

SECTARIANISM,

POLITICS AND AUSTRALIA'S CATHOLICS

Jeff Kildea

Someone recently suggested that my book *Tearing the Fabric* might have become a best-seller had I used the word “sects” rather than “sectarianism” in the sub-title so that it would have read: *Tearing the Fabric: Sects in Australia 1910-1925*. People, on hearing the name, would have bought it in their thousands believing it to be a bodice ripping yarn or a study of sexual behaviour last century. But, given the actual content of the book, such a title as *Tearing the Fabric: Sects in Australia* would have been misleading, for sectarianism in its Australian historical context has little to do with sects – or sex for that matter.

Sectarianism is a word whose meaning many Australians living today would understand from personal experience, but if you were to look it up in the dictionary you would be surprised to find it is not defined in quite the way you understood. This is because in the Australian historical context the word sectarianism is pregnant with meaning that dictionary definitions fail to capture. It has little to do with sects and it derives its distinctive meaning – the one with which many would be familiar – from the fact that religious affiliation was generally identified with the three main national or ethnic groups that constituted European society in Australia: the English, the Irish and the Scots. Competition between religions in nineteenth and twentieth-century Australia reflected not only theological differences but also complex ethnic rivalries, particularly those between Irish Catholics, on the one hand, and English Anglicans and Scots-Irish Presbyterians on the other.

In this sense, sectarianism in Australia reached its zenith – or perhaps more accurately its nadir – during the period 1910 to 1925. It was a period when Australian society comprised two distinct communities: one was British in origin and Protestant in faith, the other Irish and Catholic. It was a time when Catholics were mostly Irish by birth or descent, the Irish were mostly Catholics, and Irish Catholics were mostly on the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder – though this last conventionally accepted generalisation may

need to be revised in the light of Judith Brett's recent article in the *Australian Journal of Political Science*.¹ 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.

Although I remember as a child in the 1950s having a vague idea that the world was divided into Catholics and Publics, I can claim no direct experience of the bitter sectarianism about which I write in *Tearing the Fabric*. By the time I was conscious of the wider world, sectarianism of the kind I describe in the book was pretty much a spent force. Nevertheless, sectarianism did continue, albeit in a less extreme form, into the 1960s; some claim it exists even today. As an adolescent I heard stories that some businesses and government departments would not employ Catholics and I recall being told that I was the first Catholic to be employed by the firm of solicitors with whom I commenced articles of clerkship in 1972. I do not know if that is true or not, but even the fact that someone thought it worthy of comment is significant in itself.

Thus, for me, researching the thesis upon which the book is based was somewhat of a revelation. Night after night for many months I would go to the State Library after finishing in chambers and read the newspapers of the period. In that way I became immersed in the times and often I found the atmosphere of that era quite disturbing. A passage on page 170 of the book captures the way I sometimes felt. The passage refers to a meeting of the Victorian Protestant Federation in November 1917 called "to protest the disloyal utterances of Dr Mannix and others":

Some Catholic anti-conscriptionists in the hall heckled during the speeches and the meeting became quite rowdy. However, a change came over the gathering when Chaplain Colonel Crookston, a Presbyterian, spoke. He told the audience of his experiences in the trenches where religious difference had no meaning and said:

"I can hardly realise, coming from there, what all this noise is about. I think it is very pitiable that at such a time there should be anything like disunity among a free people of this fair land. ... I was wondering what our boys would think if they could be transplanted, with the mud and blood of the trenches on them, to this meeting tonight. Can you imagine your own brothers and sons not caring much, and not even inquiring what religion their chaplain is?"

Given the recent media coverage of the deaths of Alec Campbell and Jack Lockett, two of the last remaining veterans of the First World War, it is well to remember that while men such as they were fighting side by side in the trenches of France – Catholic and Protestant alike – their co-religionists on the home front were warring with each other in a bitter and scandalous sectarian conflict.

Thankfully, the extreme sectarianism of those times is a thing of the past. Although many older Australians living today can no doubt recount from personal experience how it affected them, not since the 1920s was sectarianism fought out so publicly and so bitterly as to threaten to tear the social fabric of the nation.

I am reminded of a debate I attended in the 1990s at Waverley College, a Christian Brothers' school, where my sons were educated. The topic was "That Guy Fawkes was right" and the opposing school was Knox Grammar. Given that Guy Fawkes was part of a Catholic plot in 1605 to blow up the Protestant King and parliament, I thought this could be a very interesting debate indeed. But not one speaker mentioned the sectarian issue. Though disappointed that the debate was lacking in passion and ended up being a somewhat pedestrian argument about means versus ends, I was nevertheless pleased to think that the boys were either unaware of the topic's implication or were too sensitive to the feelings of the other side to raise it.

One of the ironies of the period covered in *Tearing the Fabric* is that Irish Catholics did not want to be distinctive – they wanted to be accepted as part of the Australian community. Unlike their cousins in America, they had not formed physical ghettos, but nevertheless they stood out. And what particularly marked them out was their adherence to the Catholic religion. This had the effect of making them both exclusive and excluded: exclusive because one of the characteristics of Irish Catholicism as practised in Australia, in the words of Ed Campion, was "to separate out Australian Catholics from their fellow Australians: they were not to join the same Benefit societies, they were not to 'marry out', they were to get their schooling only with Catholics";² and they were often excluded because of feelings of hostility toward them by reason of their racial origin and their Papist religion – at the time despised and feared by many Protestants.

Thus, despite the absence in Australia of a physical ghetto and despite the desire of the Irish to be accepted, the large body of Irish Catholics came to be, and to be seen to be, separate from the majority of the Australian community. In Patrick O'Farrell's pithy phrase, "The Irish banded together to defend themselves against the charge that they tend to band together."³ But it was this refusal to accept them with their distinctive ethnic background and their distrusted religion that led the Irish in the newly federated nation to demand "a definition of Australia and of being Australian which was broad and flexible enough to include them as they were".⁴

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, regarded Catholic insistence on conducting their own schools with suspicion and hostility. According to the weekly newspaper 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 In 1910 another Protestant weekly, the *Australian Christian World*, opined:

There is a strong feeling that the Roman Catholics teach their young people doctrines that are subversive of the harmony of the country. The separated teaching on religion on which the Romanists insist as a sine qua non of education is alone a matter for deepest regret, and there is very widespread conviction that the loyalty of Roman Catholics to the British crown is of the thinnest quality and may in time prove the undoing of Australia.⁶

With the election in 1910 of an avowedly non-sectarian Labor government, the Catholic Church sensed an opportunity to re-open 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, Labor's opposition to sectarianism and the strong representation of Catholics in the Labor caucus 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.

The lack of success of the archbishops' strategy and the mounting pressure from clergy and laity alike for Catholics to become organised in order to force the issue, resulted in increased Catholic militancy. At about this time the following ingredients were added to the brew:

- increasing radicalisation of the working class disillusioned by the failure of Labor governments to deliver the workers' paradise;
- dislocation of normal life during the Great War;
- the Easter Rising of 1916 followed by British repression followed by the Irish War of Independence;

- the conscription referendums;
- the demagoguery of Archbishop Mannix and Father Maurice O'Reilly; and
- the repeated calling into question of Irish Catholic loyalty during and after the war.

All contributed to a recipe of deep division and social conflict.

Tearing the Fabric tells the story of those troubled times from the Irish Catholic perspective by tracing the history of the Catholic Federation of NSW, which from 1913 to 1924 advocated and articulated the interests of the Catholic Church in the State. It was a mass organisation that was part of a worldwide movement, with branches in four states: NSW, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania. At its peak it claimed a membership in NSW of 100,000 out of the State's 400,000 Catholics. Though largely forgotten today, in its time it was well known – notorious even. It commanded the attention of the major newspapers often for days on end by reason of its involvement in the significant controversies of the day:

- the state aid debate;
- the 1913 election campaign with its “votes for sale” hullabaloo, when Father Maurice O'Reilly with the backing of the Catholic Federation campaigned against the Labor premier, W A Holman;
- the internment and deportation of Father Charles Jerger, when the Catholic Federation organised a monster meeting in Moore Park that attracted a crowd of over 100,000 people;
- the Sister Liguori affair in which a nun walked out of her convent at Wagga Wagga and placed herself under the protection of the Orange Lodge, later suing her bishop in a sensational trial in the Supreme Court where she claimed damages for his having had her arrested as being insane – the Federation orchestrated and funded the Catholic side of the contest;
- the 1920 and 1922 NSW election campaigns when the Catholic Federation fielded its own candidates under the banner of the Democratic Party, having one of its number elected to parliament in 1922.

In addition, the Federation was involved in many less spectacular, but nevertheless socially important, activities: it provided aid to Catholics in need such as immigrants, the unemployed and those requiring emergency housing; it was a major campaigner against what it regarded as immoral literature and films, often in cooperation with other denominations; and in many suburban and rural parishes it was a focus of social activities, including dances, euchre nights, debating clubs and, in some towns, it even fielded sporting teams in local competitions.

For more than eleven years the Catholic Federation was the principal promoter and defender, apart from the bishops themselves, of Catholic interests in New South Wales. But by 1924 the Catholic

Federation had outlived its usefulness. Much of its social work had been taken over by more specialised agencies. It had also become a source of embarrassment to the Church and to Catholics in the labour movement because of its confrontationalist state aid campaign against the Labor Party, a party in which, ironically, Catholics by 1920 comprised almost 60 per cent of the caucus and 40 per cent of the cabinet. The heightened sectarianism of the immediate post-war years and fears of Roman domination of the Labor Party resulted in a Protestant backlash that saw the election of an avowedly anti-Catholic Nationalist Government in 1922 that attempted to legislate against Catholic marriage laws as contained in the decree *Ne Temere*.

Once it was realised that Catholic interests were best served through collaboration with the Labor Party rather than confrontation – even given the party's anti State Aid platform – the Catholic Federation was disbanded and the embarrassing social memory of its strained relations with Labor was erased, so that today very few Australians – let alone Catholics – have even heard of it.

Yet, in its day the Catholic Federation was, and was seen to be, a significant organisation. Accounts in the historical literature of the controversies to which I have referred sometimes, though not always, mention the Federation, but until *Tearing the Fabric* there has not been a synoptic account which enables its significance to be assessed.

In some ways the book adopts what Geoffrey Blainey has chosen to call the “black armband” view of Australian history, in that it portrays Australians not always in the best light – particularly those who, motivated by religious conviction, often acted in a most un-Christian manner toward their fellow Australians. But, thankfully, the conflict in Australia never descended to the violent sectarian warfare that has occurred in the north of Ireland – though, for much of the period, the parties affected to mimic their cousins in that troubled land and to fight the Irish War of Independence vicariously until the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 and the Civil War of 1922 deprived Australians of that particular brick-bat which they used regularly hurl at each other.

Thomas Hardy once wrote, “War makes rattling good history; but Peace is poor reading.”⁷ I think that points to one of the problems Australian history faces in attracting interest among the general public. We have been such a peaceful country, thank God, that you often hear it said that Australian history is boring. Our complacency has been challenged in recent times, of course, by the discovery that the European conquest of this land may not have been as peaceful as we learnt at school. And, although in the period covered in *Tearing the Fabric*, Australians did not resort to arms to settle their differences, it was nevertheless a time of intense conflict with all the human drama that, in my opinion, makes “rattling good history” – despite the absence of sex.

Endnotes:

1. Judith Brett, "Class, Religion and the Foundation of the Australian Party System: A Revisionist Interpretation", *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol 37, 2002, pp. 39-56.
2. Edmund Campion, "Irish Religion in Australia", *Australasian Catholic Record*, Volume 55, 1978, pp. 4-16 at p. 15.
3. Patrick O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, New South Wales University Press, Kensington, 1993, pp. 8-9.
4. O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, p. 9.
5. *Methodist* 21 January 1911, p. 1.
6. *Australian Christian World* 23 December 1910, p. 2.
7. Thomas Hardy, *The Dynasts* (1904).