"THE FIERY CROSS WILL GO FORTH": WORKING-CLASS RADICALISM AND
MUNICIPAL SOCIALIZATION IN TOWNSVILLE DURING THE 1930s AND 1940s

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I

Townsville, like a thousand other communities in Australia, proudly lays claim to a number of unique historical distinctions. There is the first "official" hoisting of the Australian flag, for instance, or, more preciously, the staging of "the only bull fight" ever held on Australian soil. Interest in the latter spectacle was so great that Cinesound News Review sent a unit from Sydney to film it (17 May 1933) and recorded that one bull delivered a "glancing blow" to the lower abdomen of the matador, though the other bulls were so "lethargic" that stockmen were reduced to chasing them with stock whips. ¹

Townsville's working-class citizens were also steeped in the traditions of unionism and the labour movement. For more than a generation the back room of an unprepossessing building in Flinders Street, known as Foley's Boot Store, was the university of Labor politicians in the north, some of whom, like Theodore and McCormack, rose to the highest positions in federal and State politics. But if Foley's was the university, the school for the vast majority of Townsville's working men was a capacious Terminalia, or Indian Almond tree, known locally as the "Tree of Knowledge". Under its branches in Denham Street men would gather after dark to listen to "orators" whom the more conservative folk labelled "agitators". There the opening rallies of all political campaigns - municipal, State, federal - took place. Men in their dark-blue singlets tumbled out of the bars in Flinders Street to shout comments on the loud rhetoric of the speakers. Sometimes, when the speaker was not approved of, the crowd would give "three groans" - the reverse of three cheers. Mingled in everyone's memory with their visions of what went on in the shadow
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of the "Tree of Knowledge" were stories from an earlier time, telling of labour organizers who had been shut out of the meatworks by the managers and had swum crocodile-infested creeks to reach the men and persuade them to join the union.

During the slaughter season, about a thousand men - the largest concentration of labour in Townsville - were employed by the meatworks. Wharves and railways accounted for most of the rest. All of the three unions representing the men - the Australian Meat Industry Employees' Union (A.M.I.E.U.), the Waterside Workers' Federation (W.W.F.) and the Australian Railways' Union (A.R.U.) - had inherited the mantle of militancy from "Red Ted" Theodore's "fighting A.W.A." (Amalgamated Workers' Association) when it was absorbed by the Australian Workers' Union (A.W.U.) in 1913. Each nurtured a syndicalist mistrust of parliamentary action; each refused to recognize the Industrial Arbitration Act of 1916; each reaffirmed its faith in direct action. As early as 1917 the journal of the International Workers of the World (I.W.W.), Direct Action, noted with pride that "the working class is beginning to think in these northern wilds. And, by the way, when they think they act...." To most workers, however, Townsville's reputation for industrial anarchy dated from "Bloody Sunday" in 1919 when police actually fired on striking meatworkers and a number of people were injured.

Townsville's status after 1922 as the organizational centre of the communist movement in North Queensland gave added lustre to its growing, even venerable, tradition of radicalism. The first northern branches of the Communist Party of Australia (C.P.A.) were formed in Townsville and Cairns in September 1922; in April 1926 the C.P.A. established its official northern headquarters in the Townsville Meatworkers' Hall. The C.P.A.'s relentless and bitter attack on the Labor Party's inflexible commitment to the arbitration system was undeniably popular among the rank and file of Townsville workers, many
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of whom, especially after the experience of wage reductions during the early 1920s, regarded judicial decisions as inimical to the workers' best interests. The 1930s continued to be a period of "remarkable growth" for the Communist Party in Townsville, which was without parallel anywhere else in Australia. The climax of this movement came in 1944 when F.W. Paterson became the first (and so far the only) communist member of an Australian parliament.

II

When the McCormack Labor Government fell from power in 1929, after fourteen years continuously in office, this was because large numbers of Labor supporters deserted it. The root cause of the problem was a two-fold one: on the one hand, militant left-wingers deplored the snail's pace at which socialization appeared to be proceeding; on the other hand, the more moderate majority realized to its chagrin that the Labor government was not only not the model employer they had expected it to be but even a downright unsympathetic one. Nowhere in Queensland were these feelings more pronounced than in the North and in the ranks of railway workers. Indeed as early as 1919 railwaymen had begun to denounce their employer for bureaucratic "injustice, pin-pricking and tyranny". It was not that the leaders of the A.R.U. were communists, but they were vigorously left-wing in their beliefs, constantly proselytizing an ideological position which was "one of socialism with strong Marxist overtones", and frequently "sounding like communists". Increasingly the government responded by stigmatizing them as "communists" and "revolutionaries".

Subsequently there was no attempt to conciliate leftist opinion in the Labor Party when it returned to power in 1932. The new Premier, William Forgan Smith, placed his wager on the moderate majority in the labour movement, forging a close alliance with Clarrie Fallon, the new State President of the A.W.U. whose executive, along
with the Queensland Cabinet and the Queensland Central Executive (Q.C.E.) of the A.L.P. formed "an interlocking directorate". Forgan Smith uncompromisingly reasserted the view that Labor should attempt to govern in the interests of the whole community, a policy which saw him decisively returned to power in 1935. Loyally supported on almost every major issue by Fallon and the A.W.U., the Premier's control over the party's policy-making apparatus was little short of absolute; under him, the A.L.P. frankly settled down to a policy of liberal administration of the capitalist system.

However, this brand of parliamentary, multi-class reformism remained anathema to the labour movement's left wing whose views found expression in the pages of The Advocate, official organ of the A.R.U.:

Under [Forgan Smith's] regime, the class position of the workers in this State did not improve relatively to the position of the employing class; no fundamental principle of working-class policy was established during his term as Premier...Under Mr. Smith's leadership the Labor Party lost its working-class identity.

Many others in the A.L.P. who had no ideological affinity with the "Marxist overtones" of The Advocate yet found cause for resentment towards the autocratic hold of the Cabinet-Q.C.E.-A.W.U. "interlocking directorate" over the party's entire decision-making processes. Indeed fissiparous tendencies became so strong that a spate of defections from the party took place in the late 1930s and early 1940s - to the Communist Party, to a Protestant Labor Party, to so-called "Andrew Fisher", "King O'Malley" and "Hermit Park" labour candidates. Each was concerned, in one way or another, with restoring pristine labour traditions which they sincerely believed the A.L.P. had sullied.
III

The "Hermit Park" candidate in 1944 was Townsville's Deputy Mayor, Tom Aikens, engine-driver, self-made orator, militant unionist and acknowledged working-class spokesman in Townsville. In 1932 his name had appeared on the register of founding members of the Hermit Park branch of the A.L.P. whose members, almost to a man, belonged to the A.R.U. The branch in Hermit Park (a Townsville suburb) was formed specifically to fight bureaucratic victimization and injustice of a kind that had occurred during an industrial disturbance in the Railways Department in 1931. The trouble arose, as some of the most savage of human conflicts do, over the most trivial of incidents. A quantity of copper ore was produced by non-union labour at Dobbyn, near Cloncurry, and some assiduous unionist had scrawled the legend, "Black Ore from Dobbyn", in chalk on the side of one of the railway wagons carrying the ore to Townsville. Whether by calculated intention, bored inattention, or simply because of darkness, the wagon somehow escaped notice until it reached Townsville's South Yard, the goods marshalling depot some six hundred miles away. There it was detected, and three railwaymen - O'Brien, Sparrow and Wood - were peremptorily dismissed for refusing to handle the "black" wagon. On 19 November a mass meeting of railwaymen in the old Olympia open-air cinema in Sturt Street decided to declare a strike from midnight on 27 November unless the three men were meanwhile reinstated in their jobs. On 26 November the non-Labor government of the day, led by Arthur Moore, overreacted to the railwaymen's ultimatum by rushing through parliament a Railway Strike and Public Safety Preservation Bill, empowering the Governor of Queensland to proclaim a state of emergency in the interests of maintaining railway service; not only that, a force of special police was despatched to Townsville to reinforce the persuasions of parliament. For several days, bands of uniformed men patrolled the
main streets of Townsville, crowding and jostling knots of sullen and resentful men. Occasionally, there were ugly scenes: "some of the police thugs would walk behind us as we walked along the footpaths, and they would kick us viciously in the leg muscles; if you turned on them, as some of the fellows did, they'd arrest you for creating a disturbance or assaulting a policeman." 

Police intimidation nonetheless had its intended effect, and the strike collapsed. Not content with mere victory, however, a vindictive Tory government determined to punish the refractory railwaymen and promulgated a "black list" of renegades. In the long run it was an honour to have been blacklisted by a non-Labor government, and in fact one man whose name appeared on the list later rose to the position of Acting Commissioner of the Queensland Government Railways; but there were scant grounds for jubilation at the time: "Men were refused re-employment - no one knew why - excellent men, good citizens, good workers." 

The Hermit Park A.L.P. thus came into existence as an avowed agency of class struggle. These were stirring, hope-filled years for the labour movement - before the trauma of the Nazi-Soviet Pact - when members still hailed one another breathlessly as "comrade!" and, at meetings of the branch, "you had to be early to get a seat." It was a euphoric, even apocalyptic, ambiance in which Aikens cast himself as party intellectual and sage - a role he played convincingly because of his background of wide reading and private study. Whenever the Hermit Park branch paused to consider an issue of supra-local or theoretical importance, transcending the bread-and-butter concerns which mostly preoccupied its unionist members, Aikens was invariably the proponent. Of course there were two dangers inherent in his position: first, his mates were generally suspicious of ambition and the desire to raise oneself above one's station; they looked upon education as a form of snobbery or as a means of social advancement that broke up the camaraderie of working men. In the second place, intellectual
independence, for all the guarded admiration it commanded among the rank and file, was potentially incompatible with discipline in a party whose principal strength lay in the subordination of individual to class interests. Indeed there were early indications of what A.L.P. notables soon discovered to be the abrasive and obdurate individuality of Tom Aikens: at the end of 1935 Aikens instigated a strong branch protest to the Q.C.E. over the non-endorsement of "Comrade" Bolger for the municipal plebiscite.25

In 1936 Labor aldermen had never before formed a majority on the Townsville City Council, but in the municipal elections held in April - the first in which Aikens participated, bringing him a fame (or notoriety, depending on the point of view) which he never thereafter lost - they came within easy striking distance of that goal. The main issue in 1936 - indeed the perennial issue in Townsville local politics - was lack of water. 1935 had been the driest year in living memory, and water restrictions were draconian in their severity. There was a total ban on the watering of plants, even with bath water. If the back-yard horticulturalist wanted to preserve a precious orchid, he had to take it inside his home and hide it like some common thief secreting his loot. Aikens, at his street-corner meetings talked about nothing but water. Using the forthright and vivid language for which he was becoming noted, he stigmatized Ross River, the city's main watercourse - and the source of its water supply - as "a dirty, evil, foul-smelling swamp".26 The people, in their overriding concern for water, cheerfully forgot that it was their river Tom was disparaging. On the other hand, the non-Labor "Ratepayers' Team" ignored the water crisis and found its main issue in the dispute between the respective supporters of Day Labour and Contract Labour as the most efficient means of constructing Townsville's long-awaited sewerage mains:
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Some of the local [A.L.P.] advocates of Day Labour have had their own buildings and houses built by contract, because it was advantageous, but they want to burden the electors with Day Labour. Why? If it is sound business for their own affairs, why not for you?27

Aikens' riposte, that the point of the Ratepayers' argument escaped him when there was in any case no water to flush the toilets, called forth the usual ribald and appreciative guffaws from his audiences.

The Ratepayers' Team was returned with five aldermen, compared to the A.L.P.'s four.28 The conservatism of working-class voters, which, on issues of financial control and management, still ensured the electoral ascendancy of a businessman's government, for the time being prevailed. As the Bulletin pompously put it, if a Labor City Council were returned, "the splendid fiduciary position" of the Council would be "speedily destroyed".29 Yet the creditable overall performance of the four successful A.L.P. aldermen (Aikens, Illich, Corcoran, Hamilton) provided scant justification for another post-electoral prognostication that the A.L.P. would "never" gain control of the municipality of Townsville "so long as the [Ratepayer] aldermen conduct their business with the same judgment, moderation and fairness as they have done in the past."30

Most lunch-times the four Labor aldermen would meet behind the Locomotive Foreman's Office; there, huddled earnestly around their battered black tucker boxes, they held the Caucus meetings that decided Townsville's municipal destinies over the next decade. They examined old ideas and tossed around new ones, accepting them if it seemed that they would "please" the people and rejecting them if it did not. What gradually emerged was a determination not only to proceed with the public acquisition of Townsville's principal utilities, but also to initiate municipal competition in a great many lesser fields traditionally reserved to private enterprise; in short, to inaugurate
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a bold, thoroughgoing and, in many respects, novel programme of municipal socialization.\(^{31}\)

Indeed the "main issue"\(^{32}\) in the 1939 local election became the Labor proposal to set up a Council retail undertaking for the sale of major electrical appliances, a scheme first mooted by Aikens and taken up enthusiastically by his comrades in the Hermit Park A.L.P.\(^{33}\)

In July 1937, when Aikens had first tried to persuade the Council to implement his proposal, his motion was lost only on the casting vote of the mayor.\(^{34}\) At a time when hire purchase was still regarded as usurious rather than as the panacea for working-class impecuniosity that it later became, Aikens loudly deplored the "money lending" practices which placed the ownership of an electric stove in particular beyond the financial reach of most workers:

The local retailers of stoves bought them at a certain price, placed their profit on top of that price, and...if time payment was desired, ten per cent was imposed on the selling price.\(^{35}\)

A people's electrical undertaking would not only sell stoves more cheaply but also extend time-payment periods and halve the interest rate on borrowed money.\(^{36}\)

Despite dire warnings in certain quarters that a Labor Council would be subject to "the dictation of distant outside politicians who [would] seek to use the electors of the municipality for their own ends",\(^{37}\) the voters of Townsville were sufficiently impressed with Labor's proposals. In fact, the election produced two notable results: for the first time a socialist Council gained control of Townsville's municipal affairs, and for the first time in Australia a communist, F.W. Paterson, was returned at the polls.

A certain ideological sympathy between Paterson and Aikens soon made them boon companions, the more so since each possessed qualities the other lacked but wished he had: Paterson, a formal,
disciplined education and cosmopolitan outlook; Aikens, a self-made, oratorical brilliance and parish-pump charisma. While an alderman of the Townsville City Council, Paterson was an "Independent Socialist" candidate for the Townsville-based federal seat of Herbert in the 1940 Commonwealth election (when the Communist Party was banned), and eventually entered the Queensland State Parliament in 1944 as communist Member for Bowen — whereupon he resigned from the Townsville City Council. In 1947 he was re-elected to the Queensland Legislative Assembly for the second and last time.  

Fred Paterson held the balance of power in a Council composed of four Ratepayer aldermen, five A.L.P. aldermen, and the nominally Independent mayor, J.S. Gill, who was in reality, however, an ardent anti-socialist. Already an elderly man when he became mayor in 1933 (he was born in 1867), Gill remained in the office until 1952. He built up a reputation as "a fine English gentleman" who comported himself "in the grand manner of a gentleman of the old school"; in 1939 the Bulletin thought that, "like Roosevelt", Gill was decidedly entitled to a third term. Closer, and perhaps less generous, associates, however, thought that it was not so much statesmanlike qualities that kept him in office for so long as the fact that "he agreed with everyone".  

The five successful A.L.P. aldermen were Aikens, Corcoran, Hamilton, Illich and Kogler. Aikens' contemporaries then saw him as "a force to be reckoned with...a dynamic personality, a keen, intelligent and lucid debater, with a great command of the English language, and wonderful tenacity." Jim Corcoran was "a dour, sound, reliant fighter for the workers"; Vic Hamilton made the anti-Laborites realize that Labor "can produce men equal to those from any other section of the community" (a rather back-handed compliment, since most of his friends and acquaintances privately referred to him as "suave"); Andy Illich was "solid, unswerving...an old Labor stalwart...and one of the best Unionists in the Railway Service"; Bill Kogler had "a
since Paterson had publicly announced at the hustings his endorsement of A.L.P. municipal policy, effective socialist control of the Council was thereby assured. A little apprehensively, the Register suggested that it was not so much the positive appeal of Labor policy that had brought about these "strange changes" as capricious fate, the "whirligig of time". This time Aikens was the most popular choice of A.L.P. voters; indeed, by only the slimmest of margins did he fail to edge out the front-running candidate, Talbot Heatley. That rather mild disappointment was soon forgotten, however, when he was acclaimed Deputy Mayor of Townsville at the first meeting of the new Council. Aikens was elected Deputy Mayor by six votes to five, a voting pattern which remained fairly constant throughout the life of this Council. Almost without exception, Paterson voted with the five A.L.P. aldermen, and the mayor with the four Ratepayer aldermen.

No sooner had the new Council concluded the formalities of taking control than Aikens insisted on the immediate implementation of "the most popular plank" in the A.L.P.'s electoral platform - the establishment of an Electrical Retailing Department. There was some hesitation when doubt arose over the legality of Council participation in a time-payment scheme, but a Labor government in Brisbane offered no objections and very soon the Council Electricity Department opened a trading division for the sale of stoves. Customers got their stoves by a smooth and utterly painless administrative process: all hire-purchase charges were simply added to their monthly electricity accounts. As well, by diverting a substantial sum for the advertising of electricity (which naturally benefitted private electrical retailers as much as the Council) to the provision of municipal subsidy for haulage and installation, two more birds were despatched...
with but a single stone: overhead expenses were absorbed within the framework of existing public expenditure, and buyer resistance to even the minimal outlay for installation formerly charged was speedily overcome. By the end of 1939, the venture was accounted a "particularly successful" one, sales having "exceeded expectations".

IV

War may not be the father of all things. It is nonetheless true that World War II in Townsville fathered a socialist society, or as near to one as any Australian has seen on his own shores. Between 1939 and 1949 a City Council controlled by Hermit Park A.L.P. and communist aldermen effected the public ownership of a remarkable range of utilities and services, insistently pushing to the limits its constitutional and statutory powers to do so. During and immediately after the war, the Council established a Ladies' Rest Room (later incorporating a free baby-stroller service for mothers shopping in the city), a Wood Depot, a Fruit and Vegetable Mart, a Legal Aid Department, a Municipal Ice Works and a Child Care Centre; by 1949 plans were well in hand for the development of "workers' housing", a people's bakery, and the "municipalization" of all bus services - when the Hermit Park A.L.P. finally fell from power.

While the socialization of "communal enterprises" was of course foreshadowed in Aikens' electrical retailing venture (and, to be sure, enjoined by the A.L.P. local government platform), there was little further progress towards this goal before 1943. For one thing, the Hermit Park aldermen were still insecure in their governing role. Although the communist alderman, Paterson, kept his 1939 pre-election promise to vote with the A.L.P. in Council meetings, A.L.P. aldermen were wary of his embrace, mainly because Paterson held the balance of power and could without too much difficulty represent
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the decisiveness of his vote as a triumph for communist policy. More importantly, however, the Hermit Park A.L.P. was for a considerable time riven by internal dissension over the ultimate compatibility of communism and socialism. There were bitter confrontations in the A.L.P. between those who thought that some accommodation with communism could eventually be found and those who did not. Even in society at large tempers were frayed. The instance of one priest in Townsville who was so upset at the prospect of a communist uprising that he prepared himself for martyrdom was perhaps atypical of the public mood but not of extreme partisan feeling. In the end, socialism came to Townsville not so much in fulfilment of an agreed socialist plan as the outcome of a series of ad hoc responses by socialists - factions and contentious socialists - to the exigencies of war. During the course of 1942 fortress Townsville was constructed as a vital staging centre and forward command post for the Pacific war theatre.

One outcome of the ideological struggle in the Hermit Park A.L.P. during 1941 and 1942 was that the bond of sympathy between the Hermit Park A.L.P. and the Communist Party, arising from their close, if cautious, working relationship on the Townsville City Council, grew stronger than ever. In January 1942 four leading members of the Hermit Park A.L.P., all aldermen, were advised by the Q.C.E. that they had voluntarily "left the party" because of their connections with a Townsville "Aid to Russia" Committee which, along with other "communist subsidiary organizations", the A.L.P. had recently placed under interdict. In fact the Townsville membership of the anathematized committee was politically heterogeneous and unexceptional; all other members of the Hermit Park branch, in a gesture of loyal solidarity, therefore chose to join their comrades in exile. Not only that, they resolved to "fight the tyranny of the Q.C.E." by fielding a strong team of candidates in the 1943 municipal election and combining with the Communist Party in a "popular
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front". Triennial local government elections were originally scheduled for 1942, but they were postponed by the Queensland government when it seemed possible, early in that year, that Australia would have to fend off a Japanese invasion).

Aikens, with his peculiar genius for sensing and articulating the innermost thoughts, hopes and fears of his people, took what was, in the circumstances, the courageous stand that the people could not be expected to make unlimited sacrifices for the sake of the war effort: "I said we've got to assist the war effort, to the very limit of our ability; but in assisting the war effort we have to see that the rights and privileges of our civilian population are not trampled underfoot." It was a telling attitude to take, and Townsvilleans subsequently took pride in remaining uncowed by an over-powering military presence among them. Indeed, Tom's ringing phrases, defiant but reasonable, became slogans for so long that their authorship was finally forgotten and "not-being-trampled-underfoot" became part of the conventional wisdom of the day.

Food, fuel and housing shortages had become acute by the end of 1942; by promising to end them the "popular front" won a resounding victory at the polls on 1 May 1943. Aikens received the largest number of votes, heading a seven-man Hermit Park team - Corcoran, Hamilton, Illich, Abercrombie, O'Brien, Murgatroyd and himself. Not a single A.L.P. candidate was returned.

Arthur Murgatroyd had actually taken his seat on the Council some time before, on 23 January 1942, following the resignation of Alderman Heatley. A man of small stature, but never at a loss for words, "the little rooster" was an indefatigable toiler for the A.L.P. When he first stood for elected office in 1939, he had already held more official positions within the labour movement than any other person in Townsville. The only two new faces in 1943 were those of J.J. ("Jack") Abercrombie and E.P. ("Pooger") O'Brien. Although both
were railwaymen and prominent in A.R.U. affairs, they had absolutely nothing else in common. Abercrombie was a tolerant, sincere, unassuming family man whose smiling, even-handed equanimity later made him almost a permanent fixture in the chair of "Hermit Park Labour". O'Brien was a wild, impulsive firebrand whose politics lurched even more violently to the left than Aikens' and whose name already appeared on federal security files under the heading, "Communist Party - Consolidated List of Persons with Communistic Tendencies who are at present Resident in North Queensland". Of the three communist candidates, Paterson was the only one (for the time being) to take his place at the Council table. Apart from the mayor, J.S. Gill, whom the Hermit Park aldermen, Parry and Mindham, were left to constitute an ineffectual "Tory" opposition. This opposition was weakened still further early in 1944 by the death of Alderman Mindham.

The Hermit Park "A.L.P."-Communist Party coalition, or, as it rather grandiloquently styled itself, "The Greater Townsville Labor Party" was a close, if somewhat morganatic, union. The coalition would have been quite formal except for the fact that the communist alderman (and later, aldermen) did not participate in the Hermit Park municipal Caucus nor in any other joint consultative body. However, the two parties went to the polls as a united team under a single banner and gave each other frequent, "informal" assurances of mutual support. The intimacy of the collaboration was clearly revealed when, in 1944, two more Communist Party nominees, Matzkows and Hills, were appointed to fill casual aldermanic vacancies.

The new Council moved swiftly to fulfill its election promises to combat "profiteering, waste and unnecessary interference with civilians." By now the war had moved away from the immediate vicinity of Townsville and many evacuees were returning to their homes to find themselves dispossessed by the military. At Aikens'
prodding, the Council promptly inaugurated a Legal Aid Department to provide free legal advice for such aggrieved householders. There were undoubtedly cases of gross official callousness towards civilians. A widow named Grant, for example, had lost her husband, and her only son was in the fighting forces. She went south for a while, leaving her house in the hands of an agent with instructions to rent it if he could find a tenant; but she would require the tenant to vacate the premises as soon as she returned. Subsequently, when the new tenant was advised that the widow was returning, he contacted the Air Force with advice that the owner was away; the R.A.A.F. promptly seized the house and all its contents - even the widow's clothes and wedding gifts - under a National Security Order. The widow went to court but lost her case on a technicality: the Minister for the Army referred to the occupants of the house as "personnel employed on important duties directly associated with the prosecution of the war".

Aikens' advocacy of the widow's cause brought her nationwide publicity; eventually the name of Mrs. Sarah Jane Grant appeared on the cover of one of the fattest files in the Department of the Army headquarters in Melbourne. An official report of the Townsville City Council noted the "strong public feeling" aroused by the affair. When it was proved that the widow's home had been occupied by non-combatant members of the Department of Civil Aviation, Tom saw to it that practically every newspaper in Australia carried the lurid details of "what must surely be the war's most scandalous case of military persecution and poo-bahism". He was not alone in his opinion. A scion of one of Townsville's oldest and staidest legal firms, George Roberts, who had no love for Aikens and indeed found his brand of clamant radicalism unnecessary if not vulgar, was nevertheless forced to agree that bureaucratic treatment of the widow Grant had been "iniquitous". There were many other cases of military abuse of Townsville householders' rights which Tom angrily exposed and noisily
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disseminated. One concerned an impressed home where "the plunge bath had been torn away from its plumbing fixtures and deposited in the centre of one of the bedrooms. The bath was being used... as a beer-cooler...bottled beer packed in ice".69

The influx of Australian and U.S. military personnel, trebling Townsville's population by the middle of 1943,70 had other repercussions which were both more widespread and more frightening to the civilian population. In particular, there were serious shortages of food and other essential commodities. Possibly the most desperate of these might have been borne if shared; adversity under such conditions could even be ennobling. But all too often the military (that is to say, of course, the remote and preoccupied federal government) appeared stonily indifferent to the town's most pressing needs. The Military indulged in spasms of alternate hoarding and wastefulness, which an impotent citizenry could only watch with mounting rage. Around the middle of 1943 the army had, among other things, accumulated a stockpile of 5,000 tons of firewood in the middle of the Townsville Showgrounds;71 and in that curiously distant and blissfully ignorant age, when trees were the main source of cooking fuel and smoke billowed endlessly from the stove chimneys of at least as many homes as it did not, a shortage of firewood was an alarming deprivation. The townspeople chafed at military requisitioning of all normal supplies and, despite early warnings of an impending crises from the civil authorities,72 the situation only worsened. On one occasion, in July, the Council furiously asked the Minister for the Army why soldiers were employed in the Townsville Railways' Goods Yards "guarding beer and spirits which is the property of private breweries and merchants, why they are employed at private bakeries and also employed for private contractors, but are not available to assist in providing supplies of firewood for civilians who are engaged on essential work".73 Eventually, but only by dint of
repeated protestations, the army agreed to a system of Council control over, and rationing of, firewood. The Council initiative led to the establishment and successful operation of a Municipal Firewood Depot, and civilians were thus granted equality of access "with white ants" to the Army wood heap.  

Shortages created by war are rarely absolute; rather, they manifest themselves in a number of familiar stages of relatively diminishing supply. First, a shortage of manpower leads to the curtailment of facilities for local distribution; by the end of 1942 in Townsville deliveries of meat, ice and bread had practically ceased. Second, a scarcity of local and imported produce results in either rising prices or controlled, pre-emptive rationing; an example of the former in Townsville was the prevalence of "exorbitant" prices for fruit and vegetables by the end of 1942, and, of the latter, the Council's concern to make available to milk bars and cafes "only milk not required by children". A third stage of grave scarcity produces racketeering and black markets, which are often most rampant and exploitative in the clandestine disposal of luxury (and especially addictive) goods such as alcohol and tobacco. In Townsville, as Tom Aikens sadly observed:

black marketeering was rife; ordinary bottles of whisky that usually sold for 22/- fetched £5 a bottle, and often the barmaid added another quid for herself. For a hundred other articles, ranging from toothbrushes to tinned peaches you had to buy something else as well in order to get what you wanted. I was absolutely astonished to see the greed, cupidity and avarice of a lot of our citizens.  

On the whole, however, there were only intermittent shortages of most foodstuffs. Beef, for example was sometimes unavailable, but only an Australian worker could complain about having nothing
to eat "for weeks and weeks" but lamb, fish and liver. In fact, foodstuffs in persistently short supply were limited to fruit and vegetables – until the socialist City Council again stepped into the breach with another of its audacious schemes for municipal purchase, distribution and sale.

Following several fruitless representations to Federal and State authorities, the Council, at the instigation of Alderman Paterson, ordered an investigation into the feasibility of establishing "municipal shops and/or stalls for the sale of fruit and vegetables". That was in January 1943. In April the Council launched its Municipal Fruit and Vegetable Trading Department, and the Hermit Park A.L.P. included a promise to expand this sphere of activities in its platform for the coming election. In June, a month after being returned to office, the Council advertised for an Organizing Manager, and an appointment to this position (carrying a salary of £450 per annum) was subsequently made in January 1944. In its first full year of operation, the Mart's marketing proved outstandingly successful; fruit and vegetable prices dropped by about half, and plans were announced for a further extension of the department's activities by the acquisition of a mobile suburban unit. In a gesture of triumphal generosity, the Council celebrated the first anniversary of the opening of the Mart by instructing its Manager to send a parcel of fruit to every patient in the city's general and private hospitals. As Tom Aikens exulted, "this was really what socialism was all about."

More important even than firewood in the basic economy of North Queensland was ice, and the shortage of ice became the most popular symbol of bureaucratic and military enormity, a cause célèbre with which to berate the real "enemies" of the people – the State and Federal governments that had "signally failed" them. By the same token, the Council's determination to
overcome that shortage assumed concrete form in its largest and most ambitious municipal undertaking, an ice works. "If a civilian walked into an Australian or an American army establishment", noted Tom Aikens, "he would invariably see whole wash tubs full of ice with a few bottles of soft drink floating in them. On the other hand, the people couldn't get even a sliver of ice to keep their milk and butter - that is, if they could get any milk and butter."

At the largest of the several ice works, Vardy's in Ogden Street, queues half a mile long formed by the time the works opened at 5 a.m.; some of the people actually slept on the works' saw bench to make sure they got their meagre ration. That wasn't much. Most people arrived hopefully with a sugar bag, but rarely left with more than one small block: Vardy's preferred to sell their output to the army at a higher price.

Never in Townsville's history were so many sugar bags to be simultaneously seen as in the war-time ice queues in Ogden Street. The "North Queensland Portmanteau", as some called it, was very likely everyman's most prized possession. Instead of being carried in the hand like an ordinary port, it was slung over the shoulder; indeed, possibly the most significant of its attributes was that it could be dropped, kicked about, even trampled upon with impunity. It never lost its shape or character. It was also very light when empty, and some preferred to roll it up into a bundle, tied together with a piece of string or rope yarn, and tuck it under the armpit. As the citizens of Townsville knew, it was good not only for carrying blocks of ice but also for unobtrusively handling large quantities of crab bait, horse manure and (provided it had been boiled once or twice) even the groceries, bread and week-end joint. It got a little faded after a few boilings but hardly ever deteriorated or lost its durability or versatility. For example, with two slits in the sides for arms and a much larger one for the head, it was a highly regarded football jersey; or, when one corner was poked into the other, so that it
bore a vague resemblance to Little Red Riding Hood's cape, it was the most versatile of raincoats. In fact, nearly everyone in the ice queues brought along two sugar bags - one for the ice, another for downpours. Ogden Street often presented bizarre and fantastical scenes.

Tom Aikens was the first to draw attention to the urgency of solving "the vital question" of ice supplies for the civilian population of Townsville. By the middle of 1943 the Council called tenders for the supply of an ice-making plant and advertised for a manager of the proposed Municipal Ice Works. An appointment was made at the beginning of 1944.

This action came no too soon for, towards the end of 1943, there were definite signs of an imminent break-down in civilian morale. There were "increasingly serious" complaints of profiteering and overcharging; the sudden collapse of meat distribution appeared as a final straw piled on the camel's back of unrelieved shortages. There is no evidence that shortages were really more acute than earlier in the year, but their persistence was stretching civilian patience to breaking point. There was a feeling abroad that for vindictive political reasons alone - the "discrediting" of the socialist Townsville City Council - both State and Federal governments were prepared to sit by idly even though Townsville citizens were on "the verge of starvation".

It was therefore a combination of endured hardships and frayed nerves - a sense of suffering "that had not been inflicted on any other citizens in Australia" - which provoked enraged response from the Townsville City Council. In order to "arouse" the public to the "dangers" threatening them, the Council decided on a vigorous radio and press campaign, as well as a series of public demonstrations. Later, from the floor of the Queensland Legislative Assembly, Tom Aikens reminisced:
"as a result of that campaign the Mayor of Townsville on 14 December received a long urgent wire from Mr. Murphy [federal government Food Controller] expressing concern at the press reports concerning Townsville's food supply and asking the Mayor for full particulars... on 18 December 1943, Mr. Murphy flew to Townsville and met the Townsville City Council and representatives of responsible organizations."

At a special meeting of the Council, the Food Controller accepted Aikens' invitation to visit the ice works in the early hours of the morning of Saturday, 18 December. Since the Council had not adjourned the day before until well past midnight, Aikens had a sleepless night: "I went back home and had a cup of tea and a piece of toast, then I rode my bike into town at 3 o'clock in the morning and dug Murphy out of his bed in Lowth's Hotel". They then left on an inspection of various ice works. At 5 a.m. they visited Vardy's where there was a queue along Ogden Street across Stanley and Blackwood Streets as far as the Railway Oval - about 1,500 people. According to the Bulletin, "this estimate is borne out by the fact that Mr. Vardy delivered 1,300 blocks, and the end of the queue were seen leaving at 6.30 a.m. without ice". Later in the day, during an inspection of another queue, the Food Controller was in time to see an ambulance leave, "taking home a 15 year-old girl who had collapsed owing to the heat and the crush". The next day, Sunday, 19 December 1943 the Council's campaign against government neglect reached its climax in a mass meeting of Townsville citizens on the Strand. Aikens, introducing a team of Hermit Park and communist speakers, provided the meeting's keynote: "if Murphy fails, then the fiery cross will go forth, and the standard of revolution will go up in Townsville".
Mr. Murphy took fright. Hastily returning to Canberra he reported gloomily on the atmosphere in Townsville as being "so bad" that it could only have "a permanent adverse effect upon the feelings of United States' personnel towards Australia and on the attitude of large bodies of Australian civilians towards the United States". Appalled at the possibility of such grave perturbations to high policy the Prime Minister, John Curtin, directed the Director-General of Security to initiate an urgent and "most secret" inquiry into the situation in Townsville. Local operatives on the spot in Townsville were to treat the matter as "highly confidential" and "not to be talked about in any way".

Blood did not flow in the streets, but the fact that it did not was more a tribute to the effectiveness of Council policies than to any assistance it subsequently received from government quarters. Indeed, no other community in Australia during World War II - and not only in the estimation of Townsvillians themselves - was thrown back so rudely on its own resources in the face of such formidable odds: bombing, the threat of imminent invasion, evacuation, drastic shortages, protracted military occupation by military forces far outnumbering the civilian population, a sense of isolation from the mainstream of Australian Life, and, perhaps most important of all, a conviction of actual abandonment by distant and insensitive governments - of which the Q.C.E.'s ostracism of the Hermit Park branch was just a palpable and notably crass example. As late as mid-1944, North Queenslanders still nurtured "an abiding sense" that southern governments in Brisbane and Canberra were ignorant of their total war-time experiences and indifferent to them. The chief spokesman of that mood was Tom Aikens, and in 1944 Townsvillians elected him to parliament in Brisbane to evoke it, to shame and bludgeon "Queen Street Government" with it.
Under the leadership of a small band of men from the Hermit Park A.L.P., the people of Townsville - at least the majority who stayed behind - on the whole comported themselves with dignity and pertinacity. It was even possible to suggest that, in the resourcefulness and precocity of its policies on behalf of Townsville and in the élan of its sallies against bureaucratic insensitivity, the Townsville City Council displayed those qualities of proud independence, aggressive egalitarianism, and contumacy, even rebelliousness, towards authority that made it seem an embodiment of the Australian myth. However, others saw it as an incarnation of "communism", or at least of unregenerate Jacobinism, and that was why the A.L.P. expelled the Hermit Park branch from its ranks.

REFERENCES


3. Ibid., p.87.

4. Ibid., p.86.

5. Ibid., pp.81-102.


7. Ibid., pp.57, 91.

8. Ibid., p.57.

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11. The Militant, 1 September 1919.


15. The Advocate, 1 September 1942.


19. Ibid., p.117.


21. Ibid., p.95. See also Private Papers of Arthur Murgatroyd, unclassified and unsorted in folders, held by the owner [Murgatroyd P/P], which contain a copy of the "black list". A.D. Murgatroyd, like Aikens, was a member of "Hermit Park Labour" and an alderman of the Townsville City Council.


23. There are instances of Aikens' image-building in N.Q.L.P. Mins., passim, but see especially Ibid., 21 April 1935 and 18 August 1935.


27. See *The Townsville Daily Bulletin* [TDB], 25 March 1936.

28. See TDB, 6 April 1936 and *The North Queensland Register* [NQR], 11 April 1936, where the election results are given. Apart from the Mayor, J.S. Gill, one other Independent (W.J. Wakeford) was successful at the polls.

29. TDB, 31 March 1936.

30. NQR, 11 April 1936.


32. See TDB, 30 March 1939.

33. See *The Townsville Evening Star* [TES], 20 November 1936, outlining Aikens' initial proposal for the establishment of a Council electrical retail trading department. (The Star ceased publication on Saturday, 13 April 1940). See also N.Q.L.P. Mins., 22 August 1937, 18 September 1937 (Hermit Park A.L.P. support for Aikens' proposal). Labor's policy in the 1939 municipal election campaign was outlined fully in the party's northern regional newspaper, *The Clarion*, 24 March 1939.

34. TES, 23 July 1937.

35. TDB, 30 March 1939.


37. TDB, 13 March 1939, 15 March 1939.


40. TDB, 28 March 1939.
41. This was told to me by a former alderman of the Townsville City Council. See also NQR, 10 May 1947, eulogizing Gill on the occasion of his 80th birthday on 6 May 1947.

42. See The Clarion, 24 March 1939, which gives several interesting thumbnail sketches of the successful A.L.P. candidates.

43. See TDB, 30 March 1939; NQR, 8 April 1939, under the heading "Labor-Communist Control Effective".

44. NQR, 8 April 1939.

45. See TDB, 3 April 1939; NQR, 8 April 1939.

46. See Minutes of the Townsville City Council, numbered volumes, Vol. 23 [T.C.C. Mins. (23)], p.1285.

47. See TDB, 19 May 1939.

48. T.C.C. Mins. (23), p.1322. See also TDB, 16 June 1939; TES, 22 July 1939. Under the terms of the Local Government Act of 1936 it appeared that the Council might not be competent to enter into hire purchase agreements. However, an inquiry to the Department of Health and Home Affairs elicited the response that the State Government was agreeable to the proposed scheme (see T.C.C. Mins. [23], p.1327; also TES, 18 August 1939).

49. See TDB, 20 December 1939.

50. T.C.C. Mins. (25), p.2083. Initially, there were twelve strollers.


52. "Plank" No. 4 of the A.L.P. Local Government Platform read: "All communal enterprises such as tramways, omnibuses, ferries, baths, lighting, water supply, and markets to be conducted and controlled by the Local Authority".


55. For a detailed discussion of the events just described, see Ian Moles, "Hostility, Warning, Suspicion", op.cit.

57. See TDB, 22 April 1943, outlining the Hermit Park "A.L.P." - Communist Party proposals to end shortages.

58. TDB, 3 May 1943.


60. See The Clarion, 24 March 1939.

61. See R.F.B. Wake, Inspector (Brisbane) to Director, Commonwealth Investigation Branch (Canberra), 1 March 1940, Commonwealth Records Series BP/361, Item 2-3 ("Unregistered Correspondence") [CRS BP/361, 2-3].


63. See TDB, 16 April 1943, 27 March 1943, 5 April 1943, 12 April 1943, reporting the rapprochement between the Hermit Park "A.L.P." and the Communist Party. See also T.C.C. Mins. (24), pp.1859, 1869.

64. TDB, 12 April 1963.

65. See Townsville City Council Committee Reports (1942-1943), Vol. 18 [T.C.C. Reports (18)], Special Committee, 5 February 1943, recommending the establishment of the department. See also TDB, 22 April 1943, where the aims of the department were defined as "assisting tenants against racketeering landlords, and honest home owners to regain possession of their homes."

66. See Q.P.D. (1944-1945), p.673. This is Aikens' version. Except for the reference to the Royal Australian Air Force, which ought to have been to the Department of Civil Aviation, his account tallies with the official Council report (see T.C.C. Reports [18], Special Committee, 4 June 1943).

67. See Smith's Weekly, 6 June 1943; also TDB, 22 May 1943, reporting court proceedings.

68. See CRS MP 742, 259/37/964.

69. CRS MP 742, 259/37/1149.

70. T.C.C. Reports (18), Special Committee, 10 September 1943.

71. The estimate was Alderman Murgatroyd's (see TDB, 20 December 1943).

72. T.C.C. Reports (18), Special Committee, 5 February 1943. See also TDB, 22 April 1943.
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73. See T.C.C. Reports (18), Special Committee, 2 July 1943.

74. T.C.C. Reports (18), Special Committee, 3 September 1943. The simile was Alderman Murgatroyd's (see TDB, 20 December 1943).

75. T.C.C. Reports (18), Special Committee, 9 November 1942.


77. T.C.C. Reports (18), Special Committee, 9 November 1942.


79. See TDB, 20 December 1943. There was a special meeting of the Special Committee on 10 September 1943 to discuss "the break-down of meat distribution". (See T.C.C. Reports [18], Special Committee, 10 September 1943).

80. See, for example, T.C.C. Mins. (24), p.1690.

81. Ibid., p.1711. Cf. ibid., p.1729.

82. See TDB, 22 April 1943.


84. Ibid., p.1829.


87. See TDB, 20 December 1943.


89. Loc.cit.

90. TDB, 20 December 1943.

91. I am indebted for this description of the "North Queensland portmanteau" to Mr. Jack O'Brien, an old Townsville resident whose colourful reminiscences and anecdotes have appeared from time to time in the Bulletin.

92. T.C.C. Mins. (24), p.1711. This was on 21 January 1943.

93. Ibid., p.1754.

94. Ibid., p.1829.

95. T.C.C. Reports (18), Special Committee, 6 August 1943.

96. Ibid., 3 September 1943.
97. TDB, 20 December 1943.

98. Loc.cit.

99. T.C.C. Reports (18), Special Committee, 29 November 1943.


103. TDB, 20 December 1943.

104. Loc.cit. See also Q.P.D. (1945-1946), Vol. CLXXXVI, p.1511, where Aikens explains his rhetoric about blood flowing in the streets of Townsville.

105. CRS A373, 8896, Security Service, Correspondence File, Single Number Series 'Living Accommodation in Townsville' 1943-1944.

106. Loc.cit.

107. There is a detailed account of the effects of the war on Townsville in Ian Moles, "Townsville During World War II", in B.J. Dalton (ed.), Lectures on North Queensland History, Series I, Townsville 1974, pp.213-239.