

Feature

B. A. Santamaria 1915-1998: *The social activist*

Conservative policies, radical economics

By Fr BRUCE
DUNCAN CSSR

(Dr Bruce Duncan is a Redemptorist priest teaching history and social ethics at Yarra Theological Union in Melbourne. His recently completed book on the Catholic Action movements and the Split is with a publisher.)

The death of Mr B A ('Bob') Santamaria marks the end of an era in the history of Australia and of the Church. He was a many-sided man and his biographer will face a herculean task exploring Santamaria's many activities over more than 60 years of public and political life.

Exemplary in his family and personal life, he was faithful to visiting old and sick friends and unostentatiously performed many charitable deeds to people in need or trouble. His visitors found him a most gracious, charming and humorous host and conversationalist, especially in his later years when he established contact with some prominent former opponents in the ALP or the Communist Party.

The key to his social activism was to be found in his agitation at the fate of friends and neighbours during the Depression of the 1930s. His early writings castigated capitalism, which he saw as a sister to communism in their abuse of human rights and degradation of working-class people.

But the Spanish Civil War and the development of communist organisation in Australia convinced him that communism was the prime threat to Australia. Until the fall of the Soviet



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Union in 1989, he concentrated his great skills of intellect, debating, organisation and writing to contest communism at every opportunity. However, he never abandoned his critique of capitalism, as emerged more clearly in recent years.

The values of his Italian family were profoundly formative for him, convincing him of the importance of happy nurturing families; of small farms and rural communities to provide property and political power widely; and of the role of the Catholic Church in providing a framework of meaning in life.

Through the patronage of Archbishop Mannix and his own charismatic ability, Santamaria achieved a position of unprecedented authority within the Catholic community, founding the *Catholic Worker* newspaper in 1936, working in the National Secretariat of Catholic Action in Melbourne from 1938, organising the National Catholic Rural Movement in 1939 and, most importantly, mobilising his secret anti-communist industrial organisation, the 'Movement', from 1941.

In the early years, he won

wide support among Catholics, especially the clergy and religious personnel, and developed alliances with various factions within the ALP to resist communist influence.

In 1945, Archbishop Gilroy in Sydney formalised growing collaboration between the Catholic anti-communist organisations in Sydney and Melbourne, and the Movement became national. Dr Paddy Ryan MSC had been the leading clerical anti-communist activist in Sydney, but his organisation had an ethos different from the Melbourne Movement.

The different historical experiences and cultures of

close Movement colleagues in Sydney maintain that he never really understood this Sydney ethos, which in part explains why Sydney's Archbishop Carroll from early 1954 tried to veto some of Santamaria's political goals.

Carroll's rationale and role in the Split has not been fairly outlined in much of the literature of the Split. He properly objected to the fact that the lay Movement claimed to direct Catholics in political and union affairs in the name of the Church, though some key Sydney Catholics disagreed strongly with such Movement direction.

After Evatt's denuncia-

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the Sydney and Melbourne movements underlay the difficulties which soon began to emerge. The Sydney 'style' favoured back-room diplomacy through informal networks while Melbourne was more assertive and confrontational as was typified in Archbishop Mannix himself.

The bitter sectarianism of the 1920s shielded the Sydney Church away from public controversy, and Jack Lang's Labor government delivered NSW Catholics from the threat of hostile government legislation. Catholic kin and Labor networks were closely intertwined, and the hierarchy preferred to rely on these informal networks of influence, in part co-ordinated by the Knights of the Southern Cross.

Some of Santamaria's

tion of the Movement in October 1954, Carroll did not endorse Santamaria's counter-attack and eventually asserted that the Sydney hierarchy, not Santamaria, had ultimate control over the Sydney Movement.

By this stage, most Catholics, who had little reliable information, were thoroughly confused, especially as the divisions within the Movement became more public, and it became clear that the bishops themselves were deeply at odds.

Santamaria had added to the confusion. In 1953-54, he had distributed among Movement members a paper, 'Religious apostolate and political action', which basically envisioned the Movement as the political arm of the hierarchy, and began to attempt to achieve greater influence over policy and personnel within

the ALP. Representatives of the Sydney hierarchy interpreted this as an attempt to take control of the ALP and strongly contested this new direction. They still supported the Movement's anti-communist work in the unions, but feared that any Catholic attempt to win dominance in the ALP would create a sectarian explosion.

Santamaria's paper only became public in Australia in 1956, after it was published in the *Bombay Examiner*. It was very damaging to him, because it appeared to confirm the accusations of his critics. Santamaria was also very slow to disavow the *Examiner* views.

So badly were the bishops divided that Cardinal Gilroy finally asked that Rome intervene in the dispute. After an involved investigation, the Vatican insisted that the Movement was to disengage from industrial and political activity, and to reform as an educational body.

Santamaria and Mannix had been confident of winning Vatican backing, and were devastated by the decision. But Sydney also received a setback, as its Movement was directed to withdraw from industrial activity.

Sydney transformed its Movement into the Paulian Association, while Santamaria dissolved his Catholic Social Movement, renaming it the National Civic Council, a purely civic body which was to act independently of the Church and on its own responsibility. In fact, however, it maintained intimate links with the Melbourne

Church. The skirmishing between Catholic groups over the Movement dispute underlay Catholic politics for decades, influencing in turn the debates about the Vietnam war, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, liberation theology, Catholic aid programs in the third world (Santamaria organised a boycott of the bishops' Project Compassion in the 1980s), the peace movements and changes in the Church.

Santamaria realised that he had made mistakes, though the ones he admitted were often not those his critics charged him with. In an interview, he told the present writer, only half jokingly, that he regretted many things he had written, especially in his early years.

His weaknesses derived from the basically conspiratorial framework in which he interpreted the world a tendency to push his analyses to a logical extreme without sufficient account of moderating circumstances, his inadequate grasp of economics, and, curiously, his disdain for formal theology.

Apart from his anti-communist successes, perhaps his most important contribution to Australian politics was to inject a well-developed intellectual rationale for his blend of conservative social policies with a radical economics. Familiar to Europe, it was new to Australia. Though he felt marginal in the Church in later years, he will be long remembered as Australia's most prominent Catholic social activist this century.

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