two with the majority supporting Evatt and the minority supporting B.A. Santamaria – the founder, leader, and charismatic driving force behind the Movement since its inception in the early 1940s. Between 1954 and 1957 the squabbling and disunity within the Labor Party was the background to almost every item about the labour movement in the mass media. The ALP’s chances of returning to the government benches, which seemed so high in early 1954, were very low by mid 1955.

As if to seal the fate of the Labor Party in the foreseeable future, the predominantly Catholic minority eventually hived off and formed what was initially called the Australian Labor Party (Anti-Communist) and, by early 1958, the Democratic Labor Party. Between the mid 1950s and the early 1970s the DLP ensured, not only via giving its electoral preferences to Robert Menzies’ ruling Liberal and Country Party government but also by serving as a constant reminder that the ALP was going through the greatest split in its history, that the Labor Party would remain in a state of semi-permanent opposition, especially, although not exclusively, at the national level. The effect was enduring. By 1969 not merely the federal government but each of the six state governments was led by the anti-Labor parties. Fifteen years after the split the Labor Party seemed, as veteran political scientist Neal Blewett observed, at the very nadir of its fortunes.3

Studying Secrecy: Historians and The Movement in South Australia: 1945-57

Malcolm Saunders

The Catholic Social Studies Movement must be one of the best-known phenomena in Australian labour and political history. This is hardly surprising because the impact of this clandestine and secretive organisation officially supported by the Catholic Church was far-reaching. There can be no doubt that the Movement, working through the so-called industrial groups set up by the Australian Labor Party in the late 1940s to combat communist influence in the labour movement, played not merely a major but a decisive role in wresting control of many trade unions from communists and hence the Australian Communist Party itself.1 It also, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, greatly diminished the influence that communists had come to have on the ALP itself. Indeed, by 1953 the tables had been completely turned. By this time the Right had gained an ascendancy in the organised labour movement roughly equivalent to that which had been achieved by the Left just before the end of the Second World War.

But, of course, the Movement is remembered by many and perhaps most Australian labour and political historians as having been a negative force. After the leader of the federal parliamentary Australian Labor Party (Dr H.V. Evatt) blamed the Movement for Labor’s failure to win the federal elections in May 1954,2 all hell broke loose – or so it must have seemed to those who still harboured hopes that the Labor Party would win the next federal election. The ALP split in

Research Note

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In addition, the DLP made less headway in South Australia than in any other state. True, within weeks of the formation of a branch in Adelaide, it fought the elections in November 1955 and came close to sending a DLP senator from South Australia to Canberra. Certainly, by directing its preferences to the conservative parties, it prevented the ALP on that occasion from winning a fifth Senate seat in this state. Thereafter, the DLP in South Australia vis-a-vis other states was almost always fighting a losing battle. At the end of the 1950s its membership was possibly only half of that in Western Australia and significantly less than that in Tasmania. Twenty years after the party’s formation, Queensland political scientist Paul Reynolds could state unequivocally that ‘South Australia remains the state in which the DLP finds it hardest to make any real progress even at the Senate level, its vote having shown a fairly persistent downward trend since 1955’.

Why, then, should the Movement in South Australia deserve study in its own right? Clearly one reason is the role played by Matthew Beovich, the archbishop of the Catholic Archdiocese of Adelaide throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Beovich had a significant role in ensuring the Catholic Church’s support for the Movement at the national level in 1945 and, of course, his approval of and enthusiasm for the Movement in South Australia was the sine qua non of its establishment over the following two or three years. Yet, roughly a decade later, no one in South Australia played a more important part in seeing that the Movement there was emasculated or that the DLP in the state never won the support of anything like a majority of Catholics. Indeed, with the possible exception of Cardinal Gilroy in Sydney, no archbishop more obviously thwarted Santamaria’s ambitions to establish a predominantly Catholic political party in his diocese. Without Beovich at the helm of the Catholic Church in South Australia, the fortunes of the Movement there might have been very different.
Another reason is that the Movement in South Australia was rather more than just a small state branch of what historically we recall as the most notorious underground movement in Australian political history. In the 1950s South Australia might have seen itself as a small and isolated outpost but the Movement in this state certainly wasn’t. Geographically, Adelaide was significantly closer to Melbourne than Sydney and far closer to it than any other mainland capital city. It took relatively less time and money to travel between Adelaide and Melbourne, especially by train or car, than it did to travel between Melbourne and any other Movement centre. And Movement traffic between Adelaide and Melbourne, while not heavy, was far from rare. Leading figures in the Movement in Adelaide travelled frequently to Melbourne and at least two or three times a year HQ’s leading orators - most often the Jesuit priest Father Harold Lalor or Santamaria himself - travelled to Adelaide to rally the faithful and maintain the sense of urgency about the need to thwart a communist takeover not only of the trade union movement and the Labor Party but of the nation and indeed the world.

Still another is that the Movement in South Australia was neither less enthusiastic about the anti-communist cause nor less successful in combatting communism in its local trade union movement than any other state branch excepting, of course, that in Victoria. True, there were in the late 1940s and early 1950s significantly fewer trade unions under communist control in South Australia than in any of the eastern states. But the Movement, and other, non-Catholic, anti-communists, in South Australia did succeed in wresting from communist control two unions (the Federated Ironworkers’ Association and the Shop Assistants’ Union) and came very close to removing the left-wing leadership of a third (the Federated Clerks’ Union). It must be remembered that Movement HQ in Melbourne always considered these three unions its most important targets. Thus it could never be said that, on a per capita basis, anti-communist Catholics in South Australia achieved less for the cause than their brothers in other states.

But the least known of the several reasons why the Movement in South Australia was of considerable value to the anti-communist cause at that time, and, of course, is worthy in its own right of scholarly attention, was its role as an information-gatherer. A huge part of the Movement’s purpose was the collection, use, and, much later, dissemination of information concerning the presence and influence of communists in Australia. In the first of these roles the Movement in South Australia excelled. By the early 1950s it had possibly become the leading ‘intelligence’ wing of the Movement anywhere in the nation. Years after the Movement had been forced from the underground in late 1954, its leading figure in Sydney (Roy Boylan) told his counterpart in Adelaide (Ted Farrell) that the most valuable information about communists, both in South Australia and in other states, relayed to HQ in Melbourne had come from Adelaide.

Yet the real problem is less to outline why a study of the Movement in South Australia is worthwhile than to persuade historians that it is possible. After all, one of the defining attributes of the Movement was its secrecy and this is possibly one of the reasons why so few historians have attempted the extraordinarily difficult task of discussing it in any appreciable depth. The simple fact is that the Movement, in South Australia no less than elsewhere in the nation, kept documentation to a minimum. Of course, one of its roles was as an information-gatherer, but that information was to be read by only the most dedicated and trustworthy members of the organisation. For the most part, communication between various sections of the Movement was by word of mouth or by phone, very rarely by letter, memo, or note. When important documents had to be sent from one Movement centre to another, for example, between Melbourne and Adelaide, they were often torn in two and each half sent in a separate envelope.
Yet this is only one of the several reasons any historian seriously interested in studying the Movement is likely to be discouraged. When they had to correspond with each other, leading figures in the Movement rarely used their own names. Instead they used pseudonyms or codenames. There are many letters to and from the Movement in South Australia that bear neither the name of the person who wrote it nor that of the person to whom it was sent. Much of the contents of such letters are in the form of a code with which only a select few would have been familiar. It gets worse. After Evatt’s denunciation of the Movement in October 1954, the Church that had spawned it was on the defensive, its leaders often willing to admit it was a mistake and eager to put the whole episode behind them. Certainly, there was no wish to preserve documents that could later be used to discredit both the Movement and the Church. Consequently, historians of the Movement in South Australia will probably never be able to tell its full story from the documents that have survived.

Yet there is more. More than fifty years after the ‘coming out’ of the Movement (The Catholic Social Studies Movement) and the launch of its successor (The National Civic Council), many of those who could have provided insights into the South Australian chapter simply cannot. The four men, Ted Farrell, Brian Nash, Cyril Naughton, and Spencer Killicoat, who worked out of the Todd Building in the Catholic Church’s complex of buildings in Wakefield Street, the headquarters of the Movement in South Australia, are dead. So too are many if not most of the few hundred Catholic men and women who obeyed their instructions. Of those still alive, there are still some unwilling to discuss what went on in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This is not necessarily a hangover from the mutual suspiciousness that characterised anything to do with communists and Catholics in Australia during that bygone era. Rather, it signifies a belief that what was said and done in the Movement should remain in it. People sworn to and trained in secrecy are unlikely to be willing let alone voluble interviewees. And it should not be hard to accept that people who are ambivalent about discussing their experience fifty-sixty years later would have been downright hostile to a would-be interviewer only a decade or so after these events occurred.

The Todd Building, site of the Movement’s Adelaide headquarters, along with several other organisations, many linked to the Archdiocese. It lay on the corner of Wakefield Street and Victoria Square, next to the Catholic Cathedral. It was demolished in 1977-78. Photo courtesy of the Adelaide Catholic Archdiocesan Archives.
However, such a study can be undertaken. The existing secondary sources, while far from rich, provide a valuable starting-point. John Warhurst's pioneering work on the origins of the DLP in South Australia, all published in the 1970s, is essential reading. John Hepworth's BA thesis, while ostensibly concerned solely with the Movement in South Australia, deals almost entirely with the political and cultural climate in which it operated. Much more relevant than either is Josephine Laffin's recent biographical work on Archbishop Beovich. Her doctoral thesis, and the book it became, carries a long and very useful chapter on the local Movement. All three – Warhurst, Hepworth, and Laffin – grew up in South Australia and are (or were) Catholics.

Primary sources, as already suggested, are few, fragmentary, and far from easy to use. Hepworth and Warhurst made some use of papers that the Movement in South Australia clearly generated and a few Catholic priests were equally clearly determined to preserve. After using these files, which are by no means voluminous, Warhurst, who had received these files from Hepworth, deposited them in what is now called the Noel Butlin Archives Centre at the Australian National University in Canberra. They are housed there under the misnomer 'The Edward F. Farrell Collection' (It is by no means clear that they were ever Ted Farrell's personal papers). These papers provide glimpses into the operations of the South Australian Movement, both its innermost sanctum (Todd Building) and out in the field (its parish and industrial groups).

But there is another collection of papers to do with the Movement in South Australia. The Adelaide Catholic Archdiocesan Archives holds at least two thick folders containing such documents as correspondence between Farrell and Beovich and the Archdiocese of Adelaide and those in the eastern states. While these contain little information about was going on at the grass roots level of the Movement, they reveal much about the thinking of its leaders and how this changed over the years. It must be remembered that the Catholic bishops gave their official imprimatur to the Movement in September 1945 and for the next ten years Beovich, on the advice of Farrell, was the titular head of its South Australian chapter. Josephine Laffin has made extensive use of these files in reconstructing Beovich's life and career.

Then there is the oral testimony of those former members who in the early years of the 21st Century were willing to talk to the present writer. Although all men, they were a mixed bunch. It must not be thought that every member of the Movement in Adelaide regularly went along to trade union meetings to keep 'the comms' out and to vote their own people in; if my sample was a representative one, only a minority of Movement members were so involved. One might have been wholly involved in collecting 'census' data about local Catholics; another might have delivered courses put on by the Newman Institute (the Movements cloak in South Australia); and another would have been mainly involved as a distributor of News-Weekly to parishioners; another might have acted as a chaplain to a Movement cell. While all were urged to be members of their local sub-branch of the Labor Party, only a relatively small number were directly involved in a trade union. Their reminiscences, then, not only help bring the Movement back to life but also do much to break down the stereotype of a typical member.

A study of the Movement in South Australia would allow answers to questions that the few historians seriously interested in this subject have not asked. Political scientists and historians have understandably wanted to know about the origins of the DLP in South Australia and why it never achieved much success in this state. Biographers (or life-writers) might well be interested in a study of the life and career of a leading churchman such as Matthew Beovich and how he influenced the Movement's course in South Australia. But it is also worthwhile to examine the contribution that the local chapter made to the nationwide Movement.
and whether the unique political, religious, and cultural environment in South Australia in the immediate post-war period was reflected in the course of the Movement in this state.

Yes, there are extensive studies of the Movement in Australia in which the South Australian chapter is not totally ignored. They have come in two waves. In the early 1970s there was Robert Murray’s intense, detailed, and path-breaking story of the split in the Labor Party and Paul Ormonde’s shorter and more personal glimpse into the Movement (There is not much about South Australia in either). Some thirty years later, as the half-centenary of the split approached, there was a second wave of studies in the form of books by Bruce Duncan, Gavan Duffy, and Ross Fitzgerald (Two of these provided a little more comment about South Australia). There is also a collection of chapters in a book on the split edited by Brian Costar, Paul Strangio, and Peter Love; the chapter by the present writer discusses why there was no major split in South Australia.

But this is hardly a flood of information. Given the importance of the Movement to the Labor split in the mid 1950s and the latter to the course of Australian political history from that time until at least the mid 1970s, one would have thought that labour historians in Australia would by now have nearly exhausted the field. But they haven’t. The issues of their principal journal, Labour History, over a period of nearly fifty years, carry remarkably few articles on the subject, and three of these are mere snippets. To my knowledge, no one has focused on, let alone published anything about, the Movement in any state other than that in Victoria. But enough documentation exists to allow a study of South Australia’s Movement and while there are still living links between those heady days of the 1940s and the 1950s and curious historians of the early 21st Century, it seems appropriate to pursue the task now rather than later. At the very least this state’s Movement deserves one or two lengthy research articles.

Endnotes
1. From its inception in the early 1920s until its dissolution in 1990 the correct title of the principal communist party in Australia was the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). However, it changed its name in 1944 before reverting to its original name in 1951. So, between 1944 and 1951, it was properly called the Australian Communist Party (ACP).
2. As has sometimes been noted, Evatt did not specifically refer to the CSSM, the Movement, or ‘The Show’ (another of the epithets by which it was known). Instead, by pointing the finger at the people centred round the journal News-Weekly, he made them sound sinister if not evil.
8. B.A.Santamaria, Against the Tide, OUP, Melbourne, 1981, pp.86-88. Here Santamaria refers to Beovich as one of his ‘strong friends’ and says that the archbishop’s support for the Movement was ‘invaluable’.
12. Several former members have told me this. See also Josephine Laffin, ‘The Public Role of Bishops: Matthew Beovich, the ALP Split and the Vietnam War’,

For instance, Ted Farrell, the director of the Movement in South Australia, was ‘John Edwards’. In the 1950s and 1960s Ted Farrell was a distant cousin of another Ted Farrell whose son is South Australian Labor power-broker Senator Don Farrell.

After asking this question of more than a dozen former members of the Movement in South Australia, my best estimate is that at its peak it had between 200 and 300 members. Of course, over the course of ten years many more would have come and gone so we have no way of knowing how many Catholic men and women in toto were members of it in this state.


I have discussed the provenance of these papers in Malcolm Saunders. ‘A Note on the Files of “The Movement” in South Australia’, Labour History, no. 99, Nov 2010, pp.179-186.

Most of the material on the Movement in the Adelaide Catholic Archdiocesan Archives can be found in Boxes 23 and 27 of the collection known simply as the Beovich Correspondence.

Between 2004 and 2010 the author interviewed 17 people who were either former members of the Movement in South Australia or, as South Australian Catholics, had been on the periphery of it.


