

Robert
Murray

**The Split
Australian
Labor
in the
Fifties**

matter of principle. . . . I intend to support the Government,' he said in a brief statement to the press.

His action, and the whole atmosphere surrounding the legislation, had given another twist to the sectarian spiral in Caucus and the election for the Cabinet vacancy created was particularly bitter. With the support of the Scully and Barry groups, Malcolm Gladman (Warrnambool)—Holt's potential rival for the new constituency to be created in the south-west of the state—won the Cabinet vacancy from a field of seven.

Cain wished to let the affair pass over, but a section of the Central Executive sought to discipline Holt. At the meeting on 18 December, Keon moved that business be suspended so the Executive could hear a report from Cain and Fraser on the incident. M. J. Travers seconded the motion, and a heated debate followed in which differences then developing in the Executive could be seen. Lovegrove, Woodhouse, Devlin—interestingly, as one of Santamaria's main supporters on the Executive—Cameron and Cain opposed the motion, while Hoban and Peters supported it. Hoban then moved the adjournment. R. E. Wilson supported him and it was carried by 12 votes to 9.

What made Holt act as he did? He has argued consistently that he simply objected to the notion of 'peasant farming' in communities and to Santamaria's influence and alleged threat to him. Others claim he was more influenced by pressure from officials of the Soldier Settlement Commission. There was also a widespread feeling that, as a practising Presbyterian and son of a minister, he was, perhaps unconsciously, hypersensitive to Catholics. But certainly before this incident Holt was not regarded as being particularly anti-Catholic and there were some strongly Catholic districts in his electorate. He developed a subsequent reputation as being somewhat erratic and highly emotional. Another point is that he was something of a protégé of Kennelly, who had recruited him into the ALP after the war and backed his pre-selection for Portland as a 'horse for the course'. Coleman had also been something of a mentor to him. He had little sympathy from Caucus colleagues over the incident and many were angry with him. They did not place much intrinsic significance on the incident, except in its potential to cause trouble.

In 1954, the sectarian problem continued to plague the Cain Government, while more serious trouble came in challenges from the unions.

The 1953 Conference had adopted a resolution that children attending independent schools be given full rights to use transport available to State school children. The previous provision had been that they could use it if the State school headmaster concerned considered it practicable; interpretation of this had caused sectarian trouble in some country districts.

The sponsor, Reginald Hoban, had the impression at Conference that the Minister for Education, Shepherd, was not enthusiastic about it and on 23 October he moved successfully on the Central Executive, that Cabinet be requested to implement the Conference decision immediately.

one of the traditional troubles of all Australian political parties. The fear of such a controversy had been a reason why Cain, Shepherd and others were unenthusiastic about the measure. In Caucus, the Scully group took it up and Shepherd and Cain got the impression they were being 'hounded' over it. They eventually passed the regulation required, but the affair left a stronger flavour of sectarian bitterness than the more spectacular Holt walk-out.

The left wing of the trade union movement had always been amenable to the idea that the unions should put 'stomach' into nervous politicians on radical social changes and the communists wished to expose the 'capitalist' nature of the Cain administration. These inevitable pressures led into a feud of extraordinary bitterness which had developed between the Trades Hall Council and ALP officers and by the middle of 1954 the Cain Government was facing severe hostility from the Trades Hall.

Most of the ostensible issues over which this bitter spirit arose were genuine. The unions, naturally, wanted to use the Cain Government as an instrument to get better conditions for their members and to uphold the interests of the industrial wing: just as naturally, the pressures from much wider sections of the community on a new, reforming government limited the time it had to consider issues the Trades Hall considered vital; and more importantly, the financial limitations upon it dampened enthusiasm for wage rises.

There was a strong element of malice in the union attitude, inspired by the troubles at the Trades Hall. There also was, and remained, a half-conscious contempt by some industrialists for the necessarily compromising, dealing political wing. In Victoria, this feeling had been encouraged over several generations by the 'pure' Marxism taught to aspiring young unionists at the Victorian Labor College. A contempt for 'compromising with capitalism' was developed early, and while most outgrew the overt stage, this feeling remained as a lingering prejudice. It should be added that there were faults on both sides. The political wing was often less sympathetic than it should have been to the genuine interests of its industrial partners, and among some middle class elements in the ALP a lack of sensitivity to the susceptibilities of the industrialists was marked. The predominantly Catholic nature of the ALP middle class sections only increased feelings of estrangement from the mainly Protestant or secular union men.

The principal issue around which the troubles of 1954 developed was the Arbitration Court's refusal early in the year to increase margins in keeping with basic wage rises. This led to an intensive union campaign for the State Government to pay voluntarily the increased margins sought. To add to the conflagration, part of the then anti-inflation mood of the Arbitration Court was attributed—in an atmosphere of growing hysteria—to the influence on the Court of 'Catholic Action' economic doctrines.

The Australian Workers' Union, which covered many construction workers employed directly and indirectly by the State, sought margin increases for these men, and in protest at what it considered a slow response, on

twenty-four members of the State Parliamentary Party, including two ministers—C. P. Stoneham (Agriculture) and J. Smith (Lands). The District Secretary, H. O. Davis, announced that in future membership would be confined to those engaged in industry under AWU awards. This followed an earlier decision by the AWU not to send delegates to the 1954 ALP Conference. Although a genuine industrial issue was involved it is difficult to believe that two other factors were not involved—the changed attitude of the AWU to the Industrial Groups since the previous year and the longer resentment of Davis against the ALP Executive, since his argument in 1951.

About the same time another, superficially trivial, dispute broke out when the Tramway Employees' Association directed its members not to man 41-seater buses on the Point Ormond-Clifton Hill run unless there was a driver as well as conductor. Coleman, the Minister for Transport, backed the attitude of the Tramways Board that at off-peak times the bus could be worked by a driver alone, who would collect the fares. Despite communist influence in the union, this appeared to be another genuine industrial dispute as the bus crews themselves strongly supported the union attitude at mass meetings. Nevertheless, this curious and debilitating dispute went on for nearly a year until an independent arbitrator agreed to by the parties, Mr G. S. Featonby, ruled on 7 January 1955 in favour of the union attitude.

It was actually an issue rich in background malice. Lovegrove and the Groupers feared the Tramways Union, one of the last under mainly communist control, was the spearhead of a new communist-instigated attempt to 'stand over' the Cain Government, in the spirit of the post-war years. Lovegrove pressed Coleman to stand up to the union leadership, especially its secretary, C. O'Shea, at all costs. His attitude may have been reinforced by memories of O'Shea from his Communist Party days. On the other hand, Stout seized on a sound industrial issue to beat Lovegrove and the ALP. A puritan, Stout also disapproved of Coleman being in a Labor Cabinet because of his profitable hotel interests.

At monthly meetings in mid-July, the month after the State ALP Conference, where a new dispute over Industrial Groups had flared up, the AWU and the Moulders' Union announced within a couple of days of each other that they would disaffiliate from the ALP—the AWU because of the construction margins dispute and both because of the 'activities of the Industrial Groups'. The Moulders' Union decision followed a report to the meeting by delegates to the ALP Conference.

By this time yet another issue had developed between the unions and the State Government. In June, the Industrial Group candidate J. W. Neill had finally succeeded in defeating the communist State Secretary of the Australian Railways Union, J. J. Brown. On leaving office, Brown applied to rejoin the Victorian Railways, where he had been employed prior to becoming secretary of the union in 1943. The State Cabinet, under pressure from the Industrial Groupers, asked the Railways Commissioners not to re-employ him; it was felt that a return to the rank and file would only give Brown a base from which to organise a return to office three

years later. The decision angered the Union Movement where majority opinion was that, whatever the inconvenience and personalities involved, it was a vital industrial principle that a man's activities in a union should not prejudice his chance of re-employment in his industry.

At a tense meeting of the Trades Hall Council on 22 July, the ever intensifying discord broke violently into the open, when Stout declared that the Victorian ALP was 'almost in a state of fascism'. Jordan, in a second report, said the attitude of the Government 'bordered on contempt of the union movement'.

Stout said the unions had been seeking appointments for deputations to the Government on margins, compulsory unionism, the re-employment of Brown, appointment of the Tramways Industrial Group Secretary K. Brennan instead of a man chosen by the union itself as employees' representative on the Tramways Board and the one-man bus dispute. He said there were 'fascist tendencies in Victoria'. There were apparently people with sufficient strength and ability to determine whether State ministers should confer with the unions. The THC would have to determine whether it would function purely as an industrial organisation, if the present position continued. Many Labor people were young and inexperienced and would have to 'take a tumble'.

Jordan told the meeting that the THC had been seeking a conference with Cain for six weeks on claims for higher margins for employees in state instrumentalities, but had been unable to obtain an appointment. But a few hours after the THC Executive had convened a special conference of unions on the issue, Cain had notified the THC officials that he would receive a deputation within a few days.

The bitterly anti-Grouper J. P. Brebner, of the Pulp and Paper Mill Employees' Union, said the ALP was being run by a small clique. The unions were loyal to the Labor Party, but they could not continue to be loyal when the clique running it were taking every opportunity to embarrass officials of the THC.

The following Thursday, 29 July, Cain met representatives from twenty-three unions. In his warm, placatory style, he told them the Government would examine the question of increasing margins for Government and semi-Government employees, and would support claims for increased margins before the Arbitration Court later in the year. 'All you have put forward is more than justified,' he said. 'There may have been misunderstandings in the past, but he welcomed the round-table talk and looked forward to working together for common aims. But he refused to relent on the J. J. Brown affair, and said it was closed.

Stout said a Labor Government had a normal duty to fight for the sort of industrial conditions the unions advocated, even if it lost its place as the Government in doing so. Otherwise it 'would not be worth a bad two bob'. He said the action against Brown had been 'distinctly anti-union'. 'Personally I would not care twopence if he worked on the Siberian Railway for the rest of his life,' Stout said, 'but a basic union principle is involved.'

On the same day, Cain also met a deputation from the ARU, led by Neill, and said he would consider payment of service grants to railway employees.

July was also the month for some key pre-selection contests, for vacated or re-distributed seats for the State elections due at the end of 1955. There were fears in some sections of the Party that The Movement would try to manipulate these to its advantage. The fears proved unfounded.

For the Melbourne North province of the Legislative Council, J. Little, the past-President of the ALP, a Protestant but strong supporter of the Groups and militant anti-communist, won 2,500 votes of 5,000 in a field of nine. He had the indirect backing of The Movement in that Norman Lauritz, who was interested in the seat, did not contest the pre-selection against Little. Little had the support of his union, the Boot Trades, which had many members in the province and could usually control the pre-selection.

In Warnambool, Gladman defeated Holt for the new, enlarged seat. A Catholic, Gladman had the support of the State Executive not only because of his ideological alignment but because he lived in Warnambool, the most populous part of the new electorate, and was judged to have a better chance than Holt, a Portland man, of winning it. He had also been a shop steward at Nestles milk plant where there were many union votes.

A Scully associate, Michael Lucy, whose seat of Ivanhoe was to be abolished in the redistribution, won pre-selection for the new seat of Evelyn against P. R. Connell, another Catholic right wing sitting member. The Country Organiser, John Tripovich, won Dandenong, Larry Floyd won Williamstown from a field of eight, Roy Schindler won Footscray and George Poyser, Geelong. None of these four was Catholic, and all stayed with the ALP after the split.

K. Hayes, a son of the Minister for Housing, Tom Hayes, beat pro-Movement activist, Maurie Keady for Coburg by a margin of only seven votes. A prominent right winger, T. V. Hartmedy, won Preston.

The trouble between the political and industrial wings declined temporarily after the meeting with Cain, but the one-man bus dispute dragged on to provide an issue around which the deep-seated animosity could centre. The unions had agreed to accept Coleman, the Minister for Transport, as arbitrator, but rejected his decision that one man could handle the contentious buses. A THC Disputes Committee, in which militant influence was strong, recommended to the full THC that the Victorian Branch of the Labor Party was 'no longer worthy of financial support or association'. This was in September 1954, when the Federal Parliamentary Party in Canberra was bitterly divided and unsettled over Evatt's appearance before the Petrov Royal Commission and subsequent ejection, and when factional rivalry on the Federal Executive was approaching a climax. In the branches, the restraint imposed by two impending Federal elections, in the late autumn of both 1953 and 1954, had been superseded by disillusion and a sharpening of factional and personal rivalry.

The one-man bus issue came before a stormy meeting of the Melbourne Trades Hall Council on 16 September. In a report to Council, Stout said the Disputes Committee had made its decision and unions could now do what they liked with it. The Committee felt it had been sufficiently patient

over the past ten months of the dispute, he said. He believed the Committee would have to take industrial action.

Lovegrove was the chief speaker against the decision. The Government, he said was being asked to repudiate its actions before Parliament, and possibly be turned out of office. The union movement had gained more from the present Government than from any other. One element in the dispute aimed to smash the Labor Party and the Government. F. J. Riley, supporting him, said the Disputes Committee's decision was aimed at sabotaging and white-anting the Labor Party.

The Council voted by 95 votes to 54 to support the Disputes Committee recommendation. This was fairly typical of the two-to-one majority Stout and his supporters could now command against the Industrial Group unions and supporters of the ALP Executive. The far left and communists had declined to a small minority, and, on the surface, were not operating as a faction in the Council at all, allowing the Stout-ALP fight to grow without hindrance.

The resolution which the Council adopted, with grave potential for trouble in the ALP, read:

We again affirm our belief that the manning of 41-seat buses by a driver-conductor is against the interests and welfare of the men employed by the Tramways Board and the travelling public.

We regard the actions taken by the Minister for Transport, Cabinet and the Parliamentary Labor Party in upholding the Board, rejecting the opinion of the Trades Hall Council and supporting the use of punitive sections of the Arbitration Act objected to by the ACTU and trade unions as being so subversive of trade union and Labor principles as to warrant condemnation.

Such conduct forces us to express the opinion that the Victorian branch of the Labor Party is no longer worthy of financial support or association.

On this minor issue, the vicious circle of division that had been turning in an ever more intense spiral in Victorian Labor for eight years appeared to have reached a climax. One or two more straws and the camel's back would break.