evidence for this period is

\(^{49}\) See p 32
\(^{50}\) No opponent could be found for Keane in 1929 and both he and Anstey campaigned elsewhere. Labor Call, 21 November 1929
\(^{51}\) E.g. see Labor Call, 27 October 1927
\(^{52}\) CM, 7 May 1928
\(^{53}\) Labor Call, 24 September 1928
\(^{54}\) Labor Call, 9 August 1928
\(^{55}\) Labor Call, 16 August 1928
sparse and the scale of this study too small to generalise about the Victorian Labour Movement as a whole, but perhaps it was symptomatic that the CE found it necessary in 1928 to exercise some censorship of branch reports appearing in Labor Call:

That no resolution of any branch or organisation within the ALP affecting the policy of the Party shall be given publicity without the authority of the Central Executive.

Although this was a period of relative success for Labor in Victoria there were early warnings of the crisis to come. Long before unemployment reached unusual levels the branch was urging the THC to take a more active part in the organisation of the unemployed. Early in 1928 the Coburg Council was presented with an emphatic protest against its action in dispensing with the services of fifty employees while the Council has ample work that could be proceeded with which would keep the men fully employed, instead of aggravating the already acute unemployment problem,

and the State Government was attacked for resorting to drastic retrenchment and dismissal policies at a time when there is an abnormal number of unemployed, and that the Government should appoint a Royal Commission to investigate Railway affairs.

56 Labor Call, 20 September 1928
57 Labor Call, 10 November 1928
58 Labor Call, 19 January 1928 (Jan 9)
59 ibid.
Fairly rapidly the branch was moving towards a stance of almost perpetual protest that would become singularly pronounced during the crisis years when Labor Governments struggled to cope with the depression. Two motions passed in 1928 were symptomatic of strengthening attitudes and tendencies. One expressed support for the Liberty propaganda League in their endeavour to raise funds to carry out the good work that they perform year in and year out on behalf of the industrial and Political Movement,

...a harbinger of the strenuous support for 'outside' organisations of the working class that would bring the branch into serious conflict with the CE in the thirties. The other was the declaration that the branch was firmly opposed the formation of Labor Governments without a majority in the Lower House,

...a view that was more than strengthened by the performance of the Hogan Government in the years 1929-1932.

60 Labor Call, 16 August 1928
61 CH, 10 December 1928
SECTION TWO 1927-1932
SECTION TWO 1927-1932

The Coburg branch of the ALP had begun a major re-orientation of interests and attitudes when the first signs of the economic downturn became apparent and they confronted the depression with quite remarkable intellectual and physical resources which enabled them to respond on the whole with positive action rather than defeatism. The following three chapters provide a detailed profile of the responses of one ALP branch to the events of 1929-1932.

CHAPTER SIX

THE BRANCH: PERSONALITIES AND INTERESTS

(i) Leading Branch Activists

Information on individual branch members is patchy but the little that is available provides some insight into the kinds of people that comprised the branch. Frank Keane remained active and in a way he retreated into the branch as he became more appalled by the helpless handwringing of his parliamentary colleagues in the face of the tasks of government. Virtually all of Keane's children and their families were among the more active branch members. Myrtle had married Arthur Dodds, son of an active women worker in the VSP while Aubrey was not only an articulate leader and organisern but a musician. He and his wife contributed much to the lighter side of branch life.

George McGowan was an ageing campaigner, a man of ideas and a fiery debator. Of the same generation as Keane he was a journalist and union official and had been active in the Coburg branch since the early 1920's and a Coburg councillor from 1924-27. Like Keane he had also known the victimisation of the early years of working class
organisation but he was principally a propagandist founding newspapers and standing for election in hopeless seats.¹

A most influential family group were the Grant sisters. Pearl was married to a local ironfoundary owner Earnest Hanks an active Communist who from the early twenties had been involved with the Esperanto Movement. Mr. and Mrs. Hanks were 'agitators for the study of economics' and while they later rejected Communism after visiting Russia, they were the centre of a small, left-wing intellectual coterie in Coburg with which many members of the Coburg branch were associated to varying degrees.² Mary Grant, along with her brother Norman, as active VSP members had been prominent in the free speech and anti-conscription campaigns.³ Described by Labor Call as an 'enthusiastic protagonist of militancy'⁴ she had stood for the seat of Kooyong in Labor's interest in 1919. Mary believed in 'woman's rights above everything else' and was an outspoken and dominant person who's 'ideas ... didn't help her with the general public',⁵ but she found a welcome in the Coburg branch when she joined in 1931 rising to be president in 1933 - a tribute to her devotion and organisational skills. She played an important part in the North of the Yarra Socialisation Committee and like so many in the branch became absorbed in anti-war activities in the mid-thirties.

¹ Labor Call, 26 February 1925
² Interview P. Hanks, Mrs. Hamsant, S. Johns; letter H. Koppel, 4 June 1977
³ See for example Labor Call, 5 April 1917
⁴ Labor Call, 11 January 1917
⁵ Interview, Pearl Hanks
Mrs. Anna C. Hintze was the most influential of them all.

By the time she was elected first woman president of the branch in 1929 she was a dominant organising and intellectual force. An invalid pensioner due to a crippled leg, she was a woman of great personal charm and infectious enthusiasm. The eldest of the eight Grant children she was born near Wangaratta in 1883. The father was a dour Scot who followed the mining rushes leaving his wife and children in the care of his brother and returning home mostly only when he was ill. The fact that three of the four Grant children who later became active in politics were girls seems to have been the consequence of their mother's determination to develop early in her daughters an independent attitude so that they might avoid the kind of unhappiness she suffered in marriage to a man who regarded her merely as a possession.

Mrs. Hintze was active in the ALP Militant Women's Group and an enthusiastic Esperantist, holding a diploma issued by the British Esperanto Society. An associate in later life has described her as an 'ordinary housewife' not 'what you would call a spiritual leader', but in the early 1930's she communicated a real zeal to many branch members not only to learn Esperanto, but to seek greater international understanding and political enlightenment. As the depression worsened she directed her organising skills towards helping Coburg unemployed girls and worked with the Women's Central Organising Committee. Mrs. Hanks considered her sister less radical than herself and less 'steadfast in her views', but in the end her commitment to the ideals of the Esperanto

6 A.T. Brodnoy described her and the Hanks as 'alert and alive people'.
7 Interview, Pearl Hanks
8 H. Koppel letter op. cit.
9 ibid.
10 Interview, Pearl Hanks
movement dominated and she was lost to the Labour Movement by the 1940’s.

A. Keane placed her among the 'influential' branch members, those who talked about things that mattered ... brought up the important motions.11

Above all, she played a significant role in introducing a substantial number of branch members to the politically oriented stream of the Esperanto movement thus shifting branch attention to the international political scene at a time when the Australian Labour Movement as a whole was insular and isolationist. It was also to prepare the way for a particularly enthusiastic commitment to the new federal member for Bourke, Maurice Blackburn, elected in 1934.

Less is known about other active members. G.R. Trenoweth, a builder, was a serious and deeply committed branch officer whom Keane described as:

a trustworthy and thoroughly efficient officer, one of the sincerest workers in Labor’s cause and a champion of all it embodies.12

Others, such as the Applegates,13 the Callaghane, the Mendozas, F.C. Plunkett, B. Duthie, Mrs. Murphy and Earnest Williams14 were conspicuous for their contributions to branch life and it was usual for all eligible members of a family to be very active. Among the prominent union activists in the branch were Tom Gleeson of the ARU15 - a 'most admirable man',16

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11 Interview, A. Keane
12 Report of a branch social in Trenoweth's honour 12 February 1934. Labor Call, 22 February 1934. It was Trenoweth who took the very detailed minutes that made this Chapter possible.
13 Applegate had served in the Indian Army. Interview, A.C. Keane
14 A Salesman, later secretary of the Returned Soldiers' Section of the VCMAoP.
15 He was president of the ARU in 1934 and stood as a municipal candidate on several occasions. He was active in the Úgen-Kisch Reception Committee and the VCMaP.
16 Interview, R. Gibson
who 'represented all the good things about the union movement', A. Johnson of the Waterside Workers Federation, E. Christie of the Tramways Union, W.S. Brown of the Furnishing Trade Society, Jock Hay of the Bricklayers Union, George Henderson who would later figure prominently in the formation of the ASC&J Union and Arthur Carozzi, former ASP member, of the Meatworkers Union.18

(ii)

W.J. Duggan

One further member of the branch deserves some detailed consideration. W.J. Duggan was an influential figure from the early twenties until his death in 1934 though his attendance at branch meetings was limited by his many activities in the service of the Labour Movement, and like Keane, he did not seek to occupy executive positions. In 1928 he was elected Mayor of Coburg. This was not surprising given that the tide of public opinion was swinging markedly to Labor and he was already a man of considerable stature and influence in public life.

In Labor Call's view it was as:

... fitting climax to Bill's big work in Coburg municipal life ... comrade Duggan will fill the position with honour to himself and credit to the Labour Movement we have no doubts as he has occupied the high position of President of the THC which in itself is sufficient to justify the appointment.19

At the same time Duggan was president of the Victorian ALP and foundation president of the newly formed ACTU and hence well on the way to achieving a singular eminence in the Labour Movement that was only curtailed in 1934 by his early death. Despite uncertain health, he was a man of

17 Interview, M. Blackburn Jr.
18 Interview, A.J. Brodney
19 Labor Call, 30 August 1928
prodigious energy who had made his career the service of the Trade Union movement and the pursuit of industrial peace.

Born in West Melbourne his earliest political activities were in Dr. Moloney's campaign for the seat of West Melbourne which he won in 1889. His first job was in a Real Estate office but he jibbed at posting notices to quit on out-of-work workers' homes. He therefore decided to become a more useful member of society and adopted the calling of plumber.

After a number of years in the Royal Navy where he established a reputation as a boxer, Duggan returned to Melbourne in 1910 and immediately joined the Plumbers and Gasfitters' Union. In 1912 he was elected Organiser, a position he retained until at least 1930. Between 1913 and 1915 he was president of the Union and at the same time acted as Secretary to the Building Trades Union. He turned his attention to the shipbuilding industry, and presided over the Conference convened by W.H. Hughes in 1915 to frame the Shipbuilding Agreement after which he was elected to the Shipbuilding Tribunal which was constituted under the Industrial Peace Act. Rapidly he established a reputation for his negotiating skills and skilful chairmanship and in 1926 Labor Call wrote of him that although a young man, he is old in experience in the Industrial World.

Duggan participated in virtually every ALP Conference between 1910 until his death and attended many interstate conferences. He was a member of both the ALP and the TNC executives, participating in the major policy forming debates of the 1920's, though he was clearly more significant

20 Labor Call, 21 February 1924
21 Labor Call, 13 November 1930
22 Labor Call, 21 February 1924
23 Labor Call, 23 September 1926
in his role as organisar and negotiator that as theoretician:

no better fighter or tactician ever occupied
the position of industrial leader in Victoria. 24

He travelled to America with an Industrial Commission set up by the Federal
Government and perhaps most importantly was elected foundation president
of the ACTU. In 1928 he won much public acclaim for his role as chairman
of the Industrial Peace Conference and in 1930 he took up the position
of Secretary of the THC.

Duggan was an 'ideal chairman', 25 firm but 'courteous' he
at once established

respect from members ... he has chaired many
big meetings and the recent congress took some
handling but he did this work in finished style
and won praise from all sides. 26

As a speaker he was 'fluent and forceful' with a 'good platform appear-
ance' 27, a first class debator who 'seldom [missed] a point'. His
speeches were to the 'point and delivered with fine modulation and
emphasis'. 28 The local Coburg press was particularly impressed by his
performance at the Industrial Peace Conference. Following lavish
headlines:

LABOR LEADER TALKS SOUND SENSE
LOCAL DISTRICT HAS WORTHY CHAMPION
A FAIR-MINDED LABORITE,

he was praised for his

spirited and logical address ... Cr. Duggan
dispensed with notes and made a brilliant
speech which proclaimed him a sound indus-
trialist, a level-headed man of the world
and a leader of whom the Labour Movement
throughout the community may well feel proud. 29

24 Labor Call, 30 March 1933
25 Labor Call, 18 April 1929
26 Labor Call, 6 March 1930
27 Labor Call, 23 September 1926
28 Labor Call, 16 October 1924
29 Brunswick and Coburg Gazette, 14 December 1928
Duggan's political style was less uncompromising than Keane's and perhaps this made it easier for non-Labor Councillors to elect him as Mayor. Keane was never concerned to minimise class conflict, Duggan, in contrast, could state:

> Every employer is not a tyrannical employer merely because he is an employer. Every employee is not an agitator or strike monger merely because he seeks to improve his living and working conditions.

Such views would have appeared reassuringly 'sensible' to the more conservative groups in Coburg; they could be proud of Duggan in much the same way that Melbourne in the boom days of the 1880's was proud of its Trades Hall Council. It was a brief honeymoon before the depression again polarised politics in Coburg, for Duggan was defeated at the elections following his term as Mayor. Many in the Coburg branch considered Duggan rather too moderate in his views and insufficiently deferential to rank and file opinion, particularly when it came to making public statements.

The scope of this study does not allow for any detailed examination of Duggan's contribution to the development of the Labour Movement, but it is important in terms of his influence on the Coburg ALP branch that some account be taken of his 'moderate' position and the way he was 'radicalised' by his experience of the depression. Duggan was among those trade unionists who, especially in the 1920's, were committed to gradual reform via political rather than industrial

30 Though he was defeated in the elections that followed his term of office
31 Brunswick and Coburg Gazette, 14 December 1928
32 See CM, 21 September and 30 November 1925, 15, 22, 29 April 1929 and p 48
action. As he told the Victorian Annual Conference in 1929

... the economic power of the worker in the industrial field is nebulous compared with his economic power at the ballot box.\textsuperscript{33}

Such views tended to dominate trade union decision-making in this period, and Duggan was one of the foremost among those who worked closely with and strongly supported the ALP and the Labor MP's. His position is well illustrated by an extract from a toast to the Labor Premier Hogan in 1928:

Some people, honest enough in their belief, tell us that there is no real hope for the worker even with a Labor Government in office; they would have us believe that nothing of any value can be achieved without a complete transformation of society. That is an outlook born not of courage, but of despair and helplessness, and if generally accepted to its logical conclusion would leave the reins of government forever in the hands of Labor's opponents.

At that point, displaying undue optimism, Duggan expressed the view that Hogan had demonstrated beyond all doubt the ability of Labor to govern under the most undue circumstances.\textsuperscript{34}

In contrast, the Coburg branch was strongly opposed to minority Labor Governments, suspicious of 'craft unionism' as a divisive and conservative force in the Labour Movement and impatient for a radical transformation of economic relationships in Australian society. The depression and movement of people like Duggan to the left observed at close quarters sharpened and confirmed this militant stance. In late 1929 Duggan called on Labor supporters to replace 'impatience and embarrassing demands' with 'patience and hard work'\textsuperscript{35} but less than a year later he was publically

\textsuperscript{33} L.J. LOUIS, Trade Unions and the Depression, A Study of Victoria 1930-1932, Canberra 1968 p 11

\textsuperscript{34} Labor Call, 8 March 1928

\textsuperscript{35} Labor Call, 21 November 1929
regretting much of his former position

... he had urged concentration on political effort for years, believing that when Labor Governments were returned they would give effect to the principles for which Labor stood. The records of the State and Federal Labor Governments had driven this belief clean out of his mind. 36

Nevertheless his position still remained a relatively moderate one for his solution was to call for greater Trade Union control over the ALP in order to improve the quality of politicians rather than question the value of reformist tactics in a capitalist system. In this he was in harmony with majority branch opinion who, while adopting a very militant position, were not inclined to adopt the revolutionary solution and in particular they would have endorsed his renewed emphasis on propaganda to help 'the new generation of workers' who had grown up in the 'comparatively good conditions of the past twenty years ... to realise the class struggle'; 37 and his trenchant criticism of Labor Governments which should have 'got out and refused to do the dirty work of Labor's opponents' 38 and a little later on his increasing concern with the threat of fascism and war. 39

(iii) Esperanto and the Victorian Labor College

By the end of the 1920's there was a very noticeable increase in 'intellectual' activities within the branch, one of the most important facets of which was the establishment of Esperanto classes. 40 Mrs. Hintze introduced the branch to the utopian spirit of a decidedly political

36 "Have Labor Governments Failed?", Labor Call, 14 August 1930
37 Labor Call, 20 November 1930
38 Labor Call, 2 February 1933
39 See for example a report of a May Day Address on 3KZ, by Dwyer
Labor Call, 12 May 1932
40 See p 40 for earlier interest of the branch in Esperanto.
brand of Esperanto best summed up by a correspondent to Labor Call in 1928. Declaring Esperanto the 'Latin of Democracy' and a 'stark necessity for the man who wishes to grasp the world position at first hand', he went on to outline the benefits of communication with the workers of the world:

When men understand one other and mistrust passes away, such uncomprehending fear and hate as characterised the last slaughter will vanish as have the other traits of the jungle beast. Esperanto will translate into terms of actuality the inspiring call of the founder of Continental Socialism: Workers of the World, Unite! 42

In August 1929 free classes were commenced in the Labor Hall, open to all 'irrespective of political or other views' and children. The first meeting was addressed by R. Rawson and 'the names of twenty learners were handed in ...' 45

The Esperanto Klub conducted classes and social functions for at least five years and published a mimeographed newspaper called 'Laboristo Esperantisto' which made use of information from other working class Esperanto publications throughout the world. 46

The editor of this newspaper in explaining his own involvement gives some insight into the appeal of the group:

41 The political wing of the Esperanto movement was the Sennacia Tutmonda Asocio (The Nationless World Association) which "Roho" styles as "aggressive". Mrs. Mintze remains active in this organisation for the rest of her life. In 1948 she was Australian delegate to SAT and frequently entertained members from other countries. H. Koppel, letter op. cit.

42 Labor Call, 12 January 1928
43 Labor Call, 8 August 1928
44 Labor Call, 19 September 1929
45 ibid.
46 E. Hearnes letter dated 19 June 1977
From my youth I was idealistic and politically active. Esperanto seemed an excellent means for developing a world-wide "brotherhood of man" especially after the experience of the 1914-1918 war. 47

While many members of the local ALP were active in the club, it was not exclusive to them. Most however were probably like Mr. Hearnes:

I cannot remember being an actual member of the Labor Party, although I supported them. 48

Some people in Coburg considered the club a Communist organisation because it contained militants, was interested in Russia and included people like the Hanks among its members. 49 Like the social functions held in the Hall, Esperanto classes were another point of contact with a broader cross-section of the Labour Movement than might ordinarily have been the case. The Esperantists in the branch helped other members to interpret their times in a much broader context than was available to many Australians. The Club was recommended enthusiastically to members as a means by which first-hand information can be received from workers in every country in the world, 50

and later it was reported that

Members of the Club received letters from Russia, Germany, Spain, France, China, Japan, Sweden, and in fact from nearly all other countries; also numerous papers and magazines. In this way we have first-hand information as to the happenings concerning workers in other lands. 50

47 E. Hearnes, letter op. cit.
48 Ibid.
49 Interview Mrs. Hansart, T.H. Rigby - his mother would not let him attend Esperanto classes because the club was "full of Communists".
50 Labor Call, 15 May 1930
The importance of such access to information was significant in view of the restriction on the entry of 'working class literature' into Australia throughout the 1920's and 1930's.\textsuperscript{51} By 1927, 120 'seditious' publications had been prohibited and by 1929 the list had doubled forcing some academics to complain that they could not conduct their courses. These restrictions were further tightened under the Lyons Government, perhaps partly explaining the complaint of the \textit{Workers Weekly} that Australian workers are sublimely out of touch with the development of the working class movement in countries where the lines of class structure are less blurred.\textsuperscript{53}

The Coburg branch was particularly disturbed by this situation and one of the first motions forwarded to the CR after Labor took office called for a 'list of publications prohibited by the previous government',\textsuperscript{56} and they remained concerned since Scullin took no action on the matter.\textsuperscript{55}

The Coburg branch members were not among those of whom Brian Penton complained:

\begin{quote}
\textit{it was a hard job to get readers interested in discussion of social and legal principles in those comfortable days when authoritarianism was a long word describing some kind of racket practised in far away Germany.}\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Labor Call}, 28 September 1933
\textsuperscript{52} In the twenties, however, there was virtually no censorship of fiction.
\textsuperscript{53} All information regarding censorship in this period based on P. COLEMAN, \textit{Obscenity, Blasphemy and Sedition}, Brisbane 1974 pp 82-87
\textsuperscript{54} CM, 11 November 1929
\textsuperscript{55} In April 1930 the branch presented an Agenda item to Annual Conference on the subject. CM, 14 April 1930 (42 Item) and in May the branch protested directly at Scullin's inaction CM, 19 May, \textit{Labor Call}, 22 May 1930
\textsuperscript{56} Quoted in P. COLEMAN \textit{op. cit.} p 83
\end{flushleft}
The branch was anxious for any information on the wider political scene at all. In February 1928 a series of addresses were arranged and Duggan began with an address on the Pan-Pacific Secretariat. The same meeting purchased fifty copies of H.E. Laugridge's pamphlet 'Russia 1928'. Later speakers included Col. Crouch on his travels in Europe and Blackburn on the Arbitration Act.

In 1929 the branch embarked on a far more systematic self-education programme, inviting A.T. Brodney of the Victorian Labor College to give lectures on alternate Monday nights on 'Industrial History'. In 1930 he presented a second series on 'Economics'. Not that this was enough for the enthusiasts for in June, Gleeson, Brown and Mrs. Hintze were urging members to attend Blackburn's classes at the Trades Hall as well. Brodney's lectures were highlight meetings frequently followed by 'spirited interchange' or 'warm discussion' for the branch was not passive in its search for enlightenment. On occasion, there was even 'considerable divergence of opinion between the lecturer and some of the branch members'. The influence of these lecturers was spread

57 CM, 6 February 1928
58 Labor Call, 9 February 1928
59 The VLC had been set up in 1917 in the belief that the advancement of the working class and therewith society generally required that the workers should become intellectually free from established ideas and beliefs.
60 Labor Call, 6 June 1929
61 Labor Call, 26 February 1930
62 CM, 10 June 1929
63 CM, 17 June 1929
64 Labor Call, 19 September 1929
65 CM, 21 July 1930
more evenly throughout the branch population creating a climate of opinion very different from one where key personalities inform and lead the branch in the development of ideas and attitudes. The branch had a common pool of enriched understanding from which to move forward and to use as a springboard for discussions about the depression.

In the midst of all this one domestic issue did loom ever larger. By 1929 the branch had still not managed to reduce the principal of the Hall debt and as funds shrank in the early thirties even repayment of the interest proved virtually impossible at times. To make matters worse the old building began to fall into disrepair thus reducing its desirability for hiring. In the discussions of this problem in 1929 the interesting idea was put forward that if the debt was discharged then the Hall would become the property of the ART and therefore under the management of the CE - a situation an independent-minded branch, proud of its hard-earned Hall did not relish. However, after some delicate negotiations and a very determined fund raising effort the branch was reprieved until the latter part of the 1930's.
DEALING WITH THE DEPRESSION AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

The major focus of this study is on relations between the branch and the CE, so branch activity at the local level during these years will be dealt with only very briefly at this stage in order to provide a perspective. Two issues dominated branch thinking to a very considerable degree throughout these years. One was the need to assist and organise the unemployed for:

It was Labor's job to assist the workers who had lost their jobs, and it is to the unions and the Labour Movement generally that the unemployed should naturally look for both moral and practical support.\(^1\)

The other was the need to step up all forms of propaganda activity in order to redress past deficiencies which had led to Labor's powerlessness in the current economic crisis:

The parliamentary Labor Party has signally failed in the essential work of educating the workers on class conscious lines.\(^2\)

Involvement in these kinds of activities was intense and sprang from an idealism that demanded personal commitment and rejected piecemeal and half-hearted gestures. A sense of self-righteousness and hostility toward the ALP leadership were both accentuated by the perception that all activities at the local level were less effective than they might have been because of the minimal assistance offered by the CE.

Throughout the twenties the branch had been quick to respond

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1 Labor Call, 20 November 1930
2 CM, 16 February 1931
to signs of unemployment and in 1929 they were assisted at least initially, by a rally within the whole Coburg community to raise funds. The first 'Monster Carnival' where 'all the local organisations had stalls and a friendly rivalry existed' netted £600, but the magnitude of the problem soon became almost overwhelming. Relations within the community deteriorated, particularly between the branch and the Council as it became increasingly dissatisfied with the local administration of unemployment relief. A call for the institution of day labour was not successful and when the branch protested at the reduction in municipal wages, Cr. Richards declared angrily:

if the men were not satisfied with the reductions imposed by the Council let them look for work elsewhere.

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3 Some idea of the size of the problem in Coburg in 1929 can be gained from figures of numbers registered for employment at the Coburg Town Hall as recorded in the branch minutes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Registered for Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 May 1929</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 May 1929</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 December 1929</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The branch noted, however, 'that there is a good deal more distress than appeared on the register'.

4 Labor Call, 29 May 1929

5 Labor Call, 21 November 1929

6 Labor Call, 5 December 1929

See also Brunswick and Coburg Gazette, 28 June 1929 and Labor Call, 28 June 1929.

7 By July 1930 600 are registered for employment and the Council only has employment for 200 for two days a week, CM, 21 July 1930 and by November 1930 500 are so registered and the £1500 made available by the Council has been exhausted.

8 Labor Call, 5 June, 20 November 1930

9 CM, 6 October 1930

10 Labor Call, 6 November 1930
Nevertheless the branch was sufficiently unhappy with 'the methods of administration of sustenance through the Ladies' Benevolent Society’, to prefer that the Town Hall dealt with such matters. The set-back caused by Duggan's defeat in August 1930 was somewhat offset by the election of the sole, remaining Labor councillor Alf de Chene, as Mayor. He immediately set the tone of his period in office by informing the branch that the social duties did not greatly appeal to him but he was determined that more should be done for the unemployed. He was taking steps to have a local unemployed relief committee established, and in deciding to cut out all social functions during his term as Mayor as he considered that such functions were inappropriate in view of the unemployment and distress that existed.

In applying his mayoral allowance to the purchase of fruit and vegetables

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11 CM, 16 June 1930

12 Labor experienced a crushing defeat throughout Victoria in these municipal elections - 1930 see LOUIS p 51 - the branch expressed its concern at the disenfranchisement of Labor voters unable to pay their rates and given the slim margin of support for Labor candidates even at the best of times this could well have been critical in Duggan's case.

13 This is the last occasion on which Labor achieves any prominence in the local Council for many years and there is not another Labor Mayor until 1952. De Chene himself is defeated in 1931 on completion of his term as Mayor, but is re-elected soon after in a by-election, and thereafter he gradually drifts away from the ALP so that throughout the 1930's Coburg ALP is virtually unrepresented on Council. De Chene was re-endorsed in 1934 though there were complaints about his non-attendance and he stood without endorsement in 1937. Jock Hay elected 1938, defeated 1941.

14 CM, 1 September 1930

15 CM, 22 September 1930
for the distribution among the unemployed, he made precisely the kind of gesture that Labor expected of its leaders.

The Labor Hall became the centre for many activities by or on behalf of the unemployed. Fund raising or simply 'time-passing entertainments and speakers' classes were organised and it was used as a workroom for such things as hair cutting and shoe repairing. Some of the more active of the unemployed belonged to the branch and they were not only the originators of many resolutions on behalf of the unemployed, but a valuable source of information. Hearnes, for example, returned from a visit to the Jelumont Shelter late in 1930 with graphic descriptions of food crawling with lice and his horror at the appalling isolation and hopelessness of the whole place. He saw it as a breeding ground of revolution, a view endorsed by Cook and Moore who had been doing nothing lately but chasing agents and bailiffs to prevent them from throwing unemployed workers in the streets ... the men are becoming desperate and unless something is done very soon, it is difficult to see how serious trouble can be averted.

Mrs. Hintze had been particularly active on behalf of the unemployed girls and the great majority of branch members devoted much time and energy to the problem despite some depletion of numbers. Throughout

16 Interview, A.C. Keane, W. Harman Coburg Centenary Pamphlet
17 This stands in contrast to the conflict created by Duigan's conduct of the Mayoral Ball see CH, 15, 22 and 29 April 1929.
18 CH, 11 August 1930
19 Labor Call, 20 November 1930
20 for example Moore was president of local unemployed group in 1931 Cook was spokesman for the unemployed regarding Hall use CH, 10 November 1930 Labor Call, 20 November 1930
21 CH, 8 December 1930
22 CM, 12 January 1931
23 Mrs. Hintze, Mary Grant and Mrs. Callaghan (wife of 1931 President, she herself had been an executive member of branch since 1926) were actively involved with organising unemployed girls.
1929 meetings had been so 'well attended' that W.S. Brown could boast that the branch had 'one of the best attended weekly meetings in the metropolitan area.  

Membership fell off markedly in 1930, but officially was back to 120 by 1931.

The branch was anxious that unemployed comrades remain active and therefore disturbed that the CE took no positive action to halt the loss of members through inability to pay the fees.

It seems clear however, that the people mentioned in Chapter Six provided a dedicated core that maintained both the branch and contact with the various groups of unemployed workers.

Concerned at the degree of 'apathy and hopelessness' rather than revolutionary spirit among many of the unemployed and the Labor Party in general, the branch made various attempts to organise activities that would help alleviate the 'crying need for greater knowledge of what the Movement stands for ... the collective ownership of the means of production.'

The most ambitious of these was an attempt to bring all sections of the Labour Movement within the Bourke electorate together into a body that would both assist the unemployed and organise propaganda.

The first federal electorate meetings were organised at Anstey's request and later in 1930 a 'Bourke Conference' organised a meeting in the Brunswick Town Hall which was addressed by all State and Federal representatives of the district.

Resolutions supporting the nationalisation of banking and adequate sustenance were put to this meeting and the Coburg branch expressed the hope that 'branches and unionists throughout the

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24 Labor Call, 14 November 1929
25 CM, 28 July 1930 only 49 tickets had been issued to that stage
26 Coburg Branch Account Book
27 See for example Labor Call, 17 April 1930. C. Mutton kept the Fawkner branch going by paying the membership fees of many people himself.
28 CM, 13 October 1930
29 See p 49
30 CM, 10 November 1930
State would move in a similar direction.\textsuperscript{31} The establishment of a
co-ordinating committee was suggested at this meeting but only the
Coburg branch was really interested.\textsuperscript{32} Nevertheless, the secretary was
instructed to invite all interested parties to a conference, and the
branch discussed in some detail the way such an organisation might operate.
Eventually, after much negotiation, a 'Bourke Advisory Council' was set
up early in 1931.\textsuperscript{33} This body met once a month until at least May 1932
and one of its major functions was the formulation of resolutions to be
submitted to all branches and then presented to the CE as the united
voice of a substantial body of ALP members.\textsuperscript{34} The Council published at
least one four page \textit{Workers Bulletin} \textsuperscript{35} which stated the purpose of the
Council—'a small band of earnest men and women'—as the building
up of 'a powerful fighting force within the Labour Movement'. The
Council would be part of a new dedicated vanguard to lead the masses
to enlightenment because 'success' depended upon

\begin{quote}
the measure of support given by the
more advanced and enlightened members
of our various industrial organisations.
\end{quote}

The need was for cohesive mind and united
action

in order to redress the situation created by those

who have failed to take up a determined
and definite attitude to protect the
workers against the economic wave that
threatens to engulf them.

\textsuperscript{31} CM, 10 November 1930
\textsuperscript{32} For example, CM, 1 December 1930 the secretary reported that
the Brunswick branch was not interested.
also Labor Call, 4 December 1930
\textsuperscript{33} Labor Call, 5 February 1931
CM, 2 March, 28 May 1931
\textsuperscript{34} Labor Call, 23 July 1931
\textsuperscript{35} Copy in possession of J. Hay
The Coburg branch also arranged an additional propaganda campaign of its own including Friday night street corner meetings and fortnightly Pleasant Sunday Afternoons to be addressed by 'prominent leaders of the Labour Movement'. The failure of the CE to supply speakers for these meetings prompted sharp protest but they were soon curtailed in any case by the Coburg Council which decided to ban street meetings following some disturbances which the Council believed were being provoked by the MMM group within the Communist Party. It was symptomatic of the developing tension within the Coburg community that four councillors left the Chamber when the CPA members rose to put their view. The branch delegates expressed their disgust and when asked why they found it necessary to hold meetings outside the Hall, Alec Johnson, encapsulated the branch mentality:

It was true that the Labor Party had a hall, but they could not get the people to go to it. The position was that Mahomet would not go the mountain so it was a case of taking the mountain to Mahomet. They had a gospel to preach and that gospel was one which the Party claimed offered the workers something while he was alive.

The Coburg branch contained many members who were prepared to involve themselves seriously and enthusiastically in any activity that seemed to serve the cause of the Labour Movement which was for them summed up by the Socialisation Objective. It was from this perspective that they judged the performance of Labor in government.

36 CM, 9 February 1931. Speakers included J.J. Holland, Percy Leidler, N. Blackburn and Gordon Messey
37 CM, 23 February and 5 March 1931
38 Brunswick and Coburg Gazette, 17 April 1931
39 This meant there was no quorum so the issue could not be put to a second vote.
40 Brunswick and Coburg Gazette, 17 April 1931
CHAPTER EIGHT

THE RESPONSE OF THE COBURG ALP BRANCH TO "LABOR IN OFFICE" 1929-1932

The Coburg branch was both frustrated and disillusioned by the performance of Labor Governments in the years 1929-1932, but, as the situation deteriorated, the focus of protest shifted from the politicians in particular to the leadership of the Labour Movement in general. Initially hopeful that the CE would pull the politicians into line, the branch felt doubly betrayed as the realisation dawned that the CE were little inclined to do so. Criticism and protest from the branch met with marginal response even in the form of justification. It had already been shown that the branch did not merely sit in pious judgement on its leaders, but set about working to retrieve the situation wherever they saw an opportunity, but those among Labor Party leaders and politicians who might have offered the necessary dynamic and positive leadership to weld these local efforts into an effective force were in the minority and crushing electoral defeats did little to alter that situation. For many in the Coburg branch the leaders lost all moral authority during the depression, yet they failed either to acknowledge their mistakes or re-establish their credibility by enthusiastically setting about rebuilding the Party.

When considering the response of the Labour Movement to the first signs of economic downturn it is important to bear in mind that unemployment was never very far from the considerations and experience of the Australian workforce from the time of the 1890's depression. In no quarter between 1901 and 1939 did unemployment as registered in the
Trades Union Returns fall below 5.2%, while throughout the whole period real wages stagnated and the price indexes rose. However, in the 1920's despite steep rises in unemployment in 1921 and 1925, conditions in general on the industrial front had provided a climate in which the moderate reformist policies of the Labour Movement leadership had achieved a degree of success. Consequently the Movement overall was probably unduly optimistic about the strength and effectiveness of working class organisation. The serious, protracted and finally unsuccessful strikes of 1928-1929 acted as curtain raisers to the depression revealing the deficiencies in working class organisation just as unemployment began to rise sharply - it had reached 13.5% by November 1929. The great rally of support for the Timberworkers was prompted by the realisation that they were fighting a battle on behalf of all workers.

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1 B. McFarlane "Australia's Role in World Capitalism" in J. PLAYFORD AND D. KIPNESS (eds) Australian Capitalism: Towards a Socialist Critique, Melbourne 1972 p 76

2 Ibid. 11.4% of Trade Unionists were unemployed in 1921. 1925 was also a year of recession see P.A. SAMUELSON, K.NANCOCK AND R. WALKER, Economics Second Australian Edition Sydney 1975 p 310 In Cobury in 1921 6% of breadwinners were unemployed. Australia Census of Population and Housing 1921. Bureau of Census and Statistics Labor Call, 25 February 1926

3 W. J. LOUIS op. cit. p 19

4 Ibid. pp 12 and 13

5 Ibid. p 5. 19,322 members of unions affiliated to the THC were out of work.

6 M. DIXSON, "The Timber Strike of 1929", Historical Studies May 1963 Brunswick and Coburg Gazette, 15 February 1929
The Coburg branch was part of this rally, holding weekly street corner meetings to put the strikers' case and raising £0.75 for the Strike Fund - a not inconsiderable sum, equal to 25% of the debt on the Hall. Branch morale was high at this stage and their mood was reflected in the words of W.J. Duggan addressed to the Labour Movement in January 1929:

... let us with united effort and calm determination apply ourselves to the task of installing Labor in its rightful place on humanities horizon.

Labor's electoral successes of that year more than offset the worrying signs - Anstey polled 77.4% of the vote in Bourke, the highest majority every recorded and he was appointed to Scullin's Ministry, which the branch considered

but a small recognition of the valuable and life-long service you have rendered to the Movement and trust that you will long be spared to continue your splendid service to the Labour Movement and proffer to the Cabinet the conceptions of your clear and brilliant mind.

Scepticism, however, prevailed in the branch about the formation of the second Ministry in Victoria in 1929, for it was unanimously opposed to the assumption of office by Parliamentary Labor Parties without a majority in the Legislative Assembly. The poor performance of the first Hogan Ministry in 1928 when most bills to benefit the wage earner had been slaughtered in the Upper House while the farmers received considerable aid, was not such as to raise high

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7 £300 was still owing
8 Labor Call, 3 January 1929. Duggan was speaking as President of the ALP
9 See Appendix B
10 Labor Call, 31 October 1929
11 CM, 10 December 1928
Mrs. Hintze was energetic in defence of the motion at 1929 Annual Conference but it was defeated. Labor Call, 11 April 1929
12 D. Rawson (1954) op. cit. p 89
hopes when Hogan again assumed office, although a Labor Government in Canberra would have appeared to strengthen his position.

With its strong commitment to rank and file authority and the right to advise, criticise and ultimately control its leadership, the branch was immediately activated by this accession to power and clearly expected that Labor Governments would not only serve the interests of the working class, but take the whole business of government more seriously than the non-Labor parties. One of the earliest criticisms of Hogan expressed indignation that the State Government had gone into a recess of what appears to be several months whilst important and urgent legislation remains in abeyance and without making any serious effort towards solving the unemployment problem.13

The call on the Scullin Government to lift the ban on working class literature has been noted and the continued complaints on this matter reflect not only the branch's interest in international affairs, but a profound concern at Scullin's inaction. Since much of the rationale for parliamentary participation by the Labour Movement depended on the education of the people to a sufficient level of understanding that a peaceful changeover to Socialism could be effected, Scullin's failure to lift the ban was viewed as little short of treacherous.

13 Labor Call, 23 January 1930
VCE Minutes, 21 February 1930. The CE dealt with several letters to this effect.

14 See p 97
CM, 11 November 1929
CM, 14 April 1930
CM, 22 May 1930
Hopes for rapid and decisive action from its parliamentary representatives particularly on the industrial front were fairly rapidly dispelled particularly following Scullin's feeble speech at the Victorian Annual Conference, full of excuses, special pleading and a catalogue of limits to action. It prompted a passionate response from Maurice Blackburn, a most committed supporter of evolutionary socialism and parliamentary action. His words reflect the mood in Coburg:

Mr. Scullin had sounded the death knell of parliamentary action by Labor. If the National Parliament could do nothing, then they could not look to the parliamentary system to relieve the wants of the people.

It was inevitable, however, given the structure of the ALP that branch attention focussed on the State Government and Central Executive. Branch views on federal affairs were generally addressed to Anstey who himself sought their views and support more assiduously as the depression deepened.

As early as March 1930, the branch was suspicious that Scullin was negotiating with the British Government to allow youths and domestic workers to immigrate, and following Hogan's failure to support preference for unionists the Secretary was instructed to write to the Central Executive asking them to obtain from each member of the Federal Government his attitude in regard to preference to unionists.

The branch was profoundly dismayed that its representatives lapsed so rapidly into defeatism, it wanted to see some muscle flexing, particularly

15 L.J. LOUIS on cit. p 40ff
16 Labor Call, 3 May 1930
17 Labor Call, 30 March 1930
18 Labor Call, 22 May 1930
of a parliament full of Ansteys seemed very attractive:

If there were more leaders of the calibre of Anstey, Labor would be appreciably nearer its goal.\(^25\)

The politicians themselves, however, were not yet prepared to entirely abandon the attempt at government or their more conservative colleagues. Keans demonstrated with some passion that Duggan's argument could be turned on its head:

The rank and file of the Labor Party were responsible for the unsatisfactory state of affairs ... the Government was unable to do anything worthwhile for the workers while they were only in office on the sufferance of other political parties.\(^26\)

When in September mounting pressure forced the CE to call a Special Conference on unemployment, the branch made its views very clear:

a) That the federal Government by refusing the recommendations of the Federal Labor Conference to make a credit of \(\$20\) million available to the States for the relief of unemployment has been guilty of either cowardice or ignorance or both, and Conference emphatically declares the Government’s first duty is to the unemployed and starving workers of Australia before providing for moneylenders.

b) British moneylenders should be compelled to wait.

c) Conference deprecates the action of the Labor Government in bringing or allowing the so-called financial experts to come to Australia believing as we do that they are paid financial jugglers, economic fakirs and frauds whose real objective ... is to protect the monied interests of the Capitalist class and further mislead the people ...\(^28\)

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25 Labor Call, 16 October 1930
26 Labor Call, 14 August 1930
27 L.J. LOUIS op.cit. p 49 ff
28 Labor Call, 14 August 1930
Trenoweth, who only a month previously had wanted to congratulate Scullin on his budget, moved this motion.
Moreover the branch was strongly critical of both governments for their inaction and 'apparent indifference to unemployment and distress'.

At that stage most branch members seemed convinced that the English money-lenders were the true villains of the piece. Keane considered that

until the people of Australia took control of the financial system they could expect nothing better than the existing deplorable state of affairs ...

but branch reports reveal a predictable range of opinion on causes and remedies of the depression. Typical was the discussion on whether or not the purchase of only Australian made goods would relieve unemployment:

Some members contended that the rationalisation of banking was the key; others that a higher tariff was the remedy, and others that unemployment was due to world wide over-production and the flow of immigrants to this country.

Others, under the influence of more militant branch leaders and Brodny's lectures on Marxian economics were moving towards a more radical interpretation. Alec Johnson for example, declared that

he had come to the conclusion that the existing social system under capitalism had given the workers all that it could give them, and that unless the workers realised this and took united action and overthrew capitalism we would be compelled to submit to the existing exploitation and degradation.

Johnson, Carozzi, Brown and a number of others had already moved beyond blaming financiers and politicians to a more sophisticated political and economic analysis. This broader perspective seems to have provided

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29 CM, 18 August 1930
30 ibid.
31 Labor Call, 30 May 1929
32 CM, 18 August 1930
some counter to the temptation to lapse into apathy, helplessness and the search for scapegoats: 'Only by their own actions,' declared Johnson, could the workers 'hope to obtain freedom.' This view and the radical analysis on which it was based came to be accepted by the great majority of branch members in the following months and years.

Frank Anstey began to attend branch meetings more frequently and he would be questioned closely, for his views carried great weight. In August 1930 he came to seek the branch's views on the 'current deplorable state of affairs' and it took the opportunity to suggest that Cabinet Ministers make a 'reasonable cut in their own salaries' and that since members of Parliament in general were over-paid, they 'should fall into line by reducing their own salaries'.

At Anstey's request a special meeting of all branches and unionists in the electorate was organised and he asked this large gathering whether he should support any lowering of wages, pensions etc. The meeting was unanimous in its rejection of any such proposals, affirming the right of the unemployed to food, shelter and sustenance. There were further such gatherings as Anstey sought to strengthen his position in Parliament against the moderate Lyons and in the face of Hogan's accusations that he and his supporters in Federal Caucus were 'extremists' and 'wildmen' advocating 'repudiation and inflation'. In contrast, the

33 CM, 18 August 1930
34 CM, 25 August 1930
35 ibid.
36 CM, 8 September 1930
37 L.J. LOUIS op.cit. p 56
Coburg branch congratulated Anstey on the courageous stand he had taken in opposing the attacks that were being made on the living conditions of the Australian workers. Instead of taking the easy course, so many so-called leaders take, Comrade Anstey had the courage to stand up to his convictions and principles, and he was strongly urged to persist in his efforts to obtain compliance by the Federal Government with the resolutions of the Interstate Labor Conference.

since the branch believed that the only practical solution of the present economic situation under the existing social system is the replenishing of our depleted credit resources.

When in November Anstey successfully moved in Caucus that the holders of bonds about to mature be compelled to hold them a further twelve months, the branch was unanimous and 'wholehearted' in its endorsement, despite the crisis precipitated in the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party, a support which did not go unappreciated:

... he [Anstey] valued their expressions of good will and they heartened him during a very trying time.

Events in NSW also served to strengthen the views of the branch, for Lang's election success on a platform of furious attack on 'Niemeyerism' and promises to maintain the workers' standards of living had not only temporarily strengthened the hand of Anstey's supporters in Federal Caucus but added a further example to Coburg's catalogue of 'good'

38 Labor Call, 16 October 1930
39 CM, 27 October 1930
40 Ibid.
41 L.J. LOUIS op.cit. p 59
42 Labor Call, 6 November 1930
43 CM, 9 March 1931
44 L.J. LOUIS op.cit. p 58 ff
politicians. As Louis notes:

Lang's aggressiveness impressed as a welcome contrast to the supineness of other Labor politicians who appeared to have 'got the wind up'.

The branch sent congratulations to Lang, a move seconded by Keane, and censured Hogan whose attitude, in Carozzi's view, suggested that he was 'more disappointed than pleased', and Anstey was called upon to bring pressure to bear on State Labor members to obtain the support of the Victorian Treasurer on the Loan Council for Mr. Lang and the Federal Caucus proposals.

Duggan also resumed regular attendance at branch meetings in the latter part of 1930 and his altered views about parliamentary action could only have served to harden branch attitudes. He outlined his position definitively to the branch in November:

He realised the road ahead was hard and difficult, and anything attempted would have to be of a revolutionary character. Recent events have shown that a lot of work we thought had been accomplished would have to be started over again. Owing to the comparatively good conditions of the past twenty years, a new generation of workers had grown up who failed to realise the class struggle. They would have to be made to understand that the capitalist system is responsible for their present troubles, and until it is destroyed and replaced by a co-operative system they need not look for any permanent relief.

Once the September Conference had reaffirmed the Party's policies and restated the obligations of its political representatives, the onus for action had shifted to a marked degree to the Central Executive, which was then charged with carrying out the will of Conference and bringing

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45 J.J. Louis op. cit. pp 59-60
46 CM, 27 October 1930
47 Labor Call, 20 November 1930
48 Labor Call, 20 November 1930

Duggan was replying to branch congratulations on his election to Secretary of the THC.
the politicians into line. The Coburg branch immediately called on the CE to

take drastic action against all responsible Labor leaders who from time to time have absolutely disregarded the instructions of the Labor Conference by advocating various forms of wage reductions. This particularly applies to members of the State Government.49

Briefly the issues resolved themselves into a simple matter of reasserting control, for as Gleeson pointed out:

not only was the Labor Government disregarding the instructions of Conference, but certain prominent members were, judging from their public utterances, endeavouring to belittle and discredit Conference.50

The call for drastic action was not made without some consideration of the consequences. Johnson declared that

under the existing state of affairs, the Government could not carry out the instructions of Conference and remain in office,57

to which Gleeson replied cynically that the workers

were getting tired of paying money to Unions and the ALP branches to put Labor men into Parliament to cut wages. Stanley Argyle (Opposition Leader) would do that for nothing,52

and then went on to reveal something of his own commitment to industrial unionism and syndicalism:

There were too many unions and not enough unionism. The Labour Movement should work for the One Big Union.53

For Kane too, the issue had been simplified:

49 Labor Call, 16 October 1930
50 ibid.
51 ibid.
52 ibid.
53 Labor Call, 16 October 1930
thought he did not agree with all that Conference had done, he recognised that it was the supreme governing body and he was always prepared to abide by its decisions, but in any case he was opposed to Labor taking office without a majority.

Keane's views at this time were coloured by a recent trip to Queensland which was under a Nationalist Government and his perception that affairs were so much worse there. However, he sincerely accepted the overriding authority of Conference and as he became more isolated in Caucus sought branch views more assiduously. Most members of the branch were rapidly coming to the conclusion that no Labor government would be preferable to the present one. As Mrs. Mintze put it:

If that is the best a Labor Government can do, they should get off the Treasury benches and leave the dirty work to those people who believe in crushing the workers.

The abandonment of hope as regards the Parliamentary Party throw the branch back on its own resources. The rank and file had to rouse themselves; a discussion in mid October 1930 is particularly revealing. It began with the President urging that now, more than ever, active members must rouse themselves, and throw themselves with greater energy and enthusiasm into the fight.

The discussion focussed on the various ways the Movement had lost sight of its ideals or pursued misguided policies and tactics. The tone was one of self-purification and the overwhelming view of the members was that the Labour Movement would have to be revived through greater personal

54 Labor Call, 16 October 1930
55 CM, 28 July 1930
56 See for example Labor Call, 23 October 1930
57 CM, 20 October 1930
58 Labor Call, 23 October 1930
effort and commitment at every level. There was some nostalgia for an earlier, supposedly purer, more democratic era, but the major failure was seen to be in the area of education - 'the great mission of the Movement - the enlightenment and education of the working class'.

This analysis of the sources of the Labor Party's difficulties offered an opportunity for positive action and so helped to ward off threatening demoralisation and defeatism. Members were called on to emulate the example of the early stalwarts of the Movement. They were not afraid to get out and hold street meetings. ... Labor was letting slip the greatest opportunity of its history.

Brown and Carozzi felt that the masses were insufficiently aware of the class struggle and Carozzi was concerned that the inevitable result of the Labor Party's attempt to administer the capitalist system would be the demoralisation of its supporters. Brown wanted to concentrate on the young:

... there is a crying need for greater knowledge of what the Movement stands for. There are some Labor politicians who do not seem to know the first thing about Labor's objective.

Keane, himself one of those 'old stalwarts' had the final word. He no longer wished to defend the PLP, 'it feel far short of what it ought to be'. He was painfully coming to the realisation that the ALP and its reformist policies which he had supported may in fact have been sapping away the very energy necessary to create a genuinely just and fair society:

59 CM, 13 October 1930
60 ibid.
61 ibid.
62 ibid.
He agreed with the other speakers that they must find a means of educating the people. Political action was ineffectual without an enlightened public opinion to support it. Wages Boards and Arbitration had done an immense amount of good but they were only palliatives and can be used against the workers. The workers must be taught that these things are only makeshifts. Their salvation lies in the collective ownership of the means of production.\footnote{CH, 13 October 1930}

This is, in a way, almost a repudiation of the efforts of a life-time directed at relieving the 'hard conditions that prevailed at the time', but he was less harsh than the others in his judgement:

The reason for the strike breaker and the scab is ignorance and starvation.\footnote{ibid.}

The branch was already engaged actively on behalf of the unemployed at the local level and the main outcome of this discussion was an increase in propaganda activity. These activities have already been dealt with previously\footnote{See Chapter 7} but they will be taken up in this Chapter in so far as they provoked conflict with the CE.

1930 drew to a close with the rank and file in Victoria frustrated, angry and demanding positive action from the MLP leadership. Division within the Labour Movement already seemed so deep that a 'split' was imminent, but as yet nothing decisive seemed to be planned. In discussing the Trade Union leadership, Louis suggests:

It could not be said that they failed to take sides in the stormy monetary controversies that the depression had generated in the Movement, nor even that they did not offer some leadership to the rank and file. But in reality they failed
to mobilise the Trade Union Movement
to influence decisively the outcome of
the controversies within the Parliamentary
Labor Parties. They seemed neutralised
by the horror of a split ... 66

Much the same could be said of the Central Executive. The Coburg
branch pressed for decisive action since it believed that the CE
'should be able to force a reactionary Labor Government out ...' 67 The
tempo of protest increased rapidly. Hogan's Government was attacked
for its

high-handed and unsympathetic attitude
... in the administration of unemployment
relief, 68

and the point re-iterated that

every day that Labor Governments remain
in office under the existing conditions,
they were damaging Labor's reputation, as,
rightly or wrongly, they had to take the
blame for the appalling state of affairs
that existed. 69

However,
the CE was not anxious to take the 'drastic action' demanded
by the Special Conference, and a
discussion took place as to whether the
Labor Conferences or responsible leaders
of the Movement are to be blamed, and the
attitude of certain leaders toward the
policy adopted and the instructions given
by the recent Special Conference was roundly
condemned. 70

The resolutions from the branch passed at this October meeting were not
even dealt with by the CE until January 71 and the branch began seriously

66 L.J. LEUIS op. cit. pp 61-62
67 CM, 8 December 1930
68 CM, 22 December 1930
69 Labor Call, 29 January 1931
70 Brunswick and Coburg Gazette, 24 October 1930
71 CM, 6 October 1930. Motion calling for "drastic action" passed
the reply VGB Minutes 16 January 1931 claimed that the "... Special
ALP Conference virtually endorsed a departure from Plank 4 in relation
to Unemployment Taxation on the part of the State Labor Government."
to wonder whether it was any better than the politicians:

It is useless holding Conferences if Labor Governments and members of the Party are 72 to be allowed to flout its instructions.

Some, like Caroszi, were beginning to consider secession:

... the time is approaching when either the Labor Party must clear out the reactionary individuals and the Party must be put on a sound basis, or the progressive elements will be, by force of circumstances, compelled to withdraw from the present Movement and form a straight out workers' party to oppose all existing parties. 73

The Trade Union leadership also came under criticism, which was summed up by a call on the THC to 'immediately start an intensive campaign against "Craft Unionism". 74 The reply was considered 'indefinite and evasive'. 75 The leadership of all sections of the Labor Movement came under attack for concentrating on putting men into parliament at the expense of mass mobilisation and education. 76 Keane, who had 'advocated the OBU for twenty years', 77 summed up this view:

The political wing had failed to use to the best advantage its opportunities for propaganda by organising to capture parliament rather than educate the workers on class conscious lines. 78

The branch was not, therefore, impressed by the CE's special pleading in early February 1931 following a letter to daily press from a group of trade union officials claiming that the political machine had failed to achieve its aims. 79 The CE claimed that the industrial movement had

72 Labor Call, 5 February 1931
73 Labor Call, 20 November 1930
74 CM, 17 November 1930
75 Labor Call, 11 December 1930
76 see for example Labor Call, 5 February 1931
77 CM, 17 November 1930
78 ibid.
79 See L.J. LOUIS op. cit. pp 108-109. This was the Trade Union Salaried Officers Association
failed, for the only purpose of the ALP was to get Labor men into parliament; in this regard, the political machine had been 'phenomenally successful'. The Coburg branch however, was of the opinion that while the ALP has been moderately successful in getting Labor representatives into Parliament it has signally failed in the essential work of educating the workers on class conscious lines. We are of the opinion that a reform in this direction is urgently needed.

As the months passed with little sign of a follow-up to the Special Conference decisions, increasingly the branch directed its anger towards the CE. There was much debate on how the CE might be made more responsive to the rank and file. Initially, it was suggested that MP's be excluded from it altogether, but finally the following agenda item for Annual Conference was framed:

> that the constitution of the Central Executive be amended to provide that not more than one in seven members of parliament and not more than one in five paid union officials be eligible for election to the Central Executive.

It was a clear indication of the loss of faith in leadership at all levels.

Protest at government action did not abate, particularly when wages were cut by 10%, but the branch also became concerned at the

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80 Labor Call, 5 February 1931
81 CM, 16 February 1931
82 CM, 12 January 1931
83 Labor Call, 5 February 1931
84 VCE Records 1931 Annual Conference Agenda. Conference rejected all such proposals. See L.J. Louis, op.cit. p 109
85 For example, Labor Call, 5 February, 5 and 19 February 1931
86 Labor Call, 5 February 1931
serious implications of the conflicting views within the Labour Movement. Throughout the depression the Australian community was flooded with solutions, panaceas explanations and prophecies of doom. Amateur intellectuals blossomed overnight, the Labour Movement was a fertile breeding ground for them and the Coburg branch was not without its fair share. Louis describes the Labour Movement as besieged by self-appointed economists seeking converts for what each regarded as the real solution to the crisis. Workers were inundated by the babble of would-be saviours, and there were very few journals to which they could turn for enlightenment or a strong consistent exposition of Labor policy.

Made acutely aware of this problem by the resignation of Fenton and Lyons from Cabinet in January, the branch engaged in a lengthy discussion ... on the urgent need for a unified policy within the ranks of Labor. At present there was a babel of suggested remedies for overcoming the existing chaotic state of affairs. We have the progressives as represented by the Anstey group, and the NSW Government; the moderates as expressed in the Theodore Plan; each of these schemes being supported with variations; and finally we have the calamity of Hogan and Hill with their narrow intellects and reactionary ideas of wage reductions and rationing. Little wonder that the rank and file is in a state of utter confusion. It was emphasised that unless Labor adopted a concrete and unified policy on the currency question the Movement will become further discredited and finally its effectiveness will be utterly destroyed.

86 I.J. LOUIS op.cit. pp 27-28
87 ibid. p 90
88 Labor Call, 19 February 1931
The outcome was a resolution of hope that the forthcoming meeting of the Federal Executive and the Federal and State Labor Parties would be able to produce a unified monetary policy. Duggan was forceful in his criticism of Labor leaders enunciating conflicting policies very frequently are foreign to the objectives of the Party. Labor leaders enunciating conflicting policies very frequently are foreign to the objectives of the Party.\textsuperscript{89} and Carozzi concluded the discussion with the warning that sight must never be lost of the fact that an essential plank in Labor’s platform is the socialism of the means of production, distribution and exchange.\textsuperscript{90}

\textbf{Literature Cited}:

\begin{enumerate}
  \item [89] Labor Call, 19 February 1931
  \item [90] ibid.
  \item [91] Labor Call, 5 March 1931
  \item [92] ibid.
\end{enumerate}
to become full members of ALP branches without payment of membership fees, until such time as they have regular employment, and that this be a recommendation to Conference.

met with little positive response. It was these kinds of incidents that seemed to reveal a far more fundamental malaise in the Labour Movement, particularly at the leadership level, than simply cowardly or treacherous politicians. The branch was not only angered by the token gestures made toward assisting the unemployed for humanitarian reasons, but because of its own interest in socialism and propaganda, it was frustrated that such fertile ground for propaganda was being left fallow.

With the disintegration of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party in March 1931, the whole of the Labour Movement was left floundering, for those in positions of leadership had done little to assist the rank and file make any sense of the events over the previous four months, tending in fact to deny that a split was imminent or that the differences were irreconcilable. Once the Lyons group had defected, the issue could be further avoided by denouncing the 'rats' and talk of Labor 'ridding itself of its excrecences'. The Coburg branch for a time hit out wildly in all directions; motion after motion of protest was passed, bitter, repetitive and not always consistent.

The attitude of Hogan and Calwell to Lang in NSW provided some of the angriest responses. Hogan had declared that 'neither Mr. Lang's policy nor his presence was desirable in Melbourne', while Calwell threatened to expel any ALP member who supported him. This

93 Labor Call, 19 February 1931
94 L.J. LOUIS op.cit. pp 94-96 gives a detailed account of this period.
95 Labor Call, 5 March 1931
96 L.J. LOUIS op.cit. p 98
Calwell was Victorian ALP President.
prompted a most uncompromising statement of independence:

a good deal of resentment was expressed by
some of the members at what they described as
the dictatorial action of the general president
and the following resolution was carried: That
the members of this branch resent the instructions
of the President of the Victorian ALP concerning
the attitude of members towards the Lang policy;
and that the President be informed that when we
think his opinion is worth having it will be
written for. Further that the CE be written
to and asked if they support the ruling of the
President in regard to the Lang policy. 97

Lang's strong stand, however ineffective, could serve as a yardstick
by which to measure the performance of other leaders. A section of the
Coburg branch became firmly committed to Lang at this stage and eventually
formed a tiny breakaway party. 98 Lang was an embarrassment to the
Hogan Government precisely because for many in the working class he
appeared as the 'personification of revolt' against all the forces
threatening their standard of living. 'Lang defied, and Labor wanted
defiance', 100 Certainly the Coburg branch wanted defiance and the failure
to lend even verbal support was seen as a further betrayal of the inter-
est of the working class therefore further discrediting the ALP leader-
ship in their eyes.

On other issues however, the branch was somewhat confused,
as for example when it called on the CE to 'work for a referendum with
a view to abolishing State Parliament' and at the same time protested
at the failure to contest the Senate elections. 101 This is not surpris-
ing under the circumstances since from a branch perspective the Party must
have appeared to have virtually collapsed and it was difficult to know

97 Labor Call, 30 April 1930
98 See p 104-112.
   The Depression of the 1930's Melbourne 1968 p 152
100 ibid. p 144
101 CM, 25 May 1931
who to blame and what mechanisms were still functioning. Repeatedly, the branch called for another Special Conference because, however inadequate, this was the only means by which the rank and file could put their case in any systematic way, but also because it seemed that the whole upper level of the ALP was careering out of control and disciplinary action had to be taken. The branch was outraged by the decision of the Federal Executive to support the

action of the Federal Government in remaining in office whilst unable to carry out the policy of the Labor Party, and Keane had become one of the strongest critics in the branch of his parliamentary colleagues. 'Determination ... to control' those to whom it sent to parliament strengthened markedly and once again attention centred on the politicians, particularly when Beckett was defeated in the Legislative Council elections. Several motions calling for disciplinary action were passed and the various monetary policies were discussed at length, but above all the branch was convinced that the workers had been asked to bear more than their fair share of economic distress at the hands of Labor Governments:

102 CM, 8, 15 and 29 June 1931
103 CM, 29 June 1931
104 Keane voted against the Premiers' Plan L.J. LOUIS op.cit. p 120 n
105 Charles Mutton reporting to the branch on 1931 Annual Conference Labor Call, 16 April 1931
106 Labor Call, 11 June 1932, Province of Melbourne North
107 CM, 8 and 15 June, 16 July 1931
108 See for example CM, 16 July 1931
The Labor Governments (Federal and State) came in for a good deal of criticism. They either accept this state of affairs as being inevitable - (that is if they are merely reformers) - or they are too cowardly or too concerned about place and pay to make a stand and fight the reactionary Senate and Legislative Council.

The Scullin Government staggered on until December 1931, but long before that members of the Coburg branch were firmly placed among those in the Labour Movement who were looking past the immediate situation to the ideal policy if Labor were in a majority and who were prepared to risk electoral defeat rather than carry out a policy that they had no faith in.¹⁰⁹

Unlike the majority of the leadership who were frightened by economic crisis into abandoning their 'Sentimental Socialism'¹¹¹, most in the Coburg branch were radicalised into a far more serious commitment to the need for a total re-organisation of society and therefore a rejection of the piecemeal, pragmatic approach that characterised most Labor governments' actions. Taking up a more idealistic view, they believed that such ineffective government was self-defeating. The attempt should be abandoned and all energies directed toward rebuilding the Movement from the bottom up in order to provide the support necessary for effective government. For a time there were hopeful signs of a general move to discipline and re-invigorate the Party leadership. Mutton had returned from the Annual Conference to report that although 'mild' it showed

¹⁰⁹ *Labor Call*, 16 July 1931
¹¹¹ J. Ross op.cit., p 139
¹¹¹ Interview, R. Gibson
a determination on the part of the rank and file to control those people whom it sent to parliament, while later Gleeson and Trenoweth reported that the same 'general attitude' prevailed at the ACTU Conference. There was throughout the whole Movement at this time much open criticism and talk of disciplining the politicians who had supported the Premiers' Plan especially at the Victorian Special Conference in July and various union conferences. Unfortunately the more militant rank and file found that they had very little power to change either personnel or policy.

From July 1931, the Coburg branch demonstrated a clearer sense of purpose. Members felt that the Party should 'cut its losses', seek to understand its errors and then move forward in the light of a reformed and revitalised policy and organisation. For the branch two changes were essential. Firstly a tightening of the machinery by which the rank and file controlled its representatives and executive officers. The most extreme expression of this was a demand that the Constitution be altered to clearly define the date upon which Labor Governments in power are to give effect to Labor's Platform.

Secondly, a greater commitment to the Socialisation Objective, which should be the 'only policy' in the ALP Platform. In mid July the

112 Labor Call, 16 April 1931
113 CM, 14 September 1931
Though there had been some criticism earlier of the way the "demand for Assurances" had been "Manoeuvred off the Business Sheet", CM, 6 August 1931
114 For a more detailed coverage of events in this period see L.J. Louis op.cit. pp 104-114.
115 CM, 21 December 1931
116 ibid.
Bourke Advisory Council put the following resolutions to the branch for endorsement:

1) ... it should be obligatory on every Labor candidate for election to parliament or municipal council etc., whenever addressing the public ... to state Labor's objective and demonstrate his or her adherence to advocacy of same. 2) That no Labor leader shall accept a commission to form a government unless his policy has a majority in both houses of parliament.

The discussion which followed summarised the branch position:

The objective had been kept in the background for too long, and there had been too much suppression and trimming of sails for the purpose of vote catching. Because of this, many people — and unfortunately many workers — still regard the Labour Movement as merely a reform movement. The reason for this misconception is chiefly because in the past the organisation had been used for the purpose of capturing parliament rather than for the purpose of enlightening the workers and showing them that the real cause of all their disabilities, wretchedness and poverty is inherent in the system under which they live and can only be altered by the realisation of Labor's objective. The politician whose chief concern is to get a seat in parliament, and then hang on to it, naturally refrains from saying or doing anything that might lose votes and principles are sacrificed to expediency and vital questions are kept under the hat. It was time an end was put to this sort of thing and Labor's parliamentarians and selected candidates were compelled to honestly expound Labor's objective and advocate the abolition of the predatory capitalist system. This would drive the merely reformer (sic) and opportunist out of the movement. The sooner this issue is faced the sooner the Movement will be established on an honest and sound foundation and the farse of labor governments allowing themselves to be used to administer and prop up a rotting and tottering system ended.

117 Labor Call, 23 July 1931
118 ibid.
Above all the branch did not want Labor Governments at the expense of Labor principles, and it felt that these had been lost sight of in the attempt to deal with economic crises:

... it was better to have gone down fighting than to retain the reins of government in the interests of capitalism.\(^{119}\)

There was a very important sense in which the 'idealists' in the Labor Party were not unduly concerned by Labor's electoral defeats in 1931 and 1932. Not only was it expected but it was hoped that relief from the compromises of government would allow the Party to get on with reassessing and rebuilding itself. Even so, the reduction of Anstey's share of the Bourke vote to 47.66\% against the UAP candidate's 45.24\% was a shattering blow.\(^{120}\) He held the seat by only 1200 votes and felt personally betrayed in that he had always opposed the compromises of Scullin's cabinet. Like the branch he saw the defeat as inevitable:

... Labor's principles had not been adhered to. The people were very disappointed and voted accordingly. He foresaw the debacle months before it came. Personally he had always stood by the Party's platform and always would as long as life remained with him.\(^{121}\)

The fact that the CPA candidate polled 2.9\%\(^{122}\) of the vote was perhaps indicative of a significant shift toward a less compromising style of politics. In attempting to steer a middle course, the Party in Victoria had lost support to both the left and the right without achieving very much in terms of alleviating the distress of its supporters. The Hogan government continued to outrage the Coburg branch until May 1932.

\(^{119}\) CM, 13 June 1932
\(^{120}\) See Appendix B
\(^{121}\) Labor Call, 28 January 1932
\(^{122}\) See Appendix B
when the number of Labor politicians was reduced from 30 to 16, Keane's was reduced to 52.6 %, but by that time the branch was more than a little concerned that still no disciplinary action had been taken to 'immediately rid our Movement of the incubus of traitorous reactionaries'.

There was much talk of stern discipline and greater control of politicians in the weeks after the defeat of the Hogan Government. In fact, the most extreme right-wing politicians including Hogan, were expelled and the 1933 Annual Conference finally voted against minority governments. It was enough of a purge for the Victorian Labour Movement to close ranks but a number of serious problems and conflicts remained unresolved. Rawson, in contrasting this preservation of a fundamental unity in Victoria with the situation in NSW and the Federal Party, considers that the losses among the rank and file were much more serious, not only losses in the number of members of branches, though this was serious enough, but in confidence and sense of purpose ... casting about for some worthwhile standard to follow many of the branches developed a worship of Lang, or flirted with the Communists or Social Credit, or lost themselves in elaborate yet trivial schemes for the re-organisation of the Party. With the defeat of the Lang Government in June 1932, the healthiest of these rather unhealthy props to rank and file morale was much weakened.

Writing of the Trade Union leadership in Victoria in this period, Louis suggests that:

123 See Appendix B
124 CM, 11 April 1932
125 For further details see L.J. LOUIS op.cit. pp 193-203
126 D. RAWSON, (1954) op.cit. pp 229-230
It had not been vitally concerned to mobilise or inspire the fighting potential of the Movement, or to test the possibility that a rousing forward policy might lead to a successful mass movement.127

Demoralisation was a profound problem, and no close observer of events such as the Coburg branch would have been prepared to blame Hogan, Jones and the others entirely for Labor's defeat. Under these circumstances, rebuilding the Party was, as Rawson suggests, harder because the leadership had survived 'almost intact'128 but its rank and file organisation was 'weakened and demoralised'. In the eyes of the Coburg branch the leadership was seriously discredited and this profoundly affected relations with that leadership for the rest of the decade.

127 D. RAWSON (1954) op. cit. p 210
128 ibid. p 230
The relations between the Coburg branch and the CE over the years 1933-1940 must be viewed in the context of a number of factors. Rawson describes the leadership of the Victorian ALP in the 1930’s as

... if anything, excessively sober and cautious, preoccupied with keeping its own machinery running and certainly not notable for any concern with doctrine, with the partial exception of its attitude to collective security and the related question of military conscription. There was, in fact, a singularly helpless and hopeless quality about the leaders of the Victorian ALP in the years after the depression. Achieving Federal political success was out of their hands. At the State level they seemed to have tried everything and nothing worked.\(^1\)

The overall loss of morale in the depression already noted was in Rawson’s view ‘one explanation of the lagging recovery of Victorian Labor’.\(^2\) but it was also partly a consequence of a deep insecurity on the part of the surviving leadership. Already displaying distinct oligarchical tendencies, before the depression and an inherent conservatism, the leadership increasingly came to see ‘organisation’ and discipline as an end in itself and the effect of the conflicts opened up by the depression were to make it even more zealous in squashing differences as insubordination rather than legitimate expression of the range of opinion that the Party had previously tolerated. Michels, in writing of this phenomenon noted:

They go so far as to exercise censorship over any of their colleagues whom they suspect of rebellious inclinations.\(^3\)

\(^{1}\) D. RAWSON, "Victoria, 1910-1966: Out of Step or Merely Shuffling?" Historical Studies, October 1967 p 73
\(^{2}\) Ibid. p 74
\(^{3}\) R. MICHELS, Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy, New York 1962
In the mid 1930's the Coburg branch and Maurice Blackburn found themselves victims of precisely this kind of behaviour. The CB adopted this position at least partly because it sensed its own loss of authority, yet precisely because of this the more militant ALP members were not prepared to accept such authoritarian behaviour as legitimate. The problem was further compounded by the failure of this leadership to meet the new challenges of the later part of the 1930's.

CHAPTER NINE

THE COBURG BRANCH AND THE 'LANG PLAN'

This loss of faith in Labor Party leadership consequent upon its performance in the years 1929-1932 generated an undercurrent of mistrust that significantly influenced relations between the Coburg ALP branch and the CE for the rest of the decade and this was all the more important while the decimated ranks of politicians were quite clearly not in a position to be of any great benefit to the Movement. In fact, the expulsion of the politicians seems to have had the effect of concentrating the branch's frustration on the group that dominated the CP. Hopes that the lessons of the years 1929 to 1932 could be used to build a greater force for the emancipation of the working class, were soon dispelled.

In many ways the timid, defensive attitude adopted was a more extreme version of that which had already been found wanting. Considering this in a Postscript Louis has suggested that:

One one view, the tragedy for the workers was that a left-wing alliance between the militants who ... might have offered dynamic leadership more suited to the unique challenge of the times, was ruled out by the Communist Party.4

6 L.J. LOUIS, op.cit. p 210
In the years 1932-1936 the intransigent attitude of the communists softened as the threat of war and fascism loomed and for those in the Coburg branch the only hope of dynamic and positive action seemed to be in this left-wing alliance. The passions aroused by the anti-war movement were such as to breakdown a deep and well-founded suspicion of alliances with the CPA and other more extremist elements, but the same people battled for many years to persuade the ALP to assert its leadership in these areas. It is a further tragedy that the Victorian ALP did not rise to this challenge. In basing organisational decisions on a paranoid fear of communists, the CE forced some of its more dynamic elements into alliance with them and paved the way for an equally destructive form of outside domination to enter the ALP from the right.

This section deals with the Coburg branch’s struggle to force the CE and the ALP in general to adopt a more dynamic and positive approach, particularly to involve itself in the anti-war movement. The international perspective of the branch meant it was among the earliest to perceive the direction of world politics and it rapidly came to consider the rise of fascism as the all-pervading issue in the face of which all others faded into insignificance. The behaviour of the branch can only be understood in the light of an almost millenarian fervour that developed in the years 1932 to 1936 and the organisational battles with the CE are in many ways only the outward manifestation of a serious struggle to influence the policy, ideology and direction of the whole Labour Movement.

Finally there seems to have been a peculiar intensity and activism located in the Coburg branch. The corollary of great willingness to act was the desire to be part of effective organisations. The ALP in the 1930's, particularly as regards anti-war activities, was not this, but,
Coburg branch members were loathe to abandon it altogether for the appeal of its loftier ideals remained, and at the same time they were attracted by one mushroom organisation after another. Frequently these were of limited purpose and offered short-term outlets for unused energy, and all of them were weakened by the hostility of the ALP. Virtually the entire escalating conflict in the years 1932-1936 between the Coburg branch and the CE centred on these organisations.

The Lang Plan

The first organisational conflict in fact arose over the 'Lang Plan' and it might be said that it was the last 'typical' ALP issue that the branch was seriously engaged in for some years. International affairs and a more serious commitment to socialism had already begun to dominate branch activities even before the Hogan government fell. Routine branch business and even the issues of State and Federal politics were overshadowed by broader more theoretical discussions. Social activities never again reached the scale of the 1920's despite the nagging problem of the Hall debt. It was a smaller branch, stripped down by the depression to a core of people whose common experience and shared activity dated back over a number of years. These people were a cohesive, close-knit intense group of militants who for a time stamped the branch so emphatically with their character that while the like-minded were attracted, the more moderate or less committed tended to

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5 1930 was the biggest slump in branch members, CM 28 July 1930 and in 1932 membership was back up to 115. See Appendix C
6 See Appendix C
drift away. 7

The 'Lang Plan' and the conflict between the NSW ALP and the Federal Executive set in motion a long and heated debate throughout the Labour Movement that revealed the depth of conflict about the role and objectives of the Movement and highlighted issues of legitimacy and authority at both the State and Federal level. It also re-opened the kinds of questions that had been posed by his success in the elections and the Victorian ALP's official hostility toward his stand. Rawson sees the 'worship' of Lang as an 'unhealthy prop', 8 but however ineffective he was in real terms, he made the appropriate gestures. In the Coburg branch Lang was held up in contrast to the 'betrayers of the workers', Hogan and Hill, as one who had

demonstrated the ability of Labor's representatives to sacrifice their individual interests rather than the principles of our great movement. 9

The importance of the issue however lies in the way it demonstrated how little anything had changed in Victoria. Indeed it was apparent that the rank and file were already being limited as to whom they could associate with and what policies they could support. Calwell's ruling that any supporter of the 'Lang Plan' would be expelled and the federal intervention in the NSW Labor Party revealed how little divergence of views the Party was prepared to tolerate.

The attitude of the branch to these issues was predictable and it strongly re-affirmed the democratic principles on which the

7 Mrs. Hansart said of Mrs. Halse and her group:
"you had to be with them one hundred percent or they didn't want you... they were real fanatics"

8 D. RAWSON, 1954) op.cit. p 230

9 Labor Call, 19 February 1931

10 CH, 13 June 1932
Movement ought to operate:

It is contrary to the democratic principles of the Australian Trade Union and Labour Movement, and to the working class movement in all civilised countries, that a small group of officials such as is comprised by the Federal Executive and Conference, shall have the extraordinary power to over-ride the expressed will of the rank and file, to whom they owe their existence and sustenance.11

Calwell's ruling indicated how easily the rank and file could be silenced and the branch's refusal to accept the legitimacy of this ruling put it in the first of a number of difficult situations.

A minority in the branch were so impressed by the 'Lang File' that they attempted to set up a breakaway Party. The branch, however, refused to formally accept the resignation so the new group met in the Labor Hall and still remained active in the ALP branch, while pressure was applied to reverse the ruling. When Lang was dismissed the branch convened a special meeting to voice its 'indignation and abhorrence' and congratulated Lang on 'the magnificent stand he had taken to uphold Labor's objective and principles'12 and in further open defiance of Calwell determined to contact all metropolitan branches with a view to marshalling support for the Lang candidates. The CE was also called on to:

declare bogus that body in NSW calling itself the Federal ALP which during the NSW election supported the UAP and UCP anti-Labor forces in that State ... Furthermore we call upon our Central Executive to place outside the Labor Party all members of the State ALP who supported them, believing that we cannot move forward upon our great offensive against capitalism while these weeds grow within Labor's garden to the detriment of our future harvest.13

11 CM, 28 November 1932
12 Labor Call, 19 May 1932
13 CM, 13 June 1932
Their position was weakened by Lang's defeat however, and many members became uneasy at being in flagrant breach of a presidential ruling yet even in July the branch president's attempt to rule against the Lang Planners' right to use the Hall was defeated, and a conference between the two groups was organised to try to resolve the crisis.

The outcome of this was not indicated but the branch maintained its refusal to accept the resignations and as the issue subsided the Lang Planners appear to have been absorbed back into the branch. The fact that the CE had not taken up the challenge and disciplined the branch enabled the internal conflict to resolve itself but the whole episode had further reduced its standing in the eyes of the branch.

14 CM, 25 July 1932 - see also CM, 20 June 1932 when the right to use the Hall was granted

15 The Lang Plan Party was formally set up in Coburg some time in July 1932. Brunswick and Coburg Gazette, 29 July 1932

16 E.g. CM, 3 October 1932, they were deferred another three months.
CHAPTER TEN

SOCIALISATION UNITS

One of the few organisational initiatives that might have provided a constructive outlet for the energies and enthusiasm of the Coburg branch was an attempt to establish 'Socialisation Units' in order to promote the Party's Socialisation Objective.¹

They were set up in response to pressure from militant unions and groups like the Coburg branch who wanted the opportunity to promote socialism both inside and outside the Party.² On the surface they appeared to offer a greater measure of rank and file involvement in propaganda but it soon became clear that their operations were severely limited. These Units were to advance 'the Socialisation Objective' by forming study circles, holding lectures, discussions etc. Specifically their function was to:

- keep the Party Objective before branch members by
  - (a) arranging lectures and discussions
  - (b) having the reading of the Party's pledge to new members included in the Standing Orders of the branch
  - (c) carrying out the decisions of the Party and group Conferences relative to the Objective
  - (d) assisting speakers and lecturers to keep to the Party's Objective at election and other times.

Given the Coburg branch's view on the need to promote the

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1 These were modelled on those set up in NSW in 1930. See A. DAVIDSON, The Communist Party of Australia: A Short History Stanford 1967 pp 45-45 for an outline of their formation and development in NSW.

2 Labor Call, 14 April 1932. The Victorian Annual Conference approved the idea in principle and appointed a committee which included Blackburn to draw up guidelines for their operation.

3 Labor Call, 16 August 1932
Socialisation Objective as discussed earlier, it is not surprising that initial enthusiasm for the proposal was very high and at the beginning of 1933 the following declaration was inserted in the Minutes:

Socialism shall be my dominant aim, my basic aspiration, my life's fulfilment in 1933. Thus I shall not have lived my year in vain.

The semi-religious fervour and almost redemptive spirit in which this is taken up needs to be emphasised if the behaviour of the branch in this period is to be comprehensible. Callaghan's notion that he had a 'religion to preach' has been noted, while Mary Grant declared that:

Those to whom our cause is a religion will consider all time devoted to acquiring more knowledge of our objective (the socialisation of industry) well spent.

Applegate publically declared his credo in the following terms:

... I endeavour to combine class consciousness, sincerity and tolerance in my efforts to further the emancipation of the workers and resolutely stand for Labor's objective.

Branch members considered that they were dedicated to a cause - the service of their fellow workers -, moreover they considered it an 'undoubted fact' that the Coburg branch was 'second to none so far as

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4 See page 104

5 In January the branch had called for "fundamental principles" to be the "sole consideration" of all future Conferences. CM, 9 January 1933

6 The branch was assisted in the formation of its Unit by R. Stewart of the Central Socialisation Committee and a former member of the branch. One meeting night per month and every third Sunday were set aside for Socialisation Unit meetings. CM, 9 January 1933

7 CM, 9 February 1933

8 See p. 76

9 Labor Call, 27 October 1932

10 Labor Call, 10 November 1937
its energies in the workers' interests are concerned.\(^{11}\) This strong element of righteousness did not augur well for future relations between the branch and the CE particularly as no further organisational initiatives were forthcoming and the Socialisation Units did not prove to be an effective means of influencing either the Labour Movement or the working class in general. Nevertheless the Unit functioned actively in the branch until August 1933 when it was overshadowed by the formation of the Council Against War and Fascism.\(^{12}\) At one stage long reports of meetings were published in Labor Call\(^{13}\) but since the Unit was largely confined to work within the branch there was a limit to the amount of satisfaction that could be derived from preaching to the converted, once all the amateur intellectuals had presented a paper on their pet theme. The Unit collapsed as soon as the possibility for more effective action presented itself elsewhere. The fate of the Socialisation Units in general is interesting in that it provides a rare insight into the frustrations of the militant and idealistic ALP members in Victoria at the time, and some evidence that the Coburg branch was not entirely isolated in its position. When the Central Socialisation Committee reported to Annual Conference in 1934\(^{14}\) it offered three reasons for lack of progress towards its aims.

11 Labor Call, 10 November 1932
12 Labor Call, 25 January 1934
Unit formally closed down because "it had not functioned for some time"
13 See for example Labor Call, 15 June 1933
G.R. Trenoweth, "Real Wealth, Money and Credit"
22 June 1933, E. Williams "Can Socialisation be Achieved and How?"
13 July 1933, A.C. Keane "The Socialisation of Wealth"
14 Labor Call, 1 February 1934
Firstly, there were financial constraints, secondly the 'limitations placed upon the committee by Conference have militated against its success'.

Thirdly the Committee considered that

the activities of the FCSU in many centres has absorbed the interest of many who would otherwise be active in the ALP Socialisation Units.

The 'general leadership' was attacked because it maintains silence and is evasive of the issues of class struggle and socialism as being the only salvation of the workers,

and accused of 'lethargic floundering' at a time when the prime concern should be the 'winning of the workers to its support for the establishment of Socialism'.

The Report declared that the 'propaganda and combative forces of the Movement' were in no wise consonant with the necessity of the period when the opposing conscious and economic forces of capitalism are driving rapidly and powerfully in the direction of economic nationalism - the obvious outcome of which is 'Fascism and War ... (and that) there can be no repudiation of a charge of frightened half-heartedness which results in splitting the Movement and driving many of its best rank and file elements to non-constitutional organisations while it forces others to timidly tremble at accepting any advanced policy.

The Coburg branch then, was not alone in its criticism of the leadership, despite the tendency throughout the depression years for the blame to

15 Labor Call, 1 February 1934
16 ibid.
17 ibid.
18 ibid.
19 ibid.
to be laid at the feet of the apathetic rank and file, was certainly among those 'elements' that they had been driven into 'non-constitutional organisations', but had not as yet entirely lost hope of converting the majority of the ALP to their view.

See L.J. LOUIS op.cit. p 54 for the Tramway Record's consistent view on this, and p 96 where he quotes from an editorial in Labor Call which declared that Labor crises and setbacks were "inevitable" because of the workers' "lack of resistance" and "their capitalistically conditioned beliefs".
During the 1920's members of the Coburg ALP confined their activities almost exclusively to that organisation but in the early years of the depression a number of organisations, narrower in purpose and generally more militant than the ALP, grew up in response to the problems and tensions created by economic crisis. Many of these organisations were fronts for the CPA but at the local level a person or a group was judged more by actions than political labels. The Coburg Laborites saw themselves as 'naturally' allied with these groups because they were also working class, and as the leaders of the ALP became more radical than less conservative, the attraction of these militant groups was strengthened. In general, however the workers in Coburg were sufficiently well organised and militant to work on their own behalf without CPA leadership. A branch of the CPA was not established in Coburg until 1933 and while the UWM was active in the district, another group of unemployed noted for its militancy was always attached to the THC. It was not however work with the unemployed but interest in international affairs that led the branch into associations that were not approved by the CP.

Almost certainly the branch became involved with the Friends of the Soviet Union (FOSU) through the Esperanto Club and by 1932 was

1 Interview, S. Johns, R. Gibson

2 The Esperanto Club was still hiring the Hall up to 1936. 
CM Account Book and the Hall was hired by the FOSU from 1932-1935 through its secretary Mrs. Anna Hintze see Account Book, CM 30 May 1932
corresponding regularly and exchanging delegates with this organisation.

Interest in the FOSU, founded in 1930 to 'work for peace and friendship with the world's first Socialist country', had increased as the depression worsened and many members of the working class became more susceptible to the view that complete social and economic reconstruction was necessary. Propaganda suggested that the Soviet Union had avoided the worst evils of the depression. As Gibson put it:

The wiping out of unemployment in the Soviet Union was a beacon-light to the ever mounting millions of unemployed in other lands, but this had merely served to enhance a fascination among some sections of the Labour Movement with the Soviet Union as the one example of socialism in their time, even if it had fallen somewhat short of the ideal. There were other similar groups mostly CPA 'front organisations' and the Coburg branch had been associated with most of them by 1933.

As early as 1930, branch delegates had attended the inaugural meeting of the International Class War Prisoners' Aid Society (ICWPA) of which Maurice Blackburn was the first president, an organisation founded on a determination to discover

the best means to combat the various anti-working class (Fascist) organisations which are being secretly organised to suppress and bludgeon the militant workers, and should a pretext offer, establish a fascist dictatorship.

Delegates were sent to the League Against Imperialism and the Worker Defence Corps because it was the 'only organisation capable of fighting

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3 R. Gibson My Years in the Communist Party, Melbourne 1966 p 12

5 Also 120 attended, 4 unions and 4 branches

6 E. Williams was one of the branch delegates to meetings of this group and this statement is part of a report he makes to the branch CM, 27 July 1931, see also CM, 13 July 1931

7 CM, 7 December 1931 - this organisation is the forerunner to the WCAM&F
fascism', an indication of how early the branch was in sensing the threat inherent in the trend of European politics. The branch was also aware that such associations might present difficulties and the POSU could only hire the hall on the proviso that the 'permit will be withdrawn if the organisation becomes unlawful'. Neither was it entirely indiscriminate or naive in its involvement, for when the Legality Defence Committee sought branch support, it was informed that the branch did not 'co-operate with any branch of the Communist Party while they continue their programme of vilification etc.'

The branch's sophisticated world view, primarily acquired through contact with the Esperanto Movement, was not shared by the isolationist and defensive CE. In fact associations such as those of the Coburg branch only served to re-inforce the fear that the CPA was undermining the ALP. The CE would not have been impressed by the Coburg branch's subtle distinction between acceptable and unacceptable 'united front' organisations and when the 'Lang Plan' crisis brought the issue into sharp relief and the branch reluctantly sought a CE ruling outside groups, the CE replied that the Workers International Relief Organisation (WIRO), the POSU, the ICWP, and the UWM were all subsidiaries of the CPA and 'obstacles to the progress of the working class, ... as

8 CM, 3 August 1931
9 CM, 30 May 1932
10 CM, 23 May 1932
The POSU was founded in September 1930. Initially neglected by the CPA it remained dormant until 1932 when it began to grow. By 1935 it had nearly 7,500 members and its journal had a circulation of 20,000.
11 CM, 8 August 1932. In March (CM, 21 March 1932) some members expressed doubts about sending delegates to WIRO (Trenoweth and Grant) but they were overridden. However the CE view was sought (VCE Minutes 7 April 1932). There is no record of the reply.
such they must be treated as other opponents of the Labour Movement; i.e. members of these groups cannot be members of the ALP.\(^{12}\) It was ruling that only highlighted the branch's dilemma in seeking effective and legitimate spheres of action.\(^{13}\) To ban these organisations, while at the same time only making vague gestures at meeting the needs of which these organisations were symptomatic, was only compounding the problem, since it was by that stage virtually impossible to work for the unemployed, or against fascism without associating with these groups, and the need for co-ordination and efficient use of limited human resources co-operation and integration, almost inevitable.

The Communist Party had been an insignificant force in Victoria until the 1930's and in its initial response to the united front the Central Executive was, in the opinion of Rawson, 'blindly' following the example of NSW in those it declared to be under Communist control.\(^{14}\) The Communist Party for its part was following the Committee's directive and vilifying ALP members as 'social fascists' and

\[
\text{the chief support of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie in the period of capitalist decline.}^{15}
\]

\(^{12}\) VCE Minutes, 5 August 1932
Glenhuntly, Glenroy and South Melbourne also sought a ruling on the same groups

\(^{13}\) CIU, 8 August 1932.
The same meeting that sought a CE Ruling on WIRO pledged support to the Council of Action 'in its fight against work for sustenance'.

\(^{14}\) D. RAWSON (1954) \textit{op.cit.} p 247
The 1924 Interstate Conference had forbidden members of the CPA to join the ALP

\(^{15}\) \textit{ibid.} p 248
See also L.J. LOUIS and TURNER \textit{op.cit.} pp 156-175
A. DAVIDSON \textit{op.cit.} p 49
At the local level where people had very often been associated as neighbours and activists for many years such demarcation disputes were becoming irrelevant, as the crisis deepened and the CPA attitude softened. More particularly the feeling was growing that such dispersal of forces could no longer be afforded. The working class had its back to the wall, yet the ALP seemed intent on alienating or even expelling some of its most enthusiastic workers. This view was expressed strongly during the debate at the 1933 Annual Conference on the banning of the FOSU. Delegate Edmonds was of the opinion that

if the Labor Party desired to be in a better position than it was today, it should admit members of advanced parties as members of the ALP. He had attended meetings of the FOSU. That body was holding bigger meetings than the ALP. He had seen scores of the best workers in the Movement at such meetings because they had been neglected by the ALP. The fact of the existence of the FOSU was proof against the ALP of its lack of action. Another warned that the CE's 'short-sighted outlook' would result in the exclusion of 'some of the most virile and vigorous workers' in the Movement. The Coburg branch supported these groups because they were:

working class organisations doing a necessary work in the organisation of the working class to meet the attacks of the employing class, and in educating the workers in the methods of the social system operating in the Soviet Union - the only part of the world where the control of industry is in the hands of the workers themselves ... that work is not being performed by any other organisation.

16 It was, for example, inconceivable that the branch not support the Communists in Coburg on the street meeting ban issue
17 Labor Call, 2 February 1933
18 ibid., delegate Webber
19 CM, 12 November 1932
The CE however was not concerned with what these groups were doing, but who was in them.

When it came to Annual Conference, only the POSU was seriously defended and while the CE tried to focus the debate on Communist domination, most supporters of the POSU were concerned firstly that this was not true, but more importantly that it was placing an unreasonable and possibly self-destructive limitation on rank and file freedom. As Merrifield put it:

The opponents of the POSU had to show that it was affiliated with the Communist Party directly. Members of the ALP could be members of friendly societies. Communists could be members of unions. If they carried exclusions to their logical conclusions they would have to exclude many members of other organisations.

There is some evidence that the POSU was indeed a 'front organisation' but most supporters were convinced that it was not communist dominated, nor indeed a political organisation in the strict sense of the word.

20 Only the POSU seems to have been defended in correspondence with the CE in the months between the ban and Annual Conference. See CH 29 September 1932, the Furnishing Trades Society, St. Kilda and Glen Iris branches also protest. VCE Minutes 30 September 1932

21 Labor Call, 2 February 1933
The Coburg branch, in retaliation to the ban on the POSU had proposed to Annual Conference:
That no person belonging to any other organisation upholding or perpetuating the present capitalist state of society can become a member of the ALP.

CG, 28 November 1932

22 A. Davidson op.cit. p 56 and 61 suggests that the POSU was a major recruiting ground for the CPA ... 'many were attracted to the CPA because of the sufferings they experienced through unemployment and by the myth of a Soviet paradise where there was no depression' but he does admit that the CPA lost control of the POSU several times.

23 Del Edmonds e.g. stated that 'If he considered the POSU a political association he would oppose it' Labor Call, 2 February 1933
Those who rejected the CE’s narrow interpretation of the 1924 Federal Conference ruling that no member of the CPA could be a member of the ALP were afraid that the Party would be weakened through the loss of the more militant and active Laborites. For its part the CE was attempting to counter the loss of energy into the FOSU that ought to be used more directly to serve the ALP. The majority in Conference agreed with the CE and in the long term the FOSU could not compete with the ALP. The frustration and anger however continued to foster the CE apparently was more concerned with who could or not belong to the Party at a point when Labor’s ranks were already decimated by the depression. The fundamental issue of determining at what point an organisation that included CPA members would be classified as CPA dominated was never fully nor rationally debated for the CE took executive action and then presented Annual Conference with a decision on a number of specific organisations thus polarising opinion in advance and narrowing the terms of debate. This pattern continued for quite a number of years and the fact that the CE could rely on Annual Conference majorities did nothing to enhance the legitimacy of its actions in the view of the Coburg branch.

The problem was nevertheless a very complex one and the failure to resolve it is a significant factor in Coburg in the following years. Rawson considers that the CE was not unduly severe in its ‘blacklisting’, but this tends to ignore the fact that groups like

24 This is borne out by the report of the Central Socialisation Committee of activities during 1933, Labor Call, 1 February 1934

25 It is unlikely however, given the range of strongly held views on the CPA within the ALP from the hysterically anti-Communist to the militants who saw it as a useful and necessary ally, that rational debate on the subject was possible at any stage.

26 D. RAWSON (1954) op.cit. p 255

Even political organisations which contained or did not specifically exclude Communists were not banned to ALP members as long as it was apparent that the Communists were not in control.
the FOSU were banned because so many ALP members were involved, hence the strength of the reaction. The Coburg branch was still defending it in 1934 as an organisation that ‘definitely upholds the ideals of the working class’.

The CB's position can much better be defended from the viewpoint of the electoral liability that any taint of Communism represented. In a community that had been polarised by economic crisis, class hatreds had reached an unusually high pitch and the Labor Party had to avoid extremism in order to retain electoral credibility. In addition hostility between the ALP and the CPA had reached a peak of intensity in the years 1930-1932 when serious brawls had been frequent.

Unfortunately the ALP was more than an instrument for putting working men into parliament and in any case without a showing of a dynamic, forward-looking policy it would not win seats irrespective of the associations of left-wing elements.

In the final analysis the problem was still one of a leadership that inspired little confidence and offered few directives. Dictatorial behaviour did not improve this situation and there seems little doubt that ALP members were in the FOSU and later the Council Against War and Fascism precisely because of the failures of leadership. How far the ruling was dissented from is difficult to ascertain, but since Rawson argues the 'rank and file could hardly be said to be represented directly' at Annual Conference delegates who

27 VCE Records Minutes of 1934 Annual Conference
28 See A. DAVIDSON op. cit. p 63
29 D. RAWSON (1954) op. cit. p 235
were often merely appointees of officials, outnumbered branch delegates by 5 to 2, and given that, there is some evidence that the rank and file in both unions and the ALP were more militant than their leaders, the fact that a third of the delegates voted against the ruling seems to indicate a relatively significant degree of dissent.

It was certainly not a problem that could be resolved by administrative or Conference decisions alone, nor by Labor Call's attempts to sweep the whole issue into the 'will of the majority' basket:

> those who may disagree with the decision ... on the grounds that the groups in question are giving good service in the interests of the workers, should remember that, for the moment, that is not the question.

It is significant that the same Conference received a statement from Duggan as Secretary of the THC and its President condemning the Labor ministers for desertion of principles and violation of decisions, and claiming that politicians had 'played a very important part in creating the present appalling state of affairs'!

Had it not been for the determined resistance of other loyal representatives of the ALP, the present deplorable situation would have been very much worse.

However, Trade Unionists were,

preparing and willing to fight on despite "heavy sacrifices ... provided the Party observes a policy consistent with working class ideals,

29 D. Rawson, (1954) op.cit. p 238
30 Labor Call, 2 February 1933
61 voted for the amendment and 109 against
31 Labor Call, editorial 2 February 1933
and delegates were warned that

_to ensure this you must be represented
on your Central Executive by men whose
determination in that direction can be
depended upon._

In fact there were very few changes in the personnel of the CE throughout the whole decade, but the TUC circular strengthened the Coburg branch view that the decision of this CE to ban certain working class organisations was not only provocative, dictatorial and wrong-headed, but its legitimacy could be discounted as the decision of a discredited and misguided, albeit entrenched, leadership. Such righteousness was a strong tendency in the Coburg branch, but it did not prevent the branch squabbling over the issue. One of the problems was that for many the Esperanto class and the ROSU had become an important part of their social and intellectual life and this was hard to forego even if it were possible to avoid contact. Relations with the ROSU were openly maintained for a time, but when as with the 'Lang Planners' the President attempted to rule the association out of order after 'much argument' her ruling was dissented from by a majority.

As with the Socialisation Units the establishment of the VCA&W in August syphoned off most interest in the ROSU but the branch's defiance had not gone unnoticed and the North of the Yarra Socialisation Unit

32 Trades Hall Council Executive
   "Official Statement to Annual Conference of the ALP
   (Victorian Branch)
   23 January 1933
   Pamphlet in Records of the Victorian ALP held by the La Trobe Library Victoria.
33 D. RANSOM (1954) _op. cit._ p 232; L.J. LOUIS _op. cit._ pp 140-141
34 Interview with Mrs. Harsant made this very clear and their were so many links via family members, old friends etc.
35 _e.g._ CM, 24 March 1933 accept ROSU speaker
   CM, 4 June 1933 donate 5/- to ROSU
36 CM, 28 August 1933
had complained to the CE which directed that the Hall 'must not be
hired to any political group opposed to the Labour Movement'. 37

It would however, be quite some time before the CE came to
see the VCA&W as a threat to ALP organisation, and in this time a new
and very important factor entered the Coburg political scene. In
1934 Maurice Blackburn succeeded to Frank Anstey as the member for Bourke.

37 VCE Minutes, 7 December 1933
Labor Call, 25 January 1934. Mary Grant's ruling was again disagreed
with, and the Hall was directed to the FOSU 'until the whole matter was
finalised' reveal[ed] the refusal of the branch to accept that the
decisions were yet final.
CHAPTER TWELVE

A NEW FEDERAL MEMBER FOR BOURKE

When his huge majority of 1929 was slashed to a mere 1,000 votes in 1931, Frank Anstey felt betrayed by the electorate he had devoted his best energies to serve. Bitter and disillusioned, the last of his energy and idealism burnt out by the battles in Scullin's Cabinet, he decided to retire from the seat he had held since 1910. The heartland of Anstey's support and association was Brunswick. It was not that he had neglected the Coburg sub-division after it was incorporated in Bourke in 1922, but Brunswick was where he had lived and campaigned for thirty years. Despite the tendency in Coburg to regard themselves as the more vigorous and progressive group, the Brunswick Laborites considered themselves the senior partners in the electorate and they would have assumed that Anstey's successor would be one of Brunswick's many prominent Labor men. The fact that this did not eventuate was to have far reaching consequences for politics in Coburg.

Despite the Coburg branch's impatience with the lack of electoral organisation, and complaints about 'lack of enthusiasm' even when the Bourke Campaign Committee did begin meeting, nominations for pre-selection were not called until a few months before the election in 1934. Considering the desirability of the seat there were surprisingly few candidates and it was clear from the beginning that the contest would be between R.W. Peters, Anstey's former campaign manager and member of the VCE, and Maurice Blackburn, member for Clifton Hill in the Legislative Council.

1 See Appendix B
2 As early as 1932 the branch was urging the holding of pre-selection ballots CM 17 October 1932, and complaining that the Bourke Campaign Council was not yet functioning, CM 7 November 1932. This is symptomatic of Coburg's enthusiasm and their commitment to a wider propaganda function beyond mere electioneering.
3 CM 22 May 1933
4 Brunswick Guardian, 3 August 1934. The candidates were: M. Blackburn, R.W. Peters, G. Randell, C.G. Coop, P. Warr, G. Hayes, R. Cheney
Assembly and currently Speaker of the House. After the first count, Blackburn had a slight margin on Peters, but distribution of preferences gave Peters a majority of one, the final figures being Peters 896, Blackburn 895. A recount was called on the grounds that the status of six votes declared 'informal' were in dispute. The CR ruling on these votes resulted in a tied vote and a second ballot was held in which Blackburn obtained a clear majority. (Peters 957, Blackburn 1573).

Notwithstanding the Brunswick Guardian's long reports of the two ballots spiced with vague rumours of fraud and corruption, it was a relatively uneventful pre-selection ballot and campaign, particularly in comparison with events surrounding the by-election in Fitzroy in 1925 when Maurice Blackburn had stood there. Blackburn was not a local in a period when parochial feelings were still generally strong; Peters was a prominent and influential Brunswick Laborite and still believes he was the 'heir apparent' and that only Anstey's absence during the ballots tipped the balance in favour of Blackburn, but he did acknowledge the skill of Blackburn's campaign manager and his strong support among industrial unionists. The second ballot favoured Blackburn for he was able to use the time to make himself better known in the electorate and strengthen the contacts made in Coburg during 1914-1917 when he was State member for Essendon. Above all Blackburn was an experienced politician and much respected leader of the Labor Party, while Peters was still a very young man. Despite Peters' obvious ability and impeccable credentials, Blackburn must have appeared to many as a more than fitting successor to the legendary and maverick Anstey.

5 Brunswick Guardian 3 August 1934
6 WSP Minutes 15 August 1934
7 See Brunswick Guardian 3,10 and 17 August 1934
8 Interview, E.W. Peters
The Labor vote was recovering despite the Coburg branch's concern at insufficient publicity, and Blackburn retained Bourke for Labor with one of the highest majorities in Victoria.

9 CM 3 September 1934
10 Labor Call 20 September 1934
He was ... a man of strong character and of great independence of mind, direct and fair in the expression of his views, and forceful in the advocacy of those things which he considered to be right and just, regardless of whether or not they were popular.

The scope of this thesis does not allow for a study of Maurice Blackburn in the kind of detail necessary to do justice to such a complex and influential figure - a man who towered above most of his political contemporaries in intellectual integrity and capacity, for self sacrifice for the common good, but it is not possible to fully understand his decisive influence in Coburg without knowing something of the man and his background before entering federal parliament.

Maurice Blackburn was born in 1880 at Inglewood, Victoria. His father was a bank manager - a descendant of James Blackburn, Tasmanian architect and surveyor, his mother was of the prominent Victorian family of McCrae. The death of Blackburn's father when he was only six years old left the family in a precarious financial position which became quite acute during the depression of the 1890's and it seems likely that his perception at the time of the

1 John Curtin speaking on Blackburn's death, Commonwealth Book of Australia Parliamentary Debates (1944) Vol. 179 p 29
2 Ralph Gibson Tribune, 11 June 1969
3 Most of the personal details about Blackburn's life and background except where otherwise stated, were obtained from Blackburn's daughter Mrs. Louisa Hamilton.
A scholarship enabled Blackburn to attend Melbourne Grammar School and he worked as a teacher and a librarian while studying for his B.A. and LL.B. He commenced practice as a barrister in 1910 but political activities were already beginning to assume importance in his life, an interest that was strengthened by work as a trade union lawyer. Apparently he joined the ALP in 1909, but initially he was most active in the Victorian Socialist Party (VSP) which was at that stage something akin to the intellectual wing of the Labour Movement and closely associated with the ALP through overlapping membership. Blackburn edited the VSP newspaper the Socialist from 1911 to 1913 and while it was certainly true that Blackburn's humanitarian instincts were aroused by the injustices and inequalities he saw around him and therefore he put himself at the service of 'those who suffered injustice and whose capacity to speak for themselves was limited', his commitment to socialism was largely intellectual. At its simplest he wanted 'to do something to make life a little easier for the men and women of this country ...' but Brennan probably spoke truly when he said of Blackburn:

5 E.g. he was active in the 1911 Referendum Campaign during which he published a pamphlet. S. Blackburn op. cit. p 6
6 S. Blackburn ibid p 6
7 Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates Vol. 179 op. cit. p 25
8 For a more detailed study of the early influences on Blackburn's life and political beliefs see S. Blackburn ibid. pp 4-7
9 Letter from Maurice Blackburn to Doris Hordern 25 June 1914 in the possession of L. Hamilton.
He joined the Labor Party, not because he loved the party, and certainly not because he loved manual labour, either as a diversion or as a means of livelihood, but because the Labor Party stood for things in which he most strongly believed... 10

If Blackburn was sometimes troubled that he knew little of the life and experiences of the manual worker it was nevertheless true that many of his most devoted followers came from among those groups who were most removed from him by life circumstances. These people responded to his obvious concern, deep commitment, exacting personal standards and bold, intellectual leadership.

In 1914 Blackburn successfully contested a by-election for the seat of Pascoe[11] and his intense and enthusiastic[12] campaign revealed that although a young man, most of his life-long political concerns were well established. He expounded lucidly on the key issues and treated the electors as people of intelligence to be informed and consulted rather than led - 'members of parliament were nothing more than the agents of the people'.[13] His campaign was idealistic and high-minded. Each address began with a reading of Labor's pledge and an explanation of its value to the electors but he lamented the 'difficulty of getting laws in the interests of working men passed by a Liberal government'.[14] Above all else, he declared his commitment to perfecting the machinery of democracy through the introduction of the 'initiative referendum' which...

11 Although only a recent arrival in the district he won the pre-selection easily receiving 189 against two other candidates who received 20 and 19 respectively. Letter from M. Blackburn to D. Hordern 7 July 1914 in possession of L. Hamilton, W.A. Watt had retired to contest a federal seat. See also pp 12-13
12 He attended twenty-four election meetings between 14 July and 22 July 1914
13 Ibid. 10 July 1914
14 Ibid.
would enable the people to govern the country as it had never been
governed before'. Finally, the conscious personal integrity that
would characterise his entire life became evident as when, for example,
he told his fiance during the campaign:

I did not trim, I did not indulge in
personalities. I spoke what I honestly
believed to be true and said nothing I
did not mean. 16

Later, with an obvious sense of gratification he reported a conversation
in which he was told,

"You've been straight with everyone.
Everyone in Coburg would say that. There
are a great many people who will vote
against you who have a high respect for
you as an individual". So there you are. 17

Whether admired or hated for it, his personal integrity, absolute
sincerity and fearless defence of his beliefs were the qualities of
Blackburn that were to be most remarked upon.

Blackburn's success in this campaign was mostly due to a
shift in the Catholic vote:

... Mr. Blackburn's majority was largely
made up of Catholic Liberal voters, trans-
ferred to the Labor candidate as a protest
against Dr. Martell's advocacy of the 18
Scripture Union's iniquitous proposal,

and Mr. Watt's failure as State Premier to redeem his promises. 19

15 Age, 17 July 1914
16 Letter from Blackburn to D. Horckern 13 July 1914 in the possession
of L. Hamilton
17 Letter from Blackburn to D. Horckern 11 September 1914. Blackburn
was referring to a conversation with Mr. O'Donohue of the Coburg
Catholic Federation.
18 Tribune, 1 August 1914
All citizens were to be taxed to support a system of protestant
religious teaching in the government schools.
19 Age, 24 July 1914
or as Labor Call put it the 'increasing transparence of the Liberal shams'.  

In addition, the dogmatic and uncompromisingly 'independent' Liberal candidate could not unite Liberal support behind him.  

An attempt had been made to present Blackburn as the type of man who believed that human society must be torn up by the roots and a new system planted before justice could reign among men, but most were impressed by his gentle sincerity - even Watt referred to him as 'as mild a man as ever cut a political throat' in contrast to those fierce socialists who hurl their doctrines from the platforms of Collingwood or Fitzroy.

At no stage was Blackburn ever to advocate violent revolution. He was opposed to violence. His soul revolted against the use of brute force, either to assert some right or to redress some wrong. Indeed he revolted against the use of force in the settlement of any dispute anywhere. He was not a pacifist, but he was a fighter who believed that the struggle should be worthy of the ideals that would animate the right.

Blackburn saw only two means by which the working people of Australia could advance their interests - 'the unions and the vote - industrial action and political action', though he was not unaware of the difficulties:

20 Labor Call, 6 August 1914. See also Bulletin 6 August 1914 - letter from F.C. Jones Elgar Road, Burwood where reference is made to 'underhand' business in regard to Watt's stampeding the Deskmite Liberal candidate out of Balacqua.
21 Argus, 22 July 1914
22 ibid.
23 ibid.
24 Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates Vol. 179 p 25
25 Socialist, 9 May 1913
the true scope of political action is very limited. It can be used to secure such improvements of the workers conditions as not inconsistent with the continuance of capitalism. And it can be used to secure the repeal of such laws as hinder the free use of industrial action. 26

He specifically rejected the way of the Russian Revolution, perhaps largely because of his deep commitment to individual liberty but he was more a syndicalist than a Marxist. As he explained in 1913:

Social democracy was ... political democracy plus industrial democracy, and ... it was a principle of social democracy that not only should the industries be run in the interests of the workers, but by the workers themselves. This differentiated social democracy from State Socialism, the idea that industry should be under a benevolent bureaucracy. ... State Socialism was repellent to him. 27

In 1919, as President of the ALP, he made a definitive statement of his view of the future of the Party:

The Labor Party had to choose between a position which accepted the capitalist system and one which rejected capitalism and stood frankly for the co-operative Commonwealth. They had now declared what the Labor Party Stands for, not to palliate the capitalist system, but to overthrow it. The keynote of the Party must be sick radicalism. 28

'Sane radicalism' was what Blackburn would always aspire to.

Many saw Blackburn as a naive idealist, perhaps even a little sanctimonious, inclined to sacrifice his career to moral scruples and last cause, a man who placed abstract principles above all and who stood by those principles even if it meant the sacrifice of matters of vital policy. 29
Certainly 'He was a man for whom no good cause, as he saw it, was lost while he lived', but overall he was a realist and would not have allowed such a distinction between principle and policy. It was only in the very last years of his life when suffering from a brain tumour that his political judgement really failed. To be a man of principle and a man of ideas whose horizons extended beyond Australia and next year was to be in the minority in Victorian politics, particularly in the 1920's There was, nevertheless a utopian element in his thinking and "quality of eagerness and deep interest in his fellow men", that was part of the secret of his appeal and his capacity to remain committed to an unpopular position. A letter he wrote to the *Advocate* in 1913 provides a glimpse into this side of Blackburn:

The unity of Labor is humanly-speaking, the hope of the world, and when in the great English Strike the Catholic dockers and Protestant carters of Liverpool stood shoulder to shoulder without a rift in their fellowship, they seem to me to have realised the beautiful hope of Thomas Davis:--

And oh! it was a gallant deed
To show before mankind,
That every race and every creed
Might be by love combined;
Might be combined, yet not forget
The fountains whence they rose
As fed by every rivulet,
The lordly Shannon flows.

It was also the quality that prompted F.W. Eggleston to describe Blackburn and his wife as:

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30 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 179 p 26
31 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 179 p 27
32 *The Advocate*, 16 August 1913
full of zeal for human betterment, typical of a picturesque strain of English character, the artless intelligent, enthusiastic radical, akin to Edward Carpenter and Mark Rutherford, unsuited to the hard conditions of Australian politics, yet willing to risk everything in the pursuit of their ideals.33

Eggleston also remarked, however, that he had:

the wisdom of the serpent as well as
the gentleness of the dove and...
He did not believe the Party should put
on the Platform proposals which he
knew the people did not want.34

Blackburn was far from utopian or unrealistic in his expectations of others, particularly the electorate and he accepted that real change could only come slowly.

Blackburn retained Essendon at the general election later in 1911 but his tenuous hold on the seat was short-lived for the first World War altered the political balance and Blackburn himself adopted an unpopular position asserting that

Materially the working class has very little to lose by a German victory. Even a German conquest of Australia would leave it hardly - if at all - worsened.35

33 F.W. Eggleston, op.cit. p 20
34 ibid.
35 Election Pamphlet "A Three Years' Record of the Parliamentary Work of Maurice Blackburn", which quotes the "paragraphs" that caused the Argus to charge Blackburn with holding anti-British opinions. The Argus extracted its quotations from a letter Blackburn wrote explaining his refusal to join the Parliamentary recruiting campaign. In the writer's possession.
In the hysterical election atmosphere of 1917 he was portrayed as a disloyal German lover, and many of his supporters felt that he had been 'too honest for his own good', but in reality it is unlikely that he would have held the seat under any circumstances for Fenton only just retained the relatively safe federal seat of Maribyrnong.

On this occasion Blackburn's stand was in accord with Labor Party thinking in general but his personal attitude to war was complex and at times ambiguous. War and foreign policy were to be a major preoccupation of his political career and in the long term the source of an irrevocable rift with the Labor Party.

Blackburn was not a pacifist, he urged the necessity of defence in a capitalist world where disarmament was impossible, convinced that 'Christ would have been ready to defend Judea', but he took a Marxist line as to the causes and effects of war. He considered that 'the sacrifices of toil in industry were heavier than in war' and that the outcome of war would be the weakening of capitalism. He also believed in the 'superiority of British public law and British conception of freedom' and that consequently he would feel 'bound to fight to prevent Britain becoming a third rate nation'. Principally, Blackburn was concerned at the erosion of civil liberties in war time and he was among Victoria's leading anti-conscriptionists. It was during these campaigns that he came in contact with some of the people from Coburg who would later be among his most loyal supporters.

36 All those interviewed who knew Blackburn made a statement along these lines e.g. H. Dodds, A. Keane, E.W. Peters. See also p 30
37 See Appendix B
38 S. Blackburn op. cit. p 7
39 Report of an address to the WSP in the Socialist, 8 January 1915
40 Letter to the Editor Socialist, 16 July 1915
41 In particular Harold Nicholls – see Chapter 17.
Despite defeat and the personal abuse to which he and his family were subjected in 1917, Blackburn was proudly unrepentant in forming a gathering of supporters that

If he had been prepared to withdraw his remarks he might have won the election, but he would today have been an unhappy man.

It was a quality that would in time earn him the respect of all sections of the Australian community - 'He set a standard, and we were all the better for endeavouring to live up to it' - and in three short years he had already made a deep impression of the Labour Movement as a 'fearless exponent of Labor's rights'. The Bendigo Advertiser hailed him as a:

young scholar who has made an earnest and sincere study of the living conditions of the people - one of the advance guard, who are sympathetic and increasing co-operation with the hand workers of the field, the factory, the mine and the shop.

and his term in parliament earned him warm praise from Labor Call:

Maurice Blackburn was been a finely courageous and intelligent battler for Labor since entering parliament and is recognised as one of the brainiest men in parliament. Further he has proved himself to be not only a militant fighter in Labor's cause, but a man who keeps a strong hold upon the principles and ideas of the Labour Movement.

Relieved of his parliamentary duties Blackburn devoted much more of himself to the Labour Movement generally. He was elected to the Central Executive of the ALP and was its President in 1919.

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42 It was sufficiently bad for the gentlemanly Blackburn to declare that 'he would be acting the part of a hypocrite if he took his [Mr. Ryan's] hand'. Essendon Gazette, 22 November 1917
43 Labor Call, 7 March 1918
45 Labor Call, 7 March 1918
46 Bendigo Advertiser, 14 July 1914
47 Labor Call, 1 November 1917
was involved in the founding of the Victorian Labor College in 1917\footnote{See page 68} and edited Labor Call throughout 1919 and 1920. In all these activities a very clear commitment to the intellectual enlightenment of the community and the working class in particular emerged as an essential characteristic of Blackburn's political style. His involvement with the VLC and the change of emphasis in Labor Call under his influence were early manifestations of this concern. It has already been noted that Coburg branch members approved of this change and indeed they were always anxious for Blackburn to address them. The qualities appreciated were his 'sincerity and masterly knowledge of the subject'\footnote{CM, 17 March 1919} and the clear way in which he lays down the principles to which he applies the facts brought forward in the development of the subject.\footnote{CM, 18 April 1932}

Throughout the twenties and thirties Blackburn became very much a man of the rank and file. His willingness to attend branch and union meetings to explain and elucidate to mass members but never to talk down to them, broke down the natural suspicion in the Labour Movement of the intellectual. His was not a 'silver tongue' like Anstey's and there was little of the demagogue in him, but the 'content left a very deep impression - what Blackburn said you took home to sleep on and you never forget it'.\footnote{Labor Call, 21 June 1931} Branches learnt that if they wanted a matter of policy or legislation explained Blackburn was willing and eminently capable of

\footnote{CM, 17 March 1919}{CM, 18 April 1932}{Labor Call, 21 June 1931}{Tom Payne, Address to the Society for the Study of Labour History, 21 February 1978.}
doing so. In this way and through his classes at the VLC he became personally known to a great many in the Movement and very popular which generated a certain amount of suspicion and jealousy among some of his colleagues in higher ALP circles. He was not however, so much consciously building a power base, as acting on his belief in the need for education to transform society:

He lived his ideals, and it was his overriding desire that he should find in democracy, in the context of mind with mind, not only the answer to the question of how, but also an answer that would appeal to the reason of all people.

Blackburn was probably more truly a teacher than a lawyer, though his work in that capacity was another essential component of his personal popularity. Robert Heezies captured this aspect of Blackburn's role when he spoke of the

unwearying zeal with which he places himself at the disposal of the great trade union movement not in a professional sense, not because he dreamed of making money - for no man was less interested in making money than he - but because he was convinced that that was an important way in which to serve the cause in which he believed.

Finally Blackburn was a 'most lovable man' though his personal shyness and legendary absent-mindedness sometimes led people to think he was aloof. Those of the rank and file who came to associate with him closely often became more akin to disciples than mere supporters and it is perhaps a great misfortune for the Labour Movement that he chose not to lead them but followed his own way more or less alone. Nevertheless

53 Interview, H.T. Brodney
54 Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 179 p 25
55 Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 179 p 26
56 Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 179 p 25
few prominent Labor men had as much personal contact with such a wide cross section of the rank and file at the time as Maurice Blackburn.

In 1925 amid much controversy and public scandal, Blackburn contested the by-election for the State seat of Fitzroy in which he defeated the Labor 'machine' men in the area.57 As an incorruptible, non-Catholic, prohibitionist, middle class barrister from Essendon he was everything the controllers of the ALP organisations in Collingwood, Richmond and Fitzroy despised and feared, but however hard his enemies worked to defeat him in pre-selection ballots, the industrial unionists always rallied to ensure his return and he held the seat until he retired to contest the federal elections in 1934. In the State House Blackburn was a valuable asset to the Party placing his legal expertise and broad knowledge at its service. He did not hold portfolio, relinquishing the position of Attorney General in 1927 in favour of the ageing Prendergast.59 Blackburn seems to have avoided ministerial responsibility throughout his entire career preferring the freedom of the back benches where he would not be bogged down by administrative tedium and the compromises involved in wielding real power. Gradually he also came to feel that the more important decisions were made in the federal arena. In 1933 he accepted nomination as the Speaker of the House but he was already looking for a federal seat and in 1933 he won

57 Labor Call, 5 and 12 February 1925
58 After the re-subdivision of 1926, the seat became Clifton Hill.
59 Labor Call, 19 May 1927
60 He had nominated for Maribyrnong in 1931 but had been unable to retire from the State House in time to nominate, VCE Minutes 3 July 1931.

Interview E.H. Peters

When, in 1932 Arthur Drakeford was defeated in Essendon, he was a strong contender for Maribyrnong so Blackburn decided to contest Bourke.
the pre-selection for Bourke. Having won the seat, he and his family built a house in Coburg and therefore became closely involved in Coburg politics and it was to the Coburg branch that he gravitated because of the close affinity between its activities and interests and his own. His political career became intimately bound up with affairs in Coburg and he played a most influential role in the succeeding ten years.

Frank Keane and Maurice Blackburn both succeeded in truly representing the working man but in quite different ways. Keane was a plain and simple man who represented the working man because he was one and because he had chosen to serve their interests. When Keane spoke for himself he spoke for many because their interests were the same. Like Blackburn, Keane had great personal integrity and he lacked the desire for self-aggrandisement or public recognition that led some of his parliamentary colleagues astray. On the other hand Keane's prejudices, errors of judgement and misconceptions were those of the people he represented and he lacked the capacity to lead them forward. The example Keane set was of dogged persistence, unswerving commitment to the ideal of solidarity and sheer hard work - whenever there was a job to be done, Keane was among the first to volunteer.

Blackburn was a scholar. There was little in his background to give him natural affinity with the working man - the mere experience of economic hardship is not enough to have counteracted all the other influences of his life, but he was a simple, plain-speaking man with none of the pretensions of either the scholar or the middle class and because his intellectual gifts were at the service of the ordinary working man he was not distanced from the them by intellectualism. The depth of his concern, the sincerity of his commitment was so transparent
as to inspire trust, but more than that he was able to partially satisfy a deep hunger among so many in the Labour Movement for knowledge, analysis and guidelines for a way forward. Blackburn could not only represent the working man because he could articulate their aspirations with a fine empathy, but because he could inspire and elevate — encourage ordinary men and women to discover unthought of possibilities in themselves. In the long run however, while Keane could serve no higher cause than the will of the working class, Blackburn served causes and ideals that were more universal and these sometimes diverged from the immediate interests of the Labour Movement. Men such as Keane tended to minimise conflict within the Movement, but Blackburn precisely because of his formidable abilities often exacerbated conflict in that he inspired a kind of fanatical loyalty and aroused deep hostilities that the loosely pluralist, pragmatic Labor Party could not really contain.
When in August 1933 a meeting was called to establish an Australian branch of the Movement against War and Fascism (MAWF), it was not surprising that delegates from the Coburg branch were present, but their international perspective was unusual not only within the Labour Movement but throughout the Australian community. The 1930's was 'a dismal decade made gloomier by uncertainty about the future' and the 'main concern of most Australians was with matters close to home'.¹ As regards the Labour Movement, its first and primary objective had, from the outset, been internal - to improve the working conditions and living standards of the working class, and such issues consumed most of its attention. Further:

The federal structure of Australian politics, and the distance from other centres of European civilisation, also turned the Australian Labour man inwards to Australian affairs. His knowledge of and interest in the rest of the world was strictly limited. Foreign policy was not his concern.²

The experience of World War One and the fairly wide acceptance in Australia of Socialist doctrine relating to its cause had left a legacy in the generally accepted view among Labor supporters that the only sane working class policy, was to keep out of all such wars and struggle for better conditions in one's own country. The pervasive

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¹ R. GILMAN Revolutionaries and Reformists. Communism and the Australian Labour Movement 1920-1965, Canberra 1975 p 33
² R. ANDREWS "Australian Labour and Foreign Policy", Labor History November 1965 p 22
attitude in Labor circles for the first half of the 1930's was one where a pacifist isolationism, combined with acceptance of Marxist theories on the economic causes of war, was thus the standard response of Labour to the international scene in the post-war era. Isolationism was only increased by the effects of the depression, which turned Australians inwards and led to other Labour divisions.

A significant number of members of the Coburg branch had, however, learned different lessons from the depression, perhaps because they had actively concerned themselves with Socialist theory and through Esperanto had a rather unique access to knowledge of world politics, but ultimately the reasons why a branch of the ALP in a suburb remarkable only for its ordinariness should have adopted such an advanced position defies any conclusive explanation. The association with the Esperanto Movement, the VLC and the POSU are links in a chain that lead to the Victorian Council Against War and Fascism (VCAW&F) and support for a 'united front', but it is only in terms of individual personalities that the original interest can be explained. What is certain, however, is that once this unique group of people - unique in both the nature of their interests and the intensity of their involvement in political activity - came to dominate the branch they gathered about them the like-minded and converted many others who under different circumstances might have been more orthodox in their views.

1933 marks the point at which war and fascism moved to the forefront of branch discussions. Early in the year the Annual Conference of the WCOC was called on to

3 E. ANDREWS op.cit. p 23
protest against the action of the capitalist class in trying to bring about another war for the purpose of retarding the march of the workers to socialism and to take steps to set up an organisation to prevent any person leaving Australia to fight in capitalist wars.5

In June delegates were sent to an anti-war committee and by July the branch had already reached the conclusion that it was high time that a United Front be formed with all the working class organisations for the purpose of combating fascism.6

Shortly afterwards the branch formed itself into an anti-war committee to co-operate with all other interested persons,7 a clear indication that the branch already regarded the issue as one which might well cross the usual boundaries of association. The branch already had many contacts with others in the community who were similarly concerned through the Repertanto Club, the POSU, the League Against Imperialism and others.8 It would have been surprising in fact, if delegates of the Coburg ALP had not been present at the inaugural meeting of the VCAW.9

The MAWF which was to evoke a deep moral commitment that vied seriously with loyalty to the Labour Movement, was inaugurated as the result of a meeting in Amsterdam of intellectuals and workers and people from all walks of life ... Later the Movement Against War, realising the relationship between fascism and war, combined forces with the anti-fascist movement, and became known as the World Movement Against War and

4 CM, 23 February 1933
5 CM, 4 June 1933
6 CM, 3 July 1933
7 ibid.
8 See Chapter Eleven
9 CM, 14 August 1933 all branch members were urged to attend the inaugural meeting that established the VCAW see also A. F. HOWELLS"Inside the Movement Against War and Fascism" and the "Writers' League" Labor History No. 32 May 1977 p 27. The Socialisation Unit virtually ceases to function at this point though it is not formally declared defunct until January 1934.
The Movement was first set up in Australia in August 1933, and grew by leaps and bounds until it became the most virile movement in Australia.\(^{10}\)

The Coburg branch was enthusiastic in its endorsement of the VCA\&F and almost immediately called on the ALP to formally join forces with it.\(^{11}\) The branch maintained pressure on the CE and the ALP in general to become more involved and in 1934 submitted a long resolution to Annual Conference outlining a major plan of attack of forms of incipient militarism in Australia:

That Conference declares unequivocally against all capitalist and imperialist wars, and instructs its component parts to utilise forthwith the whole political and industrial machinery at their command in an intensive campaign against war propaganda and war preparation:

1) to this end a committee be set up to assist the CE to prepare the necessary data, with power to co-operate with any similar committee set up by the Trade Unions

2) reaffirming opposition to conscription either for service at home or abroad.

Conference further declares its belief that the professional soldier being a menace to peace, there be added to the Federal Platform under "Amendment of the Defence Act" the following words: All payments to members of the Citizens Army (including all Officers) immediately cease, such army to be and remain voluntary and honorary.

3) That Federal Conference delegates be instructed to support all amendments of the Defence Platform having as their objective the nationalisation of the production of all implements and weapons of war, including the production of oil in Australia or mandated territory and generally to support the policy of making offensive warfare unprofitable to private enterprise.\(^{12}\)

\(^{10}\) A.F. Howells op.cit.

\(^{11}\) CM, 9 October 1933

\(^{12}\) Item 122 1934 Annual Conference Agenda, VCE Records
A long debate ensued during which Trenoweth declared that he did not want a repetition of Australia offering to spend its last man and last shilling on war, and which culminated in the endorsement of a long resolution forbidding any Australian Government to participate in any wars against a long list of countries. Particularly outraged by plans for a massive military display to celebrate Victoria's centenary the branch protested that expenditure on armaments meant neglect of the unemployed:

We believe that money so expended could be more fittingly expended in more adequately supporting the unemployed and in supporting our hospitals which are now begging support from the underpaid workers of Melbourne, ...

Further to this point, Mrs. Aubrey Keane called on the 1934 Annual Conference of the WCGC to vigorously protest against the use of school children in displays for Defence Week which seeks to glorify war under the cloak of patriotism, and would implant in the child's mind that war is a glorious thing instead of being stupid, cruel and barbarous.

and to recognise

that the threat of war has never been so grave than today, when every capitalist power is preparing for another slaughter of its workers in the cause of profits, when an attack by Japan upon the United States or Soviet Republics appears imminent and when fascism is being developed in every country. We therefore call upon all organised women of

13 Labor Call, 15 February 1934
NB Coburg Labor people were also present as delegates of unions
14 CM, 5 March 1934
15 Labor Call, 8 March 1934
The working class in Labor or Trade Union organisations to reject the preparations for aggressive war, developed under the name of defence,15

The whole issue remained a minority concern, however, until November 1934 when the VCNWU organised an anti-war congress to coincide with Armistice Day and the World Council sent as its delegate the noted Czech writer, Egon Kisch.16 He became a celebrity overnight when, following the Commonwealth Government's attempt to forbid him entry, he jumped from the ship at Melbourne. Despite a broken leg and the Commonwealth policy he managed to make a number of appearances and the Government's high-handed and dictatorial behaviour did much to strengthen and broaden the NWU's appeal. Tom Gleeson, Coburg branch vice-president,17 was chairman of the Kisch Reception Committee and the branch protested strongly at the government's action, particularly in view of the fact that

at the same time every facility has been ... granted to Lord Milne ... to prepare to plunge Australia into another imperialist war.18

Gollan suggests that the Kisch affair

provided a focus to rally democratic opinion against the restrictive and parochial prejudices of the Government. Although Kisch was believed to be a Communist, his courage in forcing his way into Australia aroused great sympathy, particularly as he was himself a victim of Nazism and had seen and heard the brownshirt columns marching in the Unter den Linden and the Wilhelmstrasse19

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15 Labor Call, 8 March 1934
16 A.P. HOWELLS op.cit. p 29
R. GIBSON op.cit. pp 41-43
A. DAVIDSON "The Kisch-Griffin Affair", APSA News Vol.9 no.3 September 1964
R. GOLLAN op.cit. pp 44-46
E. KISCH, Australian Landfall Melbourne 1969
17 He was at the same time also President of the ARU. See A.P. HOWELLS Against the Stream MS in La Trobe Library of Victoria p 127
18 CM, 19 November 1934 branch protested to Kisch-Griffin sentences CM, 17 December 1934.
19 R. GOLLAN op.cit. p 44
and the overall effect was to draw to the anti-war movement large
numbers of people who were neither left wing activists nor militant
unionists. In particular, many Australian intellectuals 'deeply
upset by what they saw as the xenophobic obscurantism of Australian
reactionaries were attracted to the movement:

The Kisch Affair brought together people
who had never co-operated before: a minority
of intellectuals and unionists made common
cause in organising meetings and demonstrations
to hear and support Kisch.20

By this stage the attitude of the Communists towards co-operation with
ALP members was mellowing even though the united front policy was not
formally adopted until the Eleventh Congress of the CPA in December 1935,21
and the Kisch Affair gave both Communists and non-Communists a glimpse
of the advantages that might follow from unified action.22 It prompted
the Coburg branch to make its second appeal to the CB to arrange a
conference with the CPA in order to form a united front on war and fascism,23
and unperturbed by the CB's curt reminder of the 1924 federal conference
ruling on association with the CPA,24 the branch then sought permission
to write to all branches north of the Yarra with a view to organising
an united front.25 This was followed by further resolutions on the issue26
including an attack of the CB for 'refusing Kisch permission to speak
on behalf of Labor candidates on March 1',27 but there was minimal reaction.

In the meantime, Bill Duggan had met an untimely death at
the age of 51. It was an unfortunate time for the branch and the Movement.

20 R. GOLLAM op.cit. p 44
21 See R.GIBSON op.cit. pp 52-53
22 A. DAVIDSON op.cit. p 64
23 CM, 19 November 1934
24 VCM Minutes 3 December 1934
25 CM, 12 December 1934
26 E.g., CM, 18 February 1935
27 CM, 4 March 1935
to lose a man of such depth and breadth of experience:

A man of exceptional and brilliant gifts, with a kindly and strong personality... His life was essentially a life of service. All his mental gifts and physical powers were at the disposal of the Movement.28

Above all the Party had lost an able conciliator with a flair for facilitating communication between opposing groups and factions, just when a serious rift was opening up within the ALP. For the Coburg branch, however, the loss was somewhat offset by the arrival of Maurice Blackburn who gravitated toward the Coburg end of the Bourke electorate, thus providing Coburg Laborites with a prestigious leader in their battles with the CE over the direction of ALP policy and organisation.

Crisp places Blackburn, together with Anstey and King O'Malley as examples of 'congenital individualists and non-conformists' of whom he considers the Federal Party has been 'singularly tolerant',29 but the Victorian ALP machine was to find Blackburn's brand of individualism in the unhappy decade that followed the depression almost intolerable as his ethical considerations came increasingly to conflict with the majority view of what best served the electoral interests of the Party. By the mid 1930's Blackburn's views on war and international affairs were a curious mixture of forward and backward looking thinking quite at odds with the views of the Party in general, but Coburg Laborites welcomed him as a leader of stature and influence in their crusade to

28 Labor Call, 12 July 1934
See also Labor Call, 5 July 1934
CM, 16 July 1934
Labor Call, 20 September 1934

29 P. CRISP The Federal Parliamentary Labour Party 1901-1951
Glasgow 1955 p 10
convert the ALP to the necessity for a united front in order to combat war and fascism just when they were beginning to feel isolated and powerless. Unfortunately, by the end of 1935, Blackburn was just as vulnerable in any battle with the ALP machine as the branch and events in the subsequent years were to produce a bitter and virtually unbridgeable rift among Coburg Laborites.

Blackburn was one of the few who had kept the issues of peace and internationalism before the eyes of the ALP throughout the 1920's and he early proved himself to be more international than most of the ALP. However it was not until the 1930's that his views on these matters began seriously to diverge from that of the majority of the ALP leadership, and even then in the beginning it was more a matter of emphasis for the ALP had not greatly concerned itself with the development of a war policy in the 1920's and the depression pushed such concerns even further into the background. Blackburn however had not drawn quite the same conclusions from his experience of the first world war as the ALP:

He sought more eagerly to keep peace, but did not abandon his realistic view of the necessity for defence,

and when in the early 1930's Blackburn and a few others gave early warnings of what might be in the future, the divisions created by the depression in the Labour Movement and elsewhere were not conducive to rational debate on the subject. In 1934 there were few who even wished

30 S. BLACKBURN op.cit. pp 809

31 ibid.
to discuss the subject, therefore it must have been heartening for Blackburn that the Coburg branch was so wholehearted in its commitment to the MW&F.

Once the CPA made formal overtures, the ALP could no longer avoid a discussion of the united front issue but the 1935 Annual Conference opposed any formal linking even on a particular issue.32 Notably Blackburn, as a member of the CE was requested to draft a reply to the CPA, and in this it was asserted that while the CPA had every right to propagate its own principles, there was an 'unbridgeable gulf' between the two parties.33 The CE and the ALP generally was justifiably mistrustful of the CPA's about face on collaboration with those who were so recently vilifying ALP leaders as 'social fascists'.34 Throughout the early years of the depression when a favourable climate for recruiting the more militant laborites had undoubtedly existed, the extraordinarily inappropriate attitude of the CPA at the time had, in effect, repulsed them, and:

The picture of the typical Communist as overbearing, uncompromising, pigheaded and fanatical became firmly established among ALP members in these years. Whenever they met him, in the Trades Hall, a front organisation, a trade union or a debate, he started with abuse and ended with abuse, usually alienating the very people they wished to convert.35

32 See A. DAVIDSON op. cit. p 64
33 Part of the official reply appears in Labor Call, 5 November 1936 when Blackburn claimed that some changes had been made to his original draft. See also his letter to the Editor Labor Call, 12 November 1935. For an idea of the official ALP view the CPA, see General Secretary McNamara's article in Labor Call, 18 April 1935
34 A. DAVIDSON op. cit. p 76
35 ibid. pp 52-63
The real problem for the ALP in regard to the VCAW&F was that it had still not seriously attempted to offer an alternative organisation although the Central Socialisation Committee had moved to take a more positive anti-fascist line within the ALP when it adopted a series of new guidelines in April 1934:

That in accordance with the anti-war resolutions of Conference, 1934, the Central Socialisation Committee and units take up a definite stand on all occasions where militarist subjects are brought under discussion, constantly emphasising that the trend of imperialist capitalism is to fascism and war,36

but as it has already been shown the Socialisation Units were unable to compete with organisations like the MOSU37 from the very beginning and they had already collapsed in all but name only by the time the VCAW&F began to draw large scale support from ALP members. The CPA’s overtures did force the ALP and the THC to address themselves to the issue and in January 193538 they set up a joint anti-war committee. The initiative however, had already been lost and the VCAW&F grew rapidly in 1935 and maintained its strength until the war.39 Not only were its activities and propaganda more effective and on a larger scale but although

the CPA’s new moderation was not having any effect on the leaders of the ALP, it gradually had an effect on the rank and file of the Party, and on Australians in general.40

36 Labor Call, 6 April 1934
Both Maurice Blackburn and Tom Gleeson were members of this. A conference of Metropolitan Socialisation Units in February had called on "all leaders and representatives of Australian Labor" to form a "united front" Labor Call, 18 February 1934
37 See p 122
38 D. RAWSON (1954) op.cit. p 250
39 A. DAVIDSON op.cit. p 85
40 ibid p 77
and quite rapidly

small but significant groups in the ALP had become converted to United Front. Representatives of the Clothing Trades', Tanners' and Tramways' spoke in favour of the principle at the 1936 Annual Conference. The ARU clearly expressed agreement by its motions and a number of metropolitan ALP branches submitted motions in similar terms.41

The Labor Committee Against War did very little at all. In August the Coburg branch wrote to the CE pointing out

that the vast majority of the members of the VCM&F are also members of the ALP, whilst on the other hand we have not been summoned to any conferences or apprised of any activities other than the issue of a few pamphlets by the Labor Council Against War. In conclusion, we wish to know when the LCW intends to call a conference of affiliated unions and branches of the ALP to formulate effective policy against war.42

Until Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia and the crisis precipitated by this in the League of Nations, the two groups maintained an uneasy co-existence, but from that point the ALP became increasingly isolationist in outlook while the VCM&F supported a policy of sanctions and collective security thus the organisational question of working with bodies largely founded by the CPA was complicated by the policy question of whether or not the Party should support sanctions against aggressors.43 Labor Call opened the public attack on the VCM&F with a call on the ALP to take a strong stand against those who were 'running with the hare and the hounds',44 but only a month previously the Coburg branch had written to the CE deploiring

41 D. RAWSON (1954) op. cit. pp 249-250
42 CM, 5 August 1935
43 D. RAWSON (1954) op. cit. p 251
44 Labor Call, 15 August 1935
the short-sighted policy of the CE in refusing to co-operate with the VCAW&F in anti-war work. We feel that as the VCAW&F has done so much effective work against the fascist minded leaders of the Australian National Parliament who will involve us in another war and are prepared to expend a further 67 million in useless armaments which are only made to slaughter the workers and at the same time are not prepared to sufficiently relieve the semi-starving masses of Australia, and it immediately protested at Labor Call’s attempt to mislead the members into believing that the VCAW&F is a banned organisation. In September 1935 the VCAW&F was banned to ALP members and the Coburg branch immediately demanded to know why the CE was now supporting the war mongers by causing a split in our Party and sought details of voting on the decision. As with the ROSU, the branch did not concede the right of the CE to make such a determination but the CE offered no more than a routine reply. Explanations of the decision reveal that issues raised by Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia were crucial. The strong catholic element in the VCE had already decided to oppose a sanctions policy and Curtin in federal parliament was cautious on the issue. There was little to indicate that the ALP would support the League of Nations leaving ALP supporters of the VCAW&F in an isolated and vulnerable position. The connection between the policy and organisational issues and the level of debate on the subject are revealed in a statement from Lovegrove

45 CM, 5 August 1935
46 CM, 2 September 1935
47 VCE Minutes 6 and 8 September 1935
48 CM, 16 September 1935
49 See e.g. Lovegrove "Labor and Anti-War" Labor Call, 12 September 1935 and editorial Labor Call, 26 September 1935. See also D. PAXSON (1954) op. cit. p 251
50 E. Andrews op. cit. p 24, Labor Call, 23 April 1935. Editorial "Labor and Religious Sectarianism" refers to a similar circular distributed before Annual Conference alleging that ALP in Victoria was dominated by Roman Catholics who owed allegiance to Pope and not the Labour Movement.
Under the cloak of laudable opposition to all manner of social evils for which capitalism is responsible, various organisations have been launched in an attempt to white-ant the organised Labour Movement and give effect to the foreign policy of the Soviet Union... it is... an indisputable fact that the so-called anti-war policy of the Communist Party is the 'anti-war' policy of the VCAW&F. And it is the policy of the Victorian Council Against War and not the opinion of individual members which must be proof of whether or not it is a Communist organisation.51.

The policy argument was a telling one. ALP members could not reasonably belong to an organisation that supported policies opposed to those of the ALP, but this particular policy question was still open to debate.52

ALP members of the VCAW&F were not prepared to accept that the current move towards isolationism was either correct or irreversible. Above all, they would not concede that the Council was Communist dominated.

In Davidson's view the VCAW&F was unquestionably a CPA 'front' organisation, that is, 'nominally independent, but controlled by the Party to serve as a bridge to the masses'53 which had developed from the earlier, unsuccessful 'front' organisation The League Against Imperialism.54

Certainly Ralph Gibson was secretary of both organisations,55 Communists were

51 R. GIBSON op.cit. pp 45-46. S. BLACKBURN, op.cit. p 11 Labor Call, 12 September 1935. This argument carried to its logical conclusion is patently ridiculous - the ALP had many policies similar to those of the Soviet Union. A further example of the "guilt by association" argument and the flimsy nature of the evidence is in F.J. Riley's article "Patriots What Are They? Communist Organisations" in Labor Call, 5 March 1936

52 In any case, as E. Andrews op.cit. p 26 argues the Abyssinian crisis did not lead to any radical reappraisal by Labor of defence and foreign policies. The Coburg branch wanted reappraisal but the ALP continued to rely on traditional notions that were no longer an adequate guide to the intricacies of the world situation.

53 A. DAVIDSON, op.cit. p 55

54 ibid p 61

55 R. GIBSON op.cit. Interview.
among its most active members and the Council was aided significantly by the mass affiliations of a number of allegedly Communist dominated unions, but unlike the League Against Imperialism there was a spontaneous mass movement to sustain the VCAWSP. Many prominent members were not Communists, many more would have left had they thought that the Communist members were exercising undue or illegitimate influence. The problem was fundamentally that a minority movement cannot be over scrupulous about its allies. Gibson described the VCAWSP more accurately as quite a wide fellowship of Communists, Labor Party and middle class people who worked together freely and enthusiastically.

Another leading member, however, who also asserts that the 'Council of the Movement has predominantly non-Communist', gives some insight into the unease of non-Communist members:

I had some misgivings about the number of Communists in the Movement though not for any personal reasons ... The reason for my misgivings was that the Movement might become exactly what its enemies claimed it to be - an auxiliary of the Communist Party, instead of the United Front movement it was. One M.R., a Roman Catholic remarked that he would stand alongside anyone who opposed war. But would they all take that attitude if they found, or thought, that the Movement was being dominated by the Communists at the Executive Level.

56 E.g. ARU, Tramways, A. DAVIDSON op.cit. p 61 A.F. HOWELLS op.cit. p 23
57 ibid.
58 A.F. HOWELLS op.cit. p 29
59 ibid. pp 104-105
Even Davidson suggests that 'domination' was not of the strict numerical kind but rather that these front organisations were controlled from the floor:

Although the Communists were usually in a minority on the executive, they managed to keep control of the fronts in nearly all cases without resorting to underhand methods and to work "democratically". Since the members of the executive were sympathetic with the aims of the movement, there was general consensus about policy between Communists and others from the outset. 60

In fact conflict was unlikely in a single purpose organisation particularly when the need to organise against the threat of fascism seemed great enough to cross political boundaries. Lord Robert Cecil, British Conservative speaking on this matter provides some insight into the spirit that imbued the peace movement:

"This is a matter on which their [the Communists'] doctrines and my doctrines do not conflict. We want peace. Maybe it is for one reason or another, but we can work together for peace and why in heaven's name should we not do so." 61

Idealistically, the Movement hoped that it was above parties, as Blackburn put it:

"This Movement is above parties. We need a wider anti-war militarist movement than can be got within the confines of any one party " 62

The Communists maintained credibility through their obvious dedication to the task and by behaving democratically. Any attempt at overt manipulation would have left the VCPW in the same position as the League Against

60 A. DAVIDSON op.cit. pp 55-56
61 F. GINSON op.cit. p 59
62 Workers Voice, 22 November 1935
Imperialism. The majority in the ALP and especially the CS, however, were not prepared to accept either the seriousness of the threat of fascism or the sincerity of the Communists.

The basic task of the anti-war movement was propaganda. H. Scott Bennett saw the task as one of bringing the masses to the stern realisation of what they were faced with ... to clearly understand the awful menace that threatened them so disastrously. 63

and this could be only be achieved by intensive education and organisation on lines totally different to what had been followed in the past ... Unity of thought and action must be immediately sought ... 64

The problem was, and it was particularly acute for Blackburn, that as the threat of war loomed closer, it became clear that the desire to maintain peace could not co-exist with opposition to fascism. Most in the VCAWSP faced this stern reality squarely:

We in the anti-war movement were not starry-eyed pacifists. Far from it. We were militant opponents of all forms of imperialist wars and fascist aggression. 65

When it became clear that the ALP was retreating into isolationism, Blackburn found reluctantly that his commitment to the cause of peace

63 Labor Call, 26 September 1935
64 ibid.
65 A.F. HOWELLS (WS) op.cit. p 100
and resistance to fascism over rode his loyalty to the Labor Party:

An organisation against war, to be of any value at all must be as broadly based as possible, such a body as the Australian Movement Against War is necessary. I have been associated with the Australian Council Against War since its inception. It has been stated that it is controlled by the Communist Party. I know that to be untrue. It is no more controlled by the Communist Party than by the Labor Party.

It is not sufficient in the crisis through which we are passing to say: 'Keep Australia out of this and we do not care what happens'. We can reduce the chance of war. ... We will boycott the aggressor. I am attached to the Labor Party. ... It has been a great part of my life. I do not want to break with the people with whom I have worked for twenty five years. But I see something vastly more important to me than any political Party. I see war looming ahead. It may come even now. I believe what I have said and done to be right, and whatever may be the consequences to me individually, I have to face them. 

The frustrations of five years came to a head with the banning of the VCMSP. The Coburg branch had protested at the actions of the PLP and the CE all along the way, their own initiatives were thwarted or neglected and the opportunity to put a case limited. Increasingly the CE was determining policy by pre-empting decision-making at executive level so that Annual Conference debates were deflected from principles to procedures. The militant left-wing of the Party was concerned at the steady move to the right and the tightening of central control. The VCMSP created a

66 R. GIBSON op.cit. p 48
See also S. BLACKBURN op.cit. p 15

67 Labor Call, 12 September 1935 "Labor Officials Must Declare Themselves" This is an example of a tendency noted by Michels as a Party becomes increasingly oligarchic "... hence arises the practice which becomes continually more general of discussing en petits comité questions of the greatest importance, and of confronting the Party subsequently with accomplished facts ... " R. Michels op.cit. p 169
crisis precisely because it involved both policy and an organisational issue. The ALP had manifestly failed to channel the anti-war forces and then it backed them into a corner. One the one hand the CE could not, for ideological reasons, harness this new enthusiasm to their own leadership as a group wishing to maintain its power and authority would normally attempt to do, on the other, the anti-war group was beginning to believe that the threat of war and fascism transcended all other considerations, but they were acutely frustrated by the lack of opportunity to put their case in a rational debate on isolationism versus collective security. Further, the issue of co-operation and freedom of association for ALP members had a far wider application. To those in the VCAW&F it seemed that again, instead of leading and organising the working class, the ALP was more concerned with demarcation disputes and its moral authority was further undermined. In the light of this long standing undercurrent of unresolved conflict and tension, Blackburn's decision to defy the ban was neither capricious nor lacking in political judgement. It was necessary that a gesture of defiance be made even though it was fairly clear that without the ALP the anti-war movement had little chance of making a significant impact. The problem was that Blackburn did not really follow up the gesture.

The CE, for its part, was determined on a witch hunt, and Blackburn determined on a course of provocation. On March 31 1935 he was the only Labor MHR to vote for the introduction of the Sanctions Bill

68 VCE Minutes 25 October 1935 individual ALP members are given until 15 November to resign from the VCAW&F or face expulsion. The vote in the CE was 14 for and 6 against.
into federal parliament and he openly directed the various union and ALP groups with which he came in contact to defy the CE ruling, bringing down on himself the stinging anger of the THC. Perhaps it was this open defiance that prompted the CE decision to expel members who disobeyed its ruling. Tactically it was a good move, for it had the effect of preventing those who most strongly supported the VCAMF from attending the Annual Conference that would debate the ban. Certainly the conservative members of the CB and the THC had good reason to fear Blackburn as the symbolic leader of the anti-war group for he added considerably to its credibility and influence. Some had more personal reasons to desire the removal of this embarrassingly ethical man from their midst, but he was not necessarily less of a threat to the ruling clique as a martyr. As it happened, Blackburn was disinclined to lead a challenge to the CB from the outside.

In the meantime the Coburg branch, while protesting at the CB ban, briefly turned to the Labor Committee Against War, perhaps in the hope that conflict could be averted by its vitalisation, but there were soon complaints:

In view of the fact that the Labor Committee Against War Conference of ALP members would not permit any amendments to the agenda

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69 S. BLACKBURN op.cit. p 14
70 See Labor Call, 24 October 1935 ibid.
71 E.g. Tom Gleeson of Coburg branch was expelled, and the union of which he was President - the ANU, was also excluded on account of its affiliation with the VCAMF. The Essendon branch was declared bogus and therefore could not send a delegate etc.
72 Blackburn was one of the authors of the Central Socialisation Committee Reports attacking the CB quoted on p 116
73 S. BLACKBURN op.cit.
but asks branches to set up local LCAW groups, we are of the opinion that this is an attempt to split the workers on the question on anti-war work and therefore we cannot fall into line with the LCAW in establishing local groups. 74

The implied charge of lack of consultation is most serious in view of Lovegrove's claim a month previously that one of the most telling reasons for not supporting the VCAW&F was that its policy of support for sanctions had been promulgated without consulting members of affiliated organisations. 75 Wiser councils prevailed in the branch at this stage, however, and the provocative motion was withdrawn, while the branch attempted to organise a local conference of all unionists and branches in the area to 'popularise the Labor Committee Against War'. 76 It was probably a vain hope for it was patently clear by the end of 1935 that the ALP had not only lost the initiative in this area, but the failure of the LCAW had further boosted the VCAW&F. 77 If this did represent a move toward conciliatory behaviour by the Coburg branch the provocative decisions by the CE in October hardened its attitude into one of determined defiance. Interest in the LCAW faded in the face of the branch's outrage at the CE's 'high-handed' decision to expel the unrepentant members of the VCAW&F without first charging them with doing something contrary to the Constitution or giving them any opportunity to defend themselves. 78

74 CM 7 October 1935
75 Labor Call, 12 September 1935
76 CM, 21 October 1935
77 A. DAVIDSON op.cit. p 36
78 CM, 18 November 1935
and a Special Conference was called for to avert 'what appears to be a
definite split in the Labor ranks'. 79 Williams tendered his resignation
but the branch refused to accept such action on the part of any member
and the CE was informed that the branch had 'every confidence' in Blackburn

... as we believe his actions generally
and his interpretation of the Labor anti-

war policy is the correct one and truly
expresses the opinion of the rank and file
of the Movement. 81

Like the Essendon branch the Coburg branch would have been happy to
organise behind Blackburn in an assault on the CE's stand, 82 but until
the Annual Conference had deliberated there was little to be gained by
playing into the hands of the CE and being declared bogus as Essendon
had done. 83 The year ended for the Coburg branch with a carefully
staged manoeuvre which seems to have successfully averted this. 84

79 CM, 18 November 1935
Only one CE member had suggested a Special Conference on the VCAW&F
but there was no seconder for the proposal
VCA Minutes 5 September 1935
The Coburg branch had still not formed a VCAN as late as April 1936,
though one was eventually half-heartedly set up.
Labor Call, 23 April 1936
80 Williams was a leading figure in the Returned Soldier section of
the VCAW&F
81 CM, 18 November 1935
CM, 17 February 1936
The branch being of the opinion that it is not acting contrary
to the policy of the ALP authorises the Secretary to have the
Hall to be VCAW&F for Sunday evening lectures.
82 S. BLACKBURN op. cit. p 15
83 See Labor Call, 30 April 1936
84 On 2 December 1935 (CH) Tremethick/Grant moved that the branch withdraw
its affiliation with the VCAW&F - unfortunately perhaps, in terms of
the strategy involved, the motion was defeated, but on 16 December
(CH) it becomes clear why the motion was put. - The Secretary,
Tremethick, explained that the CE had demanded to see the Minute books
in order to ascertain the position of the branch in relation to the
VCAW&F. Tremethick then gave notice of a motion to the effect that
the motion of disaffiliation be deleted from the Minute Book.
In 1936 the Annual Conference was not held until Easter and in March the CE took further action in declaring that all unions still connected with the VCAW&F by 31 March would have their affiliation cancelled and since at least one union refused to obey this ruling a further pro VCAW&F group of delegates were excluded from the Annual Conference. In the intervening months between his expulsion and the Annual Conference, Blackburn has been described as maintaining a lofty detachment from Party affairs, and devoting himself to evangelising on behalf of the anti-war movement.

but in view of the obvious strategy of the CE his decision to attempt to depersonalise the issue was not altogether misguided. As he himself told the CE:

I do not wish the real issue to be obscured and forgotten in an argument as to the Executive's powers and my personal merits and demerits.

Blackburn was not alone in desiring that above all else, the opportunity for rational debate in war and fascism be granted independent of the organisational issue. The CE, on the other hand, attempted to limit the terms of the debate as far as possible to a question of confidence in itself and in this they were successful, for although Blackburn was allowed to speak at the Conference where he expressed the hope that

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85 VCF Minutes 6 March 1935 15 for, 5 against
86 Labor Call, 16 April 1936 E.g. CM, 20 April 1935 - protests at exclusion of ARU
87 S. Blackburn op.cit. p 15
88 Letter dated 8 April 1936 to CE reprinted in Labor Call, 16 April 1936
Conference will reconstitute the Labor Anti-War Committee on such a basis as will both secure the control of policy by the Labour Movement and permit anti-militarists who accept that policy to co-operate with members of the Party without discrimination on the grounds of present, future or past differences of opinion on other matters, the decision of the CE was endorsed by a majority and further debate gagged by deletion of all other items on the subject from the Agenda. It made a mockery of the claim made earlier in the Conference by an executive member that

Members of the Labour Movement have plenty of opportunities in their respective branches and unions to voice their views on all political and industrial questions, without joining every mushroom organisation which may take for their alleged objective some plank of Labor's policy.

Branches like Coburg certainly did a lot of voicing of opinions, but long experience had shown that there was little likelihood of anyone in authority listening. The deleted resolutions from the Coburg branch gave

89 Labor Call, 16 April 1936
90 ibid.
91 Labor Call, 30 April 1936

The deleted items were from the Coburg, Glenhuntly, Box Hill, Oakleigh, Footscray and Caulfield branches, and the ARU, Bookmakers, Furnishing Trades and Carters' and Drivers' Unions.

Coburg ALP was concerned about the exclusions e.g. CM 3 April 1936, protest that delegates representing VCAW&F are excluded from WCOC Annual Conference Wilson/Applegate then moved:

"... that comrades belonging to this body (i.e. VCAW&F) be permitted to attend forthcoming Annual Conference with a view to obtaining a correct understanding in this connection".

92 Labor Call, 16 April 1936
first priority to a call for a 'Conference of all bodies in this State
who are opposed to war', but also called for the reversal of the action
taken against Blackburn and others in respect of their association with
the VCAW&F. That the branch had little faith in the outcome of the Annual
Conference is revealed by the resolution passed just before it declaring
that

if the State Branch Conference upholds the action of the CE in its attitudes toward
affiliated unions and ALP branches in their association with the VCAW&F the whole
matter should be referred to the triennial Conference of the ALP as the position is
covered by federal ALP decisions; and as such is equally binding on all States and
as Victoria is the only State which will not co-operate with the Movement against War and
Fascism - notwithstanding that other State branches of the ALP are advising their members
to join, the VCAW, the decision of the federal ALP body should be sought to enable a united
policy to be adopted to obviate what appears to be a definite split in the ranks of
Victorian Laborites.94

Unfortunately, the 1936 Annual Conference was probably the last occasion
on which the ALP might have been able to discuss war, fascism and foreign
policy in a relatively dispassionate framework, for the outbreak of the
Spanish Civil War in July 1936 added many new and highly emotional factors
to the debate. Above all it forced many sincere Catholic Laborites to
seriously confront the relationship between their religious and political
beliefs.

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93 VCE Records, 1936 Annual Conference Minutes
94 CM, 16 March 1936
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BLACKBURN REJOINS THE PARTY

One critic of the CP ban had remarked at the Conference that
the Executive were too much concerned
with expelling persons. Conference could
pass resolutions, but there was a great rank
and file outside to be taken into consideration. ¹

Certainly life in the Coburg branch reached a very low ebb. ² The expulsion
of some key members, ³ the dubious status of others and a general feeling
of anger and alienation meant that most political activity was carried
on outside the branch informally. There was no longer any point in using
the ALP branch as either a platform or a forum. 'International' discussions
continued for a little time ⁴ but gradually local and domestic issues,
particularly the Hall mortgage took over. A second attempt was made to
work within the Labor Committee Against War, ⁵ but as on the previous
occasion there were immediate protests in particular at the exclusion of

the delegates representing the Brunswick branch
of the ALP, Carters and Drivers' Union and the
Shop Assistants' Union from its meeting in the
THC on Sunday May 24. This, in the opinion of
the branch, is a violation of the rights and
privileges of Trade Union and ALP branches to
elect their own delegates to Conference. ⁶

¹ Delegate Smith of the Clothing Trades Union, Labor Call, 16 April 1936
² Total membership tickets taken out for 1936 were 32 male and 19
female and of these 28 are new nominations. Attendance at meetings
on occasion was as low as five (CM, 7 September 1936) Branch Account
Book, see also CM, 17 February 1936 only 11 present. See Appendix C
³ At least Gleeson and Williams
⁴ CM, 2 March 1936 protest at the imprisonment of Earnest Thalmann
CM, 20 April 1936 letters of protest to Consuls of Germany and Japan
at request of ECANSF - this arouses much controversy, but a very informed
debate takes place on the appropriateness of demilitarisation of Rhineland.
⁵ CM, 20 April 1936 branch requests information on how to set up LCAW. See
also CM, 25 May 1936, Labor Call, 18 June 1936 and 9 July 1936.
⁶ CM, 25 May 1936. See also Labor Call, 4 June 1936
However after 'heated debate' the motion was not sent and this was the last occasion that the anti-war issue occupied branch attention for many months.

In July 1936 civil war broke out in Spain and in Australia it precipitated an ideological crisis that would have a profound and long lasting impact on relations within the Victorian Labour Movement. It was, in addition, the first great test of the popular front as the political form with which to oppose fascism and of collective security to contain fascist aggression.\(^7\) It was a war peculiar for the atrocities inflicted by both sides and the intense emotions aroused throughout the world. For many left-wing groups, it took on the aspect of the last frontier of democracy:

The idea that it was a pure cause was given reality in particular by the behaviour of the English, French and American intellectuals for whom there was a struggle between democracy and fascism, between civilisation and barbarism.

Despite the limited knowledge of or interest in Spain and the difficulty of making sense of the garbled news reports,\(^9\) the war was not without its significance in Australia. A small number of Australians fought in Spain and twenty eight died there.\(^10\) Following Britain's lead, Australia adopted an official policy of non-intervention\(^11\) as did the ALP but it scarcely

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\(^7\) R. GOLLAN op.cit. p 51
See also A. DAVIDSON op.cit. p 85

\(^8\) R. GOLLAN op.cit. p 52
E.g. Orwell in Homage to Catalonia (Penguin 1974)
'If you had asked my why I had joined the militia I should have answered: "To fight against Fascism", and you had asked me what I was fighting for, I should have answered: "Common decency". I had accepted the News Chronicle, New Statesman version of the war as the defence of civilisation against a monical outbreak by an army of Colonel Blimps in the pay of Hitler'. pp 46-47
R. GIBSON op.cit. p 48 described the war as "that world-historic democratic battle".

\(^9\) R. GOLLAN op.cit. p 55 claims the Spanish Civil War was the main story in the daily press 20 July 1936 to early 1937 but that it would have been almost impossible to make any sense of the stories.
A. DAVIDSON op.cit. p 85

\(^10\) A. DAVIDSON ibid. p 86, R. GIBSON op.cit. pp 49-50, P. HOWELLS in Against the stream op.cit. has some interesting recollections of his and other Australian's involvement in the war.

\(^11\) A. DAVIDSON op.cit. p 85
masked the deep divisions within the Movement or the population generally. The Victorian ALP was still loathe to reconsider its defence platform, preferring to rely on the less divisive traditional theories and policies in regard to war. Andrews argues that the Spanish Civil War further accentuated this retreat from the issues because it roused intense, and opposing emotions in two sets of its supporters. Catholic influence during the Abyssinian crisis, except in certain instances, had been only marginal. The Spanish Civil War, however, roused Catholics as no other inter-war event did. The Catholic hierarchy and press were united on official support for Franco's government. The flood of atrocity stories roused Catholics to intervene against any attempt to aid the Republic. On the other hand the left were equally moved to support the Spanish Government.  

The divisions ran very deep 13 and although a schism of the kind created by the Conscription issue of 1916 was avoided the consequences of the polarisation were especially far-reaching in Victoria. Catholics and right-wing elements were sufficiently in control of the ALP machine to dominate its policy decisions but the THC defiantly declared its support for the Republicans and a bitter public debate ensued. 14

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12 E. ANDREWS op. cit. p 26

13 D. ARMSON op. cit. p 52 suggests that it was conflict over the Spanish Civil War that led to the final collapse of the LCAW. See R. ANDREWS op. cit. pp 26-27

Labor Call, 22 October 1936, report of the debate in the THC re Peters' statements as President of the ALP on the Spanish Civil War

Labor Call, 15 October 1936 "Peters Hotly Criticised"

Labor Call, 8 October 1936 Report of Brunswick ALP branch meeting disagreeing strongly with policy on united front.

14 Although Labor Call generally played the issue down. No mention of the issue is made in the report in the Annual Conference of the uproarious debate on the Spanish question. See E. ANDREWS op. cit. especially note 19
The Catholic hierarchy in Australia left little choice to sincere Catholics on the issue (though in Catholic countries with a strong anti-clerical tradition France was not universally welcomed) hence many sincere Laborites were forced to confront the conflicting claims of Catholicism and socialism on their allegiance. Sectarianism, an ever present threat to the Labour Movement flared and all the existing tensions were exacerbated.\textsuperscript{15} Clashes occurred, particularly in Victoria where the Campion Society was active and:

Groups of young catholics became the main disrupters at Communist Party, peace movement and Spanish relief meetings.\textsuperscript{16}

Given the sympathies of the Coburg branch members it is reasonable to assume that they supported the Republican cause and were active on its behalf. A letter from MG of Coburg (obviously Mary Grant) provides some interesting hints as to what the general attitude to this complex issue might have been. She felt that non-intervention was the correct policy for Labor in Australia, though not for Labour Movements in Europe, but she also argued that Australian Labor should offer other forms of aid:

\begin{quote}
Resolutions are not much help; they do not help the Spanish workers, and they do not hinder the capitalist supporters of fascism. The correct policy is to help the workers and pay no attention to international conventions.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} For example delegate Anderson remarked during the debate on Peters' statement. "If you were to strike out those affected by religious dogmas, the Labour Movement would be much improved". Labor Call, 22 October 1936

\textsuperscript{16} R. GIBSON, \textit{op.cit.} p 51
Australia, she contended, could raise money and even send arms. She concluded with a question that all advanced Labor thinkers were beginning to ask themselves:

Labor quite properly refuses to support a capitalist league against its business rivals and has set out a clear opposition to any capitalist wars, but is this not the very sort of war which we could support?17

The problem was that very little could be done without the support of the ALP and there was no hope of influencing it from outside. By August the forces for unity were gaining ground in both the Coburg branch and the Bourke electorate. Blackburn was present at a meeting in August which resolved

That a letter be sent to Comrade Maurice Blackburn earnestly asking him to co-operate with other members who were expelled from the Labor Party in consequence of their association with the Victorian Council Against War and Fascism with a view to approaching the CE for re-admission to the Party.18

In October the Bourke Campaign Council was urged to send a deputation to the CE asking Blackburn's re-instatement19 which was finally received in December.20

In the meantime, Blackburn himself sought re-admission21 on the grounds that he was prepared to resign from the VCAWF though he added somewhat provocatively that he would continue his war work and that:

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17 Labor Call, 17 September 1936
18 CM, 17 August 1936
   Blackburn donated some books to the branch at this meeting
19 CM, 5 October 1936
20 VCE Minutes, 13 October 1936
21 VCE Minutes, 6 November 1936
   The Coburg branch congratulated Blackburn on this action and called on the CE to accept CM 2 November 1936
In such work I shall be ready and willing to work with anti-militarists, without worrying what they may think on other matters.

On matters of foreign policy particularly the Spanish Civil War, Blackburn was no less outspoken in his opposition to the CP and the organisational issue of the CP's right to interpret policy and act on that interpretation between conferences was still unresolved. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that the CP replied by asking Blackburn if he was prepared to give an unqualified acceptance of the Constitution, Platform and Rules of the Party and any Conference or Central Executive interpretation thereof.

Despite the pressure from the electorate, that was an assurance Blackburn was not prepared to give. He did not agree that the CP had the power to interpret: 'The Central Executive's authority is managing and administrative', and he re-iterated his right to follow the dictates of his conscience rather than the Party:

I would never agree to be coerced to violate my conscience or to do what I believed to be against the best interests of the Australian people or the Labour Movement. If Conference gave such a decision, I would reluctantly disregard it and cease to be a member of the Party.

Blackburn was invited to attend a meeting of the CE where his case would be heard, and the deputation from the Bourke Campaign Council successfully...

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22 For the full text of this letter dated 22 October 1936, see Labor Call, 1 April 1937
23 e.g. in September he had spoken at a meeting of the VCAW&F on behalf of the Spanish Government. Workers' Voice, 4 September 1936. For an outline of Blackburn's position at this time see F. BLACKBURN 1936 cit., pp 16-17. In early November the Labor Call ran an hysterical front page spread on Communist spies in the Labour Movement (5 November 1936) quoting part of the rebuff to the CPA allegedly drafted by Blackburn. Blackburn responded by claiming that parts of the letter had been altered from his draft and that in any case he had changed his mind (Labor Call 12 November 1936)
24 Letter dated 11 November 1936. See Labor Call, 1 April 1937
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid. Letter dated 8 December 1936
sought the postponement of the Bourke pre-selection ballot until after the 1937 Annual Conference on the grounds that Blackburn was seeking re-admission. Gleeson as major spokesman argued that there "was indeed a strong opinion amongst a number of Labor supporters in Bourke' that the ballot should be postponed. The CE took the opportunity to quiz Gleeson on Blackburn's willingness to abide by CE rulings to which he replied:

... Mr. Blackburn decided that the Executive did not have the power to make the decision it did in excluding him. If he had appealed to the last Annual Conference that would have been tantamount to saying that the Executive had the power to exclude him. Mr. Blackburn was not in a position to object to the decisions of Conference as he was an excluded member. The fact of Mr. Blackburn appealing for readmission was tantamount to his agreeing to abide by the decisions of Conference.

On 21 December Blackburn assured the CE that he did not belong to any organisations that 'purport to cover the ground that was covered by the Constitution and Platform of the ALP', but again he refused to in advance give an undertaking to accept any interpretation that the Executive likes to make ... but I will do my best, as I have always done, to co-operate with the Executive and support their decisions.

Blackburn was not re-admitted, but he took up the option of appeal to

27 VCR Minutes, 4 December 1936
It appears that this request was complied with, as there nominations were not received by the CE until 9 April 1937.

28 ibid.

29 VCR Minutes 21 December 1936

30 VCR Minutes, 15 January 1937, for the "further correspondence" see Labor Call 1 April 1937. The matter was handled by a small committee of the CE, the whole CE only considered the recommendations of this committee.
Conference where he stated that he was applying for re-admission without any qualifications:

Never at any time had he contemplated being on any other footing than any other member in the Labour Movement.

He would rather be in the Party than outside it. His re-admission was carried on the voices and in the pre-selection ballot held soon afterwards he successfully retained the nomination for Bourke.

Blackburn accepted re-admission on what were unquestionably humiliating terms. Virtually nothing had been achieved by his defiance. If anything, the Party had hardened in the attitudes and practices to which he had objected. Blackburn commanded a substantial and devoted following, yet when the occasion arose he refused to accept the responsibilities of leadership. S. Blackburn describes his behaviour after the expulsion as

maintaining a lofty detachment from Party affairs, and devoting himself to evangelising on behalf of the anti-war movement.

It appears that he may have actually discouraged the moves that were made to rally behind him and reluctantly his supporters saw that the ALP, however imperfect, was still the most effective working class organisation and therefore it was better that Blackburn return and exercise whatever influence he could from within. Blackburn agreed but it seems likely that he was more concerned by the degree to which the Party could serve

31 VCE Minutes, 22 March 1937. Blackburn asked that his appeal be placed before Annual Conference. The Bourke Campaign Council sought leave to address Annual Conference in support of Blackburn’s application - this was not granted - due mainly to Calwell’s accusations that it was a Communist front - see Labor Call, 1 April 1937

32 Labor Call, 1 April 1937

33 VCE Minutes, 4 June 1937

M. Blackburn 274
A. Lewis 92

34 S. Blackburn op.cit. p 15

35 ibid. The Coburg and Essendon branches and some unions, such as the ARU, would stand behind any moves made by Blackburn.
or hinder what he had come to see as a higher good rather than the
good of the Labor Party. He could best serve the anti-war movement
outside the Party in 1936 and inside it in 1937 and from this time forward
Blackburn showed an increasing tendency to protect an overly tender
conscience at the expense of those who had come to look to him for
leadership in an attempt to restore the Party to health and vigour. It
is also from this time that his political judgement began to falter a
little and he became increasingly to be seen as a 'lone wolf', all of
which served to deepen a mistrust in him that some sections of the Labour
Movement had developed.

The Coburg branch was reactivated by his
return but there were already clear signs that all was not well in Labor
circles in the district. Blackburn had remarked at Conference:

I know I have a number of enemies in the
Labour Movement ... But I am not prepared
to deliver myself bound into their hands, 36

and some of those enemies were already on the move in Coburg.

36 Labor Call, 1 April 1937
SECTION FOUR 1936-1940
At the Annual Conference in Supporting the CI's resolution that the International Peace Council's defence platform\(^1\) opposed that of the ALP, Arthur Calwell remarked that

those who opposed the Executive resolution were misguided idealists, Comms, near Comms, half-baked Comms, ex-Comms, and for the sake of those present, some d_____ fools who didn't know where they stood.\(^2\)

In a very real sense he was summing up the attitude of the majority of the CI and its supporters toward all and any form of dissent within the Party. Polarisation had already reached a point where rational debate and communication had become almost impossible. It is in this light that all accusations of 'communist infiltration' and 'communist domination' of ALP branches must be viewed. Events in Coburg in the years 1937-1940 were partly local in origin, but they were profoundly influenced by the attitudes that developed in the wake of the Spanish Civil War and the growth of Catholic Action in the community. The re-admission of Maurice Blackburn was a prelude to a three year fight in Coburg that came to a head upon the death of Frank Keane in 1940.

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**CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

**THE PARTIES DIVIDE**

During the period of Blackburn's exile the Coburg branch had reached a very low ebb\(^3\) and when in July 1936 the membership level

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1. This included collective security and mutual assistance pacts.
2. Labor Call, 1 April 1937
3. See Appendix C
began to improve it was indicative of new forces entering Labor politics in Coburg, for many of those who joined or rose to prominence in the years 1936-1939 had a different perspective on Labor politics or were grooming themselves for political office in a manner that was not typical of members in the previous ten years. This new mentality brought increasing dissension and 'heated' debate in marked contrast to the previous five years when most resolutions had been carried 'unanimously'.

Municipal elections once more became a frequent topic of discussion and dissension since a number of newcomers were keen for municipal office. The state of branch finances completely ruled out the possibility in 1936 but it seems likely that it was a factor in the decision by J.J. Roberts to revive the West Coburg branch. Roberts, an official of the Federated Ironfounders Union, had been previously active in Brunswick and after joining the Coburg branch in May he began immediately to nominate new members, all of whom transferred with him to West Coburg, which over the next four years provided the most persistent municipal candidates, though only one - Jock Hay - was successful. The area had always been able to

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4 See for example CM, 17 February, 20 April, 25 May and 17 August 1936, 1 March 1937.

5 Municipal elections discussed at many meetings (CM, 6 July, 17 August 1936 Labor Call, 27 August and 10 September 1936) usually at the instigation of newer branch members.

6 CM, 6 July 1936 in particular and passim July-August.

7 CM, 17 August 1936, Labor Call 13 August 1936, Courier, 12 August 1936 for information regarding Coburg West.

8 CM, 10 May 1936.

9 See CM June passim. Among new West Coburg members were some recently arrived ALP activists e.g. J. Ward from Footscray and G. Webber ex MLA from Preston.

Letter VCE Records (Halls File) dated 26/8/36 from Applegate (Assistant Secretary Coburg branch) granting Roberts' request of 17/8/36 that he be transferred to West Coburg "of which he is president ...".

10 This also applies to all those comrades who were recently elected as members of this branch on our nomination.

11 Hay was elected to Council in 1938.
sustain two ALP branches in periods of high activity and relations between the branches remained amicable and co-operative, 11 with West Coburg even offering to sell a block of land it owned to save the Labor Hall.12 Combined social activities were run throughout 1937.13

The Coburg branch, despite the loss of newly gained members in August also began to revive as the moves for Blackburn's re-admission gained momentum. Some of the old fire was evident when Gleeson denounced the Douglas Credit Movement14 and another new arrival, Arthur Lewis15 was instrumental in getting a study circle formed,16 urging the necessity of Laborites possessing a thorough knowledge of international affairs as well as Australian,17 a move very much in the spirit of branch thinking in the preceding years,18 but he soon emerged as a disruptive and negative force at the centre of a running battle that finally resulted in the formation of a third branch in North Coburg.

Hall finances provoked long and often bitter debates following the refusal of the CE to offer any financial assistance19 since many of the

11 Blackburn and his family were members of West Coburg. Interview L. Hamilton
12 CM, 7 December 1936
13 Labor Call, 21 January 1937
14 CM, 21 September 1936
15 Former MP for Corio 1929-31 and official of Carters' and Drivers' Union. For further information on Lewis, see Labor Call, 29 May 1924 and 26 September 1929
16 CM, 5 October 1936
17 CM, 19 October 1936
18 Other evidence of "old style" Coburg branch activity was a lecture by Dewsnip of the VLC on "Education and Labor" (CM, 15 June 1936) and protest at the banning of Till the Day I Die and Ten days that Shock the World, Courier, 28 October 1936
19 VCE Minutes, 3 August 1936, CM, 7 September and CM 5 October 1936
newer members felt that the Hall was more trouble than it was worth and should be sold. Keane, however recalling the Hall’s purchase and the happy branch life that had centred on it, was most eloquent in pleading for its retention, hopeful of a return to that style of branch life if only ‘young members’ could be encouraged to join. Carozzi reiterated the point that discharging the debt meant loss of control over Hall management to the CE and that this partly accounted for the ‘apathetic’ attitude of many branch members to the debt. It was also pointed out that the Hall was in no fit state to be put on the market and following a ‘maelstrom of verbosity and heckling’, it was decided to seek a new mortgagor for the property and carry out some renovation. Eventually the Postal Workers’ Union came to the rescue, mainly through the representations of Harold Nicholls, who made a dramatic return to branch life in 1937.

The return of Nicholls was dramatic in that it was vehemently opposed by Arthur Lewis and Mary Grant, because during the previous meeting he had made a statement that they considered ‘disloyal’. The actual statement does not appear in the Minutes, but Perry commented that what Nicholls had alleged was a fact and that corruption was still going on in the Labor Party and there was every justification for the purging of the Party.

20 CM, 21 November 1936; see also p
21 ibid.
22 VCB Minutes 26 October 1936; CM, 30 November 1935
23 CM, 7 December 1936
24 CM, 18 and 25 January, 15 February and 1 March 1937. Nicholls had been one of the original Hall trustees and a leading branch activist until about 1928. He continued to pay his membership dues until 1931 (CM Membership Records)
25 CM, 1 March 1937 the President was upheld in his ruling that the statement he not recorded.
26 CM, 1 March 1937
When the vote was taken only Lewis and Grant voted against Nicholls' re-admission though not all members were without misgivings. Nicholls claimed that 'his idea for joining up again was to bring closer unity to the Labour Movement.' Behind that was an almost fanatical loyalty to Maurice Blackburn, and the old myths and ideals of the Labour Movement. Nicholls hoped that by joining he might be able to help build a more 'progressive party', that is, one that would pursue the Socialist Objective more seriously. Nicholls was also, vehemently anti-Catholic. A loyal and devoted friend and a hard worker, Nicholls, like Lewis, also made and maintained deep enmities and the degree of conflict between the two at that stage did not augur well for the branch. The particular cause of enmity at this stage was most likely related to Lewis' vote against the VCAW&F at the Annual Conference even though he had himself been active. Lewis and Mary Grant had become fanatically 'anti-Communist' and they saw Nicholls as part of a new left-wing offensive to take over the branch and gain control of the Hall but even before Nicholls actually rejoined, Lewis had begun a regular correspondence of complaints to the CL, and for the next eighteen months or so he bedevilled branch life with 'objections' and 'points of order' almost to the stage where no business could be carried on at all.

Lewis began with an attack on the branch president, Williams, charging him with 'disloyal and unworthy conduct' which was countered with a resolution condemning Lewis and calling on the CS to take disciplinary

27 CM, 1 March 1937
29 Interview, S. Johns
30 VCE Minutes, 22 February 1937. Williams explanation (VCE Minutes 8 March 1937) was accepted.
action and to  

insist on bringing about unity of the various organisations in the Labour Movement.  

Lewis further alienated himself from the branch when in April he contested the pre-selection ballot for Bourke against Blackburn and then in June he joined with several other members of the branch to request a hearing by the CE 'in connection with Coburg matters'. He also complained that no action had been taken against Williams, and further complaints in July prompted the CE to convene a special meeting of the two Coburg branches in '... an endeavour ... to clarify the position of the Party in Coburg'.

Following the visit of the CE there was a brief lull but eventually Lewis' behaviour drove the branch to suspend him for six months. In the Disputes Committee hearing that resulted, Nicholls outlined 'what the chairman at a branch meeting had to put up with from member Lewis', and that

31 CM, 1 March 1937  
VCE Minutes, 8 March 1937

32 He was defeated 92 to 274  
VCE Minutes, 4 June 1937

33 ibid. In May he had queried the credentials of a member nominated to Coburg branch.  
VCE Minutes, 10 May 1937

34 VCE Minutes, 21 June 1937. The CE referred the matter to the Disputes Committee of which there is no record.

35 VCE Minutes, 6 July 1937. Two letters from Lewis: One complains that his protest in respect of CPA literature and the Legislative Council elections was ruled out of order by the Coburg President, and another together with Grant and McKenna complained of "disloyal conduct of Coburg branch in disregarding the decisions of the Party"and asking to be heard as a deputation.

36 ibid.  
Even before this meeting was held Lewis wrote again querying the status of Glesson and Williams. VCE Minutes, 19 July 1937

37 VCE Minutes, 17 December 1937
owing to Rigged actions ..., on many nights the Minutes of the previous meeting were not finalised until well after 9 p.m. In his opinion this was nothing more or less than disruptive tactics. 

The Disputes Committee merely resolved the technical issue, Lewis could not be suspended for more than one meeting, but no effort was made to defuse the mounting tensions in the district.

The division of Coburg into wards for the purpose of municipal elections in 1937, provided an excuse for further divisions which Lewis and Mary Grant took up early in 1938. After some hesitation the CE allowed the formation of two new branches, North Coburg and South Coburg. North Coburg was dominated by Lewis and Grant who continued sniping at the Coburg branch with accusations to the CE that they were secret CPA members or members of banned organisations.

At the same time some conflict had arisen in the West Coburg branch and a group within it sought permission to form the South Coburg branch. The officials of this new branch were largely the same people who had left the Coburg branch to revive West Coburg, together with a number of long standing malcontents. Significantly, Ward and Roberts

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38 VCE Minutes Disputes Committee Hearing 19 January 1938
Nicholls was 1938 Coburg branch president

39 VCE Minutes, 21 February 1938
North Coburg was officially established in June 1938
Labor Call, 9 June 1938
VCE Minutes, 30 May 1938

40 See for example VCE Minutes, 14 March and 30 June 1938

41 Ward complained the branch was being "packed" with United Front supporters. VCE Minutes 13 April 1937 and from this point the branch adopted a more aggressive attitude toward the CE, for example it supports the 'united front' (VCE Minutes 3 May 1937) and on being told such discussions were not in order asked the CE whether "it is necessary ... to obtain permission from the CE before discussing any subject" VCE Minutes, 21 June 1937

42 VCE Minutes, 21 February 1938
Permission granted, VCE Minutes, 30 May 1938

43 Such as G.R. Saunders who was a frequent complainant on municipal election matters in the early 1930's. See for example CM, 14 August 1933, Brunswick and Coburg Gazette, 5 August 1932
had lost their positions on the West Coburg executive in 1938 and most of South Coburg's new officials were 'outsiders' - recent arrivals in Coburg. This branch immediately took a provocative public stand in respect of other branches in the district. E.W. Peters stated pointedly at the opening that he 'hoped members would always remain loyal to majority decisions of the Party' while the Communist Party was warned that if it or 'any of its so-called progressive elements' tried to 'white-ant' this new branch they would get short-shrift'. This was to be achieved by a 'Credentials Committee' which would consider all nominations before they were submitted to the branch because in Coburg and Brunswick, members of the Communist Party have made a special effort to join the Labor Party in an effort to create a united front. The South Coburg branch wishes to notify any hair-brained Stalinites that may have intended to join the branch to think twice before attempting such tactics because, as well as being refused they will be publicly exposed.

The name-calling had begun in earnest and the Coburg branch was finally roused to protest. South Coburg was refused representation on the State Electoral Council and the CE was asked to declare South Coburg bogus because its setting up had not proceeded along 'normal' lines.

44 As well as Ward and Roberts there was G. Webber ex MLA from Preston, and Jesse Satchell ex MHR for Castlemaine-Kyneton. (1929-31).
45 Labor Call, 23 June 1938
46 Labor Call, 14 July 1938
47 Which was still dominated by the Coburg branch at this stage. H. Wilson, Vice-President of Coburg was its Secretary.
48 VCB Minutes, 30 June 1938
HEY PRESTO! ENTER 'PHANTOM' BRANCHES

The campaign opened with the mysterious branches known as North Coburg and South Coburg. Members of the two existing branches knew absolutely nothing of the formation of the new branches until advertisements appeared in the Labor Call. This despite the fact that the rules provide that the existing Electorate Council shall handle the question of new branches. 49

All the branch protests and queries were swept aside and finally:

Further protest was met by a statement that the branches had been set up by the Central Executive and nothing further could be done about it.

Three years of move and counter move followed in a battle to dominate the ALP machine in Coburg in which the 'old' branch members and Blackburn were on the defensive, even though world events were vindicating their stand.

49 "Cleanse Our Party" No. 1 Leaflet issued by Harold Nicholls after the by-election in 1940. Copy in possession of writer.

50 With each Coburg branch protest the CE shuffled, altering its explanation according to the claims made by the Coburg branch. See VCE Minutes, passim June-December 1936.

51 "Cleanse Our Party" op. cit.
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE DIRTY STORY BEHIND THE RIGHT 1937-1939

The anti-war movement drained much of the energy of the Coburg branch and diverted its attention from the other aims of the Labour Movement particularly during the period of Blackburn's exile. By the time Harold Nicholls joined up, there was already the beginnings of a conscious plan to recruit members to strengthen the left-wing in the hope that it could influence the Party as a whole to adopt a more radical and positive stance, in particular:

That socialism - the objective of the ALP - be made a matter of rigorous, every day propaganda ...

Tom Gleeson, had asked Alex Wilson to join up because the branch was 'only a talking shop now' and the primary allegiance of many members to the Labour Movement was reasserting itself. At the same time the anti-Blackburn, anti-'Communist' forces were stirring and all this activity was super-imposed on the usual rivalries and personal antipathies. For a time the formation of new branches provided separate spheres of influence with the State Electorate Council as the main battleground. Within these enclaves both groups became increasingly righteous, fanatical and uncompromising. Men like Nicholls were less interested in unity in the Labour Movement as bringing it into closer conformity with their view of what it ought to be. It hardly needs to be stressed that the faction leaders in Coburg were 'small time operators' but they possessed an inflated sense of importance. The group that gathered around Gleeson, Nicholls, Wilson and Carozzi saw itself as part of a more intelligent, enlightened, and sincere minority. A mentality that Labor Call' had

1 Coburg Branch Agenda item, VCE Records, 1938 Annual Conference.
2 Interview, A. Wilson
It may be, as it has been at times in the past, that the decisions and policy of the majority, as expressed by the vote, because of lack of knowledge or understanding, will not be all that they should be. It may be that they will be incomplete and contradictory and that serious mistakes will be made. And it may be that a more intelligent or better informed minority of workers, either by status or conviction, will be able to do better both through the spoken and written word.

They were determined to 'Cleanse Our Party' and even though it was the 'wheeler-dealer' aspect of Labor politics, exemplified by Organising Secretary Pat Kenneally with his over-riding concern to 'get the numbers' that so outraged the Coburg branch this collection of idealists, supporters of the scrupulous Blackburn, proved quite masterful at the numbers game themselves.

The situation in Coburg can only be fully understood against a complex background of forces that were only just beginning to assume importance in the Labour Movement and the consequences in some cases would not become clear for many years. In Coburg a peculiar and possibly unique concentration of factors combined to bring to a head a conflict that was more dissipated and diffused elsewhere in Victoria at that time. Coburg in the late 1930's was the scene of a bitter prelude to the Catholic-Communist ideological and tactical warfare that would become a feature of the ALP and trade unions in the 1940's. There were personal and local factors involved but essentially the issues were those that would lead to the formation of the DLP. As Hutton put it:

I fought the same issue that caused the separation of the Party in 1955.

3 Labor Call, 16 April 1936
4 R. Murray op.cit. p 27: T. Unmack, G. Wildman, A. Wilson were all quick in interviews to make this point.
5 Interview C. Hutton
The publication of the papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* in 1931 reaffirming the Church's hostility toward socialism and communism and coinciding in Victoria with the growth of communist influence during the depression had heralded the beginning of hostilities and in the same year the Campion Society which would provide the nucleus of Catholic Action was founded. By encouraging an interest in social problems and suggesting that while political activity was prohibited, anti-Communist activities were not political, some sections of the Catholic leadership in Victoria created a climate in which conflict was inevitable, especially once the Spanish Civil War began. Davidson writes of the period that

By the mid-thirties Catholic publications were occasionally encouraging priests to go into unions in order to organise the Catholic workers against Communism. It is doubtful, however, that any organised anti-Communist activity began until after 1935. Only in 1936 with the moral schism caused by the Spanish Civil War did organised anti-Communist activity start.6

In 1937 B.A. Santamaria was appointed Assistant Director of the newly formed Australian National Section of Catholic Action and organised anti-Communist activity was well under way in some places. One of those places appears to have been Coburg.

A decade of militant, outspoken support for a united front and defiance of CE rulings made the branch a likely target for anti-Communist activities. Its members were proud of their 'strong socialist leanings - we were nearly all red ruggers'7 and Maurice Blackburn had long been identified as a Communist sympathiser and adversary of the undue Catholic influence in the Party via men such as John Wren. It seems likely that Blackburn's presence served to crystallise the conflict for

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6 A. Davidson *op. cit.* pp 126-127

7 Interview C. Mutton
by the end of the 1930's he had become a figurehead of the defiant left and so Blackburn the man, who had been so admired and respected, became obscured by the movements and trends of politics with which he was so publicly associated. Moreover, in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War controversy he was beyond the support of many Catholics because of the stand he had adopted.

'Sectarianism was rife' in Mutton's view, indeed that of most participants and there was a new fanatical zeal on the Catholic side. Brennan suggests that one of the great mistakes of Catholic Action was that having decided to clean up the political scene, we literally did not know where to stop. We marched in full of crusading fire. Out went the Communists; out went the corrupt Catholics; then out went the other Christians, or Catholics who dared question our methods... Catholics tried hard to explain the purity of their motives, but of course nobody believed them.9

Sectarian tension was never far below the surface in Australian society but in the Labour Movement it was sharpened by a sense that the Catholics had an organisational advantage:

By 1930, almost all Churches were represented in the ALP, but Catholics were the largest and best organised. Catholic Labor men often met and talked their common language of religion and politics outside the Church, at meetings of the Holy Name Society or at the Knights of the Southern Cross. There was rarely any conscious plan to run or rule the ALP, but in the minds of many of them, there was no objection to using what organisational power they could muster to achieve their own sectional interests.

8 Interview C. Mutton

9 N. BURNMAN, The Politics of Catholics, Melbourne 1972 pp 7-8
It was never very clear then if a Catholic within the ALP was there because he was a good ALP man or because he was the agent of some outside pressure group. 10

There was always a danger that non-Catholics would over-react whenever the Catholics in the Party appeared to be 'organising'. In Coburg in 1938, there was no lack of evidence, and the 'old' branch members who considered the Labour Movement a 'religion' and the anti-war movement a moral crusade met it with a crusading zeal of their own.

The source of most members of the North and South Coburg branches was the Catholic Church; 'in some cases names were taken straight from the Parish Register'; 11 Blackburn was a long standing adversary of some of the most influential Catholics in the Party.

In Mutton's simplistic view 'everyone on the CE was a Wren man', 12 and given the degree of Catholic influence at high levels in the Party, it was easy for Nicholls and his followers to blame them for the Party's limping progress and poor image in the thirties. The discredited leadership which had allowed the Party to degenerate to 'mere vote getting' 13 could also be blamed for organisational as well as policy failures. The conflict did not however divide individuals in the district on strictly sectarian lines. Arthur Lewis and Mary Grant for example, were not Catholic, but they had become fanatically anti-Communist in addition to personal antipathies. 14 Lewis was, in particular, anti-Blackburn 15 and

10 N. BRENNAN op.cit. p 3
11 Interviews, C. Mutton, A. Wilson G. Wildman, S. Johns
12 Interview, C. Mutton
13 ibid.
14 Interviews, A. Wilson, S. Johns, C. Wildman
15 "Cleanse Our Party", Leaflet No. 1 op.cit.
in the period under consideration it would scarcely have been
apparent that organised Catholics could present precisely the same
threat to ALP autonomy as the CPA so he was for the time being allied
with the Catholic, anti-Communist group. Mutton summed up the distinction
between the two kinds of Catholics who were just becoming discernible
in the ALP at this time:

I am a Catholic, as good as any,
but I will not tolerate control or
direction of the Party, by the Church. 16

In the 1930's it was no longer easy to be both a Catholic
and a Socialist and this tension was crucial to events in Coburg in
1939 to 1940.

The Coburg branch in this period remained committed to the
idea of a united front and in general maintained a provocative attitude
on the subject. In 1937 it called on Annual Conference and the CE to
accept the CPA's proposals 'for a united effort to defeat the present
17
government,' and 'in view of the grave international situation', to
convene a special conference of all anti-war organisations 'irrespective
of their religious or political views ... and that a permanent body composed
of such delegates form a united anti-war body ...' 18

These were among a sheaf of items from advocates of the
united front who hoped that 'persistence would overcome the stoutest
resistance,' 19 but the 1937 Annual Conference soundly rejected them 20
and adopted, amid uproar, a policy of non-intervention in Spain. 21

16 Interview C. Mutton
17 CM, 25 January 1937
18 Item 21 1937 Annual Conference Agenda
VCE Records
19 Labor Call, 25 March 1937
20 Labor Call, 1 April 1937
The vote was 151 to 32
21 See p 174
While this Conference re-admitted Blackburn it refused to allow the Bourke Campaign Council to speak on his behalf and endorsed a CS ruling that all trade union members wishing to attend as delegates to Annual Conference must have been a member of the appropriate ALP branch for at least two years which was principally an attempt to prevent Communist unionists from attending Annual Conferences. The nature of the debate at this Conference and earlier articles in Labor Call reveal a growing paranoia within the ruling clique of the ALP and some sections of the rank and file in regard to Communists, which had been exacerbated by emotions aroused by the Spanish Civil War and the success of Communists in convincing many people particularly trade unionists of the sincerity of their changed attitudes. Blackburn's electorate was singled out for particular attack at the Conference by A.A. Calwell who declared that the Bourke Campaign Council, whatever their protestations to the contrary was more or less a united front organisation. ... although members at Bourke had signed the Labor pledge, that did not make them adherents of Labor.

The Council, however, was not dismayed and immediately declared its lack of confidence in the Secretary J.J. Roberts, a leading figure in the Catholic Right-wing faction and, elated by the re-election of Blackburn with one of the third highest majorities in Australia, decided to "keep on the move" with the

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22 Labor Call, 1 April 1937
23 Labor Call, 25 March 1937
24 For example "Central Executive KO's Communism" Labor Call, 18 March 1937  "Communist spies in the Labour Movement" Labor Call, 5 November 1936
25 Labor Call, 1 April 1937
26 VCE Minutes, 13 April and 3 May 1937
27 Courier, 26 November 1937
object of raising the political consciousness of the electors of Bourke, and to institute social and other activities to assist in revitalising the Labour Movement in this district.  

rather than disband as was normal after an election. Given the attitude of the CE to the Council as a nest of Communists, and its own outspoken criticism of the ALP leadership  

29 it is not surprising that permission was refused.  

30 It was interpreted as a sinister thwarting of rank and file initiative. It was not the first time the Coburg branch had fought this battle,  

31 and it sought a declaration from Annual Conference that there was nothing in the Rules that prevented an Electoral Council from continuing to function. Indeed 'every form of activity in the cause of Labor should be commended and encouraged', but theirs was a very small voice.  

32 A situation had arisen in Victoria where the CE could succeed in dominating the decision making of the ALP, but it could not establish beyond doubt that its rulings were right or preferable.  

By the end of the 1930's the CE clearly had power, but its authority was questionable making it easy for some frustrated and disillusioned members, such as those in the Coburg branch, to see the situation as one where the ALP had simply fallen into the wrong hands; that the 'trouble in the Labour Movement was not coming from the bottom but from the top'  

33 and that a purge of corrupt and inept leadership was all that was necessary to restore the Party to health. The Coburg branch view of the CE was stated in no uncertain terms several years later:  

28 Labor Call, 25 November 1937  
29 VCE Minutes, 1 December 1937, for example "the leadership of the ALP wasted time over the red bogey etc."  
30 Permission sought VCE Minutes, 3 December 1937 refused VCE Minutes 17 December 1937  
31 See p 49 and p 75  
32 Labor Call, 10 March 1938  
33 Labor Call, 21 April 1938.  

The speaker was A.J.V. Miller - a delegate of the ARU but also a member of the Coburg branch.
CE WRECKERS AT WORK - BEWARE!
Coburg is just one incident in the
wrecking career of the ex-Premiers'
Plan sympathisers and others who have
again intrigued their way into control
of the Party machine.

Our investigations reveal, ... a sordid
story of ballot rigging, seizing of rank
and file selections, ballot rights, scandalous
bargaining and bargaining of membership
privileges. Mildura, Gippsland, Footscray,
Caulfield, Boroondara, Middle Park, Henty,
Balaclava, - look where you will, these
complaints arise.

Incidents abound of the stifling of necessary
propaganda and organising efforts by the
membership of the Party - grouping of branch
efforts stamped upon, Federal electorate
activities curtailed, the Metropolitan Council
abolished, lack of support to the invaluable
ALP Sports Federation, the gag on Women's
organising Committee, the sabotage of the
Presidents and Secretaries Committee of 12. 34

CE authority was further undermined in these years of escalating international
crisis by the THG's and the ACTU's support of the Spanish Republicans and
their more rapid move away from isolationism. 35 The Coburg branch
capitalised on this, calling on the 1938 Annual Conference firstly to
adopt the recommendation that "all anti-war bodies be united under the
leadership of the ALP ..." and secondly to

adopt the ACTU recommendations regarding collective
security, the organisation of the masses in opposition
to war and the democratic control of the army for it
is obvious that the majority of the workers favour the
ACTU policy, being fully aware that it is only by the
co-operation of the workers in those countries
still retaining democratic government that the

34 "Cleanse Our Party" No.1 op. cit.
35 E. ANDREWS, op. cit. pp 28-30
menace of war can be removed from the world. 36

It was only a matter of time before the anti-fascists would be vindicated but tensions in Coburg continued to mount. The proliferation of branches was apparently not serving the purposes of the anti-Communists as they had hoped, and however many times the Coburg branch Minute Book was called into the CE as a result of charges made by other branches, there were no irregularities. Nicholls was a skilful tactician, the Catholic group were inept and obvious to the frustration of those in the CE who apparently condensed what was going on. 38 It soon became clear that the balance of political power in Coburg could only be radically altered by capturing control of the Coburg branch itself and a campaign was begun by a 'handful of people in Coburg working in collaboration with the Central Executive' whose object was to capture the Labor Party Electoral machine in Coburg with a view to 1) securing the State seat for a Central Executive nominee and 2) defeating Maurice Blackburn in a selection ballot, 39

but with Harold Nicholls as master strategist, the Coburg branch set itself to prevent a take-over.

Branch membership increased dramatically, 40 making it in a

36 Items 255 and 266 Annual Conference Agenda 1938 VCE Records. The West Coburg items 256 and 272 were almost identical. Typical of branch discussions in 1938: VCE Minutes, 22 October 1937 branch regrets refusal of CE to be represented at the International Peace Conference. Discussions of "Isolation versus Collective Security" Labor Call, 10 March and 31 March 1938. Courier, 2 May 1938 report of discussion on Socialisation Objective. Courier, 28 September 1938 discussion of "Social Credit". 37 Interview G. Wildman, "They were always calling the Minute Book into the CE" 38 Interview G. Wildman. Wildman was still pleased to relate details of their superior organisation and "vote thus cards and the annoyance of Pat Kennedy at the ineptness of the Catholic group which was visible whenever he visited the branch. 39 "Cleanse Our Party" No.1 op.cit. 40 See Appendix C
little over a year probably the largest ALP branch Victoria had ever had. 41

Nicholls was particularly proud of the achievement:

Both politically and socially, working
with splendid self-sacrifice, a little
group of members of the branch had done
wonderful work, and were not only responsible
for the increased membership of the branch, but also
for the saving of the Labor Hall, which only two
years ago seemed to be lost to the Labour Movement
of Coburg. 42

Basically the increase in pro-Blackburn membership had been achieved
through an intensive campaign to enlist all eligible union members in
the district. 43 The AEU was a major source of new members, as was the
Tramways Union, the ARU and the Sheet Metal Workers' Union, all of which
had strong links with the branch through people such as Tom Gleeson, Alec
Wilson and Albert McNalty. Nicholls himself, as a postman, was in an
ideal recruiting position. This strategy was significantly assisted by
two factors. One was Blackburn's strong following among industrialists
and the left wing of the Labour Movement generally which could be mobilised
to protect his position against branch packing. Secondly, the two year
rule introduced at the 1937 Annual Conference specifically enjoined unionists
to join their local ALP branches. While there is no doubt that this was
playing the numbers game, it was far from an entirely cynical exercise, as
Nicholls cautioned:

Great work had been done, but there was greater
work to be done in the future. Labor's Objective
Socialism, had still to be achieved, Mr. Nicholls
... appealed to all members to become more than
just membership ticket holders, to realise their
full responsibility to the working class movement
and throw their whole weight into the task ahead.

41 Courier, 1 February 1939
42 This is taken from an undated cutting pasted in Jock Hay's scrapbook
The internal evidence clearly indicates that it was 1939.
43 Interview T. Unmack who was himself one of these recruits.
also interviews: S. Johns, C Wildman, A. Wilson.
44 The AEU had a branch in Coburg and two branch secretaries resident in
the district. ADJ in the branch i.e. at least four officials.
See AEU Monthly Journal and Report, December 1939 in possession of
L. Hamilton
45 J. Hay Cutting Book op. cit.
The new numbers, moreover, were vastly different to names on a parish register. Mobilisation would not have been possible unless these people had been largely in sympathy with the general stance of the Coburg branch and Blackburn. Apparently many Labor voters and unionists were disturbed by events in Coburg and were prepared to take a determined and independent stand as their support for Charles Mutton and Doris Blackburn in the 1940's was to demonstrate even more dramatically. Mutton, speaking of this period asserted that 'There were few in Coburg who weren't fairly independent'.

The other cause of the extraordinary growth was the move to 'pack the branch' in an attempt to control it and oust the original officers and as many as ninety new members could be nominated in one night. The branch was consumed with righteous indignation at this evidence of the 'cancer ... eating into the Labor Party' and Nicholls began to compile a dossier of irregular activities which had reached quite formidable proportions by 1940. When attempts to have North and South Coburg declared bogus failed, 'infiltrators' were sent out to try and join them. Most were refused admission, and it was claimed that no-one could discover where or when South Coburg met.

Despite this 'espionage' the new branches were 'growing' and Nicholls did not really find the evidence he wanted, until selection ballots were held. For example:

45a Interview C. Mutton
46 "Cleanse Our Party" No.1 op. cit.
47 Courier, 2 April 1941
48 Interview: T. Unmack, A. Wilson, G. Wildman, Unmack was one of these "infiltrators".
49 Interview T. Unmack.
"Cleanse Our Party " No. 1 op. cit.
In December 1939 South Coburg complied with a CE request to supply date and place of meeting. VCB Minutes 21 December 1939
A branch of forty members found on voting day that there were 73 on the voting list; another time there were 159 genuine members, but 195 were credited with voting qualifications. 50

By 1939 it had become a contest of charge and counter charge and the feelings of Blackburn's supporters that the 'final objective' of their opponents was the 'butchering of Blackburn for Bourke' 51 were summed up in a letter to the Courier:

It is generally realised that an organised attempt is being made to oust Mr. Blackburn: ..., and further that an attempt is being made by a most reactionary section in the community, a big proportion of whom take their instructions from a foreign directorate. Because Mr. Blackburn has never deviated from his courageous and continuous fight for truth in the cause of the working people of Australia, and because of his unequivocal stand for Labor's policy, i.e. the socialisation of industry ... these people seek his removal ... 52

Something of the view from the other side, and insight into the kind of bitterness that was engendered can be gained from a letter from J.N. McKenna to Peter Randles, though in this case the righteousness has been amplified by the 1940 by-election result and the more recent defeat of Blackburn in 1943:

... I am still straining at the leash to deal a final blow to those usurpers. Let us resolve to Blackburn them one and all. Blackburn all who revolt and attempt to dominate our Party or steal our thunder ... 53

and this from a man who had claimed earlier in the letter that he was not 'nursing a grievance'. The point was that Blackburn's support in the district

50 'Cleanse Our Party' No.1 op.cit.
51 Truth, 5 April 1941
52 Courier, 10 April 1943
53 Letter dated 26/1/44 was in a file on ALP branch properties held by the DLP. It was concerned with strategies for the "defeat" of the remnants of the old Coburg group who up to that point had maintained control of the Hall.
was so substantial that he could only be defeated by artificially boosting
the numbers of enrolled ALP members.

On this front the first specific move was an attempt to displace
the Coburg branch officials in the 1939 branch elections. Eighty members
petitioned the CE to conduct the branch election. The request was
complied with, but the pro-Blackburn candidates were elected to office
by a narrow margin. The most telling evidence that this was a carefully
engineered plan is provided by McKenna who recalled this meeting as
the one

at which all our prior activities and hopes of future success were completely skittled.

Roberts was still not satisfied and immediately called for an enquiry into
the branch on the grounds that

a) the number of names appearing on the
roll was in excess of the numbers of persons
nominated and elected as members,
b) that the names of the members holding
tickets do not appear on the roll.

As a consequence A. Calwell, M. Blackburn and D. Lovegrove were appointed
as a special committee to enquire into branch membership. This enquiry
dragged on for months and was unable to reach a decision, but 180 members
requested transfer to North and South Coburg 'in bulk', a move which placed
the Coburg branch in a minority on the State Electorate Council.

54 VCE Minutes, 9 January 1939
55 Courier, 1 February 1939
"Cleanse Our Party" No. 1 op.cit.
Interview, A. Wilson, A. Wildman
56 Letter from McKenna to Randles op.cit.
57 VCE Minutes, 1 February 1939
Branch Records show a membership of 310, but 478 votes were cast
Courier, 1 February 1939, however the February membership total
was 579.
58 VCE Minutes, 13 February 1939 The request to be reimbursed for costs incurred because the CE postponed the ballot was refused.
59 "Cleanse Our Party" no. 1 op.cit.
60 ibid.
The next battle centred on the selection ballot for a delegate to Annual Conference. Each branch had complaints and charges to lay against the others. The most serious of these was from South Coburg which claimed that because the membership ticket butts had not been returned by the CE the branch had been refused any votes by the Returning Officer, even though they had claimed 'about fifty'. Pointedly, the branch juxtaposed Blackburn's majority of 33 votes with their membership numbers which they claimed was 97 and called for another ballot because this entitled the electorate to two delegates. Evidently, the branch had been rather slow returning its receipt books but in this matter, and a petition requesting that a branch be set up in East Coburg, the CE seemed concerned to steer a less provocative course. In the case of the East Coburg branch the opinion of all existing branches was sought. Predictably North and South Coburg were in favour, West Coburg and Coburg were opposed, and finally the CE ruled that there were enough branches. Probably Blackburn's return to the CE forced it to deal rather more carefully with Coburg affairs, but the general trend in ALP politics was not favourable to the militants. Delegates could get up in Conference and complain about attempts to 'muzzle the most radical of the Movement' and argue that this would lead to apathy, but Conference voted in favour of further restrictions on the associations of ALP members.

61 VCE Minutes, 20 February, 2 February and 3 March 1939
62 VCE Minutes, 3 March 1939
63 VCE Minutes, 6 March 1939
64 VCE Minutes, 17 April 1939. Such a branch would have been in direct competition for Coburg's major catchment areas.
65 Delegate Considine, Labor Call, 13 April 1939
66 Delegate Nat. Roberts, ibid.
67 Ibid. The vote was 138 to 80
They could no longer address any outside organisation without first obtaining the sanction of the CE. Obviously aimed at prominent Labour Movement personalities, Labor Call hailed it as a 'Brake on Members Who Want a Foot in Two Camps', but one delegate at least spoke wisely when he said:

We need a more elastic movement, not one that will restrict the liberties of the individual.

For one section of the Labour Movement in Coburg, the ALP was rapidly becoming too rigid to contain them any longer. In their own minds they saw themselves as defenders of a glorious tradition. The political party to which they had given the very best of themselves, seemed to have been diverted from the high ideals that had given it a unique appeal and promise. Doggedly throughout the thirties they had fought to direct the Party leadership toward a more serious commitment to the ideals of world wide socialism. Above all they wished to see a greater measure of rank and file control, and yet they found most of their initiatives blocked or neglected. When in the late thirties, the branch became aware of what seemed to be cynical 'machine' politics directed against themselves, somewhat sanctimoniously they took up the challenge as a crusade. Theirs had always been a small voice, just one branch, albeit a little more noisy and troublesome than most, and by the end of 1939 they knew they were 'fighting a losing battle', but it was unlikely they would be defeated without a showdown.

68 Editorial Labor Call, 13 April 1939
69 Delegate Mullens ibid.
70 Interview T. Unmack
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CHARLES MUTTON

As events transpired it was not Blackburn who was at the centre of the showdown but a simple, unassuming but staunch Laborite from Fawkner – Charles Mutton. Born in 1890, Mutton was very much the same kind of Labor man as Frank Keane, though of a younger generation. The son of a foreman in a tobacco rolling factory, Mutton started work at thirteen:

My family were of humble circumstances and I was forced to go to work to assist the family budget.

He worked a forty-eight hour week at the Excelsior Barb Wire and Nail Works in addition to a morning and evening paper round. Even when his father purchased ten acres of land in Fawkner and established a mixed farm, their situation did not improve greatly for the soil was poor and provided 'just a mere existence'. Mutton and his mother both continued to work in Melbourne to supplement the budget only going home on Sundays.

Right through my boyhood days I knew the trials and tribulations of life recalls Mutton, but while this experience has left a deep impression, his recollections do not reveal bitterness so much as a sense that it was rather like a baptism into the Labour Movement and a guarantee of his credentials within that movement. His attitude is best summed up by a remark he made just before he retired from parliament:

1 C. MUTTON The Public Life of Charles Mutton Typed Manuscript in the possession of Mutton p 1
2 ibid. p 1
3 ibid. p 3
The bread and dripping man is on the way out now and the silver spoon Labour man is on the way in.

This is not to suggest that he wishes to return to those 'terrible days when capitalism prevailed', but rather it reflects his concern that men who did not experience the 'struggle' of those days against oppression and hardship may lose sight of the sacred ideals of the Labour Movement.

Mutton's attitude to his experience of hardship is directly related to the cultural milieu in which he grew up and his involvement in the Labour Movement. These forces interacted to produce a 'working class consciousness' - a deep but only semi-articulated sense of identity with the behaviour patterns, values and aspirations of all working men in Australian society. Unlike Keane, Mutton grew to maturity with the Labour Movement in a period when it was flushed with optimism, but it was his father who provided the crucial link between experience and active involvement in this movement. As a 'staunch union man', he actively encouraged Mutton to read the editorials and political comment in the newspapers rather than the sporting news and his idealism is probably accounted for by the fact that while life was hard as he grew up, it was not without hope.

The years 1880-1920 were times of widespread, enthusiastic and relatively successful working class activity. The sense of solidarity was high. Men were drawn to the Labour Movement as a spiritual brotherhood.

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4 Sun. 5 April 1967
5 Interview C. Mutton
6 ibid.
7 There are a number of accounts of the atmosphere of this period but among the most interesting are:
   B. WALKER Solidarity Forever, Melbourne 1972
   K. J. MURPHY Labor in Politics, Brisbane 1975, pp 291-334
   A. A. CALWELL Be Just and Fear Not, Melbourne 1972, pp 15-25
that would sweep all before it, for it seemed that organised political action within the newly created democracy would soon redress all social and economic injustices.

Mutton, therefore, formed his intellectual attitudes within this atmosphere of hardship and optimism. He entered the workforce at a very young and impressionable age, just when the working man was beginning to find a voice, and like so many of his generation he learned to translate his grievances into political action. Mutton's ideology was developed when many Labour Movement ideals had not been tested against reality; he was part of the generation that created the Labour mythology and his attitudes and ideas became fixed at this time, which is very important if we are to understand the passionate intensity with which he defended, in 1940, the youthful ideals of both himself and the Labour Movement. Mutton has remained a 'bread and dripping' Labour man all his life.

Mutton gravitated toward political activism from the start. 'I was', he says, 'always interested in industrial and political and progress association matters.' In 1908 he joined the Coburg branch of the Political Labour League and by 1911 was representing his state electorate at Conferences. In the same year he commenced work with John Payne and Sons, Ironfounders and rapidly rose to executive positions within a branch of the Ironfoundry Employees Union. Mutton was both temperamentally and physically suited to a political career. Endowed with remarkable health and vigour, in his eighties he still displays considerable dynamism and the battle light glints in his eyes as he recalls his career. He clearly enjoyed the political contest and has a real flair for the cut and thrust of debate. These qualities, together with his great personal amiability and passionate conviction, rapidly

8 See C.M.H. CLARK Select Documents in Australian History 1851-1900 Sydney, 1959, pp 374-387
9 C. MUTTON op.cit. p 3
10 Ibid. p 3
11 Ibid. pl, Interview C. Mutton
won him the support and trust of his colleagues and fellow workers. He is keenly aware of his lack of education or skill, but political action has provided him with meaning and value in life and he is proud of his achievements in this area.

In 1917 at the suggestion of Frank Keane, Mutton founded a branch of the Labor Party in Fawkner which in 1924 sponsored his nomination for the Broadmeadows Shire Council. He was elected on his third attempt in 1925 and remained an active and popular councillor until 1953. Mutton was very much the driving force in this branch, holding the position of either president or secretary until his expulsion from the Party in 1940 and he recalls that 'during the depression I well remember paying the unfortunate members' fees out of my own pocket to keep the branch in existence'. When his father died in 1930 he took over the farm and so was able to devote even more time to Labor Party and Shire Council activities.

The reputation Mutton established as a local councillor was to be crucial in his electoral success in 1940, and the image of the local man serving local interests remained the hallmark of his political career. This parochialism is, in fact, only a facet of an intense nationalism of the kind that characterised the Bulletin in the late nineteenth century and led to the establishment of the White Australia Policy, but for most of the time his focus is limited and concentrated. His interest lies overwhelmingly with the particular rather than the general, and a letter written in 1928 reveals some of the essential characteristics of his thinking:

12 C. MUTTON op.cit. p 3
13 ibid. p 4
14 ibid. p 3
15 ibid. p 3
With regard to the relative merits of oil-driven and steam road rollers, I hold that it does not matter a single jot whether the power be oil or steam so long as the roller be made in Australia... it is doing something which will at least help to relieve unemployment in the iron trades and that would be worthy of the highest praise. 17

It would always be easier for Mutton to understand the plight of his unemployed neighbour than the theories and policies designed to relieve unemployment, and consequently much of his attention was taken up with very concrete issues, such as the provision of public transport, housing, street lighting and the like. This is not to suggest that Mutton was unaware of the need for broad, sweeping solutions to the fundamental problems that confronted his constituents, but he saw his own role in much more limited terms. In this regard a fellow politician was prompted to say of him:

We always used to say in the House that with Charlie it was Coburg first and Victoria second, 18

and while this is not an unfair judgement it needs to be stressed that the area Mutton represented was seriously deprived of facilities.

Mutton was a man who responded immediately to the needs and injustices he saw around him and so his parochialism is matched by his deep concern for individuals and his personal commitment to those he represents. As he told an interviewer in 1967:

The happiest knowledge of my political career is that my door was open seven days a week. My first duty was to my constituents, 19

and by 1940 he had established a reputation in the area as a man of great personal integrity and conscientious attention to duty. Although the
only Labor member of the Broadmeadows Shire Council he had rapidly earned the respect and affection of his colleagues 'for his humane outlook, and as a lively and dependable Council member'. Perhaps the best insight into his career as a councillor can be gained from the words of his fellow councillors as they congratulate him for his twenty-five years of service to the Shire. Councillor Hadfield begins by noting that 'Councillor Mutton has not missed a meeting during that long period of service, totalling nearly three hundred days, fully given up to the ratepayers and for the development of the Campbellfield Riding. Councillor Mutton was known as a battler for those requiring Municipal aid and had done his very best for all that time'. Councillor Robinson added that 'he had even attended Council meetings when far from well,' and that 'his fellow councillors held him in high regard for the close attention he had given to his job'. Councillor Laffan's praise was even higher, remarking that he had 'given much more to the ratepayers than three hundred days attendance at the Council meetings. He personally felt that Councillor Mutton had given five times that to the affairs of the Shire. He could look back to those 'bad old days' when he was never left alone, and fought for those who wanted a champion, and for whom he did a tremendous amount of good.'

In view of his success as a councillor and his active participation in the Labor Party it would have been surprising if Mutton had not sought to enter the wider field of State politics. In 1935, while Shire President, he was approached by the Central Executive as 'the ideal man to carry the Labor banner' in Bulla-Dalhousie. 'It was', he says,

20 Essendon Gazette, 6 November 1947
21 Essendon Gazette, 3 August 1950
22 C. MUTTON OP.CIT. p 6
'the greatest surprise of my life', and despite his defeat he was keen to continue the fight. He was defeated again in 1937 but 'an offer of a large sum of money and jobs in the public service for himself and his two sons' if he would feign illness on nomination day and withdraw from the election, together with the questionable circumstances surrounding the 1940 general election when he was again a candidate, appear to have been very significant in heightening Mutton's feeling that the Labour Movement and democracy were being slowly strangled by corruption. Bulla-Dalhousie was regarded as a 'key seat' in 1940 and, supported in his campaign by most of Victoria's top Labor men, he was only narrowly defeated on a recount. When, a few months later nominations were called for his home electorate, Mutton looked one of the most promising candidates:

... it is generally believed that a man who has borne Labor's banner in many fights, Mr. C. Mutton, will be chosen as the new Labor representative for Coburg. Mr. Mutton has been associated with the Labour Movement for thirty years and has lived in the Coburg district all his life. At the last State Elections he was narrowly defeated for Bulla-Dalhousie. He is a member of the Broadmeadows Shire Council and a keen debater.

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23 C. MUTTON op.cit. p 6
24 Sun, 6 July 1940.
25 Both Merrifield and Mutton were keen to discuss the corruption surrounding these two elections which seems to have involved an attempt by Dunstan, who was Premier at the time, to persuade the Labor Party not to field a candidate. He was having difficulty in getting the Central Council of the UCP to endorse his preferred candidate (in 1940 it was his own son) but his informal relations with the ALP were relatively close, and it was hoped that the Labor vote would support Dunstan's candidate standing as an Independent. Merrifield alleges that this kind of collusion was notorious at the time and the cause of much bitterness in local ALP branches. It is significant that in 1937 Mutton did not receive official endorsement until the day before nominations closed.
26 Herald, 5 March 1940 has a detailed report on the events in this electorate which had, in fact, precipitated an early election.
27 Age, 18 March 1940
Primary votes cast were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHITE (UAP)</td>
<td>3,220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MUTTON (ALP)</td>
<td>3,085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MILLIGAN (UCP)</td>
<td>2,057</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

28 Age, 17 May 1940
By 1940 Mutton's personal reputation in the Coburg-Broadmeadows area and the local Labour Movement was a very impressive one, but two crucial questions need to be answered if we are to understand the outcome of the by-election. The first is why such a dedicated Labor man as Mutton would take a personal stand against the ALP 'machine' knowing that it meant automatic expulsion from the Party. The second is why so many traditional Labor voters were prepared, on this occasion, to support such a stand. In the battle that was intensifying in the Coburg area, Mutton emerged as a man able to personify the ideals and principles that seemed to be at stake, and the reasons for that bear some close attention.

Mutton's political philosophy and his motives for standing as an unendorsed candidate are crucial but it is hard to be certain of Mutton's personal feelings at the time, for success has, in a sense, provided its own justification, but what does emerge in conversations with him is a particularly strong commitment to the myths of the Labour Movement, and a sense that his own values and ideals are synonymous with those of the Labour Movement and other men like himself. Part of the explanation for his success lies in the strength of these convictions and his ability to convey the sincerity of these beliefs to the people of Coburg.

Mutton believes that he deserved the seat and this is as deeply related to his political ideology as it is to his personal ambitions. Not only had he 'carried the flag in a hopeless seat', but he had put a great deal of 'spade work' into the Labour Movement, and in his view the 'plums' of office should go to those who have worked consistently and hard at branch and union level, who have 'come up the
hard way, and experienced the reality of a working man's life. Only men such as these will be able to resist temptations of a politician's soft life that many in the Labour Movement felt would seduce the Labor man away from his ideals.  

Mutton summed up these feelings at the opening of his election campaign:

He had never been a seat seeker in his long thirty years in the Labour Movement. He had fought many forlorn hopes for the Movement, and his reward for faithful service was summed up the other night by the Labor Party leader who had designated him as a 'scab'. It was a dirty epithet to apply to a man who had given his life to the Labour Movement.

At a more personal level, Mutton's relationship with Frank Keane, led him to feel he had a special claim on the seat. It was Keane who had first sponsored him into the Labor Party and they had frequently campaigned side by side. During the last election Mutton had especially assisted the ailing politician and in his first speech in the Legislative Assembly he described their long and close association:

During my life, until his death, I was associated with him and knew of the yeoman service he rendered the state in general and to the electors of Coburg in particular. It seems rather coincidental that it was he who initiated me as a member of the Labour Movement, and it is also remarkable that, when I, as a lad, accompanied him on his political tours, he hailed me as one of his colts, and that today I am here in this house following in his footsteps as the representative of the constituency of Coburg.

29 Interview C. Mutton
30 See G.V. CHILD op.cit. p 31
31 Courier, 6 July 1940
32 Interview C. Mutton
33 C. MUTTON op.cit. p 7
34 Victorian Parliamentary Debates Vol. 209 p 195

The Essendon Gazette, 4 October 1924 reports a speech of Frank Keane's which endorses Mutton's view - "Keane had worked side by side with C\n
Mutton when the Labour Movement had not been popular".
Overall Mutton was not unjustified in believing that his experience to date amply qualified him for the task of representing Coburg.

Nevertheless, for a sincere Labor man, there is a great difference between feeling that you deserve a seat in parliament and standing against the endorsed candidate if you are not selected. Such an action places a man beyond the fraternity which is the source of his identity and comradeship; it earns him the unmitigated contempt of his fellow workers and usually deprives him of the very organisation on which he depends to win political office. However, a situation had arisen where it appeared that the interests of the Labour Movement as a whole and those of the controlling clique were at odds. In such a situation, Mutton and his supporters could break the Party rules by appealing to the higher ideals of the Labour Movement as a whole and so retain credibility within that Movement. Mutton was absolutely convinced that such a situation had arisen in 1940, but even then it was not easy for him to leave his spiritual home and only overwhelming support and dedicated service could ease his conscience. As he told a meeting in 1941:

His heart was in the Labour Movement, but his heart was sore as far as the Labor Party was concerned. The Labor Party was crucifying the Movement, and a day of reckoning would have to come. He had no desire to go back to the Labor Party while the residents of a big constituency, including thousands of industrialists, had confidence in him.35

Mutton's conviction that the Labour Movement was being betrayed was closely related to events in Coburg in the years preceding the by-election and the cancellation of the pre-selection ballot struck at the very heart of the Labour Movement to which he was emotionally and intellectually committed. By 1940 there were some ready to argue that local pre-selection ballots were a cumbersome anachronism, but Mutton's

35 *Age*, 1 April 1941
beliefs were moulded at a time when these ballots appeared as the cornerstone of the Labour Movement. One of his most cherished possessions is a battered copy of the 1916 Constitution of the ALP, which he believes embodies the true ideals and that all changes since then have been for the worse. For Mutton, the concept of 'initiation, referendum and recall' not only enshrines the power of the rank and file to select, direct and if necessary recall its representatives, but it would make parliament a place for honest, hardworking men. He is convinced, above all, that 'only true democratic principles can bring unity to the working man' and that the pre-selection ballots were the ultimate expression of these principles.

Mutton's ideology is not so much a carefully thought out and articulated system of beliefs as a series of commandments which both direct action and serve as a measure of those actions. His responses to life are guided by a series of moral-political absolutes some of the most important of which are concerned with honesty, democracy, active participation, courage and the worthlessness of power if you have sacrificed principles to achieve it. The situation in 1940 seemed to involve a disregard for these values. Mutton has applied rigid standards to the conduct of his own personal and public life and expects the same of others, but he is also a man of great warmth and good humour, a little shy but very direct and straightforward in his dealings with people, the combination of commitment, integrity and amiability made him a very promising candidate for an area like Coburg.

The people of Coburg, and more particularly those in the local Labor branches, knew Mutton as a man of simple ideals and strong convictions, a man who would not back away from a fight, as he says himself - 'They

36 Interview C. Mutton
37 Interview C. Mutton
knew my form'. 38 He had already shown himself to be a conscientious and competent councillor and few could doubt his commitment to the Labour Movement. Mutton in a way could typify the ideal Labour man, who seemed to be fast disappearing from Labour politics in the thirties.

An excellent view of opinion at the time can be gained from two statements made in *Truth*:

> He is immensely popular with Laborites in the Coburg electorate, many of whom feel that they are in no way disloyal to the Party by taking this opportunity to demonstrate to the Central Executive the growing undemocratic tendencies of a certain section of it. 39

No Labor principle will be lost if Cr. Mutton is elected on Saturday. Labor's advocacy in the Legislative Assembly will not suffer because of his presence there. He was good enough for your Executive to endorse and offer as Labor's choice for the Bulla-Dalhousie seat on three occasions. He has not changed his ideas about the principles of Democracy. Therefore it is in the interests of democratic government, and of the purity of Labor ideals, that Cr. Mutton should be returned the Labor member for Coburg on Saturday. We hope he will be. 40

The strength of Mutton's appeal to the people of Coburg was crucial in the context of Labor politics in 1940.

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38 Interview C. Mutton
39 *Truth*, 6 July 1940
40 *Truth*, 13 July 1940
CHAPTER NINETEEN

'THE CAMEL'S BACK BREAKS - AND THE CENTRAL EXECUTIVE GETS THE HUMP'

Relations between the two factions deteriorated rapidly in 1939 and meetings in the Hall resembled Parliament with members sitting on the left and right according to their sympathies. Meetings were angry, heated and sometimes erupted into violence. Mrs Hintze and Mary Grant argued vociferously from opposite sides. An attempt in June 1939 by the CE to resolve the conflict in the SEC only determined that each branch had independent control of its area. The effect of the ruling was to further reduce the influence of the Coburg branch without improving the overall Party position in the electorate since most time continued to be taken up with intra-Party manoeuvring, and results at municipal elections reflected this. Protests from North and South Coburg continued and in December 1939 Calwell presented a report on behalf of a Special Committee appointed by the CE to investigate Communist activities which

1 Interim, T. Unmack; S. Johns; A. Wildman; A. Wilson

2 VCE Minutes Disputes Committee 19 June 1939. Findings adopted. VCE Minutes 7 July 1939

3 The CE Minutes reveal nomination and withdrawal of candidates, failure to field candidates and the refusal to pool financial resources in order to concentrate effort despite the obvious keenness of Roberts, Hay, Lewis, Gleeson and Ward. A concentrated effort would probably have secured at least one ward but co-operation was impossible. An attempt by the SEC to impose a levy on all branches to conduct elections was disallowed. VCE Minutes 7 July and 28 July 1939

See also VCE Minutes 11 August and 14 September 1939, Courier, 9 August 1939

4 VCE Minutes, 14 September 1939. Coburg North complains that Holmes - a Communist - was allowed to help in Centre Ward Campaign
listed Coburg and West Coburg among the nine branches which were not to be issued with 1940 membership tickets because of suspected Communist infiltration. There is little evidence to suggest that CPA members joined the branch in significant numbers in the district. There were however, many sympathisers who subscribed to the Workers Weekly and there was certainly a case for 'guilt by association' in that the more left-wing branch members worked with Communists from time to time, particularly in anti-war activities. In the wake of Stalin's non-aggression pact with Hitler the position of the militant left-wing ALP member became even more difficult as the majority of influential and powerful Victorian ALP leaders became less and less prepared to allow a distinction between serious advocates of the Socialisation Objective and Communists. The situation in Coburg degenerated into slanging matches and head counting.

One figure, however, remained an influence toward harmony. Keane was respected and honoured as the branch's last link with the early days of the Movement, and when, despite his age and obviously failing health, he sought pre-selection again in February 1940, there were few who were seriously prepared to challenge his right to the seat but his death in May left the field wide open. Competition for seats such as Coburg was always keen and sometimes desperate. Charles Mutton was only

5 VCE Minutes, 11 December 1939.
The other branches were Sunshine, Brighton, St. Kilda, Montmorency, Oakleigh, Carnegie and Essendon.

6 S. Johns who was secretary of the CPA in Coburg at the time says that no more than five or six people were members of both parties, while R. Gibson claims that the Party was not encouraging dual membership at the time.

7 Interview S. Johns. He supplied Nicholls with the names of subscribers and they were approached as potential branch members.

8 VCE Minutes, 20 February 1940. Roy Cameron and A.J.V. Miller nominated conditional on Keane not standing. The other candidates were: A.B. Henderson, J.J. Roberts, J.S. Priestley
one of nineteen who considered Coburg would be a fitting reward for their service to the Labour Movement, and the tense situation made it very unlikely that the ballot would pass without incident. Given the usual tactics at inner-suburban pre-selection ballots, the activities in Coburg were not particularly serious breaches of ALP rules, but the way the CE chose to handle the situation provoked a crisis that led to the defeat of the selected ALP candidate Roy Cameron. Rule 60 of the ALP Constitution stated that:

No candidate, shall at any time directly or indirectly, employ agents or servants to assist his candidature, nor shall he supply or be party or privy to the supplying of vehicles for the purpose of transporting voters to the poll, nor shall he, nor any person, acting with his knowledge, make personal reflections on any other candidate.

The consequential instructions were even more explicit:

A candidate may personally canvass support generally, but there must be no recourse whatsoever to advertisements, press publicity or the issuing of any pamphlets, leaflets, or vote-thus cards, whether printed, type written or manuscript. He shall, moreover strictly observe Rule 60 ...

Several candidates protested and the Central Executive decided to cancel the pre-selection ballot on account of evidence placed before the officers that vote-thus cards, pamphlets and personal letters had been issued by or on behalf of, some of the candidates nominated. Posters had also been displayed in the electorate,

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9 VCE Minutes, 20 May 1940
See Appendix D for list of nominations.

10 G. Wildman recalled that virtually all the candidates issued 'vote thus' cards, some were only handwritten but others such as Jock Hay's were not only printed "but even had colours".


12 VCE Minutes, 21 June 1940

13 Circular from the Victorian Central Executive, 21 June 1940, in the possession of C. Mutton.
and to choose the candidate itself since, it was claimed, there was not
eough time to institute a full enquiry and hold a new ballot before
ominations closed on 27 June. This seemed to confirm the Coburg
branch's worst fears and rumours were circulating that Roy Cameron, son of
Senator Cameron, and one of only two candidates who did not live in the
district, was the 'pink eyes'; the 'pea for Coburg'. It seemed clear
to the 'old' left-wing members that because Nicholls had managed to get
the rolls in such good order, and Jock Hay was so popular in the district,
that only by cancelling the ballot could the CE ensure Cameron's election.
To make matters worse, Cameron was one of those who brought the 'infringements'
the attention of the CE while he himself was the subject of some of
the more serious of them. Nevertheless this untried young man from
Glen Iris was selected, ahead of some such as Hay, Miller, Brown, Henderson
and Roberts who had not only served the Labour Movement well for many years
but were closely connected with the district. Hay, in particular, was
not closely identified with either faction but the CE had already shown
an injudicious disregard for the rights of the rank and file and the

14 VCT Minutes, "Special Meeting", 21 June 1940
"Coburg State Selection Ballot: A Reply to the Critics" op. cit.
15 Interviews, T. Unmack; A. Wilson; G. Wildman; A. Keane; M. Dodds;
C. Mutton; A.T. Brodney - he claims that J. Cain was particularly
anxious at the time that Cameron get the nomination.
16 Interview, G. Wildman
17 "The Coburg State Selection Ballot" "Open Letter" Truth, 13 July 1940
VCT Minutes, 21 June 1940
18 Cameron gained 17 votes after counting of second preferences followed
by Hay with 5. Mutton received three primary votes, Hay 3 and
Cameron 7.
"Coburg State Selection Ballot: A Reply to the Critics" op. cit.
strength of parochialism on a number of occasions already. One such was the selection of P.J. Maloney in Footscray in 1937 who eventually withdrew because of a pronounced feeling in the electorate for a representative who had lived in the district. 19 and Mutton himself had been offered a bribe if he would refrain from nominating in Bulla-Dalhousie in 1939. 20 The Coburg branch had made its feelings clear on the subject some years earlier when it submitted to Annual Conference an item requesting that every effort be made to allow the electorate to select their own candidates as selection by the Central Executive is anti-democratic and destructive of Labour unity and entirely opposed to the wishes of the members, 21 and the effect of the CE's decision in Coburg was to compound outrage at the CE's 'fascist life actions' 22 with a deep-seated parochialism. Nicholls and the rest of the left-wing Coburg contingent held a Council of War on the tram on the way back to Coburg after the meeting and they were virtually unanimous in the view that a stand ought to be taken against this latest

... example of that centralised bureaucratic control rampant throughout the capitalistic world which is the forerunner of fascist slavery. Under these circumstances we as labourites and democrats, had no other alternative but to fight against this violation of Labour's constitution. 24

19 VCE Minutes, 13 September 1937. The State Electorate Council had passed a motion of no-confidence in Maloney.
20 Sun, 6 July 1940
21 Item for 1934 Annual Conference VCE Records, Agenda Paper
22 Courier, 17 July 1940
23 Interviews, T. Unmack; M. Keady; C. Mutton; S. Merrifield; A. Wildman, G. Wilson
24 Circular in possession of C. Mutton
None of the leading candidates, however, was prepared to put themselves outside the Party and eventually Mutton decided that 'someone had to stick their neck out against the CE and I was never one to step away from a fight' provided he could get some financial assistance, for he had spent all his own money on the Bulla-Dalhousie campaign a few months previously. There is some evidence to suggest that he was not immediately as outraged as he later became and he was probably impressed by Nicholls' view of the matter. Nicholls became campaign director in the hope that the people in Coburg would make the Labor Party a virile organisation ... All in the Movement have a part to play in cleaning out the rotten machinery so as to make the machinery work smoothly again, while Mutton declared that although he had nominated as an Independent Labor candidate for the seat of Coburg in the Legislative Assembly on 27 June 1940 he was still a Labor man. He was not a seat seeker, but intended to fight in the interests of the Coburg electors whose rights had been taken from them.

25 Wildman and Wilson both claimed that Hay, Miller and "someone else" were all asked but declined and some of their reluctance was a fear of violence. Wilson "It wouldn't take two thoughts for Cameron and his gang to bash you up".
26 Interview C. Mutton
27 Interview A. Wilson; G. Wildman
28 L. Boardman and A.N. Smith submitted Statutory Declarations to the CE claiming to have overheard Mutton say "I agree that it has been made necessary to cancel the ballot and if I'm not the Executive's choice, I hope Roy Cameron is". VCE Minutes, 16 July 1940 Both M. Kondy and E.W. Peters also made this claim.
29 S. Merrifield described Mutton as the "bunny" but there was some dispute between Wildman and Wilson as to whether Nicholls asked Mutton or he volunteered. Given Wildman's fine recollection of detail and Mutton's own claims it seems most likely that Mutton did volunteer.
30 Courier, 2 April 1941
31 Age, 26 June 1940
and he had only nominated because

he had been approached by hundreds of people who
were disgusted with the action of the Central
Executive in cancelling the pre-selection ballot
and endorsing a candidate. Mutton believed sincerely that the principle of democracy was at stake and he had not as one correspondent to the Age suggested let his 'enthusiasm for a political fight ... run away with his better judgement', nor was he interested in a seat at any cost, but there seemed to be substantial endorsement of his course of action and he was confident that as

... the Coburg selected candidate ...
Coburg workers will give me an overwhelming
vote as a protest against fascism in the Labour Movement.

Much of the feeling in Coburg was summed up in a letter to the Age from N. Greatorex

... the trade unionists have been disenfranchised and
not allowed by the political wing of the ALP to select
their candidate. This body has selected a candidate
unknown to most of the electors; apart from knowing
his father to be a senator, he is a stranger to Coburg
... Surely the people of Coburg have the right to choose
a local man if they wish.

The principles of democracy and autonomy had come, at least temporarily, to over-ride the principle of solidarity for Nicholls and the campaign committee most of whom were ALP members and with a budget of £10 and a slogan 'Danger, Democracy in Peril' - they set out to 'bust the machine wide open', though they were not particularly hopeful.

32 Argus, 28 June 1940
33 Age, 12 July 1940
34 Sun, 6 July 1940
35 Age, 5 July 1940. Greatorex was secretary of the Coburg branch of the AEU
36 Although an attempt was made to keep most people free of association with the Committee, Wildman was not supposed to be involved, but on the day could not resist. "When I went down to vote and saw what was happening there, I just had to stay and help".
37 Interview C. Mutton
38 Wildman and Wilson both claimed that they did not consider they had the slightest chance.
Mutton's campaign was assisted by the CE's decision to use the slogan 'Cameron for Coburg' which relegated 'Labor' to an insignificant part of the poster giving Mutton the opportunity to stress that he was the 'Labor' candidate - the word 'Independent' was not used. Since it was a by-election all the Labor politicians and officials were available to assist Cameron but he was subjected to constant heckling and abuse. Interjections concentrated on the dual themes of CE domination and parochialism:

We want the right in Coburg to select our own candidate; we don't want the Central Executive to do our job.
That voice was not born in Coburg.

The anguished Blackburn pleaded for moderation and goodwill but in terms that left little doubt as to his view of the CE's behaviour. In contrast, Mutton's reception was warm and enthusiastic:

The hall was packed and there were a few interjections, but Mr. Mutton was not subjected to the hostility that characterised the opening meeting of the selected Labor candidate (Mr. R. Cameron) on Monday night, a harbinger of the success that was his on 14 July 1940 when he won the seat with a majority of 2,617 votes. Cameron declared that he had been defeated by an unholy combination of the anti-Labor forces, and that the people of Coburg were parochial in their outlook, they judged him on his residential, and not on his political qualifications.

39 Interview G. Wildman
40 Age, 2 July 1940
41 Ibid. E. W. Peters and M. Keady both claim Blackburn's attitude was critical.
42 Age, 6 July 1940
43 The primary votes cast were: R. Cameron 10,036, C. Mutton 8,172, Rasmussen 7,339; after counting of second preferences: C. Mutton 14,082, R. Cameron 11,465
From Electoral Records held by the State Electoral Office, Old Treasury Building.
44 Sun, 19 July 1940
45 Ibid.
but Mutton felt that his inexpensive campaign had been possible because he had fought the election on a principle. All that I bought was a few circulars and posters because I knew that democracy would prevail. 46

Despite his automatic expulsion from the Party, Mutton felt vindicated:

Time will tell where I stand within the Labour Movement. They may expel me from the Party, but never from the Movement. 47

and Truth declared in an impassioned editorial that:

We naturally look to the great Labour Movement in Australia to protect the rights of democracy and resist the inroads of privilege and money power upon the freedom of the people. 48

Mutton had good reason to feel that the Labour Movement in Coburg had ratified his stand. A significant proportion of Labor voters had indeed attempted to correct 'unhealthy tendencies' at the ballot box, while Cameron's claim is not supported by the election statistics which reveal that Mutton's victory was due almost entirely to a split in the traditional Labor vote. 50

In March 1940 Keane had polled 67% of the votes cast (the only time he had polled less than 60% was in 1932) and the non-labor candidate polled 33%. Four months later Cameron polled only 39.3% while the non-Labor vote only fell by a little over 4%. Mutton polled 32% of the primary votes cast, and of that 27-28% had been at the expense of Cameron. Mutton was  

46 Sun, 15 July 1940
47 Sun, 19 July 1940
48 Truth, 20 July 1940
49 Ibid.
50 Interview P. Hanks. "We are all admired Charlie Mutton. All the definite Laborites supported him. Mr. and Mrs. F. Martin both claimed that many Laborites in Coburg supported Mutton for the whole period and while active in their unions, stayed aloof from the Party branches in Coburg for this reason. See Appendix B."
astounded at the result... that Charles Mutton, who was just a battler all his life was made a member of the Victorian parliament MLA! We, the committee, won the fight for the Labour Movement in Coburg.  

For the Coburg ALP militants, however, it was to be in many ways a pyrrhic victory, for the support they received in Coburg did not reverb'reate throughout the whole ALP as they had hoped. Although when called before the Special Committee to Enquire into the Situation at Coburg the members of Coburg and West Coburg called before it declared that the CE was

not competent to deal with the present situation at Coburg, a situation created by the CE over the past three years. The CE acting as accusers and judges would be a further travesty of justice. We ask that a special conference be called to discuss pre-selection ballots, democracy within the Party and electoral policy and to elect a new Executive.

many members were expelled or suspended for up to two years. The campaign to reform the ALP had to be carried on from outside which put the self-styled 'Victrics of the Hexesy Hunt' at a considerable disadvantage and deprived Blackburn of valuable, perhaps even critical, support from within the ALP. In a very important sense Nicholls, Mutton and their supporters abandoned the local ALP branches to their enemies. In no means all the old style militants or supporters of Blackburn were expelled or left the Party, but their position was weakened critically and their morale undermined by the conflict of loyalties presented by the split in the local Labor organisations. Underneath the bitter invective remained the sense that people like Mutton and Nicholls were no more or less committed to the important principles of the Labour Movement than they had been before July 1940 and that the situation was

51 C. Mutton op.cit. p 8
52 VCE Minutes, 25 July 1940
symptomatic of a serious crisis that was developing within the Movement.

The little group that gathered around Charles Mutton and Harold Nicholls, heartened by their success, mounted a quite substantial propaganda campaign given the limitations of their resources. A series of "Cleanse Our Party" leaflets were published to present their case and incorporating the grievances of other disgruntled Laborites throughout the State. The nature of their accusations and the justifications offered for their actions provide valuable insight into their perception of the role and influence of the CE in the previous decade. Two statements were most significant.

... incidents abound of the stifling of the very necessary propaganda and organising efforts by the members of the Party ... whilst stifling rank and file activities the CE was at the same time failing to do its own job.

There was much more involved in the events surrounding the Coburg by-election than aggrieved parochialism and the reverberations were still being felt a year later when a series of public meetings were arranged by Nicholls in a further attempt to keep the issue alive.

The group's activity gained further momentum when Blackburn was expelled from the ALP for a second time in 1941 in consequence of his refusal to disassociate himself from the Australia Soviet Friendship League. The Blackburn and Mutton Labor Supporters Committee began to

53 There were at least three "Cleanse Our Party" leaflets. The group also published pamphlet form a speech by C.A. Morgan (MHR Reid NSW) on Monopoly Rule. Copies of these are in the possession of the writer.

54 "Cleanse Our Party" No. 3 In possession of the writer

55 This is Rawson's view of the principle cause of grievance. D.W. Rawson (1954) op.cit. p 260

56 One meeting was held in the Coburg Town Hall 31 March 1941. Handbill in the possession of C. Mutton. See Age, 1 April 1941. Another meeting, attended by 1200 people was held in the Princess Theatre, Argus, 21 April 1941

57 See S. Blackburn, op.cit. pp 30-33
function as a small party, but Blackburn was narrowly defeated by the official Labor candidate W.A. Bryson in the federal elections in 1943. Mutton, however, had retained Coburg with an absolute majority in 1942 and it remained a standing affront that an Independent Labor man should be able to hold a blue-ribbon Labor seat against all comers shaped by the machine.

As a campaign committee the group proved reasonably successful but overall questions of national survival and the successes of Labor in the federal sphere overshadowed the kinds of issues raised in Coburg. The 'Vicrims of the Heresy Hunt' were not equal to the propaganda task necessary to marshall and organise any grievances and frustrations that existed throughout the Victorian branch of the ALP into a cohesive, effective force. The leadership seemed as unmoved and immovable as ever and despite Doris Blackburn's success in the federal elections in 1946 the Blackburn and Mutton Labor Party remained largely a local phenomenon.

59 See Appendix B
E.W. Peters suggested that a mistake on the WAP 'Vote-thus' ticket was responsible for Blackburn's defeat in that second preferences were directed to the ALP, rather than the Independent Blackburn.

60 See Appendix B
61 Brian Fitzpatrick in Smith's Weekly, 1 December 1945
62 See Appendix B
CONCLUSION

Arthur Calwell has written:

With us to whom Party loyalties go so deep to whom Party membership means so much, a split means personal tragedy which leaves scars that, in some cases are not obliterated in a generation. For some, the scars are carried to the grave.¹

There were those in Coburg who did indeed carry both bitterness and a deep sense of personal loss to the grave in the aftermath of the 1940 by-election but above all else this study has demonstrated that loyalties to the higher ideals of the Labour Movement ran so deep as to offset serious dissatisfaction with a particular leadership for a considerable length of time. In the twenties when the Party was expanding and Coburg still presented electoral challenges, the Coburg branch of the ALP was restless at times, always assertive, but fundamentally prepared to accept the wisdom and authority of the higher levels of Party leadership. Moreover these were years of moderate success for the Labour Movement as a whole.

By the end of the decade as the fragile foundations of these 'successes' became apparent the branch had come under the dominant influence of a particularly energetic and rather more dogmatic group who turned its attention toward world politics and a more serious study of socialism. The branch was imbued with a fervent idealism that sought effective opportunities for action and it was profoundly dismayed at the failure of the leaders of the Labour Movement to meet the challenges of the depression - their easy sacrifice of the workers to balanced budgets and 'sound finance', and the tokenism of efforts to assist and organise the

¹ A.F. CALWELL Labor's Role in Modern Society, Melbourne 1965 p 55
unemployed. The real difficulties in relations between the Coburg branch and the Victorian Party leadership, however, grew out of its refusal to honestly admit the failures and seek a new forward-moving policy. Fundamental unity in the Victorian ALP had been preserved, but as far as the Coburg branch was concerned at the expense of the legitimacy, and authority of the leadership.

From 1932 onwards, the CE came increasingly under the domination of right-wing and moderate forces in the Labour Movement while the Coburg branch was considerably strengthened in its left-wing militancy. The issue of war and fascism drove a wedge between these forces in the Victorian Labour Movement, but despite increasing frustration with the attitude of the CE to international affairs and its absolute rejection of any kind of alliance with the CPA, the Coburg branch in general remained more committed to the Labor Party as an ideal than they were frustrated by the leadership. Yet it was these policy decisions that created the degree of conflict demonstrated by this thesis and it was largely because these were policies virtually dictated by what the Coburg branch considered to be a 'failed' leadership. It was not however, until it seemed that the CE was prepared to adopt any underhand means at its disposal to silence the Coburg militants that a serious crisis occurred. It effectively split the ranks of Coburg Labor for fifteen years.

The focus of this thesis is very limited and it raises more questions than it answers but it does at least suggest that some more light might be thrown on the puzzle of Victorian politics and the role of the Victorian ALP in it as outlined by Rawson by closer study of the relationship between the CE and its branches and the repercussions of this electoral

2 D.W. RAWSON (Historical Studies) op.cit. p 60
behaviour. It is also clear that ideological issues played a significant role in this conflict, despite efforts by the CE to confine them to organisational details, and there are at least signs that the leadership actually inhibited rank and file initiative rather than languished as a result of its apathy that would bear further detailed study. The role of Parliamentary Labor may also have been significantly affected if it could be demonstrated through comparative study, that the CE effectively silenced the left-wing of the Party by the kinds of means used against Coburg.

If the electorate, in the wake of the 1955 'Split', had not overwhelmingly rejected the right-wing faction of the Victorian ALP, it would be easier to accept that the ALP leadership in the years 1930-1940 was genuinely representative of an essentially conservative rank and file and that those in Coburg were merely an extremist minority element. This study at least suggests that this may not have been the case, but until further similar studies are carried out and comparative material becomes available it must remain a suggestion.
APPENDIX A  COMBURG 1916-1940

(i) The Suburban Development of Coburg 1916-1940

Coburg is situated on the northern volcanic plain approximately five miles from Melbourne along the main highway to Sydney. Moreland Road divides the City from Brunswick to the south, while beyond the northern boundary, Boundary Road, lies Broadmeadows. To the east, Coburg is separated from Preston by the Merri Creek, and across the Mono Ponds Creek to the west is Essendon. Coburg's settlement as an urban residential area was largely an extension of the corridor development that was determined by these creeks and the extent of east/west communication has been limited considerably by the barrier these creeks presented, especially as they cut deeply into the plateau at Coburg and bridges were infrequent. The district is situated on a predominantly flat, well-drained plateau, 250' above sea-level which provides surprisingly panoramic views of the surrounding area.

Initially developed for agriculture and farming, the area was gradually converted into residential blocks and became 'popular ... for the erection of clerks', artisans' and working men's homes', 1 which were by and large of modest weatherboard construction. Stone quarrying was important in the early years of the district, and in the early 1920's a small area in the undeveloped north was established as an industrial zone. Such further industrial development as has taken place after World War Two is confined to the far north-east of the City between the Merri Creek and its Tributary Esgars Creek.

The urbanisation of Coburg was a very protracted process, despite its proximity to Melbourne and major areas of employment. Residential development prior to World War One huddled close to the Brunswick boundary

1 Victorian Municipal Directory and Gazette, 1930
and in a ribbon development along Sydney Road but towards the end of the war years, a number of factors coalesced to set Coburg for a major growth period. Firstly, Melbourne itself was again expanding outwards and as the population pressure on the inner suburban areas became severe areas such as Coburg and Preston must have appeared especially attractive to the young adults of Brunswick, Carlton, North Melbourne etc., looking to set up their own homes:

Possessing as it does one of the largest municipal areas around Melbourne, this district offers scope for home building, and that this fact is appreciated is evidenced by the steady influx from the more congested suburbs.²

Not only was Coburg still very close to the City proper and employment, it combined a pleasant rural character with an old established centre. Indeed, despite the large population influx which continued until the depression, the district maintained much of its semi-rural character until after the Second World War.

The electrification of the tram service (1916) and the establishment of an electric supply (1918) made the district immensely more attractive, and a small number of industries were quick to see its potential, particularly in view of an invigorated Council which sought to encourage such undertakings:

The Council has adopted a more progressive policy and it intends to do everything possible to improve the conditions of the Town by making roads and streets as an inducement to settlement.³

The Council displayed quite surprising foresight in immediately establishing an 'industrial zone' which although motivated by the desire

2 unsigned article "Coburg's Sydney Road" State Savings Bank of Victoria Officers' Association Journal, 27 September 1923

Vertical File on Coburg - Social History in Coburg Municipal Library

3 Herald, 22 January 1920
to attract industry, had the effect of protecting the residential environment to some extent and in the long run maintaining its appeal in contrast to other working class suburbs where industry and housing mixed chaotically. The major industries were the Lincoln Mill established on eighteen acres and employing 1,500 by 1922, Andersons Textile Factory and an agricultural implement works. Several smaller clothing and textile works, foundaries and metal working establishments moved to the area.

Naturally, this attracted a residential settlement nearby, close to the Railway Station that eventually became known as Batman, despite efforts by the Mill owners to have it called Lincolnsville. Overall, however, the area retained a predominantly residential character.

Further tram routes were established in the early 1920's and the route through Brunswick along Melville Road soon opened up West Coburg, where the War Service Homes Department purchased seventy-seven acres south of Ball Street and west of Melville Road and erected 450 homes for Returned Servicemen as a 'model settlement':

The homes ranging in cost from £500-£700 will be designed on the lines of modern town and housing conditions, and will be reticulated and fitted with gas, electric light and sewerage. A repetition of the same type of house will be avoided and the frontages will be varied to suit the conditions.

The outlook for Coburg in 1920 was declared 'optimistic':

the building registrations since the close of the financial year have established a record which has caused the Council to take a very cheery view of the future,

and in 1922 the district was proclaimed a City:

---

4 Coburg City Council City of Coburg Centenary 1875-1975 copy in possession of writer.

5 Herald, 22 January 1920

6 ibid.
Sixty years ago Coburg was a bush outpost, with a farming population of 250 persons, its green lanes intersecting Sydney Road, along which bullock teams toiled laboriously and frequently became bogged. Today electric trams run where bullocks strained at their yokes; instead of isolated little homesteads surrounded by crops are to be seen rows on rows of modern villas, in which are housed Coburg's 20,000 or more inhabitants.  

Progress was not however, making Coburg an unattractive suburb, quite considerable acreage had been set aside as parks and reserves. Bell Street was a 'two-chain road fringed with elms and wattles', and as the Argus noted:

the policy of planting the streets with trees has been a feature of the municipal enterprise of Coburg, and it has not gone unremarked. One American Journal referred to Coburg as a model of tree planting.

Unfortunately a newer, harsher view of 'progress' stripped the City of most of these trees in the early 1960's.

Apart from the trees, the urban landscape which developed in the inter-war years was one of modest, weatherboard houses, by and large of a simplified 'Californian Bungalow' style, occasionally relieved by some of the more florid 'Spanish Mission' style. Largely, building materials were determined by economic considerations, but it was generally believed in the district that weatherboard could better withstand the shifts of the volcanic bedrock. Moreover, the lighter foundations of timber houses reduced the cost of dealing with the rock which protrudes very close to the surface in many parts. It was not until after World War Two that brick veneer houses began to appear in any numbers.

There was little pretentiousness, the houses built between the wars are

7 Argus, 28 March 1922
9 Argus, 28 March 1922
most remarkable for their plainness though David Martin detected in:

the weatherboard houses with their crazy little
turrets, the ridiculously impractical letter
boxes squeezed among the clipped hedges, the
thousand and one ways in which men and women
defying anonymity strive to imprint their.
individuality upon an outwardly uniform envir-
onment. There is pathos in that, but also courage.

The city slowed almost to a standstill in the depression and throughout
the 1930's, before it entered the second period of major expansion after
the second world war during which most of the remaining vacant land was
built on and further industrial development took place with the estab-
ishment of factories by Kodak, Godson, Seafoam and Armitage.

Significant for the Labor vote was a large Housing Commission development
in the north east of the city commenced after the war, and the large
influx of migrants into the district in the period does not appear to
have significantly altered the voting patterns.

(ii) Coburg - A Social Profile

I.T. Saunders has suggested that 'the purpose of the social
profile' is to highlight rather than catalogue the characteristics of
the community" and in this Appendix the intention is to provide
some insight into the most notable characteristics of the population
in Coburg between the two world wars based on the census figures for
the years 1921, 1933 and to a lesser extent 1947. It falls into two
parts, the first provides a description of the population in terms of age,
sex, marital status, religion and place of birth, the second considers
Coburg as a working class suburb in terms of employment by industry,
occupational status, education and housing.

10 D. MARTIN op.cit.
    Age, 28 January 1967
    Review, Vol. 25 No.1 1960 p 76
12 All statistics in this section are based on Australia, Census of
    Population and Dwellings Australian Bureau of Statistics Canberra
    1921, 1933, 1947
One of the most striking features of the Coburg population as revealed by an examination of the Census statistics for Coburg in 1921 in comparison with the total 'Cities, Towns and Boroughs' (TCTB—an approximation for urbanised Victoria and therefore for Melbourne) is the youth of the population. A particularly high proportion of the population was in the 0-9 (22% of 19%) and 20-29 age groups (9.8% of 9.0%) while there was a low proportion aged over forty. Obviously Coburg was being settled by young married couples with children. This hypothesis is further supported by the higher masculinity ratio in Coburg (97.7%) in comparison with TCTB (87.9%) indicating that while in the general community the number of males significantly exceeded the number of females, in Coburg the numbers of each sex were almost equal. The marriage rate for females in Coburg was also higher in Coburg (38.7%) than (TCTB 36.4%).

16% of Coburg's population were foreign born (TCTB 14%), but virtually all immigrants were from the United Kingdom. In comparison with TCTB these people had not been resident in Australia for as many years, but this is consistent with the general youthfulness of Coburg's population. Nevertheless 47.8% of males and 40.7% of females had been resident in Australia for more than fifteen years. (TCTB 56%). A further third had been resident for 5-10 years, but more than 11% of females had arrived in the previous five years compared with only 7% for TCTB.

As regards religious affiliation, there is only one variation of any significance from TCTB in that Coburg had a slightly higher proportion of Methodists (13.5% of 11.5%) and a correspondingly lower proportion of Anglicans (39% of 41%). Approximately 21% of the population were Roman Catholic and 13.5% Presbyterian.
In summary the population of Coburg in 1921 was protestant and native born, with the majority of immigrants from the United Kingdom.

1933

Between 1921 and 1933 the population of Coburg more than doubled from 18,114 to 38,118 and the number of dwellings grew at an even faster rate indicating substantial in-migration which super-imposed a new pattern on the age structure, evident in 1921 and by comparing the expected age structure for 1933 had the population simply aged with the actual age structure it is possible to suggest the age structure of the in-coming population. As would be expected the bulge created by the number aged 25-29 in 1931 formed a corresponding bulge in the 35-39 age group in 1933, but many of their children have apparently left Coburg as the total in the 15-19 age group had levelled out to approximately the same as that for TCB. The proportion aged 10-14 (9.5% of 8.6%) and particularly 5-9 (10.2% of 8.4%) was high, while a further bulge has appeared in the 30-34 age group (8.6% of 7.5%) the proportion in the 25-29 age group has fallen from 9.8% to 8%.

Associated with this was a fall in the proportion aged 0-5, but it was also part of an overall decline in the birth rate throughout Victoria during the depression. Even so the proportion in this age group remained higher than for TCB (9% of 7.2%).

The proportion of foreign born in Coburg fell between 1921 and 1933 from 15.8% to 13.6% and this compares with a similar fall in TCB (14.4% to 12.6%). As a consequence the proportion born in the United Kingdom in Coburg fell from 14.1% in 1921 to 12.5% in 1933, whilst the proportion born in European countries such as Greece increased slightly. Length of residence data was not collected in the 1933 Census.
The slight variation in religious affiliation between Coburg and TCFB noted in 1921 had disappeared by 1933.

1947

1947 is well beyond the period covered by this thesis and the statistics gathered for this Census had little relevance to the period 1933 to 1940. Coburg entered a new growth phase in the immediate post-war period and the population was almost 50,000 by 1947 with a high proportion in the 20-30 (8.5%) and 0-4 (10.4%) age groups - almost a repetition of the 1921 pattern. The proportion of native born however peaked in this Census at 92% just before the influx of European born immigrants (in 1954 the proportion of foreign born was back to 1921 levels (16%), though Europeans - principally Polish and Italian were more substantially represented. Overall, however, despite rapid growth, the essential characteristics of Coburg's population remained stable throughout the period of this study.

A Working Class Suburb

At the simplest level, the 'social class' of a suburb can be judged by considering the associated characteristics of proportion of wage earners, level of income, employment according to industry and standard of housing. Level of income and education are also important, but the Census statistics on education in 1921 and 1933 relate only to type of school attended and level of income statistics were only collected in 1933. All of these variables are considered in so far as satisfactory data is available, and some comparative data is included.

A distinction between middle and working class is frequently made in terms of employment. The middle class is seen as white-collar salary earners employed in professional, administrative, or higher technical positions. These occupations demand higher levels of education which in itself rep-
represents an important variable in determining socio-economic status. A study of the social ranking of Melbourne suburbs carried out by Jones ranked 133 suburbs according to various socio-economic status (SES) variables, mainly related to occupational status and employment by industry but taking some account of education and housing. Coburg was classified at the lower end of the scale but its SES ranking was higher than that of Richmond or Brunswick. Jones' ranking for Brighton, Brunswick, Coburg, Hawthorn and Richmond was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suburb</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brighton</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brunswick</td>
<td>119,103,80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coburg</td>
<td>87,92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawthorn</td>
<td>45,46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richmond</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Occupational Status

1921

In 1921 the workforce participation rate in Coburg was relatively low. For example only 59% of males were employed compared with 65% in TCE. This was presumably a consequence of the youth of Coburg's population. 20% of females in Coburg were employed in 1921 and this percentage remained remarkably stable for the whole period 1921-1947. The female participation rate in 1921 for TCE was about 23%. 80% of Coburg's male workforce were employees in 1921 compared with 74% in TCE highlighting the working class nature of the suburb. Brunswick was much the same with 79% of males employed, however when the proportion of employers in the workforce in these suburbs (Coburg 4.6% Brunswick 4.9%) is compared with that of Brighton (12.7%) the very clear distinction between a working class and an upper middle class suburb is underscored.

13 F. LANCASTER JONES "A Social Ranking of Melbourne Suburbs". Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology Vol. 3 No.2 October 1967

14 Ibid. Where there is more than one ranking, this indicates an area within the Local Government area e.g. the part of Coburg known as Pascoe Vale has a higher SES ranking than that known as Coburg.
1933

The position had changed little by 1933, though the proportion of unemployed males had grown from 6.5% of the workforce in 1921 to 22.6% in 1933, but this was lower than in both Brunswick (26.7%) and TC6B (25%). The great majority gave 'Scarcity of Work' as the cause of unemployment.

1947

By 1947 the level of unemployment had fallen to the rates that were to become typical of the post-war period until 1973 and the percentage of employed males had risen to 90% compared with about 84% for TC6B.

Employment by Industry

In terms of employment structure Coburg was clearly a working class suburb in that a high proportion were employed in 'manufacturing' and lower proportion in 'professional and public administration' and 'commerce and finance' and this remains constant for all three Census years under consideration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDUSTRY</th>
<th>1921 Coburg</th>
<th>1921 TC6B</th>
<th>1933 Coburg</th>
<th>1933 TC6B</th>
<th>1947 Coburg</th>
<th>1947 TC6B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>M 43.1</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>40.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F 58.7</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce and Finance</td>
<td>M 18.9</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F 15.8</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Administration</td>
<td>M 9.2</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Professional</td>
<td>F 11.7</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>20.1</td>
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</table>

Another striking feature of Coburg's employment structure in 1921 was the variation between the female employment structure of Coburg and that of TC6B. In Coburg almost 60% of employed females worked in 'manufacturing'
and only 11.8% in 'domestic service' compared to 40% and 24.9% in TCTB. Employment of Coburg's women in 'commerce and finance' and 'professional and public administration' was also low. Coburg's women worked in factories and shops for the homes of the wealthy were geographically removed. It seems reasonable to speculate that this different work experience may have had political as well as social ramifications.

The proportion employed in 'manufacturing' in Coburg however, was not as high as that in Brunswick and it is interesting to compare the employment structure of the two municipalities for 1921 and 1933 in three key industries.

**TABLE A 2**

**EMPLOYMENT IN COBURG AND BRUNSWICK FOR 1921 AND 1933 COMPARED**

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<th>INDUSTRY</th>
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<th>1921 Coburg</th>
<th>1933 Brunswick</th>
<th>1933 Coburg</th>
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</tr>
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<td>Professional</td>
<td>F  7.7</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>8.1</td>
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Coburg had a lower proportion employed in 'manufacturing' and a higher proportion in 'public administration and professional' than Brunswick with the largest difference occurring for both males and females in 'public administration and professional'. These differences are however minor when compared with TCTB but they do help to explain perhaps the smaller Labor majorities in Coburg. These figures also serve to emphasise the fact that Coburg became more working class over the period 1921 to 1933 which is
consistent with the strengthening Labor vote in the area.

The employment structure is remarkably stable for a suburb undergoing such rapid population growth between 1921 and 1947. The main change between 1921 and 1933 was the decline of the rural sector and increase in the proportion employed in the building industry — a predictable trend in a fast-growing suburb. Between 1933 and 1947 the employment structure largely follows the trend in TCB with an expansion in manufacturing and the public/professional sector and some contraction in 'commerce and finance'.

Education

It is not possible to judge the comparative level of skill of the population since level of skill data was not collected in 1921 or 1933. The Census did, however, take note of those at school at the time which can provide some indication of the degree of voluntary education being undertaken by the youth of Coburg. While 47% of those under 21 were attending school in TCB only 44% of those in Coburg were so doing which is similar to the figures for Brunswick.

The situation was much the same in 1933, but with more data available it is interesting to note the attendance at university in the three suburbs, Coburg, Brunswick and Brighton. Brighton had almost twice as many as Coburg even though the numbers in the relevant age were slightly smaller. The number for Coburg was however higher than for Brunswick.

Income

The extremely important indicator of socio-economic class, income, is available for 1933. The most striking contrast between the suburbs of Coburg, Brunswick and Brighton was in the proportion of males earning above £260 p.a. (£5 per week) as can be seen in the table below:
This is the only year in the period under consideration for which income figures were available and they indicate that while Coburg incomes were low they were slightly higher than in Brunswick. This is consistent with the slightly higher proportion in Coburg employed in the tertiary sector.

Housing

1921

Coburg's housing stock in 1921 was comprised almost entirely of separate houses (95% of TCTB: 90%) 76% of these were timber clad compared with 56% for TCTB. Correspondingly the proportion of brick homes was low (19% of 40%). The percentage of home ownership in Coburg was high compared to TCTB with 63% of houses being either owner/occupied or purchasing the house in which the lived (31% owner, 32% purchasing) whereas in TCTB, while the number of owners is much the same 32%, only 15% are purchasing. (47% owner/purchaser). 34% of Coburg's population was living in rented accommodation compared with 53% in TCTB, but the average cost of this accommodation was much the same.

A consideration of the size of the housing stock reveals that Coburg had less variety than TCTB. 42% of dwellings had five rooms, and 83% had 4-6 rooms. Only 7% of Coburg's houses had 7 or more rooms compared with 17% in TCTB. As to the average number of inmates, Coburg only differed from TCTB at the two extremes, having 3% fewer persons living alone and 2% more houses occupied by eight or more persons. (10% - TCTB 8%). 55% of the houses had an average number of 3 to 5 inmates.

1933 and 1947

It has already been noted that the period 1921 to 1933 was one of considerable growth for Coburg. Some 5,500 houses were built making...
total of just over 9,000 but in spite of this rapid growth the SES characteristics of the population did not greatly alter. By and large, the same is true of the housing stock, though there were some interesting changes. Timber became a more popular form of outer-cladding with the proportion increasing from 76% in 1921 to 82% in 1933. The houses tended to be of a more uniform size with the proportion of both large and small houses decreasing and those of four or five rooms increasing. The average number of rooms rose from 5.02% to 5.23% and at the same time the occupancy rate fell from 4.62% to 4.31% indicating that the standard of housing measured in this very crude manner improved over the period. In fact, it would appear that home buyers were happy to use a cheaper form of outer cladding if it enabled them to increase the size of the house.

As regards the home ownership rate it would appear that the depression took its toll of those buying their own house as it fell from 63% to 60%. This had recovered by 1947 to 64%.

The growth of the housing stock between 1933 and 1947 was much slower than in the earlier period but it continued to be of relatively small, modest construction, though the proportion with brick outer-cladding rose and the average number of rooms fell. As the occupancy rate also continued to fall this should not be construed as a reduction in housing standards - an indicator of improved housing afforded by increased living standards which followed community wide trends.

Conclusion

Coburg in the years between the wars was by and large a 'working class' suburb with the majority of breadwinners employed in manufacturing or other similar blue collar occupations. The community was relatively homogenous both in terms of socio-economic status, age and marital status.
Its working class characteristics were not, however, quite as strong as Brunswick, particularly in 1921, and this partly explains the smaller Labor majorities in Coburg compared with Brunswick, and to a lesser extent, the success at municipal elections.
(i) **VOTING IN FEDERAL ELECTIONS RELEVANT TO COBURG 1910-1955**

The following represents percentage votes recorded for candidates in the federal electorate of which Coburg formed a part and the percentage vote recorded in the subdivision or subdivisions that coincided with Coburg for the elections held between 1910 and 1955.

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<th>YEAR</th>
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<th>OTHER</th>
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1 The percentages for the total electorate are from C.A. Hughes and B.B. Graham, Voting for the Australian House of Representatives, 1901-1964, Canberra, 1974.

Those for the sub-divisions are based on voting figures held by the Australian Electoral Office, corner La Trobe Street and Victoria Street, Melbourne.
(ii) VOTING IN THE VICTORIAN LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS RELEVANT TO COBURG 1911-1967

The following presents percentage votes recorded for candidates in the Victorian Legislative Assembly seat of Essendon of which Coburg formed a part until 1926 when the electorate of Coburg, roughly coterminous with the City's boundaries was created.

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<th>ALP</th>
<th>Independent</th>
<th>Other</th>
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<td>C. Mutton</td>
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<td>A. Bateman</td>
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<td>53.59</td>
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<td>D. Abernathy</td>
<td>C. Mutton</td>
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<td>1958</td>
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<td>C. Mutton</td>
<td>K. O'Dea (DLP)</td>
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<td>22.55</td>
<td>62.44</td>
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1964 | J. Knight | C. Mutton | J. Hardy (DLP) |
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1967 | C. Symons | W. Brown | J. Mutton | J. Hardy (DLP) |
<table>
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<td>24.59</td>
<td>39.83</td>
<td>28.84</td>
<td>14.74</td>
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</table>

Final Count | 41.59 | 50.37 |

*In this election the 'New Executive' did not endorse a candidate for Cobury, thus tacitly endorsing C. Mutton, and K. Hayes stood as the representative of the 'old' (Barry-Coleman) Executive which eventually became the DLP.

2 Based on voting figures held by the State Electoral Officer Old Treasury Building Melbourne and C. A. Hughes and B. D. Graham Voting for the Victorian Legislative Assembly 1890-1964 Canberra 1975
### APPENDIX C

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>President</th>
<th>V. President</th>
<th>Secretary</th>
<th>Ass. Secretary</th>
<th>Treasurer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>Stewart</td>
<td>De Chene</td>
<td>Heneberry</td>
<td>L. Nicholls</td>
<td>Plunkett</td>
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<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Smallman</td>
<td>Walker</td>
<td>Nicholls</td>
<td>Greig</td>
<td>Evendon</td>
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<td>1921</td>
<td>De Chene</td>
<td>Heneberry</td>
<td>Evendon</td>
<td>De Chene</td>
<td>Northausen</td>
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<td>1922</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>Williams</td>
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<td>Pile</td>
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<td>1924</td>
<td>McGowan</td>
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<td>Pile</td>
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<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>Harris</td>
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<td>Williams</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Callaghan</td>
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<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>Mrs. Johnson</td>
<td>Callaghan</td>
<td>Mrs. Callaghan</td>
<td></td>
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<td>1930</td>
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<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>Callaghan</td>
<td>W. Brown/ A. Keane</td>
<td>Miss Grant</td>
<td>A. Keane</td>
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<td>1932</td>
<td>Johnson</td>
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<td>Johnson</td>
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<td>1933</td>
<td>Duthie</td>
<td>Applegate</td>
<td>Trenoweth</td>
<td>Callaghan</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Goff</td>
<td>McMahon</td>
<td>A. Keane</td>
<td>Henderson</td>
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<td>1936</td>
<td>Trenoweth</td>
<td>Trenoweth</td>
<td>Mrs. Hintze</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>1938</td>
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<td>F. Keane</td>
<td>Williams</td>
<td>H. Nicholls</td>
<td>A. Wilson</td>
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<td>1939</td>
<td>Gleeson</td>
<td>Gleeson</td>
<td>Gleeson</td>
<td>A. Wilson</td>
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</table>
(continued) 1935 1936 1937 1938
SECRETARY Trenoweth Trenoweth O'Neill V. Levi
ASS. SECRETARY Lacey Henderson Wilson A. Chapman
TREASURER Mrs. Murphy Mrs. Murphy Mrs. Murphy Mrs. Murphy

1939 1940
PRESIDENT G. Henderson H. Nicholls
V. PRESIDENT V. Levi
SECRETARY V. Levi
ASS. SECRETARY
TREASURER Mrs. Connell

(11) MEMBERSHIP STATISTICS OF THE COBURG ALP BRANCH 1919-1939

The recording of the number of branch members was haphazard
and the absence of the Minute Books for several years make it even more
difficult to provide any definitive statistics on the size of the branch.

Even where yearly totals are available it is not possible to ascertain the
proportion of new members to lapsed members. The names of new members nominated
into the branch were recorded consistently and (a) below provides yearly totals
of new members. From 1931 the branch Account Book listed the total yearly
membership on the value of membership 'tickets' sold and (b) sets out those
statistics.

(a) New Nominations

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<thead>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>1919</th>
<th>1920</th>
<th>1921</th>
<th>1922</th>
<th>1923</th>
<th>1924</th>
<th>1925</th>
<th>1926</th>
<th>1927</th>
<th>1928</th>
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<th>1931</th>
<th>1932</th>
<th>1933</th>
<th>1934</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>66</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>15(to 27 March)</td>
<td>no Minutes available</td>
<td>1925</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>no Minutes available</td>
<td>1936</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>31</td>
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</table>
(b) **Total Yearly Membership 1931-1939**

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Value</th>
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<td>1931</td>
<td>75</td>
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<td>115</td>
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<td>71</td>
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<td>55</td>
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<td>1934</td>
<td>66</td>
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<td>1935</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>68</td>
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<td>1936</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>310</td>
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<td>1937</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>579</td>
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<tr>
<td>1939 (Jan)</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>599</td>
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(iii) **LENGTH OF ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN BRANCH LIFE**

The incompleteness of branch membership records and lack of information regarding attendance at meetings makes it difficult to trace the length of active participation of any more than branch officials.

The period of holding office, obviously represents only the minimum period of active involvement in branch affairs. Such information on length of participation in branch activities as could be gathered is presented below.

K. NICHOLLS: pre World War I until 1940 with a lapse 1931-1937
A.C. HINTZE: 1929-1940
T. GLEESON: 1938-1940
J. HAY: early 1920's to 1940
K.J. DUGGAN: 1920-1934 (death)
G. McCANN: 1921-1931 (death)
A. DE CHENE: 1912-1936
L. NICHOLLS: 1920-1930
W. LACEY: 1921-1936
W. CARROLL: 1925-1940
A. KEANE: 1920-1934
MCKENNA: 1920-1940
O'SHEA: 1920-1930's
E. WILLIAMS: 1924-1940
G.B. HENDERSON: 1934-1940
A. CAROZZI: 1929-1940
M. GRANT: 1931-1940
W. CALLAGHAN: 1926-1938 (transferred)
MRS. CALLAGHAN 1928-1935
MRS. MURPHY 1929-1938
MR. & MRS. APPLEGATE 1931-1938
G. R. TRENOWETH 1929-1940*
A. JOHNSON 1936-1938
P. BINMORE 1931-1930's
A. WILSON 1935-1940
G. WILDMAN 1936-1940*
W.S. BROWN 1926-1940*
E. CHRISTIE 1925-1932 (death)
H. DOWSON 1919-1931
F. BLOGAN 1932-1940*
A. LEWIS 1935-1940*
MR. & MRS. MENDOZA 1925-1936

* remained active in Coburg Labor politics either in the official ALP or the Blackburn and Walton Labor Supporters Committee after 1940, in most cases well into the 1950's. Arthur Lewis was still attending Coburg ALP branch meetings in the late 1960's.

(iv) OCCUPATIONS OF BRANCH MEMBERS

It would have been of great interest to compare the occupations of branch members with those of the ALP membership and the Coburg community in general, but the information was not available with the exception of two brief periods when the occupations, or union of newly nominated members were listed. This information is presented in (a) below while (b) lists the occupation or union of leading branch personalities where this was known.

(a) 9 December 1918 - 22 December 1919

2 Carters
2 Tramway employees
6 Labourers
3 Municipal employees
2 Lino (sic) attendants
2 Railway employees
Driver
Stevedore
Chairmaker
Bootmaker
Textile worker
Printer
Engineer

2 Iron/Sheetmetal workers
3 Carpenters
5 Clerks
2 Civil Servants
5 Wardens
Gatehouse Keeper
Confectioner
Cabinet Maker
Plumber
Storeman
Traveller
Fruiterer
Gentleman
1931 (March, August and November)

Clerk (2)  
AWU (2)  
Printer  

1932 – mid 1933

January/February

Merchant Service  
Bookmakers  
Furnishing Trades  

April – July 1933

Clothing trades  
Bootmakers (2)  
Tramways (6)  
 Quarry Worker  
Carpenters (3)  
Clerks  
Public Servant  
Grocer  
Storemen and Packers  
Barber  
Retired (2)  
Sheet Metal Workers

V OCCUPATIONS OF LEADING BRANCH PERSONALITIES

A.W. Applegate  
D. Burrows  
P. Bimber  
W. Brown  
A. Carozzi  
L. Christie  
P.W. Cook  
A. Dodd  
E.J. Duggan  
A. De Cheno  
G.E. Brandon  
A. Coggy  
H. Greatorex  
T. Gleeson  
Mrs. Higgins  
J. Hay  
R. Homfield  
D. Henchberry  
A. Johnson  
P. Keane  
A.C. Keane  
A. Lewis  
J. Murphy  
G. McGowan  
J. MchShan  
G. Mulander  
McIntyre

Ironmoulder  
Carter

Bricklayers  
Carters and Drivers

Locomotive Engineer (2)  
Unemployed (5)  
Machinists  
Builders' Labourer (3)  
Carters and Drivers  
AWU  
AWU (2)  
Bus Driver  
Textile (3)  
Bricklayer  
Carrier

ex-Indian Army  
Labourer  
Builder  
Furnishing Trades  
Meat Inspector  
Tramways  
Waterside Workers  
Butcher  
 Plumbers  
Cigar Maker  
Textile Worker  
Engineer  
AWU  
AWU  
Invalid Pensioner  
Bricklayers  
AWU  
VRU  
Waterside Workers  
Cooper  
Plumber/Musician  
Carters and Drivers  
Farrier/Blacksmiths  
Journalist/Union official  
Carpenters  
Tramways  
Bakers
J. McAdam
C. Mutton
A.J.V. Miller
L. Nicholls
H. Nicholls
F. Northam
F. Randles
J.J. Roberts
T. Strangman
G. Saunders
L. Stafford
E. Sewall
E. Stewart
G. Traneweth
A. Wilson
G. Wildman
S. Williams
T. Ormack

Grocer
Ironworker/Poultry Farmer
ARU
Clerk
Postman
Bootmaker
ARU
Ironmoulders
Clerks
Accountant
Clerk
Estate Agent
Furnishing Trades
Builder
ARU
FSW
Salesman
ARU
## APPENDIX D

**Nominees for the Coburg by-election 1940**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>UNION</th>
<th>ALP BRANCH</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John S. Brandon</td>
<td>ASU</td>
<td>Northcote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W.S. Brown</td>
<td>Furnishing Trades</td>
<td>Coburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R.A. Cameron</td>
<td></td>
<td>Glen Iris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.J. Carozzi</td>
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<td>Coburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.F. Cummins</td>
<td></td>
<td>Glen Iris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.P. Daly</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>H.E. Derby</td>
<td>Municipal Employees</td>
<td>North Carlton</td>
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<tr>
<td>A. Dodds</td>
<td>Ironmongers</td>
<td>North Carlton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. Hay</td>
<td>Bricklayers</td>
<td>North Essendon</td>
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<tr>
<td>A.B. Henderson</td>
<td>Carpenters</td>
<td>West Coburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Keady</td>
<td>Vehicle Builders</td>
<td>Coburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank Keane (Jnr.)</td>
<td>Ironmongers</td>
<td>North Coburg</td>
</tr>
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<td>A.J.V. Miller</td>
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<td>Coburg</td>
</tr>
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<td>N. Moloney</td>
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<td>C. Matton</td>
<td>Furnishing Trades</td>
<td>West Coburg</td>
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<tr>
<td>G.P. Piora</td>
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<td>Pawlet</td>
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<td>J.J. Roberts</td>
<td></td>
<td>Brunswick</td>
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<tr>
<td>J. Satchell</td>
<td>Municipal Officers</td>
<td>South Coburg</td>
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<tr>
<td>G.R. Saunders</td>
<td>Clerks</td>
<td>South Coburg</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

---

1. VCE Minutes, 31 May 1940
APPENDIX II
APPENDIX E

COBURG PEOPLE IN THE VSP 1928-1931

E. Blake
Mrs. R. Dodds
C.W. Green*
T.P. Holloway and family*
Mr. and Mrs. J. Holt
R.E. McBreachy*
Mr. and Mrs. G. Meagher*
E.C. Owen*
Mrs. Rickard
Mr. and Mrs. A.E. Riddell*
W.G. Smallman*
Mrs. Adela Walsh
H. Achecon

* Members of the Coburg ALP branch also, i.e. nominated 1918-1922 or mentioned in minutes. Others may also have been active. In addition, the VSP's most active period pre-dates this card index.

1 from "Card Index to Financial Members of the VSP 1918-1931"
MS 564 National Library of Australia
BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. MANUSCRIPT AND UNPUBLISHED MATERIAL.

"Minutes and Records of the Coburg Branch of the ALP" 1918-1937
Riley Collection MS 759 Series 2 Box 1 (9 Volumes)
National Library of Australia


"Minutes of the Coburg City Council" 1913-1931
Coburg Town Hall

L. BARNES "Maurice Blackburn"
Australian National University Archives

P.W. EGGLESTON "Confidential Notes Part II. The Victorian Parliament as I Knew It". Menzies Library Australian National University

A.F. HOWELLS "Against the Stream" 2 volume typed MS in the
La Trobe Library Victoria.

"Coburg - Social History" Vertical File,
Coburg Municipal Library.

Letters to the Author

H. Koppel 4 June 1977
E. Hearne 19 June 1977
L. Barnes 9 December 1977

THESIS

D.W. RAMSON "The Organisation of the ALP 1916-41" PhD 1954
University of Melbourne

I. WILSON "A Study of Two Branches of the ALP" Fourth Year Thesis 1956, Department of History University of Melbourne
Private Collections

Mrs. L. Hamilton, Hobart

personal correspondence, newspaper clippings, notes and papers of Maurice and Doris Blackburn

J. Hay, Coburg

letters, newspaper clippings, pamphlets etc. relating to Jack Hay and the Coburg ALP branch

M. Keady, Coburg

Newspaper clippings and pamphlets

S. Merrifield

Documents, letters, pamphlets and other unpublished material relating to the Labour Movement

C. Mutton

Newspaper clippings, pamphlets, letters and memorabilia.

II OFFICIAL PUBLICATIONS

AUSTRALIA

Parliamentary Debates House of Representatives, Canberra 1946

Census of Population and Dwellings
Australian Bureau of Statistics 1921, 1933, 1947

VICTORIA

Parliamentary Debates Legislative Assembly, Melbourne 1924-1940

Electoral Returns 1910-1967
III NEWSPAPERS

**Age**

*Argus*

*Advocate*

*Brunswick and Coburg Leader*

*Brunswick and Coburg Gazette*

*Brunswick Guardian*

*Brunswick and Coburg Star*

*Baumg Advertiser*

*Coburg and Moorabbin Courier*

*Coburg Citizen*

A monthly paper published irregularly from 1941 by the Coburg branches of the ALP. Individual pre 1955 copies in various private collections, 1947-1949 held by National Library of Australia and 1955-1967 in the possession of G. HRYANT MHR.

*Borondon Gazette*

*Herald*

IV INTERVIEWS

Mr. Blackburn

eldest son of M.M. Blackburn 30 August 1977

A.T. Bradney

long-time associate of M.M. Blackburn 23 February 1977

J. Brosnan

Secretary DMP 15 April 1976

Son W.W.C. Brown

active in Coburg or West Coburg


Gordon Bryant MHR

Member for Wills since 1955 15 June 1976

M. Dodds

daughter Frank Keane active in branch throughout 1920's to mid 1930's. Her husband was also active in the branch and the son of an active VSF member 23 April 1975

R. Gibson

Secretary of the CPA and the VCSWFP in the 1930's 1 March 1978
L. Hamilton
daughter M.A. Blackburn

25 & 26 March 1977
4-9 May 1977

P. Hanks
see pp 56-57

22 June 1977

W. Herman
Town Clerk Coburg

28 June 1976

Mrs. Harsant
associated closely with
the Esperantists in the
district

12 December 1977

J. Hay
son of Jock Hay and
himself an active branch member

15 July 1976

G. Heffy
foundation member Campion
Society

16 July 1975

K. Jepson
son of C. Jepson leading
branch activist 1940's and
1950's

20 July 1976

S. Johns
active member of CPA in
Coburg 1930's

20 April 1976

M. Keady
leading branch activist
from 1937 (mainly associated
with North Coburg) Member of
Coburg Council 1946-1955

13 April 1976

A.C. Keane
younger son of Frank Keane
active in Coburg branch 1920's
and 1930's.

5 August 1976

C. Koutsokheras
Secretary Coburg ALP branch
1975-1976

3 June 1976

P and F. Martin
Mrs. Martin's family, the
Aamensons, came to Coburg in the
ey early 1920's and were active
Socialists and involved with
Labor circles. Her uncle Albert
McNalty was a leading figure in
the Trade Union Movement and active
in Coburg. Mr. Martin came to
the district later and both were
particularly active after 1955
W. and Mrs. McClellan
active in ALP circles 1940's and 1950's

S. Merrifield
former MLA and MLC for the Essendon district

C. Mutton
MLA Coburg 1940 - 67

J. Mutton
MLA Coburg 1967 - son Charles Mutton

J. Murphy
active in Coburg ALP branch 1920's

E.W. Peters
leading Brunswick activist from the 1920's and member of Victorian Central Executive from early 1930's. Former MR Burke/Scullin

T. Unmack
branch activist from 1937

G. Wildman
active in Coburg ALP branch from 1936, leading figure in Blackburn and Mutton group

A. Nilson
active in Coburg ALP from 1935 and leading figure in Blackburn and Mutton group

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P. COLEMAN
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J. HOLMES
The Government of Victoria
Brisbane 1976

C.A. HUGHES AND B.C. GRAHAM
A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics 1890–1964
Canberra 1966
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
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<tr>
<td>C.A. Hughes and</td>
<td>Voting for the Australian House of Representatives 1901-1964</td>
<td>Canberra 1974</td>
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<tr>
<td>B.C. Graham</td>
<td>Voting for the Victorian Legislative Assembly 1890-1964</td>
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<td>A.F. Howells</td>
<td>&quot;Inside the Movement Against War and Fascism and the Writers' League&quot;</td>
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<td>Maurice Blackburn and the Struggle for Freedom</td>
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<td>R. Michels</td>
<td>Political Parties</td>
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The sources used in this thesis were not consistently available and varied in quality, affecting the depth of the study in some places and its perspective in others. The Minutes of the Coburg branch of the ALP were unavailable from April 1922 to December 1924, April 1926 to December 1927 or after April 1937. Furthermore, the quality varied considerably, though
only for one brief period (the latter part of 1933) were they poorly kept. For much of the early period the Minutes were little more than a list of the motions proposed, but by the end of the 1920's they began to include considerably more detail about branch discussions. In addition from the end of 1925 to the mid 1930's reports of branch meetings appeared regularly in Labor Call. These were often more elaborated than the Minutes themselves providing greater insight into branch thinking. It was the exceptionally detailed Minutes kept by G.R. Trenoweth from 1930-1932 incorporating long reports of branch discussions and the opinions of members that made the detailed study in Section VII possible.

The Minutes of the Victorian Central Executive and of Annual Conferences were available for the entire period, though some records such as Minutes or reports of Dispute Committee Hearings were not complete. These were little more than a record of decisions made and by the 1930's there was only a very brief description of the contents of letters sent into the Executive from the branches. It also appears that increasing amounts of correspondence were dealt with in a routine manner by the Secretary, and there were no correspondence or circular files available for this period.

Interviews with activists provided a most valuable source of both factual information, and interpretation and it was these people who had preserved most of the pamphlet and leaflet material that has been used in this study. It was not possible to trace many who were active in the 1920's but those who had been active in the 1930's proved an invaluable source. All those interviewed were able to recall events, and personalities in surprising detail and there were very few discrepancies between stories. It would not have been possible to untangle the complicated alliances enmities, and intrigues of the years 1937-1940 without the willing assistance of
participants and in so far as this study was concerned with the attitudes of individual members and the branch as a whole irrespective of its 'appropriateness' when considered in a wider context, their recollections and opinions were essential. Finally, not only did the interviews assist in personalising the rank and file who are so often through lack of suitable evidence, totally anonymous, but they provided much contextual and detailed background information about relations within the ALP at the time that was not available in existing studies, with the possible exception of L.J. Louis' study of _Trade Unions and the Depression 1930-1932_ in that their scope was much broader or their evidence taken from such impersonal sources as the Minutes of the Victorian CE.

The overall effect of this variation in availability and quality of sources on this thesis has been to alter the perspective in some places. Fundamentally the intention was to view the politicians and executives from the perspective of the branch. The period 1929-1933 was the richest in sources and therefore the study is most detailed as regards even quite minor shifts in the branch view of events around them, but in the period 1935 to 1937 despite the records, much of the significant activity of branch members was taking place outside the ALP thus reducing the amount of detail possible. In the years 1937-1940 the perspective shifts, since in the absence of the Minutes the branch must be judged by its actions from the 'outside' and a greater amount of inference was necessary.

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