



A Political Patriot

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It's impossible to understand Australia's political history of the 1950s and 1960s without understanding the Labor Party Split. And it's impossible to understand the Split without understanding the role of Bartholomew Augustine (B.A) Santamaria in it. Now, it can be said that that it's impossible to try to understand Santamaria without having read this magnificent biography of him by Gerard Henderson.

For anyone who wants to know about this (until recently) quite neglected period of Australian history, there are two indispensable works. John Howard's *The Menzies Era: The Years that Shaped Modern Australia* published in 2014, and Henderson's *Santamaria: A Most Unusual Man*.

Santamaria is a serious political biography. It's 500 pages long, including a forty page bibliography. But it nonetheless has a Robert Caro-like quality to it. The detail is never overdone and in keeping with the times the book describes. There's a pace and verve to the writing which keeps the reader wholly engaged. Lots of Australian history writing is worthy—but not much of it is interesting. *Santamaria* is above all interesting and many parts of it are engrossing.

Someone who only knows Gerard Henderson from his funny and insightful Friday afternoon email *Media Watch Dog* might be surprised by the extent of the scholarship of *Santamaria*—but they shouldn't be. Henderson is well-known as the head of The Sydney Institute, a media commentator, and as the former chief of staff to John Howard when Howard was Opposition Leader. However he also deserves to be known as an author and historian too.

In his 1992 book *The End of Certainty*, journalist Paul Kelly popularised the concept of 'The Federation Settlement' which was a series of settled bi-partisan policies that determined the nature of Australia's economic and political development until the 1980s. Its components were the White Australia policy, protective tariffs, compulsory arbitration and wage fixation, state paternalism, and imperial benevolence. Yet it was Henderson in his 1990 work, *Australian Answers*, that first proposed such a model in the form of the 'Federation Trifecta' of the White Australia policy, industry 'protection all round', and centralised wage fixing. The work of Henderson that has perhaps had the biggest policy impact was an article he wrote in 1983 for *Quadrant*. His piece 'The Industrial Relations Club' set an agenda and started a debate that continues to this day. Henderson wrote:

Industrial relations in Australia takes place in [a] club-like atmosphere. The Club's high priests preside on the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission ... The key IR institutions are located in Melbourne – the Commission ... [the ACTU], Confederation of Australian Industry ... and ... the Department of Industrial Relations.

If a few names are updated, not too much has changed in thirty years.

There are many strengths of *Santamaria*, for it is as much a political history of Australia, as it is a biography of someone who arguably has been one of the most powerful people in Australian politics never to have held elected office.

Henderson brilliantly puts Santamaria's life into the context of the times. The course of Australia's post-war history was decided in the few years after 1945. While now it's assumed that the country was always destined to follow the model of a mixed economy in a liberal democracy, at the time there was nothing inevitable about such a path. As Henderson makes clear, by the end of the Second World War the Communist Party of Australia had more than 20,000 members and controlled many trade unions. At the Australian Trade Union Congress in June 1945, communists and their sympathisers in the trade unions held a majority of the votes. Of the five members elected to the ACTU Executive from the Congress, three were communists.

The influence of communists and the Communist Party of Australia during the 1930s and 1940s has long been derided by left-wing historians. Communists in Australia have been portrayed as participants in a vain and virtuous struggle—but the reality is different.

As Henderson discusses, the Communist Party of Australia— following the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact— supported the actions of both Hitler and Stalin. Henderson writes:

The communist line was to brand World War II an imperialist war and to assert that Josef Stalin had decided on a policy of neutralism. But the Soviet Union was anything but neutral and was actually supplying the German war machine. Moreover, the Red Army was engaged in acts of aggression in Poland, Finland, the Baltic States— and more besides.

Even though Australia was at war with Germany and the Communist Party was effectively supporting the Nazi cause, it was only in April 1940 that the Australian government ordered that all Communist Party publications be censored prior to print.

In June 1940 the Communist Party was declared an illegal organisation according to the federal government's defence powers, and from that date the party operated illegally, until the Curtin Labor government lifted the ban on the party in December 1942. Curtin hoped that allowing the Communist Party to exist legally would assist the war effort on the basis that the communists had promised to 'guarantee assistance in war production' and prevent 'stoppages and absenteeism'. As Hal Colebatch documents in his outstanding recent book *Australia's Secret War – How unionists sabotaged our troops in World War II*, the communists did not come close to keeping their promise.

This was the political environment in which Santamaria grew up, as the child of Sicilian migrants who owned and operated a fruit shop in the inner-city Melbourne suburb of Brunswick. Santamaria attended St Kevin's College and then studied law at the University of Melbourne.

In March 1937, a twenty-year-old Santamaria spoke in a famous debate at the university on the Spanish Civil War. In front of more than 1,000 people he spoke on a motion opposing Spain's Republican government. Manning Clark claimed to have been in the audience—and as Henderson notes—sometimes Clark simply made up things, such as when he said he was in Bonn in 1938 on the night of Kristallnacht, when in fact he was in Britain. But regardless of whether he witnessed the debate, the method of Santamaria's argument that Clark describes was to be typical of how Santamaria carried political arguments for the following six decades:

Bobby [Santamaria] spoke in that voice which from that day to the present has always suggested to me that man within was about to reveal some higher truth. His information that night, as ever after, was voluminous, the argument as tidy as a theorem in geometry, but it was the quantity of felt life which attracted me. One passage in his speech lived on in my mind: 'When the bullets of the atheists struck the statue of Christ outside the cathedral in Madrid, for some that was just lead striking brass, but for me those bullets were piercing the heart of Christ my King'. Wild shouts of approval from his supporters, hurrahs, stamping of feet, much whistling. Angry cries from his opponents, some calling on him to keep it clean, or speak to the motion ...

In 1945, the Catholic bishops in Australia approved the establishment of the 'Catholic Social Studies Movement'. What came to be called 'The Movement' with Santamaria as its executive

officer, was an organisation that was part religious and part political, with its primary focus being to fight communism in the union movement and to prevent the Labor Party from adopting left-wing policies.

The problem faced by The Movement, namely that only 25 per cent of the community was Catholic, was overcome by the formation of 'Industrial Groups' operating within unions, and the ALP made up of both Catholics and non-Catholics who were committed to opposing communism.

The battle over communism in the ALP of course came to a head in 1954 with The Split in the Labor Party and the formation of the Democratic Labor Party (DLP). Preference votes from the DLP helped keep the ALP out of office federally and in several states throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s.

Henderson has a deep understanding of his subject. He knew Santamaria for many years and worked for him at the National Civic Council. Henderson admires and respects Santamaria—but not uncritically. Henderson's assessments about some of Santamaria's judgements are acute. On economics, Santamaria could be variously described as naïve, simplistic, and downright wrongheaded. Santamaria's sentimentalising about the peasant life of subsistence farming is embarrassing to read. The claims of Santamaria, such as this one made in 1936 are ridiculous:

The new communism is only the old capitalism plus a little missionary fervour.

Henderson is not afraid to say:

Santamaria was only 20 years old when he wrote this. Even so, it is dross.

The pity is that this was reminiscent of Santamaria's economics for the rest of his life. When in 1947 Labor tried to nationalise the banks, the Catholic community was divided. Some bishops for example, opposed bank nationalisation, some supported it, and many were indecisive. As an influential lay person, Santamaria was ambivalent about the issue. Fortunately, it was on Australian politics, not economics, that Santamaria exercised his very great talents.

But still, on the big things, Santamaria was invariably on the right side of history. Even though, as he was to write, he often stood against prevailing public opinion. Santamaria believed it was better to be right than to be popular. 'It is easy and pleasant to swim with the tide', he wrote, but from an early age he knew his 'future was not to be with, but against, the tide'.