

Australia's Muffled Crisis

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The perplexed struggle against Communism is described by an Australian editor.

AUSTRALIA is today undergoing the most serious and searching crisis in its public affairs that it has ever had to face. It is a crisis peculiarly well fashioned to test and try the various elements that go to make up the Australian national composite. And it is being met in a way that is highly characteristic. For while a small number of people are vividly aware of the issues and are locked in a tense bitter struggle, which may be decisive for Australia's political destiny in the coming decades, the public generally has little awareness of the problem, and such overt signs of the struggle as appear in the newspapers sink into the surrounding apathy with hardly a trace or ripple.

Not unexpectedly, the central feature of the problem is Communism. For a number of reasons which will be touched on in this report, Australia has for a long time shown a degree of susceptibility to Communist influence surprising in a country which is prosperous, well advanced industrially, and liberal-democratic in its tradition. At the same time its strategic position as an isolated western nation on the edge of the unstable volcanic zone of South East Asian politics lays it dangerously open to the particular form of political-economic warfare now favoured by the

Communist bloc. Americans generally, including the State Department (in spite of the warnings of some of its local advisers), tend to assume that Australia is at least one friendly nation whose loyal co-operation in SEATO and other anti-Communist arrangements can be relied on. But the truth is that under certain circumstances Australia could be swung away towards neutralism and the kind of 'peaceful co-existence' programme which the Communists regard as an intermediate stage leading to satellite status. It may be well, therefore, to begin by indicating how this change could be brought about.

The Communist political-economic challenge to Australia would reach full strength only in conjunction with continuing successes in other theatres of operation: especially, the Middle East, India, Japan, and South East Asia. Soviet policy in the Middle East at this stage aims not so much at the setting up of Communist regimes as at the mobilizing of anti-Western sentiment to the point of cutting off oil supplies to Britain and Western Europe. The resultant economic crisis would seriously affect Australia, which is already concerned about the effect on its trade of the entry of the United Kingdom into the European Common Market. Concurrently

with this development the Communists hope to see a leftward swing in India and Ceylon, the turning away of an economically dissatisfied Japan (one of Australia's vital trading partners) towards China and Russia, and a political deterioration in Indonesia and Malaya (also markets of great interest to Australia) which would favour the rise of Communist influence or domination. All these developments, it must be conceded, seem only too possible on present indications.

The Communist approach to Australia would in these circumstances follow by stages a pattern whose elements are already clear because they have been for some time the major themes of Communist propaganda in this country. In the background would be the ultimate military threat—the impossibility, which many Australians already concede, of a small exposed nation standing up to such overwhelming power, and the folly, as many already think, of relying on American support which may not be forthcoming or sufficient. In the foreground would be the great themes of peace and trade. All sorts of worried Australian interests would listen attentively to Mao's invitation to Australia to participate in the trading opportunities of a Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity and Co-Existence Sphere. The political price would only gradually be unfolded: first the harmless purely 'technical' step of recognition of Red China (weakening the US position in East Asia and disturbing the US-Australian entente): then the desertion of SEATO in favour of a Locarno-type pact of mutual guarantees covering South East Asia but excluding the United States as an imperialist intruder. Ultimately would come the demand for Communist bases near Australia to guarantee the security of the area on the model of the US system of bases in other parts of the world. Re-oriented economically, and politically isolated from the US, Australia could pass almost insensibly into a satellite condition.

This process could appeal to various elements in Australia for diverse reasons

of fear or material advantage; but it would require management by a political force sufficiently attuned ideologically to the final result. Moreover, given such a political force, determined upon such an external policy but supported by electors for other internal reasons, the consummation could be effected while public opinion was still uncertain and confused.

Does such a political force exist, explicitly and unmistakably committed to this type of policy, and enjoying public support for other reasons? Undoubtedly it does, in the Australian Labor Party as re-modelled by Dr. H. V. Evatt. It is the alternative party which will form the government if the present Liberal-Country Party coalition is defeated. It has adopted a foreign policy which the Communist Party has enthusiastically endorsed, since it is exactly the policy which the Communist Party has been arguing for Australia; and it now works in open collaboration with the Communist Party in several fields. Nor is this an accidental fleeting alignment likely to be repudiated at the next turn of the wheel; for the forces which Dr. Evatt is now riding are not likely to permit any real change of direction. This is the immediate overt political expression of the crisis I have spoken of above, and it constitutes a danger to Australia's survival as a free nation. But the fundamental factors in the situation lie deeper.

The founding and formation of the Australian nation took place largely within the nineteenth century, and the particular blend and balance of elements which constitute the national polity and culture are what one might expect in a new country without old structural residues, filled up with immigrants from the British Isles. Liberal, radical, secularist, democratic and progressivist strains predominate. The outlook is one that lends itself easily to a positivist philosophy and a Marxist undercurrent. Countervailing tendencies come partly from the conservative strain in Anglicanism but chiefly from the Catholic population which is one-quarter of the

whole. As in the United States, the Irish were mainly working-class democrats willing to back a reformist political programme but ultimately hostile to secularist ideologies.

The original Labor Party was an alliance of diverse reformisms and utopianisms, subject always to intermittent factional turmoil and splits, but retaining sufficient coherence while its main social-welfare programme was gradually enacted either by itself or by its competitors. The Chifley Government after the Second World War completed the installation of this programme in its main elements, and observers began to ask where the party was going from there—all the more because a new tension had developed within it of a qualitatively different kind from the old faction fights.

The cause of this tension was the power of Communism within the party and in Australia at large. From its inception in 1920 the Australian Communist Party had chosen the industrial field as its main source of power. Australia is the most completely unionized country in the free world. The Australian worker is characterized by great loyalty to his union and great apathy in regard to day-to-day union politics. The unions are generally affiliated to the Labor Party, which is thus regarded as the political wing of a general 'Labor Movement'. Unions which fall under Communist control are usually free to continue affiliation with the Labor Party, which wants their financial support even if this means introducing Communist-controlled voting blocs into its governing conferences. For the Communists, therefore, the unions meant not only a source of industrial striking power but also a springboard into the political party which normally commands at least one-half of the electorate.

As a result of their own organizing zeal, pitted against frequently inefficient or corrupt union leadership, helped forward by economic depression and later by the wartime wave of industrialization in a

pro-Soviet atmosphere, the Communists by 1945 had won control of most of the major unions and held a majority on the Australian Council of Trade Unions. Through union affiliation plus secret membership in the locality branches they were within sight of effective domination of the Australian Labor Party.

This produced a reaction of alarm not only amongst genuine anti-Communists but also amongst the uncommitted careerists who did not mind a Communist element to their left which they could play off against factions to their right but were scared at the prospect of being overwhelmed from the left. This reaction took the form of an organized counter-campaign to win unions back from Communists by running ALP tickets in union elections. The anti-Communist organization in the industrial field was through Industrial Groups carrying official ALP endorsement. Against these the Communists used every weapon of intimidation, clauumny, and ballot-faking, but gradually the Industrial Groups gathered strength, and between 1949 and 1954 union after union was taken from the Communists after bitter struggles. This not only relieved the pressure of Communist militancy in industry (which had risen to great heights between 1945 and 1949) but also changed the balance of forces within the ALP, so that the major States went right-wing under 'Grouper' control.

But the very thoroughness of this victory carried within it the seeds of trouble. At the beginning of 1954 it seemed on the surface that the anti-Communist wave would go on unchecked and eventually storm the last Communist strongholds in certain key industrial unions where they remained strong. Yet a year later the position was entirely reversed. The Industrial Groups were outlawed by the ALP; the ALP adopted Communist policies on major issues; and 'unity tickets' composed of Communists and ALP men were bringing Communism back into power in the unions. How was such a reversal possible?

The great reservoir of convinced active anti-Communism from which the Industrial Groups drew their strength was the big Catholic element in the 'Labor Movement'. In the forties this was the only large section of Australian opinion immune to the current illusions about the nature and purposes of Communism. At all times it was the only section from which large numbers of active anti-Communist militants could be recruited to carry on the struggle in the unions and in the ALP branches. A large part of the leadership and an overwhelming proportion of the rank-and-file membership of the Industrial Groups was Catholic. This could not be helped; it was inevitable if the job was to be done. But in a country where sectarian tensions have always been prominent, Catholic preponderance among the 'Groupers' charged the atmosphere with electricity.

Catholic participation was not simply spontaneous and unorganized. Ordinarily as inert in public matters as other Australians, Catholics could be rallied and nerved for the ugly, exhausting, and thankless task of day-to-day struggle only by an appeal to them from their Church authorities bidding them to do their civic duty because of the religious issues involved in the Communist threat. The Catholic Bishops of Australia issued such an appeal and directly sponsored the setting up of a lay organization, the Catholic Social Movement, as a form of lay apostolate. The lay leader was a young Melbourne lawyer, B. A. Santamaria, one of a group of younger Catholics who had been fired in the thirties to the idea of an apostolate in the intellectual and social fields. 'The Movement', as it was briefly called, was the unpublicized driving force that made possible the victories of the Industrial Groups.

The difficulties latent in such a form of Catholic activity came to the surface only when success began to reward the years of work and struggle. An organization of Catholics clearly comes under the direction of the bishops insofar as their work raises

moral questions. The bishops also clearly had the right to call Catholics to organized anti-Communist action because the proper spiritual interests of the Church were at stake in the struggle. But once organized, the work of 'the Movement' involved a host of purely tactical decisions made in the course of industrial and political campaigns. And as victories mounted, a new race of union leaders and Labor Party office-holders came into being, installed by 'the Movement' and often members of it. How far were the bishops to be held responsible for these purely political consequences of their initiative? Did they have any right to guide the purely tactical side of such developments? Even if they abstained from giving political (as distinct from moral) directives, could they avoid *appearing* to be meddling in politics because of their sponsorship of 'the Movement'? And what would happen if bishops began to take different personal views about the wisdom of particular practical courses chosen by the lay organization? These questions seem not to have been closely examined in the first years: the need for action was desperately urgent and no one dreamed of the success that would later lay such power in the hands of the 'Groupers'. But time has a way of bringing unresolved problems to the surface, and it happened in this case.

The Communists began from 1952 onwards to fight back on a new tactical line. Their aim was to build up a revolt against the 'Groupers' within the ALP by playing on every difference that could be fomented. Once freed from the immediate threat of Communist strength, many ALP leaders and union officials took alarm at the rising power of young right-wing militants who had an unpleasant zeal for enforcing clean union ballots and attacking corruption in public places, and a doctrinal abhorrence of the old easy-going compromises with Marxism which had made Socialism (vaguely and variously interpreted) a plank of the ALP platform. The old-guard careerists and opportunists, many of whom

were Catholics themselves, started to cast around for a way of checking this new power. Meanwhile, among Protestant and secularist elements in the ALP, the rise of the 'Groupers' could easily awaken suspicion that 'Rome' was on the march, under the cover of anti-Communism, to seize political power in Australia for its own ends.

Dr. H. V. Evatt was the Federal leader of the Australian Labor Party. His political career had been a zig-zag from right to left as suited his interests, but with a predominantly leftward bias and with some continuing close associations of a strange nature with the Communists. Carried to the leadership with 'Grouper' support which he had won by a rightward swerve at the right time, he was never privately sympathetic to either the Groups or Catholicism, and in 1954 he suddenly placed himself at the head of the motley growing opposition to the 'Groupers', denounced 'the Movement' as a clerical-fascist plot, conducted a purge in defiance of the rule-book, and wrenched the ALP onto its present course as a left-wing party in open collaboration with the Communists. Even some Catholic politicians went along

with him in his attack on 'the Movement' and the Industrial Groups; they calculated that he would quickly destroy himself by his use of the sectarian weapon and ultimately leave the old-guard careerists with the balance of power; but they are now helpless and frightened prisoners of an Evatt dictatorship which uses the axe on anyone who steps out of line. They had failed to understand the forces at work, and found that instead of a faction fight of the old ALP type, which could be dealt with by a little fast footwork, they were jammed in the middle of that almost unthinkable thing, to them unintelligible, a struggle between right and left in which principles actually counted.

Dr. Evatt's coup de main proceeded by stages. The first purge was in Victoria, where a Labor Government was split and broken in consequence. The defeated right-wingers became the Anti-Communist Labor Party. In South Australia, Tasmania and later Western Australia small groups in sympathy also set up an Anti-Communist Labor Party. Eighteen months later, Dr. Evatt's Federal Executive then moved in to New South Wales, and dismissed the

A Voluntary for Doctor Johnson

Gentlemen, let us tie the tongue of talk
And be silent — bid the trumpeter sound
A voluntary for Doctor Johnson.

A voluntary for Doctor Johnson
Whose carcass gross as far-gone pregnancy
Concealed the fearful wonder of a child;
Who couched himself in the cushioned
phrase
Of dogma and felt it creak against his
weight
And pound of anguish;
Who cheered himself with the sound of
voices

And tilted his tongue against his terror
And talked, talked, talked, till Despair her-
self despaired
And like a squelched woman bit her lips
and schemed.

Gentlemen, let us tie the tongue of talk
And be silent — bid the trumpeter sound
A voluntary for Doctor Johnson.

A voluntary for Doctor Johnson
Who, in his fright, conversed against the
night
And talked down speechless death.

EDWARD CASE