

THE RED SHIRE OF KEARSLEY, 1944-1947: COMMUNISTS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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If the concept of 'municipal socialism' has meant anything at all to Australians over recent years it was most likely in reference to militant British local governments, Liverpool or Sheffield City Councils, or the well publicised Greater London Council and its leader, 'Red Ken' Livingstone. Indeed the exploits of the GLC would be far better known in this country than the activities of any single Australian local government, past or present. This fact is reflected in the general lack of interest by the Australian left in what might constitute socialist strategy at the local government level. This, of course, is to be distinguished from a correspondingly keen interest by certain laborite factions in the business of capturing and retaining municipal office. Trendy 'amenity' or 'turf' politics, mainly inspired by concern for the comfort and property value of middle class homeowners, have also been confused with genuine left wing policies. So, too, have certain managerialist or corporatist approaches to urban management.¹

Now and again there have been efforts to develop and implement policies with a socialist orientation, even if these have not been part of any well developed overall strategy. Little, however, has been written about past left wing action in local politics. What there may be to learn from the past seems to be largely forgotten, except perhaps in the case of the English Councils of Poplar and Clay Cross,² and the 'Little Moscovs' of Scotland and Wales.³ Consistent with the conservatism of other accounts of Australian local government, its histories have almost always been apparently a-political chronologies, bland and idealist. This paper is an attempt to do something about such an unsatisfactory state of affairs by reporting on a largely forgotten local government, the only Communist controlled council to have been elected in Australia.⁴

Communists to Office

For the NSW local government elections of December 1944 the Communist Party, at its zenith nationally,⁵ mounted a statewide campaign to get members

1. For example, a *Sun-Herald* article on the 'new left' Leichhardt Municipal Council whose 'catchcry' is reported to be 'Better financial management at all cost', 7.11.82:15.
2. See Noreen Branson, *Poplarism, 1919-1925: George Lansbury and the Councillors Revolt*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1979. David Skinner and Julia Langdon, *The Story of Clay Cross*, Spokesman Books, Nottingham, 1974. Leslie Sklair, 'The Struggle Against the Housing Finance Act', in Ralph Milliband and John Saville (eds), *The Socialist Register*, Merlin, London, 1975, 250-92.
3. See Stuart Macintyre, *Little Moscovs: Communism and Working Class Militancy in Inter-war Britain*, Croom Helm, London, 1980.
4. *Tribune*, announcing the return of Kearsley's Communist majority, gave the election as 'the first in Australia's history to give Communists a chance to show what a Communist-led council could do' (7.12.44:1). Comerford claims that Kearsley was the only local government in the English-speaking world to have had a Communist Party majority. Jim Comerford, 'The Mines', in W. S. Parkes, Jim Comerford and Max Lake, *Mines, Wines and People: A History of Greater Cessnock*, City of Greater Cessnock, Cessnock, 1979, 171-215:187. Two very short articles on the Communist Shire Council of Kearsley have recently been published: Martin Mowbray and Christine Townend, 'When Communists Ran Councils', *Tribune*, 19.12.84:8; and 'Kearsley's Forgotten Anniversary', *Australian Society*, 4(1), Jan. 1985, 18-20.
5. About 25,000 members.

elected.⁶ Of the seventy candidates, sixteen were returned, mostly in working class industrial areas of the state. These included Broken Hill, Bulli, Cessnock, Kearsley, Lake Macquarie, Newcastle, North Illawarra and Portland. A few seats were also won on metropolitan and rural councils. A majority was gained on one council, Kearsley, where Communists took five of the eight seats.⁷ In the two Ridings that a full Communist team contested, they received 74% and 56% of the total vote, respectively.

The Communists elected to Kearsley were: Jock Graham, Allan Opie, James Palmer, Nellie Simm and Bill Varty. Varty, experienced and popular, was to be elected Shire President over the term of the Council. Between 1930 and 1943, prior to standing on a Communist ticket, he had served four (yearly) terms as Shire President, and two as Deputy President. The male councillors all worked in the collieries. Allan Opie had been sent by the Communist Party from the small Wonthaggi field in Victoria to help ensure continuity of production for the war effort. Nellie Simm had been District Organiser of the Unemployed Workers' Movement, an activist in the Textile Workers' Union in Sydney, and was a leader in local service organisations.

A remarkable feature of the election, and one that was to be sharply contrasted with subsequent developments, was the coverage of the Communist campaign in the local press and radio. The treatment was as extensive and supportive as for the only organised opposition, the Labor Party. This was reflected in *The Cessnock Eagle's* post-election report headed **Great Success by the Communist Party**. It began:

The result of the Kearsley Shire elections came as a complete surprise to many of the electors, and was a great victory for the organizing ability of the Communist Party.⁸

The accolade was subsequently repeated, and seemed to indicate close adherence to the campaign prescriptions of a contemporary Party guide, *Outline for Work with Municipal and Shire Councils*, published in similar forms in both New South Wales and Victoria.

An *Eagle* front page article signalled the advent of an unusual type of shire council. This was headed **Kearsley Council Criticizes Britain**. The article reported the first of various sallies by Kearsley into international affairs, at its first meeting. The Council condemned the British Army for its opposition to the Greek National Popular Liberation Army and for its active support for the former right wing establishment and Nazi collaborationist forces. Council was:

opposed to the undemocratic policy of the British Government being pursued towards the people of Greece, which is resulting in the loss of thousands of lives of those who have been struggling against the Nazi invader. We are of the opinion that the British Military forces should be withdrawn and the people of Greece be permitted to form their own Government in conformity with the Atlantic Charter and the Teheran Conference.⁹

The resolution was sent to other NSW councils with the request that they send protests to the Prime Minister. Predictably enough, replies of outrage

6. See *Tribune* articles: **Win the Councils for the People!** (23.11.44:1), **Help Return Communists in Municipal Elections** (23.11.44:6) and **Every Effort to Get Communists on Councils!** (30.11.44:1). The Communist Party, being proscribed by the *National Security (Subversive Associations) Act*, did not contest the previous local government elections in 1941.

7. *The Newcastle Morning Herald*, 4.12.44:4; *The Cessnock Eagle*, 5.12.44:3; and *Tribune*, 14.12.44:8.

8. *The Cessnock Eagle*, 5. 12.44:3.

9. *The Eagle*, 15.12.44:1.

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flowed in. Councils such as Albury, Muswellbrook, Taree and Maitland accused Kearsley variously of 'deplorable action', 'disloyalty' and of intervention inappropriate for local government. Only neighbouring Lake Macquarie (with three Communist councillors) was reported as having co-operated on the matter.¹⁰ At various other times the Council was to sally into the realm of international politics, for example, in relation to Canada, Indonesia and the Soviet Union, usually incurring sharp rebuke from one organisation or another.¹¹

Based on Cessnock, in the heart of the state's northern coalfields, the Shire of Kearsley took in such towns as Abermain, Branxton, Greta, Kearsley, Kurri Kurri, Rothbury, Weston and Wollombi, as well as a large rural area. Proclaimed in 1926, the Shire at different stages incorporated parts of various previous councils. These included the old Wollombi-MacDonald District Council (proclaimed 1843), the Municipality of Greta (1890) and the Shires of Cessnock (1907) and Tarro (1907). The town of Cessnock, in the heart of the Shire, had its own Municipality (also proclaimed in 1926).¹² Kearsley extended over more than 1200 square kilometres, with a population of about 20,000.

Kearsley's Militant Heritage

In 1945 *Coaltown, A 'Social Survey' of Cessnock*, by the Reverend Alan Walker, gave strong testimony to intensity of the locality's concern with political questions and to its working class militancy.¹³ The author saw Cessnock as a town whose 'most distinctive community activity' is the May Day celebration,¹⁴ whose 'people look not to religion or personal initiative', and where 'politics are the dominant concern'.¹⁵ He lamented,

There is one dominant political faith . . . ; it is that community ownership of the means of production, or, in brief, socialism, will alone provide a solution to the problems of society. . . . Because of the extent of radical thinking in the community, the conservative parties in Australian politics do not think it worthwhile to contest the electorate.¹⁶

Fifty-three per cent of 184 Cessnock men questioned by Walker thought that 'all problems would definitely be solved by socialism'.¹⁷ Socialism was the avowed objective of even the most conservative of the local parties, the Australian Labor Party, holder of the district's parliamentary seats. The other locally significant political parties were the State Labor Party and the Australian Communist Party, which were soon to amalgamate.

Walker was struck, and a little disturbed, by the energy and determination of the Communists. The Party claimed a local membership of 400 and was well enough established to have a bookshop in the main street and 'as many as three broadcast talks a day from the local radio station'.¹⁸ Walker goes on to describe the self-conscious working-class solidarity of the area with its 'emphasis on "class struggle", and antagonism to the capitalist, the mention of revolutionary action and the ideal of socialism'.¹⁹

10. *The Cessnock Eagle*, 12.1.45:1.

11. See *The Cessnock Eagle*, 8.3.46:5.

12. Shires and municipalities (sometimes called cities) are alternative forms of local government in NSW. In 1956 the Shire of Kearsley was amalgamated with the Municipality of Cessnock to become the Greater City of Cessnock.

13. Alan Walker, *Coaltown: A Social Survey of Cessnock, NSW*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1945.

14. *Ibid.*, 100.

15. *Ibid.*, 76.

16. *Ibid.*, 80.

17. *Ibid.*, 80.

18. *Ibid.*, 84.

19. *Ibid.*, 44.

'Loyalty to one another is strong in Cessnock. Attachment to wider entities like the nation as a whole may be weak, but the very fact that emotions are canalized and directed toward near and easily understood objectives adds to the strength of this quality in the life of the people. It expresses itself in a close community solidarity. . . . It is the unwritten law of the community that the injustices of the one become the concern of all . . .'²⁰

Jim Comerford, a local ex-miner (and General Secretary of the Miners' Federation) has emphasised the quality (a point not shared by Walker: 93-4) as well as the solidarity of communal life:

. . . despite the tragedies and the industrial experience, life on the Coalfields was never dull or a thing always dominated by dread. It was lively with a broad sweep of civic, sporting and cultural activities. There were publicly supported bands, eisteddfods, orchestras, choirs, concert parties, libraries, university tutorial classes, workers' educational association groups, Marxist study classes, night schools and mining classes, co-operative women's guilds and church guilds and associations, flourishing friendly societies; all in all a depth of constant community activity and association whose richness was unequalled anywhere else.²¹

Collective action against objectionable practices of local businesses was a manifestation of this collective consciousness. Walker gives the example of houses that were declared 'black' and left to rot because of unfair evictions by landlords.²²

Another illustration of the latent militancy of the area was reported in *The Eagle*. Discontent about the quality of the service and the manner of the publican at the Kearsley Hotel led to a public meeting and a decision to 'black' the hotel. A committee was appointed to oversee the matter and a picket line placed until the licensee offered a 'better go' for patrons.²³

Local miners had a history of violent dispute with mine owners and the state over such issues as union jurisdiction, the legality of strikes and the use of scab labour. Northern District miners had, for example, confronted the police and military in 1861, 1862, 1879, 1888, 1890, 1894, 1909 and 1917.²⁴ About the most widely known example of locality based militancy was 'The Lockout' of ten thousand miners on the northern coalfields, who had rejected a 12.5% wage cut in 1929. The most notorious incident of The Lockout was the riot of police and pickets, with police firing on the miners, at the Rothbury Colliery.²⁵ Dixon notes that the strength of the sixteen-month stand was partly drawn from a 'tightly knit community life and . . . a class-conflict concept of society'.²⁶ Cessnock and other centres organised Councils of Action to help sustain the resistance by organising picketing, relief, publicity, transport and building morale. The Councils of Action directly involved rank and file miners and their wives in The Lockout, especially through the organisation of relief. Where mines were using scab labour, Councils of Action drew in large numbers of pickets, including women and children. The communal effort and high tension of the period, fuelled by systematic police harassment and brutality towards activists and retaliatory activity, did much to revitalise the district's militant disposition.

20. *Ibid.*, 93.

21. Jim Comerford, 1979, 203.

22. *Ibid.*, 93.

23. *The Cessnock Eagle*, 5.2.45:3.

24. See Andrew Metcalfe, 'Fraternity and Terror: The Organization of Violence in Everyday Life', *Mankind*, 14(5), Dec. 1984, 373-382.

25. For a first hand account, see Jim Comerford, 'Rothbury 1929', *Overland*, 6, Feb. 1956, 3-4.

26. Miriam Dixon, 'Stubborn Resistance', in John Iremonger, John Merritt and Graeme Osborne (eds), *Strikes: Studies in Twentieth Century Australian Social History*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1973, 128-42: 128.

Mass demonstrations occurred, factional antagonisms within the labour movement sharpened and the Communist Party, offering a militant leadership, gathered strength.

A Local Programme?

The Communist Party in the 1940s saw local government as a potential 'mass-rallying ground' for recruitment and the exercise of influence, and as 'the most stable stepping-stones to parliamentary leadership.' A strategically significant feature of this position was the transcendence of localism. Effective political work involved capture of local council offices, local reforms and service provision as steps towards establishing the national hegemony of the Communist Party. The Party's vanguardist approach was paternalistic and unashamedly elitist, and its intentions manifestly co-optative. This could hardly have been more clearly evidenced than in a contemporary article by Councillor Opie²⁷ which saw the Communist councillors as the 'true representatives of the people'²⁸ and the Party's task as to 'lead the working class to final and successful struggles for socialism'.²⁹ Council work was a vehicle for establishing 'leadership of the people's needs . . . to identify our Party with the most progressive, the most urgent demands'.³⁰ Intervention in other local organisations also 'afforded' opportunities 'to assume the leadership':³¹

Let us understand clearly that local government is the first elementary institution of parliamentary government. You know the old adage 'you must learn to crawl before you walk,' well, the quicker Communists begin to learn that lesson the quicker we will be walking and doing a lot of effective talking on behalf of the workers, in the commonwealth parliament.

The influential NSW Party handbook of the time urged intervention in:

local issues, and on this basis, win the people to an understanding of our Party and the acceptance of our leadership. . . . It is the duty of the Party . . . to give the most serious attention to the local government of its area, to the possibilities of campaigns around local issues, and to developing progressive workers in local affairs. In this way Party members and progressive persons will be raised to popularity and public regard, and their election to council will follow on the basis of the leadership they have provided. This fact emphasises the enormous importance of every locality Branch having its own local programme, and basing its activity on winning the local citizens to support and to co-operate with the Party in realizing this programme.³²

Organising Secretary Bert Chandler, regarded as a leading Party authority on local government work in NSW, reinforced this state instrumentalist position, wherein the strategy was to use the existing state machinery, under Communist management, to establish socialism.

Our objective is to raise the political level of the councils and draw the people into municipal affairs . . . We aim to raise councils above the level of glorified complaints committees . . . We want to see them active progressive bodies, capable of the big tasks that lie ahead, dealing with

27. Allan Opie, 'Work of the Communist Councillors', *Communist Review*, 62, October, 297-302.

28. *Ibid.*, 297.

29. *Ibid.*, 300.

30. *Ibid.*, 299.

31. *Ibid.*, 300.

32. *Outline for Work in Municipal and Shire Councils*, How to Organise, Series No. 8, Australian Communist Party, Sydney, 1944:4 (A Victorian edition of the same booklet was published by the International Bookshop).

the big projects that would provide improved living amenities, not the trivialities which too often divert them from their path.³³

What specific form the local plan of the Communists in Kearsley and Cessnock took is not absolutely clear. While at least one, entitled *Plan for People*, existed, no remaining copy appears available. The plan would have been the product of the local Party branches. It would have been for the guidance of all local work, not just that of the Communist councillors and aldermen of Kearsley and Cessnock Councils. The planning process was referred to in *Tribune* immediately following the election of the Council.³⁴ To have accorded with the Party's recommendations, the first part of the plan should have matched, at least in its rhetoric, the following criteria: It would have embodied the 'real demands of the people' with the immediate points 'based on the most urgently felt local needs'. The programme was only to include 'practicable objectives'. The second part should have outlined longer-term aims.³⁵ *Tribune* reported the early effort to develop a twelve month plan as focusing on improving:

the social amenities and general conditions of the people . . . Kearsley Councillors will be early in the field to take the fullest possible advantage of national projects and will lose no time in bringing the maximum comfort to the people of their area.³⁶

Another article reported steps 'to draw up a three-year plan for children's playgrounds in every populated area of the Shire'.³⁷ Kearsley's concerns, judging from newspapers of the period,³⁸ seemed to closely parallel the Party's general priorities for work in local government. Rather than adopting the traditional focus of local government on 'matters that enhance or preserve the value of property', Council's emphasis was on meeting immediate material or 'social needs'.³⁹

The Bread and Butter Reforms

In practice this meant devoting a large proportion of attention to improving the 'social wage', winning 'bread and butter' reforms. Sometimes these were to be met through Council's own direct provision, and sometimes indirectly, through Council advocacy and agitation at both the local and central state level.

Since prior to the Communist victory Kearsley had no organised garbage collection and disposal, establishment of such service was naturally an early priority. The Council became involved in an ambitious, and eventually fruitless, effort to 'municipalize' the electricity that was being supplied to the Shire by five separate companies. This strategy appears to have had its origins in a Party policy of extending council control of privately owned utilities and other businesses.⁴⁰ The necessary support for the enterprise, sought from the State Government, was not forthcoming. Council persistently pressured the franchised companies to provide a more extensive, reliable and cheaper service. In the face of a tight financial situation and the post-war shortage of materials, a Swimming Pool and Baby Health Centre in Kurri Kurri were completed in 1947.

In 1946 Kearsley became the only council in NSW to exempt all old age and invalid pensioners from the payment of general rates. This pioneering move

33. H. B. Chandler, 'Politics in Local Government', *Communist Review*, 43, Mar. 1945, 454-5.

34. **ACP Councillors are Pledged to Fight for Local Programs**, 14.12.44:8.

35. *Outline for Work in Municipal and Shire Councils*: 5.

36. *Tribune*, 14.12.44:8.

37. *Tribune*, 18.1.45:6.

38. *The Cessnock Eagle* and *Tribune*.

39. *Outline for Work in Municipal and Shire Councils*: 4.

40. *Tribune*, 22.8.47:3.

followed an unsuccessful delegation to the State Government seeking financial support.⁴¹

Local Advocacy

The Council frequently put pressure on local businesses to improve services. The most notable example was its interminable dispute with the local bus monopoly, Rover Motors, over fares, routes, frequency and safety. Also concerning transport, Council periodically pressed the state's rail authorities to improve passenger services for the coalfields. The State Government was also engaged to force construction of low rent public housing in Kurri Kurri, as well as over its use of poor-quality building materials.⁴²

Another matter for state action concerned drinking regulations. Breweries and publicans were a constant source of agitation for the Council. 'Excessive profits' were criticised, as was the State Government's prohibition on workers' organisations getting liquor licences. If it was good enough for 'wealthy squatters and landowners' to have a 'fine club . . . in Macquarie Street in which liquor is served . . . it is good enough for persons working in heavy industry'. So said one councillor in speaking to a resolution on the matter (in response to a request for support from the Aberdare Miners' Lodge).⁴³

Job security on the coalfields was an obvious concern for a Council representing miners. A recurrent proposal to central government was for the development of a local secondary industry. The notion of production of oil-from-coal, a contemporary 'hi-tech' solution for unemployment, was popular with the Communist councillors, if not state or federal government.

National Advocacy

Given the lack of constitutional recognition of local government in Australia, the idea of direct local government communication with Canberra was (and still is) rather extraordinary. This did not seem to deter Kearsley from forthright advocacy of what it saw as its constituents', and working class, interests. Council, for example, called on the Curtin government to legislate for a 40 hour week. It also urged a 30 shilling per week increase in the basic wage and it asked Canberra to explain 'why the basic wage is being reduced by 1 shilling in the case of females'.⁴⁴ Another communication with the Federal Government was a request that it increase old age and invalid pensions by 100%. For this Kearsley also sought the support of other councils.⁴⁵ A Council resolution of 21.1.47 was to join with the Northern Miners' Board of Management in the 'general campaign' protesting about the high costs of foodstuffs: 'We consider it the Federal Government's duty to immediately take steps to bring about reduction in prices and to establish a firmer price fixing control'.⁴⁶ In the interests of the elimination of profits and lower prices, Council regularly called for the nationalisation of major industries—airlines, banks, breweries, coal and so on.

Less endearing to Federal politicians would have been Kearsley's resolution of 27.5.47 to ask the government to revoke its decision to increase Parliamentary salaries by 500 pounds a year. This was also the occasion for another request for a pension increase, this time by only 50%! It was reported in the *Eagle* under the heading **Council Criticizes Salary Grab**⁴⁷ New South Wales

41. *The Cessnock Eagle*, 19.10.45:1.

42. *The Cessnock Eagle*, 8.8.47:10.

43. *The Cessnock Eagle*, 9.2.45:1.

44. *The Cessnock Eagle*, 18.5.45:1.

45. *The Cessnock Eagle*, 26.11.46:1.

46. Council Minute 4123, 21.1.47.

47. 30.5.47:1.

Parliamentarians received a similar serve from Kearsley over their own round of salary increases.⁴⁸ The Kearsley Communists' irreverent demeanour was also demonstrated in numerous other ways. On one notable occasion, the Labor Party was greatly offended by Kearsley's boycott of a vice-regal visit to Cessnock when Bill Varty said that he did not think that it was worth five shillings to eat with the Governor.⁴⁹ The Shire President publicly acknowledged that 'Council had got away from the (*Local Government*) Act sometimes'.⁵⁰

Decision Making

A procedural feature which further demarcated the Kearsley Communist regime from most local government of the time was its heavy emphasis on joint action and consultation. The Council called public meetings and conferences over, for example, development of local services and amenities, and post-war reconstruction on the coalfields. In April 1945 it called a conference in Cessnock to receive reports on: secondary industries for the coalfields, social 'supplies' and amenities, housing, electricity and nationalisation. The aim was 'to co-ordinate activities, essential for the betterment and security of the South Maitland district in the postwar period'.⁵¹

The Council also often sought to join forces with other councils, unions and local groups and deputations were common. It was often in receipt of delegations, and councillors themselves periodically lobbied Members of Parliament, Ministers and their departments. Council meetings were comparatively informal and open affairs. An exception to this open style was when Kearsley was involved in secret manoeuvres to try to municipalise electricity. The Council considered that to show its hand to the companies affected was 'not good business'.⁵²

Out of Office

The most significant development as far as the future of the Communist Council was concerned was the onset of the cold war and the rapid escalation of red baiting. Initially, the local newspaper had been reasonably even handed, but vicious articles about Communism appeared with increasing frequency as the term of office ran on. By far the most significant source was the Labor Party, as in the following case of hysterical editorialising. *The Eagle* reproduced material written by Lloyd Ross in the official ALP paper, *The Standard*, which ran:

Labor opposes the Communist Party not merely as a rival political party . . . The Communist Party was in fact, anti-working class, anti-militant, reactionary and traitorous to the needs of the masses of the world. Keep awake Australians and rid yourselves of this evil thing that Premier McKell recently described as a 'cancerous growth'.⁵³

Numerous other articles with strong anti-Communist sentiments appeared. Typical headlines were: **Communist Fifth Column**,⁵⁴ **Labor Parties Fighting Communism**,⁵⁵ **Labour Party Denounces Communists**, and **The Communist Plots to Smash the Labour Party**.⁵⁶

48. *The Cessnock Eagle*, 29.8.47:1.

49. *The Cessnock Eagle*, 20.6.47:1.

50. *The Cessnock Eagle*, 1.11.46:1.

51. *Tribune*, 10.4.45:5.

52. See 'Hush-Hush Policy Alleged', *The Cessnock Eagle*, 31.5.46:10.

53. *The Cessnock Eagle*, 8.3.46:1.

54. 9.10.45:3.

55. 14.6.46:5.

56. *The Eagle*, 18.6.46:3.

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The Catholic Church, in which was rooted the subversive anti-communist Movement, was an important vehicle for this sort of sentiment. From 1943 the Movement began to stack Labor Party branches with large numbers of recruits, with a view to using the Party as a weapon against Communism and generating a national climate of fear. Referring to this role locally, Walker wrote,

while it is of course not a political party . . . the Roman Catholic Church . . . actively seeks to direct political thought, particularly in relation to the challenge presented by Communism.⁵⁷

Despite concerted local attacks on Communists, the most telling blow against Kearsley came from the NSW Labor Government, itself in the hands of the Catholic right, through the *Local Government (Electoral Provisions) Act* in 1946. This was a means of giving the Labor Party an electoral advantage over Communists in the industrial areas of the state, through making voting at local elections compulsory. This move appears to have been the critical factor for the Labor Party on the coalfields. At the preceding Cessnock municipal by-election in 1946, the last poll before the 1947 general council elections, the Communist Party defeated Labor in a two-way contest.⁵⁸

The introduction of compulsory voting had the desired effect for the State Government. The Labor Party took seats from the Communist Party in Cessnock, Kearsley, Lake Macquarie, Newcastle and Broken Hill. In other areas Labor generally lost ground to its conservative opponents, citizen's groups and independents.⁵⁹

While no Communists were returned in Kearsley, a remarkable feature of the election was that, despite signs of a slackening of the Party's electoral efforts, its votes were very substantially increased over the previous elections (see table). Bill Varty's vote was up by 61%, Jock Graham's by 105% and Nellie Simm's by 141%. In the latter pair's own riding the Communists won over 40% of the total vote, and a majority in their own neighbourhoods (Kurri Kurri [Courthouse] and Stanford Merthyr). In the latter, the Communist vote was twice that for the combined opposition. The total Communist vote in the Shire of Kearsley (7302 in three ridings) was 76% up on that for 1944.⁶⁰

Red Kearsley?

Undoubtedly, between 1944 and 1947 the Shire of Kearsley had an extremely progressive council. Its commitment to planning, participation, welfare and advocacy was, at least for Australian local government, way before its time. The question, however, as to what was distinctively socialist about the activities of a council with a Communist majority demands attention. It is, after all, possible to conceive of non-Communist councils taking up similar or equivalent issues to Kearsley. It is barely conceivable, though, that a council without a strong militant disposition would take up such matters, or pursue them with the same force. Nevertheless, the fundamental feature that distinguished Kearsley's approach from that of non-socialist councils is a persistent commitment to working class interests. In the implementation of this, perhaps the greatest contribution the Communist Council of Kearsley made was to integrate efforts to deal with problems experienced at the local level with challenges to the wider capitalist state. That is, it tried to move beyond the narrow localist and parochial preoccupations that seem to characterise

57. *Ibid.*, 85.

58. This was won by Tom Gilmore and the victory was again attributed by *The Eagle* to 'superior Communist organization', 23.7.46:1.

59. *Tribune*, 10.12.47:8.

60. See Declarations of Poll, in *The Cessnock Eagle*, 9.12.44:4 and 12.12.47:20.

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Shire of Kearsley Elections Comparative Performance of Communist Party Candidates

2.12.1944
(Voluntary Voting)

6.12.1947
(Compulsory Voting)

	Number of votes	Percentage of total	Number of votes	Percentage of total	Percentage increase on previous election
<i>'B' Riding</i>					
Alan OPIE (1)	838	33%	1294	17%	
Bernard TONNER (2)	1033	41%	1658	22%	61%
William VARTY					
Total Votes for 'B' Riding	2524		7667		204%
<i>'C' Riding</i>					
James PALMER	604	25%	635	11%	5%
Total Votes for 'C' Riding	2460		5801		136%
<i>'D' Riding</i>					
John GRAHAM	893	30%	1833	20%	105%
Mary Ellen SIMM	781	26%	1882	20%	141%
Total Votes for 'D' Riding	2952		9293		

Source: Declarations of Poll, *Cessnock Eagle*, 9.12.44: 4 and 12.12.47: 2.

Notes: Eight councillors constituted the Council, two from each Riding. The Communist Party contested three Ridings.

The first-past-the-post elective system applied.

(1) Resigned 16.8.47.

(2) Stood in 1947 only.

so much of left or right wing involvement in local politics. The Communists connected local experiences with national and international issues, and they connected domestic and consumption issues with those of the workplace.

While no 'red island' was established in a capitalist sea, and although the Council's actions were not part of any sophisticated theory or elaborate strategy, the Communists' efforts were at least based on a class analysis and directed at building a socialist state. The Kearsley Communists' oppositional perspective moved them to step outside the normal parameters that guide the operation of the state. The councillors recognised a place for 'non-constitutionalist' intervention at any level of the state thought relevant to the interests of not just their own constituents, but working class people in general. They often displayed uncustomary courage to challenge commercial interests and established authority, and they saw local government as a platform from which to proclaim alternative, socialist, principles reaching far beyond the locality itself.

A number of limitations affecting what could have been achieved should be noted. First, the Communist councillors, Bill Varty aside, were handicapped by having had no experience on local government. Second, Kearsley Shire had a very limited financial base, most of its funds being tied to roadworks and waste disposal. The severe austerity of the depression and the war contributed a great deal to these limitations. The Council's staff was very small, and its other resources meagre. For the

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year ending 31.12.45, Council's income was 47,426 pounds, 6,379 of which came from government grants. The greatest expenditure, 24,310 pounds, was on public works. Only 259 pounds were spent on parks and reserves.⁶¹ Council only employed about 120 staff, 100 or so of whom worked outdoors. Third, Australian local government did not bear a recognisable reformist or socialist tradition that might have provided guidance for newly elected Communist councillors. Local government responsibilities were traditionally perceived as being very limited. Even if these were not necessarily closely defined in the legislation, the areas open for legitimate intervention were narrowly circumscribed by convention, and generally restricted to the sphere of distribution rather than production. Fourth, the elitist and bureaucratic approach to socialism of the Soviet Union was the contemporary role model for Communist organisation. There was very little critical debate about alternative socialist strategy at the time. Fifth, the Council operated in the context of a state administration in the hands of an avidly anti-Communist right wing Labor Party. Consequently, little support was offered for initiatives that came from the Communists. Additionally, the emerging political climate, towards which the press contributed a great deal, was one of deepening hostility towards socialism.

A remaining question to be taken up here is to ask what might explain the unusual dissonance of the Shire of Kearsley as compared with the characteristic servility of Australian local government? Writing about militant British localities of the inter-war period, Macintyre and Bassett have identified a range of common elements that bear remarkable similarities to the Kearsley situation: A period of economic crisis; dependency on a staple industry (such as coal, iron and steel, engineering or textiles); a high level of unemployment; local councils made up of working class representatives; strong influence from the organised left, such as the Communist Party, and antagonism from the mainstream Labor Party.⁶² Taking into account the immediate pre-war situation, the northern coalfields of NSW shared these features.

Such factors go a long way to explain the militancy of Kearsley, especially if they are coupled with certain other characteristics of the area. These include: the discrete geographic location of the district, itself made up of relatively closely knit and homogeneous communities; a recent history of offensives from capital and the state that enhanced class consciousness; and, perhaps most critically, a high degree of overlap between domestic and industrial environments. The mines, the main sources of work, were usually identified with particular townships, from which they also drew their labour. These mines had their own miners' lodges, branches of the Miners' Federation which, in a very difficult, dangerous and unstable industry, were the focal organisations for whole communities. The not infrequent disasters and industrial conflicts in the pits necessarily involved everyone. These material circumstances made for a high degree of solidarity and militancy in the entire district.

When the Kearsley Communists came to office, they inherited a strong militant tradition. Their work on Council, therefore, was seen as a continuation of working class struggle on the coalfields. Their consciousness, speech and activity did not clearly separate local politics from the politics of work, as is

61. The Council's tight budget was made worse, a former rates clerk alleges, by the Shire Clerk's over-careful financial management. Compared to Cessnock Municipality, for example, it has been suggested that Kearsley was very reluctant to borrow funds.

62. Macintyre, 1980:20; Keith Bassett, 'Labour, Socialism and Local Democracy', in Martin Boddy and Colin Fudge (eds), *Local Socialism? Labour Councils and New Left Alternatives*, Macmillan, London, 1984, 82-108:86.

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usual and expected in local government. This was most evident in the fact that the Council often joined forces with union organisations and was constantly involved with questions determining the social wage. Where other local governments perpetuated the segmentation of work and community, or the distinction between production and consumption, in their practice the Kearsley Communists did not recognise these boundaries. This had the potential of consolidating an already developed class conflictual local culture and was, therefore, a distinct threat to conservative interests. Recognition of this threat helped galvanise the right wing counter-offensive that after three years prevailed over the red Shire of Kearsley.

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