

The Damage was done: the demise of the Catholic-ALP alliance*

Introduction

In this paper I will put forward some ideas for a book that I am writing on the rise and demise of the Catholic-Labor alliance in the federal sphere. The working title of the book is *Iron Law No More* which relates to the fact that for most of the twentieth century, it was an iron law of Australian politics that the only way for a Catholic to participate and succeed in public life was through the Labor Party because the non-Labor side of politics was a closed shop and Catholics need not apply.¹ Today that iron law is no more. In this paper I will look at when it was that the Catholic-Labor alliance first began to weaken.

The Iron Law Is No More

The iron law is well illustrated by comparing the Labor governments of the 1940s under John Curtin, Frank Forde, and Ben Chifley with the coalition governments of the 1950s and 1960s under Robert Menzies and Harold Holt. Those three Labor prime ministers, all from a Catholic background, included 11 or 12 Catholics in their cabinets of 19 ministers. Menzies included mostly one or two Catholics in his ministries of 20 to 29 members, while Holt's ministries in 1966 and 1967 were devoid of Catholics altogether.² Furthermore, during the long reign of the Liberal-Country Party coalition from 1949 to 1972, Catholics were rarely found on the government benches. From 1956 to 1963 John Cramer was the only non-Labor Catholic in the House of Representatives. This is in stark contrast to the Labor governments of the 1940s when Catholics were more than half the caucus.

That the iron law is no more is evidenced by the fact that today Catholics are as numerous and well placed in the non-Labor parties as they are in the Labor Party, if not more so. Up to the elections in May this year, only one of the seven leaders of the Labor Party this century was a Catholic, with two others being from a Catholic background.³ In the same time frame, the Liberal Party and the Nationals each had six leaders, of whom four Liberals and three Nationals were Catholics.⁴ In 2009 the contest for leadership of

¹ As with most laws there were exceptions. In the first three quarters of the twentieth century, when on average Catholics were about 24.7 per cent of the population, Catholics were 38.25 per cent of Labor MPs but only 9.15 per cent of MPs from the non-Labor parties (other than Labor breakaway parties such as Lang Labor or the DLP). Over the same period, Catholics made up 42.57 per cent of those who served in Labor ministries but only 12.17 per cent in non-Labor ministries.

² There was a period of just under three years from 28 February 1956 to 10 December 1958 when three Catholics served in Menzies' ministry: Senator Neil O'Sullivan, Senator Shane Paltridge, and John Cramer MHR. For more than four years O'Sullivan was the sole Catholic in the ministry, as was Paltridge for just over two years. The only other Catholic to serve in a Menzies ministry was Enid Lyons MHR.

³ The one Catholic was Anthony Albanese. The other two were Kevin Rudd (twice) and Bill Shorten, who were brought up as Catholics but embraced Anglicanism as adults. The four non-Catholic Labor leaders were Kim Beazley, Simon Crean, Mark Latham, and Julia Gillard.

⁴ The four Catholic Liberal Party leaders were Brendan Nelson, Malcolm Turnbull (twice), Tony Abbott, and Peter Dutton. Dutton had a Catholic father and an Anglican mother, attended an Anglican school but has said he identifies as a Catholic, though not a churchgoer (Michael Cook, 'This Is Going to be a Unique Contest Between Two Catholics', *Catholic Weekly*, 7 April 2025, <https://catholicweekly.com.au/unusual-dynamics-at-play-in-federal-election/>, accessed 19 April 2025). The two non-Catholic Liberal leaders were John Howard and Scott Morrison. The three National Party Catholic leaders were Mark Vaile,

* A paper given by Dr Jeff Kildea, honorary professor in Irish Studies at the University of New South Wales, to the 'The Spirit of 1975: Transformations in Australian Labour History', the 19th Biennial Conference of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History held at the Victorian Trades Hall, Carlton, Victoria, 26 - 28 November 2025.

the Liberal Party was a three-way competition between the Catholic incumbent Malcolm Turnbull and his two Catholic opponents Tony Abbott and Joe Hockey. When the coalition was elected to government in September 2013, Abbott's cabinet of 19 ministers included nine Catholics.

Demise of the Catholic-Labor Alliance

Many commentators point to the Labor split in the mid-1950s as the time when the Catholic-Labor alliance began to fall apart. Certainly the split did serious damage to the alliance, particularly in Victoria. As it unfolded many Catholics either left the ALP or were expelled, establishing a breakaway party that came to be known as the Democratic Labor Party (DLP). Thereafter, the DLP attracted the votes of many Catholics who had traditionally voted Labor but were disturbed that their party was not taking seriously enough what they perceived to be the immanent and existential threat of communism at home and abroad.⁵

Although the DLP won places in the Senate, it never won a seat in the House of Representatives. However, due to its distribution of preferences, it influenced the result in a string of elections for the lower house, deliberately spoiling Labor's chances of returning to government. The highpoint of DLP representation in the federal parliament came with the 1970 half-Senate elections in which it received 11.11 per cent of the national vote and won three Senate places. In Victoria it polled 19.1 per cent. With two continuing senators, the DLP held five Senate places when the new Senate met in July 1971. But at the very next election for the Senate, the double-dissolution election of May 1974, the DLP lost all its senators. It also failed to run candidates for the lower house except in Victoria, thus diminishing its spoiling role. By 1978 it was spent as an effective political force and was dissolved.⁶

With the DLP's demise some Catholics returned to the Labor fold but many did not. The damage was done. The once solid Catholic-Labor alliance failed to recover its pre-split vitality. Moreover, Catholics were advancing in the coalition parties. At the 1975 elections Catholic coalition MHRs for the first time outnumbered Catholic Labor MHRs. As with Rip Van Winkle's awakening after 20 years of deep sleep, the world had changed since the split of 1955. Following what political scientist David Kemp called the 'embourgeoisement' of the Catholic working class, their political concerns and interests had also changed.⁷ The iron law had lost its rigidity. By century's end more Catholics were voting for the coalition parties than for Labor and Catholics were entering the

Barnaby Joyce (twice), and Michael McCormack. The three non-Catholic leaders were John Anderson, Warren Truss, and David Littleproud.

⁵ According to political scientist Paul Reynolds, 'Seventy-eight per cent [of DLP voters] were Roman Catholic and 24 per cent claimed various Protestant affiliations. Non-Christian and agnostic or atheist respondents virtually did not exist. A very high 69 per cent had attended mass in the last month—nearly two-thirds in the previous fortnight' (Paul Reynolds, 'From the DLP to Family First', papers presented at Australasian Study of Parliament Group (Queensland Chapter), Brisbane, 22 November 2004).

⁶ Cathy Madden, 'The Democratic Labor Party: An Overview', paper presented at Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2022, p. 2. Madden notes, 'Some members of the party refused to accept the vote and formed a new DLP, which they claimed was a continuation of the original DLP, a claim disputed by almost all the officers of the original DLP. ... In 2010 after a gap of almost forty years, the [new] DLP won a Senate seat at the general election with John Madigan winning 2.33 per cent of the primary vote in Victoria.'

⁷ D.A. Kemp, *Society and Electoral Behaviour in Australia: A Study of Three Decades*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia (Qld), 1978, p. 191-202.

federal parliament on the non-Labor side in record numbers that exceeded their proportion in the population.⁸

Although the split and the emergence of the DLP were thus significant factors in the demise of the Catholic-Labor alliance, my hypothesis is that the wedge that eventually broke the alliance had first been inserted before the split, during debates over bank nationalisation in 1947 and the banning of the Communist Party in 1951.

Bank nationalisation

Bank nationalisation had been a plank in the Labor Party's platform since 1919 and was consistent with its socialist objective adopted in 1921. Furthermore, Chifley had advocated it a decade before when he was a member of the banking royal commission.⁹ Nevertheless, the decision to nationalise the banks was made unexpectedly as a 'knee-jerk' reaction to the judgment of the High Court in August 1947 striking down legislation that aimed to strengthen the position of the Commonwealth Bank as Australia's central bank and to regulate private banks.¹⁰

When three days later the government announced it intended to nationalise the private banks, the news was received favourably by the labour movement but unfavourably by the banks and by conservatives. However, among Catholic labourites an unease soon emerged. Some prelates and Catholic newspapers declared as a matter of principle that bank nationalisation was socialist or even communist and was therefore something a Catholic in good conscience could not support.¹¹ Curiously, this challenge to Labor principles was occurring at a time when Catholics were more than half the Labor caucus and almost 60 per cent of the cabinet. Had not Catholic concerns with Labor's socialist aspirations been resolved with the church's endorsement of the party in 1905 during George Reid's anti-socialist campaign and again in 1921 when Labor adopted the socialist objective?

To understand why this issue, which had lain dormant in Catholic circles for a quarter century, was suddenly revived, one needs to appreciate that to many Catholics in post-World War II Australia, socialism and communism were linked and that communism was perceived as an imminent threat. Still fresh in the memory of Australian Catholics were newspaper reports of the wanton murder of bishops, priests, and nuns during the

⁸ The 1996 Australian Election Study showed that 50.8 per cent of Catholics voted for the coalition and 40.4 per cent for Labor (Rodney Smith, 'Religion and Electoral Behaviour in Australia: Searching for Meaning', *Australian Religion Studies Review*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1998, pp. 17-37, p. 18); John Warhurst, 'Religion and Politics in the Howard Decade', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2007, pp. 19-32, p. 21; Donovan, 'The Irrelevance and (new) Relevance of Religion', pp. 626-646, p. 629.

⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald* 24 June 1919, p. 7; *Report of Royal Commission into the Monetary and Banking Systems*, 1937, p. 263.

¹⁰ *Melbourne Corporation v The Commonwealth* (1947) 74 CLR 31; *Sydney Morning Herald* 14 August 1947, p. 5; 18 August 1947, p. 2. See John Faulkner and Stuart Macintyre (eds), *True Believers: The Story of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest (NSW), 2001, p. 68.

¹¹ For a survey of Catholic attitudes to bank nationalisation see John Warhurst, 'The "Communist Bogey": Communism as an Election Issue in Australian Federal Politics 1949 to 1964', PhD Thesis, Flinders University, 1977, pp. 43-46, 62-72. See also Bruce Duncan, *Crusade or Conspiracy: Catholics and the Anti-Communist Struggle in Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2001, pp. 110-121.

Spanish civil war, conjuring in their minds images of a fate that would likely befall Australia should the communists gain control here.¹²

Unlike 1905 and 1921, Labor's commitment to socialism now raised in Catholic minds questions of existential concern. To these troubled Catholics, communism was on the march in Eastern Europe and in Asia,¹³ while at home communists had taken control of several key trade unions affiliated to the Labor Party. Mobilised by the Catholic Social Studies Movement, Catholic trade unionists were at this time engaged in a bitter struggle to push them out.¹⁴

In Sydney, Archbishop Norman Gilroy, who was overseas until early October, largely avoided the controversy but the *Catholic Weekly* adopted a negative stance to Chifley's proposal, implying that bank nationalisation overstepped the line of what was acceptable if Catholics were to associate themselves with the Labor Party.¹⁵ Archbishop Duhig of Brisbane took a similar approach, calling it 'a revolutionary measure':

The Catholic Church believes in the principle of private property ... If the Government can do this with banks today they can do it just as easily with private property ... It savours to me too much not only of Socialisation but of Sovietisation.¹⁶

Archdeacon Thomas O'Donnell of Hobart declared, 'Its main object is to promote communism' and 'It would be the first step towards making Australia a totalitarian state and its people slaves'.¹⁷

Ironically, given what was to occur in the 1950s, the government's proposal was received more sympathetically by Catholic authorities in Victoria than in other states.¹⁸ Archbishop Mannix adopted a wait-and-see approach, seemingly content with the Blackburn interpretation of Labor's socialist objective.¹⁹ Melbourne's Catholic newspaper the *Advocate* opined that nationalisation of trading banks was not in direct contradiction of any social principle of the Church so that it was essentially a party-political issue. Director of the Melbourne-based Australian National Secretariat for Catholic Action (ANSCA) B.A. Santamaria adopted a similar approach to Mannix. He

¹² See, for example, 'Anti-Catholic Outrages in Spain' (*Catholic Freeman's Journal* 6 August 1936, p. 24); 'Terrible Atrocities in Spain/Wholesale Slaughter of Clergy' (*Catholic Freeman's Journal* 27 August 1936, p. 25); 'Those Murders in Spain' (*Catholic Freeman's Journal* 11 February 1937, p. 24).

¹³ See, for example, 'Communism on the March' (*North West Champion* 4 March 1948, p. 4); 'Reds on the Move in Asia' (*Herald* 17 October 1947, p. 1); 'World Conquest by 1953 Alleged Russian Aim' (*Worker* 20 November 1950, p. 6); 'Threat to Australia Worst Ever' (*Daily Advertiser* 24 January 1951, p. 7).

¹⁴ See, for example, 'Increased Union Opposition to Communist Control' (*Toowoomba Chronicle* 26 April 1949, p. 1); 'Alleged Communist Control: Unionists Seek T.H.C. Help' (*Age* 16 February 1950, p. 4); 'Communists Challenge the A.L.P.' (*Smith's Weekly* 27 January 1945, p. 3).

¹⁵ *Age* 2 October 1947, p. 12; *Catholic Weekly* 11 September 1947, p. 4. This started a vigorous debate in the letters pages of the weekly: *Catholic Weekly* 25 September 1947, p. 6 (SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT).

¹⁶ *Argus* 22 September 1947, p. 1.

¹⁷ *Argus* 1 September 1947, p. 3; *Sydney Morning Herald* 13 September 1947, p. 4. Archbishop Ernest Tweedy later forbade O'Donnell from denouncing bank nationalisation (T. P. Boland, *James Duhig*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Qld., 1986, p. 326).

¹⁸ 'The positions of Melbourne and Sydney Catholics as regards the legitimacy of Catholic support for the A.L.P. was the reverse of those taken in the better-known controversies of the late 1950's' (Warhurst, 'The Communist Bogey', p. 68).

¹⁹ *Catholic Weekly* 2 October 1947, p. 1. The Blackburn declaration, adopted at the 1921 federal Labor conference qualified the socialist objective by stating that the Labor Party only sought to socialise industry in order to 'eliminate exploitation and other anti-social features of industry'.

considered Sydney's condemnatory attitude to Labor's socialist objective to be 'philosophically mistaken, historically uninformed, and that it completely ignored the fact that the policies likely to be pursued by a Labor Government ... would have little to do with philosophical Marxism'. He believed that it would be 'extremely damaging to the Church's mission of influencing public life if Catholics were encouraged to leave [the] Labor Party'.²⁰ Adelaide's Archbishop Matthew Beovich agreed.²¹

In September 1948 the Australian Catholic bishops published a social justice statement entitled *Socialisation*. Given that it was prepared by ANSCA and drafted by Santamaria, it is not surprising that the statement asserted that bank nationalisation was not in itself opposed to the principles of social morality. It was a political question for prudential judgment rather than a matter of faith and morals.²² But many Catholics disagreed with this analysis. According to historian Timothy Suttor, the controversy over bank nationalisation 'ended the Labour-Catholic compromise forever'.²³ However, political scientist John Warhurst was more sanguine:

[D]espite the existence of a not inconsiderable grouping of prominent Catholics who took up anti-government positions on the socialisation question, the great bulk of the Catholic hierarchy remained loyal to the A.L.P., or at least were not heard publicly to the contrary. This commitment to the A.L.P. persisted in the face of strong Catholic opposition.²⁴

Pre-election surveys conducted by the Australian Public Opinion Poll showed no decline in Catholic electoral support for Labor between 1946 and 1949.²⁵ Nevertheless, by raising doubts as to whether Labor policy was consistent with Catholic social teaching, the controversy caused a crack in the Catholic-Labor alliance that in the 1950s would develop further into a severe fracture.

The Communist Party Dissolution Act

Following the coalition's victory at the 1949 elections, the Menzies government enacted legislation in October 1950 banning the Communist Party. Despite misgivings by Chifley and Labor's deputy leader Bert Evatt, the parliamentary party, on instructions from the national executive, had not used its majority in the Senate to defeat the bill. At a time when the 'Iron Curtain' was being drawn across eastern Europe, the Chinese Communist Party had gained control of China, and the Korean War had just begun, the executive believed it would be electorally damaging for Labor to appear to be soft on communism.

After the legislation was passed, the Communist Party and some trade unions challenged it in the High Court. Counsel for the Waterside Workers Federation was Evatt. On 9 March 1951 the High Court ruled that the act was unconstitutional.²⁶ Determined to press on with the legislation, the government called a referendum to

²⁰ B. A. Santamaria, *Against the Tide*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1981, p. 44.

²¹ *Advocate* 20 August 1947, p. 6; 17 September 1947, p. 3.

²² Michael Hogan (ed.), *Justice Now!: Social Justice Statements of the Australian Catholic Bishops First Series, 1940-1966*, Department of Government and Public Administration, University of Sydney, Sydney, 1990, pp. 98-111; *Catholic Weekly* 2 September 1948, p. 1. Santamaria, *Against the Tide*, pp. 44-46.

²³ T.L. Suttor, 'Australian Catholic Culture', *Manna*, 1961, pp. 122-136, p. 130.

²⁴ Warhurst, 'The Communist Bogey', pp. 66-67, 71.

²⁵ In fact, they showed a slight increase from 72 per cent to 73 per cent (Leicester Chisholm Webb, *Communism and Democracy in Australia: A Survey of the 1951 Referendum*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1954, pp. 97-98).

²⁶ *Australian Communist Party v Commonwealth* (1951) CLR 1.

amend the Constitution to validate the act. At that referendum held on 22 September 1951 the Labor Party, now led by Evatt, campaigned against the government's proposal.

At first it looked as if the referendum would easily pass. Only one metropolitan newspaper, Melbourne's *Argus*, urged a No vote, while a Gallup poll conducted three months beforehand had shown 80 per cent support for the legislation. One month out it was still a commanding 73 per cent. A week before the vote, Yes was at 53 per cent and No at 40 per cent with 7 per cent undecided. In the end, after a bitter and emotional campaign, the result was a narrow win for the opposition with 50.48 per cent of the national vote and a majority of electors in three states voting No.²⁷

Not all Catholic anti-communists supported the ban on the Communist Party. In 1950 Santamaria, with Archbishop Mannix's backing, had advised the government not to introduce the legislation. They argued that it would undermine the efforts of trade unionists successfully fighting to isolate and defeat communists on the factory floor. During the referendum campaign, most Catholic bishops, including Mannix, adopted a neutral stance. The only bishop to openly advocate a Yes vote was Archbishop Duhig, who declared, 'I believe the best thing for Australia is to curb the menace of Communism. If it is not curbed we will pay dearly for it'.²⁸ Despite Santamaria's previous stance, the Movement, against Mannix's advice, campaigned in support of the referendum. Santamaria would later admit it was a mistake to have done so.²⁹

For Catholic labourites, the issue proved to be yet another source of anxiety in their relationship with the Labor Party. The referendum was very divisive within Catholic parishes and families. According to an opinion poll taken a week before the vote, Catholics were split 50-50 over the issue. As John Warhurst has pointed out, the significance of these figures is not that the Catholic vote was split evenly but that more than a quarter of the 68 per cent of Catholics who voted Labor at the double dissolution election five months before supported the coalition government's proposal at the referendum.³⁰

Conclusion

While bank nationalisation did not cause the Catholic-Labor alliance to rupture, it did, as Warhurst has observed, 'lead to a revival of a dormant debate in Catholic circles about the nature of the socialism of the A.L.P. and its reconciliation with Catholic social principles'.³¹ Perceiving communism to be on the rise both internationally and domestically, many Catholics, their minds seared by stories of atrocities in Spain and Eastern Europe, regarded the threat as imminent and existential, unlike in 1905 and 1921 when it was more theoretical. The referendum on banning the Communist Party yet again put the question of Labor's attitude to communism in the spotlight.

²⁷ Webb, *Communism and Democracy*, pp. 129, 133-134; Murray Goot and Sean Scalmer, 'Party Leaders, the Media, and Political Persuasion: The Campaigns of Evatt and Menzies on the Referendum to Protect Australia from Communism', *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2013, pp. 71-88; Frank Bongiorno, 'Herbert Vere Evatt and British Justice: The Communist Party Referendum of 1951', *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 44, 2013, pp. 54-70.

²⁸ *Queensland Times* 19 September 1951, p. 1

²⁹ Santamaria, *Against the Tide*, p. 125.

³⁰ John Warhurst, 'Catholics, Communism and the Australian Party System: A Study of the Menzies Years', *Politics*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1979, pp. 222-24, p. 230.

³¹ Warhurst, 'The Communist Bogey', p. 63.

Yet, at the same time as some Catholics were questioning Labor's commitment to the fight against communism, opposition was growing within the labour movement to what many perceived as the undue influence of the Catholic church in the party's affairs. Eventually, the two forces would collide in 1954-55, leading to the split, in the course of which the decline of the Catholic-Labor alliance definitely did take hold.