

ROB DARBY (1953-2019): Interviewed in 1982, 1983, 1984 and 1989 by John Herouvim for a thesis on the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist)

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The following transcript of an interview with my long-time friend, Rob Darby, who died in March this year, is based on interview sessions recorded in the 1980s by John Herouvim (who died in 1995). I know that Rob would have no problems with it being published more than 30 years later.

I have edited out the names of living persons, unless they are public figures.

The transcript may be of historical interest. The CPA(ML) quickly became a zombie party in the 1970s (I was one) and the transcript may help in understanding how and why this can happen. I also recommend this article: <https://c21stleft.com/2014/12/12/fascism-and-the-left-from-red-eureka-movement-november-1980/>

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ROB DARBY: Interviewed in 1982, 1983, 1984 and 1989 by John Herouvim for thesis on the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) undertaken in the History Department at La Trobe University and supervised by Dr Peter Cook.

Tape 1, 22 August 1982

JOHN HEROUVIM: Interview with ROB DARBY, 22 August 1982. Okay, let's start with the details. Your age?

ROB DARBY: Twenty-nine.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Your work?

ROB DARBY: I work in the Commonwealth Public Service.

JOHN HEROUVIM: When did you join the party [CPA(ML)]?

ROB DARBY: In 1976.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Do you remember when in '76?

ROB DARBY: The same time that the USS Truxtun was visiting. The second half of the year, August or September.

JOHN HEROUVIM: I'll track that down. Are you still a member of the party? When did you resign?

ROB DARBY: I never sent in any formal resignation but I don't consider myself a member.

JOHN HEROUVIM: To what extent was the party's connection with China, or its sister/brother relationship with the Chinese Communist Party, a factor in your support for it and your joining it?

ROB DARBY: It wasn't a factor in my joining the party. I was first attracted to the party in 1974. For two reasons. Firstly, because a long-standing friend of mine was urging me to take an interest and I was following his example. But secondly and probably equally significantly, I was at that stage a member of the CPA [Communist Party of Australia] and having gone through the early 1970s, sort of radicalizing and in particular having developed an interest in Marxism, and having joined the CPA largely because a faction in it – the Carlton branch – offered intellectual stimulation of the kinds of Marxist works that I'd been reading. In particular they were sort of followers of Althusser who I'd just read a lot of, and it seemed to me very exciting that there were actually people around who were trying to put his ideas into practice. So I joined the CPA to be with what was then the Carlton branch or the 'Adelaide Tendency'. That was in early 1974. The CPA Congress was held in the middle of that year.

I'd never really, at that stage, supported many of the CPA's policies. In particular, I was very much against its sort of reformist attitudes towards trade union issues and towards the ALP, and even at that stage I was pretty much opposed to the Soviet Union which I regarded as an imperialist power. So during 1974, I first began to read copies of 'Vanguard', and the thing that attracted me to it at first and most decisively was its hostile attitude toward the ALP. I found this very much in accord with what I understood Lenin, which I'd been reading, and a very welcome relief from the mealy-mouthed apologetic attitude of the CPA. So, that was... I remember quite clearly that the attitude to the ALP was the decisive factor that encouraged me to keep reading Vanguard. In 1974, too, I was very much, in thought at least if not in actions, very much an ultra-leftist. You know, sort of a 'red hot' revolutionary... extremely pure and this sort of thing.

I think the CPA(ML) at that stage was going through a very leftist phase and the rhetoric of Vanguard was very appealing. China came in, only because China opposed revisionism. China sort of stood for the revolutionary purity of Marxism-Leninism and opposed the bureaucratic stagnation that we saw in the Soviet Union. And at that stage, of course, the heroes of the cultural revolution were still in power, and this was what I regarded as the correct revolutionary thing to do. Keep the revolution going, oppose stagnation, oppose bureaucrats consolidating power, fight revisionism, you know, support revolutionary movements all over the world. China stood for those things. China was good. But I never had any sentimental attraction to China. I never sort of looked to it as a 'socialist motherland' or a beacon. It was just that the Chinese represented, you know, the application of Marxism, the continuing application of revolutionary principles, as opposed to the Soviet Union.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well, the big one: In your view, to what extent do you think the party was influenced or controlled, or whatever, by China? And do any specific examples of that come to mind?

ROB DARBY: Yes, well when I was in the party, I cherished the view that what was said in Vanguard was true, namely that it was just a fraternal party, that they had ideas in common, that they were both striving for Marxism-Leninism and that there was an identity of views rather than any kind of influence one way or the other. At least that was my impression at first. My conclusion is that indeed the party virtually hung on every word that came from China. There are numerous examples of that, not the least of which is that every time that Xinhua [China's news agency] found a new issue in the world, Vanguard would duly take it up as a crucial issue for Australian communists to be concerned about. A classic case in my own experience was when – I was not in the party at that stage – but a group of friends at La Trobe University, amongst whom I was, and one had written an article asserting that Australia was in the Third World and this was duly published in 'Australian Communist' [journal], only to be retracted in the following issue, under a great cloud and storm, because the Chinese view was that Australia was in the Second World. It was quite clear that China had said that this was absolute nonsense.

JOHN HEROUVIM: In what way was it clear? How do you know that it was...?

ROB DARBY: It was clear because the person who worked on Vanguard said that's what the Chinese had said. I suppose that's hearsay. The other classic instance was over the arrest of the so-called 'Gang of Four', a fairly obvious example. The only details that I want to add is that shortly before that incident took place, I recall a discussion with some people – I don't know whether they were party members or not but certainly close associates – and we were talking about how close the party was to China and I remember saying at the time that if there was a counter-revolutionary coup in China and the radicals were deposed, the party would support the radicals. Someone else there expressed the view that there were so many Sinophiles in the party that they would simply follow whatever the leadership decided was right, and almost to the letter that prophesy was fulfilled. I was working in the Vanguard office at the time of the arrest of the Gang of Four and there's no doubt that but for my direct and more or less continuous contact with Duncan Clarke, the editor of Vanguard, I would have supported the radicals because they had been heroes and the very ideas which had led me to the party in the first place. And there was no real discussion, Duncan didn't actually say anything about what was right, what was wrong for a couple of days, when he received a telegram from [Ted] Hill who was visiting Albania. Then he suddenly announced that they were publishing a statement in Vanguard in support of [Premier] Hua [Guofeng] and this was on the basis of no more than assurances Hill had received in Albania from the Chinese representatives.

JOHN HEROUVIM: How would you sum up the relationship between the Chinese party and the Australian party?

ROB DARBY: My impression is that the Australian party wanted a lot more control than the Chinese party were prepared to provide; a case of being 'more Royalist than the King'. The Chinese were quite happy to have a party that was sympathetic but not subservient, except on

major issues. But it was quite clear that in the leadership of the party itself there were those who wanted to be told what to do. They literally wanted a Big Brother and guardian along the correct path.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Was there anything in particular that gave you that impression?

ROB DARBY: Oh, there are definite incidents which, being reported to me... Can we turn it off for a minute?

[Tape turned off, then resumes]

JOHN HEROUVIM: In your view, then, how would you explain both the subservience and the desire for more subservience that you've mentioned on the part of the party leadership? I mean what did the party leaders and the party organisation from this relationship? What are the bases for that relationship?

ROB DARBY: Well, I think there are several bases. The first is an ideological one. The leaders of the party are all old men who'd come to communism in the 1930s when the Soviet Union was the socialist beacon. The views of communists all over the world was primarily to defend and support the Soviet Union, particularly during the War when it was menaced by the armies of fascism. This policy became extremely entrenched. Hill's admitted, even in his recent publications, that in those days the party was far too subservient to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and tended to play Soviet interests above Australian interests. It's quite clear to me that the same attitudes coloured their relationship with China. It's a very engrained kind of practice that you just can't shake off. He seems to be of the opinion that the CPA(ML) has, but that's just an assertion.

The other aspect is more a material one. When the split took place in the early 1960s, the Chinese provided a great deal of material assistance to the new party. Without their support, partly in the form of simply sending publications for sale and partly in the form of actually paying Duncan Clarke to be the Xinhua representative, and thereby in quite a major sense subsidizing the production of Vanguard, it's very unlikely the new party would have got off the ground. And Duncan continued to be paid as Xinhua representative, as I understand, certainly until 1979 or 1980, so there was a direct financial aspect as well.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Do you have any views on, given the habit of subservience to a 'socialist motherland' of some description, why a group of people within the CPA should...

ROB DARBY: CPA or CPA(ML)?

JOHN HEROUVIM: ...CPA... should switch their allegiance, in the context of the Sino-Soviet split, from the Soviet Union to China?

ROB DARBY: Well, this would just be speculation on my part...

JOHN HEROUVIM: Yes.

ROB DARBY: I think it had a lot to do with the evaluation of Stalin. I mean, again, these people had grown up with Stalin as the hero and father figure, and to find him denounced was a very great shock, and hence it's logical that they would want to remain loyal to whatever international communist force would continue to recognize Stalin as a major figure. That's not the whole story, of course, because, no doubt, I don't believe that their motives were insincere. I'm sure they were sincere and believed that's the CPA was revisionist and the Soviet Union's policies were counter-revolutionary in some instances and they had a soft attitude to the state and to class struggle. They wanted a more fiery revolutionary spirit and I think they supported the Chinese position for that reason as well. I doubt that would have been strong enough without the denunciation of Stalin.

JOHN HEROUVIM: To your knowledge, were there any instances of disagreement on matters of policy between the Chinese and Australian parties?

ROB DARBY: Oh, I don't know.

JOHN HEROUVIM: When Chinese policies changed, and you know, often changed completely overnight, before policies corresponding to the Chinese policies were adopted by the CPA(ML), were members consulted first or was there any sort of gauging of membership opinion before party opinion was brought into line with the new Chinese policy?

ROB DARBY: There was never any party discussion of any policy statement or any policy adopted by the party publicly. The usual pattern was for an idea to be aired in Vanguard as a contributed article, then backed up by a non-contributed article and finally stated as policy by a leading article or editorial. But at no stage was there any internal discussion of any of these things. At the very most, we'd be given a chance to comment on the policy as already formulated and announced. Never has any policy been changed as a result of internal discussion. The classic case, of course, was the Chinese change of line following the arrest of the Gang of Four when we were given Hill's pamphlet to study. I recall that somebody had the temerity, in response to the invitation, to criticize this pamphlet as being rather unconvincing and they were simply told that it was a classic piece of Marxist-Leninist analysis and anyone who criticized it must be totally bourgeois.

JOHN HEROUVIM: I'd like to mention a number of policies and attitudes that were fundamental to the CPA(ML) especially under the period under consideration, 1972 to 1977, and seek your opinion as to the extent to which there was any Chinese influence involved in the adoption and propagation of these policies.

ROB DARBY: You need to remember that I was only directly involved in the last two of those years.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Right, okay. Everything I'm going to mention has relevance to those two years. The concept of revolution by stages, of independence being a prerequisite to socialism.

ROB DARBY: Sorry, what do you want me to say?

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well, do you think that policy owes anything to the party's relationship with China?

ROB DARBY: I had understood that it was a result of the study of the Vietnamese experience. But I have no direct knowledge of how that policy came to be formulated.

JOHN HEROUVIM: The party's attitude toward the Soviet Union.

ROB DARBY: I think it's quite clear that they simply took over the Chinese analysis of that. They did not decide of their own accord that the Soviet Union was a capitalist imperialist power. Having got that analysis from China, they were quite prepared to find evidence to support it, but the origin of the view is definitely directly from China.

JOHN HEROUVIM: What about, in a broader context, the general attitude towards demonstrations and the need for militancy and the applauding of militant action at demonstrations? The general position that the CPA(ML) took up within the left of always advocating the most extreme slogans?

ROB DARBY: Well that was certainly the case until 1977 and even later, despite the change of line in China. It kept on, with the Chinese style of the cultural revolution, for some time afterwards. The party's whole history coincided with that period of what the Chinese now denounce as the ultra-leftism of the cultural revolution period. Big demonstrations, militant struggle, that kind of thing. The party took that to heart and, yes, I think that's where they got it from. It's also, I think, true that any left sect trying to be more left than the rest is inevitably going to put forward more militant type slogans and more militant demands. I mean, the Trotskyite sects are the classic example of that. They don't get their militancy from China or anywhere else. It's just that they're more left and have to sound more extreme. I think there's an element of that in the CPA(ML)'s policy as well.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Can you elaborate at all on your own experience from things that you saw or did, on the degree of indirect Chinese input in the sense of the cultural revolution and the style, methods and slogans of the cultural revolution within the party?

ROB DARBY: I'd really need to go back and analyse it, analyse the kind of leaflets we wrote and compare them with the kinds of slogans that came out during the cultural revolution. But the style was a highly confrontationist one. Enemies were multiplied enormously. Anybody who disagreed on a minor issue was denounced in extremely strong terms. The whole emphasis was on asserting an extreme position rather than winning allies or trying to win support to a line or argument that might be expected to gain adherents. 'Confrontationist' is probably the best single word to describe the style of operation. The language that we used was very much a Chinese language from that period. It's easy enough to give examples from leaflets but I can't think of any at the moment.

JOHN HEROUVIM: What about the party's analysis of, and approach to action, around the time of the sacking of the Whitlam government at the end of 1975?

ROB DARBY: The strange thing is – it has to be remembered that I wasn't a member of the party at this time – the strange thing is that the party appeared to have no policy and didn't appear to be organising anything. One of the things I remember most vividly about the night of November 11th was that Ted Bull couldn't be contacted because he was at a performance of the Chinese Philharmonic Orchestra or some such visiting Chinese musical group. As I said, I wasn't a member of the party then but I was with that group of La Trobe students who were members of the party, and as far as I could see then, and nothing that has happened since has shown me otherwise, they were the only people doing anything. My impression is that, apart from bringing out a special edition of Vanguard a couple of days later, the party was doing absolutely nothing. The whole thing about the party was that its organisation – I mean, we talk about its policies and so forth but these are very largely what's written in Vanguard – the actual organisation, actually doing things, is very hard to work out, even when it happened, because of their diffused organisational structure and the absence of any normal forms of organisation.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Apart from what's been mentioned so far, the party had attitudes to economic struggles – well, let me isolate one other thing before I go on to general things – parliamentary and trade union politics, its attitude to them.

ROB DARBY: Well, I don't know whether... I'm inclined to think that they didn't owe very much to China. Unless... because, of course, in China neither of those things were a feature of the pre-revolutionary situation and this might have ironically forced the party to developing its own views on these questions. And, as I said earlier, these were the issues on which I was initially most attracted to the party. I think possibly more than anything else these were the result of the party leaders' own experience in Australia. Certainly, Hill's 'Looking backward, looking forward' is the result of the reflections of someone who's been a communist and workers' compensation lawyer over a long period. I don't think they owe a lot to China.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Policies on an assortment of other issues that seem to be connected solely with Australia – health schemes, uranium, freeways and so on – do you see them in a similar way?

ROB DARBY: Well, the party there... if people were struggling over something the party just automatically said, you know, support people's struggle. It was just a conditioned reflex.

JOHN HEROUVIM: How about uranium?

ROB DARBY: Well of course, the party's policy on uranium changed. It didn't actually change but it never unreservedly supported the anti-uranium position. It was of the opinion that there was, sort of, socialist uranium and capitalist uranium and that capitalist uranium was harmful and socialist uranium was a force for good. I've no doubt that was connected to the fact that China was embarking on a major atomic energy and nuclear missiles program.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Were you involved to any degree, both before and during your party membership, with any of the various groups that could be described as front groups for the party?

ROB DARBY: Yes, yes.

JOHN HEROUVIM: To what extent was allegiance to China or, you know, following the Chinese line, or even more generally the party line, a condition of being a member of those groups? To what extent was there any sort of Chinese domination of those groups?

ROB DARBY: Well, the two groups that I suppose we're talking about are Students for Australian Independence at La Trobe University and the Australian Independence Movement [AIM] in Melbourne. Now, both these groups made a tremendous song-and-dance about how broad they were, and I've no doubt they would have been delighted if someone who didn't support China would have joined – until he actually started expressing views! But what those groups actually did, and the way they talked among themselves, would have made it virtually impossible for somebody who didn't support China to be a member. The classic, the AIM became a public forum in which the CPA(ML)'s factional battles were fought out in public, particularly after the break with the followers of [Albert] Langer.

The Students for Australian Independence at La Trobe was a fantastically correct organisation which loyally put forward the party line on every issue, even to the extent of, at a demonstration over the installation of traffic lights, arguing that the press shouldn't be invited because at that stage the party was having a campaign against the press. A good instance, actually, just to extend, the SAI was run by the party, not merely in that all its leading personnel were party members but I recall, it must have been in 1977, we had a demonstration against a visiting Russian academic at Melbourne University and we trooped down and confronted him with the flag and tried to prevent him speaking and then walked out. A week later, at our weekly SAI meeting, somebody said that – I don't think he specified who – but we were to be thanked for this demonstration and it was greatly appreciated. We weren't entirely clear who greatly appreciated but we regarded it that 'higher beings' regarded it as a very good thing.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did you find yourself in any difficulties, political difficulties or difficulties with regard to talking to uncommitted people about party policy or politics in general as a consequence of finding yourself having to support Chinese policy and the changes in it?

ROB DARBY: It became particularly difficult after the Gang of Four and Kampuchea. Before then it wasn't difficult because, by and large, people regarded China fairly sympathetically. Mostly I didn't mention China, I didn't talk about China at all, unless we got onto the question of socialism and people wanted to know where does socialism work and we'd say, 'Well! Funny you should ask!' But after the coup, or change of line or whatever you want to call, it in China, it became difficult partly because those people who most regarded as the goodies had been kicked out and were gone and the new leadership tended to represent the things people I was dealing with – students, people like that – precisely the things they hated, namely industrialisation, technology, heavy industry, motor cars, nuclear power, all the things they were opposed to, this group seemed to be pushing as the panacea to China's ills. And of course, the issue of Kampuchea was a classic case of how adherence to China's line brought absolute disaster.

JOHN HEROUVIM: You mean supporting Pol Pot?

ROB DARBY: Because we were supporting someone who everyone knew had babies for breakfast and it just became impossible to argue rationally on the issue because people would regard you as a raving lunatic.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Do you care to comment on the manner in which the disagreements with the group of people headed by Albert Langer challenged the party's line following the arrest of the Gang of Four were handled and whether this has any bearing on the party's subservience to China?

ROB DARBY: Yes, there's no doubt that it was handled in an extremely dishonest and underhand way. I went along with it to my great shame. I recall that before the issue surfaced Duncan Clarke gave me a number of texts on economics, the economic situation in Australia and Marxism to read, and asked me for my opinion of them. I didn't know who they were, they were just typescripts. I read them and thought they were very good. They accurately summed up Marx's economic theory as I understood it and made useful analysis of the current economic trends in Australia such as inflation and unemployment. I couldn't understand why Duncan was displeased with this analysis – until he revealed at some stage later that these had been written by Albert Langer. And he gave it to me again, to give me a second try to, you know, a second chance (laughs) to find out what was wrong with them. I suppose to my credit, I still said that I couldn't see anything wrong with them, and he became angry and said, 'Well, we think that these are bourgeois anti-Marxist documents. They're just showing the way that this person's going'. That must have been at the end of '76, I think.

The big attack on Langer, I think, occurred just after May Day in 1977 and, incidentally, this was a classic instance of how the AIM operated as a communist front. There was no CPA(ML) presence at May Day but a big AIM contingent that could only be seen as co-terminus. Anyway, Langer was a speaker at May Day and I wasn't there but I gather he discussed the kind of movement that was needed to successfully fight for socialist ideals. He was very strongly attacked, without being named, in the next issue of Vanguard as, you know, leading an attack on the workers from the workers' platform. I considered the attacks on him in Vanguard to be very unfair, partly because they made no attempt to criticize the views he was actually expressing. They vented views that were attributed to him, namely Vanguard asserted that Langer argued that under capitalism the relations of production were already socialized. This point was hammered to death in Vanguard, though whether anybody understood the significance of it, even if he had said it, is another issue altogether. In fact, it was just a total straw man.

The other issue was one with which I was directly involved. He [Albert Langer] had come out to La Trobe to give a speech on American bases in Australia and I had recorded the speech and made a transcript of it and I think I sent a copy to Canberra to a friend and I think I sent it to Vanguard. Anyway, there was a comment in it about how after, or during, nuclear war he'd be out there fighting for peace, or for revolution, and this aroused Vanguard's anger and a refutation of his erroneous views on the importance of firepower and weapons as opposed to people was published in Vanguard shortly after. For a start, I didn't think that he had argued the importance of weapons over people – I think rather the contrary. And there was a sequel a little later on when Langer himself asked for a copy of the transcript, which I gave him, and he said that he'd been told by people in the party that his speech had caused a lot of controversy and confusion at La Trobe and had led people there astray, and I said, "No" (laughs) and he said, "Well, that's

what they told me” (laughs). So it’s clear again that there was quite a dishonest approach being taken there.

I also know of a case, purely in internal party terms, Langer at that stage was working as a postman and another person I knew was also working as a postman, and this person told me that somebody in the postal service who was widely regarded as being the party contact – this was long before any official denunciation of Langer had taken place – had warned him that they were not to have anything further to do with Langer because he had ‘gone bad’. This was just another example of the clearly underhand way in which dissidents were frozen out.

JOHN HEROUVIM: So you see his being frozen out and treated in this unprincipled manner as not in any way connected with the fact that he took a public position contrary to that of China and therefore of the party.

ROB DARBY: I haven’t really commented on that. I think, given the party’s organisational structure, the total lack of any internal democracy, the behaviour of that group – sorry, the treatment – the behaviour of the party in relation to that group, its treatment of that group, could be explained independently of China; though equally, I don’t doubt that the fact Langer was attacking the new Chinese leadership, and I’m sure that this added zest, at the very least, to the party’s hatred for him. It’s very hard to weigh up, sort of, what element was stronger. The disagreement over political economy came first. And the issue came to a head when the party supported Hua Guofeng and Langer supported the Gang of Four. If you read the Red Eureka Movement’s own documents, they certainly trace the disagreement to a long, long, way before that split. So I think it’s more complex than just a disagreement over China.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did you visit China?

ROB DARBY: Yes.

JOHN HEROUVIM: While a party member?

ROB DARBY: Yes.

JOHN HEROUVIM: What was the nature of your tour?

ROB DARBY: I was on an official Vanguard delegation to China in 1978/79. When I was living in Melbourne I’d been doing quite a lot of work on Vanguard. I continued to write fairly regularly for it and I think this was my reward.

JOHN HEROUVIM: What were your impressions of China and did you gain any impressions of the party’s relationship to the party in China while there?

ROB DARBY: Well, oddly enough, China had rather a disillusioning effect on me...

JOHN HEROUVIM: That’s not odd.

ROB DARBY: I found China a poor Third World country. I didn't see any wonders of socialism. People seemed pretty much the same as anywhere else. Buses were even more crowded than in Australia. Working people led remarkably bleak lives. Pollution was very bad. Of course, by that stage, the Chinese were emphasizing how backward they were, so I could certainly confirm their analysis. But, you know, unlike some people who visited China and came back with renewed faith in the future, or renewed faith in socialism, I came back far more sceptical of socialism than when I left. If that's all it did for China, there was really very little about the place that anyone could regard as particularly... I would not want to live there. That was my impression. Being a Vanguard delegation, Duncan himself had fairly long discussions with Chinese Xinhua officials that didn't involve anyone else on the tour. But I do recall one instance. The tour was just after the 1978 [CPA(ML)] party congress and Duncan was taking to China a large bundle of documents from the congress to give to Chinese officials. Unless the parcels contained multiple copies, there were certainly far more documents in that bundle than I'd ever seen. I suppose that, in a sense, was a comment on what I saw as the party's relationship to China while actually there.

The other classic case was the report of the Vanguard delegation, which I wrote more or less at Duncan's dictation. As a report, it just doesn't deserve the title of a 'report'. It was simply a rehash of the official Chinese line on everything that was going on. We didn't report anything we'd actually observed. In any case, you can't tell on these tours because you're brought into contact with people who are going to tell you what the Chinese, you know, want you to hear. So you can't really judge. But the report itself might as well have been written by the Chinese, even though we wrote it ourselves.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well, that's my last question. Anything you want to add to the topic.

ROB DARBY: Well, I might but turn it off.

Continuation of interview, 13 March 1983

JOHN HEROUVIM: Were you introduced to party politics and Chinese politics at the same time?

ROB DARBY: More or less. The point was that I was in the CPA in 1974 and an old friend of mine at that stage was moving more in the direction of the CPA(ML) as a result of people he knew in Canberra. When I first joined the CPA, he was very critical of it because he'd been told the CPA(ML) was the best party, the most revolutionary party. I poo poo'd that saying it was very sectarian, didn't have a party program or anything. I remember him going to the old East Wind Bookshop in Melbourne and asking for a copy of the party platform and being told in a rather shocked voice that no such thing existed. They did give him, I think, a recent copy of 'The Australian Communist' or some publication like that which listed some of the party's aims and principles. Or they might have given him articles on striving for Marxism-Leninism in Australia, or something like that, and of course 'Australia's Revolution' by Hill. But he agreed that if the party didn't have a platform, it wasn't to be taken seriously. During that year, 1974, I increasingly came round to the view that socialism was to be achieved through independence, so the things that drew me to the CPA(ML) were not connected with China except insofar as both the CPA(ML) and China opposed revisionism. What attracted me to the CPA(ML) was its

opposition to the ALP, its analysis of the Soviet Union and its support of the independence struggle, its anti-imperialist position. Now, that led me on to China rather than the other way round, in the sense that it was the Chinese who pioneered that analysis of the Soviet Union. It was the Chinese who were most strongly supporting the Third World countries in their fight against imperialism. So, it was my interest in those political positions which led me both towards the CPA(ML) and China as another force supporting those positions.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did you become interested in China or was China something you used to read a bit about as a consequence of becoming attracted to the CPA(ML).

ROB DARBY: Yes, the latter. I never had a great interest in China but when I began to move close to the CPA(ML) then I felt that I ought to read more about China because I began to see that as the kind of socialist model that we need to be looking at, that China was giving an example of what building socialism should be like, the right way to do it. So I read a few books about China but it was never a major attraction. The attraction to China was a consequence rather than a cause of getting interested in the CPA(ML).

JOHN HEROUVIM: How true do you think it is to say that the party, the CPA(ML), was formed as a consequence of the Sino-Soviet split?

ROB DARBY: Well, of course, I have no direct knowledge of that. What I know is what I read about it. It's clear that the party was formed as a result of the split. Most of the points on which it later came to disagree with other parties on the left in Australia developed following the split. At the time of the split, the only issues were the evaluation of Stalin, the attitude to peaceful coexistence and the general line of the international communist movement.

JOHN HEROUVIM: There were also a lot of polemics about the Labor Party.

ROB DARBY: Yes, the Labor Party was the other issue Hill polemicized about. And the state too, was one of the factors precipitating the split. The CPA refused to publish a booklet, a pamphlet, that Hill had written on the state.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did they? When?

ROB DARBY: Oh, just before the split.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Just before the rumblings or just before the break?

ROB DARBY: Just before the break. Or, it would have been in the course of the rumblings.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Where did you come across this?

ROB DARBY: I've got a copy of it.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Hill's booklet on the state?

ROB DARBY: Yes.

JOHN HEROUVIM: What 'Towards the Police State'?

ROB DARBY: Yes.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Where did you find that the CPA refused to print it?

ROB DARBY: It says so inside. The booklet states that Hill wrote this when he was still Victorian state secretary and the party refused to print it. So, the state was the other factor but it was only later that the analysis of the Australian revolution developed and the support for independence. Trade unions were, of course, another difference that arose fairly early but I don't think they figured prominently in the debates about and within the split. Despite the issue of the state, I think the major issues were international ones and I think in that, the question of Stalin was probably the most important to most people. Basically, the CPA(ML) people could never accept the demotion of Stalin because they'd grown up in the heroic days of the 1930s and 1940s and in view of the Cold War defending him. It was just too traumatic to accept.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Do you think the split would have happened if not for the Sino-Soviet split?

ROB DARBY: That's speculation. I can't say. I don't know. I would suspect not.

JOHN HEROUVIM: I suppose what I'm doing is asking you to speculate as to the motives of the people who broke with the CPA as to how much of it was because they had an alternative centre to follow and were given a lead, and how much was it because of differences because difference had existed for a long time.

ROB DARBY: I think without the split in the world communist movement the nucleus couldn't have arisen, the differences could have been accommodated within the one party, but when another centre of world revolution came into existence it was possible for a second party to be formed.

JOHN HEROUVIM: How much influence do you think the conditions under which the party came into existence had on its subsequent development?

ROB DARBY: A very big influence. Dependence on China was there from the start. It never changed. It took different forms but essentially...

JOHN HEROUVIM: When you were a member of the party how important was it to you to do work to promote or support China? How high a priority was it?

ROB DARBY: (laughs) I couldn't give a stuff about it! (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: How high a priority was it in the party as a whole?

ROB DARBY: It used to be given quite high priority. I remember branch meetings with circulars saying it was terribly important to promote China. Vanguard would run promotions of Chinese publications. And I know the Australia-China Society [ACS] was riddled with party people who made it their main area of work. I just thought it was all bullshit.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did you ever have any...

ROB DARBY: ... though I went along with it, to a limited extent. I never took part in any... I was never a member of ACS. I can't remember doing any... Oh, the only thing I ever did directly with China was when visiting Chinese journalists came to see Duncan Clarke and I remember talking to them.

JOHN HEROUVIM: When was that?

ROB DARBY: '76, perhaps. [Mentions a name – deleted].

JOHN HEROUVIM: Oh, of course! (laughs) The sp... Xinhua correspondent.

ROB DARBY: The party found a worker, a wharfie, for him to go and talk to, at Fawkner, and I found the whole thing rather surprising because the worker basically wanted Russia and China to come to an understanding, to stop fighting among themselves, but to unite against US imperialism. And I thought, gee, if this is the best wharfie the CPA(ML) can find, it doesn't say much for party influence on the wharves. He doesn't accept the party analysis of the Soviet Union. [Name deleted] was very discreet, he didn't disagree with anything he said, and just took notes. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: (laughs) How important were Chinese domestic campaigns to you? How closely did you follow the fall of Lin Piao and Deng Xiaoping's fortunes?

ROB DARBY: Well, Lin Piao and the cultural revolution and all that were before my time. It was from '74 onwards that I began to pay some attention to Chinese domestic politics. I was interested. I was basically, then, what became known as the Gang of Four, were the goodies. I sort of accepted their analysis of the bourgeoisie inside the party. I remember reading something, a small item, in the daily press towards the end of 1974, which talked about clashes in China, fighting, and suggestions that Chou Enlai was revisionist [inaudible for a few seconds]. I remember writing to [name deleted] and saying this was very likely. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: (laughs) That Chou Enlai be done away with?!

ROB DARBY: Well, that he was a revisionist.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did you ever express those views within the party?

ROB DARBY: Well, I wasn't in the party then.

JOHN HEROUVIM: No, but after you joined?

ROB DARBY: No.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Because you no longer held them or it wouldn't have been wise?

ROB DARBY: Oh, I think the incident passed out of my mind. Until the coup, that is the coup in China, the '76 coup, if 'Peking Review' had said that Chou Enlai was revisionist, I'd have said, well, he is. I found their articles on class struggle within the communist party, class struggle under socialism, very impressive, cogent, very revolutionary. I'd have believed anything they said. It was only after the coup, when Peking Review started saying the opposite that I realized that you couldn't believe anything that you read in Peking Review. (laughs) It was purely a result of who happened to be in charge of it.

JOHN HEROUVIM: (laughs) How important was what happened in China to you? As a party member, I mean. How much of a bearing did it have on your overall work?

ROB DARBY: Well, my attitude when the Gang of Four were arrested in '76, particularly the effect of that on both the party and its various supporting and front organisations was 'what a nuisance'. (laughs) We were going so nicely, everything was going really well, '76 was a tremendously successful and exciting year. The influence of the independence movement particularly seemed to be growing strongly. The party vanguard had got bigger. Really boom times. And then we get this wretched event in China that sends people off in all directions. It was the cause of splits and massive dissension. I was very angry. Bloody Chinese! You know. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: (laughs) But it was obvious that a big event like that in China, even though it had no bearing on Australian events, would automatically cause enormous upheaval in the CPA(ML)?

ROB DARBY: Well it did have direct consequences, bigger consequences than any domestic issue ever had. I just remember being very annoyed by it. Just when we were going really well!

JOHN HEROUVIM: If a campaign was taking place in China, was it automatically important to you, something to be studied, was it automatically applied here, in some way? For instance, it was very important for students and intellectuals to perform manual labour and so on. Was that important here?

ROB DARBY: I wasn't really in the party or in the movement when that issue was around, that was fairly early. I think there was always an attitude in the CPA(ML) of hostility towards intellectuals and it became apparent later on because they were afraid they could think. There was always the idea that someone who worked with his hands could think better than someone who worked with his mind, but that's not really what you're talking about.

JOHN HEROUVIM: No.

ROB DARBY: The campaigns that I remember, having some kind of repercussion, for example was the campaign to study the dictatorship of the proletariat in 1975. I remember thinking that

was important, and I remember reading the Little Red Book that came out that consisted of quotes. Similarly, those two pamphlets by Yao Wenyuan and Chang Chun-chiao also came out at that time and I read those with great attention. They weren't things I thought were relevant to Australia but I thought they were relevant to the principles of socialism. They were relevant to the construction of socialism, additions to communist theory, the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat. They were important for that reason, not because they had any immediate relevance to Australia. I wasn't particularly turned on by the campaign to criticize Lin Piao and Confucius. I remember getting the 'Little White Book' that came out but I don't think I ever read it. That one rather bizarre.

JOHN HEROUVIM: That's your personal attitude to it but what was the party's attitude to those sorts of campaigns?

ROB DARBY: The party's attitude was that rich lessons ought to be learned from studying Chinese material on these matters, party members should devote themselves seriously to the study of these things. They were taken very seriously with great emphasis placed on reading all this stuff.

JOHN HEROUVIM: I asked you something previously, didn't I? To what degree was the overall style, the way the party worked and behaved, influenced by China, do you think?

ROB DARBY: By China. I'm tempted to say very heavily but the point is, of course, that the stereotyped style of party writing would have existed before the CPA(ML). Essentially, they retained the old style of the CPA in the '30s and '40s. The style [inaudible] very rhetorical with staccato sentences, a lot of hyperbole, grandiose phrases, blood and guts, hatred, a dogmatic and very non-dialectical style, a very crass style, were there already. What the Chinese connection did was perpetuate that style but, of course, the Chinese had also retained that style though they made it a lot more colourful and they did it a lot better than the party here ever did. The Chinese publications you felt they were really sincere when they did this stuff and they carried it off with aplomb and flair. It was good. But here it was a lot more mechanical and far less convincing. The Chinese connection really froze the party into that style of writing and presentation. Very staccato leaflets, for example, which were supposed to be written in an easy style that workers could understand.

JOHN HEROUVIM: In your inner party life, were there elements there that would have made it obvious to you or to anyone else who confronted with it, that picture of inner party life, that here was a party that modelled itself on, or was considerably influenced by, China? I mean, did you talk Chinese expressions and language forms? Did you model yourself in any way on what would have happened in China or what would the Chinese have reacted to this?

ROB DARBY: I don't think I ever did that. I did a lot of my writing style for Vanguard. It was a great triumph when I could produce a piece of writing that looked as though it had been written by anybody! (laughs) A perfect piece of *Vanguardese*.

JOHN HEROUVIM: You genuinely, sincerely, thought that that was very good?

ROB DARBY: Oh yes. I was qualified to write for Vanguard now that I'd perfected the style. That wore off after a couple of years and I began to have the opposite view that more colour and life and variety of styles, more ordinary modes of expression, were desirable. I began to make efforts in that direction which were, of course, largely frustrated by Duncan. So I had to keep turning silk purses back into sow's ears!

JOHN HEROUVIM: (laughs)

ROB DARBY: Party meetings were extremely practical. You know, banal almost in their practicality. Working out details like who was going to bring the drinks to a function or write a leaflet. This kind of thing was 90 percent.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well, that's your own experience but did you come across people, or hear of events or messages or anything that suggested otherwise? Some people have mentioned the 'Sinophiles' in their interviews.

ROB DARBY: I heard, I had the impression, that there were people who hung on every word from China around. There's no doubt about that but I didn't have any direct experience of it. I'd only be reporting rumours and stories that I'd heard and that you'd probably get more correctly from others.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Could I ask you something with respect of question 14? The overall orientation... The CCP was an elect party even when it had become more pragmatic and outgoing in its international relationships at home under the influence first of Mao and then of the Gang of Four, the emphasis remained, you know, struggle struggle struggle. And so was the CPA(ML) during that period, and I think it's fair to say that when the left influence was removed in China the CPA(ML) followed suit domestically and started saying that we should be more reasonable and there was no revolutionary situation in Australia. Do you see any connection between the overall left orientation of the CPA(ML) and the CCP?

ROB DARBY: Well I think that you've just expressed it, just stated it. I think it's more than just sequential, not just a coincidence that after the Chinese party changed its line the CPA(ML) did domestically as well. I think it's a direct consequence.

JOHN HEROUVIM: People like Ted Hill had a tradition of leftism and Victoria was more left than the other states and so on, there is an argument that when Hill and those people said that the Chinese and the CPA(ML) happened to share in common a subscription to Marxism-Leninism but they were both independently ultra-left. But then again the change after 1977...

ROB DARBY: That argument is logical. I used to use it myself when people said that the CPA(ML) just follows China. I used to say, no, the similarity in line just results from a similar analysis because they have a similar ideology and similar world view and similar adherence to Marxism-Leninism. But I think it would be remarkable if the common adherence to Marxism-Leninism meant that *simultaneously* they arrived at a new analysis and a new analysis of results deriving from their common adherence to Marxism-Leninism which not only led to them

changing their minds about certain things at the same time but led them to change their minds about the same things at the same time. That's stretching credulity.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well, as a consequence of that, the CPA(ML) became associated within the left-wing movement as the violent ones, the ultra-militants, always with struggle. The lesson that was drawn from anything was 'struggle gets you places'. Negotiations and so on were dirty words. Was there a connection between this sort of stance and the party's relationship with China?

ROB DARBY: It's difficult. The party's association with violence was a patchy thing. The people who were associated with violence were, in fact, only a small section of the party but the movement, and many other people in the party or the movement, regarded them as loonies, strongly for the way they behaved. Now I think what the connection with China did was it led acts of senseless violence to be approved rather than condemned. As you mentioned, they were editorially approved, and I think that's where the China influence came in. Without that, these actions might have been more critically examined and not endorsed so enthusiastically by a newspaper editor who knew nothing about what was really going on. But because it looked like struggle, it was militant, it had to be good. The irony was that those party members who were involved in real struggle situations, say in the trade unions, used every trick in the book – negotiating, lying low, concessions, you name it – and acted very subtly to achieve their ends, even though when any of their victories were written up in Vanguard it was always stated as merely a result of struggle rather than Norm Gallagher pulling a swiftie or doing a deal with the bosses to achieve something. So, you had this thing where Vanguard mindlessly approved every act of militancy regardless of its real content or real consequences and this, of course, encouraged those who had a disposition to behave like that anyway because it was approved of at the highest levels and they felt justified in continuing their behaviour.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well, we'll stick to...

ROB DARBY: The other point there, of course, the other reason why Vanguard and Hill always endorsed these things is that their knowledge of what went on came largely from the people carrying on these actions. Hence, they got their version of events rather than someone who was critical of them.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Following attacks on the US Consulate during a July 4 demonstration in Melbourne in 1968, editorials in every major Australian daily commented that the demonstration was un-Australian and employed foreign tactics, words to that effect. In what ways was the party and its members or supporters active in such demonstrations following some sort of lead from China, if they were at all?

ROB DARBY: I can't think of any very good examples of that. It was 1968, well before, well, it's my time, when I was young...

JOHN HEROUVIM: That's just as an example...

ROB DARBY: An example of party people creating violence at demonstrations, I can remember a couple of incidents. There was a very small demonstration in support of Aboriginal land rights after the AUS [Australian Union of Students] council meeting in August 1974 and we marched. I was at that stage just becoming...

JOHN HEROUVIM: *Free Fred Fogarty!* (laughs)

ROB DARBY: Yes, it might have been *Free Fred Fogarty*, a real tongue-twister. We marched to the Old Customs House and then marched back to the Queensland Tourist Bureau in Collins Street. It was all quite friendly and a low-key affair until we got to the tourist bureau, it might have been the Northern Territory Tourist Bureau, and we all sort of gathered around the window and [name deleted] threw a rock through it, someone threw something through the window, and the whole character changed. And I was rather shocked by that. Frightened. But that sort of thing happened.

The other, of course, was the July 4, 1975, throwing rocks at Pan Am. So, yes, well, it was a classic case of desperately trying to revive days... in '68/'69, it was just media rhetoric to say they were un-Australian and just provoked by a small core of demonstrators. The whole mood of the demonstrators in those days was violent and militant...

JOHN HEROUVIM: But was it, though?

ROB DARBY: What went on involved quite large numbers of people. Well, the Springbok demonstration. I think that throwing firecrackers and marbles, it wasn't just a minority of the crowd. Everyone who went was pretty wild. By the time I was involved that pre-'72 atmosphere had changed dramatically.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Why do you think the people who were trying to keep it going were trying to keep it going? Why couldn't they just accept that times had changed? Do you think they were psychologically just vandals? What was it? There's Barry's theory that there was the second-generation of Maoists – you know, people like myself – and they came into the piece late and were really upset that all that was over and wanted to keep it going and that's what they liked about it?

ROB DARBY: Well, Barry might be right but I don't know. I don't know why people get hooked on a particular mode of operating but it's a fact that people very often do. People tend to get hooked on the thing that they did when they feel they were most successful when they were in their prime of life. Just as they retain the hair-do's of their youth, like E F Hill...

JOHN HEROUVIM: (laughs)

ROB DARBY: You know, when they were spunkiest and all the rest of it. So, they retain a commitment to what they did in the good old days. What went on at La Trobe, of course, is the classic instance of that. As late as 1977, they were putting out broadsheets, you know, 'La Trobe's militant tradition lives!' but it had been dead for about five years. (laughs) It was a pathetic attempt to try and convince students that they were heirs to a revolutionary and struggle

tradition that they knew nothing about and didn't want to know anything about and certainly didn't want to be part of. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: As late as 1976, the front cover of the RSM [Radical Student Movement] alternate handbook was a policeman being unseated from his horse by a besieged [crowd] with flagpoles.

ROB DARBY: It was just a pathetic attempt to impose a tradition on people. If people had just stopped for five minutes to think about what students were really like, it wouldn't have even been contemplated.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Were you part of that?

ROB DARBY: Yeah.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well why?

ROB DARBY: Well, this is where Barry's third or second generation thing probably applies. When I joined the movement I was desperately anxious to sort of prove my credentials. I took Lenin and Mao and all those people very seriously and I wanted to prove myself as a fighter and as a theorist and all these things. I wanted to be accepted as one of the [inaudible] and be accepted as a loyal supporter and member of the party so I just, whatever the prevailing attitude and prevailing styles were, endorsed them uncritically because I felt that the best way to be accepted and approved of was to do what was regarded as good with fervour. I didn't have a critical attitude at all.

JOHN HEROUVIM: You thought it was right?

ROB DARBY: I probably did, too, yes. I didn't think that what I was doing was *wrong* but that I had to do it in order to be accepted. I think I genuinely thought that what I was doing was the right thing.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Can you recall instances or examples where you did things or said things that you weren't comfortable with or didn't think were right? You know, that psychological dimension of party discipline. Conformity.

ROB DARBY: Some things. One July 4 threw rocks at Kentucky Fried Chicken or MacDonald's. Kentucky Fried Chicken, you know, buildings, shops. [inaudible] We went out on this expedition and I remember saying it was really stupid and we shouldn't go ahead. But I went ahead none the less.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Why?

ROB DARBY: Well, I believe that if a democratic decision, a majority decision, is to do something then I'll do it. Where things got really bad [inaudible] I really felt that what I was doing was wrong came after the coup in China. For example, I [inaudible] printing the Vanguard

editorial at that time which hailed the defeat of the Gang of Four. At that stage I was convinced it was a counter-revolutionary coup like a lot of people, in those early stages, were. I didn't say anything and just went ahead and did the [Vanguard] mail-out.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Why not?

ROB DARBY: I think it was a case of who I knew. By that stage my close associates were people like you and like Duncan. Duncan was a hard person to argue with, he tended to just bowl you along with his enthusiasm. And I really didn't want to have an argument with him. And to an extent I trusted him: Duncan knows about these things, no doubt he'll be proven right as time goes on and the evidence comes out. His position will be proven to be correct but, at that time, I had this sort of seeking feeling. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: (laughs) Well, getting back to the question of violence and the number of other party's even more strongly-held principles, their secrecy in organisation, their opposition to parliament and to everything that was the mainstream of Australian politics and even the mainstream on the left, they were totally divorced from it in many ways, to what extent do you think this was a product of the party's relationship with China and to what extent did other factors bring this about, for instance, the old Bolshevik/Comintern tradition in which a lot of the party leaders grew up in?

ROB DARBY: Yes, well I think two things. I think the influence of China was important because, you know, they were thinking of the Chinese party organising secretly under the Kuomintang in the White Areas of China and that was the inspiration. But I think if that was their model, it was a pretty pale amateur imitation. Secrecy was never very good, never very effective. I think the other major factor was simply Hill's dominance in the party. It was a Hill characteristic which he had throughout his party career to be very sensitive on the issue of the state. Secrecy was one of his characteristics, so when he came to lead the party, he did more than lead, I mean he *ruled* it. I don't think anyone has had such dominance over an organisation. He was its brains. He was its everything, so he just stamped it, the whole organisation, with his own obsessions. I think that in many ways is the most important factor, in so far as it took its model from the Chinese Communist Party in the White Areas in the '30s and '40s and the writings of Mao, 'fish in water' idea, that came from Hill. But as I say, the ideals were far from the execution.

Tape 2A, 13 March 1983

ROB DARBY: The example of that is the Vanguard itself which, the notion of secrecy...

JOHN HEROUVIM: This is ROB DARBY, tape two, by the way...

ROB DARBY: Oh, right. A good example of that was the very production of the newspaper. How on earth do you have a secret organisation that produces a newspaper printed at a commercial printer's, distributed through the post. Even if it was with false names and post office boxes. It's just absurd. An example of just how absurd all the secrecy was, at one stage, it would have been '77, after the decision was taken to break up party cells based on a common

workplace and to put all sorts of weird combinations of people together for study purposes, I was meeting a funny little guy who had some job with a fishing co-op, I can't remember his name but the office was in South Melbourne...

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did he have a bung eye?

ROB DARBY: Oh, I can't remember. And I was going to meet him at his office one day, we were going to go off somewhere, and I'd forgotten the address. I happened to be working in the Vanguard office so I asked Duncan (laughs) where he was (laughs), what his address was (laughs), and Duncan just told me. Out loud! (laughs) In this presumably bugged Vanguard office.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Was his name Basil?

ROB DARBY: I don't think so. He was Greek. Well, it probably was him.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Short bloke, white hair, bung eye. You don't remember his name? Basil Steffanou.

ROB DARBY: Yes, possibly.

JOHN HEROUVIM: You weren't ever a member of the ACS [Australia China Society] were you? What was your impression of the ACS as a party member, like, what did you think the connection was between ACS and the party?

ROB DARBY: Oh, I knew the connection. I knew the ACS was largely a party front organisation.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Was that how it was regarded in party circles? Did you think of it as one of our groups?

ROB DARBY: Oh yes, for sure, but it was irrelevant to what I was on about. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: Your trip to China wasn't organised through the ACS.

ROB DARBY: No.

JOHN HEROUVIM: You said to me a couple of weeks ago that you had further thoughts about your trip to China that you wanted to relate to me.

ROB DARBY: I don't know whether I'd... I don't know that I really do. Turn it off for a minute. [turns off tape, then resumes] Yes, the trip to China was quite strange because as an official Vanguard delegation given extremely red carpet treatment wherever we went, massively fed and feted and met important people, it was a classic case of being duchessed.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Who did you meet?

ROB DARBY: One guy we met was... turn it off.

[turns off tape, then resumes]

JOHN HEROUVIM: So he was a Politburo member?

ROB DARBY: He was quite senior. He was the most senior person that we met. We were duchessed from one end of China to the other but, as I said earlier on, the thing that impressed me most about China was the poverty, [inaudible], hopes for the future. I was also impressed with how relaxed people were, how little concerned with politics and struggle, which led me to be a lot more relaxed in my own attitudes when I got back. Probably the opposite effect it has on some people who go to China and are impressed by the puritanism of Chinese life and come back extremely puritanical but I was impressed by their lustiness (laughs) and came back even less puritanical than when I left.

The other thing about China and about *leading* Chinese people, people in government circles, was how little they knew about Marxism, how little they knew about socialism and capitalism. I remember Duncan and I went to give a talk to journalism students at this new journalism institute in Peking. I was just outlining a few basic facts about advertising in western media and they were just *amazed* at what I said, that the newspapers were paid for by advertising and that about 90 percent of newspapers were advertisements, that advertisers bought audiences through the media. What the media were doing was selling a commodity, turning the readers into a commodity and selling them to the advertisers. I thought this was a fairly basic, if reasonably developed, Marxist concept of media but they were all absolutely stunned. At that time, of course, Peking was beginning to receive its first billboards advertising Coca Cola and other wonderful things. Which even Hill doesn't like. [laughs]

JOHN HEROUVIM: Billboards?

ROB DARBY: He has reservations about them. So, there's a naivety about capitalism. Because the leaders want to be a modern technocratic society, they take things from capitalism that look good without realizing how they developed, that they're organically part of the capitalist system of exploitation, and they gaily throw them around China. Either things like advertising will wither in China because of their irrelevance to the mode of production or the society will develop in such a way that they will flourish and they will become organically part of the society as they are in the West.

The things that I liked about China, the things that most people in fact like about China, is its pre-industrial characteristics: the peasant community, the manure in the fields, the intensive cultivation, the absence of heavy industry, the absence of the rat race. That's what people liked. The moral fervour, the idealism, all the things the Chinese have turned their back on since 1976. The other thing about China... who was it who went? That Milliss. Roger Milliss whose father, I forget which is which, his father, the elder one, and his wife, went to China. He didn't like it very much but his wife was ecstatic. She just loved it, and the reason was [inaudible] (laughs) That was at the time of the cultural revolution.

JOHN HEROUVIM: What do you know about the publication 'New China News'?

ROB DARBY: I know who produced it. I know who did the proof-reading at one stage.

JOHN HEROUVIM: What was the...

ROB DARBY: It was basically a system by which Duncan got money from the Chinese.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Were you familiar with the publication?

ROB DARBY: Yes.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did you read it?

ROB DARBY: No.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did many people read it?

ROB DARBY: I don't know anyone who read it. [laughs]

JOHN HEROUVIM: What was its standing in the party, to your knowledge?

ROB DARBY: I regarded it as a joke. I thought it was a load of shit. (laughs) How anyone could take it seriously, I don't know.

JOHN HEROUVIM: What do you mean when you say it was a way of Duncan Clarke getting money?

ROB DARBY: Well, of course, he produced it for the Chinese. They probably paid him at a rate far exceeding the value of what they were getting in return. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: You don't know what he was getting paid?

ROB DARBY: No.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Were you aware of Duncan's position as a Xinhua correspondent?

ROB DARBY: Yes.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did you have many dealings with the Chinese in Australia? With the Embassy?

ROB DARBY: No, not many. Like I said, a couple of times when Xinhua correspondents were in Melbourne, I drove them around a bit and answered their questions about Australian life and politics.

JOHN HEROUVIM: What was the status of that sort of thing? I mean I did the same thing too, quite a few times. How did you regard it? Was it proletarian internationalism? Was it natural that we'd help the Chinese?

ROB DARBY: I guess I never really thought about it. It was something I was never really easy about. I was flattered, I think, was probably the major reaction because it seemed that I was getting into important international political circles. You know, meeting and talking to people and being terribly grown up and I thought, wow, I'm really in with the heavies now. So, it was very flattering to be doing something that seemed so important. You know, it came about just through personal connections with Duncan. I didn't see it as a party duty of any kind but, you know, I was pretty keen on working on Vanguard and very very keen on everything that was going on, and I liked Duncan very much and I would have done anything that he wanted me to, practically.

JOHN HEROUVIM: In what ways, other than that feeling of prestige, of derived importance that members got, do you think the Chinese aided the party, to your knowledge, ranging from the material to what I regard as the more important psychological implications of it being a member of a group that's got 800 million de facto members?

ROB DARBY: Well, it helped in a number of ways. It helped financially.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Do you know how it helped financially?

ROB DARBY: Well, the only way that I know it helped financially was through paying Duncan Clarke to be Xinhua correspondent and paying him to produce New China News and buying vast quantities of party publications at inflated prices.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Do you know that they did that?

ROB DARBY: Yes.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Do you know how many they bought?

ROB DARBY: I remember at one stage packing massive box-loads of Hill's books and sending them to China. Hundreds of them.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Do you know what the Chinese paid for them?

ROB DARBY: I don't know how much they paid, no, I don't.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Box-loads of Hill's books. They used to get a thousand Vanguards. Which is incredible. I don't know what they paid for them.

ROB DARBY: I always assumed that they'd pay at inflated prices and this would be a way of financing the party. And, of course, they supplied their books, their own publications, for the

bookshops at reduced prices, so that was another one, whereas the bookshop would sell them at a large profit, and that was another way.

I think the most important aid the Chinese party gave the CPA(ML) was to provide a political line. They virtually wrote the political line of Vanguard, the editorials. All the locals had to do was to fill in different places, different names. The Chinese supplied an all-purpose algebra and Hill or Duncan just filled in the numbers. He wrote the same editorial about everything, just slightly different. It was like a Mills & Boon romance. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: Any other contributions by way of aid?

ROB DARBY: The provision of political line. The provision of political advice. Duncan used to regularly visit the Embassy and not only to talk about complications and things but just to be told what the political line is.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Is this something that you deduced rather than he told you?

ROB DARBY: Well, a mixture of both. He'd say that he'd had discussions at the Embassy and he'd give a bit of an outline about some of the things they'd discussed about the international situation. It was when the party was having great trouble with its line on superpower contention and the 'main enemy', all this kind of thing, and Duncan always used to go there to be straightened out. (laughs) Then he'd come back and very often the results of those discussions would appear in a Vanguard editorial or a lead article or non-contributed article.

JOHN HEROUVIM: There are some people I've spoken to who said that the Chinese, from what they can gather, was quite goofy and that the party took its lead from China just by reading Chinese material and then went overboard and exaggerated and said things the Chinese would never say.

ROB DARBY: Yes, yes. I think that's true.

JOHN HEROUVIM: How does that gel with this notion of being straightened out?

ROB DARBY: Well (laughs), Duncan would do that or he'd read a 'Peking Review' or he'd read a Chinese publication of some sort and he'd think, wow, and improve it. (laughs) Then on one of his regular visits to the Embassy they'd try and straighten him out. The two are quite consistent, I mean, one was the counterpart of the other.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Can you give me any specific examples of Duncan being straightened out, that you know of? Or the issues involved?

ROB DARBY: Where it was most apparent was on the issue of the... well, it must have happened on the issue of the 'three worlds'. China's policy was that Australia was part of the Second World.

JOHN HEROUVIM: That definitely happened, I know that.

ROB DARBY: 'AC' [The Australian Communist journal] published something saying that it was part of the Third World. I have no direct knowledge of that, it's inference. But I know that when the following [inaudible] in '76 the party was having great trouble handling 'superpower contention' and getting the issue of the 'main enemy' right, the correct way of conducting struggle against US imperialism while not letting the wolf in the back door or whatever it was. I think that's where discussions at the Embassy played an important role in sort of preventing the party from adopting a too pro-American position, which they were inclined to do. They were inclined to, not only make superpower contention the cause of everything from unemployed teachers to...

JOHN HEROUVIM: Lack of traffic lights at La Trobe University! (laughs)

ROB DARBY: Lack of traffic lights at La Trobe University. There's an example of party supporters taking the line to an absurdity, something I did myself, utter absurdity.

JOHN HEROUVIM: I'm still keen to get down some basics.

ROB DARBY: Specific examples.

JOHN HEROUVIM: You say the Chinese helped, well their advice prevented the hardening of a pro-American line. Now, how do you know that? I mean, did Duncan Clarke come back from the Embassy one day and say, well, the Chinese have just pointed out to me how we should not be pro-American. What happened?

ROB DARBY: Nothing as obvious as that. It would just be that the Vanguard editorials or lead stories would be tending towards an increasingly pro-Fraser and anti-Russian. Hill would write things like that the coup had this good effect in that it stopped a pro-Russian government from staying in power in Australia, and then after Duncan visited the Embassy that sort of trend would stop and it would go back to a more critical stance on the multinationals and be reminded that GMH was actually operating in Australia! (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: And you noticed the coincidence between Duncan's visits...

ROB DARBY: I noticed the coincidence and he'd talk about what they were saying. He'd say we've got to have something on, we've got to emphasize workers' struggle a bit more, something like that. He never concealed, well, he probably concealed some of the things he talked about but he never concealed the fact that he'd been there and talked about things and that he got a lot out of it. I wish I could give you some striking examples.

JOHN HEROUVIM: No. I only want what happened, what you know.

ROB DARBY: So they're the two main ones. The Chinese helped the party. The other main one was as a big brother, immense ideological support. Not so much for me or my age group but for the older, the original party members, who'd spent their adult lives worshipping Stalin and being inspired by the socialist beacon in northern Europe and northern Asia, the Soviet Union, and I really don't think they could survive any other way.

JOHN HEROUVIM: One interviewee has said that the organisational structure of the party was altered when after a visit to China, during which he toured the former White areas and studied Liu Shao-Chi's methods of organisation, Ted Hill returned from China – and he said the source of this information to him was his party contact with the Central Committee – how likely in light of your experience as a party member does this sound, that such a major organisational change could occur because of something Ted Hill had been told in China?

ROB DARBY: As I've said I think much of the party's organisation derived from long-standing views of Hill. I don't know to what stage this refers. Do you?

JOHN HEROUVIM: Yes, it was in the late '70s. Seventy-nine.

ROB DARBY: So that was the change?

JOHN HEROUVIM: When they instituted the change whereby all contact, any branches that were left were dissolved, there would be no study groups, all contact would be one to one. And that was also part of the 'lay low', in the sense of 'don't open your mouth'.

ROB DARBY: Yes, I think that's quite possible. It's consistent with what I understand about the party's characteristics. Also, I mean it's just a further intensification, as I've emphasized, of the party organisation being based on Hill's long-standing characteristics. Well, this is an intensification of that, not a departure from it. My whole impression of party organisation was that it just didn't exist. A total absence of any organisation. When I became cynical about the party, I used to say that this was not so much for reasons of security but to make it easier for Hill to control the organisation, because if you don't know any other party members then you can't organise effectively to have policies changed. In effect, there's no effective internal democracy.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Do you think that's the rationale? The real explanation?

ROB DARBY: No. I don't think that's the reason why it was set up like that but I think once it was set up like that, Hill and the rest fully utilized that characteristic to make sure that their own will always prevailed and dissenters were isolated and ineffective. They didn't set it up with that reason specifically in mind but they fully utilized it once it was there. I think it mainly reflected the fact that the party here was not a mass movement. It was basically this hot-house product. In China the Communist Party was a creation of a mass movement against imperialism and against landlords. In Australia, the party was trying to bring the mass movement into existence.

JOHN HEROUVIM: The party began to lose members fairly rapidly in 1977 to 1978. Some went into opposition and others just drifted away. Most, I think, just drifted away from Marxist-Leninist politics. Why the loss of membership then?

ROB DARBY: I think the main factor is the coup in China, not necessarily because people supported the Gang of Four but because people were disgusted that they'd been arrested and disgusted with the party's support for the new Chinese leadership. Many people were simply disgusted by the cynicism that the party displayed in, you know, endorsing without question this

somersault in Chinese policies, the fact that the party could warmly hail Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping only a few months after condemning them, you know, Deng as a revisionist, and do so without apology, without explanation, it was the brazen cynicism with which this was done, which I think alienated most people rather than the content of the decisions that were made.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Do you think the arrest of the Gang of Four was a cause or a trigger?

ROB DARBY: It was a trigger in some cases because certainly people around Langer had been disenchanted with the party for some time. That disenchantment grew mainly out of the party's hopeless understanding of economics. He [Langer] began his Political Economy study group at least a year before the split was consummated and he'd become very critical of the party's line on economic questions, its arguments about inflation and recession and unemployment and so forth, and he began writing stuff for Vanguard and AC and also began writing critical commentaries on party pamphlets and articles that had appeared. I remember Duncan showing them to me one day and saying 'Tell me what you think' and I came back and said 'I think they're very good'. (laughs) And I couldn't understand why he didn't look pleased. He got me to read them again and I told him it seemed really good stuff to me, and he just got very angry and said, 'Well, we think they're bourgeois and revisionist and no good. Anti-Marxist'. He got his friend Vera to read them and she didn't like them very much. Vera was never a Marxist so (laughs) I didn't really find this very... One of the things Langer had written was in fact a criticism of an article...

JOHN HEROUVIM: Based on what Vera had said.

ROB DARBY: Of hers, yes. About inflation. It was some fantastic concoction about...

JOHN HEROUVIM: Inflation was the same...

ROB DARBY: Capital inflow. I remember saying to you, we were looking at the original article in AC in the Vanguard office and I was saying I thought the criticism was correct and I never understood this article and I asked you whether you'd ever understood that point, and you said you'd never understood it either, and Duncan said, 'Well, it makes sense to me!' (laughs) And I said to him, 'Well, can you explain it to us'... (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: 'Go away and read it!'

ROB DARBY: ...and he couldn't explain it in words of two syllables. (laughs) And what of course had happened was that Langer had been bringing these criticisms mainly to Duncan and to Hill, and Duncan always says when anyone criticizes Vanguard, 'Well, you write it! You do it better!', so, of course, Langer stunned him by – well, Duncan was telling me this – so Langer did produce a lead article for Vanguard on inflation and Duncan said, 'Of course, we couldn't print it! (laughs) It was anti-party!' (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well, 'You write it in a different way saying exactly the same thing like you've been told to do!'

ROB DARBY: So, in their case, certainly, the opposition had been going for a long time and the party's somersault over the Gang of Four had brought to a head... well, throughout '77, or '76, following the Gang of Four thing, Vanguard entered a very drab phase.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well, it's hard to get whipped up over the 'four modernizations'!

ROB DARBY: Vanguard was full of articles from workers saying how good the party was. They were desperately trying to... you know, by patting themselves on the back they could avoid charges they'd gone revisionist. They published a letter by someone who'd been in England saying they didn't think the party was revisionist. And an article from two workers saying the party's line is correct.

JOHN HEROUVIM: I remember typing that one up.

ROB DARBY: But that's not really relevant. What are we talking about?

JOHN HEROUVIM: We're talking about question 26.

ROB DARBY: Why people drifted away.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Yes.

ROB DARBY: The party somersault brought a lot of disagreements to a head and they centred on the attitude to the Soviet Union and superpower contention, the softer line on US bases and US imperialism generally, lump all the Chinese things together in the somersault, and the local things, the change of attitude (laughter)... so, domestic issues were important, disenchantment over the party's policies on economic questions, disagreement with the party's policy on many international issues that, following China, the support for reactionary regimes that happened to be anti-Russian, I think was an important factor.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Again, that re-raises the question of the party going too far, or certainly further than the Chinese required them to. I remember, for instance, an article being submitted by someone who couched it in such anti-Soviet terms that it was obvious that it was meant to do no damage to the united front but it was about a giant anti-missile testing base in Zaire. And it was rejected.

ROB DARBY: Well, it's all this thing about going overboard, as you say.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Why do you think they went so overboard? Because they had no political line of their own? Were they trying to curry favour?

ROB DARBY: I think both those factors. They didn't really understand. They accepted the results of the Chinese analysis without understanding how the Chinese came to it. They thought that if 'x' was the line, if 'x' was good then therefore 'xx' was better. You know, the more strongly you applied the line the better it must be, that kind of thing.

JOHN HEROUVIM: How were changes in line conveyed?

ROB DARBY: They were usually conveyed in Vanguard but it depends on how big the change was.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Take for an example then, the shift from superpower contention being the enemy to Russia being the enemy.

ROB DARBY: I think that was fairly well orchestrated. It begins with you writing ‘contributed’ articles, and then Marcus or somebody writing enthusiastic responses to those ‘contributed’ articles and producing evidence and lots of facts and this builds up into a crescendo with masses of stuff on it and then editorials and lead articles. There was no discussion in the party about any change of line, it was all orchestrated from the top.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well, given that a number of the changes were very drastic...

ROB DARBY: You can follow that in Vanguard.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Yes, that’s right. So it wasn’t through the party organisation or anything, it was through Vanguard?

ROB DARBY: The most that party members might be asked to do was to discuss such and such an article in order that they can better agree with it. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well, there were two types of changes, the gradual change in emphasis and also the one-hit jobs like ‘the Gang of Four is bad’. Now, given that a lot of those changes were so drastic compared to what you as a party member had been told to believe, did you accept them? And if so, why?

ROB DARBY: I accepted the Gang of Four thing. I’m really not sure why. I guess the main reason is that I didn’t care much. It was China. It wasn’t really all that upset about it, as long as the party was right on Australian issues. What I thought about China, I thought, was secondary. I think that’s the main reason I accepted the Gang of Four business.

JOHN HEROUVIM: What about, did you accept domestic...

ROB DARBY: Now, when, when, I accepted the change from superpower contention to the Soviet Union. I basically agreed with that. Where I disagreed, and this is what led me to place myself outside the party, was the change of line from independence struggle to reserving sovereignty and lying low and not sort of doing anything. It was at that point that I no longer accepted what it was doing, what it was saying.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Were there things that you accepted at the time which you later rejected?

ROB DARBY: Oh yes, yes. The extent of their emphasis on the Soviet Union, for example. I disagree with that. Their acceptance of US bases, attitude to the arms race. I totally disagree with that.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Then why did you accept them at the time? Did the facts seem to make sense? Or were you just being loyal? Was it a habit of always accepting what was in Vanguard?

ROB DARBY: Well, I think the bases thing was a consequence of the analysis of the Soviet Union so as long as I accepted the whole policy on the Soviet Union it was inevitable that bases had to be agreed to. Once my attitude to that had changed, then similarly my attitude to bases would change. The other big area is the area of moral issues. I could never stand the party's policies on women, for example, on sexuality, they stank! But I was just gutless. I didn't want to raise them.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Why?

ROB DARBY: I did on one occasion. It produced such a furore.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Can you tell me about that? What happened?

ROB DARBY: Well, Duncan used to have this extremely efficient way of producing Hill's books which was to get them typeset and then have people read them for comment. (laughs) This would maximise the amount of work you had to do in laying them out. So, I was simultaneously reading one of Hill's book – I can't remember which one it was, one of the later ones, I lose track of them as they all became the same in the end (laughs) – and he was talking about 'Man' in history and so forth, and I just made the point to Duncan that I thought Hill's terminology, which was of course common to all the things he wrote, was unfortunate because it would make it difficult, or more difficult, to read and agree with what he saying because of the exclusive use of this terminology. I asked Duncan whether he could raise this with Hill and just saying 'people'. (laughs) This kind of thing. I didn't make a big deal out of it. Well, Duncan did that and Hill, according to Duncan, Hill went off his brain in fury. He wrote back an angry comment, you know, 'do you want us to talk about dogs and bitches'! Duncan was very angry, as a result with me, but he didn't actually attack me very much, he marauded [name deleted] and reduced her to tears. Then the usual, we got this highly provocative article in Vanguard from an 'aunty Tom' in the party talking about 'Man' this and 'Man' that and '*HIS*' with a capital 'H'. Deliberately provocative. I was tempted to refuse to lay it out but, again, gutlessness prevailed.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Why do you think the party members as a whole accepted these changes?

ROB DARBY: Well, one doesn't know whether... finally the party members as a whole *didn't*. (laughs) That's why they all left. (laughs) But why they accepted what they did accept was because, I think, it was the kind of party that encouraged 'yes men' or 'yes people' because there was no opportunity for internal democratic discussion. Your only contact with the party was Vanguard and, you know, if you rejected Vanguard, you were out. You just sort of weren't part of it. There was just nothing in the party structure to encourage a critical attitude to anything. You either accepted what Vanguard said, you know, or you weren't part of the party. The other

option, which I think people did most, was that they grumbled about what they read in Vanguard among their friends, the people they knew, you know, 'What a load of shit this is' or 'Get a load of this?!' but, you know, basically, oh well, it may be bad but it's all we've got, that kind of attitude, there's nothing better around.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Question number 32 now. Around 1979 to 1980, there were a number of significant changes made to the party's line. I'd like to go through them one by one with you.

Tape 3, 13 March 1983

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well, the dropping of opposition to US bases.

ROB DARBY: Right, the dropping of opposition to US bases was of course a consequence of the party's line on the Soviet Union, which was overkill from the Chinese position, as we've discussed. My only doubts about the dropping of opposition to Omega is whether it was done in response to the Chinese line on foreign affairs and their seeking of an alliance with the United States against Russia or whether it was dropped so as to save Gallagher embarrassment about building it. Gallagher, I think, is a trade union wheeler and dealer first and a party supporter second but the party has to accommodate him because he's their only remaining link with the organised working class. Omega, foreign bases, directly related to Chinese policy through the line on the Soviet Union. It's perfectly consistent. It's the logical consequence of regarding the Soviet Union as the main enemy to support US bases, and it results from misreading the parallel with the 1930s which, you know, was just sad, so heavily pushed by Vanguard in this period, constant stuff on fascism and appeasement. You know, the Soviet Union was the equivalent of Nazi Germany in the thirties and hence we had to unite with...

JOHN HEROUVIM: Modern day Churchills.

ROB DARBY: Modern day Churchills. And in the Chinese case, with Japan invading China, as Japan was to China in that period so Russia was to Australia, a kind of crude transposition of previous historical situations.

JOHN HEROUVIM: I won't even bother with... their support for Liu Shaoqi's rehabilitation's obvious. Also a more tolerant attitude was expressed to parties which up to them had been regarded as revisionist. The quotation marks were dropped around the Communist Party of Australia.

ROB DARBY: That's interesting, isn't it? Hill and other leading comrades have finally had a meeting with the CPA to discuss common interests. I better make a few speculations here. I think part of it is that the party has now become so small that they're desperately seeking a new membership, that they're desperately seeking unity with anybody who they can unite with because the party's in danger of extinction. Certainly most of the young people who joined in the '60s and '70s have dropped out, there's a few left, but most of the party members are the old original core. There can't be many apart from that. So one thing is a desperate search for members, maybe some kind of merger is eventually planned.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Are you suggesting that they might want to merge or attract members from these organisations?

ROB DARBY: Possibly the initial plan would be to attract members from the CPA but a merger is also a possibility if that fails. The other possibility is that China is reconsidering its connection with the CPA(ML). If the CPA(ML) is becoming as marginal as I think it is, then it's becoming correspondingly of less use to the Chinese who might be considering establishing links with the CPA instead. The CPA(ML) may be wishing to guard itself against that possibility. Another possibility is of course, you mentioned the Theory of the Three Worlds before, the Chinese publication of the Theory of the Three Worlds, its advice for western communist parties, for some time the Chinese have been emphasizing the need for left-wing parties in the Second World to get together and cooperate more. I think it's also a response to that.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Also, the Chinese have received delegations from revisionists.

ROB DARBY: Yes, well the Chinese have had a lot of dealings with European, previously revisionist, parties. Not, as far as I know with the CPA in Australia but one never knows. So, again, I think it's following the Chinese *lead* in that respect, toning down opposition to revisionism. That's been going on for some time, of course. Hill wrote something several years ago.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well, if that's the case then, well, to ask a broader question: Do you think that the party's leadership, or Ted Hill's, or whoever you think is the appropriate group to ask the question about, that their adherence, or loyalty, to China is in the final analysis stronger than their loyalty to any single political principle? Because, you know, something like the polemic, the break with the CPA, is so fundamental. The opposition to American bases has been fundamental from the start. You know, from the first Vanguard that was published. You would have thought that the support for the cultural revolution... but alright that can be seen as Chinese matters. But on domestic matters, the intolerance of revisionism and the opposition to American bases, is there anything do you think that they wouldn't somersault on?

ROB DARBY: No. No, I think you put it well. The only situation where I could see them going for political principles rather than following China is if they had another model. Now, the only... and when the business with the Gang of Four occurred and there were some people who started to take their inspiration from Albania, now I could see the party sticking to political principles if it had somewhere like Albania to be the next big brother. I mean, who could take Albania seriously! (laughs) There was never the slightest likelihood of that happening. Hill never particularly liked the Albanians in any case. They were insignificant in terms of the world balance of forces.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Why do you say Hill never particularly liked the Albanians?

ROB DARBY: I remember, he went... just before or at the time of the coup against the Gang of Four, he was in Albania as an observer at the whatever-it-was [Seventh] congress of the Albanian Party of Labour, and reading something while he was there that he disapproved of the

practice of having foreign observers present at these functions. So, I think, you know, he said nice things about Albania because it was the right thing to do but I don't think he ever regarded it as a serious kind of place. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did you have any experience with Ted Hill?

ROB DARBY: I met him once in Canberra. He and Duncan had come up for a Chinese National Day function and we met briefly in his hotel room. Duncan set the tone for the evening by raising a letter I'd written to you about an article in Vanguard...

JOHN HEROUVIM: Withers?

ROB DARBY: It was something which blamed superpower contention for some event. I can't remember what the event was. It might have been the Wither's sacking. Anyway it was something where the notion of superpower contention as a causative factor was preposterous, and I wrote a somewhat expostulatory letter saying what a load of bullshit.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Which I agreed with, and so we both got criticized in an editorial.

ROB DARBY: So Duncan suggested we discuss this use. But Hill's idea of a discussion is, of course, giving you a lecture. So Hill proceeded to give a lecture in which he was extremely insulting. He just talked about people who write well but secretly don't accept the party's line on the Soviet Union and virtually, you know, sort of insinuated, without saying anything directly, that I was basically pro-Russian.

JOHN HEROUVIM: (laughs) If not a KGB agent! (laughs)

ROB DARBY: If not a KGB agent. Only someone who was fundamentally pro-Russian and didn't *really* accept his analysis could have disagreed with the analysis made of that event. And he made one of his typically disparaging references to people who can write well, as though that were a sign of ideological unsoundness.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well, he's got no worries on that score.

ROB DARBY: (laughs) So, I just sat and endured that.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did you object to him?

ROB DARBY: No. No, I didn't argue.

JOHN HEROUVIM: You were obviously unhappy with that meeting. What had your impression of Hill been before that? Let me ask you this: What did you used to think of Ted Hill and what do you think of Ted Hill?

ROB DARBY: I always respected him and what I still respect is his incredibly obstinacy, his most dominant characteristic. You know, stick at something through thick and thin regardless of

reality. (laughs) The CPA held a series of functions for their 60th anniversary, it must have been 1981, and I read a report on that written by John Sendy. Hill gave a talk, and he was questioned and people were asking questions about how isolated the party was and somebody said, 'If you keep going at your present rate, you'll end up a minority of one. You'll be on your own', and he said, "It wouldn't be the first time".

JOHN HEROUVIM: (laughs)

ROBERT DARBY: So there's that incredible, almost evangelical, inner strength that he has. But the other side of that is that he is an incredibly inflexible and dogmatic kind of person. I've never been impressed with any of his theoretical writings. I found them dry and superficial. I read 'Australian Revolution'. I didn't think it broke new ground either in revolutionary theory or in Australian history. I just found it repeating formulae that had been around for a long time. The books which followed that were even worse. The only area where I think he made a real contribution was on the theory of trade unions and, related to that, his strong position on the state. I think on those two issues he did have some original thoughts, but significantly they're both issues that China has had no experience of, and where he could actually think for himself rather than have the line fed to him by his Chinese comrades.

Hill is not somebody you could ever like. But I certainly respected his tenacity, his hard working party work, and all that kind of thing. Now, I don't mind if he's any of those things but I feel now that they're being used for evil (laughs) rather than good. (laughs) To that extent, unfortunate. I think an Australia ruled by Ted Hill would be the closest thing to Hell on Earth. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well, you've already made comments to that regard, I want to know whether you want to add to them. Ted Hill's influence. His position within the party. He's certainly a central figure, which he denies.

ROBERT DARBY: Oh, Hill and the party, I mean, as I said, I don't think anyone has exercised such a total domination over any organisation that I can think of. I mean he was the party's brains, he was its public image, its front. Everything the party does, its policy, its organisation, is personally shaped by him. I read something, read a document he wrote at one stage, Duncan left lying around, and I kept them (laughs). Shortly after the Gang of Four business, saying how the party ought to have its next congress, and it was saying how – it must have been addressed to Central Committee members – saying how at previous congresses 'comrades have asked that I write their speeches for them. I'm quite prepared to do that if you want me to, but I don't think it's necessary'. (laughs) So, it extends even that far. Whether this is just because he so surrounds himself by incompetents, all his close associates are incompetent 'yes men' who can't write speeches, so that's another possibility. He's a bit like Fraser or Menzies in that respect. I don't think he'd want people around him who could threaten his position. It goes back to his hatred of intellectuals.

JOHN HEROUVIM: To hear him called a revisionist, which I heard in early 1977, was just an absolute... I couldn't countenance the idea of Ted Hill being called a revisionist or of Ted Hill being criticized. You know, all sorts of things would be criticized by Ted Hill was outside that circle. He was certainly, he was incredibly, he was worshipped by all sorts of people, by Clarrie

O'Shea, by Ted Bull, certainly by the younger generation. Now, part of that, I think, was his quaintness really; in the way that this stodgy old bastard can make incredible comments. Like, I remember the glow I got when Duncan was arranging my defence when I bashed that Nazi up and Ted Hill said...

ROBERT DARBY: When you *didn't* bash that Nazi up. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: When I didn't bash that Nazi up. They can't try you twice! And Ted Hill said, "Well, there's two unfortunate things about this incident. One, a comrade was arrested. And two, that the bastard wasn't killed." Now, from a lawyer – 'kill the bastard'...

ROBERT DARBY: (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: Why do you think his name was so revered. Plus the mystique that he deliberately... but I've come across ordinary people who've met him and sort of think, 'Wow! What a man!'

ROBERT DARBY: Well, I think you can answer that question much better than me and you've given the answer. I only met him on one occasion and on that occasion didn't lead me to respect him at all.

JOHN HEROUVIM: How attributable is the party's support of China to him?

ROBERT DARBY: I think we've already answered that question in different ways. I mean it's not due to him alone. It's due to a generation of communists who went with him, their history of dependency on a socialist motherland. So, in that sense, he's representative of that whole group. He's not personally responsible. But, I will say that, but for Hill, the party would have supported the Gang of Four in 1976. When the incident happened, certainly Betty Little, Kalkadoon Bookshop, put out Yao Wenyuan's and Zhang Chunqiao's pamphlets very prominently and Vanguard reprinted something Hill had written prior to the fall of Deng Xiaoping which was a pro-Gang of Four article. Well, the party had always supported the Gang of Four because they were running China. But after the coup, and I also read this in a circular from Hill that Duncan left lying around, he actually wrote, 'Many of you wanted to put out a statement supporting the Gang of Four but I persuaded you to wait until I visited China'. And while he was away, and before he in fact got to China, he got 'Peoples Daily' in Albania and it was on the basis of that, without consulting the party, that he sent the telegram to Vanguard saying support the coup.

JOHN HEROUVIM: He said publish this in Vanguard after consulting leading comrades and [inaudible]...

ROBERT DARBY: Yes.

JOHN HEROUVIM: That was the question I was going to ask you: Had Ted Hill supported the Gang of Four in the party?

ROBERT DARBY: Oh yes. Yes. For sure.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Are you prepared to make a guess of any sort as to the party's size during your period of membership?

ROBERT DARBY: Well, it's very hard to know. Of course, it depends how you define members.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Members in the sense that you were a member, that now someone recruited you.

ROBERT DARBY: I guess there might have been five hundred people throughout Australia.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Is there anything you'd like to add to anything you said?

ROBERT DARBY: Yes! *IT'S ALL LIES!!!* (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: (laughs)

Continuation 6 May 1984 (on cassette 2B)

JOHN HEROUVIM: Can I go through those little points that you jotted down first? Timor, Helen Hill, issues not pushed by CPA(ML) despite China.

ROB DARBY: I just remember reading somewhere, possibly 'Arena', by Helen Hill where she expressed surprise that given China's very fervent support for Timor, this would be '75 to '77, I suppose, it was remarkable that the local CPA(ML), the local Maoists, generally were devoting so little attention to the issue. That's all that is.

JOHN HEROUVIM: What about, here it says, 'Duncan paid off by Xinhua in 1980, long service leave, superannuation'?

ROB DARBY: Yes. He rang me up at work during 1980 to ask me if I could find out what an AJA [Australian Journalists Association] member would be entitled to after how ever many years' service he had. It would be twenty years, I suppose, service. I can't remember whether it was superannuation or pay in lieu of sick pay or holiday pay or what, but it was one of those things, and he was quite surprised at how little it was. It wasn't very much. This was because Xinhua obviously wanted, they terminated their agreement...

JOHN HEROUVIM: He told you that?

ROB DARBY: Yes. Or maybe I just assumed it[inaudible]. But they wanted to know exactly what he would be entitled to if he were an Australian journalist, under AJA rates, what he'd be entitled to after that many years.

JOHN HEROUVIM: And that was 1980?

ROB DARBY: Yes. That was 1980.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Yes, [reading from list] Split. Those that followed Hill. Blind devotion to Stalin. Could not take criticism. [Name deleted] in Canberra. [Name deleted]. And 'New Times'.

ROB DARBY: Right. That's just the idea that some of those who followed Hill in the early '60s did so largely because they were still committed to Stalin and they couldn't take the Kruschev and the CPA criticism of Stalin. And one classic example of that is [name deleted], now [name deleted] can tell you a lot more about [name deleted] than I can, but of course when he came to run the bookshop here in Canberra and the... now, what was it, you'd better check with [name deleted] what the incident was but there was some international incident... it wasn't Kampuchea, it was much earlier, it would have been '76, there was some big incident in '76, he was basically supporting the soviet union on that question and when various reports of this went back to Melbourne but, of course, nothing had ever happened. It was during the attempt of the local BWIU to take over the BLF here and [name deleted] was in town. And he went into the bookshop and asked for something on whatever the issue was, Vietnam, Timor, and [name deleted] gave him a copy of 'New Times' from under the counter.

JOHN HEROUVIM: So he knew that he wasn't supposed to be...

ROB DARBY: Oh yes. And he was very smartly moved, after this. [Name deleted] would know the details.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did [name deleted] tell you about that?

ROB DARBY: No, [name deleted] did.

JOHN HEROUVIM: [Continues reading from Rob's list] Pat Malone, Paddy Malone. Union heavies guaranteed adherence of other officials and organisers and, why did Bull leave no successor or Gallagher? No, because of wheeling and dealing style.

ROB DARBY: Isn't that self-explanatory?

JOHN HEROUVIM: Yes, it is but I just wondered whether you had any particular insights.

ROB DARBY: No. Just a thought.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Before you joined or were recruited to the CPA(ML), what was your image of the party? What did you think it would be that you were joining?

ROB DARBY: I don't know whether I had a very clearly defined image but I expected something very well organised, very dedicated and very secret. There was an ABC science fiction serial one time and they had this secret organisation preparing for the future. I saw it very much in that sort of light. I expected a party, I guess, similar to that which existed in China under the terror of the Chiang Kai-shek regime but obviously not quite so intense as that, not shooting people. But I expected at an organisational level it to have about that sort of intensity.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well, what did you find?

ROB DARBY: At first, that impression was confirmed. The student branch that I was a member of took things very seriously, did everything by the book, weekly meeting, were very careful about not talking about party matters other than at party meetings, messages were sent in the approved way and answers received. I guess the first hint that there were certain defects in the machinery, and things got a little bit creaky, was the length of time it took to receive replies to questions that were sent through party channels. There were scathing remarks by people like you on this very point: they always take ages to reply and it's all bullshit anyway, or something to that effect. They send back nonsense. I remember we sent in a question about 3CR, whether we should be involved in 3CR. I don't know how many weeks it took to get a reply but it was a very vague about how 3CR can be closed down by the state at any time and revolutionaries have to assess for themselves where's the most useful place for them to be active in. They said you shouldn't place all your eggs in one basket but again it's a chance to put forward the correct line and these opportunities should be seized. Well, we sort of knew that!

JOHN HEROUVIM: What were your organisational experiences in the CPA(ML)? How were you organised? Initially in a student branch?

ROB DARBY: Well, the student branch at La Trobe first and then after that a series of bizarre meetings.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Can you go into some detail there?

ROB DARBY: But the student branch was active, well organised and seemed to take things seriously. Now, the situation then changed slightly when Barry and [name deleted] and you left La Trobe and there was only [name deleted] and [name deleted] and me left, and we continued to meet in the old way, I guess, for about... well you three left in '76... I guess we continued to meet in the old way for about six months. We often used to meet in [name deleted]'s room [inaudible], we didn't meet in pubs so much where we used to meet. [name deleted] was the person who had contact with the party contact. I think I worked out who it was too. I saw him wandering through the uni. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: Who?

ROB DARBY: I never knew his name. Dark haired guy, young, wore an Independence badge, beard, very intense looking person. Anyway, we then got a message to the effect that we would no longer be organised in this way [inaudible] it was felt that this type of organisation merely duplicated, that workplace based organisation merely duplicated what you were doing anyway and if it were tested, we'd find this [new] way effective. We were split up and each of us got somebody else to meet with, purely for study purposes. There was no question of using it on a political organising base for political activity, which is what our branch had always been. We'd always organised political activities at La Trobe through it. It was meeting for purposes of study and that was all. It might be theoretical study or it might study of some Vanguard article or AC

article but there was no orientation towards action. My person I met with was this funny little man who worked at some fishermen's co-op at South Melbourne. A Greek guy.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Do you know his name?

ROB DARBY: I can't remember his name.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Would you remember it if you heard it?

ROB DARBY: Possibly.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Basil?

ROB DARBY: Doesn't ring a bell. He was a friend of Duncan. He sometimes dropped in to the...

JOHN HEROUVIM: Crook eye? One crook eye?

ROB DARBY: He was quite short.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Used to wear a grey dustcoat?

ROB DARBY: No. Used to wear a tie and stuff. He came into the Vanguard office one time and gave Duncan some money. Another time I was due to meet him at his workplace and I'd lost the address, I couldn't remember where it was, and I had to ask Duncan where it was. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: It was just you and him?

ROB DARBY: Yes. We used to meet. One time we went down there to the Exhibition Gardens and sat on a park bench and talked about the 'Theory of the Three Worlds'. And that's the kind of thing we did.

JOHN HEROUVIM: How often?

ROB DARBY: Once a fortnight. I don't know if it meant anything to him but it certainly meant nothing to me. I just found the whole thing a time-wasting distraction. By that stage it was the end of '77 and I was working quite a lot for Vanguard again.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did you ever complain about this 'time-wasting distraction'?

ROB DARBY: No. I think the main reasons why I never complained, first, I thought my main party work had nothing to do with those meetings. My main party work was in relation to doing stuff for Vanguard and AIM [Australian Independence Movement], and various other mainly writing type of things. That's what I was involved in. That's what mattered. The other thing is that I regarded it as a ritual which one did in order to conform with what was expected of you, rather than anything of any practical or even theoretical use. The second reason was, I think I'd

learnt the futility of complaining about anything. It didn't matter if you complained about something. You never knew where the message would go. For one thing, you didn't know how to complain. How could you send a message of complaint, and through whom and to whom?

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well, through your proper channels, surely.

ROB DARBY: Well, that would have been that guy. (laughs) I could hardly send a message through him saying that I didn't want to meet with him, that I couldn't see much point in it. So *how* do you send a message? What effect will it have? And I just didn't think it mattered. A wasted hour every fortnight for the sake of form, you know, is not worth making a fuss over. I'll do it because that's what's expected. I'll confine my real work to where it matters.

JOHN HEROUVIM: So the period of your organisation in this manner was from 1977, was it?

ROB DARBY: Mid-77 'til I left Melbourne in March '78.

JOHN HEROUVIM: When you came to Canberra were you picked up? Were arrangements made?

ROB DARBY: Yes. Quite quickly.

JOHN HEROUVIM: And in what form were you organised then?

ROB DARBY: Well, [name deleted] came round to my room at the Macquarie Private Hotel one night. I'd met him before so when he arrived there I guessed immediately what...

JOHN HEROUVIM: Were you expecting him? Were you told in Melbourne by your fish market man that something would happen or how did you know that...

ROB DARBY: I think I asked Duncan whether arrangements would be made for me in Canberra and he assured me that they would. I don't think I said anything to the fish market man about it. There were a couple of groups in Canberra.

JOHN HEROUVIM: What? That you knew of?

ROB DARBY: Yes.

JOHN HEROUVIM: So there could have been more.

ROB DARBY: I knew of two. I doubt that there were more. There was [inaudible], [name deleted] and a guy called [name deleted]... [inaudible]

JOHN HEROUVIM: Worker or organiser?

ROB DARBY: (laughs) A bit of both. I think he was a carpenter by trade. He wasn't a full-time organiser. I think he was out of work. We met, once again, on the study group basis. [name

deleted] and [name deleted] were not in AIM. [Name deleted] ran the China Society and [name deleted] was active in the union, of course. They'd also attempted to form a group called the Canberra Workers' Alliance which was just them [inaudible]... a few leaflets [inaudible]... the BLF plus [name deleted], it was a terrible shame to be a teacher. You had to be a blue collar worker to be worth anything. And we just studied 'The great cause of Australian independence' and other such works and we used to meet alternatively in each other's house.

JOHN HEROUVIM: When you studied, did you read it out loud at meetings and then discuss it?

ROB DARBY: No, not necessarily. We might read out passages but we'd set a section to be read by next time. Someone would introduce and lead the discussion.

JOHN HEROUVIM: So, these meetings were weekly?

ROB DARBY: No, fortnightly.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Was that by decision of the cell? Did it seem to be a rule?

ROB DARBY: No, just our local decision.

JOHN HEROUVIM: So you were organised in that way for how long?

ROB DARBY: It would have gone on for probably about two years, '78 to early 1980. Then we were organised, things worked out differently, partly because [name deleted] broke up with his wife and went overseas. Apart from that, I'm not sure why. I think again that it was to do with the party directive that branches were to concentrate more on study. I was organised with [name deleted] and [name deleted]. Now, I didn't meet with Ian for very long because that was around the time he decided he was leaving the party and winding up the bookshop. So [name deleted] and I continued to meet for a while. Oh, now, somebody else was brought in. [name deleted], a metal worker. Queanbeyan City Council.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Ex-student worker?

ROB DARBY: No, he was a worker worker.

JOHN HEROUVIM: And what about [name deleted], what does he do?

ROB DARBY: He's an economist, ex-La Trobe but before you lot, before Barry.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Again, that was a study thing?

ROB DARBY: Turn it off for a minute.

[Turns off tape, then resumes]

JOHN HEROUVIM: That was a study thing?

ROB DARBY: Oh yes. Just correcting it a little bit. First of all, [name deleted] replaced [name deleted]. [name deleted] was organised in a different way, and [name deleted] and he and I continued to meet. Then, after that, we were organised differently again. [Name deleted], [name deleted] and me. Then [name deleted] and I decided to recruit [name deleted] into it. [Name deleted], [name deleted] and I met probably until the end of '81.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Then what happened?

ROB DARBY: Then I decided that I was leaving.

JOHN HEROUVIM: When you recruited a new person...

ROB DARBY: During most of '81, most of our discussions were about the party's failings. [Name deleted] had discussions with his contact in Melbourne and raised some of the objections about what was going on.

JOHN HEROUVIM: And what happened?

ROB DARBY: [inaudible] I considered it so unsatisfactory that it confirmed my decision to leave.

JOHN HEROUVIM: So [name deleted]'s superior was in Melbourne not Canberra?

ROB DARBY: Yes.

JOHN HEROUVIM: And what? He'd have to go to Melbourne to have those discussions?

ROB DARBY: [inaudible] I think they communicated by.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Do you know who the contact was?

ROB DARBY: No.

JOHN HEROUVIM: When you recruited someone new, did you put them in for approval?

ROB DARBY: No.

JOHN HEROUVIM: The two of you decided and that person became a member? Did you convey that to the centre that you'd done it?

ROB DARBY: [Name deleted] may have. I couldn't be sure of that.

JOHN HEROUVIM: In 1978, there was a congress. Were you part of that?

ROB DARBY: Oh, we did receive a few documents. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: And what about the subsequent congress in '82?

ROB DARBY: No.

JOHN HEROUVIM: You weren't a member technically. Well, you were technically but you...

ROB DARBY: No-one in Canberra was sent any documents.

JOHN HEROUVIM: How did you find out? You read about the congress, did you?

ROB DARBY: I found out from [name deleted] in Sydney that documents were being circulated. I told [name deleted] and he was very scandalized. He made a big protest. Canberra had been excluded, we thought, because of the interface between [Norm] Gallagher and [Peter] O'Dea. This was the time when Gallagher and O'Dea were at each other's throats. We might have been cut off for that reason.

(tape ends)

Continuation Tape 3A

JOHN HEROUVIM: ROB DARBY tape 3. Eventually you did receive some documents?

ROB DARBY: We did receive some documents but it must have been probably sheer formality because any discussions or amendments or anything meant to have taken place I'm sure would have well and truly taken place by then. We were really just given a look at what others had seen.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did you receive documents with explanation or an apology?

ROB DARBY: Oh, I'd lost interest by then.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well, in your political activity, during your period of party membership, how much direct guidance did you receive from the party?

ROB DARBY: There was no direct guidance from the party. My main activity in Canberra was in AIM and more specifically, after we started 'Southern Cross', producing the newspaper 'Southern Cross'. The party didn't provide any kind of support or advice, except when it was trying to put forward the idea of the deferral of independence. There was an article in 'The Australian Communist' about Australia being dependent yet independent or whatever the precise phrase was, and effectively meaning that the independence struggle should be postponed. [inaudible] to defend democratic rights and the struggle against Soviet social-imperialism. Now we wrote a criticism of this article which we sent in to the party, and we got a reply, not from, I don't know who from in Melbourne, but I suspect just the contact. I found it a very inadequate reply to it. But I've got those documents and you've seen them. That would be 1980, I guess, but you can check whichever issue of the AC. That was the only time it tried to impose definite political guidance. And we, sort of, duly objected. (laughs) [inaudible] unacceptable. So I

continued to concentrate on newspapers. I always had the impression that the party organised a little coup to stop 'Southern Cross' being published, mainly through [name deleted]. [inaudible] exposed people too much.

JOHN HEROUVIM: There was only one edition wasn't there?

ROB DARBY: Oh no, it went for over a year.

JOHN HEROUVIM: You have them all?

ROB DARBY: They're in the National Library now. It did well. The first issue came out in November '78. It was published throughout '79 and the last one came out in June/July 1980. It went for 18 months.

JOHN HEROUVIM: And it was Canberra AIM?

ROB DARBY: Yes.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Were you active in a mass way, in a mass organisation?

ROB DARBY: Well, AIM was never really a mass organisation.

JOHN HEROUVIM: What the party called mass organisations.

ROB DARBY: I suppose.

JOHN HEROUVIM: AIM, Students for Australian Independence.

ROB DARBY: Well, [inaudible] there wasn't a student movement.

JOHN HEROUVIM: When you were in Melbourne.

ROB DARBY: Oh yes.

JOHN HEROUVIM: How broad were those organisations?

ROB DARBY: They weren't broad at all.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Why?

ROB DARBY: They essentially consisted of party members in different clothes.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Why?

ROB DARBY: I think because they existed on pure party policy. They talked about being broad but what in fact they put forward was very strict line on every question. It was pure detailed

party line, even down to the same... One of the few widely supported struggles we had at La Trobe, the famous traffic light struggle, this was the time when Hill was feeling cheated off with the press and Vanguard was saying 'never talk to the press', so we argued at student meetings that the press should not be invited and we shouldn't speak to them.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Was an organisation like Canberra AIM led by party members, made up of party members?

ROB DARBY: Oh yes. [Name deleted] and [name deleted] were the main people in it, and [name deleted]. She's an old Stalinist. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: And the imposition of this line, it wasn't something that happened externally to those organisations? The party didn't say you must do this or that, you acted independently in thinking that was the best way to do it, or why did it happen that way?

ROB DARBY: AIM here existed before I got here so I don't know why or how it was set up. [inaudible] I mean, AIM was formed after the coup. In 1976-77 it was quite a large organisation. It was declining steadily and by the time I got to Canberra was in quite rapid decline, and continued to do so. Its main activity was just having a stall every week in Civic near the shops. But it used to have meetings when I first arrived in Canberra in 1978, it had quite large meetings. There might be up to fifteen people there. Most of who, as far as I knew, were not party people at all. We'd discuss different issues as much as organize things.

JOHN HEROUVIM: In this broader independence style organisation you were a member of, were there formal party links and party guidance of these organisations?

ROB DARBY: Well, at different stages there were. When SAI at La Trobe, of course, the leaders of SAI were just the La Trobe party cell, with virtually duplicate meetings. The party cell would meet every week and decide what to do at the next SAI meeting. (laughs) I don't think there was any guidance from the party to that cell as to what they should do, except I think we were told to organise some kind of anti-Soviet... Were we told to organise it, or did we just decide to do it?

JOHN HEROUVIM: I don't remember any orders.

ROB DARBY: Then we had that mysterious 'thanks' from nobody-knew-where. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: I forget that. Can you tell me what happened?

ROB DARBY: We had this Russian academic, foreign affairs guy, talking at Melbourne University and we had a demo against that. Well, we just came in, disrupted things a bit, and then pissed off. Didn't make a good impression on anybody. The OSS [Overseas Students Service] students were there too and they remained quiet until the end and embarrassed him with questions. But we didn't do it that way. We just came and stormed around with flags, created a scene, and hit someone, and so forth. The usual style. And at the SAI meeting the following week, you informed the group that you'd been asked to thank them for this demo, that it was very much appreciated.

JOHN HEROUVIM: (laughs) The SAI meeting?!

ROB DARBY: Yes. Everybody thought, 'Isn't that nice?' I don't think anybody thought to ask who asked him to thank us. (laughs) The Chinese? (laughs) It was a mystery.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Now I remember it. I think it was Ted Hill who had asked Duncan to ask me...

ROB DARBY: Well, that's what I guessed, the chain of command.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did you recruit people to the party?

ROB DARBY: Well, only, that guy I mentioned here in Canberra. I think I did mention that I recruited [name deleted]. I definitely did raise that with you.

JOHN HEROUVIM: What happened with that?

ROB DARBY: I think it happened. That must have been in '77 before I left for Canberra. I said to you that I think you should recruit him. He was still at Melbourne Uni at that stage, or maybe he had a job by then. It doesn't matter. You agreed and I think you saw Ted Bull about it and I asked [name deleted] whether anything had happened, and months later it hadn't. (laughs) So I mentioned it to you again and you said you'd do something about it and eventually something did happen.

JOHN HEROUVIM: You were recruited, I'd imagine, in the usual way, someone from La Trobe came up to you and said this-and-that.

ROB DARBY: I think it was Barry.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Right. So, were any of the recruits that you were involved in recruiting, in either Canberra or Melbourne, critical of China?

ROB DARBY: No.

JOHN HEROUVIM: What did you see as the standards you'd apply?

ROB DARBY: Oh, effectively anyone you'd been working closely with.

JOHN HEROUVIM: So it would be a question of what's technically in the constitution, whether they support the party line...

ROB DARBY: Whether they supported the party line more or less uncritically and whether they were active and did things.

JOHN HEROUVIM: You've already touched on, in fact spoken at length about criticizing party policy and how nothing ever came of it, and also in terms of your organisational dissatisfaction in Melbourne there were criticisms you'd didn't mention, you didn't raise, what about others, were there other criticisms and reservations that you didn't mention and, of so, why? What I'm asking is during your party membership were you unhappy with the political line of the party or with behaviour, or statements, but you didn't convey that unhappiness to the party leadership?

ROB DARBY: Oh yes. I had disagreements with a lot of particular policies. Its understanding of economics was weak. Its policy on literature and art was crude. Its policies on sexuality were objectionable. I guess they're the three main areas but I just put them aside on the grounds that its political line was so correct that these issues were side issues and you had to take the bad with the good. Plus I knew only too well that to seriously tackle such issues would destroy your credibility and no-one would trust you any more. So I just put them aside. There was an occasion I remember. The people at La Trobe were writing some document on the student movement and there was some reference to sexuality, 'bourgeois decadence' or something of that kind, which I argued against, that it should be deleted because it's nonsense.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Was it?

ROB DARBY: It was deleted, yes.

JOHN HEROUVIM: To the outside observer, the party...

ROB DARBY: Another interesting example is when Duncan once gave me some type-written articles on political economy to read, and said tell me what you think of them. I read them and told him they excellent, the best thing that I'd read for years. I thought they were very good. I didn't quite understand why he was so displeased by this response and eventually it proved that they were things Langer had been writing, partly at his request and partly as part of his critique of the party's policies on political economy. As far as I was concerned, they were pretty sound Marxist economics. Duncan eventually told me they were by Langer and they were no good and I realized that I had to change my opinion (laughs).

JOHN HEROUVIM: And did you? Superficially at least?

ROB DARBY: Of, well, I didn't realize that there was a political hidden purpose, a hidden agenda.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Was the party as monolithic as outside observers thought it was? Were there factions in the party, differences?

ROB DARBY: Well, not that I was aware of until the Langer thing surfaced. He had quite a large faction behind him. The party wasn't monolithic. It was more that its policy was monolithic, and accountable to nobody. But the functioning of the party was diffuse and random. It wasn't organisationally monolithic but it was in terms of policy and political direction.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Do you remember a separate Canberra branch being organised?

ROB DARBY: I don't, no.

JOHN HEROUVIM: How seriously did you take the party's emphases on mass work, on avoiding left blocism and so on? What was the understanding of mass work?

ROB DARBY: Well, everybody paid lip service to it but the party's own requirements made it impossible because the emphasis was on doing things, which by definition had to be organised by a small group of committed people. So in practice you spent most your time with other party members preparing leaflets and organising meetings and demo's and so forth and there was no time left for the ordinary affairs of life.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Do you think that was a general condition or a student one?

ROB DARBY: No. No, it was particularly acute among students but a similar thing with any member who was involved in any kind of organised work, organised activity, publishing, or AIM, or anything like that, and you had a lot of antagonism between people who thought what they should be doing was mass work, particularly ex-student factory workers who, you know, felt that it was legitimate political work for them to go to the pub with their workmates, and frowned severely on students who suggested they might do the same thing with their fellow students, and there was a lot of resentment and hostility between the two groups. There were those who emphasized just immersing yourself in the workplace and those who believed it was more important to get out and do things. There were always arguments about that.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Do you think that the Maoists as a group on the left, because of their emphasis on ordinary people and mass work, they in fact had more mass connections with non-political non-left people than other groups like the CPA or the Trotskyites?

ROB DARBY: No. I think they had far less.

JOHN HEROUVIM: You think they had less?

ROB DARBY: Oh, not less than the Trotskyites! (laughs) Less than the CPA.

JOHN HEROUVIM: You think they were more of a left bloc?

ROB DARBY: Oh yes. But they idealized ordinary people. An ordinary person was someone who (laughs) virtually subscribed to the party line because it was just so obvious and transparent that any reasonable man could not but agree with it. (laughs) Plus there was an increasing tendency, as I pointed out, to idealize right-wingers, to see them as the source of all virtue because they had the simple basic hatred of Russia. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: Of communism.

ROB DARBY: Of communism. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: What happened inside the party on November 11, 1975?

ROB DARBY: Well, as far as I'm aware: *nothing!* (laughs) There's no evidence that I'm aware of, that the party organised anything in relation to 1975. Vanguard came out at the same time with a special insert – when was November 11th? It must have been a Tuesday – Vanguard came out as normal on the Thursday and had a special insert. But naturally I headed for the city square in the evening and I had copies of 'Independence Voice' that I just put out with a story about John Kerr in it and other they were handed out, and you know what happened after that. But I was very concerned and alarmed. I was waiting, hoping, for some kind of direction, some kind of leadership, some kind of organisation to emerge but nothing ever did. We all looked to you to secure that but, of course, you know what you were told. I in fact raised this issue with the little Greek fishmonger man, some years later and said how I was disturbed that, on November 11, the party didn't show leadership. Had we [La Trobe students] not organised the demo that evening and the following day, the party would have done absolutely nothing. It disturbs me. And he just assured me that the party was there, and if there was a necessity for anything to happen it would have been done. (laughs).

JOHN HEROUVIM: [inaudible] You've mentioned also before that one of the things you were disturbed about was the party's attitude to sexuality. Generally speaking on the sex and drugs and rock-n-roll front, the party had a puritanical attitude quite out of keeping with the lifestyle of its youth members. Would you agree with that?

ROB DARBY: Oh, no. I don't think it was out of keeping with its youth members. I mean, its youthful members were mostly Ockers. They weren't into drugs. They were all mostly very straight. Male chauvinism was quite widespread. It wasn't out of keeping with typical Australian youth attitudes. They were out of keeping with student attitudes.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Student party members were out of keeping?

ROB DARBY: Yes. They were just totally out of sympathy with the student lifestyle and general attitudes because they were puritanical, because they were heavy, because they disapproved of drugs and they really didn't enjoy themselves very much.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Were they a humourless bunch?

ROB DARBY: No, they were very humorous.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Was the party the brunt of any of the humour?

ROB DARBY: Frequently.

JOHN HEROUVIM: What did that mean?

ROB DARBY: Well, it just that you were sufficiently committed to be able to joke about it.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Was Ted Hill the butt of any of the humour?

ROB DARBYD: Oh yes. We used to sing Ted Hill songs, 'I dreamed I saw Ted Hill last night, the same as you and me'. (laughs) Oh frequently. Frequently he was the butt of humour. But it was kind of good natured humour that's associated with something that you basically respect and trust, and you're so committed to it that you don't have any worries about laughing at it.

JOHN HEROUVIM: How about both the party's attitude, the party's attitude is on record, the average party member's attitude to other left groups that would always be in inverted commas if 'left' was used.

ROB DARBY: Most people were extremely hostile. Some of the young people who came in in '76 or '77 tended to be more tolerant.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did that change?

ROB DARBY: I remember, at La Trobe of course we had atrocious relations with everybody, awful, absolute low life, but during '77 we made some attempt to be nice to everybody and they really trusted us. They realized, I think, that we were just very weak and couldn't afford to be nasty to anybody. I remember how angry [name deleted] was when I tried to get us to participate in SRC type things, go to meetings about the La Trobe workers' strike, and how he disagreed with my... There was some argument with the Union Board over a barbeque or something, I've forgotten the details but I was conciliatory and agreed to do everything they said. [Name deleted] got very angry about this and I shouldn't have behaved like that. He made the remark that people like [name deleted] and [name deleted] didn't like my leadership because they were worried that if there was a fight I wouldn't back them. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: (laughs) [name deleted]! Brawler [name deleted].

ROB DARBY: I think what I said to [name deleted] was, of course I wouldn't back them! (laughs) I didn't want to get into a fight again. And, of course, the year ended with [name deleted] and – what's the name of that young lunatic?

JOHN HEROUVIM: Which one? [name deleted]?

ROB DARBY: No, the little guy.

JOHN HEROUVIM: [name deleted]?

ROB DARBY: [name deleted]'s and [name deleted]'s attack on that Spartacist down at the bus shelter.

JOHN HEROUVIM: You were involved with the production of Vanguard, putting it out. How was the Vanguard office run?

ROB DARBY: Well, Duncan Clarke. It was run like a little newspaper in the 1930s. It was a very Bohemian set-up. Quite extraordinary in many ways. The practical detailed work, really it

was Reva who held it together. Duncan used to storm 'round the place losing things all the time. Reva basically doing the work, getting the correspondence out, being a very efficient secretary for a very absent-minded boss. It held together by string and glue, and hard work.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Do you think that the circumstances under which the paper was produced had an effect on not so much the line but the sort of paper it was?

ROB DARBY: No, I don't think so. I think Hill said what kind of paper he wanted and Duncan did that. It's come out looking identical for twenty years. (laughs) That's pretty good going. They decided they wanted a paper that puts the line so you have the front page covered with editorials rather than anything interesting. That's how it's always been, and the shape hasn't changed.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did you have anything to do, or any knowledge about, the despatch office at Milton Street?

ROB DARBY: Yes.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Can you tell me as much about that as you know? Who owned it?

ROB DARBY: Wasn't it owned by [name deleted]? Well, my impression is [name deleted] owned it.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did you meet him?

ROB DARBY: No, I never met him. Oh, maybe I did meet him. I only went there a couple of times. Once when we were despatching great stacks of all Hill's books to China and another couple of times to drop in the Vanguards being sent out and another time when they were short of people to wrap the stuff and I helped with despatching.

JOHN HEROUVIM: What is stacks of Hill's book? Hundreds? Thousands?

ROB DARBY: Well, at the end of '77, we got all his surplus copies, anything we could find, not thousands, hundreds of copies of each.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Hundreds of copies of each book?

ROB DARBY: Yes. Sent them [inaudible] to Kalkadoon and got their surplus stocks.

JOHN HEROUVIM: And sent them to China.

ROB DARBY: Sent them to China.

JOHN HEROUVIM: And they were paid for?

ROB DARBY: Yes.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Do you remember what price?

ROB DARBY: Oh, no idea.

JOHN HEROUVIM: And you also said you took the Vanguards down there on a couple of occasions...

ROB DARBY: To Milton Street.

JOHN HEROUVIM: The forward run?

ROB DARBY: Yes, all of them.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Straight from the printer's?

ROB DARBY: Oh no, I don't think I ever collected Vanguard from the printer. I never knew how many were printed. I knew it was about four or five thousand.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Can you remember how you knew that?

ROB DARBY: Duncan said so.

JOHN HEROUVIM: So Milton Street, they'd mail things out from Milton Street?

ROB DARBY: Yes. And that's about all. The mailing list from Milton didn't seem very large, the mailing list for Australia didn't seem very large. The mailing list to China was quite big. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: Was it?

ROB DARBY: I reckon they'd send a stack of Vanguards about six inches high to China, but possibly not much more [inaudible] in Australia.

JOHN HEROUVIM: That would hardly account for five thousand.

ROB DARBY: Oh, it wouldn't, they wouldn't dispose of... Of course, there's the bookshops, a lot went to bookshops. There were two groups sent out, one sent to institutions and so forth, were mailed out separately, and the less well wrapped ones went to individuals, to individual addresses. They were wrapped so tightly I'm sure no-one was able to read it. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: They still wrap them that way.

ROB DARBY: (laughs) Mainly old women and a couple of old men used to work there.

JOHN HEROUVIM: What about 'The Independent Australian' magazine? Was that a... I mean, I've been told a fair bit by [name deleted] about what was involved. Were you involved at all?

ROB DARBY: No.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did you pick up from your relations with Duncan Clarke anything about it?

ROB DARBY: Obviously, I picked up a lot from him and from [name deleted] about it. I knew nothing about it until I saw the first issue. I'd have liked to have been more involved than I ever was. My first involvement in it was to help with the layout on the third or fourth issue, with the film theme cover, and to research a little story about Eddie Gilbert, the cricketer. It wasn't until I came to Canberra that I began to write for it to any great extent.

JOHN HEROUVIM: When you were in China was there much by way of political discussion...

ROB DARBY: Oh, except for the tour, the Albury-Wadonga story. Duncan and [name deleted] and [name deleted] and I went on a trip to Albury-Wadonga.

JOHN HEROUVIM: With pre-arranged contacts up there?

ROB DARBY: Oh, no. Just went up to interview the people involved in the Albury-Wadonga project and I wrote the story, which was published.

JOHN HEROUVIM: When you were in China did you have political discussions with the Chinese?

ROB DARBY: No.

JOHN HEROUVIM: So, did they take place but you were excluded?

ROB DARBY: No. Duncan had a lot of publishing business to attend to. Xinhua business, that kind of stuff. Everywhere we went, of course, we received the same lecture about the Gang of Four. (laughs) But that was not in the nature of discussion. We were just told what was what. I remember (laughs) Duncan and I went to the equivalent of a tech school in Peking. He gave a little talk about the press in Australia and I gave a talk about advertising. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: How do you think they saw the party? Did you get any impressions?

ROB DARBY: Impossible to tell. You got the impression, you know, they thought it was going to take power any minute.

JOHN HEROUVIM: What, from their speeches?

ROB DARBY: Yes. You know, their standard form of speech. They believed that [runs words together very fast] the Australian working-class under the leadership of the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) led by E. F. Hill was making great strides in the battle for national

independence and socialism and to defeat US imperialism and repel Soviet social imperialism. We were treated extremely well, and shown great respect. We were shown not just respect but luxury, like royalty, but that's Chinese hospitality.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did it have the effect on you that such things might be designed to fortify you?

ROB DARBY: Well, my trip to China made me more sceptical. I could see no justification for the way we were being treated, considering how insignificant we really were. I wasn't impressed with socialism in China. I just found it a poor Third World country. They had a lot they needed to do. I came back feeling more relaxed about personal [inaudible]. They weren't terribly ideological, by and large. The mass of the population were the same as anywhere else. They just wanted to have a wander in the park and lead an ordinary kind of human life. They didn't want to run 'round waving placards and shouting slogans. And I was disturbed by the way Duncan seemed to think, you know, the main test of a policy or anything was how it was received in China. Any time I criticized Vanguard, he'd say 'The Chinese think so highly of it'. It was a constant. And that was the last word. The Chinese think it's the best overseas paper anyone produces.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Do you know what the basis of him making those comments was? Do you think it's likely that the Chinese would have said such a thing to him?

ROB DARBY: I'm sure that the Chinese said very complimentary things about it all the time.

JOHN HEROUVIM: As they probably did to every...

ROB DARBY: (laughs) As they would have, no doubt, to all the others. And the main reason the Chinese would have liked it was because of the way it always supported their line so fervently and reprint their important communications. Hill's stuff was always being reprinted in 'Peking Review' and Xinhua and so forth.

JOHN HEROUVIM: I'd like to run through a list of names...

ROB DARBY: [Jokingly speaks in German accent] *I don't know any of them.*

JOHN HEROUVIM: And see if any of them ring a bell, things that Duncan's told you or personal experience or whatever.

ROB DARBY: Right.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Frank Johnson.

ROB DARBY: Well, all I know about Frank Johnson is what you've told me.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Paddy Malone, Ken Miller...

ROB DARBY: Duncan was always talking about Ken Miller. I ended up hating him! (laughs)
Every year this wretched little peon of praise to this paragon would appear in AC. I'd think, shit,
Ken Miller again. (laughs)

[At this point, John Herouvim mentions names of several of the older generation of party
members but ROB DARBY responds negatively that he does not know them].

JOHN HEROUVIM: Gerry O'Dea.

ROB DARBY: Yes. Duncan used to talk a lot about him. They were good friends. They died.
When did he die?

JOHN HEROUVIM: Around 1970, I think.

ROB DARBY: I don't know any great stories about him. All I know is that Duncan thought very
highly of him.

JOHN HEROUVIM: [name deleted]

ROB DARBY: No.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Don Scott.

ROB DARBY: Yes. He was a very old revolutionary. He'd been involved in the revolutionary
movement throughout most of the century. He left all his books to Duncan. We had them in that
room in the new office in St Kilda Road. I don't know much about him, except that he was a
founding member of the CPA in 1920.

JOHN HEROUVIM: You might be getting him mixed up with his father, Jim Scott.

ROB DARBY: Well, anyway, he died in 1978 and left his books to Duncan.

JOHN HEROUVIM: [name deleted]

ROB DARBY: No.

JOHN HEROUVIM: [name deleted]

ROB DARBY: No.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Jack MacLeod.

ROB DARBY: Jack MacLeod. Well, I know that he was 'Mister Bookshop'. Also, organised the
Pilbara Aborigines in the '40s. There's a book about that.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Is there? Where? You got it?

ROB DARBY: Upstairs. But again [name deleted] would have had a lot of [inaudible]. I never knew him but I think I might have met him a few times in Milton Street.

JOHN HEROUVIM: [name deleted]. A fellow called Alec who was an accountant and used to work...

ROB DARBY: Only what was in 'Nation Review'.

JOHN HEROUVIM: What was in Nation Review?

ROB DARBY: A story about him.

JOHN HEROUVIM: When?

ROB DARBY: '77 probably.

JOHN HEROUVIM: About Alec?

ROB DARBY: Yes. An article about the CPA and Hill.

JOHN HEROUVIM: [name deleted]

ROB DARBY: No.

JOHN HEROUVIM: George Slater.

ROB DARBY: Oh, Duncan still had contact with him. He used to go and see George from time to time.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Do you know what that was all about? Just mateship?

ROB DARBY: No, I thought Slater was meant to be in the party, some tenuous connection with the party.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Dulcie Stephanou.

ROB DARBY: Only what you told me or what [name deleted] has told me.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Albert Langer.

ROB DARBY: (laughs) Where shall I begin?! (laughs) What do you want to know?

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well, you would have been, you were recruited to the party before the blow-up with Langer happened. What impressions did you have before then? Did you regard him as an important man?

ROB DARBY: I had a lot of respect for Langer. It was curious. I was responsible for the first blow being struck against Langer by the party because, it must have been '76, and I got Langer out to speak on foreign bases at La Trobe and I recorded his talk and transcribed it and I sent a copy to Vanguard and I sent a copy to somebody in Canberra. And Duncan, obviously looking for grounds on which to discredit Langer, and he picked up two little things in the transcript. One about having a light-hearted attitude towards nuclear destruction, and the other thing some reference to the relations of production being socialized. That's where that little thing came from. In the course of an answer to some question, he used an expression like that. I even have a copy of the transcript.

JOHN HEROUVIM: I remember that meeting. I remember him saying it. I thought it was a slip of the tongue.

ROB DARBY: And Langer was severely spoken to about that and criticized and he saw me about it afterwards and asked whether people at La Trobe had complained about his talk and I said, 'No, I even sent it to Vanguard. I thought it was a good talk'. And he said, 'Oh, I'd been told that I'd gone to La Trobe and misled everybody, that I'd caused great confusion among La Trobe students'. (laughs) That would be later in '76. I didn't have much to do with Langer. The closest I came apart from that was we used to print 'Independence Voice' on the press in his garage, and I'd occasionally see him there.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Jack Lazarus.

ROB DARBY: No.

[Again, John Herouvim mentions names of several of the older generation of party members but ROB DARBY responds negatively that he does not know them].

JOHN HEROUVIM: Charlie McCaffrey.

ROB DARBY: No, but I know who he is, the Adelaide guy.

JOHN HEROUVIM: [name deleted]

ROB DARBY: No.

JOHN HEROUVIM: [name deleted]

ROB DARBY: No.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Ted Bull.

ROB DARBY: Well, I know him. Well, I know [name deleted] and I've heard of [name deleted]. But I couldn't tell you anything about them that you wouldn't already know. I never had very much to do with them.

[Again, at this point, John Herouvim mentions names of several of the older generation of party members but ROB DARBY responds negatively that he does not know them].

JOHN HEROUVIM: Jock McEwen. There was a Jock and a Jack.

ROB DARBY: Was he the one who wrote 'Once a jolly comrade'?

JOHN HEROUVIM: No, no. That was Keith... [name deleted].

ROB DARBY: No. Oh, BLF guy.

JOHN HEROUVIM: [name deleted].

ROB DARBY: Another BLF guy.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Yes. I know where they come from. I just wondered whether... Rick and Betty Oke.

ROB DARBY: I met Rick once at the office.

JOHN HEROUVIM: How did he strike you?

ROB DARBY: Oh, very little, mild, gentle. A nice man.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Why was he there? Do you remember?

ROB DARBY: Something to do with publishing something. No, I don't know what he was doing there.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Norm Wallace.

ROB DARBY: BLF.

JOHN HEROUVIM: [name deleted].

ROB DARBY: No.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Harry Daniher.

ROB DARBY: BLF. I interviewed him about the Depression.

[Turns over tape]

Tape continues

ROB DARBY: Where shall I begin with Gallagher?

JOHN HEROUVIM: Begin with how you thought of him as a party member and what your close relationship with a member of the party leadership, i.e. Duncan Clarke, led you to believe was Gallagher's position in the party.

ROB DARBY: Gallagher was meant to be Vice Chairman though his name was silently removed after he voted with the ACTU Executive to support wage indexation in 1975. This is a well-known historical fact. I had no reason not to respect Gallagher and indeed came round to support the party in the traumatic process of the federal intervention into the New South Wales BLF office which was an issue of course at AUS. [name deleted] and I, in so far as we could, supported Gallagher and supported the BLF at AUS, against the pro-Mundy people there who were in the vast majority. So, I had no reason not to...

JOHN HEROUVIM: Do you have documents from that time?

ROB DARBY: Yes.

JOHN HEROUVIM: That trace your coming to the party and so on? Any letters and anything?

ROB DARBY: Yes.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Could you look at them one day when you've got a bit of time and see if there's anything for me?

ROB DARBY: Yes.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Okay, so [name deleted] and you were supporting Gallagher. Why? Because of the arguments that Gallagher was putting forward or because you already supported the party and therefore felt it incumbent on you to...

ROB DARBY: A bit of both. I think our position was that Mundy had no political defence because the ML policy was correct and the CPA policy isn't. (laughs) That was the political side, and the other side was we were prepared to believe Gallagher's side's account of mismanagement and financial corruption and that kind of stuff. So, you know, I had no reason not to respect Gallagher and nothing ever happened, he just didn't seem to figure in the party very much. You just saw his name as Vice-Chairman on and off (laughs), according to whether he'd done something that was considered good or bad. It was hard to think of him... An occasion I saw him in the pub, I never met him, I saw him in the pub, he was like a medieval baron among his vassals. The closest, the best comparison I think you could draw is a rorty old down-to-earth baron surrounded by his retainers. He was holding court in the corner while everybody sort of swilled and fawned around him. He had a barbeque after May Day in 1975 at the new BLF house they bought in Brunswick...

JOHN HEROUVIM: The anti-fascist Centre.

ROB DARBY: Had a big barbeque out the back. Talk about left blocism! (laughs) And you know, again, he was just this enormous baronial presence. He was very fatherly, like a feudal seigneur. It was very hard to connect him with the party's policies. He seemed to have his own life and did his own things. Duncan occasionally had to drop into the BLF office for some reason, I suspect to give Gallagher internal party documents like the ones that were circulated among the leadership, mostly written by Hill, the central committee or whatever they had. I did interview Gallagher once, over Fraser Island, for Independence Voice, it was published in an issue of that, opposing sand mining. That's really the extent of my contact with him. I recall Duncan telling me, this must have been in '77, about Gallagher who was under even more than usual attack by the Establishment press, you can look up whatever the particular issue was, and Hill was writing various things in his defence, various things about him, and Duncan saying, "Ted's got a real soft spot for Normie". You know, as though Hill's attitude to him was not a strictly political attitude because they were old buddies. You know, he was going to stick by him no matter what.

JOHN HEROUVIM: And did your fondness or your support for Gallagher change over time?

ROB DARBY: Well it didn't, it didn't. I mean I still respect him as a real old-style larrikin unionist. There's a certain abrasive charm in that. But he's certainly done nothing to give communism a good name. If you look at him at all objectively, you'd come to the conclusion that he's basically concerned with his own union position and that's his principle concern in life.

JOHN HEROUVIM: I just thought of another one of those comments that caused a furore in the party. He said, 'The bosses are like a maiden. They string you along but when you put the hard word on them for the goods they start squealing'.

ROB DARBY: (laughs) Even worse than that he described them as 'a pack of old women'. He made an apology in Vanguard or Hill wrote an apology saying that Gallagher apologizes for this.

[Again, John Herouvim mentions names of several of the older generation of party members but ROB DARBY responds negatively that he does not know them].

JOHN HEROUVIM: Marj Broadbent.

ROB DARBY: Oh, through the peace movement.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did you know who she was at the time?

ROB DARBY: No, I hadn't the faintest idea. I thought she was some child of the masses. (laughs) A peacenik.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Gwen Sullivan.

ROB DARBY: Yes, I met Gwen. Well, I didn't really meet her but she used to run the bookshop, didn't she?

JOHN HEROUVIM: East Wind. What did you think of her?

ROB DARBY: Oh, she was very frightening, a frightening figure. Scared to go to the bookshop, she was so formidable.

JOHN HEROUVIM: In what way?

ROB DARBY: She'd stare at you and wonder what you were doing there, as though you were stealing something or even worse as though your political line might be weak in some little area that you'd never suspected and she'd pounce on you, anyone without the correct line who was found in her bookshop. But I went to the bookshop quite early on, in '74, and bought a few things, some Lenin or something. It might have been even earlier. Yes, probably even earlier, '72. I was doing Chinese politics at Melbourne Uni and I needed to get Mao's Selected Works and they were cheaper there than anywhere else. They were two-dollars-ten (laughs). Cheap. And she said, "Here, you'd better have this, Lenin on revisionism. They don't publish this in the Soviet Union any more since the bloody revisionists got in charge". (laughs) [Name deleted] interviewed her for the Depression [History course at La Trobe]. If he doesn't have a transcript, it's quite possible David Potts does.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Betty Little.

ROB DARBY: Well, bookshop but I never really had very much to do with her.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Duncan Clarke. (laughs) My final question.

ROB DARBY: (laughs) Where shall I begin?!

JOHN HEROUVIM: Anywhere. Rave. Ramble. I want to know what sort of fellow was Duncan Clarke? Was he an important party leader?

ROB DARBY: No. He was the editor of the newspaper.

JOHN HEROUVIM: That sounds important. He was a member of the Political Committee, wasn't he?

ROB DARBY: I think he was mistrusted because he was such a Bohemian. I don't think he was a leader. I think he was there to do Hill's bidding. Essentially, he was a real messenger boy for Hill. He couldn't argue with Hill. He didn't really have a mind of his own in relation to Hill. His behaviour in Hill's presence was always quite different to his behaviour anywhere else.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Were you witness to that behaviour?

ROB DARBY: Yes, he'd get very formal and almost abashed, almost embarrassed, if Hill was there. He'd be very correct but other times he was far more light-hearted and flamboyant and flippant about things. He was there to do Hill's bidding. Even to the extent that, you know, Hill would be down at Lorne, at his holiday house, and Duncan would have to drive down there every

day to pick up things Hill wrote for Vanguard and then take the Vanguard proofs down for Hill to read. Really, the inconvenience he was put to was staggering. At four o'clock in the morning having to drive down to Lorne. So, you know, he was always running round. I first met Duncan because I asked you whether you knew anybody who I could interview for the Depression unit I was doing at La Trobe and you said you knew an old guy who might be prepared to be talked to. You gave me this address in this block of flats in St Kilda Road...

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did I tell you who he was?

ROB DARBY: No. But I quickly put two-and-two, it didn't take long. I was walking down the corridor, after noticing his flat had 'Futureways Publicity Editorial Ltd', I had a fair idea what I would find. And sure enough when I got in, there was this hearty old guy with a big desk with laid-out pages of Vanguard in front of him. (laughs) And this came as no great surprise. Anyway, we talked about the Depression and he didn't want me to use his name. And then he asked me to do some proof-reading. (laughs). It *always* ends with proof-reading.

JOHN HEROUVIM: I must say this so I can remember it myself, when he picked up a hitch-hiker and brought her into the office (laughs) and introduced her to me (laughs) and she was proof-reading (laughs) 'New China News' (laughs). He literally picked her up off the street (laughs), poor girl!

ROB DARBY: Well, that was the kind of improvisation that you needed to keep that paper going, to keep that apparatus going. At the time they were trying to make some money out of the thing, would have been late '77, trying to get all kinds of ordinary jobs, they'd be up all day and night for various union journals and real estate brochures and this kind of stuff. The next contact was farmers, dairy farmers, had a big demo in Melbourne and dear old 'Uhl' [nickname of someone] and I took a banner, a dreadful time, we nearly got lynched (laughs), we had a big banner 'Workers and Farmers Unite against Multinationals'. We were very brave, carrying this on the procession. I wrote a story about that, which I took down to the office because I was quite intrigued by [inaudible] and I gave them the story and did the proof reading.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Was this before you were in the party?

ROB DARBY: Oh yes. This must have been '75. Less than a year. So, you know, gradually my contact increased and Duncan got me to go down there on Thursdays to help do the postage, send off the Vanguards and New China News, at the office Thursday mornings.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Side-tracking for a moment, I think I might have you this last time but just quickly, how was the New China News handled? What was that and was it well distributed?

ROB DARBY: I think the mailing list was very old. (laughs) A hundred copies went to the Moulders' Union (laughs) and fifty copies went to the Waterside Workers branch in Brisbane. (laughs) You know, this kind of thing. I don't think any amendments were made for twenty years. (laughs) I can't believe anybody ever reading it. Always thousands of copies left over. And, oh, it was just Xinhua stories with boring pictures of giant tumours and things. (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: Go on, so you gradually became more involved...

ROB DARBY: I began writing and started doing lay-out, and started coming down over the weekend to work on lay-out.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well, I'm interested in Duncan Clarke. What sort of fellow was Duncan Clarke?

ROB DARBY: He was in many ways a classic journalist Bohemian of the '30s. He was very hearty, good-natured.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Was he an idealist or a cynic?

ROB DARBY: Generous. Very cynical. I mean cynical about everything. It was very hard to know what he believed in. He could mock anything. He had no trouble putting shit on anything. He was quite capable of writing a beautiful editorial one day supporting one thing and then the opposite point of view the next day. He was the ideal editor when the line's going to change so frequently. He wasn't a theorist. He was a good story-teller. His greatest skill was as a raconteur. He had endless stories about his life and the weirdos he'd met. They were superb to listen to. He was afraid of Hill, it was a rather school-masterly kind of relationship. He didn't want to be seen to be playing up when Hill was around. The dome of silence would descend and his expression would change. There was one time, in '77, I think, and he had to go over to Hill's place, home, with the Vanguard to fix something up or get something from him and he was a bit late getting away when he left and Hill rang up the office. I was the only person there and Duncan had said he'd ring to tell me something, so I assumed it was Duncan. So I said [Chinese accent], "Oh herro, Duncan Crarke, Chinese raundry service" and Hill said, "What? Who's that? Is Mr Clarke there?" and I said, "Oh, no, he's just gone out". (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: (laughs)

ROB DARBY: (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: Did Duncan say anything about it when he got back?

ROB DARBY: Well, I told Duncan what had happened and he just laughed and laughed and said that Hill had mentioned it to him and I just said, "Well, some of the people I employ down there are real weirdos". (laughs) I don't think Hill had the slightest idea how the place was actually run. I think he thought Duncan employed people in a sort of employer-employee relationship. Certainly I think that was his attitude when we were making political objections to the way certain things were being run, the way the paper was being produced, in particular sexist language. And Hill's reply was "Well, if they don't like it, get somebody else".

JOHN HEROUVIM: What?!

ROB DARBY: You remember that incident, that dreadful Saturday? We were there till all hours.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Yes, I remember that big character poster.

ROB DARBY: We put up the big character poster. That had come on top of my objection to sexist language in Hill's book, which Duncan agreed to and obviously got scolded by Hill over and then came back and scolded us, or more particularly Helen. And, you know, we left that note that we'd be there for all hours because we had to rewrite this article that had been laid out. It was so wasteful and stupid. And I remember Duncan saying what Hill had said, you know, that the people you've got there if you don't like them then get somebody else. So I don't know whether he knew they were party people who could be ordered round or whether he just thought they were just employees who could be ordered round.

JOHN HEROUVIM: He thought they were part of the Vanguard collective...

ROB DARBY: None of this collective shit! (laughs) You were there to do a job, oh you had control to the extent that you knew what was acceptable and you would do what was acceptable.

JOHN HEROUVIM: More on Duncan Clarke?

ROB DARBY: Well, you probably have as many Duncan Clarke stories as I. Just stop the tape. [tape stops, then resumes] One of the things about Duncan was that he had a very difficult almost impossible task of getting out a weekly newspaper. It was his sole responsibility. He'd be in severe trouble if he didn't do it, but he had very little in the way of resources. He only had those resources that he could drag in, often. As Vanguard got larger, from '76 onwards, it of course required far more work and there developed a real contradiction between Hill's demands that Vanguard office was getting too open, too used and too much a meeting centre, when in fact that was essential if the paper was to come out because it got so big and so much was being done there, that you needed that number of people working on it. I remember in '77 I was ordered to have nothing to do with the Vanguard office, not to go down there, and that lasted for four or five months, maybe six months, after which the pressure of work there became so great that it had to be ignored. From then on, late '77 onwards, I was there nearly every day working there full-time.

Interview continues on 4 March 1989 in Melbourne

JOHN HEROUVIM: It's now the 4th of March, 1989. We're in Melbourne. The thing that I told you I wanted to get on tape to supplement the interviews that you've already done is the story about the park in...

ROB DARBY: Exhibition Gardens.

JOHN HEROUVIM: So what's the suburb there? It's in the city, it's Melbourne. Around which you were taken for a walk...

ROB DARBY: By Basil...

JOHN HEROUVIM: Basil Steffanou.

ROB DARBY: Basil Steffanou.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Apparently the same park that for security reasons Dulcie Steffanou, his wife, used with [name deleted].

ROB DARBY: That has to come last! You have to tell the story correctly so as to make it...

JOHN HEROUVIM: A punch-line.

ROB DARBY: Correct.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well, this to me...

ROB DARBY: It has to be retrospective.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Well, all interviews are.

ROB DARBY: Well, what you've got to do is tell it in terms of [inaudible] talked to [name deleted]. I can't do it now! (laughs)

[tape turned off]

[tape resumes]

ROB DARBY: When I was round at [name deleted]'s and we were talking about when we were in the party, I was explaining how after the order came to virtually dissolve party branches, which essentially meant to reduce opposition by separating people who knew each other, I had hitherto belonged to a La Trobe University branch which had been – a cell, I suppose you'd call it, a branch or cell – which had been fairly active and sent in recommendations and generally, you know, been sufficiently lively to get the reputation for being students or intellectuals, etcetera.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Intellectuals! That's the *worst* thing you can be!

ROB DARBY: Which is even worse! And all this was changed by a radically new party directive. It would have been early 1977, and the story was that each individual member would have a party contact and my particular contact was a little man called Basil whose surname I later discovered to be Steffanou. I didn't know that at the time. Now I don't remember my first meeting with Basil but it was all set up in a fairly secretive kind of manner.

[A third voice, a woman's voice] And John was still in the party?

JOHN HEROUVIM: Oh shit yes!

ROB DARBY: I was at La Trobe then. John was teaching. I thought this Basil character might have been somebody genuinely fresh and new, a real worker or something, and I remember I was always in great demand at the Vanguard office and I said to Duncan “I’ve got to go off and meet this character. I’m a bit late. Do you know where I can get him after hours?” and he said, “Oh Basil! Oh, yeah. He’s at the bloody fish market in South Melbourne! I can’t remember the street but you go down this street and...”

JOHN HEROUVIM: He was a proletarian fish-monger.

ROB DARBY: He was, sort of, not quite as basic as that. He was more an entrepreneur.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Yes, being a Greek he’d be a businessman. Yes.

ROB DARBY: A business operator in the fish trade, and he had this bloody office underneath the shell of the new freeway, I think it was the Westgate freeway. Well, far from being someone fresh and new he was some ancient bloody character Duncan had known for years.

JOHN HEROUVIM: From the days of the split.

ROB DARBY: So that was that, that illusion was dispensed. But I was saying to [name deleted] how we used to meet for our discussions, because the point about branches was not to formulate strategy or anything like that, or to develop ideas for change or, you know, to propose things to do or anything of that kind. It was to discuss lengthy essays and positions on the world situation handed down, and the particular thing at issue at that time...

JOHN HEROUVIM: Meet and talk about the Theory of the Three Worlds.

ROB DARBY: Was some fake document that they supposed Chairman Mao had written about the Three Worlds, which I remember laying out in the Vanguard office. So much so that I could virtually quote it word for word without understanding a single syllable. Our duty was to intimately digest this particular document, so because nowhere in the world was safe on account of spies, etc, Basil used to meet me at the Exhibition Gardens just south of the Exhibition buildings. And I said that I would see him fairly close to the toilets just in case anything interesting came up but nothing ever did, they couldn’t have been empty. And, you know, he’d come up and we’d have a fairly abstract discussion about what we’d read and this particularly document had been published by the Chinese and then republished by Vanguard, so it wasn’t exactly inaccessible to those in the know, and we’d walk around the gardens so as to avoid the microphones in the trees, discussing the pros and cons.

JOHN HEROUVIM: An old man and a young man walk around the Exhibition gardens in order not to attract suspicion.

ROB DARBY: Not to attract attention in any kind of way but I didn’t think about that kind of thing in the context. And I was saying this to [name deleted] many years later and she suddenly said, “But that’s where I used to meet Dulcie Steffanou!” (laughs) who was this guy’s wife, who was equally a party member, who used to discuss precisely the same issues in exactly the same

spot, on *other* days of the week. Such was the disorganisation of individuals within the party that it took, sort of, like, five years later. Like, she [name deleted] and I were good friends, we were at La Trobe together. We used to be in the same branch together until it was disrupted and years later we realize we'd been organised in this peculiar way with this husband and wife team to keep us apart but they both used the same bloody gardens to walk around, talking about the Theory of the Three Worlds.

JOHN HEROUVIM: It was not beyond the realms of possibility that it could have happened one afternoon, unless Dulcie and Basil liaised closely, that Rob and [name deleted] might have bumped into each other coming in opposite directions on the circuit. [Seemed to be talking to the third person, the woman present].

ROB DARBY: Oh, I'm sure they were sensible enough to make it different days.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Thank you Rob.

[turned tape off] [tape resumes]

ROB DARBY: One of the great doubts we had, which you brought out in your article, was that the CPA(ML) was a paper organisation that really had no existence apart from the newspaper it published. And our fears on this point were greatly confirmed on November 11, 1975, when we found that we, that is to say La Trobe University students, were the only people making any fuss about the coup, and one of the great issues or things that emerged, whether true or not, was that when we tried to contact one of the leaders of the party we found he was too busy attending a performance of the Shanghai Philharmonic at the Town Hall to be concerned with such an important issue. That was Ted Bull of the Waterside Workers Federation. Whether he was or not is neither here nor there, we were trying to do something about the issue. The party appeared to have no leadership and no concern. It was just taken totally by shock. All this business about the vanguard party and leadership and so forth was shown to be totally hollow.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Insofar as it existed, it was left to a handful of students at La Trobe.

ROB DARBY: Now I raised this with Basil a couple of years later at the Exhibition Gardens. I said, well, when I was at La Trobe in 1975, we felt we were out on a limb. No-one else was doing anything. Ted Bull was at the Shanghai Philharmonic. Vanguard came out, and as it normally does, saying various things but, you know, there wasn't any leadership shown or any directions for activity given, apart from what we ourselves could offer. We were a bit disappointed. We felt the party let us down, that in fact the party didn't exist apart from what we were doing. We were a bit demoralised. I felt as though we were the only people around who felt anything. I didn't feel that anyone around was doing anything else. It was as though the party hardly existed. You know, what I would have liked to have felt was that there was some deep laid strategy, that certain people were lying underground and all this was thought about. And he sort of said, "Well, yes, I think you were right to think that". (laughs)

JOHN HEROUVIM: Really?

ROB DARBY: I let him off the hook in other words.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Yes. I know what you mean.

ROB DARBY: He had nothing to offer. I let them off the hook by offering this excuse that there was some deep laid strategy that was not being brought into the open and which we may have been the sacrificial victims to publicity. But he sort of knew there was some much deeper organisation which was withstanding all this kind of stuff.

JOHN HEROUVIM: What did you think about that? Were you reassured?

ROB DARBY: Not in the slightest. I thought he was talking bullshit.

JOHN HEROUVIM: And you met him again, and again after that?

ROB DARBY: Not all that often but a few times. I mean I never took him seriously from the start.

JOHN HEROUVIM: How were your meetings decided? At the end of each meeting would you decide on the next meeting?

ROB DARBY: I think it was every fortnight.

JOHN HEROUVIM: In the Exhibition gardens, same time, same place? And each time it was a discussion about some abstract policy matter?

ROB DARBY: It was the Theory of the Three Worlds for, I don't know, a couple of weeks and then Hill's 'Class struggle and the Communist parties'. And then, I can't remember, I think it petered out. It just stopped.

JOHN HEROUVIM: Because you went to Canberra?

ROB DARBY: Well, I didn't go to Canberra for some time after that. I think there was another reorganisation but for the moment I can't think what happened. I may recollect but I'm uncertain.