

Brian Costar, Peter Love and Paul Strangio (eds), *The Great Labor Schism. A Retrospective*, Scribe publications, Melbourne, 2005, ix + 374 pp, **PRICE?**

BY DON AITKIN

This excellent book demonstrates just how strong contemporary Australian humanities and social science have become. In 21 essays a rather smaller number of contributors re-analyse and re-assess one of the great political events of the last fifty years, immortalised in the title of Robert Murray's great book, *The Split*. It is hard to write concisely about the Split, because like the onion it has many layers, and each layer turns out to be a new onion, with many layers. If your attention is on Dr Evatt you are likely to miss the arguments going inside the Catholic community about the proper relationship between Church and State. If your attention is on the consequences for the Victorian branch of the ALP you are likely to miss the differing views that Senator Gair and his colleagues about the role and future of the DLP. They are all connected, and it may well be the case that a book like this is the best way to understand the connections.

What impressed me most was the high level of competence in the analysis and the writing, coupled with the now extraordinary depth of scholarship and research that is available for writing about something whose key event occurred just fifty years ago. I had a small try at counting the number of references in the book, but soon gave up. There must be hundreds. I expected to recognise much of the material in the book, but I was quite mistaken: the richness of this book is really special. Apart from confusing Sir Roden Cutler with Sir Charles of that ilk (the one the Governor of New South Wales, the other the Leader of the Country Party in that State) I saw no errors of any consequence.

A quick description. The analysis has four parts to it: what happened in the various States and why what happened was different; who were involved and how the media presented them; the war of ideas inside the Roman Catholic Church; and what happened afterwards. The editors have ordered the chapters nicely, so that one reads on expectantly, building understanding as one proceeds. Either the editors have exercised some fine quality control in their editing of the contributors' essays, or they had a superb team, because there is almost a common style. (I would, however, offer for the Mixed Metaphor Prize of 2005 the following: 'Finally, organisationally sclerotic, the party was ill-equipped to cope with a miasma of tensions festering in and around it.')

The Australian Labor Party has always attracted more writers than its opponents, probably because it presents elements of tragedy that the others lack. Why is it that a party that is so dedicated to doing good behaves so badly so often? If that question interests you then this book will be great reading. One of the contributors asks, indeed, whether or not the ALP is hard-wired to split, and I think that the answer you get from this book is that it is. The last chapter, a splendid finale, brings us to the present, and reminds us that the Split produced a Victorian ALP that became so intransigently uninterested in electoral success that it had to be reformed. The reformers included Jim Cairns, Bob Hawke, Clyde

Holding and John Button. To deal with the 'winner takes all' mentality they saw as one of the root causes of the party's problems they set up a proportional representation system that ensured all the factions were represented. Today the factions are the problem, stifling a new rebirth of the party, which always seems to need reform somewhere.

I hope this book becomes widely read and, since we are now all expected to see everything in money terms, widely sold. I first began to write on Australian politics in 1958, not quite fifty years ago. Then there was virtually nothing available on print for the previous fifty years. Dr Evatt's biography of Holman gave you the only published accounts of NSW politics. The only journal circulating was *The Australian Quarterly*, but it was only thirty years old and its 'Political review' was much more recent. To write anything new meant a laborious trip through the files of the major newspapers. It is a measure of the much greater maturity and capacity of Australian society that a book such as this one could be written. Might I suggest to the present Australian Government that it recognise just how much benefit each successive Australian society gains from the research and education of its forbears. This book is a beautiful example.