

## ALP Federal Intervention, 1970

### Bob Murray

A potpourri of politics, some quite exotic, formed the background when the ALP Federal Executive intervened in the Victorian Labor Party in September 1970 and sacked the Central Executive. To grossly simplify, the Executive had to consider the interests of three factions in the home state as well as numerous sensitivities in other states.

Gough Whitlam, then the Federal parliamentary leader, inspired the intervention in his drive to broaden the Party's organisational wing and the Adelaide MP Clyde Cameron executed it.

A stockily built ex-shearer, shrewd and tenacious, charming but devious, Cameron's conversion to the Whitlam cause made the intervention possible. South Australia had long held the balance of power on the Federal Executive and Federal Conference. It had generally exercised that position on the side of the left. Cameron dominated the South Australian branch of the Australian Workers Union vote. His close partnership with State Secretary and Senator, Jim Toohey, gave him substantial control of the SA branch if State Premier (from June 1967 to April 1968) Don Dunstan agreed.

Since the 1955 Split, Cameron had been the advocate for a left-wing party that would come to power in an economic crisis and implement a radical programme of state-owned industry and foreign affairs independence. His hero was the NSW MP Eddie Ward, who had begun his career as a protege of the Labor Premier Jack Lang. Ward died suddenly in 1963. The Federal parliamentary left chose Jim Cairns as its next leader and Cameron's enthusiasm gradually waned. Whitlam argued successfully that a Labor win in 1972 with a big spending social democracy program would better help the workers – and Cameron would be his Minister for Labour.

Don Dunstan had just become Premier again (June 1970) and wanted any trouble in the party to be early in his term. He had also become a more national figure at the 1969 Federal Conference – the first to be held in public and to have the four federal and six State parliamentary leaders as delegates, along with the six selected by each state conference. In short, by 1970 Dunstan and Cameron were ready for an intervention to attack the 'Victorian problem'.

The left leader in the Federal organisational wing was (and had been since 1955) F.E. 'Joe' Chamberlain from Perth. He was the Federal President or Secretary during these years but also Secretary of the WA branch of the ALP. The two positions had been combined in the 1930s to economise and now gave Chamberlain the pre-eminent sway in the West. The tension between he and Whitlam became bitterly personal but his reputation as

a good union official, adept at arbitration, made him popular with WA workers. He was a very good committee politician who enjoyed the power of his dominating positions, both state and national. His ideology, as far as it can be assessed, was that of a conventional socialist but was mostly known for being rigidly against all the usual Labor enemies.

The Victorian situation prior to intervention had become almost bizarre. The Communist Party of Australia (CPA) had leverage in the branch since 1955 through the unions it controlled to various degrees. It had exercised it judiciously through the affable George Seelaf of the Meat Workers Union in favour of policies such as a strong role for unions, nationalisation of industry and a neutral foreign policy.

By the late 1960s the CPA was in decline. Membership had fallen and remaining members were losing conviction. The mainstream CPA had broken away from pro-Moscow and pro-Peking (Beijing) splinter parties. Trotskyist cells were growing with the New Left. All had influence in unions and what was called 'competitive militancy' developed among them. The New Left spirit also produced younger officials who saw themselves as an independent ALP union left. All these, though bitter enemies, jostled for influence in an outwardly solid Trades Hall left.

The ALP State Secretary, Bill Hartley, who came from Perth, was Chamberlain's man in Melbourne. The mainstream Victorian CPA leader was Laurie Carmichael of the Amalgamated Engineering Union, a more aggressive personality than Seelaf.

'Unity tickets', where both ALP and CPA members could stand for union elections on the same how-to-vote card, were especially divisive. Federal ALP policy banned them, but the Chamberlain compromise was to not enforce this ban in Victoria. The critical issue for the left was for the ALP to stay right out of union elections. The Whitlam forces, however, wanted much less Communist Party influence.

The other major left-right issue was State Aid for non-state schools. The left adamantly opposed it, though it was never clear how far this was about educational conviction and how far it was a stick to beat the right. Apart from the actual question, the right saw State Aid as a free hand essential for winning elections. State Aid was the spark that set off the intervention. Opposition Leader Clyde Holding promised a small amount of State Aid for the May 1970 Victorian election. As a new leader Holding hoped to improve on the Party's previous dismal performances. State Secretary Bill Hartley, presumably directed by Chamberlain keen to hold the left firm, instructed Holding to withdraw the promise, which he did.

The voters were not impressed. The hovering Federal Executive swooped and used its newly changed 'numbers' to investigate the branch, get the answer it wanted, sack Hartley and the executive and introduce

a new administration system based on proportional representation.

The 'Feds' shrewdly put Bob Hawke, elected the year before as ACTU President, in charge of a provisional committee to administer the Victorian branch, pending election of a new administration. A new 'Centre Unity' faction developed around Hawke, comprising the Trades Hall moderates and another group of unions and branch members who had previously voted with the Central Executive. Hawke's 'numbers man' there was Bill Landeryou of the Storemen and Packers, later a State minister.

The Socialist Left that arose from the intervention looked on those who had crossed to the Hawke side as a 'fifth column', one of the angry epithets used at the time. The moderate branch members led by future Senator John Button also detested the new faction as opportunists who would look after their mates – especially for pre-selection – despite the more open voting system. Landeryou's domineering style on behalf of Hawke and Holding dismayed them. The embittered former participants formed an 'independents' faction which often voted – strategically, not ideologically – with the Socialist Left to defeat Landeryou's faction.

Hawke and Holding had until then opposed the intervention. They had been under pressure from Carmichael: Hawke because the left unions had backed him for the ACTU presidency and Holding because of the union work going to his law firm.

Whitlam made the intervention possible. He campaigned relentlessly and welcomed what support he could get. The moderate unions, his notional base, had not always been enthusiastic. They did not want fruitless Trades Hall discord or too many union elections. They were wary about backing charismatic political leaders whose sense of destiny eventually turned to tears. Lang, Evatt and Calwell came to mind.

I had decided at this point that my personality did not suit political activism and let my ALP membership lapse. But one night that week I had the good fortune to be in the Melbourne hotel room where Cameron and John Ducker, the emerging strong man of the NSW right, were working the phones to get support for the intervention. 'They've beaten us with a ticket to the races,' Cameron said resignedly after hanging up from a call to a wavering union leader.

But they were wrong. Tom Burns (ALP federal president) and Mick Young (federal secretary) were successfully installed as temporary administrators of the Victorian branch. My friend and Whitlam's speech writer, Graham Freudenberg, pronounced then that that Cameron-Ducker alliance made the Whitlam Government possible.

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## *Memoirs of a Cold War Warrior*

**Michael Easson**

Review: Keith Harvey, *Memoirs of a Cold War Warrior* (Connor Court Publishing, 2021). pp.+260. Paper \$32.95.

This is a lucid and interesting story by Keith Harvey: From university activist in the Democrat Club at Monash University in the early 1970s, gradual attraction to the ideals and works of the National Civic Council (NCC), conversion to Catholicism, marriage, children, recruitment to the anti-communist union cause, union work, including the Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC) in 1977-78 (it did not end well), then the Federated Clerks Union (FCU) to retirement, and attraction to the ideals of the Australian Labor Party in coalition with Christians concerned with social justice.

What is unusual about these memoirs is that Harvey was not a product of the ALP split (he was a toddler at the time). He was as a recruit decades later, who saw consistency and purpose in the 'old Catholic right' of the Victorian Movement. There are few such memoirs, if any, from those of his vintage who fought and stayed true (as distinct from those who returned from battles disillusioned and in apostasy.) Harvey uses the term 'vocation' to capture how he and colleagues of religious inclination saw union work, seeking better pay and conditions for working people. Ideals of a better world were turned into practical reality.

The book, dedicated to his wife and family and for 'all those who kept the faith', also mentions Harvey's ancestors, one a progressive farmer, another a utopian socialist, as if there is a consistency of purpose, a coalition over time that reflects the grand, boisterous coalition that was and (to some extent) still is the Australian labour movement.

Harvey was employed by the Victorian branch of the FCU from 1979, then the national office of the union until it disappeared in 1993 — amalgamated with several unions into the Australian Services Union (ASU) where he worked until 2013.

The book's first chapter, 'Nineteen Eighty-Four', alludes to Orwell's novel, communism, and the year Harvey re-joined the ALP (having previously been a member from 1974-78). 1984 was the year the Victorian branches of the Clerks, the Shop Assistants, the Ironworkers and the Carpenters and Joiners, applied to re-affiliate to the Victorian ALP. It is a nice scene setter.

Chapter 2 is 'The Monash Soviet' (which was really the Beijing Soviet, as the university's Labor Club and much of Monash student politics were dominated by Maoists and other crazies.) A future Labor Premier of Tasmania, Jim Bacon, then a Monash Maoist, was a contemporary, as were future Builders Labourers