Conservatives, Communists and Catholics

Introduction

Over a life of more than one hundred years, the Australian Labor Party has split three times. The first split came during the first world war, when the Labor prime minister, Billy Hughes, led his supporters out of Caucus and set up a new Nationalist Party government. Hughes’ opponents in the ALP had opposed his bid to introduce military conscription to send more men to the Western Front.

Numerically, the ALP split of 1931 was less dramatic. This time the disagreement centred on how the depression of the 1930s should best be managed. Joe Lyons and four of his colleagues, who favoured cuts in wages and government spending, resigned from the federal ALP caucus and joined a new conservative party, the United Australia Party. Lyons led the UAP, successfully, into the next election.

The third Labor split came in the mid-1950s. The Cold-War was at its height, with the Warsaw Pact countries of Eastern Europe arming against the West and the NATO countries of Western Europe arming against the East. This week we look at that far-reaching split in the Australian Labor Party, and at the political, social and religious events that surrounded it.

Post-war Cold War

In the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe during this period, ‘show trials’ and widespread repression were used to maintain the communist order. In the United States, the House of Representatives Committee on UnAmerican Activities conducted inquiries into the influence of communism and its sympathisers in every aspect of life. The Cold War and fear of communist infiltration also influenced Australian politics from the early 1950s. The trade union movement was seen to be the natural home of communism, and the Communist Party of Australia was openly aligned to the Soviet Union. The Korean war was fought in the early 1950s to prevent communist influence from spreading through Asia and into the Pacific.

As we’ve seen, the era of post-war reconstruction was characterised by significant government involvement in the economy, both under the Labor government up to 1949 and, to a lesser extent, under the Liberal government after the 1949 election. In some ways the Labor and Liberal sides of federal politics were growing more alike. Yet the fear of communism, real or imagined, became deeply divisive, particularly within the Labor Party itself, and came to be seen as one of the ALP’s electoral weaknesses. One of the most controversial actions of the Menzies government was its attempt, in 1950 - 51, to ban the Communist Party of Australia. Although the High Court decided that the government’s attempt to legislate for the ban was unconstitutional, Menzies proposed that a referendum be held to amend the Constitution so that the federal parliament could dissolve the Communist Party. The new Labor opposition leader, Dr H.V. Evatt, successfully opposed the government’s referendum, which was widely seen as a major threat to civil liberties. But his campaign meant that conservatives within his own party viewed Evatt as being soft on communism.
Sectarian Divisions

The political tensions of this period were complicated by the often sectarian character of Australian politics. Divisions between Protestants and Catholics had exercised a remarkable influence over the shape of Australian education, sport, politics, work and social events. In a society which was schooled in policies of assimilation to ‘the Australian way of life’, the Protestants and the Catholics were at a stand-off, an uneasy compromise. As Michael Hogan writes in his book, The Sectarian Strand: Religion in Australian History:

Despite the great changes in Australian society after the second world war, a social division between Catholics and Protestants was still perpetuated by the sectarian character of some of the most important social, political and economic institutions of the nation. By their own choice Catholic leaders encouraged a separation between Catholics and others in the school system And, of course, the religious division was still reflected in the political party system.


Broadly speaking, the Liberal Party was run primarily by Protestants and the ALP by Catholics. But within the ALP, Catholics made up an identifiable, influential and committed group. The conservative Catholic element in the ALP was often deeply hostile to the socialist element in the party. Dr Evatt, who led Labor from 1951 to 1960, was not a Catholic.

Tensions within the ALP and the labour movement surfaced frequently within individual trade unions. There, two groups were often vying for control: the Communist Party of Australia, and the Industrial Groups that had grown out of the conservative Catholic Action organisation.

Outside the unions, anti-communist Catholics worked in an organisation which came to be known as ‘the Movement’. The best-known of the leaders of the Movement was B.A. Santamaria, a protegé of the Archbishop of Melbourne, Daniel Mannix.

The Petrov Affair

A key event in the lead-up to the Labor split was ‘the Petrov affair’. The defection of the Soviet diplomat, Vladimir Petrov, was announced by Prime Minister Menzies shortly before the 1954 election, and it was made clear that Petrov would provide information on Australians who had supplied information to the Soviet Union. The royal commission that took place after the election caused considerable embarrassment to the Labor Party’s federal parliamentary leaders, which added to the other factors that helped keep Labor in opposition for a further 18 years. Some Labor Party members and a few historians have argued that the defection was timed to have an impact on the election by strengthening the Liberal government’s anti-communist credentials. But the balance of opinion has swung against that view.

(See the recommended reading, below, for examples of different views on the Petrov Affair.)
The Petrov affair contributed to the growing tension between the right and the left wings of the Labor Party. This crisis culminated in 1955 when the Queensland and Victorian branches of the party split, with enormous implications for the federal ALP. The conservative Democratic Labour Party (DLP) was formed by the breakaway groups. So bitter was the split that the DLP directed its preferences to Liberal candidates at all subsequent elections. The DLP held the balance of power in the Senate until the election of the Whitlam government in 1972, and so exercised significant influence over Australian political life.

Although the DLP is no longer a political force, the effects of the split are still felt in the ALP. Some commentators attribute the authority of the NSW right faction to the fact that there was no split in the NSW branch. In other words, the right wing of the branch did not lose many of its members to the DLP in the mid-1950s.

The 1950s are now frequently portrayed as an era of innocence and fun when hemlines were just below the knee, Holdens were the family car, blue suede shoes and rock’n’roll were just around the corner and the baby boomers were marching into the kindergartens. The contemporary nostalgia industry has seized the 1950s. What is often left out of this story are the fears generated in politics, race relations, relations between the sexes, and religion.

Recommended reading


Chapter 3 of the unit textbook deals with the growing Cold War tension in Australia and the rise of the Catholic Movement, and describes other features of the early years of the Menzies government. Chapter 6 details the Petrov Affair and chronicles the main political events of the 1950s.


This lively essay deals with two main postwar themes, the role of the Movement in the 1950s and the role of the churches during the Vietnam War (one of the topics we will examine in week 8 of this unit). Gilbert provides a useful overview of the period, and the essay is well illustrated.


The most dramatic single incident in the lead-up to the split was the Petrov Affair. The conservative political scientist Robert Manne gives his interpretation of the affair, and is particularly critical of earlier ‘conspiracy theories’ about the events of 1954. A different interpretation comes in Nest of Traitors (Jacaranda Press, Milton, 1975), in which Nicholas Whitlam and John Stubbs argue that the Petrov Affair raises questions about the role of Australia’s security organisation ASIO in opposing the election of a Labor government. In his essay, ‘A Labor Myth?’, Jack Waterford argues that the main damage the ALP received from the affair was self-inflicted, brought on by its leaders’ overreaction to the revelations and the royal commission; Waterford’s essay is published in Australia’s First Cold War 1945-1953, volume 2 (also known as Better Dead than Red) edited by Ann Curthoys and John Merritt (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1986).