Reds under the bed

Australia's fear of communism was not just confined to events occurring overseas. Within Australia, there was a growing fear of Communist infiltration in the trade union movement and the Australian Labor Party (ALP). These concerns, whether true or not, helped to bring about the downfall of the Chifley Labor Government in 1949 and played a role in keeping the ALP out of government until 1972.

In this lesson, you learn about post-war fears of ‘Reds under the bed’ (an expression that was commonly used in the 1950s regarding popular fears that there were communists within Australia). You then examine attempts made by the Menzies Government to ban the Communist Party in Australia. This resulted in a referendum in 1951 on that issue.

Red fears

Immediately after World War II there was turmoil in the workplace. The Communist Party of Australia (CPA) had begun influencing the activities of many of the biggest trade unions. There were large-scale strikes in each year from 1945 to 1949.

The coal strike of 1949 was especially harmful to then Prime Minister, Ben Chifley. He broke the strike by calling on army and air force personnel to work the mines. The union movement saw this as a betrayal by someone who had been elected to represent them.

Also during the 1940s, a new political party had been formed. In 1943, Robert Menzies, who had previously been Prime Minister when leading the United Australia Party (UAP), was urged to become leader of the new Liberal Party. He agreed on condition that he could reorganise the party structure.

The industrial problems, rumours of the ALP’s communist connections and Chifley’s unpopular attempts to nationalise the banking system were three of the issues in the 1949 federal election.

The opposition leader, Menzies, heavily exploited the public’s communist fears during his campaign for both the 1949 and 1951 elections. He also promised to end petrol rationing, which was still in force from World War II.
Chifley was concerned about rumours of the Labor Party’s involvement with the communists so he took a tough stand on the CPA, as they were blamed for the many strikes occurring. The CPA’s offices were raided and their bank accounts frozen as the government investigated the communist influence on the union movement.

This strong stance on communism, however, didn’t save the Labor Government. Many Labor supporters thought Chifley had gone too far in freezing the CPA’s bank accounts.

In the December election, Menzies’ Liberal Party had a victory in the House of Representatives and therefore became the government. However, Labor was able to hold the majority of seats in the Senate.

**Activity 14**

Colour in the circle that best answers the following questions about ‘Red fears’.

1. In the 1949 Federal election:
   a. the ALP won in the House of Representatives but the Liberal Party won in the Senate  
   b. the Liberal Party won the House of Representatives but the ALP won the Senate  
   c. the Liberal Party won both Houses of Parliament.

2. Contributing to the Federal election result in 1949 was:
   a. the rumours of ALP links to the Communist Party of Australia  
   b. Menzies’ promise to end petrol rationing  
   c. the coal strike just before the election  
   d. all of these.

3. A sign of Menzies’ dominance in the Liberal Party was:
   a. his winning the 1949 Federal election  
   b. his creation of the party  
   c. his insistence on reorganising the party  
   d. all of these.
The 1949 victory in the Federal election was the start of what was to become the longest term ever served by a Prime Minister of Australia. Menzies remained in office until he decided to retire in 1966. The Liberal Party remained in government until the ALP victory in 1972.

Banning the Communist Party

Australia’s post-war economy was sound and Australians enjoyed prosperous times during the Menzies years. Many were able to realise the ‘great Aussie dream’ of owning their own home and the nation experienced a baby boom.

However, not everything during the Menzies years was rosy. There were many domestic and international issues that the Menzies government had to deal with during their time in office. One of the most difficult issues was what to do with the Communist Party of Australia.

One of Menzies’ major promises after becoming leader of the Liberal Party in 1943 was to rid Australia of the ‘red menace’ by banning the CPA. The figures in the following graph would have caused him deep concern.

Source: Communist Party of Australia membership, 1920-75

You might have noticed that the largest rise in CPA membership coincided with the worst years of World War II. Can you think why the war might have had an effect on these numbers?
Activity 15

Answer the questions based on the CPA membership graph.

1 What was the peak year for CPA membership?

2 What does this graph tell an historian?

Check your responses by going to the suggested answers section.

Menzies’ first attempt to ban the CPA

Soon after Robert Menzies was installed as leader of the Liberal Party in 1945, he put forward a bill to outlaw the Communist Party of Australia. The Communist Party of Australia Dissolution Bill also allowed for the banning of any suspected members, or former members of the CPA, from taking key positions in trade unions or government organisations.

Furthermore, anyone suspected of having been a member of the Communist Party had to prove that they weren’t in the Party. The Dissolution Bill meant people denounced as being communist had to prove themselves innocent.

A basic right of Australian citizenship is the notion that someone is innocent before proven guilty. What did Menzies’ Bill do to this right? Write an answer if you wish.

The Menzies’ Bill went against this legal right. It was also discovered that in 1994 when he became prime Minister he had secretly planned to send CPA members to internment camps in rural areas for up to six years (Knightley, 2001). This showed how serious Menzies had been in his efforts to wipe out the CPA.
Ben Chifley and the Labor Party were against outlawing any political party and so they planned to oppose the Dissolution Bill in the Senate. However, a right-wing faction of the Party wanted to vote for it. This difference of opinion within the Labor Party, along with the outbreak of the Korean War, resulted in the Federal Executive of the Labor Party dropping its opposition to the Bill.

Without the Labor Party’s opposition, the Bill became law in 1949. The campaign against the Communist Party of Australia Dissolution Act now intensified. Immediately, the Communist Party and several trade unions took the case to the High Court. According to the Australian Constitution, the High Court can reject a law it believes to be unconstitutional.

Leading Labor politician, Dr Evatt, appeared for one of the major unions and mounted an impressive case. In March 1951, the High Court ruled the Dissolution Act invalid as it violated civil liberties and property rights.

The following cartoon gives a modern perspective (a secondary source) of a criticism that could have been made of Prime Minister Menzies’ never-ending campaign against communism.

Source: A cartoon illustrating one of Menzies’ criticisms of communism
Activity 16

Answer the following questions based on what you have learned in ‘Menzies’ first attempt to ban the Communist Party’.

1 What was the purpose of introducing The Communist Party of Australia Dissolution Act?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2 What point is the cartoon making?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

3 What point is the cartoon making?

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Check your responses by going to the suggested answers section.

Despite the High Court ruling, Menzies was not giving up in his battle with the CPA, but he did change his tactics.

Menzies’ second attempt to ban the CPA

Menzies’ next step was to attempt to pass a bill that would prevent any future attempts at nationalising banking, keeping all banks in private ownership. Labor refused to allow this bill to pass through Parliament. Remember that the ALP had a majority in the Senate so it could stop a bill.

Frustrated by being blocked by Labor, Menzies then asked the Governor-General for a double dissolution. This means a simultaneous dissolving of both houses of parliament by the Governor-General before calling an election. Dissolution is used when the Senate (the Upper House)
consistently opposes legislation put forward by the House of Representatives (the Lower House) so that laws cannot be passed.

The election was held in April 1951 and the Liberal Party was able to gain a majority in both Houses of Parliament. Menzies was now able to get the Commonwealth Bank Bill passed.

**The people decide**

Menzies believed that the electoral victory in April meant the majority of Australians supported his anti-communist stance. He announced the date for a referendum to be held, asking for additional powers for the Federal Government to deal with the CPA. He was seeking the public’s support to overturn the High Court decision and effectively ban the CPA.

The Labor Party opposed Menzies and agreed they would campaign for a ‘No’ vote. During the referendum campaign the Labor leader, Chifley, died. The new leader, Dr H. V. Evatt, and the Labor Party campaigned strongly.

For a referendum to succeed, there must be a ‘Yes’ vote by a majority of states as well as a majority of Yes votes nationwide. This is known as a ‘double majority’. The 1951 referendum failed on both counts, though only narrowly.

You can learn more about the 1951 referendum and a short history of referendum results in Australia in one of the exercises for this lesson.

The CPA was able to remain a legal political group. Although most people believed that the party had a right to exist, many Australians still thought communism was a very real threat to Australian society.

In the next lesson, you’ll get a taste of the public’s feelings about the ‘Red threat’ in the most famous communism-related case in Australian history.

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Go to the exercises section and complete Exercises 1.10 to 1.12 as directed by your teacher.