Contents

Foreword – Hon. Jay Weatherill vii
Labor or Labour? x
Preface xi

PART ONE  RADICAL TRADITIONS
1 Radical Traditions – South Australia 3
2 Radical Traditions – The Cornish at Home and Abroad 25

PART TWO  COPPER AND ORGANISED LABOR
3 1848 and All That – Antipodean Chartists? 55
4 Moonta, Wallaroo and the Rise of Trade Unionism 75

PART THREE  RISE AND FALL
5 Towards Parliamentary Representation 121
6 Labor in Power – Tom Price and John Verran 152
7 Labor and the Conscription Crisis 187
8 Between the Wars 222

PART FOUR  THE NATURAL PARTY OF GOVERNMENT?
9 The Dunstan Era 261
10 Life After Dunstan – To Bannon and Beyond 290

Epilogue 306
Notes 310
Index 349
The election, in May 1891, of Richard ‘Dicky’ Hooper – a Cornish miner from Moonta – as the first Labor MP in State Parliament might have represented a shock to the political establishment of South Australia. But his historic victory, in fact, resulted from the inception and steady growth of a determined and well-organised local labor movement – one that owed much of its origins to the zeal of Cornish copper miners who settled in the Mid North and on Yorke Peninsula during the early decades of the colony.

As Philip Payton explains in this meticulously researched and superbly told story, among the many cultural traditions the Cornish brought with them was a belief in education and self-improvement, a deep devotion to the Methodist faith and an oftentimes fiery attachment to radical politics. In their
adopted home of South Australia, these traits helped create an embryonic trade union movement and, in turn, led to the formation of the forerunner of today’s Labor Party.

The work of the early labor activists was carried out on fertile political ground. Unlike neighbouring colonies, South Australia was conceived and founded as an ‘experiment’ – a new society predicated, in the eyes of radicals and Nonconformists, on religious and civic freedom and economic and social mobility.

The practical implementation of such principles led to a series of social and political milestones, establishing South Australia’s early democratic credentials. These included the introduction of universal male suffrage and the secret ballot, the granting to women of the right to vote and stand for Parliament, and, in 1910, the formation, under John Verran (another Cornish miner), of the first majority Labor government in the world.

‘One and All’: Labor and the Radical Tradition in South Australia outlines not just the early successes of the Cornish Methodists, but also their long-term and profound influence on the South Australian Labor Party and, in particular, the great latter-day reformist, Don Dunstan – who was, like me, of Cornish descent.

The circumstances of the ALP’s formation and development in South Australia were quite different from those of the party in the eastern States and nationally. But, as we learn from this vivid account, such differences did not prevent the local organisation from also undergoing flux, ferment and damaging splits – such as during the conscription debate of World War I and in relation to the Premiers’ Plan to combat the effects of the 1930s Depression.

Life in modern Australia is a world away from the experiences of the working folk of the 1800s, and the Labor Party has naturally evolved and adapted to our changing society.

This volume vividly retells the story, however, of the early struggles, and of how a passionate and hardworking group of miners, with a unique mixture of religious and political motivations, translated ideals in action and laid a rock-solid foundation for equality and social justice. The Cornish miners of the Mid North and Yorke Peninsula made an overwhelmingly positive and
disproportionately large contribution to our civic and political culture, and we South Australians – and especially the ALP of the post-War period – remain in their debt.

I thank and commend Philip Payton, the Don Dunstan Foundation and Wakefield Press for reminding us, through ‘One and All’: Labor and the Radical Tradition in South Australia, of our political heritage and the remarkable way in which everyday workers have advanced the common good and made our State a better place to live.

Jay Weatherill
Premier of South Australia
Labor or Labour?

It is difficult to be precise or definitive in dealing with the terms Labor and Labour (not only competing spellings, but questions of upper and lower case), so throughout this book I have attempted to adhere to the following convention. When dealing with the several political parties in Australia (for example, United Labor Party; Australian Labor Party) I have adopted the spelling Labor, as per common usage. Likewise, I refer to the Labour Party in the United Kingdom. However, usage in both primary and secondary sources is far more diverse and often inconsistent, and when quoting directly from original documents, newspapers, articles and books, I have allowed the author’s preference (capitalisation as well as spelling) to stand. Additionally, and perhaps somewhat controversially, I have adopted Labor as a generic term, referring, for example, to the wider ‘Labor movement’ (trade unions and other associations) and identifying an embryonic ‘Labor movement’ in early pre-union collective action and organisations. Indeed, this usage is implicit in the title of this book, ‘One and All’: Labor and the Radical Tradition in South Australia.

Philip Payton
In November 2009, as part of the activities associated with the launch of the bid to acquire National Listing (and ultimately UNESCO World Heritage Site status) for the Cornish copper-mining landscapes of South Australia, I gave an after-dinner address at Ayers House in Adelaide, hosted by Jay Weatherill, then Minister for Environment and Conservation in the South Australian government. Although the bid was, of course, strictly apolitical, I recognised that the early days of the Labor movement in South Australia’s mining towns would be of particular interest to the Minister, not least as he was himself of Cornish descent, and I dealt with these in my talk.

Subsequently, Jay Weatherill suggested that the topic should be written up in detail, providing as it did an alternative and distinctive narrative of the Labor movement in South Australia, especially when compared to the eastern States, shedding new light on the origins of the Labor Party here in this State. Later, towards the end 2012, Jay Weatherill, now Premier, renewed the suggestion, and in May 2013 the project leading to this volume ‘One and All’: Labor and the Radical Tradition in South Australia was born.

The book falls neatly into four parts. The first, entitled ‘Radical Traditions’, begins by examining South Australia’s radical credentials (not least through the eyes of former Premier, Don Dunstan), and shows how the Province’s foundation in the midst of the so-called Reforming Thirties in Britain paralleled an upsurge in political radicalism in Cornwall, the source of many of South
Australia’s early migrants. Part Two, ‘Copper and Organised Labor’, traces the impact of the predominantly Methodist Cornish settlers, first at the Burra (and the strike of 1848) and then at Moonta, Wallaroo and Kadina on northern Yorke Peninsula, where an embryonic trade union movement first appeared. Part Three, ‘Rise and Fall’, explores the parallel efforts in the Labor movement on Yorke Peninsula and in metropolitan Adelaide to secure representation in the South Australian Parliament, which was at last achieved in 1891. Tom Price emerged as South Australia’s first Labor Premier in 1905, and John Verran as Premier led the State’s – and the world’s – very first majority Labor government in 1910–12. Yet Labor’s fortunes were mixed. The conservative Legislative Council proved a constant thorn in the party’s side, while fierce controversies over conscription during the First World War and later over the Premiers’ Plan split the party down the middle. However, as Part Four, ‘The Natural Party of Government?’, demonstrates, despite these and other vicissitudes, Labor re-emerged strongly after the Second World War, leading to the incomparable Dunstan Decade of the late 1960s and 1970s. This was a prelude to South Australia’s more recent contemporary political history which, although outside the principal scope of this book, is sketched briefly in the concluding chapter of Part Four, indicating the continuance of the State’s radical tradition in the Labor Party up to and into the twenty-first century.

Commissioned by and conducted under the aegis of the Don Dunstan Foundation, this project was funded with the assistance of the Office of the Premier of South Australia. Led by its Executive Director, Donna Harden, the Don Dunstan Foundation is a charitable trust that works with the University of Adelaide and Flinders University to gain a deeper understanding of social justice issues and to share these understandings with the greater community to influence change. It has been a great privilege and a huge pleasure to work with the Don Dunstan Foundation, especially Donna Harden, with her infectious enthusiasm and tireless dedication to the Foundation’s cause, and I am deeply grateful to her and her team, particularly Sharna Pearce, Olivia Power and Ben Waters. Likewise, I am extremely grateful to the project’s Steering Committee, chaired by John Williams and including Don Hopgood, David Pearson, Angas Story, Chris Sumner and Ben Waters, together with
Donna Harden, which has provided invaluable advice and feedback at every stage of this book’s development.

I am similarly indebted to academic colleagues and students in the School of History and International Relations at Flinders University, notably Lance Brennan, Darryl Burrowes, Brian Dickey, Matthew Fitzpatrick, Prudence Flowers, Carol Fort, Lauren Gobbett, Bronte Gould, Stephanie James, Catherine Kevin, Margrette Kleinig, David Lockwood, Peter Monteath, Tony Nugent, Melanie Oppenheimer, Eric Richards, Ella Stewart-Peters and Andrekos Varnava, not least for their searching questions and critical comments at seminars presented on work in progress. Thanks too to the staff of Flinders University Library, especially the Special Collections team – Mary Addyman, Gillian Dooley, Kylie Jarrett, Adele Lenz, Tom Snook – for arranging access to the Don Dunstan and John Bannon Collections. Over many years I have also benefitted from the expert assistance of the staffs of the State Library of South Australia and the Barr Smith Library at the University of Adelaide, and again I offer my thanks. I also acknowledge the National Trust of South Australia, Moonta Branch, for allowing access to its archival and newspaper collections. Thanks too to the members of the Cornish Association of South Australia and the South Australian Mining History Group for their interest and assistance, and especially to Michael Bollen and Wakefield Press, South Australia’s premier scholarly imprint, for agreeing so readily and with such enthusiasm to publish this book. The Wakefield team, not least Julia Beaven and Michael Deves, have been enormously helpful as they have smoothed the way towards publication.

At the Institute of Cornish Studies, University of Exeter, I owe an immense debt of gratitude to my erstwhile colleagues, Bernard Deacon and Garry Tregidga, and I am likewise indebted to the History staff at Exeter’s Penryn campus in Cornwall, especially Tim Cooper, Bryony Onciul, Catriona Pennell and Nicola Whyte. More generally, I am indebted to those many chroniclers of Australia whose works I have consulted, especially those who have written on Labor history, politics and biography, notably Neal Blewett, Frank Bongiorno, Brian Dickey, Nick Dyrenfurth, Dino Hodge, Don Hopgood, John Hirst, Dean Jaensch, Stephanie McCarthy, Ross McMullin, Jim Moss, Andrew Parkin,
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Finally, I should add a very special ‘thank you’ to my wife Dee. We have shared many adventures in Cornwall and Australia, and Dee has eagerly embraced all the excitements and opportunities – some daunting! – that life has thrown at us, not least completion of the index for this book (for which I am hugely grateful).

Philip Payton
School of History and International Relations
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26 January 2016, Australia Day
PART ONE

RADICAL TRADITIONS
Chapter 1
Radical Traditions – South Australia

‘On the face of it, South Australia might have seemed an unlikely and unrewarding area for the experiment’.1 As he penned his political memoirs, published in 1981 after his retirement from active politics (he was Premier from 1967 to 1968, and again from 1970 to 1979), Don Dunstan mused on the chain of events that had led him to high office in South Australia. Born in Fiji of Australian parentage in 1926, Dunstan had been educated in his parent’s home State, first at St Peter’s College and then at the University of Adelaide, where he obtained a law degree. Returning to Fiji shortly after his mother’s untimely death, Dunstan began work as a litigation lawyer. He enjoyed the challenge, although he devoted more hours than was good for his health. Eventually, too, he began to worry about the long-term relevance of his work. As he explained in his memoirs, he doubted whether he was really ‘contributing to the sum of human good by what I was doing’. Lawyers, Dunstan complained, merely patched up ‘messes and mistakes in human behaviour’, sorting out the difficulties that people had made for themselves.2 He yearned instead, he said, for something of greater and more fundamental social value.

Don Dunstan’s ‘experiment’
‘I believed then, as now’, Dunstan wrote in 1981, ‘that it is possible to build a society in which individual citizens have security of food, shelter, work and
services’, a society ‘which will celebrate their worth as individuals . . . their differences [and] their strengths’, and ‘where all citizens have an equal and effective say in their own governance and an opportunity to participate in and to influence the decisions affecting their lives. It is possible’, Dunstan insisted, ‘to build [such] a social democracy – a dynamic society in which there would be equal opportunity to act creatively in a social context’. This could not be achieved everywhere in his lifetime, he conceded, but he was certain that he could at least ‘build a model’. This was his ‘experiment’, and South Australia was to be the laboratory in which the social democratic ‘model’ was developed.3 As we shall see (in Chapter 9), Dunstan proved spectacularly successful in building his model. He entered the South Australian Parliament as Labor member for the Adelaide suburb of Norwood in 1953, and as Premier ushered in what became known nationally and internationally as the Dunstan Decade when, as Allan Patience has argued, he ‘helped to restore and rejuvenate the social democratic tradition in the Australian Labor Party’.4 But, as Dunstan had admitted, at first glance South Australia had seemed an unlikely place in which to perform his experiment and construct his social democratic model. Why?

As Don Dunstan himself explained, by the time he entered South Australian politics in the early 1950s, the State had long since acquired its reputation as socially and politically staid. It was, perhaps, the most conservative of all Australian States, he said, where every institution – ‘even the trade unions’ – was slow to change, and everywhere there was a demand for conformity and a suspicion of novelty.5 Moreover, he continued, since 1933 the conservative Liberal and Country League had been in government in South Australia, the Labor Party seemingly condemned to perpetual Opposition. Adelaide was dubbed ‘the city of churches’ by both admirers and detractors, a label that had acquired negative as well as positive connotations, with its supposed intimations of ‘wowserism’ and ‘kill-joy’ opposition to frivolity, drinking and gambling. Indeed, Dunstan added, the churches in South Australia were overwhelmingly ‘puritan’ in flavour, as he put it – Methodists, Lutherans, Baptists, and so on – reflecting the relative weakness of both Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism (the latter in marked contrast to the Eastern States),
and attesting to the State’s distinctive religious history. This ‘puritanism’ was part of South Australia’s conservative culture, Dunstan suggested. ‘On Sunday everything closed’, he recalled: ‘The whole State appeared shrouded in Calvinist gloom. There was no organised sport, no entertainment, and it was considered improper to appear to enjoy oneself.’ Yet, as Dunstan also recognised, religious distinctiveness was but one component of a wider ‘sense of difference’ that had often distinguished South Australia from other parts of the continent, and which gave the State its separate identity. Moreover, as Dunstan was keen to acknowledge, this ‘puritanism’ was deeply paradoxical, for behind the conservative façade was an ingrained if sometimes latent radicalism, in the churches themselves and in the wider society they sought to influence. As he observed, ‘there had always been an element of radicalism in South Australia’, and, significantly, among the first European settlers in the early colony (or ‘Province’) of South Australia were Chartist radicals (see Chapter 3), many of them religious ‘puritans’, who had arrived ‘with the black book of the Charter in their pockets’, as Dunstan put it dramatically.
Chartists, Methodists and Radicalism

The Chartist movement had emerged in Britain in 1838 (just two years after the foundation of South Australia) in the heady atmosphere of the Reforming Thirties, taking its name from the so-called ‘People’s Charter’. Drawn up in May of that year by reformist agitators, including the Cornishman William Lovett, the Charter demanded universal male suffrage, secret ballots, abolition of property qualifications for Members of Parliament, payments for MPs, equal electoral districts (to ensure one-man, one-vote, one-value), and annual elections. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, had preached a politically conservative acceptance of one’s lot in life, with due reward given later in Heaven. His followers, however, were apt to be as concerned with this life as the next, and Methodism swiftly developed a moral code that taught compassion, concern for the needy, and the equality of men (and women) before God. Not surprisingly, many of Wesley’s adherents turned to Chartism.

Likewise, in South Australia, according to Dunstan, Methodists and other ‘dissenters’ (or ‘puritans’, as he liked to call them) were ‘unable to contain the lively sense of injustice which inequality . . . inevitably aroused amongst their largely working-class supporters’. Chartism appealed instinctively to such people, Dunstan added, and later in the nineteenth century the emergent Labor Party in South Australia would draw ‘many members and supporters from the ranks of Methodists’, attracted by its moral code. Indeed, he continued, ‘numbered amongst its leaders were men who were labelled “speakers in the pulpit style”’. Skilful orators, and given to Biblical allusion, such speakers were often Methodist lay (or ‘local’) preachers, regular and powerful performers in the many Nonconformist churches scattered across the colony. As Dunstan remarked, they tended to be ‘conservative about matters which related to family, sex, drink or gambling’, giving South Australia its staid reputation, but were ‘radical about rights to political expression and concern for fairness and equality of opportunity’. Moreover, they were highly influential.

‘The most potent religious movement in nineteenth century South Australia was Methodism’, agreed David Hilliard and Arnold D. Hunt, and by the mid-1870s Methodism rivalled the Church of England as the largest denomination in the colony. Indeed, by 1870 Methodism’s constituent
groups – principally the Wesleyans, Bible Christians and Primitive Methodists – were already dominant in several respects. In that year the Wesleyans sported 148 churches throughout the colony, the Bible Christians eighty-one, and the Primitive Methodists ninety-nine. The Church of England, by contrast, could muster only sixty-four. Likewise, the Wesleyans could boast thirty-one clergy, the Bible Christians twenty, the Primitive Methodists twenty-two, and the Church of England just thirty-eight. The disparity was even more pronounced in the numbers of lay preachers – 259 Wesleyans, ninety-eight Bible Christians, 191 Primitive Methodists, and fifty-four Church of England. So too in the number of Sunday-school scholars – 11,429 Wesleyans, 3,492 Bible Christians and 4,312 Primitive Methodists, compared to 4,198 Church of England.11

On 1 January 1901 the Wesleyans, Bible Christians and Primitive Methodists in South Australia joined together to form a united Methodist church, comprising almost 25% of the State’s religious adherents. Although there were areas of concentration, notably the copper-mining district of northern Yorke Peninsula, where in the 1891 census an astonishing 80% of the local population was returned as Methodist, Methodist influence permeated South Australia, town as well as country, its appeal evident in Adelaide as well in the rural areas.12 Although usually conservative on moral issues, as Dunstan averred, the Methodists were not always as dour as he had imagined. Not all were offended by the pejorative term ‘wowser’. Instead, many South Australians eagerly embraced the term, proudly (if ironically) claiming it as an acronym of ‘We Only Want Social Evils Remedied’, a slogan supposedly displayed on banners at rallies demanding restrictions on the sale of alcohol or a clamp-down on prostitution.13 Such objectives were morally conservative. Yet banners, slogans and demonstrations evidenced passionate devotion to the right to political expression, together with a belief in the ability of political action to achieve social change and societal improvement. Both were fundamental components of political radicalism, as Dunstan appreciated, essential elements of his imagined social democracy.

Moreover, as P.A. Howell has noted in his study of South Australia at the turn of the twentieth century, Methodists were not as socially staid as
their detractors sometimes suspected. They may have avoided public houses, dance halls and theatres but often enjoyed a vibrant social and cultural life, conducted through the medium of the Methodist church – everything from concerts and picnics to outings and visits to the seaside – as well as frequenting temperance hotels and being active in Freemasonry and friendly societies. They may have eschewed horse-racing but enthusiastically embraced football, cricket and athletics. By no means as narrow-minded or introvert as their critics suggested, South Australia’s Methodists were thus actively engaged in the community of which they were so conspicuously a part. For many, their concern for social justice and societal improvement had led seamlessly to political radicalism of the type detected by Dunstan, producing and explaining the conservative-radical paradox he had identified so deftly.

Perhaps, Dunstan mused, South Australia was after all not such an odd choice for his ‘experiment’ in social democracy. Maybe, even, South Australia lent itself to the development of the innovative political ‘model’ he had sketched for himself. Certainly, many of the objectives sought by the early Chartists had been achieved in South Australia long before other parts of the Anglophone world, and, as he reviewed the State’s history, Don Dunstan appreciated afresh the strength of its radical tradition and its impressive record of progressive legislation. As he put it, South Australia ‘had been the first place in the world to get manhood suffrage and the secret ballot’. It was also the first ‘to establish a children’s court, [and] to establish a system of simple land registration (Torrens Title) which swept the common-law countries of the world’. Above all, he acknowledged, South Australia was the very first place in the world ‘to elect a majority Labor government’, and was ‘only the second in the world to grant votes for women’ (the first was New Zealand).

As Dunstan had observed, it was hardly surprising that the Methodists had been so intimately involved in the rise of the early Labor Party in South Australia. Many, he added, were of Cornish birth or descent, for ‘the Cornish were overwhelmingly Wesleyan in religious persuasion’. As he explained, the discovery of copper in the 1840s, ‘particularly at Kapunda and at Burra and later [in 1859–61] at Wallaroo and Moonta brought a flood of Cornish miners to South Australia’. This meant, he continued, ‘that South
Australia’s labour force, unlike that in most of the rest of Australia, was Cornish rather than Irish.16 Dunstan was overstating the case, of course. Despite the ethno-occupational visibility of the Cornish in South Australia, there were immigrant working people – skilled as well as unskilled – from a variety of other backgrounds, most obviously the English and Scots, together with a large contingent of Germans. Likewise, the Irish, though numerous, were but one component of a heterogeneous workforce in other parts of Australia, even in neighbouring Victoria where they were especially strong. Nonetheless, Dunstan’s comparison was well-made, even if exaggerated, and nowhere was it more pertinent than in the contrast between the predominantly Methodist flavour of the Labor Party as it emerged in South Australia and the Irish-Catholic complexion of its counterparts elsewhere, especially in the eastern States.

Methodists, Catholics and Labor in Victoria

Yet the Cornish-Methodist influence had also been important elsewhere in Australia – in the silver-lead-zinc mining district of Broken Hill, for example, just across the border from South Australia in New South Wales (see Chapter 5), and on the Victorian goldfields. In Victoria, as Frank Bongiorno makes plain, religious dissent, ‘especially Methodism’, was a ‘powerful influence’ in the mining districts in the nineteenth century, not least in the Amalgamated Miners Association (AMA), a trade union which – as Bongiorno notes – exhibited a working-class liberal radicalism which helped lay the foundations for the State’s Labor Party.17 The Bendigo Miners’ Association, for example, a constituent of the AMA, sported Cornishmen, no doubt predominantly Methodist, in all its leading executive positions in the early 1880s, the roll call of Association presidents peppered with tell-tale Cornish surnames until at least the Great War, among them Dunstan, Grigg, Laity, Rowe, Treleavan and Trewartha. In 1883 the Bendigo Advertiser published the Association’s rallying cry, a doggerel verse sporting the tell-tale Cornish motto, ‘One and All’:

United may we stand,
Guarding throughout the land,
Right against Wrong,
Justice we seek for all,
Ready at duty’s call,
Our motto ‘One and All’;
We shall be strong.

Methodist influence in Victoria’s mining districts sought to make miners model citizens, ‘transforming the “mob” into citizenry’, according to Bongiorno, the Amalgamated Miners Association advocating mutual improvement activities and lending support to numerous goldfields institutions. It gave financial assistance to local brass bands, lending libraries, hospitals and benevolent organisations, and was involved in friendly societies, sports clubs, local councils, and school and mining boards. Such activity won popular approval across the community, and some local businessmen were even made honorary members of the AMA, such was the breadth of consensus achieved in this emergent civic culture.

William Trenwith, the son of a Cornish cobbler and a leading activist in the Victorian Operative Bootmakers’ Union, argued that in Australian colonial society, with its inherent egalitarianism and commitment to liberal and democratic values, social radicalism could exist alongside capitalism in felicitous equilibrium. As he put it, writing in 1886, ‘employers and employed stand on absolutely equal terms – the one wishing to buy labor, and the other having it to sell’. James Nankervis, AMA President, another Methodist of Cornish descent, agreed, insisting in the Melbourne Age in 1904 that it was the duty of government to arbitrate between capital and labor, and to perform ‘the role of the father in the parable in the Old Book to reconcile the two sons, if he might so call them’, should they find themselves in dispute. Such opinion helps to explain the otherwise puzzling partnership that sometimes existed between Labor and Liberal politicians in the Victorian Parliament in this period. William Trenwith himself, despite being a vocal advocate of independent Labor representation, nonetheless entered the Victorian Parliament in 1889 under the National Liberal League banner. In 1892 he established a separate Labor caucus, yet by 1894 was leading a United Labour
and Liberal Party, the two strands – sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting – having merged once more. Only in May 1896 did this finally metamorphose into a truly independent United Labor Party.

Partly a result of this long gestation, aided by the built-in rural bias of the electoral system, Labor did not find itself in government in Victoria in its own right until as late as 1952, although it had formed minority administrations in 1913, 1924, 1927–28, 1929–32, 1943 and 1945–47, with a grand total of barely six years in office. Additionally, Labor had supported the Country Party government of Albert Dunstan (no relation, apparently) from 1935 to 1942. Again, this appears an unlikely alliance but, as Geoffrey Blainey has explained, in Victoria the Country Party had long sported a radical wing, especially in the north-western wheat belt, where many goldfields workers had gone to try their luck farming. Albert Dunstan’s father was among them, a Cornish Methodist-miner who, like many of his countrymen, had at length abandoned the gold mines to take up land on what was then Victoria’s outback frontier. Dunstan junior joined the Country Party, and led the foundation of a breakaway group, the Progressive Country Party, which within weeks had formed more than 100 branches, mainly in the north-western wheat belt, where his father and other former gold-miners had settled. Albert Dunstan managed to gain – and hold – the balance of power in the Victorian Parliament, keeping Labor in power in 1927–28 and 1929–32. He also managed to negotiate the reunification of the Country Party, largely on his terms, and, after the defeat of the Labor Party, joined a coalition administration in Victoria led by the Liberals. In 1935, now leader of the Country Party, Dunstan shifted his coalition allegiance to the Labor Party, and in doing so became Premier of Victoria, a position he would hold for a decade.

As Blainey has observed, Albert Dunstan’s eventual defeat in 1945 evidenced the final waning of what he termed the ‘nonconformist Protestant lobby in Victoria’. As Blainey explained, Methodists and other Nonconformists had long been powerful in Victorian politics. But, he said, this Protestant lobby ‘was vulnerable because its political influence lay essentially in the Liberal and Country parties and not in Labor where Catholics were strong’. The Methodist-Nonconformist estrangement from Labor in Victoria had begun by
the end of the nineteenth century, and after Federation in 1901 there was an increasing identification of Roman Catholicism with the Labor Party. As the Labor Party had forged its own separate identity, appealing unambiguously to the working-class, so it was natural that the many workers of Irish-Catholic origin in Victoria would be drawn to its ranks. Moreover, the Labor Party was formally opposed to religious sectarianism, a principle which many Catholics found attractive at a time when they felt disadvantaged within the community, not least by what they saw as an encroaching ‘Protestantised’ secular State education system. As Frank Bongiorno has argued, in Victoria many ‘Catholics believed that Labor was the party most likely to give Catholics a fair deal’. Catholics flocked to join, to the dismay of many Methodists and other Nonconformists who began to detect a malign ‘alliance’ between the Labor Party and the Catholic church in Victoria, a fear exacerbated by Catholic attitudes during the Boer War, which Protestants interpreted as being less than supportive of the British Empire’s cause. Sectarian suspicion would reach new heights during the First World War, where in the conscription crisis of 1916–17 Victoria’s Catholic population proved resolutely ‘anti-conscriptionist’ – much to the chagrin of Protestant ‘pro-conscriptionists’ – and redoubled Catholic support for Labor. As Bongiorno concluded, by then ‘Labor’s reputation as the Catholic party was, for good or ill, now secure’. And if this was true for Victoria, it was also apparent across much of Australia. As Dean Jaensch has observed, ‘most of the Protestant influence resigned’ in the Federal Labor Party in the aftermath of the conscription crisis, ‘leaving the Irish Catholic component with a controlling vote. The party moved to the Left in rhetoric, ideology and policy’.

**Privileging the Cornish**

In South Australia, by contrast, despite the antagonism between institutional Methodism and Labor during the conscription controversy, Methodism remained a crucial strand of Labor Party identity after the First World War. Unlike neighbouring Victoria, there were relatively few Catholics likely to challenge the relationship between Methodism and Labor, and the intimacy survived the upheaval of the war years. Don Dunstan, tracing the early
fortunes of the Labor Party in South Australia, privileged the Cornish role in this enduring relationship. As he readily admitted, he was himself of Cornish descent, and proud of it. His forebears, he explained, had come to South Australia from Cornwall in the early days, settling at Monarto, ‘an arid, shallow valley with little vegetation except low mallee scrub’, where they wrested a living from the unpromising soil.28

It was a heritage that Dunstan remembered (as a boy, ‘I was taken there for church reunions’,29 he recalled), and when, as Premier of South Australia, he was approached by the business community of Moonta, Wallaroo and Kadina – the former copper-mining towns of northern Yorke Peninsula – for support to encourage economic regeneration, he suggested that they develop a cultural tourism strategy based on their Cornish past. ‘When I proposed the establishment of a Cornish Festival, in Australia’s “Little Cornwall”, people of Cornish descent came flocking’, he wrote: ‘The staid citizens of the three towns were soon dancing the Furry Dance in the streets of Wallaroo.’30 In fact, Dunstan had already undertaken a study tour of Cornwall itself, seeking to discover how the distinctive Cornish identity had been deployed there to promote tourism. He returned to South Australia brimming with enthusiasm, exclaiming: ‘I think that, if properly developed, that unique triangle of towns [on Yorke Peninsula] can draw and display its Cornish heritage in such a way that there is a continuing and expanding tourism industry that will, quite literally, revitalise them.’31

In privileging the Cornish and emphasising the role of Methodism, as well as sketching the strands of radical continuity, as he saw them, from Labor’s early days to his own premiership, Don Dunstan drew particular attention to John Verran. It was Verran who had become the first majority Labor Premier of South Australia in 1910, heading what was hailed at the time as the very first Labor government ‘in the history of the world’.32 Born in 1856 at Cusgarne in the parish of Gwennap, deep in the old copper-mining district of west Cornwall, Verran emigrated to South Australia with his parents as a child, settling first at Kapunda (where he was employed as a pickey-boy at the mine, sorting ore) before moving to Moonta where he worked underground as a miner. Although only a youngster when he left Cornwall, John Verran remained overtly Cornish
in outlook and manner, his ethno-occupational and ethno-religious identity fostered by his lifetime immersion in the community life of Moonta, Wallaroo and Kadina. ‘He was known as “Honest John”’, wrote C.C. James in his history of Gwennap, published in 1947, and in his native parish was honoured as ‘a strong Trade Unionist and a fluent speaker . . . a very strong Temperance Reformer and Methodist Local Preacher’ who ‘owed his advancement to his adherence to principle and sheer hard work’.

John Verran’s reputation in Cornwall was matched in South Australia, as Dunstan noted. He was a ‘Methodist lay preacher’, wrote Dunstan, ‘folksy, flamboyant and nearly illiterate’, cast almost stereotypically in the ‘pulpit style’, and ‘legends about him, too, are legion’. There was the time, Dunstan explained, when Verran ‘mounted the pulpit and informed his congregation of fellow-Cornishmen in Moonta that he was going to preach on the greatest little three-lettered word in the Bible “L-U-V”’. This was not, as Dunstan supposed, a measure of Verran’s alleged near-illiteracy but reflected instead his self-effacing Cornish wit. On another occasion, Dunstan added, Verran was questioned by ‘a portly matron’ who demanded more details about Labor Party policy. ‘Give us figures Jan, gives us figures’, she insisted. As Dunstan tells it, Verran ‘came to the edge of the platform, caressed his own considerable embonpoint and said, “Mither, the less thee and me talks about figures the better”’. Neither dour nor staid, the saucy response was indicative of the impish Cornish humour that fed the Verran ‘legend’, and was a revealing insight into the lighter side of popular Methodist culture that observers – especially critics – were inclined to miss. Dunstan provided a further, perhaps even more surprising, example. Speaking at a temperance meeting at Moonta, Verran ‘stood brandishing a bottle of whisky in his right hand while his left hand was holding back his frock-coat and resting in his trouser pocket in his customary stance. “My friends”, he cried, “what I hold in my hand has been the ruin of many a widow and orphan child!” A voice from the crowd said, “Which hand, Jan?”’.

Dunstan also appreciated that such wry anecdotes were often illustrative of the links between popular culture, Methodism and politics. Like William ‘Billy’ Hughes, Prime Minister of Australia for much of the First World War, Verran left the Labor Party over the conscription issue and joined the
National Labor camp. Nonetheless, Billy Hughes and John Verran had their political differences, and were keen to air them. On one occasion, so the story goes, Hughes had out-manoeuvred Verran in a public debate. Returning to Moonta, Verran observed the headline ‘Hughes trounces Verran’ as a paperboy delivered the local Sunday newspaper. ‘Mr Verran, what do you think of Mr Hughes?’ asked the bold but cheeky paperboy. Verran looked the lad in the eye. ‘My boy, I never speak ill of a man’, he replied, ‘especially on the Lord’s day. But coom down t’chapel ’night and I’ll tell thee what the good Lord thinks of the dirty little rat!’.

As the Adelaide _Advertiser_ observed in its obituary of John Verran in June 1932, he ‘was noted for his plain speaking and repartee, and some of the replies attributed to him have become almost legendary’.

Don Dunstan was not alone in privileging the Cornish and the Methodists in explaining the distinctive history of South Australia’s Labor Party. Robert Hetherington and Bob Reid, writing as long ago as 1962, acknowledged the significance of the Labor-Methodist nexus. It was a recognition that would become de rigueur thereafter for those commenting on the State’s distinctive politics. Malcolm Saunders, for example, writing as recently as 2003, was careful to note that in ‘South Australia the Labor Party itself had almost always been dominated by Nonconformists rather than Catholics’. As he explained: ‘Traditionally, Catholics have tended to dominate most state branches whereas Methodists, in particular, have been conspicuous among the leaders and members of the South Australian branch.’

As if to reinforce the point, Saunders added in a further article (in 2005) that, for much of its history, ‘the leadership of the state branch had been dominated by Cornish Methodists’. The enduring quality of this Cornish-Methodist prominence struck historian John Lonie as especially telling. As he remarked in his analysis of South Australian politics during the inter-war period, the Cornish-Methodist influence had continued to remain strong, despite the major structural changes that had overtaken the South Australian economy since 1918 – not least the closure of the Moonta and Wallaroo copper mines in 1923. As he put it, by ‘1930 the ALP [Australian Labor Party] itself did not mirror, in its hierarchy, the changes that had taken place in the composition of the work force since the time of the party’s inception, and especially since the end
of World War I’. Instead, Lonie argued, ‘its composition and ideology reflected the social situation of the 1890s. Of note was the still very strong Methodist flavour which derived in the first place from the mine workers of Burra and Wallaroo who were of Cornish stock’. More colloquially, Don Hopgood noted in his study of the inter-war years that, well into the 1920s and 1930s, the cartoonist’s stock stereotype of the South Australian Labor politician was a corpulent Cousin Jack (Cornish miner), complete with Moonta billy-goat beard of the type John Verran had sported.

Dean Jaensch, in his survey of *The Government of South Australia*, published in 1977, emphasised the corollary of the Labor-Methodist nexus. ‘Nor has there been a prominent Catholic element in Labor party affairs’, he agreed, ‘the founders and early members were overwhelmingly Methodists, and “good-living” ones at that’. Again, it was a sectarian distinction that was politically significant well into the inter-war period, and even beyond. In 1927, for example, the Labor Party endorsed Frank Coulson, a Roman Catholic, to fight the safe Labor seat of Port Adelaide. He was defeated in the subsequent election by an unofficial ‘Protestant Labor’ candidate, Tom Thompson, such was the level of hostility to Coulson’s religious affiliation and its supposed political implications, not least a ‘soft’ line on the sale of liquor. Indeed, the Labor Party in South Australia did not acquire a Catholic leader until as late as 1949 (on the resignation of R.S. Richards, another Cornish Methodist), when Mick O’Halloran was elected to the position.

It was a situation summed-up by John Bannon, Labor Premier in the 1980s. A distinguished historian in his own right, Bannon affirmed the distinctive nature of the Labor Party in South Australia. As he observed in 1991: ‘The major difference between the background of the S.A. Leaders and their counterparts in other States is the fact that only three have been Catholics – reflecting the Methodist/protestant tradition of the S.A. working class which produced a unique mix of social policy – and the “conscience vote”.’ Bannon’s successor as Labor Premier was Lynn Arnold, another politician with scholarly leanings. Writing in 1994, Arnold added his own historical perspective. He too pointed to the ‘significant cultural input’ of the Cornish, and emphasised that ‘Cornish “low church” views on society have left more impact on South
Australia than just the State’s largest Primitive Methodist chapel [on Yorke Peninsula]. These views ‘were to result in a perception of “wowserism” that characterised the state, in the eyes of other Australians, up until the nineteen sixties’. But far more importantly, he added, they were expressed ‘by Cornishmen in the State parliament’, contributing to the distinctive quality of South Australian politics. As Arnold concluded, the ‘Labor Party in South Australia . . . has through this difference of history been somewhat different in its modus operandi, from, for instance, the Labor Party in Victoria, which had a much stronger Catholic influence in its history’.47

More recent scholarship has offered similar conclusions, David Hilliard noting in 2015 in his chapter ‘Methodism in South Australia, 1855–1902’ that ‘Methodist chapels in the mining areas played an important role in fostering working-class organisation and action’. As Hilliard has explained, these chapels were ‘self-governing institutions’, and ‘they encouraged their (male) members to acquire skills in public speaking, the formulation of ideas, administration, financial management and the arbitration of disputes’. Moreover, he continued, they ‘also supplied a moral framework: a language of social justice derived from the Bible and the teachings of Jesus’. In this way, ‘Methodists, many of them local preachers, were prominent in the early labour movement . . . of the labour members elected to the South Australian Parliament during the 1890s at least five were Methodists, more than from any other denomination’.48

‘Paradise of Dissent’

However, as even Don Dunstan acknowledged, the Methodist-Nonconformist influence in South Australian Labor was by no means exclusively Cornish. In 1905 Tom Price, Labor leader, became Premier in a Labor-Liberal coalition government which lasted until his death in 1909. According to Dunstan, Tom Price was ‘respectable’, a ‘stonemason, a Methodist lay preacher, and a Rechabite’. He ‘typified an element which remained strong in the Labor Party until the 1960s’.49 However, although Dunstan did not say so, Price was a Welshman, born at Bymbo, near Wrexham, Denbighshire, in industrial North Wales in 1852. He arrived in South Australia in 1883, working as a