

# **CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2023**

## **2308 Reds Under the Bed**

**by Michael Considine**

## REDS UNDER THE BED – A FAMILY MYTH

In October 1957 an audacious Soviet Union launched an artificial satellite called Sputnik into outer space. Thousands of miles away on a spring evening, in the garden of a Melbourne suburban home, as a nine year old boy, I held the hand of my grandfather and looked upwards into the night sky. As our eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, we searched the heavens watching to catch a glimpse of the tiny, shiny speck of reflected light as it made its way across the heavens. When we saw it, I felt my grandfather tighten his grip slightly, in a sort of vicarious sense of pride. I was not to know that Mick Considine had already enjoyed a long association with Soviet Russia, one which had given rise to a family myth – grandpa, the Russian spy.

In 1890, four year old Michael Patrick Considine sailed from Ireland bound for West Kempsey, New South Wales with his widowed mother and three siblings.<sup>i</sup> He could not have anticipated the colourful life he would lead as a prominent labour worker, union President, radical politician and the myth that would develop around him.



Fig. 1 Michael P. Considine, 1918, author's collection

Mick lived and was schooled in Kempsey. He eventually moved to Sydney for work where he quickly became a radical, active unionist earning him six months imprisonment.<sup>ii</sup> Following his release, he made his way to the Broken Hill mines arriving in March 1911. Along with Percy Brookfield he was to become one of the most influential people in bettering the working conditions of miners. Both were prominent in the fight against conscription during WW I. As President of the Amalgamated Miners Association, Mick served a record five half-year terms. In 1917 he was elected as the Labor member for the federal seat of Barrier centred on Broken Hill. A tall, imposing figure, journalists, interviewers authors and others who met him, consistently referred to his physical features. “His relentless hatchet face, curious gliding walk and suggestion of having learnt his hairdressing in Fiji

.....”<sup>iii</sup> “A thin-faced young man with a melancholy tightness about the lips and wavy hair which rose high like a choppy sea. ....”<sup>iv</sup> “unruly dark, wavy hair and cleft chin.....”<sup>v</sup>

On 23 January 1918, Mick married Bessie, daughter of local Labor identity Bill Washington at the family home, Eaglehawk, Victoria. Percy Brookfield was best man.<sup>vi</sup> A silver butterdish that was Percy's wedding present sits on a sideboard in my home. The newly-weds moved to Toorak and during the next 7 years raised a family of 3 children.

Following the Russian Revolution of October 1917, Peter Simonoff a Russian émigré who had worked at the Broken Hill mines with Brookfield and Considine, was appointed consul-

general to Australia by the Bolshevik government. The Commonwealth Government ignored the appointment. Later that year, Simonoff was gaoled for six months for addressing public meetings which was prohibited.<sup>vii</sup>

Whilst Simonoff was serving his time Mick Considine stood in as Consul. It was this action that gave rise to the myth that Considine was a Russian spy. This can in great part be attributed to the manner in which he assumed the role, and how it was reported.

“Considine had willingly accepted the **nomination** in spite of the opprobrium he incurred by doing so while a Member of the Federal House of Representatives.”<sup>viii</sup> and Simonoff wrote that he was grateful that he “had **nominated** Considine as Acting Consul for Soviet Russia.” Another account suggests that Considine “reached the zenith of his revolutionary challenge when he **assumed** consular representation for the Soviet Union .....”<sup>ix</sup> The news press dutifully reported “Mr. Considine MP has been **appointed** by the Bolshevik Government as Acting Consul for Russia.”<sup>x</sup> and “Labor Member Considine MHR has been **appointed** Acting Consul for Russia in place of Mr. P. Simonoff who has taken his departure .....”<sup>xi</sup> Mr. M.P. Considine MHR who is **acting** as representative in Australia of the Russian Soviet Administration .....”<sup>xii</sup> “..... Mick Considine who had **appointed himself** acting Consul for the new Bolshevik government of Russia.”<sup>xiii</sup> (**My emphases**) Considine relinquished the position when Simonoff indicated that he was not leaving our shores.

Mick continued his volatile political career characterised by continuing calls to rail against conscription, advocacy on behalf of the striking miners in Broken Hill, suspensions from Parliament, and imprisonment for uttering “bugger the King, he’s nothing more than a German bastard.”<sup>xiv</sup> He was re-elected late 1919 as MHR for Barrier but defeated three years later. In the meantime, his pro-Soviet activities and demeanour had attracted the attention of the Australian Security Service.

In a report, the security service outlined their concerns about alleged soviet operatives they had identified in Australia. It was no comfort to them that a serving member of His Majesty’s Australian Parliament had been approached by a group they had dubbed The Secret Seven as “they were endeavouring to get Considine as an active Communist member. They thought that his position as a member of Parliament would render him very useful to the group in obtaining information on Government matters.”<sup>xv</sup>

After his retirement as a serving politician, Mick returned to Melbourne settling into a more mundane lifestyle as a poultry farmer, agent, and employment officer. He was secretary of his local ALP branch for many years. In 1954 he was guest of honour at Broken Hill’s May Day celebrations where he led the parade.

Michael Patrick Considine died 2 November 1959 and was cremated at the Fawkner Cemetery. As he was laid to rest, so too was the myth of reds under the bed for our family. Or was it? Following the service, mourners returned to the family home. They found Bessie and son Donel burning sheafs of Mick’s private papers in the back-yard incinerator. Within the family, it has long been accepted that amongst those papers was considerable correspondence between Mick and the Bolshevik leaders dating back to the 1920s!

- 
- <sup>i</sup> *Macleay Argus*, 24 Sept. 1890, pg. 2
- <sup>ii</sup> New South Wales, *Gaol Description & Entrance Books, 1818-1930* record for Michael P Considine
- <sup>iii</sup> From the Federal Gallery, *The Argus*, 24 Jul. 1919
- <sup>iv</sup> G. Blainey, *The Rise of Broken Hill*, Macmillan of Australia, Sth. Melbourne, 1968, pg. 124
- <sup>v</sup> Frank Farrell, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Melbourne University Press, Vol. 8, 1981, pg. 92
- <sup>vi</sup> Office of the Victorian Government Statist, *Certificate of Marriage*, 23 Jan. 1918
- <sup>vii</sup> K. Windle, *Trotsky's Consul: Peter Simonoff's Account of His Years as a Soviet Representative in Australia (1918-21)*, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 93, No. 3, July 2015, pp.493-524
- <sup>viii</sup> K. Windle, pg. 513
- <sup>ix</sup> J. Garvey, *Michael Patrick Considine: A Memoir, Recorder*, Australian Society for , the Study of Labour History, Melbourne April 1978, pg. 6
- <sup>x</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 Aug. 1918, pg. 1
- <sup>xi</sup> *The Labor Call*, Political Labor Council of Victoria, 8 Aug. 1918
- <sup>xii</sup> *Melbourne Herald*, 19 Aug. 1918, pg. 7
- <sup>xiii</sup> G. Souter, *Acts of Parliament: A Narrative History of the Senate and House of Representatives, Commonwealth of Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1988, pg. 168
- <sup>xiv</sup> G. Souter, pg. 168
- <sup>xv</sup> Australian Security Service, *The Secret Seven*, Summary No. 5, Melbourne, 26 Jul. 1922, pg. 7