



# Revolutionary Organisation: The Iceberg Principle Explained

by CPA (M-L) Executive Committee

The posting of the September online edition of our paper **Vanguard** elicited comments from two followers on our Facebook page both questioning the way in which we organise. This article seeks to answer those comments and clarify our often-misunderstood organisational principles.

**F**ounded 56 years ago, our Party has always adhered to what we have called the “iceberg principle”: A few members are seen and open about their membership to allow the organisation to be accessible to the working class, while the membership of the majority remains largely unknown, revealed appropriately as their workplace, community and personal circumstances demand.

Why do we organise in this way? We would be the first to concede that a fully open Communist Party is entirely possible in our country at the present time. However, constitutional democracy and its attendant rights mask the reality of the class dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. We could use those rights to, for example, publish articles in *Vanguard* under our own names. From time to time, some of us have. It is best that most do not.

The bourgeois dictatorship rests upon coercive institutions of state power. They include the armed forces, the gaols, the courts, various police forces (themselves open and secret). The people in charge of these institutions well understand their role.

ASIO, as a secretive body, keeps political activists and militant workers under surveillance. It keeps extensive files on many Australians. When Annika Smethurst revealed in a 2018 *Daily Telegraph* story that the government wanted to grant new powers to the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD), a cyber intelligence agency, her home was raided by the Australia Federal Police. The ASD spies on people outside Australia: Smethurst revealed that it was intended that they spy on



*Like an iceberg, only a small part of our organisation is open and visible above the surface, while the majority remains submerged among the sea of the people.*

emails, bank records and text messages of Australians. The coercive powers of the state – current and planned – threaten politically active Australians.

Those coercive powers are kept at the ready. They are the constant in a mix that includes democratic rights. The Communist Party of Australia was made illegal in June 1940 following the outbreak of World War 2. Changing to circumstances of illegality, the Party brought out its paper on an illegal press. Its membership grew despite the illegality. The illegality was formally ended in March 1943.

Speaking of this period, E.F. Hill, founding Chairperson of our Party wrote:

“Illegality is a hazard that all Communist Parties face. This has been historical experience. Illegality of a Communist Party follows from the logic of capitalism, with



its state machine used as it is for the suppression of opponents of capitalism.”<sup>13</sup>

Surveillance occurs so that suppression can be introduced. A second attempt at illegality was made by Menzies after the War. He introduced a Communist Party Dissolution Bill (1950). The Australian Labor Party (ALP) opposed the power under which the Attorney-General could declare who was and who was not, a Communist. They amended that section but, supported by both major parliamentary parties, the Bill became law. Communists were prohibited from joining a union. The Communist Party of Australia was declared an unlawful organisation and was dissolved, its property forfeited to the Commonwealth without compensation.

ASIO, which had been created by the ALP in 1949, was charged with gathering the materials which would prove, in a court of law, that a person was a Communist. It was not enough for the spooks to know that a person was a Communist, or for the Attorney-General simply to declare that a person was a Communist – they had to provide evidence that would withstand a challenge all the way through to the High Court. For example, Comrade Charlie McCaffrey, then South Australian state secretary of the Federated Ironworkers Association, and after the 1964 split, a leading member of our Party, had a file opened titled “Evidence to Support Declaration”. It comprised two parts:

1. Evidence to bring within section 9 (1) of the Communist Party Dissolution Act No. 16 of 1950
  - A. Admissions
  - B. Documents found in searches
  - C. Communist docs.
2. Evidence to bring within Section 9 (2) (Prejudicial Activity) of the Communist Party Dissolution Act No. 16 of 1950. Evidence

showing likelihood of engagement of prejudicial activity

- A. By reason of his own past activity as an individual, and
- B. By reason of his adoption of the method of achieving its objectives proposed and practised by the Australian Communist Party.

Documents were gathered to meet each of the five requirements. Among the documents in this folder is a letter written by Charlie as Secretary of the Adelaide District Committee of the CPA seeking permission to have a speakers’ platform in the Adelaide Botanic Gardens. The letter had been seized during a secret raid on the party’s Adelaide office on 23 October 1950, three days after the Dissolution Bill had passed through parliament.

By this stage, ASIO head Brigadier Spry had compiled a list of around 1000 Communists and “fellow travellers” to be interned in Army-run concentration camps.<sup>14</sup> Despite the subsequent defeat of Menzies’s plans to get parliamentary approval for the camps, the lists of recommended internees were maintained by ASIO until at least 1960.

Many people opposed the banning of the Party. An appeal to the High Court was upheld in March 1951, but Menzies was undeterred. He tried to change the Constitution (the High Court had found that it did not give him the power to ban the Party). On 23 August he announced a referendum to include powers against Communists in the Constitution. A mass campaign to defeat the referendum was successful and Menzies was at last forced to retreat.

Hill’s observation that “Illegality of a Communist Party follows from the logic of capitalism” and that it was a hazard Communist Parties could expect to face, led him to reconsider the

<sup>13</sup> EF Hill, *Communism and Australia: Reflections and Reminiscences*, 1989, p. 105

<sup>14</sup> <https://quadrant.org.au/opinion/tony-thomas/2012/10/australia-s-civil-war-almost-part-ii/>



organisational basis of the way that the CPA had operated as a an open, public, legal Party.

In 1968, four years into the life of the new Party, ASIO prepared a 101-page secret report on the Party. It wrote:

“...many of the Party’s characteristics do not conform with those usually attributed to a Communist Party. Whilst it is possible to establish, by means of membership cards, the size and complexion of the C.P.A., to describe the Party’s organisational structure from its National Executive, through State, District and Section Committees to Locality Branches, to clearly delineate policy and policy changes in the C.P.A. and to observe its activities in many fields, ranging from the “cultural” to the industrial, it has not been possible to do these things with regard to the C.P.A. (M/L).”<sup>15</sup>

To summarise, the iceberg principle was adopted to protect as many as possible of the members of the Party from surveillance by state institutions; to protect members from harassment, intimidation and physical abuse by extra-legal thugs operating either independently of, or in tandem with, the state; and to enable them to carry out their mass work without the immediate barriers some people may have erected had they been publicly identified as Communists.

With that background, we now look at the comments placed on our Facebook page.

*Don't you think it's time to stop using such obvious pseudonyms as Ned K. - Ned Kelly I assume? I suggest a reading of 'The history of the CPSU(B) on the balance between a secret party and the need for open Party work.*

Well, with all due respect to the comrade with a long history of political activism who made this comment, there remain reasons why we favour the use of pseudonyms. Let us assume Ned K. is

not Ned Kelly in disguise but a worker in precarious employment who has been trying to organise his fellow precariats. Attributing reports such as those that Ned K. writes for us to him under his real name places him in a particularly vulnerable position.

Equally, some who write under pseudonyms are working in unions affiliated to the ALP. If they were identified as members of our Party, it is certain that they would be run out of their position in the union. It is a fact that some of our members who have won the respect of the union members they represent have been able to contest and win senior positions of union leadership that would have been denied to them as Communists because of popular prejudices against Communism and Communists.

The comrade refers us to the *History of the CPSU (B)*. His comment implies that we do not have “the balance” right, that we dismiss the need for open Party work.

The main period of illegal work by what was then the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party was during the period between the failed 1905 bourgeois democratic revolution and the October 1917 successful proletarian socialist revolution.

Achieving a balance between legal and illegal work was pursued quite intensely after 1912.

Legal work included the newspaper *Pravda*, a daily “designed for the broadest sections of the workers” (History...p. 145) It was first published on May 5, 1912 to replace the weekly *Zvezda*, “intended for advanced workers”. *Zvezda* had “played an important part” in mobilizing the working class for the struggle. The change to a daily paper aimed at a broader audience did not signify a retreat from the “trenchant political articles” in *Zvezda* by Lenin and Stalin, but the acceptance of that message by more and more workers “in view of the rising revolutionary tide”. Changes in the material circumstances and

<sup>15</sup> <http://soda.naa.gov.au/record/30030241/1>



requirements of the revolutionary movement made it possible for a more frequent and more widely available propagation of Lenin's and Stalin's articles.

The tsarist government suppressed *Pravda* eight times in the space of two and a half years forcing it to reappear under various new names. The use of *Pravda* as a legal paper did not replace the illegal forms of Party work; rather, through *Pravda* "the illegal revolutionary activities of the Bolsheviks were combined with legal forms of agitation and organization of the masses of the workers".

Another form of legal Bolshevik work in this period was the group of six deputies elected to the Fourth Duma (parliament) in 1912. In addition to using the Duma as a platform from which to call for land redistribution and the eight-hour day, the deputies were "very active outside the Duma as well. They visited mills and factories...and working-class centres...where they made speeches, arranged secret meetings...The deputies skilfully combined legal activities with illegal, underground work" (History...p 155-6).

As the commenter says, the Bolsheviks achieved a "balance between a secret party and the need for open Party work." However, both forms were maintained and the existence of the former remained the guarantee for the existence, during periods of revolutionary high tide, of the latter.

This balance between the legal and illegal forms of work remained until early 1917. The February Revolution saw the abdication of the Tsar and the formation of a bourgeois Provisional Government. The Bolshevik Party emerged from illegality with a membership of up to 45,000 steeled and tempered revolutionary members. It began its legal existence in the midst of a new rising tide of revolution and within the year those changed material circumstances had witnessed their seizure of power.

As far as our Party goes, there is a constant striving to get the balance right. We operate a legal Facebook page, blog, Twitter account, and a legal online newspaper and website. Four of our

leading comrades have written articles for that newspaper in their own names in recent times, and have spoken as representatives of the Party on various occasions. We have legal publications and have legally had Party stalls at May Day and other events. We distribute hard copies of *Vanguard* and Party leaflets at rallies and demonstrations. However, we have survived for 56 years with most of our "iceberg" below the surface, and by and large it is the workers who most easily accept the reasons behind this.

Our second respondent made two comments.

*The party is a tool for the liberation of the Australian proletariat, why must it be so secretive in this? Unless you are funelling [sic] money or aiding spies from the USSR, I see this focus on secrecy alienating the party from ANY form of mass work. As Maoists we understand that mass work and building a mass base is CENTRAL to building the party and thus the people's power and revolution*

*Yes personally I've found the party to be overly secretive. If we are serious about building the party and a mass base we should adhere to the principles of Marxism Leninism Maoism, first and foremost being building a mass base amongst the proletariat through openly serving the people.*

As we have said, mass work and non-divulgence of membership are not inconsistent. Given a century of attacks on Communism, escalating through the Cold War with its spy scares and stories alleging infiltration, subversion and disloyalty on the part of Communists, and now with the "told-you-so" failures (really defeats) of socialist paths in the Soviet Union and China, barriers to mass work are all too likely to be raised with a premature declaration of one's Communist beliefs and Communist Party membership.

We are not a secret society, a shut-away sect that keeps to itself. Our members are actively involved in workplace and community struggles and have strong connections to ordinary people.