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The National Civic Council

FORGOTTEN, BUT NOT GONE

Where are our politicians

coming from? Which organisations exist to influence them? What are their beliefs, motivations, agendas and allegiances? It is impossible to know the whole truth about politicians' interests, but much can be gleaned from the public record. Researcher **Chloe Martin** presents a series of information sheets on the religio-political affiliations of Australian politicians and political groups.

Who are they?

Bob Santamaria, its fiercely anticommunist Catholic founder, may be dead— but it seems that his legacy lives on. While many people think that the National Civic Council (NCC) has faded into Australian political history, the organisation is still very much alive. Since the 1970s, it has steadily broadened its range of interests and now ‘seeks to shape public policy on cultural, family, social, political, economic and international issues of concern to Australia’ – <http://www.newsweekly.com.au/aboutncc.html>. The group has branches in all states and several hundred active members as well as thousands of more passive supporters. Working on its own account and via other bodies and publications, the NCC is currently one of the most effective and influential conservative Christian organisations in this country.

The NCC has always been strongest in Victoria and has its national office in Melbourne. Its major publications are the current affairs magazine *News Weekly* and the conservative religious journal *AD2000*. It has also spawned a number of ‘associated organisations’ (in reality, well-integrated ‘fronts’) including the **Australian Family Association (AFA)**, focusing on ‘all forms of public policy affecting the family’, and covering everything from gay rights to censorship; and the **Thomas More Centre**, specialising in bioethical issues ‘and the formation of young people’, many of whom presumably develop into NCC operatives who try to attain influential positions in unions, political parties, student associations, the media etc.

The AFA, in particular, has a much higher public profile than the NCC itself, and although the link between the two groups is not secret, most journalists seem quite unaware of it. AFA leaders are very upfront about the ‘terrible dangers’ facing Australia:

Every day new anti-faith outrages are taking place and the obvious question to ask is, ‘How long before Christianity is outlawed altogether?’ (Bill Muehlenberg, National Vice-President, AFA, www.acl.org.au, 17 August, 2005)

Feminism is seen as one of the greatest dangers to our future:

... And perhaps there is a great spiritual awakening needed in women – to realise that what women do is have babies, and that their self-identity and self-esteem may be found and grown through giving themselves to and loving their husband and family, rather than in pursuing materialism and individualism. (Kerrie Allen, AFA Research Officer, ‘Australia’s Fertility Crisis’, *The Australian Family*, July 2005, 34)

The NCC was officially formed in 1957. Before this time its leading members belonged to a body known as the Catholic Social Studies Movement, the Catholic Social Movement, or simply ‘The Movement’. This grouping of lay Catholics had emerged during 1942, led by B.A. (Bartholomew Augustine) Santamaria. Its initial objective was to contest communist influence in the trade union movement.

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Movement’s power grew and several Australian Labor Party (ALP) figures became edgy. Following Labor’s defeat in the 1954 federal election, the party’s leader, Dr Evatt, denounced the ‘subversive’ work of the

Movement. This precipitated the ALP split of 1955, which saw the formation of the Democratic Labour Party (DLP). Generally conservative and strongly influenced by the Movement/NCC, the DLP directed its voters' preferences to the Coalition parties, thereby helping keep the ALP out of power for 23 years, until 1972.

Santamaria's organisation was backed mainly by the Catholic hierarchy in Victoria, and in 1956, other (so-called 'Sydney-line') bishops opposed to direct church support for the Movement sought Vatican intervention. In 1957, Rome responded by ordering the Australian church to reconstruct the Movement, excluding from its program any intervention in the activities of unions or political parties. However, Santamaria and his supporters continued their work through the newly-formed, 'independent' NCC.

The NCC's formal structure seems unexceptional, even democratic in many of its aspects. But in practice, it operates much like a military intelligence outfit, complete with centralised decision-making, an obsession with secrecy and bitter internal power-struggles. Its influence over unions has greatly declined over time, but its interest in political parties did not disappear with the DLP's demise in 1974. There are strong indications that some contemporary Coalition MPs are significantly influenced by NCC policy positions on matters such as opposition to abortion.

Internal tensions have existed within the NCC since its inception (as the Movement) in the 1940s. These have sometimes erupted into full-scale factional war – see Mark Considine 'The National Civic Council: Politics Inside Out' in *Politics XX(1)*, May 1985, 48-58 for an account of one such explosion. Santamaria died in 1998 and since that time the NCC has suffered many significant defections. *The Weekend Australian* of 29 October 2005 reported that:

The family of late National Civic Council founder B A (Bob) Santamaria has walked out of the organisation that helped keep Labor out of power for 23 years. The family claims the NCC has fallen under the influence of the extreme Right and has wasted up to \$1 million on a failed political party, the Australian Family Alliance ... Mary Helen Woods [nee Santamaria] said her father had been betrayed by his successor as NCC president , Peter Westmore ...

There are several studies of the NCC, a recent (though generally critical) text being Paul Ormonde (ed.) (2000) *Santamaria – The Politics of Fear* (Spectrum Publications).

About the Australian Family Association (AFA)

'... the AFA is Australia's leading family advocacy group.'

An associate organisation of the late B.A. Santamaria's National Civic Council, the AFA is very active in the fight for the traditional heterosexual family to the exclusion of all other family models.

Leading lobbyists against recognition of same-sex relationships and adoption rights, and in favour of extensive film and television censorship.

As far as possible, all information has been derived from the original sources specified in the text. Various collections of documentary and online information have been consulted.