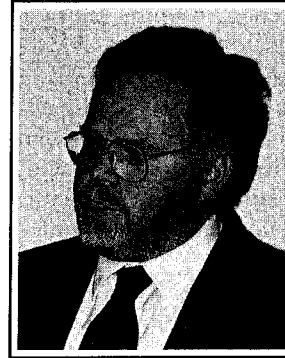


Greg Sheridan



Bruce Duncan

Photos: David Karonidis

The late BA Santamaria, otherwise known as "Bob" Santamaria, became one of Australia's rarer public figures. He led a political organisation – the National Civic Council – for over four decades, presented a television commentary "Point of View" for three decades, paid for by the NCC, and from 1976-98 was a columnist for *The Australian*. Heralded as a friend of the Liberal Party, BA Santamaria declared he had never voted Liberal. Accused of initiating the Labor split of the 1950s as an avid anti-Communist, he came to be admired by prominent leftists such as Phillip Adams. To shed some light on a complex figure, Bruce Duncan, author of *Crusade or Conspiracy – Catholics and the Anti-Communist Struggle in Australia* (UNSW Press) and Greg Sheridan, Foreign Editor, *The Australian* and friend of BA Santamaria addressed The Sydney Institute on Tuesday 24 July 2001.

SANTAMARIA,

THE CHURCH AND THE "MOVEMENT"

Bruce Duncan

I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak on the topic of my recent book, *Crusade or Conspiracy: Catholics and the Anti-Communist Struggle in Australia*, published by the University of New South Wales Press. A number of other authors had opened up various aspects of the story of B. A. Santamaria's anti-communist "Movement", including indeed the executive director of The Sydney Institute, Gerard Henderson, in his thesis published as *Mr Santamaria and the Bishops* (Sydney: Studies in the Christian Movement, 1982). This work was particularly significant since Henderson had access to Santamaria's own files with much new information.

For my PhD topic at the University of Sydney I had considered exploring the philosophy and politics of the Catholic Action movements and the later Split between the Catholic churches of Sydney and Melbourne, which extended into the Australian Labor Party. However, I soon realised this was too ambitious since there had been very little detailed research on these topics and I would have to start from scratch in many areas. Hence I restricted my thesis topic to the origins of the Catholic Action movements in Sydney, entitled: "Ghetto or Crusade: A Study of the Social and Political Thought of Catholic Opinion-Makers in Sydney during the 1930s" (Department of Government, 1987). The 1930s were decisive not only for the Catholic Action movements, but also for the communist organisations, as Australia struggled to cope with the effects of the Great Depression, the apparent collapse of liberal capitalism and democracy in many parts of Europe, the rise of Fascism, Nazism and Communism, and of course the Spanish Civil War. The results of this study impressed on me the distinctiveness of Sydney's Catholic history, and particularly Catholic involvement in the ALP and social reform debates.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, it was clear that the dispute among Catholics over the Labor Split of the 1950s underlay continuing cleavages in the Church, especially affecting attitudes towards the Vietnam War, the Cold War, debates over disarmament and nuclear

deterrence policy, liberation theology, Australian aid projects in South East Asia, and particularly the role of Australian Catholic Relief and the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace. Santamaria's National Civic Council and its associated organisations and friendly bishops played a major role in these debates, and made it very difficult for the Church to speak on social issues with a united voice.

Part of the problem was that the issues arising in the Split had never been properly resolved, and could not be until the events themselves had been clarified. Several versions of the Catholic debates behind the Split had been published, notably by Santamaria himself or his opponents in the *Catholic Worker* group, Paul Ormonde's *The Movement* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1972) and Max Charlesworth's *Church, State and Conscience* (Brisbane, UQP, 1973). Other historians gave a context for the debates, especially Pat O'Farrell in *Catholic Church and Community* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1977), Michael Hogan in *The Sectarian Strand* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1987) and *Australian Catholics: the Social Justice Tradition* (Melbourne: CollinsDove, 1993) and Ed Campion in a number of his books.

What was lacking was a more comprehensive account, detailing the long dispute between the Sydney and Melbourne hierarchies, the nature of the Vatican intervention, and the significance of the debates for how the Church should promote social justice and equity in a liberal democracy in the future. I was intrigued also to determine how the ideas of the French political philosopher and activist, Jacques Maritain, had influenced the debate in Australia. I was aware of his influence on Pope Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council, and knew that members of the *Catholic Worker* group had appealed to his thinking in their critique of Santamaria. I felt very strongly that until the issues raised for Catholics by the Split were resolved, it would be difficult for the Church to engage more constructively with our society in a collaboration for social equity, justice and peace.

Fortunately for my work, I was granted access to all the Church archives I approached, and though only a few had retained significant documentation from the Catholic Action years, I was gradually able to build up a fairly adequate overview of events and to fill in many gaps in the historical record. I was also greatly helped by various Catholic activists of the period on both sides of the dispute, who supplied me with further Movement documentation and personal correspondence.

In addition, I interviewed as many of the participants who were still alive as I reasonably could, and also gave them the opportunity to read and critique my account of what they had told me. Some others, listed in my acknowledgments, agreed to critique the whole draft, a most generous contribution, as the version I first offered to a publisher was in two volumes, totalling 350,000 words. I am eternally grateful for their numerous corrections and suggestions, but of course hasten to

add that they should not be held accountable for any deficiencies or mistakes in the present shorter text.

I also offered my draft to Bob Santamaria and he agreed to a series of meetings to discuss the text section by section. In fact, we only had one meeting on the first seven or eight chapters, and I left him with another seven or so to read. Understandably, he found this difficult and time-consuming, and so instead he suggested that we continue our discussion in writing. This we did until he fell ill.

Over the years Santamaria and I had debated social issues in the pages of the Catholic press a number of times, so he knew that I was not a sympathiser with his particular version of Catholic social thought. Yet I was conscious of what a privileged position I was in as a historian to detail the complex events of the Split, and to try to understand and explain Santamaria's view of the world. There were aspects of his personality and goals which even sharp critics and past enemies admired. The challenge for me was to evaluate this period as fairly as I could, avoiding both hagiography and demonology by considering Santamaria primarily as a political actor and thinker. In a very real sense, it is historians rather than the subjects of their research on trial before their readers.

It was clear to everyone that something very major had gone wrong with the Church's social engagement in the 1950s, but it was not clear what. Never before had Australians seen a leading Catholic layman, Santamaria, denouncing the Sydney hierarchy of "cowardice and betrayal" (*Crusade or Conspiracy* pp.307, 313), while Gilroy reported to Rome on the Melbourne "fanatics" and to his priests denounced the NCC in 1959 as a "subversive organisation" (p.371).

Yet because the bishops were not free to make public their involvements, and indeed were not able to come to any agreement among themselves, many Catholics were left thoroughly confused about what had happened in the dispute and why. Unless they were in the small groups with privileged access to the behind-the-scenes activity, they had little alternative but to follow their local bishops. Hence with some significant exceptions, Catholics in Victoria, Tasmania, Wagga-Wagga and other friendly dioceses tended to follow the Mannix-Santamaria line, while most of the NSW dioceses, Adelaide etc. tended to follow the directions of Cardinal Gilroy and the then Bishop James Carroll in Sydney.

Many Catholics can still remember how bitter were the divisions in the Church, with the line of cleavage running through parishes and even families. The divisions were generally deeper and longer lasting in Melbourne than elsewhere. The tragedy was not just the personal suffering caused by the Split, but it provoked many Catholics to disengage from social debate, and, I suspect, left a hiatus in the social consciousness of the next generation, which was suspicious of the

earlier social idealism expressed in Catholic documents and more included to pragmatic social improvement.

My book, *Crusade or Conspiracy?*, then, looks at the origins of the Catholic Action Movements, and particularly at Bob Santamaria and his colleagues in the Champion Society, but also traces the differing emphases from Sydney. What is clear from almost the beginning is the difference of views among the Champions about the standing of Maritain's views, which had a wide international audience from the early 1930s. Maritain argued that official Church organisations acted under the authority and control of the bishops, and were to be distinguished sharply from movements acting under the inspiration of Catholic principles but independently of the Church in social and political affairs, i.e. "action of Catholics". These distinctions were particularly articulated by Mr Kevin Kelly, later Australian Ambassador to Portugal and Argentina who, ironically, had first recommended to Mannix that Santamaria be asked to work for the Australian National Secretariat for Catholic Action (ANSCA) in Melbourne in 1937.

The curious thing is why Santamaria so studiously ignored these distinctions of Maritain which were to prove so important for events in Australia. As I trace through my book, this was to prove one of the most important criticisms of Santamaria: that he claimed to be acting as if the Movement was the secular arm of the Church. He later strongly and repeatedly denied this, but you will find in my book many instances where he claimed to be acting under the authority and control of the bishops, and that Catholics were obliged to follow him. Cardinal Gilroy was always uneasy about this ambiguous arrangement, but went along with it while the object was to prevent a communist takeover in Australia.

The turning point came when Santamaria began to expand his aims beyond the anti-communist fight into an attempt to assume the dominant influence within the Australian Labor Party, and ultimately the Australian government, so he could implement his plans for a rural-based civilisation. He detailed his rationale in the 1952 paper, "Religious Apostolate and Political Action" and in 1953 and early 1954 promoted versions of this as the theoretical basis for Movement activity. How does one explain Mannix's astonishing reliance on Santamaria and his backing for this extraordinary political adventure?

Dr Paddy Ryan, the Sacred Heart priest who had originally organised Catholic anti-communist groups in Sydney from the 1930s, contested Santamaria's new direction for the Movement, though this was known only to top Movement leaders and their clerical advisers. Ryan warned Gilroy that Santamaria was ignoring the limits placed on him by the Sydney understanding, and launching into a direct involvement in party politics in the name of the Church and demanding the loyalty of Catholics.

It was then that Gilroy promoted his canon lawyer and adviser, James Carroll, to bishop, so that he could resolve the entanglement over the Movement. Carroll tried to reign in Santamaria from his political plans, but when this failed, he effectively withdrew the Sydney Movement from Santamaria's direction. Mgr Tom Wallace, parish priest of Darlinghurst, also played a key role in urging key Labor Party identities to move against the Movement.

However, it was left to Dr Evatt in October 1954 finally to denounce the Movement publicly, leading eventually to the Labor Split. From around this time, Santamaria began claiming that the Movement was an independent organisation of lay Catholics, not under the command of the Church, but still closely allied with friendly bishops who lent legitimation and intense vocal support, considerable finance and access to other Church resources.

I have attempted to trace the close involvement of the Church leaders in this unfolding drama. The divisions within the Church became so inflamed over the Split that the Melbourne-aligned bishops in October 1956 refused to attend meetings of the entire hierarchy to try to resolve the issue. Hence the Sydney alignment appealed to Rome.

Drawing on many new sources in Rome and Sydney, I have detailed the fate of this appeal, and shown the extent to which the 1957 Vatican intervention was influenced by Maritain's thinking, particularly through Mgr Pietro Pavan, the secretary of the Vatican's international secretariat for Catholic Action, whose views Santamaria had long ignored.

To the enormous surprise of Mannix and Santamaria, the Roman decisions went against them. Mannix appealed unsuccessfully to Pope Pius XII himself. Sydney immediately acted on the Vatican instructions to disengage from the Movement altogether, in industrial affairs as well as political. In fact, Sydney had already been doing so. In areas of the Melbourne alignment, on the other hand, things continued much as before. Contrary to the explicit Roman instructions, there was little or no disengagement from the Movement by the Melbourne alignment. The Vatican Instructions were never publicly clarified by the bishops.

Finally, in 1959, after Gilroy's repeated appeals to Rome, one of the Vatican's top trouble-shooters, Cardinal Agagianian, was sent to quieten the dispute. The situation in Melbourne was not formally resolved until Archbishop Simonds succeeded Mannix in 1963.

This is where my story ends. Santamaria, of course, continued to agitate as a Catholic champion on social issues, particularly in relation to the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and debates over the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace. Someone suggested to me that I should continue Santamaria's story through these years, but I quail at

the thought of the amount of work involved. Perhaps some of this audience may be interested in pursuing this massive project.

I would have liked to have written a book with a happy ending, but unfortunately history is rarely so kind. Whatever their good intentions, Mannix and Santamaria in particular emerge very tarnished figures. How does one explain why Santamaria so often interpreted official Church directives and conferences in a way contrary to what was intended, particularly on the Church's engagement in political affairs? After 1954 Santamaria simply reversed earlier positions on Church involvement in politics for strategic reasons, and pressed on as if nothing had changed. Denials by Santamaria and some of the bishops of Movement activities which were in fact true, though understandable from a political point of view, do not support a hagiographical interpretation in relation to truth-telling.

Part of the explanation for this surprising lack of frankness is that a clandestine organisation like the body must rely on the principle of deniability to preserve its operational integrity as a secret body. Hence members denied they belonged to such a body on the pretext that they were not technically formal members; they even had to be prepared to deny that such an organisation existed. The Movement soon became trapped in the morass of its own "disinformation", scandalising many Catholics and outside observers.

Gilroy acknowledged that he and the other bishops had in 1945 made a mistake setting up the national Movement in the first place, and wanted to wrest control of the Sydney Movement from Santamaria, but did not seem to understand the importance of Maritain's distinctions. Nor did Carroll and his advisers.

In his review of my book in the *Australian Book Review* (May 2001), Ross Fitzgerald considers that I have rendered Gilroy "as being pure as driven snow", when he claims, the NSW bishops, particularly James Carroll, were "devious pragmatists, intimately connected with the powerful ALP machine." (p. 35). I am not sure what Fitzgerald wanted me to say about Gilroy. The Cardinal was known to be petty and authoritarian in the manner of the time, unintellectual and mistaken about authorising the Movement. But as for being improperly involved in politics, as far as I could determine, contemporaries considered that Gilroy was very averse to any personal involvement in politics, though his position meant some regular contact with politicians.

How much did he understand of what Carroll was doing? And was Carroll doing any more than resisting Santamaria's control of the Sydney Movement? Certainly he intervened in Sydney in very authoritarian fashion against the Melbourne Movement, and he campaigned for much of his life for Catholic education. But did his

interventions go any further than this? Until Archbishop Carroll's papers are released in several decades, it will be difficult to know.

The ones who emerge from this account with most credibility are the proponents among the Champions and *Catholic Worker* people on the matters of principle raised by Maritain and repeatedly endorsed by overseas Church authorities. Why did Santamaria ignore these distinctions for so long? Presumably because he found Maritain's opposition to a crusading mentality in the Spanish Civil War so repugnant that it rendered the developing political views of the French activist in coming years totally unacceptable, despite the fact that they won widespread agreement in Catholic circles and had strongly influenced the authorities in international Catholic Action for many years.

In addition, Maritain was much more sophisticated in his critique of communism than Santamaria, and did not dismiss it as totally demonic. On the contrary, Maritain said it contained elements that had been discarded by the Church and should be retrieved into its social teaching. Maritain in many of his 60 books certainly attacked errors in the philosophy of communism which helped explain the atrocities of the communist regimes, but he also argued that communism had won much popular support because of its attack on real social injustices.

The dispute over the Movement was the most torrid in recent Catholic history in Australia. Santamaria's project was bound to fail, as he could not simply resurrect a theocratic view of Church political engagement and ignore contemporary Church thinking on the question. Yet the question of the relationship between Church and State/society has been a perennial one in western civilisation, and will continue to be so. I hope my book has shed some light on a distinctively Australian chapter in this long history.