

Maurice Blackburn and the Australian Labor  
Party, 1934 - 1943.  
A Study of Principle in Politics.

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MAURICE BLACKBURN  
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## INTRODUCTION

Considering that Maurice Blackburn never held any official position in the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party, the veneration which surrounded him, particularly after his death, is surprising. His fellow-parliamentarians always listened to his speeches with respect, and any criticisms of his remarks were almost invariably couched in courteous terms and prefaced by tributes to his sincerity and honesty. After he died in 1944, his memory received nothing but praise, and for several years annual pilgrimages to his grave were led by prominent citizens like Judge Foster and Judge Stretton. In 1946, when his widow was elected to his former seat of Bourke in Victoria, it seemed that Blackburn's electors wished to reinstate his memory after his defeat in the 1943 elections.

The consistently high regard in which Blackburn was held is the more surprising because he was expelled twice from what his United Australia Party friend, Archie Cameron, called "his temporal and spiritual home, the Labour Party,"<sup>1</sup> and was for the last two years of his political career an independent, and a critic of the Labor Government, sometimes causing it considerable embarrassment. Nevertheless, he maintained friends and admirers on both sides of the House of Representatives throughout his life.

1. Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, Volume 170, p.631.  
(Hereafter written as C.P.D., 170:631.)

The main reason for this esteem, for his expulsion from the Party, and also, probably, for his failure to achieve a more commanding position, was that he was seen by everyone as a man of principle. Those who most disagreed with his political views readily acknowledged this: Menzie\*s, for instance, said that "perhaps his most remarkable quality was his indomitable moral courage",<sup>2</sup> and Hasluck, writing about the Second World War, refers to Blackburn's "lifetime of political scrupulousness and intellectual integrity"<sup>3</sup>. John Curtin, with whom Blackburn disagreed most bitterly because he felt that Curtin had abandoned the principles of the Labor Party, said, apparently without a trace of irony,

He lived his ideals... He was... conscientious to a fault... He set a standard, and all of us were the better for endeavouring to live up to it.<sup>4</sup>

As a man of principle, with a gentleman's passionate solicitude for his honour, Blackburn naturally came into conflict with party discipline in the A.L.P., and it was his refusal to abandon what he believed to be right that led to his expulsion from the Party in 1935, and, after he had been readmitted in 1937, again in 1941. Whether he showed himself politically unwise in the <sup>degree of scrupulousness he</sup> defence of principle, will be one facet of the study of principle *displayed in the* in politics with which this paper is concerned. How much

2 C.P.D., 179:26

3 Paul Hasluck, The Government and the People, 1939-1941 (Canberra, 1952), p.175.

4 C.P.D., 179:25.

dedication to principle an individual politician can afford is one of the basic questions of party politics.

The fundamental cause for Maurice Blackburn's clash with his party was his attitude to war, which was determined by some of his most basic principles. To have a coherent policy on war involves several issues. In Labor politics, the theoretical basis, dealing with the causes and justification of wars and the position of the nation in the international system, has varied according to the emphasis that has been placed on international socialism, and Blackburn was always a dedicated international socialist. The more immediate issues of practical politics, such as defence and the domestic policy of a democracy in time of war, are concrete tests of a politician's and his party's devotion to peace and liberty. The preservation and enlargement of personal freedom was perhaps Blackburn's fundamental political aim, but as a result of the First World War, which he had seen threaten to eclipse civil liberties in Australia, he was led to advocate the cause of peace equally ardently. Thus by the end of World War One, Blackburn had developed an attitude to war based on international socialism and dedication to peace and liberty.

It was during his years in federal parliament which he entered in 1934, that Blackburn's political principles underwent their severest test, for during those years, 1934 to 1943,

attitudes to war were of the greatest importance. The rise of fascism tested the strength of pacifist principles, and led to a conflict between them and the desire to defend liberty against fascism. The socialist interpretation of the causes and justification of wars was challenged: if fascism was merely another form of imperialism and no worse than any other form, was it justifiable to defend British imperialism against it, or was the conflict between fascism and anti-fascism one of ideals? World War Two was an even greater test of the willingness of the defenders of liberty to forego liberty during wartime.

However, this is not merely a biographical account of one politician's attempt to reconcile his settled attitude to war with changing circumstances, because such a study of Maurice Blackburn inevitably develops into the larger issue of the A.L.P.'s attitude to war. This period is a test of A.L.P. principles too, since Blackburn's attitude to war was roughly that of the A.L.P. in the pre-1930 era: in fact, he had contributed much to the formulation of the A.L.P. platform on this subject in the post-World War One era. In his years in federal parliament, Blackburn was in effect the custodian of Labor's traditional policy on war, and his struggle to preserve his and the Party's principles was carried out not merely in the face of changing international circumstances but in the face of changing party attitudes. Thus this study of principle ~~is~~

in politics deals not only with one man, but with the question of how consistent the A.L.P.'s attitude to war has been, and therefore, considering the issues included under this topic, how fundamental international socialism, peace and liberty have been among the principles of the A.L.P.

In examining the extent of the A.L.P.'s commitment to principle on these issues during 1934-1943, it is necessary to see whether its attitude to war varied with changing international events, whether it was willing to sacrifice its principles on war to other interests which it regarded as more important, and whether it is possible to speak of the Labor Party as a whole in connection with this issue - i.e. were there differences of opinion between politicians and non-politicians, or between the various States?

Thus the study of principle in politics is carried out at several levels in this paper. At the broadest level is the question of the A.L.P.'s concern with certain principles connected with its attitude to war; at the level of individual/party relations is Maurice Blackburn's attempt to make his party retain its traditional principles, and the conflict between a man of principle and party discipline; and at the purely individual level is the concern of Blackburn to maintain deeply held principles which he finds difficult to reconcile with changing circumstances.



CHAPTER I.MAURICE BLACKBURN AND THE A.L.P. : THEIR VIEWS ON  
WAR BEFORE 1934.

To discover how large a part principle played in the attitudes to war of Maurice Blackburn and the A.L.P. between 1934 and 1943, it is first necessary to find whether they had any settled attitudes to war before 1934. In fact, both had evolved similar attitudes to war by 1934, centring around the devastating experience of the First World War.

## i

Before 1914, the issue of war did not loom large in the A.L.P.'s consideration of policy - not surprisingly, since Australia had never experienced a serious war, and the Party was absorbed in domestic affairs. But the Party's link with Australian nationalism at least caused a large part of it to be anti-imperialist and unwilling to be involved in European strife. In general, the A.L.P.'s interest in international affairs was negligible, but it proved its vague identification with international socialism by resolutions passed at the 1912 Interstate Conference:

That this Congress conveys its fraternal greetings to the Social Democratic party of Germany, and wishes the party every success at the elections in their fight for humanity.

That Conference recommend Parliament to make every effort not inconsistent with Australian National Defence to bring together the world's workers with the object of promoting international peace.

That conference affirms the principle of (a) International Arbitration as opposed to war; and (b) Universal decrease of armaments, with invitation to other nations to co-operate along the same lines.<sup>1</sup>

However, Labor politicians differed from the rest of the Party in seeking a more popular, pro-British Empire line. In 1902 only six Labor members of the House of Representatives voted against the Government's resolution supporting the British in the Boer War and approving a volunteer force from Australia.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the A.L.P. was in office federally for several years during this period, and therefore faced practical decisions related to war. It adopted a realistic defence policy including compulsory military service for home defence, which was approved by the 1908 Commonwealth Conference.<sup>3</sup>

At the outbreak of war in 1914, a division on attitudes to the war was perceptible between Labor politicians and the extra-parliamentary Party, and even amongst the politicians themselves. Many non-parliamentarians showed themselves, through Labor newspapers, to be unenthusiastic supporters of the war, wary lest the working class lose any of its hard-won rights during war-time, and resentful of the "Jingoistic" patriotism of non-Labor people who were stealing the limelight.<sup>4</sup> In federal parliament, the fact that

1 Victorian A.L.P. Constitution, 1914, pp.31-2.

2 C.P.D., 3:3552.

3 Report, Fourth Commonwealth Conference, 1908, pp.16-20.

4 See, for instance, the Victorian Labor Call of 13 August, 1914.

Labor gained office in October 1914 made it difficult for Labor politicians to criticize the war effort even if they had wished, for Andrew Fisher, W.M. Hughes and other leaders were whole-hearted supporters of the war and willing to sacrifice "the last man and the last shilling". But even in October 1914 when the Grant to Belgium was introduced, signs of dissent were obvious in the ranks. Frank Anstey, who was the first M.H.R. to come out publicly against the war, declared that the war "is the outcome and the product of the capitalistic system, and all we do is to vote £100,000 to the King of the Congos"<sup>5</sup>.

Also in October 1914, the Labor Government introduced the Crimes Act and the War Precautions Act, which gave the government sweeping powers, especially through the regulations issued under the latter act. Yet no voice, Labor or otherwise, was raised in parliament when these acts were carried.

Nevertheless, by 1915 the Party in general was growing restive under the oppressive measures of the Labor Government and its neglect of domestic reforms. Not only the far left group under Anstey, but the more moderate part of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party showed signs of resentment when the Government introduced the second War Precautions Bill in April 1915. King O'Malley, a cabinet minister, declared that although the god-

5 C.P.D., 75:148.

father of the Bill was Labor, "its real father is a military, gilt-spurred rooster". He went on to ask,

Do honourable members opposite think that it would have got here if it had been before the Caucus?... and yet here is a Labour party, with a majority in this House, submitting a proposal like this! I hope their names will not go down in history execrated as Jeffrey's name in England".<sup>6</sup>

However, the Bill passed, and Anstey announced his resignation from the A.L.P.<sup>7</sup>

Outside Parliament, distrust of the Government grew in Labor circles, especially after Hughes became Prime Minister in place of Andrew Fisher. Hughes' abandonment of the prices referendum, and certain tactless measures introduced by him that seemed calculated to unfairly force men into enlisting, alienated the Labor Party still further from its parliamentary leaders. On December 23, 1915, the Victorian Labor Call probably spoke for the vanguard of dissident labor when it declared:

The Federal Labor Government has lost its grip on the masses. Our boasted liberty and freedom have vanished. The press is muzzled... The exploiter reigns supreme.

By 1916 the issue of conscription for overseas service crystallized the A.L.P.'s opposition to Hughes and to the Government's diminution of civil liberties during the war. By

6 C.P.D., 76:2680-1

7 C.P.D., 76:2780

mid-1916, the State Labor conferences in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria had passed resolutions opposing conscription and forbidding Labor parliamentarians to support it<sup>8</sup>.

The rest of the history of conscription in World War One is well-known: how Hughes introduced a referendum on conscription held in November 1916, and how parliamentarians were split into opposing and supporting groups, with the majority of the Labor movement outside parliament campaigning strongly for a NO vote. The success of the NO campaign led to the division of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party, twenty-four members following Hughes out of the Party, leaving forty behind. The campaign was repeated, even more bitterly, in 1917, when Hughes, now heading a Nationalist government, again held a referendum on the issue. These two campaigns, and the success of the NO vote in both, strengthened the radical wing of the Labor Party, especially since all pro-conscriptionists had been expelled by Party decision.

Even from 1915, the anti-war movement had been growing in Labor circles, and many Party members, including some parliamentarians, became more involved in peace associations. For instance, on December 14, 1916, Mathews, the Labor member

<sup>8</sup> Ian Turner, Industrial Labour and Politics. The Dynamics of the Labour Movement in Eastern Australia, 1900-1921 (Canberra, 1965), pp. 101-2.

for Melbourne Ports, argued in the House of Representatives for peace negotiations with Germany, and demanded, "...are such as we, whose own lives are safe, to assert that millions more are to be killed and maimed, and millions of pounds to be wasted to gratify our pride?"<sup>9</sup> However, most Labor politicians continued to support recruiting; they remained far more "loyal" than the outside movement.

In 1917 the State A.L.P. conferences in Victoria, South Australia and Queensland adopted the peace resolution of the New South Wales Conference, which declared that war was inevitable under capitalis<sup>m</sup>, asserted that "peace can only be accomplished by the united efforts of the workers of all the countries involved", and called for an immediate international conference to negotiate a peace settlement.<sup>10</sup>

At the Interstate Conference in June 1918, the 1917 peace resolution was endorsed unanimously, but a split threatened between politicians and non-politicians over recruiting. Eventually the controversial issue of participation in recruiting was referred to a referendum of the membership of the A.L.P. However, the possible split was averted, because the end of the war enabled the ballot to be withdrawn.<sup>11</sup>

9 C.P.D., 80:9229

10 Turner, Industrial Labour and Politics, pp.172-3.

11 Turner, Industrial Labour and Politics, pp.177-8

The war had the long-term and immediate effect on the A.L.P. of making even the politicians suspicious of anything that could possibly be labelled "militaristic". At the 1918 Interstate Conference, several new "anti-militarist" planks were added to the federal platform: besides several minor ones, for instance abolishing saluting and "other useless discipline" and calling for the election of officers, the raising of forces for service overseas or participation in future overseas wars was prohibited, "except by a decision of the people".<sup>12</sup> The war strengthened Labor's belief that wars were caused by capitalism, and that therefore it was Labor's duty to keep Australia out of them and to develop international working-class solidarity. The A.L.P. was now even more anti-imperialist, since close ties with Britain brought Australia too close to possible European capitalists' conflicts. The first obvious sign of ~~the~~ this antagonism to the Empire was a new plank inserted in the Federal Fighting Platform at the 1918 Interstate Conference; it read: "No Imperial Federation".<sup>13</sup>

The anti-militarist reaction was even clearer in the field of defence. At the 1919 Interstate Conference, it was moved "That the Defence Act be amended, and all the compulsory

12 Victorian A.L.P. Constitution, 1918, pp.3-4

13 Victorian A.L.P. Constitution, 1918, p.2

training and service clauses be deleted therefrom." This was carried by twenty-two votes to one, in a spirit of hopeful pacifism.<sup>14</sup> Although during the 1920's some of the earlier and more extreme signs of anti-militarism disappeared from the platform, the 1924 Interstate Conference called for the amendment of the Commonwealth Constitution to include a condition that no Australian be conscripted for military service overseas.<sup>15</sup>

The division between politicians and non-politicians seemed to have disappeared in the A.L.P. in respect to their attitude to war. Parliamentarians enthusiastically supported the League of Nations and voted against increased expenditure on defence. The Federal Parliamentary Labor Party made some positive suggestions on defence that fitted in with the Party's policy that defence was justifiable only against attacks on home territory: it supported the idea of aerial defence and the fostering of local industries.<sup>16</sup> But even when the Party was in power, briefly, under Scullin, it proved itself as anti-war as when it was out of office: within a fortnight of being sworn in, the Scullin Ministry abolished compulsory training by administrative act, and later reduced defence expenditure.<sup>17</sup>

14 Labor Call, 3 July, 1919

15 Labor Call, 6 November, 1924

16 Hasluck, The Government and the People, pp.23-4

17 Hasluck, The Government and the People, pp.37-8.



In the early 1930's, the Party retained the policy on war that it had developed, but the issue was largely obscured by the Depression and serious divisions within the Party on internal matters. International events did not impinge on Party conferences, and the general attitude of the 1920's, of vague faith in international working-class solidarity and a thirst for peace, remained, without being applied in the interpretation of current events.

## ii

Before comparing Maurice Blackburn's attitude to war during these years with that of the A.L.P., it is important, for the sake of understanding Blackburn's political beliefs and behaviour, to examine his character and general background.

In many ways Blackburn resembled the great radical liberals of the Victorian political scene during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In fact, his character was extraordinarily like that of George Higinbotham,<sup>18</sup> whom he greatly admired.<sup>19</sup> Both were known for their often exasperating devotion

18 My notes on Higinbotham's character come from Edward E. Morris, A Memoir of George Higinbotham, An Australian Politician and Chief Justice of Victoria (London, 1895), Chapter 30.

19 K.J. Kenafick, in his The Australian Labour Movement in relation to War, Socialism, and Internationalism (Particularly as evidenced in the careers, writings and speeches of John Curtin and Maurice Blackburn), says in a note to p.10, Book III (published by Kenafick, Victoria, 1957), that Judge Higgins and Blackburn, who were friends, both admired Higinbotham.

to principle, but they were also alike in many other respects. Both were optimists in their assessment of other men, were singularly generous with money, lived in a very simple fashion (although Blackburn undoubtedly lived more humbly than Higinbotham, who was Chief Justice and had servants), and were always sympathetic and courteous. It was said of Higinbotham that he never spoke a single word of offence to an individual, but Maurice Blackburn went further than this. Frank Brennan remarked that he "wasted no nerve tissue in useless anger";<sup>20</sup> the tone of his speeches and writings is always amazingly even-tempered, cool and logical. Although they sometimes contain a note of righteous indignation, the indignation is more in sorrow than anger, and never fiery.

In this respect Blackburn differed from Higinbotham. The former seems to have been of a far more equable and cheerful temperament. Higinbotham had no sense of humour because he feared that jokes might hurt someone's feelings; Maurice Blackburn was noted among his friends and family for his good humour and love of the ridiculous. Higinbotham appears to have been far more puritanical and religious by nature. Blackburn, although a non-smoker and a teetotaller, was regarded as very sociable, and the religious streak in him, although very deep, was of a far less formal and public type than in Higinbotham. He never, for instance, brought religious references into his speeches. In fact,

<sup>20</sup> C.P.D., 179:28

although Blackburn seems to have been as admired as Higinbotham, the word "lovable" was applied to him<sup>21</sup> rather than to the Chief Justice.

It is not surprising that Blackburn had much in common with Higinbotham and other nineteenth century individualists, since in many ways he had a similar background. On the paternal side of the family he was a descendant of James Blackburn, a well-known architect and the town-surveyor of Melbourne (admittedly, he had been shipped to Australia on a forgery conviction!), and his father was a bank manager in a Victorian country town. His mother was a McCrae, one of the colonial aristocracy. Maurice Blackburn was born in 1880, and since his father died in 1887, his mother had ample opportunity to impress upon him the dignity of his descent. In later life he mentioned his connection with the McCraes with some pride. Tradition always appealed to him, and this sometimes annoyed his Labor associates: Arthur Calwell, for instance, recalls that Blackburn, on being made Speaker of the Victorian Legislative Assembly,

wore the wig and gown, and this appalled many of us who had grown up in the atmosphere of the Australian Natives Association where no regalia of any sort was worn, and where the egalitarian principles of Calvinism were more honestly revered and observed.<sup>22</sup>

With his upper middle class family background and his education at Toorak Preparatory Grammar School, followed by some years at

21 e.g. by Curtin and Brennan in their remarks on the death of Blackburn, C.P.D., 179: 25 and 28.

22 Letter to the author.

Melbourne Grammar, where he won several honours, it was no wonder that Blackburn appeared very different from his A.L.P. colleagues. The effect was emphasized later in life when he continued to wear the formal dark suits and high butterfly collars which had gone out of fashion by the 1920's.

However, despite his air of the nineteenth century gentleman, his large cheerful person, and his equability, Blackburn was in some ways a very sensitive man, and this is a clue to both his socialist beliefs and his attitude to war. He had an almost pathological fear of physical pain. His widow recalls that he preferred to suffer rather than visit a dentist or doctor, and was afraid of travelling, even by car. He winced when even a verbal insult was paid to anyone. It may be that, as his widow suggests, this sensitivity was due to the fact that his mother, a temperamental woman of very strong character, completely dominated the lives of her four children, who were devoted to her. (A measure of Maurice Blackburn's devotion is the fact that he supported his mother and his unmarried sister, who lived together, until he died). Maurice Blackburn's widow also relates that his mother whipped him for misdemeanours until he was sixteen years old, when he informed her that he would in future refuse to be whipped. He reacted against his mother's influence in many ways, and showed surprising courage in all situations that depended on himself alone - for instance, he faced dangerous public meetings

calmly- but never seemed to overcome this physical nervousness.

Other factors in Blackburn's upbringing counteracted the conservative influence of his family background. After the death of her husband, Blackburn's mother was forced to work as a teacher of music and singing in order to support her children, and the family lived in much reduced circumstances. The depression of the 1890's also struck Melbourne when Blackburn was at a very impressionable age, and the combination of the poverty he must have observed, and the gap between his family's position and his mother's high hopes for her children, must have influenced him in turning towards views that questioned the existing social order. His mother could not afford tertiary education for him, and Blackburn at the age of sixteen became an office-boy in a legal firm. It was here that he decided to become a lawyer, but he could only do so by further education. Then followed several years when he worked as a teacher and a librarian while studying for a B.A. and LL.B, which he received in 1906 and 1909 respectively, starting practice as a trade union lawyer in 1910.<sup>23</sup>

Most of the first thirty years of Blackburn's life therefore centred around intellectual activities, which coloured his whole political style and beliefs. He was an omnivorous reader in a

23 These details on Blackburn's education come from Kenafick, The Australian Labour Movement, pp.68-70.

wide variety of fields, as can be seen by the references to books which he made in his speeches and writings - he read deeply not only in politics, economics and history but in the literatures of several languages, and followed international events in French and German newspapers. He was devoted to the English radical and socialist tradition, and was especially influenced by J.S. Mill, Ruskin and William Morris, showing his deep interest in the ethical side of socialism. For many years Blackburn was a member of the "Free Religious Fellowship", which lasted from pre-war days to about 1930. Melbourne intellectuals like Vance Palmer, Nettie Higgins (later Palmer's wife), the Egglestons and Frank Wilmot (the poet Furnley Maurice) also joined this group which held informal religious services as well as a Sunday School for the children and many intellectual activities such as political discussions (the Fellowship's independent minister, Frederick Sinclair, was a dedicated socialist), poetry-readings and performances of plays.

His intellectual associations influenced Blackburn's political career profoundly. His religious convictions, undogmatic and tolerant though they were, led him to believe that politics was a branch of ethics, and therefore morals and principles dominated his political behaviour. The libertarian streak was equally strong in him: his sympathy for others, his reading of the

nineteenth century liberals, his interest in all opinions and points of view, and his university training made one of his favourite sayings that of Voltaire: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it". Like Mill, he believed strongly that only if all opinions were freely aired would the truth win through. On this point he was an optimistic rationalist: he felt often that he had the right political answer, but that he had only to express this answer clearly and logically, without any appeal to the emotions, for it to be seen to be right. Thus he always spoke tolerantly of others, and his articles and speeches were models of unimpassioned, simple and reasoned prose. People were impressed by his obvious sincerity, by his "magnificent, rich voice"<sup>24</sup> and his clear enunciation, but they sometimes complained that he was too calm and thoughtful, that his speeches were like lectures. John McKellar, who knew Blackburn over many years, recalled:

He did not practice the spurious method called putting the audience in a "good mood", and this gave a certain austerity to his personality... He held his audience by a sort of direct simplicity. He was transparently sincere, well informed, aiming at the truth of the matter, and leaving the truth to work its will among his listeners.<sup>25</sup>

Probably largely because he believed in principle and libertarianism, Blackburn was in practice a dedicated political

24 Conversation with Mr. A.T. Brodney, Maurice Blackburn's legal partner.

25 John McKellar, Maurice Blackburn and the Struggle for Freedom (Melbourne, 1945), pp.35-7.

pluralist.<sup>26</sup> His belief in voluntary associations came out in his intense interest in church organization, church history, and trade unions. He thought people should join organizations for the aims of the organization, since he saw voluntary associations as the means of upholding different and usefully dissenting opinions in society. So strongly did he hold this view that he opposed pacifists entering organizations before World War Two in order to convert them to pacifism,<sup>27</sup> and opposed the tactics of the Militant Propagandists during World War One. The Propagandists were a group within the Victorian A.L.P. which ran tickets and organized support within the Party for its militant aims.<sup>28</sup> Blackburn in fact endorsed these aims, but he disliked factions. He would have agreed with Burke's definition of party as organized opinion: its principles, not the interests of its members or desire for office, were all in all to him.

All these political beliefs did not come quickly to Blackburn; he was a late developer as far as politics were concerned, and did not join the A.L.P. until 1908,<sup>29</sup> when he was twenty-eight. He admitted that when he was about twenty-one he was secretary of a conservative political association, and had only learned through his experience in this position that conservative politicians had

26 I am indebted to Mr. Brodney for pointing this out to me.

27 Conversation with Mr. A.T. Brodney.

28 See M. Brodney, "Militant Propagandists of the Labor Movement", in Labour History, No. 5, Nov. 1963, pp.11-17.

29 Kenafick, The Australian Labour Movement, p.72.



no principles.<sup>30</sup> He therefore abandoned conservatism. It was probably his work as a trade union lawyer that led him to take a greater interest in Party activities, and in 1911 he took his first recorded public political action, giving lectures in support of the 1911 Referendum, and publishing a leaflet on it.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, he was a member of the Victorian Socialist Party (V.S.P.), which unlike the Socialist parties in other States, was closely associated with the Victorian A.L.P.

Blackburn's keen interest in socialist affairs once he had committed himself to politics is shown in the fact that from 1911 to 1913 he edited the Socialist, the weekly newspaper of the V.S.P. In several articles he expressed views which were the foundation of his lifelong political principles. For instance, he urged Socialists to join the A.L.P., thus bringing socialism to Australian practical politics.<sup>32</sup> As Brennan later said of Blackburn,

He joined the Labour party, not because he particularly loved party, and certainly not because he loved manual labour... but because the Labour party stood for things in which he most strongly believed...<sup>33</sup>

His was an intellectual commitment to politics.

Dealing with issues even more basic to his attitude to war, he delivered lectures and wrote articles defending the A.L.P.'s

30 Victorian Parliamentary Debates, 146:345-6

31 Catechism on the Referenda (Melbourne, 1911)

32 e.g. Socialist, 14 July, 1911.

33 C.P.D., 179:28

policy of compulsory military service.<sup>34</sup> Arguing against the more utopian and pacifist Socialists like Sinclair, Blackburn urged the necessity of defence in a capitalist world where disarmament was impossible. He then considered the different possible types of army, and ruled out a professional or volunteer army on the grounds that it usually consisted of people with a vested interest in war, and of non-working-class people, so that it could be used by a capitalist government against the workers. The only bearable alternative, he decided, was a citizen army which, because it would include a majority of workers, could not be the tool of a capitalist government.

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While forming the opinions which were decisive in his later life, Blackburn was becoming more and more deeply involved in practical politics. He proved himself invaluable to the unions and the Party through the legal advice he so generously proffered, and in 1914 was elected to the Victorian state electorate of Essendon. Although State politicians seldom participate in national debates, Blackburn took an active part in showing his disapproval of the war. In 1915 he gave a public lecture on the war at the University of Melbourne,<sup>35</sup> expounding a basically Marxist line on the causes of war and war's inevitability in a

34 Socialist, 15 Sept. 1911; 22 Sept. 1911; 29 Sept. 1911; 6 Oct. 1911; 3 Nov. 1911; 17 Nov. 1911; 8 Dec. 1911.

35 Printed in Prof. R.J.A. Berry and A.T. Strong (ed.s), Public lectures on the War, (Melbourne, 1916)

capitalist world.

However, the implications of this interpretation put Blackburn in an ambiguous position in relation to the war. That he had worked out these implications, at least in part, is clear from a lecture he gave in December 1914 to the Socialist Party.<sup>36</sup> The deterministic socialist line obviously influenced him when he came to ask the question, "Should we stop the war?" He answered that he "had never regarded war as the worst evil of capitalism. The sacrifices of Toil in industry were heavier than in war". He took the Marxist line that the war would weaken capitalism and therefore prove to the benefit of the proletariat. It is important to realize that when Blackburn took this stand, the war had been under way for only a few months, and no-one foresaw or had experienced conflict on the scale that was to follow.

When Blackburn considered the matter more deeply, his attitude became less clear-cut. In a letter to the editor of the Socialist in July 1915,<sup>37</sup> he stated that he strongly believed "in the superiority of British public law and British conception of freedom" to those of Germany, and therefore that he would "feel bound to fight to prevent Britain's becoming a second or third rate nation." However, he argued that Britain's defeat was unlikely, and then, as if reminding himself of his strict Marxist approach, asserted:

<sup>36</sup> Reported in the Socialist, 8 January, 1915

<sup>37</sup> Socialist, 16 July, 1915.

"What the working class has to lose by the defeat of Britain is great, but it is more a spiritual than a material loss". That the hardness of Marxism did not really appeal to him is further shown by a letter in the Socialist in June 1916.<sup>38</sup> In it he supported the British Empire because "loose voluntary unions of states with common institutions and language are a step towards Internationalism".

The simplicity of Blackburn's initial Marxist reaction to the war was breaking down, and it disintegrated even further as he observed the damage done to civil liberties at home and the useless sacrifice of lives abroad. In a meeting of the two Victorian Houses of Parliament in June 1915, he declared that he would not help the recruiting campaign in his constituency.<sup>39</sup> By 1916, Blackburn was thoroughly in step with majority Labor thinking on the war. There are reports of him addressing anti-conscription rallies<sup>40</sup>, and at a meeting of the Central Executive of the Victorian Labor Party in August 1916, he seconded Scullin's motion criticizing the oppressive administration of the War Precautions Act.<sup>41</sup> In September 1916 he moved

38 Socialist, 7 July, 1916

39 Labor Call, 15 July, 1915

40 Socialist, 30 June, 1916: Labor Call, 7 September 1916: 14 Sept. 1916.

41 Victorian Central Executive Minutes, 4 August, 1916.

That members of State and Federal Parliaments be individually informed that unless they can show reason for exemption, they are required to speak in opposition to conscription...<sup>42</sup>

Both motions were carried. Blackburn was in the forefront of the movement for peace which was growing in the A.L.P. , particularly in Melbourne, the heart of anti-war activities. At the 1917 Victorian Labor Conference, for instance, he seconded the motion that the New South Wales Labor Party's peace resolution be adopted.<sup>43</sup> No doubt his "disloyal" attitude on the war contributed to his failure to be re-elected in the 1917 State elections.

In 1918 Blackburn was a Victorian delegate to the Interstate Labor Conference, moving or seconding resolutions on peace and conscription, and during the immediate post-war period was actively anti-war. He was at a high point- probably his highest- of popularity in the A.L.P., being elected vice-president of the Victorian Central Executive in 1918, and president in 1919. In late 1918 he also took over the editorship of the Labor Call for more than a year, during which time the paper underwent a transformation, articles on international socialist affairs adorning it as never before or afterwards.

But there was one bone of contention. Blackburn's attitude to war was not so entirely changed by experience of the Great War as was that of the A.L.P. He sought more eagerly to keep peace,

<sup>42</sup> Vic. Central Executive Minutes, 1 September, 1916

<sup>43</sup> Labor Call, 9 August, 1917.

but did not abandon his realistic view of the necessity of defence. In the face of the abandonment by the A.L.P., and especially the Victorian branch, of all forms of "militarism", he continued to defend a citizen army based on compulsory military training. When the Victorian Conference moved for the abolition of military training, Blackburn withdrew as a delegate to the 1919 Interstate Conference, so that he would not have to speak and vote for a resolution he disapproved of.<sup>44</sup>

During the 1920's, Blackburn was one of those who kept the issues of peace and internationalism before the eyes of the A.L.P. For instance, at the 1924 Interstate Conference, he moved

That Australia shall not under any circumstances be committed to military action except for the defence of Australian territory on Australian soil,<sup>45</sup>

expressing his belief that defence was justifiable only when it was genuinely home defence. This motion was lost, but another of his was carried, recording the Conference's sympathy with the "enslaved Italian workers" for the loss of the socialist Matteotti, murdered by the Fascists while resisting "the tyranny of Mussolini".<sup>46</sup> Blackburn had in fact begun to prove himself more internationalist than most of the A.L.P. As has been seen, he differed from the more nationalistic and anti-Imperialistic view of the A.L.P. ,

<sup>44</sup> Both Blackburn and Scullin were elected as interstate delegates, but withdrew on these grounds. (Labor Call, 22 May, 1919)

<sup>45</sup> Labor Call, 6 November, 1924

<sup>46</sup> Labor Call, 6 November, 1924.

since he approved of the British Empire as a step towards internationalism.

## iv

In 1934, after a distinguished career in State politics, resumed in 1925 and culminating in his tenure of the speakership, Blackburn moved to the federal political sphere. His attitude to war up to this point was largely in agreement with that of the A.L.P. at the time, except that he regarded it as more important. Equally with the A.L.P. he had stressed the capitalistic origin of wars and the need to assist world-wide workers' solidarity in the search for peace. Both had vowed that war and its threat to civil liberties should never recur, and although the Party had been led further towards utopian pacifism in its rejection of some defence measures, Blackburn, by his public silence on the issue after 1919, doubtless felt that it erred in the right direction. His maintenance of principle during this period did not cause him to differ with the Party, because the A.L.P. took a stand which he approved: its opposition to conscription in the war had been a defence of principle in the self-sacrificing and disinterested style for which Blackburn was noted.

CHAPTER II.THE IMPACT OF THE RISE OF FASCISM : 1934-1939.

During Maurice Blackburn's first six years in federal parliament, from 1934 to 1939, Australian politicians for the first time faced the need to make public pronouncements on the rise of fascism. The first occasion, was in 1935 when League of Nations members were called upon to impose sanctions on Italy, following Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia. From then on, through the succession of fascist aggressions during the 1930's, Australian political parties were obliged to work out an attitude to fascism and the growing threat of war.

i

The attitude of the A.L.P. was complicated by the growth of communism and its desire to seek a united front with the rest of the Labour movement against fascism. This considerably embarrassed the A.L.P., which had in 1924 announced its complete opposition to communism,<sup>1</sup> and discouraged the Party in many States from leading the campaign against fascism.

In fact, during this period the A.L.P. in general paid little

1 The 1924 Interstate Conference had decided that "No member of the Communist Party may be or become a member of the Australian Labor Party", and the Federal Executive ruled in 1928 "That individual members of the A.L.P. are prohibited from advocating the policy of the Communist Party." (See AL.P. Federal Constitution and Platform, 1939).



attention to formulating a coherent policy on war that would cover the case of fascism. The Party was split by different factions seeking power, and the attitudes to war that were assumed by most State executives and politicians were determined not by a consideration of peace, liberty, internationalism or any other principles connected with war, but by attitudes to communism or Roman Catholicism, by a desire to rally support from certain sections, or by a wish to avoid discord.

In 1934 the Party as a whole was still recovering from the divisions engendered by the Depression and disagreement over the Premiers' Plan. The New South Wales Party was plagued, as it was throughout the thirties, by the Lang issue, which divided Labourites into supporters and opponents of Jack Lang, the contentious ex-Premier.

By 1934, communism was beginning to cause new differences of opinion, or to be the cause of prolonging old ones. In New South Wales, Lang found that the communists in his party were getting out of hand. When in 1933 the Communist International recommended a United Front policy, and the Communist Party of Australia subsequently advocated it, Lang refused to have anything to do with it. In keeping with his general retreat from militancy, prompted perhaps by a wish to regain office, this stand began a split in the Lang ranks.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See T.C. Truman, The Pressure Groups, Parties and Politics of the Australian Labour Movement, (M.A. Thesis, University of Queensland, 1953), Ch.2, pp.66-7.

The issue of communism had not really arisen in the Victorian A.L.P. until the Depression, because until then the Communist Party was inactive in Victoria. In 1932 the Central Executive banned several suspected communist front organisations, but the real challenge did not arrive until the new wave of United Front organisations was formed.<sup>3</sup> The most controversial of these began in 1933 as the Victorian Council Against War, part of a world-wide movement in which Romain Rolland and Henri Barbusse were prominent, and was later named the Victorian Council Against War and Fascism (V.C.A.W.F.)<sup>4</sup> Anti-communists in the A.L.P. also tended to be suspicious of the League of Nations when the U.S.S.R. joined the League in 1934 and communists began to support it.

If 1934 was the uneasy prelude, 1935 marked the recommencement of strife over international affairs in the A.L.P. That the Victorian branch was becoming aware of the fascist threat to peace is evident from the founding in March 1935 of a Labor Anti-War Committee by the Victorian Central Executive and the Trades Hall Council.<sup>5</sup> This body shortly issued a pamphlet, Labor's Case Against War and Fascism, which set out what was a fairly straight forward adaptation of Labor's traditional attitudes on war to

3 See D.W. Rawson, The Organization of the Australian Labor Party, 1916-1941, (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1954), pp. 247-249.

4 My information on the Council comes from Eleanor Moore, "Australian Peace Movements," in The Peacemaker, January 20, p.4, and from a letter to me from Mr. Len Fox, who was on the Council's Committee.

5 For a report of the Committee's first year of activity see Labor Call, 23 April, 1936.

fascism. The pamphlet stressed the economic causes of war, the military significance of fascism, "opposition to war which threatens the national right of self-determination and Socialism in any country" (an indirect reference to the U.S.S.R.), and the "severance of political relations with nations engaged in capitalist war". Later in 1935 this statement was endorsed by Melbourne, Sydney and Hobart Labor Councils.<sup>6</sup>

However, the impact in Australia of Italy's aggression against Abyssinia during 1935 brought a changed attitude to fascism and the League in some A.L.P. circles. Several Catholic spokesmen had supported Mussolini, causing some division between Catholics and non-Catholics in the Labor Party. On the question of sanctions against Italy, isolationists who feared that war might result from sanctions united with Catholics who did not wish to oppose Mussolini. In New South Wales, Lang opposed sanctions and adopted a policy of isolationism, partly, it seems, in the hope that this would rally anti-communist, and particularly Catholic, support?<sup>7</sup> In Victoria, where the Central Executive was especially anti-communist and contained a large proportion of Catholics, the Executive in general soon decided to oppose sanctions,<sup>8</sup> and in October 1935 banned the V.C.A.W.F. to A.L.P. members.<sup>9</sup>

6 Hasluck, Government and the People, p.79

7 E. Andrews, "Australian Labour and Foreign Policy, 1935-1939", Labour History, No.9, Nov. 1965, p.24.

8 Andrews, "Australian Labour and Foreign Policy", p.24.

9 Central Executive Minutes, 25 October 1935.

At this difficult time, in October 1935, John Curtin was elected as the new leader of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party. Since his party was disunited, Curtin was cautious on the explosive issue of foreign policy, and settled for opposition to sanctions - the view which seemed predominant in the Party - although he defended this attitude far more tepidly than many of his colleagues.

During the parliamentary debate on the Italo-Abyssinian Dispute in October 1935, the most restrained comment came from Curtin, who said that the A.L.P. maintained

that, as a world concert in restraint of Italy is not at the present stage of the evolution of the League of Nations attainable, Australia should not resort to warlike acts against any other nation.<sup>10</sup>

J.A. Beasley spoke out more strongly, claiming that Labor "will not support a war camouflaged as sanctions".<sup>11</sup> At the crucial point of practical commitment to peace-keeping, the A.L.P. deserted the League of Nations, which it had championed from the League's inception. The A.L.P.'s fear for national security and its desire to maintain party unity were greater than its interest in long-run international security and opposition to fascism.

During 1936, as though it was becoming more conscious of the threat of war, the Labor Party showed more concern for defence. At the 1936 Interstate Conference, a defence scheme was outlined,

10 C.P.D., 147:566

11 C.P.D., 147:40

emphasizing aerial defence and making other practical proposals. However, although the conference seemed to connect impending war with fascism, since it passed a resolution expressing "its greatest abhorrence to war and Fascism," the party displayed few signs at conferences or in parliament of interest in international affairs or of desire to find a way of ending fascist aggressions. The 1936 Conference offered no answer to fascism except "that the Commonwealth Government should endeavour to establish and maintain friendly relations with other nations."<sup>12</sup> The A.L.P. in general was too afraid of offending sections within the party and thus causing further disunity, or of offending other countries and thus provoking a war, to take a stand openly against <sup>specific</sup> acts of fascist aggression.

In 1937, the Spanish Civil War further opened the wound within the A.L.P. Two important sections in the A.L.P. took completely different stands on the war, most Catholics advocating non-intervention because "Both bishops and laity on the whole supported the military cause of Franco"<sup>13</sup>, whereas Leftists everywhere strongly supported the <sup>Spanish</sup> ~~socialist~~ Government. The Civil War issue created an uproar at the 1937 annual Labor Conference in Victoria, and when finally a resolution advocating non-intervention was passed, many trade unions objected. The 1937 A.C.T.U. Conference expressed solidarity with the Spanish Government as well as

12 Hasluck, Government and the People, p.84

13 James G. Murtagh, Australia: The Catholic Chapter, (Sydney, 1959), p.177.

supporting collective security.<sup>14</sup> It was this difference amongst Labour people that led to the virtual dissolution in 1937 of the Labor Anti-War Committee in Victoria, after intermittent activity.<sup>15</sup> In New South Wales an open breach had occurred between Lang and the isolationists on the one hand, and on the other a group of moderates, militant unionists and communists, led by R.J. Heffron, W.P. Evans and J. Hughes.<sup>16</sup>

Curtin, faced with a difficult situation in the party, ignored the issue of the Spanish Civil War, although he personally sympathised with the Spanish Government,<sup>17</sup> and during the 1937 federal election the A.L.P. neglected foreign policy and concentrated on accusing the Lyons Government of intending to revive conscription for overseas service.<sup>18</sup> Instead of dealing with international issues, Curtin focussed the Party's war policy on more practical defence demands. As the Lyons Government began rearmament in 1937 and 1938, Curtin's "objections were raised to the method of financing the expenditure, not to the expenditure itself."<sup>19</sup> But even on this point a section of his fellow parliamentarians would not follow. For instance, during the August 1937 debate on the

14 Andrews, "Australian Labour and Foreign Policy", p.26.

15 Rawson, Organization of the Australian Labour Party, pp.252-3.

16 Truman, Pressure Groups, Parties and Politics, Ch.2, p.67.

17 Andrews, "Australian Labour and Foreign Policy", p.27.

18 Geoffrey Sawyer, Australian Federal Politics and Law, 1929-1949, (Melbourne, 1963). p.99.

19 Hasluck, The Government and the People, p.87.

Imperial Conference, Brennan was proclaiming:

...my main arm in defence is to stifle and muzzle the war makers wherever they are; to root out the profiteers wherever they can be found,<sup>20</sup>

while E.J. Ward was assuring the nation that the workers would prevent war.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in the debate on the second Loan Bill in 1938, Brennan opposed the Bill's object of providing increased defence expenditure, and blamed the Government for neglecting social services and for "creating a psychology of fear and panic".<sup>22</sup>

Outside parliament, feeling in the A.L.P. on war remained divided. The Victorian Central Executive was isolationist and evasive on the issue of fascism. In New South Wales, Lang expressed his isolationism through his paper, the Century, founded in May 1938,<sup>23</sup> while the Heffron-Evans group, following a more anti-fascist line, called its own conference in 1938. At a special unity conference in August 1939, Lang was finally ousted from the leadership of the A.L.P. in New South Wales, and a number pro-communists and moderates formed the new executive.<sup>24</sup>

The divisions in the Party were seen most clearly at a Special Federal Conference, called in May 1939 to decide on a war policy. The States tendered different resolutions, South Australia's being

20 C.P.D., 154:119

21 C.P.D., 154:138-9

22 C.P.D., 158:2860

23 Andrews, "Australian Labour and Foreign Policy." p.28.

24 Truman, Pressure Groups, Parties and Politics, Ch.2, p.67.

based on collective security and working-class sanctions. However, the conference carried the Queensland proposal, standing for "the maintenance of Australia as an integral part of the British Commonwealth of Nations," and "a policy of complete national and economic security."<sup>25</sup>

Just before the war broke out, the Party was far more realistic on the issue of defence, as could be seen in the parliamentary debates of 1939, when the A.L.P. accepted increases in defence expenditure. But this action was merely the result of a realization that war was imminent and the nation must be defended. The Party had still not committed itself on the nature of fascism, and had not conceived of an international answer to fascism. Indeed, within the Party there was no general agreement on opposition to fascism. In May 1939, Brennan defended Anschluss and stated that "everything up to the last action of Germany was all right... All these assimilations were made without bloodshed." Isolationism still flourished: "We should abstain from troubling our heads to insult dictators who are not offending us."<sup>26</sup>

ii

During this period, Maurice Blackburn was finding the same difficulty as the A.L.P. in general, in attempting to formulate an attitude to war that covered the rise of fascism. However,

25 Hasluck, The Government and the People, pp.90-91.

26 C.P.D., 159:229,227.



to Blackburn this attempt was of paramount importance, since he regarded international events as of as much consequence as internal ones, and moreover he early saw the threat of war that fascism brought. He therefore considered that the A.L.P. should study closely possible answers to fascism, and if necessary, all other issues should be sacrificed to this one. But as war came closer and closer, Blackburn found that his overwhelming desire to maintain peace could not co-exist with his opposition to fascism.

In 1934 there were no signs that specific international events had aroused Blackburn's fear for peace. It is ironical, in view of his later behaviour, that it was he who drafted the Victorian Executive's rebuff~~ed~~ to the Communist Party's request for a United Front. His letter largely blamed the communists for the drift towards fascism, because the Communist Party stressed that socialism could be achieved only through violence, and this encouraged violence in its opponents.<sup>27</sup>

However, although at this stage Blackburn's disapproval of communist tactics is evident, there are signs that even before he wrote this letter he had begun to make plain his dissatisfaction with the A.L.P. In two articles in the Labor Call of March 1934,

27 The letter was published in Labor Call, 5 November, 1936. Also note Blackburn's reply on 12 November, 1936, pointing out the letter was not written wholly by him.

entitled "Capitalism to Socialism: Can the Change Over Be Made Peacefully?" he emphasized that the changeover could be made peacefully only by an effort of the people as a whole to cooperate for their general, as opposed to class, national, or other sectional, interests, and complained that "the Labor Movement fails to supply the spiritual conditions of change."<sup>28</sup>

Although as yet there was no direct conflict between Blackburn and the Labor Party, his position in the Victorian Branch was already a difficult one. For instance, at the Labor pre-selection ballot for Bourke in 1934, Blackburn was bitterly opposed by the then Vice President of the Central Executive, E.W. Peters. In fact, the circumstances surrounding the voting were so suspect (Peters defeated Blackburn by one vote), that a second ballot was held, which Blackburn won by a large majority.<sup>29</sup> The 1920's and 1930's were years of widespread corruption in Victorian Labor politics,<sup>30</sup> and Blackburn, as a man who refused to be bought, doubtless won many enemies.

By 1935 Blackburn was deeply immersed in anti-fascist activities, which, after the Abyssinian crisis, did not appeal to the Victorian Executive, largely composed as it was of <sup>Catholics,</sup> ~~Catholic~~ isolationists and fierce anti-communists like Peters and A.A. Calwell. Blackburn

28 Labor Call, 29 March, 1934.

29 For details on the ballots, see the Argus, 30 July and 13 August, 1934.

30 This corruption is ~~documented~~ <sup>depicted</sup> in Frank Hardy's Power Without Glory, (Melbourne, 1950), which shows Blackburn (thinly disguised as Maurice Blackwell) as one of the few untainted genuine socialists in the Labor Party.

was at this time a member of the Central Executive, as he had been off and on, for many years, but the rest of the Executive was obviously out of sympathy with him. During 1935 he became active in the V.C.A.W.F., and in August chaired a session of its State Conference. It was reported that at the time, because of the Abyssinian dispute which had caused a great divergence of opinion over war attitudes between the Victorian Labor Executive and the Communist Party, the Central Executive was considering branding the V.C.A.W.F. as a subsidiary body of the Communist Party, and thus proscribing it to A.L.P. members. In his speech to the V.C.A.W.F. Conference, Blackburn claimed that the Council was not dominated by the Communist Party, and that "It was necessary for the Anti-War Movement to co-operate with all bodies which desired peace."<sup>31</sup>

It is clear that Blackburn had begun to adopt a United Front attitude, and it cannot be said that his conduct in the face of the Central Executive's opposition was very diplomatic. In September, the Executive ruled that "no loyal member of the A.L.P." could be associated with the V.C.A.W.F.<sup>32</sup> Somewhat provocatively, in early October Blackburn was reported as saying that if the Party continued its present confused policy on sanctions it would

31 Workers' Voice, 9 August, 1935.

32 Central Executive Minutes, 8 September, 1935.

divide the movement.

He added that if anything was needed to strengthen his opinion that the V.C.A.W. was a useful organization, the existing differences in the Labour movement would do so.<sup>33</sup>

In a press statement the following day, he prophesied,

...if Australia stands aloof from the economic boycott, the boycott will fail and war will be inevitable... The League of Nations, if it fails to prevent the Italian conquest of Abyssinia, will disappear,<sup>34</sup> and the world become a welter of warring nations...

C. Crofts, Chairman of the Labor Anti-War committee, and a member of the Central Executive, issued a scathing reply, accusing Blackburn of advocating a risky policy that would lead to war.

He concluded:

Having appeared on the public stage through the efforts of the Trade Union movement, Mr. Blackburn now appears to be attempting to build for himself an altar of martyrdom in the hope that he may remain an actor, with the assistance of those whom he feels he can coax away from the movement and others who have always been opposed to it.<sup>35</sup>

Through the mixed metaphors it is clear that Blackburn's airing of his disagreements outside the Party had, as is usual in the A.L.P., completely alienated his fellow-members. As can be seen in Blackburn's later behaviour, there is perhaps a grain of truth in Crofts' accusation that he desired martyrdom, although the motives he attributes to Blackburn are unworthy, and the sneer

33 Workers' Voice, 25 October, 1935. The paper reports that Blackburn's speech was made at a private conference of A.L.P. branch delegates held on October 12 and 13, but the purpose of the conference is not recorded.

34 Workers' Voice, 25 October, 1935.

35 Workers' Voice, 25 October, 1935.

about trade unions is quite unjustified and merely smacks of anti-intellectualism.

Unconsciously or not, Blackburn continued to bait the Party. On October 18, 1935, he spoke in Parliament against the views of Curtin on the Italo-Abyssinian crisis. The scenes in Caucus are unknown, and therefore it is impossible to say whether Blackburn had genuinely attempted to win the Party over to his view. But the continual emphasis throughout the speech is suspiciously personal, although unimpassioned. "I believe..." and "I am not prepared to support..." abound. When he found himself isolated, Blackburn tended to depart from his usual calm appeal to reason alone, and to become self-righteous, as if Parliament were his pulpit.

The actual content of the speech, however, shows the theoretical attitude on war that Blackburn was adopting, and is in fact quite moderate and sensible. Maintaining his socialist views he remarked that

while the present [economic] system continues, it is impossible to prevent war. But means of diminishing the risk of it have been devised, and one of them is collective security.

He considered that if all nations "sincerely and concertedly" applied economic sanctions, they could prevent a conflict. Although he maintained "I have never professed great faith in the League, or belief in its possibilities," he considered that

the use of economic boycott was the only way of averting an actual outbreak of war.<sup>36</sup>

The Party obviously did not appreciate Blackburn's sincerity, and on October 25, the Victorian Central Executive decided that A.L.P. members who were or had been prominent in the V.C.A.W.F. should be given until November 15 to sever their connection with that body.<sup>37</sup>

Unrepentant, Blackburn alone of A.L.P. parliamentarians voted with the Government for the Sanctions Bill introduced on October 31, and pointedly repudiated A.L.P. arguments by asking,

If the policy of collective sanctions is too offensive for us to risk, why are we not deterred by the much greater risk of giving offence which is involved in the White Australia policy and the Ottawa Agreement?

He condemned isolationism and pointed out that Australia was necessarily involved in world events by virtue of its membership of the League of Nations and the British Commonwealth.<sup>38</sup>

On Armistice Day, Blackburn with other V.C.A.W.F. leaders, including well-known communists, headed a demonstration for peace, and spoke at the Yarra Bank.<sup>39</sup> He again denied that the Council was a communist organisation, and added,

This movement is above parties. We need a wider anti-war, anti-Militarist movement than<sup>40</sup> can be got within the confines of any one party...

36 C.P.D., 147: 862-4.

37 Central Executive Minutes.

38 C.P.D., 147: 1286-7.

39 Workers' Voice, 15 November, 1935.

40 Workers' Voice, 22 November, 1935.

On December 6, 1935, the Victorian Central Executive expelled Blackburn.<sup>41</sup> He spent 1936 outside the Party, but still a member of parliament. Although he received some support from sections of the Labour movement, he made no attempt to organize it, and almost discouraged it. In December 1935, Harry Booley, a close friend of Blackburn's and Secretary of the Essendon<sup>42</sup> Branch of the A.L.P., which was disaffiliated in November for its association with the V.C.A.W.F., circularised other branch secretaries, informing them that his branch had decided to call a conference of all branches,

to discuss the Central Executive's action in expelling members and branches for their affiliations with the Victorian Council Against War and Fascism, and especially in expelling Maurice Blackburn and Mrs. Clarey [the wife of P.J. Clarey, an Executive member],

because the expulsions were made "as the result of a ban which has never been approved at any conference of the Labor Party"<sup>43</sup>. But in January 1936, Blackburn wrote to Booley that he was unable to attend the meeting Booley was organizing,<sup>44</sup> and that he thought anyway

that it would be better if the Conference deliberated without any suggestion or possibility of influence by me. The friendly relationship of the Essendon Branch and myself has already been suggested to be the only reason why the Branch has acted as it has done. I don't want support out of friendship or esteem based on the past.<sup>45</sup>

41 Central Executive Minutes.

42 Essendon was part of Blackburn's constituency.

43 A copy of this circular is part of the collection of Mr. S. Merrifield, of Moonee Ponds, Victoria.

44 Although he had a prior engagement for the night in question, he admitted that he could attend the meeting later if he had wanted to.

45 This letter is in the possession of Mr. Merrifield.

The disaffiliated branches seem to have had little effect on the Central Executive.

Blackburn himself was maintaining a lofty detachment from party affairs, and devoting himself to evangelising on behalf of the anti-war movement. On April 8, he wrote to the Victorian General Secretary, D. McNamara, saying that he would not appeal against the Executive's decision: "... I do not wish the real issue to be obscured<sup>cur</sup> and forgotten in an argument as to the Executive's powers and my personal merits and demerits". He considered that the real issue was whether Party members should be free to advocate A.L.P. policy in association with other people who "while agreeing with them on that policy may disagree on other matters," and he pointed out that the Party conceded this freedom to members of the Anti-Sweating League and the League of Nations Union. If the Easter Conference of the Party gave more freedom on this issue, he would apply for readmission.<sup>46</sup>

At the 1936 annual Easter Conference, Blackburn was allowed to present his views. He remarked that he "did not believe that the Executive were animated by any personal feelings towards himself", and that

he was more concerned about securing unity against War and Fascism. He hoped Conference would take steps to bring in an Anti-War policy that would embrace all parties against war...

and cited the example of the fight against conscription, when people  
46 A copy of this letter is in the possession of Mr. Merrifield.



from several different parties worked together.<sup>47</sup> However, the conference did nothing in that direction.

Blackburn continued to speak at V.C.A.W.F. meetings. In September 1936, for instance, he spoke on behalf of the Spanish Government at one of the Council's meetings.<sup>48</sup>

In October 1936, when the Budget was debated, Blackburn outlined his attitude towards defence. He considered there were

three ways in which Australia can approach the problem of war and its own defence: first, from the viewpoint of those who advocate imperial defence, which implies that Australia's preparations should be integrated with the general Imperial preparations; secondly, the isolationist viewpoint; and thirdly, what I shall term the internationalist viewpoint.

He condemned the first approach as being closely connected with the idea of "a closed Empire", and considered isolationism impossible.

He concluded:

should [Australia] make preparations on an Imperial basis, it might be called upon to suppress popular movements in China... or in Farther India; and should the preparations be made on an isolationist basis its social services would be slashed... and minority opinion would be suppressed in order that a united front might be presented to possible foes... It seems to me, therefore, that the people of Australia should endeavour to secure... collective security.

Although the League of Nations had failed, he believed that the great nations, especially the British Commonwealth, could do much to achieve collective security. He advanced the proposition that

47 Labor Call, 16 April, 1936.

48 Workers' Voice, September 4, 1936.

Britain should take the initiative by offering to place its non-self-governing territories under international control, and invite the other nations of the world to co-operate in developing them.

He ended by stating prophetically:

If Britain is not prepared to do that, I cannot see anything ahead but Australia and Britain becoming involved in a<sup>49</sup> war which would prove to be the end of the British Empire.

This argument was to be the basis of the general one on war presented by Blackburn during the next couple of years. Believing that a mixture of economic need and fear between nations were the causes of war, he considered that free access to trade, and co-operation between countries would reduce the likelihood of war, and Australia could do her part in this direction by inducing the British Commonwealth to make <sup>a</sup> sacrifices for peace. The ultimate aim was

not a confederacy such as the League of Nations more or less is, which requires unanimous decision before anything can be done, but an authority which will be above the nations and to which will be committed the exclusive power to exercise<sup>50</sup> military force - if military force should be exercised at all.

Meanwhile, the question of Blackburn's relations with the A.L.P. continued unresolved. Late in 1936 he was prevailed upon, largely it seems by his electorate,<sup>51</sup> to apply for readmission to the Party. He informed McNamara that if the Executive recommended his readmission to the next State Conference, he would resign from the

49 For Blackburn's speech, see C.P.D., 151:1050-5

50 C.P.D., 151:1054-5

51 This is the opinion of Mr. Harold Nicholls, Blackburn's campaign director. (Conversation with the author) The Bourke Campaign Committee sent a deputation to the Central Executive asking<sup>fit</sup> to readmit Blackburn. (Central Executive Minutes, 14 December, 1936).

V.C.A.W.F., but characteristically added:

The Labor Party is entitled to insist that the anti-war policy shall be framed by it and it is to be hoped that the Labor Party will take the lead in the Movement. But the Anti-War Movement should be open to anti-war workers of all parties and of no party.<sup>52</sup>

The Executive replied that Blackburn must give "unqualified acceptance of the Constitution, Platform and Rules of the Party and any Conference or Central Executive interpretation thereof."<sup>53</sup>

This was a sore point with Blackburn, who believed in as much direct democracy, as possible, and had championed the cause of popular initiative and referendum for legislation at several A.L.P. conferences, notably over the issue of drinking laws. He wrote back stiffly that he had always considered that the Executive had no power to require members to accept decisions on policy that had not been made by Conference. "I have always refused to coerce others to accept such decisions, and I would not myself accept such a decision unless I could honestly and honourably do so."<sup>54</sup> The Executive refused Blackburn's application for readmission, demanding that he should make no qualifications concerning the Executive's power to make decisions.<sup>55</sup> In March 1937, moreover, the Executive specifically forbade any A.L.P. member to "be associated with members of the Communist Party or

52 A copy of this letter, dated 22 October, 1936, is in the possession of Mr. S. Merrifield.

53 A copy of this letter, dated 9 November, 1936, is in Mr. Merrifield's possession.

54 Letter dated 11 November, 1936: copy in Merrifield collection.

55 See a copy of the letter from McNamara to Blackburn, dated 16 January 1937, printed in the Labor Call, 18 March, 1937.

subsidiary thereof in the holding of joint meetings in advocacy of the 'United Front' or any other matters."<sup>56</sup> This followed a letter by Blackburn in November to the Labor Call, supporting the United Front policy, saying that he had only opposed it in 1934 because the Communists had not then been sincere, and because the world situation had not been so grave.<sup>57</sup>

However, in spite of these moves by the Executive against what he "honourably" believed, Blackburn resigned from the V.C.A.W.F. and stood for readmission to the Party at the Annual Victorian Conference at Easter 1937. The situation was rather a comical one, with the Executive determined to humiliate Blackburn and wring an "unqualified application" from him, and Blackburn resisting. A compromise resulted. Blackburn stated that "he wished to apply for readmission to the A.L.P. without qualifications," but immediately proceeded to complain that he "had been asked to give assurances that no other member had been asked to do." Although "he was prepared to accept Executive decisions" since he wanted to return to the Party in order to "do things for the people", he was "not prepared to give his written promise how he was to cast his vote in Parliament upon anything which might occur in the future..." He added darkly, "I know I have a number of enemies in the Labor Movement... but I am not prepared to deliver myself into their hands." This is one of the few remarks that give any

56 Labor Call, 18 March, 1937

57 Labor Call, 12 November, 1936.

indication that Blackburn felt persecuted by the Party.

It was agreed that Blackburn's "unqualified application for readmittance" be accepted. This was followed by an interesting series of comments that indicate a variety of attitudes towards him in the Victorian Party. For instance, S.M. Keon, rather aptly summing up Blackburn's strange mixture of love for British traditions and strong Socialist commitment, "said that when the next war came Mr. Blackburn would have a red flag in one hand and a Union Jack in the other." Calwell proceeded to mention the Executive's decision that the International Peace Campaign's defence platform opposed that of the A.L.P., since it included collective security and mutual assistance pacts. He remarked that

there was no difference between Fascist imperialism and democratic imperialism.

Those who opposed the executive resolution [and this obviously included Blackburn] were misguided idealists, Communists, near Communists, half-baked Communists and ex-Communists, and for the sake of those present some d--- fools who didn't know where they stood.<sup>58</sup>

It was clear that the Party itself did not know in which of these categories to place Blackburn. His attitude to war was an intellectual mixture culled from several sources and beliefs, and the result baffled pigeon-holers.

Apparently unaffected by his clash with the Party, Blackburn returned to spreading the anti-war message. In August 1937, for

58 See the report of the Conference in Labor Call, 1 April, 1937.

instance, in the debate on the Imperial Conference, he reiterated his proposal for a "supra-national authority which would hold the undeveloped territories of the world under...trusts." His was an optimistic attitude towards the ending of war, like his faith in fellow-men. He said he did not believe even Hitler or Mussolini desired war, but that they probably felt driven to it by their countries' economic needs.<sup>59</sup>

This strange mixture of feeling that war was imminent yet denying invasion would occur persisted in 1938. In April 1938, Blackburn ruled out the possibility of invasion from Japan on the grounds that Japan would be financially exhausted by her war in China.<sup>60</sup> He concluded with some justice that

the greatest danger of war results from international misunderstandings... there is a great danger of war between countries that do not possess the same institutions and do not understand one another's views.<sup>61</sup>

In November 1938 he condemned the existing British Commonwealth as an association of white self-governing nations to control and exploit the subject peoples of the rest of the Empire, and again demanded the "internationalization" of these territories.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, he warned that

Any nation that prepares for war cannot long remain constitutional and democratic. Fascism or dictatorship is a form of government which declares that the chief business of any country is to prepare for war because

59 C.P.D., 154:127-9

60 C.P.D., 155:667

61 C.P.D., 155:669

62 C.P.D., 158:2138-40

other nations are doing so... If the existing state of "smothered war" continues, we shall soon see the end of democratic institutions.<sup>63</sup>

That Blackburn really feared this is shown by the active role he played in the Australian Council for Civil Liberties. He had been a member of its Legal Panel since 1936, and became one of its Vice-Presidents in 1938. The Council frequently referred breaches of civil liberties to Blackburn to be brought before Parliament.<sup>65</sup>

As the war threat drew closer, Blackburn's speeches grew more frantically and unrealistically anti-war, as indeed did those of most Labor members of parliament, as though words could stave off a conflict. He made predictions that proved wide of the mark: for instance, in December 1938 he foretold that the British Government would not become involved in a European war, but would only defend its overseas trade.<sup>66</sup> He refused to support the Loan Bill because he said he would not encourage rearmament and thus recommence the war cycle that began in 1913.<sup>67</sup> In May 1939 he

63 C.P.D., 158:2142

64 The Council, affiliated with the British National Council for Civil Liberties., was founded in 1936, and had its headquarters in Melbourne. In 1941 Blackburn wrote (in The Queensland Way to Dictatorship, one of the Council's pamphlets, issued in Melbourne) that although the Council had received less than £1000 since 1936, it had issued many publications, held many public meetings, and enlisted 67 affiliated societies in the six States, predominantly trade unions.

65 In 1937, for instance, Blackburn objected to two Unlawful Assemblies Ordinances which prevented public political meetings near Parliament House. He pointed out that since Canberra residents were voteless, this was their only means of exerting influence. (C.P.D., 154:411)

66 C.P.D. 158:2841.

67 C.P.D., 158:2844.

declared that Britain and Germany should negotiate, ~~and Britain should negotiate~~, and Britain should

show a willingness to meet [the German people] on such terms that everybody will be able to live in security and enjoy the good things of this world upon an equal footing.

He added that there was "no great difference... between democracies and totalitarian states", because although in a democracy people voted, the political atmosphere was "created or de-natured by wealth."<sup>68</sup>

However, this seems to have been a last wild outburst similar to Brennan's on the same occasion, and symptomatic of the general anguish amongst those who had been determined that what the world had suffered during the Great War should never be repeated. By May 1939, Blackburn had faced the fact of War, and announced in resigned tones, "I feel that no one can dismiss lightly the possibility of war within the next few months", and therefore "it is necessary to make some preparations."<sup>69</sup> Un-like other radicals in the Party, from this point on, with only transitory hesitation, he accepted that Australia was to fight, and his main concern was to protect as much of civil liberties as possible.

iii

During 1934 to 1939, the A.L.P. and Maurice Blackburn attempted

<sup>68</sup> C.P.D. 159:209

<sup>69</sup> C.P.D. 159:813



to adapt their attitudes to war to the rise of fascism, and neither of them emerged from the process with much credit - but then, few people of any political persuasion did so in these years. The A.L.P. abandoned any interest in maintaining international peace and security, and reverted merely to a desire to keep Australia out of any war at all costs, even at the expense of deserting the League of Nations when the latter attempted a policy which might have peacefully prevented the spread of fascism. Even those within the Party who were concerned at fascist aggression, like Curtin, preferred to remain silent on the matter for fear of offending Catholics or anti-communist extremists. Since the different States felt differently about war, and anti-communism and internal struggles consumed party attention, Curtin, the politic leader, was careful to avoid the issue of fascism as capable of causing further strife. The parliamentary party gained some degree of consensus over practical defence proposals, and when war finally seemed inevitable, resumed the old popular cry of adequate defence within the Empire. The fear of seeming unpatriotic was enough to tame most parliamentarians in the last resort, and, moreover, their previous neglect of the war issue left them with no alternative.

Blackburn also floundered through these years to some extent, but he maintained a good deal more integrity than did most of his

party. He realised the supreme importance of international events during this period, in that the threat to world peace was rapidly growing. The efficacy of the solution he proposed is debatable, but at least he conceived that any solution for peace had to be on an international scale through an international agency, and he was consistent with traditional Labor policy in that he applied international socialist ideas in his proposal for economic changes to remove international friction. Believing in the urgency of the situation, he tried to rally the A.L.P. to fight against war and fascism, and conceived of the movement as a united front above parties. His attitude to war throughout the period was relatively consistent both in itself and with his and the A.L.P.'s pre-1934 attitudes, based as it was on internationalism and a desire for peace, in contrast with the Labor Party's post-1934 abandonment of the search for a long-term policy for international peace.

Blackburn's retention of principles and his determination that they were more important than party caused his expulsion from the A.L.P. However, he gained nothing by his stand and was readmitted to the Party at the cost of compromising his principles. It would perhaps have been more fruitful if he had compromised earlier and avoided expulsion. Why he had not from the start attempted to work through the Labor Anti-War Committee is unclear. Although the membership of the Committee was unsympathetic to his anti-

fascist commitment, it was less so at its inception in early 1935, and when it was far more antagonistic, in late 1936,

Blackburn stated:

If permitted to take part in the activities of the Labor Anti-War Committee, I shall be satisfied to confine my anti-war and anti-fascist work to such meetings or other propaganda work that the committee may do.<sup>70</sup>

On the other hand, it is obvious that the Victorian Central Executive was completely out of sympathy with Blackburn's attitude to war. Throughout the story of his stand for principle it is clear that if he had not belonged to the fiercely anti-communist Victorian branch, Blackburn might have made more headway. However, if he had to make a stand on principle, he acted clumsily. First of all, he chose a bad issue, since the Executive could too easily dismiss the V.C.A.W.F. as a communist front organization. Secondly, he did not act decisively and organize support, but refused to lead those who defended him, and after a period of relative inactivity, returned to the Party on slightly humiliating terms. His behaviour in these years displays political imbalance: although he was wise enough to see that he had an important mission to convert the Victorian A.L.P. to the anti-fascist cause, his failure in this task was in part a reflection of his deficiencies as a practical party politician.

70 Central Executive Minutes, 21 December, 1936.

CHAPTER IIIDEMOCRACY AT WAR: SEPTEMBER 1939 TO OCTOBER 1941.

As Australia entered the Second World War, the A.L.P., still in opposition in the Federal Parliament, had enunciated no theory as to how a democracy like Australia should behave in time of war. The experience of the First World war had taught the A.L.P. how civil liberties and living standards could be assaulted by the government, and the Party had revolted against this trend on the part of its parliamentary leaders, especially in the cases of censorship and conscription. Since then, the Party had clearly propounded its opposition to conscription and to sending Australian troops overseas. It remained to be seen whether the principle of the maintenance of democratic rights at home while Australia was at war had embedded itself in the Party's tradition. Several tests of this principle were to recur during the war, in the issues of protection of vulnerable minorities like conscientious object<sup>ors</sup>ions and aliens, and in the question of the supremacy of parliament and the extent of freedom of speech.

## i

Some months before Australia was declared to be at war in September 1939, the Menzies Government introduced measures intended to prepare the country for war. The attitude of the A.L.P. toward these bills showed that it was, at this stage at least, determined not to allow civil liberties and workers' rights to be trampled

underfoot as they had been in the First World War.

The Supply and Development Bill, introduced in May 1939, provided the first great debate on how Australia should be governed during the war. The Bill laid the foundation for industrial mobilization, and Labor members were active in suggesting ways of bringing it into line with some Labor policies. By combining with some Country Party and U.A.P. members they managed to compel the Government to accept some measure of profit control. Maurice Blackburn moved an amendment to protect union industrial awards during war-time, and induced the Government to accept this principle, at least in regard to private employment.<sup>1</sup>

In June, Blackburn moved an amendment to the Defence Bill 1939, requiring that conscription should not apply outside the Australian mainland and Tasmania. The amendment was lost and conscription was extended to the Australian territories, although Blackburn claimed that

the territories are not part and parcel of the Australian nation. They are a sort of empire which Australia is acquiring in the course of development with all the evils involved in imperialism.<sup>2</sup>

Faithful to his long-established beliefs, Blackburn was maintaining that conscription was justified only for home defence in the strictest sense.

The actual outbreak of war in September 1939 brought a predictable

1 C.P.D., 160:1065-8

2 C.P.D., 160:2108.

pattern of patriotic dedication on the part of Labor parliamentarians, and greater reluctance and suspicion among the rank and file. However, as in World War One, a section of federal Labor politicians was also cautious in its attitude to the war effort. For instance, when Menzies declared war, J.R. Beasley, Dr. Maloney and E.J. Ward warned that living conditions must be maintained, and exploitation by profiteers eliminated.<sup>3</sup> Blackburn took the opportunity to outline the approach he would be taking to the war, and at the same time to link it to his previous statements. In the style of a Cassandra, he remarked that the war had "been impending ever since the failure of the attempt to prevent war by economic boycott".<sup>4</sup> Unlike others in the A.L.P., he supported Menzies' pronouncement that Australia was automatically at war if Britain was, for he continued to uphold the British Commonwealth:

The bonds that tie us to the British Commonwealth of Nations are not the much-belauded bonds of community of race. They are the bonds<sup>5</sup> of community of institutions and democratic traditions...

In keeping with this belief that it was institutions and liberties that provided the basis for loyalty, he opposed the idea of an expeditionary force, claiming that it would lead to the introduction of conscription in order to keep up the numbers of reinforcements. Again, he pointed out that although the Prime Minister had spoken

3 C.P.D., 161:56-62, 67 and 72-76.

4 C.P.D., 161: 54-5.

5 C.P.D., 161: 55.

of the need to preserve freedom in Australia, he saw in "the regulations already made dangerous suggestions that liberties are to be attacked."<sup>6</sup> Finally, he urged Australians not to be provoked into discriminating against people of German extraction living in Australia, since these people "have helped to develop this country."<sup>7</sup> Plainly he saw himself as a guardian not only of Labor policy but of civil liberties.

The Parliamentary party as a whole was represented by the Caucus' War Statement, which in general expressed willingness to help the war effort, but concluded:

The democratic rights of the people must be safeguarded to the maximum. The very minimum of interference with the civic liberties of the people should be the objective of the Government in carrying through its measures for national security.<sup>8</sup>

Outside parliament, the position in the different States varied. In New South Wales, the official State Labor Party, now led by Heffron and Hughes, was influenced by the Communist Party, which was at the outbreak of the war an enthusiastic supporter of the Allied cause.<sup>9</sup> Victoria, at the other extreme, remained isolationist: Lovegrove, an influential member of the Central Executive and a frequent writer for the Party's paper, the Labor Call, declared the war was imperialist like the previous ones.<sup>10</sup> In Western

6 C.P.D., 161 : 56

7 C.P.D., 161 : 56

8 Labor Call, 7 September 1939

9 Rawson, Organization of the A.L.P., pp.323-4.

10 Labor Call, 7 September 1939.

Australia, the Party paper expressed reluctant support for the Federal Party's official policy.<sup>11</sup>

By early November, when the Soviet Union finally declared itself neutral in the conflict and Australian communists denounced the war as imperialist,<sup>12</sup> and when the first wave of patriotism had passed, the attitude to the war ~~and~~ <sup>had</sup> become more uniformly apathetic throughout the A.L.P. This was the period of the "phoney war", when, with the war situation unsettled, enthusiasm for the Allied cause flagged everywhere. In Federal Parliament, Labor men regarded the Menzies Government with suspicion, warning it against conscription, and the Party opposed the National Security Bill, introduced in September 1939.

This Bill allotted to the Executive power to make regulations "for securing the public safety and the defence of the Commonwealth." Some matters were specified, but Clause Five also gave a general power

for prescribing all matters which...are necessary or convenient to be prescribed, for the more effectual prosecution of the present war,

with two exceptions: the government could not enforce by regulation any form of military and industrial conscription other than that already provided for,<sup>13</sup> and precluded the trial of civilians

11 Westralian Worker, 8 September, 1939.

12 L.D. Atkinson, War, Communism, and Federal Parliament (B.A. Thesis, Adelaide, 1959), p.66.

13 Under the Defence Act men could be required to serve in the Australian Military Forces.



by court-martial. The only other checks on the Executive's regulatory power were the Constitution, and the Parliament's usual ability<sup>14</sup> to disallow regulations by a majority vote, which was difficult for the Opposition to obtain.

Blackburn led the opposition to the Bill. In measured tones he began by observing that the Bill surrendered "the principle of democracy for which we are supposed to be fighting, and adopts our enemy's principle of totalitarianism" because, like totalitarianism, it combined the executive and legislative powers.<sup>15</sup> Becoming slightly more impassioned, he recalled that similar legislation was passed in 1914, and declared:

Those who have fresh in their memory the things that were done in the years 1914 to 1918 cannot regard this legislation coolly and calmly.<sup>16</sup> It will be used to deprive the people of their liberties.

Blackburn was in his element, delivering his manifesto before participating in the struggle for civil liberties. His speech ended with a restrained trumpet call:

I should say that the most important thing is that the people of this country shall believe that in this struggle they are preserving as much of their freedom, as much of their constitutional rights, as can possibly be preserved for them... It is those rights that make their country dear to them, not the fact that they live in this portion of the earth... but that they live among a people who have certain traditions which they have acquired and developed through long centuries of struggle. These things are valuable, and cannot be risked. The price of liberty is eternal vigilance.<sup>17</sup>

14 Under the Acts Interpretation Act.

15 C.P.D., 161 : 180

16 C.P.D., 161 : ~~161~~ : 181

17 C.P.D., 161 : 183

In later debates on the Bill, Blackburn spoke vehemently against court sittings being held in camera,<sup>18</sup> and moved two amendments, one proposing that the regulatory powers under the Bill be limited to those particularised in the Bill<sup>19</sup> (i.e. omitting the sweeping general delegation) and the other more emphatically excluding the authorisation of conscription by regulation.<sup>20</sup> While his first amendment was defeated, the Government accepted the second. Other Labor members proposed numerous amendments also designed to restrict the scope of the regulations, and succeeded in having some of these accepted: one, for instance, restricted trials in camera on war charges to higher courts.

Blackburn was most concerned at the extent of the Government's regulatory powers under the National Service Act and those already being used under the Defence Act.<sup>21</sup> Even while the National Security Bill was being debated he had objected to a regulation that had appeared in August, allowing a Minister to delegate his powers and functions to prohibit the holding of meetings that "would be likely to cause disturbance of public order or promote disaffection."<sup>22</sup> Menzies later assured parliament that these

18 C.P.D., 161:234

19 C.P.D., 161:219

20 C.P.D., 161:239

21 For the extensive use of regulations under the Defence Act even before the war, See Sawyer, Australian Federal Politics, 1929-1949, p.118.

22 C.P.D., 161:341

powers would not be delegated,<sup>23</sup> but in order to ensure close parliamentary supervision of regulations, Blackburn introduced a Regulations Bill,<sup>24</sup> intended to provide that regulations should not become effective until they had been laid before both Houses of Parliament.<sup>25</sup> Although the A.L.P. voted for the Bill, it was defeated by the U.A.P. and Country Party which were impatient at such attempts to restrict the Government's freedom.

Other members of the A.L.P. left-wing joined Blackburn in campaigning against restrictions of civil liberties. Later in September Ward introduced a Defence Bill (No.2) 1939, and although the Government did not allow the entire Bill to pass, provisions redefining the scope of conscientious objection to allow for grounds of conscience not associated with religious belief, were carried.<sup>26</sup>

Much of the A.L.P.'s willingness to protect civil liberties was doubtless due to the continuation of the "phoney war". In November 1939 there were suggestions by Menzies, Curtin and others that there would soon be peace negotiations.<sup>27</sup> Blackburn too was apparently influenced by the general apathy towards the war, since he had withdrawn a step from his previous position on conscription,

23 C.P.D., 161:472

24 C.P.D., 161:477, 830-45

25 As the situation was, regulations became effective when issued, although they could be disallowed by Parliament.

26 C.P.D., 161:945. Blackburn spoke twice in support of this clause-pp.918 and 944.

27 C.P.D., 162:1210ff.

as could be seen by his amendment on this subject to the National Security Bill (see p. 63 above). In November he explained more fully this new opposition to conscription even for home defence. He claimed that conscription was "not compatible with the recognition of the rights of the religious objector"; that "the adoption of compulsion for military purposes carries with it the danger of compulsion for all sorts of other purposes," leading to "the glorification of the state"; and that young men were being trained "so that they may be more readily influenced by recruiting propaganda to join the 2nd Australian Imperial Force." He concluded ominously,

What I fear is that when next this question of compulsion for overseas military service arises ~~it~~<sup>it</sup> will be enforced without the holding of any referendum...

At this time Blackburn seems to have been more impressionable than usual. The fact that Menzies had actually introduced a limited form of conscription by calling up youths under the Defence Act<sup>30</sup>, the lack of enthusiasm for the war shown by some of his closest parliamentary associates - Brennan and Ward- and the loss of liberties that the war had entailed, caused him to abandon his moderate stand on conscription, thus over-compensating for the eagerness of others to assail civil liberties. However, in the rest of his speech on this occasion, he showed he had not gone as

28 C.P.D., 162:1262

29 C.P.D., 162:1263

30 This he did on Sept. 16, 1939. (See Atkinson, War, Communism & Federal Parliament, p.58).

far as Brennan, who was anxious to force Britain into peace negotiations. Blackburn felt that Britain and France could not seek a peace conference, as this would be yielding to Germany, while the cause of the former countries was right.<sup>31</sup>

Later in November, Blackburn was back on the firmer ground of settled principle, joining other Labor members in protesting against Menzies' announcement that an expeditionary force would be sent overseas. Curtin's reply to this statement was restrained and based on the argument that such action would diminish Australia's manpower.<sup>32</sup> In an earlier address to Sydney unionists he had spoken more forcefully, maintaining that compulsion for training, associated with an expeditionary force, was "the starting-point which will lead to the eventuality of conscription being selected by the Government as unavoidable." He claimed that together they imperilled Australian defence and civil liberties.<sup>33</sup>

In his reply to Menzies, Blackburn's deep revulsion against physical violence came to the surface as he asserted that the men were being sent on "a wild adventure", and that "Australia will not again suffer the loss of its young men if my vote can prevent it".<sup>34</sup> The conflict within him between opposition to fascism and pacifism was a painful one, and at this point memories of World

31 C.P.D., 162:1264

32 C.P.D., 162:1699-1703

33 Labor Call, 30 November, 1939

34 C.P.D., 162:1757

War One swayed him towards isolationism. Ignoring the suffering of other countries in need of support, he was for the moment transfixed by the threat to the lives of the people he knew best-his fellow-countrymen. After this, which was for him an emotional outburst, he reverted to his usual more reasoned arguments against expeditionary forces, i.e., that the results were rigid censorship to keep up recruiting, and, when recruiting flagged, conscription.<sup>35</sup>

But again, the end of his speech showed that once war had started, Blackburn, as in World War One, became obsessed with the defence of liberties at home. Extraordinary in one who had spent the inter-war years arguing against a short-sightedly nationalist view of peace, he had returned to the position he held in 1915:

If the Australian Labour party must choose between supporting the raising of forces for overseas service, and an immediate negotiated peace, I know which I would choose. I believe that the cause of Great Britain is right. I do not want an immediate negotiated peace, because I believe that such a peace would be tantamount to German victory; but I would rather have such a peace than agree to the despatch of forces overseas, because I believe that, by so agreeing, I would be consenting to the bringing of greater ruin and destruction to our country than could be effected by even an unfavorable peace. I do not care what the results to the party may be, or to myself.<sup>36</sup>

Besides revealing the strain the situation had imposed on Blackburn's internationalism, this statement casts serious doubts upon his political discernment: it shows that he not only had an unrealistic view of the role of democracy in war time, but that he did not appreciate how Nazi totalitarianism differed from the forms of

35 C.P.D., 162:1756-8

36 C.P.D., 162:1759

dictatorship practised briefly in democracies during war.

A similar lack of realism is shown in Blackburn's attacks on censorship during this period. On November 28, 1939, in a debate on the Department of Information, he broached the difficult question of how publications should be censored in war time, and attacked the regulations which provided for censorship before publication, since this gave people no opportunity to defend their work. But the solution he proposed was impracticable: that the democratic right of a person to be charged in an open court, after the alleged offence has been committed, be maintained.<sup>37</sup>

However, as the war situation worsened in early 1940, Blackburn's approach to the war became more realistic and useful. As if resigning himself to agreeing that Australia should be closely involved in fighting Germany, he almost refrained from commenting on foreign policy, and restricted himself to exposing and fighting what he regarded as unnecessary encroachments on civil liberties at home.

In this role, he was the parliamentary spokesman for the Council for Civil Liberties. In May 1940 he became President of the Council,<sup>38</sup> and in the same month delivered a number of speeches in Parliament condemning first the excessive censorship,<sup>39</sup> then the suppression,<sup>40</sup> of the Communist press, and spoke again about

37 C.P.D., 162:1606-7

38 Civil Liberty, Vol. 3, No.4, July 1940.

39 C.P.D., 163:559-60.

40 C.P.D., 163:1288-9.

the role of a democracy in war-time, contrasting the situation in Australia with that in Britain. He argued very justly that Britain, which was in far greater danger than Australia, and where Communists were much more influential, allowed a free communist press without any obviously harmful results, and possibly with some benefit.<sup>41</sup> He objected to National Security Regulation No. 42 which prohibited endeavours "to influence public opinion.. in a manner likely to be prejudicial to the defence of the Commonwealth or the efficient prosecution of the war", and pointed out that since the House of Commons had amended a similar regulation in Britain so that statements of opinion were not punishable as they were under Regulation 42, Australia should do likewise. This demand was to have an ironic sequel.<sup>42</sup> Blackburn, acting for the Council for Civil Liberties, recommended that Regulation 42 be amended "so as to penalize a person only if his propoganda be by means of any false statement, false document or false report." In reply, Regulation 42A was gazetted in January 1941. It began "A person shall not... spread false reports or make false statements or reports intended or likely to cause disaffection." The Council commented,<sup>43</sup>

As Reg. 42 remained as it was, the position as it was after Jan. 13 appeared to be that truthful critics could be punished under 42 for their statements intended and likely to interfere with the war effort, while liars could be

41 C.P.D., 163:559-60.

42 Recounted in B. Fitzpatrick, The Australian Commonwealth, pp.269-70.

43 In The War and Civil Rights, 2nd series, Melbourne, May 1941.



punished under 42A for their statements intended or likely to have a similar effect.

Later in May 1940, Blackburn gave a noble defence of the liberal conception of parliament and the party system, an ideal which he lived up to during the war:

The chief function of Parliament, especially in time of war, is to enable people who have complaints against the administration of the Government to express their grievances, to have their wrongs redressed, and to defend their rights.<sup>44</sup>

Better than any other Labor member, he expressed the case against a national government, which the other two parties were urging upon the A.L.P.:

I am one of those who believe very strongly that without the party system of government there cannot be real democracy. It is the party system that secures to the people real participation in government; it is the party system that organizes criticism of the government which exists, and having organized that criticism, by presenting the people with an alternative to the government, enables them to make a choice between men and policies... I do not believe in party bitterness... The party struggle should be a conflict between men who hold different principles, and yet<sup>45</sup> despite those principles, respect one another just the same.

However, proving that he was concerned for national unity in the war effort, he announced his eagerness to help construct better industrial machinery to reduce friction in industry.<sup>46</sup>

Fear of conscription for overseas service continued to be common to all Labor circles, and Curtin made it the focal point of the Corio by-election in February 1940 - an election that the

44 C.P.D., 163:1266

45 C.P.D., 163:1391

46 C.P.D., 163:1393.

A.L.P. won.<sup>47</sup> However, Curtin's main aim was still a fully united Labor Party. At the Sydney meeting (mentioned above) which he addressed in November 1939, he remarked that Labor had learned from its experience in the First World War, which had been a loss for the workers because the structure<sub>^</sub> was that of Labor disintegrated. The moral he drew

The paramount thing in this war is that, however the war ends, its termination must see in Australia a united, well-organized and clear-thinking Labor Movement,

so that the trophies of victory were not just for the non-workers.<sup>48</sup>

Curtin rightly addressed these words to the New South Wales workers, because this branch was still the main cause of disturbance in the A.L.P. The Lang group quarrelled with the leaders of the Official Party, some of whose members held public meetings in conjunction with prominent communists.<sup>49</sup> At the Easter A.L.P. Conference in New South Wales, the Executive went too far and produced what became known as the "Hands off Russia" resolution, which opposed Australian participation in overseas conflicts, and particularly any aggressive acts against neutral countries, "including Soviet Russia". This had been the communist policy for months: the Communist Party had distributed thousands of leaflets proclaiming "Hands off Soviet Russia".<sup>50</sup>

The resolution, which was carried by the Conference, created

47 See the Labor Call, 7 March, 1940.

48 Labor Call, 30 November 1939

49 See Rawson, Organization of the A.L.P., p.325.

50 Atkinson, War, Communism, p.69.

a public furore because Russia at the time was regarded as tantamount to an ally of Germany, and gave the Lang group in New South Wales an excuse to call for intervention by the Federal Executive. However, the latter merely ordered the New South Wales executive to expunge the motion, which Hughes and his followers, realizing their danger, were quick to do.<sup>51</sup> As a result, Lang and his supporters decided to form a Non-Communist Labor Party,<sup>52</sup> although not all of Lang's former followers joined it: only Beasley and four others deserted Curtin.

ii

June 1940 was one of the turning-points in Labor's attitude to <sup>the</sup> war. The Party in general had during the early months of the war been careful to stress that peace-time privileges and liberties must be maintained during the war. However, so far the Party's dedication to this principle had not been really tested, since the war situation did not appear critical. In June 1940 the pressure began. The rapid capitulation of Europe before the Nazis, culminating in France's signing of the armistice in June, and Italy's entry into the war on the German side in the same month, shook Australians into a realization that Britain was so hard-pressed that it could not help to defend Australia. The effect in Australia and on the A.L.P. was immediate. One of the first reactions of the Government was to use a regulation to ban the Communist Party as a subversive

51 Argus, 13 April 1940; 18 April 1940

52 Argus, 19 April 1940.

organization capable of weakening Australia's war effort, as it was already alleged to have done by instigating the New South Wales coal strike.<sup>53</sup>

In late June, before the federal elections in September, and as France was collapsing, a special Federal Conference of the A.L.P. was held to reconsider its war policy. Shortly before this meeting, Curtin had delivered a stirring speech to the Victorian Annual Conference, urging it

that the plank in the federal platform, which specifically limits the workers of Australia in participating in overseas wars, be revised so that there could be put into the platform that flexibility which will enable a Labor government... to indicate where and how the defence of this nation can be increased.

As a reason for this change in policy, he added what proved to be a revelation of the thinking which dominated his later actions as Prime Minister:

In the common protection of this portion of the British Commonwealth [i.e. Australia and New Zealand], it would be particularly desirable in certain contingencies to have the direct aid of another country... To be entitled to such aid if it should come to pass, then inevitably the price would be some acknowledgement of the principles of mutuality.<sup>54</sup>

The Victorian Conference agreed to a change in policy, despite the opposition of Blackburn, on whom the changing tide of war had produced little obvious effect. He argued, "For shame's sake

<sup>53</sup> See Atkinson, War, Communism..., esp. Ch.5. Blackburn was the only labor parliamentarian to give a reasoned defence of the miners' cause, denying Communist subversion. See C.P.D., 163:396-8; 163:1395-7.

<sup>54</sup> Labor Call, 30 June, 1940.

we should stick to our policy instead of trying to win an election."<sup>55</sup> However, the Federal Conference<sup>56</sup> confirmed the Victorian decision that the amendments to the Defence Act which the A.L.P. had previously demanded in order to eliminate all references to military training were now to be postponed during the war period. The Conference carried several resolutions calling for a more whole-hearted and efficient war effort, and urged

National training for defence in terms of the existing Defence Act to be maintained on the highest basis of efficiency... Necessary provision for reinforcement of the A.I.F. divisions, the extent of European participation by volunteer army to be determined by circumstances as they arise, having regard to the paramount necessity of Australia's defence.<sup>57</sup>

The Party still refused to participate in a National Government and opposed conscription for overseas service, but, breaking with its inter-war resolutions, it had decided to approve volunteer forces for an overseas war, and to allow compulsory military service within Australia. Presumably Curtin had forgotten his warning that these would lead to conscription for overseas service.

Curtin and the majority of federal labor politicians were now not only fully behind the war effort but prepared to accept restrictions on civil liberties which they would never before have tolerated. When Menzies introduced a second National Security Bill in June 1940, giving even greater powers to the government by

55 Labor Call, 30 June, 1940

56 At which Blackburn was a delegate.

57 Labor Call, 20 June, 1940.

removing the guarantees against industrial and military conscription and courts-martial for civilians, Curtin supported the Bill, saying that the time had come when one consideration was "paramount over every other aspect of the life of the country; that is, the consideration of assuring the safety of the country against an imminent danger."<sup>58</sup>

Blackburn, continuing to defend civil liberties, opposed the Bill. He argued forcibly that although Menzies had promised the Bill would give unlimited power to tax and take property, it could do neither because the Constitution limited the Government's power in both respects. He maintained the Bill was intended to be used against the workers, to order men to work under military control and to be punished by court martial. In deference to the general emotional upheaval about the threat of war, he permitted himself to join<sup>in</sup> it as far as to say, "England is the hope of our race; we love England, and if England should go down it would seem to me as if the sun went down", but quickly returned to earth to state that his duty was to defend "his people", the trade unionists.<sup>59</sup>

Finally only four official A.L.P. members - Blackburn, Brennan, Maloney and Ward - voted against the Bill at the second reading, joined by the five Non-Communist members.

On the whole, the A.L.P. was becoming increasingly united on its war policy. The New South Wales Executive, after a period

58 C.P.D., 164:19

59 C.P.D., 164:54-8

of caution, again began to display signs of co-operation with communists, especially after the Communist Party was banned in June 1940.<sup>60</sup> Finally the Federal Executive, aroused by complaints by New South Wales federal labor parliamentarians that their State Executive had put pressure on them to vote against the second National Security Bill, suspended the State Executive, and in August 1940 appointed a new Executive of moderates,<sup>61</sup> which proved to have electoral support. The former State Party, now generally known as the Hughes-Evans Party, survived but eventually merged with the Communist Party.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, after their poor showing in the federal elections in September 1940, the Non-Communist Party merged with the Official Labor Party in February 1941.<sup>63</sup>

However, a slight difference in attitude to the war persisted between the non-Parliamentary section of the Party and most of the Labor politicians. The latter were still more prepared <sup>to accept sacrifices on behalf of the people</sup> than was the outside Labor movement. The Labor Call, for instance, continued to complain of the oppressiveness of the National Security regulations<sup>64</sup> and at the annual Victorian Labor Conference in June 1941, a resolution was carried demanding "a substantial improvement in the standard of living for the workers... together

60 Rawson, Organization of the A.L.P., pp.346-7

61 Argus, 13 August 1940

62 Atkinson says the merger took place on 16 January 1944, but gives no source for this. (War, Communism... footnote, p.109)

63 Hasluck, The Government and the People, p.366.

64 e.g. an article entitled "Hitler Fought for Six Years to Get Such Power," 6 February 1941.

with freedom of speech and assembly."<sup>65</sup> But Curtin was more and more concerned with national security, particularly after the Opposition was granted equal representation with the Government on an Advisory War Council, constituted in October 1940. In February 1941, he warned an Australian Workers' Union convention in Sydney that, as Britain was heavily beset, "all must contribute to the common effort to defend the whole British Commonwealth", and proceeded with a long speech that indirectly hinted at the threat of invasion from Japan.<sup>66</sup>

While Labor enthusiasm in the defence of civil liberties waned, Blackburn during the remaining months of non-Labor rule continued to tilt at government oppression, backed by the evidence provided for him by the Council for Civil Liberties.<sup>67</sup> He gave general speeches praising the British maintenance of the liberties of speech, association and press, and drawing the conclusion that this made the British willing to fight for their country,<sup>68</sup> and brought forward specific cases of breaches of civil liberties. For instance, in June 1940 he protested against attempts to prevent the holding of meetings by the Trotskyite Communist League of Australia, which

65 Labor Call, 19 June, 1941

66 Labor Call, 20 February, 1941

67 An examination of the Correspondence of the Council's executive in these years (in the possession of Mrs D. Fitzpatrick of Toorak, Victoria) shows that the Council documented most of the cases Blackburn cited as examples of injustice.

68 C.P.D., 164:217-8.



had not (yet) been banned as had the Communist Party.<sup>69</sup> In August he questioned the Postmaster-General as to why a Social Credit speaker had been prevented from delivering a planned A.B.C. broadcast dealing with social reconstruction, and received the unsatisfactory answer that "No talks will be permitted which are considered detrimental to ~~the~~ Australia's national defence effort".<sup>70</sup> In the same month he protested against the questioning and searching of people's belongings at their place of employment, in connection with suspected subversive organizations.<sup>71</sup> In March 1941, considering the Defence Bill, which had retrospective provisions to deal with profiteers, he condemned their retrospective nature, adding almost with bitterness, "but it is all of a piece with the general regression from the principles of freedom and liberty which we have made during this war."<sup>72</sup>

1941 was an even more active year for defenders of civil liberties. The Council for Civil Liberties, in its pamphlet, The War and Civil Rights, Third Series, of October 1941, said it was "never kept so busy as in the four months between mid-May and mid-September of 1941." Blackburn himself wrote a pamphlet<sup>73</sup> for the Council in February, protesting against the Queensland Public Safety Act of 1940, which delegated the power of the Queensland Parliament to the State's Government to an

69 C.P.D., 164:159

70 C.P.D., 164:301-2

71 C.P.D., 164:533

72 C.P.D., 166:260

73 The Queensland Way to Dictatorship, Melbourne, 1941.

even greater extent than the National Security legislation delegated power to the Commonwealth Government. Whereas the Commonwealth Constitution was a considerable check on the Executive because it could be altered only by referendum, the Queensland Constitution could be altered merely by an act of Parliament, and moreover it had no guarantees of democratic liberties as did the Commonwealth Constitution. Furthermore, the Public Safety Act provided that on proclamation the Queensland Government could set up a Council of Public Safety which could in effect do what it wished without any check, even a financial one, by Parliament. Finally, whereas the Commonwealth Parliament could disallow regulations, in Queensland the Public Safety Act did not even require that Parliament should meet, and the standing order which permitted Parliament to annul regulations, could itself be suspended by regulation.

Blackburn was the parliamentary leader of the movement to revise conscientious objector legislation along the lines of British provisions, so that such objectors need not render even non-combatant service. This campaign had been going on for some time. In May 1940 he led a parliamentary deputation representing various interested organizations, such as the Council for Civil Liberties and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.<sup>74</sup> A year later he spoke in Parliament supporting the

<sup>74</sup> Peacemaker, March 1942.

proposed revision<sup>75</sup> and also in May 1941 addressed a public meeting on the issue.<sup>76</sup> The campaign was eventually to bear fruit in early 1942, when the Labor government issued a regulation allowing conscientious objectors to escape non-combatant duties.<sup>77</sup> Blackburn also took an active part in the Council's campaign for the release of Ratliff and Thomas, two communists who, having served a term of imprisonment for subversive activities in 1940, were re-arrested and interned without trial. Blackburn drew up a petition for their release, which was carried out as soon as the A.L.P. took office.<sup>78</sup>

In July 1941 Blackburn scored a victory when he moved in Parliament for the disallowance of Regulation 42A, which has been discussed above. He pointed out that the regulation could prevent anyone safely discussing the war: one section merely forbade people to "make any subversive statement".<sup>79</sup> By a majority of one vote, Blackburn's motion was carried - one of the few regulations to be disallowed during the war.

iii

However, towards the end of non-Labor rule, Blackburn was again in trouble with his party. After June 1941 the Party faced a

75 C.P.D., 167:84

76 Peacemaker, June 1941

77 Commonwealth Statutory Rules No. 80, issued 23 February 1942.

78 Fitzpatrick, Australian Commonwealth, pp.283-7

79 C.P.D., 167:880-5

slightly awkward situation, since with the entry of the U.S.S.R. into the war on the Allies' side in that month, Australian communists were again eager to unite with the A.L.P. Several "Aid for Russia" societies sprang up in the different States. In general the Party solved the problem by supporting Russia in principle but regarding these societies with suspicion, or banning them, according to the temper of the State Executive.<sup>80</sup>

The Victorian Central Executive had throughout the war shown itself to be more concerned with fighting communism than Nazism and Fascism. Its mouthpiece, the Labor Call, carried attacks on Australian and Russian communists far more bitter than those on the official enemy.<sup>81</sup> This attitude was largely due to the increasing strength communists were gaining in the trade unions.<sup>82</sup> Some members of the Central Executive - notably Cremean - were in close contact with the newly-formed Catholic Action movement, which was organizing Catholics to fight communism in industry.<sup>83</sup> Others on the Executive were passionately anti-communist for other reasons: Lovegrove, for instance, was an ex-communist. Although Blackburn had been re-elected to the Executive in 1938 only a year after his readmission to the Party, and had remained an Executive member since, he was clearly out of place amid the general pre-occupation with anti-communism. At the annual Conference in June 1941, this

80 Rawson, Organization of the A.L.P., pp.367-9

81 e.g. Labor Call, 4 January 1940

82 For evidence of this, see reports of struggles within the Trades Hall Council, e.g. Labor Call, 24 April, 1941; 22 May 1941.

83 See B.A. Santamaria, The Price of Freedom, (Melbourne, 1964) pp.26-8.

disagreement was evident. When Blackburn "declared that troops should not be sent overseas, and expressed the view that Australian troops in the Middle East should be withdrawn", Lovegrove replied that

there were certain individuals in the Labor movement who were nothing but "stooges"... He had no doubt that if the Nazis invaded Russia tomorrow certain individuals would demand that every able-bodied young man be damned-well conscripted and sent overseas to fight for Russia.<sup>84</sup>

In these years there was also a skirmish over alleged "dictatorship" by the Central Executive. The Executive was accused of trying to take over branches, and of selecting its own candidate for the seat of Coburg in preference to Charles Mutton, who had been popularly chosen by a pre-selection ballot in the constituency. The Coburg Branch was expelled when it supported Mutton, who stood as an Independent and was elected. The expelled members alleged that the Executive was also out to defeat Maurice Blackburn, and indeed, whether or not they had "packed" the branch, Blackburn, to most people's surprise, was not elected by Coburg as a Conference delegate that year.<sup>85</sup> At the Conference, Blackburn (attending as an Executive member) cannot have made himself popular by remarking, after the Central Executive had tried to justify itself on the Coburg pre-selection

84 Labor Call, 19 June 1941

85 On this controversy see "Cleanse-our-Party leaflet No.1" issued "on behalf of the Coburg Victims of the Heresy Hunt", and Truth, 5 April 1941.

issue, "that the Executive had not done the right thing."<sup>86</sup>

The situation became explosive when Blackburn became active in the Australian-Soviet Friendship League, one of the friendship-with-Russia associations set up after the entry of Russia into the war. On August 1, 1941, directly referring to the A.S.F.L., the Executive warned that its 1939 decision required<sup>ing</sup> members to seek its permission before addressing outside meetings must be observed.<sup>87</sup> From then on, what was essentially the same pattern as in Blackburn's earlier conflict with the Executive developed, and with the same result.

If anything, Blackburn's behaviour was even more provocative. For instance, on August 14, the night before the Executive had arranged to discuss the question of what action should be taken about the A.S.F.L., he addressed two meetings of the A.S.F.L., without seeking permission from the Executive to do so.<sup>88</sup> On the following night, the Central Executive ruled that members of <sup>the A.L.P. could not be members of</sup> or participate in A.S.F.L. activities.<sup>89</sup> Chairing a meeting of the A.S.F.L. after this decision but before he himself <sup>had</sup> ~~and~~ been excluded, Blackburn claimed that the 1939 resolution to which the Executive had referred was not a rule of the A.L.P., since rules could not be made by the Party unless notice was first circulated

86 Labor Call, 19 June, 1941

87 Central Executive Minutes.

88 Argus, 15 August 1941

89 Central Executive Minutes, 15 August 1941

to its branches and unions.<sup>90</sup> This excuse was founded on an even more extreme conception of democracy than his defence in similar circumstances in 1935. On September 21, the Federal Executive warned that the "Aid to Russia" meetings were communist subsidiaries, but took no further action except to declare that no member of the A.L.P. could belong to the A.S.F.L. "or other kindred organizations similarly dominated."<sup>91</sup> The following day, Blackburn made the extraordinary statement "that he did not want to sacrifice his A.L.P. membership, but if his choice was the party or the League, he would stand by the League."<sup>92</sup> On the 3rd October, the Central Executive excluded Blackburn, not for being a member of the A.S.F.L. (for he was not), but for participating in its activities.<sup>93</sup>

Blackburn had been an admirer of Russia since the foundation of the Soviet regime; he had in fact issued one of the first pamphlets on Bolshevism in Australia.<sup>94</sup> Although he opposed violence and did not believe that any change was worth "the destruction of a single innocent life," he looked upon the Russian Revolution "as many other people now look upon the French Revolution... in its ultimate result it effected one of the most

90 Argus, 25 August 1941

91 Labor Call, 25 September, 1941

92 Argus, 23 September, 1941

93 Central Executive Minutes.

94 Bolshevism: what the Russian Workers Are Doing. (Melbourne, 1918)

beneficial changes that the world has ever known." Although he "detested" the Russian invasion of Finland, he continued to support the Russian "great experiment in government."<sup>95</sup>

This loyalty came to conflict with his membership of the A.L.P. In his election manifesto of August 1943 he explained the situation thus:

Although I knew that the Executive was not authorized by the Party's rules to give such a direction [i.e. that he should not speak at A.S.F.L. meetings], I would have complied, if compliance had been right and honourable. But I owed a duty to myself and my beliefs. I had been, for nearly two years, asserting that Russia would never be the tool of Hitler; that she would resist him at the risk of invasion and possible defeat. And when there came to pass the very thing I had expected, I felt bound, by every means in my power, to persuade my people that their duty, and their interest, was to be friends of Russia. I did all I could to destroy prejudices and to dispel suspicion. No one today doubts that we were right in so doing. But if every one had obeyed the Executive's direction, this work would never have been done.<sup>96</sup>

However, after he had spent all his long political life in the A.L.P., it suggests a lack of perspective in Blackburn that he was prepared to give what was really a side-issue priority over the Party which was his only hope for fulfilling the principles he supported. Rawson<sup>97</sup> suggests that Blackburn calculated that the growing enthusiasm in the A.L.P. for the Russian cause would ensure his readmission to the Party even if he stood by the League. Certainly Blackburn was unlucky, for he was expelled just before the support for friendship-with-Russia societies began in the

95 C.P.D., 163:1395

96 Federal Elections August 21, 1943. To the Electors of Bourke.

97 Organization of the A.L.P., p.370.



A.L.P., doubtless influenced by growing interest in the war effort after the Labor Party took office and the Japanese began their southward advance. Later, many leading Labor men spoke at such meetings,<sup>98</sup> and indeed, less than a year after Blackburn's expulsion, on September 13 1942, the Victorian Central Executive amended its ruling on the A.S.F.L. to allow members of the A.L.P. to participate in the League's activities, provided the meeting was approved by the Executive.<sup>99</sup>

Even under these circumstances, Blackburn did not apply for readmission, perhaps because, unlike in 1936, there was little pressure from his electors for him to do so,<sup>100</sup> since he seemed out of step with public enthusiasm for the war effort, and partly perhaps because the Executive had influence in his electorate branches. Moreover, after the formation of the Labor Government in the same month as his exclusion from the Party, he was to differ from the A.L.P. even more radically than before.

iv

When, after a shuffling of governments caused by the split in the U.A.P. - Country Party coalition, Curtin was called upon to become Prime Minister in October 1941, the Labor Party was after many years united. In the previous two years, the A.L.P. and Maurice Blackburn had shown a perhaps predictable reversal in their

98 Rawson, Organization of the A.L.P., p.370.

99 Central Executive Minutes.

100 This is the opinion of Mr. H. Nicholls, Blackburn's campaign director (Conversation with the author.)

attitudes to the war. Once the war had begun, the A.L.P. in Parliament - especially Curtin - and increasingly in the Party outside, regarded the international struggle for liberty as all-important, and this attitude strengthened throughout the Party as the war situation worsened. Although at first Party leaders had been careful to stipulate that liberties and living standards should not be sacrificed to the war effort, these reservations were fast disappearing when Labor took office in October 1941. Most of the Party obviously considered with Curtin that a democracy's role in war was to preserve its security, whether or not it temporarily ceased to be a democracy in the process. The vehemence with which the Party continued to oppose conscription for overseas service began to sound suspicious in the face of its abandonment of other principles.

Blackburn, on the other hand, was so alarmed by the diminution of liberties at home that he was ready almost to disregard the international situation. Although he resigned himself to the fact that the war had to be fought, he considered that a democracy must maintain its civil liberties at home even while it was at war, or else the war was meaningless, and people would not be prepared to fight for an unfree country. His approach was not entirely realistic, since people have shown that they are not patriotic merely out of love for the liberties of their homeland, although in some countries this may be a significant factor.

Nevertheless, Blackburn's stand by the liberties he had always defended and desired to maintain in other countries during the inter-war years, served a useful purpose, for Australia, unthreatened by invasion as she was in these years, was unduly burdened by restrictive regulations and injustices.

Thus far, however, there was no real reason why Blackburn's stand for principle should have seriously brought him into conflict with the Party, for the A.L.P. was out of office and willing to tolerate some defence of liberties while the war was still distant. Blackburn's second expulsion from the Party was an extraneous event which does not fit neatly into his battle for principles. He can hardly be blamed for disagreeing with the pettiness of the Victorian Central Executive in seeking to ferret out any suspicion of sympathy with communism when Russia had just become an ally. This event was a matter merely between the Victorian Executive and himself. However, the recklessness with which he left the Party over what was a comparatively small issue shows, perhaps, an overdeveloped concern for honour which a political man, who wishes to continue to fight for more important issues within the useful framework of a party, cannot afford to display.

CHAPTER IV

TOTAL WAR : OCTOBER 1941 TO AUGUST 1943.

From their behaviour during the early years of the war, the reactions of Maurice Blackburn and the A.L.P. to the threat of Japanese invasion were predictable. The tale of Blackburn's last months in Parliament and in life has an almost tragic inevitability and certainly a dramatic simplicity, since now Blackburn was clearly silhouetted in his struggle against the A.L.P., with the struggle culminating in the "last stand" for the last of the A.L.P.'s former principles on war to be abandoned - opposition to conscription for overseas service.

i

In November 1941, Blackburn's first speech in Parliament since the Labor Government had taken office showed that he was by no means confident in the new government. He was disappointed in the budget, which continued the borrowing policy of previous governments, instead of financing the war by direct taxation, as was Labor's policy.<sup>1</sup> He also felt it necessary to warn against conscription for overseas service.<sup>2</sup>

Less than a month later, on December 6, 1941, Japan entered the war by her attack on Pearl Harbour. Curtin, who had been studying the Japanese situation for months and fully appreciated

1 The Federal Platform of the A.L.P. 1939, specified that naval and military expenditure were to be allocated from direct taxation.

2 C.P.D., 169: 314-6.

the danger of invasion, committed Australia to what he was not afraid to call "total war"! When he announced war with Japan in Parliament on December 16, he stated flatly:

the people will acknowledge that such order and promptness as are necessary to deal with the emergency can be best achieved by obeying the directions of the authorities, rather than by wasting time in fault-finding, criticizing and opposing.

Having listened to similar remarks from other parliamentarians, Blackburn was obviously alarmed, especially when Opposition members urged conscription for overseas service upon the Government. He set out clearly his moral objections to this course of action, describing the "traditional distinction" made between a "just and defensible compulsion" for the defence of one's own country and an "unjust and indefensible compulsion" to fight abroad.

It rests not merely on logic but on the instinct of man, which calls upon him to take up arms for the defence of his own countryside, for the defence of himself, his wife and children... But when a man voluntarily goes overseas as a soldier, he knows perfectly well that he may be required to make war against people<sup>4</sup> who bear him no illwill and against whom he has none.

However, it is difficult to tell whether he really believed what he was saying, or whether he was trying to persuade both himself and his listeners when he claimed:

... I do not think it is possible to get a united people, or Parliament, on any proposal for compulsory service overseas. The Government party is led by men whose rise to influence in the Labour movement began

3 C.P.D., 169:1070

4 C.P.D., 169:1099

with the conscription campaign... Can any one imagine the honourable member for Melbourne Ports (Mr. Holloway) or the Prime Minister (Mr. Curtin) being a party<sup>5</sup> to the introduction of compulsion for overseas service?

In all probability he was thoroughly convinced that the A.L.P. would never abandon this principle, for he was a trustful man, and had made a similar statement in June 1916, when he said he did not believe Hughes would introduce conscription.<sup>6</sup> His real aim was to justify this stand. He stated that he did not believe in total war. "There are certain things that we would not do even in order to win a war", and conscription for overseas service was one of them.<sup>7</sup>

Edmund Burke has told us that though we may use liberty as an abstract name, we cannot think of liberty without calling to mind some definite immunity which is for us and our people the core and centre of liberty... To the masses of the people of Australia the most glowing experience in the struggle for freedom<sup>8</sup> is the defeat of overseas conscription in 1916 and 1917.

At this stage Curtin was willing to refrain from tampering with this holy relic, but in other respects the Government considered it had a free hand. Like the population in general, the A.L.P. had become infected by the war crisis: for instance, the Labor Call, hitherto so reluctant concerning the war, in January 1942 was full of war news, and worked itself up to a pitch of anti-Japanese feeling, typified by a war advertisement

5 C.P.D. 169:1099

6 Socialist, June 30, 1916

7 C.P.D. 169:1099

8 C.P.D. 169:1100

in April: "We've always despised them - now we must smash them!"<sup>9</sup>  
The new patriotic intensity was warranted, as country after country fell before the Japanese advance in the early months of 1942. The Labor Government moved fast to mobilize Australia, making extensive use of its powers under the National Security Act to issue regulations on almost every conceivable subject, from fixing prices to requisitioning binoculars.

In June 1942, the Council for Civil Liberties published a pamphlet entitled Liberty and the Labour Government. It reported: "In many respects the Labour Government has brought about redress of injustices and reforms of practice," and instanced the extension of the rights of ~~the rights of~~ conscientious objectors in February 1942. But in general the verdict of the Council went against the Labor Government. Not only had it failed to abolish many existing dangerous provisions, but it had issued some regulations which caused the Council "the liveliest apprehension", the main one apparently being the National Security (Mobilization of Services and Property) Regulations, Statutory Rule No. 77. These regulations, intended to enable the government "to use, for the public safety and the defence of the Commonwealth... the services and property of all persons and companies within Australia and its Territories," gave a "Minister, or any person authorized by a Minister" power to direct, "either orally or in writing,"

9 Labor Call, 2 April, 1942

any Australian resident

- (a) to perform such services as are specified in the direction;
- (b) to perform such duties in relation to his trade, business, calling or profession as are so specified;
- (c) to place his property, in accordance with the direction, at the service of the Commonwealth.

Any such direction could apply to individuals, classes, or people in certain areas.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the Labor Government had ruled by regulation to an even greater extent than had the previous governments:

National Security Regulations to the number of 243 were gazetted during the nine months of non-Labour rule in 1941. But in the first seven months of Labour rule 329 such regulations were gazetted.

For the Labor Government to work fast, regulations were necessary during these months in which occurred the most critical moments of the war, in Australian eyes: the first reverse the Japanese received was not until the battle of the Coral Sea, on May 7; in July the Japanese landed in New Guinea and in the following weeks drove the Australians in the territory southwards. Nevertheless, during this period the Government perpetrated some needless acts of repression and dictatorship which Blackburn made it his duty to publicize. He was particularly concerned with the case of the Australia First Movement, a pro-fascist organization, many of whose members were arrested when Japan entered the war. In his first speech on the subject, on March 25, 1942, he protested

<sup>10</sup> Commonwealth Statutory Rules, 1942, p.878. This Rule was made on 19 February, 1942.



against the internment of fifteen of the Movement's members - all Australians - without trial.<sup>11</sup> He later cleverly took the opportunity to point out that the only charge of treason made during the war - that against the Australia firsters - was against Australian people, and that refugee immigrants were likely to fear the enemy more than Australians did, and therefore they should be respected, not suspected.<sup>12</sup> In September 1942 he protested against the harsh treatment of some of the Movement's internees, complained that they had not been brought to speedy trial, and urged that they be given legal aid.<sup>13</sup> However, the pressure of Blackburn and a few other parliamentarians on this issue seems to have had little effect. Dr. Evatt (the Attorney-General) made a statement on the case in September 1942, but did not indicate that the internees would be brought to trial.<sup>14</sup>

Blackburn was also dissatisfied with the Allied Works Council, which had the power to conscript labour to carry out public works. He maintained that its work was "being carried out at a great cost of human suffering and loss of civil morale," and cited cases of elderly men being sent out to do unsuitable work in harsh conditions, and moreover being treated with contempt by the representatives of

the Council.<sup>15</sup> There is no doubt that with the bureaucracy expanded

11. C.P.D., 170 : 417-8

12. C.P.D., 170 : 517-8

13. C.P.D., 172 : 48

14. C.P.D., 172 : 154-6

15. C.P.D., 172 : 710-11

to deal with the new regulations, many Australians were ill-treated,<sup>16</sup> and their demoralization could not have helped the war effort. Blackburn was even more alarmed when he found that blank prosecution forms were being issued by the Director-General of Allied Works, authorized by the Prime Minister.<sup>17</sup> In response to his and other protests, Evatt promised "to make sure that in each case the attention of the Director-General is given to the facts before a consent is signed..."<sup>18</sup>

Blackburn's constant pleas during these months were for more decentralization of effort<sup>19</sup> - he urged the government to work through the unions, State governments and voluntary associations, not dictate to them - and for greater parliamentary supervision of regulations. He suggested that "If we cannot have constant meetings of Parliament... parliamentary committees should be appointed to deal with regulations before they are gazetted."<sup>20</sup> As the regulations proliferated, he found that they were not only oppressive but confusing and inefficiently drafted. On March 26 1942 he complained:

Regulations are being turned out at the rate of more than ten a week. Orders come out at about the same rate... I am a man whose business it is to know something of regulations, but I cannot keep track of them... nearly every matter covered is dealt with inconsistently, at least twice, by different regulations.<sup>21</sup>

16 See "Preserving Individual Rights", Sydney Morning Herald, 7 August 1943, reprinted in Sydney Morning Herald, Men, Parties and Politics, (Sydney, 1943), pp.58-60.

17 C.P.D., 173:919

18 C.P.D., 173:726

19 C.P.D., 170:62-3, 485-6

20 C.P.D., 170:243

21 C.P.D., 170:485

As a remedy he suggested "frequent consultation on regulations of various subjects "to prevent overlapping, and

periodical acts of parliament passed to deal with matters covered by regulations, in order to place them on a statutory basis and enable them to be discussed and considered by Parliament in their relation to one another.<sup>22</sup>

As an independent, Blackburn was in the fortunate position of being able to move for the disallowance of regulations. The United Australia Party - Country Party opposition was not sufficiently critical of the Government to do this: Fadden, for instance, called for the discussion of Regulation No. 77 mentioned above,<sup>23</sup> but was willing to accept Curtin's assurance that there would be "no general delegation whatsoever" under the regulation.<sup>24</sup> Members of the Government party, who were obviously glad to have the opportunity to vent their criticisms, were not content with this conclusion. Brennan, for instance, declared, "...if it were my last act in public life I would oppose these regulations on a vote of this House being taken."<sup>25</sup>

Four days later, Blackburn gave him an opportunity to fulfil that promise when he moved to disallow Regulation No. 77. Blackburn presented the case against the regulation clearly and convincingly:

The essence of a law is that it should be a rule of conduct and should lay down principles for the guidance of the people who have to obey it. In addition, the matter should apply to people generally... These regulations are made by

22 C.P.D., 170:485

23 C.P.D., 170:391

24 C.P.D., 170:400

25 C.P.D., 170:397

the Executive under parliamentary authority, and should comply with that principle, but Statutory Rule No. 77 does not observe it... it<sup>26</sup> makes no pretence at being anything but arbitrary...

He pointed out that the regulation had been used only against workers: once against the coalminers, and its use had been threatened against the striking Amalgamated Engineering Union. "Threats of that kind have aroused the anger of the unions."<sup>27</sup>

The A.L.P. members had been so well disciplined in Caucus that none of them would second Blackburn's motion. It was Archie Cameron of the United Australia Party who seconded it.

The dour Scotsman began by saying:

Although I have never belonged to the Boy Scouts Movement, I think this is possibly one of the occasions in my life when I have, perhaps subconsciously, obeyed the scout's dictum to do one good turn a day. When I look across the House and see the honorable member for Bourke (Mr. Blackburn), for the second time... expelled from his temporal and spiritual home, the Labour party, I feel<sup>28</sup> that I should come to his assistance and support him.

A dismal scene followed in the House of Representatives as several A.L.P. members - ward (then a Cabinet Minister), Morgan, Calwell and Rosevear - arose to testify against the regulation, knowing that their opposition was no more than words. Morgan remarked of Blackburn, "I envy him because, on this occasion, he can not only speak, but also vote as he honestly thinks proper."<sup>29</sup> In the event, six Opposition members only voted with Blackburn, and the motion was lost.

26 C.P.D., 170:629

27 C.P.D., 170:630

28 C.P.D., 170:631

29 C.P.D., 170:735

Some A.L.P. members were also concerned, like Blackburn, at the fact that although Labor was in office, its government did nothing to implement the Labor policy in social and economic matters. The most heated debate on this subject occurred in early March, 1942,<sup>30</sup> when Blackburn defended his friend Ward, the Minister for Labour and National Service, in his criticisms of the Loan Bill, which carried on the non-Labor tradition of financing the war by loans on which interest was paid. Opposition members joined in bitter attacks on Ward, whom they regarded as the most dangerous, because the most socialist, member of Cabinet. Blackburn's support did not seem to make things easier for Ward: a member of the U.A.P. sneered that communists always stood together.<sup>31</sup> Calwell later remarked bitterly:

...This Government will never inject any socialism into the economic structure, nor will it do anything to disturb the existing<sup>32</sup> order, except with the concurrence of the Opposition.

With the general acquiescence of the public and the rest of the A.L.P., the Labor Government had shown that in a national emergency it behaved no differently from a non-Labor administration, except that it could afford to dragoon the workers to an even greater extent. Curtin especially had blossomed into something of an autocrat. In the biographical extracts he has published about

30 C.P.D., 170:133-72.

31 C.P.D., 170:153

32 C.P.D., 170:747

Curtin, Dr. Lloyd Ross notes,

From the day that Curtin became Prime Minister his personality seemed to change. No longer neurotic and "lackadaisical", he was determined and ruthless in enforcing his basic ideas.<sup>33</sup>

He felt personally responsible for the conduct of the war, and thought in terms of national security alone. Ross reports his impatience of union stoppages:

...following an outbreak of stoppages, he would have the union officials down to Canberra, and would anger them with his preachings and his demands... He refused to meet a miner's delegation which had travelled to Canberra to see him - because the miners were still striking.<sup>34</sup>

Although the Government had to act swiftly and without recourse to normal democratic procedures, its administration might often have been more efficient if more groups had been consulted. Parliament remained the only place of appeal and criticism, and Blackburn used his position there to the full, not to hinder the Government but to prevent unnecessary injustice and to suggest how some more democratic methods might be more effective than heavy-handed coercion.

ii

As the old Labor attitude to war dissolved, Maurice Blackburn began to look with foreboding upon its last vestige - opposition to conscription for overseas service. On May 1, 1942, as the Japanese advanced unchecked, Fadden moved "that all territorial

33 Sun-Herald, 27 July, 1958.

34 Sun-Herald, 10 August, 1958.

limitations upon the power of the Commonwealth Government to employ the Australian Military Forces should be removed."<sup>35</sup>

Curtin opposed the motion, but in a measured, almost reluctant manner, arguing purely that Fadden's motion would be of use only if the Australian forces were on the offensive, which they were not.

Blackburn maintained that Curtin's reply "dispels, I think, any fear that the Government will resort to compulsion for overseas service..."<sup>36</sup> But as if he were still not quite confident of this, he repeated his arguments against conscription for overseas service, adding one relevant to the immediate circumstances:

Men so enlisted...may be required to put down insurrection among the Burmese, the peoples of India or Indonesia, who think, perhaps, that this a favourable opportunity to rise for the liberation of their country. Australians can have no conceivable quarrel with coloured peoples who wish to win their freedom from the white races, and there should be no risk of Australians being employed against them.<sup>37</sup>

Finally he repeated that

Whatever happens in Australia, it will never be found that a government led by the right honorable member for Fremantle (Mr. Curtin)... will be responsible for amending the Defence Act for the purpose of sending men overseas against their will.<sup>38</sup>

Later in the year, in October 1942, when Australian troops had stopped the Japanese advance in New Guinea, the Army Minister, Mr. Forde, informed the Senate that there was no need to apply

35 C.P.D., 170:797

36 C.P.D., 170:810

37 C.P.D., 170:811-2

38 C.P.D., 170:813

in Australia conscription for overseas service.<sup>39</sup>

However, Labor men who thought thus had reckoned without Curtin. Ross reports that he could not sleep for worrying about the war, and "Troop movements became an obsession with him".<sup>40</sup> Fearing for Australia's safety, he was also dominated by the American alliance, as shown by his public message to Roosevelt on December 27 1941, in which he declared that "Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links with the United Kingdom..." General MacArthur, whom the Allies had put in command of the South-West Pacific, arrived in Australia in March 1942 and at once became Curtin's close friend. Although he never fully revealed the motives for his change in policy, it appears likely that when by November 1942, Curtin had decided that Australia required conscription for overseas service, it was not mainly strategic reasons which prompted the change, but political interest in maintaining the protection of the Americans. The move was intended not to defend Australia, which was by this time safe from attack, but to help the Americans rout the Japanese from the South-West Pacific islands. Dr. Lloyd Ross observes that Curtin

was certainly influenced by MacArthur and by the argument

39 C.P.D., 172:1491. On the previous day, Forde had told the House of Representatives that the rate of transfer from the A.M.F. to the A.I.F. was the highest since the war began, measuring about 6,000 transfers a week. (C.P.D., 172:1417)

40 Sun-Herald, 3 August, 1958.



which was indirectly discussed in America that, while the Americans were fighting as conscripts in a foreign country which they were protecting, that country did not have conscription for service overseas.<sup>41</sup>

Ross elsewhere indicates that Curtin did not initiate the change in policy, but merely saw no reason for rejecting American requests for it,<sup>42</sup> and the Sydney Morning Herald reported, on November 20, 1942: "It was officially stated in Canberra yesterday that General MacArthur was the inspiration of the move."

Having decided that he would not make the same mistakes as Hughes did in the First World War, Curtin moved carefully in the way he thought would be least likely to split the A.L.P. He broached the issue at a special Federal Conference of the A.L.P. on November 18, 1942, showing that he wished to act in accordance with Party rules, and was prepared to abide by a majority decision; but at the same time, discussion of the proposal would be limited, and a vote would be virtually a vote of confidence in Curtin personally, at a time when Curtin knew he was a popular leader. He moved as a matter <sup>of urgency: a resolution dealing with a matter</sup> not on the agenda paper, authorizing the Government to amend the Defence Act to allow the Australian Military Forces to serve in "such other territories in the South-West Pacific area<sup>43</sup> as the Governor-General proclaims as being

41 Letter to the author.

42 Sun-Herald, 3 August, 1958

43 This area, as assigned to MacArthur, included, besides Australia and Tasmania, the Philippines, Borneo, the Celebes, Java, New Guinea, New Ireland and New Britain. See Dudley McCarthy, South-West Pacific Area - First Year: Kokoda to Wau (Series I, Vol. V of Australia in the War of 1939-1945), (Canberra, 1959) p.19

territories associated with the defence of Australia."<sup>44</sup>

However, Calwell pointed out that since the question was not on the agenda, it would have to be submitted to the State branches. The conference voted to do this and to reconsider the motion at another special conference on January 4, 1943.

Curtin's move came as a shock to almost everyone. He had not discussed it with Cabinet or Caucus, although he had possibly talked it over with Chifley and Scullin.<sup>45</sup> Blackburn was one of the first to denounce Curtin's action publicly. On November 23, the Argus, printed a letter from him on the "Ethics of Compulsion". (It is notable that, in keeping with his belief that politics is a branch of ethics, Blackburn was one of the few who argued against conscription for overseas service on moral grounds as apart from arguments based on military necessity, national unity, and Labor tradition.) He argued that there was a natural obligation to resist an armed invader of Australia,

but there is no natural obligation, obvious to all, to enter another man's country in arms, even though his nation is the first aggressor. There should be no such legal obligation.

Responses in the A.L.P. at large varied. Some bitter attacks were made on Curtin's proposal, but the reaction was moderate compared with that to Hughes' proposal in 1916. For one thing, Curtin had

<sup>44</sup> Argus, 19 November, 1942

<sup>45</sup> See Ross in Sun-Herald, 3 August, 1958. Professor L.F. Crisp, in Ben Chifley (London, 1961), footnote to p.198, says Chifley had been consulted.

gone out of his way to persuade critics around to his point of view.<sup>46</sup> His first success was the the Cabinet, which on November 23 voted in favour of his proposal.<sup>47</sup> Outside Parliament, the responses differed from State to State. But even in Victoria, where the Labor Call had been intensely anti-conscriptionist, the paper's report of Curtin's move sounded surprised but guarded, and preoccupied with a desire to prevent a split in the Party.<sup>48</sup> Even if the Party in this State had inherited a strong anti-conscription tradition from the First World War, it had also, like Curtin, inherited a stronger fear of Party disunity.

The weeks before the January conference were crucial ones for the anti-conscription cause, as the decisions of the various State executives on Curtin's proposal were awaited. The first vote taken, on 27 November, was that of the New South Wales executive, which declared in favour of his proposal by 27 votes to 13.<sup>49</sup> Victoria remained faithful to its tradition when on 4 December its executive rebuffed Curtin's proposal by 17 votes to 5, and the minority five favoured an amendment that the question be put to a referendum.<sup>50</sup>

At this critical stage in the proceedings, Blackburn managed to severely embarrass the Labor Government. On December 10, Curtin

46 Ross, Sun-Herald, 3 August, 1958.

47 Argus, 24 November, 1942.

48 Labor Call, 26 November, 1942.

49 Argus, 26 November, 1942.

50 Labor Call, 10 December, 1942.

gave a review of the war situation in Parliament; in effect it was a preparation for his proposed amendment to the Defence Act. Although he admitted that the Japanese were being repulsed, he stressed that there was increased enemy activity in Timor, which might be used as a base for operations against North West Australia. He concluded meaningfully that Australia must be prepared to make total sacrifices to match those of the enemy.<sup>51</sup> Blackburn proceeded to disrupt the A.L.P. by unexpectedly moving that the House,

reaffirming the policy upon which the majority of its members were elected, opposes the imposition of any form of compulsory service outside Australia and the Territories of the Commonwealth.<sup>52</sup>

Following his beliefs in direct democracy, he argued: "We are not here to do what we think fit. We are elected on pledges which we gave to the people..." He pointed out that even most members of the Opposition were elected on a platform opposing conscription for overseas service.<sup>53</sup>

At this time, although Caucus had come to no decision on Curtin's proposal, pending the Conference vote in January, it had agreed to oppose any amendments to Curtin's war statement.<sup>54</sup> However, the debate on Blackburn's amendment quickly revealed Labor members' feelings on the subject, which was precisely what Curtin wished to

51 C.P.D., 172:1689-94

52 C.P.D., 172:1700

53 C.P.D., 172:1700-1

54 Argus, 11 December, 1942

avoid. Calwell defied Caucus in order to second the amendment, and (ironically, considering his previous remarks about Blackburn) rose to defend Blackburn against a charge of representing communists, levelled at him by Sir Charles Marr. Although Blackburn said midly, "What the honorable member has said will not do me any harm," Marr apologised:

If the honorable member for Bourke is hurt by what I have said, I withdraw it. I have too much respect for his convictions, and his attitude in this House, to "throw stones" at him.<sup>55</sup>

Brennan remarked bitterly:

There is one matter upon which the Prime Minister is absolutely sincere. He believes that he is the greatest military strategist since Hannibal, not excluding Napoleon Bonaparte. His opposition to the proposal of the Leader of the Opposition [Fadden's proposal in May for conscription for overseas service]<sup>56</sup> was based on military considerations, not on principle.

Ward also defended Blackburn's amendment<sup>57</sup>, but Evatt and Forde accused Blackburn of deliberately trying to embarrass the Government and prejudice the outcome of the January Conference.<sup>58</sup> Evatt went as far as to say,

...it is absurd to suggest that Government supporters are bound to support any amendment of a motion like the Prime Minister's [that his paper be printed]<sup>59</sup> merely because it is based on the Labour platform.

When the vote was taken, the Party had had time to discipline Calwell, and Blackburn's amendment was vetoed on the voices, with no one supporting him. Archie Cameron observed waspishly of

55 C.P.D., 172:1703

56 C.P.D., 172:1710

57 C.P.D., 172:1812-20

58 C.P.D., 172:1820, 1822

59 C.P.D., 172:1821

Calwell, "When it came to a vote it was found that there was not one drop of rain in all his storm."<sup>60</sup>

It was probably after this failure that Blackburn realized the full urgency of the situation. On the day he moved his amendment it became known that the Tasmanian Executive had approved Curtin's proposal by the narrow margin of four votes to three.<sup>61</sup> This was the turning-point, since it was certain that Western and South Australia would vote likewise, which they subsequently did, by large majorities.<sup>62</sup> Although the Queensland Executive rejected the proposal by 19 votes to 12,<sup>63</sup> the majority of the States now favoured it, thus determining the result of the January Conference. However, the fierce opposition to conscription in Victoria, Queensland's vote, and the fact that in New South Wales there was real hope for a change in vote, since Lang was campaigning vigorously there for rejection of the Executive's decision by the Annual Conference, gave some hope to anti-conscriptionists.<sup>64</sup>

On December 21, 1942, Blackburn and three others<sup>65</sup> called a public meeting to form a No Conscription Campaign in Victoria, which elected Blackburn as president and proceeded to set up local

60 C.P.D., 172:1831

61 Argus, 10 December, 1942

62 D. Whittington, The House will Divide, (Melbourne, 1954), p.106

63 Argus, 12 December, 1942

64 K.J. Kenafick, Maurice Blackburn and the No-Conscription Campaign in the Second World War, (Melbourne, 1949), p.44.

65 Mrs M. Brodney, Secretary of the Labor College, Mr. W. Scanlon, Secretary of the Timber Workers' Union, and Mr. T. Richards, Secretary of the Boot Trades Union, (Kenafick, Maurice Blackburn.. p.16).

committees. The only State where a similar campaign took place was New South Wales, where the Anti-Conscription Committee was formed.<sup>66</sup> Lang carried on his campaign independently within the A.L.P. The No Conscription Campaign was initially intended to win support from A.L.P. and union members, but even before the January Conference it found that there was little response from these circles, in terms of attendance at meetings, probably because Labor members feared causing public friction on the issue, and many unions were dominated by communists, who, now that Russia was in the war, were enthusiastic supporters of conscription.<sup>67</sup> Blackburn received no official support from the Council for Civil Liberties, whose executive was unsympathetic with his cause.<sup>68</sup>

The Special Federal Conference, on January 4-5, 1943, with a minority of Queensland and Victoria voting against the Curtin proposal, settled the official Labor position on conscription for overseas service. On this occasion Curtin explained that the South-West Pacific area

for practical purposes would be south of the Equator with its western boundaries unchanged,<sup>69</sup> and its eastern boundaries subject to some alteration near New Caledonia.<sup>70</sup>

This area was distinctly smaller than that mentioned when Curtin

66 Kenafick, Maurice Blackburn..., p.42

67 Kenafick, Maurice Blackburn... p.40-1

68 J. McKellar, in Maurice Blackburn and the Struggle for Freedom (Melbourne, 1945), p.30, reports that Brian Fitzpatrick, the General Secretary of the Council, supported Curtin's move on conscription.

69 Curtin is presumably referring to the South-West Pacific area officially designated by the Allies.

70 Official Report of Proceedings of Special Commonwealth Conferences held at Melbourne in November 1942 and January 1943, p.42.

first introduced his motion, which had embraced the whole South-West Pacific of MacArthur's command: this had included the Philippines and northern Borneo, which are north of the Equator. It is possible that Curtin had limited the area out of deference to protests in the A.L.P.

The No Conscription Campaign experienced increasing difficulty in obtaining publicity and support after the January conference. The Press practically ignored it, and the A.L.P. would have nothing to do with it because it was led by Blackburn, who had been expelled.<sup>71</sup> At this time, however, the Victorian A.L.P. was still strongly anti-conscriptionist: Lovegrove and Senator Cameron, for instance, continued to denounce conscription in the Labor Call.<sup>72</sup> It appears that at some time in these weeks, Blackburn was invited to apply for readmission to the next State Conference, but he refused, saying, "I will never rejoin the Labor Party so long as it is a conscription party".<sup>73</sup> Probably he was wise to take this attitude, since he could have done little within the Party to oppose Curtin's proposal which Victorian Labor men like Calwell, Cameron and Brennan were not already doing, and as an independent, he could publicize opposition more easily. In any case, it seems unlikely that the Victorian Central Executive would have allowed him to return to the Party, since they were still sufficiently

71 Kenafick, Maurice Blackburn... p.49

72 e.g. Labor Call 7 January, 1943; 14 January; 28 January; 11 February.

73 McKellar, Maurice Blackburn..., pp.32-3.



antipathetic to him to refuse to co-operate with him in a movement which they theoretically supported. With Curtin's proposal being introduced into Parliament in February, the No Conscription Campaign, lacking Labor support, concentrated on distributing leaflets and circulars to members of parliament.<sup>74</sup>

Debate on the Defence (Citizen Military Forces) Bill 1943 (often referred to as the Militia Bill), began on February 3, 1943. Clause Four of the Bill provided that

Notwithstanding anything contained in the Defence Act 1903-41, or in the National Security Act 1939-40, any member of the Citizen Military Forces may be required to serve in such area contained in the South-Western Pacific Zone as is specified by proclamation.

This Zone was defined in Clause ~~Four~~<sup>Three</sup> as

the area bounded on the west by the one hundred and tenth meridian of east longitude, on the north by the Equator, and on the east by <sup>75</sup>the one hundred and fifty-ninth meridian of east longitude.

This was an even smaller area than that designated by Curtin in January, since the specification of the 110th meridian of longitude eliminated half of Java, all of which was within MacArthur's Pacific command. The area remaining included mainly New Guinea, Timor, New Britain and half the Solomon Islands, with only parts of Java, the Celebes and Borneo. It is difficult to believe that within this confined area sufficient defence could not have been provided by volunteer forces, especially when Forde

74 Kenafick, Maurice Blackburn..., p.50

75 C.P.D., 173:264

had said in October that the numbers entering the A.I.F. were exceptionally high.

Curtin's rationalisation of the Bill was based on strategic grounds. He argued that "The defence of Australia is not confined to its territorial limits", and that the occupation of the areas defined in the Bill was necessary to prevent the enemy launching attacks from them, and also to provide "points of vantage from which offensive action can ultimately be developed".<sup>76</sup> The rest of his speech showed how dominated he was by the American alliance. He looked forward to the time when MacArthur would lead an Allied expeditionary force in an offensive.

By the time Australia has made the maximum contribution of which it is capable to the allied expeditionary force, to the protection of base and line of communication areas, and has also replaced its casualties, it will have stretched its capacities to the utmost.<sup>77</sup>

The Bill almost seemed to be Curtin's tribute to MacArthur. He said,

The Commonwealth Government has assigned to General MacArthur all the forces it possesses. It now says to him: "We will extend the area within which the Citizen Military Forces may be used. When your offensive exceeds the boundaries of this zone, you shall have in your Allied Expeditionary Force the maximum naval, land and air components that can be furnished..."<sup>78</sup>

Brennan and Calwell spoke against the Bill,<sup>79</sup> but all were aware that their storm held no rain. Blackburn's speech was the

76 C.P.D., 173:265

77 C.P.D., 173:266

78 C.P.D., 173:269

79 C.P.D., 173:320-4, 338-43

pièce de résistance. He asserted that the area proclaimed in the Bill would be extended,<sup>80</sup> an assertion which seemed to be justified by some remarks by Curtin in defence of the Bill:

Criticism has been made that the Citizen Forces cannot serve in Malaya and the Solomons... when the time comes to use forces from the South-West Pacific Area in another theatre, it will be soon enough for the critics to raise their voices on this matter.<sup>81</sup>

Blackburn proceeded to recount Australia's anti-conscription tradition, adding:

I am not wedded to it merely because it is a tradition, but when I find a tradition in favour of liberty, I am firmly of opinion that it is based on human nature, on human reason, and on human instinct. I believe that this tradition is so based - that it is based on the natural repugnance of men to the taking of human life... But a man may have to choose between the alternative of taking another man's life and of not merely surrendering his own life, but also ceasing to protect those who have a claim upon him for protection. That is why there is a distinction between taking up arms for the defence of one's home<sup>82</sup> and kindred and going abroad to foreign lands to fight.

After reiterating his argument that in the South-West Pacific Zone Australian soldiers might be called upon to put down native uprisings, Blackburn dealt with the arguments tendered in favour of the Bill. He dismissed the contention that people owed a "duty to the state" to allow themselves to be conscripted anywhere:

I do not admit the existence of any duty to the state that should compel persons to do things that they believe to be morally wrong... I believe... that the happiness and self-realization of its citizens is the purpose for which the state exists.<sup>83</sup>

80 C.P.D., 173:452

81 C.P.D., 173:268-9

82 C.P.D., 173:453

83 C.P.D., 173:454

To the favourite argument of the Opposition, that Australians must show their gratitude to the Americans by supporting the Bill, Blackburn replied,

I have a great respect for the American nation and people, but I am not foolish enough to take the clatter of the American newspapers as being the expression of the opinion of the American people... As a matter of fact, our greatest danger comes from the fact that Australia is the base for American offensive operations against Japan. If it were not for the fact that Australia is the base from which America will strike at Japan, Japan would be consolidating the empire it has acquired.<sup>84</sup>

Blackburn made two attempts to reduce the effect of the Bill. He first moved an amendment that it be submitted to a referendum,<sup>85</sup> and then moved that no member of the C.M.F. under 21 years should be conscripted outside Australia and its territories.<sup>86</sup> Both were negatived without a counting of votes.

However, the campaign against conscription for overseas service continued. The Victorian Central Executive persisted, through the Labor Call, in attacking conscription, though in a muted fashion. At the Victorian Annual Conference in April 1943, delegates overwhelmingly adopted a resolution carried at a January meeting of the Central Executive, reaffirming opposition to conscription for overseas service, and pledging itself to work for the repeal of the amendment to the Defence Act. The Conference further recommended that action be taken by the Federal Conference

84 C.P.D., 173:455

85 C.P.D., 173:607

86 C.P.D., 173:616

in July to revoke the previous Special Conference decision.<sup>87</sup>

In New South Wales, Lang was expelled from the A.L.P. on March 5 for continuing his campaign against conscription. He was engaged in preparing support for his case at the State Conference in June.<sup>88</sup> The Sydney Anti-Conscription Committee also continued its efforts.

Encouraged by these signs of resistance, the No Conscription Campaign in Victoria decided to press on with its campaign to repeal the Militia Bill.<sup>89</sup> By the middle of February<sup>90</sup> it had printed a leaflet by Blackburn, Against Conscription - Forty Questions Answered, which warned:

If conscription is enforced here, we shall never be able to resist it again... So long as overseas forces cannot be raised except by voluntary enlistment there is a check on aggressive war. Unless it can persuade people of the justice of its war, a warring government will not get recruits. But once accept compulsion for overseas service and the merits of the war will be nobody's concern.

Recent Australian history has tended to bear out the truth of this, as of several of Blackburn's prophecies. The Campaign later printed another of Blackburn's writings in a pamphlet called Against Conscription. Our Last Stand.

But support for the Campaign was fast disappearing. After the Militia Bill was passed, several Labor members resigned from the

87 Labor Call, 29 April, 1943

88 Kenafick, Maurice Blackburn...p.75

89 Kenafick, Maurice Blackburn...p.64

90 Kenafick, Maurice Blackburn...p.53

committee,<sup>91</sup> and attendance at public meetings dwindled. For instance, at a South Yarra meeting at which Blackburn was to be the main speaker, much publicity was given but barely twelve people turned up.<sup>92</sup> But Blackburn spoke on, apparently reliving the 1916-17 anti-conscription campaigns. He seemed oblivious to the general public's support for the war, and remarked that he "could see no essential difference between this war and world War One. What had been called 'Prussianism' then was called Fascism now".<sup>93</sup>

Having failed to gain public support, the only real hope of the anti-conscriptionists lay in the New South Wales Labor Conference in June 1943. If the delegates reversed their State Executive's decision in favour of the Military<sup>ia</sup> Bill, there was a possibility that the next Federal Conference would call for the repeal of the Act. Curtin obviously feared that the New South Wales Conference would have this result, for he attended it and delivered "what was probably the best speech of his career".<sup>94</sup> Stressing national security, he declared:

I said in 1914, and in recent years, that this country cannot afford to be a policeman in Europe. I now say in 1943 and in years to come that this land may remain free only by Australia remaining the policeman in the Pacific.<sup>95</sup>

91 Kenafick, Maurice Blackburn.. p.65

92 Kenafick, Maurice Blackburn...p.83

93 Kenafick, Maurice Blackburn...p.74

94 Whittington, The House Will Divide, p.108

95 Sydney Morning Herald, 7 June, 1943; quoted in Whittington, The House Will Divide, p.108.

As the supreme example of how times had changed since World War One, and of how Curtin differed from Hughes, the Conference, "at which a count of heads suggested the numbers were against him,"<sup>96</sup> was won over to Curtin's policy.

This was in effect the death-blow to the anti-conscription cause. The Sydney Anti-Conscription Committee went out of existence.<sup>97</sup> The No Conscription Campaign decided to continue, Blackburn optimistically asserting that "The Labor movement could not follow its leaders indefinitely, and if pressed too far, would rebel against them".<sup>98</sup> However, it was obvious that Curtin's reasoning had a great following in the A.L.P., as in the general public. As he said<sup>99</sup>, Australian opposition to conscription had been based on opposition to sending conscripts to distant parts of the world where Australia's defence was not immediately concerned. Once Australia was threatened, her people would undergo almost any sacrifice of liberty, including acquiescence in conscription for overseas service, that was justified as necessary to remove the fear of invasion.

iii

The end of the drama as far as Maurice Blackburn was concerned came shortly after the failure of his "last stand". During his last months in Parliament he was active in the debates centring around

96 Whitington, The House Will Divide, p.107

97 Kenafick, Maurice Blackburn..., p.42

98 Kenafick, Maurice Blackburn..., p.93

99 Labor Call, 17 June, 1943.

the social welfare Bills that the Labor Government began to introduce. When he stood as an Independent Labor candidate in the federal elections of August 1943, his supporters were confident of his victory.<sup>100</sup> He issued a manifesto, To the Electors of Bourke, which summarised everything he stood for. It began: "I stand, as I have stood for thirty years, as the advocate and exponent of Labor principles." He stated that he stood against restrictions of civil liberties "that cannot be shown to be necessary as a matter of national security;" against the "use or threat of coercion to secure industrial peace"; and against the "postponement of social reconstruction until after the war." He stood for the repeal of conscription for overseas service; for various social reforms, including equal pay for women; and for the amendment of the Constitution by referendum, to protect "freedom of conscience and religious opinion and practice, against interference by Parliament", and to introduce equal adult suffrage at all elections.

The voting at the federal elections was close in Bourke, but the distribution of preferences gave the seat to the official Labor candidate, W. Bryson. Blackburn was so feared by both the U.A.P. and the Communist Party that, contrary to the usual practice, they advised their supporters to give their ~~second~~ preference to Bryson rather than Blackburn, (Ironically for the Communists, Bryson later joined the Democratic Labor Party).

100 Kenafick, Maurice Blackburn...;p.107



The general opinion of Blackburn's closest associates was that he was not embittered by his defeat. He felt that he had done his duty to the best of his ability, and he renounced pessimism. To some extent he could feel that his services had been appreciated: on October 28 1943 a large meeting of prominent people was held in his honour at Coburg Town Hall, resulting in the foundation of a Maurice Blackburn Testimonial Fund. But he did not last long after this: in December he was suddenly taken ill, seemed to recover, and then died of a brain tumor on March 31st, 1944.

Had he lived longer, Blackburn would have seen the Labor Government struggling back to the fulfilment of many of its traditional principles, in the form of social service acts, strongly internationalist support for the United Nations, and attempts at socialism in the form of the Bank Nationalization Bill. But it is doubtful whether this would have reconciled him to the Party: he had seen how Labor's adherence to some of the principles he held most dear - those dealing with attitudes to war - had so varied with changing circumstances that they could not be said to constitute a coherent and reliable policy.

CONCLUSION.

It is interesting to consider whether Maurice Blackburn was not so much a tragic figure as a pathetic one: not a man who, fully aware of his opponent, fights it and is defeated, but one who, like Don Quixote, fights without understanding his failure. There are several signs that in Blackburn's later life, especially in the Second World War, he did not understand his times. He appeared to believe that the circumstances of the second war were the same as those of the first: his remarks in 1943 that Fascism was the same as Prussianism, and that Labor men would desert their leaders to fight conscription show a man who was blind to what was going on around him. During the 1930's and later, the deliberate brutality of the Nazis and Fascists appears to have escaped him: he seems never to have publicly talked of the annihilation of the Jews, of the totalitarian manipulation of people's minds, or of concentration camps. To him, the Fascists appeared in the tradition of the dictators of his youth, who were to be opposed merely because they were aggressors. The significance of Nazi occupation obviously never came home to him, or he would not have suggested, when the war was about to break out and when it had just begun, that compromises should be made. Similarly, the fact that although so concerned for civil liberties, he seems never to have mentioned the Stalinist purges, displays a warped view of his age.

In this respect it is instructive to compare, for instance,

the Labor Call of the First World War with that of the late 1930's. The former breathes the stern and puritanical spirit of radical socialism; the latter carries "Women's Pages" of film star gossip and cookery, and, while covering the news of current Labor bun-fights, has largely glossed over the issue of socialism. Blackburn had remained spiritually in the earlier era, and seemed incongruous in the later one.

Nevertheless, while it is true that Blackburn did not fully realize how times had changed, he made a determined attempt to adapt his attitude on war to what he appreciated were altered circumstances in the 1930's. Unlike the rest of the A.L.P., he realized not only that fascism was a growing threat to world peace, but that it could perhaps be stopped by international co-operation against aggressor nations. When economic sanctions through the League of Nations failed to have effect, he supported action through the British Commonwealth to keep the peace. Certainly his proposals were a more useful contribution to world peace than the narrow isolationism of the A.L.P. during the 1930's.

On the whole, Blackburn's attitude to war as it had finally emerged by 1943 appeared fairly practicable. He opposed and feared war because it could destroy the democratic liberties he cherished, but at the same time believed that war was likely, since nations competed fiercely for trade and  
 ^ the languages and traditions of these nations differed, so that they did not understand, and therefore feared, each other. Having

learnt to question the pure Marxist stand on war, Blackburn came to combine an economic interpretation with a sociological one, which appealed to his appreciation of tradition. In order to prevent war, he therefore suggested the lowering of tariff barriers between nations, the transfer of colonial possessions into international development trusts, and the broadening of national interests into co-operation with other people of similar backgrounds and traditions. Ultimately he looked forward to a form of supra-national government with a co-operative international police force. He saw Australia's contribution to preventing war as directed through either the League of Nations or the British Commonwealth, for he conceded that by itself, Australia could do nothing.<sup>1</sup> In the League, he wanted Australia to support collective security and economic sanctions against aggressive nations, but when the League failed, its only hope was to persuade the British Commonwealth to make sacrifices for peace by giving up its colonial territories in the Empire.

However, if war came, and Blackburn admitted that in a capitalist world one had to be prepared for it, he supported conscription for home defence,<sup>2</sup> came to admit the possibility of voluntary forces abroad if the fight for the freedom of other nations was urgent and Australia was not immediately threatened, but he

1 C.P.D., 162:1265-6

2 After some vacillation, and with provisions for conscientious objection.

strongly opposed conscription for overseas service because this overrode individual conscience too severely and led to a military dictatorship. At home during wartime, he never admitted the necessity for arbitrary and dictatorial government: he felt that this was not only inefficient and likely to disunite and demoralize the people, but that to surrender basic civil liberties altogether made the fight against dictatorship abroad a hollow one and cast doubts upon the return of traditional rights after the war.

If some of the inconsistencies in which Blackburn occasionally floundered are ignored, this is a valuable contribution to Australian political thinking on war: certainly, as it was founded largely on the attitude to war that the A.L.P. built up during and after the first world war, it was not a way of thinking to be lightly discarded as Curtin did. Principles need not necessarily change with the times, as Dr. Lloyd Ross seems to have assumed when he praises Curtin for his flexible leadership.<sup>3</sup> Curtin was in fact the antithesis of Blackburn, and perhaps because they felt this the two disliked each other - a most unusual thing for Blackburn. Curtin did not even change his principles with the times: he abandoned them, though with considerable heart-burning. Whereas Blackburn had principles, Curtin had interests: he was above all concerned to maintain national security and party unity, and he succeeded very well in his aims.

3 Sun-Herald, 24 August, 1958

Blackburn was at the other extreme: his principles were absolute ethical rules to which all interests must if necessary be sacrificed. For a political party or a nation the practical answer must lie somewhere between: too many Curtins are as dangerous as too many Blackburns. The importance of principle in a party was overrated by Blackburn; a party is a much more subtle mixture of opinions and interest in power and position and capable of being influenced by outside interests such as patriotism. Curtin knew the secret of handling his party: he knew that it would not stand for the ultimatums that Blackburn presented it with from time to time. It is short-sighted to maintain, as Blackburn did in effect, that a party is a voluntary association whose principles one can further by joining it, or which one can leave if it is not pursuing these aims. In a two-party system, as, at the federal level, Australia's essentially is, there is no effective choice for most politically - minded people: if one wants to further some political principles one must remain in the appropriate party until it has obviously abandoned those principles. It follows that up to this point one must ignore petty differences and side issues, as Blackburn never learnt to do. His expulsion from the A.L.P. in 1941 is the most obvious example of this lack of perspective. Moreover, if Blackburn had been less willing to delude himself, he would have noticed before how unreliable were the Communists who supported him for leaving the A.L.P. for the A.S.F.L. It is ironic that, in 1943, at the only

point in his career when the Communists might have helped him, since they controlled many unions, they had suddenly changed policy to oppose his principles, and helped to defeat the man who had twice been expelled from the A.L.P. on charges of defending them.

Thus it is natural that Curtin, the practical party man, should have been reported as emerging from a debate waving his arms and muttering, "Blackburn and Brennan - what have they ever done for the Labour movement!"<sup>4</sup> But he was mistaken, for service to a movement does not only mean keeping it united and strong electorally. Curtin failed to distinguish between means and ends, as to some extent Blackburn also did. While pursuing power, Curtin forgot that power in itself is not an end, and that if principles are ignored, a party or nation will have no guides to the use of power and will tend towards mere expediency. Blackburn tended to be too rigid concerning means: his ethical approach made him prefer to be right rather than effective. But he argued with some force that democracy was a farce if parties abandoned their platform principles, for then elections meant nothing.<sup>5</sup> And what should it profit the party if it gained the elections but lost its own soul, or even, in the case of Curtin's cherished nation, if Australia won the war but lost its own soul? This is what Blackburn feared.

4 Sun+Herald, 17 August, 1958

5 Kenafick, Maurice Blackburn..., p.72

Curtin's preoccupation with interest, which has so often prevailed in the A.L.P., has landed the party and the nation in some tragic dilemmas. Concerned only with Australia's safety, Curtin threw Australia at America's feet, founding a relationship of sycophancy to that "mighty nation" which Australia, as part of the British Commonwealth, had not felt towards Britain. And when in the 1930's and early 1940's the A.L.P. abandoned its previous attitude to war, concern for party unity and electoral support outweighed interest in principles and theories, so that a new and coherent attitude to war was not formulated. The result ultimately, in the 1950's and later, was further disunity.

From Maurice Blackburn to the Vietnam war may seem a long way, but the connection is not a ~~tenuous~~ one because it relates to principle in politics, and, as was pointed out in the Introduction, a study of Blackburn in the period 1934 to 1943 leads to the question of the A.L.P.'s concern for principles connected with its attitude to war. During this period the Labor Party progressively (or should one say regressively?) shed its old attitude to war in favour of more basic interests: concern for party unity and national security.

It is true, as Dr. Lloyd Ross warns, that it is difficult (though not always impossible, as he claims) to speak of a "Labor" attitude to war.<sup>6</sup> The period we have considered shows how opinions

6 Lloyd Ross, "Some Factors in the Development of Labor's Foreign Policies." Australian Outlook, March 1939, Vol. 3, No.1, p.35



varied among the States and the different wings of the Party. But before 1930 the Labor reaction to militarism after the war had been profound and widespread, as voting at Conferences reveals, reinforcing already existing internationalist and peace-seeking tendencies in the Party. That internationalism was not a foundation-stone in Party policy was shown in its disregard for the momentous international events in the 1930's; and that dedication to civil liberties had not been fundamental either is obvious from the ease with which Labor parliamentarians imposed heavy curtailments of these liberties during the war, and the passivity with which the Party as a whole underwent these sacrifices. Since then the Party has fluctuated in its regard for these principles:<sup>7</sup> Evatt's leadership in the United Nations and the A.L.P.'s opposition to the 1951 referendum on the Communist Party have been high points. But none of these issues has been wholeheartedly supported in the Party: they have not been regarded as basic to the Party's policy.

To Maurice Blackburn, peace and democratic liberties were fundamental concerns, not only for the A.L.P. but for Australia and the world. To his credit he fought to the end of his political career to hold the A.L.P. to its pre-1934 attitude to war, which embodied these aims. While seen individually, his demands may

7 For the great differences of opinion on foreign policy in the A.L.P., see Tom Truman, Ideological Groups in the Australian Labor Party and their Attitudes, (University of Queensland Press, 1965).

sometimes have seemed extreme, they were a useful counterweight to the silence that prevailed almost completely throughout the rest of the Party and the nation. He did not succeed, partly because he dealt too brusquely with that delicate mechanism, the party, but largely because, although he did not fully understand it, the times had changed, and the rise of communism in particular had confused the A.L.P.'s once simple outlook on world affairs.

Nevertheless, even if he failed to adapt his policy successfully at every stage to changing events, the principles Blackburn espoused were valid, although old-fashioned. His concern for civil liberties is something that has been rare in Australian Labor politics - so rare that it does not even seem part of a coherent tradition. Maurice Blackburn and Brian Fitzpatrick were two of the main exponents of this trend, which was carried on, although with no direct link, by Dr. Evatt. Evatt was not influenced by Blackburn, and his defence of democratic liberties was not as consistent. In fact, Blackburn seems to have had no political progeny, which is not surprising, since he preferred people to be independent.<sup>8</sup> In response to threats to world peace, Blackburn did come to emphasize international co-operation and government to prevent war, and this principle again was sponsored, by Evatt, though with little support from the Party in general. Blackburn can be said to have pioneered these strands of Labor

<sup>8</sup> Although he does seem to have taken E.J. Ward under his wing. (See Ward's speech on Blackburn's death, C.P.D., 179:27)

thought, which have been perpetuated by individuals in the Party.

In a party with more intellectual traditions, Blackburn might have appeared as a link in some chain of ideas, but as with most A.L.P. thinkers, his theories owe more to British than to any original Australian Labor thought. However, he can be placed among the several radicals who have fought for principle in Labor politics- in the tradition of Anstey, Evatt and Cairns: men who have been influential in keeping a balance in the A.L.P. between ends and means. Of these, Blackburn was the pre-eminent "incorruptible", with none of Cairn's' slightly sea-green quality, and with greater scrupulousness than any of them. If principle is not all-important in politics, Curtin, a man whom the question obviously troubled, was wise enough to see when Blackburn died that his influence was a valuable one. Curtin's remarks on the death of Blackburn are wistful ones, as if he felt that the mystical powers which haunted many of his own speeches had bestowed their blessing on Blackburn rather than himself:

He would allow nothing to turn him from what he considered to be the right, and however unpopular he might become, however discomforting his attitude might be to his colleagues, the divine monitor within him impelled him to stand for what in his soul he believed.

...His influence affected the Labour movement, and the men and women associated with it, and he also had a profound influence upon every political party. He set a standard, and all of us were the better for endeavouring to live up to it.<sup>9</sup>

9 C.P.D., 179:25.

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