

TROUBLED TIMES

An overview of the history of the Catholic Federation of New South Wales

JEFF KILDEA

Between 1913 and 1924 the Catholic Federation of New South Wales articulated and advocated the political interests of the Catholic Church in the state. As part of a world wide movement, having its origins in the successful resistance of German Catholics to Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* during the 1870s, the Federation was one of four such bodies that were established in Australia and which enrolled tens of thousands of Catholic men and women as members.¹

At its peak the NSW federation claimed a membership of over a hundred thousand and there were times when its activities dominated news reports in the major metropolitan newspapers for days on end. Yet less than eighty years after its demise, few Catholics have heard of the Catholic Federation of NSW, let alone are aware of what it did during its short existence. This article aims to give an overview of the history of the Catholic Federation of NSW so as to fill that gap in the awareness and understanding of the organisation and its significance in the history of the Australian Catholic community.²

Catholics in early twentieth-century Australia

When the Catholic Federation of NSW was established in 1913, Catholics were mostly Irish by birth or descent, the Irish were mostly Catholics, and the Irish Catholics were mostly on the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder. This three-fold identification of religion, ethnicity and class had long been a feature of Australian society.³ From the earliest days of European colonisation, Irish Catholics had perceived themselves as a persecuted minority. The degree to which, if at all, Catholics were in fact subject to persecution in this country is a question which has frequently been debated in the historiography of religion in Australia.⁴ Whatever may have been the reality, it was the perception which was most important in shaping the attitude of Catholics as to their place in the wider community, and during the period of the Catholic Federation's existence persecuted Catholicism was the orthodox Catholic historical interpretation.

In the first quarter of the twentieth-century Australian society comprised two

Jeff Kildea, barrister and historian, received a PhD in 2001 for his thesis on the history of the Catholic Federation. This paper, the Twelfth Gavin Cashman Memorial Lecture, was given to the Society at St Mary's Cathedral on 14 July 2002

communities: one was British in origin and Protestant in faith, the other Irish and Catholic. At a functional level these two communities generally co-existed and co-operated peacefully and effectively, but viscerally they were quite distinct and often in a state of tension. From 1910 political and industrial troubles magnified by the stress induced by the Great War saw these tensions increase to a point that at times threatened the social fabric of the nation.

The education question

The issue that chronically and most clearly divided the two communities concerned the financing of education. Originating in the 1870s, the struggle between the Catholic Church and the NSW government over the withdrawal of state funding for denominational schools had by 1910 endured far longer than either side initially contemplated and had in fact assumed a de facto stability.

The Catholic Church regarded the restriction of government assistance to state-run schools as imposing an unjust burden on Catholic parents who in good conscience could not send their children to state schools. Protestants and secularists, on the other hand, were suspicious and hostile towards Catholics' insistence on conducting their own schools. According to the *Methodist*, the Catholic Church 'seeks to segregate its young people, and to bring them up under influences which imbue their minds with the narrowest and most bigoted notions, separating them in the most sacred relations of life from the rest of the citizenship of the State'.⁵

With the election in 1910 of an avowedly non-sectarian Labor government, the Church sensed an opportunity to reopen the education issue. At first, Catholic Archbishops of Sydney, the scholarly patrician Cardinal Patrick Francis Moran, and his successor, the rotund and pious Michael Kelly, endeavoured to do so by a strategy of constructive engagement with the new government. However, the strategy's lack of success, and the mounting pressure from clergy and laity alike for Catholics to become organised in order to force the issue, resulted in increased militancy. But this approach also failed. Labor's opposition to sectarianism and the strong representation of Catholics in the Labor caucus, particularly after the party split in 1916, did not translate into the party's sympathy for the Church's claims. A number of factors in the party's collective approach to the issue combined to dash the Church's hopes for a re-negotiation of the education settlement. These factors included: political realism in the context of a predominantly Protestant electorate that remained fearful of Catholic intentions; support for the existing education system that taught both secular subjects and non-dogmatic religion; and an anti-sectarianism that, far from promoting freedom of denominational choice in education, rejected the separateness considered to be inherent in such a system.

Origins of the Catholic Federation

The Catholic Federation was not the first, nor would it be the last, organised effort by the Catholic Church in Australia to promote its interests in the wider community, particularly on the education issue. In the nineteenth century a Catholic Association had been formed on two occasions to defend, improve and raise funds for Catholic schools.⁶ At the turn of the century Catholics once again felt the need to organise. In June 1900 the newly established Melbourne Catholic newspaper, the *Tribune*, after reporting on the activities of the American Federation of Catholic Societies, pledged itself 'to promote the consolidation and federation [of Catholic societies in Australia], believing that union is strength both for individuals and societies that have similar purposes'.⁷ A few months earlier W. L. Bowditch in the *Austral Light* had urged Catholics to combine to 'put an end to dissention and division, and weld us into one body for a holy war against injustice and political tyranny'.⁸ Political organisation was also the theme of A. L. Kenny's address to the first Australasian Catholic Congress in 1900 in which he argued for the establishment of a Catholic voter registration organisation with a view to securing the 'return to each Colonial Parliament and to the Commonwealth Parliament [of] a solid Catholic party, which should be able to exercise a power similar to that possessed by the great Catholic party in the German Reichstag'.⁹ The success of the German Centre Party and the German Catholic federation, the *Volksverein*, was often cited in support of arguments in favour of Catholic organisation.¹⁰

In 1905 Father M. P. Malone of Sydney wrote two articles for the *Austral Light* in which he addressed the nature, methods and aims of Catholic federation,¹¹ and in the following year branches of the Voters' Registration Society were established in Victorian parishes.¹² Although the *Freeman's Journal* considered that, in the normal course, 'the experiment would be a dangerous one, as likely to indicate the segregation of the Catholic body in the exercise of its political privileges', it stated that the circumstances were such as to justify it.¹³ At about this time, steps were being taken in Sydney to establish a Catholic Union, but they did not proceed.¹⁴ Catholic newspapers frequently contained letters advocating Catholic organisation, but, despite these agitations and the fact that Father Malone was invited to deliver a paper on Catholic federation at the 1909 Australasian Catholic Congress, it was not until 1911 that a federation was established in Victoria, and 1913 in New South Wales.¹⁵

History of the Catholic Federation of NSW

Up until his death in August 1911 Cardinal Moran maintained his opposition to the formation of a federation, but shortly thereafter Archbishop Thomas Carr gave his consent to the establishment of the Australian Catholic Federation in Melbourne.

In Sydney Archbishop Kelly continued the Cardinal's opposition, hoping that by quiet negotiation he could gain concessions from the Labor government. He achieved some success in 1912 with the *Bursary Endowment Act* that enabled pupils at Catholic primary schools to compete for state bursaries to pay for their secondary education. But increased government benefits to state schools meant that Catholic families who obeyed the Church's teaching on Catholic schools were paying for their children's education as well as contributing through their taxes to an expanding state education budget.

In October 1912 P. S. Cleary, a leading lay proponent of Catholic federation, wrote to Archbishop Kelly setting out the case for the establishment of a federation. Although Kelly responded favourably to Cleary's suggestion, he had his doubts and attempted to limit the proposed organisation's purposes. He openly expressed his concern that there was a lack of lay leadership of sufficient ability and standing to carry out the tasks which such a body would demand. Nevertheless, during December and January representatives of a number of Catholic societies held meetings under the auspices of the Catholic Club, whose president, P. J. Minahan, was a strong supporter of Catholic federation. By March 1913, there emerged from that process a proposal and a constitution that met with the archbishop's approval. The Catholic Federation had arrived.



P.S. Cleary, first President of the Catholic Federation of NSW

Archbishop Kelly's decision to approve the establishment of the Catholic Federation in Sydney was endorsed by his episcopal colleagues around the state, and the inaugural meeting of the Federation was held at St Mary's Cathedral on 13 April 1913. It was followed by similar meetings around the state, with branches being formed at a rapid rate indicating the widespread popularity of the new organisation. Initially, the emergence of the Federation caused little controversy. However, in July 1913 Father Maurice O'Reilly, a former class mate of Archbishop Daniel Mannix and a controversialist in his own right, indicated his support for the Federation's adopting an aggressive stance in its pursuit of Catholic interests, by announcing that at the next elections, due later that year: 'We are going to sell

ourselves to the highest bidder'. In the context of a growing disillusionment among Catholic opinion leaders with the record of the Labor government, O'Reilly's outburst struck a responsive chord. Some, however, viewed it with alarm, and over the next few months a public debate ensued in both the Catholic and the secular press as to the proper role of the Federation.

The debate brought to light a number of issues that were to plague the Federation during the whole of its existence: to what extent should the Federation engage in political activity; what was the proper role of the clergy in the Federation; and was the Federation a source of unity or division in the Catholic community. Moderate Catholic opinion, led by the *Freeman's Journal*, saw the Federation's proper role as being educative rather than confrontationalist, arguing that the first task of the Federation was to establish and consolidate its position in the community, not to participate in electoral politics. However, as the election campaign intensified, militants, led by outspoken priests including Father O'Reilly and supported by the *Catholic Press*, gained the ascendancy. Initially, the Federation's lay leadership played a moderating role, but the president, P. S. Cleary, eventually threw in his lot with the militants.

The Federation decided to send a questionnaire to the parliamentary candidates, seeking their views on a range of issues of interest to Catholic electors. The questionnaire contained seven questions concerning the candidate's attitude to state subsidies for education and charities. It did not, however, broach the issue of direct financial assistance to denominational schools. In that respect the questionnaire was regarded by many as being a moderate and appropriate action for the Federation to adopt. Premier Holman, however, did not share that view and sent a 'private and confidential' circular to Labor candidates suggesting they do not respond.

Rather than neutralising the Federation's questionnaire, Holman's circular provoked a bitter and personal attack on him by Father O'Reilly with the support of P. S. Cleary and the *Catholic Press*. For over a week the pages of the Catholic and secular newspapers rang daily with invective and recrimination as O'Reilly and Holman engaged in a war by press release. Their tussle became even more personal when O'Reilly, speaking at a Federation meeting in Cootamundra, urged Catholics in Holman's electorate to vote against the premier.



Fr Maurice O'Reilly cm

Catholic Federation Campaign, 1916

JANUARY and FEBRUARY.

THE OBJECTIVE— To obtain the Renewal Subscriptions of one shilling from old Members, and to enlist 30,000 NEW MEMBERS FOR 1916.

If you back the Federation, you are sure of a win.

DO IT NOW.

The Catholic Federation started business two years ago.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED SINCE ?

EDUCATION GRIEVANCES REDRESSED.

- 1.—Children are carried **FREE ON THE RAILWAYS** to the nearest Catholic School.
- 2.—Catholic School Children are also carried **FREE IN CONVEYANCES** where Railways are not available.
- 3.—Catholic School Children receive the **SAME FREE MEDICAL INSPECTION AS PUBLIC SCHOOL CHILDREN.**
- 4.—**SCHOLARSHIPS** tenable at Public High Schools **ONLY HAVE BEEN ABOLISHED**, and Bursaries tenable at **CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOLS INCREASED.**

STATE TREATMENT OF CHARITIES IMPROVED.

- 1.—In 1915 despite financial stress £2,000 was distributed by the State amongst our Hospitals.
- 2.—The Deaf and Dum Institute of Waratah received £500 for the first time.
- 3.—A promise of **ASSISTANCE TO OUR ORPHANAGES** has been made.

WHAT THE FEDERATION CAN DO.

- 1.—Obtain the same subsidies for our Hospitals and Orphanages as **ARE GRANTED IN ALL OTHER AUSTRALIAN STATES.**
- 2.—Obtain the same payment for **SECULAR SUBJECTS** in Catholic Schools as is given in England, Ireland, Scotland, Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and many other States.
- 3.—Improve our social conditions by the abolition of **Objectionable Literature, Plays, and Pictures, and unjust ideals of civic life.**

HOW THE FEDERATION WILL DO IT.

- 1.—By strengthening the Catholic Spirit.
- 2.—By organised direction to Catholic action.
- 3.—By encouraging Catholics to take a lively interest in Public life and matters.

The Catholic Federation **IS NOT AND NEVER WILL BE ATTACHED TO ANY POLITICAL PARTY**, and so far from inducing Catholics to change their politics, it exhorts them to become active Members of the party they feel is right.

OFFICERS OF YOUR BRANCH WILL APPROACH YOU NEXT SUNDAY AND AFTER TO SECURE YOUR SUBSCRIPTION.

MEN AND WOMEN 1s. School Children 6d.

Let the Children help to get better conditions for their devoted Teachers.

☞ JOIN YOURSELF AND GET YOUR FRIENDS TO JOIN ☞

Catholics over the previous decade had increasingly aligned themselves with the Labor Party and had a special affection for Holman because of his support for Irish Home Rule. Many were, therefore, scandalised by these events. The divisions over the proper role of the Federation thus widened. Archbishop Kelly, who for the most part had remained silent during the debate, intervened during the last week of the election campaign. He at first appeared to side with Father O'Reilly, but when Liberal leader Charles Wade blundered into the controversy by reaffirming his party's opposition to state aid for denominational schools, Kelly attacked his party also.

In the result the Labor government was returned with an increased majority. The Labor candidates whom O'Reilly had specifically targeted were all elected—with Holman gaining an increased majority. The ineffectiveness of the Federation's campaign was demonstrated by the fact that the Labor Party increased its support among Catholic electors. Although the publicity gained during the campaign made the wider community more aware of Catholic grievances, this awareness had come at a high price. The Church's relationship with the Labor government—and with Holman, in particular—had been seriously damaged and the Catholic community had been divided. In an effort to avoid a repetition of the unseemly events of the 1913 election campaign, the Catholic Federation's annual conference at Easter 1914 made changes to the constitution. But the legacy of the election campaign was to last for a long time.

The Great War

The early war years were a time of hope for Australian Catholics, who believed that by sharing the burden of war with their Protestant compatriots they might be accepted as equal members of the Australian community. P. S. Cleary told a meeting of the Camden branch of the Catholic Federation on 27 August 1914:

Catholics should not look upon themselves as units in one-fourth of the community, but as units in full Australian citizenship ready and willing to take all its responsibilities, and, therefore, entitled to its full rights.¹⁶

It is not surprising, therefore, that the Federation volunteered its support for the war effort, with the general secretary offering to the Minister of Defence any possible assistance that may be required.¹⁷ However, from mid-1916 relations between the two communities began to sour once again, with the main causes being the Easter Rising in Dublin in April 1916 and the defeat of the conscription plebiscite in October 1916.

Australian Catholics initially condemned the rising, but as they learned of British reprisals they became increasingly critical of British action in Ireland. This provoked a response from Empire loyalists who publicly called into question Catholic loyalty to the British Empire. Their concerns increased when the Catholic Church failed to

support the federal government's proposals for conscription. Whereas Protestant churches called on their members to vote Yes, the official Catholic line was that the issue was a political one for individuals to determine according to their consciences. The public opposition to conscription of Archbishop Mannix and the *Catholic Press* confirmed for anti-Catholic critics their belief that Catholics were disloyal. When the result of the plebiscite was known, Irish Catholics were blamed for the government's defeat, intensifying anti-Catholic feeling in the Australian community.

Subsequent research has shown that in 1916 Catholics did not vote en bloc but tended to vote according to their class interests and not their religion. When the government put the conscription issue to the voters once again in December 1917, a number of issues emerged that affected Catholics as Catholics. In particular, the government's published scheme did not exempt seminarians and teaching brothers from the call up, potentially threatening the Church's ability to conduct its schools and to staff its parishes. Thus, Archbishop Kelly, who was well known to be in favour of conscription, publicly opposed it in 1917, as did many of his fellow bishops. Furthermore, the Catholic Federation, which had remained silent in 1916, felt free to mobilise opposition to the government's proposal through its extensive branch network and at public meetings.

When the referendum was lost a second time, an infuriated prime minister, W. M. Hughes, blamed Catholics and the labour movement for his humiliation on the issue. He and many other Australians regarded Archbishop Mannix as a particular menace. But in these troubled times, even Archbishop Kelly, once regarded as a firm loyalist, came under suspicion. In May 1918 he issued a pastoral letter decrying the fact that Catholics in Australia were expected to support the war effort even though they had grievances that remained unsatisfied and despite their anguish at the way Britain was handling events in Ireland. The Protestant and secular newspapers were quick to condemn Kelly, claiming that his remarks meant that Catholic support for the war effort was 'for sale, hire or exchange'. The archbishop denied this interpretation, but the controversy, by linking the issues of state aid and Catholic loyalty, hardened Protestant attitudes. The education concessions that the Federation had won from Labor seemed to be at risk under the new Nationalist government and the loyalty of Irish Catholics was increasingly being called into question.

During 1918, a series of incidents served to underscore their predicament. The most notorious of those incidents were: the internment of Father Charles Jerger (who was born in Germany but had emigrated to Australia as a young child) for disloyal utterances from the pulpit; the arrest of seven Irish-Australian nationalists for conspiracy; the prosecution of Father Patrick Tuomey for an anti-British speech at the Paddington Town Hall; and the death of Nurse Annie Egan at the Manly Quarantine Station after federal health authorities had denied her dying request to see a priest. The Catholic Federation took a leading role in promoting the Catholic viewpoint on these issues.

Although 1918 saw the end of the Great War, it also heralded significant changes to social, political and economic life in Australia. These changes would present a major challenge to the Catholic Federation as it sought to position itself in the post-war world. Competition intensified among those promoting various proposals for the future direction of the young nation. The president of the Catholic Federation, P. S. Cleary, in newspaper articles and monographs outlined his vision of a Christian Australia organised according to Catholic social principles. But rising militancy within the labour movement threatened that vision. Some militants were inspired by the success of the Bolsheviks in Russia; others put their faith in an Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) style of syndicalism known as the One Big Union. Both of these approaches were antithetical to Catholic social teaching which rejected the concept of class war, and advocated notions of distributive justice and worker participation through cooperatives. To defeat these militant tendencies, the Church, through members of the Catholic Federation, joined forces with moderate elements in the Labor Party to expel the militants from the mainstream of the labour movement.

In October 1919, following the introduction of proportional representation for NSW elections, the Catholic Federation adopted a resolution at its annual conference committing the organisation to direct involvement in party politics. For many years Catholic activists, including Federationists, had been advocating proportional representation because they believed it would provide the Catholic Church with direct representation in parliament. By a majority of three to one the conference supported a proposal that would see candidates endorsed by the Federation standing for office at the state parliamentary elections to be held the following March. This was to occur under the banner of the Democratic Party—a dramatic shift from the 'non-political' stance adopted when the Federation was first established more than six years before and re-affirmed after the debacle of the 1913 elections.

Although Federation members tended to support the interests of the labour movement, the Federation had frequently demonstrated it was not a mere extension of the Labor Party. The decision to run its own candidates meant that henceforth the Federation would be pitting itself directly against the party to which most Catholics gave their support. The prospect of gaining the balance of power under the new voting system was considered an opportunity too good to pass up. However, at the 1920 elections the Democratic Party's performance was disappointing, failing to attract enough support to have any of its candidates elected.

The year 1920 was also punctuated by a series of events that raised the intensity of sectarianism to its highest level for decades. The most notorious events were: the deportation of Father Charles Jerger; the arrest of Archbishop Mannix by the British navy while he was on his way to Ireland; the Sister Liguori affair, which involved a young nun dramatically leaving her convent at Wagga Wagga and taking refuge with members of the Orange Order, later suing her bishop in the civil courts for his part in her arrest and imprisonment as a lunatic; and the expulsion of Hugh



MISUNDERSTOOD.

His Grace:—"Well, maybe, 't would be better for us all if I make use of an Irishman's privilege and speak twice."

from Daily Telegraph, 21 May 1918

Mahon from the Federal Parliament for speaking out against England's policies in Ireland. While these incidents are relatively well known to those who have read the history of those times, what is not generally appreciated is that the Catholic Federation played a significant role in mobilising Catholic public opinion on these issues. For example, it organised public protest meetings concerning Father Jerger, including a monster meeting at Moore Park that attracted over a hundred thousand people, and it directed and financed the campaign to 'rescue' Sister Liguori from the clutches of the Orange Order.

These and other similar events during 1920 confirmed in the minds of many Catholics a sense of their being a persecuted minority. At the same time, many Protestants had also begun to feel insecure. The Labor government, elected in March 1920, consisted of a high proportion of Catholics. This fact and the activism of the Catholic Federation convinced many Protestants that militant Catholicism was on the march and that the prospect of 'Rome rule' was no longer fanciful. At the same time, sectarian rhetoric in Australia increasingly echoed the rising violence in Ireland—it was as if the war in Ireland was also being fought vicariously in Australia, not with guns and bombs and armoured cars but with words.

But all was not well with the Catholic Federation. It found it difficult to recover from the disruptive effect of the pneumonic influenza epidemic ('the Spanish flu'), which in 1919 had caused meetings to be postponed for months on end, and the disenchantment arising from its unsuccessful foray into electoral politics. The 1920 elections had returned a hung Parliament in which Labor governed only whilesoever the Nationalist member, Daniel Levy, was prepared to occupy the Speaker's chair. Many in the labour movement blamed the Federation for this state of affairs. Some Catholics, however, saw the potential for the Democratic Party to hold the balance of power in a new parliament if it could win just one or two seats at the next elections. Accordingly, the misgivings of the many were cast aside and, as the next elections approached, the Democratic Party once again prepared itself to enter the contest.

This time, however, organised Catholicism was opposed by organised Protestantism in the form of the Protestant Federation. Many Protestants had become concerned at what they perceived to be the disproportionate influence of Catholics on the government at Cabinet and parliamentary levels and in the public service. Fear of 'Rome rule' galvanised an electoral effort that witnessed the elevation of sectarian politics in NSW to new heights. The Protestant Federation's campaign, with its appeal to voters to elect only Protestant candidates, and a hopelessly divided Labor Party assured the Coalition parties of success. The Democratic Party did, however, secure parliamentary representation, but the extent of the Coalition's victory robbed its candidate, Dr C. J. Fallon, of any substantial influence in the new parliament. When the Nationalist Government began to implement some of the policies advocated by the Protestant Federation, Catholics could see the high price they were to pay for provoking Protestants to protect and preserve their majority status.

In 1921 the horrors of the Irish War of Independence began to subside as Britain and Ireland moved toward peace. When the Treaty was signed in London in December, Irish-Australians rejoiced. But as it became clear that a significant minority of Irish men and women were opposed to the idea of pledging allegiance to the British Crown, joy turned to disbelief and anguish as former comrades in arms began killing each other. For many years, events in Ireland had had their analogues in Australia and had fuelled local antagonisms between Catholics and Protestants. When Ireland plunged into civil war, the Australian Irish lost interest. Envoys of the Irish Republican movement who visited in 1923 mostly received a frosty welcome. Their meetings in Sydney were well attended, but it was Communists rather than Catholics who gave them official sanction. When the Federal government moved to deport the envoys, there was no repetition of the popular outcry which greeted Father Jerger's deportation.

It was against this background that the Catholic Federation slowly declined into obscurity and ultimate demise. Many of those who doubted the wisdom of electoral involvement had left the Federation in 1919 and 1920 to join the newly formed Knights of the Southern Cross, an organisation that would promote the interests of Catholics without the fanfare of the Catholic Federation. In December 1922 the Federation lost its senior and most experienced leaders, the president P. S. Cleary and the general secretary Charles Lawlor. The former resigned to take up the role of editor of the *Catholic Press* following the death of Tighe Ryan and the latter was forced out following an investigation into the Federation's financial and administrative affairs.

Other organisations soon began to take over many of the Federation's activities. For example, the Catholic Evidence Guild displaced the Federation in providing speakers for the Catholic platform in the Domain. Ironically, just as the Federation entered its final months, two of the ambitions of early federationists—a national confederation and an international Catholic union—began to take shape.

In 1924, despite the continued strength of anti-Catholicism in the community, the Catholic Federation, which had been formed to defend and promote Catholic interests, found itself with nothing to do and quietly ceased to exist. The closest thing to an 'epitaph' is an enigmatic report in the *Freeman's Journal* in May 1924 which states: 'Through force of circumstances the Catholic Federation found itself unable to function this winter'.¹⁸

Assessment of the Catholic Federation

The Catholic Federation played a significant role in many of the major controversies of its day, including: the hotly contested state elections of 1913, 1920 and 1922; the ongoing state aid debate; conscription; Irish Catholic loyalty; opposition to the One Big Union; the campaign against the internment and deportation of Father Charles Jerger; and the Sister Liguori affair. The Federation also engaged in many important but less contentious activities including: assistance to immigrants, the

homeless and the unemployed; the propagation of the teachings of the Catholic Church; and the organisation of social activities for members, particularly in remote rural communities. It was also a leading participant, sometimes in collaboration with Protestant organisations, in moral crusades such as campaigns against indecent films, plays and books. Although the Catholic Federation is sometimes mentioned in the literature in connection with some of the more spectacular issues and events, mostly it is ignored. Accordingly, the Federation's involvement in particular incidents and its overall influence have been underrated.

Although financial and administrative difficulties, coupled with the loss in 1922 of its dominant figure, P. S. Cleary, can be said to have precipitated the Federation's demise, they do not provide a complete explanation for its decline and fall. At one level it can be said that the Federation withered and died because it had outlived its usefulness. Many of the services which it had provided had been taken over by more specialised agencies: the Knights of the Southern Cross; the Catholic Evidence Guild; the Catholic Immigration Aid Association; and so on. However, at another level, one cannot help but feel that the Federation did not die from natural causes, and that rather it was done away with. There were many Catholics prominent in the Labor Party who resented the damage that the Federation had caused to the labour movement by standing candidates against the party in the elections of 1920 and 1922. There were also many in the Church who recognised the danger to Catholic interests if the Nationalist government, which had come to power in 1922 with the active support of the Protestant Federation, were to be re-elected in 1925. Although there is no direct evidence that Archbishop Kelly decided to kill off the Federation at the request of Catholic Labor politicians, the inference is compelling.

The Catholic Federation had a stormy history, and although at many times during its life, and particularly toward the end, it became somewhat of an embarrassment to the Catholic Church in the methods it employed, it was, nevertheless, an important vehicle for the mobilisation of Catholic opinion on significant issues. Furthermore, at the local level its branches provided an opportunity for social interaction amongst Catholics in local communities throughout the state, and members were educated in methods of political organisation not dissimilar to those that were employed successfully a generation later in the Movement. Whether or not the Federation caused Catholics more trouble than it protected them from is arguable. However, at times when Irish Catholics were under pressure to assimilate on terms which many of them rejected, the Federation vigorously advocated and articulated their cause. In doing so, the Federation played a significant part in the evolution of a distinctly Australian nationalism with which Irish Catholics could willingly identify. On the other hand, its belligerence often made life more difficult for those Catholics who otherwise had good relations with their Protestant fellow citizens, including neighbours, work mates, employers and, in the case of those Catholics who had climbed the social ladder, business and professional associates.

By the time of the Federation's demise the world had become a significantly

different place from that which had witnessed its establishment. In Australia, more and more Catholics were moving out of penury and taking their places in the upper echelons of society. Appeals to Catholics as an oppressed and persecuted minority were becoming less compelling. In the wider world, new challenges were emerging. Thus, organisations that were more outward looking than the Catholic Federation were needed to meet this challenge. But in its day the Federation had risen to the challenge of the troubled times into which it was born, and the work of the tens of thousands of Catholic men and women who actively supported it for more than a decade deserves to be given greater recognition than it has so far received.

¹ Other branches were established in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania.

² For a detailed account of the Catholic Federation of NSW see Jeff Kildea, *Tearing the Fabric: Sectarianism in Australia 1910-1925*, Citadel Books, Sydney, 2002

³ Michael Hogan, *The Sectarian Strand: Religion in Australian History*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1987, pp.28-29.

⁴ The view that Catholics were a persecuted minority has been challenged by those who argue that there was a liberal consensus which was shattered by Catholic intransigence (Joan and Bruce Mansfield, 'Australian Religious History: 21-23 August 1975', *Journal of Religious History*, Volume 8, 1975, p.414). See James Waldersee, *Catholic Society in New South Wales 1788-1860*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1974; Mark Lyons, *Aspects of Sectarianism in New South Wales circa 1865 to 1880*, PhD thesis, Australian National University, 1972; C. J. Duffy, 'The Origins of Anti-Catholicism in Australia', *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society*, Volume 1 Part 2, 1960, pp.1-12.

⁵ *Methodist*, 21 January 1911, p.1.

⁶ Patrick O'Farrell, *The Catholic Church and Community in Australia: an Australian History*, New South Wales University Press, Kensington, 1992, p.51; Ronald Fogarty, *Catholic Education in Australia, 1806-1950*, Melbourne University, Melbourne, 1959, pp.218-220.

⁷ Quoted in Cecily Close, *The Organisation of the Catholic Laity in Victoria 1911-1930*, MA thesis, University of Melbourne, 1973, p.30. For a history of the American federation see Adele Francis Gorman, *Federation of Catholic Societies in the United States 1870-1920*, PhD thesis, University of Notre Dame, 1962.

⁸ W. L. Bowditch, 'Catholics and Political Justice', *Austral Light*, 1899, p.694.

⁹ A. L. Kenny, 'On Catholic Registration' in *Proceedings of the First Australasian Catholic Congress*, St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, 1900, p.200.

¹⁰ See, for example, the series of twelve full-page articles in the *Freeman's Journal* between 20 January 1906 and 28 April 1906 by P. S. Cleary, who was to become the founding president of the Catholic Federation of NSW.

¹¹ M. P. Malone, 'Australian Catholic Federation: Its Nature Methods and Aims', *Austral Light*, 1905, pp.501-510. 621-629.

¹² *Freeman's Journal*, 21 July 1906, p.34.

¹³ *Freeman's Journal*, 2 June 1906, p.21.

¹⁴ In the Sydney Archdiocesan Archives there is a folder entitled 'Catholic Union and Catholic Young Men's Association' (C1101) in which there are a number of copies of a printed document headed 'Catholic Union', the text of which is reproduced in Patrick and Deirdre O'Farrell (eds), *Documents in Australian Catholic History*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, Volume II: 1884-1968, 1969, pp.148-9.

¹⁵ M. P. Malone, 'Organised Catholic Energy' in *Proceedings of the Third Australasian Catholic Congress*, St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, 1910, pp.462-465.

¹⁶ *Catholic Press*, 3 September 1914, p.18.

¹⁷ *Catholic Press*, 27 August 1914, p.18.

¹⁸ *Freeman's Journal*, 29 May 1924, p.19.