

Beverley Symons

Red councillors during the Cold War: Communists on Sydney City Council, 1953-59

Beverley Symons was a CPA member for 20 years, 1970-91, and on the National Committee in the 1980s. She was a peace movement activist and a full-time worker for the Vietnam Moratorium Movement. In the 1990s, she was President then Secretary of the Sydney Branch of the Labour History society. She got her PhD at Wollongong Uni on women workers during the war and is now enjoying retirement in Newcastle where she is involved in The Greens.

AS is well known, the Communist Party of Australia was represented in Parliament only once—by Fred Paterson in the Queensland state seat of Bowen from 1944-50. However, the party's electoral successes in local government have attracted little historical attention. As far as I know, the only published material outside the communist press were two articles in 1985 and 1986 examining the CPA's 1944 victory in winning five of the eight seats on the Kearsley Shire Council in the northern NSW coalfields.¹

During a period of over 30 years, CPA councillors held office in numerous city and municipal councils in several states. The first—Fred Paterson and Jim Henderson—were elected in April 1939 to

the Townsville City Council and Wangaratta Shire Council respectively; and the last — Bill Flynn and Bill Whiley— who were on Broken Hill Council for 21 and 12 years, were defeated in October 1974.

Subsequently, some communists have been elected to councils—such as Jack Munday and Brian McGahen to the Sydney City Council in 1984— however, they stood as community independents and not for the CPA.

Of comparable significance to the Kearsley wartime victory is that, throughout the Cold War 1950s with its prevailing anti-communism, the party continued to achieve electoral successes in local government. In the NSW municipal elections in December 1953, eight CPA candidates were elected—two to the Sydney City Council, one to outer-suburban Penrith Council and five to the country councils of Lithgow, Cessnock, Lake Macquarie, Broken Hill and Binnaway. Three of these councillors served only one term, two served for six years, two for eight or nine years and one for 21 years. This paper examines the experiences of the two communists elected to the Sydney City Council for the first time, Tom Wright and Ron Maxwell.

At the time of their election, Wright, 51, was NSW Secretary and Federal President of the Sheet Metal Workers' Union and had led the NSW Branch for 17 years. He was the CPA's General Secretary for four years in the 1920s and since then, had continued to be a leading member of its Central Committee. Maxwell, 42, a waterside worker, was a senior vice-president of the Waterside Workers' Federation, Sydney Branch and had been a party member for 10 years.

Given that the 1953 municipal elections occurred only two years after the CPA had narrowly escaped being declared illegal, it seems pretty remarkable that it was able to break through the anti-communist barriers and gain entry to the aldermen's chambers in the Sydney City Council. In fact, if it had not been for decisions made by the Labor Party in its own interests, it is a pretty safe bet that no communist would have got a toehold in the council during the 1950s. Shortly before the elections, the CPA's task was made much easier when the Cahill Labor government

brought down legislation “which radically changed local government election practice.” Its amendments abolished the ward system, reduced the number of aldermen to be elected from 30 to 20, provided for direct popular election of the Lord Mayor and—most importantly—introduced proportional representation (PR) voting.² Without those changes, the party and other minority groups would have had little chance under the former “first past the post” voting in wards. On top of that, the CPA’s team of 15 candidates, headed by Wright, drew first place on the left of the ballot paper, thus picking up a good proportion of “donkey votes”.* This added bonus probably ensured the unexpected win of the second candidate, Maxwell, along with Wright.

To understand the political context behind the Labor Government’s hasty decision to radically alter the conduct of the 1953 municipal elections, we need to go back a few years. In 1947 it introduced legislation to redraw the city boundaries, which finally resulted in a greatly enlarged city divided into ten wards, each electing three aldermen. Eight surrounding municipalities that were all Labor-held councils, were incorporated—Alexandria, Darlington, Redfern, Waterloo, Erskineville, Newtown, Glebe and Paddington. Their addition meant “that the Labor Party would now have its ‘permanent’ majority at the Town Hall,” at least until the state government changed.³ The large working-class populations of these incorporated areas, added to those in existing city areas such as Millers Point, Ultimo/Pymont and Kings Cross/Woolloomooloo. In the late 1940s-early ’50s, a large percentage of these male residents would have worked for one of the city’s three biggest employers—the Eveleigh Railway Workshops, the Waterfront, or the City Council. The benefits to Labor of these changes were apparent at the 1950 election, when it won 24 of the council’s 30 seats. The rival Citizens’ Reform stood candidates in only two of the ten wards.⁴

By October 1953, in an effort to quieten adverse criticisms about

* A donkey vote is one where the voter gives first preference to the candidate at the top of the ballot paper, and works their way down.

Labor's absolute domination of the city council, the government acted to alter the rules for conduct of the December elections, as explained above. In the words of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Labor's reputation at the time "was at a low ebb. In plain English, it stank." The amalgamation of councils and the rigging of ward boundaries were seen to have produced "an unhealthy ill-balance of representation." The government calculated that its changes to the voting system "could redress some of the worst evils," while still ensuring Labor control of the council.⁵ It argued that PR voting would give "Reform and the minor parties seats to match the number of votes they won."⁶ After the elections, Premier Cahill said the legislation "was brought in to create a more equitable distribution in the City Council and that has been achieved".⁷

The Labor Party had also been rocked by intense publicity about allegations of long-standing graft and corruption against several Labor aldermen. The attacks were led by the virulently rightwing *Daily Telegraph*, which advocated a vote for the Civic Reform-Liberal team and for Labor to be swept out of office.⁸ In the event, Labor retained control although with a reduced majority and the Lord Mayor, Pat Hills, was elected outright without going to preferences. Tom Wright, with 6,909 votes, was one of 3 out of 54 candidates who won on primary votes (the quota was 4,189).⁹ The election of one communist was not entirely unexpected, given that Jim Healy had polled 6,600 votes for the CPA in the city area in the recent Senate election. However, a week later, Ron Maxwell also scraped in, as the last candidate left in the ballot. The composition of the new council was then: Labor 11, CR-Liberal 6, Communist 2 and Independent Labor 1.¹⁰

To the conservatives, one communist was bad enough, but to have two gaining entry to the council chambers was a disaster that should never have been allowed to happen. They were quick to blame Labor for changing the electoral rules and thus, enabling the Reds to get in. As the State Opposition leader, VH Treatt, said, the government "was warned its legislation would put Communists on the City Council" and "must have

known it would happen.”¹¹ The Liberals’ State Secretary, JL Carrick, said it was a “dreadful thing” that proportional representation had been applied to the council election, as it was “a gift” for the communists. He warned that “Communist representation on the Council, although a minority, represents a fifth column which cannot be treated lightly.”¹² And according to the CR-Liberal leader, Alderman RJ Bartley, the election of a second communist was a tragedy. “With one Communist alderman to move a resolution and another to second him, they could give the Council an unhappy time,” he said.¹³

Soon after his election, Tom Wright was asked whether he would press for a royal commission on alleged corruption in the council. The Communist Party’s view, he replied, “is that the danger of corruption arises daily because of the way business is conducted in our present society. The best guarantee against corruption is to alter our ways of doing business.” He went on that he would “support any genuine move from any quarter which wishes to improve the integrity of the Council and raise its standing with the population.”¹⁴ He also said he would “advocate primarily an adequate housing scheme and would urge the City Council to seek the support of other councils in a united approach to the Federal Government for funds for housing.”¹⁵ And in a letter to the *Herald*, he said the communist aldermen:

will work to the best of our ability to strengthen and improve the Council so that it may better serve the needs of the people. All proposals brought forward by the Labor Party or any other councillors which are in the interests of the majority of citizens will receive our support, while we ourselves will endeavour to submit constructive proposals of benefit to the people.¹⁶

The issue of pressing the federal government for substantial direct funding for local government needs, was clearly a long-term policy objective that had little chance of being realised. Nevertheless, it was the major policy point advanced by all CPA candidates in the 1953 NSW

municipal elections and for the next several years. They advocated an immediate reduction of the huge annual defence budget and diversion of funds to municipalities for priority services to the people.¹⁷ More specific policies of the Sydney Council candidates included: full use of local government powers to enforce home repairs; reduced rates on workers' homes, with full rating on factory and business premises; basic wage adjustments for council employees; a clean-up of market rackets; and suitable city premises to be made available to pensioners' clubs. Wright believed that much more could be done through local government bodies 'to insist on the provision of housing and to improve housing conditions. More must be done to assist the cheap marketing of fruit and vegetables for the benefit of the city consumer and the grower.'¹⁸

So, what were the communist councillors able to achieve in their first term before Maxwell was defeated, and in the next three years when Wright was on his own? The short answer is not a great deal, in terms of the party's objectives for major social changes in the local government area. This is not surprising, of course, given the right wing majority on the city council and the general political climate of the 1950s. On a more modest level, however, they did achieve some gains for Sydney's working people—mainly through assistance with problems of housing conditions and rentals, and pushing for more parks, child-care centres and other facilities. An important success was the campaign to save the Domain Harbour Baths from destruction in 1954. Following a majority vote for the baths to be closed concurrently with opening of the council's new Victoria Park pool, Wright, Maxwell and an Independent Labor alderman succeeded in getting the Lord Mayor and other aldermen to confer with various groups using the baths who were opposing its closure. The upshot of that conference was that the council rescinded its earlier resolution and voted to keep the baths open and to expend funds for their continued maintenance.¹⁹

During Ron Maxwell's term on council, he worked on the waterfront, as well as being an honorary senior vice-president of the

WWF. With a family to support, he had to keep up his working hours and so had limited time to put in at the council. In those days aldermen received no financial allowance at all, not even a telephone reimbursement, and the only assistance provided was a gold pass for use on government buses. In a recent interview, Maxwell, now aged 89, recalled that often on his way to and from work, the drivers would query him when he showed his pass instead of paying the fare, probably because they didn't believe that a bloke in overalls was a city councillor.²⁰ A Sydney Branch stopwork meeting had voted for him to be allowed Mondays off on council business, so the one day a week he spent at the Town Hall interviewing constituents and doing other work was only possible because the union covered his wages.²¹ At first, Ron says, the union's President, Jim Young, didn't believe that aldermen got no payment whatsoever. "He even rang up the Town Hall to find out, because he thought that if I'm getting paid from them, I'm not going to get paid from the Wharfies. Quite right too. But he got the shock of his life, he said that's wrong."²²

Both the communist councillors spent a lot of time talking to people who came to see them and following up their concerns. Many of their problems were to do with landlords, the state of their houses, the plumbing and so on. The great majority of working people then were renting and Ron says the landlords:

were very hard in those days, they'd do nothing unless you pushed them. But the moment someone had a city council alderman behind him, they moved pretty quickly. And we got a lot of work done with repairs and so on. And if they threatened the tenant by putting the rent up, then I really got stuck into them. Many times, as an alderman, I attended the Fair Rents Court to have rents kept as they were or reduced.²³

Some estate agents and landlords "bailed up and refused to do any repairs. The usual excuse was that the owners lived overseas... But with a little persuasion and pressure, they were compelled to carry out necessary

repairs.”²⁴

Other issues pursued on behalf of groups of residents included provision of pedestrian crossings, traffic lights, playing equipment in parks and use of Council halls for community activities. One problem that many people experienced then was trying to get their children transferred into schools in the outer-western suburbs, following the family’s resettlement into Housing Commission homes. They often could not get into the local schools and their kids would have to travel back to their old inner-city schools. Ron particularly remembers one Town Hall employee who was “a vicious anti-communist until I got his two children transferred from the Glebe school to St Marys.” It didn’t matter what department it was in the State Government or the Council, he says, “we were always given a good hearing, no viciousness, in fact we got on very well with everyone... And within 24 hours, I had those kids in the schools... It just shows what can be done if you’ve got something behind you.” In those days an alderman “had quite a bit of push behind him” and would usually get put through to the right people straight away on the phone. “It made a big difference being on the Sydney City Council.”²⁵

Ron Maxwell believes that he and Tom Wright won the respect of their fellow aldermen. “They knew we were working hard and it wasn’t for ourselves, it was for the people of Sydney,” he says. “And the shopkeepers, we had to work hard to do a lot for them, because they were raided a lot by inspectors, often over silly things. But where there were lots of vermin and cockroaches, well then we really got stuck into them. We used to do a lot of inspections.”²⁶ Whatever he and Tom did, “it was always in the interests of the working class,” he says. “And not only for the working class, but for the middle class, we did lots for them too. A lot of them appealed to us because they couldn’t get things done. You’d be surprised, a lot of the shopkeepers who were real Liberal minded, a lot of them came to us for advice.”²⁷

In a report to the CPA’s Central Committee in late 1955, Tom

Wright said that until the 1953 municipal elections, the Party “had taken only a desultory interest” in local government work. But since then, there had been a much greater display of interest in this activity and for the first time, a Party Programme for Local Government had been adopted. Since their election he and Ron Maxwell had “endeavoured to work in a united front way with the Labor Party aldermen on matters of benefit to the citizens, and while we can claim a number of minor successes, we cannot claim to have made any great impact.” He also pointed out that one of the main weaknesses was the failure to link up the local government work with the Party branches. “The work is largely that of individual aldermen working with individual citizens, without the local party organisations coming into the picture.”²⁸

Half-way through their first term, the CPA paper, *Tribune*, said that Wright and Maxwell had played an important part in the council’s work and given outstanding service to the people who elected them. Their achievements included approval of a children’s playground, provision of more bus stop seats and halt signs, forcing landlords to restore lights in blocks of flats and residentials, and initiating the campaign to save the Domain Baths. They had also gained increased meal money allowances for city council employees, as part of their support for improved wages and conditions for these workers. And they had successfully pressed for an explanation from the city council’s representatives on the county council, which distributed electricity, as to why domestic consumers missed out on a reduction in charges.²⁹ In 1956 they again protested against a 14% rise for domestic electricity consumers. Maxwell led a party deputation to a county council representative³⁰ and Wright’s demand for a review of the new charges was supported by Lord Mayor Hills and adopted by the council.³¹ At a further meeting, he extensively questioned two county council officers about the injustice of the increase to domestic users.³²

For the 1956 city council elections, the CPA again ran a team of 15 candidates. A main point in its program was for the council to develop

housing projects, to be recognised as a housing authority and share in government housing loans, and to have power to prevent demolition of homes.³³ The growing trend for demolition of inner-city housing to make way for commercial businesses, was already an issue of concern to residents whose rented homes were increasingly being sold for development. Protest campaigns increased over the next few years as more and more houses and blocks of flats were replaced by non-residential businesses. In February 1957, Tom Wright successfully moved that the city council send a deputation to the state government, seeking power to prevent such demolitions by commercial developers. Because the council currently did not have that power, he said, “a large number of habitable houses were being destroyed to make way for more profitable commercial and industrial undertakings”, despite the terrible housing position for low-income people. One example was the St Kilda flats in Woolloomooloo, where 26 people were being threatened with eviction by the big secondhand car dealers, Auto Auctions, in order to build a car park.³⁴

In the 1956 elections, 102 candidates stood for the 20 council positions and five for Lord Mayor. Five political parties ran, including the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) for the first time. Following the 1953 experience of the communists drawing No. 1 position on the ballot paper and two being elected, one can imagine the consternation among conservative circles when the CPA again scored the favoured first position. In an editorial headed “The Red Marble Comes Up Again”, the *Sydney Morning Herald* said the Cahill government alone was responsible for the CPA’s entry into the city council in 1953 and it “can now be thanked for the prospect that Sydney will still have two Red aldermen after December 1.” It also said that the two aldermen “have been an improvement rather than otherwise on some of the Labor representatives”.³⁵

As it turned out, Maxwell was defeated for the last position by a DLP candidate, while Wright’s vote dropped from his 1953 figure of

6,909, to 4,510. The ALP retained control with 10 aldermen, plus Lord Mayor Harry Jensen, with Citizens Reform getting 4, Liberals 3, DLP 2 and the CPA 1.³⁶ Clearly there would now be less possibility for the lone communist to make much headway, with 9 solid conservatives and a majority of right wing Labor aldermen opposing him.

By early 1958 the Labor Party decided that the ward system of elections should be reinstated, while retaining PR voting. This move was a “step backwards” for minority parties, Wright said. They would find it much more difficult to get candidates elected, as irrespective of the voting method, the ward system favoured the major parties. “A division of the City into wards, each electing two, three, four or five aldermen, would ensure a safe Labor Party majority in the present period,” he said.³⁷ In April, government legislation authorised the city council to reinstate wards without having to take a poll of electors, which had previously been provided for in the Local Government Act.³⁸ Wright commented that the Labor Party had returned to a division of the city area into wards in order to strengthen its position at the expense of other parties. They were influenced by the fact that the city’s working-class population was being rapidly depleted because of the demolition of houses, which was bringing about a substantial increase in the relative voting strength of property owners and business people.³⁹

In December, the city council adopted the Lord Mayor’s motion dividing the city into four specified wards which would each elect five aldermen. Wright supported an unsuccessful amendment seeking the establishment of an impartial electoral commission to determine the wards and boundaries.⁴⁰ The division was officially gazetted in May 1959, seven months before the elections. Wright believed that the change was “designed to secure our exclusion.” It meant that to win election, a candidate would require a quota of 16.7% of the votes, instead of 4.8% as previously.⁴¹

The ALP ran 44 candidates in the 1959 elections, 11 in each of the

four wards, virtually ensuring them at least the first three positions from each ward. Lord Mayor Jensen said the move, “was designed to reduce informal votes and avoid Labor supporters having to give preferences to the Civic Reform Party, by giving them to a full team of ALP candidates.”⁴² This time, the three anti-Labor parties—Civic Reform, Liberal and DLP—had combined forces under the one Civic Reform label, in a concerted effort to break Labor’s control of the council. However, Labor greatly strengthened its position, finishing with 13 aldermen to 7, while Jensen resoundingly beat his nearest opponent for Lord Mayor, by 33,000 votes.⁴³ The five-member CPA team led by Tom Wright in Fitzroy ward polled 2030 votes (almost 10% of the total) and five candidates led by Ron Maxwell in Gipps ward polled almost 8%.⁴⁴

At the declaration of the Lord Mayoral poll, Jensen paid tribute to Tom Wright, saying he had “conducted himself in a way which won the admiration of all, including those who strongly oppose his policies.”⁴⁵ And a successful Labor candidate, Alderman T Foster, while expressing his opposition to communist policy, said that Wright was “probably one of the best aldermen this city has seen for a long time.”⁴⁶ Speaking at the declaration of the council poll, Wright said:

I do not regard my defeat as a setback for my party. The only reason I was defeated and the Communist Party deprived of its only representative on the council, was the change in the election system to wards.⁴⁷

He also said that although there will be no communist aldermen on the council in the next three years, “we are confident that the future is with us. We will be represented again very soon.”⁴⁸ It actually took 25 years for communists to get back on the Sydney City Council, although not as CPA representatives.

The experience of municipal elections in the 1950s illustrates the readiness of the major parties—in this case, the ALP—to manipulate the voting system, and the boundaries, to suit their own ends. Through the

1950s and early 1960s, the government acted to change the rules whenever necessary, to ensure Labor's control of the Sydney City Council. After the Askin Liberal government's victory in mid-1965, it did likewise, resulting in Labor's defeat and the election of Liberal majorities in other councils. Then, after 1976, the Wran Labor government again altered the city council boundaries to include more working-class voters and denied employers the right to vote.⁴⁹ All too often, it seems, power takes priority over principle and governments keep passing legislation until they get the desired result.

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