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The Victorian Farmers' Union, Country, and National Party, 1916-2000: Survival, Adaptation, and Evolution

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Submitted in total fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

February 2020

School of Historical Studies

Faculty of Arts

The University of Melbourne

Abstract

This thesis undertakes a detailed analysis of the Country-National Party in Victorian state politics from its formation as the Victorian Farmers' Union during the First World War through to the defeat of the Kennett Liberal-National Coalition Government in 1999. Long neglected as a subject of dedicated research, the Victorian Country-National Party is a rare example of an agrarian party that endured for over a century in a developed and comparatively urbanised democratic polity. The thesis examines the various survival and adaptation strategies deployed by the movement as it transitioned from its origins as an exclusively agrarian, political-industrial farmers union into a more broad-based, 'country-minded' rural party, and subsequently into a conservative, regional-oriented, right-aligned wing party. Having subsisted for most of its history as an independent agrarian third party outside of a conventional anti-Labor coalition partnership, the Victorian Country-National Party charted the most distinctive course of any of its federal and interstate counterparts over the course of the twentieth century. By situating the Victorian movement within the context of the wider agrarian party family in both Europe and North America, it is argued that its overarching strategic direction conformed more closely to the pattern exhibited by most comparable agrarian parties abroad than did the rigid coalition model that was adopted elsewhere in Australia from the 1920s onwards. Like most agrarian parties, the Victorian Country-National Party initially conceived of itself as a moderate agrarian force positioned between the twin urban-based extremes of city capital and organised labour, and sustained its parliamentary representation by means of an extensive, farmer-dominated, mass-membership, extra-parliamentary machine. The thesis explores how the party forged strategic alliances with both sides of the traditional party divide between the First World War and the 1970s, before it finally accepted the coalition model and pursued a political partnership with the Liberal Party. The thesis challenges the assumption that the party was merely a passive conduit for 'country-minded' sentiments in Victoria, and instead posits that the movement actively cultivated and shaped agrarian political thought amongst its members and supporters, and reinforced traditional gender relations on the land. The thesis examines how power was contested in the movement as the parliamentary leadership successfully resisted the efforts of the organisational wing executive to enforce external controls over the elected members and assumed greater authority over the strategic direction of the party.

Declaration

This is to certify that:

i. This dissertation comprises only my original work towards the PhD;
ii. Due acknowledgments have been made in the text to all other material used; and
iii. This thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies, and appendices.

Andrew Murray Black

28 February 2020

Acknowledgments

Sincere thanks and gratitude must be accorded to Associate Professor Sean Scalmer and Professor Stuart Macintyre for their invaluable support, infinite patience, and exceedingly helpful comments, feedback, and suggestions.

A great number of people have contributed to this thesis, including the late Stuart McDonald AM, Shirley McKerrow OAM, Peter Nixon AO, James Webster, Brendan Tam, and Katrina Black. Their assistance and contributions are greatly appreciated.

I would also like to acknowledge the assistance rendered by the staff and volunteers of the National Party of Australia – Victoria, the Page Research Centre, the Charles Sturt University Regional Archives, the State Library of Victoria, the National Library of Australia, the University of Melbourne Archives, and – last but by no means least – the Library at the Creswick Campus of the University of Melbourne.

This thesis is dedicated to my family, friends, and an extraordinary potato grower from East Trentham by the name of Isaac Hart.

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List of abbreviations

ACPA: Australian Country Party Association

ALP: Australian Labor Party

AWNL: Australian Women's National League

CC: Central Council

CP: Country Party

CPP: Country Progressive Party

CTA: Country Townspeople's Association

CWA: Country Women's Association

DLP: Democratic Labor Party

FRP: Finnish Rural Party

FSA: Farmers and Settlers' Association

GEB: Grain Elevators' Board

LCP: Liberal Country Party/Liberal and Country Party

NFF: National Farmers' Federation

NP/NPA: National Party/National Party of Australia

PAV: Pastoralists' Association of Victoria

PPU: Primary Producers' Union

SEC: State Electricity Commission

SLKF: Svenska Landsbygdens Kvinnoförbund/Swedish Rural Federation of Women

SP: Finnish Smallholders' Party

THC: Trades Hall Council

UAP: United Australia Party

UCP: United Country Party

UFA: United Farmers of Alberta

UFWA: United Farm Women of Alberta

UFWM: United Farm Women of Manitoba

UFWO: United Farm Women of Ontario

UGA: United Graziers' Association

VDA: Victorian Dairymen's Association

VFGA: Victorian Farmers' and Graziers' Association

VFF: Victorian Farmers' Federation

VFU: Victorian Farmers' Union

VWGA/VWWGA: Victorian Wheatgrowers' Association/Victorian Wheat and Woolgrowers' Association

WGGA: Saskatchewan Women Grain Growers' Association

WSVFU/CP/NP: Women's Section Victorian Farmers' Union/Country/National Party

YCP/YNP: Young Country/National Party

Omnium autem rerum, ex quibus aliquid acquiritur, nihil est agricultura melius, nihil uberius, nihil dulcius, nihil homine libero dignius – Cicero, *On Duties,* 1.151.

'The members of the Country Party supported the astronomical endeavours as much as did members of the Liberal Party and the Labor Party. I remember, for example, to take one incident, a member of the Country Party getting up, and when he got up to speak the Liberal Party members shouted, "Sit down Larry, sit down Larry, all you want is a subsidy for the milk in the Milky Way", and he spoke up immediately and said, "You boys on the left side of this Parliament, keep quiet and you boys on the right, keep quiet too. You don't know what astronomy is all about. When I milk my cows" – which he hadn't done for thirty years but it sounded fine – "When I milk my cows near dawn, I can see the Milky Way, I see the Magellanic Clouds, I know what goes on".'

– Bart Bok, Director at Mount Stromlo Observatory, Canberra, 1957-1966 [1]

[1] Bart Bok, quoted in Ragbir Bhathal, Ralph Sutherland, and Harvey Butcher, *Mt Stromlo Observatory: From Bush Observatory to the Nobel Prize* (Collingwood: CSIRO Publishing, 2013), 111.

Introduction and Literature Review

God made the country, and man made the town.
What wonder then that health and virtue, gifts
That can alone make sweet the bitter draught
That life holds out to all, should most abound
And least be threaten'd in the fields and groves? – William Cowper[2]

I. Key research questions, thesis structure, and contention

On the evening of 18 April 1914, with unsettled weather swirling around the summit of nearby Mount Macedon, a meeting of local farmers was convened in Thorburn's Victoria Hotel, a solid, largely unadorned building in the main street of Woodend.[3] The assembled men, purportedly a dozen in number, were split into two distinct groups encamped as far apart as the room would allow. One faction was 'sturdy Liberal in politics, Protestant in religion and largely Rechabite in habit', the other by contrast 'keenly Laborite, Roman Catholic and at least not Rechabite.'[4] Despite the atmosphere of mutual suspicion between the two factions, the meeting reached unanimous agreement that a stand-alone farmers' party and industrial movement was desperately needed in Victoria to advance the interests of primary producers. On the motion of Isaac Hart of East Trentham, a bespectacled, moon-faced, Irish-Catholic potato and onion grower, and seconded by Eli Jones, a staunch Particular Baptist farmer from Newham, the Victorian Farmers' Union (VFU) was formally brought into being.[5] On 5 June 1914, the first VFU branch was established at the Mechanics' Hall at Newham, six miles from Woodend.[6] By the Victorian state election in November

[2] William Cowper, *Beauties of Cowper: To which are Prefixed, a Life of the Author and Observations on his Writing* (Cornhill: R. Duton, 1801), 51.
[3] Not 'Thornton's Hotel' as incorrectly described by Ulrich Ellis. See Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party* (Parkville: Melbourne University Press, 1962), 30; *Lancefield Mercury and West Bourke Agricultural Record*, 24 April 1914, 2.
[4] As per the account of Mr S. Allan Johnson of Woodend, recorded in 1960. See Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, 30-31.
[5] *Countryman*, 31 March 1966, 1; *Gisborne Gazette*, 1 May 1914, 3; *Woodend Star*, 3 June 1916, 2.
[6] *Romsey Examiner*, 12 June 1914, 2.

1917, the Union was sufficiently strong to fight its way into the Legislative Assembly, winning an initial five parliamentary seats.

That a political and industrial movement of primary producers had emerged in Victoria in the weeks immediately prior to the outbreak of the Great War was not at all surprising. Across the Australian continent, thousands of primary producers had concluded that a farmers' party should be formed to remedy the litany of problems they encountered in daily life.[7] These included unstable commodity prices, rising tariff duties on imported machinery, hefty freight charges and overdraft interest repayments, and the destruction wrought to crops and pasture by invasive pests and noxious weeds. Similar agrarian movements were stirring across both the New World and the Old as primary producers banded together to assert their common interests at the ballot box and through coordinated industrial action. That the direct political descendant of the Victorian Farmers' Union – rechristened first as the Country Party (CP) and then subsequently as the National Party of Australia (NP/NPA) – has maintained continuous representation within both the Victorian and Commonwealth legislatures for more than a century is an achievement that only an exceedingly small number of agrarian parties have been able to equal or exceed.

At the time of the foundation of the VFU, Victoria was home to approximately 145,000 primary producers, who collectively accounted for about one fifth of the state labour force.[8] A sizeable majority of the state electorates – at least 40 seats in the 65-member Legislative Assembly – could be classified as rural or country constituencies. A century later, by

[7] Louise Overacker, *Australian Parties in a changing society: 1945-67* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1968), 241-251; Keith Richmond, "The National Country Party," in *Political Parties in Australia*, eds. Graeme Starr, Keith Richmond, and Graham Maddox (Richmond: Heinemann, 1978), 102-106.
[8] Charles H. Wickens, *Census Bulletin No. 12: Summary of the State of Victoria* (Melbourne: Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, 1921), 12.

contrast, the number of Victorians employed in the combined agriculture, forestry, and fishing sectors had dwindled to just 60,913 or approximately two percent of the workforce.[9] Victoria had been transformed from a predominantly rural-provincial society into an advanced post-industrial state with three-quarters of its population residing within metropolitan Melbourne. Perhaps 20 of the 88 seats in the Assembly could reasonably be classified as rural or even largely regional constituencies. Near identical demographic forces, combined with chronic political and organisational instability, had led to the demise and extinction of rural and agrarian political parties throughout most of the western world by the mid-to-late twentieth century. Not so, however, in Victoria and several other states of Australia.

By this metric, therefore, the National Party of Australia is a remarkable political aberration. As an 'agrarian party in a developed democracy' it is a living fossil example of a species of political party that has otherwise only survived on a continuous basis in the frosty Nordic climes of Northern Europe. Indeed, by the reckoning of Christian Leithner, the National Party of Australia is the 'last remaining agrarian party in an advanced industrial democracy' anywhere in the world, the standout even amongst the other oft-cited surviving members of the once extensive agrarian *famille spirituelle* that, in his assessment, 'gradually lost their agrarian *raison d'être*' and distinctiveness.[10] A fixed definition of what constitutes an agrarian party is notoriously difficult to settle on with universal precision. Agrarian parties have tended to differ markedly from each other depending on their precise local environment and circumstances. The tenets of agrarian political thought 'were never fully developed to the

[9] Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Victoria: Industry of Employment by Occupation, Count of employed persons aged 15 years and over,' in *2016 Census of Population and Housing: General Community Profile, Victoria* (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017), G53.
[10] Christian Leithner, "An Econometric Analysis of the Australian Country Party 1922-1928," (Master's thesis, Australian National University, 1989), 17.

same extent as the ideological foundations of the social democrats or the liberals'.[11] In its various political incarnations, 'agrarianism can be anything from highly reactionary to wildly radical (and sometimes almost both at once)'.[12] Nevertheless, some key distinguishing attributes have been identified.

Agrarian parties typically share 'a common origin, rooted in defence of agrarian interests', whether predominantly farmer ('a mostly self-owning, market oriented and specialised agriculturalist') or peasant based (a 'self-sufficient agriculturalist, tilling the land in accordance to traditional knowledge and holding to the village') depending on the typical mode of local agricultural production and the prevailing land tenure system.[13] The great majority of the historical agrarian parties, whether farmer or peasant based, emerged between the final decade of the nineteenth century and the mid-to-late 1920s.[14] This was a period of significant economic disruption, technological change, and political transformation in rural and agricultural districts across the globe.

In Europe, the traditional order of peasant and farming communities was disturbed by rapid urbanisation and industrialisation, the rise of the market economy dominated by an increasingly powerful professional *bourgeois* urban elite, and the dissolution of the continent's multi-racial empires following the First World War.[15] The newly-enfranchised

[11] Vít Hloušek and Lubomír Kopecek, *Origin, Ideology and Transformation of Political Parties: East-Central and Western Europe compared* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 88.
[12] James A. Montmarquet, *The Idea of Agrarianism: from hunter-gatherer to agrarian radical in western culture* (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1989), viii.
[13] Agnes Battory and Nick Sitter, "Cleavages, competition and coalition-building: Agrarian parties and the European question in Western and East Central Europe," *European Journal of Political Research* 43, no. 3 (2004): 524; Johan Eellend, "Agrarianism and Modernization in Inter-War Eastern Europe," in *Societal Change and Ideological Formation among the Rural Population of the Baltic Area 1880–1939*, ed. Piotr Wawrzeniuk (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2008), 37-38.
[14] Leithner, "An Econometric Analysis of the Australian Country Party 1922-1928," 7.
[15] Derek Urwin, *From Ploughshare to Ballotbox: the Politics of Agrarian Defence in Europe* (Toyen: Universitetsforlaget, 1980), 165-177.

small farmers and freehold peasants – having been excluded from the voter rolls in many of the earlier semi-representative democracies of the nineteenth century – sought to defend and preserve their way of life and attain greater economic security through land reform or statutory intervention in the rural economy.[16]

In the New World, the advance of the vast agricultural frontiers of North America and Australasia, connected by railways and steamships to far-flung markets abroad, had given rise to an expanding class of export-oriented commercial farmers, such as the grain growers of the continental wheatbelts. These pioneer settlers – residing in 'small, harshly functional wooden homesteads' on often precarious and isolated holdings – were 'dependent on an economy directed by others and which subordinate[d] them' to global market forces and powerful commercial interests beyond their control.[17] The economic dislocation brought by the First World War further fermented agrarian discontent. In Australia, for instance, most agricultural products were requisitioned by powerful wartime statutory marketing pools controlled by state-appointed boards. These marketing pools were considered by most farmers to be hopelessly inefficient and inadequately responsive to their protests and concerns.[18] Inspired by the successful political mobilisation of the urban industrial and commercial classes, a wave of dedicated agrarian political movements rose to prominence around the world by harnessing the voting power of farmers and peasants.

The new agrarian parties were also able to draw on centre-periphery and urban-rural cleavages to further justify their separate existence, as well as a set of distinctive

[16] Ibid.
[17] David Matheson and Risto Sänkiaho, "The Split in the Finnish Rural Party: Populism in Decline in Finland," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 10, no. a10 (January 1975): 221; C.B. MacPherson, *Democracy in Alberta: Social Credit and the Party System* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953), 225-226; B.D. Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1966), 13.
[18] Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, 96-104.

romanticised ideals and ideological values described by political scientists as 'agrarianism'.[19] The principal common elements of agrarianism were summarised by M. Thomas Inge as follows:

> The cultivation of the soil, the mother of all arts, has within it a positive spiritual good and instils in the cultivator such virtues as honour, manliness, self-reliance, courage, moral integrity, and hospitality…
>
> Only farming offers complete independence and self-sufficiency… The farmer has a sense of identity, a sense of historical and religious tradition, a feeling of belonging to a concrete family, place, and region... His life is harmonious, orderly, and whole, and counteracts tendencies in modern society toward abstraction, fragmentation, and alienation…
>
> Industry, capitalism, and technology and the thriving metropolises they have created are often destructive of independence and dignity and encourage corruption, vice, and weakness... Agricultural communities, where the brotherhoods of labour and cooperation bring about increased understanding, provide a potential model for an ideal social order.[20]

The Australian manifestation of agrarianism, known as 'country-mindedness', has been codified in similar terms by Don Aitkin:

> (i) Australia depends on its primary producers for its high standard of living, for only those who produce a physical good add to a country's wealth.

[20] M. Thomas Inge, "Introduction," in *Agrarianism in American Literature*, ed. Thomas Inge, (New York: Odyssey Press, 1969), xiv.

(ii) Therefore all Australians, from city and country alike, should in their own interest support policies aimed at improving the position of the primary industries.

(iii) Farming and grazing, and rural pursuits generally, are virtuous, ennobling and co-operative… they bring out the best in people.

(iv) In contrast, city life is competitive and nasty, as well as parasitical.

(v) The characteristic Australian is a countryman, and the core elements of national character come from the struggles of country people to tame their environment and make it productive. City people are much the same the world over.

(vi) For all these reasons, and others like defence, people should be encouraged to settle in the country, not in the city.

(vii) But power resides in the city, where politics is trapped in a sterile debate about classes. There has to be a separate political party for country people to articulate the true voice of the nation.[21]

Derek Verrall, Ian Ward, and Peter Hay have also observed that Australian country-mindedness integrated ideas that are not overtly rural or agrarian

> but which tend to be defended from citadels beyond the metropolis, where sin and corruption are seen to render these much more at risk – the family, Christian faith, Empire loyalism, sexual moralism, reward for effort, and so on.[22]

Although the Australian Country-National Party ceased to be an industrially-affiliated primary producers' party many decades ago and has been somewhat 'unsure of its self-

[21] Don Aitkin, "Countrymindedness – the spread of an idea," *Australian Cultural History* no. 4 (1985): 35.
[22] Derek Verrall, Ian Ward, and Peter Hay, "Community, country, party: roots of rural conservatism," in *Country to National: Australian rural politics and beyond*, eds. Brian Costar and Dennis Woodward (North Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1985), 21.

image' ever since – 'witness the multitude of titles the party has adopted over the years…is it a farmers' party, a rural party, a regional party, a conservative party, or, in the… words of… Tim Fischer, a progressive conservative party?' – it has never *entirely* dispensed with its disproportionate focus on the primary industries.[23] At the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century, the National Party is widely understood in both the popular imagination and in the party's own projected image as a 'party of the bush' with an enduring specialist concern for the interests of farmers and graziers. When in power, the party still jealously guards the agriculture and primary industry portfolio as its own fiefdom and has even sacrificed its long-standing control of the federal trade portfolio to retain its direct ministerial connection to its founding constituency.[24] While this residual agrarianism is now tempered by the party's expanded political purview encompassing regional representation and development, social conservatism, and support and advocacy for the mining and extraction industries, the ideals of agrarian exceptionalism remain 'essential to the Nationals' purpose and identity'.[25]

Nevertheless, the survival of the C-NP as an independent and distinct party has by no means been guaranteed, even within the favourable soils of Australia. At the time of writing, the party has retained its separate existence as an autonomous parliamentary force in only three of the eight state and territory legislatures (Victoria, New South Wales, and Western

[23] Brian Costar, "The National Party: Revival or Extinction?," in *For Better or For Worse: The Federal Coalition*, ed. Brian Costar (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1994), 130.
[24] Linda Courtenay Botterill and Geoff Cockfield, "From 'Unstable' to 'Stable' Minority Government: Reflections on the Role of the Nationals in Federal Coalition Governments," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 61, no. 1 (2015): 60.
[25] Ibid., 59; Brian Costar, "The National Party: the Resilient Party," in *Contemporary Australian political party organisations*, eds. Narelle Miragliotta, Anika Gauja, and Rodney Smith (Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2015), 25-26.

Australia), in addition to the Federal Parliament, with all other state divisions having amalgamated with the wider urban-based non-Labor forces.[26]

Throughout much of the twentieth century the Victorian Country Party charted by far the most distinctive, parochially-independent, and non-conformist course of any of the divisions of the party and endured the most fractious relationship with its urban-based non-Labor counterparts. The Victorian movement was an 'almost rebel party' throughout much of its history that 'doggedly persisted in maintaining a separate identity, usually refusing to join in coalition with the Liberals and engaging in three-cornered electoral contests'.[27] With the exception of the South Australian National Party, whose sole representative served as a minister in the Rann Labor Government between 2004 and 2010, the Victorian party has been the only division of the movement either to take office with Labor support or, alternatively, to install a Labor government to power.

The conventional non-Labor coalition model that has long been a near-permanent feature of federal politics and state politics in New South Wales and, to a lesser extent, Western Australia and Queensland, has become a stable element of Victorian state politics only comparatively recently. In the 101 years between the formation of the VFU as a parliamentary party in November 1917 and the 2018 state election, the Victorian C-NP was in a formal non-Labor coalition (whether in government or opposition) only 28 percent of the time. By contrast, the federal parliamentary arm of the party has worked in coalition with the Liberal Party and its predecessors for 88 percent of the 99 years between its formation in January 1920 and the 2019 federal election. The current Victorian Liberal-National Party

[26] Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, 233, 267-269.
[27] Richmond, "The National Country Party," 120.

state coalition agreement was re-established in February 2008, more than seven years after the termination of the previous coalition partnership.[28]

The historical distinctiveness of the Victorian Country-National Party was also apparent from its long dominance over the state political arena between the early 1920s and the 1950s. Within the C-NP party family, the Victorian movement's record tenure in effective control of the Treasury benches is exceeded only by the ascendancy of the Queensland Country-National Party between the 1950s and late-1980s.[29] Between October 1920 and November 1945, the Country Party held a stranglehold on the balance of power in the Victorian Legislative Assembly, which it ruthlessly exploited to impose its will on the statute books and public administration of the state. Whereas at a federal level Country-National Party leaders have served as prime minister on only a fleeting stop-gap basis (80 days in total if one combines the time in office of Earle Page, Arthur Fadden, and John McEwen), in Victoria the party has controlled the state premiership for a combined period of 15 years, five months, and 21 days. As noted by Brian Costar, it is intriguing how 'a minority rural party ever came to occupy a position of parliamentary dominance' in what has long been 'one of Australia's most industrialised and metropolitanised states'.[30] Joan Rydon similarly observed that the 'peculiar features of Victorian politics are essentially tied up with the role of the Country Party' and its long history of parochial independence and disproportionate parliamentary power.[31]

[28] Farrah Tomazin, "Straight Shooter," *Age*, 10 December 2010, 17.
[29] Margaret Bridson Cribb, "Queensland," in *Country to National: Australian rural poltics and beyond*, eds. Brian Costar and Dennis Woodward (North Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1985), 68-81.
[30] Brian Costar, "National-Liberal Party Relations in Victoria," in *Essays on Victorian Politics*, eds. P.R. Hay, J. Halligan, J. Warhurst, and B. Costar (Warrnambool: Warrnambool Institute Press, 1985), 157-158.
[31] Joan Rydon, "Victoria 1910-1966: Political Peculiarities," *Australian Historical Studies* 13, no. 50 (1968): 238.

However, the history of the Victorian division of the C-NP has long been neglected by both historians and political scientists alike. The Victorian Country-National Party has never been the subject of a dedicated and comprehensive published work of political history. The broad narrative of the party's early history in Victoria can only be cobbled together from a disjointed patchwork of archived university theses, the relevant sections of two half-century-old books that provide a condensed panoramic history of the party across Australia, and the very occasional relevant paragraph in a more contemporary book chapter or journal article. After the fall of the last all-Country Party ministry in 1952, the Victorian party disappears almost entirely from the historical literature. As a uniquely aberrant and non-conformist veteran survivor that long defied the strictures of Australia's conventional labour-versus-capital political divide, the Victorian Country-National Party merits further analysis.

This thesis aims to fulfil three overarching research ambitions. Firstly, it will seek to fill the gap in the historical literature by providing an analysis of the evolution and development of the party in the Victorian state political arena across the breadth of the twentieth century. In doing so, the thesis will present the first narrative account of the history of the party that extends beyond the movement's 'golden years' of political power in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s to explore in detail the fate of the movement under the leadership of J.G.B. McDonald (1945-55), Herbert Hyland (1955-64), George Moss (1964-70), Peter Ross-Edwards (1970-88), and Patrick McNamara (1988-99). In light of the more extensive pool of literature covering the movement's first three decades, the thesis will not include a comprehensive narrative account of the party's history prior to 1945, but rather will seek to highlight the turning points and key developments from this era.

The second aim of the thesis is to examine how and why the Victorian division of the party survived into the twenty-first century as an autonomous, independent rural-agrarian political movement. To maintain its continuous representation in the state and federal parliaments, the Country-National Party in Victoria has had to fend off the perennial threat of extinction posed by a declining core constituency, the ruinous impact of electoral boundary redistributions, fierce competition from political rivals, and persistent siren calls for amalgamation in the interests of non-Labor anti-socialist unity. To date, the Victorian Country-National Party is the only traditional 'party of government' in Australia to have successfully endured a continuous *forty*-year period of exile from ministerial office (December 1952 to October 1992) and return to power with much of its previous electoral presence intact.

The survival of the C-NP has generally been explained chiefly in terms of the external or demand-driven forces that purportedly sustained the party in parliament over the past century. In essence, so the argument goes, the party has endured because the agrarian or 'country-minded' ideological forces and grievances that first conjured it into existence continue to exercise some residual influence beyond the capital cities.[32] While there is undoubtedly some merit to this conventional contention, the thesis will explore a hitherto largely neglected alternative perspective: how the party itself – through its own *internal* decision making processes encompassing its parliamentary leaders, organisational wing executive, and rank-and-file membership – sought to respond and adapt to its many existential challenges, attract a wider constituency to its banner, and sustain its administrative and campaign operations against often unfavourable political headwinds. Furthermore, through its official organs, electoral propaganda, and internal debates, the party has actively shaped and promulgated its

[32] Linda Courtenay Botterill, "Soap Operas, Cenotaphs and Sacred Cows: country-mindedness and rural policy debate in Australia," *Public Policy* 1, no. 1 (2006): 23-36.

own understanding of 'country-mindedness' as a set of ideological values over the course of its history.

The thesis will also examine why it is that the Victorian division of the party charted such an ostensibly unconventional and heterodox political course throughout much of its history. As recognised by James Jupp, the Victorian Country Party 'carried out its third-party functions more consistently and stridently than in any other state' and 'asserted a truly independent role' in the Victorian Parliament.[33] It is therefore 'impossible, in the light of the Victorian Country Party's history, to treat it as a "wing" of the other non-Labor Party', until, at the earliest, the early-to-mid 1970s.[34] Most historical accounts have attributed this development primarily to the power of militant radical-inclined grain producers within the movement, particularly those hailing from the marginal country of the Wimmera-Mallee.[35] A purported 'conservative' realignment in the party is said to have occurred following the abandonment of many marginal holdings by debt-laden small producers during the Depression years, and the establishment of statutory organised marketing and price stabilisation schemes in the 1940s that took the radical edge off the industrial militancy of Victorian wheat farmers.[36] Again, while there is value in this argument that links localised economic-sectional discontent with disruptive political activism, the dominant narrative has arguably obscured other important ideas and developments in the history of the party that were just as crucial in derailing efforts to secure a stable coalition arrangement in Victoria.

[33] James Jupp, *Australian Party Politics* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1968), 149-150.
[34] Ibid., 150.
[35] Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, 110, 292.
[36] Overacker, *Australian parties in a changing society 1945-67*, 248.

In examining these questions, the thesis will draw contrasts and comparisons between the historical experience of the Victorian movement and other agrarian parties beyond Australian shores. The thesis will accord particular attention to Northern Europe where agrarian parties (or their quasi-agrarian descendants) remain active in countries such as Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland. The analysis will also draw on the experience of the now largely defunct farmer or peasant parties of Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Poland, amongst others, and the Canadian provinces of Ontario, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. To date, historians and political scientists have shown remarkably little interest in drawing comparisons between the Australian Country-National Party and its counterparts overseas. Ulrich Ellis, for instance, warned his readers that those who sought direct parallels with similar parties elsewhere, whether past or present, were 'liable to be disappointed'.[37] While this thesis does not examine each of the international agrarian parties in comprehensive detail, the analysis will seek to connect the history of the Victorian Country-National Party with the expanding pool of specialist European and North American literature that has drawn inter- and trans-national comparisons between the historically significant agrarian parties.

In seeking to situate the Victorian Country-National Party within the context of the international agrarian party family, the thesis adopts a so-called 'genetic approach' whereby political parties of the same broad family type are postulated to share a common 'genetic' origin that may result in similar patterns of long-term behaviour, or an enduring 'family resemblance', despite localised differences in political culture and party systems.[38] When viewed from such a perspective, the Victorian Country Party prior to the 1970s appears to be not so much an unusual and unorthodox 'rebel party', but rather the single most typical

[37] Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, 6.
[38] Peter Mair and Cas Mudde, "The party family and its study," *Annual Review of Political Science* 1, no. 1 (1998): 211, 225; Batory and Sitter, "Cleavages, competition and coalition-building," 524.

agrarian party of any the divisions of the movement in Australia. In particular, the Victorian Country Party's more autonomous strategic direction and prevailing centre-aligned ideological orientation resembled far more closely – in some respects, eerily so – the more typical patterns observed amongst comparable agrarian parties abroad operating under similar political circumstances. If anything, the rigid right-aligned coalition model that predominated elsewhere in Australia was far more atypical and abnormal for an agrarian party in the early-to-mid twentieth century.

The first five chapters of the thesis will recount the broad chronological history of the party between 1916 and the turn of the millennium. Chapter one focuses on the early expansion of the parliamentary and organisational wings of the party, the development of its distinctive agrarian ideology and unconventional – at least by Australian standards – strategic approach to state politics, and its transition from its origins as a joint industrial-political farmers' union into a more broad-based 'country' party. Chapter two examines the resurgence of agrarian radicalism within the movement during the Great Depression years, the formation of an all-Country Party government in 1935, and the internal factional battle for control that consumed the party until the fall of the Dunstan Ministry in 1945. Chapter three will explore the period of J.G.B. McDonald's leadership of the party between 1945 and 1955, including the defeat of the Cain Labor Government in 1947, the collapse of the ill-fated Hollway-McDonald Liberal-CP Government in 1948-49, and the ensuing conflict between the mainline Country Party and the rival 'Liberal and Country Party' movement. It will also outline the course of the short-lived McDonald Country Party Government between 1950 and 1952. Chapter four will examine the party's long wilderness years between 1955 and 1988, and recount how three successive party leaders – Herbert Hyland, George Moss, and Peter Ross-Edwards – sought to reposition the movement to maintain its relevance while it was out of office and rebuild its

parliamentary representation despite a rapidly changing rural and regional electorate. Chapter five is dedicated to the McNamara era between 1988 and 1999, and will focus on the experience of the National Party as the coalition partner in the Kennett Government between the 1992 state election and the unexpected defeat of the ministry seven years later. Chapter six will explore the contribution of the extra-parliamentary wing to the survival of the movement, including its extensive rank-and-file membership, organisational infrastructure, and dedicated party organs. Finally, chapter seven will provide an analysis of the role of women in the life of the party over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

The survival of the Country-National Party as a rural-agrarian movement in Victoria was not a mere accident or quirk of history. Rather, its parliamentary and organisational leadership consistently asserted the party's independence and separate identity, pursued strategies to cultivate a broader electoral constituency to offset its shrinking agrarian base, and maintained a formidable mass membership organisational infrastructure to support its campaign efforts. By bridging the hitherto largely intractable ideological, sectional, and sectarian divisions between Victorian primary producers, the movement was able to unite a coalition of disparate agrarian forces under its banner and break into the state and federal parliaments in 1917 and 1918 respectively. Unfettered by an enduring coalition partnership with its non-Labor counterparts, the Victorian Country Party sought to position itself in the broad centre of the political landscape as a moderate 'country-minded' force between what it characterised as the urban-based twin extremes of Collins Street capital and Trades Hall-dominated organised labour. Its unique capacity to harvest crucial preference votes from both major parties, combined with the fortuitous rural malapportionment of the Victorian electoral boundaries, and its pragmatic ambidextrous 'both way optionality', allowed the CP to emerge as the

powerful hinge or fulcrum party of the Legislative Assembly.[39] By the mid-1940s, the Country Party was the largest and most powerful force in the Victorian Parliament, with a seemingly unbreakable hold both on the Treasury benches and a considerable swathe of rural electoral territory.

The party's fortunes declined sharply in the late-1940s and early-1950s, however, as it lost more than half its representation in the Legislative Assembly through adverse electoral boundary redistributions, the defection of much of its conservative wing to the Liberal Party, and fierce competition from the urban-based major parties. Although the CP largely receded from frontline prominence in state politics, it survived as a non-aligned rural minor party with an enfeebled rump of about a dozen members representing a string of seats on the peripheries of the state. Until the 1970s, it was able to leverage its effective control of the balance of power in the upper house to exert influence over the Bolte Government from the parliamentary crossbenches. Following its disastrous result at the 1970 state election, the party shifted to the right of the political spectrum and tried to coax a reluctant Liberal Party into a coalition partnership. Its overtures were rebuffed by the Liberal Party for two decades until 1990, when the two non-Labor parties reconciled to defeat the Cain-Kirner Labor Government. The party finally returned to office as part of the Kennett Liberal-National Coalition Ministry in 1992. After seven tumultuous years as the very much junior coalition partner in the ministry, the National Party terminated the coalition agreement following the humiliating defeat of the Kennett Government, predominantly at the hands of rural voters at the 1999 state election.

[39] David Arter, "Neglected and Unloved: Does the Hinge Party Deserve That?," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 39, no. 4 (December 2016): 412.

Unlike the now-defunct Country parties of South Australia, Tasmania, Queensland, and the Northern Territory, the Victorian Country-National Party strenuously resisted all attempts to subsume or amalgamate its separate identity within the wider anti-Labor movement.[40] From its very nascent beginnings, the party eschewed entangling alliances that could compromise or endanger its political independence. On several occasions the party even elected to withdraw from ministerial office altogether rather than accede to any substantial derogation of its autonomy. It therefore avoided the amalgamation trap that proved to be the downfall of many once-thriving agrarian parties both in Australia and abroad.

Confronted by an electoral landscape dominated by urban country town voters – who typically regarded the agrarian creed espoused by the party with some scepticism and even outright hostility – the party leadership tried a multitude of alternative strategies to accommodate and win over non-agrarian country interests. It gradually morphed from its origins as a dedicated farmers' party into the more broad-based, rural-minded Country Party committed to decentralisation and state development, and later into the conservative, anti-socialist, 'free enterprise', right-aligned National Party. While the party was almost entirely unsuccessful in making inroads into the larger provincial cities and outer metropolitan areas, it nevertheless remained competitive in many of the rapidly expanding regional centres of the hinterland regions of the state.

As a corollary to these changes, the party ceased to operate as the 'machinery of a vested interest' under the control of its agrarian extra-parliamentary wing, as the industrial wing of the movement detached and established itself on a non-partisan, independent basis.[41]

[40] A small, but only sporadically successful, independent Country-National Party was re-established in South Australia in 1963.
[41] F.W. Eggleston, *Reflections of an Australian Liberal* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1953), 103-104.

Although the pioneers of the VFU had sought to replicate much of the organisational structure and constitutional 'organs of control' of the Australian Labor Party, the great bulk of the Parliamentary Country Party resisted, and eventually succeeded in undermining, the determined efforts of Central Council to enforce strict organisational discipline over the elected members. From the mid-1940s onwards, the parliamentary leadership assumed almost exclusive – and sometimes domineering – control over the strategic direction of the party. Any dissenting supporters, members, or even parliamentarians who were dissatisfied with the course charted by the parliamentary leadership either protested in vain or departed from the movement, as occurred on several occasions, most prominently in the defection of party members to the 'Liberal and Country Party' in the 1940s or to support rural independents in the 1990s.

II. Literature Review

'The Nationals are the forgotten party.'[42] So began political scientist, John Warhurst, in his analysis of the party's performance at the 2013 federal election. Warhurst's rather blunt turn of phrase could just as easily describe the status of the Country-National Party within the canon of Australian political history. Despite being Australia's second-oldest political party, having furnished three prime ministers and ten state premiers, and having held office in the Australian Federal Parliament for a greater combined period of time than any other single political party in history, the C-NP has often struggled to capture the attention of serious historical and political science scholarship. As long ago as 1953, when the party was nearing the fortieth anniversary of its foundation, politician and diplomat Frederic Eggleston noted that an account of the 'story of the Country party.... is very badly needed'.[43] Eggleston lamented that Australian political scientists have simply 'not thought this subject worth their

[42] John Warhurst, "The forgotten Nationals," *Eureka Street* 23, no. 20 (18 October 2013), 47.
[43] Eggleston, *Reflections of an Australian liberal*, 107.

investigation'.[44] In delivering the Boyer Lecture some 48 years later, Geoffrey Blainey observed that nothing much had changed: 'I hesitate to say too much about [the Country-National Party]. But it rarely appears in the history books...'[45] Remarkably, the historiographical blind spot identified by Eggleston was evident even in the published histories of the state-based farmer industrial organisations that had given birth to the Country Party movement, such as F.R. Mercer's *On Farmers' Service: A Short History of Farmers' organisation in Western Australia* (1955), W.A. Bailey's *History of the Farmers and Settlers' Association of N.S.W.* (1957), and Janet McRae's *The Tasmanian Farmers Stockowners and Orchardists' Association, 1908-1958* (1961).[46] These brief and largely unsophisticated works concentrated almost exclusively on the industrial contribution of the movements and did not consider their respective political arms in any more than the most basic perfunctory detail.

For many years after its formation, the Country Party movement was dismissed by academic historians as little more than an unsophisticated band of self-serving agrarian political brigands, bereft of the sort of ideological pedigree that would merit detailed study and analysis. As observed by Aitkin, the Country Party was the 'most easily misunderstood' of the Australian parties and consequently

> the most severely treated by academics, many of whom have called it "selfish", "reactionary" or "naïve". Its leaders have been found "dull" or "plodding", and more

[44] Ibid.
[45] Geoffrey Blainey, *The Great Divide*, Boyer Lecture, ABC Radio National, 25 November 2001, http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/boyerlectures/lecture-3-the-great-divide/3500858.
[46] F.R. Mercer, *On Farmers' Service: A short history of Farmers' organisation in Western Australia* (Perth: Executive of the Farmers' Union of W.A. Inc., 1955); William A. Bailey, *History of the Farmers and Settlers' Association of N.S.W.* (Sydney: Farmers and Settlers' Association, 1957), Janet McRae, *The Tasmanian Farmers Stockowners and Orchardists' Association, 1908-1958* (Hobart: The Association, 1961).

> than one modern-day Procrustes, holding that Australia has a two-party system, has denied the party a separate existence at all.[47]

Keith Hancock, writing in 1930, provides an illustrative example of such an attitude in his assessment of the Victorian Country Party as

> the Heaven-sent instrument of cockey-farmers, and marginal wheat-growers, and fruit growers on irrigated lands, who seek an untidy agrarian socialism for themselves…the disintegration of Parliament into groups has produced a succession of weak Governments quite incapable of defending Victoria's extensive Government businesses from blackmail and pillage by predatory Naboths.[48]

Similarly, according to the assessment of A.F. Davies, the Country Party was the only party in the Victorian Parliament 'without any ideas at all beyond the make-believe of rural-urban jealousy'.[49] Such caustic historical commentary with scarcely even a veneer of scholarly non-partisan detachment mirrored the critiques proffered by the party's political rivals. W.M. Hughes, for instance, who was famously dethroned as prime minister through the intervention of the Country Party in 1923, heckled the farmers' party representatives as 'hayseeds' and 'men with nothing between their ears'.[50]

As alluded to by Aitkin, political scientists readily concluded that the C-NP did not even constitute an independent political movement in its own right, but was instead just a tacked-on remnant 'half party' (or even, more recently, a 'diminished…quarter party') under

[47] Don Aitkin, "The Australian Country Party," in *Australian Politics: a second reader*, ed. Henry Mayer (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1969), 328.
[48] W.K. Hancock, *Australia* (London: Jacaranda Press, 1930), 200-201.
[49] A.F. Davies, "The Government of Victoria," in *The Government of the Australian States*, ed. Solomon R. Davis (London: Longman, 1960), 175.
[50] Manning Clark, *A History of Australia. Volumes V & VI, From 1888 to 1935* (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 1999), 142-143.

Australia's 'two-and-a-half party system'.[51] Similarly, the C-NP has been characterised by L.C. Webb as merely 'a regional and autonomous extension of the main non-Labor party'.[52] This tendency has the consequent result of either 'writing the Country[-National] Party out of history or of describing its role in narrow and erroneous terms', and jars awkwardly with the tri-partite party landscape that defined Victorian politics for much of the twentieth century.[53]

The persistence and widespread currency of such attitudes has often been cited as evidence of a purported rural-agrarian blind spot within the Australian academy. Costar has speculated that the Country-National Party may have 'fallen victim to an intellectual urban bias of the magnitude which originally sparked its own formation'.[54] Kate Darian-Smith has echoed Costar's concerns, noting that 'non-urban Australia has undoubtedly received far less attention than it deserves'.[55] The reliance of Australian political historians on metropolitan-based archives and media may have resulted in an inherent tendency to overlook political movements, centred not in the capital cities, but on the geographical peripheries, like the Country-National Party. This metropolitan bias is by no means limited to Australian shores. As noted by American cultural theorist William Major, very 'few academic specialists... pursue ideas and issues of importance to, for lack of a better term, country people' and much contemporary scholarship and cultural thought tends to be 'driven by metropolitan lives and cosmopolitan claims'.[56]

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[51] Leslie Lipson, "Party systems in the United Kingdom and the Older Commonwealth: Causes, resemblances and variations," *Political Studies* 7, no. 1 (1959): 17, 21; Costar, "The National Party: The Resilient Party," 24.
[52] L.C. Webb, "The Australian Party System", in *The Australian Political Party System*, ed. Solomon R. Davis (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1954), 103, quoted in J.M. Barbalet, "Tri-partism in Australia: The role of the Australian Country Party," *Politics* 10, no. 1 (1975): 1-2.
[53] Barbalet, "Tri-partism in Australia," 1.
[54] Brian Costar and Dennis Woodward, "Introduction," in *Country to National: Australian rural politics and beyond*, eds. Brian Costar and Dennis Woodward (North Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1985), 2.
[55] Kate Darian-Smith, "Up the country: histories and communities," *Australian Historical Studies* 33, no. 118 (2002): 92.
[56] William Major, *Grounded Vision: New Agrarianism and the Academy* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011), xi.

The first significant efforts to rectify the party's long absence from the history books emerged in the 1960s through such works as Ulrich Ellis's *A History of the Australian Country Party* (1963) and B.D. Graham's *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties* (1966).[57] Both works sought to trace the emergence and development of the party in each of the states from their amorphous predecessor movements in the late nineteenth century through to the electoral breakthrough and strategic experimentation of the early Country parties. Although Graham's text is more limited in its chronological scope – his analysis concludes at approximately the Great Depression era, in contrast to Ellis who outlines the history of the federal party, but regrettably not the state parties, up until the early 1960s – his book remains arguably the most intellectually rigorous work on the history of the party to date. J.B. Paul's master's thesis, 'The Premiership of Albert Dunstan', submitted in 1961 though never published, should also be acknowledged as the most authoritative and influential historical account of the long Dunstan era of the Victorian Country Party between 1935 and 1945.[58] These historical works first demonstrated the merit of exploring the history of the Country Party as an autonomous political movement in its own right as distinct from the wider non-Labor political forces. Graham and Ellis's work was further supplemented by Don Aitkin's political science research into the movement in New South Wales. He examined the party's own distinctive and idiosyncratic internal political culture and ideological foundations. Far from being bereft of all serious political thought beyond narrow sectional self-interest and anti-urban envy, Aitkin presented the Country Party as 'above all an "ideological" party' founded on its own country-minded philosophical ideals.[59]

[57] Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party* (Parkville: Melbourne University Press, 1962); Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1966).
[58] John Paul, "The Premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan," (Master's thesis, University of Melbourne, 1960).
[59] Aitkin, "Countrymindedness," 34.

This mid-century flowering of historical scholarship was all but extinguished by the early 1970s, however, as the field of 'traditional' political history withered in the Australian academy, displaced by a new enthusiasm for social history and 'history from below'. Scholars and researchers focused on questions of 'race and gender relations, immigration, health and medicine, sexuality, work, leisure and sport' – fields of study to which the Country-National Party was of little obvious relevance.[60] Heather Gunn's doctoral thesis (1996) on the history of women and gender relations in the Victorian Country-National Party is a notable and impressive exception to this otherwise long and baleful period of neglect.[61] As the movement dispensed with its old 'Country Party' branding and sought to expand its electoral base into more urbanised constituencies through the 1970s and 1980s, the task of analysing this historic transition was left almost exclusively to political scientists, through such works as *Country to National: Australian rural politics and beyond* (1985), edited by Brian Costar and Dennis Woodward, or its more recent counterpart, *The National Party: Prospects for the Great Survivors* (2009), edited by Linda Botterill and Geoff Cockfield.[62] While these works contain invaluable socio-political analysis of the party's changing electoral fortunes, they are not primarily historical in their focus, and consider the Victorian state division only in passing.

There has, however, been a modest revival of historical interest in the party over the course of the past decade or so, presumably stimulated by what Frank Bongiorno has described as the 'commemorative impulse' as the movement approached its centenary.[63] This revival was led

[60] Frank Bongiorno, "Real Solemn History and its Discontents: Australian Political History and the Challenge of Social History," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 56, no. 1 (2010): 7.
[61] Heather Gunn, "'For the Man on the land:' Rural Women and the Victorian National Party, 1917-1996," (PhD thesis, La Trobe University, 1996).
[62] Brian Costar and Dennis Woodward, *Country to National: Australian rural politics and beyond* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1985); *The National Party: Prospects for the Great Survivors*, eds. Linda Botterill and Geoff Cockfield (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2009).
[63] Frank Bongiorno, "'Real Solemn History' and its Discontents," 14.

most notably by Paul Davey, author of *The Nationals: the Progressive, Country and National Party in New South Wales 1919-2006* (2006), *Politics in the Blood: the Anthonys of Richmond* (2008), *Ninety Not Out: The Nationals 1920-2010* (2010), and *Joh for PM: The Inside Story of an Extraordinary Political Drama* (2015).[64] Like Ulrich Ellis before him, Davey is a former journalist, ministerial staffer, and party official rather than an academic historian, and his work provides a rather simple narrative account of the party's history rather than an analysis of its broader historical significance or development. Alongside Davey's work can be added the comprehensive account of the history of the Western Australian party, *Blood Nose Politics: A Centenary History of the Western Australian National Party 1913-2013* (2013), edited by Lenore Layman and Wendy Duncan.[65] Several illuminating doctoral theses have also been completed, including Antony Lamb's 'Of Measures and Men: The Victorian Country Party, 1917 to 1945' (2009) and Stephen Wilks's '"Now is the Psychological Moment" – Earle Page and the Imagining of Australia' (2017).[66] Two former C-NP parliamentarians from Victoria have published their political memoirs in more recent years, namely Peter Fisher's *Backbench: Behind the Headlines* (2011) and Peter Nixon's *An Active Journey: The Peter Nixon Story* (2012).[67] These texts are the first such autobiographical memoirs to be written by members of the Victorian division since the publication of *With the Nationals in Spring Street: An autobiography of soldier settlement, flying in the RAAF, local government, and parliamentary service* (1996) by Ken Wright,

[64] Paul Davey, *The Nationals: the Progressive, Country and National Party in New South Wales 1919-2006* (Annandale: Federation Press, 2006); Paul Davey, *Politics in the Blood: the Anthonys of Richmond* (Sydney: University of NSW Press, 2008); Paul Davey, *Ninety Not Out: The Nationals 1920-2010* (Sydney: University of NSW Press, 2010); Paul Davey, *Joh for PM: The Inside Story of an Extraordinary Political Drama* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2015).
[65] Lenore Layman and Wendy Duncan eds, *Blood Nose Politics: A Centenary History of the Western Australian National Party 1913-2013* (West Perth: The Nationals WA, 2014).
[66] Antony Lamb, "Of measures and men: the Victorian Country Party, 1917 to 1945," (PhD thesis, Swinburne University of Technology, 2009); Stephen Wilks, "'Now is the Psychological Moment' – Earle Page and the Imagining of Australia," (PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2017).
[67] Peter Fisher, *Backbench: Behind the Headlines* (Brisbane: CopyRight Publishing, 2011); Peter Nixon, *An Active Journey: The Peter Nixon Story* (Ballan: Connor Court Publishing, 2012).

which includes a comprehensive account of his time as a member of the Victorian Legislative Council between 1973 and 1992.[68] These works sit alongside several other useful autobiographies and biographies of prominent C-NP politicians, including Peter Golding's *Black Jack McEwen: Political Gladiator* (1997), McEwen's own brief autobiographical notes in *John McEwen: His Story* (1983), Earle Page's *Truant Surgeon: the inside story of forty years of Australian political life* (1963), Peter Rees's biography of Tim Fischer *The Boy from Boree Creek* (2001), and Patricia Hocking's *Stormy Petrel: A Biography of Albert Edward Hocking* (1990) that traces the life of a prominent chief president and central councillor of the Victorian CP in the 1930s and 1940s.[69]

Although some of these more contemporary works have at least partly remedied the decades-old dearth of research into the Country-National Party, there still remain several considerable gaps in the historical record. At the time of writing, there have been no dedicated comprehensive accounts published of the history of the party in Queensland, Victoria, or South Australia. By contrast, the New South Wales division has been the subject of multiple full-length books published since the 1950s.[70] Furthermore, the more recent pool of historical literature, with only a handful of exceptions, has failed to make any significant attempt to build upon or challenge the work of Graham, Ellis, and Aitkin from the 1960s and early

[68] Ken Mackenzie Wright, *With the Nationals in Spring Street: An autobiography of soldier settlement, flying in the RAAF, local government, and parliamentary service* (Mildura: K.I.M. Wright, 1996).
[69] Peter Golding, *Black Jack McEwen: Political Gladiator* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997); John McEwen, *John McEwen: His Story* (Barton: Page Research Centre, 2014); Earle Page, *Truant Surgeon: the inside story of forty years of Australian political life* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1963); Patricia Hocking, *Stormy Petrel: A Biography of Albert Edward Hocking* (South Yarra: Hyland House, 1990); Peter Rees, *The boy from Boree Creek: the Tim Fischer story* (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2001).
[70] Ulrich Ellis, *The Country Party: A Political and Social History of the Party in New South Wales* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1958); Don Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales: membership and electoral support* (Canberra: Australian National University for the Australian Political Studies Association, 1965); Don Aitkin, "The Country Party and Non-Labor Unity in New South Wales, 1944 to 1965," *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 11, no. 2 (1965); Don Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales: A study of organisation and survival* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1972); Paul Davey, *The Nationals: the Progressive, Country and National Party in New South Wales 1919-2006* (Annandale: Federation Press, 2006).

1970s. The survival of the National Party into the twenty-first century is still typically explained as a manifestation of the enduring influence of 'country-mindedness' – now characterised as a 'latent agrarian sentiment' in the words of Botterill – and the potency of the centre-periphery political cleavage, whether recognised as a comprehensive ideology or dismissed as a convenient but effective political 'marketing tool' utilised by National Party strategists and politicians.[71] Thus, the country-mindedness thesis pioneered by Aitkin has remained the dominant and virtually unchallenged 'analytical tool' deployed by scholars of country politics in Australia 'seemingly without examination, critique, or development. Country-mindedness has not been developed into a multi-layered, dynamic, and complex understanding.'[72] As observed by Costar, 'it is symptomatic of the relative neglect which the party has suffered… that the major, published academic treatises of it are now two name changes distant'.[73]

Alternatively, the party's ability to fend off the perennial threat of extinction is commonly explained by the longevity and stability of non-Labor coalition agreements, whose durability has been described as a 'tribute to habit as much as to anything'.[74] The institutional coalition arrangement, it is argued, has allowed the party to 'gain a level of influence in government beyond that suggested by its electoral performance' and to channel 'policy outcomes

[71] Botterill, "Soap Operas, Cenotaphs and Sacred Cows," 23, 27, 31; Linda Courtenay Botterill, "An Agrarian Party in a Developed Democracy," in *The National Party: Prospects for the Great Survivors,* eds. Linda Courtenay Botterill and Geoff Cockfield (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2009), 22; James Forrest, Margaret Alston, Chris Medlin, and Sitri Amri, "Voter Behaviour in Rural Areas: A Study of the Farrer Electoral Division in Southern New South Wales at the 1998 Federal Election," *Australian Geographical Studies* 39, no. 2 (July 2001): 168; Marc Brodie, "'A Valuable, but Minority, Section': The Country Townspeople's League and responses to farmer politics in 1920s Victorian country towns," *History Australia* 1, no. 1 (2003): 60.
[72] Jim Longworth, "'Countrymindless' Rural Railway Closure: Destabilising a social exchange relationship between country and city in New South Wales," (PhD thesis, Charles Sturt University, 2013), 15.
[73] Costar and Woodward, "Introduction," 1.
[74] Don Aitkin, "Return to 'Countrymindedness'," in *Struggle Country: The Rural Ideal in Twentieth Century Australia*, eds. Graeme Davison and Marc Brodie (Clayton: Monash University ePress, 2005), 197.

favourable to its constituency' through its control of key cabinet ministries.[75] While such an argument works well to explain the party's survival in jurisdictions where relations between the non-Labor parties have been comparatively harmonious and thus conducive to an enduring coalition partnership, it fails to acknowledge the historical success of the Victorian division despite its state parliamentary arm having rejected the strictures of an enduring coalition agreement for many decades.

The modest commemorative revival has also failed to connect the Australian historical experience of the Country-National Party with the small but gradually expanding pool of specialist published research abroad that has examined the evolution, adaptation, and survival strategies of agrarian parties as well as the rise of agrarianism as an inter- and trans-national political phenomenon in the twentieth century. In a twist of historiographical fate, most of this international literature was published from the late 1970s and 1980s onwards, a decade or more after most Australian scholars had lost any residual interest in the Country-National Party. One of the first landmark works in this field, for instance, was *Europäische Bauernparteien im 20. Jahrhundert* ['*European Farmers' Parties in the Twentieth Century'*] (1977), edited by Heinz Gollwitzer, which traced the development of agrarian parties across nations as wide-ranging as Poland, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Germany, Finland, Sweden, and Norway.[76] Derek Urwin's *From Ploughshare to Ballotbox: The Politics of Agrarian Defence in Europe* (1980) embraced a virtually identical geographical breadth with a greater emphasis on international comparative analysis examining both 'farmer' and 'peasant' based historical agrarian movements.[77] Other more

[75] Botterill, "An Agrarian Party in a Developed Democracy," 25; Dean Jaensch, *The Australian Party System* (North Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), 67-68.
[76] Heinz Gollwitzer ed., *Europäische Bauernparteien im 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Gustav Fischer Verlag, 1977) [German, Germany].
[77] Derek Urwin, *From Ploughshare to Ballotbox: the Politics of Agrarian Defence in Europe* (Toyen: Universitetsforlaget, 1980).

recent works with a similar international comparative scope, albeit with a more targeted focus on the Nordic and Scandinavian parties, include Gunnar Kristinsson's *Farmers' Parties: A study in electoral adaptation* (1991) as well as *From Farmyard to City Square? The electoral adaptation of the Nordic Agrarian Parties* (2017) edited by David Arter.[78] North America has also been a profitable field for comparative research, most notably in examining the agrarian-populist movements that arose in the American and Canadian prairie lands, as exemplified by such works as Paul F. Sharp's *The Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada: A Survey Showing American Parallels* (1948), Louis Aubrey Wood's *A History of Farmers' Movements in Canada: The Origins and Development of Agrarian Parties 1872-1924* (1975), and Michael Lansing's *Insurgent Democracy: The Nonpartisan League in North American Politics* (2015).[79]

As argued by Victor V. Magagna, this renewed specialist research into agrarian political movements

> has shown us that established notions of rural passivity, social incapacity, and historical insignificance cannot be accepted... Instead, we have learned that rural people can act to shape society, and we have begun to understand the ties of kinship and community that render action possible, even in contexts of poverty and subordination.[80]

Agrarianism as an ideological creed or philosophy has been increasingly recognised as a complex political-cultural phenomenon that 'cut across the primary, socioeconomic left-right

[78] Gunnar Kristinsson, *Farmers' Parties: A study in electoral adaptation* (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 1991); David Arter ed., *From Farmyard to City Square? The electoral adaptation of the Nordic Agrarian Parties* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).
[79] Paul F. Sharp, *The Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada: A Survey Showing American Parallels* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1948); Louis Aubrey Wood, *A History of Farmers' Movements in Canada: The Origins and Development of Agrarian Parties 1872-1924* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975); Michael Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy: The Nonpartisan League in North American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
[80] Victor V. Magagna, *Communities of Grain: Rural Rebellion in Comparative Perspective* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), ix.

dimension' that defined the political landscapes of most industrialised or industrialising western democracies in the early twentieth century.[81]

Despite the useful advances heralded by these works, the study of agrarianism remains a largely underdeveloped and neglected backwater of the global academy. As argued by Anne Kane and Michael Mann, agrarianism as a political creed has been 'inadequately theorised' with the great bulk of research work on farmer politics and agrarian class relations still rooted in a predominantly 'economistic' analysis that neglects the underlying ideological nature of the agrarian political movements.[82] Even the basic concept of what precisely constitutes an agrarian party remains woefully ill-defined and has been 'the subject of almost no rigorous analysis'.[83] Although recognised as one of the 'historically important' party types, contemporary research by political scientists into the agrarian *famille spirituelle* is hampered by a perception that it is 'mostly a residual historical relic' of 'minor interest' sliding inexorably towards extinction – an 'anachronistic throwback to an earlier age somehow representative of the mythological yeomanry of Jurassic Park'.[84] Likewise, as noted by Saturnino Borras, Marc Edelman, and Christobal Kay in their introductory essay to a dedicated special issue of the *Journal of Agrarian Change* on transnational agrarian movements – that made no reference to the existence of a long-surviving agrarian party in Australia – 'in short, despite increasing scholarly attention to transnational social movements, the agrarian dimension of these has remained significantly under-studied.'[85] Borras, Edelman,

[81] Batory and Sitter, "Cleavages, competition and coalition-building," 526-527.
[82] Anne Kane and Michael Mann, "A Theory of Early Twentieth-Century Agrarian Politics," *Social Science History* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1992): 421.
[83] Leithner, "An Econometric Analysis of the Australian Country Party 1922-1928," 6.
[84] Hloušek and Kopecek, *Origin, Ideology and Transformation of Political Parties*, 87, 103; Costar, "The National Party: Revival or Extinction," 130; Klaus von Beyme, *Political Parties in Western Democracies* (Aldershot: Gower Publishing, 1985), 114.
[85] Saturnino M. Borras, Marc Edelman, and Cristobal Kay, "Transnational Agrarian Movements: Origins and Politics, Campaigns and Impact," *Journal of Agrarian Change* 8, nos. 2 and 3, (April and July 2008): 181.

and Kay also observed that there has been a 'dearth of analysis of the dynamics of interconnectivity, or absence of it, between the international, national and local levels' of the agrarian movements and parties.[86]

Regrettably for scholars of the Australian Country-National Party, inter-continental comparisons, examining the principal commonalities or differences between the historical farmer-based parties either side of the Atlantic or Pacific, for example,
have typically not featured to any prominent extent in the historical or political science literature. Although B.D. Graham noted as long ago as the 1960s that several compelling comparisons could be drawn between the early Country Party movement in Australia and the populist-radical, grain-grower political activism of North America, this intriguing observation has never been further explored to any useful extent. Accordingly, the Australian perspective has been effectively excluded from the global story of agrarianism, a lamentable further confirmation of Ann Curthoys' observation that Australian history 'has a low profile in international historical scholarship'.[87] Vernon Bognador's *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Science* even concluded that 'as a durable political phenomenon… agrarian parties have been significant only in Scandinavia'.[88] As dryly observed by Costar: 'so much then for the political careers of Earle Page, Artie Fadden, Doug Anthony et al!'[89]

The long isolation of Australian agrarianism from the advance of agrarian studies abroad, while regrettable, is not entirely surprising. International comparative historical research can be 'notoriously difficult' to conduct in practice given 'the sheer quantity of scholarship that it

[86] Ibid., 180.
[87] Ann Curthoys, "Does Australian history have a future?," *Australian Historical Studies* 33, no. 118 (2002): 140.
[88] Quoted in Brian Costar, "The National Party: Revival or Extinction," 130.
[89] Ibid.

normally requires'.[90] This problem is particularly pertinent in seeking to tie together the disparate strands of what were frequently amorphous and divergent agrarian political movements across a multiplicity of shifting borders, cultures, and languages. Such an analysis requires connections to be drawn between Australia and nations such as Finland or Bulgaria that have seldom fallen within the typical geographical trans-national purview of Australian historical scholars. Indeed, even in conducting research for this thesis, the author has had to grapple with texts in no fewer than six languages, frequently without English translations. Nevertheless, a dedicated effort to remedy this historical blind spot may yield important new insights both into the distinctive nature of Australian political agrarianism and in further defining the common elements of the movement across the globe over the course of history.

[90] Curthoys, "Does Australian history have a future?," 144.

Chapter One. Farmers' Union to Country Party: Expansion, Evolution and Parliamentary Ascendancy, 1916-c. 1930

I. Introduction

Shortly after four-thirty in the afternoon of 18 November 1924, in the sombrely-appointed temporary Victorian Legislative Assembly chamber at the Royal Exhibition Building, the hulking form of John Allan approached the dispatch box.[1] Allan, a dour, walrus-moustachioed farmer, MP for Rodney, and Country Party leader – a 'dull-looking, heavy man, with the lumbering walk of a born rustic'– announced that he had been commissioned as Premier of a new joint Country-Nationalist ministry.[2] Almost precisely seven years to the day since the Farmers' Union had first entered the Victorian Parliament, the movement had attained the coveted Premiers' office. While the news of a change of government was hardly unusual – Victoria had, after all, churned through six Premiers over the preceding decade – never before had a Country Party member been appointed to such a high ministerial rank anywhere in Australia. Allan's appointment was all the more remarkable in light of the fact that the Country Party commanded just 13 seats in the 65-member Assembly as opposed to the 23 seats held by the Nationalist Party, and yet, by mutual agreement, the CP was to hold precisely half the portfolios in the new ministry along with the Premiership. The outgoing Labor Government which had been defeated by a no confidence motion moved by Allan, had itself only secured office through Country Party support just four months earlier.[3] This unprecedented chain of events – a Country Party-backed democratic socialist Labor ministry being displaced by a Country Party-Nationalist composite government led by the *junior* coalition partner – would have been inconceivable in any other parliament in the nation. In

[1] *Countryman*, 21 November 1924, 3.
[2] *Table Talk*, 1 April 1926, 14.
[3] Peter Love, "Elmslie, Prendergast and Hogan: Labouring against the tide," in *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*, eds. Paul Strangio and Brian Costar (Annandale: Federation Press, 2006), 177-178.

Victoria, however, it was simply another permutation of the unstable tri-partite party system that had descended on the Victorian Legislative Assembly since the rise of the Victorian Farmers' Union (VFU).

The purpose of this chapter is not to explore in significant detail how or why the Country Party was formed in Victoria, or to furnish a comprehensive narrative account of the rise and fall of the various ministries with which the CP was associated between 1917 and 1930. These matters have been explored in comprehensive detail by historians and political scientists such as B.D. Graham, Ulrich Ellis, Brian Costar, and Antony Lamb.[4] In seeking to understand both why the Victorian Country Party set upon its distinctive political trajectory and how it evolved over time, it is nevertheless essential to commence our analysis in this formative era when the party's decision-making forms and practices crystallised and many of the crucial internal debates and reform processes that would shape much of its subsequent history were set in motion.

Between 1916 and the late 1920s, the Victorian organisational wing made the crucial transition from its origins as an exclusively farmer-controlled and oriented industrial-political movement into a more broad-based 'Country Party': still overtly agrarian in its focus, but also intent upon enlisting the support and goodwill of country townspeople. Although it has generally been assumed that the Country Party burst onto the political landscape with a strong base of support amongst country town residents already intact, the party initially had great difficulty in winning votes beyond its founding agrarian constituency. This transition in turn

[4] See particularly Ulrich Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1963); B.D. Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1966); Antony Lamb, "Of measures and men: the Victorian Country Party, 1917 to 1945," (PhD thesis, Swinburne University of Technology, 2009); Brian Costar, "John Allan: the first agrarian," in *The Victorian Premiers 1856*-2006, eds. Paul Strangio and Brian Costar (Annandale: Federation Press, 2006).

led to the gradual decoupling of its industrial wing from the movement. This chapter will also trace the emergence of the party's ideological framework and its long-standing centrist understanding of its place within the political landscape. Despite the shared 'country-minded' outlook and common economic interests amongst farmers, the task of welding together such a large body of primary producers drawn from both sides of the ideological, party-political, and religious divide into a single political movement proved to be difficult in practice. The Victorian Country Party came to conceive of itself as a moderate movement *between* the extremes of capital and labour rather than a purely anti-Labor force, even if particular factions within the party were determined to push it towards one end of the ideological spectrum or the other. The Country Party became the 'hinge' party of the Victorian legislature with a disproportionate say over the composition of the ministerial benches. While this independent 'balance of power' political strategy was highly unusual for an agrarian party in Australia, the political path forged by the Victorian movement, as well as its centrist ideological alignment, was in fact entirely typical for an agrarian party operating in similar circumstances in the interwar years, as seen in Europe.

II. Mobilising a mass movement: The expansion of the VFU

The formation of the Country parties in each of the Australian states between 1913 and 1920, though driven exclusively by local actors stirred by domestic political and economic concerns, was not an isolated development unique to these Antipodean shores. Rather, it was just one expression of an international phenomenon – described variously as the 'Agrarian Revolt' or 'Green Wave' – that led to the formation of dedicated farmer or peasant-based agrarian parties across North America, Oceania, and in most European countries between the

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[5] Although as noted by Christian Leithner, 'no discussion – let alone explanation – of the simultaneous rise of agrarian parties on these three continents has been undertaken', by his assessment the establishment of the Country parties across Australia occurred right at the very crest of the Green Wave of agrarian party formation.[6] The pioneers of the VFU, like their fellow agrarian activists across Australasia, Europe, and North America, aimed to mobilise the agricultural population through a dedicated farmers' political organisation that would advance their collective interests and resist the perceived growing power of city-based industrial, commercial, and political interest groups.

Despite their largely contemporaneous origins and common agrarian-oriented political and economic ambitions, the seventy-three individual parties (by Leithner's count) that emerged between 1876 and 1962 that constitute the agrarian *famille spirituelle* varied considerably in their organisational structures and broader ideological sympathies.[7] As noted by Daniel Brett, 'one reason the agrarian movements are the great lost family of party politics is that they are so difficult to pin down ideologically'.[8] These agrarian political movements could be placed on an continuum ranging from the radical and authoritarian Bulgarian Agrarian National Union on the hard left – a mass-member peasant-based party with its own paramilitary wing – through to more middle-of-the-road parties such as the Icelandic Progressive Party combining agrarian conservatism and radical idealism within a semi-formal, loosely

[5] Christian Leithner, "An Econometric Analysis of the Australian Country Party 1922-1928," (Master's thesis, Australian National University, 1989), 7-10, 24; Illka Ruostetsaari, "Restructuring of the European Political Centre: withering Liberal and persisting Agrarian party families," in *Democratic Representation in Europe: Diversity, Change, and Convergence*, eds. Maurizio Cotta and Heinrich Best (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 223; Richard Allen, "The Social Gospel as the Religion of the Agrarian Revolt," in *The Prairie West: Historical Readings*, eds. R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer (Edmonton: Pica Pica Press, 1992), 561.
[6] Leithner, "An Econometric Analysis of the Australian Country Party 1922-1928," 8.
[7] Klaus von Beyme, *Political parties in Western Democracies* (Aldershot: Gower Publishing, 1985), 112-115.
[8] Daniel Brett, "What was the National Peasant Party? Internal Division and Organisational Conflict, 1900-1947," in *Politics and Peasants in Interwar Romania: perceptions, mentalities, propaganda*, eds. Sorin Radu and Oliver Jens Schmidt (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 190.

organised 'cadre party' structure, reaching all the way to the far-right, with the fascist-oriented 'Peasants' Defence Committee' or 'Greenshirts', a French agrarian militia movement of the interwar era.[9] In *most* European nations, however, the agrarian parties emerged broadly in the centre of the political landscape between the existing socialist and liberal-conservative parties.[10] Agrarianism was typically a 'constructive force of the middle way' that was 'more pragmatic and experimental than ideological' in its approach to politics.[11]

Although not nearly as ideologically and organisationally diverse as the European agrarian parties, the six state-based farmer parties that eventually coalesced as the Australian Country Party began as autonomous and distinctive political organisations, with the Victorian Farmers' Union arguably the most idiosyncratic and distinctive of them all. In the other states, the nascent Country parties emerged as the sponsored political arm of pre-existing farmers' industrial bodies, such as the state-based Farmers and Settlers' Associations (FSA) in New South Wales, Western Australia and South Australia, the Queensland Farmers' Union, and the Tasmanian Farmers, Stockowners and Orchardists' Association.[12] These industrial bodies exercised considerable influence and control over the new agrarian parties for years and even decades after their formation.[13]

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[9] Derek Urwin, *From ploughshare to Ballotbox: the Politics of Agrarian Defence in Europe* (Toyen: Universitetsforlaget, 1980), 214-215; Gunnar Kristinsson, *Farmers' Parties: A Study in Electoral Adaptation* (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 1991), 113, 144-145; Robert Paxton, *French Peasant Fascism: Henry Dorgères's Greenshirts and the Crises of French Agriculture 1929-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[10] Ruostetsaari, "Restructuring of the European Political Centre," 217-218.

[11] Waclaw Soroka, review of *Europaische Bauernparteien im 20. Jahrhundert*: *Quellen und Forschungen zur Agrargeschichte, no. 29*, ed. Heinz Gollwitzer, *The American Historical Review* 84, no. 1 (Feb 1979): 145.

[12] Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, 35-38.

[13] Lenore Layman and Wendy Duncan, *Blood Nose Politics: A Centenary History of the Western Australian National Party 1913-2013* (West Perth: The Nationals WA, 2014), 35, 58-59, 70; Lenore Layman, "The Country Party: Rise and Decline," in *Essays on Western Australian Politics*, eds. Ralph Pervan and Campbell Sharman (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1979), 169-171; Paul Davey, *The Nationals: The Progressive, Country and National Party in New South Wales 1919 to 2006* (Annandale: Federation Press, 2006), 145-148.

By contrast, the VFU burst into life as an assertively independent organisation from the 'ground up', free of any formal ties, whether political, industrial, or otherwise. Unlike its interstate counterparts, the VFU was established from the outset as an integrated industrial *and* political movement, an unconventional hybrid organisation with no clear delineation between its dual functions. After a two-year hiatus, necessitated by the onset of the First World War, the VFU was resurrected into active operation in early 1916 and its organising secretaries – Isaac Hart, J.J. Hall, and Percy Stewart – set across the state recruiting a mass membership base.[14] Approximately 130 branches were established between March and September 1916 and more than 2,800 members enrolled.[15] According to contemporary estimates, the VFU had enlisted approximately one out of every six farmers in Victoria by the early 1920s, with a total membership of between 11,000 and 15,000.[16]

The overtly political nature of the VFU was apparent from its inaugural constitution drafted by Hart, which declared that the Union would seek to advance the interests of primary producers by electing representatives to parliament 'pledged to the platform of this Organisation' so as to secure 'such legislation as will effectively advance their collective and individual interests'.[17] Hart's constitution also envisaged that branches would seek more direct means of advancing the economic interests of their members, including by securing opportunities for the cooperative sale of livestock, the establishment of experimental plots for

[14] Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, 31; *Numurkah Standard and Wunghnu, Cobram, Yarroweyah and Strathmerton Advocate*, 3 May 1916, 4.
[15] Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, 112.
[16] Ibid., 125; *Argus*, 6 October 1920, 11.
[17] 'Union of Victorian Farmers – Constitution as arranged by the Provisional Central Council,' Documents maintained by Party General Secretaries documenting party history, c. 1916-1964, Charles Sturt University Regional Archives (CSURA), PG 2694, Box 49, Item 595.

crop improvement, and the bulk purchase of produce bags, twine, machinery, and fertiliser.[18] Far from drawing on the supporter networks of existing farmers' associations, the VFU constitution expressly *banned* its members from belonging to any rival organisation on pain of expulsion.[19]

The absence of any formal link between the Pastoralists' Association of Victoria (PAV) and the VFU was particularly significant during the Union's formative stages. At the outbreak of the First World War, the membership of the PAV was still drawn predominantly from the elite 'squattocracy' rather than the small wool producers and mixed farmers that were increasingly influential within the Graziers' Association of New South Wales.[20] The upper echelons of the pastoral industry in Victoria had no real need for an independent Country Party to advance their political and economic interests. On the contrary, they could 'operate much more effectively in politics through the medium of pressure groups and good lobbying', calling on their considerable influence within the existing Liberal and Nationalist parties.[21] It was the influence of the smaller graziers in New South Wales, who were more sympathetic to the aims and ambitions of the new Country Party movement, that fostered the close association between the Graziers' Association and the Progressive Party, the forerunner of the Country Party in that state.[22] In Queensland, by contrast, pastoralists and graziers were induced to support the new Country Party movement following the successive victories of the Labor Party at the 1915 and 1918 state elections.[23] The United Graziers' Association (UGA) – which represented the 'highly conservative interests of wealthy graziers' – was alarmed at

[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] *Leader* (Melbourne), 30 August 1913, 8.
[21] B.D. Graham, "Graziers in Politics, 1917-1929," in *The Simple Fleece: Studies in the Australian Wool Industry*, ed. Alan Barnard (Parkville: Melbourne University Press, 1962), 599.
[22] Ibid., 594-595, 597.
[23] Ibid., 597-598; Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, 119.

the ambitions of the Ryan-Theodore Labor Government to amend pastoral lease rental charges, impose more stringent rural labour conditions, and abolish the Legislative Council.[24] The UGA mobilised its considerable financial resources behind the political Primary Producers' Union rather than the National Party, 'whose links with city business interests it disliked'.[25]

As neither of these factors operated significantly in Victoria, the large pastoralists had little incentive to involve themselves with the VFU. Elsewhere in Australia the graziers' organisations exercised significant, even disproportionate, influence over the ideological and political direction of the new Country parties, moderating their early radical impulses and enmeshing them with the existing liberal-conservative parliamentary forces. As noted by Graham, 'wherever the Graziers' Association took an active interest in the Country Party's affairs… it sought to bring the Country Party into as close an association with the National Party as possible'.[26] Indeed, under the terms of the first constitution of the NSW Progressive Party, the Graziers Association directly controlled a full third of the party's governing Central Council.[27]

In Victoria, by contrast, the small farmers who insisted that the Country Party movement should maintain its non-partisan untangled independence – 'measures before men' as their oft-repeated battle-cry declared – held considerable sway over the infant VFU. Unlike in NSW, where the Labor Party had met with some success in building support amongst small, radical-inclined farmers, in Victoria this constituency proved to be more resistant to the

[24] Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties,* 119-120.
[25] Ibid., 119-120.
[26] Graham, "Graziers in Politics, 1917-1929," 596-597.
[27] Davey, *The Nationals,* 16.

agrarian overtures of the ALP.[28] The Labor Party's 'anti-land monopolist' policy of leasehold rather than freehold tenure of agricultural land held little appeal for the 'new rural capitalist' small producers in Victoria, particularly following the erosion of significant local squatter-selector tensions south of the Murray River by the end of the nineteenth century.[29] Furthermore, the efforts of the Rural Workers' Union to standardise the wages and conditions of agricultural labourers in Victoria in the years prior to the First World War alienated many modestly successful smaller primary producers who might otherwise have been sympathetic to the Labor cause.[30] The Labor Party struggled to break out of its urban and provincial mining-industrial heartland in Victoria, particularly in state elections, with the notable exception of the disproportionately Irish-Catholic tenant farming areas around Port Fairy and to the east of Ballarat.[31]

The governing structure of the VFU – dominated by its all-powerful annual conferences of rank-and-file branch delegates and a democratically-elected administrative Central Council – afforded significant influence and control to the numerically ascendant small producers in setting the ideological and strategic direction of the new Country Party. By contrast, regular annual state-wide party conferences did not commence in New South Wales until the late 1930s.[32] Without regular inflows of campaign donations from well-heeled pastoralists or industrial associations, the VFU was reliant on membership subscriptions to sustain its operations, which further strengthened the power and influence of the rank-and-file members within the party. With this in mind, it is much more difficult to sustain, at least in the

[28] Jim Hagan and Ken Turner, *A history of the Labor Party in New South Wales 1891-1991* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1991), 34.
[29] Frank Bongiorno, *The People's Party: Victorian Labor and the Radical Tradition 1875-1914* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 89-92.
[30] Ibid., 92.
[31] Ibid., 88-92. Denis Murphy, *T.J. Ryan: a political biography* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1975), 86, 91-92.
[32] Davey, *The Nationals*, 67-68.

Victorian context, the essentially Marxist argument proposed by Andrew Moore that the Country Party and its 'country-minded' ideology was cultivated as a 'manipulative and duplicitous' instrument to suppress class divisions in rural districts and preserve the economic hegemony of the pastoral elites.[33] From its very inception, the VFU was controlled by branch delegates who were overwhelmingly middling farmers, orchardists, dairymen, and small graziers rather than wealthy pastoralists. As an instrument of anti-socialist class warfare, the VFU was hardly a success, as its subsequent electoral history attests. Between 1917 and 1935, the Victorian CP won only two Assembly seats from the ALP, namely Grenville (1917) and Eaglehawk (1920), with the rest of its considerable electoral gains made at the expense of the non-Labor parties or independents. Furthermore, the Victorian Country Party or its radical offshoot, the Country Progressive Party, were instrumental in installing all three of the Labor ministries that took power in the State Parliament in the interwar years.

III. Ideological fermentation: Welding together a Union from disparate parts

In recruiting a mass membership base amongst primary producers, the rapidly-expanding VFU was confronted with precisely the same challenge that had bedevilled its inaugural meeting at Thorburn's Hotel some two years previously. Although the farmers, graziers, dairymen, orchardists and primary producers of all kinds who joined the VFU could readily agree that they shared a common interest, they did not immediately constitute a single homogenous and cohesive constituency. The VFU had not emerged in an ideological or political vacuum. Male primary producers had been enfranchised in Victoria for nearly 60 years prior to the formation of the VFU, and their entrenched ideological sympathies – whether Liberal/Nationalist-inclined or members or supporters of the Labor Party – were

[33] Andrew Moore, "The old guard and 'Countrymindedness' during the Great Depression," *Journal of Australian Studies* 14, no. 27 (1990): 63.

brought with them into the new Union. According to Isaac Hart's own account of the formation of the VFU, his recruitment efforts were so successful that in some districts both the local Labor and Liberal Party branches were dissolved, and their politically active farmer members joined the VFU instead.[34] As recounted by John McEwen, a federal Country Party leader and prime minister:

> At the time the Country party [sic] was formed… many of its members were people who had graduated into farming from being miners, from being share farmers or from being people employed on farms – people whose natural affiliation would have been with the membership of the Labor party. They carried this sense of identity with Labor into their membership of the Country party. At the same time, the more stable and well-off farmers also saw the Country party as their political party. There was always tension between the two groups – the established farmers and those who had come across from the Labor ranks or whose fathers had been Labor.[35]

The quandary that confronted the leadership of the Union was how to integrate these ideologically disparate strands into a united agrarian political movement. This very problem was cited by Maurice Duverger to explain why enduring agrarian parties have been comparatively rare phenomena:

> the major difficulty of every Agrarian party comes from the perpetual conflict within it between Right and Left, springing from the variety of social strata amongst agriculturalists: there exists no agricultural class, only a division between the

[34] Isaac Hart, Papers belonging to Isaac Hart, State Library of Victoria, MS Box 4221/7, MS 14507, 46.
[35] Peter Golding, *Black Jack McEwen: Political Gladiator* (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 68.

> agricultural proletariat and the agricultural proprietors, and a deeper division still between the smallholder and the large-scale farmer.[36]

The deep-seated political and industry-based divisions within the farming community in Australia were only further entrenched by the admixture of religion – the sectarian suspicions between those of the Catholic faith and the congregants of the various Protestant denominations – that rendered the task of political union all the more difficult. As noted by F.W. Eggleston, a contemporary Liberal parliamentarian:

> … the Labour [sic] party had many supporters in the Catholic families and the poorer farmers. The Liberals and Nationalists, especially during the war, were Protestant... These Catholics would support a Country Party, while they would vote Labour rather than Liberal.[37]

The founder and prime mover of the infant VFU, Isaac Hart, was a Catholic of Irish descent and had been an active member of the ALP: an 'industrious militant propagandist for the Political Labor League, and a confessed socialist of the deepest dye' in the words of one of his anonymous critics in the *Argus*.[38] While it is difficult to precisely quantify the proportion of former Labor supporters within the VFU and its emerging electoral base, an examination of CP preference distributions provides some tantalising clues. In its first foray into electoral politics at the 1917 state election, VFU preferences were instrumental in two electorates in determining whether the Nationalists or Labor Party would hold the seat, namely Glenelg and Eaglehawk. In both contests, a significant portion of VFU preferences – 48 and 24.7 percent respectively – flowed to the ALP, sufficient to elect the Labor candidate in Eaglehawk.

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[36] Maurice Duverger, *Political parties: their organisation and activity in the modern state* (London: Muethen and Co, 1964), 236.
[37] F.W. Eggleston, *Reflections of an Australian Liberal* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1953), 104.
[38] *Argus*, 27 June 1916, 8.

Glenelg, centred on Portland and the lush pastoral-grazing country of Victoria's far south-western corner, could not have been further removed from the harsh Mallee plains traditionally characterised as the 'cockpit' of agrarian radicalism within the Country Party movement.[39] Nevertheless, nearly *half* of the VFU voters in Glenelg had chosen to preference the Labor Party ahead of the Nationalists. The 1917 election was by no means an isolated case. Until the late-1940s, the Labor Party could regularly command between 20 and 45 percent of CP preferences where they were distributed in a three-cornered contest. Overall, the data would suggest that at least a quarter or perhaps a third of Country Party supporters, depending on the district, were broadly sympathetic to the Labor Party, a sizeable portion of whom had likely supported the party prior to the formation of the VFU.

To prevent the embryonic Union from foundering on these political shoals, Hart's provisional constitution initially proscribed the 'introduction of Party Politics [sic] either by speech or motion' and banned any politicians or aspiring parliamentary candidate from joining the Union or addressing its meetings.[40] So strictly was this rule enforced that the membership application of a sitting parliamentarian, namely John Gordon, MLA for Waranga, was rejected and his subscription fee duly returned.[41] A further illustration of this principle in action can be seen in the Union's response to the conscription debate during the First World War, arguably the most divisive political issue of its time. Whereas in each of the other states the leadership of the farmers' associations came out unambiguously in favour of compulsory military service, the VFU maintained a steadfast neutral official stance on the matter.[42] In an

[39] Lamb, "Of measures and men," 83.
[40] 'Union of Victorian Farmers – Constitution as arranged by the Provisional Central Council,' Documents maintained by Party General Secretaries documenting party history, c. 1916-1964, CSURA, PG 2694, Box 49, Item 595.
[41] *Murchison Advertiser and Murchison, Toolamba, Mooroopna and Dargalong Express*, 20 July 1917, 2.
[42] *Western Mail* (Perth), 27 October 1916, 19; *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 11 October 1916, 9; *Cairns Post*, 1 June 1916, 5; *Tweed Daily*, 12 October 1915, 2.

editorial published in the *Farmers' Advocate*, J.J. Hall condemned any attempt to impose a single party line on conscription as likely to be 'as fatal to the Union as shooting a torpedo through the sides of a battleship and having an explosion in the magazine'.[43] According to Hall, the VFU was determined to remain impartial on the issue even to its electoral detriment, attributing W.C. Hill's narrow defeat in the seat of Eaglehawk at the 1917 election to the desertion of both pro- and anti-conscriptionists from the VFU banner.[44] At the 1916 conference, when the conscription issue was raised by a delegate on the conference floor, he was shouted down by loud cries of 'leave it alone' and 'out of order' from around the hall.[45] As a result of the determined efforts of its pioneers, the early VFU emerged as a unique force within the new constellation of agrarian parties flickering into being across the continent: independent, grassroots-controlled, overtly political but consciously non-aligned on key partisan issues. In the words of B.D. Graham, this was 'a different kind of country party'.[46]

The influx of former Labor supporters into the VFU also had a significant impact on the structure and organisational culture of the new party. The VFU was an almost textbook example of what Maurice Duverger describes as the 'contagion from the left', that is, where the strategies, tactics, and organisational methods of the left-aligned, working class mass-member political movements were embraced by their political rivals.[47] As noted by Eggleston, the VFU 'borrowed a good deal' from the ALP including an 'exceedingly strong' branch-based party infrastructure in each electorate with the power to select candidates, combined with a central organisation that devised the party platform and controlled 'to a greater or less extent, the actions of the parliamentary leaders and the alliances they made'.[48]

[43] *Farmers' Advocate*, 7 December 1917, 1.
[44] Ibid.
[45] *Herald* (Melbourne), 28 September 1916, 16.
[46] Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, 125.
[47] Duverger, *Political parties*, xxvii.
[48] Eggleston, *Reflections of an Australian Liberal*, 103-104.

The end result, Eggleston concluded, was that 'the party had a functional importance which equalled that of the Trades Union in the Labour party. It was the machinery of a vested interest.'[49] Such were the structural similarities between the two parties that one Labor parliamentarian claimed the founders of the VFU had 'first sent to the Trades Hall for a copy of the constitution and policy of the Labor Party, for the purpose of imitation'.[50] While Isaac Hart issued an 'emphatic denial' of this accusation, the constitution and rules of the VFU clearly emulated the Labor Party in incorporating 'organs of control' over the parliamentary wing.[51] Hart envisaged that the VFU's representatives would enter parliament not as independent-minded politicians intent upon pursuing their own ambitions, but as 'apostles of a great cause, and disciple[s] of a great movement… consecrated to the cause of the man on the land'.[52]

The centrepiece of Hart's model, and by far its most controversial element, was a pledge that each aspiring parliamentary candidate was required to sign that they would 'advocate the Union's platform' and withdraw from the contest if they were unsuccessful in winning party endorsement.[53] As Hart explained in 1916: 'We must go into Parliament and make one voice felt there, but *only by a pledge those* [sic] *who represent us must do what we want*' [emphasis added].'[54] A similar, although more comprehensive, pledge had been the established practice of the Labor Party since the early 1890s.[55] The determination of the VFU to retain the pledge came at some cost to the expansion of the movement. A number of sitting parliamentarians who were sympathetic to the ideals of the VFU – including David Oman (MLA for

[49] Ibid.
[50] Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, volume 168, 9 December 1924, 1671.
[51] *Countryman*, 19 December 1924, 2; Vere Gordon Childe, *How Labour Governs: A study of workers' representation in Australia* (Parkville: Melbourne University Press, 1964), 16.
[52] *Farmers' Advocate*, 23 November 1917, 1; Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, 126.
[53] *Farmers' Advocate*, 20 November 1919, 2.
[54] *Kerang Observer*, 29 July 1916, 3; Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, 113.
[55] Childe, *How Labour Governs*, 16-21.

Hampden), John Gordon (Waranga), Thomas Livingston (Gippsland South), and Sydney Sampson (MHR for Wimmera) – ruled out standing as endorsed Country Party candidates, citing their objections to the pledge.[56]

The inflow of former Labor supporters into the VFU formed the nucleus of the so-called 'radical' wing of the movement that remained influential well into the 1940s and 1950s, and even as late as the 1960s. The radicals retained a doctrinaire devotion to the principle of non-alignment, and strenuously opposed the formation of coalition ministries or electoral pacts with the other non-Labor parties. They were also much more inclined than their 'conservative' brethren in the movement to demand state intervention in the rural economy and promote collectivist solutions to common problems, such as compulsory commodity pooling and statutory marketing schemes, the public ownership of transport and grain storage infrastructure, and interventions in the banking and financial system.[57] While some historians and political scientists have leapt upon these radical instincts as evidence of underlying socialist principles amongst farmers, it should be acknowledged that 'socialism in agrarian politics has seldom meant more than socialism for the sole benefit of farmers'. [58] In practice, the agrarian radicals sought to establish corporatist structures to deliver higher guaranteed returns to producers within a predominantly free enterprise national economy.[59]

Such was the influence of the radical, disproportionately but by no means exclusively Irish-Catholic element in the early VFU that its detractors accused the Union of being a Labor-Catholic front. According to published comments by J.G. Pottenger, the secretary of the

[56] *Murchison Advertiser and Murchison, Toolamba, Mooroopna and Dargalong Express*, 20 July 1917, 2; *Gippsland Times*, 21 August 1919, 4; *Argus*, 6 October 1920, 11; *Morwell Advertiser*, 19 August 1921, 2.
[57] Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, 15.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.

Liberal-aligned People's Party, it had been 'obvious' since the very formation of the VFU that it was of 'Roman Catholic inspiration' and that 'its political objective was to aid the Labor Party'.[60] Hall condemned Pottenger's sectarian comments as a 'dastardly lie' and pointed out that all eleven of the endorsed VFU candidates at the 1917 state election were of the Protestant faith.[61] The early VFU was by no means averse to endorsing candidates of Irish-Catholic descent, however. At every Legislative Assembly election between 1920 and 1952, the CP had at least one – and occasionally two or more – endorsed candidates of Irish-Catholic heritage. Nevertheless, only four Irish-Catholics were ever successful in winning a parliamentary seat for the CP in this era, all with at least some left-leaning ideological pedigree. Two were elected under the banner of the radical-leaning breakaway Country Progressive Party, namely Harold Glowrey, MLA for Ouyen, and Edward Cleary, MLA for Benalla. The remaining two were both former Labor cabinet ministers, Edmond (Ned) Hogan – a former Labor Premier – and Henry Bailey, MLA for Warrnambool.

In addition to welcoming ex-Laborite small farmers within its ranks, the VFU was sufficiently broad to accommodate those at the polar opposite end of the political and economic spectrum. John Allan, who served as the inaugural leader of the Parliamentary Country Party between 1917 and 1933, was the archetype of a rigidly anti-socialist conservative within the movement. In the words of one of his political contemporaries, 'you wouldn't make a man more conservative than John Allan'.[62] Allan championed an alternative vision of the Country Party as a resolutely anti-socialist agrarian movement and supported moves to establish a collaborative working relationship with the other non-Labor parties in the Victorian Parliament. Allan did not believe that the CP parliamentary wing could

[60] *Farmers' Advocate*, 30 March 1917, 2.
[61] *Seymour Express*, 13 April 1917, 3; *Farmers' Advocate*, 9 November 1917, 2.
[62] Costar, "John Allan," 194.

continue to sit as an unaligned corner party and derided those who argued otherwise: there are 'only two sides in Parliament', Allan roared, with 'no rail in the gangway that divided the Parliamentary chamber' for a 'rail sitter' to perch upon.[63]

Edmund Jowett, the federal member for Grampians who defected from the Nationalists to the Country Party at the 1919 election, is a further instructive example. Prior to entering politics Jowett had established himself as one of the most successful graziers in the nation, with extraordinarily extensive holdings encompassing 40 pastoral runs and more than six million acres.[64] Known as the 'Sheep King of Australia', Jowett was purported to have owned more sheep than anyone else in the world by the time of his death.[65] Having accumulated sufficient wealth to be 'financially obese' in the words of Melbourne's *Punch*, Jowett entered politics as the federal member for Grampians for W.M. Hughes' National Party.[66] After joining the VFU, claiming that he intended to belong to both movements, he re-contested Grampians as a standalone CP candidate in 1919 after discovering that the Nationalists intended to run a candidate against him.[67] Described by his detractors within the VFU as a 'real Tory', Jowett was elected deputy leader of the federal Parliamentary Country Party in 1920, before leaving parliament in 1922 after the abolition of his seat.[68] Despite the radical turn in the Victorian Country Party in the early 1930s, Jowett remained an active member of the party and a conference delegate until his passing in 1936.[69] Although there was a stark contrast between Jowett's palatial Toorak home and the corrugated iron huts of the pioneer settlers on the

[63] *Argus*, 12 March 1925, 10.
[64] Joan Rydon, "Jowett, Edmund (1858–1936)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. *Volume 9, 1891-1939, Gil-Las*, eds. Bede Nairn, Geoffrey Serle, and Chris Cunneen (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1983), 525-526.
[65] Ibid; *Sydney Stock and Station Journal*, 26 October 1923, 4.
[66] *Punch* (Melbourne), 19 April 1917, 6.
[67] *Argus*, 8 December 1922, 12.
[68] *Age*, 14 April 1923, 14.
[69] Rydon, "Jowett, Edmund," 525-526.

Mallee frontier, the Victorian Country Party succeeded in transcending this economic and ideological divide to accommodate both strands of agrarianism.

While this spirit of bipartisanship was exceedingly useful, arguably even essential, in forging a new mass-member agrarian party in Victoria, it soon proved difficult in sustain once the VFU had secured representation in parliament. The VFU members elected to the Legislative Assembly in 1917 could not be induced to vote as a single disciplined bloc: three tended to support the Nationalists on divisions (John Allan, D.G. Gibson, and Isaac Weaver) and the remaining two (J.J. Hall and Percy Stewart) were more sympathetic to the Labor Party.[70] After the fall of the Bowser Ministry in March 1918, the Country Party members (now reduced to four after Hall lost his seat in a recount) could not even agree amongst themselves where to sit in the chamber, with Allan, Gibson and Weaver joining the ministerial corner benches and Stewart encamped next to Labor in the Opposition corner.[71] As is evident from the transcribed branch debates and stream of highly polemical letters that appeared in the pages of the *Farmers' Advocate*, the rank-and-file membership was just as divided on matters of political strategy.

The annual party conference became the principal battleground between the warring camps within the movement: anti-socialist coalitionists against advocates for non-aligned 'conditional support' independence; unyielding compulsory wheat pool militants duelling against pragmatists backing a voluntary pool; supporters of a rigidly-enforced pledge and

[70] *Romsey Examiner*, 21 December 1917, 2.
[71] In 1917, the Victorian Liberal Party was renamed the Nationalist Party, falling in behind the new federal party led by Prime Minister W.M. Hughes. The Liberal Party had previously split into rival Ministerialist and 'Economy Party' factions. See John Chesterman, "Alexander Peacock: the laughing pragmatist," in *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*, eds. Paul Strangio and Brian Costar (Annandale: Federation Press, 2006), 156; Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, 126.

organisational discipline against those who favoured greater parliamentary autonomy. Unlike the other Country parties across Australia, each of which conformed to a familiar coalitionist model by the late 1920s, a stable internal consensus on such strategic matters could not be reached within the VFU. Those defeated on a given issue at any conference refused to meekly concede to the victors and would instead simply regroup to prosecute the matter afresh the following year.

Despite these volatile internal disputes, there remained a powerful unifying narrative within the movement that it was not necessarily an exclusively *anti*-Labor political force, or even a right-of-centre party of 'country capital' naturally aligned with the liberal or conservative side of politics. Rather, the Country Party considered itself to be a moderate and 'progressive' political force that had emerged *between* the twin sectional extremes of organised labour on the one side and city capital on the other. Tellingly, merchant bankers and Collins Street commodity traders were more frequently denounced by CP radicals – typically as conspiratorial parasitic profiteers – than was the labour movement. Rural conservatives in the Country Party were in turn suspicious of Deakinite liberalism and the increasing political power of metropolitan manufacturing and commercial interests.[72] 'Miralie', an anonymous member writing to the *Farmers' Advocate*, argued that the Country Party, as a 'progressive party… must in many instances travel a parallel path with the Labor Party's platform', although there would be many issues where the two parties 'will be as far apart as east and west'.[73] Thomas Patterson, who would in time represent the federal Division of Gippsland in the Commonwealth Parliament, and by no means an agrarian radical, made similar comments while campaigning for the Senate in 1919: although the VFU had 'no sympathy with Labor

[72] Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, 78-79.
[73] *Farmers' Advocate*, 21 September 1917, 4.

extremists… it *fully sympathised* with Labor generally' [emphasis added].[74] Even the arch-conservative John Allan joined the refrain from time to time. As he explained to an election rally in 1924, the Country Party was a 'constructive party' and was 'not formed to oppose either Nationalists or Labor, but to promote legislation having for its object decentralisation and the encouragement of country industries both primary and secondary'.[75] The platform of the movement, as argued by one party publication, was a 'moderate and well-balanced national one, retaining the best features of all and discarding any form of extremism'.[76] In essence, the Victorian Country Party 'saw itself as providing a bridge for the moderates between the two major parties'.[77]

This pervasive centrist sentiment, combined with the ambition to grow the party's electoral base beyond its core rural constituency, gave rise to a perennial debate about altering the movement's name, which continued even after the 'Victorian Farmers' Union' name was formally dispensed with in 1927.[78] The mooted alternatives – including the 'Australian Progressive Party', 'Country and Liberal Party', 'Country-Centre Party', and 'Country and Democratic Party' – were intended to appeal to the supposedly 'vast body of electors' who were opposed to the Labor Party 'with its Trade Hall domination' but were equally 'dissatisfied with the strong conservatism of the Nationalist Party', as explained by the CP State President (or 'Chief President' as they were originally known), A.E. Hocking.[79] Despite the vocal support of leading party members such as Hocking, such proposals were always

[74] *Age*, 5 December 1919, 7.
[75] *Geelong Advertiser*, 3 June 1924, 3.
[76] *Numurkah Leader*, 21 September 1937, 6.
[77] Antony Lamb, "Of measures and men," 138.
[78] *Age*, 9 June 1933, 10.
[79] Ibid.; *Age*, 26 March 1931, 9; *Age*, 20 June 1933, 10; *Horsham Times*, 7 July 1933, 3; *Weekly Times*, 22 January 1938, 28; United Country Party, Minutes of Meeting of Change of Name Committee held at Central Office on 23 September 1935, CSURU, PG2694, Box 7, Item 27, 1A.

thwarted by the large section of the membership who were unconvinced by moves to de-emphasise the rural character of the party to such an extent.[80]

Intriguingly, this centrist conception of the CP's role in the political landscape was not confined exclusively to Victoria. Short-lived breakaway Country Party-esque movements twice emerged under the name of 'Centre Party' – firstly in South Australia under the sponsorship of the Victorian Country Party in 1936, and again in Tasmania under the leadership of Kevin Lyons in 1966.[81] In 1944 the Western Australian Country Party formally changed its name to the 'Country and Democratic League', as part of what Lenore Layman and Wendy Duncan describe as 'a strategy to expand [the party's] appeal beyond its farming heartland by insisting that it was Australia's middle-of-the-road democratic party and not just a party of the bush'.[82] As articulated by Arthur Watts, the leader of the WA state Parliamentary Country Party, in an almost direct echo of Hocking:

> many people… are today determined to veer neither to the left i.e. towards socialism – or to the right – i.e. towards conservatism – but are anxious to take the middle way… It is to these people that the parties affiliated with the Australian Country Party… not only make their appeal but draw their support.[83]

A nearly identical trend was evident amongst the agrarian parties of Northern Europe from the 1940s through to the 1960s as they too grappled with how to expand their electoral base beyond its agrarian roots. Ultimately, the name 'Centre Party' was chosen by the agrarian

[80] *Countryman*, 12 April 1935, 2.
[81] *Mail* (Adelaide), 18 April 1936, 9; *Laura Standard and Crystal Brook Courier*, 31 July 1936, 119; Dean Jaensch, "National Party," in *The Wakefield Companion to South Australian History*, ed. Wilfred Prest (Kent Town: Wakefield Press, 2001), 376; Colin A. Hughes, "In the constituencies: competition with the Liberal Party," in *Country to National: Australian rural politics and beyond*, eds. Brian Costar and Dennis Woodward (North Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1985), 43-44.
[82] Layman and Duncan, *Blood Nose Politics*, 70.
[83] Ibid., 101.

parties of Sweden (formally adopted in 1958), Norway (initially the 'Democratic Party' or 'Democrats' in 1959 but replaced shortly after by the agrarian compromise of 'Centre Party – Farmers' Party' although 'in practice… the "Farmers' Party" part of the new name was soon forgotten') and Finland (from 1965).[84]

Although the Victorian Country Party never ultimately adopted an overtly centrist title – its shift to the non-rural 'National Party' came only in 1975 – it does appear that its middle-of-the-road strategic alignment did pay lucrative electoral dividends. As has long been recognised, the adoption of preferential voting (first used for federal elections in 1918, Victorian Legislative Assembly elections in 1911, and 1921 for Legislative Council elections) was advantageous to the new Country Party movement as it could safely contest seats against Liberal or Nationalist candidates without the risk of fatally dividing the non-Labor vote.[85] For the centre-aligned Victorian Country Party, however, there was an *additional* advantage to compulsory preferential voting. In a conventional three-cornered contest, the Labor and Liberal-Nationalist parties shared such a mutual antagonism that they were loath to preference each other and instead directed their preferences to the Country Party as the least unpalatable remaining option.[86] Provided a CP candidate could place either first or second on primary votes in a given three-cornered contest, they were likely to win the seat with the lion's share of the distributed preference votes regardless of which other candidate was eliminated. As the Legislative Assembly electoral data reveals, the CP prevailed on 21 of the 22 occasions between 1917 and 1935 where preferences decided the

[84] Gunnar Kristinsson, *Farmers' Parties: A study in electoral adaptation* (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 1991), 140; David Arter, "The Finnish Centre Party: A case of successful transformation?," in *From Farmyard to City Square? The electoral adaptation of the Nordic Agrarian Parties*, ed. David Arter (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 67.
[85] Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, 42-44.
[86] Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, 129.

ultimate victor in such triangular contests.[87] Similarly, according to Graham's analysis of preference distributions in three-cornered contests at the 1919 and 1922 federal elections, the only cases where Labor preference votes flowed *toward* Country Party candidates all occurred in Victoria.[88] Throughout the VCP's expansion phase, these favourable preference flows were crucial in offsetting the lower levels of support for the party amongst country town voters, as any distributed Labor or Liberal-Nationalist preferences could channel a large chunk of town votes towards the Country Party. While historians have rightly pointed to the rural-malapportionment of the Victorian state electoral system as instrumental in the rapid rise of the CP as a parliamentary force (by 1920, for instance, 39 rural votes had the same effective electoral value as 100 votes in metropolitan Melbourne), the party's unique ability to wedge its opponents and harvest preferences from both sides of the political divide was arguably an equally important contributing factor.[89]

The centre orientation of the Victorian Country Party was also instrumental to its role as the *de facto* 'hinge' party of the Legislative Assembly. In the 12,803 days between the appointment of the Bowser Ministry in November 1917 and the fall of the McDonald Ministry in December 1952, the governing ministry was effectively dependent on Country Party support, either from the ministerial or crossbenches, more than 86 percent of the time or 11,073 days in total (Table 1.1). In the absence of single-party majority governments (with the exception of the 1918-1921 Lawson Ministry) and the two major urban parties so ideologically incompatible that they were unable to collaborate except on the most rare of occasions (such as the temporary four-day defeat of the Dunstan Government in 1943), the

[87] The sole exception being in the seat of Kara Kara at the 1921 Victorian General Election.
[88] B.D. Graham, "The Choice of Voting Methods in Federal Politics, 1902-1918," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* VIII, no. 2 (November 1962): 164-181; Joan Rydon, "Victoria 1910-1966: Political peculiarities," *Australian Historical Studies* 12, no. 50 (1968): 238.
[89] Love, "Elmslie, Prendergast and Hogan," 180; Don Aitkin, "The Australian Country Party," in *Australian Politics: a second reader*, ed. Henry Mayer (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1971), 329.

balance of power in the Assembly remained in Country Party hands. This inherently unstable parliamentary landscape, combined with the Country Party's expedient and ruthless political pragmatism, volatile and frequently combustive relationship with its non-Labor urban counterparts, and 'strategic in-betweenness' on the political spectrum allowed the Country

Duration of Ministry	**Premier of Ministry**	**Composition of Ministry**	**CP in Ministry, or Ministry dependent on CP support in Assembly?**
29 November 1917-21 March 1918	John Bowser (Economy)	Economy Party-Nationalist	Yes
21 March 1918-18 July 1924	Harry Lawson (Nationalist)-Alexander Peacock (Nationalist)	Nationalist, Nationalist-CP, Nationalist	Yes, from 21 October 1920 onwards
18 July 1924 – 18 November 1924	George Prendergast (ALP)	Labor	Yes
18 November 1924 – 20 May 1927	John Allan (CP)	CP-Nationalist	Yes
20 May 1927 – 22 November 1928	Edmond Hogan (ALP)	ALP	Yes
22 November 1928 – 12 December 1929	William McPherson (Nationalist)	Nationalist	Yes
12 December 1929 – 19 May 1932	Edmond Hogan (ALP)	ALP	Yes
19 May 1932-2 April 1935	Stanley Argyle (UAP)	UAP-CP	Yes
2 April 1935-14 September 1943	Albert Dunstan (CP)	CP	Yes
14 September 1943-18 September 1943	John Cain (ALP)	ALP	No
18 September 1943-2 October 1945	Albert Dunstan (CP)	CP-UAP/Liberal	Yes
2 October 1945-21 November 1945	Ian Macfarlan (Ministerial Liberal)	Liberal/Independent	No
21 November 1945 – 20 November 1947	John Cain (ALP)	ALP	No
20 November 1947-27 June 1950	Tom Hollway (Liberal)	Liberal-CP, Liberal	Yes
27 June 1950-17 December 1952	John McDonald (CP)	CP	Yes
17 December 1952-7 June 1955	John Cain (ALP)	ALP	No

Table 1.1. Summary of the composition and duration of Victorian state governments, 1917-1955.

Party to become the powerful fulcrum party of the State Parliament.[90]

While in Australia the notion of the Country-National Party functioning as a genuine hinge party has been largely unthinkable outside Victoria in the early-to-mid twentieth century – such a strategy, for instance, was abandoned in Western Australia as early as March 1915, only five months after the party first won representation in the Legislative Assembly – the European agrarian parties much more readily embraced this role in their respective political systems.[91] As argued by Derek Urwin, the agrarian parties of the urbanising and industrialising nations of Europe were uniquely suited to this hinge parliamentary role as their 'relative divorce from the economic issues arising out of industrial society' left them with 'a certain degree of freedom in considering potential electoral and governmental partners'.[92] Urwin continues: 'In other words, the agrarian parties consistently emphasised [their own agrarian economic concerns] over questions arising from other social cleavages with which the [non-agrarian] parties may have been linked, or involved.'[93]

The Agrarian-Centre Party of Finland has been one of the world's leading examples of a long-standing hinge party, having been a governing partner in coalition ministries of various ideological persuasions for most of the nation's history since independence in 1917.[94] A similar situation arose in Iceland, where the agrarian Progressive Party dominated the parliament or *Althing* during the late 1920s, 1930s and early 1940s, governing as either a parliamentary majority or as part of cross-ideological coalition ministries with either the

[90] David Arter, "Neglected and Unloved: Does the Hinge Party Deserve That?," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 39, no. 4 (December 2016): 412-413.
[91] Layman, "The Country Party," 163.
[92] Urwin, *From Ploughshares to Ballotbox,* 243.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Arter, "The Finnish Centre Party: Profile of a 'Hinge group'," 109; Arter, "Neglected and Unloved," 427-429.

centre-right or centre-left.[95] Likewise, in Czechoslovakia the agrarian-oriented Republican Party of Agriculturalists and Small Peasants expanded to become the largest party in the national Chamber of Deputies by 1925 and made strategic use of its centre position in the political landscape to serve as the 'backbone of almost every government between the wars, and usually held the post of premier'.[96]

Although the Country Party had a near-permanent hold on the balance of power in the Victorian Legislative Assembly, the deep-seated internal divisions within the movement undermined its capacity to exploit fully its hinge party status. The conservative wing of the party was decidedly uncomfortable with open collaboration with Labor, whereas the radicals were implacably opposed to the formation of composite ministries with the Nationalists. Neither camp could attain a decisive victory to settle the matter in its favour. In short, the conservatives foiled every attempt by the radicals to expressly prohibit the parliamentary wing from joining a composite ministry under the party constitution, while the radicals in turn succeeded in dislodging the Country Party from each state composite ministry with which it was associated.

The perennial conflict between the two factions over the coalition question – further enflamed by the refusal of the Allan-Peacock Government to conduct a grower ballot for a compulsory wheat pool, as demanded by the radicals – eventually resulted in a formal split in the party. The discontented radical wing, led by Percy Stewart, then serving as MHR for Wimmera, and Albert Dunstan, the state member of Eaglehawk, marched out of the 1926

[95] Gudni Johannesson, *The History of Iceland* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 87-89; Vít Hloušek and Lubomír Kopeček, *Origin, Ideology and Transformation of Political Parties: East-Central and Western Europe Compared* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 89.
[96] Hloušek and Kopeček, *Origin, Ideology and Transformation of Political Parties*, 94.

annual conference and established the Primary Producers' Union (PPU) – shortly thereafter renamed the Country Progressive Party (CPP) – several weeks later.[97] The constitution of the breakaway party mandated that its parliamentary representatives were forbidden from joining any coalition or pact with another party, but instead 'shall support in Parliament any measures from any Administration that are in conformity with its programme and policy'.[98] Following the 1927 state election, the four CPP members in the Legislative Assembly ousted John Allan and his coalition ministry from office, and provided crossbench support to the new Hogan Labor Government.[99] The two rival agrarian parties eventually reconciled in September 1930 to form the United Country Party (UCP). As part of the reunification negotiations, a constitutional compromise was brokered whereby the party could only enter a coalition if the UCP obtained six portfolios, including the Premier's office, and the arrangement was sanctioned by a two-thirds vote of Central Council.[100] However, as will be seen in subsequent chapters, the coalition question continued to divide the party for decades to come.

IV. Farmers' Union or Country Party? A decade of debate

In addition to the challenges of unifying its ideologically and sectionally diverse membership and settling on an appropriate electoral strategy within the existing Victorian party landscape, the emergent VFU was confronted by a further problem: how to reconcile its dual industrial and political ambitions? To safeguard its credibility as a dedicated farmers' industrial organisation, the early VFU strictly confined its membership to primary producers only. As

[97] Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties,* 249-252.
[98] Ibid., 252.
[99] Costar, "John Allan," 195.
[100] Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties,* 265.

an active *political* force, however, the VFU was intent on securing crucial non-agrarian votes at the ballot box.

Tensions between the VFU's twin spheres of operation were apparent before the Union had contested even a single election. At only its second annual conference, held some two months prior to the breakthrough 1917 state election, delegates carried a motion from the Colbinabbin branch that the parliamentary wing, once formally constituted, should be known as the 'Country Party' rather than the 'Victorian Farmers' Union Party'.[101] The motion received the vocal support of two endorsed parliamentary candidates for the forthcoming state election, namely W.C. Hill and John Allan. Hill insisted that the proposed name would 'convey a wider meaning than if the party were merely known as a farmers' body', and stressed that the VFU needed to demonstrate that the they were 'out to fight [for] the farmers' rights but also to build up country industries by decentralisation'.[102] In the electorate in which he standing, Hill continued, the present name did nothing to convince the thousands of town-dwellers that the party was standing for their interests.[103] Not all party members were sympathetic to such arguments, however. Speaking at a Nambrok branch meeting earlier that year, Matthew Boland objected to any move to change the name or membership rules for fear that 'the parasites – the Collins Street farmers' would gain control of the Union, having previously 'spoiled every other movement of the farmers' to date.[104] Despite such opposition, the successful passage of the Colbinabbin motion represented an extraordinary admission, before even a single ballot had been cast in favour of the VFU anywhere in the state, that its electoral prospects would ultimately depend on its capacity to capture the non-agrarian vote.

[101] *Herald*, 26 September 1917, 10.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid.; *Farmers' Advocate*, 5 October 1917, 2.
[104] *Rosedale Courier*, 5 July 1917, 2.

The fact that the VFU was to spend more than a decade grappling with how to reconcile its founding agrarian mission with its expansive political ambitions raises a question mark against one of the key planks of the 'country-mindedness' thesis as it has been traditionally understood in Australian political historiography. According to this thesis the electoral breakthrough and survival of the Country parties depended on their capacity to win the support of the country town residents.[105] Consequently, the Country Party 'quickly developed a body of doctrine with which it could appeal to all sections of rural society' by seeking to 'play down its sectional and emphasise its regional, "country-minded" character'.[106] The central tenets of country-mindedness, as recounted in the preceding chapter, formed the nucleus of a political ideology that supposedly resonated in the towns and rural districts alike.[107] Both farmers and country town residents are said to have 'partook [sic] of "country-mindedness", although their practical needs and interests might differ', and forged an alliance that has underwritten the political longevity of the Country-National Party ever since.[108] In the fullness of time, Aitkin argues, this ideology became so embedded in rural communities that the country townsman even became the Country Party's 'principal supporter'.[109] However, as Marc Brodie has persuasively argued, 'country-mindedness' as a political ideology did *not* typically resonate in Victorian country towns throughout the first decade of the Country Party's existence, and 'this fact greatly surprised the early farmer politicians'.[110] This electoral problem was a source of considerable concern within the VFU, and drove a series of reforms designed to widen the party's appeal, a process which ultimately resulted in

[105] Marc Brodie, "'A Valuable, but Minority, Section': The Country Townspeople's League and responses to farmer politics in 1920s Victorian country towns," in *History Australia* 1, no. 1 (2003): 59-61.
[106] Don Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales: A study of organisation and survival* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1972), 17.
[107] Don Aitkin, "'Countrymindedness': The Spread of an Idea," *Australian Cultural History*, no. 4 (1985): 35-36.
[108] Ibid., 35.
[109] Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales*, 4.
[110] Brodie, "A valuable, but minority section," 61.

the transition of the movement from its origins as an exclusively farmer-controlled industrial-political union into a more broad-based country party.

Despite the VFU's rapid electoral expansion – its numbers in the Legislative Assembly more than tripled from four to 13 at the 1920 election – there remained a pervading sense within the movement that the country towns were a stumbling block to its further advancement. Following the 1919 federal election, in which the CP secured five of Victoria's 21 seats, E.F.S. England of the Rushworth branch complained of 'a certain grave aloofness and detachment in the minds of the townsfolk' resulting from a 'suspicion that the Union is a closed, exclusive institution'.[111] The required remedy, in his opinion, was for CP parliamentarians to demonstrate their 'wholehearted support' of the towns, and for the rank-and-file membership to foster 'a spirit of social intercourse with town residents'.[112] Others had reached the conclusion that the VFU needed to admit non-farmers to its ranks – 'widening the membership', as it was known – to broaden its political appeal.[113] While there was at least some in-principle support for such proposals amongst the Central Councillors, others warned that the Union could be swamped 'in spirit or policy' by subversive non-agrarian interests.[114]

In April 1920 the VFU was unsettled by the launch of a new organisation, the Country Townspeople League, which aimed to represent the 'majority section of the country folk, viz, the country towns residents', as opposed to the minority section: 'the Big Fat Farmer, who was not worth a straw to the town'.[115] Despite months of determined efforts to woo the

[111] *Farmers' Advocate*, 24 December 1919, 1.
[112] Ibid.
[113] *Farmers' Advocate*, 28 August 1919, 5.
[114] *Argus*, 8 November 1920, 6.
[115] Brodie, "A valuable, but minority section," 62; *Ararat Advertiser*, 22 April 1920, 3; *Clunes Guardian and Gazette*, 15 March 1921, 2.

League into an alliance, the VFU was unsuccessful in corralling its town-based rival into compliant submission. By late 1922, Central Council instigated its own town-based political movement, the 'Country Townspeople's Association' (CTA) as a 'sister organisation' to the VFU.[116] It was envisaged that the new Association could contribute to joint Country Party policies and stand electoral candidates under the party banner, but would otherwise be distinct from the VFU farmers' organisation. While the leadership of the Country Party movement in Victoria was by now convinced of the need to broaden the party's *political* base, they were still firmly of the view that an exclusively farmer-based and farmer-controlled organisational and industrial wing should be maintained at the core of the organisation.

Figure 1.1. A Norwegian anti-Farmers' Party satirical cartoon from 1920 lampooning the agrarian protests of the greedy, obese primary producers in contrast to the wretched impoverished town folk, *Hvepsen* magazine.[117]

[116] *Farmers' Advocate*, 9 November 1922, 2.
[117] Jens R. Nilssen, *Hvepsen*. See Knut Dørum, *Bind 1 i Ås bygdebokverk 1850-2010: Bondestyre, kamp og forsoning: Ås 1850-1940* (Ås: Ås kommune, 2007) [Norwegian, Norway].

The Country Townspeople's Association did not prove to be the elixir of electoral success that had been anticipated. At its first electoral test – a by-election in the Assembly seat of Daylesford, precisely the sort of semi-rural provincial electorate that the party hoped to win – the result was disappointing. Even with a candidate drawn from the Townspeople's Association, namely Cr. E. Trembath, the Mayor of Daylesford, the Country Party only managed to attract a modest 15.1 percent of the primary vote.[118] By early 1924 it was clear that the organisation had failed: 'although strenuous efforts have been made by the V.F.U., and financial assistance rendered, the residents of country towns have so far not shown appreciation of the movement…'.[119] Fewer than 400 members had been enlisted in the CTA across just ten branches.[120]

The failure of the VFU, firstly to win over the Townspeople League and subsequently to draw in town voters through the CTA, revealed the daunting challenge that confronted the party in mobilising electoral support beyond its core agrarian constituency. As lamented by 'Butter', an anonymous *Farmers' Advocate* correspondent, in 1924, 'practically every country town is anti-farmer… that statement has been amply proved by the number of votes cast against farmers' candidates in country towns'.[121] Butter's frustration with the intransigence of town voters was evident from his proposed solution: 'the farmers should retaliate and let them have the country towns to themselves for a while. They would starve if it were not for the farmers' support…'.[122] As noted by Brodie, 'it was the absence in the

[118] Brodie, "A valuable, but minority section," 68.
[119] Ibid., 70-71.
[120] *Farmers' Advocate*, 15 February 1924, 5.
[121] *Farmers' Advocate*, 7 March 1924, 10.
[122] Ibid.

towns of a "country-minded" ideology which most shocked the farmer activists' during the early years of the movement.[123]

By the mid-1920s, a large section within the movement was convinced that the organisational wing needed to jettison its farmer-centric membership rules and admit all supporters regardless of occupation. By the time this was achieved in 1926-27, the CPP had split from the VFU. Dunstan led the charge on the conference floor to allow town residents to join the movement, urging members not to view the proposal 'through farmers' spectacles' but rather to consider the multitude of common interests between farmers and townsmen.[124] The motion was passed and shortly thereafter the conference voted to discard the organisation's overtly agrarian name – the 'Primary Producers' Association' – in favour of the more broadly-oriented 'Country Progressive Party'.[125] Seven months later, the VFU annual conference followed suit.[126] Opponents of the motion again raised the prospect of the farmers being 'swamped' by outsiders, and unsuccessfully moved to have residents of Ballarat, Bendigo, and Geelong excluded from membership. That this argument failed to dissuade the delegates was a mark of the emerging settled maturity of the party: the early fears of nefarious non-agrarian interests foiling the movement were evaporating as it approached its second decade as a stable parliamentary force, with its leader serving as Premier of the state. The new name of 'Victorian Country Party' was approved by a large majority vote.[127]

[123] Brodie, "A valuable, but minority section," 65.
[124] *Geelong Advertiser*, 18 September 1926, 9.
[125] Primary Producers' Union/Country Progressive Party, Provisional Executive, State Council and Annual Conference Minutes, CSURA, PG 2694, Box 8, Item 31, 358.
[126] *Age*, 17 March 1927, 11.
[127] Ibid.

This process of organisational reform highlights a revealing point of difference between the Australian Country parties and their agrarian counterparts in Northern Europe. While the Australian parties had largely jettisoned their explicitly agrarian branding in favour of the broader 'Country Party' name by the mid-to-late 1920s, the Nordic farmers' parties retained their agrarian names until the late-1950s in the case of Norway and Sweden (the *Bondeparteit* or Farmers' Party in Norway, and the *Bondeförbundet* or Farmers' League in Sweden), and the mid-1960s in Finland (the *Maalaisiitto* or Agrarian League), as noted above. Virtually all other historical agrarian parties across Europe and North America had either never utilised an overtly agrarian name – such as in Iceland and Denmark – or disappeared into oblivion without ever making the transition, taking their intact agrarian names with them either to their graves or into the amalgamated non-agrarian political movements that eventually subsumed them.

Two tentative suggestions can be made to explain why the Australian agrarian parties sought to make this transition earlier than their Nordic counterparts. Firstly, Australia was a more urbanised society with comparatively fewer primary producers as a proportion of the voting population. Whereas primary producers constituted more than 60 percent of the national population of Finland in the early 1920s, approximately 40 percent of the population of both Sweden and Iceland, and more than 35 percent in Norway, in Australia agricultural production accounted for only a quarter of the male workforce.[128] Secondly, under the multi-member proportional representation systems utilised in Scandinavia, the agrarian parties could win seats with a minority share of the vote.[129] Under the single-member electoral

[128] Kristinsson, *Farmers' Parties*, 95; Department of Home and Territories, *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1921, Volume 2, Part XVII* (Melbourne: Department of Home and Territories, 1922), 1214; Kari Hokkanen, "Die finnischen Bauernparteien," in *Europäische Bauernparteien im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Heinz Gollwitzer (Stuttgart: Gustav Fischer Verlag, 1977), 169, 201 [German, Germany].
[129] David Arter, "Conclusion," in *From Farmyard to City Square? The electoral adaptation of the Nordic agrarian parties*, ed. David Arter (Abington: Routledge, 2017), 168.

system in Victoria, it was necessary to attract a *majority* share of the vote either through primary or preference votes to secure victory. In such an electoral environment, the country towns formed a crucial segment of the voting population that the party could ill afford to ignore.

Although Central Council trumpeted that country town business people were joining the party in 'large numbers' and that there were 'some towns in Victoria at present where practically every businessman is a member', the Country Party retained its substantially agrarian character.[130] Until the early 1940s, each annual report prepared by Central Council included a lengthy summary of the prevailing conditions in each of the major agricultural sectors, as had been the practice in the early years of the VFU.[131] The concerns of primary producers remained the unassailably-dominant feature of state conference debates.

The party's pitch to voters remained overwhelmingly agrarian. John Allan's radio broadcast at the 1932 Assembly election is illustrative of this point. The policy of the Country Party, Allan declared, was 'founded on a solid basis – that of the man of the land'.[132] The rehabilitation of the state and nation, he explained, had to begin on the land so as to assist the primary producers who were keeping the nation solvent.[133] While he declared his support for the Premiers' Plan and denounced dole-based unemployment relief, his only proposed remedy for unemployment was to provide further assistance to primary producers in the hope that they might absorb some of the surplus labour.[134] The party continued to struggle to

[130] Victorian Farmers' Union and Victorian Country Party, Annual Conference Annotated Business Papers 1926-1929, CSURA, PG 2694, Box 8, Item 30A, 115, 167.
[131] This practice ceased after the twenty-sixth annual conference held in 1941. See United Country Party, Annual Conference Annotated Business Papers 1940-1946, CSURA, PG 2694, Box 9, Item 34, 50-89.
[132] *Age*, 10 May 1932, 8.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Ibid.

attract town votes, as attested to by individual polling booth electoral data, which was first recorded at state elections in 1927. Comparing the CP primary vote in three-cornered contests in rural booths where primary producers were likely to form a large segment of the voting population (defined here as those booths with fewer than 100 voters) to those from larger country towns (booths containing more than 400 electors), we find that in a rural electorate such as Waranga, a voter at a town booth was 62 percent less likely to vote for the CP candidate than were those at rural booths. Even in seats that were won by the Country Party in 1927, such as Upper Goulburn and Walhalla, town voters were more than 40 percent less likely to vote for a CP candidate than were rural voters.[135]

Just as the Country Party movement was opening its ranks to non-farmers, the industrial wing began to de-couple from the party and establish itself on an independent, non-partisan basis. Under the new membership rules, a wheat farmer, orchardist, or dairyman could conceivably be seated at a local branch meeting next to a store keeper, stock-and-station agent, wage-earning farm-hand, or bank manager – townsmen whose *industrial* interests would not always align with those of the primary producers. The mooted solution to this problem, as proposed by the federal CP leader Earle Page, was to form separate industrial organisations for the major agricultural sectors affiliated with the political Country Party Association.[136] This model was ultimately never implemented in Victoria. Only one sectional industrial organisation was ever formally established – namely the Victorian Wheatgrowers' Association (VWGA) – and it soon escaped the orbit of the Country Party movement to chart its own course on an independent non-partisan basis.[137]

[135] Data from Chief Electoral Officer for the State of Victoria, *Qualifications, Disqualifications, and Enrolment of Electors; Postal Voting; and Statistics* (Melbourne: State of Victoria, Legislative Assembly, 1927).
[136] *Shepparton Advertiser*, 18 February 1926, 9.
[137] H.J. Falla, *Farmers in Unity: A History of the Donald branch of the Victorian Wheatgrowers' Association* (Donald: Donald History and Natural History Group, 1983), 1.

The initial impetus behind the establishment of the VWGA arose from a conference meeting of Victorian wheat producers held in September 1927 alongside the Country Progressive Party annual conference. The delegates determined that a dedicated wheat growers' association should be formed under the auspices of the CPP to agitate for compulsory wheat pooling, a wheat export control board, and higher returns to producers.[138] By the time of its formal inauguration in 1929, however, the new Association had dispensed with its direct links to the Country Progressive Party to convene the 'first non-party political conference of wheat-growers' in Victoria.[139] In recruiting for the VWGA, the provisional state secretary, R.E. Ward, marshalled arguments reminiscent of those used by Hart and his associates more than a decade previously in building up the VFU. Victorian wheat producers had 'no organisation worth talking about', Ward thundered, because political differences had undermined all efforts aimed at achieving sectional unity.[140] The only remedy was to build up the new Association on a strictly non-political basis so that 'friction will be eliminated, and loyalty to the common cause ensured'.[141]

While Nicholas Harrigan has argued that the formation of the VWGA arose 'out of a direct split with the Country Party over the Country Party's failure to support compulsory wheat pooling' and as a protest against 'the conservative hegemony' within the party, this argument fails to fully appreciate the wider context of the Victorian Country Party movement of the time.[142] The establishment of the PPU-CPP as a breakaway radical agrarian party in 1926 had already furnished grain producers with a political body under their effective control and

[138] *Geelong Advertiser*, 20 September 1927, 5.
[139] *Goulburn Valley Stock and Property Journal*, 10 April 1929, 4.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Nicholas Harrigan, "The 'Australian Settlement' in the Countryside: Small farmers and the rise of statutory marketing in Australia," (paper presented at Australasian Political Studies Association Conference, University of Adelaide, 29 September – 1 October 2004), 31.

purged of any residual 'conservative hegemony'. The joint parliamentary votes of the ALP and CPP allowed the Hogan Labor Government to conduct a ballot on the compulsory wheat pool question, which subsequently returned a narrow 'no' majority when put to growers in April-May 1928.[143] Political action had secured the wheat growers the ballot, but a lack of effective *industrial* unity had cost them the prize. The sentiments of the pioneer activists of the VWGA in favour of industry-based solidarity and strict political non-partisanship were by no means confined to the grain industry. Similar moves had been underway within other agricultural sectors in Victoria, leading to the foundation of the Victorian Dairymen's Association (VDA) in 1926-27 and the re-establishment of the Victorian Potato and Onion Growers' Association in 1928.[144] By its second year, the VDA had recruited a membership of some 8,000, approximately the same size as the total state-wide membership of the Victorian Country Party.[145]

Although the Victorian Wheat and Woolgrowers Association (VWWGA – as it was renamed in 1939 when it admitted small woolgrowers to its ranks) remained formally unaligned and non-partisan in its political sympathies, its Country Party origins left an indelible mark on the organisation. Throughout the VWWGA's 41-year history, its upper echelons were replete with prominent Country Party identities – 'tightly controlled by committed Country Party cadre' in the words of Harrigan – including several past and future CP ministers and members of parliament.[146] According to the Holt sociological survey of Victorian wheat growers conducted in the mid-1940s, all of the farmers interviewed who were financial

[143] *Australasian* (Melbourne), 2 June 1928, 48.
[144] Norman Godbold, *Victoria – Cream of the Country: A history of Victorian dairying* (Hawthorn: Dairy Industry Association of Australia – Victorian Division, 1989), 107; *Age*, 9 November 1928, 13.
[145] *South Bourke and Mornington Journal*, 30 September 1926, 7; *Herald*, 22 February 1927, 4; *Australasian*, 5 March 1927, 13.
[146] Harrigan, "The 'Australian Settlement' in the Countryside," 34.

members of the Country Party were found to be affiliated with the VWWGA.[147] Holt also noted that many interviewees who did not support the CP indicated that they would have joined the VWWGA 'had it not been for the apparent close connection between the Country Party and the Association'.[148] Despite the hopes of the Country Party leadership of holding its political and industrial arms together through some form of affiliation relationship, Victorian producers were turning *en masse* to the new and politically independent industrial organisations to represent their collective industrial interests. It would take another half century before Victorian farmers and graziers could attain the industrial unity envisaged by the VFU pioneers in the First World War.

V. Conclusion

Within just fifteen years of the formation of the VFU in 1914, many of the central tenets of Isaac Hart's founding vision for the movement had been significantly moderated or even repudiated altogether. The ambition of building in Victoria a political movement composed of, and controlled by, primary producers to the exclusion of all others, fused with an industrial wing seeking to unite all producer interests in common pan-agrarian solidarity, had proved to be too difficult to achieve. No more than perhaps one out of every five or six primary producers in Victoria had been induced to join the Union, although a larger percentage of farmers likely supported the party at the ballot box. To broaden its electoral appeal and expand its parliamentary power, the movement gradually dispensed with its farmer-centric branding and membership rules, and effectively abandoned the classical farmers' party model. Victorian agrarian activists in turn looked beyond the Country Party movement to build new autonomous and non-partisan organisations to represent their

[147] Alan Holt, *Wheat Farms of Victoria: A Sociological Survey* (Parkville: School of Agriculture, University of Melbourne, 1946), 137-139.
[148] Ibid.

sectional industrial interests – indeed, even Isaac Hart himself became a prominent active member of the Potato and Onion Growers' Association.[149] The party had faced considerable challenges in holding together its diverse and perennially fractious rank-and-file membership and was ultimately unable to avoid a schism with its more radical elements in 1926 that took four long years to formally reconcile. Other controversial aspects of Hart's founding model, particularly the enforcement of the pledge and Central Council authority over the parliamentary wing, were to provoke ferocious internal debate throughout the 1930s and 1940s, as will be seen in the next chapter.

Nevertheless, the Victorian Country Party was reaping the electoral rewards of its willingness to adapt and reform itself. The party continued to supplant its rivals across an ever-wider swathe of rural Victoria, consolidate its hold over its established electoral heartland, and build up the parliamentary tactical and ministerial experience of its elected members. By securing for itself an exceedingly advantageous and lucrative strategic position as the hinge party of the Victorian Legislative Assembly, the party was able to exert disproportionate control over the affairs of the state and replicate the success of its counterparts abroad despite the comparatively modest size of the agrarian vote in Victoria and Australia more widely. In the eyes of its most devoted enthusiasts, Victoria had established itself as the outstanding 'home of Country-Party-ism', the living proof that a rural and agrarian political movement could thrive on an independent basis in one of the most urbanised and industrialised states of Australia.[150]

[149] *Weekly Times*, 4 November 1933, 5.
[150] *Countryman*, 26 July 1929, 12.

Chapter Two. A Decade under Albert the Artful: The Country Party in the Dunstan Era, 1935-45

I. Introduction

In the century-long history of the Victorian Country-National Party, perhaps no single individual has loomed so large yet been so roundly condemned and lamented as Albert Arthur Dunstan, the party's third leader and Victoria's second-longest-serving Premier. Almost without exception, historians have been scathing in their assessment of both Dunstan and his Government. Raymond Wright described the man as 'humourless and extraordinarily unpopular', a 'byzantine schemer' with an 'insatiable appetite for power' who lulled Victoria into ten years of 'torpid... political narcosis'.[1] Brian Costar echoed this sentiment in concluding that Dunstan was an 'opportunistic' and 'devious' politician who 'squandered his ten years in office by avoiding hard policy decisions', leaving him 'one of the least revered' Premiers in history.[2]

As these quotations demonstrate, historians have been all too willing to peer inside Sir Albert's dome-shaped skull to explain the direction and longevity of the Dunstan Government, typically attributing its achievements or failures to the Premier's own personal virtues or vices. It should also be acknowledged, however, that the Dunstan Government was a distinctly *Country Party* administration and the story of the ministry's unexpected creation, unlikely decade-long hold on the Treasury benches, and eventual spectacular destruction was intimately intertwined with that of the Country Party movement in Victoria. The intended purpose of this chapter is not to present a more sympathetic revisionist or hagiographical

[1] Raymond Wright, *A People's Counsel: A History of the Parliament of Victoria 1856-1990* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992), 162-163, 177.
[2] Brian Costar, "Albert Dunstan: the jumping jack premier," in *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*, eds. Brian Costar and Paul Strangio (Annandale: Federation Press, 2006), 215.

account of the legacy of Albert Dunstan, or to provide a detailed blow-by-blow narrative account of his time in office. Rather, this chapter will identify and contextualise the key changes that occurred within the Country Party during the Dunstan era that shaped its subsequent history as a political force in Victorian politics.

Radicalised by the severe economic deprivation of the Great Depression, the Victorian Country Party passed through the most 'unorthodox' phase in its history, during which time it severed all connections with its federal and interstate counterparts and openly collaborated with the Labor Party to an extent unprecedented even by its own radical-inclined standards. As a result, Dunstan was propelled into the Premier's office to lead Australia's first all-Country Party government, supported by the Labor Party in an 'unholy' cross-party alliance that defied the conventional labour-versus-capital political divide of Australian politics.[3] When viewed from a global historical perspective, however, the Victorian CP-ALP parliamentary alliance of 1935-42 was simply an antipodean example of a 'red-green' alliance (or 'green-pale pink' alliance in this instance, given the entirely disproportionate power of the Country Party in the new arrangement) of the sort that was not uncommon in Europe and some Canadian provinces at a similar point in history. The Country Party reached the zenith of its strength in the Legislative Assembly during the Dunstan era as it capitalised on the weakened state of its opponents and its long exclusive tenure of the Treasury benches to bring all but a small minority of rural Assembly seats under its banner.

Despite having attained commanding control of the instruments of state power in Victoria, the Dunstan-era Country Party remained afflicted by the perennially fierce conflict over the movement's strategic direction that had raged since its formation. Although two of the

[3] Kate White, *John Cain and Victorian Labor 1917-1957* (Marrickville: Hale and Iremonger, 1982), 79.

defining pillars of Isaac Hart's founding constitution had been felled by the onset of the Great Depression, a third contentious aspect of the original VFU model remained unresolved: to what extent should the extra-parliamentary organisational wing direct and control the affairs of the elected parliamentary members? This was to become the defining battle of the Dunstan era, prosecuted with bitter tenacity within the party's branch and conference meetings, in the columns of the print media, and at the ballot box. The end result was a pyrrhic victory for the Premier and his parliamentary allies. Although Dunstan was able to rein in the insurgent forces within the Central Council and secure the *de facto* supremacy of the parliamentary leadership over the movement, his ministry was subsequently dethroned from power with the aid of rebel forces within the CP party-room who were thoroughly disillusioned with his capricious and autocratic rule.

The turbulent latter years of the Dunstan era – including the withdrawal of Labor support from the Government in 1942 and the formation of a stopgap CP-UAP/Liberal composite ministry in September 1943 – marked the beginning of the end of the Country Party's long hegemony over Victorian politics. As frustrations with the Country Party's somnambulant administration and seemingly immutable grip on power reached breaking point within both of the two urban parties, the Dunstan Government was forced under great duress to commence the process of dismantling Victoria's grossly malapportioned rural electoral boundaries. Although the ever-wily Dunstan was able to significantly reduce the impact of this redistribution package, its passage nonetheless wiped out a swathe of the Country Party's heartland electorates and heralded the eventual demise of three-party politics in Victoria. Furthermore, the subterranean machinations within the dysfunctional Dunstan-Hollway Government hastened the deterioration of the relationship between the two non-Labor parties and further undermined the prospects of securing a stable and enduring state coalition

alliance. Finally, the fermenting disaffection with Dunstan's leadership further divided the already fractious Country Party party-room and laid the foundations for the destructive implosion of the parliamentary wing and the party's subsequent drastic fall from power in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

II. The prelude to the Dunstan Ministry: 1932-35

The circumstances and chain of cascading events that led to the sudden and unexpected formation of the Dunstan Country Party Government in April 1935 can be traced back to the profound economic and political dislocations of the Great Depression. The collapse of world commodity prices following the 1929 market crash had a calamitous impact on Australia's predominantly export-oriented agricultural economy. Based on the prevailing farm-gate prices in the early 1930s, dairy farmers with herds of fewer than thirty cows (approximately three-quarters of Victorian producers), or wool, beef, wheat and sheep producers with holdings smaller than 1,000 acres (about 80 percent of producers across the south-eastern Australian beef and sheep zone, and close to 100 percent of Victorian wheat growers) were likely to be in a state of severe financial distress.[4]

The economic dislocation wrought by the Depression in turn triggered a period of extraordinary instability and party realignment in Australian politics. The acrimonious collapse of the Hogan Labor Government in Victoria in April 1932, which mirrored the implosion of the Scullin Government and Federal Labor Party over the issue of austerity just a few months previously, at first pushed the Victorian Country Party and the newly-

[4] Bruce Davidson, *European Farming in Australia: An Economic History of Australian Farming* (Amsterdam: Elsevier Scientific Publishing Company, 1981), 321; Edgars Dunsdorfs, *The Australian Wheat-growing Industry 1788-1948* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1956), 318; O. Galwer, *Victorian Year Book 1934-34* (Melbourne: Office of the Government Statist, 1935), 429.

established United Australia Party (UAP) into closer political partnership. The 1932 Victorian state election held on 14 May – just a day after the vice-regal dismissal of the Lang Labor Government in New South Wales – resulted in a landslide victory for the non-Labor forces: 31 seats to the UAP and 14 to the United Country Party (UCP) in the 65-member Legislative Assembly.

The stuffily conservative UAP leader, Sir Stanley Argyle, was commissioned to lead a ministry with the combined support of the UAP and UCP.[5] Despite holding nearly a third of government seats, the UCP was allocated just a quarter of the positions in the ministry and denied even the customary office of deputy premier. An 'insidious spirit of disunity' arose almost immediately between the two parties, particularly between the Country Party and the 'Young Nationalist' wing of the UAP.[6] Led by the irrepressibly ambitious and supercilious Deputy Premier, Robert Menzies, the Young Nationalists were openly contemptuous of the 'insatiable greed' and sectional outlook of the Country Party.[7] The two parties clashed in cabinet over legislation to reduce interest rates for mortgage holders, the extension of loans for rural freezing works, changes to the bulk handling of wheat, and transport regulations.[8] Menzies openly denounced the Country Party at the 1933 UAP conference, arguing that it 'does not profess any real political beliefs except a catch-as-catch-can philosophy' and would 'vote for communism tomorrow if it meant 3d a bushel on the price of wheat'.[9] The Country Party backbench in turn expressed its displeasure by crossing the floor to vote against government legislation.[10]

[5] Geoff Browne, "Stanley Argyle: the incidental premier," in *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*, eds. Brian Costar and Paul Strangio (Annandale: Federation Press, 2006), 207.
[6] Ibid., 210.
[7] Ibid., 208; *Herald* (Melbourne), 5 May 1933, 7.
[8] Browne, "Stanley Argyle," 210-211.
[9] *Gippsland Times*, 28 September 1933, 5.
[10] *Age*, 4 October 1933, 11.

The mounting frustration with the narrow conservatism of the Argyle Government and the parlous state of the agricultural industries boiled over at the 1933 UCP annual conference at St Arnaud. The delegates delivered a thumping majority to a radical-inclined 'reform' ticket in the Central Council elections led by the new Chief President, A.E. Hocking.[11] A prosperous city businessman, former mayor of the affluent metropolitan City of Camberwell, and one-time preselection aspirant for the Nationalist Party in Kew, Hocking was at first glance an unlikely standard bearer for the reformist-radical wing of the Country Party.[12] Despite jibes that he was a 'St. George's Road Toorak farmer', Hocking was a successful orchardist and past president of the Fruit Growers and Cool Stores Association of Victoria.[13] These agrarian credentials, combined with his stirring oratorical appeals for rural rehabilitation and banking reform, and his personality 'of tremendous vitality, drive and force' endeared Hocking to the rank-and-file membership of the UCP.[14]

Once in control of Central Council, Hocking and his supporters set about procuring the withdrawal of the Country Party from the Argyle Government. To do so, they first sought to remove one of the most stubborn obstacles in their path: the arch-conservative UCP leader, John Allan. An ageing and unimaginative political warhorse, Allan was rapidly losing support due to his 'masterly inactivity' as Agriculture Minister and refusal to take a more assertive line against the UAP.[15] After pressure had been applied to any wavering parliamentarians – the threat of losing party endorsement proved to be sufficient to ensure

[11] *Argus*, 30 March 1933, 7.
[12] Brian Costar, "Hocking, Albert Edward (1885–1969)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography. Volume 14, 1940-1980, Di-Kel,* eds. John Ritchie and Christopher Cunneen (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 459-460.
[13] Patricia Hocking, *Stormy Petrel: A biography of Albert Edward Hocking, 1885-1969* (South Yarra: Hyland House, 1990), 42; *Age*, 2 March 1940, 28.
[14] Hocking, *Stormy Petrel*, 42, 45, 53.
[15] *Age*, 1 March 1933, 11; *Weekly Times*, 4 February 1933, 6; John Paul, "The Premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan," (Master's thesis, University of Melbourne, 1960), 20-21.

compliance – Allan was levered from the leadership three months to the day after Hocking's election as chief president.[16] In a rather characteristic Spring Street backroom twist, however, Allan was replaced not by Central Council's preferred candidate, Albert Dunstan, but rather a compromise figure more palatable to the conservatives, Brigadier Murray Bourchier, MLA for Goulburn Valley.[17] Bourchier was a grazier and feted First World War veteran – he had famously led his cavalry regiment in the charge at Beersheba in 1917 – and had served as Minister for Agriculture in the Allan Government and subsequently as deputy leader of the Country Party.[18]

In a mark of how little respect was accorded to the UCP in the Argyle Government, Bourchier was not appointed to the ministry after his ascension to the leadership. Instead, John Allan retained his portfolio alongside the two other UCP ministerial representatives, Albert Dunstan and George Goudie.[19] Although Bourchier proved to be more vocal than the languid Allan in asserting CP interests – he even on occasion crossed the floor to vote against government legislation – he would not acquiesce in Hocking's demand for unilateral withdrawal from the ministry, insisting that the CP would remain 'so long as nothing inimical to country interests was done'.[20] Bourchier's absurd exile on the backbench sapped his authority and prestige as leader, all the more so given that his ambitious rival, Albert Dunstan, was sitting in his stead as the most senior UCP representative at the cabinet table. The state member for Mildura, Albert Allnutt, an agrarian radical of 'uncompromising opinions and caustic tongue', was sufficiently emboldened to attack Bourchier on the floor of

[16] *Age*, 28 June 1933, 9.
[17] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 June 1933, 12.
[18] *Table Talk*, 27 July 1933, 19.
[19] Antony Lamb, "Of measures and men: the Victorian Country Party, 1917 to 1945," (PhD thesis, Swinburne University of Technology, 2009), 137, 141.
[20] *Shepparton Advertiser*, 31 July 1933, 3; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 September 1934, 10.

the 1934 party conference.[21] He declared that it was the talk of the state that 'the Country Party has lost its punch and the reason is that it has no real leadership'.[22]

The mounting dissatisfaction with the Argyle Government and lacklustre party leadership prompted the radical-reformist section to press for the extension of Central Council powers of control over the parliamentary wing. In drafting the founding constitution and rules of the VFU during the First World War, Isaac Hart had initially envisaged that the parliamentary members could be rendered adequately subservient to the dictates of the rank-and-file membership through a pledge to the Union. As he explained to a rally at Kerang in July 1916, 'members of the Government and Parliament are merely putty in the hands of an organisation'.[23]

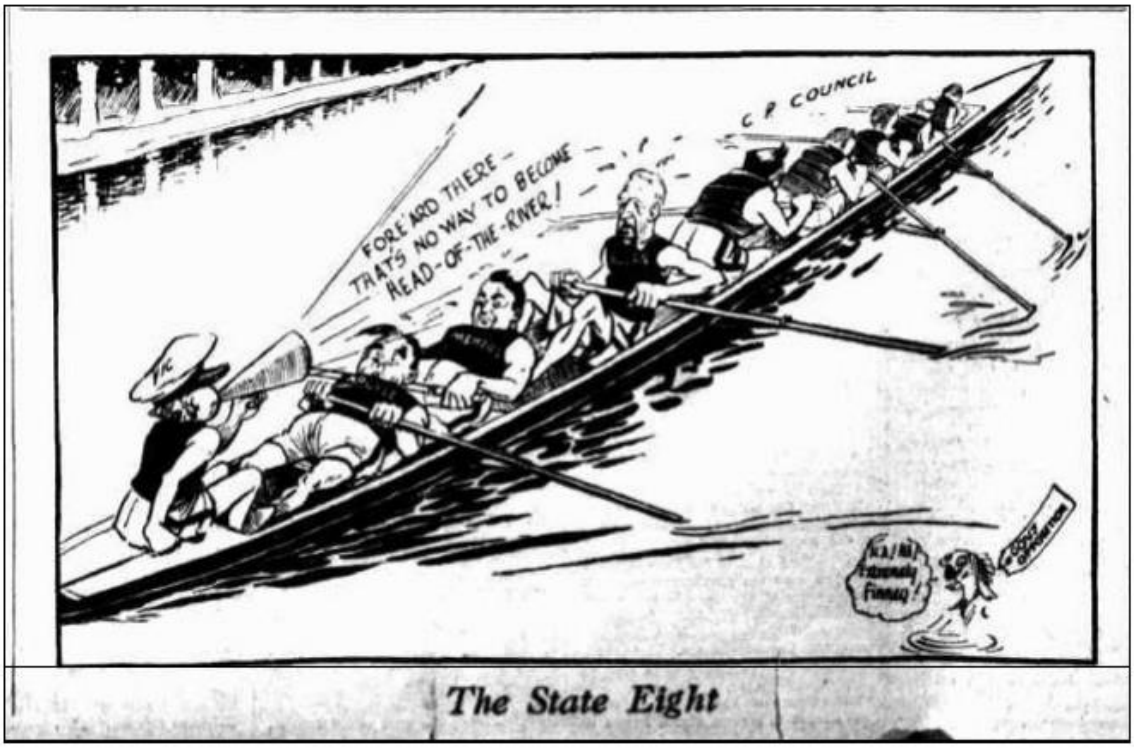

Figure 2.1. The new CP Central Council rows against the Argyle Ministry to the consternation of Allan, Menzies, and Argyle. *Herald* editorial cartoon.[24]

[21] Geoff Browne, "Allnutt, Albert George (1892–1963)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography. Volume 13, 1940-1980, A-De*, eds. John Ritchie and Christopher Cunneen (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1993), 36.
[22] *Age*, 15 March 1934, 9.
[23] *Kerang Observer*, 29 July 1916, 3.
[24] *Herald* (Melbourne), 13 May 1933, 6.

In practice, however, many parliamentarians resented and resisted such controls. Some, such as Hampden MLA and Lismore VFU member David Oman, outright refused to sign the pledge.[25] Other attempts to impose external controls over the parliamentary wing proved to be equally difficult to enforce. A resolution of the 1919 annual conference mandating that the party could only join a composite government if it obtained a majority of the cabinet positions was ignored when the Lawson-Allan Government was formed in 1923 with only minority CP representation in the ministry.[26] At the 1934 conference the delegates voted to extend sweeping new powers to Central Council. The party's participation in any composite ministry could now be terminated by a simple majority vote at a joint sitting of Central Council and the Parliamentary Country Party: the perfect mechanism to force the parliamentary wing to leave the Argyle Ministry. Secondly, and more controversial still, a new and more comprehensive nomination pledge was introduced, to be binding on all parliamentary candidates, to the effect that they could not accept any ministerial position in a composite government unless sanctioned first by Central Council, must vote in accordance with the majority decisions of the Parliamentary Country Party, and submit to preselection ballots and withdraw from any electoral contest if unsuccessful.[27]

The resolve of Central Council to enforce the new rules was tested just seven weeks later after a by-election for the seat of Gunbower. Norman Martin, who was aligned with the anti-Hocking forces, prevailed as an 'unendorsed CP candidate' against J.G. Matheson, the Central Council-endorsed UCP candidate.[28] Although Martin was expelled from the party by

[25] Lamb, "Of measures and men," 45; *Argus*, 7 April 1920, 9.
[26] B.D. Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1966), 198-199.
[27] Hocking, *Stormy Petrel*, 73-74.
[28] Brian Costar, "Martin, Sir Norman Angus (1893-1978)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography. Volume 15, 1940-1980, Kem-Pie*, eds. John Ritchie and Di Langmore (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2000), 318-319; Lamb, "Of measures and men," 141-142.

Central Council, he was still admitted to the Parliamentary Country Party on a 12-4 party-room vote.[29] Several weeks later Central Council expelled yet another member of parliament, Dr John Harris, the unofficial leader of the UCP in the Legislative Council, for refusing to sign the new nomination form.[30] Like Martin, Harris continued to attend party meetings. Despite having the letter of the law of the party constitution in its favour, the radical-dominated Central Council still could not assert its authority over the state parliamentary members. The federal parliamentarians proved to be just as uncooperative and resistant as their state counterparts, and argued that the new rules could not reasonably be extended to their federated party room and purportedly obtained legal advice that the pledge could constitute a 'criminal conspiracy'.[31] Hugh McClelland, MHR for Wimmera, who refused to sign the pledge prior to the 1934 federal election, was denied endorsement and only narrowly held his seat against an insurgent campaign from H.L. Simpson, a UCP Central Councillor and close Hocking ally.[32] Hocking later succeeded in ousting from parliament at least one of the vocal opponents of the new pledge, namely Marcus Wettenhall, MLA for Lowan, who was defeated by the radical-aligned Hamilton Lamb at the 1935 state election.[33]

The 1935 Assembly election, held on 2 March, was the catalyst for the fall of the Argyle Government. Riding a wave of rural discontent, the UCP won an additional six seats to attain a total of 20, the Labor Party gained one to increase its numbers to 17, and the UAP was reduced to 25. Shortly after the election, the Labor leader, Tom Tunnecliffe, made a public offer to support a minority Country Party government if the UCP would withdraw from the

[29] Lamb, "Of measures and men," 142.
[30] *Argus*, 18 August 1934, 19.
[31] Lamb, "Of measures and men," 145-146.
[32] Charles Fahey, "McClelland, Hugh (1873–1958)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography. Volume 10, 1891-1939, Lat-Ner*, eds. Bede Nairne and Geoffrey Serle, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1986), 228; *Age*, 4 August 1934, 19.
[33] Lamb, "Of measures and men," 150-156.

Argyle Ministry.[34] Broken by years of internecine factional conflict and his party's chronic inability to secure an outright parliamentary majority, Tunnecliffe was sufficiently desperate to offer the Country Party sole command of the Treasury benches in return for some modicum of political influence.[35] Tunnecliffe emphasised the similar outlook of the two parties and their 'identical policies' on unemployment relief and rural rehabilitation: 'Our parties have much in common – the farmers and workers need to unite.'[36] At the post-election party room meeting convened on 14 March a ballot was called for the party leadership. By 11 votes to 13, Murray Bourchier was defeated by Albert Dunstan.[37]

Figure 2.2. 'Gettin' Nowhere', *Herald* editorial cartoon on the dispute over the new Country Party pledge[38]

[34] Paul Strangio, *Neither power nor glory: 100 years of political Labor in Victoria, 1856-1956* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2012), 215.
[35] Ibid., 209-215; Wright, *A People's Counsel*, 150.
[36] *Age*, 14 March 1935, 10; Lamb, "Of measures and men," 156.
[37] Lamb, "Of measures and men," 165.
[38] *Herald*, 1 June 1934, 6.

An understandably disappointed Bourchier lamented that it was 'remarkable that a leader should be deposed after having led the party to a substantial victory' and having increased the party's representation in the Assembly by a third in less than two years.[39] Murray Bourchier's 624-day reign as leader remains by far the shortest in the history of the party. Although historians such as Don Watson and J.B. Paul have dismissed Bourchier's record as leader as 'uninspired' and 'quite incompetent', it would be perhaps more charitable to conclude that his principled soldierly stoicism and cautious, middle-of-the-road restraint was ill-suited to the tumultuous times enveloping Victorian state politics.[40] Emasculated by an unsympathetic UAP-dominated ministry, stalked for the leadership by the canniest politician of his generation, and finally dethroned by a Country Party backbench enraptured by the prospect of attaining sole occupancy of the ministerial benches, Bourchier of Beersheeba was consumed by the invidious circumstances unfolding around him.

Albert Dunstan, by contrast, would prove to be a far more formidable party leader. A short and rotund man with a piping, high-pitched voice and 'curiously frog-like mouth', Dunstan had first made an impression on the parliament as a champion for the radical wing of the CP movement in the 1920s.[41] In 1926 he had led the breakaway of the Country Progressive Party and supported the Hogan Labor Ministry attain office in May 1927 and again in December 1929: two earlier instances of overt red-green parliamentary cooperation that foreshadowed the formation of the Dunstan Ministry in 1935. Following the reunification of the two Country parties in 1930, Dunstan was elected deputy leader of the new United Country

[39] *Age*, 15 March 1935, 11; Lamb, "Of measures and men," 166.
[40] Don Watson, "Bourchier, Sir Murray William James (1881-1937)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography. Volume 7, 1891-1939, A-CH*, eds. Bede Nairn and Geoffrey Serle (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 1979), 354-356; Paul, "The Premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan," 27.
[41] Barbor, *They Went Their Way* (Traralgon: The Journal and the Record, 1960), 2; J.B. Paul, "Dunstan, Sir Albert Arthur (1882–1950)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography. Volume 8, 1891-1939, Cl-Gib*, eds. Bene Nairn and Geoffrey Serle (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1981), 376-379.

Party.[42] By 1935, Dunstan was an experienced minister, a shrewdly calculating tactician, and a veteran Country Party brawler with an impeccable pedigree in agrarian radicalism. Even with Dunstan installed in the leadership, however, the task of dispatching the Argyle Ministry was not yet accomplished. In an eleventh hour bid to save his Government from destruction, Argyle promoted Dunstan to the office of deputy premier and offered the UCP an additional honorary position in the ministry.[43] A joint meeting of the Parliamentary Country Party and Central Council was convened on 19 March which resolved by 27 votes to 14 to withdraw from the ministry.[44] Nine days later the Argyle Government was defeated in the Assembly by the combined votes of the UCP and Labor Party.[45]

III. The Dunstan Ministry as a red-green alliance

After spending his first afternoon as Premier basking in the adulation of the delegates to the 1935 Country Party annual conference, Dunstan called upon the Secretary of the Victorian Trades Hall Council to discuss the resolution to a strike of unemployed sustenance workers.[46] Shortly thereafter, the Dunstan Government announced its first administrative act: a £36,000 increase in sustenance payments.[47] An outraged editorial in the *Shepparton Advertiser* – headlined 'CP in office, Labor in power' – exclaimed that the first measure of the new farmer Government was not to assist primary producers 'but to benefit a body of men who have been swayed into extreme action by extremists'.[48] While the Labor Party would soon discover that the Country Party was not as slavishly amenable to its requests as the *Shepparton Advertiser* feared, these links between the Dunstan Government and the labour movement were

[42] Paul, "Dunstan, Sir Albert Arthur (1882–1950)," 376-379.
[43] Lamb, "Of measures and men," 166-168.
[44] Ibid., 168-169.
[45] Ibid., 183.
[46] *Countryman*, 5 April 1935, 1; *Weekly Times*, 6 April 1935, 5.
[47] *Herald*, 4 April 1935, 1.
[48] *Shepparton Advertiser*, 3 April 1935, 2.

indicative of the new *de facto* 'red-green' alliance in Victoria, following the pattern of worker-farmer legislative collaboration across numerous western nations in the inter-war years.

Arguably the earliest international precedent for a cross-party farmer-labour alliance was the Drury Ministry in the Canadian province of Ontario between 1919 and 1923. The United Farmers-Labour Coalition Government was led by a cabinet composed of nine Farmer and two Labour ministers.[49] Despite having implemented far-reaching social welfare and banking reforms, the Government was defeated in 1923 amidst bitter divisions between the coalition parties and a split with the industrial wing of the United Farmers movement.[50] Populist agrarian governments swept to power across the Prairie Provinces as dissatisfaction with depressed commodity prices, burdensome debt charges, and high production costs stirred the farmer industrial organisations into political action.[51] The United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) were elected in a landslide victory in the 1921 provincial elections, and formed a government along with a representative of the Dominion Labour Party, with whom they had openly collaborated during the preceding election campaign.[52] The UFA would rule in Edmonton for the next fourteen years.[53] A majority agrarian government took power in Manitoba in 1922 under the Premiership of John Bracken, which remained in power either alone or in coalition until it merged with the Manitoba Liberals in the early 1930s, and thereafter until 1958.[54] The

[49] Peter Baskerville, *Sites of Power: A Concise History of Ontario* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2005), 184; Charles Johnston, *E.C. Drury: Agrarian Idealist* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 70-71, 76, 82; Louisa Aubrey Wood, *A History of farmers' movements in Canada: the origins and development of agrarian protest 1872-1924* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 331-332.
[50] Johnston, *E.C. Drury*, 202-206.
[51] Paul Sharp, *The Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada: A Survey Showing American Parallels* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1948), 128-151.
[52] Alvin Finkel, "The Rise and Fall of the Labour Party in Alberta, 1917-42," *Labour / Le Travail* 16 (Fall 1985): 71-73.
[53] Bradford J. Rennie, "Richard Reid, 1934-1935," in *Alberta Premiers of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Bradford J. Rennie (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2004), 117-120.
[54] Sharp, *The Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada*, 166-171.

informal partnership between the radical agrarians and the socialist-labour forces in Canada blossomed to such an extent that the two movements formally combined in the early 1930s. In Saskatchewan, a 'Farmer-Labour Group' was formed in 1932 by delegates from the United Farmers of Canada and the Independent Labour Party as a joint political front to contest provincial elections.[55] Similarly, that same year the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation – Farmer-Labour-Socialist (CCF), the forerunner of the contemporary New Democratic Party, was established in Calgary as an amalgamated farmer-labour political vehicle. The CCF was supported by the United Farmers' organisations of Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, and Saskatchewan, as well as regional labour organisations.[56]

A similar alignment of agrarian and democratic socialist-labour forces occurred across much of Northern Europe. In perhaps the closest direct equivalent to the Victorian CP-ALP alliance, an agrarian Progressive Party minority government ruled Iceland between 1927 and 1932 with the cross-bench support of the Social Democratic Party.[57] By July 1934, the radical section of the Progressive Party had gained sufficient power to facilitate a formal coalition ministry with the Social Democrats, which remained in office until 1938.[58] This agrarian-dominated 'red-green' coalition ministry – the '*Stjórn hinna vinnandi stétta'* or 'government of the working/toiling classes' – introduced organised marketing schemes to aid the farming

[55] Jim Warren and Kathleen Carlisle, *On the side of the People: A History of Labour in Saskatchewan* (Regina: Coteau Books, 2005), 92; J.F. Conway, "From 'Agrarian Socialism' to 'Natural' Governing Party: the CCF/NDP in Saskatchewan, 1932-2007," in *The Prairie Agrarian Movement Revisited: Centenary Symposium on the Foundation of the Territorial Grain Growers Association*, ed. Murray Knuttila and Bob Stirling (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2007), 209; S.M. Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism: The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in Saskatchewan: A Study in Political Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), 105.
[56] Barry Eidlin, *Labor and the Class Idea in the United States and Canada* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 185.
[57] Gunnar Karlsson, *The History of Iceland* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 307; Gunnar Kristinsson, *Farmers' Parties: A Study in Electoral Adaptation* (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 1991), 97-98, 144-145.
[58] Guomundur Halfdanarson, *The A to Z of Iceland* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 75-76.

and fishing industries as well as Iceland's first comprehensive social welfare legislation.[59] In Sweden, parliamentary collaboration between the dominant Social Democrats and the Farmers' League commenced in 1932 as part of an arrangement known as the '*kohandel*' or 'cow-trade' in which the agrarians supported key elements of the Social Democrats' program in return for assistance measures and concessions for primary producers.[60] As noted by historian Ingvar Andersson, this farmer-labour political collaboration arose in direct response to the Great Depression: 'it was the parties representing the social groups most directly hit by the crisis, therefore, who… tried to find a compromise solution'.[61] Formal 'red-green' coalition ministries governed Sweden between 1936 and 1939 and again between 1951 and 1957.

Image 2.3. Swedish editorial cartoon from 1934. Per Albin Hansson (Social Democrats) and Axel Pehrsson-Bramstorp (Farmers' League) agree to continue the mutually profitable Red-Green 'cow-trade'.[62]

[59] Ibid., 75-76; Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, 311, 331; Gudni Johannesson, *The History of Iceland* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 88.
[60] Franklin Scott, *Sweden: The Nation's History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1977), 486-487.
[61] Ingvar Andersson, *A History of Sweden* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), 438.
[62] Reproduced in Jan Myrdal, "Varför nådde fascismen inte verkhöjd i Sverige?," *Folket i Bild*, November 2017, 31 [Swedish, Sweden].

In Denmark, the first of the red-green 'crisis agreements' was signed in 1933 between the Social Democrat-Radical Liberal Government and the *Venstre* Party, the essentially farmer-controlled agrarian party.[63] Like the Swedish *kohandel*, the agreement traded a package of social welfare reforms for extensive subsidies and concessions for farmers.[64] Although a red-green coalition ministry never eventuated in Denmark (at least not until 1978-79), the crisis agreements secured crucial agrarian support for the Stauning Government in the upper house of the Danish national parliament.[65] A series of similar agreements were negotiated in Norway in 1935 and 1936 between the Farmers' Party and the Labour Party, although, again, a formal red-green coalition government was not established.[66] Nevertheless, the combined votes of the Farmer and Labour parties were sufficient to push the Mowinckel Liberal Government from office in March 1935 and install an all-Labour government with crossbench Farmer support.[67] In Finland, the installation of the agrarian party candidate, Kyösti Kallio, as president with the support of the Social Democrat bloc in March 1937, followed by the formation of the 'Red Earth' Coalition Government between the Agrarians, Social Democrats, and Progressive Party only days later, heralded the beginning of three decades of loose political 'class cooperation' between the producer and worker movements.[68]

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[63] Jorgen Goul Andersen and Jan Bendix Jensen, "The Danish Venstre: Liberal, Agrarian or Centrist?" in *From Farmyard to City Square? The electoral adaptation of the Nordic Agrarian Parties*, ed. David Arter (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 104-106.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Sven Anders Söderpalm, "The Crisis Agreement and the Social Democratic Road to Power," in *Sweden's Development from Poverty to Affluence, 1750-1970*, ed. Steven Koblik (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), 274; Moshe Maor, *Parties, Conflicts and Coalitions in Western Europe: The Organisational determinants of coalition bargaining* (London: Routledge, 1998), 44-48.
[66] Kristinsson, *Farmers' Parties*, 136-138.
[67] Francis Sejersted, *The Age of Social Democracy: Norway and Sweden in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 164.
[68] David Kirby, "Finland," in *The Working Class and Politics in Europe and America 1929-1945*, eds. Stephen Salter and John Stevenson (Harlow: Longman Group UK, 1990), 53-54; David Arter, "From a Contingent Party System to Party System Convergence? Mapping Party System Change in Postwar Finland," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 32, no. 2 (June 2009): 232; Kari Hokkanen, "Die finnischen Bauernparteien," in *Europäische Bauernparteien im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Heinz Gollwitzer (Stuttgart: Gustav Fischer Verlag, 1977), 185-188 [German, Germany].

Although the editorial board of the *Countryman* was evidently unaware of these international parallels – it congratulated the Victorian CP on achieving 'the first country Government probably in the history of the world' – the Labor-CP alliance that installed the Dunstan Ministry was in fact a rather typical example of agrarian-democratic socialist cross-party cooperation during the inter-war era.[69]

Although both the Country and Labor parties officially denied that they had entered into a *formal* pact in 1935, there was such an extraordinary degree of collaboration between the two parties that the arrangement amounted to a *de facto* red-green or green-pink alliance.[70] Premier Dunstan purportedly received a covert visit each week from the Labor Party President, Arthur Calwell, with fresh instructions to the Government from the ALP.[71] The two parties even maintained an unofficial electoral alliance that was broadly similar to the negotiated electoral pacts between the CP and UAP. At the 1937 election, for instance, Labor refrained from contesting all but one of the seats held by the UCP, namely Mildura, which was reciprocated by the Country Party in all Labor-held seats except Allendale.

In justifying the decision to install the Country Party to power, some Labor members expressly characterised the arrangement as a farmer-worker partnership. J.L. Murphy, MLA for Port Melbourne, argued that there was a natural 'affinity between the farming and industrial communities' arising from their common exploitation by the financial ruling class.[72] While he had no great personal affection for the Country Party, Murphy was content that 'at last [the UCP] had discovered that the interests of the farming community and the

[69] *Countryman*, 5 April 1935, 8.
[70] *Countryman*, 5 April 1935, 3; *Shepparton Advertiser*, 28 March 1935, 5.
[71] Lamb, "Of measures and men," 194.
[72] Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, volume 196, 25 March 1935, 96.

workers were interwoven'.[73] Jack Holland, MLA for Flemington, echoed Murphy's call for greater collaboration between the Country and Labor parties as representatives of the two toiling classes who produced 'the great wealth of the community'.[74] *Labor Call* boasted of the 'leading part' played by the Labor Party in the installation of the Dunstan Ministry and explained that this 'apparent apostasy' was rendered necessary by the extreme economic conditions.[75] In circumstances where both the wage labourer and farmer were 'becoming more and more impoverished', the editorial continued, the CP Government was bound to 'give effect to some degree or other to Labor's policy for assisting impoverished wage workers and farmers'.[76]

By contrast, the public rhetoric of the Country Party studiously avoided any direct acknowledgement of its collaboration with the Labor Party. In a rather stretched reinterpretation of the events of the preceding weeks, the *Countryman* proclaimed that the 'people have rebelled and made over the seat of authority to the country' following the 'rank failure of what may be termed the city interests to govern'.[77] As for the role of the Labor Party in the change of ministry, Dunstan had a ready-made response: 'Some have said there is an alliance with Labor. I know of no such alliance.'[78] The rhetorical approach adopted by the *Countryman* – under the control of its chairman, A.E. Hocking – and the new Premier was necessary in what was still a bitterly-divided Country Party. The conservatives in the party were thoroughly displeased by the decision to withdraw from the Argyle Ministry and uneasy about the new political alignment. Thomas Paterson, the deputy leader of the Federal CP and MHR for Gippsland, denounced the defeat of the Argyle Government as 'most unwise and

[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid., 100.
[75] *Labor Call*, 11 April 1935, 8.
[76] Ibid.
[77] *Countryman*, 5 April 1935, 8.
[78] *Countryman*, 5 April 1935, 3.

regrettable' and expressed his confidence that the state conference would decline to endorse the new arrangement.[79] John Allan pointedly declined to join the new ministry and made known his hopes that the 'position may right itself' with the CP back in a joint ministry with the UAP within twelve months.[80] With a parliamentary party that had split almost perfectly evenly in the Dunstan-Bourchier leadership ballot and an internal backlash from at least one section of the rank-and-file membership widely expected, Dunstan and Hocking had to sell the new parliamentary arrangement in a way that would resonate most favourably within the party.[81] With this in mind, it is no surprise that the party leadership was loath to make any reference to a 'worker-farmer' alliance.

IV. The early Dunstan years and the triumph of CP radicalism

The early years of the Dunstan Ministry through until approximately 1939-40 represented the triumphant 'high water mark' of Country Party radicalism in Victoria and of its hard-line independent, anti-composite-ministry political strategy. The radical-reform section secured a thumping victory at the 1935 conference elections, having retained control of the position of chief president and returned 12 of its candidates to the 17-member Central Council.[82] The rank-and-file membership of the party continued its sustained growth, expanding from approximately 12,500 in 1932 to a record peak of more than 18,000 in 1938. Although the combined numbers of the UCP and ALP were more than sufficient to control the Legislative Assembly, the Dunstan Government received sympathetic support from a breakaway faction of eight disaffected UAP members known as the 'Country and Liberal' section.[83] With

[79] *Countryman*, 22 March 1935, 1.
[80] *Argus*, 22 March 1935, 9.
[81] *Age*, 26 March 1935, 11.
[82] *Argus*, 5 April 1935, 9; *Australasian* (Melbourne), 13 April 1935, 9.
[83] *Australasian*, 18 July 1936, 11.

support from both sides of the chamber – at least for the time being – the CP ministry was effectively unassailable.

By the end of 1935, the Dunstan Government had passed two landmark pieces of legislation to aid primary producers, namely the *Marketing of Primary Products Act* and the *Loan (Farmers' Debts Adjustment) Act.* The new marketing act provided a statutory mechanism for producers of a particular agricultural commodity to establish their own grower-controlled centralised marketing boards with exclusive jurisdiction over the sale and distribution of their produce in Victoria. The Country Party had long advocated the establishment of such 'organised marketing' boards as a means of securing higher and stabilised farm-gate prices and to reduce the power of the commodity traders. However, the 1935 marketing legislation, as drafted by the former Labor Premier and new Agriculture Minister, Ned Hogan, had a distinctive Labor pedigree. The legislation was derived in large part from the marketing scheme introduced by the Theodore Labor Government in Queensland in 1922, as well as the marketing bill proposed by the Labor ministry led by Hogan as Premier that had been quashed by the Victorian Legislative Council in 1930.[84] By 1936 new marketing boards had been established for the onion, chicory, and maize industries, followed by an egg and egg pulp board in 1937.[85] The Dunstan Government's debt legislation established the Farmers' Debts Adjustment Board with extensive powers to assist primary producers in financial difficulties with banks and other lending institutions. Trumpeted by the Country Party as 'the best legislation of its kind in Australia', the new Board received nearly three thousand applications for debt adjustment involving some 57,640 creditors and more than £12,200,000 in liabilities by December 1936.[86]

[84] Paul, "The Premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan," 68-70.
[85] Ibid., 76.
[86] Ibid, 78, 82.

The Country Party was not alone in boasting of the early achievements of the Dunstan Ministry. Labor, too, was seeking to convince its supporters of the merits of the new political alignment and gain credit for the Dunstan Government's reforms. Tunnecliffe proclaimed that Labor had 'cause for gratification' for its decision to install the Country Party to office and recited a litany of measures delivered by the new Government, including increased sustenance payments, the restoration of financial assistance to pensioners and disabled miners, reduced secondary school fees, and a new workers' compensation regime.[87] Here were the dividends of the Victorian CP-ALP 'cow trade'. *Labor Call* featured an editorial cartoon (Figure 2.4) which presented the Country Party, represented by a balding Albert Dunstan, being held aloft by the Labor Party to reach the 'two loaves' of 'rural rehabilitation' and 'unemployment relief' to aid the worker and farmer waiting patiently below.[88] Remarkably, Tunnecliffe disavowed the formation of a Labor government even if the party won a lower house majority at the next state election, arguing that without control of the Legislative Council a new Labor ministry would only be 'bumping its head against a brick wall'.[89] The powerful Australian Railways Union remained unconvinced, however, and derided Tunnecliffe's strategy as 'cuddling the cocky party'.[90]

Like the other largely contemporaneous red-green agreements around the world, the Victorian CP-ALP alliance was essentially transactional in nature. Once the most straightforward and politically palatable of the Labor demands had been met – or met in part – it was apparent that the Country Party had no intention of being overly generous or obliging to its parliamentary partner. The Dunstan Ministry 'went the shortest distance in fulfilling the

[87] *Australian Worker* (Sydney), 18 December 1935, 13.
[88] *Labor Call*, 4 April 1935, 3.
[89] *Argus*, 24 September 1937, 2.
[90] Strangio, *Neither power nor glory*, 219.

minimum unavoidable commitments of office' and was reluctant to imperil either its support amongst more conservative rural interests or its almost obsessive commitment to fiscal discipline to appease the Labor Party any more than was strictly necessary.[91] Dunstan knew full well that the only feasible alternative to the CP-ALP alliance was a reconstructed conservative CP-UAP coalition ministry, a prospect that held very little appeal for the ALP.

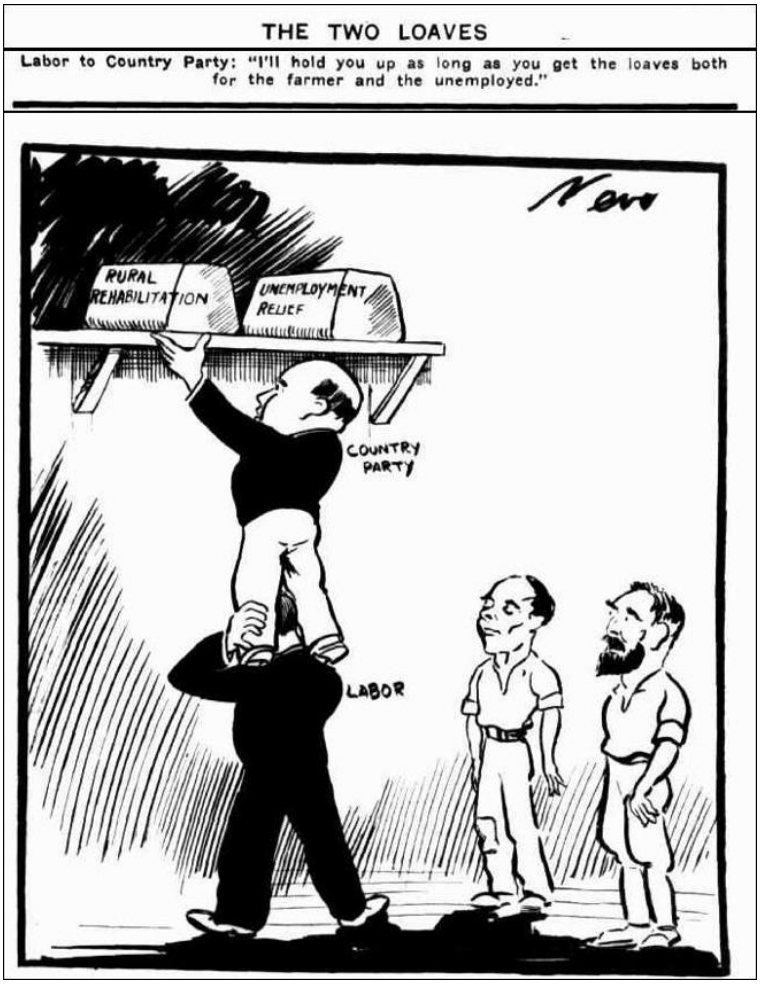

Figure 2.4. 'The Two Loaves,' *Labor Call*, 4 April 1935, 3.

[91] Paul, "The Premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan," 413.

In any case, the Country Party Government was genuinely restrained in the extent to which it could implement a more expansive radical agenda by the stubborn intransigence of the Victorian state upper house. Described as the 'most unassailable second chamber in the world' due to its narrow electoral franchise and the absence of any deadlock provision, the conservative-dominated Legislative Council – the UAP held 23 of the 34 upper house seats in 1935 – had long frustrated the legislative ambitions of both the ALP and the radical wing of the Country Party.[92] The Dunstan Government, too, soon found that its legislative agenda was frequently imperilled by the Legislative Council and set upon seeking to reform the intractable upper chamber.

Dunstan initially sought to secure a modest redistribution of the Council's province-based electoral boundaries on lines less favourable to the UAP.[93] Once this redistribution bill became hopelessly bogged between the two chambers, Dunstan, who was 'genuinely piqued' by the obstinacy of the upper house, submitted a more comprehensive reform bill which included a new mechanism to resolve Assembly-Council deadlocks, the abolition of plural voting for Council elections, and a reduction of the age and property qualifications for the upper house franchise.[94] After three attempts to secure the passage of the reform bill, and a state election fought on the issue in October 1937, the Legislative Council finally relented just before Christmas 1937. While the reforms were not spectacular in their effect – the new deadlock mechanism was so 'tortuous' that it was ultimately never used – Dunstan's battle with the conservative establishment of the Legislative Council won him the plaudits of the liberal press and cemented Labor's support for his Government.[95] The rather unlikely spectacle of a Country Party ministry seeking to bludgeon a conservative 'house of review'

[92] Quoted in Raymond Wright, *A People's Counsel*, 160.
[93] Paul, "The Premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan," 113-114.
[94] Strangio, *Neither power nor glory*, 218-219.
[95] Ibid., 218.

into submission with apparent reformist zeal speaks to Dunstan's sheer determination to triumph over those who challenged his political authority, as well as the genuine radical-reformist streak that permeated the ministry during its early years.

Without any serious electoral opposition from the tamed Labor Party or the divided and demoralised UAP, and using the Victorian Treasury to strategically lavish funding on electorally sensitive rural towns (Charlton in the Premier's home district was apparently a frequent recipient of this selective largesse), the Country Party continued to entrench its electoral dominance over the hinterland of the state.[96] In 1937 a CP candidate won the Federal Division of Bendigo, the first occasion that the party had secured victory in an electorate dominated by one of Victoria's largest provincial cities. At the 1937 state election more than half of the CP members in the Assembly were returned unopposed and the remainder re-elected by comfortable margins. An average of 45 percent of distributed Country Party preferences flowed to Labor candidates, a much stronger flow to Labor than at either of the previous two state elections (see Table 2.1 below). The Labor Party had previously indicated that it would be satisfied to receive even 40 percent of CP preferences.[97] The preference distribution in Bulla-Dalhousie in 1937 – 54.5 percent of CP preferences to Labor – was one of the very rare occasions where an outright majority of Country-National Party preferences have flowed to a Labor candidate ahead of the other major right-of-centre party in a classical three-cornered contest. These results suggest that the Country Party was attracting more Labor-sympathising voters to its banner and that a sizeable portion of its existing electoral base was supportive of the CP-ALP alignment.

[96] Barbor, *They Went Their Way*, 33-34.
[97] *Argus*, 7 September 1937, 12.

Year of Assembly Election/Electorate	To UAP %	To ALP %	To Independent %	To other CP candidate %
1932				
Bulla-Dalhousie	86.4	13.6	*	*
Grant	83.0	17.0	*	*
Average to ALP		**15.3**		
1935				
Allendale	75.2	24.8	*	*
Bulla-Dalhousie	64.0	36.0	*	*
Kara Kara-Borung	10.9	*	9.8	79.3
Average to ALP		**30.4**		
1937				
Benalla	*	45.9	54.1	*
Bulla-Dalhousie	45.5	54.5	*	*
Hampden	65.5	34.5	*	*
Average to ALP		**45.0**	*	*
1940				
Bulla-Dalhousie	53.2	46.8	*	*
Gippsland North	*	30.3	*	69.7 (to Liberal Country Party)
Hampden	58.9	41.1	*	*
Average to ALP		**39.4**		

Table 2.1. Distribution of CP preference flows at the 1932, 1935, 1937, and 1940 Legislative Assembly General Elections.

Following the 1940 state election, the UCP held 22 seats in the Assembly and the breakaway Liberal Country Party one further seat (Benalla). At the following election in 1943, the UCP emerged as the largest party in the Assembly with a total of 25 seats, the apogee of the party's parliamentary representation (Figure 2.5). The UCP held all three of the seats along the south-western coast (Portland, Warrnambool, and Polwarth) and two seats on the outer metropolitan fringe (Grant and Bulla-Dalhousie), both areas that had long proved resistant to Country Party incursions. With more than 38 percent of the seats in the Assembly in 1943, the Victorian Country Party was much larger than its closest interstate counterpart – the Queensland Country Party with 22 percent of the members of the lower house of that state –

and more than three times the proportionate size of the federal Country Party, which accounted for just 12 percent of the House of Representatives.

V. The LCP split and Hocking-Dunstan feud

As the Country Party grew fat on the spoils of office, the internal battle for control over the movement did not subside. Hocking and his close supporters were convinced of the merits of their non-aligned, anti-coalitionist political strategy and of the potential for the movement to expand further still, possibly even into urban areas as a rebranded centrist party, with the ultimate ambition of attaining an outright parliamentary majority.[98] Charged with evangelical zeal, Central Council wished to export its 'go-it-alone' model to the federal parliamentary arena and the other state divisions of the party.

At Central Council's direction, the UCP formally disaffiliated from the federal body of the party, the Australian Country Party Association (ACPA) – denounced by the UCP Treasurer as a 'sinister sham' under the domination of Earle Page – in July 1934.[99] The Hocking faction intended to supplant the ACPA with a new Australia-wide Country Party movement reconstructed in the image of the Victorian UCP with extensive extra-parliamentary controls. It was rumoured in the press that the new organisation 'will possibly have distinct leanings towards that of Labour [sic]'.[100] A radical agrarian 'Centre Party' or 'Centre Group' was initiated in South Australia with the support of the Victorian Central Council to stand against

[98] *Countryman*, 30 April 1937, 4.
[99] *Queensland Times* (Ipswich), 23 July 1934, 6; *Advocate* (Burnie), 23 July 1934, 7.
[100] *Sunday Times* (Perth), 29 March 1936, 1.

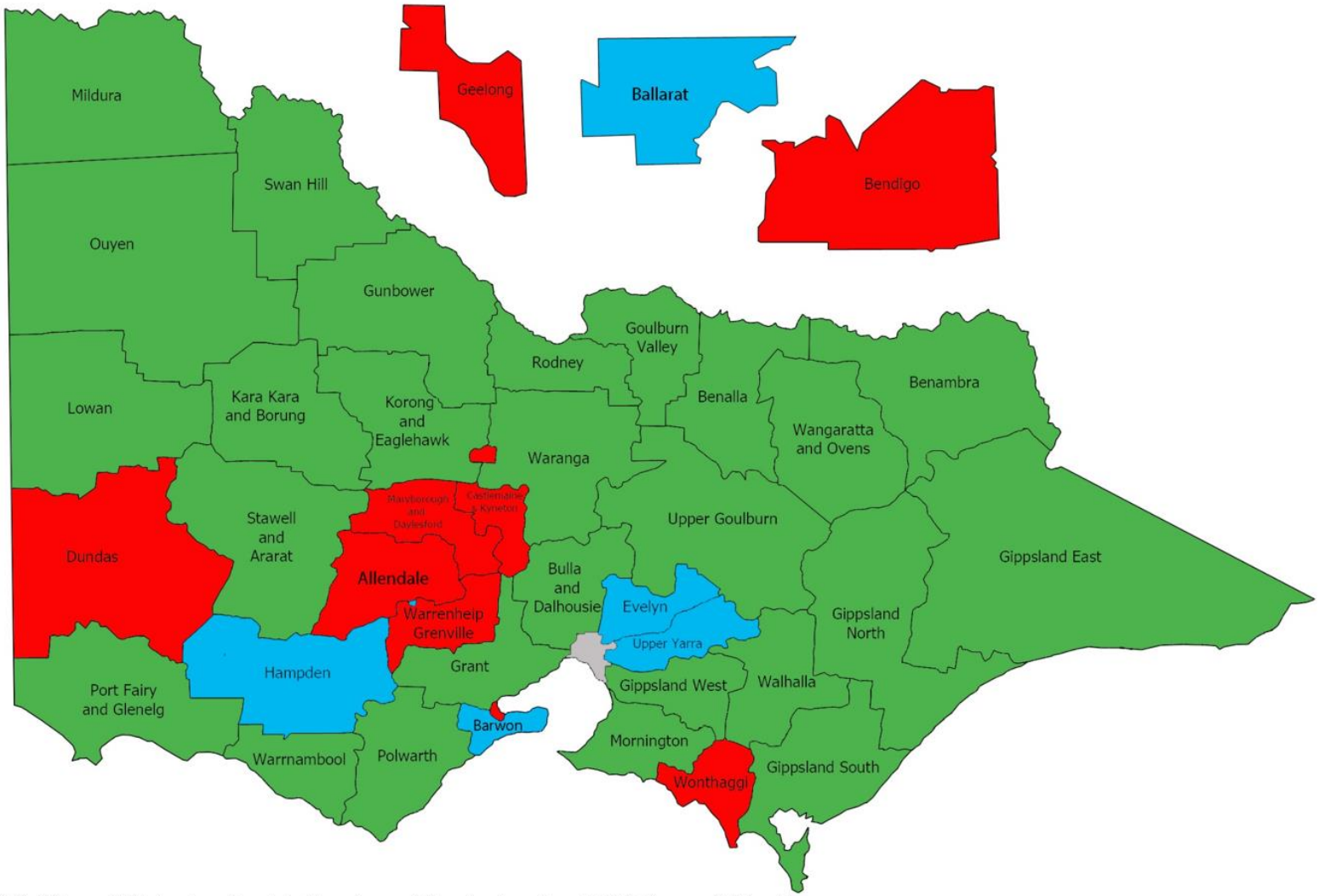

Figure 2.5. Map of Victorian Legislative Assembly electorates, 1943 General Election.
NB: Colour of electorate indicates which party won the seat: United Country Party (green), United Australia Party (blue), Australian Labor Party (red)

the Liberal and Country League, the amalgamated non-Labor party in that state. The Centre Group subsequently won eight seats at the 1938 state election in South Australia.[101]

While a new national body was not achieved, the *Countryman* gleefully reported on any overtures of support from the other states as further evidence of the innate superiority of the Victorian model.[102] Tensions between the federal and Victorian parties escalated to breaking point in December 1937 when John McEwen, MHR for Indi and 'the acknowledged leader of the moderate section', was expelled from the party by Central Council after he accepted a ministry in the Lyons Government without prior sanction.[103] McEwen retorted that he would rather leave politics altogether than serve as the 'tool of a group of men, many of whom had been rejected by the people as Parliamentary candidates, but who now sought to dictate to Governments and coerce public men by star chamber methods'.[104]

Unperturbed by McEwen's caustic denunciations, Central Council only days later requested that the Dunstan Ministry submit all draft legislation to a special party sub-committee to be vetted before it could proceed to parliament.[105] Although the idea of appointing such a sub-committee was initially proposed by the 'moderate' or 'conservative' wing as a means of countering Labor influence over government legislation, it was readily embraced by the radicals for their own purposes.[106] From the perspective of the state Parliamentary Country Party, it appeared that the organisational wing was pushing for 'complete official domination' and seeking to reduce each elected member to 'merely be the mouthpiece of the dominant

[101] *Age*, 14 July 1936, 12; Dean Jaensch, "National Party," in *The Wakefield Companion to South Australian History*, ed. Wilfred Prest (Kent Town: Wakefield Press, 2001), 376.
[102] *Countryman*, 27 August 1937, 3.
[103] *Argus*, 8 December 1937, 3.
[104] *Argus*, 15 December 1937, 2.
[105] *Argus*, 14 December 1937, 1.
[106] *Argus*, 14 December 1937, 1-2.

few', as later complained by J.G.B McDonald, MLA for Goulburn Valley.[107] At this juncture, however, Dunstan publicly disavowed any suggestion that Central Council was seeking to 'dictate to the Ministry' and declared that the organisational wing had only 'extended the utmost goodwill and cooperation' to his Government.[108] Antony Lamb has plausibly speculated that Dunstan's comments were motivated by a desire to dispel the persistent accusation that Hocking was the power behind the Premier's throne.[109] As Wilfrid Kent-Hughes, UAP MLA for Kew, had taunted Dunstan during the no-confidence debate on the Argyle Ministry: 'He is controlled by an outside junta; Hitler-Hocking controls him.'[110]

The internal backlash arising from the McEwen expulsion resulted in a formal schism in the movement. A breakaway party, known as the 'Liberal Country Party' (LCP), was formed after an unsuccessful last-ditch attempt to have McEwen's membership reinstated at the UCP annual conference in March 1938.[111] At its foundation meeting at the Ballarat Town Hall, attended by several hundred delegates who had stormed out of the UCP conference the preceding day, the LCP resolved to seek affiliation with the ACPA. This move was welcomed by the federal CP leadership, which pledged 'the closest cooperation' between the two entities.[112] The *Liberal Country Times*, the official organ of the LCP, denounced the UCP pledge as 'an outrage on conscience' and blamed the split on the 'old CPPs', referring to the Country Progressive Party, who were 'now firmly in control' of the mainline Country Party.[113] Although the LCP stressed that it was not out to bring down the Dunstan Ministry and that its dispute was solely with the Central Council 'junta' that sought to 'regiment and

[107] *Numurkah Leader*, 20 May 1941, 4.
[108] Paul, "The Premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan," 214.
[109] Lamb, "Of measures and men," 215, 221.
[110] Ibid., Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, volume 196, 28 March 1935, 141.
[111] *Countryman*, 1 March 1938, 4.
[112] *Age*, 31 March 1938, 11; *Weekly Times*, 30 April 1938, 6; *Argus*, 30 March 1938, 1.
[113] Lamb, "Of measures and men," 229.

discipline' elected parliamentarians, the commentary of the *Liberal Country Times* was often highly critical of the UCP Government.[114] The newspaper attacked the 'Dunstan Labor Government' and warned that private property rights could be imperilled by its Labor-inspired legislation.[115] Hocking and his colleagues fired back and lampooned the LCP in each weekly edition of the *Countryman* as a politically impotent lackey of the UAP (Figure 2.6).

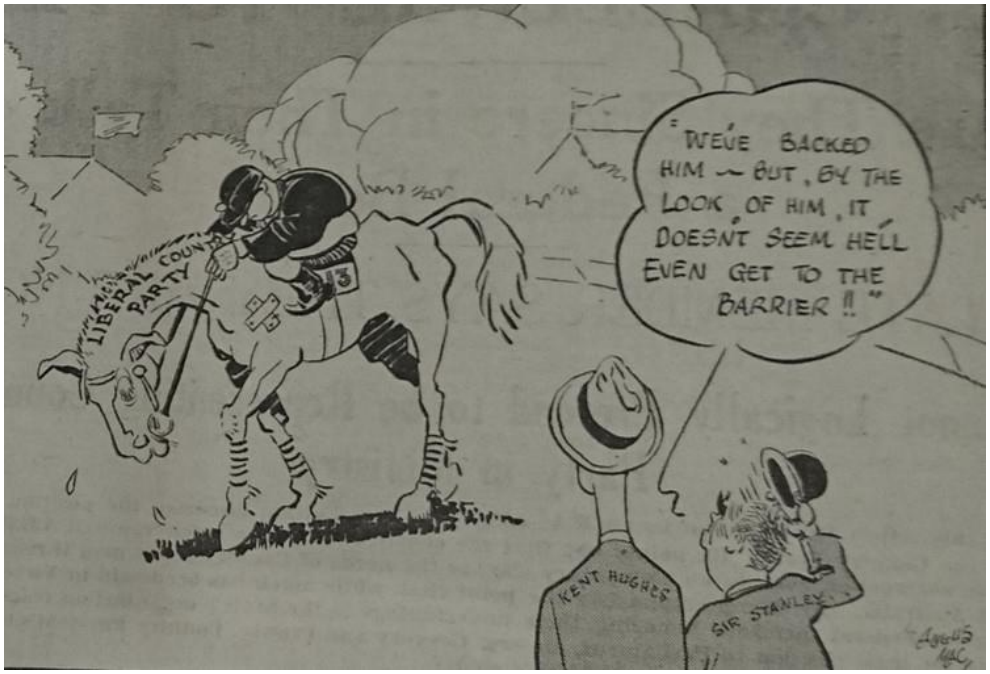

Figure 2.6. Sir Stanley Argyle and Wilfrid Kent-Hughes of the UAP lament the poor state of the LCP: Anti LCP editorial *Countryman* cartoon.[116]

The comparatively modest rank-and-file membership of the LCP, at its height likely somewhere between 1,200 and 2,200 members organised into approximately 70 active branches, was concentrated almost exclusively within Gippsland and the North-Eastern and Goulburn Valley districts corresponding to the federal electorates held by McEwen and

[114] *Liberal Country Times*, 6 April 1939, 2.
[115] *Liberal Country Times*, 23 September 1928, 1

[116] *Countryman*, 6 May 1938, 3.

Paterson.[117] With the exception of seats where the incumbent members had defected to the LCP such as Benalla, the breakaway party's electoral incursions against the UCP were entirely ineffectual. In its first campaign, the 1938 Gippsland North by-election, the LCP won just 17 percent of the primary vote, well behind the successful UCP candidate, A.H. Borthwick (who won 30 percent), and the Labor nominee (also on 30 percent).[118] At the 1940 Legislative Assembly election, the LCP contested only six seats, winning only Benalla. At the 1940 Legislative Council election, the LCP failed to nominate a single candidate. The Liberal Country Party was nonetheless a useful vehicle for McEwen and Paterson – both of whom were comfortably re-elected as LCP candidates at the 1940 federal election – to retain their affiliation with the federal Country Party while this was not possible within the Hocking-dominated UCP.

While the UCP and LCP sparred out on the hustings and in the columns of their respective published organs, relations between Hocking and Dunstan, the two power-hungry strongmen of the movement, remained outwardly cordial and cooperative. That was to change, however, in August-September 1939 following the intervention of Central Council to thwart the Premier's bid to have his son, Arthur Dunstan, installed as the UCP candidate for the seat of Bulla-Dalhousie.[119] With Hocking and his factional allies effectively unassailable on Central Council and on the conference floor, Dunstan turned to the executive power of the Premier's office to extract his revenge. As an opening shot, Hocking's sand supply company suddenly and mysteriously lost its valuable contracts with the State Government.[120] This was followed by a direct challenge to Hocking's legal eligibility to serve as a commissioner of the State

[117] *Gippsland Times*, 31 March 1938, 2. Tom Paterson had resigned from the UCP in protest on the floor of the 1938 conference.
[118] *Age*, 8 November 1938, 12.
[119] Paul, "The Premiership of Albert Dunstan," 220-221; *Argus*, 22 November 1939, 3.
[120] Lamb, "Of measures and men," 243.

Savings Bank – a position to which he had been appointed by the Dunstan Government in July 1935 – which culminated in Dunstan pushing through legislation that expressly terminated Hocking's appointment.[121] Dunstan's interventions outraged the so-called 'Mallee Hens', the firebrand radical Hocking-aligned parliamentarians from the Wimmera-Mallee region, including Hamilton Lamb, Albert Allnutt, and Keith Dodgshun, MLA for Ouyen, who openly criticised the Premier's actions in parliament.

The three rebels were joined shortly after by F.A. Cameron, MLA for Kara-Kara and Borung, ironically the sole CP backbencher to have spoken in favour of the Hocking bill. In the opinion of J.B. Paul, Cameron had been possessed by 'an anxious desire to impress the Premier with his loyalty' before realising the 'utter futility of such a course'.[122] Whipped into an outraged frenzy by the coverage of the Hocking-controlled *Countryman*, a considerable number of branches and district councils angrily condemned the Premier's actions.[123] Dunstan once again sought to by-pass the opposition forces within the party by resorting to his executive power as Premier, and called an early election on the grounds that an external 'junta' was attempting to illegally subvert his Government by means of 'Tammany Hall' tactics.[124] The subsequent election campaign degenerated into open warfare as Dunstan worked to defeat the rebel members of his own party.[125] All four of the Mallee Hens were re-elected, although Hocking's bid to enter parliament for the Labor-held seat of Allendale and take the fight directly to Dunstan in the party-room was not successful.[126] Such was the indignant mood within the party that a motion to expel the Premier was considered to be a distinct possibility at the UCP conference scheduled to open just a fortnight after the state

[121] Hocking, *Stormy Petrel*, 101-127.
[122] Paul, "The Premiership of Albert Dunstan," 237.
[123] Ibid., 245.
[124] Lamb, "Of measures and men," 254-255.
[125] Ibid., 255-256.
[126] Costar, "Albert Dunstan," 223.

election.[127] Dunstan, in turn, made it known that he and his ministers would stage a 'walk-out' if a censure motion was carried.[128] With the two camps locked in an effective stalemate, Hocking disarmed the volatile situation with a conciliatory address renouncing his right to redress in favour of party unity.[129]

Figure 2.7. The burly caricatures of Hocking (left) and Dunstan (right) trade blows in the boxing ring, cheered on by their respective supporters from the parliamentary and organisational wings.[130]

With the Mallee Hens safely returned to the Victorian Parliament and Hocking still encamped on Central Council, Dunstan's efforts appeared to have been in vain. In substance, however, the Premier was to emerge victorious. The hitherto formidable radical bloc on Central Council had been fatally fractured – H.L. Simpson, the outgoing UCP Chief President (1938-

[127] *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 31 March 1940, 6.
[128] *Argus*, 4 April 1940, 1.
[129] Ibid.
[130] *Argus*, 13 April 1940, 14.

40), had fallen out with Hocking during the State Savings Bank dispute – and Central Council ceased to pose any material threat to the Premier's authority.[131] By way of illustration, when a composite UCP-UAP ministry was formed in September 1943 in clear breach of the UCP constitution, Dunstan was able to extract retrospective endorsement from Central Council without difficulty.[132] Hocking had stepped away from the *Countryman* board in early 1943 and thereby ceased to be a member of Central Council.[133]

In its mortally weakened state after the 1940 state election, the remnant of the former Hocking faction on Central Council lost control of even its own ostensibly-aligned supporters within the parliamentary wing, such as Alexander (Alec) Wilson, MHR for Wimmera. Since September 1940, Wilson and Arthur Coles (Independent MHR for Henty) had held the balance of power in the Federal Parliament and provided support for the UAP-CP Government led first by Robert Menzies until August 1941 and then Arthur Fadden. A militant wheat producer of 'inflexible principle [and]… innate granite-like convictions' from Tempy in the heart of the Mallee, Wilson had served as a Hocking-aligned UCP Central Councillor and president of the Victorian Wheatgrowers' Association before his election as an endorsed UCP candidate for Wimmera in 1937.[134] Wilson styled himself as an 'Independent Country Party' member and proclaimed that his allegiance was owed solely to the Victorian movement rather than the ACPA-aligned federal party room.[135]

In October 1941, Wilson and Coles voted with the Labor Opposition to defeat the Fadden Government and install John Curtin as prime minister. In announcing his decision to the

[131] *Argus*, 10 February 1940, 5.
[132] Lamb, "Of measures and men," 284-285.
[133] Hocking, *Stormy Petrel*, 139.
[134] *Daily Telegraph*, 1 December 1940, 9.
[135] *West Australian*, 9 November 1937, 19.

House, Wilson explained that his 'sympathies have always been to a considerable degree with the Labour party [sic]' and that the platform of the Victorian Country Party 'is not far removed' from that of the ALP.[136] Despite his professed opposition to composite ministries, Hocking, who was on friendly terms with Arthur Fadden, actively lobbied Wilson *not* to withdraw his support from the Coalition Government.[137] The remaining Hocking-aligned radicals were infuriated by Wilson's refusal to confer with Central Council in the lead up to the fall of the Fadden Government.[138] At the 1943 federal election, Wilson was opposed in the seat of Wimmera by Reginald Skeat, a former chief president and 'first lieutenant' to A.E. Hocking.[139] Skeat was thoroughly trounced by Wilson on polling day by a 67-32 percent two-candidate margin.[140]

Once Hocking and his leading supporters had been suitably humbled and marginalised, the cause of extra-parliamentary discipline over the parliamentary wing largely receded into oblivion. This very point was noted by J.B. Paul, who observed that since the Dunstan era, the Parliamentary CP 'had been relied on for direction and leadership while Central Council seems to have been content with a more subdued role in following the former's direction'.[141] In a further mark of the rising prestige and authority of the parliamentary wing, the 1944 annual party conference restored voting rights to the parliamentary representatives on Central Council.[142] Parliamentarians had been excluded altogether from Central Council in 1930 and were readmitted purely 'as liaison members without voting power' in 1935.[143] An attempt in

[136] Commonwealth, House of Representatives, *Parliamentary Debates*, No. 40 1941, 3 October 1941, 714.
[137] Hocking, *Stormy Petrel*, 138.
[138] *Age*, 11 October 1941, 12.
[139] *Argus*, 13 April 1940, 14.
[140] *Examiner* (Launceston), 28 August 1943, 5.
[141] Paul, "The Premiership of Albert Dunstan," 410.
[142] Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, 266; *Age*, 30 March 1944, 3.
[143] Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, 266; United Country Party, Annual Conference Annotated Business Papers 1934-38, Charles Sturt University Regional Archives (CSURA), PG 2694, Box 9, Item 33, 65.

1950 to reimpose new constitutional restrictions on the parliamentary wing – including an expanded pledge for CP candidates and an effort to again exclude all parliamentarians from Central Council – was rejected by conference delegates.[144] By 1958, the CP state leader, Sir Herbert Hyland, candidly admitted the subordinate role played by the organisational wing in comparison to the Parliamentary Country Party: 'The fact is, we're up here and they're down there. We don't see much of each other.'[145] That it was Albert Dunstan who had largely secured this historic result, the former leader of the militant radicals and roaring champion of extra-parliamentary control through the 1920s, was tinged with more than a touch of irony.

VI. The collapse of the red-green alliance and return to coalition

Despite Wilson's instrumental role in bringing Labor to office in Canberra, the advent of the Curtin Government drove a further wedge in the already-strained alliance between the ALP and Country Party in Victoria. Tunnecliffe had been replaced as Labor leader in October 1937 by John Cain, a younger and more spirited politician. From 1940 onwards a growing section of Victorian Labor was deeply dissatisfied with the Premier's inflexibly conservative outlook and the glacial pace of his Government's reform agenda.[146] Over his two decades' long parliamentary career and ascent through the political ranks, Dunstan had progressively shed his militant doctrinaire agrarian radicalism and instead increasingly embraced a reflexive conservatism and ruthless pragmatism oriented towards attaining and holding power at all costs. This gradual transformation could be detected before his elevation to the Premier's office – the young Albert Dunstan who had shrilly demanded at the 1919 conference that the VFU pledge be rigidly imposed upon all parliamentarians without fear or

[144] Country Party, Annual Conference Annotated Business Papers 1948-1956, CSURA, PG 2694, Box 10, Item 35, 78-80.
[145] Paul, "The Premiership of Albert Dunstan," 410; Costar, "Albert Dunstan," 222.
[146] White, *John Cain and Victorian Labor*, 80.

favour by 1934 thought similar measures to be unfairly 'humiliating' – but was subsequently masked in the early years of the Government while the unprecedented CP-ALP agrarian-socialist alliance was being bedded down.[147] As Dunstan entrenched himself as Premier, having survived two general election campaigns, delivered on many of the key demands of his agrarian constituents, and increased the CP's parliamentary numbers, he was less willing to expend his meagre political capital and the state's tightly balanced budget surpluses to meet Labor demands. On the outbreak of the Second World War, the Premier declared that the Government would not proceed with any legislation of a 'contentious character', which naturally precluded many of the measures that Labor still hoped to extract from the ministry, including a long-overdue redistribution of the Legislative Assembly electoral boundaries.[148]

The evaporating patience of the Labor rank-and-file was expressed in a series of motions to the ALP country and state conferences in 1941 calling for the party to withdraw its support from the Dunstan Government.[149] By March 1942, Dunstan had publicly locked horns with the Curtin Government over the latter's plans to institute national uniform taxation to replace the former state-based income tax regimes. State finances were dear to the heart of Dunstan, who served as both Premier and State Treasurer and took great pride in his strictly frugal budget management.[150] Under the proposed uniform taxation system, state tax reimbursements were to be tied to the former income tax rates as set by the respective state governments. For each year of Dunstan's Premiership, Victoria had either the lowest or second-lowest taxation revenue and expenditure rates per capita in the Commonwealth. Consequently, in 1944-45, Victoria received just £3 4s 1d per capita as income tax

[147] *Argus*, 17 March 1934, 21; Lamb, "Of measures and men," 36, 141.
[148] *Recorder* (Port Pirie), 6 September 1939, 1; Costar, "Albert Dunstan," 219.
[149] Strangio, *Neither power nor glory,* 234-235.
[150] John Paul, "Albert Dunstan and Victorian Government," in *Australian Conservatism: Essays in Twentieth Century Political History*, ed. Cameron Hazelhurst (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1979), 188.

reimbursement from the Commonwealth, compared to £5 2s 10d for New South Wales and £5 7s 0d for Queensland.[151] Victoria joined with South Australia, Queensland, and Western Australia in an unsuccessful High Court challenge to the validity of the uniform taxation legislation.[152] Dunstan's virulent public opposition to the Curtin Government proved to be too much for the Victorian Labor Party and it withdrew its support for his ministry in July 1942.[153]

The fact that the UCP-ALP alliance had lasted for more than seven years – and four state-wide election campaigns (two for the Legislative Assembly and two for the Legislative Council) – rendered it one of the most successful, stable, and enduring cross-party alliances in Victorian history. It endured 84 days longer than the Kennett-McNamara Coalition Government between 1992 and 1999, the longest-serving non-Labor coalition ministry to date. Although the alliance was sustained in large part because Labor had no palatable alternative, its remarkable endurance indicates that there was a substantial degree of ideological and strategic compatibility between the Victorian Country Party during its more radical years and the powerful right-wing 'Catholic-Wrenite axis' that dominated the enfeebled post-Depression Victorian Labor Party.[154]

Fortunately for Artful Albert and his Government, the UAP stepped into the breach to pledge its support for supply until the following election. Freed from the strictures of the Labor alliance, a metamorphosised-conservative Albert Dunstan emerged into full public view. In a venomous editorial, *Labor Call* described the Premier's Jekyll and Hyde transformation:

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[151] Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia No. 36 – 1944 and 1945* (Canberra: Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, 1947), 708.
[152] *Westralian Worker* (Perth), 31 July 1942, 1.
[153] *Weekly Times*, 8 July 1942, 4.
[154] White, *John Cain and Victorian Labor*, 78-79, 83-85; Strangio, *Neither power nor glory*, 220-222.

> Mr. Dunstan seems to possess a dual personality, one day aping the sympathetic, tolerant democrat, deeply concerned with the welfare of the workers and most anxious to hasten their journey to Utopia; another day behaving as the arrogant, fanatical conservative, eager to fan the fires of class hatred that never cease to glow in the breasts of his henchmen.[155]

The Premier was more than capable of returning fire. The Labor leader, John Cain, was the 'sparring partner of communism', Dunstan thundered, and it remained 'one of the mysteries of life' why any rural electorate would ever elect a Labor member to parliament.[156] Dunstan likewise railed against the alleged bureaucratic socialist dictatorship of the Curtin Government.[157] Now entirely dependent on the good will and indulgence of the UAP to retain office, Dunstan had appropriated the tub-thumping anti-socialist and anti-Labor rhetoric deployed by the conservative wing of the Country Party he had once scorned in his youth.

The end of the CP-ALP alliance in 1942 has been cited as a turning point in Victorian political history – the 'beginning of the end of [the] baroque period of Victorian politics' in the words of A.F. Davies – as the State Parliament gradually transitioned towards a stable two-party system.[158] While Davies is broadly correct in his main argument, namely that the electoral reforms of the latter Dunstan years did contribute to the *eventual* erosion of the Country Party's disproportionate and disruptive political influence, the significance of the 1942 parliamentary realignment should not be overstated. Firstly, the reconciliation brokered between the UAP and UCP in 1942 would ultimately prove to be yet another temporary alliance of convenience rather than the beginning of a stable and enduring non-Labor

[155] *Labor Call*, 6 August 1942, 2.
[156] *Age*, 29 May 1943, 3.
[157] Barbor, *They Went Their Way*, 46-47.
[158] A.F. Davies, "The Government of Victoria," in *The Government of the Australian States*, ed. Solomon R. Davis (London: Longman, 1960), 223.

coalition partnership. The ministerial churn between the Labor, UAP/Liberal, and Country parties continued unabated until the mid-1950s. Furthermore, the Premier's rather sudden rhetorical lurch to the conservative right was not matched by an immediate corresponding ideological shift amongst all segments of the Country Party movement. By way of illustration, as late as the 1945 state conference, sufficient radical delegates could be marshalled to carry Alec Wilson's motion in favour of the Curtin Government's proposed banking reforms despite the virulent protests of an enraged Dunstan.[159] While the extreme economic desperation that had fuelled the upsurge of agrarian radicalism in Victoria had eased after the outbreak of war – average net farm income in Australia more than tripled between 1938-39 and 1945-46 while the retail price index rose by less than 30 percent – the impact of rigidly-enforced agricultural price controls, government 'cheap food' policies, shipping restrictions, input and labour shortages, and severe drought conditions in Victoria limited the financial benefits to many primary producers.[160] Unlike the now independently wealthy Albert Dunstan, who had moved his residence to leafy Camberwell in 1943, many Victorian farmers on modest holdings had not yet entirely recovered from the lean Depression years and retained their agrarian radical sympathies.[161]

Although the radical section of the Country Party held firm to its doctrinaire opposition to composite ministries, it could no longer use Central Council to enforce its will on the movement. In November 1943, an emergency 'conference' of 43 branches was convened in Birchip to protest against the new CP-UAP composite state ministry formed in September 1943. Orchestrated by A.C. Everett, a Wilson-aligned Central Councillor of such radical

[159] *Northern Miner* (Charters Towers), 14 April 1945, 4; *Worker* (Brisbane), 30 April 1945, 6.
[160] Davidson, *European Farming in Australia*, 328-329; J.G. Crawford, C.M. Donald, C.P. Dowsett, D.B. Williams, and A.A. Ross, *Wartime Agriculture in Australia and New Zealand 1939-50* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1953), 51-52, 124-129, 164.
[161] Paul, "Dunstan, Sir Albert Arthur," 376-379.

disposition that he eventually defected to the Labor Party, the Birchip rally passed a motion of no confidence in Dunstan as Premier and demanded the termination of the composite ministry.[162] In a mark of the new order within the movement, Central Council promptly dismissed the Birchip rally as having 'no official status whatever' and disregarded its demands.[163] The power and influence of the anti-coalitionist radicals had been further diluted by the reunification of the LCP and UCP several months earlier in April 1943. With the radicals effectively disarmed, Hocking in self-imposed exile from Central Council, and both the Victorian ALP-CP alliance and Lyons-Menzies-Fadden composite ministries consigned to the history books, the main points of conflict between the two Country parties had been resolved. Once formal reunification was secured, the Victorian Country Party re-affiliated with the ACPA.[164] The influx of former LCP members as conference delegates diluted the voting power of the radicals at the 1944 annual conference, and secured the election of a bloc of more conservative-aligned former LCP luminaries to Central Council.[165]

VII. The fall of the Dunstan Government

The corrosive atmosphere of scarcely concealed animosity that had destroyed the Argyle Ministry in 1935 soon reappeared to poison the Dunstan-Hollway Government, aptly described by Paul as a 'a most unhappy marriage of convenience'.[166] During the course of the 1943 state election campaign, held several months prior to the formation of the coalition ministry, Tom Hollway, who had succeeded Argyle as leader of the UAP in November 1940, campaigned vigorously in favour of an electoral redistribution to reduce CP power and

[162] *Argus*, 29 October 1943, 4; *Recorder* (Port Pirie), 3 November 1943, 4; *Labor Call*, 28 November 1946, 1.
[163] *Age*, 19 October 1943, 2.
[164] *Countryman*, 16 April 1943, 1; *Age*, 29 April 1943, 2; *Age*, 12 July 1943, 2.
[165] *Age*, 31 March 1944, 2.
[166] Paul, "Dunstan, Sir Albert Arthur," 376-379.

restore a two party system in Victorian politics.[167] Dunstan, by contrast, continued to prevaricate on the redistribution question and declared that he would not 'be bullied, bluffed or bounced into adopting a policy which will spell disaster to the country districts'.[168] Such was the determination of the non-CP forces to secure electoral boundary reform that Hollway entered into a secret alliance with John Cain in September 1943 to install a short-term UAP ministry to pass the necessary redistribution legislation with Labor support. When Cain was unexpectedly commissioned by the Governor to form a ministry instead of Hollway, the 'stillborn' Labor Government was defeated by the combined votes of the UAP and UCP just four days later. A new non-Labor composite ministry, again under Dunstan's leadership, was sworn in to succeed the vanquished First Cain Ministry.[169] As the price of UAP support, Dunstan at last agreed to introduce a redistribution bill, as well as a 'long-range plan' for education and an independent tribunal to administer the public service.[170] Ian Macfarlan, who served as Attorney-General in the ministry, subsequently described the UAP's ambition to secure the latter two reforms as 'a complete failure… we were powerless inasmuch as we were in an easy minority of the total number of the government…'.[171] Since falling from office in 1935, the ailing UAP had lost half its representation in the Assembly, shrinking from 25 to just 13 seats by 1943, with only a single outer rural electorate to its name, namely Hampden (Figure 2.5).

The UAP was successful, however, in extracting a modest redistribution scheme in September 1944, which reduced the number of country seats from 39 to 33 in the 65-member

[167] *Herald*, 26 May 1943, 5.
[168] *Herald*, 26 June 1943, 3
[169] Strangio, *Neither power nor glory*, 249.
[170] Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, volume 215, 15 September 1943, 693; Lamb, "Of measures and men," 284.
[171] Paul, "The Premiership of Albert Dunstan," 364; Lamb, "Of measures and men," 285-286.

Assembly.[172] While the redistribution proposal assuaged, at least temporarily, the Dunstan Ministry's circling critics in both the UAP and ALP, it sparked great consternation within the Parliamentary Country Party. A spill motion was called to oust Dunstan as leader but defeated by 19 votes to 11.[173] When the new electoral boundaries were formally presented to parliament in May 1945, 14 CP backbenchers – more than half the parliamentary party – crossed the floor to vote against the plan.[174] Despite this rear-guard protest, the redistribution passed the parliament without difficulty. The first substantive blow had been struck against Victoria's infamous electoral malapportionment, the remainder of which would be progressively swept away over the next decade, and, along with it, the bulk of the parliamentary base of the Country Party.

By August 1945 the war of attrition against the indefatigable Albert Dunstan was drawing towards its final showdown. On 30 August 1945, the ministry narrowly survived an Opposition-sponsored no confidence motion by 33 votes to 29. In an ominous sign for the Premier, Cain's motion won the support of two independents, an Independent Labor member, and two Country Party members, Edwin Mackrell and Albert Allnutt.[175] Mackrell, a former minister in the Dunstan Government, had fallen out with the Premier over the redistribution plan.[176] Both dissident members were promptly expelled from the Country Party. Three weeks later, on 25 September, Cain rose in the Assembly and moved that the Supply Bill be reduced by the sum of one pound. After a venomous debate in which the Premier was roundly condemned from across the political divide – branded 'Iscariot Dunstan' and 'fanatically dictatorial' by Allnutt and Mackrell respectively – the Government was defeated

[172] *Age*, 6 September 1944, 3.
[173] *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 6 June 1945, 5.
[174] Lamb, "Of measures and men," 293.
[175] *News* (Adelaide), 30 August 1945, 4.
[176] *Alexandra and Yea Standard and Yarck, Gobur, Thornton and Acheron Express*, 2 November 1945, 4.

by 29 votes to 26. Five Liberal members, including Macfarlan, had crossed the floor to vote with the Opposition, along with two independents and the two expelled former CP members.[177]

Dunstan resigned as Premier on 2 October 1945, bringing to a close his record ten-year reign at the apex of Victorian politics. Ian Macfarlan was subsequently commissioned as Premier to lead a stop-gap ministry until the election of 10 November 1945. Bruised and deposed from power, the Country Party was suddenly confronted with a state-wide electoral battle against a resurgent Labor Party on the decidedly unhelpful new electoral boundaries. The Country Party was reduced to 18 seats. At the first parliamentary party meeting following the election, Dunstan declined to nominate as leader, citing his desire for a rest after having served more than thirteen consecutive years as a minister and a decade as Premier.[178] For the shell shocked and battle weary Country Party, the long and painful downward political spiral had only just begun.

VIII. Conclusion

The ten-year reign of the Dunstan Government, interrupted only by the four-day interlude of the First Cain Ministry, demonstrated that the Country Party was more capable than many of its critics had previously ever imagined: a non-metropolitan and overwhelmingly agrarian party had ably governed one of the most urbanised and industrialised states of the Commonwealth, held together an unorthodox worker-farmer parliamentary alliance for years at a time, and brought a stability to the parliament hitherto unknown in Victorian state

[177] Wright, *A People's Counsel*, 175-176. The Liberal Party having replaced the now-defunct United Australia Party.
[178] *Sun* (Sydney), 22 November 1945, 3.

politics.[179] Like many agrarian parties in the bleak interwar years, the Victorian Country Party had found a useful parliamentary partner in the democratic socialists to its left on the political spectrum by bartering power for policy and legislative concessions, though largely to its own benefit. The Country Party's ruthless pragmatic opportunism, bolstered by two decades of hard-won experience in exploiting the dark arts of parliamentary politics and an unrepresentative rurally-weighted electoral system, had allowed it to become the largest and most powerful force in the Assembly, ruling the state with less than one-sixth of the total popular vote. The Victorian Country Party reaped a rich reward for its refusal to conform to the rigid right-aligned coalitionist strategy of its interstate and federal counterparts. Nevertheless, the dominance of the Country Party had also depended on its ability to play off the mutual loathing between its two urban-based rivals, a factor that could no longer be relied upon as the Liberal and Labor parties started to strategically cooperate to reduce the power of the ascendant agrarians. Furthermore, as the acrimonious and messy downfall of the Dunstan Ministry had amply demonstrated, the unresolved disunity within the CP, enflamed by the former Premier's incessant devious scheming, would only hasten the party's decline.

In the preceding chapter we noted the observation of F.W. Eggleston that the central organisation of the Victorian Country Party constituted 'the machinery of a vested interest' that controlled 'to a greater or less extent, the actions of the parliamentary leaders and the alliances they made'.[180] While Eggleston's thesis was at least plausible during the time of his own parliamentary and ministerial career (1920-27), a crucial shift in the internal balance of power within the Country Party had occurred by the end of the Dunstan era. The parliamentary 'putty' had proved to be far less malleable and compliant than Isaac Hart and

[179] Wright, *A People's Counsel*, 177-181.
[180] F.W. Eggleston, *Reflections of an Australian Liberal* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1953), 103-104.

his fellow pioneering activists had once imagined. The struggle for supremacy had triggered an internal civil war, fought by proxy in electoral skirmishes across the state: LCP McEwen-ites versus UCP loyalists, rebel Mallee Hens besieged by Dunstan acolytes, and Hocking's first lieutenant Reginald Skeat head-to-head against the recalcitrant Alec Wilson in Wimmera. Although the powerful constitutional organs of control remained formally 'on the books' years and even decades later, in practice the organisational wing had lost the will and determination to regiment and discipline the parliamentary leadership. Whether for good or for ill, the political direction of the movement would henceforth be in the hands of its factionally-riven parliamentary members.

Chapter Three. Fightin' Mac: The McDonald Years, 1945-1955[1]

I. Introduction

As the clock chimed three in the Executive Council Chamber at the Old Treasury Building in Melbourne on 17 December 1952, the glory years of the Victorian Country Party drew to a sudden and definitive close. The battle-weary Premier, John (Jack) Gladstone Black McDonald handed the resignation of Victoria's final all-Country Party ministry to the Governor, Sir Dallas Brooks. By half-past the hour, the state had a new Premier, John Cain, at the head of the first majority Labor government in Victorian history.[2] After 35 years as the powerful 'hinge party' of the Victorian Legislative Assembly, the once mighty Country Party was left to ponder its unfamiliar future as an agrarian minor party on the sidelines of state politics. When the thirty-ninth Parliament formally opened on 23 December, the surviving twelve-member rump of the Country Party in the lower house settled into the cross-benches – deprived of even official opposition status by the combined votes of the Liberal Party and Electoral Reform League – where the party would languish in lonely exile for virtually the entirety of the next four decades.[3]

As McDonald tended to the pear trees of his beloved orchard following his retirement from politics, he may have taken a moment to reflect on the tumultuous and paradoxical fortunes of the Country Party over the decade of his leadership. Between November 1945 and June 1955, the Country Party had reclaimed ministerial office on three occasions, dislodged four governments, switched political partners three times, lost nearly half of its strength in the Assembly, and had survived both an aggressive hostile 'takeover bid' from the Liberal Party and yet another disastrous electoral redistribution that further eroded the power of rural

[1] *Countryman*, 10 September 1948, 2.
[2] *Herald* (Melbourne), 17 December 1952, 1.
[3] *Argus*, 23 December 1952, 1.

interests in the State Parliament. The tempestuous course of the McDonald years was intertwined with the upheavals of the preceding Dunstan era, as a familiar cast of characters – including Albert Dunstan, Tom Hollway, John Cain, and even a fleeting re-appearance by A.E. Hocking – settled old scores and duelled for supremacy in the emerging post-war political landscape. It would be no exaggeration to characterise at least the first half of McDonald's time as leader as the closing chapter of the 'long Dunstan decade' stretching from April 1935 to Sir Albert's sudden death in 1950. During the nearly five years between the fall of the Dunstan-Hollway Ministry and the passing of the Machiavellian Member for Korong, the bitter factional feud that had long consumed the party and cast it from power in October 1945 continued unabated. The parliamentary wing remained at loggerheads over Dunstan's perceived lingering influence over Jack McDonald, his hand-picked protégé, who perpetuated the former Premier's authoritarian style of leadership and relentless drive for political power.

In a not entirely unrelated development, the early-to-mid McDonald era also witnessed a decisive show-down in the long power struggle over the Country Party's appropriate relationship with its urban non-Labor counterpart, a debate that had been raging without a definitive resolution since the movement's formation. Dethroned from its former preeminent position as the largest force in the Assembly and determined to re-take power from the Labor Party, the Country Party re-engaged with the resurgent Liberal Party in August 1947. The Hollway-led Liberals, however, were intent on reining in the spirited independence of the maverick agrarians through the amalgamation of the non-Labor forces under the Liberal Party banner. Following a vicious falling out between Dunstan and Hollway that destroyed a Liberal-CP composite ministry in December 1948, the Country Party fractured into warring pro- and anti-amalgamation camps which ultimately culminated in the defection of six

parliamentarians and thousands of rank-and-file members to the new 'Liberal and Country Party'. Although the split ensured that the surviving remnant of the Country Party, now purged of its most pro-Liberal Party section, was resolutely committed to its independent anti-coalitionist course, the movement was gravely weakened having being deprived of a large swathe of its hard-won former electoral territory.

The unexpected formation of the McDonald all-Country Party Ministry in June 1950 – installed to power with Labor cross-bench support in a short-lived re-creation of the red-green alliance of 1935-42 – marked the spectacular closing act of the Country Party's golden years. In a marked contrast with the unenergetic latter years of the Dunstan Government, the McDonald Government set in motion a flurry of state and rural development projects as part of its expansive decentralisation ambitions. Unfortunately for McDonald's historical legacy, the CP Government found itself hobbled by a desperate shortage of resources, crippling federal loan cuts, and a precariously balanced parliament that saw it tipped from office after just 855 days, before even a single parliamentary term had expired. The enfeebled Country Party, reduced to just twelve members in the Assembly after the 1952 election, could only protest furiously as the most sweeping redistribution in Victorian history further eroded its electoral strength.

II. Leading the charge against the Second Cain Ministry

Following Dunstan's decision to relinquish the leadership after the 1945 election, the ballot to elect a replacement became a *de facto* test of strength between the surviving pro- and anti-Dunstan forces in the party room. Jack McDonald narrowly prevailed by 15 votes to 13 over Herbert Hyland, MLA for Gippsland South, who had 'for some time been an open opponent

of Mr Dunstan's leadership'.[4] A solidly-built 'granite Scot' of boxy frame and rough-hewn features, John 'Jack' Gladstone Black McDonald was a 'dour and sturdy political fighter' with a boundless appetite for work built up over his formative years on the family dairy farm and later on his own orchard at Shepparton.[5] To balance McDonald's victory, the deputy leadership went to Keith Dodgshun, MLA for Rainbow, a radical 'Mallee Hen' stalwart of the anti-Dunstan camp. 'Quietly spoken and placid' in temperament, Dodgshun was a Baptist soldier settler and wheat grower from Hopetoun in the heart of the Mallee.[6]

Having spent more than two years railing against the Curtin and Chifley Labor Governments, McDonald and the Country Party readily embraced the task of leading an anti-Labor Opposition at Spring Street. Labor had taken office at a particularly challenging juncture as crippling industrial disputes, a fuel supply crisis, and a desperate shortage of capital and materials rendered the task of post-war reconstruction inordinately difficult.[7] Strikes and industrial chaos cascaded through heavily unionised sectors of the labour force such as the metal trades, railways, tramways, the construction industry, and on the waterfront.[8] McDonald adopted a highly aggressive, borderline obstructionist political strategy as leader of the Opposition, no doubt reflective of Dunstan's advice and counsel. McDonald first publicly flagged his intention to move a motion of no confidence in the Cain Ministry as early as February 1946, just three months after the state election.[9] Although the two non-Labor parties were both firmly opposed to a Labor government ruling the roost at Spring

[4] *Argus*, 23 November 1945, 1.
[5] *Age*, 21 April 1955, 2; Edward Barbor, *They Went Their* Way (Traralgon: The Journal and the Record, 1960), 125-130.
[6] Brian Costar, "Dodgshun, Keith (1893-1971)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography. Volume 14, 1940-1980, Di-Kel*, eds. John Ritchie and Christopher Cunneen (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 15-16.
[7] Paul Strangio, "John Cain Snr: The star-crossed Premier," in *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*, eds. Brian Costar and Paul Strangio (Annandale: Federation Press, 2006), 257.
[8] Kate White, *John Cain and Victorian Labor 1917-1957* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1982), 119.
[9] *Age*, 26 February 1946, 2.

Street, the urbane and liberal Hollway had little time for the ruthless hard-line tactics and inflexible agrarian conservativism of his CP counterpart.[10] The Liberal and Country parties operated independently of each other in parliament and frequently voted differently on key divisions, providing an essential legislative lifeline to the embattled Cain Government.[11] McDonald's mooted motion of no-confidence was delayed until October 1946, by which time the state was mired in yet another protracted transport strike.[12] In a debate so heated that the Speaker cautioned that the Assembly was 'getting like a mad house', McDonald thundered that Victoria was on the brink of 'industrial anarchy' and charged the Government with failing to maintain basic law and order.[13] The no confidence motion failed by 29 votes to 33.[14]

Although the CP leader had failed to dent Cain's precarious hold on the lower house, he had an alternative means to bring down the Government: the Legislative Council. Labor held just seven of the 34 upper house seats in 1945, compared to 15 held by the Liberals and 11 for the Country Party. To block Labor legislation in the Legislative Council – including supply bills – McDonald therefore required the support of Councillors from both the Country *and* Liberal parties. Such support, however, was not always readily forthcoming. As members of the older and more luxuriously-appointed chamber with a proud history of patrician independence, many MLCs did not take kindly to being regimented by strict party discipline. Furthermore, McDonald's aggressive parliamentary war of attrition was proving controversial amongst even his own discontented and factionally fractured backbench. In May 1946, three Country Party members of the Legislative Council – Robert Rankin (Western Province), Allan

[10] *Horsham Times*, 4 July 1947, 2.
[11] *Argus*, 27 June 1947, 1.
[12] Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, volume 222, July-November 1946, 30 October 1946, 2727.
[13] Ibid., 2729; *Riverine Herald*, 1 November 1946, 4.
[14] Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, volume 222, July-November 1946, 30 October 1946, 2830.

McDonald (South Western Province), and Trevor Harvey (Gippsland Province) – risked expulsion from the party by crossing the floor to facilitate the passage of the Dunstan Government's Teaching Service Bill.[15]

Just as tensions were again flaring within the Country Party, relations between the two non-Labor parties were strained by the Liberal Party's unwavering determination to entice its agrarian rival into a union to form a single anti-Labor political movement in Victoria.[16] McDonald declared he was 'absolutely certain' that the CP would never agree to such a proposal.[17] The amalgamation question was debated at length at the 1947 UCP Conference. John McEwen warned that a merger would result only in the immediate establishment of a new 'leftist Country Party which would work closely with Labour' [sic], and urged the conference to instead support closer *cooperation* with the Liberal Party.[18] McDonald implored the delegates to endorse an electoral pact with the Liberals, arguing that the Labor Party was 'determined to destroy the Country Party' and would direct its preferences against CP candidates to eliminate its parliamentary power.[19] In a stirring contrarian speech, Keith Dodgshun denounced the Liberal Party as the 'number one enemy' of wheat growers and called on the CP to target the Liberals in their four remaining rural seats.[20] The conference delegates rejected the amalgamation proposal but were prepared to endorse 'close cooperation' with the Liberal Party to avoid three-cornered contests, provided such an arrangement did not 'prejudice the entity of the Country Party'.[21]

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[15] *Riverine Herald*, 10 May 1946, 1.
[16] Paul Davey, *The Nationals: The Progressive, Country and National Party in New South Wales 1919 to 2006* (Annandale: Federation Press, 2006), 142; Wendy Duncan and Lenore Layman, *Blood Nose Politics: A Centenary History of the Western Australian National Party* (West Perth: The Nationals WA, 2014), 61.
[17] *Age*, 4 October 1946, 4.
[18] *Canberra Times*, 27 March 1947, 4.
[19] United Country Party, 'Country Party Thirty-First Conference, Proposed Merger with Liberal Party', 26 March 1947, Charles Sturt University Regional Archives (CSURA), PG 2694, Box 49, Item 595, 5-10.
[20] Ibid., 10-11.
[21] Ibid, 21; *Argus*, 27 March 1947, 4.

Internal tensions in the Country Party continued to build as McDonald sought to impose greater discipline on his increasingly recalcitrant backbench. In June 1947, four upper house members – Trevor Harvey, Allan McDonald, Robert Rankin, and Ivan Swinburne – refused to vote against a raft of legislative reforms to the Soil Conservation Board in defiance of the CP leadership.[22] A similar rebellion broke out in the following week when the CP Opposition sought to fiscally strangle the Cain Government by restricting supply to just single month instalments.[23] Although this supply amendment received the support of all Liberal and Country Party members in the Assembly, it was defeated by nine votes to 19 in the Council.[24] All Labor and Liberal Councillors voted against the amendment and two CP members – Allan McDonald and Rankin – strategically absented themselves from the chamber to protest against the 'prostituting [of] the functions of the Upper House'.[25] A further five of the twelve CP Councillors openly sympathised with their rebel colleagues' stand and 'strongly objected' to the proposal.[26] Jack McDonald's response to the discontented members was blunt: 'you will do as you are told or take the consequences'.[27]

The following day, on 25 June, the two upper house rebels again defied the CP whip, this time on an amendment to the *Transport Regulation Bill*, with Rankin abstaining and Allan McDonald voting with the Government.[28] The rebellion spread to the Assembly. F.C.T. Holden, MLA for Grant, was summoned before the Central Council to account for his absence during several 'vital divisions'.[29] Allan McDonald and Rankin resigned from the

[22] *Weekly Times*, 11 June 1947, 23; *Australian Worker* (Sydney), 9 July 1947, 6.
[23] *Argus*, 18 June 1947, 28; Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, volume 224, May-June 1947, 17 June 1947, 5635, 5640.
[24] Victoria, Legislative Council, *Debates*, volume 224, May-June 1947, 24 June 1947, 5785.
[25] Ibid.; *Age*, 5 July 1947, 3.
[26] *Age*, 5 July 1947, 3.
[27] Ibid.
[28] *Argus*, 26 June 1947, 24.
[29] *Age*, 4 July 1947, 14.

Country Party on 4 July, pre-empting moves by Central Council to expel them.[30] The two former CP members sat as independents until they joined the Liberal Party nearly twelve months later.[31] The fallout from the two resignations culminated in a heated three-hour meeting of the Parliamentary Country Party. Five members – Dodgshun, Hyland, Harvey, E.F. Guye, and Albert Lind – voted against a motion of confidence in McDonald's leadership.[32] During the meeting, Albert Dunstan was denounced by his critics for his alleged shadowy manipulation and nefarious sway over the CP leader.[33] Several MPs purportedly declared that they 'could not guarantee their full cooperation' unless McDonald's leadership was 'kept free from outside influence'.[34]

The timely announcement by the Chifley Government of its controversial plan to nationalise the private banking sector in August 1947 presented the perfect cause to reconcile the feuding non-Labor forces in the Victorian Parliament. An emergency working agreement was reached for a united Country-Liberal Opposition to 'fight the dangerous socialistic and totalitarian' policy of the ALP.[35] The new arrangement provided for joint party meetings to discuss policy and tactical matters, closer inter-party parliamentary cooperation, and plans for a preference exchange agreement and electoral pact to reduce the number of three-cornered contests.[36] The new proto-coalition embraced McDonald's hardball strategy on the floor of parliament. On 1 October 1947, Sir Frank Clarke, a Liberal former president of the Council, announced the Opposition's intention to block the Government's supply bill in the upper house. Clarke argued that banking nationalisation was a 'financial revolution' being inflicted on Australia

[30] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 July 1947, 3.
[31] *Argus*, 30 June 1948, 5.
[32] *Age*, 31 July 1947, 1.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] *Argus*, 21 August 1947, 2; *Argus*, 15 August 1947, 1.
[36] *Age*, 14 August 1947, 16.

by the Chifley Government 'without any reference whatever to the wishes of the majority of the people', aided and abetted by John Cain and Victorian Labor.[37] The Supply Bill was defeated by 19 votes to 13.[38] The Supply Bill was resubmitted to the Council a further three times and soundly rejected on each occasion. Finally, at approximately 10.30 in the evening on 8 October 1947, an exhausted Cain announced to the Legislative Assembly that the Governor had granted him a dissolution of the lower house.[39] After an intense two-year parliamentary siege, McDonald had succeeded in forcing Cain to the polls.

III. The Hollway-McDonald Government

Out on the hustings, the Liberal and Country Party campaigns denounced Labor for its nationalisation and socialisation agenda. McDonald warned in melodramatic fashion that the banking legislation heralded 'a swift plunge into the whirlpool of the totalitarian state… the seizure of the people's money is coming. The set-up is nearly complete for DICTATORSHIP.'[40] Facing almost certain defeat, John Cain cast the election as a battle between a democratically-elected government and the forces of capital and reaction.[41] Cain denounced the CP as the 'most ruthless party that ever existed': McDonald may be the voice of the Country Party 'but the hand was the hand of Mr Dunstan'.[42] Polling day brought a sweeping victory for the non-Labor parties. The Liberal Party doubled its numbers in the Assembly from 13 to 26, including two seats wrested from the Country Party (Mernda and Mornington). The Country Party, by contrast, was returned with a more modest and disappointing 20 seats, a net increase of just two seats. After a decade as the dominant non-

[37] Victoria, Legislative Council, *Debates*, volume 225, September-October 1947, 1 October 1947, 81-84.
[38] Ibid., 116.
[39] Victoria, Legislative Council, *Debates*, volume 225, September-October 1947, 8 October 1947, 415.
[40] Emphasis in the original article, see *Shepparton Advertiser*, 24 October 1947, 5.
[41] Ibid.
[42] *Camperdown Chronicle*, 30 October 1947, 1.

Labor force in the Victorian Assembly, the Country Party had finally fallen behind the swollen ranks of its urban non-Labor counterpart in its parliamentary numbers.

Despite the Liberals' superior numbers in both the Assembly and Council, Premier Hollway offered the Country Party equal cabinet representation in the new coalition ministry. Each party room conducted a separate exhaustive ballot to elect its ministerial candidates, and Hollway exercised his prerogative as Premier in allocating portfolios.[43] Hollway's precise division of portfolios between the two parties caused considerable consternation within the Country Party. The allocation of the prized agriculture ministry to a metropolitan Liberal was later denounced as a ploy to keep the Country Party from entrenching itself as the rural voice within the Government.[44] Dunstan was also displeased with being allocated the health portfolio, which he purportedly considered a 'great indignity' after having served as Premier, Treasurer, and Solicitor-General in his last Government. [45] After the collapse of the composite ministry, Hollway was to cite Dunstan's surly dissatisfaction as evidence of his 'oft repeated boast' that if he 'could not lead a Government he would wreck it'.[46]

Kate White has characterised Hollway's decision to grant equal representation within the ministry to the CP as a magnanimous offer, arguing that the Premier was under no obligation to be so generous to the junior coalition partner.[47] While it is true that Hollway was not bound by a formal coalition agreement to divide the ministry evenly between the two parties, it is likely that his decision was informed more by political pragmatism than a spirit of benevolent generosity. The Country Party had not served as the junior partner in a composite ministry

[43] *Age*, 11 November 1947, 1.
[44] Costar, "Dodgshun, Keith," 15-16.
[45] Barbor, *They Went Their* Way, 28-29; White, *John Cain and Victorian Labor*, 133.
[46] Barbor, *They Went Their* Way, 115; Kathleen White, "A political biography of Thomas Tuke Hollway," (Master's thesis, La Trobe University, 1975), 133-134.
[47] White, *John Cain and Victorian Labor*, 134.

since the fall of the Argyle Government in 1935, and some of its long-serving members could recall just how little influence its ministerial representatives had held in the UAP-dominated cabinet. Having spent the subsequent twelve years as the dominant non-Labor force in Victorian politics the Country Party was unlikely to meekly accept a subordinate role in the new ministry. Moreover, despite its strong result at the election, the Liberal Party did not have an outright majority in either chamber and was thus beholden to CP support to retain office and secure the passage of government bills.

Repeating the all-too-familiar pattern of Victorian non-Labor coalition governments, the rocky start to the Hollway-McDonald Ministry heralded only worse to come. Tom Hollway and Jack McDonald were men of radically differing temperaments that rendered them ill-suited to sharing power. Hollway, the urbane, liberal, and eloquent barrister, was almost the antithesis of McDonald, the earthy, uncompromising, Calvinistic orchardist. While Hollway considered McDonald to be incurably conservative, McDonald in turn was deeply suspicious of the liberal Hollway and his friendships with Labor figures such as John Cain and Vic Stout of the Victorian Trades Hall Council (THC).[48]

The Hollway Government was immediately confronted by the same intractable industrial warfare that had bedevilled the former Cain Ministry. Following an extended tramway strike in January 1948, the Liberal Transport Minister, Wilfred Kent-Hughes, pushed through the draconian *Essential Services Act* which granted sweeping powers to the Victorian Government to break industrial disputes, take control of any essential services, hire or dismiss any employee 'as required', and mandate secret union ballots prior to industrial

[48] Brian Costar, "Tom Hollway: the bohemian," in *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*, eds. Brian Costar and Paul Strangio (Annandale: Federation Press, 2006), 232; White, *John Cain and Victorian Labor 1917-1957*, 135.

action, backed by hefty penalties for non-compliance.[49] Hollway was decidedly uncomfortable with the new anti-strike regime, and openly admitted that he would be 'most proud' if the legislation was never once put into operation.[50] When the passage of the legislation brought a swift end to the transport strike, Hollway personally assured the THC that the legislation would never be proclaimed without prior consultation.[51] McDonald and Dunstan had no such scruples. The Country Party leadership demanded that further legislative action be taken against Communist agitators, and secured an in-principle resolution from state cabinet in April 1948 in favour of outlawing the Communist Party.[52] Hollway once again was personally opposed to such a measure. It was resolved that no such legislation would be introduced unless Communist cells actively flouted the law or sought to disrupt the economy.[53]

Greatly dissatisfied with Hollway's liberal compromise, McDonald went on the offensive. The CP leader launched into an extraordinarily vitriolic, tub-thumping anti-Marxist diatribe at the Country Party conference in which he denounced communism as a 'demoniacal menace' and the greatest threat to ever face the British Commonwealth.[54] McDonald then turned on his own Liberal colleagues, declaring that the Country Party would withdraw from the Hollway Ministry unless it 'dealt effectively with the menace of communism'.[55] The Deputy Premier also extended his remarks to the Chifley Government, which he warned was seeking the 'enslavement of every person in the State to the State'.[56] If Chifley was not personally a

[49] *Argus*, 16 January 1948, 1; Kenneth Frederick Walker, *Australian Industrial Relations Systems* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 35.
[50] *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 23 February 1949, 4.
[51] *Age*, 16 January 1948, 1.
[52] *Maryborough Chronicle*, 6 April 1948, 3.
[53] *West Australian*, 8 April 1948, 5.
[54] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 April 1948, 5.
[55] *West Australian*, 8 April 1948, 5.
[56] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 April 1948, 5.

Communist himself, McDonald bellowed, 'then he is the best supporter they have'.[57] When asked by the press about McDonald's speech, Hollway claimed that he was 'at a loss' to explain the outburst and offered to discuss the future of the Government with his deputy.[58]

This rift between McDonald and Hollway was indicative both of the power struggle that was consuming the Government and the ideological differences between the parties. Unlike the Liberal Party, with its progressive 'Deakinite' tradition, the Country Party had never possessed a recognisable 'classical liberal' or 'small 'l' liberal' wing and, as such, was decidedly unsympathetic to pleas to safeguard the civil liberties of subversive elements, particularly those they believed were only too willing to violently dispossess farmers of their land and capital. The Country Party had led the charge in the Federal Parliament to outlaw the Communist Party. In 1932 the CP leadership insisted on a policy of deporting 'alien Communists' as a condition for re-forming a coalition with the UAP.[59] Likewise, in 1940, Earle Page had argued strenuously in favour of a ban on the Communist Party and the publication of Communist literature, a course of action initially opposed by both the UAP Attorney General, W.M. Hughes, and the Commonwealth Investigation Branch.[60] Following the conclusion of the Second World War, Arthur Fadden was the first party leader to call for a reinstatement of the ban on the Communist Party, which he likened to a 'venomous snake' that must be 'killed before it kills'.[61] By comparison, the federal Liberal Party did not formally shift to support a ban until March 1948, although some Liberals such as Percy

[57] Ibid.
[58] *Canberra Times*, 8 April 1948, 4.
[59] *Australasian* (Melbourne), 30 January 1932, 9.
[60] *Advocate* (Burnie), 2 April 1940, 7; *Riverine Herald*, 3 January 1940, 3.
[61] Frank Cain and Frank Farrell, "Menzies' war on the Communist Party, 1949-1951," in *Australia's First Cold War 1945-1953*, eds. Ann Curthoys and John Merritt (North Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 112.

Spender had long advocated such a policy.[62] Support for a ban on the Communist Party remained part of the federal platform of the Country Party until as late as 1966.[63]

As was evident from McDonald's remarks above, socialism and communism were frequently conflated in CP rhetoric as manifestations of a common insidious, totalitarian ideology that threatened to impose dictatorial bureaucratic control over the rural economy from distant capital cities. The reflexive anti-communism of the Country Party also arguably reflected the instinctual cultural and social conservatism that tended to permeate agrarianism and agrarian parties in western nations.[64] Don Aitkin has characterised the belligerent anti-communism of the Country Party as representing 'not a greater awareness of the threat than the Liberal Party, but rather a smaller degree of sophistication' in its response to the issue.[65] J.M. Barbalet, by contrast, highlighted the assertive and proactive anti-communism of the Country Party as characteristic of party's ability to take a 'leading political role' on key issues and of its refusal to sit as 'a mere passive member of any coalition it has joined'.[66] Jack McDonald had no intention of meekly acceding to what he considered to be the effete cosmopolitan sensibilities of the Premier and was determined to stamp his own iron-willed authority over the direction of the ministry.

The acrimonious collapse of the Liberal-Country Party composite ministry in December 1948 was precipitated by the departure of Hollway some four months earlier for a Commonwealth

[62] Ibid; Arthur Fadden, *They called me Artie: The Memoirs of Sir Arthur Fadden* (Milton: Jacaranda Press, 1969), 97; Stuart Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment: War and Reconstruction in the 1940s* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2015), 452-453.
[63] Don Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales: a study of organisation and survival* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1972), 60-61.
[64] Vít Hloušek and Lubomír Kopeček, *Origin, Ideology and Transformation of Political Parties: East-Central and Western Europe Compared* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 87.
[65] Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales,* 61.
[66] J. M. Barbalet, "Tri-partism in Australia: The role of the Australian Country Party," *Politics* 10, no. 1 (1975): 7.

Parliamentary Association conference in London. In yet another indication of the bitter divisions within the Government, the Premier requested – and was refused – a cabinet 'pair' to offset the proportionate increase in CP power caused by his absence.[67] In September, Liberal voting strength in cabinet was further reduced when Kent-Hughes also departed for Britain.[68] As Acting Premier McDonald took full advantage of the situation. Supported by his fellow-CP cabinet members, he pushed through the appointment of Ned Hogan as Chairman of the Soil Conservation Board and L.R. Rodda to the Farmers' Debt Reduction Board, both former Country Party parliamentarians.[69] Bill Galvin, the acting leader of the Opposition, accused McDonald and Dunstan of having perpetrated a 'bloodless revolution' to impose a Country Party 'dictatorship entirely opposed to the wishes of the people'.[70] With Hollway still out of the country, the Victorian Government was confronted by yet another industrial quagmire in October 1948, with rolling strikes crippling the tramways, railways, dockyards, and the coal industry. After weeks of fruitless negotiations, and the onset of additional strike action in the gas industry, McDonald persuaded cabinet to proclaim the *Essential Services Act*. When an illegal transport strike was initiated soon thereafter, the CP-controlled cabinet voted to prosecute several union officials.[71]

Upon his return to Melbourne, Hollway denounced the strike action as orchestrated by Moscow-backed 'Russian fifth columnists'.[72] State cabinet resolved to maintain its hard-line stance against the strikers.[73] Nevertheless, McDonald was summoned to a meeting at Hollway's apartment, and, along with Dunstan, was presented with the terms of a private

[67] Costar, "Tom Hollway," 231.
[68] *Argus*, 9 September 1948, 3.
[69] *Argus*, 20 October 1948, 9.
[70] *Age*, 25 October 1948, 2.
[71] White, *John Cain and Victorian Labor*, 135.
[72] *Age*, 23 November 1948, 2.
[73] *Argus*, 23 November 1948, 1.

settlement the Premier had negotiated with the unions: namely, that no further strike action would occur without the sanction of the THC and, in return, all charges against the union officials would be dropped. McDonald and Dunstan both objected to the deal. On 29 November, Hollway opened state cabinet with a threat to the Country Party that the coalition would be terminated unless they accepted the terms of the settlement in full.[74] After a heated exchange, in which McDonald and Dunstan denounced Hollway for appeasement, cabinet voted to accept the settlement.[75] Subsequent to the meeting, Hollway wrote to McDonald insisting that Dunstan be dropped from the ministry as a mandatory condition for the continuation of the Coalition Government. The Parliamentary Country Party split 14-all when the matter was put to a vote. McDonald used his casting vote to reject the Premier's ultimatum.[76] After just one year and ten days in power, the Liberal-Country Party Government – a 'welter of cross-purposes and a tangle of jarring discords, animosities, jealousies and conflict'– was finished.[77]

Hollway's decision to issue McDonald with such an explosive ultimatum was a curious one. His primary objective – indeed his stated intent – was to be rid of Dunstan, whom he considered to be a wholly nefarious influence on the Government.[78] It must have been clear to the Premier, however, that McDonald and a sizeable bloc of Country Party members would never agree to such a condition, especially when imposed by the leader of the Liberal Party. Since the internal tensions within the Country Party surrounding Dunstan's lingering influence were well known, Hollway may have intended his intervention to split the junior coalition party – as indeed subsequently occurred – or, at very, least to undermine

[74] *Age*, 30 November 1948, 1.
[75] Costar, "Tom Hollway," 232.
[76] *Evening Advocate* (Innisfail), 8 December 1948, 1.
[77] Raymond Wright, *A People's Counsel: A History of the Parliament of Victoria 1856-1990* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992), 184.
[78] White, "A political biography of Thomas Tuke Hollway," 160.

McDonald's leadership and facilitate a transition to a more accommodating deputy premier, such as Herbert Hyland. Either way, the events of late 1948 were a watershed in the history of non-Labor politics in Victoria. The 'working agreement' of 1947 and the subsequent resounding electoral victory on a common anti-socialist platform had presented the ideal opportunity for the normalisation of Liberal-Country Party relations into the familiar coalition model common elsewhere in Australia. The acrimonious collapse of the Hollway-McDonald Government ultimately set back such a development for decades.

Figure 3.1. McDonald, Hollway, and a diminutive canine Dunstan come to blows to the amusement of Cain and Chifley, *Herald* editorial cartoon.[79]

[79] *Herald*, 8 January 1949, 4.

IV. The Liberal 'Little Red Riding Hood': The Liberal and Country Party

In the wake of the collapse of the Hollway-McDonald Government, tensions within the Parliamentary Country Party were at breaking point. Hollway attempted to lure the Country Party back into the ministerial tent. The Premier asked five of the former CP ministers – he expressly excluded Dunstan – to return to Cabinet and offered a sixth portfolio to any other member nominated by the CP. In an ominous sign for Country Party unity, John Lienhop, the former Minister for Mines and Electrical Undertakings, 'would not disclose… what he intended to do' when approached by the press.[80] McDonald rejected the offer and on 7 December 1948 a new all-Liberal Cabinet was sworn in. McDonald shifted the Country Party to the Opposition benches, further angering a substantial bloc of the party room that wished to continue to support the Hollway Government from the crossbenches. A group of seven Country Party members – Herbert Hyland, Edward Guye, Wilfred Mibus, Harold Hedditch, John Hipworth, John Lienhop, and George Lansell – boycotted a Country Party peace conference and opened negotiations with the Liberal Party about the prospects for amalgamation.[81] Six of the seven rebels resigned from the Country Party and defected to the Liberals. Hyland was the sole exception, although he did not announce his definitive decision to remain with the CP until April 1949.[82]

John Hipworth explained his decision to defect as stemming from his 'desire to restore stable government' as the 'only effective way of defeating socialism and communism'.[83] Edward Guye, the second to resign from the CP, placed the blame squarely on Dunstan – whose 'intriguing' had led to 'continual bickering and divisions within the party' – and Jack

[80] *West Australian*, 4 December 1948, 4.
[81] *West Australian*, 12 January 1949, 10; *Barrier Daily Truth*, 14 January 1949, 1.
[82] *Age*, 2 April 1949, 4.
[83] Kerang District Council, 'Letter from John Hipworth to Swan Hill District Council branches', 30 January 1949, CSURA, PG 2694, Box 18, Item 150.

McDonald, for taking the party on to the Opposition benches rather than providing support to the Hollway Government.[84] A Parliamentary Country Party meeting on 4 February, attended by Hyland, Hedditch, and Mibus, descended into 'bitter scenes and vigorous verbal exchanges' between the members present.[85] According to one newspaper account, two unnamed members came to physical blows after Hedditch denounced the Country Party as 'full of deceit and dishonesty'.[86] While a range of interacting factors precipitated the crisis – the unyielding autocratic leadership of Jack McDonald, the years of accumulated resentment towards Albert Dunstan, and Hollway's extraordinary provocative ultimatum – the essential point of division between the CP loyalists and the disaffected defectors came down to the relationship between the two non-Labor movements. Should the Liberal and Country parties forge a permanent, effectively unbreakable alliance or even amalgamate in the interests of the anti-socialist and anti-communist cause, as some of the defectors had concluded? Or, alternatively, was another round of drawn-out trench warfare between the two parties preferable to the loss of the identity, dignity, and autonomy of the Country Party as an independent rural-agrarian movement in Victoria?

On 11 February 1949, a new political party, the Liberal and Country Party (LCP), was launched at the Horsham Town Hall. The meeting, organised by Wilfred Mibus and supported by W.J.F. McDonald, Liberal MLA for Dundas, attracted a monster crowd of over two thousand.[87] Mibus was joined on the stage by none other than A.E. Hocking, who, having apparently shed his former radical agrarian colours, argued strenuously in favour of the amalgamation of the non-Labor parties 'to present a united front against socialism and

[84] *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 2 February 1949, 4.
[85] *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 4 February 1949, 1.
[86] Ibid.
[87] White, "A political biography of Thomas Tuke Hollway," 168.

communism'.[88] Hocking had purportedly been a 'central figure' behind the defection of the six former CP members, and the 'secret talks' that facilitated the split occurred in his office in Queen Street, Melbourne.[89] By late February, LCP branches had been formed at Portland, Bendigo, Colac, Kerang, Swan Hill, and Horsham.[90] Edward Barbor recalled that the mood at the Bendigo LCP rally was 'violently anti-Country Party'.[91] According to an *Argus* report, more than 90 percent of the Bendigo CP membership had defected to the new party and the local CP Women's Section branch – formerly 200-strong – had ceased to exist altogether. By mid-March, the LCP claimed to have 'more than 100 branches' across the state, concentrated predominantly in Western Victoria and in the districts surrounding Melbourne.[92] Elsewhere the impact of the new party was less pronounced. The foundation meeting of the Sale branch of the LCP, for instance, was purportedly 'one of the smallest political meetings ever held' in the town, with just nine people in attendance.[93]

The Country Party leadership was busy with its own campaign to fend off what McDonald dismissed as the 'Rag and Bobtail' party.[94] The CP leader likened country voters to Little Red Riding Hood, with the 'Liberal Wolf' masquerading 'underneath grandma's bonnet of the Liberal-Country Party'.[95] The Country Party formally considered the amalgamation offer from the LCP at its annual conference in March 1949.[96] Following a twenty-minute presentation on the virtues of amalgamation from a representative of the LCP Provisional Committee, a vote was taken on whether the CP should remain as an independent political

[88] *Countryman*, 11 February 1949, 3; *Queensland Times* (Ipswich), 10 February 1949, 1.
[89] In a perhaps not entirely unrelated development, Hocking was reappointed as a Commissioner of the State Bank by the Hollway Government a few months after the Country Party walkout, See *Countryman*, 2 September 1949, 3; *Age*, 31 August 1949, 3.
[90] *Argus*, 26 February 1949, 3.
[91] Barbor, *They Went Their* Way, 66.
[92] *Argus*, 18 March 1949, 5.
[93] *Gippsland Times*, 17 March 1949, 6.
[94] *Countryman*, 25 February 1949, 1-2.
[95] Ibid.
[96] *Countryman*, 18 March 1949, 1.

force or merge into the LCP. As recorded by the *Countryman*, the 'delegates rose as one man' in support of independence 'amid loud cheering and enthusiasm'.[97] A week later, on 22 March, the Victorian Division of the Liberal Party was formally dissolved and merged with the Liberal and Country Party. The new combined organisation boasted of a membership of 50,000 organised into 280 branches.[98]

Unsurprisingly, relations between the two non-Labor parties were strained for the remainder of the parliamentary term. The Country Party was increasingly willing to support Labor-sponsored motions on the floor of parliament.[99] Without an LCP majority in the Legislative Assembly, Hollway was forced to rely on two disaffected Country Party members, Herbert Hyland and Matthew Bennett, who selectively left the chamber for key divisions to secure the passage of legislation.[100] By April 1950, with Melbourne plagued by yet another tramway strike, Hollway called an election on the grounds that 'Parliament could not continue to function satisfactorily' with an entirely 'non-cooperative' Opposition impeding its work.[101]

Brian Costar has downplayed the long-term significance of the LCP, arguing that the CP counter-attack 'prevented the haemorrhaging of its rank and file' and that most of the parliamentary defectors 'later lost their seats to their old party'.[102] This latter statement, however, is simply not supported by the facts. Of the six defectors, only Hipworth was ultimately defeated by a Country Party candidate, namely Harold Stirling at the 1952 state election. By contrast, Mibus retained Borung until its abolition in 1955, and then Lowan until his death in 1964. Similarly, Guye comfortably held Polwarth for the LCP until his retirement

[97] Ibid.
[98] *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 23 March 1949, 2; *Argus*, 24 March 1949, 5.
[99] White, "A political biography of Thomas Tuke Hollway," 184-185.
[100] Wright, *A People's Counsel*, 184.
[101] *Age*, 13 April 1950, 3.
[102] Costar, "Tom Hollway," 233-234.

in 1958. While Hedditch was defeated at the 1950 election, it was Labor and not the Country Party that won the seat of Portland. Indeed, far from seeking to wipe out Hedditch, more than nine-tenths of Country Party preferences flowed to him rather than the Labor candidate. Likewise, George Lansell was defeated by the Labor Party at the 1952 Legislative Council election. The Country Party did not even contest Bendigo Province at that election. John Lienhop remained in parliament until his appointment as Agent-General for Victoria to London in 1950. He survived a straight CP-LCP electoral contest in Bendigo Province in 1949, winning 11,457 votes compared to 7,268 votes for the CP candidate, who had the benefit of Labor support and both Sir Albert and Lady Dunstan personally door-knocking homes for his campaign.[103] The Country Party was never able to retake Portland, Polwarth, or Borung, although Lowan (which partially replaced Borung) was won from the Liberal Party in 1967. Likewise, until its abolition in 1988, Bendigo Province did not return another Country-National Party representative.

Costar is correct, however, in his assessment that the Country Party was able to successfully defend and retain the great bulk of its membership base. According to internal membership records, the General Section of the CP had 19,103 financial members in 1950, down from 20,228 in 1949 and 21,459 in 1948.[104] This was only slightly behind the 1947 membership numbers (19,580) and significantly ahead of the 1946 figures (16,141).[105] Political scientist Peter Aimer had been informed by Liberal sources that as many as 8,000 CP members had defected to the Liberal Party, though Aimer believed that this figure was an 'exaggeration'.[106] It would seem from this data that the LCP was able to poach somewhere between 10 and 20

[103] *Argus*, 20 June 1949, 7.
[104] Country Party, Party membership files, CSURA, PG 2694, Box 16, Item 119.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Peter Aimer, *Politics, Power and Persuasion: The Liberals in Victoria* (East Hawthorn: James Bennett, 1974), 36.

percent of the Country Party rank and file membership. If we compare the electorate-level membership data of 1952 to 1946, it is evident that most of the decline in membership occurred in Western and Central Victoria and in the inner regional areas – the epicentre of the LCP movement – with the most significant losses at Bendigo (a decline of 46 percent), Mornington (40 percent), Borung (27 percent), Mildura (22 percent), and Ripon (21 percent). However, the Country Party managed to *grow* its membership in the seats of Swan Hill and Portland despite the defection of their respective local members to the LCP. The membership losses were offset by considerable gains in other parts of the state, including a remarkable 206% increase in Midlands, a 70% surge in Benambra, a 57% increase in Shepparton, and a solid 38% growth in Benalla.

This evidence broadly confirms Kate White's argument that the Liberal merger 'achieved little' despite the 'initial enthusiasm' for the new political party, and that the LCP simply 'settled into the former Liberal party niche in state politics'.[107] The LCP did not win 'appreciably more support for the Liberals', nor had it 'obliterated the CP as an independent force in state politics' as Hollway had hoped.[108] Alternatively, it is possible that many new LCP branch members retained their membership of the Country Party despite an organised Liberal effort to distribute CP membership cancellation forms *en masse*.[109] According to reports from Liberal branch secretaries in the mid-1960s, it was 'not uncommon' for conservative voters in rural districts to maintain membership of both the Country and Liberal parties.[110]

[107] White, "A political biography of Thomas Tuke Hollway," 171.
[108] Kate White, "Hollway: An atypical liberal leader?," *Politics* XIII, no. 2 (November 1978): 321.
[109] *Age*, 19 March 1949, 3.
[110] Aimer, *Politics, Power and Persuasion*, 30.

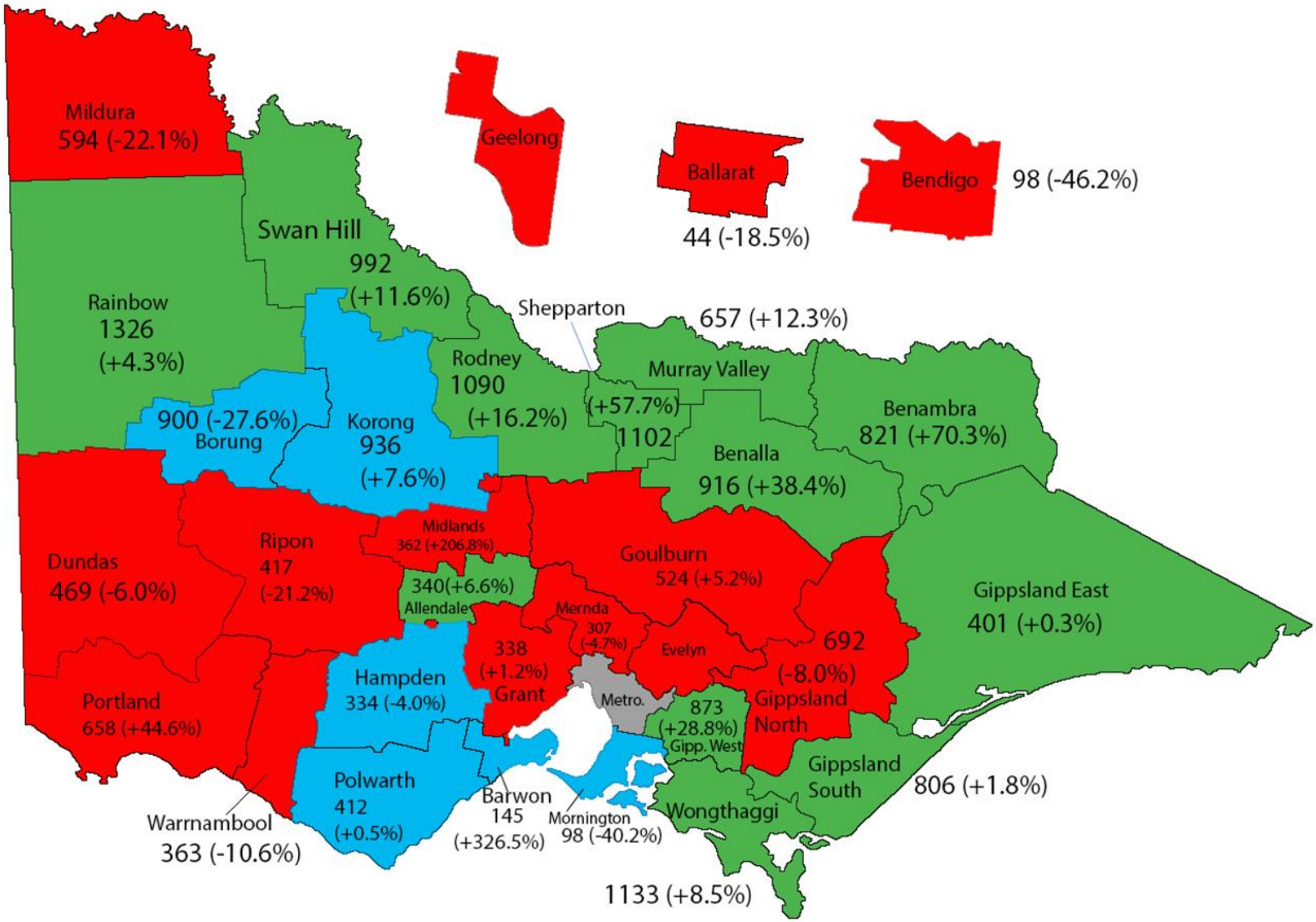

Figure 3.2. Country Party General Section financial membership by state electorate in 1952, and percentage change since 1946. NB: Colour of electorate indicates which party won the seat at the 1952 General Election: Country Party (green), Liberal Party (blue), Australian Labor Party (red)

While the LCP failed to wipe out the Country Party, it would be a mistake to underestimate the long-term electoral consequences of the abortive merger. The LCP reinvigorated the rural arm of the Liberal Party and assisted it to build a formidable country membership base – estimated at approximately 15,000 in 1950 – and campaign infrastructure with which it could wrest back control of much of the electoral territory that the UAP had lost to the Country Party.[111] The Country Party lost a considerable portion of its talent pool to the LCP, such as the young and ambitious Kerang Shire councillor and future prime minister, John Gorton, who defected from the Country Party and stood for the LCP in Northern Province in 1949.[112] Indeed, at the 1950 state election eleven of the LCP candidates in rural Assembly electorates were CP defectors.[113] Furthermore, the defection of a considerable portion of the more 'conservative' wing of the state Parliamentary Country Party significantly weakened the pro-coalition forces at a crucial moment when the party was grappling with its appropriate relationship with the Liberal Party. As a result, a *de facto* anti-coalitionist majority crystallised within the Victorian Parliamentary Country Party that was to endure until approximately the early 1970s and scuttle any serious prospects of a stable Liberal-Country Party alliance in the state arena.

V. The last Farmer Government

In his pitch to country voters at the 1950 election, McDonald pledged to embark on a 'vigorous' state development program, including expanded housing construction, the decentralisation of industry to country centres, and the extension of dryland irrigation

[111] Ibid., 37.
[112] Geoffrey Browne, "Gorton, Sir John Grey (1911-2002)," in *The Biographical Dictionary of the Australian Senate, vol. 3, 1962-1983*, eds. Ann Millar and Geoffrey Browne (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2010), 17-27.
[113] *Countryman*, 21 April 1950, 3.

schemes.[114] Hollway in turn implored voters to end the three-party system, warning that 'only stalemate and frustration' would result if the LCP or ALP had to rely on the CP to form government.[115] The election results proved to be a disaster for the Country Party, with a swing against the party in every seat contested except Gippsland South. Indeed, the CP's 'poor showing' was considered the 'main surprise' of the election.[116] With the sole exception of Allendale, the CP was totally wiped out in South Western Victoria. The LCP even poached Korong by a comfortable margin, the seat formerly occupied by Albert Dunstan, who had passed away four weeks before the election. In total, the CP won just 13 seats in 1950, down from 20 in 1947, its worst result since 1924.

Despite the electoral disaster, the failure of either the Liberals (27 seats) or Labor Party (24) to win an outright majority left Jack McDonald holding the whip hand. In a subterranean manoeuvre eerily reminiscent of the events of 1935, Labor agreed to support a minority all-Country Party ministry as part of a new red-green alliance to displace the Hollway Liberal Government.[117] The requisite no confidence motion in the Hollway Government was duly passed at 4.05 am on the morning of 23 July. McDonald was commissioned as Victoria's thirty-seventh Premier five days later.[118] As observed by Mick Armstrong in his *Argus* editorial cartoon (Figure 3.3), it was an astonishingly serendipitous result for a party that only weeks before was fighting for its very survival against a full-blooded extermination campaign waged by the LCP. With Albert Dunstan at long last expunged from state politics, the shell-shocked Country Party had the perfect opportunity to reconcile its quarrelsome factions and savour the fruits of office.

[114] *Argus*, 11 May 1950, 3.
[115] *Argus*, 20 April 1950, 2.
[116] *Advocate* (Burnie), 15 May 1950, 2.
[117] Paul Strangio, *Neither power nor glory: 100 years of political Labor in Victoria, 1856-1956* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2012), 285.
[118] *Age*, 24 June 1950, 4.

Figure 3.3. The CP eludes the LCP exterminators and wins control of the ministerial benches, *Argus* editorial cartoon.[119]

As the new 'Farmer's Cabinet' moved into the ministerial offices – all but two of the new ministers were primary producers (Fulton and Hyland) and only one resided in Melbourne (Hyland) – the Country Party's metropolitan detractors lamented that a 'cow-yard atmosphere' was returning to the top of Bourke Street.[120] If this crude image of muck-encrusted agrarians retaking the Treasury benches suggested that Victorian politics would simply revert back to the somnambulant, narrowly-agrarian status quo of the Dunstan years, then the critics were gravely mistaken. Although McDonald had learned the dark arts of

[119] *Argus*, 27 June 1950, 2.
[120] *Argus*, 27 June 1950, 1; *Age*, 27 October 1951, 4.

politics at the knee of Sir Albert Dunstan, the new Country Party Premier embraced a markedly different approach to the task of state administration from his late mentor. While still decidedly 'country-minded' in its orientation, the incoming McDonald Government set about implementing arguably the most ambitious state development and reform agenda of any of the CP-led governments, and at a pace that would have been unthinkable in the lethargic latter years of Dunstan's premiership. With the Country Party possessing a third fewer Assembly seats in 1950 than when Dunstan took power in 1935, and entangled with a far more canny and battle-hardened Labor Party that was determined to extract its pound of flesh from the new CP Government as expeditiously as possible, McDonald and his ministerial colleagues were never likely to remain in office for long. Accordingly, McDonald worked frenetically to translate the Country Party platform into tangible results before the shifting political winds sent his ministry tumbling from power.

The crux of the CP-Labor alliance was a formal fifteen-point policy agreement which included the removal of the property-based restricted franchise for the Legislative Council, the stricter enforcement and extension of price controls, a guarantee that the *Essential Services Act* would no longer be implemented, the nationalisation of gas distribution in Victoria, the establishment of a metropolitan-wide Greater Melbourne municipal council, reforms to strengthen workers' compensation legislation, and, most thorny from a CP perspective, a redistribution of the Legislative Assembly to give metropolitan Melbourne an additional four seats.[121] As aptly described by Brian Costar, the 15-point agreement was the 'triumph of pragmatism over ideology' with McDonald and his weakened Country Party in

[121] Strangio, *Neither Power nor Glory*, 285-286.

no position to haggle with Cain.[122] Unsurprisingly, Liberal members christened the McDonald Ministry the 'glory without power' Government.[123]

In contrast to the pronounced agrarian policies of previous Country Party-led ministries, which were concerned primarily with rural rehabilitation programs and marketing schemes for agricultural produce, the McDonald Government placed a much greater emphasis on decentralisation and state development. While Albert Dunstan had frequently warned of the 'evils' of centralisation and even threatened to outlaw the establishment of new industries in Melbourne without ministerial approval, his Government's practical decentralisation efforts betrayed the same miserly close-fistedness, suspicion of bureaucracy, and habit of sluggish inaction that bedevilled so much of his approach to statecraft in the latter years of his time in power.[124] The McDonald Government, by contrast, leapt into a fury of action almost immediately upon taking office. The most significant state development projects launched by the new CP Government were the construction of the Eildon Dam and duplication of the Waranga channel– trumpeted by McDonald as the largest single construction contract ever signed in Australia (£11,360,000) – as part of the Country Party's plan to double Victoria's irrigation capacity by 1956.[125] The McDonald Government also had ambitions to triple power generation in five years, and to fast-track the extension of the electrical supply network across rural Victoria.[126] Tens of millions of pounds were budgeted for other capital works programs, including £26,000,000 for the chronically run-down Victorian Railways, £4,500,000 for school construction and £3,500,000 in hospital funding.[127] To finance these

[122] Brian Costar, "John McDonald: a remorseful premier," in *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*, eds. Brian Costar and Paul Strangio (Annandale: Federation Press, 2006), 244.
[123] Wright, *A People's Counsel*, 286.
[124] *Portland Guardian*, 22 September 1941, 2; *Northern Star* (Lismore), 30 June 1943, 5; *Argus*, 23 February 1943, 4.
[125] *Kilmore Free Press*, 7 September 1950, 8; *Countryman*, 6 April 1951, 2.
[126] *Wodonga and Towong Sentinel*, 1 September 1950, 2; *Countryman*, 6 April 1951, 2.
[127] *Countryman*, 6 April 1951, 2.

projects, as well as the Government's extensive programme for housing construction and the further development of local coal resources, McDonald wrested £74,398,000 from the Loan Council, making Victoria the largest single borrower for public works in the nation.[128] The state budget brought down by McDonald as Treasurer just a few weeks later produced a deficit of £2,450,000 – a marked departure from the fiscal restraint of the Dunstan years.[129]

McDonald's first budget had a distinctly Country Party flavour and contained a raft of benefits for primary producers. The irrigation sector – perhaps the cause dearest to the Premier's heart – was the principal beneficiary, with water charges slashed by between 3 and 10 shillings an acre depending on usage.[130] Payments under the *Cattle Compensation Act* were also increased, as were grants for agricultural research, herd-testing for bovine diseases, and agricultural education.[131] By combining the Country Party's traditional support for agrarian assistance measures with its new and aggressive infrastructure development and decentralisation programme, the McDonald Government was seeking to build the foundations of an ongoing and expanded role for the Country Party in the post-war political landscape. Gunnar Kristinsson has pointed to a not-dissimilar pronounced shift in emphasis towards decentralisation rather than purely sectional agrarian concerns in the Scandinavian agrarian parties in the mid-twentieth century, most prominently in the Swedish Farmers' League-Centre Party in the late 1950s and the Norwegian Farmers Party-Centre Party in the 1960s.[132] Kristinsson argues that this shift marked a key stage in the ideological development of the

[128] *Age*, 11 September 1950, 3.
[129] *Age*, 12 September 1950, 3; *Herald* (Melbourne), 26 September 1950, 3.
[130] *Argus*, 27 September 1950, page 7.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Gunnar Kristinsson, *Farmers' Parties: A Study in Electoral Adaptation* (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 1991), 172, 180-181.

Nordic agrarian parties as they evolved from farmer-centric movements into more broad-based country parties and ultimately regional 'centre' parties.[133]

Like its Swedish counterpart, the Farmers' League, which governed in a coalition with the Social Democrats between 1951 and 1957 in a resurrection of the Depression-era red-green alliances, the Victorian Country Party also had to balance its pro-farmer programme with sufficient concessions to its democratic socialist parliamentary partner. In stark contrast to the 'pallid pink-green' Dunstan era alliance of 1935-42, the decidedly 'red-green' McDonald 'cow trade' was much more profitable for the Labor Party, in keeping with the greater strength of the Labor numbers in parliament and commensurate weakness of the Country Party. Within six months of the CP taking office, nine of the fifteen conditions had been met, including the extension of full adult franchise for the Legislative Council, the expansion of the state wage board to encompass rural workers, and the nationalisation of the gas industry under the new state-owned Fuel and Gas Corporation.[134] It was little wonder, then, that the McDonald Ministry was dubbed by its conservative detractors as the 'McCain Government'.[135] Even with this impressive legislative record under its belt, in early 1951 the CP was placed on notice by John Cain, who threatened that Labor support for the ministry would be withdrawn if further 'progressive legislation' was not forthcoming.[136]

The question of just how far the grassroots base of the Country Party could be pushed in support of the Labor alliance was tested in a three-cornered by-election in Bendigo Province in March 1951.[137] McDonald was purportedly of the view that Country Party preferences

[133] Ibid., 166-167.
[134] *Age*, 18 December 1950, 2.
[135] *Age*, 27 October 1951, 4.
[136] *Argus*, 31 January 1951, 3.
[137] *Argus*, 24 November 1950, 5.

should be directed to the Labor Party ahead of the LCP candidate, despite the opposition of many Central Council members.[138] The party resolved to leave the preference question to individual electors, and the 2,546 CP votes ultimately split 60:40 in favour of the Liberal candidate, T.H. Grigg.[139] Clearly a substantial block of CP supporters were in sympathy with the Premier, even if the majority could not countenance placing the LCP candidate last on their ballot papers. In an ominous development for the McDonald Ministry, the LCP victory in Bendigo Province provided Hollway with sufficient numbers to block supply bills in the Legislative Council.

The ascension of the McDonald Government in 1950 left the Country Party in the curious position, for the first and only time in its history, of governing at Spring Street in a *de facto* parliamentary alliance with Labor, while simultaneously being part of a formal coalition government with the Liberal Party in Canberra. Intriguingly, it was the latter arrangement that caused by far the most angst amongst the 700 delegates to the 1951 CP state conference. Two district councils and five branches submitted motions condemning the Menzies Government's wool tax prepayment scheme, a measure that was deeply unpopular with graziers as they reaped the benefit of record high wool prices.[140] Arthur Fadden, the federal treasurer and CP leader, was heckled by angry delegates when he attempted to defend the scheme.[141] By stark contrast, the Premier and his ministers were welcomed with loud cheers, stamping feet, and thunderous applause. In his address, McDonald sought to head off any objections to the Labor alliance, and stressed that the ALP had not 'pressed' his Government in any way: 'if it did, my Ministry would resign'.[142] It would appear that he had little cause

[138] *Lithgow Mercury*, 7 March 1951, 2.
[139] *Age*, 8 March 1951, 3.
[140] *Age*, 5 April 1951, 1.
[141] *Shepparton Advertiser*, 10 April 1951, 6.
[142] *Argus*, 4 April 1951, 7.

for concern. None of the debated motions were critical of the state alliance, and the delegates were quick to praise the parliamentary party for its work and the speed of state development, seemingly unfazed by the distinct socialistic flavour to the CP Government's agenda.[143] As an *Age* correspondent was to remark: 'One certain fact has issued from the conference – the political Country Party is right behind the Premier…'[144]

As the McDonald Government approached its first anniversary in office, the Premier showed few signs of moderating the pace of his state development agenda. The Housing Commission was pressed to commence work for an additional 5,900 homes throughout Victoria.[145] In his typical abrasive style, McDonald publicly threatened to nationalise the Geelong cement works unless the company agreed to increase production.[146] Construction work commenced on the East Goulburn channel extension and Eildon dam project.[147] In total, the McDonald Government had an endorsed programme of loan works for 1951-52 totalling some £76,694,000, a figure more than double that of the previous financial year (£37,335,000).[148] Four months later, McDonald again approached the Loan Council to secure additional credit – this time requesting a mammoth £118 million in funds.[149] Inflationary concerns, however, prompted the Council to adopt a rather different approach, and Victoria was allocated just £56 million.[150] A shocked and exasperated McDonald declared that the proposed cuts 'just cannot be done. I do not care who the Treasurer of the State is, no man faced with this problem can reconcile the two figures.'[151] Six thousand state employees were dismissed,

[143] *Age*, 3 April 1951, 3.
[144] *Age*, 7 April 1951, 2.
[145] *Shepparton Advertiser*, 6 February 1951, 7.
[146] *Argus*, 20 March 1951, 1.
[147] *Shepparton Advertiser*, 9 March 1951, 13; *Argus*, 15 June 1951, 5.
[148] Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, volume 236, August-October 1951, 5 September 1951, 4290.
[149] *Argus*, 15 August 1951, 2.
[150] *Argus*, 18 August 1951, 1.
[151] Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, volume 236, August-October 1951, 5 September 1951, 4291.

contracts worth many millions of pounds deferred, and drastic cuts inflicted on the Government's planned housing, energy, road construction, and water supply projects.[152] Even the Government's keynote Eildon scheme had to be reduced in capacity by more than half.[153] McDonald hit hard at the Menzies Government, roaring that Victoria was being fiscally 'murdered', and that his federal counterparts had lost 'all sense of financial decency'.[154] McDonald even threatened to withdraw state support for the Melbourne Olympic Games if additional funding was not forthcoming.[155] Speaking to a meeting in Shepparton in October 1951, a dispirited Jack McDonald declared that he was so 'disgusted' by the loan cuts that he no longer cared whether he remained as Premier.[156]

The McDonald Government was also facing intense pressure over the redistribution question, as well as its plans to establish a Greater Melbourne Council for the metropolitan area, two of the few remaining items of the fifteen-point policy agreement yet to be implemented. The Melbourne Council plan proved to be intensely unpopular amongst municipal councils, including a significant number of rural shires that protested in sympathy with their metropolitan counterparts. The Shepparton City Council in McDonald's own electorate, for instance, denounced the proposal as a socialistic menace that threatened to morph into an 'immense soulless monster' so powerful that country municipalities would be 'completely submerged and outweighed'.[157] When the Bill was blocked by the LCP in the Legislative Council and shelved by cabinet 'at least until next June', one suspects that many a Country Party MP breathed a sigh of relief.[158]

[152] *Age*, 18 September 1951, 1.
[153] Ibid.
[154] *Argus*, 1 October 1951, 5.
[155] *Age*, 27 October 1951, 3.
[156] Ibid., 4.
[157] *Shepparton Advertiser*, 18 September 1951, 1; *Shepparton Advertiser*, 21 September 1951, 5.
[158] *Age*, 9 October 1951, 4.

True to form, the Country Party was also determined to delay a redistribution for as long as possible. In February 1951 McDonald stressed that he had no intention of even discussing any proposed redistribution until 'late next year', despite considerable Labor pressure for progress on the matter.[159] The redistribution issue exposed the contradictory political interests between the two parties in the red-green alliance. In the zero-sum game of electoral boundary reform, it was simply not possible to afford greater representation to Melbourne's burgeoning suburbs while simultaneously insulating the Country Party's fiefdoms across the country districts of the state. With no palatable solution at hand, the McDonald-Cain alliance was unlikely to endure for long. Tom Hollway remained almost fanatically devoted to the so-called two-for-one redistribution plan, which would divide each federal division in Victoria into two state seats of approximately equal size to eliminate the generous rural weighting in the state electoral system. The Liberal leader continued to court the Labor Party, hoping to secure cross-party support for a redistribution bill. He likened the CP to a 'shaggy dog' that had wandered on to the ground during a football match, requiring both teams, Labor and Liberal, to 'combine to catch the dog and chuck him over the fence before they can continue the game'.[160] The prospect of a Labor-Liberal alliance was too much for many Liberal members, however, and Hollway was deposed as party leader in December 1951 in favour of Leslie Norman, MLA for Glen Iris.

The Victorian Labor Party Conference in April 1952 heralded further political difficulties for the McDonald Government. Stan Keon, MHR for Yarra, denounced the Country Party as the 'most conservative, reactionary group of politicians in this State' and supported a motion

[159] *Argus*, 1 February 1951, 4.
[160] *Argus*, 15 November 1951, 18; *West Australian*, 6 December 1951, 7.

calling on Labor to withdraw its support from the ministry.[161] In a worrying sign for the Country Party, John Cain was ambivalent about the future of the ministry, declaring that he 'wouldn't lose a moment's sleep' if the alliance was ended.[162] He called on the conference to terminate the alliance there and then if they were so inclined. The motion was defeated, however, when the Victorian ALP secretary reminded delegates that Federal Labor had given its 'unqualified blessing' to the alliance – unsurprising given McDonald's incensed denunciations of the Menzies Government – to which Arthur Calwell, the deputy federal leader of the Parliamentary Labor Party, assented with a pronounced 'hear him'.[163]

Finally, on 18 July 1952, following significant Labor gains in the Legislative Council elections, the Victorian Central Executive of the ALP voted to withdraw its support for the McDonald Government.[164] On 23 July, after more than twelve hours of negotiations, the Parliamentary LCP agreed to support the McDonald Ministry for the remainder of the year. The Liberals insisted on a new policy agreement with the Country Party, including the abandonment of any legislation of a 'socialistic flavour', the preservation of the Legislative Council, and reform of rental control measures.[165] Although the Liberal Party had sought to make the amalgamation of the two parties a precondition for the alliance, McDonald successfully defused that issue by agreeing to refer the matter to the CP Central Council.[166]

Thoroughly incensed by the new non-Labor alliance, Tom Hollway moved a motion of no confidence in the McDonald Ministry on 17 September 1952. With the support of the Labor Party and several dissident Liberals, the motion came within a single vote of defeating the

[161] *Argus*, 15 April 1952, 4; *Weekly Times*, 16 April 1952, 3.
[162] *Argus*, 15 April 1952, 4.
[163] Ibid.
[164] *National Advocate* (Bathurst), 19 July 1952, 1.
[165] *Weekly Times*, 23 July 1952, 3.
[166] *Age*, 23 July 1952, 3.

Government.[167] The former Liberal leader was subsequently expelled from the Parliamentary LCP. A dejected and tired McDonald publicly conceded that his ministry was doomed.[168] The McDonald Government limped on until 21 October when a combination of Labor members and Hollway-aligned Liberals successfully blocked the budget.[169] McDonald resigned as Premier and Hollway was appointed to form a government on 28 October. Three days later, the new ministry was itself defeated in the Assembly by the CP and LCP Opposition. McDonald was commissioned as caretaker Premier to serve until the forthcoming state election.[170]

Evidently either ill-prepared for the campaign or pessimistic about its electoral prospects against the sweeping pro-Labor tide, and locked out of much of its former heartland by an electoral pact with the LCP, the Country Party contested only fifteen Assembly seats, seeking to win back only Swan Hill and Korong in addition to the thirteen seats it had won in 1950. It was successful in the former contest only, and narrowly lost both Mildura and Gippsland North to the resurgent Labor Party. The LCP fared even worse than the Country Party on polling day and was reduced to just eleven members, losing even Les Norman – defeated by Tom Hollway – in the seat of Glen Iris. The Hollway-aligned Electoral Reform League won four seats.

VI. The beginning of the long exile: 1952 – 1955

With a Labor majority in the Legislative Assembly, the horse-trading tactics that had served the CP well for the past three decades were suddenly obsolete. When a 'two-for-one'

[167] *Argus*, 18 September 1952, 5.
[168] *Age*, 27 October 1952, 3.
[169] Brian Costar, "McDonald, Sir John Gladstone Black (Jack) (1898-1977)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography. Volume 15, 1940-1980, Kem-Pie*, eds. John Ritchie and Di Langmore (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2000), 191-193.
[170] *Age*, 1 November 1952, 1.

redistribution bill was finally pushed through the Victorian Parliament in late 1953, the Country Party could only protest from the sidelines. The case for change, however, was compelling. By the 1952 election it had required on average 22,000 votes to elect a Labor member to parliament, 20,000 for a Liberal, but only 10,000 votes for a Country Party member.[171] McDonald could only lament the virtually inevitable electoral consequences of the redistribution as a swathe of rural constituencies were amalgamated or scrapped altogether: 'The guillotine has fallen on the Country Party, and Country Party heads are already lying on the ground.'[172] Among the list of abolished seats were Shepparton and Rainbow, held by Jack McDonald and Keith Dodgshun respectively. In September 1954 both men informed the press that they would retire from politics at the next state election, citing ill health.[173] Despite this announcement, and Sir Herbert Hyland's public declaration of his intention to nominate as a candidate for leader, McDonald and Dodgshun remained in their respective leadership positions for another seven months.[174]

One of McDonald's very last political duties as a member of parliament was to second the motion of no confidence in the Cain Government moved by LCP leader Henry Bolte on 19 April 1955.[175] In the preceding weeks the Victorian Labor Party had imploded in some of the most acrimonious scenes of the Labor Split of 1955. Deprived of its hard-won parliamentary majority by the breakaway 'Coleman-Barry' Labor Party, the fate of the Cain Ministry was sealed. Within hours of the defeat of the Cain Government, and with a state election scheduled for just a few weeks' time, the Parliamentary Country Party elected Herbert Hyland and George Moss as leader and deputy leader respectively.[176] After nearly a decade at

[171] White, *John Cain and Victorian Labor*, 148.
[172] *Argus*, 28 October 1953, 1; *Age*, 25 March 1953, 5.
[173] *Cobram Courier*, 23 September 1954, 1.
[174] *Age*, 29 September 1954, 3.
[175] Strangio, *Neither Power nor Glory*, 340.
[176] *Argus*, 21 April 1955, 5.

the helm of the Victorian Country Party, 'Fighting Mac' was finally free to return to his Goulburn Valley fruit groves.

VII. Conclusion

Brian Costar, arguably the leading historian of the McDonald Government, concluded that while Jack McDonald was 'not in the top rank of Victorian premiers', his time in office was nonetheless 'transitional' in that it heralded the last of Victoria's chronically unstable minority governments.[177] Furthermore, McDonald's willingness as Premier to tackle difficult and controversial policy issues marked a 'refreshing change from the inertia of the previous two decades'.[178] Overall this is a broadly sound assessment of McDonald's brief reign as Premier. It should be recognised, however, that the fall of the McDonald Ministry was only a transitional moment in state political history because the Country Party had *itself* undergone a period of profound transition and disruption during McDonald's period as leader. In the space of less than ten years, the Victorian Country Party was reduced from its preeminent status as the leading non-Labor party in state politics, and by far the most dominant political force in non-metropolitan Victoria, to a modest agrarian rump confined almost exclusively to a string of rural seats in Gippsland and along the Murray River. In future, the party would find it extremely difficult to break out from this remnant 'heartland' territory as it was supplanted by the Liberal Party as the default non-Labor party in much of country Victoria. Internal disruption and inter-factional warfare – a hang-over from the Dunstan era but exacerbated by McDonald's iron-willed leadership style – combined with the loss of key electoral territory through redistributions and the resurgence of the rural arms of the Liberal and Labor parties – cost the Country Party much of its parliamentary power and, in turn, its coveted status as the

[177] Costar, "John McDonald," 248.
[178] Ibid.

hinge party of the Legislative Assembly. The Country Party ceased to be a disruptive force in the Legislative Assembly from 1952 onwards, not out of any ideological or strategic change of heart on its part, but rather because the brutal rigour of parliamentary arithmetic had rendered it essentially irrelevant.

As leader, Jack McDonald held fast to the political strategy of ruthless, brutal pragmatism and political horse-trading that had proven to be exceedingly profitable for the Country Party in decades past. These tactics served to alienate pro-Liberal conservatives within the CP party room and destroyed any realistic prospect of stable non-Labor cross-party collaboration in state politics throughout much of the remainder of the century. By the same token, however, under McDonald's leadership the Country Party had supplanted its rivals to reclaim ministerial office on two occasions (three, if one counts the short-lived stop-gap ministry appointed in the lead up to the 1952 election), successfully repelled the 'hostile takeover' campaign by the Liberal and Country Party – by far the most serious and ferocious extermination effort encountered by the movement in its history – and advanced the most expansive ministerial policy programme ever contemplated by a Country Party-led ministry in Victoria.

With both Albert Dunstan and the LCP rebels gone from the movement, a stable consensus had finally descended on the state parliamentary wing as to the most appropriate strategic direction for the party. The Victorian Country Party would be an avowedly anti-socialist force but also decidedly sceptical and unsympathetic to a coalition with the urban Liberals; a conservative rural minor party defending agrarian and country interests from the profligacy and self-interest of the city-dominated major parties. This post 1948-49 settlement would endure without serious challenge for more than two decades.

The record of the McDonald Government in vigorously pushing decentralisation and public works projects – particularly in the water supply and electricity sectors – stands in marked contrast to the languid and tight-fisted approach of previous ministries with which the CP was associated. The expansive state development agenda of the McDonald Government highlighted the ideological evolution of the movement as it gradually sought to transition from its agrarian-centric classical farmers' party roots into a more broad-based 'country-minded' movement that could win the support of a broader regional constituency. Having successfully incorporated a large swathe of the agricultural sector into the 'Australian settlement' through various state and federal market intervention schemes, the McDonald-led Victorian Country Party was seeking to establish its enduring relevance in the post-war political landscape through massive reconstruction projects with a decidedly rural slant. The efforts of the short-lived McDonald Ministry were frustrated by both post-war capital restrictions and its weak position on the floor of the Legislative Assembly, however, and were not sufficient to reverse the party's electoral decline as state politics reverted to an effective two-party, or perhaps a two-and-a-half-party, system.

Chapter Four. The Wilderness Years: Hyland, Moss, and Ross-Edwards, 1955 – 1988

I. Introduction

If Victorian politics was notable in the first half of the twentieth century for its chronic volatility and rapid turnover of ministries, then the political landscape after the 1955 state election was remarkable for its near glacial stability. Unfortunately for the Country-National Party (C-NP), as the party that had benefited most from the turbulent three-party system at Spring Street, it was to pay the heftiest price under Victoria's newly becalmed political order. From 17 December 1952 through until 6 October 1992 – a period of thirty-nine years, nine months and nineteen days – the Country-National Party was out of office in the Victorian Parliament: the longest single period that any Australian 'party of government' has been deprived of the Treasury benches. Given that political history is typically concerned with power and those who wield it, it is unsurprising that historians have shown very little interest in the travails of the Victorian C-NP during its long exile. This chapter seeks to fill this significant gap in the historical record.

The Victorian Country-National Party was not entirely powerless during its wilderness years in state politics, however. For many years, the party held the balance of power in the Legislative Council and was thus able to cooperate with the Opposition to block legislation and extract concessions from the government benches. Furthermore, during its absence from state ministerial office, the Victorian C-NP formed part of two coalition ministries at a federal level for a combined period of 30 years, three months, and 17 days. Several Victorian C-NP members were powerful players in federal politics, including most prominently, John McEwen, MHR for Murray, a long-serving Country Party leader (1958-1971) and briefly Prime Minister in his own right between December 1967 and January 1968, and Peter Nixon,

MHR for Gippsland, a member of the so-called 'Mulga Mafia' ministerial triumvirate along with Doug Anthony and Ian Sinclair.[1] Throughout the long ascendancy of the non-Labor coalition parties in federal politics between 1949-72 and 1975-83, the C-NP exercised significant – some would argue even disproportionate – control over national trade and economic policy.[2] Whether firmly ensconced at the very heart of ministerial power in the Federal Coalition Government or as an influential minor party entrenched on the crossbenches of the Victorian Parliament, the Country-National Party could demonstrate its utility as a defender of agrarian and rural interests, preserving the special treatment accorded to non-metropolitan areas and the agricultural industries.

During the C-NP's near *Exodus*-length absence from the state ministerial benches, Victorian society changed through surging population growth, industrialisation, and urbanisation, and came to be far less dependent on agricultural production to underwrite its prosperity. To ensure its survival, the Country Party experimented with different tactical strategies – including an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to resurrect a closer relationship with the Labor Party – with mixed results. As the long years in exile slowly turned into decades, the party gradually shed its maverick, agrarian-radical inclinations and was transformed into a more orthodox conservative political movement focused on returning to power by the only realistic means open to it: coalition with the Liberal Party. The party's pronounced shift to the right of the ideological spectrum marked a departure from the course adopted by the surviving

[1] Other Victorian C-NP ministers included Senator Harrie Wade who served as Minister for Air and later as Minister for Health in the Menzies Government; Mac Holten (MHR for Indi) as Minister for Repatriation in the Gorton and McMahon Ministries, and Senator James Webster as Minister for Science and the Environment in the Fraser Government. See Paul Davey, *Ninety Not Out: The Nationals 1920-2010* (Sydney: University of NSW Press, 2010), 108, 211; Paul Davey, *Milestone - A Centenary of Achievement: National Party of Australia 1920-2020* (Barton: National Party of Australia, 2020), 84-89.
[2] Davey, *Ninety Not Out*, 108, 211.

agrarian parties of Northern Europe who sought to reposition themselves as moderate 'centre' parties to appeal beyond their declining traditional agrarian electoral heartland.

II. Stabilisation and consolidation: The Hyland era, 1955-1964

The election of Sir Herbert (Bert) Hyland as leader of the Victorian Country Party in April 1955 was perhaps the least surprising event in a year otherwise marked by extraordinary turmoil at Spring Street. Hyland had been widely tipped as McDonald's successor at the announcement of the latter's retirement the previous year.[3] Hyland, a portly, full-faced man with swept-back silver hair, had served as a senior minister in the Dunstan, Hollway, and McDonald Governments and had only narrowly lost out in the 1945 leadership contest. At 71 years of age, he was a full fourteen years older than his predecessor and remains to date by far the oldest man to assume the leadership of the party. A grocer by trade, Sir Herbert was the first leader of the party not to have been a farmer prior to his election to parliament.[4] In a further somewhat unusual attribute for a CP member, Hyland lived in the bayside metropolitan suburb of St Kilda rather than his electorate of Gippsland South, although he visited his constituency on a weekly basis and remained by all accounts an exceedingly popular local member.[5] 'Outspoken, colourful, and fiery' by temperament, Hyland was nevertheless no radical in his politics, and was more naturally conservative in his ideological inclinations in the tradition of John Allan and Murray Bourchier.[6] Hyland's deputy leader and eventual successor was George Moss, MLA for Murray Valley. As a wheat farmer, grazier, sheep-breeder, and champion athlete at Numurkah-Katunga in Northern Victoria, a district

[3] *Weekly Times*, 22 September 1954, 4.
[4] Brian Costar, "Hyland, Sir Herbert John Thornhill (Bert) (1884-1970)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography. Volume 14, 1940-1980, Di-Kel*, eds. John Ritchie and Christopher Cunneen (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 529-530.
[5] Ibid.
[6] *Age*, 8 July 1964, 3.

his forebears had pioneered, Moss had a thoroughly orthodox agrarian Country Party background.[7] By contrast to Hyland the old parliamentary warhorse, Moss was a mere 41 years of age and had served as the youngest minister in the McDonald Government, holding the prized Agriculture portfolio.[8]

Thrust immediately into the 1955 election campaign, Hyland pledged greater efforts towards decentralisation and the extension of services in rural districts, accused Labor of being soft on communism, and drew a contrast between the unity of his party and the bitter divisions within both the Labor and Liberal parties.[9] The CP contested 17 seats and was rewarded by retaking Mildura from Labor. The new two-for-one boundaries, however, had eroded the Country Party's electoral base, just as Hollway had intended, and the party returned with just ten members in the Assembly, three fewer than in 1952 despite a modest rise in the CP state-wide primary vote. Arguably the most disappointing result was the loss of Lowan, largely replacing Keith Dodgshun's former seat of Rainbow, to Mick Mibus of the Liberal and Country Party (LCP).

In the week following the election it was still uncertain whether the LCP would have sufficient numbers to govern in its own right. Premier-elect Henry Bolte wrote to Hyland proposing either a coalition government with three CP ministers or, alternatively, that CP members be appointed as speaker and chairman of committees if the requisite 34 seats were not secured by the LCP.[10] The Parliamentary CP unanimously rejected both offers.[11] Although nearly seven years had passed since McDonald's walkout from the Hollway

[7] *Countryman*, 1 October 1948, 2.
[8] *Countryman*, 8 December 1950, 4.
[9] *Argus*, 12 May 1955, 4; *Argus*, 28 May 1955, 7.
[10] *Canberra Times*, 4 June 1955, 1; *Age*, 8 June 1955, 1.
[11] *Age*, 8 June 1955, 1.

Ministry, the Victorian Country Party was evidently still reluctant to embrace a state coalition ministry or entangling cross-party arrangement. In any case, the victory of the LCP candidate in Bendigo several days later secured a working majority for the Bolte Government without the need for an alliance with the Country Party. In the 34-member Legislative Council, however, the new ministry held just ten seats and thus required the support of either the Country Party (8 seats) or ALP (10 seats) to pass legislation.[12] This state of affairs would continue with only fleeting exceptions for the next decade and a half as the Country Party's remarkably stable upper house representation – maintained at eight seats at every election between 1955 and 1970 – gave it an exceedingly valuable leverage over the Liberal Government.

Within three months of the 1955 election, the CP threatened to force the Bolte Government to an election over proposed increases to railway fares and charges. Moss taunted the Premier that 'if the rates go up, out you go!'[13] Although only twenty bills were formally rejected by the Legislative Council between 1955 and 1970, a large portion of contentious legislation was successfully amended or delayed in the upper house. Proposed changes to the regulation of bread production, for instance, were stalled for a total of eight years.[14] According to Peter Blazey, the Country Party constituted the 'only significant parliamentary opposition' encountered by the Bolte Government during its early years in power.[15] The strength of the Country Party in the Legislative Council was reinforced by the tactical cunning of its leader in that chamber, P.T. Byrnes, MLC for North-Western Province, a bespectacled farmer from the irrigation districts north of Swan Hill. Liberal ministers soon realised that calling on

[12] The balance of the Legislative Council in 1955 was made up of 5 Labor (Anti-Communist) members and Sir Clifden Eager who sat as an independent.
[13] *Argus*, 18 August 1955, 1.
[14] Raymond Wright, *A People's Counsel: A History of the Parliament of Victoria 1856-1990* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992), 211.
[15] Peter Blazey, *Bolte: A Political Biography* (Milton: Jacaranda Press, 1972), 75.

Byrnes and Jack Galbally, the Labor leader in the Council, prior to the introduction of legislation was a prudent move to secure its safe passage.[16]

Although the Country and Liberal parties had been working in comparative harmony at a federal level as partners in the Menzies Coalition Government since 1949, relations between the two non-Labor parties in the state arena were far from affectionate. The Country Party seethed at the continued use of the 'Liberal and Country Party' name by the Victorian Liberals. Hyland even publicly raised the prospect of legal action over the offending title.[17] Relations deteriorated further in 1958 after a subterranean bid by Bolte to persuade the secretary of the Parliamentary CP, Dudley Walters, to accept the Presidency of the Legislative Council.[18] The LCP had improved its numbers to 17 in the Legislative Council at the 1958 election which had left the Government just one vote short of a majority once it had furnished a president. Hyland was most unimpressed by this bid to undermine his party's negotiating strength and denounced the Premier as a 'mongrel'.[19]

With Bolte and Hyland at the helm of their respective parties, Victorian politics had produced the counterintuitive situation of a farmer leading the Liberals and a metropolitan-resident businessman leading the Country Party. Although a successful primary producer with impeccable rural credentials, Henry Bolte was an arch-opponent of the Country Party. In 1967 he famously denounced the party as a 'mob of political prostitutes who will go to bed with the highest bidder'.[20] While Bolte evidently resented the Country Party's continual interference with his legislative programme, his dislike of the party would appear to have

[16] Ibid., 211.
[17] *Argus*, 11 April 1956, 5.
[18] Katherine West, *Power in the Liberal Party: A Study in Australian Politics* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1965), 43.
[19] Ibid.; Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, volume 255, 9 July 1958, 126.
[20] *Age*, 26 December 1972, 6.

been drawn from deeper roots. A son of the Western District, Bolte had grown up in a 'staunch' conservative-voting family at Skipton to the south-west of Ballarat, an area that had never had strong ties to the Country Party.[21] Indeed, Bolte's seat of Hampden was one of the very few rural constituencies never to have been won by the Country Party, having remained a battleground seat fought between the Nationalist-UAP-Liberal parties and the Labor Party. As Bolte recounted in an interview in 1976, in his view there was 'no need for [the Country Party] or use for them' in the Western District: 'to me the Country Party was no damned different to… the Labor Party… I couldn't stomach [the] Country Party at any price…I would have voted Labor ahead of Country Party.'[22] Although Bolte boasted that he sought to keep the Country Party representation as small as possible, he never wished to eliminate the party altogether as its looming presence helped to unify his own rural backbench members: 'they always had someone to be jealous of… I had to keep the Country Party in business, keep them curbed, and keep them as a foil for my own party.'[23]

Bolte's principal line of attack against the Country Party was to accuse it of maintaining a secret alliance with the ALP. With a man as instinctually conservative as Bert Hyland – he had, after all, nearly joined the LCP back in 1949 – leading the CP, any formal arrangement to this effect was decidedly unlikely. Although limited informal parliamentary cooperation with the ALP was acceptable to Hyland, anything as radical as an open preference swap at the ballot box was entirely out of the question. At the 1964 election, for instance, the Labor leader Clive Stoneham was purportedly left 'speechless' when the CP announced two weeks before polling day that, despite rumours to the contrary, it would once again preference the

[21] Barry Muir, *Bolte from Bamganie* (Melbourne: Hill of Content Publishing, 1973), 27.
[22] Henry Bolte interviewed by Mel Pratt for the Mel Pratt collection, recorded at the Commonwealth Centre, Melbourne, 11 February 1976 [https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-214915563/listen]
[23] Ibid.

Liberals in all seats, thereby all but assuring the re-election of the Government.[24] Nevertheless, Hyland was a frequent and trenchant critic of the Bolte Government, which he considered to be city-centric, dictatorial, and profligate in its handling of state finances. The Hyland-led CP regularly spent 'nine-tenths of its platform, radio and television time attacking the Bolte Government'.[25] In his policy speech for the 1961 election, for instance, Hyland condemned the Government for its 'complacency, arrogance, indifference, and apathy', charging it with neglecting decentralisation and the primary industries while diverting funding and development into metropolitan Melbourne.[26] Hyland mixed in a passing jibe at the Labor Party ('just as much Melbourne-based and Melbourne conscious as the Liberal Party') and he remained as fiercely anti-Communist as his predecessors (he stressed that Marxists had 'no place in the Country Party', lest anyone oddly thought otherwise).[27]

Overall, Hyland's political strategy was remarkably effective at halting Liberal ambitions of seizing the Country Party's remaining electoral territory. During his ten-year leadership the CP lost only a single seat in the Assembly to the LCP, namely Ballarat North, following the retirement of Russell White in 1960. The loss of Ballarat North was offset, however, in 1964 by the gain of Kara Kara, won by Bill Phelan, a prominent manufacturer from Maryborough, thus lifting the CP back to 10 seats in the Assembly. This was the first occasion that the CP had returned after an election with a net gain of seats since 1947. Having attracted a broader range of non-agrarian election candidates to the Country Party banner, such as Phelan, the proportion of farmer-graziers in the Assembly party room declined from 90 percent in 1955 to less than 60 percent in 1967.

[24] Blazey, *Bolte*, 117.
[25] *Canberra Times*, 16 June 1964, 2.
[26] Herbert Hyland, Policy Speech of the Victorian Country Party, 20 June 1961, State Library of Victoria, 18.
[27] Ibid., 12, 18.

The Country Party's success in holding its numbers in the State Parliament throughout the Hyland era was all the more remarkable given its ambiguous relationship with one of the most significant political forces in Victorian politics at the time: the Democratic Labor Party (DLP). The DLP had particularly strong support in Victoria and often secured nearly twice as many primary votes as the Country Party across the state. It would be no exaggeration to argue that the electoral dominance of the Liberal Party in Victoria during the Bolte era can be largely attributed to the role of DLP second preferences in securing the victory of Liberal candidates. In 1958, for example, Liberal candidates secured 85 percent of DLP second preferences, which delivered five of the 38 seats won by the LCP.[28] The Country Party was also assured of DLP preferences where its chief electoral opponent was the Australian Labor Party. However, the electoral data indicates that DLP preferences overwhelmingly favoured Liberal Party candidates ahead of those of the Country Party where the two parties were in direct competition. At the 1964 election – the only state election of the Hyland era in which DLP preferences were distributed in contests fought purely between LCP, CP, and DLP candidates – DLP preference votes strongly favoured the Liberals in all contests, even with a well-entrenched incumbent CP member in the field: in Benalla (80 percent to Liberal ahead of CP), Gippsland East (80 percent), Lowan (71 percent), Murray Valley (79 percent), and Rodney (82 percent). At first glance, the CP's strident anti-communism and social conservatism would seem to have aligned closely with core DLP values. On the other hand, there may have been concern on the part of the DLP and its supporters that the Country Party might be tempted to install a Labor Government in Victoria if the opportunity arose. The DLP was still prepared to *threaten* to direct its preferences to the CP to gain additional leverage over the Bolte Government, as it did in 1967 to bolster its campaign to secure

[28] Blazey, *Bolte*, 76.

additional funding for independent schools.[29] Unsurprisingly, the requested financial aid was promptly delivered. The Country Party was not alone in using its political power to extract concessions from the Bolte Government.

Despite his achievements in stabilising the party and defending its electoral territory from the resurgent Liberal Party, Hyland ultimately joined Murray Bourchier as the only other Victorian CP leader in history to be deposed by a party room ballot. George Moss dislodged Hyland for the leadership following the 1964 election in what was considered an upset result.[30] Hyland then nominated for the deputy leadership but was again defeated, this time by Bruce Evans, MLA for Gippsland East, a dairy farmer half his age.[31] While no explanation was proffered in the press as to why Hyland was replaced, two primary reasons can be suggested. Firstly, he had recently turned eighty and was by far the oldest member of any party in the Victorian Parliament. Although he protested that he was in good health, it is probable that his colleagues believed that a more youthful and energetic leader was required. Secondly, Hyland's refusal to collaborate more closely with the Labor Party likely rankled some of the more radical members of the parliamentary wing who were prepared to cooperate with the ALP to undermine the Bolte Government.

Under Hyland, the party that had previously fought doggedly to control the Treasury benches by any means necessary suddenly appeared content with its status as a rural-oriented minor party receding into the periphery of Victorian politics. It is difficult to imagine Dunstan, McDonald, or John Allan, for instance, turning down an opportunity to gain ministerial

[29] Damon Mayrl, *Secular Conversions: Political Institutions and Religious Education in the United States and Australia, 1800–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 227; *Canberra Times*, 11 April 1967, 2.
[30] *Age*, 8 July 1964, 3.
[31] Ibid.

portfolios as did Hyland and his party room in 1955. The vaulting ambition and ruthless political 'killer instinct' that had propelled his two predecessors into the centre of Victorian politics and ultimately the Premiers' office seemed to be absent in the septuagenarian Hyland. This, of course, reflected the greatly diminished strength of the CP in the Assembly: the party no longer had the numbers to decide who ruled the roost at Spring Street. Hyland openly conceded that he led a minority party – one representing an important constituency – but a minority party nonetheless.[32]

On balance, Hyland had been a moderately successful leader of the Country Party given the difficult electoral terrain of his era. The Country Party had effectively halted the expansion of the Liberals into its rural territory and entrenched itself as a country-minded check on the urban-based major parties. While the CP could no longer leverage its rivals in the Assembly as it had in decades gone by, its enduring strength in the Legislative Council gave it an invaluable means of blocking government legislation if the Labor Opposition could be induced to cooperate. While Hyland may have been prone to blustering rhetoric in his frequent attacks on the Government, he forced Premier Bolte to substantiate his rural credentials to country voters and carved a niche for the party as a conservative rural critic of the triumphant LCP.

III. The 'last hurrah' of maverick radicalism: The Moss era, 1964-70

Upon the ascension of George Moss to the leadership of the Country Party, the Victorian press gallery drew an immediate contrast between the old stager, Bert Hyland, and his successor. Whereas Hyland was a vociferous, animated, and fierce debater, Moss was

[32] Hyland, 'Policy Speech of the Victorian Country Party, 20 June 1961,' 13-14.

characterised as a 'thoughtful and quieter' member who had not sought the parliamentary limelight.[33] While Bolte had maintained a relatively cordial personal relationship with Hyland, his interactions with Moss were 'always formal and cool'.[34] As his six years as party leader would attest, however, Moss was far from a shy and retiring figure. On the contrary, Ken Wright, a CP Central Councillor during Moss' leadership and later MLC for North-Western Province, found him to be a 'tough, effective, hard-drinking operator'.[35] Unlike his more cautious and conservative predecessor, Moss was determined to pursue a much more aggressive – but also high risk – strategy by forging a closer working relationship with the Labor Party. While this approach was to deliver some impressive results in the early years of Moss's leadership, the Country Party would suffer one of the worst electoral defeats in its history when it eventually backfired.

At the 1964 election, the LCP secured a single seat majority in the Legislative Council, thereby liberating the Bolte Government from the combined ALP-CP upper house veto. This reprieve was to prove only transitory, however. Barely two months later, Labor won a by-election in South Eastern Province on the leakage of nearly forty percent of Country Party preferences. The CP had not previously contested the province since 1949, and Moss had purportedly believed – correctly it would seem – that a CP candidate would offset the impact of the DLP vote at the by-election.[36] At its first electoral test, Moss's strategy had triumphed and returned the balance of power in the Legislative Council to Country Party hands.

[33] *Age*, 8 July 1964, 3.
[34] Muir, *Bolte from Bamganie,* 76.
[35] Ken Mackenzie Wright, *With the Nationals in Spring Street: An autobiography of soldier settlement, flying in the RAAF, local government, and parliamentary service* (Mildura: K.I.M. Wright, 1996), 46.
[36] Muir, *Bolte from Bamganie*, 77.

His next tactical move was to prove equally as fruitful. Prior to the South Eastern Province by-election, the Bolte Government had announced a significant increase in railway fares and charges, hospital fees, and power and gas rates. Sensing the vulnerability of the Government, the Labor and Country parties moved to force a general election by blocking supply. Wishing to avoid an election at such an unfavourable juncture, Bolte struck a deal with Moss. In return for supporting the supply bill, the Country Party secured reduced railway fares and additional freight concessions for decentralised industries, a 'fair' redistribution of electoral boundaries, and a personal commitment from the Premier that he would support the abandonment of the offending 'Liberal and Country Party' name.[37] Although the deal was slammed by the *Age* newspaper as a 'hollow victory' achieved purely by 'political blackmail', it was an unqualified success for the Country Party and marked the apogee of George Moss's leadership.[38] Moss later revealed to journalist Barry Muir that he had never had 'anywhere near' enough support within the Parliamentary Country Party to actually block supply in the Legislative Council: 'It was bluff. That's all it was. Fair dinkum.'[39] The subsequent *Electoral Provinces and Districts Act 1965* once again provided for an electoral zoning system with different enrolment ratios between metropolitan, provincial, and rural electorates. This proved to be advantageous to the Country Party, which was able to win an additional two Assembly seats at the 1967 election, though not the six or even eights seats that Moss had boldly predicted.[40] The 1964 agreement represented a symbolic triumph over Tom Hollway's legacy: both the hated 'two-for-one' electoral scheme and 'Liberal and Country Party' name were vanquished and never to return.

[37] Ibid., 78; *Age*, 28 October 1964, 3.
[38] *Age*, 28 October 1964, 2.
[39] Muir, *Bolte from Bamganie*, 79.
[40] *Canberra Times*, 26 January 1966, 3; *Canberra Times*, 11 April 1967, 2.

The next opportunity for Moss to wring further concessions from the Bolte Government arose in April 1965 when a substantial increase in motor registration fees was announced to fund the construction of Victoria's expanding freeway network. Protesting vigorously against the additional financial burden on rural motorists, Moss threatened to force an election if the plan was not moderated.[41] Once again, a private conference was convened between Bolte and Moss, and a significant reduction in the proposed registration fees was secured.[42] Never one to meekly accept political dictation, Bolte hatched a plan to turn the tables back on the upstart CP leader. Before the commencement of the spring session of parliament, he again sought to poach a sitting CP member for the presidency of the Legislative Council, this time Percy Feltham, MLC for Northern Province.[43] To sweeten the deal, Bolte proposed a pairing arrangement on 'important legislation' to preserve, at least temporarily, CP control of the balance of power in the upper house. The 'sharply split' CP party room meeting rejected the proposition and passed a motion forbidding any of its members from accepting the role, much to Feltham's disappointment.[44] Shortly thereafter, following a further clash with his leader, Feltham resigned from the Country Party as he refused to 'serve under a man I cannot trust'.[45] By sitting as an independent member, Feltham took with him the coveted balance of balance in the Legislative Council, which he was to retain until his defeat by an endorsed CP candidate at the 1967 election.

Although the Labor and Country parties no longer had the numbers in the upper house to block government legislation, Moss could now ramp up his anti-Bolte rhetoric free of any obligation to match his words by actually forcing the Liberal Government to an election:

[41] Muir, *Bolte from Bamganie*, 80.
[42] Ibid.
[43] *Age*, 8 September 1965, 1.
[44] Ibid.; *Canberra Times*, 8 September 1965, 3.
[45] *Age*, 29 September 1965, 1.

always a contentious proposition among the more conservative members of the party. During the 1967 election campaign, Moss squarely targeted the Premier, whom of he accused of being 'smitten with squandermania' in his management of public finances and of running the state as an 'overlordship' surrounded by political 'yes-men'.[46] Moss hoped to secure a preference deal with either the DLP or ALP, which, combined with the favourable redistribution of rural seats, had the potential to nearly double the Country Party's numbers in the Assembly. Moss intended to assume the mantle of official Leader of the Opposition if CP gains pushed it ahead of the Labor Party in its lower house numbers.[47] Given the CP leader's bullish predictions, the Country Party's modest gains at the 1967 election – picking up the new seat of Shepparton and winning Lowan from the Liberal Party – were something of an anti-climax.

The result of the 1967 state election was all the more disappointing given that the CP had secured Labor second preferences in all contests. An initial decision to direct CP preferences to the ALP proved to be too controversial within the party and was openly condemned by several branches. As a compromise solution, Central Council endorsed double-sided how-to-vote cards directing preferences to both the Labor and Liberal parties in all seats except Midlands (held by the Labor leader, Clive Stoneham), where CP cards recommended second preferences be given exclusively to the ALP.[48] Even this arrangement proved to be unpalatable and eight CP candidates refused outright to distribute the official how-to-vote cards.[49] Bill Phelan directed his preferences exclusively towards the ALP.

[46] *Canberra Times*, 5 April 1967, 11.
[47] *Canberra Times*, 11 April 1967, 2.
[48] *Canberra Times*, 25 April 1967, 6.
[49] *Canberra Times*, 27 April 1967, 15.

Country Party voters were also divided on the preference issue. CP preferences favoured the ALP in only two seats, Dundas and Western Province, and only by a handful of votes. Labor gained a sizeable (20-40 percent) chunk of the CP preference votes in Ballarat Province, Bendigo, Bendigo Province, Portland, Gisborne, and South-Western Province, but in all other contests CP preferences overwhelming favoured the Liberal Party, or the in case of Warrnambool, the Liberals and DLP. The lingering dissatisfaction with the preference debacle culminated in an unsuccessful leadership challenge to both Moss and Byrnes at the post-election party-room meeting by their respective deputies, Bruce Evans and Ivan Swinburne.[50]

While Moss was prepared to push the boundaries of the party's strategic relationship with the Labor Opposition, his vision of the overarching purpose of the Country Party movement remained largely indistinguishable from that articulated by Herbert Hyland, or even Jack McDonald. According to George Moss, the CP remained a 'specialist party' exclusively focussed on non-metropolitan interests, seeking to expand its electoral base by emphasising its decentralisation and regional 'quality of living' policies rather than its purely farmer-centric agrarian credentials.[51] As Moss explained in his 1967 election launch address, the CP existed to 'fight for a fair deal for the country and country people' and was 'striving to make life in the country more attractive and profitable, with full backing for all secondary industries'.[52]

[50] *Age*, 17 May 1967, 3.
[51] *Countryman*, 21 January 1965, 4.
[52] George Moss, 'On election day vote the CP way,' Country Party policy speech, 12 April 1967, State Library of Victoria, 28-29.

Perhaps more than any of his predecessors, Moss had good reason to court the town and provincial vote. By the 1960s, rural and regional Victoria was undergoing a period of profound economic and demographic transition. Although the 1950s had brought years of comparative prosperity to the primary industries with high agricultural commodity prices and improved production output, the increasing mechanisation of agriculture – a process that had been stalled by the Great Depression and Second World War – reduced demand for agricultural labour in rural districts.[53] The small family farm, long sustained through manual labour and stretched overdraft accounts – the social unit that had incubated the infant Victorian Farmers' Union – was ill-suited to the capital- and land-intensive demands of modern agriculture.[54] The decline in the aggregate number of farming enterprises and the total size of the agricultural work force across Australia accelerated through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.[55] In the three decades covered by this chapter, many agriculture-dependent small rural towns declined as their residents departed in search of brighter prospects elsewhere. Jeparit, in the mixed cropping and sheep country of the Wimmera, for instance, lost nearly half its population.[56]

By contrast, many of the larger country towns were rapidly expanding into provincial cities with burgeoning industrial and service sectors. Between the mid-1940s and mid-1960s, the

[53] Bruce Davidson, *European Farming in Australia: An Economic History of Australian Farming* (Amsterdam: Elsevier Scientific Publishing, 1981), 325, 344; Julia Miller, *La Niña and the Making of Climate Optimism: Remembering Rain* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 181.
[54] Davidson, *European Farming in Australia*, 334-335, 339-342.
[55] Ibid., 389; R.J. Cameron, *Year Book of Australia, No. 64, 1980* (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1980), 304; Ian Castles, *Year Book of Australia, No. 73, 1990* (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1990), 391.
[56] S.R. Carver, "Part V – Population and Occupied Dwellings in Localities," in *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1954, Volume II - Victoria* (Canberra: Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, 1954), 17; Ian Castles, "Persons and Dwellings in Legal Local Government Areas, Statistical Local Areas and Urban Centres/(Rural) Localities – Victoria," in *Census of Population and Housing, 1986* (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1988), 33.

population of Shepparton doubled in size, and trebled by the late 1980s.[57] While the Country Party was never particularly adventurous in seeking to expand into the larger cities such as Ballarat or Geelong (let alone Melbourne), it did have to adapt to the increasingly urbanised character of many of its own long-held seats. The Melbourne-versus-Country centre-periphery cleavage nevertheless remained central both to the party's core identity and its pitch to the electorate.

The orthodox 'country-centric' focus of Moss and the Victorian CP stood in contrast to the largely contemporaneous attempts made by John McEwen, the federal party leader, to carve out a broader constituency for the Country Party among the manufacturing and mining industries. An immensely powerful agrarian political colossus as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade and Industry, McEwen sought to promote the CP as the champion of what he described as 'Australia's great wealth-producing industries' embracing all exporters, not just farmers and graziers.[58] As McEwen outlined in 1961, he envisaged a 'partnership for the development of Australia… which the Country Party is pledged to sustain' between the primary and secondary manufacturing industries to underwrite national prosperity.[59] This provided the ideological justification for McEwen's role as the chief proponent of an industry policy of 'all-round protection'. An 'all-round protection' industry policy was achieved by a high protective tariff regime to stimulate industrial development combined with extensive statutory support mechanisms to compensate farmers and graziers for higher input costs and

[57] Peter John Smailes, Trevor Louise Charles Griffin, and Neil Michael Argent, *Regional Cities and City Regions in Rural Australia: A Long-Term Demographic Perspective* (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 15; Andrew Beer, Andrew Bolam, and Alaric Maude, *Beyond the Capitals: Urban Growth in Regional Australia* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1994), 183-200; Ian Castles, "Persons and Dwellings in Legal Local Government Areas, Statistical Local Areas and Urban Centres/(Rural) Localities – Victoria," in *Census of Population and Housing, 1986* (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1988), 32.
[58] Peter Golding, *Black Jack McEwen: Political Gladiator* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997), 187.
[59] *Canberra Times*, 8 December 1961, 13.

to stabilise agricultural commodity prices.[60] Journalist Alan Reid compared McEwen's efforts in uniting these disparate forces to a 'rider in a Roman amphitheatre with a foot on each of two horses. But in his case the horses were not harnessed together. They were kept together solely by the force of his personality.'[61]

While McEwen's attempts to woo manufacturers and mining interests may have boosted CP fundraising efforts – including in financing the construction of its new offices in Canberra, John McEwen House – he ultimately failed to dissuade his party from its traditional agrarian hostility to high protective tariffs for secondary industry.[62] The 1971 Victorian state conference, for instance – the first such conference held following McEwen's retirement – spurned his legacy by passing several resolutions calling for drastic tariffs reductions.[63] Even McEwen's own hand-picked successor, Doug Anthony, likewise backed away from his mentor's industry and trade policies almost immediately after succeeding to the leadership.[64]

In April 1968, the Victorian CP reclaimed the balance of power in the Legislative Council following its victory in a by-election held in Western Province, secured through Labor and Independent Labor preferences.[65] Just a few days later, however, the CP outraged the Labor Party by again voting to grant supply to the Government. The new Labor leader, Clyde Holding, a more dynamic figure than the languid Stoneham, issued a thinly-veiled threat that

[60] Simon Ville and David Merrett, "Too Big to Fail: Explaining the Timing and Nature of Intervention in the Australian Wool Market, 1916-1991," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 62, no. 3 (September 2016): 347, 350-351; Charles Massy, *Breaking the Sheep's Back: the shocking true story of the decline and fall of the Australian wool industry* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2011), 5-9, 40-72.
[61] Paul Kelly, "Black Jack: The Godfather of the Banana Republic," *The Weekend Australia*, 26 July 1986, quoted in Paul Kelly, *The End of Certainty: The story of the 1980s* (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1992), 43.
[62] Don Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales: a study of organisation and survival* (Canberra, ANU Press, 1972), 122.
[63] Country Party, Minutes of Country Party 55th Annual Conference - Shepparton, CSURA, PG2694, Box 11, Item 37.
[64] Davey, *Ninety Not Out*, 133-134.
[65] *Age*, 8 April 1968, 1.

the ALP would 'consider the consistency of the CP' when allocating preferences at the next election.[66] The Victorian Labor Conference, held the following June, voted to prohibit any general preference exchange with the CP at future elections, a decision denounced by Moss as likely to 'keep the Liberal Government in power for all time'.[67] Nevertheless, as explained by Holding, the ultimate ambition of the preference ban was to 'demolish Country Party strongholds' and secure a pure two-party system in Victoria.[68]

Despite the Labor preference ban, Moss apparently still believed that a deal could be salvaged for the 1970 state election. Indeed, he publicly claimed that a CP-ALP coalition ministry, or a Labor-backed CP government, was a distinct possibility.[69] While the CP had supported Labor ministries from the crossbench in the past, and the ALP had done the same in turn for the CP, a *joint* ALP-CP coalition ministry had never previously been openly contemplated by a CP leader. It would appear that Moss was driven to this position more by his loathing of the Premier than an overt ideological sympathy for the policies of the Labor Party. Moreover, it was abundantly clear that the CP would remain a marginal force in Victorian politics so long as the Liberal Party maintained its strangle hold on the Assembly. Whether the CP party-room and rank-and-file membership, or indeed the Labor Party, would have tolerated a joint 'red-green' ministry in practice is doubtful. Nevertheless, it is instructive that as late at 1970, the Victorian CP continued to occupy a sufficiently ambiguous 'centre' position that an ALP-CP government or legislative alliance was at least within the realm of possibility.

[66] Ibid.
[67] *Age*, 11 June 1968, 3.
[68] *Canberra Times*, 17 November 1969, 2.
[69] *Age*, 22 January 1970, 1; *Canberra Times*, 22 January 1970, 3.

At the Central Council meeting convened to determine the CP's electoral strategy for the 1970 election, Moss, Evans, and Swinburne (who had succeeded Byrnes as leader in the Legislative Council) all argued in favour of allocating CP second preferences to the ALP. As Ken Wright later recalled, he opposed the plan as he 'well knew the strong views of my area on this issue'.[70] Wright was one of just six Central Councillors to vote against the proposal.[71] The ALP country conference in March 1970 resolved by a significant majority to reject any deals with the Country Party on preferences, coalitions, or minority government.[72] Moss was unrepentant, proclaiming that the CP would 'use every means possible' to dislodge the Bolte Government and that directing CP preferences to Labor was the only way of bringing 'some semblance of sanity back to politics' in Victoria.[73] During the course of the 1970 election campaign, Bolte made much of the CP preference issue. He branded the Country Party a 'Labor front' and declared his confidence that farmers would refuse to preference a socialist-aligned party.[74]

The Country Party lost four Assembly seats at the election (Kara Kara to Labor, and Lowan, Gippsland South, and Gippsland West to the Liberal Party) and one in the Council (Gippsland Province). As Wright put it, the result was 'an unmitigated disaster' which confirmed his 'worst fears' about the preference arrangement.[75] The Country Party had been caught in a perfect electoral storm: its state-wide primary vote dropped by more than a fifth to just 107,011 (6.4 percent) down from 136,126 (8.7 percent) in 1967; a preference deal with Labor did not materialise; and two popular CP incumbent members were not available to recontest their seats, namely Leslie Cochrane who had retired in Gippsland West, and Bert

[70] Wright, *With the Nationals in Spring Street*, 45-46.
[71] Ibid.
[72] *Canberra Times*, 9 March 1970, 9.
[73] *Age*, 14 May 1970, 1.
[74] *Canberra Times*, 15 May 1970, 12.
[75] Ken Wright, *With the Nationals in Spring Street*, 46.

Hyland in Gippsland South who had passed away two months before the election.

CP preferences votes had favoured Labor in all contests where they were distributed and were instrumental in aiding the ALP to pick up Dundas, Kara Kara, Morwell, and Portland, and retain Midlands. Nevertheless, a substantial minority of CP voters – as high as 45 percent in Western Province and 40.6 percent in Morwell – refused to preference the ALP. It is likely that many of the nearly 30,000 voters who abandoned the CP in 1970 were alienated by the preference debacle. As recounted in 1985 by Hewson, who had lost his upper house seat in 1970, his supporters 'still remind me of the agony they suffered' in being directed by the Country Party to preference Labor.[76] Following the election, the Federal Country Party President, E.F.S. Roberts, declared that the preference issue was the 'major cause' of the disaster.[77] The organisational arm of the Victorian Country Party, however, stated only that it 'was at a loss' to explain the result.[78]

The overarching electoral strategy championed by Moss had been broadly sound in principle. A preference exchange between the Labor and Country parties was, in theory, the most direct means of reducing Liberal numbers in the Victorian Parliament. Prior to 1970, the party had long been able to exploit its ambiguous relationship with the Labor Party without incurring a backlash at the ballot box. Moss and the CP leadership had failed to account for two important shifts in the political landscape since the last red-green alliance of 1950-52, however. Firstly, purged of much of its formerly ascendant right-wing Catholic element following the 1955 split, the Victorian Labor Party had moved decisively towards the views

[76] Henry Arthur Hewson interviewed by Tony Hannan for the Australian Parliament's oral history project, December 1985, session 9 [https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-217602024/listen?searchTerm=arthur%20hewson].
[77] *Canberra Times*, 2 June 1970, 7.
[78] Ibid.

Seat	% Preferences to ALP	% Preferences to LPA	% Preferences to DLP
Dundas	64.1	35.9	-
Gippsland Province	75.4	24.6	-
Midlands	60.8	23.2	16.0
Morwell	59.4	40.6	-
Narracan	66.2	33.8	-
Portland	63.9	36.1	-
South-Western Province	55.4	26.0	15.6
Warrnambool	70.1	22.0	13.8
Western Province	54.3	45.7	-

Table 4.1. Distribution of CP preference votes at the 1970 Victorian Election.

of its inflexibly doctrinaire left faction and was no longer as willing to prop up its agrarian fair-weather friend, not even to advance the cause of dislodging Bolte from power.[79] Secondly, the increasingly conservative rural electorate – composed of ever-fewer farm labourers and radical-inclined small producers – was more hostile to open red-green political collaboration, even if a sizeable bloc of the Country Party's 'rusted-on' supporters could be induced to follow a pro-Labor preference card. The political career of George Moss was finished. He declined to renominate for the leadership, glumly informed the press that 'perhaps the party will be better off under another leader', and retired at the next election.[80] Moss was succeeded as leader by Peter Ross-Edwards, MLA for Shepparton, the protégé of

[79] Bill Guy, *A life on the left: a biography of Clyde Cameron* (Kent Town: Wakefield Press, 1999), 218-219.
[80] *Canberra Times*, 16 June 1970, 3.

John McEwen, who considered him to be the 'white hope' of the Country Party in state politics.[81]

George Moss's bold political strategy represented an audacious bid to revive the CP as a powerful force in Victorian politics by reclaiming its place as the 'hinge party' of the parliament, but its spectacular failure in 1970 only further marginalised the party and condemned it to another two decades of exile on the crossbenches. Moss had overestimated the extent to which the Victorian ALP would tolerate the old-fashioned CP horse-trading without at least some commensurate return for the Opposition. The humbled and chastened Victorian Country Party was about to move in quite a different – and more conservative – direction.

IV. The shift to the conservative right: The Ross-Edwards era, 1970 – 1988

In the historical pantheon of Victorian Country-National Party leaders, Peter Ross-Edwards stands apart as by far the longest serving leader, having held the role for a period of 18 years and four months in total. Upon stepping down from the leadership in October 1988, Ross-Edwards had led the Victorian C-NP for a full quarter of its history as a parliamentary party. This achievement was all the more remarkable given that Ross-Edwards was a somewhat reluctant leader. He openly admitted that he had never particularly wanted the position in the first place and that he found the role at times 'very odious and difficult'.[82] Furthermore, Peter Ross-Edwards is the only Victorian C-NP leader never to have attained ministerial office. During his 27 years in parliament (1967-1991), the C-NP spent 26 of them in lonely exile on the crossbenches, shifting to sit with the Liberals as part of the official Opposition shortly

[81] *Canberra Times*, 17 June 1970, 3
[82] *Age*, 20 August 1980, 6.

before his retirement. Consequently, Ross-Edwards' historical legacy is to be found not in the statute books, but rather in his impact on his own party, which he successfully remodelled as a credible, orthodox conservative, anti-socialist force in Victorian politics.

Upon assuming the leadership of the Country Party in June 1970, Ross-Edwards immediately set upon repudiating his predecessor's tactical experimentation and pro-Labor flirtations. He declared that it was 'most unlikely' his party would ever again direct preferences to Labor candidates.[83] An avowed conservative firmly on the right of the ideological spectrum, Ross-Edwards freely conceded that he would have joined the Liberal Party rather than the Country Party had he resided in Melbourne instead of Shepparton.[84] Invariably polite, well-informed, and measured in his remarks, reflecting his previous occupation as a country solicitor, Ross-Edwards was marked out at Spring Street by a pronounced speech impediment that had afflicted him since his youth. Ross-Edwards's deputy for the first twelve years of his leadership was Milton Whiting, who had served as the state member for Mildura since 1962. One of 'Sunraysia's favourite sons', Whiting was a dried fruit and citrus grower from Merbein and Robinvale.[85]

The Liberal Party also experienced its own leadership transition not long after the Country Party, with the ascension of Rupert Hamer to the Premier's office upon the retirement of Sir Henry Bolte in August 1972. An urbane lawyer of liberal disposition from Melbourne's leafy inner eastern suburbs, Hamer was a strikingly different character from his rustic and pugnacious predecessor. Hamer's dealings with Ross-Edwards and the Country-National

[83] *Canberra Times*, 6 August 1970, 9.
[84] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 October 2012.
[85] "Sad passing of La Trobe statesman," *La Trobe University News*, 2010 [https://www.latrobe.edu.au/news/articles/2010/article/sad-passing-of-la-trobe-statesman].

Party were courteous, fair-minded, and at times magnanimous. By way of illustration, when the Parliamentary National Party fell below twelve members in April 1978 and thereby lost its official party status according to parliamentary rules, Hamer agreed to provide the same level of staffing and resources as had been previously allocated.[86]

This thawed relationship between the parliamentary leadership of the two non-Labor parties did not extend to their respective organisational wings. In 1971, the Liberal Party made an unsuccessful but determined attempt to poach the Division of Murray following McEwen's retirement. At the 1972 federal election only the intervention of Prime Minister McMahon prevented the Liberals from launching a similar bid for Wimmera, held by Robert King for the CP.[87] The relationship between the two non-Labor parties deteriorated further following the termination of the federal coalition agreement after the 1972 election. While the Liberal Party was eventually dissuaded from contesting the seat of Gippsland, held by Peter Nixon, fierce three-cornered contests took place elsewhere across the state throughout the 1970s. In 1972, Arthur Hewson rather miraculously won McMillan for the CP from an Independent Liberal member with just 16.6 percent of the primary vote and a fortuitous distribution of preference votes. Although Hewson held McMillan at the 1974 election, he was ultimately defeated by a Liberal candidate in 1975. In 1973, the Liberal state executive terminated the Senate joint ticket arrangement, which had traditionally reserved the 'safe' second position for a CP candidate, and instead proposed to demote the sitting CP Senator, James Webster, to the precarious third position.[88] Federal Liberal President, Robert Southey, justified the decision based on the Victorian CP's 'long record of belligerence and opportunist dalliance

[86] Wright, *With the Nationals in Spring Street*, 79.
[87] *Canberra Times*, 14 July 1972, 1.
[88] Tim Colebatch, *Dick Hamer: The liberal Liberal* (Brunswick: Scribe Publications, 2014), 260.

with Labor'.[89] The VCP Central Council begrudgingly accepted the new arrangement.[90] While Webster was comfortably re-elected at the double-dissolution election in 1974, his successor, Laurence Neal, who filled the casual vacancy when Webster was appointed High Commissioner to New Zealand, was not so fortunate at the 1980 election. In 1977, the Liberals successfully won the federal Division of Indi from the National Party by dislodging Mac Holten, who had held the seat since 1958.

A similar war of attrition was fought in the state arena. At the 1973 state election, Neil McInnes, a travel agent, wrested Gippsland South from the Liberal incumbent, James Taylor, by a narrow twelve-vote margin. This victory was offset, however, by the loss of Swan Hill to Liberal candidate Alan Wood, and the defeat of Robert May and Clive Mitchell in Gippsland and Western provinces respectively. Going into the election, Ross-Edwards had boldly predicted that the CP would hold the balance of power in the Assembly, and had indicated that he would request the deputy premiership and portfolios of state development and housing in any coalition ministry.[91] The result, however, was a landslide Liberal victory, with the Hamer Government securing 46 seats in the Assembly, compared to 18 for Labor and eight for the Country Party, complemented by a comfortable Liberal majority in the Legislative Council.

The result was no better at the 1976 state election. The youthful Bill Baxter, previously MLA for Murray Valley, was unable to fend off the Liberal assault on Benambra after the retirement of Tom Mitchell. Even with the expansion of the Assembly from 73 to 81 members and the allocation of DLP preferences to National Party candidates in all contests,

[89] *Canberra Times*, 7 August 1973, 1.
[90] *Canberra Times*, 27 August 1973, 1.
[91] *Canberra Times*, 15 April 1972, 3; *Canberra Times*, 4 May 1973, 3.

the party was unable to make any compensatory gains elsewhere. In the Legislative Council, the abolition of Northern Province and its replacement by a new province centred on Bendigo – electoral territory far less favourable to the National Party – cost Michael Clarke his previously safe upper house seat. Clarke's fellow member for Northern Province, Stuart McDonald, the NP leader in the Legislative Council, suffered an identical fate in 1979. Lowan was clawed back from the Liberal Party in 1979, when farmer and ex-VFL player Bill McGrath defeated the incumbent member, Jim McCabe.

At the 1975 state conference, the delegates voted to follow the Queensland division of the party and dispense with its overtly rural 'Country Party' branding. The new name of 'National Party' won convincingly with 701 votes, compared to 200 for 'National Country Party' (the name initially used by the federal and Western Australian divisions, and adopted in New South Wales in 1977), 27 for 'National and Country Party' and just eleven for the old 'Country Party' title.[92] The name change was widely supported across the party, including the 'elderly diehards' who, it was assumed, would be most attached to the old brand.[93] In the accompanying press coverage, Ross-Edwards expressed his delight at the change, and declared that it represented a 'new era' for the party as it sought to broaden its focus beyond sectional rural issues and attract supporters from 'all walks of life'.[94]

The adoption of the new 'National Party' name in 1975 reflected the shift in how the state party had been marketing itself to the electorate following the 1970 election. Ross-Edwards gradually stepped away from the rural-focused 'country-minded' vision of his predecessors, and instead framed the party on broader philosophical lines more likely to resonate in

[92] Davey, *Ninety Not Out*, 145-146; *Canberra Times*, 21 April 1975, 3.
[93] Wright, *With the Nationals in Spring Street*, 61.
[94] *Age*, 21 April 1975, 5.

Figure 4.1. Peter Nixon, Doug Anthony, and Ian Sinclair try to sell the new 'National Party' branding to replace the old 'cocky party' image, *Canberra Times* editorial cartoon.[95]

provincial urban-dominated constituencies, such as in his own seat of Shepparton. In his 1973 policy launch, for instance, Ross-Edwards pitched the Country Party as a 'free enterprise party concerned about the freedom of the individual… constructive in its thinking and anxious to make Victoria a better place for all Victorians regardless of where they live'.[96] For the first time in its history, the party released comprehensive policy documents, such as 'Blueprint for Victoria' in 1976, running to a hundred pages in length, with detailed policies on issues as broad ranging as the arts, youth affairs, sport, and recreation.[97] In a marked break with the past, the party's policy on individual civil rights occupied pride of place on page two of the platform, with the agricultural policy demoted to a lowly page 56 after the sections dedicated to youth, housing, transport, health, and education.

[95] Geoff Pryor, *Canberra Times*, 19 October 1982, 2.
[96] Peter Ross-Edwards, 'Country Party State Election Policy Speech, 3 May 1973, Shepparton', CSURA, PG2694, Box 13, Item 89, 28.
[97] National Party of Australia – Victoria, 'Blueprint for Victoria: The Policy of the National Party for the State Election, March 20 1976', CSURA, PG2694, Box 13, Item 62.

The Victorian C-NP situated itself firmly to the right of the Liberal Government, which, under Hamer's leadership had shifted markedly towards the liberal-progressive centre to embrace social liberalism and 'quality of life' issues such as environmental protection and more assertive urban planning. Hamer's push to abolish capital punishment in 1975, for instance, was opposed by all National Party members despite the party leadership having granted a free conscience vote on the issue.[98] The increasing divergence on social issues between the two non-Labor parties prompted the DLP to re-direct its preferences towards the C-NP rather than the Liberal Party. Unfortunately for the C-NP, by this juncture the DLP was a sharply declining force in Victorian politics, having attracted just 2.6 percent of the state-wide primary vote in 1976 compared to 17 percent in 1961.

The efforts of Ross-Edwards to realign the Country-National Party more overtly to the right of the political spectrum placed it at odds with the course charted by its surviving sister parties in Northern Europe as they, too, grappled with how to expand their electoral support beyond their perpetually declining agrarian founding constituencies. Many of the leading agrarian parties of Europe of the interwar years, such as those of Romania, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia, had been eliminated by the Stalinist regimes that had come to power behind the Iron Curtain in the immediate post-war years.[99] Dedicated stand-alone agrarian parties had also disappeared in Canada as the political arms of the various province-based United Farmers' organisations had amalgamated with either the socialist-labour forces or with the

[98] Wright, *With the Nationals in Spring Street*, 63-64; Colebatch, *Dick Hamer*, 254-257.
[99] Karel Kaplan, *The Short March: The Communist Takeover of Czechoslovakia, 1945-1948* (London: C. Hurst and Co, 1987), 118; Vít Hloušek and Lubomír Kopeček, *Origin, Ideology and Transformation of Political Parties: East-Central and Western Europe Compared* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 96-97.

Liberals. [100] In Alberta, the remnant of the United Farmers Party was wiped out entirely at the 1935 provincial election by the rise of the Social Credit Party.[101]

The surviving independent agrarian parties, concentrated mainly in the Nordic nations of Northern Europe, were faced with a challenging post-war electoral landscape as urbanisation and a shrinking agricultural sector undermined the strength of the agrarian vote.[102] Small family farms were in rapid decline.[103] In Finland, for example, the proportion of the national population directly dependent on agriculture for its livelihood declined from approximately one half in 1945 to about one fifth in 1970.[104] From the late 1950s, the agrarian parties of Norway, Sweden, and Finland rebranded and repositioned themselves as middle-of-the-road 'Centre' parties embracing more broadly-pitched, centrist, post-industrial policy concerns such as environmentalism, cooperative industrial democracy, and, in more recent decades, multiculturalism, 'eco-humanism' and gender equality.[105] The Swedish and Norwegian parties also made use of single-issue campaigns to target wider non-agrarian constituencies. Thus, the Swedish Centre Party positioned itself as an anti-nuclear protest party in the early 1970s, just as the Norwegian Centre Party sought to harness its opposition to the European Union to win over 'Eurosceptic' urban and provincial voters.[106] The Nordic parties were also much more proactive in seeking to build an electoral presence in metropolitan areas than was

[100] S.M. Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism: The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in Saskatchewan: A Study in Political Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), 103; Nelson Wiseman, *Social Democracy in Manitoba: A History of the CCF-NDP* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1983), 29.
[101] Alvin Finkel, *The Social Credit Phenomenon in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 38.
[102] Hloušek and Kopeček, *Origin, Ideology and Transformation of Political Parties*, 90-91.
[103] Risto Sänkiaho, "A Model of the Rise of Populism and Support for the Finnish Rural Party," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 6, no. A6 (1971): 35; David Matheson and Risto Sänkiaho, "The Split in the Finnish Rural Party: Populism in Decline in Finland," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 10, no. A10 (January 1975): 220.
[104] Kari Hokkanen, "Die finnischen Bauernparteien," in *Europäische Bauernparteien im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Heinz Gollwitzer (Stuttgart: Gustav Fischer Verlag, 1977), 201 [German, Germany].
[105] Maximillian Spinner, *Continuity and Change: Adaptation strategies of agrarian parties in Scandinavia and Central Eastern Europe Compared* (Norderstedt: GRIN Verlag, 2003), 5-7; David Arter, "The Finnish Centre Party: A Case of Successful Transformation?," in *From Farmyard to City Square? The Electoral Adaptation of the Nordic Agrarian Parties*, ed. David Arter (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2001), 80.
[106] Hloušek and Kopeček, *Origin, Ideology and Transformation of Political Parties*, 90-91; Dag Arne Christensen, "Adaptation of Agrarian parties in Norway and Sweden," *Party Politics* 3, no. 3 (July 1997): 400.

the Victorian C-NP. The Swedish agrarians, for instance, first contested urban seats in the national capital in 1948 and Gothenburg in 1952, although they did not attain a Stockholm-based MP until 1964.[107]

Although the Country-National Party was much less adventurous than its Nordic counterparts in re-branding and re-positioning itself on the ideological spectrum, it enjoyed similar success in broadly maintaining its parliamentary strength, at least from the mid-1950s through to the late-1980s. Both the Swedish and Norwegian parties enjoyed transitory 'sugar hit' spikes in their electoral support as remodelled 'single-issue'-oriented Centre parties. The Swedish Centre Party, for instance, attained its best-ever result on a surge of support for its anti-nuclear platform at the 1973 election, winning a quarter of the seats in the *Riksdag.*[108] Nevertheless, all five parties (the Finnish, Swedish, and Norwegian Centre parties, as well as the Victorian and Australian Country-National parties) ended the 1980s with a broadly similar proportion of their respective legislatures as they had held in the mid-1950s (Table 4.2). Despite unfavourable demographic trends eating away at their traditional constituencies, the surviving agrarian parties had broadened themselves just enough to attract sufficient voters to hold most of their ground, or even marginally expand their electoral presence.

None of the former farmers' parties had as yet entirely transcended their rural and agrarian origins at the ballot box, however. As late as 1982, the Finnish Centre Party was still dependent on primary producers for as much as two-fifths of its primary vote.[109] In 1987 –

[107] Anders Widfeldt, "The Swedish Centre Party: The Poor Relation of the Family?," in *From Farmyard to City Square? The Electoral Adaptation of the Nordic Agrarian parties,* ed. David Arter (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), 7; David Arter, "The Finnish Centre Party: Profile of a 'Hinge group'," *West European Politics* 2, no. 1 (1979): 110.
[108] David Arter, "Party Change: Modernising the Nordic Farmers' parties," in *The National Party: Prospects for the great survivors,* eds. Linda Courtenay Botterill and Geoff Cockfield (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2009), 176-177.
[109] Arter, "The Finnish Centre Party: A Case of Successful Transformation?," 87.

admittedly a poor year for the party – the Centre Party averaged just 2.1 per cent of the vote in Helsinki, Finland's national capital and largest city, a figure worse than that attained by the Victorian National Party in the metropolitan seat of Springvale in 1988 (2.5 percent primary vote), the party's sole attempt to contest an entirely urbanised Melbourne state seat in its history.[110] The Finnish Centre Party did not win its first seat in Helsinki until 1991, after decades of sustained effort.[111] Similarly, by the end of the 1980s – some three decades after the Norwegian Centre Party had abandoned its overtly rural and agrarian name and policy focus – approximately 70 to 80 percent of the party's supporters resided in rural districts, a figure that had remained essentially unchanged since the late 1950s.[112]

Despite the widening ideological rift that emerged between the two right-of-centre non-Labor parties in Victoria in the 1970s, the C-NP finally abandoned its long-held ambition of playing a centre 'pivot' role in the Victorian party system and recalibrated itself into a 'wing party' intent on governing exclusively with the Liberal Party. In a stark reversal of the bellicose anti-Liberal rhetoric of the Moss era, Ross-Edwards insisted that his party was intent on 'improving rather than changing the present [Hamer] Government', and that its ambition was to 'work hard side-by-side with our parliamentary non-socialist colleagues'.[113] Victorian state politics did not immediately revert to an effective two-party political system, however. C-NP hopes of returning to power rested on the Liberal Party losing enough seats to deprive it of its outright majority while retaining enough strength to keep Labor from retaking government, thereby necessitating the formation of a coalition Liberal-National ministry. Throughout the

[110] Ibid., 89.
[111] Arter, "Party Change," 181.
[112] Dag Arne Christensen, "The Norwegian Agrarian-Centre Party: Class, Rural or Catchall Party?," in *From Farmyard to City Square? The Electoral Adaptation of the Nordic Agrarian parties,* ed. David Arter (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), 49-50.
[113] National Party of Australia – Victoria, "Blueprint for Victoria," 1.

Party	Election	Parliamentary Representation/Size of legislature	Election	Parliamentary Representation/Size of legislature
Finnish Agrarian League-Centre Party	1954	53/200 (26.5%)	1987	40/200 (20%)
Swedish Farmers League-Centre Party	1956	19/231 (8.2%)	1988	42/349 (12.0%)
Norwegian Farmers-Centre Party	1957	15/150 (10%)	1989	11/165 (6.7%)
Victorian Country-National Party	1955	10/66 (15%)	1988	9/88 (10.2%)
Australian Country-National Party	1954	17/121 (14.0%)	1987	19/148 (12.8%)

Table 4.2. Comparison of votes and parliamentary strength of the agrarian parties of Finland, Sweden, Norway, Victoria, and Australia (federal) between the mid-1950s and late-1980s.

1970s, the Liberal Government maintained more than enough parliamentary numbers to govern in its own right.

Some within the National Party, such as Deputy Leader Eddie Hann, argued that the transition of the movement into a broad-based conservative party presented an opportunity to emulate the success of its Queensland counterpart and establish itself as the larger non-Labor party in Victorian politics.[114] To achieve this lofty ambition, however, the Victorian Nationals needed to contest and win seats in metropolitan Melbourne and the provincial cities. While the party was adept at *announcing* its intention to contest a wider range of seats – in 1983 it declared that it would contest every seat in Victoria at the next state election – it was rarely able to follow through with concrete action.[115] In 1985, for instance the National Party ran in some provincial seats, such as those around Bendigo, but its mooted metropolitan candidates failed to materialise. The party did nominate candidates for some metropolitan federal seats, however, to maximise its Senate vote at both the 1984 and 1987 elections. In

[114] *Canberra Times*, 14 August 1983, 6.
[115] *Canberra Times*, 23 November 1983, 3.

1984, the National Party contested a record 22 seats across Victoria, including, for the first time in its history, inner urban constituencies such as Melbourne Ports and Higgins. With the exception of the peri-urban seat of Burke, none of the urban NP candidates attracted even three percent of the primary vote. The party contested 17 seats at the 1987 federal election and again performed abysmally across Melbourne, failing to attract even two percent of the vote in Aston, Calwell, Casey, Chisholm, Isaacs, Jagajaga, and Streeton.

This failure to expand the party's electoral base, or at very least, to claw back more rural seats from the Liberal Party, was just one of the issues that fed into the long-running leadership tensions in the state parliamentary party throughout virtually the entirety of Ross-Edwards's tenure. Bruce Evans had not surrendered his ambitions after his defeat for the leadership in 1970; he stood again on multiple occasions between 1973 and 1982 but was unsuccessful each time.[116] Edward (Eddie) Hann, MLA for Rodney – a 'solid, dour, and humourless' dairy farmer and fervent Christian from Lockington – was another persistent leadership aspirant.[117] Hann and Evans launched a renewed but unsuccessful assault on Ross-Edwards in August 1980 following the defection of Neil McInnes, MLA for Gippsland South, to the Liberal Party.[118] Hann declared that the 'problem lies with the leadership…. We have gained no ground in the past two or three elections.'[119] Other critics of Ross-Edwards contended that he lacked charisma and telegenic charm.[120] Along with Evans, Hann unsuccessfully stood against Ross-Edwards for the leadership in 1982, but succeeded only in dislodging Milton Whiting for the deputy leadership, a position he was to retain until 1988.[121]

[116] Wright, *With the Nationals in Spring Street*, 46, 96, 104,
[117] Ibid., 122-123.
[118] *Age*, 13 August 1980, 1.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Wright, *With the Nationals in Spring Street*, 122-123.
[121] Ibid., 104.

The 1982 state election, in which the flagging 27-year-old Liberal Government was at last defeated by the resurgent Labor Opposition, dashed National Party hopes of returning to office. Nonetheless, the party successfully weathered the nearly five percent swing to Labor with its state-wide primary vote holding steady despite having contested six fewer seats than in 1979. While the Liberal Party lost 17 seats, the National Party gained one by wresting Gippsland South back from McInnes. As a further bonus, the four National Party members in the Legislative Council emerged with the balance of power in the upper house for the first time since 1970. 'Buoyed by a sense of conservative mission' to do battle with Victoria's first socialist ministry since 1955, the reinvigorated National Party threatened to block Labor legislation on a range of issues including changes to probate duty, industrial relations reform, daylight savings, and electoral redistributions.[122] The Victorian Liberal Party elected a new leader to succeed the former Premier, Lindsay Thompson: Jeffrey (Jeff) Kennett. A young, brash, and outspoken advertising executive from Melbourne's eastern suburbs, Kennett was no friend of the National Party. During the 1982 campaign, he had stridently opposed any suggestion of forming a coalition, arguing that ordinary Victorians had 'no time for a party that represented 3 to 4 percent of the overall vote'.[123]

In 1983, the National Party recaptured Swan Hill from the Liberal Party at a by-election triggered by the retirement of Alan Wood. The National Party candidate, Barry Steggall, a farmer and former mayor of Swan Hill, led comfortably on primary votes and was easily elected on Labor preferences. A preference deal with Labor for the Swan Hill by-election had

[122] Paul Rodan, "The Liberals in Opposition," in *Labor to Office: the Victorian state election 1982*, eds. Brian Costar and Colin Hughes (Blackburn: Drummond, 1983), 255; Karen Owen, "The Victorian National Party: an investigation of the policymaking process which resulted in the National Party education policy statement released for the 1985 Victorian state election," (Master's thesis, University of Melbourne, 1990), 48.
[123] *Canberra Times*, 31 March 1982, 3.

been struck in return for support for the Cain Government's redistribution bill and an agreement that the Nationals would furnish the deputy president in the Legislative Council.[124] The preference deal did not extend to the by-election held in Warrnambool on the same day, however, and the National Party candidate, John McGrath, narrowly missed out to Liberal Adam Kempton.[125] McGrath defeated Kempton at the 1985 state election, which secured the National Party ten members in the Legislative Assembly, its strongest representation since 1967. McGrath was joined in the party-room by Roger Hallam, an accountant and former Hamilton City councillor who was elected for Western Province.[126]

Any hopes of securing an immediate rapprochement between the non-Labor parties in Victoria were dashed, however, by a destructive political bushfire raging from the north: the so-called 'Joh for PM' campaign. Flushed with confidence after the triumph of the Queensland Nationals at the 1986 state election, Premier Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen launched an audacious bid to transfer to federal politics and lead the non-Labor forces against the Hawke Government. The 'Joh for Canberra' or 'Joh for PM' campaign destabilised and destroyed the federal coalition, led by John Howard and Ian Sinclair for the Liberal and National parties respectively, both firm traditional 'coalitionists'. The Queensland National Party withdrew its members from the federal coalition in February 1987, a move which led to the formal dissolution of the coalition agreement three months later.[127] The Joh campaign flopped after Prime Minister Hawke called a snap early election. Bjelke-Petersen never nominated for a federal seat and the Labor Government was comfortably re-elected. The National Party lost two federal seats, both in Queensland.

[124] Wright, *With the Nationals in Spring Street*, 110-111.
[125] Ibid, 111.
[126] *Canberra Times*, 4 August 1990, 9.
[127] Paul Davey, *Joh for PM: The inside story of an extraordinary political drama* (Sydney: University of New South Wales, 2015), 35-56.

As it built up steam prior to the election, the 'Joh for PM' campaign posed a troubling quandary to the Victorian National Party. On the one hand, a successful Joh campaign had the potential to revitalise the National Party across Australia and allow it to break out of its rural electoral heartland. By way of illustration, a Morgan Gallup poll conducted in March 1987 found that the National Party primary vote could surge to 27 percent if led by Bjelke-Petersen, compared to just three percent if Sinclair remained in the leadership.[128] On the other hand, many in the Victorian party were highly sceptical of the campaign, including former Victorian State President and incoming Federal President Stuart McDonald, the outgoing Federal President Shirley McKerrow, and Bruce Lloyd, MHR for Murray.[129] The wider grassroots Victorian party was divided on the merits of the Joh push. At the 1987 state conference the membership split on a motion to 'endorse the move by Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen to remove the National Party from the Federal Coalition', with 70 votes in favour and 139 against.[130] Given that the state executive had publicly affirmed its support for the federal coalition in the lead up to the conference, this not-inconsiderable dissenting bloc was indicative of the strength of the pro-Joh camp within the rank-and-file membership.

The Victorian organisation was confronted with the very real prospect of Joh-aligned candidates contesting seats in competition with its own members and candidates. A split Senate vote would have fatally undermined the party's chance of securing a Senate seat in its own right. This problem was at least partly resolved in a deal struck between the Victorian and Queensland parties, whereby a separate Joh Senate ticket in Victoria was dropped in return for the Victorian National Party adopting a 25 percent 'flat tax' policy, a key plank of

[128] Ibid., 60.
[129] *Canberra Times*, 2 March 1987, 3.
[130] Davey, *Joh for PM*, 29-30.

the Joh platform.[131] Nevertheless, the Victorian party ultimately had to fend off several 'Joh Independent' lower house candidates on election day, including in Murray, Mallee, and Indi. The National Party Senate ticket attracted 5.7 percent of the primary vote, which was sufficient to elect Julian McGauran, a City of Melbourne councillor and brother of Gippsland MHR Peter McGauran.

Despite the impact of the Joh campaign on Liberal-National inter-party relations – or perhaps because of it – many influential members of the Victorian Liberal Party had arrived at the conclusion that a stable coalition agreement was essential for the non-Labor forces to defeat the Cain Government. In October 1987 Kennett's deputy, Tom Austin, was replaced in a party-room spill by Alan Brown. As later recalled by Reg Macey, Liberal MLC for Monash, 'Austin was one of the haters of the National Party. That's why he went… we needed to do something about the Nats.'[132] Kennett himself survived as leader by a single vote, fending off a challenge from Roger Pescott, an avowed coalition proponent.[133] Despite the Liberal realignment, no coalition was forthcoming prior to the state election. The 1988 election was to be the sixth campaign for Ross-Edwards as leader, and he pledged to step down should the Cain Government be re-elected.[134]

The election result was short of the mark: Labor lost just a single seat, Warrandyte, which fell to the Liberal Party. In another disappointing blow to the National Party, the seat of Mildura was lost to a Liberal candidate, Craig Bilstein, following the retirement of Milton Whiting. The loss of Mildura was partially offset, however, by a win in Gippsland Province in the

[131] Ibid., 156-158.
[132] Tony Parkinson, *Jeff: The Rise and Fall of a Political Phenomenon* (Ringwood: Viking, 2000), 92-94.
[133] Ibid., 92-93, 100.
[134] *Age*, 21 October 1988, 13.

Legislative Council, with the victory of Peter Hall, a former Carlton player in the VFL. True to his word, Ross-Edwards resigned from the leadership on 20 October 1988. Ross-Edwards remained on the backbench until his retirement in August 1991. Less than fourteen months later the Victorian National Party was back in government.

When asked upon his retirement to name his greatest contribution to politics, the rather characteristic answer proffered by Ross-Edwards was that he had '[led] a party that had built a reputation of having honesty and integrity'.[135] The maverick Victorian Country Party, famed for its political ruthlessness and wheeling-and-dealing parliamentary tactics, had been transformed into the reliably conservative and predictable National Party. Deprived of the balance of power in either parliamentary chamber for almost the entirety of the 1970s and much of the 1980s, the C-NP could no longer justify its existence by pointing to the concessions it had won by hardnosed bargaining in the backrooms of Spring Street. Instead, the party was only able to impress its agenda upon the government of the day through the gentler art of persuasion and by the ever-present threat of picking off vulnerable rural seats if the Liberal Party drifted too far from the values and views of country voters. In this context, a coalition agreement that secured the National Party a voice at the cabinet table or within the shadow ministry made eminent sense. By the time of Ross-Edwards's retirement, a workable state coalition agreement – a virtually unthinkable prospect in 1970 – was all but assured and required only a few practical details to be worked out for a final agreement to be signed. Securing the final signatures, however, was to be the work of a new generation.

[135] *Age*, 21 October 1988, 3.

V. Conclusion

The story of the Country-National Party in Victoria between 1955 and 1988 is one of survival amidst often unfavourable political circumstances. Deprived of any ministerial representation in the state arena for four decades, and at times lacking even the capacity to pressure the government in the house of review, the C-NP was fortunate to retain so much of its remaining electoral base, particularly when confronted with intense competition from the well-resourced and expansionist Liberal Party machine. The fact that it was able to do so, and at some elections even reclaim some of its lost electoral territory, reveals just how resilient a foundation had been built by the movement in its ascendant years and the enduring potency of the urban-rural divide in Victorian politics across the twentieth century.

The party had tried – and ultimately failed – at two alternative electoral strategies: resurrecting a red-green alliance modelled on the Labor-Country Party partnerships of decades past, and an attempt to refashion itself into a more broad-based conservative movement to the right of the Liberal Party capable of winning provincial and metropolitan support. Nevertheless, the party succeeded in building a modest electoral base beyond its traditional rural constituency to retain its hold on many of Victoria's rapidly-expanding provincial cities. While the Victorian Country-National Party was not as adventurous as its Nordic counterparts in rebranding and repositioning itself on the ideological and political spectrum, the comparative electoral data would suggest that it enjoyed similar success in maintaining its approximate relative position within the state legislature despite the declining power of the rural and agrarian vote.

Although some academic commentators, such as political scientist Louise Overacker, have identified the post-Second World War years as the key point of transition when the

overarching political strategy of the Victorian Country Party finally 'fell into line with that elsewhere' and became firmly 'allied to the non-Labor side', the analysis in this chapter has revealed that this shift occurred much later.[136] Ultimately, it was not until the early 1970s that the C-NP leadership conceded that its viability as a party of government would depend henceforth on its ability to corral the Liberal Party into a stable and enduring coalition. The Victorian Country-National Party had finally emerged as a right-aligned 'wing' party and abandoned its ambitions of acting as a hinge party in the Victorian Parliament. This key transition – arguably the single most important shift in the history of the party in the latter half of the twentieth century – was achieved not through a decisive conference or Central Council vote, but rather by a revolt of the party's own supporters at the ballot box at the 1970 state election.

[136] Louise Overacker, *Australian parties in a changing society: 1945-67* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1968), 247-248.

Chapter Five. Back in the 'main game'? Or the 'glorified rural arm of the Liberal Party'? The Pat McNamara Era, 1988-1999

I. Introduction

Following the historic party-room ballot of 20 October 1988, which elected Pat McNamara to succeed Peter Ross-Edwards, the new National Party leader appeared on the front steps of Parliament House for a press 'photo-op' with his predecessor. In an intriguing and unprecedented symbolic gesture, McNamara and Ross-Edwards were joined not by the new NP deputy leader, Bill McGrath, but rather the Liberal Opposition leader, Jeffrey (Jeff) Kennett. This carefully choreographed show of solidarity between the Liberal and National parties – both McNamara and Kennett embraced by the arms of Ross-Edwards – belied the fact that the two non-Labor parties were still far from united in Victoria, in large part because the Liberal leader had been implacably opposed to a state coalition throughout his career in politics. McNamara pledged all his 'enthusiasm and energy into ensuring that we turn the tide of socialism in Victoria' and declared that he was 'optimistic' about the prospects of forming a coalition with the Liberal Party in future.[1] As the events of the subsequent years would amply demonstrate, a coalition agreement would indeed be forthcoming, the 'tide of socialism' decisively reversed, and the political fate of Pat McNamara, and that of the Victorian National Party more widely, intimately intertwined with the ambitious and brash Kennett and the Liberal Party he led.

In the small pool of literature on the history of the Kennett Government, the National Party typically appears only in a peripheral capacity: more notable for its supposed enfeebled irrelevance amidst the tumult of the 'Kennett Revolution' than for its contributions to the Government. For example, as argued by Nick Economou, the National Party was effectively

[1] *Age*, 21 October 1988, 16.

'neuter[ed]… as a source of opposition to the [Kennett] Government's reform agenda' under the terms of the 1990 coalition agreement, as the 'adverse and disproportionate' impact of those reforms on country communities alienated the party's rural constituency.[2] Similarly, as observed by Brian Costar in 1999, prior to the defeat of the Kennett Government, 'the smooth relations between the Liberal and National parties can be explained by the political weakness of the smaller party. The National Party in Victoria has few political options other than to submit to the numerical dominance of the Liberal Party'.[3] While I am in substantial agreement with this widely shared interpretation, this chapter will seek to explore some of the neglected nuances in the Liberal-National cross-party relationship in Victoria during the McNamara era and provide the first detailed account of the Kennett Government written from the perspective of the National Party.

During its time as the very much junior coalition partner in the Kennett Government between 1992 and 1999, the Victorian National Party had to grapple with several thorny strategic challenges that it had never previously encountered in the state political arena. For the first time in its history, the parliamentary wing was in office as part of a state composite ministry but deprived of the balance of power – in both parliamentary chambers – by a much larger and more dominant coalition partner that had no need of its support. For many decades the party had been the master of minority government and upper house blackmail tactics to leverage concessions from its urban-based counterparts. Following the 1992 election, however, the National Party was left to navigate a new political landscape without even a stable 'coalition culture' amongst the two non-Labor parties – the last state composite ministry having ended in acrimony nearly half a century earlier. When viewed solely from

[2] Nick Economou, "Jeff Kennett: the larrikin metropolitan," in *The Victoria Premiers: 1856-2006*, eds. Paul Strangio and Brian Costar (Annandale: Federation Press, 2006), 368.
[3] Brian Costar, "Coalition Government: an unequal partnership," in *The Kennett Revolution: Victorian politics in the 1990s*, eds. Brian Costar and Nicholas Economou (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999), 97.

the perspective of the junior partner, the long sought-after coalition agreement and subsequent Liberal-National Government ultimately proved to be more costly and traumatic in practice than its strategists might have anticipated. As the 'Kennett Revolution' swept through Victoria, leaving in its wake a mounting sense of anger and grievance in many country districts, the National Party found itself ensnared in an invidious, self-imposed political trap. The party was unable to extract a better deal from its unsympathetic coalition partner, but was unwilling to withdraw in protest from the ministry lest it surrender the limited influence it retained at the cabinet table and the hard-won spoils of office after so long on the crossbenches.

The chapter will also examine the tensions that developed as the movement experienced arguably the most significant ideological shift in its history: the abandonment of its traditional 'country-minded' sympathy for market intervention and collectivist agrarianism to embrace the new neoliberal or 'economic rationalist' order that was transforming Australian agriculture and rural communities. Deprived of their traditional vehicle to channel their discontent in parliament, namely an independent Country-National Party, discontented rural Victorians began to turn to alternatives that had not been seriously countenanced in decades: rural independents and even the new-look, rurally-consciously Labor Party. The eventual consequence was a humiliating and unexpected election defeat for the Kennett Government, the loss of National Party heartland seats, and the termination of the coalition agreement.

II. Locking down a coalition agreement

A tall, wiry, moustachioed farmer and real estate agent from Nagambie in the Goulburn Valley with 'dancing blue eyes, the strong arms of a rower and the gift of the blarney', Patrick (Pat) McNamara came to the leadership at the age of 39, by far the youngest leader in

the history of the Victorian Country-National Party.[4] A creature firmly of the party, McNamara had joined the movement in 1975, and served as both state and federal president of the Young Nationals, junior vice president of the Victorian organisational wing, and chairman of the Benalla District Council. After several terms on the Goulburn Shire Council, including a stint as shire president in 1977, he was elected to parliament for the state seat of Benalla in 1982.[5] In the 1988 leadership ballot, McNamara emerged victorious in a three-way contest against Eddie Hann and Barry Steggall.[6] According to Ken Wright, McNamara was considered to be a 'good front man, excellent with the media, and particularly good on television', a skill that had largely eluded his predecessor.[7]

McNamara's first priority as leader was to secure a workable coalition agreement with the Liberal Party. By the late 1980s, the tide was gradually turning against the anti-coalitionists in the Victorian Liberal Party as frustration mounted with the failure of the Opposition to dent the electoral strength of the Cain Labor Government at the 1985 and 1988 state elections. The embarrassing failure of the Liberal Party to wrest either the seat of Rodney from the Nationals – the NPA securing a thumping majority despite an aggressive Liberal campaign – or the eminently-winnable seat of Greensborough from Labor at two by-elections in early 1989 rendered Kennett's doctrinaire anti-coalition position untenable.[8] Five days after the Greensborough by-election, the Liberal and National Party leaders announced the establishment of a 'joint working group' to investigate closer ties between the two parties, 'including the creation of a coalition and the development of common policies'.[9]

[4] *Age*, 5 November 1999, 25.
[5] *Age*, 21 October 1988, 16.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ken Mackenzie Wright, *With the Nationals in Spring Street: An autobiography of soldier settlement, flying in the RAAF, local government, and parliamentary service* (Mildura: Kenneth Mackenzie Wright, 1996), 146.
[8] Ibid., 151; *Canberra Times*, 17 April 1989, 3.
[9] *Canberra Times*, 20 April 1989, 5.

Despite this progress, the actual signing of the coalition agreement was still more than twelve months away. The state coalition question was complicated by its federal implications, including the position of the Victorian National Party Senator, Julian McGauran, who had been elected on a separate National Party ticket in 1987. For an agreement to be secured, McGauran had to be slotted into a joint Liberal-National Senate ticket, potentially to the detriment of a Liberal senator. The federal Liberal leader, John Howard, proposed an arrangement whereby McGauran would be placed at the essentially unwinnable fourth position on the ticket for the forthcoming federal election, in return for the National Party being allocated the 'safe' second position at the following election.[10] The new Senate deal was endorsed by a secret ballot – 387 votes in favour to 135 against – at the NP state conference.[11] Howard praised the compromise deal as 'the greatest Coalition breakthrough in Victoria ever' that went 'far beyond anything ever achieved, even in the Menzies era'.[12]

One further sticking point in the negotiations was the status of the seat of Mildura, which the Liberal Party had captured from the Nationals at the 1988 state election. Many rank-and-file NP members were adamant that the party should be permitted to field a candidate against the sitting Liberal member, Craig Bildstein, in a one-off exception to the coalition agreement.[13] Understandably, the Liberal Party was strongly opposed to any such arrangement and rejected the suggestion.[14] The rapidly declining fortunes of the Labor Government added further urgency to the coalition discussions as the Liberal and National parties grew increasingly hopeful about their prospects at the next state election. The Cain-Kirner

[10] *Canberra Times*, 7 April 1989, 10.
[11] Costar, "Coalition Government," 90.
[12] *Sun Herald* (Sydney), 30 April 1989, 16.
[13] Wright, *With the Nationals in Spring Street*, 152.
[14] Ibid.

Government was collapsing under the strain of cascading political disasters, including a chronic tramways strike, a financial crisis at the State Bank of Victoria, a substantial shortfall in the statutory scheme of workers' compensation, systematic mismanagement of the Victorian Economic Development Corporation, and the outbreak of factional warfare within the Labor Party.[15]

The finalised coalition agreement – the first in Victoria since 1947 – was signed on 30 July 1990 by Pat McNamara and Alan Brown, who had succeeded Kennett as Opposition Leader in May 1989.[16] Whereas the terms of the federal and New South Wales coalition agreements were usually contained within a short letter exchanged between the two party leaders, the Victorian agreement extended to six full pages of carefully crafted legal prose.[17] As noted by Brian Costar, 'if informality and brevity are indicators of trust between parties, then the 1990 coalition agreement was a prenuptial contract rather than a meeting of true minds'.[18] Under the terms of the agreement, neither party could contest seats held by the other – even upon the death or retirement of a sitting Liberal or National Party member – unless the parties agreed otherwise in writing.[19] The National Party would be entitled to four representatives on the coalition front bench, as well as the deputy premiership and cabinet secretary position in the event of winning office.[20] Crucially, the agreement provided that it was still binding even if the Liberal Party was to win a parliamentary majority in its own right.[21] Alan Brown was insistent that the new coalition agreement would pass the test of time: 'It's not an election-to-

[15] Paul Strangio, "John Cain jnr: The burden of history," in *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*, eds. Paul Strangio and Brian Costar (Annandale: Federation press, 2006), 338-343.
[16] *Canberra Times*, 31 July 1990, 5.
[17] Costar, "Coalition Government," 90.
[18] Ibid.
[19] This was a major departure from the usual practice in most other coalition agreements, which generally permitted three-cornered contests in the event of a retirement or vacancy in a seat. Wright, *With the Nationals in Spring Street*, 153.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.

election agreement, it's an agreement that's going to take us from decade to decade.'[22] As Costar later observed, the 'devilment' of the agreement was 'later to be found in its implementation'.[23]

Although the state coalition agreement was officially in force, the residual legacy of inter-party conflict would claim one final political scalp: Alan Brown, whose rather staid leadership style gradually eroded his support within the Parliamentary Liberal Party. Several rural Liberals were dissatisfied with the coalition deal and believed that Brown had been overly generous in guaranteeing four frontbench positions to the National Party regardless of its parliamentary numbers and in eliminating three-cornered contests.[24] Furthermore, according to newspaper accounts, some unnamed rural Liberals complained that Brown had imposed a double-standard by insisting on strict internal discipline for Liberal members while the Nationals 'went unchecked as they contravened Coalition policy and ignored or tried to upstage their Liberal partners on key issues such as conservation…'.[25] The discontent culminated in a successful coup against Brown's leadership in April 1991, which returned Kennett to his former position as leader of the Liberal Party.

A state election was called for 3 October 1992 by Premier Joan Kirner, who had succeeded John Cain as Labor leader in August 1990. With the Labor Government in dire political straits, a Liberal-National election victory was virtually a foregone conclusion.[26] Precluded from contesting Liberal-held seats such as Mildura, the National Party's sole opportunity for growth was in Labor-held electorates. This posed quite a challenge for the Nationals: the

[22] *Canberra Times*, 30 July 1990, 7.
[23] Costar, "Coalition Government," 91.
[24] *Canberra Times*, 29 April 1991, 12.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Jennifer Curtin, "Joan Kirner: the first feminist," in *The Victoria Premiers 1856-2006*, eds. Paul Strangio and Brian Costar (Annandale: Federation Press, 2006), 357-361.

party had not won an Assembly seat from the ALP since 1947. The Labor Party had long since collapsed as a serious force outside the large provincial centres and did not hold a single rural seat anywhere in the state. In 1992, the National Party contested three Labor-held seats: Bendigo West, Morwell, and Seymour, all three of which were ultimately won by the Liberal Party. The National Party's best result was in Morwell, where it secured 16.5 percent of the vote with Tom Wallace, the former MLA for Gippsland South, as its candidate. The NP comfortably retained all of its existing seats, including Gippsland South and Gippsland East, which returned new members, namely Peter Ryan and David Treasure respectively. The National Party state-wide primary vote remained essentially unaltered at 7.8 percent, a swing of just 0.1 percent, despite the collapse in Labor support across Victoria. The Liberal Party was the overwhelming beneficiary of voter discontent, picking up an additional nineteen Assembly seats and four in the Legislative Council: more than enough seats in both houses to govern in its own right. The double-edged nature of the 1990 coalition agreement was clearly apparent. On the one hand the NP could more safely transition seats such as Gippsland East without fear of Liberal incursions into its electoral territory. On the other, the party's capacity to grow was effectively blocked as its primary path to expansion since the late 1940s – picking off vulnerable Liberal-held rural seats – was no longer open. The 1988 territorial split between the two non-Labor parties was effectively frozen in suspended animation.

III. The Kennett-McNamara Government: First Term, 1992-96

On 6 October 1992, the new Liberal-National Coalition Government was formally sworn in. The National Party did not emerge entirely unscathed from the transition to power, however. In a direct contravention of the coalition agreement, the cabinet secretary position was given to a Liberal, Rosemary Varty, rather than a National Party member as stipulated in the

coalition agreement. Barry Steggall was instead appointed as parliamentary secretary to the Premier.

Within days of taking office, the new Government commenced an extraordinary reconstruction of the state's finances and administrative structures, setting in train the most radical transformation of the public sector in the state's history. The Treasurer, Alan Stockdale, brought down a 'horror' mini-budget hiking taxation, slashing expenditure and state services, and cutting entitlements for public sector employees. Rural services were by no means exempt from the fiscal pain; indeed, some suggested that country Victorians had shouldered a disproportionate share of the burden.[27] The budget of the Department of Agriculture – the so-called 'Holy Grail of the National Party' – was cut by twenty percent, the largest reduction of any department, despite having lost nearly a third of its funding under the previous Labor Government.[28] Two National Party upper house backbenchers, David Evans and Barry Bishop, formally wrote to Stockdale in protest, a rare public admission of dissent from within the coalition party room.[29] A large number of rural hospitals, many of them in National Party seats, were closed.

Rural rail services were also a target for budget cuts, to the great displeasure of many country residents. Passenger rail services to Leongatha, Bairnsdale, Dimboola, and Cobram were withdrawn within twelve months of the Coalition Government taking office. In Bairnsdale protesters blockaded the railway line to prevent the last service from departing.[30] Discontent was also brewing within the National Party itself. With a federal election campaign

[27] *Weekly Times*, 12 May 1993, 1-2.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] *Canberra Times*, 22 August 1993, 5.

underway, endorsed National Party candidates Phillip Pullar in Indi and John Forrest in Mallee voiced their concerns about the magnitude of the cuts.[31] Several NPA district councils passed protest motions to raise the issue at the forthcoming state conference.[32] Nevertheless, further cutbacks continued with passenger services to Ararat and Mildura withdrawn in 1994, and Shepparton and Warrnambool line services contracted out to private operators.[33]

Local government, another landmark institution of rural life in Victoria, was also to face a significant shake-up under the new Government. In 1992 Victoria had 210 local municipal councils fixed by meandering nineteenth-century boundaries, including 120 rural shires and 35 regional cities or boroughs.[34] Many rural shires relied on an exceedingly small and declining ratepayer base.[35] Roger Hallam, the National Party Local Government Minister, was in the driving seat of the reforms. The Kennett Government dismissed all 1,600 councillors across Victoria and appointed commissioners in their stead with instructions to cut rates by 20 percent, impose rate capping for future budgets, and introduce mandatory competitive tender for municipal services, effectively locking out many smaller local contractors in favour of larger metropolitan businesses.[36] Over the next two years, the number of local councils was reduced to just 78, with only the tiny Borough of Queenscliffe spared from amalgamation.[37] By the end of the decade, some 11,000 local government employees had been made redundant.[38] As with the rail cutbacks, many rural residents resented losing their local shires and council services. Hallam later recalled his staff receiving a frosty

[31] *Age*, 13 February 1993, 5.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Robert Lee, *The Railways of Victoria 1854-2004* (Melbourne: State of Victoria, 2007), 255-257.
[34] Anne Vince, "Amalgamation," in *Australian Local Government: Reform and Renewal*, eds. Brian Dollery and Neil Marshall (South Australia: Macmillan Education Australia, 1997), 156.
[35] Ibid., 157.
[36] *Herald Sun*, 24 August 1995, 14; *Age*, 25 April 2004, 8.
[37] Vince, "Amalgamation," 156.
[38] *Herald Sun*, 24 August 1995, 14; *Age*, 25 April 2004, 8.

reception when visiting a small rural council near Ballarat: 'the bastards didn't take the cellophane off the biscuits, they waited until we were gone before they put the cup of tea on'.[39]

The 1993 state National Party conference provided an opportunity for the rank-and-file members to express their views on the new Coalition Government. A number of motions on the agenda called for changes to the $100 state deficit levy that had been imposed in Stockdale's mini-budget. The chief point of contention, however, was still the 1990 coalition agreement. The outgoing Junior Vice President, Isobel Arbuthnot, openly criticised the ban on three-cornered contests, arguing that it was an 'admission that the Nationals were not good enough to win seats against Liberal candidates'.[40] Barry Steggall replied that that such contests would cause friction within the coalition: 'we are not going to stay in government if we are going to fight and scratch and claw'.[41] After a lengthy and heated debate, the motion seeking to amend the coalition agreement was lost.[42]

The Kennett Government's reform agenda also included an ambitious program of deregulation and privatisation, which heralded significant change for many farmers in Victoria. Since the early-to-mid twentieth century, many agricultural industries in Australia had been regulated by elaborate government-backed marketing schemes, a system derided by its critics as 'trade cycle socialism' that 'socialised' the economic losses of agricultural production but 'privatised' the profits.[43] This involved three predominant forms of statutory 'organised marketing' assistance to producers: tariffs on some imports where high cost

[39] *Age*, 25 April 2004, 8.
[40] *Canberra Times*, 25 April 1993, 3.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] J.M. Barbalet, "Tri-partism in Australia: The role of the Australian Country Party," *Politics* 10, no. 1 (1975): 6.

structures penalised local production (the maize and sugar industries, for example), subsidies for the export of Australian-grown produce (dried fruits, for instance), and stabilised guaranteed returns for other export-oriented commodities (wheat and wool being the most notable).[44] State-based commodity boards also had the authority to regulate the marketing of many agricultural products within state boundaries. The establishment of these marketing schemes had been the crowning achievement of the Country Party in decades past as it sought to give farmers effective control over the pricing, distribution, and sale of their produce.

When first confronted by a concerted push to liberalise the Australian economy as early as the 1960s, the instinctive response of the Country Party parliamentary leadership had been to oppose such moves and strenuously defend the state interventionist and rural protectionist agrarian settlement that the party had assembled in the decades since its formation.[45] As federal Country Party leader, John McEwen garnered a reputation as the leading advocate for industry protection to support local manufacturing, extensive statutory intervention to compensate and assist primary producers, and bilateral trade agreements to secure market access abroad for export industries.[46] This position was at odds with the earlier free trade policies of the Country Party during the 1920s and early 1930s that strenuously opposed high tariffs that inflated the price of imported farm machinery and penalised Australian export industries.[47] The party maintained its protectionist position as a leading defender of statutory intervention as part of the Fraser Government between 1975 and 1983. The agrarian 'Fraser-National Party cabinet axis' – the powerful farmer bloc within cabinet composed of Prime

[44] B.D. Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1966), 231.
[45] Peter Lloyd and Donald MacLaren, "Relative assistance to Australian agriculture and manufacturing since Federation," *Australian Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics* 59, no. 2 (2015): 166.
[46] Ibid., 167; Evan Jones, "In search of McEwenism: the economic Anti-Christ," *Journal of Economic & Social Policy* 3, no. 1 (1998): 96-104.
[47] Lloyd and MacLaren, "Relative assistance to Australian agriculture and manufacturing since Federation," 166.

Minister Malcolm Fraser, Deputy Prime Minister Doug Anthony, Peter Nixon, and Ian Sinclair – resisted the implementation of neoliberal economic policies.[48] A 'relic of agrarian socialism' that had 'misread the times' in the scathing assessment of Paul Kelly, the National Party found itself pitted against the 'radical liberal' free market policies of the new National Farmers' Federation (NFF – founded in 1979), neoliberal think-tanks such as the H.R. Nicholls Society and Institute of Public Affairs, and the rising tide of the so-called economic 'dries' within the Liberal Party, including the likes of John Howard, John Hewson, and Peter Reith.[49]

With the defeat of the Fraser Government in 1983, the National Party 'Mulga Mafia' lost its commanding influence over national agricultural and industry policy. The void was filled by the NFF and its various affiliated member organisations that dominated the Rural and Allied Industries Council, the corporatist entity that advised the Hawke Labor Government on agriculture policy.[50] The NFF used its lobbying power to pursue the 'rationalisation' and restructuring of Australian agriculture, to root out unviable small farm enterprises, and remake the primary industries into an efficient and competitive export-oriented sector of the economy.[51] The Hawke-Keating Government implemented full deregulation of federal controls over the cotton, tobacco, egg, apple and pear, and domestic wheat industries, ended the underwriting scheme for dairy exports, and suspended and subsequently abolished the statutory reserve price scheme for the wool industry.[52]

[48] Paul Kelly, *The end of certainty: the story of the 1980s* (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1992), 37.
[49] Ibid., 45-52.
[50] Darren Halpin and Peter Martin, "Farmer Representation in Australia: Avenues for changing the political environment," *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 58, no. 2 (June 1999): 36-37.
[51] Ibid., 37-38; Geoffrey Lawrence, *Capitalism and the countryside: the rural crisis in Australia* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 1987), 201.
[52] Geoff Cockfield, "Remembering Agrarian Collectivism," in *The National Party: Prospects for the Great Survivors*, eds. Linda Courtenay Botterill and Geoff Cockfield (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2009), 126.

Figure 5.1. Ian Sinclair laments the fall of McEwenism at the behest of the NFF, editorial cartoon, *Canberra Times*.[53]

By the 1990s, however, most of the National Party elite were inclined to be as supportive of neoliberal economics as its Liberal Party equivalent, with 'all vestiges of McEwenist interventionism […] jettisoned by the parliamentary leadership – but not by all in the branches'.[54] A new generation of economically 'dry' National Party politicians had risen to prominence and power. Ian Sinclair, the last of the 'Mulga Mafia' to remain in parliament, was deposed as federal leader in 1989, and succeeded first by Charles Blunt, who was in turn replaced by Tim Fischer eleven months later. As Deputy Prime Minister in the Howard Government, Fischer was supportive of market liberalisation, deregulation, and free trade policies, and proclaimed that 'our goal should be the ultimate elimination of all subsidies that

[53] Geoff Pryor, *Canberra Times*, 29 October 1985, 2.
[54] Costar, "Coalition Government," 96.

distort prices, production and trade'.[55] Likewise in Victoria, ministers such as Roger Hallam were regarded as a 'new breed of educated, economically rational Nationals', in perfect harmony with the prevailing 'New Right' philosophy of their Liberal colleagues.[56]

In any case, with the peak agricultural industry bodies and lobby groups – representing the increasingly corporate-dominated agricultural industries – largely in favour of further deregulation of the primary industry sector, the National Party had little option but to fall into line.[57] The party had long maintained that it existed as a conduit into cabinet for the ideas and views of the extra-parliamentary farm organisations rather than as the author of industry policy. Even John McEwen, at the height of his power, had argued that his party 'should be the agent of the industry organisations rather than the deviser of policies in respect to the marketing, for instance, of primary products'.[58]

It was the National Party agriculture ministers, first Bill McGrath and later Pat McNamara, that were tasked with dismantling the behemoths of agrarian state corporatism in Victoria. The Victorian Egg Marketing Board, established under the Dunstan Government, was deregulated and privatised in 1993.[59] Similar deregulation and restructuring programs were introduced for the domestic barley and tobacco industries shortly afterwards.[60] The complex task of deregulating the Victorian dairy industry was set to commence in the late 1990s and was ultimately concluded by the Bracks Labor Government.[61] In accordance with neoliberal

[55] Cockfield, "Remembering Agrarian Collectivism," 130-131; Rae Wear, "Countrymindedness and the Nationals," in *The National Party: Prospects for the Great Survivors*, eds. Linda Courtenay Botterill and Geoff Cockfield (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2009), 95.
[56] *Canberra Times*, 4 August 1990, 9.
[57] Cockfield, "Remembering Agrarian Collectivism," 124.
[58] John McEwen, Speech to Farmers and Pastoralists Union, Perth, 25 July 1967, quoted in Peter Golding, *Black Jack McEwen: Political Gladiator* (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 141.
[59] *Age*, 2 September 1993, 24.
[60] *Weekly Times*, 14 April 1993, 33; *Australian Financial Review*, 19 January 1998, 6.
[61] *Australian Financial Review*, 22 December 1999, 5.

orthodoxy, the Victorian Government would no longer intervene in the marketing of agricultural commodities to stabilise or underwrite farm-gate prices, even when buffeted by adverse external market forces. The sweeping dissolution of the formerly sacrosanct statutory marketing authorities at the hands of National Party ministers would have been unthinkable in decades past and signalled the decisive triumph of free-market 'economic-rationalist' thinking within the parliamentary wing of the movement.

When the Victorian Grain Elevators' Board (GEB) – established by the Argyle UAP-Country Party Government in 1934 to manage the bulk handling of grains – was earmarked for privatisation, Victorian grain grower groups were determined to purchase it to ensure ongoing producer control and prevent a corporate breakup of its assets.[62] A grower-controlled 'farm consortium' submitted a bid for $51.9 million, which was promptly rejected by the State Government for failing to meet the reserve price, purportedly as high as $95 million.[63] Treasurer Stockdale announced that the GEB would instead be privatised by tender, infuriating grower groups.[64] The 1994 National Party state conference passed a motion in support of the consortium taking control of the GEB.[65] After months of internal wrangling with the National Party, Stockdale relented and accepted a bid of $52.4 million from the consortium.[66] The GEB sale agreement represented one of the few unambiguous victories for the National Party during the Kennett era, securing an outcome that simultaneously satisfied its core constituency and accorded with the Coalition Government's reform agenda.

[62] *Weekly Times*, 17 February 1993, 29.
[63] *Age*, 2 August 1994, 3.
[64] *Age*, 16 November 1994, 9.
[65] National Party of Australia – Victoria, 'Seventy-Eighth Annual Conference, Hamilton, 1994, Conference Determinations', Charles Sturt University Regional Archives (CSURA), PG2694, Box 12, File 43, Motion 23.
[66] *Age*, 10 May 1995, 7.

Nevertheless, the rank-and-file membership – made up largely of older primary producers hailing from long-established family farming enterprises in the heavily-regulated sectors such as the horticultural, grain, and dairying industries – and the wider electoral base of the National Party was still at least partially resistant to and sceptical of the new economic order. In the local branches, it was 'baffling to diehard Nationals to hear their leaders rail against the kinds of policies that Page, Fadden and McEwen had fought to procure'.[67] The official platform of the Victorian National Party at the 1988 state election, reflecting the policy motions submitted by local branches and endorsed by grassroots conference delegates, recited a litany of agrarian collectivist orthodoxies that would not have been out of place in the Country Progressive Party in the 1920s. These included a '[total] commitment to fostering the family farm' as the primary agricultural unit, a general pledge to defend organised marketing to 'return guaranteed and stable prices to producers', and commitments to maintain the established marketing regimes for the barley, wool, dairy, egg, and tobacco industries.[68] As late as the 1997 state conference, a motion demanding that the parliamentary party 'cease their support for the theories of global free trade, economic rationalism and the lowering of protective trade barriers' was narrowly passed by delegates.[69] However, as noted by Costar, 'given the free-market content and tone of the speeches delivered by state and federal National parliamentarians to the 1998 state conference, this motion… had no noticeable impact'.[70]

These debates fought on the floor of the party conferences were not purely a contest of the merits of economic ideas and theories. Rather, the clash reflected the tension – indeed, the

[67] Wear, "Countrymindedness and the Nationals," 95.
[68] "Agriculture Policy" in National Party of Australia – Victoria, *The Nationals: part of Victoria's future, 1988 policies* (Melbourne: National Party of Australia – Victoria, 1988), 1, 14, 15, 17-19, 21-22, 28
[69] Costar, "Coalition Government," 96.
[70] Ibid.

fundamental differences – between the party's traditional agrarian 'country-minded' philosophy and the tenets of modern neoliberalism. In many respects, neoliberalism was the very antithesis of agrarian exceptionalism. Whereas 'country-mindedness' asserted that rural and agrarian interests merited special treatment, direct financial assistance from the state, and statutory intervention schemes to ensure that primary producers attained an appropriate return for their labour, neoliberal reformers saw only inefficient market-manipulating 'quangos', underperforming state-owned assets, and an unjustifiably high per-capita distribution of public funds. Likewise, while country-minded thought had long contended that it was a moral and economic imperative that more Australians be settled on the land – hence the 'closer settlement' policies stretching back to the 'free selection' land reform acts of the nineteenth century – neoliberal-aligned institutions such as the NFF freely conceded that inefficient farmers would, or indeed, should, be forced out of production if they could not pay their own way.[71] By abandoning its entrenched traditional interventionist sympathies, the National Party of the 1990s was far less ideologically distinctive from its electoral opponents – particularly the Liberal Party – and had undermined its historical claim that a dedicated rural-agrarian party was essential to underwrite the material prosperity and security of the primary industries and country communities.[72]

Riven by these fermenting ideological tensions, the 1994 state conference was no less fiery than that of the previous year. McNamara departed from his prepared notes to address the seething discontent within the party, and insisted that the formation of the state coalition was 'the best decision this party has made… it has put us back in the mainstream… we are respected and we are relevant'.[73] The only alternative to cooperation with the Liberals,

[71] Cockfield, "Remembering Agrarian Collectivism," 127.
[72] Wear, "Countrymindedness and the Nationals," 96.
[73] *Age*, 16 April 1994, 3.

McNamara argued, was to 'sit on the sidelines and squawk'.[74] Many of the 400 delegates, however, were far from convinced. One delegate reminded the parliamentarians that the party 'came into being to protect the interests of rural people' and that the now-dominant Liberal Party had previously worked to 'make paupers out of rural Australia'.[75] The Party President, Bernie Dunn, pointed to a raft of benefits delivered by the Kennett Government to rural voters: the abolition of stamp duty on farm transfers to family members; a $21 million increase in agricultural research and development funding; a $30 million allocation to fight salinity on top of extra funding for weed and vermin control; and tens of millions for rural road maintenance and upgrades.[76]

This list of funding commitments recited by Dunn revealed the party hierarchy's reinvented model of 'country-mindedness' for the neoliberal era. Although no longer willing to actively interfere in the free operation of the market, the National Party would seek to justify its existence by extracting the greatest possible share of public funding for country voters – within the boundaries of appropriate fiscal discipline, of course. The party would support Australian agricultural industries through indirect means, such as research and development programs, agricultural education and skills training, and the opening of new export markets abroad. As the 1993 state conference booklet proclaimed to the delegates:

> Our rural industries must be able to realise their full potential. They must be given the opportunity to be competitive on world markets now and in the future. The time has come for special understanding and action… By developing agricultural skills and production

[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.
[76] *Age*, 10 May 1994, 12.

> through training and research we can increase our export opportunities and generate greater income for all.[77]

The old concept of decentralisation – of relocating industry, population, and government departmental offices from the capital cities to outlying rural and regional areas to slow metropolitan expansion and grow country towns – was discarded in favour of 'regional development' programs. Public funds were to be used to upgrade services, tourism facilities, and infrastructure in non-metropolitan areas to encourage and support private enterprise. State-owned instrumentalities such as Telstra – formerly used to guarantee the equitable provision of services across both rural and metropolitan districts – were privatised and at least some of the profits channelled to rural programs, such as the Natural Heritage Trust, a regional telecommunications infrastructure fund, and new rural business transaction centres.[78]

The tensions between the Victorian Liberal and National parties that had been building since coming to office finally boiled over in August 1994 over the issue of uniform power pricing. Since 1966, Victoria's state-owned electricity provider, the State Electricity Commission (SEC), had maintained uniform tariff rates across the state to ensure that rural consumers paid no more for electricity than those in Melbourne. In preparing the SEC for privatisation, the state cabinet had resolved to sweep away the Commission's expensive web of cross-subsidies, including the uniform tariff. The National Party was determined to resist such moves, and McNamara issued an ultimatum to the Premier that the party would withdraw from the coalition unless the Government changed tack. A behind-the-scenes deal was stuck to avert a split: uniform pricing would be guaranteed until 2000 and country electorates

[77] National Party of Australia – Victoria, 'A New Beginning for Rural and Regional Victoria: National Party 77th Conference, Town Hall, Wangaratta, 22-24 April 1993', CSURA, PG2694, Box 12, Item 43.
[78] Paul Davey, *Ninety Not Out: The Nationals 1920-2010* (Sydney: University of NSW Press, 2010), 325-329.

would receive an additional package of capital works expenditure.[79] Although the National Party had secured some tangible concessions by delaying the impost of higher electricity charges for country residents by six years, the deal was at best a qualified success.

A further round of inter-party conflict within the coalition was triggered by the retirement of Bruce Lloyd, the former deputy leader of the federal National Party. Lloyd was the sitting member for the federal Division of Murray, a seat centred on the National Party heartland of Shepparton and the Goulburn Valley. The bitterly-fought National Party preselection contest for Murray was marred by claims of procedural irregularities and favouritism by the party hierarchy.[80] An unprecedented second preselection contest was held and won by John Walker, an accountant and lecturer from Shepparton who had served as state treasurer of the Victorian National Party: the candidate favoured by the preselection delegates but opposed by the party leadership. Sensing a unique opportunity, the Liberal Party entered the contest for Murray and endorsed Dr Sharman Stone, a wool grower and former communications director for the Victorian Farmers' Federation. Stone later recounted that few even in the Liberal Party seriously believed she could win; but win she did, with 43 percent of the primary vote well ahead of Walker on just 29 percent.[81] The loss of Murray was a disaster for the National Party. The party now held just two federal seats in Victoria: Gippsland and Mallee. Despite the nation-wide swing against the Keating Labor Government, the Nationals picked up a net gain of just two seats across Australia compared to twenty-six for the Liberals – which in turn led to a reduction in the party's representation in the cabinet of the new Howard Ministry.[82]

[79] *Sunday Age*, 4 September 1994, 1.
[80] *Herald Sun*, 27 November 1995, 18.
[81] *Weekly Times*, 27 March 1996, 10.
[82] *Weekly Times*, 13 March 1996, 11.

Shortly after the conclusion of the federal campaign, a state election was held in Victoria on 30 March 1996. The National Party was again prevented by the coalition agreement from contesting any Liberal-held seats, but given a free hand in the Labor-held seat of Morwell without Liberal competition. Out on the hustings, McNamara extolled the virtues of being in government with the Liberals: 'We are in the engine room of this state and we have the power to make changes.'[83] The result on election night, however, reflected the deep dissatisfaction that had been mounting in many rural parts of the state. Although the National Party retained all of its seats, there were severe swings against many of its sitting members: 22.7 percent in Wimmera, 17.9 percent in Warrnambool, 16.4 percent in Swan Hill, with more contained swings in Benalla (9.3 percent) and Rodney (8.4 percent). Many rural Liberals suffered from a similar backlash, including Craig Bildstein in Mildura who was defeated by Russell Savage, an independent candidate.[84] Savage described himself as an 'independent conservative' and claimed to support the 'basic philosophical position of the National Party'.[85] The bad news for the party did not cease at the declaration of polls, however. The Premier had resolved to reduce the size of cabinet from 21 to a more 'streamlined' 18 and cut the number of National Party ministers from four to three: yet another clear violation of the 1990 coalition agreement.[86] Having just endured a stern rebuke from rural voters at the ballot box, the party's weakened position in the reshuffled ministry only further reduced its ability to shape the Kennett Government's agenda and priorities. 1996 was proving to be an *annus horribilis* for the National Party. And it was about to get worse still.

[83] *Age*, 16 March 1996, 4.
[84] *Weekend Australian*, 6 June 1998, 11.
[85] *Age*, 11 May 1996, 20.
[86] *Australian*, 3 April 1996, 4.

IV. The Kennett-McNamara Government: Second Term, 1996-99

On 28 April 1996 a deranged lone gunman, Martin Bryant, opened fire on tourists at the Port Arthur heritage site in Tasmania, killing 35 people. Prime Minister Howard announced plans to reform Australia's disparate state-based firearms regulations. Gun reform was a particularly sensitive issue for the National Party. Primary producers and recreational shooters – the two segments of the population most likely to be adversely affected by the proposed reforms – constituted a large segment of its core voter and membership base. In 1988, the Victorian National Party had taken a 'tough, consistent, and determined stand' against the gun law reform proposals of the Cain Government, and effectively torpedoed the plan by forcing the Liberal Party to resile from its initial tentative support for the reforms.[87] Upon winning office in 1992, the Coalition Government launched a 'major review' of firearms legislation to fulfil a pre-election commitment to shooters' groups.[88] Kennett himself was no firearm enthusiast – on the contrary, he openly professed his hatred for guns and declared that he wished he had a 'magnet' to suck them out of society.[89] McNamara, as Police Minister, was sandwiched between Kennett and Victoria Police on the one hand, who both favoured tighter gun regulations, and his political base on the other which was sceptical of, and even implacably opposed to, such proposals. When the review handed down its findings in 1995, state cabinet decided not to proceed with the recommendations and instead launched a voluntary gun amnesty for illegal weapons.[90] There the issue may have remained undisturbed had it not been for Martin Bryant.

[87] *Weekend Australian*, 14 March 1998, 25.
[88] *Age*, 13 November 1993, 1.
[89] *Weekend Australian*, 14 March 1998, 25.
[90] *Age*, 6 April 1995, 1; *Age*, 7 April 1995, 2.

In the wake of the Port Arthur Massacre, a national gun summit was convened to tighten and harmonise Australia's firearms regulations. Prime Minister Howard pushed for a nation-wide ban on all automatic and semi-automatic weapons. Bill McGrath, as the newly sworn-in Victorian Police Minister, was opposed to such a wide ban, and argued that farmers and sporting shooters should have access to some low-velocity semi-automatic weapons.[91] Despite Howard lobbying Kennett directly to support a total ban, McGrath secured a partial exemption for primary producers which allowed them access to some low-powered semi-automatic weapons in special circumstances.[92] Although McGrath declared that he was 'reasonably satisfied with the result', a significant bloc of National Party members and supporters were staunchly opposed to the plan.[93] A thousand protesters rallied in Horsham – in the heart of Bill McGrath's own electorate – to vent their displeasure. An unprecedented stream of handwritten resignation letters – some polite, others decidedly less so – poured into the party head office in Melbourne. Gun control was seen as an emblematic battle between the city and the bush: a metropolitan overreaction to an undoubted tragedy that was depriving country people of their heritage, civil liberties, and a core component of rural life. Unfortunately for the National Party right around Australia, it fed into a narrative that the party had ceased to stand firm for its core supporters, or at very least was so weakened and enfeebled that it could no longer offer even token resistance.

The dawn of 1997 brought yet another challenge for the state Liberal-National coalition: a by-election in Gippsland West, the Liberal Party's second-safest rural seat. In the interests of coalition unity, the National Party declined to nominate a candidate, much to the consternation of some within the local branches. It soon became apparent that the Liberal

[91] *Age*, 9 May 1996, 14; *Age*, 10 May 1996, 6.
[92] *Age*, 11 May 1996, 7.
[93] Ibid.

candidate, Matthew Coleman, a former Victorian Farmers' Federation executive, was struggling against a strong field of independents, including Susan Davies, a former ALP candidate, and David Turnbull, a former National Party member. Turnbull campaigned on a platform of ending the state coalition with the Liberals, arguing that it 'would be the best thing that could happen to country Victoria'.[94] Robert Ettery, a former National Party Senate candidate and Leongatha branch president, who was campaigning for Turnbull, was even more scathing of his former party, and described the NP parliamentary members as a 'laughing stock, spineless and weak' who had become the 'glorified rural arm of the Liberal Party'.[95] Davies won the seat with a 13 percent swing against the Liberal Party.

Although both of the rural independent members in the Assembly, Savage and Davies, had won seats that had previously been held by the Liberal Party, the National Party was not immune from the surge in support for independents across rural and regional Victoria. At the 1996 state election, independent candidates attracted a sizeable vote in National Party seats such as Swan Hill (21.8 percent of the primary vote), Wimmera (21.5 percent), Rodney (16.6 percent), Benalla (16.6 percent), and Warrnambool (12.6 percent), and absorbed the great bulk of the swing against the party. Most of the rural independent candidates had stood on a broadly similar electoral platform: opposition to government cut-backs, shire amalgamations, and the withdrawal of community services, and in protest against the incumbent members of parliament for failing to articulate the grievances of their rural constituents.[96] Rural independents had been effectively eliminated from the Legislative Assembly by the rise of the Country Party through the 1920s and 1930s.[97] Deprived of their traditional vehicle of

[94] *Weekly Times*, 29 January 1997, 4.
[95] *Sunday Age*, 9 February 1997, 12.
[96] *Weekly Times*, 3 April 1996, 1.
[97] Gippsland North, the last hold-out rural independent stronghold prior to Savage's election in 1996, had fallen to the United Country Party in 1938.

political protest – an independent and autonomous rural third party – country voters were turning back to a hitherto long-forgotten alternative to vent their discontent.

The rise of rural independents in Victoria during the 1990s was in some respects reminiscent of the protest movement that emerged from, and in opposition to, the Agrarian League-Centre Party in Finland in the latter half of the twentieth century. Founded in 1959 by a disaffected former agrarian parliamentarian, Veikko Vennamo, the breakaway Smallholders' Party (SP) – renamed the Finnish Rural Party (FRP) in 1966 – emerged in protest against the decline of traditional small-scale agriculture and the decision of the Agrarian League leadership to pursue a broader non-rural electoral constituency.[98] Described by academic commentators as a 'populist anti-establishment' party, the SP-FRP claimed to represent the traditional constituency of the Finnish agrarian movement: the 'small man' and 'forgotten people' of the rural districts and country towns as opposed to the large industrialised centres of Southern Finland.[99] Like the Victorian independents, the SP-FRP was critical of the 'old parties' and professional politicians for having supposedly lost touch with the concerns and interests of the common people and rural voters.[100] At the 1970 national election, the FRP surged to 10.5 percent of the vote and won 18 seats in parliament, primarily at the expense of the Centre Party which fell to just 37 seats and 17.1 percent of the primary vote.[101]

[98] David Arter, "From a Contingent Party System to Party System Convergence? Mapping Party System Change in Postwar Finland," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 32, no. 2 (2009): 232-233.
[99] David Arter, "Analysing 'Successor Parties': The Case of the True Finns," *West European Politics* 35, no. 4 (2012): 813; David Matheson and Risto Sänkiaho, "The Split in the Finnish Rural Party: Populism in Decline in Finland," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 10, no. A10 (January 1975): 219; David Arter, "The Breakthrough of Another West European Populist Radical Right Party? The Case of the True Finns," *Government and Opposition* 45, no. 4 (2010): 486; Francis Jacobs, "Finland," in *Western European Political Parties: A comprehensive* Guide, ed. Francis Jacobs (Harlow: Longman, 1989), 537-538.
[100] Arter, "The Breakthrough of Another West European Populist Radical Right Party?," 489; Risto Sänkiaho, "A Model of the Rise of Populism and Support for the Finnish Rural Party," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 6, no. A6 (January 1971): 39-40.
[101] Jacobs, "Finland," 535, 537; Arter, "The Breakthrough of Another West European Populist Radical Right Party?," 500.

Although the Victorian rural independents and Finnish Smallholders Party – Rural Party both rose to political prominence by channelling a broadly similar sense of grievance at the direction of rural society and consequent dissatisfaction with the established parties, there were revealing differences between the two phenomena. While the SP-FRP was formed as a breakaway party that split from the Agrarian League in an attempt to restore the agrarian movement to its founding political mission, the rural independents in Victoria never combined into a formal movement or party to challenge the National Party across the state. The Victorian National Party did face some limited pressure from One Nation, a populist and nationalist right-wing protest party, but this movement never came even remotely close to winning a seat in Victoria, unlike in Queensland, New South Wales, and Western Australia. One Nation was to attract less than a third of one percent of the total state vote at the 1999 Victorian election.

Apart from the resignation of dissatisfied rank-and-file members, a split in the National Party was never seriously contemplated during the 1990s. Unlike in 1926, 1938, and 1948-49 when the Victorian Country Party movement had divided into feuding rival parties, the parliamentary wing of the National Party of the 1990s remained formally united under McNamara's unchallenged leadership. In a Victorian Parliament dominated by an ascendant Liberal Party in control of both chambers, there was very little to be gained by a breakaway party of dissatisfied backbenchers withdrawing to the cross-benches, only further weakening the bargaining power of the National Party in the process. Without a charismatic and ambitious parliamentarian – an Albert Dunstan, a John McEwen, or indeed a Veikko Vennamo – to lead a breakaway faction out of the mainline party, the rising discontent within the movement was largely contained to robust debate on the conference floor. Nevertheless, the success of the Victorian country independents and Finnish SP-FRP demonstrated that

alienated rural voters were prepared to shift their support from the established parties and seek out alternatives that could credibly rearticulate the centre-periphery and urban-rural cleavages that had long dominated rural politics both in Finland and Victoria.

In a bid to stem the political damage from the gun reform issue, the National Party continued to lobby for further concessions for firearm holders. In August 1997, the Victorian Parliamentary National Party formed a firearms taskforce, led by Shepparton MLA Don Kilgour, to tour regional communities and attend to rural grievances on the issue. Kilgour readily admitted that the taskforce was 'stacked' in favour of shooters, noting that the 'National Party are the only friends shooters have got in the Government'.[102] The taskforce culminated in the Victorian *Firearms (Amendment) Bill* which reduced (at the chief commissioner's discretion) the 28-day waiting period for existing firearm owners, permitted members of the Field and Game Association to use semi-automatic firearms, and allowed licensed shooters to carry loaded weapons in populated towns under special circumstances.[103] The National Party had secured tangible concessions that met some of the grievances of recreational shooters and primary producers, despite the vocal objections of the Commonwealth Government, gun control lobbyists, and large segments of the metropolitan press. This was an outcome that could only have been delivered by sitting at the cabinet table as part of a coalition government. For many alienated former National Party supporters, however, it was too little too late.

Just as McGrath was making some headway on the firearms issue, yet another challenge was looming: drought. From early 1997 large swathes of Victoria, and particularly the southern

[102] *Sunday Age*, 8 March 1998, 1.
[103] *Australian*, 9 March 1998, 3.

and eastern parts of the state, were suffering from significantly reduced rainfall and severe drought conditions. Political tensions were rising across the regions as farmers looked to government for drought relief. The Victorian Government's offer – a paltry $1 million support package contingent on federal funding – was dismissed by some Gippsland farmers as 'insulting'.[104] A rally of 700 farmers at Korumburra, attended by the leader of the Labor Party, John Brumby, passed a motion of no confidence in the Deputy Premier.[105] McNamara refused demands from irrigators for a greater share of water from the Thomson Dam, which supplied drinking water to metropolitan Melbourne, although the Government pledged to explore options for new water storages in Gippsland.[106]

V. The defeat of the Kennett Coalition Government

Relations with the Liberal Party also flared as the 1999 state election loomed closer. The coalition agreement, as renegotiated after the 1996 state election, now permitted both parties to contest a seat in the event of an incumbent Liberal or National member retiring. The Liberal Party was determined to run in both Warrnambool and Wimmera – both Bill McGrath and John McGrath had announced that they would retire at the forthcoming election – and the Nationals in turn were eying off Polwarth, based on Colac and the Otway Ranges, where former Liberal cabinet minister Ian Smith was also leaving parliament. The National Party preselected a high profile candidate in Polwarth, former Geelong footballer and Brownlow medallist Paul Couch. Both parties were also planning to go head-to-head in the independent-held seats of Mildura and Gippsland West. All attempts by McNamara to negotiate a deal with Kennett to carve up the five disputed seats were rebuffed.[107] The National Party leader

[104] *Weekly Times*, 4 June 1997, 5.
[105] Tony Parkinson, *Jeff: The Rise and Fall of a Political Phenomenon* (Ringwood: Viking, 2000), 309.
[106] *Weekly Times*, 31 December 1997, 7; *Weekly Times*, 21 January 1998, 1.
[107] *Australian Financial Review*, 3 September 1999, 15.

called on country voters to give his party the balance of power in the Assembly so that regional interests could have a 'bigger say' in cabinet and the Government.[108] Premier Kennett purportedly 'scoffed' at such a suggestion.[109] Despite this cross-party friction, the two parties formally campaigned as a single coalition team, with a joint policy platform, including a $19 million rural and regional development package.[110]

Sensing the vulnerability of the Government outside of Melbourne, Labor promised a $170 million regional infrastructure fund as part of its strategy to lure country voters away from the coalition parties.[111] In his autobiography, *The Long Haul*, John Brumby recalled several heated arguments with his Labor colleagues over his decision to spend much of his time campaigning in rural towns such as Ararat and Horsham instead of metropolitan marginal seats.[112] Although Brumby was replaced by Steve Bracks – a former school teacher from Ballarat – as Labor leader in March 1999, the Opposition held firm to Brumby's rural electoral strategy. For the first time in years – if not decades – country Victoria was again the key battlefield of state politics. Nevertheless, even with rumbling disquiet evident in the regions, the return of the Kennett Government was widely expected in political circles – a view privately shared even by the leader of the Opposition.[113]

The result of the 1999 state election was a shock collapse in support for the Liberal and National parties, with a swing to Labor of 7.8 percent in rural areas and 4.7 percent in the

[108] Brian Costar and Dennis Woodward, "The Victorian Election of 18 September 1999: Another Case of Electoral Volatility?," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 1 (2000): 126-127.
[109] Ibid., 127.
[110] *Australian Financial Review*, 3 September 1999, 15; Parkinson, *Jeff*, 397.
[111] Ibid, 397.
[112] John Brumby, *John Brumby: the Long Haul, Lessons from Public Life* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2015), 24.
[113] Joel Deane, *Catch and Kill: The Politics of Power* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2015), 134.

regional cities, compared to just 2.5 percent in Melbourne.[114] The Liberal Party lost four metropolitan seats and eight in the regions, all to the resurgent Labor Party. The Nationals in turn lost two seats: Warrnambool to the Liberal Party and Gippsland East to independent Craig Ingram. Gippsland East had previously been held by Country-National Party members on a continuous basis since 1920. The state-wide primary vote of the National Party had fallen to just 4.8 percent: its lowest vote in history.[115] The swing against sitting National Party members varied greatly. Where the electoral contests remained effectively a 'two-horse race' between the National and Labor parties, as in Benalla, Rodney, and Murray Valley, the drop in the National Party vote was relatively modest: just 1.5 percent, 2.8 percent, and 5.3 percent respectively. Gippsland South, which had borne much of the brunt of the 'green drought' in the preceding two years, was a notable outlier, with a 17.2 percent collapse in the National Party primary vote. The party fared worst when under assault from rival Liberal candidates: its primary vote declined by 40.3 percent in Warrnambool and 24.5 percent in Wimmera. A similar collapse in support was evident where sitting National Party members were challenged by strong independent candidates, such as in Shepparton (a 26.1 percent decline in support), Gippsland East (17.0 percent), and Swan Hill (13.8 percent). Although the National Party finished first on primary votes in Gippsland East (35.9 percent), a tight flow of preferences allowed Craig Ingram, an independent candidate, to leapfrog both the Labor candidate and David Treasure to win the seat. The National Party had suffered its greatest shock at the polls since 1970.

The Kennett Government had lost its majority in the Legislative Assembly. The Liberal-National Coalition held 43 seats and Labor 41, with the balance of power in the hands of the

[114] Costar and Woodward, "The Victorian Election of 18 September 1999," 129.
[115] Scott Bennett, *Victorian Election 1999: Research Paper No. 19 1999-2000* (Canberra: Department of the Parliamentary Library, 2010), 24.

three rural independents: Savage, Davies, and Ingram. The death on election day of the former Liberal-turned-independent member for Frankston East, Peter McLellan, forced a special supplementary election in the seat which further complicated the parliamentary deadlock. The three independents set about drafting a so-called 'Victorian Independents' Charter' dictating their expectations for the next ministry, including, amongst other mooted reforms, the establishment of 'clear plans, strategies and targets to address the urgent needs of Rural Victoria'.[116] Where once the Country Party had sat as the horse-trading hinge party between the two larger parties, now three country members – all holding seats represented at one time or another by the Country-National Party – were calling the shots at Spring Street. McNamara declared that he was of 'like mind' with the independents and threatened to withdraw the National Party from the state coalition, insisting, at very least, that the agreement with the Liberals be renegotiated: 'If we are going to be part of any government in the future there has got to be a lot more emphasis on country Victoria.'[117]

At the Frankston East by-election on 16 October Labor prevailed to win the seat with an outright majority of the primary vote. All three independent members shortly thereafter announced their intention to support Labor to take office. In a further humiliation for the National Party, Russell Savage lambasted the junior coalition partner in his statement announcing his support for a Labor Government, accusing National members of being 'more interested in the perks of office and a comfortable lifestyle' than fighting for country interests.[118] Savage decried the erosion of 'the great Country/National Party of the past' which, in his view, was now nothing more than a 'shallow and non-performing waste of

[116] Russell Savage, Susan Davies, and Craig Ingram, "Victorian Independents' Charter 1999," 28 September 1999, https://australianpolitics.com/1999/09/28/independents-charter-victoria.html.
[117] *Age*, 23 September 1999, 1.
[118] Russell Savage, "Statement from Russell Savage, independent member for Mildura." 18 October 1999, http://australianpolitics.com/1999/10/18/russell-savage-statement-on-minority-government.html.

space'.[119] After seven years in power, the National Party was leaving office as a diminished political force with its hard-won reputation as a parochial champion for rural Victorians in tatters.

The shell-shocked National Party was left to ponder its defeat. Federal leader and Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson was quick to wade in and accuse the Victorian Liberals of having ignored the National Party to the ultimate peril of the Coalition Government.[120] Brian O'Sullivan blamed the defeat squarely on the Liberal Party for its poor performance in provincial Victoria: 'I strongly suggest that no representative of the National Party should accept the blame for the Labor Party gaining power.'[121] Peter Ryan, who succeeded McNamara as National Party leader, adopted a more conciliatory and reflective tone, noting that there had been a sense in the community of 'being talked at, not listened to' by the previous Government.[122] Ryan concluded that the National Party had not been sufficiently vocal in office: 'people were saying: "Where are you, we can't find you".'[123] The movement was divided as to what course should be chartered to rebuild the party. One option was to press on working with the Liberals in support of a united anti-Labor state Opposition. Barry Steggall argued that the National Party should simply amalgamate with the Liberals to form a stronger country Liberal faction.[124] In his last few weeks as leader, McNamara negotiated a 'partnership agreement' with the new Liberal leader, Denis Napthine. The new 'partnership' replaced the now-defunct former coalition agreement and allowed the two parties to sit as separate blocs in parliament with a joint shadow cabinet of 17 Liberals and five Nationals.[125]

[119] Ibid.
[120] *Sunday Age*, 26 September 1999, 4.
[121] *Weekly Times*, 19 April 2000, 8.
[122] *Weekly Times*, 10 November 1999, 5.
[123] Ibid.
[124] *Weekly Times*, 17 November 1999, 14.
[125] *Australian Financial Review*, 29 October 1999, 10.

This quasi-coalition agreement was unpopular with many rank-and-file members, who called for the party to cut all ties with the Liberal Party and rebuild its identity as a completely separate and autonomous rural party.[126]

The election of Peter Ryan as leader in December 1999 provided an opportunity for the party to draw a line under the Kennett-McNamara era and commence the slow process of reconstruction. An articulate former lawyer from Sale, Ryan had served as a backbencher during the Kennett years and thus presented a comparatively fresh face for the party. Ryan was initially supportive of the new 'partnership' with the Liberals and ruled out any suggestion of a merger.[127] Following his election as leader, Ryan embarked on a 15,000 kilometre 'listening tour' of regional Victoria to reconnect with his party's alienated former supporters: 'Our function now is as it was when the party started 80 odd years ago, to look after country people, and that's the focus of where we are now.'[128]

In May 2000, Ryan and the National Party were confronted with a by-election campaign in the seat of Benalla, triggered by the resignation of Pat McNamara from parliament. With the new Labor Government having just delivered its first budget, including a significant boost to rural funding, the timing of the by-election was decidedly unhelpful. The result was a knife-edge battle between Bill Sykes, the National Party candidate, a local consulting veterinarian and former Fitzroy football player, and his Labor opponent, Denise Allen. Labor prevailed by just 237 votes at the end of the count: the first occasion that the seat of Benalla had elected a Labor member in its 97-year history. In the words of the *Weekly Times*, the Benalla by-election result was a 'calamity of mind-blowing proportions' for the National Party, as its

[126] *Weekly Times*, 12 April 2000, 25.
[127] *Weekly Times*, 10 November 1999, 5.
[128] *Weekly Times*, 26 January 2000, 12; *Weekly Times*, 19 April 2000, 8.

parliamentary representation in the Legislative Assembly was reduced to its lowest level since 1920.[129] As Peter Ryan made the long drive home from Benalla to Sale he determined that the party would withdraw from its partnership with the Liberals and 'go it alone' as an entirely independent rural political movement.[130] The only alternative, Ryan concluded, was a slow and painful withering 'death by a thousand cuts'.[131] The Victorian National Party would spend the next eight years on the crossbench and a full decade out of government.

VI. Conclusion

Although bruised and dazed after the disastrous 1999 state election, the Victorian National Party had survived intact as a parliamentary movement to reach the dawn of the twenty-first century. The seven years of government with the Kennett-led Liberal Party had nevertheless been more damaging to the reputation and parliamentary strength of the National Party than had the preceding forty years of exile on the crossbenches. While the Kennett-McNamara Government was the first non-Labor coalition ministry in Victorian history to endure for two consecutive full parliamentary terms, it could not escape the familiar pattern of inter-party rivalry and conflict that had bedevilled all other such coalition governments in the twentieth century. Alan Brown's bold prediction that the state coalition agreement he had brokered with Pat McNamara in July 1990 would take the two non-Labor parties in partnership 'from decade to decade' had proved to be overly-optimistic: the coalition was terminated just two weeks short of its ten-year anniversary.

In the weeks before his retirement from the leadership, McNamara was unrepentant of his conviction that the decision to reform the coalition and form government with the Liberals

[129] *Weekly Times*, 17 May 2000, 14.
[130] *Age*, 5 June 2011, 17.
[131] *Weekly Times*, 19 July 2000, 5.

had served the best interests of the National Party: 'To seriously represent country people, you've got to be in the room where those decisions are made… Forty-four years [sic] we were in the wilderness, on the cross benches, not having a say in the determination of policy. We're now in the main arena, we're part of the main game.'[132] Unlike the maverick-radical Victorian Country Party of old, the McNamara-led National Party had proven to be a stable, united, and cooperative partner to the Liberal Party that was prepared to compromise to keep the coalition together. With virtually no effective bargaining position over a Liberal Party that had no need of its parliamentary numbers to hold office in the first place, the National Party had been in an unusually invidious position, and was fortunate to extract even the partial concessions it has secured on matters of importance to its constituents, such as the GEB sale, the SEC uniform tariff, and the firearm reform package. McNamara's colleagues within the Parliamentary National Party were adamant that as deputy premier he had adequately asserted the party's interests within cabinet and the Government more widely: 'Kennett was such a dominating force and it was hard standing up to him. But he did. He stood up to him more than anyone else.'[133] Victorian rural voters at the 1999 state election may have reached a rather different conclusion.

The neoliberal transformation of the Australian economy and public administration had not been initiated by the Country-National Party. Indeed, the movement's most senior representatives had long resisted its advance from the highest levels of government. By the early 1990s, however, the ideological orientation of the Parliamentary National Party had shifted to fall in line with the prevailing economic and philosophical spirit of the age. The National Party was more than a passive, powerless victim or naive, ineffectual lackey of the

[132] *Age*, 5 November 1999, 25.
[133] Ibid.

sweeping Kennett Revolution; it was not just another historic relic of Victoria's political-administrative infrastructure to be "Jeffed" in the 1990s – to use the colloquial language of the era – along with the SEC, Victorian Public Service Board, or the statutory marketing authorities.[134] The National Party was a willing and active partner in the Kennett Government reform program, with its ministerial representatives steering through key planks of the Government's neoliberal reform agenda that transformed public services, local government, and agricultural marketing in country communities across the state.

This ideological shift was never fully embraced by all parts of the rank-and-file membership, however, and the internal forums of the National Party, particularly the state conferences, become a battle ground between the old orthodoxies of country-mindedness and agrarian exceptionalism pitted against the uncompromising mantras of free-market economic-rationalism. The new-look neoliberal National Party was now more difficult to distinguish from its larger and more assertive Liberal Party rival, which continued to make inroads into the National Party's dwindling electoral territory, poaching seats such as the Division of Murray and the Assembly District of Warrnambool, just as an independent candidate had ended its hitherto unbroken hold on the seat of Gippsland East. Having dispensed with its former role as the reliable sentinel and guardian of the agrarian settlement, the National Party was left to salvage what was left of its reputation as an advocate for rural and regional interests.

[134] As defined by Steve Bracks, the term "Jeffed" 'applied to someone who was being victimised by Jeff Kennett and his government'. See Steve Bracks with Ellen Whinnett, *A Premier's State* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2012), 69.

Chapter Six. The Organisational Wing

'A great man once said that God made the country and man made the cities. [I believe] that God made the Country Party' – Mr Forde, Willaura branch delegate, 1938 UCP Conference[1]

I. Introduction

In the sandstone Gothic expanse of the Assembly Hall in Collins Street, Melbourne, as the delegates to the thirty-sixth (1952) annual Country Party conference debated their way through the policy resolutions, the proceedings were suddenly interrupted by Mr J. Bartley, a delegate of the Lysterfield branch. Begging the indulgence of the Chief President, H.W. Wade, Bartley requested that a motion from his branch listed well down the agenda paper be brought forward for immediate debate as 'we have to go home to attend to the cows'.[2] The Chief President in turn responded: 'Shame on me if I fail to recognise the sanctity of the cow. What does the conference say?' The question was promptly answered in the affirmative by a resounding 'roar of approval' from around the hall, and Bartley's wish duly granted.

This 'bright interlude' to the 1952 conference, leavening polite procedural formality with the earthy mundane demands of life on the land, provides a small but revealing insight into the culture of the Victorian Country Party in the final year of its ascendancy in state politics.[3] The fact that Bartley's brief interruption was deemed sufficiently noteworthy to be recounted in the *Countryman* newspaper – and in a dedicated front-page article no less – highlighted the enduring power of the cult of the small farmer in the movement's understanding of itself,

[1] *Countryman*, 14 April 1938, 4.
[2] *Countryman*, 10 April 1952, 1.
[3] Ibid.

despite the party having formally renounced its exclusively agrarian political mission and membership restrictions a quarter of a century earlier.

The extra-parliamentary organisational wing of the Country-National Party, to which Bartley, Wade, and their fellow conference delegates belonged, has performed an indispensable role in cultivating this culture and sustaining the party as an independent political movement. Accordingly, any satisfactory analysis of the evolution and survival of the Country-National Party in Victoria over the course of the twentieth century must examine the contribution of the organisational wing. This chapter will explore the organisational wing as 'both instrument and arena', with a particular focus on the expansion and development of the VFU-Country Party as a successful agrarian 'mass membership' party.[4]

The VFU's early and thorough embrace of the mass membership model mirrored the efforts of other successful agrarian parties abroad, which also typically established themselves along democratic mass-membership lines. The founders of the VFU conceived of their movement as more than just a passive conduit for agrarian political activism; rather, the organisational wing was to be an exemplar of the democratic and ruggedly independent civic virtues that distinguished the 'country-minded' men and women of the land from the city folk and their political representatives. The movement inculcated a shared sentiment of rural and agrarian solidarity and country-minded consciousness amongst its members and supporters that was crucial in preserving the party as an autonomous and independent political organisation.

[4] Gunnar Sjoblom, *Party strategies in a multi-party system* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1968), 183, referenced in Dean Jaensch, *The Australian Party System* (North Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1983), 109.

Despite its historical success and resilience as a mass member party over the bulk of the twentieth century, the Victorian party has in more recent decades evolved along the 'electoral-professional party' lines identified by political sociologists such as Angelo Panebianco.[5] In seeking to modernise its administration and offset its shrinking rank-and-file membership base, the National Party has gradually dispensed with much of its former mass-member party infrastructure in favour of a more centralised, elite-controlled management system sustained largely through external finance.

II. The VFU/Country/National Party as a mass membership organisation

Narelle Miragliotta's claim that the Australian Country Party was 'not initially conceived to be a mass membership organisation', is mistaken as far as the Victorian division is concerned.[6] From its foundation until at least the mid-1970s, the Victorian Country Party functioned as a 'textbook' mass membership party in which the recruitment of rank-and-file members constituted 'a fundamental activity' of the movement, and the membership base in turn provided the funds and campaign infrastructure to sustain its operations and support its candidates.[7] Indeed, as recognised by Brian Costar, the Victorian movement has historically been the 'best exemplar of the Country Party as a mass-political party model'.[8] The mass membership model proved to be so successful for the Victorian party that it remained 'virtually solely' dependent on its own internal 'democratic financing' sources to fund its activities until as late as the 1970s.[9] By contrast, the Country Party in New South Wales was

[5] Angelo Panebianco, *Political parties: organization and power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
[6] Narelle Miragliotta, "Parties and the Mass Membership," in *Contemporary Australian Political Parties*, eds. Narelle Miragliotta, Anika Gauja, and Rodney Smith (Clayton: Monash University Press, 2015), 74.
[7] Maurice Duverger: *Political parties: their organisation and activity in the modern state* (London: Muethen and Co, 1964), 63.
[8] Brian Costar, "The National Party: The Resilient Party," in *Contemporary Australian Political Parties*, eds. Narelle Miragliotta, Anika Gauja, and Rodney Smith (Clayton: Monash University Press, 2015), 28.
[9] *Shepparton Advertiser*, 11 June 1936, 1; *Countryman*, 29 April 1971, 4; Duverger, *Political parties*, 63.

almost entirely reliant on the financial support of the Graziers' Association, which had purportedly assumed 'practically the entire responsibility for the party's finances', until the 1940s.[10]

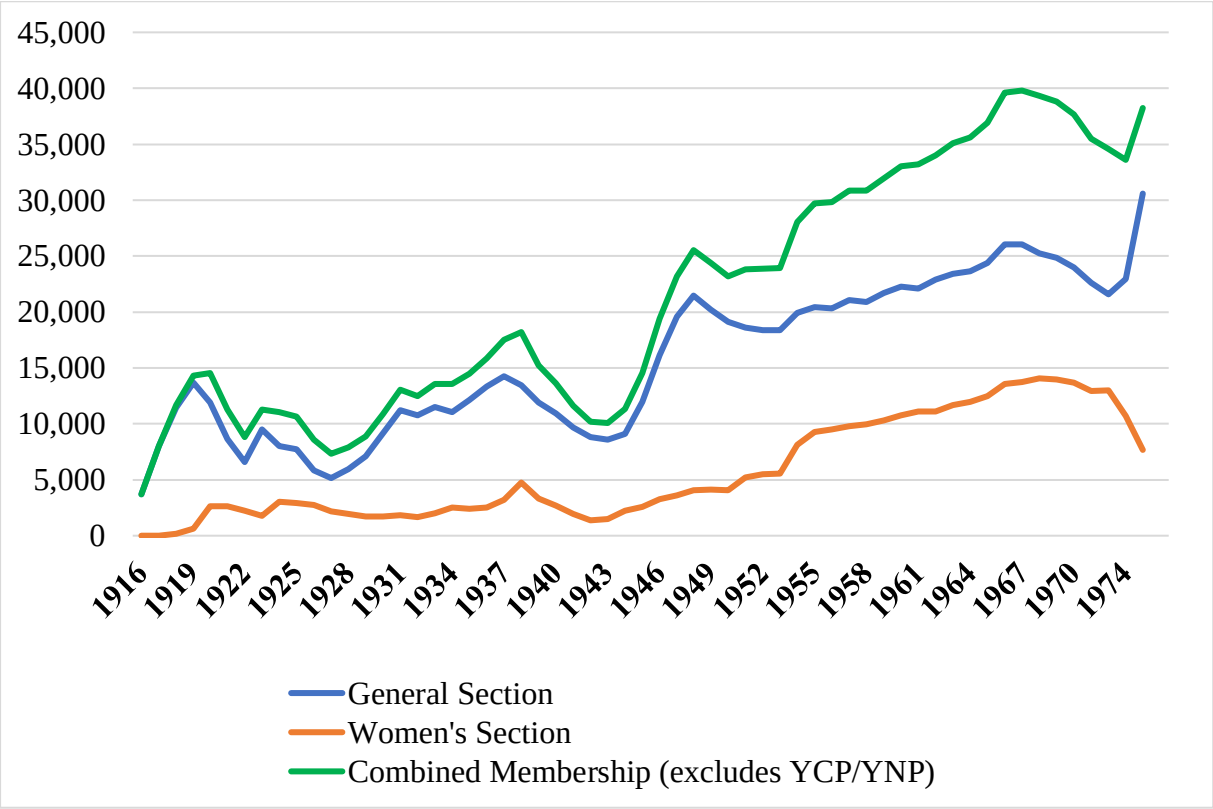

Figure 6.1. Rank-and-file financial membership of the VFU, Country Party, and National Party of Australia – Victoria, 1916-1976.

As was noted in the first chapter of the thesis, the Victorian movement was unique in Australia as the only division of the Country Party established from its very outset as an autonomous mass-member political movement of primary producers, rather than as the sponsored political arm of pre-existing agricultural industrial organisations.[11] As can be seen

[10] Don Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales: a study of organisation and survival* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1972), 30.
[11] Ulrich Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party* (Parkville: Melbourne University Press, 1963), 35-38.

in Figure 6.1 above, the expansion of the party's grassroots membership was concentrated in four key waves:

1. An initial recruitment drive from 1916 through to approximately 1920. This was followed by a marked decline in the branch membership, just as occurred in each of the other states following the Country Party's initial electoral breakthrough.[12]
2. A rebuilding period between the Great Depression and the onset of the Second World War.
3. A further post-war rebuilding period from 1945 through to the LCP 'takeover' bid of 1949-50.
4. And, finally, a sustained expansion from approximately 1953-54 through to 1967-68, when the party reached its peak membership just short of 40,000.[13]

Although our analysis is somewhat curtailed by the 'poverty and paucity' (to quote Ian Ward) of reliable historical data on the membership of Australian parties, it would appear that the Country Party amassed the largest grassroots membership of any party in Victoria by the 1950s, as shown in Figure 6.2, a feat the party would also achieve in Queensland, New South Wales, and Western Australia by the 1960s.[14] If the notoriously sketchy Labor Party membership figures can be relied upon, it would appear that the Victorian CP had more financial members than both the Labor and Liberal parties *combined* from the late 1950s until at least the 1970s.[15] By the 1970 state election, approximately one in every three Country

[12] B.D. Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1966), 8, 248, 250-251.
[13] Party membership data obtained from the party archives. See Country Party membership files, Charles Sturt University Regional Archives (CSURA), PG2694, Boxes 14-17, Items 104-140.
[14] Ian Ward, "The Middle Classing of the ALP: the Victorian Branch 1961-1981," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 34, no. 2 (August 1988): 201; Helen Nelson and Lex Watson, "Party Organisation," in *Australian Politics – A Second Reader*, ed. Henry Mayer (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1971) 286; Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales*, 132.
[15] Peter Aimer, *Politics, Power and Persuasion: The Liberals in Victoria* (East Hawthorn: James Bennett, 1974), 36; Ian Ward, "Labor's Middle-class Membership: A Profile of the Victorian Branch of the ALP in the

Party voters were financial members of the party. By comparison, the average ratio of members to voters for the ALP at a broadly similar point in history was apparently 1:65, and 1:26 for the Liberal Party.[16]

While it is difficult to determine with precision what percentage of the party's membership were active contributors to the movement, interstate data may offer some guidance. Don Aitkin claimed that 'no more than one-third of the nominal membership' were active party 'militants' of the NSW CP in the 1960s, while Richard Lucy indicated that only 12 percent of NSW National Party financial members were active in the life of the party in the early 1980s.[17] Even if these comparatively low active member ratios are applied across the total state-wide financial membership in Victoria, the movement would still have had a formidable electoral and fundraising machine at its disposal.

The success of the Victorian C-NP and its interstate counterparts in establishing themselves as mass-member political movements followed a similar pattern amongst other agrarian parties across the world. The mass membership party structure, as first pioneered by working-class socialist movements in the late nineteenth century, proved to be ideally suited to 'interest-group' or class-based political activism.[18] It is thus unsurprising that agrarian

Eighties," *Politics* 22, no. 2 (1987): 84; Ward, "The Middle Classing of the ALP," 202-203; P.R. Hay, "Labor Vacates the Bush: The Eclipse of Working Class Values in Victoria's Western District," *Labour History* 54 (May 1988): 71; Andrew Scott, *Fading Loyalties: The Australian Labor Party and the Working Class* (Leichhardt: Pluto Press, 1991), 30-31.

[16] James Jupp, *Party Politics: Australia 1966-1981* (North Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1982), 174; Scott, *Fading Loyalties*, 30.

[17] Don Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales*, 144; Richard Lucy, *The Australian Form of Government* (Crows Nest: Macmillan, 1985), 87.

[18] Leon Epstein, *Political parties in Western democracies* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1980), 118; Elin Haugsgjerd Allern, Knut Heidar, and Rune Karlsen, *After the Mass Party: Continuity and Change in Political Parties and Representation in Norway* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 2.

movements, as interest-group parties *par excellence*, replicated the same mode of organisation and mobilisation that had been deployed by the industrial working class. Where

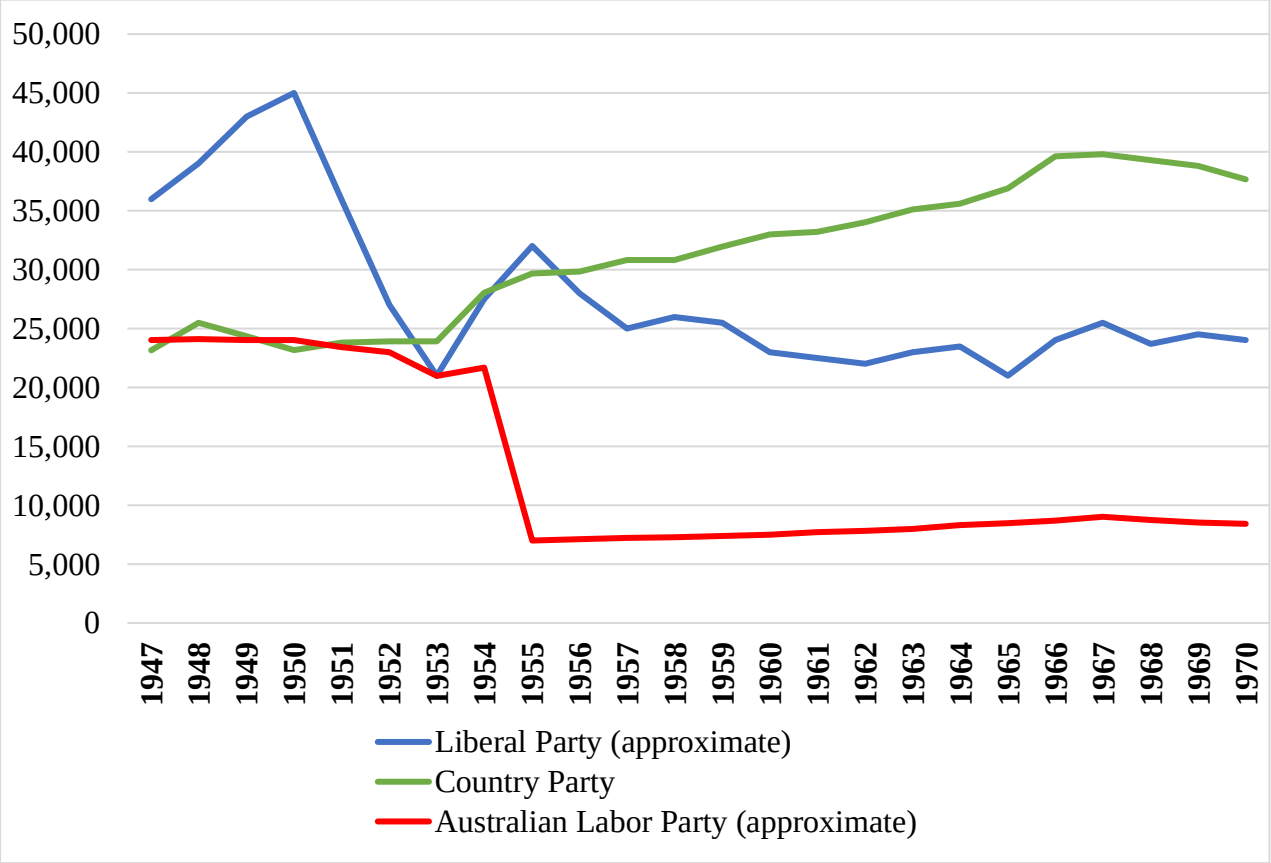

Figure 6.2. Comparison of the rank-and-file financial membership of the Liberal Party, Country Party, and Australian Labor Party in Victoria, 1947-1970[19]

agrarian parties have not emphasised or permitted *direct* membership subscriptions from individual grassroots supporters, they have typically maintained a close relationship with extra-parliamentary industrial farmers' organisations and cooperatives, again imitating the close cooperation between many socialist parties and affiliated unions of workers.[20] As further observed by Wyn Grant, the 'electoral weakness of agrarian parties in urbanised societies is offset by their organisational strength', most notably their links with agricultural

[19] Data obtained from Aimer, *Politics, Power and Persuasion*, 36; Ward, "The Middle Classing of the ALP," 201-214; Hay, "Labor Vacates the Bush," 71; Scott, *Fading Loyalties: The Australian Labor Party and the Working Class*, 30-31.
[20] Duverger, *Political Parties*, 6.

industrial organisations, large rank-and-file membership and high membership ratios, capacity to mobilise their supporters and party members, and stable party leadership and internal unity.[21]

Agrarian parties were the 'mass parties of the countryside' across much of Europe.[22] By the 1950s, both the Swedish and Norwegian agrarian parties had secured a membership-to-voter ratio of approximately one to three – a figure virtually identical to the Victorian Country-National Party at its peak – and the highest ratio of any of the parties then represented in their respective national parliaments.[23] In Finland, the post-war recruitment efforts of the Agrarian-Centre Party were so successful that it became by far the largest mass member party in the country.[24] By the mid-to-late 1980s, the Centre Party's rank-and-file membership – approximately 300,000 members organised into 3000 local branches – was almost one-and-a-half times larger than that of the other three major parties in Finland combined.[25] The Finnish Centre Party attained a member-to-voter ratio of 1:2.[26]

A similar pattern can be discerned amongst the agrarian parties of Central and South-Eastern Europe.[27] At its height in the 1940s, the Romanian National Peasants' Party built a

[21] Wyn Grant, "Agrarian parties," in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics*, eds. Iain McLean and Alistair McMillan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.
[22] Maximillian Spinner, *Continuity and Change: Adaptation Strategies of Agrarian Parties in Scandinavia and Central Eastern Europe Compared* (Norderstedt: GRIN Verlag, 2003), 4.
[23] Gunnar Kristinsson, *Farmers' Parties: A Study in Electoral Adaptation* (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 1991), 103, 108; Tertit Aasland, "The Norwegian Agrarian Party," in *Europäische Bauernparteien im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Heinz Gollwitzer (Stuttgart: Gustav Fischer Verlag, 1977), 87 [German, Germany].
[24] Francis Jacobs, "Finland," in *Western European Political Parties: A comprehensive Guide*, ed. Francis Jacobs (Harlow: Longman, 1989), 536.
[25] David Arter, "From Class Party to Catchall Party?: The Adaptation of the Finnish Agrarian-Centre Party," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 22, no. 2 (1999): 170-171; Jacobs, "Finland," 536.
[26] Jacobs, "Finland," 536.
[27] Roumen Daskalov, *Debating the Past: Modern Bulgarian History from Stambolov to Zhivkov* (Budapest: Central European Press, 2011), 87; Iwan Rakoff, "Bauerndemokratie in Bulgarien," in *Europäische Bauernparteien im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Heinz Gollwitzer (Stuttgart: Gustav Fischer Verlag, 1977), 472 [German, Germany]; Daniel Miller, *Forging Political Compromise: Antonín Svehla and the Czechoslovak Republican Party 1918-1933* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999), 90; Miroslav Mareš and Pavel

membership of more than two million out of total national population of some fifteen million.[28] The Croatian Peasant Party claimed that it had a membership of 1,483,000 in the early 1920s – a figure encompassing nearly half of the national population – though this figure has been discounted as 'an exaggeration'.[29] The membership of the Czech Republican Party of Farmers and Peasants encompassed approximately four to five percent of the total electorate of Czechoslovakia in the 1920s, a remarkable achievement given the highly fractured nature of the country's party system at that time.[30] In Poland, the agrarian Peasant Party was able to re-establish itself as the largest mass membership party in the country after the fall of communism, having enrolled between 150,000 and 200,000 financial members, a figure more than twice the size of its nearest competitor.[31]

A similar phenomenon occurred amongst the Canadian agrarian movements. The United Farmers of Alberta has been described as 'one of the greatest mass democratic and agrarian movements in North American history', with a financial membership of 37,500 at its height in the early 1920s, which encompassed almost 40 percent of the male farmer population of the province.[32] Similarly, the United Farmers of Ontario enrolled approximately 60,000 members at its peak, or between one-fifth and one-third of the primary producers in Ontario.[33] The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, an amalgamated agrarian-social democratic farmer-labour party founded as a successor to the earlier United Farmers

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Pšeja, *Agrarian and Peasant Parties in the Czech Republic: History, Presence and Central European Context* (Brno: Masaryk University Information System, Masaryk University, 2007), 2.

[28] Tudor Călin Zarojanu, *Viața lui Corneliu Coposu* (Bucharest: Editura Mașina de Scris, 2005), 34 [Romanian, Romania].

[29] Mark Biodich and Stjepan Radić, *The Croat Peasant Party and the Politics of Mass Mobilisation, 1904-1928* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 160.

[30] Miller, *Forging Political Compromise*, 90.

[31] Spinner, *Continuity and Change*, 16.

[32] Bradford James Rennie, *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy: the United Farmers and Farm Women of Alberta 1909-1921* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 224.

[33] Kerry Badgley, *Ringing in the Common Love of Good: The United Farmers of Ontario, 1914-1926* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 53.

movement, recruited a full eight percent of the Saskatchewan electorate as financial members by the mid-1940s.[34]

How was it that the Victorian C-NP was able to match this success and enrol such a large number of its supporters? Although it is true, as Brian Costar has noted, that the membership figures in Victoria were 'artificially inflated' by the practice of enrolling both a husband and wife on a single membership subscription, this practice was only permitted from the 1970s onwards and therefore does not account for the large, disproportionately male membership recruited over the preceding five decades.[35] At least a partial answer can be attributed to the very significant resources that the party ploughed into its recruitment efforts. Paid field officers or 'organisers' were employed to conduct a farm-to-farm canvass to enrol or follow up lapsed members and to establish and re-form local branches.[36] As can be seen from Figure 6.3 below, Central Office regularly reinvested in excess of 30 or even 40 percent of its principal income, General Section membership subscriptions, into its organising efforts. As further demonstrated in Figure 6.4, the level of paid organising support in any given year broadly correlated with a rise or fall in state-wide membership income to the CP Central Office, though this can be at least partly explained by the increased costs associated with servicing a proportionately larger membership. The importance of these paid field staff was highlighted by the pronounced decline in the number of financial members during the Second World War, when organising efforts were suspended following fuel rationing.[37] Despite Central Council offering to pay 'liberal commissions' to party members who carried out their

[34] Epstein, *Political Parties in Western Democracies*, 127-128.
[35] This rule change in the 1970s explains the decline in the membership of the Women's Section that can be seen in Figure 6.1. See Brian Costar, "Victoria," in *Country to National: Australian rural politics and beyond*, eds. Brian Costar and Dennis Woodward (North Sydney: George Allen and Unwin Australia, 1986), 98.
[36] United Country Party, 'Seventeenth Annual Conference Report', 1932, Annual Conference Annotated Business Papers 1930-1932, CSURA, PG2694, Box 8, Item 32, 117.
[37] United Country Party, 'Central Council Report – 1944 Annual Conference', 1944, Annual Conference Annotated Business Papers, 1940-1946, CSURA, PG2694, Box 9, Item 34, 143-144.

own local organising efforts, the total state-wide membership collapsed by 45 percent between 1938 and 1943.[38]

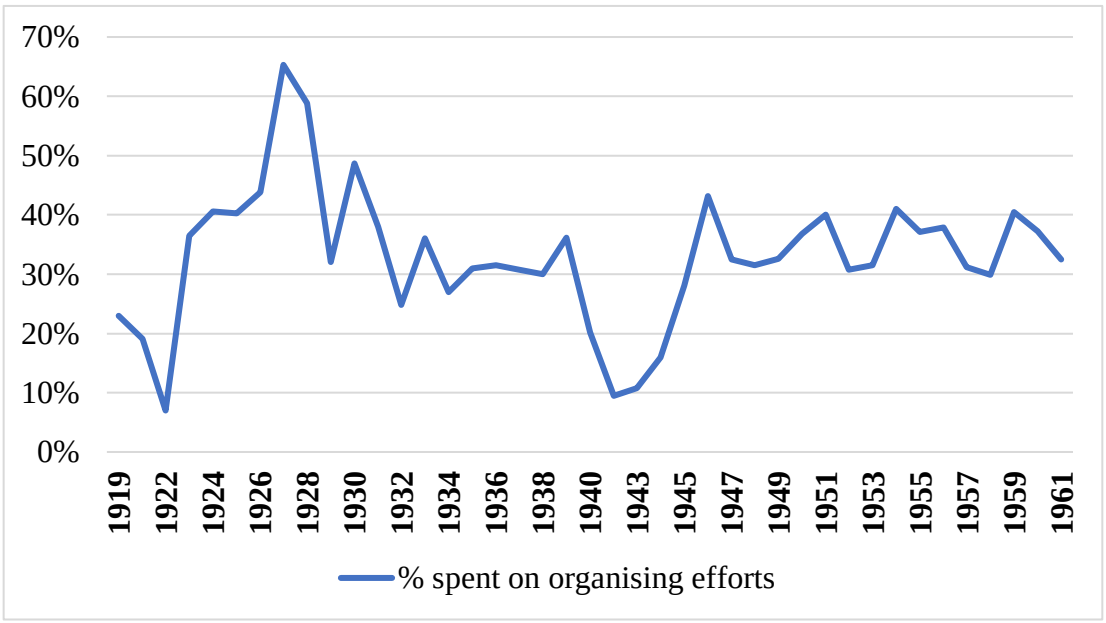

Figure 6.3. Expenditure by CP Central Office on organising efforts as a percentage of General section membership fee income, 1919-1961.

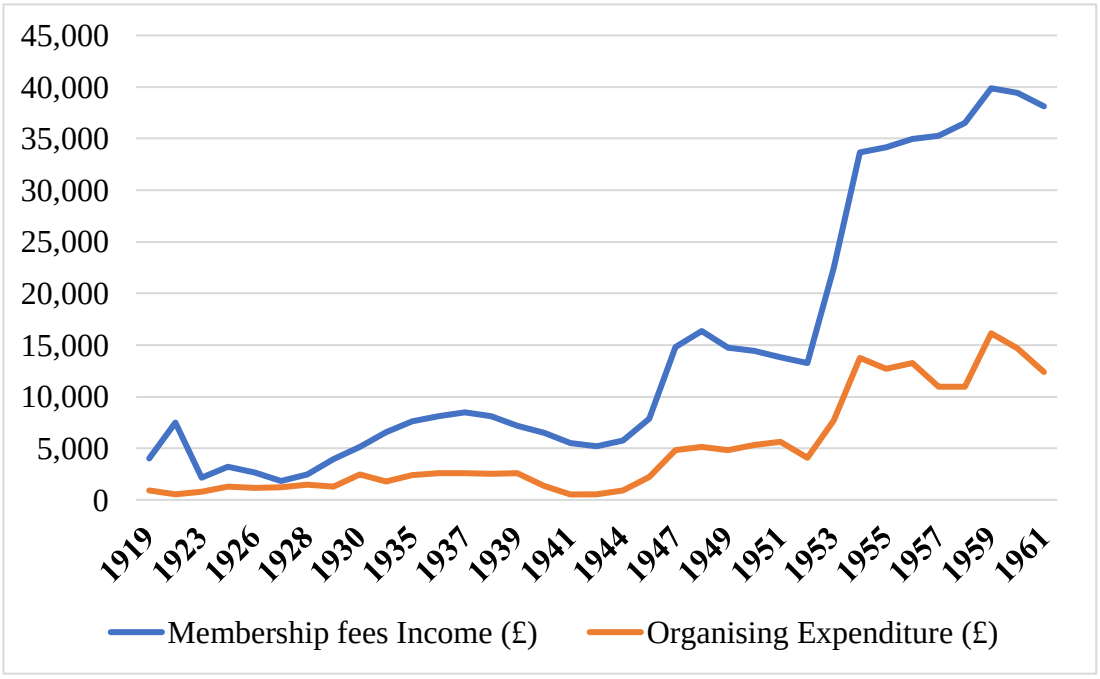

Figure 6.4. Expenditure by CP Central Office on organising efforts, compared to income from General Section membership subscriptions, 1919-61.

[38] Ibid.

The task of retaining new members was rendered much easier following the adoption of bank order subscriptions from 1927.[39] Prior to the bank order system, local branches were exceedingly unreliable at the task of collecting membership fees.[40] The new direct debit scheme allowed the party to automatically draw on a member's bank account each time the annual subscription fell due. By 1929 more than half of the General Section members had signed a bank order form, a proportion which steadily increased until it embraced approximately 90 percent of the rank-and-file membership by, at latest, the mid-1940s.[41] Annual subscription income was not the only financial benefit that the party received from its large membership base. From 1933 until 2017, the party was paid a commission by Federation Insurance and its successor companies for every branch member that purchased a policy with the firm. According to Don Aitkin, the Victorian party accumulated a total sum of approximately $250,000 (in 1960s dollar values) from insurance commissions between the 1930s and late 1960s.[42] Likewise, according to Ken Wright, by 1984 the party was receiving an *annual* commission of over $500,000, up from $28,000 in 1972.[43]

III. Geographical distribution of the membership

As noted elsewhere in this thesis, historians and political scientists who have written on the Victorian Country Party have often embraced regional geography as an important lens in seeking to understand the movement's internal machinations. It is not uncommon, for

[39] Victorian Country Party, 'Thirteenth Conference – Annual Report for the Year ended 31st December 1927', 1928, Minute Book, various meetings, 1926-1929, CSURA, PG2694, Box 8, Item 30A, 115.
[40] Victorian Farmers' Union, 'Eleventh Conference, Report and Balance Sheet for the Year ended 21st December, 1925', 1926, Minute Book, various meetings, 1926-1929, CSURA, PG2694, Box 8, Item 30A, 43.
[41] *Countryman*, 2 August 1929, 3; Countryman, '1945 Bank Orders', Countryman Ownership and Assignment of Trust, CSURA, PG2694, Box 50, Item 613.
[42] Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales*, 125.
[43] Ken Mackenzie Wright, *With the Nationals in Spring Street: An autobiography of soldier settlement, flying in the RAAF, local government, and parliamentary service* (Mildura: Kenneth Mackenzie Wright, 1996), 45.

instance, to read of the 'radical' Mallee or Wimmera-Mallee section of the party in opposition to the more 'conservative' members from the dairying and fruit-growing regions of Gippsland or the Goulburn Valley.[44] Accordingly, in seeking to form a better understanding of the C-NP in Victoria as a grassroots movement, it is useful to explore the geographical distribution of its rank-and-file membership and how this changed over time. This task is complicated, however, by the limited local membership data in the party archives, and the inconsistent tabulation methods used across the decades. Nevertheless, some broad trends have been identified. In the four decades between the 1920s and the 1960s – a period for which at least some state-wide branch and electorate-level membership records have survived – the party successfully broke out from its original heartland in the Mallee and Lower Murray districts to build an extensive membership base across the state, even in rural seats that had long been held by non-Country Party members.

Using the earliest surviving comprehensive data, namely a branch list from 1923, it is possible to reconstruct an approximate seat-by-seat distribution of the VFU's grassroots membership at that time, summarised in Figure 6.5 below. The General Section membership of the Union stood at approximately 9,200 divided amongst 360 local branches. VFU membership was strongest in the north-western corner of the state in an area stretching from the sprawling electorate of Swan Hill – accounting for approximately 1,500 members in its own right – down to Rodney, based on Echuca, and across to Lowan in the west. Approximately half the membership resided in the principal grain-growing electorates stretching from Swan Hill across to Benalla. The VFU was remarkably weak in East and North Gippsland, in the far North-East of Victoria (the electorates of Benambra and Ovens)

[44] See for example Brian Costar, "John Allan: the first agrarian," in *The Victorian Premiers 1856-2006*, eds. Paul Strangio and Brian Costar (Annandale: Federation Press, 2006), 188.

and had no listed branches at all in the seats of Port Fairy and Warrnambool in South Western Victoria. Just 15 percent of branch members resided in the six Gippsland seats (Gippsland East, North, South, and West, Walhalla, and Mornington), less than a quarter (24 percent) in the *eleven* Western and South-Western electorates (Glenelg, Dundas, Port Fairy, Warrnambool, Polwarth, Hampden, Stawell and Ararat, Kara-Kara, Lowan, Korong, and Borung), and just 14 percent in the remaining inner regional electorates clustered around Bendigo, Ballarat, Geelong and the Greater Melbourne area.

By 1946 a distinct shift in the geographical distribution of the party's membership was evident. The organisational wing was emerging from its long war-time malaise as membership surged above the 16,000 mark. As is evident from Figure 6.6 below, the membership was now more evenly distributed than in 1923 as its geographical centre of gravity shifted south and east. The six northern and north-western electorates of Swan Hill, Mildura, Rainbow, Borung, Korong, and Rodney now accounted for just 35 percent of members, down from 43 percent in 1923. Most strikingly, there had been significant growth in the South West in Warrnambool, Polwarth, Portland, Dundas, Ripon and Hampden. Collectively, the five Gippsland seats (Gippsland East, North, South, and West, along with Wonthaggi) now accounted for 21.6 percent of members, with a much stronger presence in the eastern parts of the region. Most (22) rural electorates had amassed between 300 and 1,000 financial members and a further three – Rainbow and Borung in the North-West and Wonthaggi in southern Gippsland – had exceeded the 1,000 mark.

Jumping forward further still to June 1964 (Figure 6.7), after which point comprehensive electorate-level membership data disappears from the archives, it is evident that the party

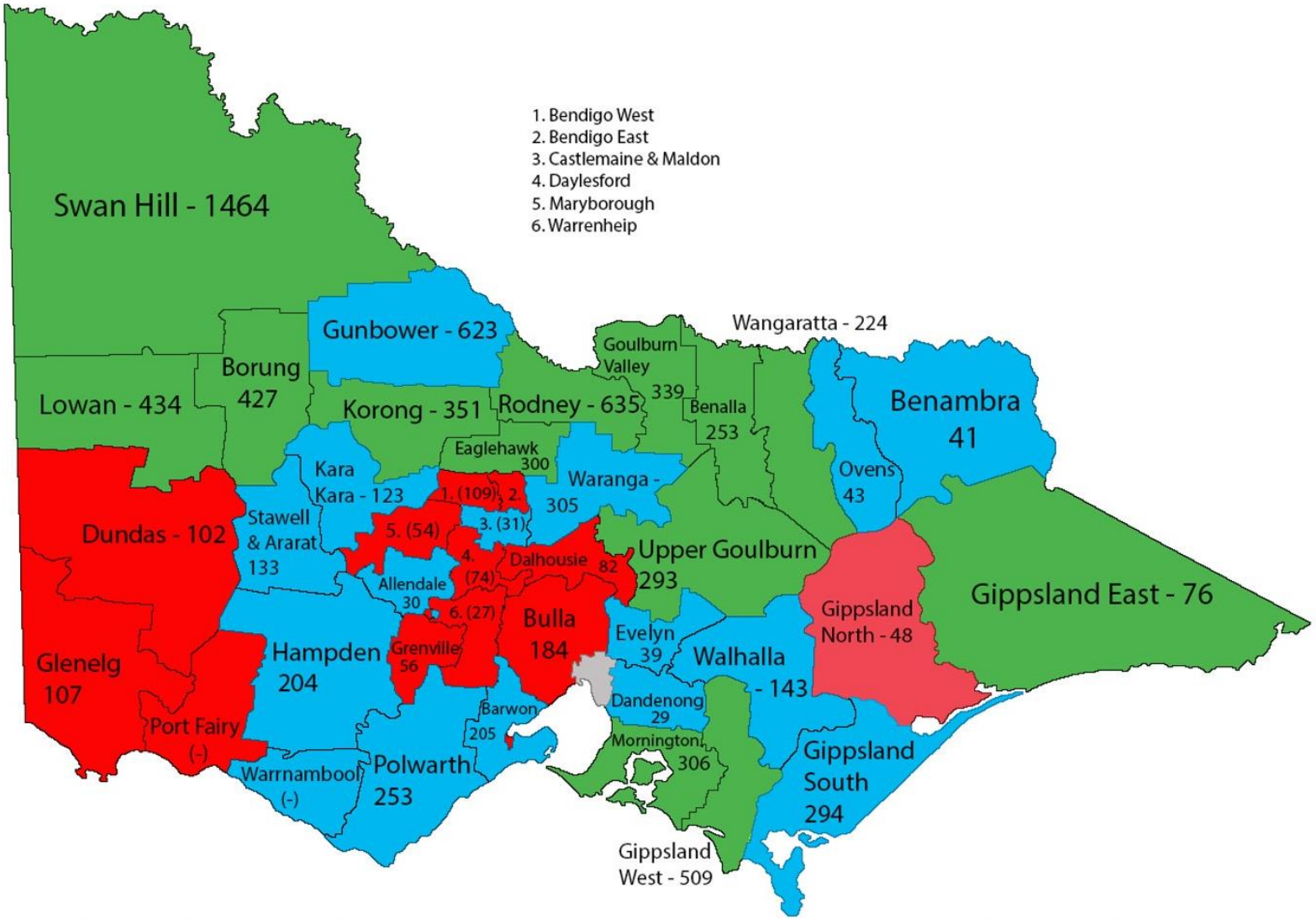

Figure 6.5. VFU General Section financial membership by state electorate, 1923 (approximate figures drawn from local branch data).
NB: Colour of electorate indicates which party won the seat at the 1924 General Election: Country Party (green), Nationalist/Liberal Party (blue), Australian Labor Party (red), Independent Labor (pink)

continued to entrench itself at a grassroots level despite the ascendancy of the Bolte Liberal Government. A significant number of rural seats (13) had at least 900 General Section members and two (Murray Valley and Swan Hill) had in excess of 2,000 members. While the party's grassroots membership was typically greater in seats that had long been held by CP parliamentarians, it was still remarkably strong in seats such as Dundas that had never been won by the party, or Portland which was held only fleetingly in the 1940s. This suggests that many branch members were motivated by more than just personal loyalty to the local member of parliament in joining the party. Furthermore, in the absence of an electoral pact for state elections in Victoria, the Country Party had a strong incentive to maintain an extensive local campaign machinery across the state to rebuff perennial Liberal incursions in its heartland seats, sustain Legislative Council campaigns, and support its own expansionary efforts in non-Country Party rural seats. Murray Valley had leapfrogged the north-western electorates as the constituency with the largest membership, indicating a further realignment of the party's centre of gravity towards the irrigated dairying and horticultural districts rather the traditional dryland wheat regions of the North-West.

I. The rank-and-file membership: A demographic analysis

Having examined the growth and shifting geographical distribution of the Country Party rank-and-file membership over the movement's first five decades, we can now turn to an important related question: just who were the grassroots members? Unfortunately, the surviving Victorian membership records typically do not contain even basic data on individual members, such as age or occupation. Nevertheless, there are some useful sources that can assist in forming at least a broad impression of the party membership over time.

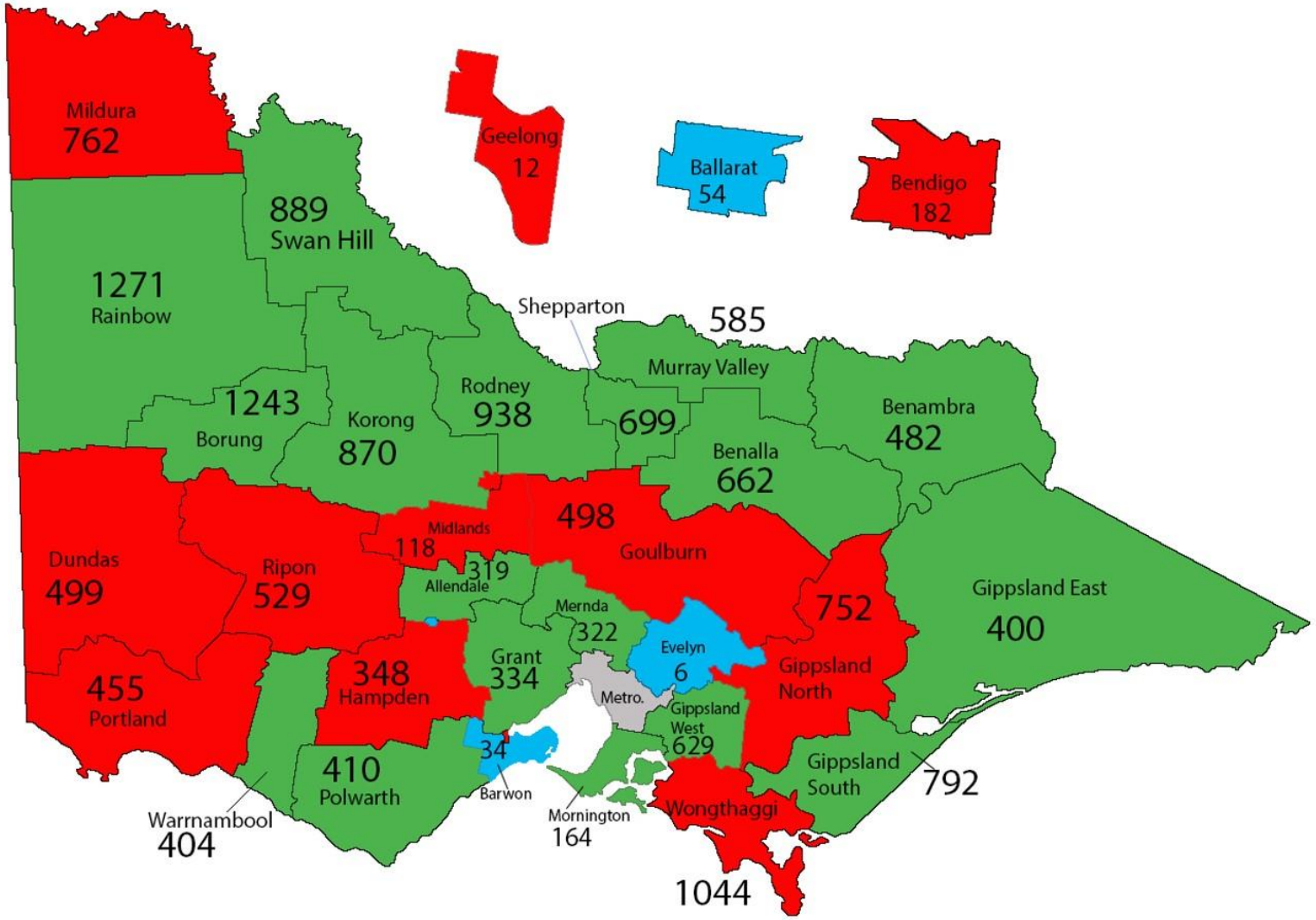

Figure 6.6. Country Party General Section membership by state electorate, 1946.
NB: Colour of electorate indicates which party won the seat at the 1945 General Election: Country Party (green), Liberal Party (blue), Australian Labor Party (red)

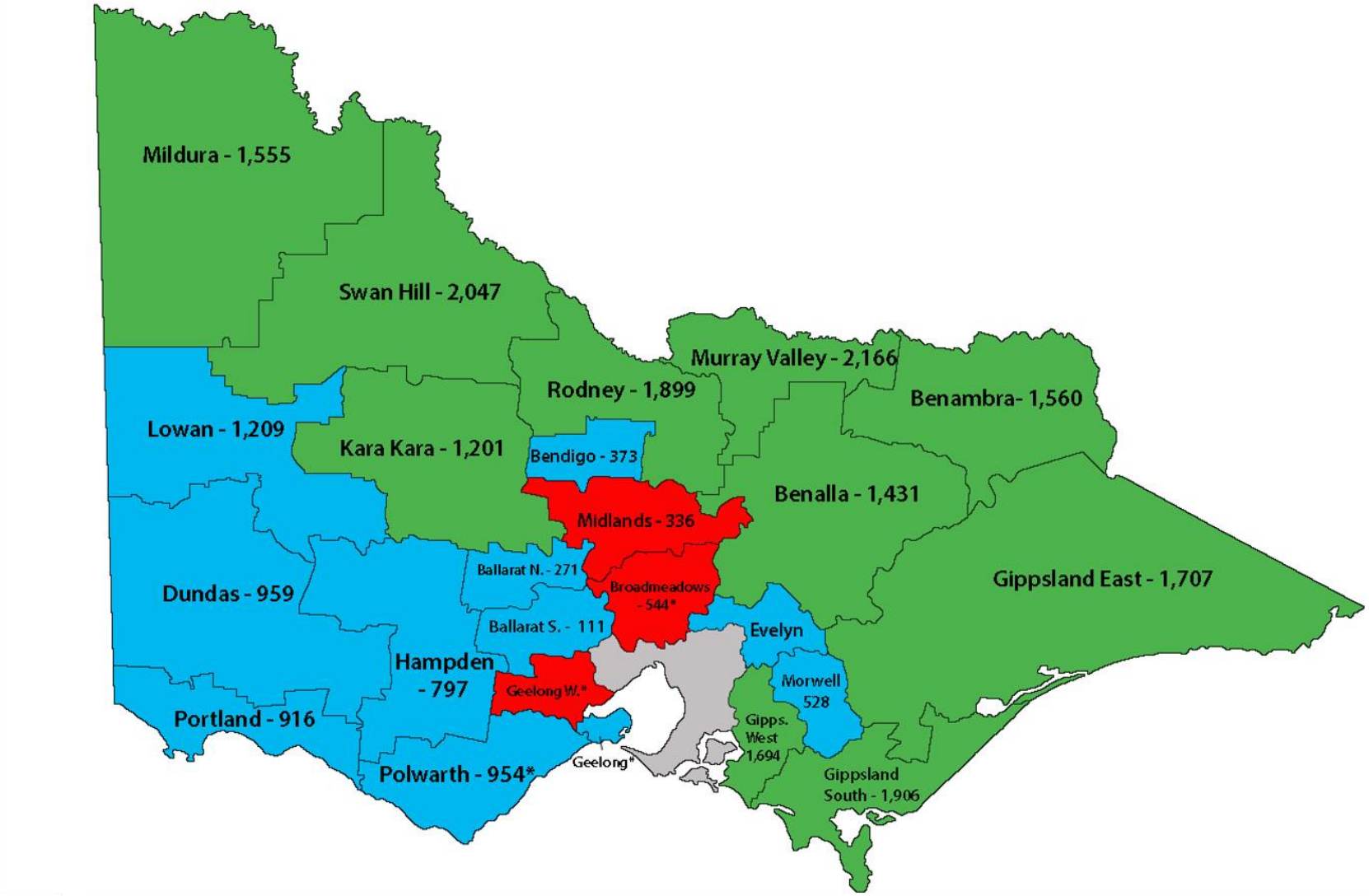

Figure 6.7. Country Party General Section membership by state electorate, 1964.
NB: Colour of electorate indicates which party won the seat at the 1964 General Election: Country Party (green), Liberal Party (blue), Australian Labor Party (red). Polwarth figures include Geelong and Geelong West. Broadmeadows figures include Melbourne metropolitan area.

Firstly, although the Victorian historical data is exceedingly limited, we do have a comprehensive profile of the rank-and-file membership of the New South Wales Country Party from the 1960s which can provide a useful approximate guide. The membership of the NSW Country Party was 'fundamentally homogenous' in occupation, family background, and religious affiliation: 'The typical Country Party member who emerges… is an elderly, married, Protestant farmer whose parents lived on the land and whose father was also a member of the party'.[45] The great majority – 60 to 70 percent in most NSW state electorates, and over 90 percent in one constituency – were farmers or graziers, with the balance consisting mainly of farm labourers, rural workers, housewives, and a modest number of professional town residents.[46] Four out of every five members were aged over 40, and one quarter over 60, and most party office-bearers were aging First World War soldier settlers.[47] Only one in 12 members were Roman Catholic and 23 percent were Presbyterians (compared to 9 percent for NSW as a whole).[48] Using the small pool of surviving archival material, anecdotal information, and biographical data on the state parliamentary members, it would appear that the Victorian membership was likely similar in composition to its counterpart north of the Murray River.

Although the party frequently boasted of a significant influx of country town businessmen into the movement, it would seem that the membership remained predominantly agrarian.[49] This view is supported by the only surviving archival files that include explicit occupational data on rank-and-file members, namely, a collection of Morwell Assembly Electoral District

[45] Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales*, 141.
[46] Ibid., 135-138.
[47] Ibid., 139.
[48] Ibid., 140.
[49] See for example Victorian Country Party, 'Thirteenth Conference – Annual Report for the Year ended 31st December 1927', 1928, CSURA, PG2694, Box 8, Item 30A, 115.

Council branch records from the early 1990s.[50] Given that the Labor-held state seat of Morwell was a comparatively urbanised electorate centred on the heavily industrialised Latrobe Valley, one would perhaps expect to see a greater diversity of occupational backgrounds amongst National Party branch members here than in more typically rural and farming-dominated electorates. Yet even in Morwell, primary producers still constituted an absolute majority (57 percent) of the rank-and-file financial members in the electorate, ahead of tradesmen and labourers (11 percent) and professionals and managers (also 11 percent). Even in more urban branches such as Traralgon and Hazelwood North-Morwell, primary producers were still by far the largest single occupation group.

In light of these figures, it is perhaps unsurprising that the overwhelming majority of the state presidents of the organisational wing have been primary producers, up to and including the present day. Reginald Skeat (Chief President 1935-36), an accountant and businessman from Red Cliffs, and Tom Tehan (1974-75), a solicitor from Kyabram, were rare exceptions as country town professionals rather than farmers. Similarly, although the parliamentary wing was unlikely to have been a perfect facsimile of the rank-and-file membership, the biographical data recorded by the Parliament of Victoria indicates that a significant, though gradually declining, percentage of the Country/National Party members elected to the Legislative Assembly over the past century have been primary producers.

[50] See National Party of Australia – Victoria, Gippsland membership files, CSURA, PG2694, Box 16, Items 120-126.

Branch	Farmer/Grazier	Trade/Labourer	Small Business	Professional /Manager	Home Duties	Retired	Unspecified	Total branch strength
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	N
Boolarra	82	12	*	*	*	6	*	17
Glengarry	70	25	*	*	*	5	*	40
Hazelwood North – Morwell	44	5	14	16	2	*	19	36
Heyfield	100	*	*	*	*	*	*	6
Traralgon	49	10	10	18	2	5	6	126
Yinnar	61	11	7	*	3	7	11	28
Total for all branches studied	**57**	**11**	**8**	**11**	**2**	**5**	**6**	**253**

Table 6.1. Occupation of financial members of local National Party branches, Morwell Assembly Electorate District Council, 1991-1992.

Figure 6.8. Percentage of C-NP Legislative Assembly members with/without a career in agriculture prior to entering parliament, 1917-2014.

Further demographic insights into the party can be gleaned from the religious background of the parliamentary party, again drawn from the records of the Parliament of Victoria. Until the 1970s, the members of the state parliamentary wing were overwhelmingly Protestant in their religious affiliation. Indeed, prior to the mid-1970s, only four Catholics had ever joined the ranks of the state Parliamentary Country Party. While Irish Catholics, such as Isaac Hart,

were prominent in the formative years of the Victorian Farmers' Union, it would appear that this Catholic element was largely superseded by Protestants until the 1970s, when Catholics, such as Pat McNamara and John McGrath, again rose to frontline prominence. James Jupp identified the integration of rural Catholics into the party as evidence of its successful political and cultural entrenchment into rural society in the 1970s and 1980s.[51] Nevertheless, drawing on the recollection of Stuart McDonald, a former state president and upper house member, there was at least some sectarian resentment at the influx of non-Protestants into the party.[52] Some members, McDonald recalled, considered that the party was 'going downhill now these Catholics are getting in'.[53] This accords with Aitkin's findings that party members in NSW in the 1960s 'often [saw] their party as a Protestant group, and consider the proper political vehicle of Roman Catholics to be the ALP, or, in more recent times, the DLP'.[54]

Again, while precise information on the age distribution of the membership has not survived in the archives, it can be cautiously inferred from some anecdotal information that the *active* rank-and-file membership has been predominantly drawn from an older age cohort. As early as the late 1920s, there was a pronounced sentiment that the movement was dominated by older men and that greater efforts were required to recruit younger farmers. Writing to the *Countryman* in 1929, Irene Matchett of Warragul complained of the 'overwhelming number of elderly men' amongst the conference delegates such that she 'could scarcely see a youthful member'.[55] Ewan Tuckett of Lancaster echoed Matchett's concerns: 'instead of a young,

[51] Jupp, *Party Politics*, 165-166.
[52] Stuart McDonald interviewed by Andrew Black, recorded at Rochester, Victoria, on 2 August 2016.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales*, 140.
[55] *Countryman*, 3 May 1929, 3.

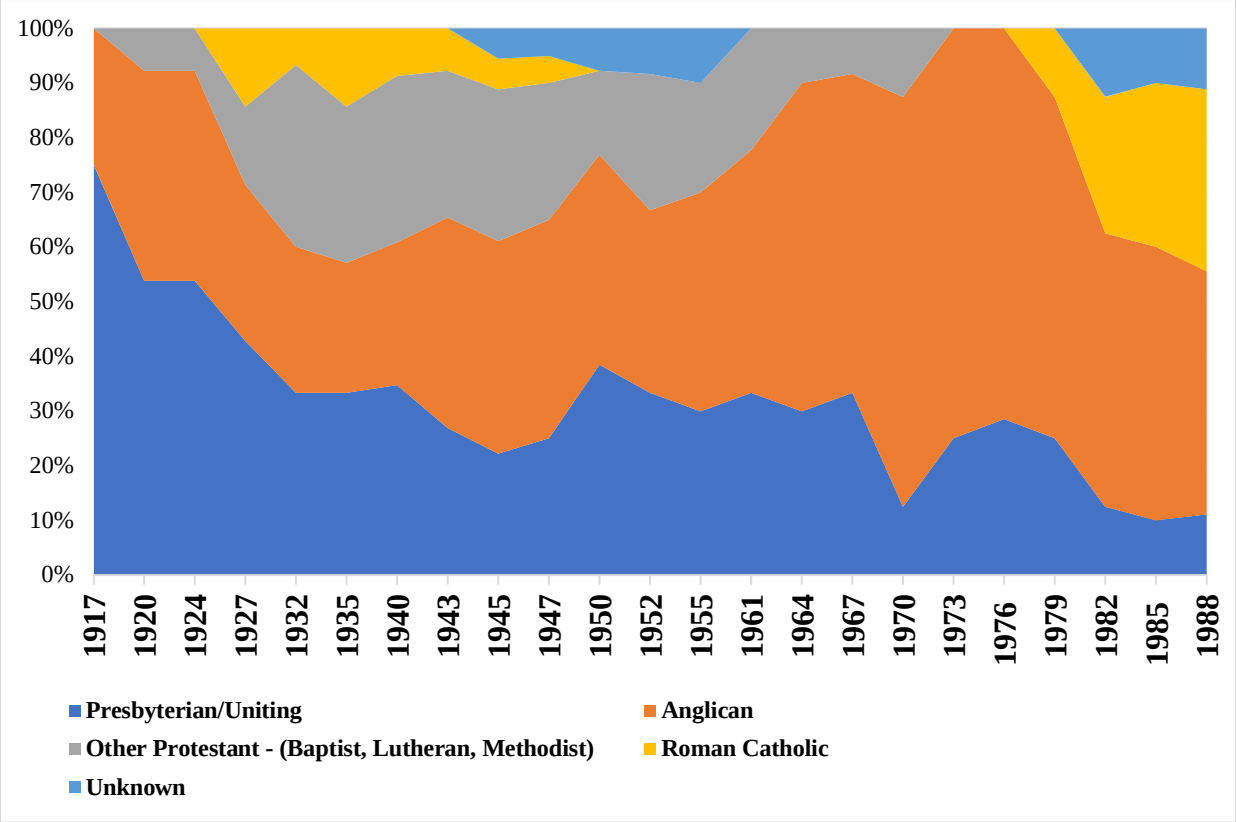

Figure 6.9. Religious affiliation of C-NP Legislative Assembly members (including both VCP and CPP 1926-1930), 1917-1988.

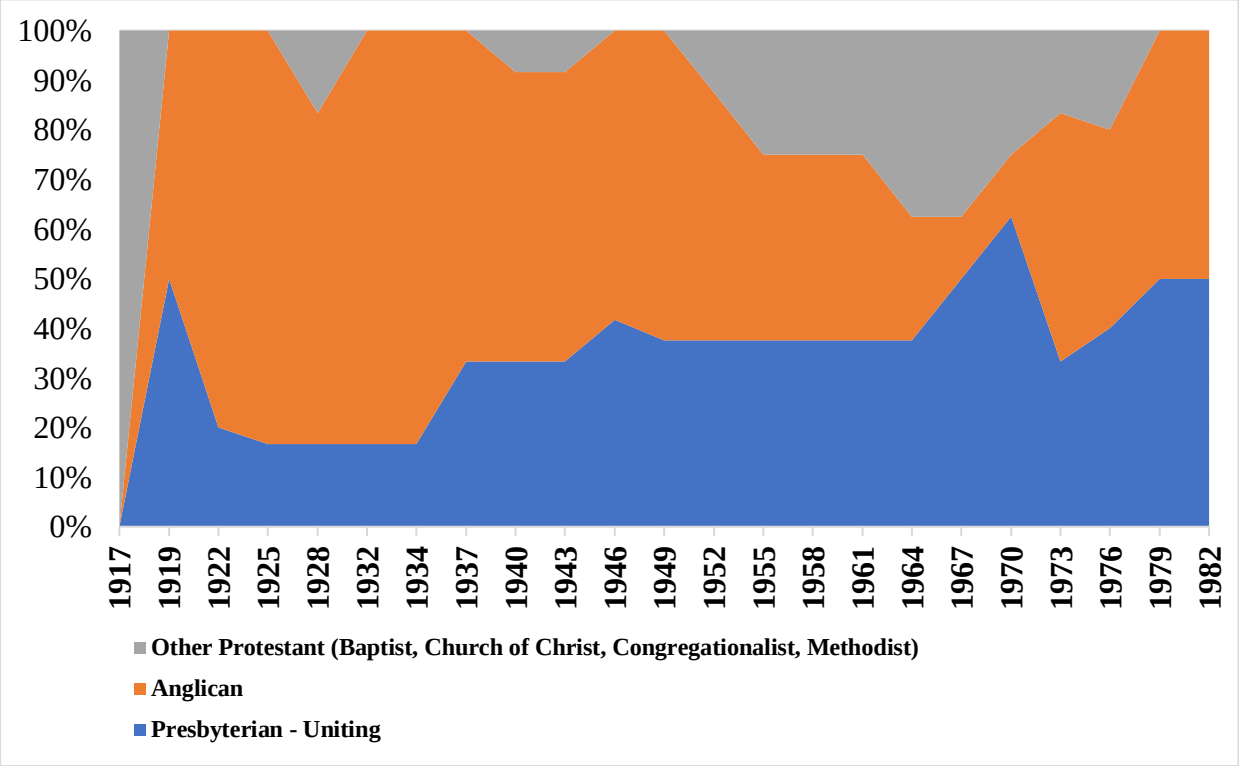

Figure 6.10. Religious affiliation of C-NP Legislative Council members, 1918-1982.

vigorous, living, growing tree, our organisation is much more reminiscent of an old strainer post'.[56] The Young Country Party (YCP) was formally established in February 1931 in an attempt to remedy this problem.[57] Despite organisational support and the establishment of several branches, the first incarnation of the Victorian YCP was defunct by 1935.[58] This boom-and-bust trajectory was again repeated between 1948 and 1954, before a more stable youth wing finally emerged in 1965. Even at its height, the Young Country-National Party amounted to no more than a few percent of the total party membership. According to the Priebe-Anderson Report, an internal 'holistic audit' of the party's operations and future prospects conducted in 2008, the average age of party members in Victoria was a ripe 64.[59]

Once again, we find several compelling parallels between the experience of the Victorian Country-National Party and its Nordic counterparts abroad. In Sweden, farmers have continued to be the 'mainstay' of the organisational membership of the Centre Party.[60] Despite, the Centre Party's success in expanding its *electoral* constituency beyond primary producer interests from the 1950s onwards, this was 'hardly reflected at all in its membership figures' and the movement has 'remained a mass party of farmers'.[61] In 1970, farmers accounted for 73 percent of party members, ahead of labourers at 12 percent and 'middle class groups' at 10 percent, figures broadly similar to the Morwell AEDC data above.[62] Similarly in Finland, the Centre Party continued to rely on the primary producer industrial organisations to furnish the party with its 'core of active members, economic support and

[56] *Countryman*, 10 May 1929, 2.
[57] *Countryman*, 27 February 1931, 7.
[58] *Goulburn Valley Stock and Property Journal*, 5 July 1933, 3.
[58] *Gippsland Times*, 19 October 1933, 6; *Gippsland Times*, 22 February 1934, 1.
[59] Michael Priebe and John Anderson, *Priebe-Anderson Review into The Nationals* (Canberra: National Party of Australia, 2008), 20.
[60] Kristinsson, *Farmers' Parties,* 103.
[61] Ibid., 103-104.
[62] Ibid.; Mats Bäck, *Partier och organisationer i Sverige* (Stockholm: Liber Förlag, 1980), 83 [Swedish, Sweden].

staffing assistance', which again suggests a considerable predominance of farmers within the active units of the party.[63] As late as 1989, approximately one half of the members of the Centre Party were primary producers and farmers.[64]

A common pattern can also be discerned when comparing the occupational backgrounds of the parliamentary members of the Victorian, Swedish, Norwegian, and Icelandic agrarian parties.[65] All four emerged as exclusively (or nearly so in the case of the Norwegian Farmers' Party) farmer-based parliamentary parties. The percentage of primary producers in the parliamentary wing of each party has progressively declined over time to the point that farmers and graziers now constitute a minority in all four parties. While the three Nordic parties had transitioned into majority non-farmer parliamentary forces by the mid-1970s (and as early as the 1930s in the case of the Icelandic Progressive Party), this occurred in Victoria only at the 2014 state election. With the exception of a pronounced 'dip' in the 1960s, farmer/graziers constituted more than 80 percent of the Victorian Legislative Assembly until the mid-to-late 1970s.

II. The organisational wing as an instrument and arena

The *internal* homogeneity of the rank-and-file membership of the Country-National Party described by Aitkin – which would seem to have had strong parallels in the Victorian party – is reminiscent of the *external* homogeneity of the party's voting constituency that has frequently been cited to explain the Country-National Party's survival and electoral

[63] Jan Sundberg, "Finland: Nationalised Parties, Professionalised Organisations," in *How Parties organise: change and adaptation in party organisations in Western democracies*, eds. Richard Katz and Peter Mair (London: SAGE Publications, 1994), 167-168.
[64] Jacobs, "Finland," 536.
[65] Kristinsson, *Farmers' Parties,* 125-128.

durability.[66] Duncan and Epps, for instance, posit that the enduring electoral support and mass-membership strength of the National Party arose from a political-cultural process known as 'the homogeneity of reinforcement'.[67] According to this theory, the party affiliation of residents of highly homogenous communities – such as agricultural districts in Australia – is influenced to a very significant extent by the political sympathies of the elite members of the community. In the case of the rural electoral heartland of the National Party, the local elite are usually National Party-aligned farmers and graziers.[68]

As further contended by Derek Verrall, Ian Ward, and Peter Hay, the party was successful over time in firmly integrating 'into the social fabric within its supporting regions' and 'gained and maintained acceptance and loyalty… though networks of social and family relationships which exist in rural communities'.[69] Don Aitkin has explained the longevity and strength of the party's 'country-minded' ideology as a product of inter-generational political socialisation in rural families.[70] Country-minded attitudes were purportedly further reinforced by the power of 'sustaining institutions' such as city-versus-country sporting contests, the ABC 'Country Hour' radio programme, and the Country Women's Association.[71]

While there may be merit in these respective explanations, they all neglect the important role played by the Country-National Party as an active force – a 'sustaining institution' even – in cultivating, socialising, transmitting, and shaping 'country-mindedness' as a political

[66] Jennifer Curtin, *The Voice and The Vote of the Bush: The Representation of Rural and Regional Australia in the Federal Parliament* (Canberra: Department of Parliamentary Services Parliamentary Library, 2004), 1.
[67] C.J. Duncan and W.R. Epps, "The demise of 'countrymindedness': New players or changing values in Australian rural politics?," *Political Geography* 11, no. 5 (September 1992): 434; C.B. Kenny, "Partisanship and political discussion," *Political Geography Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1991): 97-109.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Derek Verrall, Ian Ward, and Peter Hay, "Community, country, party: roots of rural conservatism," in *Country to National: Australian rural politics and beyond*, eds. Brian Costar and Dennis Woodward (North Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1985), 16.
[70] Don Aitkin, "Countrymindedness: the spread of an idea," *Australian Cultural History* no. 4 (1985): 38-39.
[71] Ibid.

philosophy. The party was always more than a passive conduit for the pre-existing 'country-minded' ideals that permeated the communities it represented. To its dedicated core members and activists, the movement *itself* was conceived of as a model, indeed, the very embodiment, of the rural virtues that distinguished the noble and sturdy countryman from his more duplicitous and anaemic city cousins. Whereas the 'city-controlled' parties were considered to be contaminated by the corruption and cronyism that afflicted urban life, the Country Party was to be unambiguously and vigorously democratic, open and transparent in its internal operations, and patriotic in its aspirations.

From the inauguration of the VFU, the movement's devoted evangelists insisted that the party was a uniquely democratic organisation controlled by its rank-and-file membership. Agrarian political thought around the world has often characterised the farmer or peasant as a 'natural democrat' with a deep attachment to cooperative community life situated in opposition to oligarchical and divisive urban power.[72] The Victorian Country Party movement was lauded by its members as the 'the most democratic body in this democratic country…neither run by class nor caucus' but rather 'governed from the bottom up... the members have supreme control'.[73] Although the organisational structure of the Victorian Country Party was closely modelled on that of the Labor Party, its advocates considered the movement to be a more 'independent political force', free from external Trades Hall regimentation, with 'no place for groups of agitators, for communism or socialism.'[74] One fervent member, Mr J.W. Gregory

[72] Johan Eellend, "Agrarianism and Modernization in Inter-War Eastern Europe," in *Societal Change and Ideological Formation among the Rural Population of the Baltic Area 1880-1939*, ed. Piotr Wawrzeniuk (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2008), 46-49.
[73] *Farmers' Advocate*, 14 June 1918, 3; *Farmers' Advocate*, 11 March 1920, 8.
[74] James Jupp, *Australian Party Politics* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1968), 158-159; *Countryman*, 1 April 1965, 2.

of Yarram, even suggested that the party was possibly the most democratic organisation in the world:

> Each member under the constitution has an equal voice… It is not possible for the control to fall into the hands of a body of city men, nor is there any possibility of any one branch of primary producers out voting the others. It is equal representation right through Victoria...[75]

Here, according to Gregory, was the model patriotic democracy of the men and women of the land: a movement built not on 'any coercion' but simply the invitation of 'one farmer to another to fill his place as a citizen'.[76] As noted by B.D. Graham, the Victorian state division of the Australian Country Party retained a much more robust democratic culture than its interstate sister parties, which, from the late 1920s, fell under the control of 'conservative oligarchies' that succeeded in 'stifling those remnants of delegate democracy which had survived from the movement's formative years'.[77]

The centrepiece of the Victorian party's organisational structure was the sovereignty of the annual General Section conference – the 'Farmers' Parliament' as it was informally christened – which served as the supreme decision-making body for the movement.[78] Typically comprised of between 500 and 1,000 branch delegates, the state conference had sole authority to amend the constitution and rules, elect the executive officer bearers (and for much of the party's history, the members of Central Council), and to add to or alter the party's official policy platform.[79] Although the attendees were generally 'not well versed in the arts of public speaking and debate' and focused more on specifics than general

[75] *Gippsland Standard and Alberton Shire Representative*, 28 August 1918, 3.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Graham, *The formation of the Australian Country Parties*, 287.
[78] *Farmers' Advocate*, 10 August 1922, 14; *Countryman*, 28 November 1924, 2; *Argus*, 8 February 1947, 19.
[79] Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales*, 177.

philosophical principles, the debates still facilitated 'the regular mutual re-affirmation of values and goals held to be true and worthwhile… and the recital of shared grievances'.[80] To party activists such as J.T. Moodie of the Craigieburn branch, there was 'no kind of propaganda' as effective for the movement as the annual conference debates, particularly to 'hear a Bush Battler, on his pins, demanding in plain unvarnished terms justice for the cause of farming'.[81] In keeping with this agrarian egalitarianism, even the most eloquent and eminent parliamentarian could be challenged and bested on the floor of conference by a delegate of the most humble origins, rudimentary education, and oratorical abilities. As exemplified by Mr Bartley's exchange with the Chief President at the 1952 conference noted at the outset of this chapter, even the most mundane contributions to the conference proceedings could serve to reinforce the party's rural ethos and affirm the indispensable contribution of primary producers to the welfare of the nation.

In practice, however, the proceedings of the party conferences were not always as exemplary of the movement's supposedly sacrosanct egalitarian and democratic principles as the remarks of Messrs Moodie or Gregory may have suggested. Delegates often decried the dominance of the parliamentarians in debates, such that some even sought to have them excluded from the platform altogether to sit as 'spectators rather than gladiators'.[82] Other delegates lamented that the conference plenary sessions were so large that the contributions of the proverbial 'Bush Battler' could not be heard by those standing towards the back of the hall, and were likely in any case to be challenged and overruled by the domineering Central Councillors in attendance.[83] Furthermore, the result of any controversial conference debate was seldom considered to be final and determinative by the losing camp, and many

[80] Ibid., 182-183.
[81] *Farmers' Advocate*, 14 June 1918, 3.
[82] *Countryman*, 7 May 1937, 5.
[83] *Farmers' Advocate*, 5 July 1918, 3.

unsuccessful motions were simply resubmitted each subsequent year until the desired outcome was achieved.

The Victorian Country Party also sought to distinguish itself from its electoral competitors by its 'strong and unassailable independence' as an autonomous, democratically financed, and transparent political organisation.[84] As noted above, the Country Party expressly refused all external donations until at least the 1940s to ensure that the party members could be 'self-reliant and work out their own political destiny'.[85] Without this safeguard, as explained by Mr N. Donnelly of the Sea Lake branch, city interests would 'buy out the VFU root and crop'.[86] Each year an audited annual balance sheet was submitted to the conference, a practice that endured for at least the first five decades of the party's existence. Indeed, in the early years of the VFU, the balance sheet, along with a statement of receipts and expenditure, was published in the *Farmers' Advocate*.[87] The columns of the *Advocate* lauded this practice as a 'welcome departure in the political world of Australia' that should 'meet with the approbation and appreciation' of voters.[88] Just as the sons and daughters of the soil earned an honourable and honest livelihood from their independent toil, so too would their political movement maintain its moral integrity free from the taint of city-backed finance.

Nevertheless, opponents from both sides of the political divide would occasionally allege that the Victorian Country Party was not as financially autonomous and transparent as it claimed. In July 1948, for instance, the Labor Member for Richmond, Stan Keon, alleged that the 1947 Country Party state election campaign had been financed by John Wren, the notorious

[84] *Farmers' Advocate*, 20 November 1919, 1.
[85] *Farmers' Advocate*, 1 November 1918, 1; *Farmers' Advocate*, 13 November 1919, 3.
[86] *Farmers' Advocate*, 14 June 1918, 4.
[87] *Farmers' Advocate*, 4 September 1919, 2.
[88] Ibid.

Melbourne underworld identity, an accusation vehemently denied by both Wren and the Country Party.[89] Similarly, in 1949 Liberal Deputy Premier Wilfred Kent-Hughes insinuated that the Country Party obtained a 'large part' of its funds from city interests, an accusation dismissed by Jack McDonald as 'typical of the Liberal Party's campaign of mud-slinging'.[90]

The party's ambition of uniting all primary producers and rural interests under a common banner was also prosecuted through the official party organs: the *Farmers' Advocate* (1917-24), or *Countryman* as it was later rebranded (1924-1976), and its short-lived daily newspaper, the *Morning Post* (1925-27). In the eyes of many within the fledgling VFU, the Melbourne newspapers were the mouthpiece of vested city interests – grain merchants, speculators, and metropolitan-based politicians of both political persuasions – who were conspiring to strangle the Country Party movement at its birth. As lamented by an early edition of the *Farmers' Advocate*, 'a campaign of lies… evidently financed in Melbourne' was being prosecuted against the Farmers' Union, with a team of 'skilled journalists' allegedly employed by city-based political organisations to carry out the 'work of attempted assassination'.[91] The only remedy was a state-wide dedicated rural organ under the control of the movement.

Within just three weeks of the inaugural conference in 1916, VFU branches were asked to forward a list of potential newspaper subscribers to the General Secretary.[92] The new organ would be similar to other agrarian-political newspapers, such as *The Land*, which was established as the official organ of the NSW FSA in 1911 and the *Grain Growers' Guide*, the

[89] *Labor Call*, 30 July 1948, 3; Niall Brennan, *John Wren: Gambler - his Life and Times* (Melbourne: Hill of Content Publishing, 1971), 185-190; James Griffin, *John Wren: a life reconsidered* (Carlton North: Scribe Publications, 2004), 354-357.
[90] *Age*, 28 May 1949, 10.
[91] *Farmers' Advocate*, 20 July 1917, 1.
[92] *McIvor Times and Rodney Advertiser*, 30 November 1916, 3.

newspaper of the Saskatchewan Grain Growers' Association, United Farmers of Alberta, and United Farmers of Manitoba.[93] The *Grain Growers' Guide* was considered the 'most effective organ of persuasion and indoctrination possessed by the farmers' and greatly aided in forging 'uniformity of opinion and solidarity of purpose' across the agrarian movements of the Canadian Prairies.[94] Indeed, in an indication of the trans-national links between the emergent agrarian parties, the new *Farmers' Advocate* in Victoria frequently re-published articles directly from the *Grain Growers' Guide*.[95]

The first edition of the new *Farmers' Advocate*, a four-page weekly broadsheet, was published on 26 January 1917, some ten months before the VFU secured its first members in parliament.[96] The content settled into a pattern that was to endure until the eventual demise of the *Countryman* nearly sixty years later: reports of branch meetings, accounts of parliamentary debates, opinion letters from members, and general agricultural news. The *Advocate* was praised in a VFU annual report as 'beyond doubt… the most stimulating influence in the movement, and the best organiser it has'.[97] By the *Advocate's* final print run (edition 386) in June 1924, each weekly edition had expanded to eighteen pages.

While the *Advocate* had proved popular within the movement, the newspaper struggled to build a readership amongst the wider voting public. The overtly agrarian name of the publication was held responsible – it had purportedly earned the newspaper 'a sectional

[93] Paul Davey, *The Nationals: The Progressive, Country and National Party in New South Wales 1919 to 2006* (Annandale: Federation Press, 2006), 86; Louis Aubrey Wood, *A History of Farmers' movements in Canada: the origins and development of agrarian protest 1872-1924* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975) 202; Paul Sharp, *The Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada: a survey showing American parallels* (Regina: University of Regina, 1997), 36, 80, 127.
[94] Wood, *A history of farmers' movements in Canada*, 202; Paul Sharp, *The Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada*, 36, 80, 127.
[95] *Farmers' Advocate*, 31 May 1918, 3.
[96] *Farmers' Advocate*, 26 January 1917, 1.
[97] Victorian Farmers' Union, 'Fifth Annual Conference, Annual Report and Balance Sheet for the Year ended 20th June, 1920', 1920, CSURA, PG2694, Box 12, Item 38, 8.

reputation that its columns did not justify' – and was replaced by the re-branded '*Countryman'* which was hoped would 'have a more general appeal in the country towns as well as on the farms'.[98] An ill-fated state-wide daily newspaper, the *Morning Post*, aimed at 'expounding and championing country politics' to city and rural residents alike, was launched in October 1927 but closed just two years later having accumulated total losses of £123,500.[99]

The *Countryman* did not achieve an appreciably greater readership than its predecessor and its weekly circulation languished at approximately 6,000 by the late 1920s.[100] The party's ambitions of supplanting the hostile 'city-controlled' print media with its own publications had not proved successful. Nevertheless, the decision of the 1929 party conference to provide a *Countryman* subscription to all financial members of the movement revived the publication's fortunes as a largely internal newspaper consumed almost exclusively by party members. By the mid-1930s the *Countryman* was bringing in sufficiently profitable returns (holding advertising contracts to the value of £449/18/6 per annum in 1935) that the newspaper's Board of Management was able to make a generous donation each year to defray some of the costs of the party's organising efforts.[101]

Given the sheer size and geographically scattered distribution of the party membership, and strict quota system that allowed at most only one in every ten members to attend conference as a branch delegate each year, the posted editions of the *Countryman* were probably one of the party's main (and perhaps even sole) point of contact for a sizeable portion of its membership. As an archived internal memo conceded, the primary purpose of the

[98] *Farmers' Advocate*, 27 June 1924, 1.
[99] Countryman, 'History of the Countryman', CSURA, PG2694, Box 50, Item 616, 2.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Countryman, 'List of Advertising Contracts', 1935, CSURA, PG2694, Box 50, Item 613.

Countryman was as a 'means of propaganda to our own membership, and if possible to provide that membership with ammunition to use amongst non-members'.[102] To achieve this purpose, the pages of the *Countryman*, and the *Farmers' Advocate* before it, poured forth a torrent of suitably 'country-minded' propaganda, extracts from speeches from CP parliamentarians, and highly slanted coverage of political events, delivered to the post boxes of members each week. The Victorian party organs largely reflected the tone and style of their North American counterparts like the *Grain Growers' Guide*, which were notable for their 'directness of attack [..] simplicity of argument, and […] aggressive attitude', but succeeded in their 'great feat of indoctrination' by 'welding the individualistic prairie farmers into an effective unit which thought and acted with uniformity'.[103]

In light of these internal forces that entrenched the core country-minded agrarian ethos of the movement, it is unsurprising that none of the 103 conference meetings in the history of the party have ever seriously contemplated amalgamation with the Liberal Party or its predecessors. Whenever the merger question has been the raised, it has been the oft-repeated received wisdom within the movement that any such attempt would result only in the establishment of a new rural party to fill the vacancy. Stuart McDonald, then serving as federal president of the party, wrote in his formal review of the amalgamation question:

> While it is probably true that some National members would continue their financial memberships under a single Party banner, it is also true that many more would resign… these members would be more than likely to reform [sic] something akin to the former Country Party.[104]

[102] Countryman, 'History of the Countryman,' 3.
[103] Sharp, *The Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada*, 37.
[104] Stuart McDonald, "An assessment of amalgamation," (paper presented at the University of Southern Queensland, School of Management, 28 July 1990), 2, 18, See CSURA, PG2694, Box 14, Item 101.

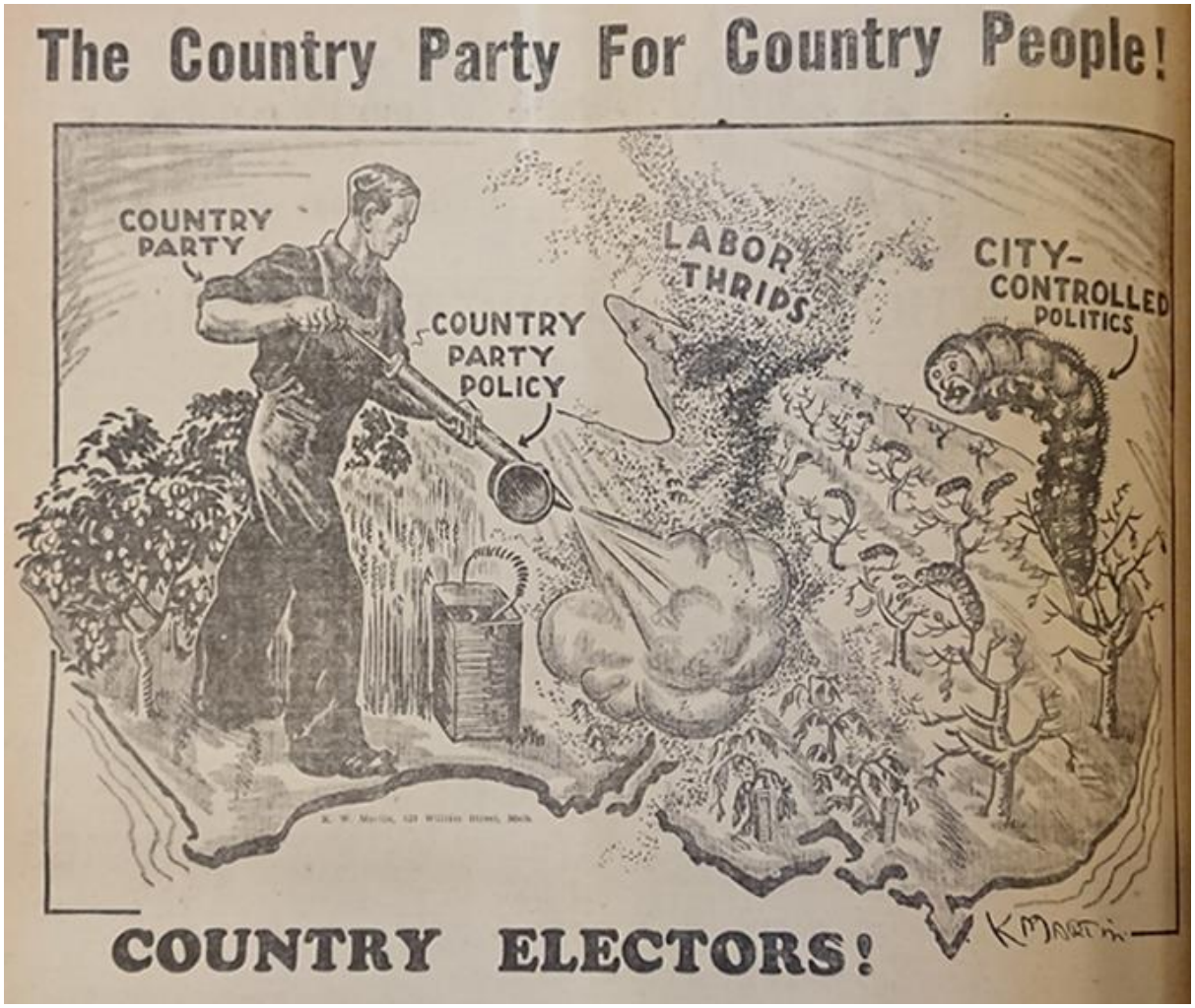

Figure 6.11. An Anti-Labor cartoon from the 1931 Federal Election campaign, typical of the overtly agrarian political content published in the party organ.[105]

The Victorian party's steadfast refusal to follow the example of its Tasmanian, South Australian, Queensland, and Northern Territory counterparts and fold in with the urban conservatives has principally depended on the zeal and commitment of the party faithful to its survival as an autonomous non-metropolitan political movement.

[105] *Countryman,* 11 December 1931, 2.

III. Decline as a mass member party

Although at its height the Victorian Country-National Party was arguably one of the most successful mass membership parties in Australia, the organisational wing has not been immune from the slow and seemingly inexorable decline that has afflicted most mass membership parties in the western world since the late twentieth century.[106] Beginning approximately in the 1970s, but accelerating thereafter, each of the previously rock-solid organisational pillars that once buttressed the non-parliamentary wing of the party have eroded. By the end of the second decade of the twentieth-first century, the Victorian National Party assumed many of the characteristics associated with post-mass-membership parties, such as the 'electoral-professional' party model described by Angelo Panebianco or the 'modern cadre' party of Ruud Koole.[107] Thus, although the National Party retained a modest grassroots membership base to 'maintain a specific image…[and] guarantee a certain degree of internal democracy', its governing and fundraising structures, and policy formation processes have been largely centralised and brought under the control of a small professional party elite.[108]

The National Party in Victoria has experienced a substantial decline in its rank-and-file membership over the past three decades. Indeed, such was the probable magnitude of this collapse – a decline in the order of 90 percent or more since its peak in the late 1960s – that the party arguably no longer qualifies to be described as a 'mass' membership party. To track the membership figures from the mid-1970s onwards, when the archival trail suddenly runs

[106] Ingrid van Biezen and Thomas Poguntke, "The decline of membership-based politics," *Party Politics* 20, no. 2 (2014): 205.
[107] Stephen Wolinetz, "Beyond the Catch-All Party: Approaches to the Study of Parties and Party Organization in Contemporary Democracies," in *Political Parties: old concepts and new challenges*, eds. Richard Gunther, Jose Ramon Montero, and Juan Linz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 139-143.
[108] Wolinetz, "Beyond the Catch-All Party," 141-142; Ruud Koole, "The Vulnerability of the Modern Cadre Party in the Netherlands," in *How Parties organise: change and adaptation in party organisations in Western democracies*, eds. Richard Katz and Peter Mair (London: SAGE Publications, 1994), 299.

cold, the historian must rely on the party's public statements, internal membership reports, as well as the work of political scientists.

According to its abridged 1985 policy platform document, the National Party claimed 30,000 members organised into 380 branches across Victoria in that year.[109] By contrast, the NSW National Party is estimated to have had a membership of approximately 50,000 in 1983-4 (doubling from approximately 25,000 in 1975) and the Queensland branch approximately 38,000, indicating that the Victorian party was, by this juncture, the smallest of the state divisions on the eastern seaboard.[110] More recent estimates suggest that the Victorian party fell to approximately 10,000 members in 2005 – a two-thirds decline over the course of the preceding twenty years – compared to 16,300 in NSW and 12,000 in Queensland.[111] This estimate is likely too conservative. According to the Priebe-Anderson Report, the financial membership of the Victorian National Party fell by more than 75 percent between 1986 and 2007.[112] Australia-wide, the membership of the party fell from roughly 100,000 at the time of the Nixon Report in 1988 to less than 20,000 in 2008. The Priebe-Anderson report estimated that only 500 to 800 members regularly attended branch meetings across Victoria. According to figures quoted by Narelle Miragliotta, the NSW National Party had fallen to 4,714 members in 2012-13.[113] Assuming that the state-wide membership of the Victorian party remained in approximately the same proportion *vis-à-vis* the NSW party, then its membership would have stood at about the 3,000 to 4,000 mark: roughly the same size as the VFU in 1916.

[109] National Party of Australia – Victoria, 'Nationals Policy – Abridged Booklet', February 1985, CSURA, PG2694, Box 13, Item 67.
[110] Costar, "The National Party," 29; Lucy, *The Australian Form of Government*, 70; Paul Davey, *Ninety Not Out: The Nationals 1920-2010* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010), 148.
[111] Costar, "The National Party," 29.
[112] Priebe and Anderson, *Priebe-Anderson Review into The Nationals,* 33.
[113] Miragliotta, "Parties and Mass Membership," 65.

While identifying the reasons for this collapse could readily consume an entire doctoral thesis, it would appear that the party largely lost its capacity to recruit new members to offset the natural attrition of its rapidly ageing pool of long-standing party members. Indeed, the cessation of formal paid organising efforts in the early twentieth-first century suggests that the party leadership no longer considered membership recruitment as a priority. The total number of primary producers in Victoria – almost certainly still the largest single occupation group amongst party members – nearly halved in the five decades between 1966 and 2016.[114] An ever greater share of Victorian farmers were likely to be 'tree-changers' – former city residents who had relocated on the land to pursue a rural lifestyle – who were much less likely to be sympathetic to the National Party and its conservative ideological values.[115] The sweeping economic reforms between the 1970s and 2000s eliminated many small family farms that had subsisted in the hitherto heavily regulated agricultural industries, such as dairying and fruit production. These primary producers, and the agriculture-dependent small rural towns they had once sustained, had long formed the nucleus of the party's core membership and supporter base in Victoria.

The decline in the rank-and-file membership from approximately the late-1970s also corresponded with the significant shift that occurred in the relationship between the National Party and farm industry groups. Although the Country parties had severed their *formal* affiliation with primary producer industrial bodies by at latest the mid-1940s, a strong

[114] V.H. Arnold, *Victorian Year Book 1970 No. 84* (Melbourne: Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, 1970), 120; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Victoria: Industry of Employment by Occupation, Count of employed persons aged 15 years and over,' in *2016 Census of Population and Housing: General Community Profile, Victoria* (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017), G53.
[115] Colin Boylan, "Staffing Rural Schools: A New Perspective," in *Demographic Change in Australia's Rural Landscape: Implications for Society and the Environment*, eds. Gary Luck, Digby Race, and Rosemary Black (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 333; Geoff Cockfield and Linda Courtenay Botterill, "From Country to National to Regional?," in *The National Party: Prospects for the Great Survivors*, eds. Linda Courtenay Botterill and Geoff Cockfield (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2009), 196.

informal relationship between the political and industrial bodies persisted through the 1950s and 1960s. The Country Party had continued to serve as the *de facto* 'voice of primary producers in the forum still considered to be the locus of political power – parliament'.[116] As articulated by John McEwen,

> It has always been the policy of my party that those who produce, own and sell a product are the best judges of the way in which their property should be treated. It is the function of my party to see that the will of those who produce and own the product is carried into legislative and administrative effect.[117]

This essentially corporatist relationship was to change, however, as the formerly disparate tangle of rival producer organisations gradually coalesced into larger, unified – and more politically independent – industry bodies through the late 1960s and 1970s.[118] In Victoria, for example, the Wheat and Woolgrowers' Association amalgamated with the Australian Primary Producers' Union in 1968 to form the Victorian Farmers' Union, which in turn merged with the United Dairyfarmers of Victoria and the Graziers' Association in 1979. The end result was the establishment of a single monolithic membership-based industrial organisation, the Victorian Farmers' and Graziers' Association (VFGA), renamed the Victorian Farmers' Federation (VFF) in 1986.[119] The VFGA affiliated with the National Farmers' Federation in 1979, the new national peak industry body representing the various

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[116] Darren Halpin, "Transitions between Formations and Organisations: An Historical Perspective on the Political Representation of Australian Farmers," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 50, no. 4 (2004): 478.
[117] Peter Golding, *Black Jack McEwen: Political Gladiator* (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 141.
[118] Halpin, "Transitions between Formations and Organisations," 480-482; Brian Connors, "To Speak with One Voice: The Quest by Australian Farmers for Federal Unity," (PhD thesis, University of New England, 1996), 86, 143-144.
[119] Campbell Curtis, "Bourke, Miles (1925-1982)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography: Volume 17: 1981-1990*, eds. Di Langmore and Darryl Bennet (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2007), 131.

primary producer groups around Australia.[120] The new farm bodies sought to maximise their influence across the political divide.[121] By consolidating into a single unified industrial bloc for the first time since the foundation of the VFU in 1916, Victorian farmers were able to exercise greater influence through direct professional lobbying and advocacy than traditional party-political activism. This in turn 'undermined the National Party's claims as the dominant vehicle for farmer representation' as Australian primary producers 'needed the [party] less and less'.[122] With the National Party deprived of its traditional function as the powerful conduit between primary producers and the state, it is not at all surprising that fewer Victorian farmers and rural residents were willing to become financial members of the movement.

Although the party maintains that it is still the most democratic and grass-roots-controlled of any political movement in Australia, there has been a pronounced shift in its internal power structures in recent decades, with a much greater concentration of power in the hands of party elites. The centrepiece of this power shift was the creation of a new eight-member 'Management Committee' in 1984 to exercise delegated administrative, financial, and candidate endorsement powers previously controlled by the 40-member Central Council.[123] This development was all the more remarkable given that some members had previously been critical of the 'excessively centralist' powers of Central Council compared to the branches and local district councils.[124] As noted by Karen Owen as early as 1990, this new structure

[120] David Trebeck, "Farmer Organisations," in *Agriculture in the Australian Economy*, ed. D.B. Williams (South Melbourne: Sydney University Press, 1990), 136.
[121] Halpin, "Transitions between Formations and Organisations," 469; Rae Wear, "Countrymindedness and the Nationals," in *The National Party: Prospects for the Great Survivors*, eds. Linda Courtenay Botterill and Geoff Cockfield (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2009), 94.
[122] Halpin, "Transitions between Formations and Organisations," 479, 484.
[123] Karen Owen, "The Victorian National Party: an investigation of the policymaking process which resulted in the National Party education policy statement released or the 1987 Victorian state election," (Master's thesis., University of Melbourne, 1990), 50; Costar, "Victoria," 96.
[124] Costar, "Victoria," 96.

'meant some loss of management control by the Central Council which now concentrates on the broader questions of strategy and organisation'.[125] Although Costar found that the elite management of the organisational wing was 'more open and subject to greater constraint than might be expected in a conservative, rurally based political party', he noted that informal decision making was largely controlled by the state Parliamentary National Party, state president, and state director.[126] Although the Central Council and annual conference retained very significant *formal* powers of control over the direction of the party – including the authority to initiate the withdrawal of the party from a coalition ministry – in practice the parliamentary wing and professional administrative staff progressively assumed much wider control over the organisation.

By the 1980s, even the previously sacrosanct principle that policy formation was the preserve of the grassroots membership was rendered increasingly redundant. Although the party leadership acknowledged that the annual conferences 'theoretically' remained the supreme policymaking forum of the party, in practice this process was usurped by the Parliamentary National Party with some limited input from specialised Central Council policy sub-committees. The traditional model of policy development was considered to be a 'grave weakness' and 'major electoral handicap' to the movement: 'opposition parties could shoot down our policies or say they were grossly inadequate. This was particularly so as the Labor Party started to research theirs very carefully and come up with a few figures and definite promises.'[127]

[125] Owen, "The Victorian National Party," 50.
[126] Costar, "Victoria," 96.
[127] Owen, "The Victorian National Party," 81.

By the early 1970s, the party leadership publicly acknowledged that its exclusively membership-based fundraising strategies were no longer adequate to sustain the movement as it 'lacked the necessary finance to present its policy to the people of Victoria'.[128] The party gradually embraced external corporate fundraising and investment strategies to secure alternative income streams, making profitable use of Peter Ross-Edwards's 'excellent contacts' with the boardrooms of Melbourne.[129] By the 1980s, membership fees contributed only 40 percent of the party's annual income, with the balance drawn from insurance commissions, federal public funding (introduced in 1983), and corporate fundraising.[130] According to the party's annual 1998-99 financial disclosure declaration to the Australian Electoral Commission, the party's own investment funds contributed a combined sum of $248,841 in that year, an amount more than half as large as the total public funding secured by the party at the 1998 federal election.[131] By 2008, internal fundraising covered barely a third of the organisation's basic operating costs, such that the party was 'no longer in control of its own financial destiny' and dependent on public funding and corporate donors for survival.[132]

The decline of the organisational wing was also evident from the slow deterioration of its official organ. By the mid-1950s, the *Countryman* was haemorrhaging money – in excess of £11,700 a year – as production costs outstripped advertising and subscription revenue.[133] Despite cost-saving measures such as a shift to a tabloid format, renegotiated printing

[128] *Countryman*, 29 April 1971, 4.
[129] Wright, *With the Nationals in Spring Street*, 50; Brian Costar, "The Possum: a mellow conservative," *Age*, 12 October 2012, 20.
[130] Costar, "Victoria," 99.
[131] Australian Electoral Commission, "Political Party Return – National Party of Australia – Victoria," 20 October 1999, https://periodicdisclosures.aec.gov.au/Returns/1/P215.pdf.
[132] Priebe and Anderson, *Priebe-Anderson Review into The Nationals*, 39.
[133] Countryman, 'History of the Countryman,' 3; Ivan Swinburne, Harrie Wade, Ern Cock, 'Report of Committee of Investigation into the Countryman', 1 December 1955, CSURA, PG2694, Box 50, Item 616.

contracts, and reduced publication frequency from weekly to fortnightly and eventually to every three weeks, the newspaper continued its downward trajectory both in content and revenue. An archived letter of complaint from one reader, Mrs P.H. McKenzie of Deans Marsh, in June 1970, expressed her 'disgust' when she opened the paper only to find that the front page editorial had appeared in the *Sun* a few days earlier.[134] Mrs McKenzie rhetorically asked whether it was 'not too much to expect topical news in a four-page paper' and concluded that the publication no longer served any useful purpose to a party member.[135] The *Countryman* battled on until its final edition in March 1976.

With a combined service of 59 years and two months, the *Farmers' Advocate*/*Countryman* was one of the longest serving political organs in Australian history, comparable to publications such as the Australian Communist Party's *Tribune* (1939-1991), or the Victorian Labor Party's *Tocsin-Labor Call* (1897-1953). The *Countryman* was replaced by a new magazine, *National Outlook*, a less formal publication that dropped any pretence of operating as a serious newspaper for wider public consumption. The party's shift from its traditional and distinctive agrarian ideology to its more broad-based conservative platform reduced the need for a lengthy regular publication to aid the 'intellectual and moral encadrement of the masses' as in the past.[136] *Outlook* adopted a more intimate tone as a seasonal newsletter containing accounts of party activities and reports from members of parliament, mixed in with biographical profiles of key party activists, and a sprinkling of political and agrarian trivia. While still in circulation as an internal party newsletter, *Outlook* has long since dispensed with many of the features once integral to its predecessor publications, including

[134] Letter from Mrs P.H. McKenzie to Country Party Office, 16 June 1970, CSURA, PG2694, Box 50, Item 616.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Otto Kirchheimer, "The Transformation of Western European party systems," in *Political Parties and Political Development*, eds. Joseph La Polombara and Myron Weiner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 184-185.

wider non-party-related rural news, letters and comments from party members, and even accounts of branch and district council activities.

IV. Conclusion

From the first branch meeting of the VFU in a weatherboard Mechanics Hall at Newham in June 1914, the survival of the Country-National Party has depended in large part on the dedicated support of its grassroots members from across the country districts of the state. Like many agrarian parties across the western world, the Country Party excelled at the art of organisational mass recruitment, surpassing its larger rivals that enjoyed much wider electoral support at the ballot box. The party's remarkable – almost paradoxical – ability to sustain and expand its formidable extra-parliamentary branch network and fundraising infrastructure in the decades after it was no longer the dominant power in state politics allowed it to defy the political and demographic forces that may otherwise have led to its extinction.

As a 'miniature political system' in its own right, the forums and structures of the organisational wing successfully nurtured, evangelised, and perpetuated the party's distinctive rural ideology and *Weltanschauung* for more than a century.[137] The pioneers and leading luminaries of the Country Party in Victoria conceived of their movement as a new model of party politics, unsullied by the corruption of city-based vested interests, embodying the egalitarian values, democratic outlook and rugged independence that set the men and women of the land apart from their urban counterparts. Nevertheless, the party has experienced significant decline as a mass-membership movement in more recent decades, a shift necessitated in part by the profound changes brought by modern professionalised

[137] Giovani Sartori, *Parties and party systems: a framework for analysis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 71, quoted in Jaensch, *The Australian Party System*, 109.

electoral politics from the 1970s onwards as well as the slow disappearance of the party's core traditional agrarian constituency and the changing relationship of the agrarian sector with the political system.

Chapter Seven. Women in the VFU, Country, and National Party

I. Introduction

Since its inception, the Victorian Country-National Party has commanded the support of farmers' wives, country townswomen, and rural women of all walks of life who have identified with its political philosophy, supported its candidates at the ballot box, and joined its ranks as members. The survival of the party has depended in no small part on the loyal service of its women members who served as officer bearers, devised party policy, raised campaign funds, staffed election booths, and, in time, stood as candidates at state and federal elections. Until comparatively recently, however, women have been marginalised or even excluded altogether from the history of the party and the contribution of agrarian women activists to Australian democracy largely ignored within the academy.

The Victorian party was the first of the Country parties in Australia to systematically recruit and mobilise rural women and build an auxiliary wing – known as the 'Women's Section' (WS), which existed as a semi-autonomous women-only organisation within the party between 1918 and 1980 – with dedicated women's branches, leadership structures, and conferences. Some six decades later, it was the very first political party in Australia to elect a woman as its state president and then subsequently as its federal president. And yet, curiously, the Victorian Country-National Party was among the very last parties in the nation to send a female representative to parliament, having long resisted pressure from its women members to accord them greater power, influence, and membership rights. This paradoxical record reflects the divergent and occasionally contradictory range of views within the movement on the appropriate role of women in the public-political and domestic spheres. Although ostensibly committed to improving the material living standards of rural women,

the Country-National Party was wedded to a predominantly patriarchal agrarian vision predicated on rigidly differentiated and idealised gender roles that conceived of women as loyally submissive farm wives and mothers rather than as primary producers and civic leaders in their own right.[1]

Despite the insistence of much of the male leadership that women members should confine their activities to traditional 'political housekeeping' tasks, the Women's Section expanded its scope to pursue a broadly social feminist reform agenda through conventional political advocacy as well as charitable and direct-action community development projects. Working within the party's patriarchal framework, rural women maintained their agency as independent actors and used the structures of the Women's Section to improve the quality of life for agrarian families, to advocate for the cause of women's civic rights, and to work in solidarity with the wider Country Party movement for the advancement of rural political interests more generally. The internal forums of the party served as an important arena in which rural women contested and debated their appropriate role in public life both amongst themselves and with male members of the party. At the same time, however, Country-National Party women generally defended traditional gender relations and dissociated themselves from the views and campaigns of more militant and radical women's activists, most prominently following the rise of second-wave feminism.[2]

The dual scope of the work of the Victorian WS – encompassing both traditional party auxiliary functions as well as activities more typically associated with non-partisan rural women's organisations such as the Country Women's Association (CWA) – followed the

[1] Heather Gunn, "'For the Man on the land:' Rural Women and the Victorian National Party, 1917-1996," (PhD thesis, La Trobe University, 1996), 1-23.
[2] Ibid., 182-232.

practice of comparable agrarian women's auxiliaries in North America and Northern Europe. Even the historical ideological orientation of the Victorian WS – an amalgam of 'country-minded' agrarianism, social and cultural conservatism, civic patriotism and imperial loyalism, as well elements of social and maternal feminism – was essentially an Antipodean manifestation of a common political and cultural outlook shared by similar organisations across the globe.[3] The Victorian WS actively cultivated and maintained links with like-minded movements abroad and formed part of an international network of rural women's organisations.

II. Historiography

One of the most glaring omissions in the conventional histories of the Country-National Party has been their virtual silence on the role and contribution of women in the life of the movement. Women have been 'all but invisible' in the traditional literature on rural political parties in Australia.[4] Neither B.D. Graham's *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties* nor Ulrich Ellis's *A History of the Australian Country Party* makes any reference to the role of women in the emergence of the Country Party movement or the formation of women's auxiliaries and branches.[5] More recent publications have improved on this situation. Heather Gunn's doctoral thesis, 'For the Man on the Land: Rural Women and the Victorian National Party, 1917-1996', submitted in 1996, furnished a comprehensive historical analysis

[3] See Louise Carbert, *Agrarian Feminism: The Politics of Ontario Farm Women* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Monda Halpern, *And on that farm he had a wife: Ontario Farm Women and Feminism, 1900-1970* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); Bradford Rennie, *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy: The United Farmers and Farm Women of Alberta, 1909-1921* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Hans Albin Larsson, "Mellan verklighet och forskning - teorier kring jordbrukskvinnor och politik," *Scandia* 55, no. 1 (1989): 115-146 [Swedish, Sweden].
[4] Heather Gunn, "'For the Man on the Land': Issues of Gender and Identity in the Formation of the Victorian Farmers' Union Women's Section, 1918-1922," *Journal of Australian Studies* 42 (1994): 32.
[5] B.D. Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1966); Ulrich Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party* (Parkville: Melbourne University Press, 1962).

of gender relations and the participation of women within the party, and provided a useful starting point for this chapter.[6] The contribution of women to the New South Wales and Western Australian state divisions of the party has been explored in at least some detail by works such as Paul Davey's *The Nationals: The Progressive, Country and National Party in New South Wales 1919 to 2006* (2006) and *Blood Nose Politics: A Centenary History of the Western Australian National Party 1913-2013* (2014) edited by Lenore Layman and Wendy Duncan.[7] Similarly, Davey's *Ninety Not Out: The Nationals 1920-2010* (2010) briefly recounts the involvement of women in the federal parliamentary party and organisational wing.[8] Nevertheless, with the notable exception of Gunn's research, the task of producing stand-alone historical accounts of women in the Country-National Party has been the sole preserve of amateur enthusiasts within the women's auxiliaries. In 1968, Dorothy Hobson, a former State President of the WS, compiled a short history of the Victorian Women's Section, *Looking In the Past,* to mark the organisation's fiftieth anniversary.[9] An updated and unpublished brief pamphlet, *A Record Honouring the Founding Women of the National Party of Victoria 1918-1998* was released to mark the Section's eightieth anniversary.[10]

Country-National Party women have appeared only incidentally and all too fleetingly in Australian scholarly literature, which has only 'helped perpetuate the masculinist stereotype of the Women's Section as inconsequential'.[11] Marilyn Lake's *The Limits of Hope: soldier*

[6] Gunn, "For the Man on the Land: Rural Women and the Victorian National Party."
[7] Paul Davey, *The Nationals: the Progressive, Country and National Party in New South Wales 1919-2006* (Annandale: Federation Press, 2006), 65, 68, 265, 329, 362-364, 370-371; Lenore Layman and Wendy Duncan eds, *Blood Nose Politics: A Centenary History of the Western Australian National Party 1913-2013* (West Perth: The Nationals WA, 2014), 2-3, 35-39, 43, 66, 70, 72-73, 91, 97, 118-119, 124, 148, 150, 182, 201, 262-265, 293, 326, 348.
[8] Paul Davey, *Ninety Not Out: The Nationals 1920-2010* (Sydney: University of NSW Press, 2010), 91-101, 139-140, 194.
[9] Susan Stribling, *A Record Honouring the Founding Women of the National Party of Victoria 1918-1998* (Melbourne: National Party of Australia – Victoria, 1998), 19.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Gunn, "For the Man on the Land: Rural Women and the Victorian National Party," 8-9.

settlement in Victoria, 1915-38, which draws on the correspondence of WSVFU members as a key source of historical evidence, is one of the few examples where the lived experience of Country Party women has been accorded sympathetic attention within the academy.[12] The dearth of scholarly literature arguably reflects the wider neglect of women in Australian rural studies and the enduring male image of Australian agriculture.[13] Although there was some redress of this imbalance in the 1980s and 1990s, rural women have largely been ignored in the story of Australian primary production.[14] Where historians have sought to rectify this shortfall they have primarily focussed on the nature of women's work and domestic relations on the land rather than the political agency and activism of rural women. As argued by Kathryn Hunter, the history of rural women and girls in Australia has been 'lost in the gulf between a rural history that has taken men as the central focus… and a feminist history that has ignored the specificities of location'.[15]

Historians of women in politics have seldom demonstrated any significant interest in the Australian Country-National Party movement as a subject of research. In both academia and the wider public imagination, Country-National Party women have been primarily associated with 'scone making', or as 'loyal and hospitable' farmers' wives and the 'housekeepers' of the party.[16] While feminist historians pioneered extensive research into the role of women in Australian labour history and socialist and social democratic politics as long ago as the 1970s, there has never been a commensurate flowering of interest in the contribution of

[12] Marilyn Lake, *The Limits of Hope: soldier settlement in Victoria, 1915-38* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1987).
[13] Pam Roberts, "Tea, Scones and a Willing Ear: The Country Women's Association of Victoria, 1928-1934," *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal* 1 (1984): 23.
[14] Margaret Alston, *Women on the Land: the hidden heart of Rural Australia* (Kensington: UNSW Press, 1995), 10.
[15] Kathryn Hunter, "The Drover's Wife and the Drover's Daughter: Histories of Single Farming Women and Debates in Australian Historiography," *Rural History* 12, no. 2 (2001): 181.
[16] Ibid; Gunn, "For the Man on the Land: Issues of Gender and Identity in the Formation of the Victorian Farmers' Union Women's Section," 32.

women to Australian agrarian politics.[17] This seems to confirm Margaret Fitzherbert's observation that 'the right of Australian politics has not documented its women's history with the proclivity of the left'.[18] This problem is not confined to Australia. As observed by Kathleen Blee and Sandra McGee Deutsch in their analysis of international political literature, right-wing women have been 'simply overlooked or considered unimportant' in academic research and their contribution as 'active agents in the construction of right-wing ideology or the mobilisation of right-wing movements or parties' has long been ignored.[19]

The long tradition of conservative women's activism associated with the Australian non-Labor political movements challenges the notion that feminism is innately radical and consistent only with socialist, social-democratic, or liberal ideas and beliefs.[20] Historians of women's agrarian activism, particularly in North America, have long recognised that farm women pursued their own 'social' or 'agrarian' feminist goals even within the predominantly masculinist farmer movements. Agrarianism, as it emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, has been recognised as an inherently gendered ideology that projected different ideals and roles for men and women.[21] Capitalist agricultural production and manual farm labour were understood to be intrinsically masculine activities, with men as the primary decision makers and owners of the land. Women were to serve as wives and mothers

[17] Marilyn Lake, "Women's and Gender History in Australia: A Transformative Practice," *Journal of Women's History* 25, no. 4 (2013): 193.
[18] Margaret Fitzherbert, *Liberal Women: Federation – 1949* (Annandale: Federation Press, 2004), x.
[19] Kathleen Blee and Sandra McGee Deutsch, "Introduction," in *Women of the Right: Comparisons and Interplay across borders*, eds. Kathleen Blee and Sandra McGee Deutsch (University Park: University Press, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 1.
[20] Marian Simms, "Conservative Feminism in Australia: a case study of feminist ideology," *Women's Studies International Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1979): 307.
[21] Sheila Gibbons, "'Our Power to Remodel Civilization': The Development of Eugenic Feminism in Alberta, 1909-1921," *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 128; Carolyn E. Sachs, *Gendered Fields: Rural Women, Agriculture, and Environment* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 133; Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 29.

attending to the home, nurturing children, and as 'helpmates' to their farmer husbands.[22] The lived experience of many women on small or less prosperous farm enterprises seldom aligned with this idealised model. In addition to their household and domestic chores, many farmwives provided unpaid manual labour to sustain farm operations, such as hand-milking dairy cows, which 'unsexed' them in the view of wider society.[23] The very survival of the family farm – of cardinal importance to the agrarian vision – depended on 'a subordinate woman, usually concealed and peripheral' who deferred her own interests to the overriding demands and needs of the farm.[24]

Despite – or perhaps because of – the rigid gender divide inherent in agrarian thought, farm and rural women have typically been slow to embrace an explicitly feminist identity and nomenclature.[25] Nevertheless, most agrarian women's movements embraced a set of ideas and ideological values described by scholars as 'social' or 'maternal' feminism. Social feminism emphasised the distinctive nature and virtues of women, such as love, peace, kindness, cooperation, and motherly nurturing.[26] Maternal feminism, considered to be closely related to social feminism, conceives of a woman's distinctive role and nature as a manifestation of biology and anatomy, especially the capacity for childbirth and reproduction: 'Having a womb becomes almost a guarantee of virtue, of finer feelings and unselfish commitment to service of one's children… and thus to all of humanity.'[27] Whereas maternal feminism was oriented towards the domestic sphere of the home and family, social

[22] Halpern, *And on that farm he had a wife*, 15-16.
[23] Marilyn Lake, "'Building themselves up with Aspros': Pioneer Women Reassessed," *Hecate* 2, no. 2 (1976): 18.
[24] Halpern, *And on that farm he had a wife*, 15-16; Fink, *Agrarian Women*, 10.
[25] Berit Brandth, "On the relationship between feminism and farm women," *Agriculture and Human Values* 19, no. 2 (June 2002): 3-8; Kerry James, "Introduction," in *Women in Rural Australia*, ed. Kerry James (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1989), 4.
[26] Naomi Black, *Social Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 53, 67; Halpern, *And on that farm he had a wife*, 8, 9.
[27] Black, *Social Feminism*, 65.

feminism 'doubted a public sphere that had been left to men's untender care' and sought to mobilise women as a civilising influence to reform society.[28] In the agrarian women's movements, this social or maternal feminism blended with agrarianism to produce what Louise Carbert has identified as a distinctive 'agrarian' feminism.[29] Agrarian feminists sought to improve the lives of farm women through education and organising efforts, and by exerting their influence over the male-dominated public sphere of the countryside.[30] Nevertheless, they were cautious in challenging the sexual division of labour on the land: 'In the end, the farm woman had no choice but to depend on the uncertain benevolence of her capital-owning husband.'[31]

III. Formation of the Women's Section VFU

As illustrated by the sea of facial hair and felt hats in the official photograph of the first VFU state conference in September 1916 (Figure 7.1), the Victorian Country Party was founded exclusively by men of the land to represent their industrial and political interests. Even the very name of the new movement – the Victorian *Farmers'* Union – denoted its implicit masculine orientation: if farming was an innately male occupation according to the prevailing values of the era, a union of farmers must *ipso facto* be an organisation composed of, and led by, men.[32] The ambition of the VFU was to reassert the power, dignity, and 'manly self-sufficiency' of primary producer interests against metropolitan economic exploitation and political domination.[33]

[28] Ibid., 65, 67-68, 86; Halpern, *And on that farm he had a wife*, 8.
[29] Carbert, *Agrarian Feminism*, xii-xiv, 3-6; Janet K. Boles and Diane Long Hoeveler, *Historical Dictionary of Feminism* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 32.
[30] Halpern, *And on that farm he had a wife*, 16-17.
[31] Ibid., 15-17.
[32] Hunter, "The Drover's wife and the drover's daughter," 183.
[33] Gunn, "For the man on the land: Rural Women and the Victorian National Party," 11, 28.

Figure 7.1. Photograph of the inaugural conference of the Victorian Farmers' Union, Melbourne, 28 September 1916.[34]

As enfranchised voters, it was inevitable that country women would take an interest in the new agrarian political movement. The Union's strictly-enforced policy of confining full membership privileges to *bona fide* primary producers had the effect of excluding women from equal participation, however: by definition, a *bona fide* farmer was a male according to the standards of the time.[35] Female relatives of full (male) members could join branches as associate members, which entitled them to attend meetings but not to exercise a vote in any matter except for preselection ballots.[36]

[34] Image supplied by National Party of Australia – Victoria.
[35] Hunter, "The Drover's wife and the drover's daughter," 183.
[36] *Farmers' Advocate*, 5 October 1917, 1.

Nevertheless, the VFU soon realised that it needed the support of rural women at the ballot box to fulfil its expansive political ambitions. In the 1917 state election campaign, branches were exhorted to organise and target women voters to maximise the Union's electoral chances.[37] The *Farmers' Advocate* pointed to the success of the Labor Party in appealing to women voters to achieve its electoral breakthrough: 'Bring them into the branches in their hundreds and thousands, and the movement will be given a great impetus and become an irresistible power in the land.'[38] The VFU leadership gave no consideration to women standing as electoral candidates.[39]

The formation of a dedicated women's auxiliary was first proposed by one of the early female associate members, Lily Sutherland.[40] Writing in the 'For Our Women' column of the *Farmers' Advocate* under the pseudonym 'Evangeline', Sutherland implored Australian rural women to emulate the success of the women's branches of the Grain Growers' Association in Canada: 'The VFU needs the co-operation of the women, and the women need the VFU.'[41] The first women's branch was established at Loch in South Gippsland on 18 July 1918.[42] Eleanor Glencross, a notable women's activist, was enlisted to address the meeting. She urged those present to unite behind their husbands and the VFU:

> You take great pleasure in recalling the moment when you promised, "before God and this congregation" to love, cherish and keep your chosen mate. Now you know he bends under the strain of long hours of wearying toil... Then are you fulfilling your

[37] *Farmers' Advocate*, 14 September 1917, 1.
[38] *Farmers' Advocate*, 30 March 1917, 1.
[39] Gunn, "For the Man on the Land: Rural Women and the Victorian National Party," 83.
[40] Gunn, "For the Man on the Land: Issues of Gender and Identity in the Formation of the Victorian Farmers' Union Women's Section," 36.
[41] *Farmers' Advocate*, 17 May 1918, 8.
[42] *Farmers' Advocate*, 28 June 1918, 8.

> wifely obligations if you either stand idly by politically, or support organisations born and bred in the city for the city alone?[43]

Glencross's pitch that political mobilisation constituted a natural extension of a married farm woman's uxorial duties was typical of the attitude of the leading women of the movement, who accepted that their primary *political* task was to aid and support their male relatives and neighbours through the VFU.[44] Yet this did not necessarily preclude women from pursuing their own independent objectives and ambitions within the framework of the party.

Not all male members of the Union approved of the formation of dedicated women's branches. As explained by a Mr Dealey at a Kyabram District Council meeting, farm women 'had enough to think about without the trouble of bothering about politics'.[45] Despite these protests, the formation of women's branches was unanimously endorsed by the delegates of the third annual VFU conference – all of them men – in September 1918.[46] The inaugural meeting of the new Women's Section, conducted in parallel with, but separate from, the main VFU conference, was a modest affair. Only fourteen women were able to attend.[47] It was initially suggested that the new organisation be named the 'Victorian Women Farmers' Union', but this was rejected in favour of the 'Women's Section VFU' as the first proposed name implied that women 'might become farmers on their own, and goodness knows what they might be doing', as recounted by Florence Laver, the newly-elected inaugural president of the WSVFU.[48]

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[43] Ibid.; *Farmers' Advocate*, 2 August 1918, 8; Gunn, "For the Man on the Land: Issues of Gender and Identity in the Formation of the Victorian Farmers' Union Women's Section," 37.
[44] Gunn, "For the man on the land: Issues of Gender and Identity in the Formation of the Victorian Farmers' Union Women's Section," 42.
[45] Ibid., 39; *Farmers' Advocate*, 8 November 1918, 3.
[46] *Leader* (Melbourne), 28 September 1918, 12; *Farmers' Advocate*, 25 October 1918, 1.
[47] *Farmers' Advocate*, 27 September 1918, 3.
[48] *Kooweerup Sun, Lang Lang Guardian and Cranbourne Shire Record*, 23 October 1918, 2.

By the time of the first WS conference in September 1919, 60 branches had been established across the state.[49] The Section continued to expand at a sustained pace: by the second conference, 116 branches were in operation with a membership in excess of 2,000.[50] Using membership income figures from the surviving annual financial reports as well as archived branch data, it is possible to calculate the approximate size of the financial membership (that is, full members who had paid their annual dues for a given year) of the Women's Section across most of its history.[51] The state-wide financial membership of the Women's Section typically fluctuated between approximately 1,700 and 3,300 from the early 1920s until the Second World War, reaching a peak of 4,770 in 1938. The Women's Section typically comprised between 15 and 30 percent of the total financial membership of the Victorian CP movement. Central Council allocated far fewer resources to organising women's branches than was provided to the General (male) Section of the movement.[52]

By the 1920s, the Victorian Women's Section was by far the leading such organisation amongst the various Country Party state divisions and one of the most active and extensive women's auxiliary units of any agrarian party in the world. The Saskatchewan Women Grain Growers' Association (WGGA), founded in 1913, was the first of the dedicated women's agrarian political organisations in Canada. As a self-governing auxiliary empowered to establish its own membership and governing structures, the WGGA served as the model for

[49] Ibid.; *Argus*, 26 September 1919, 7; *Great Southern Advocate* (Korumburra), 31 October 1918, 3.
[50] Gunn, "For the Man on the Land: Issues of Gender and Identity in the Formation of the Victorian Farmers' Union Women's Section," 38; *Age*, 16 September 1920, 8.
[51] Data obtained from the annual financial reports in the WS conference minutes between 1919 and 1976, as well as archived women's branch registries. See WS minutes books and branch registers, Charles Sturt University Regional Archives (CSURA), PG2694, Boxes 16-17, 28-32, Items 274-279, 128-130, 301-305.
[52] Gunn, "For the man on the Land: Rural Women and the Victorian National Party," 38, 168.

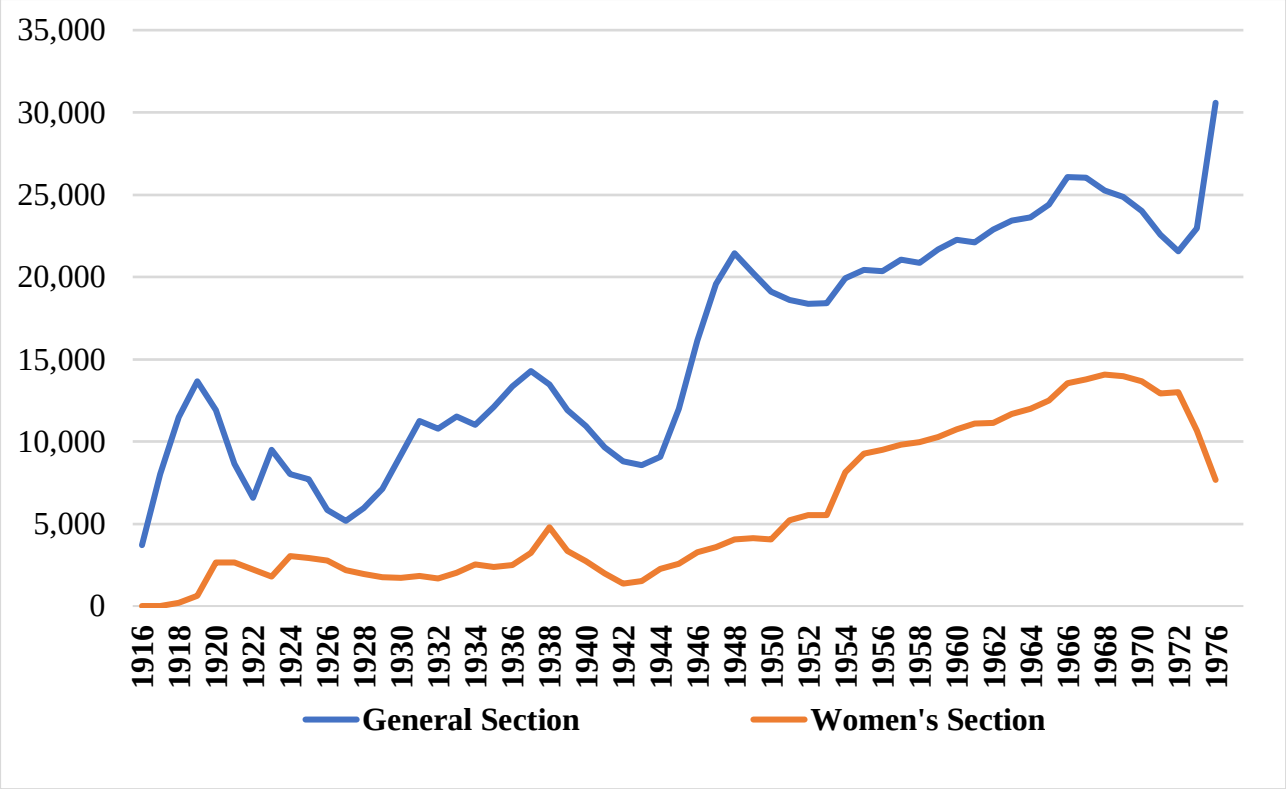

Figure 7.2. Financial membership of the General and Women's Sections of the Victorian Country-National Party, 1916-1976.

the formation of the United Farm Women organisations of Alberta (the 'United Farm Women of Alberta' or UFWA) in 1915, Manitoba (UFWM) in 1917, and Ontario (UFWO) in 1918, and, ultimately, the WSVFU in Victoria.[53] As an illustration of the international connections between the Victorian and North American movements, the women's column of the *Farmers' Advocate* frequently included published reports of the activities of its sister organisations in Canada, who were 'very far away, as measured by geographical miles, but very close indeed, in ties of Empire and the every-day work and play of rural life'.[54] Comparing the surviving membership figures from either side of the Pacific, it appears that

[53] David Smith, "Saskatchewan Women Grain Growers," in *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, ed. David Wishart (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 336; Louise Carbert, *Agrarian Feminism*, 11; Rennie, *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy*, 110-111.
[54] *Farmers' Advocate*, 30 October 1919, 6; *Farmers' Advocate*, 14 September 1923, 20.

by 1920 the WGGA and WSVFU both accounted for approximately the same proportion of the total membership of their respective movements – about one in every six members – marginally ahead of the UFWA which comprised roughly one in eight members within the wider United Farmers organisation in Alberta.[55]

The WSVFU was the first formal state-wide agrarian women's organisation in Australia, predating its interstate counterparts by at least half a decade. Although the Western Australian Country Party was the first division to establish women's branches – the first founded at Meckering in 1914 – a formal Women's Section was not established until 1926.[56] Women's Country Party auxiliaries were established in both New South Wales and South Australia in 1923.[57] In Queensland, a women's branch was first established at Chinchilla in 1948 some four years after the Queensland Country Party was re-established in that state.[58] Until approximately the 1970s, the Victorian WS was the most active and extensive of the Country Party auxiliaries operating in Australia. In the 1960s, for instance, women comprised only about six percent of the membership of the NSW Country Party compared to approximately a third in Victoria, and the 'lively' Victorian Women's Section was apparently 'much envied' north of the Murray River.[59]

The agrarian parties of Northern Europe took much longer to develop dedicated women's auxiliaries. The Swedish Farmers League was the first to establish a stable and permanent women's auxiliary, the *Svenska Landsbygdens Kvinnoförbund* (SLKF) or Swedish Rural

[55] Smith, "Saskatchewan Women Grain Growers," 336; Rennie, *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy*, 180.
[56] Duncan and Layman, *Blood Nose Politics*, 36.
[57] Davey, *The Nationals*, 362; *News* (Adelaide), 14 September 1923, 4; *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 17 September 1921, 8.
[58] Beverley Siller and Mendy Campbell, *Queensland in their hearts: A history of the Women's Section of the National Party of Australia (Queensland) 1949-1993* (Maryborough: True Blue Books, 1994), 4.
[59] Don Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales: a study of organisation and survival* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1972), 139.

Federation of Women in 1932, nearly twenty years after the party first won representation in the Swedish Parliament.[60] In Finland, an enduring women's auxiliary to the Finnish Agrarian League, the *Maalaisliiton Naiset*, was only established in 1941 at the League's thirty-fifth annual conference.[61] In Norway, the first women's structures of the Farmers' Party were not established until 1953 and the first national women's conference held only in 1962.[62] The comparatively late foundation of the Norwegian Farmers' Party women's auxiliary can be explained by the presence of an existing agrarian women's organisation, the *Norges Bondekvinnelag* or Norwegian Farmwomen's Association, which operated from 1921 as an affiliated auxiliary of the Norwegian Peasants' Association, the sponsoring organisation behind the Farmers' Party.[63] Consequently, there had been little need to establish a dedicated women's auxiliary until the formal disaggregation between the industrial and political wings of the movement following the Second World War.[64]

An explanation for why the Victorian Women's Section was such an early standout amongst the Australian Country parties and the wider agrarian movement across the world may be found in the looming presence of a highly organised and powerful rival women's political organisation: the Victorian-based Australian Women's National League (AWNL). Established in Melbourne in 1903 under the sponsorship of the Victorian Employers'

[60] Anita Dahlgren, Ole Elgström, and Hans Albin Larsson, *Landsbygdskvinnor organiserar sig. Hur svenska landsbygdens kvinnoförbund bildades* (Lund: Lunds Universitet Sociologiska institutionen, 1983), 12-13, 16-18 [Swedish, Sweden]; Christina Drottman and Maria Holmberg, ""Inte bara en vanlig syförening: Fem Centerkvinnors vardagsverklighet utifrån ett kunskapssociologiskt perspektiv" (Bachelor's thesis, Blekinge Institute of Technology, 2004), 5-6 [Swedish, Sweden].
[61] Anna Elomaki, "Rethinking political action and enforcing sexual morality: Finnish women's struggle for suffrage as conceptual politics," in *Redescriptions: Yearbook of Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory*, ed. Kari Palonen (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2009), 153; Centre Party of Finland, "Järjestön historia: Maalaisliiton naisjärjestön synty," http://www.keskustanaiset.fi/Suomeksi/Jarjesto/Historia [Finnish, Finland].
[62] Gunnar Kristinsson, *Farmers' Parties: a study in electoral adaptation* (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 1991), 107.
[63] Neve Scarborough, *History of the Associated Country Women of the World and of its member societies* (London: Rydal Press, 1953), 298-299.
[64] Kristinsson, *Farmers' Parties*, 107, 111.

Federation, the AWNL developed into the 'largest and most effective women's political organisation in Australian history'.[65] The AWNL performed a crucial role in non-Labor politics both in preselecting electoral candidates and providing support on the campaign trail. At the time of the formation of the VFU, the League had approximately 54,000 members organised into 500 branches across the state, many of them in rural Victoria.[66] As recounted by one VFU organiser, 'nearly all' of the wives and daughters of the newly enrolled Union members belonged to the AWNL.[67] By contrast, the AWNL's interstate counterparts, such as the Women's Reform League in New South Wales, were considerably smaller organisations that posed a less substantial threat to the emergent Country parties.[68]

In Victoria, the formation of VFU women's branches and the endorsement of Farmers' Union candidates against the Liberal and Nationalist parties led to an inevitable clash with the AWNL. The League's central executive warned its rural members of the 'danger' posed by the new Farmers' Union, citing its alleged links to the Labor Party and supposed lack of loyalty to the war effort.[69] The AWNL State President, Eva Hughes, declared that no member 'could honestly join [the VFU] while she remained with the League'.[70] The VFU leadership feared that divisions within the family unit could imperil the party's electoral success. Florence Laver implored rural women to 'give allegiance to the men, and not nullify two votes by voting against their husbands' by supporting AWNL endorsed candidates ahead of those of the VFU.[71] A Women's Section column published in the *Farmers' Advocate* made a

[65] Fitzherbert, *Liberal Women*, 10; Richard Norris, "Deakin, Alfred (1856–1919)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography. Volume 8, 1891-1939, Cl-Gib*, eds. Bede Nairn and Geoffrey Serle (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1981), 248-256.
[66] Fitzherbert, *Liberal Women,* 46.
[67] *Farmers' Advocate*, 8 November 1918, 3.
[68] Fitzherbert, *Liberal Women,* 38-40, 70-71.
[69] *South Gippsland Shire Echo*, 4 August 1916, 3; *Farmers' Advocate*, 25 October 1918, 1.
[70] *Bendigo Independent*, 26 September 1917, 8.
[71] *Kooweerup Sun, Lang Lang Guardian and Cranbourne Shire Record*, 23 October 1918, 2.

similar point by reference to a martial analogy: no force can mount 'a successful offensive with half of their army in one camp and the other half in another'.[72]

At the heart of the battle between the League and the WSVFU was a fundamental disagreement over the proper place of rural women within the Australian party system. In justifying the need for a distinct rural women's organisation, the pioneers of the WSVFU pointed to the contrasting living conditions between women on the land and those cocooned within the relative comforts of the cities. As Frances Hammond of the WSVFU argued in an open letter to Eva Hughes: 'No woman living, say, as you do, has any conception of the conditions under which many of us live. One must live on a farm – not the stud farm of some city man, but the little common, cheap and inconvenient average farmhouse – to realise it.'[73] In articulating sentiments such as these, the members of the WSVFU were establishing the foundational ideas of agrarian feminism in Australia: the idea that rural and agrarian women constituted a distinct interest group with their own common shared identity, political priorities, and outlook on life that set them apart from their sisters in the towns and cities.

IV. 'A sort of social welfare organisation for the country districts': The scope of the activities of the WSVFU/CP

The leadership of the VFU anticipated that the new women's branches would be occupied with basic political 'house-keeping' tasks such as ensuring that the rural electoral rolls were up to date.[74] As the head of the movement, the male farmers would handle the responsibilities of leadership and decision-making on behalf of the organisation.[75] The farm wives were to be

[72] *Farmers' Advocate*, 1 November 1918, 1.
[73] *Farmers' Advocate*, 8 November 1918, 3.
[74] *Farmers' Advocate*, 25 October 1918, 1.
[75] Gunn, "For the Man on the Land: Rural Women and the Victorian National Party," 105.

the helpers by raising funds, providing hospitality at branch meetings, and supporting the VFU's male candidates during campaigns.[76] Women members were exhorted to serve as 'missionaries' for the Country Party and 'devote all one's leisure' to promoting VFU candidates by arranging women's electoral meetings, organising postal vote applications, canvassing from door to door, and caring for children to help farm women reach polling stations on election day.[77]

The Women's Section, however, did not accept that its sole or even dominant purpose was to undertake subservient tasks for the political arm of the VFU. Laver even assured potential new recruits that there was 'not to be an overbearance [sic] of politics' in the organisation.[78] Instead, the founders of the WS envisaged a much broader set of reform-minded objectives, and pledged its members to improve the welfare and living conditions of rural women and children, further develop education and health facilities in country districts, assist returned veterans, war widows, and children of soldiers, and support charities 'in cash and kind'.[79] As Ethel Reseigh enthused to the 1922 women's conference: 'What must we surely do in this coming year…? Reform of a hundred sorts!… State affairs, country affairs, education, postal and telephone facilities all call for our attention. To women organised, all things are possible, politically and socially.'[80] The WSVFU emerged as a hybrid of a traditional women's political auxiliary unit and a more general community-based rural women's movement akin to the Women's Institutes of Canada and Great Britain. As explained by Jeanie McKerrow,

[76] Ibid.
[77] *Farmers' Advocate*, 6 June 1924, 14; *Farmers' Advocate*, 13 June 1924, 14.
[78] *Farmers' Advocate*, 20 November 1919, 6.
[79] *Farmers' Advocate*, 15 November 1918, 3; Gunn, "For the Man on the Land: Rural Women and the Victorian National Party," 105.
[80] *Farmers' Advocate*, 21 September 1922, 4.

who served as state president on six occasions between 1926 and 1941, 'in short, [the Section] acts as a sort of social welfare organisation for the country districts'.[81]

WS branches turned their attention to improving and civilising almost every aspect of rural life: supporting bush nursing hospitals and infant health centres, lobbying for improved school facilities, establishing libraries, campaigning for better telephone and mail services to rural districts, organising instructional lectures for farm women and millinery and dress-making classes for country girls, and even donating wireless sets for the enjoyment of hospital patients.[82] Women's Section club rooms were established in country towns as a place for farm women to meet socially, revive after an arduous day of travel, or shelter from the elements as they waited for infrequent rail services.[83] Rural and farm women who journeyed into town for appointments, often with children in tow, had previously had no place to wait or amuse themselves, unlike the menfolk who could retreat to a hotel public bar. The club rooms allowed agrarian women to carve out a distinctly feminine space in the otherwise male-dominated environment of a small country town, suitably decorated to extend the domestic familiarity of the farmhouse into the urban township.[84]

The Women's Section provided its members with their own exclusive forums – women's branch and district council meetings, and state conferences – to debate political issues and draw attention to the practical problems they encountered in everyday life. While there was frequently an overlap between the motions endorsed by the men's and women's annual

[81] *Shepparton Advertiser*, 16 June 1927, 6; Stribling, *A Record Honouring the Founding Women of the National Party of Victoria 1918-1998*, 12-13.
[82] *Farmers' Advocate*, 9 October 1919, 4; *Horsham Times*, 25 August 1925, 4; *Shepparton Advertiser*, 16 June 1927, 6; *Age*, 21 February 1928, 7; *Age*, 5 February 1929, 7.
[83] *Farmers' Advocate*, 21 September 1922, 4.
[84] *Table Talk*, 11 March 1926, 46.

conferences, there were nonetheless telling differences between the two sections. Whereas the men generally devoted much more time to 'practical' farming-related issues, produce marketing arrangements, and the strategic and political direction of the party, the WS tended to focus more on traditional 'feminine' domestic and social concerns such as education, healthcare, and community welfare. Indeed, the resolutions passed each year by the women's conferences provide an informative compendium of the problems and frustrations faced by rural women on the land: inadequate and understaffed schools and health care facilities; slow, infrequent, and uncomfortable passenger railway services; and difficulties and delays in securing electricity and telephone services. Following each conference, the Women's Section organised delegations to call on government ministers and agencies to press their requests and demands directly on the state.[85]

WS members also used these forums to express their frustration with politicians and farming men who failed to uphold their obligations to farm wives and children on the land. Letters streamed in from members decrying the misery and arduous labour of dairying wives and mothers, and the 'apathy of the politician… who lets precious opportunities [for reform] slip through his fingers'.[86] In 1925, the Bena women's branch presented a petition directly to the prime minister, with 1068 signatures affixed, urging action to remedy structural problems in the dairy industry.[87] One WS correspondent with the *Countryman* denounced the 'self-satisfied jellyfish cockie' for his laziness and cowardice in refusing to better organise and press for higher dairy prices that would liberate his wife and children from the toils of the cow yard.[88] Obliged by economic circumstances to fulfil contradictory roles and expectations

[85] *West Gippsland Gazette*, 2 August 1927, 2.
[86] Gunn, "For the Man on the Land: Rural Women and the Victorian National Party," 107-117.
[87] Ibid., 120-121.
[88] Ibid., 116.

– to be devoted mothers, attractive wives, and to provide unpaid manual farm labour – members of the Women's Section became political activists agitating for change.[89]

Beyond these typically 'country-minded' concerns, the ideological orientation of the Women's Section tended to blend traditional Country Party agrarianism with overt conservatism. Comic magazines, films, radio broadcasts, and 'Communistic literature' were condemned for their scandalous content and stricter censorship urged as a necessary remedy.[90] The WS strenuously opposed Sunday sporting events as a 'desecration of the Sabbath' and entreated governments to retain restrictive liquor licencing laws.[91] As a member organisation of the Empire Day movement, the WS actively promoted Anglo-Australian imperial patriotism by encouraging the distribution of Union Jack flags to school students.[92] The WS infused the Country Party movement with a pervading social, cultural, and patriotic conservatism decades before the parliamentary leadership expressly realigned the party firmly to the right of the ideological spectrum in the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, whether sensitive to pressure from the Women's Section or wider public opinion in its rural electoral heartland, the all-Country Party ministries in Victoria tended to hold a firm line on moral issues. As Premier, Albert Dunstan railed against the 'vile practice' of advertising contraceptives, resisted efforts to liberalise state liquor regulations, and chastised mothers employed outside the home for their 'regrettable disregard for their obligations'.[93] Likewise, J.G.B. McDonald opposed lottery schemes as 'engines of moral degradation' and pledged

[89] Ibid., 113, 122.
[90] *Argus*, 27 September 1951, 3; *Brisbane Telegraph*, 28 July 1954, 23; WSCP, Minute Book 1932-1939, CSURA, PG2694, Box 29, Item 276; WSCP, Minute Book 1946-54, CSURA, PG2694, Box 29, Item No. 278.
[91] WSCP, Minute Book 1932-39, CSURA, PG2694, Box 29, Item No. 276; WSCP, Minute Book 1946-54, CSURA, PG2694, Box 29, Item No. 278.
[92] *Countryman*, 26 April 1946, 6.
[93] *Gippsland Times*, 25 July 1935, 8; *Herald*, 11 March 1942, 5; *Argus*, 12 August 1942, 3.

that there would be 'no extension of drinking hours while the Country Party remains in government'.[94]

The Section's 'Empire loyalist' sentiments were balanced by an enduring commitment to the cause of world peace, particularly during the interwar years, and support for the League of Nations.[95] This internationalist sentiment arguably represented an Antipodean manifestation of what Helen McCarthy has identified as a 'maternalist pacifism' that emerged in Britain during the inter-war years as a distinctly gendered subset of liberal internationalism.[96] Support for the League of Nations was promoted within women's organisations as a means of 'mothering the world', an idea that 'drew on an age-old binary opposition twinning femininity with the values of pacifism and masculinity with those of militarism'.[97] The distinctive international outlook of the Victorian Women's Section – which had no real parallel in the General Section beyond its perennial interest in the world commodity trade – was also apparent from the correspondence trail between the WS and an impressive array of likeminded organisations across the world. The 1932 WS conference, for instance, received formal greetings from women's organisations in South Africa, Southern Rhodesia, Ireland, Denmark, the United States, Switzerland and Czechoslovakia.[98] The WS even sought to send delegates to international gatherings such as the Conference of Rural Women's Organisations, held in London in 1929 under the auspices of the International Council of Women.[99]

[94] *Age*, 1 April 1952, 2; *Age*, 26 August 1952, 3.
[95] See resolution at 1936 WS conference: WSCP, Minute Book 1932-39, CSURA, PG2694, Box 29, Item 276.
[96] Helen McCarthy, *The British people and the League of Nations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 182-203.
[97] Ibid., 182.
[98] *Age*, 4 February 1932, 10.
[99] *Countryman*, 24 May 1929, 10.

The WS also cultivated close ties with non-partisan organisations of a charitable or civic-minded character in Australia. By the early 1950s the WS was formally affiliated with the National Council of Women, the Cinema Council, the Travellers Aid Society, the Empire Day Movement, the National Resources Conservation League, the Forests Campaign Council, the Good Neighbour Council, and the United Nations Association of Australia.[100] Both the WSCP and AWNL were formally represented at the foundation meetings of the CWA in Victoria in 1928, which was established to transcend the political and sectarian divisions that had split rural and country women into rival movements.[101] The Country Party delegation voted against the decision to form the CWA, as instructed by Central Council which considered the proposed non-political organisation to be both unnecessary and a threat to the CP membership base.[102] The well-resourced CWA, with its 'man-free' and 'women-sustaining' environment, nevertheless proved popular among the WS membership and many joined both organisations.[103]

The advancement of women's civil rights and their wider participation in civic society was also a priority of the WS. The Section long supported efforts to allow women to sit on juries – although the passage of reform legislation on this matter was frustrated by the Parliamentary Country Party on several occasion in the 1950s – and campaigned for more women to be appointed as Justices of the Peace, as members and trustees of statutory boards, and as police officers in Victoria.[104] The WS delegates were distinctly less supportive of more radical feminist ambitions that threatened the traditional social order and conventional

[100] WSCP, 'Thirty-Fourth WS Annual Report and Expenditure Statement (1953)', Minute Book 1946-54, CSURA, PG2694, Box 29, Item No 278.
[101] Gunn, "For the Man on the Land: Rural Women and the Victorian National Party," 78.
[102] Ibid., 78-81. *Age*, 12 October 1927, 14; WSVCP, 'Meeting of WSVCP Executive, 23 July 1929', Minute Book 1927-32, CSURA, PG2694 Box 28, Item No 275, 98-99.
[103] Gunn, "For the Man on the Land: Rural Women and the Victorian National Party," 78-81.
[104] *Argus*, 6 September 1956, 1.

gender relations. The 1947 WS conference, for instance, condemned the Commonwealth Labor Government for extending pension payments to *de facto* wives and called on delegates to 'discuss the domestic problem with a view to wiping out the social stigma that it attached to all who do domestic labour'.[105]

The maternal duties of the Women's Section extended to the children's wing of the party – the 'Country Bees' movement – which was formally affiliated in 1920 under the auspices of the Women's Section.[106] The focal point of the Country Bees movement was the children's column in the party newspaper, which typically included letters from children describing their daily activities on the farm alongside suitably bucolic poems and song lyrics. The Country Bees raised funds to sponsor several cots at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne and were encouraged to make scrapbooks for the amusement of the patients.[107] The WS also arranged picnic excursions for the Country Bees which provided a social event for young farming families. It was understood that the junior wing would be of utility to the party by recruiting and training activists for the movement. The Bees were encouraged to be 'good and busy members of the hive' so that, come election time, they may be 'useful, just like scouts, and be VFU messengers'.[108] Furthermore, by instilling in children a love of country life and a strong rural identity, the Country Bees section was intended to stem the drift of young rural Australians into the cities, widely considered in the party to be an existential threat to the prosperity and development of the nation. The Country Bees section was active until at least the mid-1960s.[109]

[105] WSCP, Minute Book 1946-54, CSURA, PG2694, Box 29, Item No 278.
[106] *Weekly Times*, 18 September 1920, 48.
[107] *Farmers' Advocate*, 13 June 1924, 16.
[108] *Farmers' Advocate*, 6 May 1920, 4.
[109] WSCP, Minute Book 1954-76, CSURA, PG2694, Box 30, Item 279.

The wide-ranging activities undertaken by the WS branches, encompassing both traditional modes of political activism as well as extra-political social welfare and community development projects, mirrored the work of other agrarian women's auxiliaries across the world. In Sweden, for instance, the SLKF operated variously as a 'union' to secure better working conditions for agrarian women on the land, as a social network to foster communal bonds between rural women, and as a more traditional political auxiliary working in concert with the wider Farmers' League.[110] The SLKF worked to provide maternal health, home-help, and collective laundry services in rural districts, organised childcare facilities during harvest seasons, and lobbied to have electricity, water, and sewerage connections extended to rural properties.[111] One of the SLKF's most notable and enduring achievements was the *husmoderssemester* or 'housewife vacation' program, first established in the late 1930s to provide dedicated recreation and holiday facilities for rural women.[112] A similar program of *aitileirejä* or 'mother camps' was introduced in Finland in 1954 through the efforts of the Women's Agrarian League.[113] Like the club rooms established by the Victorian WS, these holiday programs were intended to provide a greater level of comfort, respite, and companionship to rural women who were otherwise confined to the drudgery and social isolation of farm life. The Canadian agrarian women's auxiliaries also performed a similar dual role. The United Farm Women of Ontario, for example, expanded the scope of its extra-political activities throughout the 1920s to encompass such works as the construction of community halls and fundraising to support rural hospitals and schools.[114] Further west in Alberta, the UFWA worked collaboratively with the men's UFA branches to run Sunday

[110] Larsson, "Mellan verklighet och forskning," 122-123.
[111] Ibid., 128.
[112] Ibid., 133-134.
[113] Liisa Moilanen, "Vertaistuki Maaseudun Terveys- ja Lomahuolto ry:n tuetuilla lomilla," (Master's thesis, Laurea University of Applied Sciences, 2017), 20 [Finnish, Finland].
[114] Kerry Badgley, *Ringing in the Common Love of Good: The United Farmers of Ontario 1914-1926* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 137-138.

schools, organise community picnics, build community halls, and establish libraries, cemeteries, women's rest-rooms, and schools.[115]

The conservative maternal-agrarian ideology of the Victorian Women's Section also had strong parallels in other women's agrarian movements across the world. The Finnish Women's Agrarian League actively promoted traditional values such as 'family-centeredness, Christianity and patriotism' ahead of its gender equality ambitions.[116] In Sweden, the SLKF cultivated the *bonderomantik* or 'farm-romantic' ideology of the movement – a philosophy essentially identical to the 'country-mindedness' of the Australian Country Party – to build solidarity and political consciousness amongst agrarian women.[117] The SLKF strongly defended the traditional role of agrarian women as homemakers on the land as part of the Christian order of Swedish society. The ideal farm woman was to located primarily in the domestic space of the home, while simultaneously able to fulfil a wider, socially-useful volunteer role in the community beyond the farm gate.[118] Like the Victorian WS, the UFWA and UFWO in Canada both took great interest in the world peace movement, a cause that Leona Barritt, the inaugural UFWA secretary, described as 'perhaps… nearer to our hearts' than the campaign for women's suffrage or property rights.[119] The maternal orientation of the UFWA was also expressed in its work establishing and maintaining the junior section and youth clubs of the movement, rather like the 'Country Bees' movement in Victoria.[120]

[115] Rennie, *Rise of Agrarian Democracy*, 82-85.
[116] Maija Metsola, "Naiset tulkaa toimimaan eestä perheen, uskon, isänmaan! Porvarilliset naispoliitikot Suomessa vuosina 1945-1966," (Master's thesis, Tampere University, 2008), ii [Finnish, Finland].
[117] Larsson, "Mellan verklighet och forskning," 124-125.
[118] Ibid., 136.
[119] Rennie, *Rise of Agrarian Democracy*, 117; Badgley, *Ringing in the Common Love of Good*, 119-120.
[120] Ibid., 117.

V. The battle for equitable representation within the CP movement

Although the autonomous structure of the Women's Section afforded Country Party women considerable latitude to pursue their own projects and policy objectives, the effective segregation of the party along gender lines marginalised and excluded women from the movement's key decision-making forums. After the formation of the Women's Section, the male 'General Section' retained exclusive control over the governing structures of the Union including the Central Council, the annual General Section state conferences, and district council meetings. Consequently, the key administrative and strategic decisions of the party, such as amending the constitution and rules, deciding whether to contest a seat and candidate endorsement, and the formation or dissolution of coalition ministries, were the sole preserve of male members of the party. Even amendments to the Women's Section constitution required ratification by Central Council and the General Section conference, which led in some instances to 'humiliating reversals of carefully-thought-out Women's Section decisions'.[121] While the General Section was never strictly a 'men's section' – any woman could theoretically join if she could substantiate her credentials as a primary producer (a mandatory eligibility requirement until 1926-7) and paid the considerably higher membership fee – it would appear that only a very small number of women ever elected to do so.[122] According to Shirley McKerrow, only approximately six or seven women had joined the General Section rather than attend WS branch meetings at the time she joined in the late 1960s.[123]

[121] Gunn, "For the Man on the Land: Rural Women and the Victorian National Party," 167.
[122] *Gippsland Times*, 17 April 1941, 6.
[123] Shirley McKerrow interviewed by Andrew Black, recorded at Melbourne, Victoria, on 23 March 2017.

Many members of the WS resented the inequitable situation whereby they were expected to work for the electoral advancement of the movement but denied any real voice in its governance.[124] To remedy this injustice, the WS pursued a decades-long campaign to secure greater representation and membership rights. The reform proposals submitted by the WS were routinely dismissed by the male party membership, however, using 'language which implied a deeply irrational fear of women: the party, they imagined, would become "out of control", in "danger", subject to "flooding", "abuse" and "overloading" if women were to gain power'.[125]

The first formal attempt by the WS to win representation on Central Council occurred in the mid-1920s, when the WSVFU conference formally called for the appointment of a WS delegate 'with full privileges' to Central Council.[126] Only a few weeks later the Victorian WS attained representation on the newly reconstituted federal party organisation, the Australian Country Party Association.[127] Nevertheless, the WS had to wait to gain their first foothold on Central Council in their own state organisation. In 1932, some six years later, the WS were invited to send two delegates to Central Council meetings.[128] These WS delegates were not accorded voting privileges until 1937.[129] An additional third representative to Central Council was gained in 1946.[130]

[124] Gunn, "For the Man on the Land: Rural Women and the Victorian National Party," 164.
[125] Ibid., 172.
[126] *Geelong Advertiser*, 16 February 1926, 3.
[127] *Shepparton Advertiser*, 1 April 1926, 7.
[128] WSCP, 'Fourteenth Annual Conference Annual Report, St Arnaud 1933', Minute Book 1932-39, CSURA, PG2694, Box 28, Item 276, 82.
[129] Gunn, "For the Man on the Land: Rural Women and the Victorian National Party," 167.
[130] *Countryman*, 12 April 1946, 7.

The task of attaining even this modest representation was long frustrated by the exclusion of women delegates from the General Section annual conference, where such constitutional amendments were determined. Women delegates had been admitted to conference on one occasion only, namely in 1930, as the party considered rule amendments drafted to bring about reconciliation with the breakaway Country Progressive Party. The so-called radical section objected to the 'unconstitutional' admission of women delegates, which was considered to be a 'stacking' tactic deployed by the conservative faction.[131] Although Women's Section members enjoyed full voting and speaking rights at the annual conferences of the breakaway Liberal Country Party (1938-43) – in part, one suspects, to boost the rather modest number of delegates – this concession was not as readily forthcoming in the mainline United Country Party.[132] In 1943, the WSCP called for a joint session to be convened at each conference to discuss rule changes and matters pertinent to both sections of the party. As the *Gippsland Times* reported, CP women were 'fed up of being simply chattels' and having to 'kow-tow to the men's section', except when their fundraising and campaigning skills were required during elections.[133]

The Premier, Albert Dunstan gave his unfettered endorsement to the Women's Section's ambitions, asserting that women in the party had 'never got the recognition and consideration' they merited before listing a litany of 'indignities' that needed to be rectified: the 'censoring' of WS conference resolutions by Central Council, the exclusion of the WS members from joint conference meetings between the Parliamentary Country Party and Central Council as well as district council meetings, and the lower rate of travel

[131] *Age*, 28 March 1930, 13.
[132] *Mercury* (Hobart), 29 March 1939, 6.
[133] *Gippsland Times*, 12 April 1943, 4.

reimbursement for Women's Executive members.[134] The following year, however, the men's conference rejected a motion to admit WS delegates to UCP state conferences.[135] Dunstan accused the male delegates of being 'afraid the women might overwhelm them' in debate at conference and insisted that at elections he would 'prefer to have one active woman working for him than half a dozen men'.[136] In 1945, the delegates finally relented and endorsed joint conference sessions in future to discuss rule changes.[137]

As is evident from Dunstan's strident interventions, the Parliamentary Country Party and WS maintained a collaborative and mutually beneficial relationship. Unlike the perennially disruptive radical wing amongst the General Section membership, the WS was a broadly conservative and stabilising force in the party that seldom challenged – or even had the authority to challenge – the agenda and political direction pursued by the parliamentary members. The Parliamentary Country Party could in turn rely on the support of the WS both out on the campaign trail in elections and in crucial votes at Central Council. JB Paul was in 'no doubt' that Dunstan effectively controlled the Women's Section, or at least the leadership of the Section, which he used to increase his influence on Central Council.[138]

The Victorian WS was by no means the only women's auxiliary to encounter determined resistance in its efforts to secure equitable representation and decision-making authority within a male-dominated agrarian political movement. The long campaign by the members of the United Farm Women of Alberta, for instance, to attain equal status and full integration

[134] *Age*, 8 April 1943, 2.
[135] *Age*, 30 March 1944, 3.
[136] Ibid.
[137] *Argus*, 13 April 1945, 8.
[138] John Paul, "The Premiership of Sir Albert Dunstan," (Master's thesis, University of Melbourne, 1960), 364-368.

within the UFA organisation 'required a great deal of persistence and patience' by women members before they could convince the male leadership to accede to their demands.[139] Although women members could vote at UFA conventions, their resolutions to government agencies were screened by UFA officers.[140] UFWA office-bearers received lower rates of reimbursement for their expenses than their male counterparts, or, in some circumstances, no payment at all for roles that were remunerated within the male wing of the organisation.[141]

From the late 1940s, a parallel debate emerged within the party as to whether the two sections should amalgamate. The Women's Section had experienced rapid membership growth, reaching 5,000 members by 1950, 8,000 four years later and passing the 10,000 mark in 1959. As a proportion of the overall party membership, the WS expanded from just 16 percent in 1946 to approximately a third of the members by the end of the 1950s. With the Women's Section commanding such a large and growing base of resources and members, its full integration into the administrative structures of the General Section was an increasingly enticing prospect for a party under intense external electoral pressure. Helena Marfell, the WS President between 1949 and 1951, was supportive of a merger, arguing it would save money through efficiencies and allow WS fundraising proceeds to be paid directly into the general CP Fighting Fund.[142] Marfell further contended that amalgamation would give greater standing to women in the party who, after all, had equal voting power at the ballot box and 'did much of the campaign work such as all the addressing of envelopes' during elections.[143] It concerned her that one men's branch had purportedly described WS branches

[139] Leslie May Robinson, "Agrarian Reforms: Women and the Farm Movement in Alberta 1909-1926," (Master's thesis, University of Calgary, 1979), 51; Catherine Cavanaugh, "The Limitation of the Pioneering Partnership: The Alberta Campaign for Homestead Dower, 1909-25," *Canadian Historical Review* 74, no. 2 (June 1993): 213; Gunn, "For the Man on the Land: Rural Women and the Victorian National Party," 155.
[140] Rennie, *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy*, 116.
[141] Ibid.
[142] *Countryman*, 6 April 1950, 7.
[143] Ibid.

as purely 'social bodies' in contrast to the 'political' orientation of the men's branches.[144] The proposal was opposed by a number of delegates, including Mrs Dennis of Nambrok, who, while supportive of joint conferences, favoured a separate women's auxiliary as many women were 'diffident' about speaking at meetings attended by men.[145] The delegates to the 1951 WS conference rejected a proposed amalgamation of the two sections.[146]

VI. The Women's Section and women candidates for parliament

The exclusion of women from positions of authority and power in the Victorian Country Party was also reflected in its dilatory record of nominating women as electoral candidates. The Country-National parties took significantly longer than other Australian political parties to return women candidates to parliament. Indeed, the Victorian party lagged behind even its interstate C-NP counterparts in this regard, and elected its first female representative to the Victorian Parliament only in 1996, and to the Commonwealth Parliament in 2010. By comparison, each of the other Country-National parties had elected their first female state member of parliament by the 1970s or 1980s, and had sent at least one woman representative to the Federal Parliament between the mid-1950s and the 1990s.[147]

At the time of its foundation, the WS members were predominantly opposed to women standing for parliament, a view that prevailed as late as 1921 when conference delegates rejected a resolution calling for women to be legally permitted to stand at Victorian parliamentary elections.[148] That decision was suddenly reversed at the 1922 conference,

[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid.
[146] See 1951 Conference minutes: WSCP, Minute Book 1946-54, CSURA, PG2694, Box 29, Item No 278.
[147] Duncan and Layman, *Blood Nose Politics*, 91, 118; Paul Davey, *The Nationals*, 371.
[148] *Farmers' Advocate*, 28 September 1922, 13.

however, when nine branches each submitted motions for the ban to be lifted and a resolution to this effect carried unanimously.[149] The WS President, Ethel Reseigh, openly endorsed the election of 'capable, loyal women' to parliament – preferably a 'womanly woman, a sound home-loving woman' – so that the views of both men and women could be heard in the halls of power.[150] Nevertheless, she warned that such a development first required that women be educated in civic affairs and better organised politically, particularly those residing in more remote rural districts.[151] The male membership was divided on the question. John Allan, the state parliamentary leader, was opposed to women 'coming into this house to teach us how to legislate', and argued that 'they could do far more effective work behind the scenes'.[152] Earle Page, by contrast, was an enthusiastic supporter who thought women parliamentarians would be better qualified for the Treasury portfolio than 'most of the male Treasurers for many years past'.[153]

Britomarte James, the 'stately' and 'imperious' president of the metropolitan WS branch with close links to the National Council of Women, the Housewives' Association, and the Women's Citizen's Movement, sought preselection for the Victorian Country Party Senate ticket in 1922. She received little support from the Women's Section – they apparently regarded her as 'not sufficiently steeped in rural life to represent them' – and none at all from the men.[154] Two decades later, in 1942, Eve Mary Borthwick, the widow of Alexander Borthwick, the CP state member for Gippsland North, contested the preselection to fill the vacancy left by her deceased husband.[155] Mrs Borthwick was unsuccessful, losing out to

[149] Ibid.
[150] *Farmers' Advocate*, 21 September 1922, 4.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Gunn, "For the Man on the Land: Rural Women and the Victorian National Party," 92-93, 131.
[153] Ibid., 91.
[154] Ibid., 82-102.
[155] Ibid., 134-137.

William Fulton, an agricultural implement manufacturer, and purportedly lamented later that 'it would have been useless expecting a bunch of cow cockies to elect a woman'.[156]

Finally, in 1949, there was a breakthrough of sorts. Helena Marfell was preselected as the CP candidate for the federal Division of Wannon, a seat that had never been held by the Country Party and had always been effectively a two-horse Labor-Liberal/UAP/Nationalist contest.[157] Marfell was an active citizen of Warrnambool, and a prominent member of both the WSCP and CWA – a founding CWA member in 1928, state president between 1942-45, and the inaugural federal president in 1945.[158] Although she ran a vigorous campaign, ably assisted by the Women's Section, she finished third behind the Labor and Liberal candidates with less than 16 percent of the primary vote.[159] It would be a further considerable wait before a woman was again selected to contest a seat in Victoria. In 1970 Alma Uebergang of Penshurst, the WSCP State President, was preselected for the electorate of Portland, the first woman CP candidate to be endorsed for a state seat. With a state-wide swing against the Country Party on polling day, Uebergang secured a creditable 20.7 percent of the primary vote. Both Marfell and Uebergang had to draw on their own personal funds to supplement the inadequate financial resources allocated to their campaigns by Central Council.[160] Neither woman was ever offered an opportunity to stand again in a more winnable seat.[161]

[156] Ibid., 136.
[157] *Portland Guardian*, 10 November 1949, 2.
[158] Karen Crook, "Marfell, Helena Catherine (1896–1981)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography. Volume 18, 1981-1990, L–Z*, ed. Melanie Nolan (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2012), 125-126.
[159] *Countryman*, 9 December 1949, 4.
[160] Gunn, "For the Man on the Land: Rural Women and the Victorian National Party," 144, 147.
[161] Ibid., 153-154.

VII. The winds of change: 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s

The rise of 'second wave' feminism across the western world profoundly altered the place of women within the political sphere, and its impact was felt even within the resolutely conservative ranks of the WSCP. Although Australian agriculture was undergoing a significant transition as mechanisation and the consolidation of small holdings boosted production, the quality of life of women on the land did not always improve. The declining use of hired agricultural labour left more of the menial labour tasks to farm women: 'the wives were expected to do more outside work while the men sit on machines'.[162] Stagnating commodity prices and rising input and production costs through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s compelled more farm wives to seek external employment to sustain struggling small farms.[163] This only added to their already burdensome on-farm and domestic workloads. Alternatively, greater numbers of farm wives were left to manage the farm as their husbands took outside work to keep financially afloat. A Women's Section survey found that that many farm wives were working long hours as 'seven-days-a-week peasants'.[164] As book-keepers, wage earners and farm managers, rural women were assuming greater responsibilities and authority on the land.

The issue of amalgamating the two sections was again raised at the 1962 conference. Lawrie Price of the Warrnambool branch, in speaking in favour of a merger, argued that the time had long passed when women 'should be kept to serve the cake and do the washing up' and, as 'loyal and hard workers' for the party they had 'earned the right to join with the men in

[162] James, "Introduction," 7.
[163] Ibid., 6; Bruce Davidson, *European Farming in Australia* (Amsterdam: Elsevier Scientific Publishing, 1981), 325, 388-392.
[164] Gretchen Poiner, *The Good Old Rule: Gender and other power relationships in a rural community* (South Melbourne: Sydney University Press, 1990), 132.

debates'.[165] Although Price's motion was ultimately lost, the WS State President, Nell Bassett, called for a committee to be appointed to further consider the amalgamation question, striking a markedly assertive tone in her accompanying remarks. Women, she argued, were 'on the way up' and 'quite capable of sharing responsibilities at the top with the men', and as such, would 'take their place more and more in public affairs'.[166] In her 1963 annual conference address, Bassett argued that women should be assuming a greater role in politics as Australia was 'wasting half its brain power' and urged women to stand for blue ribbon CP seats.[167] Bassett was soon to be a pioneer in her own right: in 1966 she was the first woman elected to Central Council as a General Section delegate rather than a WS representative.[168]

Just as the WS was reaching its all-time peak membership – slightly above 14,000 in 1968 – the gendered divisions between the two sections of the party were dissolving. In 1967, Alma Uebergang and Mrs W. Vardy of Maffra were both elected presidents of their respective local district councils.[169] As recounted by Edith Taylor, who served as the WS State Organising Secretary, by the mid-1960s a 'much younger' group of women was stepping forward as conference delegates, and unlike their predecessors, they wished to attend the General Section conferences rather than the traditional women's events.[170] Shirley McKerrow, for

[165] See minutes of 1962 WS conference: WSCP, Minute Book 1955-1976, CSURA, PG2694, Box 30, Item 280, 168.
[166] Ibid.
[167] 'Address of the State President, Mrs R. Bassett, to the 44th Annual Conference of the Women's Section of the Country Party in the Mechanics Hall Lakes Entrance on Wednesday 3rd April 1963,' WSCP, Minute Book 1955-1976, CSURA, PG2694, Box 30, Item 280.
[168] WSCP, 'Annual Report to 47th Women's Section Conference', Minute Book 1955-1976, CSURA, PG2694, Box 30, Item 280, 265.
[169] WSCP, 'Annual Report to 48th Women's Section Conference', Minute Book 1955-1976, CSURA, PG2694, Box 30, Item 280, 285.
[170] *National Outlook*, 3 September 1978, 6.

instance, who joined the party in 1968, pointedly chose *not* to join the Women's Section but to associate exclusively with the General Section.[171]

McKerrow's meteoric rise through the organisational wing of the party – elected to Central Council in 1972, and subsequently Junior Vice President in 1975, State President in 1976, and finally serving as Federal President between 1981 and 1987 – was itself an indication of the shifting gender relations in the party.[172] The Victorian Country-National Party, dominated by older, socially-conservative Protestant farmers from the rural back-blocks of the state, had elected the first female state president of any political party in Australian history. And not just any woman at that, but a young mother of Irish-Italian Catholic descent, raised in metropolitan Melbourne, and studying part-time towards a university degree. Intriguingly, McKerrow is adamant that her ascent to the leadership of the organisational wing was not due to an influx of women members into the General Section of the party. In her experience, male members of the party were quite supportive of her standing provided she could do the job effectively. By contrast, McKerrow recounts that she received far more pushback from the more conservative elements of the Women's Section who did not think it entirely proper that a woman should play such a prominent role in the General Section.[173]

By the 1970s, the autonomous structures of the Women's Section were wasting away as the gendered lines of demarcation in the party faded into irrelevance. In 1972, a landmark constitutional amendment extended full membership privileges to the spouse or female dependent relative of a General Section member for no additional charge.[174] Across

[171] Shirley McKerrow interviewed by Andrew Black, recorded at Melbourne, Victoria, on 23 March 2017.
[172] Ibid.
[173] Ibid.
[174] Country Party, Annual Conference and Business Papers – 49th to 57th Conferences, 1965-1973, CSURA, PG2694, Box 12, Item 41.

Australia, women in the National Party 'moved into the party proper in their thousands'.[175] In an address to the WS executive in 1974, Jean Webster, the wife of Senator J.J. Webster, articulated the new scope for the Women's Section as a 'vital force in leading the way for reform within one Country Party' rather than as a mere 'appendage to the Men's Section'.[176] Webster's vision was readily apparent in the annual conference agendas. By 1973 the combined session of conference was more expansive (37 motions listed on the agenda) than the Women's Section conference (just 22 motions). The following year, this ratio had blown out further still with 124 combined motions and just 17 for the dedicated WS conference. The 1978 WS conference occupied just two hours.[177] The practice of holding separate women's conferences was withering as the cultural and political forces that had rendered them necessary in the first place waned.

The year 1978 proved to be the death knell of the Women's Section as it had traditionally operated since 1918. The WS delegates accepted the recommendations of the Joint Committee on the Future of the Women's Section report that the women's conferences be suspended for two years, and that the five WS central councillors – to be elected from five regions rather than at conference – constitute the central executive and elect a chair and deputy chair amongst their own ranks.[178] The decisions of the 1978 conference were ratified in 1980 and the women's constitution was formally abolished.[179] After six decades and fifty-eight annual conferences, the existence of the Women's Section as an autonomous party auxiliary was brought to a close.

[175] Jocelyn Clarke and Kate White, *Women in Australian Politics* (Sydney: Fontana Books, 1983), 74.
[176] Jean Webster, 'Address by Mrs JJ Webster to the Country Party Women's Section Central Executive on the role of women in this changing society', Minute Book 1955-1976, CSURA, PG2694, Box 30, Item 280, 5.
[177] WSNPA, Minute Book 1977-1980, CSURA, PG2694, Box 31, Item 280.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Ibid.

A lingering remnant of the Women's Section continued to exist as a formal group within the party until 1995, when the title of 'Women's Section' was replaced by 'Women's Executive' to refer to the reserved women's representatives on Central Council.[180] In 1993-4 there were only four active women's branches in Victoria.[181] The Women's Section/Executive was sustained by a dedicated band of stalwarts holding the tide against a shrinking active membership and critics who considered the remaining privileges of the Women's Executive to be an outdated anachronism. As lamented by Alice Cheesman, a former WS President, in an archived report to the Women's Executive in 1994:

> We are a specialised group and don't let anyone tell you any different. There will always be those who want to disband us and I am sorry to say some of our opponents are women… Who has the down to earth knowledge of how it really is? Women. Who suffers the most when hard times strike e.g. rural properties etc? Women. Don't ever let our Party forget that they rely on the vote of over 52% of women.[182]

By the late 1980s, the maternal-agrarian feminism that had dominated the movement in decades past had evolved into a stridently conservative opposition to radical feminism and the equal-opportunity legislation of the Hawke Government. As noted by the 1988 'Nixon Report', the Women's Federal Council was 'influential' in the party's decision both to rule out a specific federal policy for women ('rather, the interests of women should be taken into account in the development of all policies') and to oppose affirmative action measures in

[180] Marian Simms, "Two steps forward, one step back: Women and the Australian party system," in *Gender and Party Politics*, eds. Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris, (London: Sage publications, 1993), 16-34, 21.
[181] WSNPA, Minutes 1993-1996, CSURA, PG2694, Box 31, Item 281.
[182] 'Report from Alice Cheesman to Victorian Women's Executive, 12 February 1994', Minutes 1993-1996, CSURA, PG2694, Box 31, Item 281.

parliament.[183] As late as 1988, the election platform of the Victorian Nationals described the perception that women and minority groups were disadvantaged in society as an 'over simplification' and 'clearly inaccurate' and concluded that dedicated minority interest policies could be 'counterproductive' as they only fermented resentment in the community.[184]

Within twelve months of the retirement of the former 'Women's Section' name in 1995, the party had secured its first female parliamentary representative: Jeanette Powell, elected for the North-Eastern Province in the Legislative Council at the 1996 state election. An accomplished former Shire President, businesswoman, and television presenter from Shepparton, Powell was virtually the antithesis of the homely and demure farm-wife stereotype that had long haunted the Women's Section. Tellingly, Powell's political ascent was achieved not through years of dedicated service in the women's branches but her work in local government and business. Over the course of her 18 years in the Victorian Parliament, Powell shattered two further layers of the rural 'grass ceiling' (to borrow an expression from Alston) as the first National Party woman elected to the Legislative Assembly after winning the seat of Shepparton in 2002, and, between 2010 and 2014, the first woman minister.[185]

Powell's pioneering political career was followed by a stream of women into the state and federal parliamentary ranks. In 2010, the Victorian party attained its first female federal member with the election of Bridget McKenzie to the Senate. At the time of writing, women hold three of the seven National Party seats in the Victorian Parliament, half the National

[183] Peter Nixon, Ralph Hunt, John Paterson, and David Russell, *National Party of Australia: the Future. Report of the Committee of Review into the Future Direction of the National Party of Australia* (Canberra: National Party of Australia, 1988), 38.
[184] "Social Justice Policy," *Nationals: part of Victoria's future* (Melbourne: National Part of Australia – Victoria, 1988), 1.
[185] Margaret Alston, *Breaking through the Grass Ceiling: Women, power and leadership in agricultural organisations* (Amsterdam: Harwood, 2000).

Party positions in the shadow state cabinet, and the deputy leadership of the state party, as well as the leadership of the National Party in the Senate (and until February 2020, the deputy leadership of the federal Parliamentary National Party). Like Jeanette Powell before them, and much of the male membership of the parliamentary wing, each of these new generation National Party women parliamentarians entered politics after a professional 'white collar' career rather than a traditional background in agriculture. As observed by Jenny Hammett, the first woman in the history of the party to have served as an election candidate, senior state-wide executive office-bearer, and state director, the Victorian Country-National Party had finally 'come of age' in terms of female participation.[186]

VIII. Conclusion

This chapter has sought to correct the long-standing gender imbalance in the historiography of the Country-National Party and Australian rural politics by considering in detail the unique contribution and experience of rural and agrarian women within the party. Since its first forays into electoral politics during the First World War, the party has depended on the vital support of women to build and sustain its parliamentary representation and grassroots organisational presence across the state. The semi-autonomous structures and forums of the Women's Section auxiliary in turn provided country women with a platform to articulate their own distinctive ideological values and political priorities, to press their needs upon political and bureaucratic authorities, and an extensive organisational infrastructure to pursue community development projects aimed at improving the social and cultural amenity of country districts and the living and working conditions of rural farm women. A vibrant, transnationally-connected rural women's movement emerged within the Country Party in

[186] *Weekly Times*, 23 May 2014, [https://www.weeklytimesnow.com.au/news/politics/young-women-leading-the-way-for-victorian-nationals/news-story/67ef1e329689c95fade828308fba95cf].

Victoria, with its own distinctive ideological outlook, and a women's branch network that sustained an impressive array of political, cultural, and social interests that stretched well beyond the farm gate. In straddling the boundary between a traditional party auxiliary unit and a more broad-based civic-minded rural women's movement, the Victorian Women's Section mirrored the work of other contemporaneous agrarian women's auxiliaries across the world who, likewise, rarely confined their activities exclusively to subservient 'political housekeeping' tasks.

At the same time, however, the decades-long effective segregation of the party along gender lines restricted the capacity for women to fully participate on equal terms with male members and delayed their advancement into positions of power in the party and parliament. The Victorian Country Party, as an 'organisation with a more-than-usually robustly masculine culture and ideology', consistently 'reassert[ed] its idea of ideal femininity to authenticate its masculinity' for many decades by excluding women from full equality within the movement.[187] Although the WS progressively challenged the dominant male hegemony in the party and campaigned for the extension of some additional civic and political rights for women, the prevailing conservatism within the movement was such that its members typically re-affirmed rather than challenged the traditional gender norms that pervaded agrarianism as a political and cultural ideology.

[187] Gunn, "For the Man on the Land: Rural Women and the Victorian National Party," 23, 50.

Conclusion

Along a flat and lonely stretch of the Sunraysia Highway, eight miles south of Donald in the heart of the grain-growing plains of the Wimmera-Mallee, there can be found a moss-encrusted granite post-and-lintel memorial gate. Standing tall like a pre-historic Stone Age megalith, the gate commemorates the life and political career of Sir Albert Dunstan, perhaps the only person of historical prominence to have hailed from the former township of Cope Cope. The hall whose entrance the gate had grandly guarded disappeared decades ago – along with most of the community it had dutifully served – leaving behind only an empty block overrun with weeds and gnarled Mallee scrub. Like the Dunstan Memorial Gate, the Country Party that its namesake had once dominated as an agrarian political colossus has survived to reach the third decade of the twenty-first century; not nearly as imposing as in its glory days in the mid-twentieth century but still, against the odds, standing nonetheless. By contrast, most of the agrarian parties that once sat astride the parliamentary benches of Europe and North America have long since disappeared – in the great majority of cases decades before even the Cope Cope public hall was demolished, which seems to have occurred at some point during the 1970s or 1980s.[1]

The social, economic, and political world from which the Victorian Farmers' Union had sprung – of small family farms dividing up the land around railheads and rural hamlets like Cope Cope, with sufficient electoral power to outvote the metropolis of Melbourne – has largely vanished. Over the past century, the large coastal capital cities and provincial centres absorbed an ever-greater share of the Australian population while most rural districts and

[1] The precise date or even decade for the demolition of the hall is not specified in the published history of the township. The hall was still in use in 1965 but long since demolished by 2000. See Lilian B. Kirk, *A History of Cope Cope* (Donald: Donald History and Natural History Group, 2000), 55.

small country towns declined. Of the nation's top ten exports by dollar value in 2018, only one agricultural commodity – beef – made the list.[2] This is an astonishing departure from the era when wool, wheat, and butter were by far the leading products to fill the hulls of ships departing Australian ports. Primary producers in Australia presently receive some of the lowest levels of state support amongst any of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development nations.[3] And yet Australia is still home to what is regarded by some to be the 'world's longest-running and most influential rural-based party', a rare surviving relic of the once extensive agrarian party family that swept to prominence across much of Europe, North America, and Australasia a century ago.[4]

The conclusion of the chronological chapters of this thesis left the Victorian National Party at the dawn of the twenty-first century much as we had found it following the VFU's electoral breakthrough in 1917: a comparatively small, non-metropolitan minor party with a handful of seats in the Legislative Assembly, unsure of its proper place in the political landscape and divided about its relationship with its larger, more urban non-Labor counterpart. And yet, in other important respects, the party that Peter Ryan inherited in 1999 was also markedly different from that which had anointed John Allan as its inaugural leader more than eight decades earlier. The exclusively agrarian Farmers' Union – the 'Heaven-sent instrument of cocky-farmers' pledged to the pursuit of an 'untidy agrarian socialism' under the watchful eye of an external industrial machine – had given way to the modern quasi-agrarian National Party that had just spent seven years in power zealously sweeping away the foundations of

[2] Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Composition of Trade – Australia 2018* (Canberra: Statistic Section, Office of Economic Analysis, Investment and Economic Division, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, July 2019), 25.
[3] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2013: OECD Countries and Emerging Economies* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2013), 15-16, 80.
[4] Rob Manwaring, "Parties and Representation," in *Contemporary Australian Political Parties*, eds. Narelle Miragliotta, Anika Gauja, and Rodney Smith (Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2015), 98.

statutory intervention for the primary industries.[5] By the turn of the millennium, the party's election candidates were more likely to have pursued a pre-parliamentary career toiling at a desk than tilling the topsoil. Likewise, its elected members depended as much – if not more so – on the votes of large urbanised regional centres to secure their seats than the rural and agrarian farming areas that had first propelled the VFU into the state legislature.

In the 82 years between the 1917 and 1999 state elections, the Country-National Party had charted a strikingly turbulent course as the agrarian third party of Victorian politics. In its first three decades in parliament, the Country Party rose to prominence as the formidable fulcrum party of the Legislative Assembly. By the early 1940s it had expanded to become the largest and most powerful bloc in the Victorian Parliament, and the sole occupant of the Treasury benches and state cabinet between 1935 and 1943, and again between 1950 and 1952. Beset by internal ruptures, disastrous boundary redistributions, reinvigorated opposition from its rivals, and a rapidly changing post-war rural electorate, the party was dethroned from its preeminent position in state politics between the late 1940s and early 1950s. For the remainder of the century, it survived and endured more than it thrived or prospered, clinging on to a much-diminished electoral territory on the peripheries of the state while clawing back an occasional rural seat from the Liberal Party. Although the National Party returned to office in 1992, the task of sharing power with a considerably larger and unsympathetic coalition partner proved no less challenging than in the tumultuous 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. On this occasion the party was both unable and unwilling to withdraw its support and bring down the Kennett Government despite the discontent of many party members and rural voters. The party suffered the worse result in its history at the subsequent state election in 1999.

[5] W.K. Hancock, *Australia* (London: Jacaranda Press, 1930), 200-201.

The thesis has also explored the party's long and somewhat unconventional tradition of parochial independence in state politics. Despite pressure from the movement's conservative wing for closer anti-socialist cooperation in the Victorian Parliament, and the persistent lobbying by the Liberal Party for an amalgamation of the two parties, the Victorian Country-National Party stubbornly retained its autonomy as a separate party. For much of its history the party was just as willing to collaborate with the Labor Party in the state parliamentary arena as with the urban-based liberals and conservatives. It withdrew from composite ministries that it considered to be unsatisfactory (as in both 1935 and 1948-49), rebuffed efforts to secure a comprehensive non-Labor coalition agreement (in 1924, for example) and forged unofficial 'unholy' parliamentary alliances with the ALP to install all-Country Party ministries (1935 and 1950) and Labor minority governments (in 1924, 1927, and 1929) to office. Until the 1970s, the Country Party found that it could exert significant parliamentary power, sustain its electoral representation, and impress much of its platform on the statute books without acceding to a permanent entangling partnership with the Liberal Party and its predecessors in the state political arena. Although the Country-National Party finally accepted that a coalition was its sole realistic means of regaining ministerial tenure following its disastrous result at the 1970 state election, it was unable to convince its prospective governing partner of the merits of such an arrangement for another two decades. Following the defeat of the Kennett Government, the party again reverted to its old tradition of non-aligned autonomy and withdrew to the crossbenches to rebuild its support amongst its rural and regional constituencies.

Given the C-NP's history of vigorous third-party independence in Victoria, it is neither fair nor accurate to characterise the organisation as a 'half' or 'quarter' party that merely

subsisted within the larger anti-Labor political movement. The tendency to dismiss the C-NP as a mere 'regional and autonomous extension of the main non-Labor party' made up of 'Liberals in moleskins' ignores its unique internal culture as well as its extensive and self-governing grassroots-based organisational wing.[6] The Country-National Party actively constructed and promulgated its own country-minded political identity and ideological values – blended with a mixture of rural radicalism, conservatism, anti-socialism, neo-liberalism and even social or maternal feminism that evolved and changed over time – while capitalising on and reinforcing the underlying urban-rural and centre-periphery political cleavages of the Victorian countryside. In Victorian state politics, therefore, the survival of the Country-National Party cannot be plausibly explained by reference to an enduring anti-socialist partnership between the twin parties of organised capital – urban and rural – that collaborated to share power and thwart the forces of organised labour.

This thesis has also challenged the largely settled consensus that the early electoral success and ultimate survival of the Country Party movement in Victoria depended predominantly on the 'luck of the distribution' that assured the party of 'enough unlosable seats to maintain its decisive position' in state politics.[7] Since its formation, the party's place in the rural political landscape has been resisted and challenged by an array of well-resourced hostile forces. Even in the party's so-called electoral 'heartland', there is not a single rural district of the state that remained so unswervingly loyal that it did not transfer its allegiance to a state or federal

[6] L.C. Webb, "The Australian Party System," in *The Australian Political Party System*, ed. S.R. Davis (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1954), 103, quoted in J. M. Barbalet, "Tri-partism in Australia: The role of the Australian Country Party," *Politics* 10, no. 1 (1975): 1-2; Linda Courtenay Botterill, "An Agrarian party in a Developed Democracy," in *The National Party: Prospects for the great survivors*, eds. Linda Courtenay Botterill and Geoff Cockfield (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2009), 14.

[7] Brian Costar, "The National Party: Revival or Extinction?," in *For Better or For Worse: The Federal Coalition*, ed. Brian Costar (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1994), 132-133; A.F. Davies, "The Government of Victoria," in *The Government of the Australian States*, ed. Solomon Davis (London: Longman, 1960), 222.

member of a different political persuasion on at least one occasion between the late 1920s and the end of the twentieth century. Likewise, the party has never had a monopoly on the votes or sympathies of farmers and graziers in Victoria, as the political career of Henry Bolte well illustrated.

Conventional historical accounts have hitherto accorded insufficient attention to the movement's independent agency and have underestimated the crucial role that its internal strategic decision-making has played in building and maintaining the electoral viability of the party. The resolve of the VFU's pioneer leadership to position the movement as a moderate centre-aligned agrarian party, for instance, afforded it unique flexibility in seeking cross-party alliances and allowed the party to attract supporters and invaluable preference votes from both sides of the pre-existing polarised political divide in rural Victoria. The party has also been prepared to change, regroup, and adapt – whether proactively or reactively – in its efforts to address the threats it has encountered and maintain its relevance in an often unfavourable and shifting political landscape. Decade by decade and conference by conference, the party gradually dismantled the key components of Isaac Hart's founding model for the Farmers' Union – 'essentially an industrial party representing the farmers in the wheat, dairying and fruit growing areas' – as it proved to be unworkable or unhelpful to its electoral viability.[8]

The party recognised almost from its very outset that it could not remain an exclusively farmer-oriented movement and realise its expansive political ambitions. Its election candidates were regarded with scepticism and even open hostility, first in country towns and

[8] Antony Lamb, "Of measures and men: the Victorian Country Party, 1917 to 1945," (PhD thesis, Swinburne University of Technology, 2009), 24.

later in the provincial cities, where it has been routinely dismissed as a narrowly sectional and unrepresentative 'cockie' party. The VFU's industrial wing detached and departed from the movement as it was gradually rendered redundant by the rise of non-partisan industrial organisations. In a drive to broaden its appeal, the party dispensed with its restrictive membership rules to admit non-farmers, discarded its overtly agrarian and rural party names, and recast its policy platforms to place a greater emphasis on broader non-agricultural issues such as decentralisation and state development. Nevertheless, the party has not been able to reposition itself to expand into the large provincial cities or metropolitan areas. It has always struggled to formulate and articulate a credible alternative to its traditional country-minded philosophy that was both suitably broad to win over a larger, more urbanised constituency while simultaneously consonant with the rural heritage that its predominantly agrarian membership was never entirely willing to jettison. It is doubtful that there was ever sufficient genuine demand for a newly rebranded quasi-agrarian centre party or right-wing conservative party in urban Victoria to support a Country-National Party advance into the cities.

Likewise, Hart's ambition to replicate the extra-parliamentary 'organs of control' machinery of the Labor Party to compel the VFU's elected members to submit to the collective will of the organisational and industrial wings was effectively abandoned after it proved to be largely ineffectual and split the movement asunder on several occasions. In the drawn-out war of attrition fought between the organisational and parliamentary wings between the 1920s and the early-to-mid-1940s, Central Council never entirely succeeded in bringing the recalcitrant parliamentarians to heel. The politicians proved to be far less malleable and meekly compliant than Hart and his fellow VFU pioneers had anticipated. The political and strategic direction of the ostensibly mass-democratic party machine was henceforth under the *de facto* control of the parliamentarians. Disgruntled members could voice their displeasure against

the contentious decisions of the leadership – such as J.G.B. McDonald's withdrawal from the Hollway Government to the crossbenches, George Moss's flirtations with the Labor Party, or the neo-liberal revolution of the Kennett era – but had no realistic prospect of ever forcing a change in direction. The alternative option that was embraced by many disaffected party members and supporters – to draw on Albert O. Hirschman's 'exit, voice, and loyalty' framework – was to leave or 'exit' the movement altogether.[9] This occurred most prominently in two waves: firstly, the mass defection of pro-coalition or pro-amalgamation conservatives to the Liberal and Country Party in 1949, and secondly, in the rise of rural independents in the 1990s in protest against the policies and reforms of the Kennett and Howard Governments.

By situating the history of the Victorian Country-National Party within the context of the wider agrarian party family – from which it has long been excluded – it has been possible to identify several striking parallels and common attributes that it has shared with its counterparts abroad. The agrarian parties that were examined for comparative purposes in this thesis – most prominently those of Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Finland, and Canada, with some additional passing remarks where relevant on those of Denmark, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Croatia – typically shared a similar trajectory to that of the Victorian Country-National Party. Despite the considerable geographical and cultural differences that separated these parties, and the varying electoral and party systems in which they operated, they were confronted by remarkably similar challenges over time and tended to respond to them in similar ways.

[9] Albert O. Hirschmann, *Exit, voice, and loyalty: responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970).

Like the VFU, most agrarian parties emerged in the years following the end of the First World War and were able to break into their respective legislatures by mobilising the support of extra-parliamentary farmers' industrial machines. The new parliamentary farmers' parties forged alliances with other predominantly class-based movements either on the liberal-conservative right or the social democratic-socialist left, and many shifted between the two over time, indicative of the broad centre position that they tended to occupy in the party system as well as the internal 'oscillation between conservatism and radicalism' that was endemic to farmer-based rural movements.[10] More often than not, the agrarian parties were prepared to cut deals with left-leaning social democratic parties in times of rural economic hardship and dislocation to secure concessions for their constituents – including the formation of 'red-green' parliamentary alliances, such as that which installed the Dunstan Government to office in 1935. Like the Victorian Country-National Party, the agrarian parties abroad tended to build their electoral strength on formidable grass-roots-based organisational machines – including, in many instances, a dedicated women's auxiliary – that were often much more extensive than those of the more electorally-successful urban-based parties.

The few agrarian parties that survived the destruction and upheaval wrought by the Second World War were left to grapple with a rapidly urbanising post-war electorate. The leadership of the agrarian parties sought to reposition and recast their movements to appeal to broader non-agrarian constituencies, and they cast aside their overtly rural and agrarian names and farmer-oriented policy platforms that were thought to be retarding their expansion. Although some of the newly rebranded parties achieved a short-lived electoral spike, over the long term they tended to settle back to the same approximate share of the vote that they had occupied in

[10] C.B. MacPherson, *Democracy in Alberta: Social Credit and the Party System* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953), 226.

the mid-1950s. This in itself was a remarkable achievement given the drastic decline in the voting power of primary producer interests across most of the industrialised western world from the early 1960s onwards.

In light of this comparative international analysis, the strategic course charted by the Victorian Country-National Party over its history would seem to be far less unorthodox and unconventional than it has traditionally appeared when viewed purely within the narrow context of Australian political history. If anything, the Victorian movement has arguably been the single most typical agrarian party in Australia in the way that it has positioned itself in the political landscape, transacted with other parties in parliament, and sustained its operations as a rank-and-file organisation. The 'wing-party' coalitionist model that was entrenched as the almost unquestioned default mode of operation of its sister parties around Australia from the 1920s onwards – although with some notable periods of disruption in both Western Australia and Queensland that are beyond the scope of this thesis – would appear to be far more out of step with the strategic direction pursued by most prominent agrarian parties across the world. This discovery sheds new light on the nature of the Victorian Country-National Party as an antipodean manifestation of the wider international agrarian movement and undermines the assumption that Australian agrarianism would inevitably and instinctively gravitate towards a virtually permanent alliance with the liberal-conservative forces of city capital.

Historians and political commentators have seldom looked favourably on the contributions of the Country-National Party to public administration and the practice of democracy in the state of Victoria over the past century – perhaps with some justification. At even the apogee of its electoral success in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the party could scarcely attract half or even one-third of the number of primary votes of either of its two principal rivals and yet it

held a monopoly on ministerial power in the Victorian Parliament. Its critics down through the decades have lamented the party's narrow sectionalism and rural parochialism, its ruthless, hardnosed subterranean bargaining and blatant political horse-trading, and its inflexible social and cultural conservativism. The entrenched system of structural gender segregation that the party maintained for many decades, as well as the idealised family-farm-oriented vision of the rural idyll that it promulgated, reinforced an inherently masculinist model of gender relations that long excluded women from positions of power and authority in the public sphere of rural communities. However, as observed by B.D. Graham, the great historian of the rise of the Australian political agrarianism,

> these failings, for all their importance, should be weighed against the fact that, through the early Country Parties, about one-sixth of the Australian people were brought back into a political system from which they had felt excluded. Quite simply, the Country Parties survived because they were needed.[11]

In Victoria, at least, the party has succeeded for ten decades in convincing sufficient numbers of rural and regional voters that it is still needed in the state and federal parliaments. How much longer it will continue to be able to do so remains to be seen.

[11] B.D. Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1966), 296.

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