
Elliot Johnston was a first class law student, an innovative legal practitioner and a respected QC who reached the pinnacle of his profession when he was appointed a Judge of the Supreme Court of South Australia. On leaving the Court he made a significant contribution to the welfare of indigenous people through his role on the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. There can be no doubt that Johnston left both his profession and his community far better for the life he lived. But inevitably what ensures him a place in South Australian political history is not so much this worthy life, rather the fact that for most of it he was a committed communist and a high profile member of the Communist Party in South Australia.

This commissioned biography by Penelope Debelle presents an interesting but benign account of Johnston’s life. Its title, Red Silk, ostensibly acknowledges that the contradictions between his Communist ideology and his life as part of legal apparatus of the capitalist state is where the main historical interest in Johnston lies. But if you are seeking insights into the history of the Communist Party and its role in Australian politics through the prism of Johnston’s life then this book will disappoint. Moreover, if like me you are curious to know why he remained a lifelong Communist in the face of all that was revealed about the Soviet Union, Stalin, China and Mao during his life time, you will also come away far from satisfied.

Debelle’s account has Johnston joining the Communist Party in 1941, one of the many of young ‘Depression Communists’ who signed up in the 1940s with “an idealistic commitment to create a political economy that was kinder and fairer than capitalism”. However, Stuart Macintyre, in his account of the history of the Party suggests that he was one of “a number of middle class recruits” brought into the Party shortly after organisers were sent to Adelaide in 1936 to revitalise its languishing membership. But what is certain is that he was no mere fellow traveller, or a bystander to events who just paid his dues to the party. War service saw him gravitate to the Australian Education Service, which Debelle describes as “a refuge for Communists” in the forces. In 1950 he visited the Soviet Union after attending the
Sheffield Peace Conference in the UK. A year later at the request of the Party and “without any fuss” he left the law to become a full time organiser for the South Australian branch of the Party. He was to hold this position for six years until Lance Sharkey, the Secretary General of the Party, visited Adelaide to tell him he could now best serve the Party by returning to the law. During these six years he had stood for the first time as a CPA candidate for Parliament, been elected to the State Committee of the Party and undertaken a gruelling eighteen month study trip to China after which he then travelled on to the Soviet Union. He was, according to an ASIO report in 1954, the “paramount person” on matters of party security who would have a key role in the event of the Party having to go underground.

He was at the centre of events in a period of Australian political history which still fascinates well over half a century later particularly as the meticulous recorded observations of ASIO become generally available. It is the colour and drama of these events which mark out his life and times which are missing. This might be an unfair judgement as the book is of course essentially intended to be a record of the rich life and achievements of Johnston and his equally committed wife Elizabeth. This it does well, but I was left wanting a ‘bigger’ book; a longer account which provided more detail of the role he played and his relationships with other key players on the political left.

Then there is the question of why a man of such intellect remained in the Party despite all the evidence that the institutions in which he had placed his faith had proved worthless. He is of course not the only person to find himself “staying” when others leave. Eric Hobsbawn reflected on his own decision to remain a party member 70 years after his youthful embrace of Communism in the 1930s:

I belong to the era of anti-fascist unity and the Popular Front...I belonged to the generation tied by an almost unbreakable umbilical cord to hope of the world revolution, and its original home, the October Revolution, however sceptical or critical of the USSR.2

His life would have been easier, and employment prospects brighter, if he had chosen “to slip out quietly”. But, despite the Party’s many ideological twists and turns, the ever present rationalizations, even its spectacular failures, he stayed.
Johnston also stayed, indeed he outlived the party. In part the answer is naivety which Debelle does not attempt to hide describing how he believed that “China presenting a smiling socialist alternative to the mistakes of Stalin “that Mao was on a genuinely inclusive path”. Another part of the answer is his sincerity, a virtue which even ASIO conceded; his genuine belief that the rights and decency of ordinary people were sacrosanct. However, the key is Debelle’s assessment that he embraced communism because he wanted to improve the lives of ordinary people and in doing so “he embraced it in the manner of a religious conversion”

This faith in a better society as represented by his understanding of Communism sustained him throughout his long life. It drove a commitment to the underprivileged, a lifelong determination to improve the lives of indigenous Australians, and even the nurturing of a community of high achieving and socially progressive lawyers.

Johnston died at the age of 93 shortly after this book was published. According to Penelope Debelle by 2008 only 3 ASIO files on Johnston had been released, although it has since been disclosed that another 20 exist, not all of which have been made available. So for future historians it would seem that the material exists to extend this interesting book on his life to a further volume on his times.

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