

**F**orty years ago last October, Australia was startled by the accusations of the Labor Party leader, Dr H.V. Evatt, that a secret organisation led by Mr B.A. Santamaria was trying to take over the Labor Party and political power in this country.

The final outcome was the so-called Split, during which the Labor Party rent itself asunder: the formation of the Democratic Labour Party helped ensure that the ALP was unable to win a national election until 1972.

The Catholic Church was quite traumatised by the dispute, which marked a decisive watershed in the history of Christianity in Australia. It signalled an end to an age of innocence in the muscular style of Catholicism epitomised by the Santamaria Movement.

The fracas shattered the 'ghetto' style culture of Catholics in many parts of Australia. People were denounced from the

*BRUCE DUNCAN  
brings to light some  
hitherto unpublished facts  
about B.A. Santamaria's  
Movement and its effects  
on the Catholic Church in  
Australia.*

pulpit, there were scuffles in the aisles of churches, even families were split into passionately-held positions for the ALP or for the Movement.

The hierarchy and clergy were themselves bitterly divided. As the lines of cleavage deepened and set, the bishops in October 1956 were unable to meet

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together. Even after a directive from the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Carboni, to attend a further meeting in Sydney, almost half the bishops — those supporting the Santamaria view — declined. To break this damaging deadlock, Cardinal Gilroy, Bishop James Carroll (Sydney) and Archbishop O'Donnell, auxiliary of Brisbane, went to Rome to place the whole business before Vatican authorities. It was an unprecedented move.

• *Formation of  
the Movement*

IN an astonishing achievement, the 30-year-old Santamaria had won the approval of the Australian bishops in 1945 to form a national organisation to combat communism, particularly in the unions. Called the Catholic Social Studies Movement, it incorporated various anti-communist groups, most notably Santamaria's own organisation in Victoria and the Sydney network



which operated under the inspiration of the Sacred Heart priest, Dr Paddy Ryan. Other networks joined in, most notably that of Frank Rooney in Newcastle, a tough and determined opponent of communism in the unions.

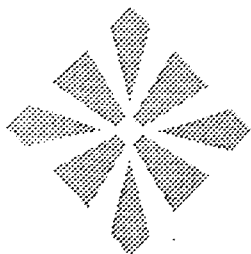
• *Conflict within the Movement*

ALMOST from the start, however, differences arose about policy, control and personnel. Sydney had its own style and loyalties which were not always apparent in Melbourne. Not till the early 1950s was Santamaria able to move in a more effective organising team to run the Sydney Movement, but this caused some resentment as it was regarded as a Melbourne takeover.

At first, the Movement and the ALP had worked closely together, particularly in the Industrial Groups which by the early 1950s had dealt the communists many severe blows. But tensions had been building well before Evatt's 1954 cynical denunciation not just within the Labor Party, but within the Catholic Action movements as well as between the Sydney and Melbourne hierarchies.

The central issue of contention concerned the relation between church-directed movements and industrial or political ones. The Movement claimed to operate with the authority of the bishops and hence it was disloyal of Catholics to oppose it. This claim was strongly contested by various groups, and particularly in Melbourne by many of the older Campion Society members who, like Kevin Kelly, were enthusiasts for the political thinking of Jacques Maritain.

The Movement thinking was also contested by some key people in Sydney, including Brian Doyle, who wrote for the



*Catholic Weekly* before moving to edit the *Brisbane Catholic Leader* in 1958. Under him, this paper became the most prestigious Catholic weekly in Australia, and was greatly sought after for its in-depth reports on overseas events and the significance of events after the Second Vatican Council.

Doyle was a formidable debater, voracious reader and a vigorous proponent of the ideas of Catholic Action. Fr Eris O'Brien had nominated him to head national Catholic Action in the late 1930s, but the job went to Melbourne's Frank Maher and Santamaria instead. Like other well-informed Catholics, Doyle grew alarmed about the confusion between Catholic Action and the Movement, and dismayed that Santamaria had continued to head both organisations. Following Maritain, he thought that it was improper to demand a line of strictly political action in the name of the church.

Despite the rumblings, Santamaria ignored the warnings of friends and critics. Instead in his 1952-53 paper 'Religious Apostolate and Political Action', he developed his ideas about church control of his political movement, and his political vision to reconstruct Australia. Published in the *Bombay Examiner* in June 1955, it later found its way into the hands of the Labor Party, and proved very damaging to Santamaria's credibility.

• *Rebutting Evatt*

HOWEVER, Santamaria's difficulty in October 1954 was this: suddenly forced into the public spotlight, how could he protect his secret political organisation and its supporters and still answer the questions of journalists? With hindsight, it would have been much better for the Movement to have frankly acknowledged what it was doing, and to have transformed itself into an open organisation.

Instead, many defenders of the Movement fell back on the practice of mental reservation, a term used to offer misleading answers to questions which one considered the questioner had no right to ask, but to do so without telling untruths. It was a fine distinction, and one not always handled well in practice. However, it gave the unfortunate impression to many, and even some long-time Movement members, of telling outright lies. Even some bishops were caught out in the limbo-land of mental reservation.

• *The Pan-Pacific Secretariat*

ANOTHER apparent reason why Santamaria did not want to change the status of the Movement into that of a public organisation was because of the damage he thought that would do to his attempts to extend his Movement model throughout Asia. The concept was discussed under the name the Pan-Pacific Secretariat.

Santamaria's ideas alarmed members of the Permanent Committee for International Congresses of the Lay Apostolate in Rome, headed by Mgr Pietro Pavan with the Australian Grail member, Rosemary Goldie, as secretary. They had seen Santamaria's article in the *Bombay Examiner*, and feared that any attempt to establish a

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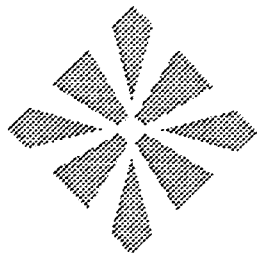
The Vatican supported the Maritain position that political action should be the responsibility of the laity acting independently.

secret political organisation run by the church in India, or indeed anywhere in Asia, would be provocative and extremely dangerous.

Ms Goldie immediately had copies of the *Bombay Examiner* articles sent to her close Sydney friend, Jean Daly, an accomplished thinker, Catholic feminist and outstanding community leader, in the hope that difficulties in Australia about the status of the Movement could be resolved, and hence head off problems overseas.

At the Congress on Catholic Action in Manila, Philippines, in December 1955, Pavan gave an address which implicitly rejected the Santamaria model and stressed the difference between Catholic Action and the independent action of Catholics. He too advocated the Maritain distinctions. He was well informed about difficulties in Australia and elsewhere, and was further briefed in Manila by Brian Doyle, Fr John Leonard of the Sydney Catholic Youth Organisation, and other delegates.

Santamaria was unable to attend the Congress but his close friend, Fr Harold Lalor SJ, did, and afterwards toured most of the countries of Asia trying to interest the leading bishops, Jesuit colleagues and Catholic Action officials into adopting or adapting the Movement model.



Despite Santamaria's hopes, these efforts collapsed with the increasing opposition.

• *Santamaria's exemplars*

MORE so than most of the other Champions, Santamaria's thought had been deeply influenced by Denis Jackson. Though he has been neglected by historians, Jackson more than any one else shaped the thinking of Melbourne Catholics on international affairs during the 1930s and 1940s.

A prodigious writer and media commentator, he admired the political views of the reactionary *Action Française* and was a monarchist. Jackson's radical anti-capitalist and anti-communist views set the framework for Catholic thinking in Melbourne.

Santamaria's preferred political model was partly a product of his pragmatic need to forge the most effective tool against communism, but partly also a reading of trends in Rome itself. He had been following closely the rise of the so-called 'integralist' faction which had become dominant during the 1950s.

This was reflected politically in the increasing importance of Professor Luigi Gedda, who was not only head of the National Civic Committees (NCC), which mobilised Italians to vote against the communists, most spectacularly in the 1948 elections, but later rose to the top of Catholic Action itself.

Santamaria not unreasonably interpreted this to mean that the Vatican approved of a close link between Catholic Action and political action.

• *The new Roman position*

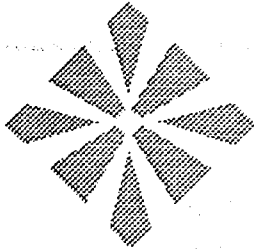
UNFORTUNATELY for Santamaria, the next pope in 1958 was John XXIII, who undermined the position of the integralists and initiated the Second Vatican Council, which was carried through by Pope Paul VI, another enthusiast for Maritain's political thinking. As reflected in his *Against the Tide*, Santamaria felt himself abandoned by the Vatican and these two popes.

Even before John XXIII, however, when the Vatican in 1957 was investigating the dispute about the Movement, at the hearings in Rome Pavan was advocate for the Sydney case, Fr Messineo SJ, a conservative, for Melbourne. The Vatican attempted a face-saving compromise in Australia, but it fundamentally supported the Maritain position that political action should be the responsibility of the laity acting independently. Santamaria had to end his Catholic Social Movement which he reconstituted as the National Civic Council (NCC).

Rome also ended Sydney's claims to episcopal control over the Movement's political activity. Pope Pius XII himself had finally to intervene personally in the dispute.

• *A further query*

THOUGH the Melbourne-aligned bishops made their written representations to Rome, why did they not send their own delegation with that of the Sydney bishops? Perhaps because their supporter, the Apostolic Delegate, advised against it, presumably because he thought it unnecessary since he himself was so firmly behind the San-



tamaria group and that Rome would support him. If so, he was wrong.

Mannix and Santamaria were deeply shocked that the Roman decision went against them, though they tried to put a good face on it, and Santamaria offered a clever interpretation which was able to preserve most of the Movement structure without appearing to disobey the Roman directives. Under the influence of Archbishop Carboni, he had gradually shifted his position to claim that the Movement was one of laity acting independently of the Church and hence not under Church direction. Thus Church leaders or groups were not entitled to use their authority or organise against his Movement.

• *Loyalty as response*

IN the circumstances of the time, with little access to reliable information, most Catholics had little choice but to follow their church leaders, even when these leaders disagreed among themselves. The governing value here was loyalty to one's hierarchy and colleagues when times got tough, even though the personal or career cost might be high. At times, loyalty was an even stronger value than obedience to bishops in political matters. Hence in NSW, Frank Rooney, Jack Kane, Kevin Davis and others struggled for the Santamaria cause.

The greatest tragedy of the Split was that so many people of

immense goodwill, who had devoted sometimes years of their lives to fighting the threat from communism in the unions, suddenly found themselves on opposite sides. Practically everyone suffered from lack of information. Even some highly-placed people in the Movement knew little of the inside politics of what was happening, especially within the Church.

The dispute cannot simply be blamed on a few of the principal people involved. In a sense it resulted from a failure in the Catholic community as a whole to think through the issues more clearly. Though there were some informed Catholic intellectuals, they were not able to go public and air the issues properly.

The bishops, too, were at fault in not exercising their responsibility more carefully — right from the early 1940s. Despite constant internal problems, the bishops were unable to resolve the central is-

sues. Those who later pressed for changes faced the immobility occasioned by the need for cohesion and loyalty to the people in the field.

Santamaria thus became a public figure in national life. Highly intelligent, of indomitable will and with immense energy, he has sustained his political role till the present when he is almost 80 years old.

The church was never quite the same after the Split. The divisions within the church had ironically spiked most of the sectarian reaction, but this extraordinary endeavour of the Santamaria project to meet the threat of secularisation had largely failed.

Yet at the same time, the Catholic community had learnt to think more carefully, to recognise more clearly the limits and ambiguities of political action, and to adapt more constructively to the dilemmas of living in a secular culture. ■

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