

## BOOK REVIEW

*Arthur Calwell: Transforming Australia through Immigration*

Authors: James Franklin and Gerry O Nolan

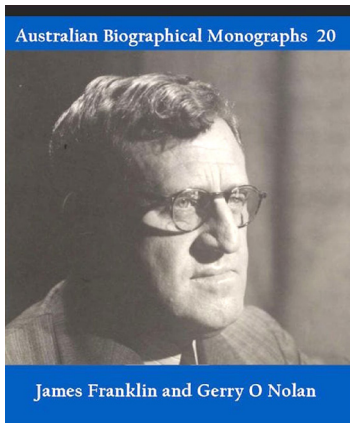
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Reviewed by Michael Costigan \*



### ARTHUR CALWELL

This compact but all-embracing life of Arthur Augustus Calwell (1896–1973) is a timely inclusion, the 20<sup>th</sup>, in Connor Court’s Australian Biographical Series. Nine of Australia’s Prime Ministers and several other political figures have so far been the subjects of monographies in the (now) Queensland-based publisher’s collection.

Arthur Calwell, Leader of the Opposition for six of his thirty-two years as a member of the Commonwealth Parliament, failed by only a few hundred votes in 1961 to become a Prime Minister himself. Nevertheless his achievements as Australia’s first Immigration Minister (1945–49) can be said to have surpassed the productive record of most if not all of those who have held higher office.

Calwell implemented his own “populate or perish” philosophy through the immigration plan he first devised, then introduced with Prime Minister Ben Chifley’s blessing and in due time left to his and Chifley’s successors to carry on. As the historian Geoffrey Blainey has been quoted as reminding us, Calwell can be credited with bringing far more newcomers to Australia than Prime Ministers and other Immigration Ministers of varying political persuasions did.

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\* Michael Costigan was Associate Editor (as a priest) of *The Advocate* (Melbourne, 1961–69). After retirement in 2005, he was appointed an Adjunct Professor of the Australian Catholic University.

In spite of this, Calwell is still remembered chiefly by some as the cartoonist John Frith's "Cranky Cockatoo" character shrieking "Curse the press!" because of his wartime censorship of newspapers and other publications in his accompanying function as Minister for Information, once insultingly called the Australian Goebbels. He was under fire too for efforts to expel coloured refugees.

A reason why he was and may still be unfavourably recalled by others was his persistent defence of the controversial White Australia policy. Calwell sometimes used excessively vehement language in support of his view, but cannot be fairly accused of harbouring a racist attitude. There was no racism in the wish and hope he once expressed, that discrimination against Aboriginal Australians, many of them homeless, would end and they would receive justice. Meanwhile, he lived to see the beginnings of the abandonment of the White Australia policy at Government level. If still living he could have found reason to wonder how many supporters the waning policy still has among those who voted No in the recent Voice referendum.

Thoroughly and competently written by its subject's two experienced researchers, this new and overdue biography neglects nothing major in its coverage of aspects and phases of a busy life, with attention to successes, talents, setbacks, relationships, family, rivalries, tragedies, evolving motivations and occasional contradictions. The authors make good use of quotations from the eloquent and learned major speeches Calwell delivered, usually in Parliament, over the years. Some were prepared in cooperation with the inimitable speechwriter for Labor Party celebrities, the late Graham Freudenberg. Many of them included the kind of witty and memorable quips and politically designed thrusts for which Calwell was famous or in certain cases notorious. He is quoted as saying what could be applied to some of his well-known duels: "Half the problems that I have encountered for myself I have created for myself."

Calwell was approaching his mid-40s when he entered Parliament in 1940. He had already, from his late teenage years, made his mark as a leading figure in the Victorian ALP. His patience was rewarded by, as long expected, his succeeding the legendary Labor member for the Melbourne electorate, Dr William Maloney, the "Little Doctor". Maloney had just died at 86 after creating a record by remaining a never promoted backbencher for all of his thirty-six years in the lower House. Meanwhile, Calwell during the 1930s had been helping the Opposition Leader and future Prime Minister, John Curtin, to diminish the power of the separatist NSW Labor leader and Premier Jack Lang. For a few years towards the end of the 1940s Calwell and

an ageing Lang were to be fellow members of the House of Representatives. He also delighted in a link with the opening of the National Parliament in 1901 through the presence in the Chamber of one of its most famous survivors, William Morris (Billy) Hughes, acting for a period as the Minister for the Navy in the Liberal Party Government.

The relationship between Catholicism in Calwell's life and his belief in Socialism is incisively handled by Professor Franklin and his researcher colleague Gerry O Nolan. In their view much depended on the form of Socialism that won Calwell's loyalty. If it aimed to abolish private property without qualification, that would have made reconciliation with the Labor man's Catholic orthodoxy a problem. It is more likely that continuing research will confirm that what he most sincerely wanted was a fair and just sharing of the earth's resources. In that, he would have been close to the Scriptures and the social justice teaching of all the Popes from Leo XIII to Francis, as well as the Second Vatican Council, in which he had a keen interest. Whatever his heartfelt views were about private property, there is no doubting that his biggest target was always unrestrained monopoly capitalism. Essential to his thinking was the importance of the separation of Church and State.

As a devout Catholic, Calwell had to face the accusation by conservative Catholics that his refusal to move from the ALP to the DLP after the Party's split in 1954 was a "betrayal". It did alienate him from some old friends but did not change his love for Archbishop Mannix, although he was deeply hurt by Mannix's disgraceful public refusal to appear on speaking platforms in the presence of ALP politicians who had chosen to "stay in and fight". Calwell's presence by the Archbishop's deathbed, preceded not long before by the pair having a personal meeting, was indicative of his openness to reconciliation with adversaries, although the sad exception was B.A. (Bob) Santamaria, whose attempt to offer him sympathy after the tragic death of his 11-year-old son was rebuffed.

Calwell derived much satisfaction from the highest level papal knighthood awarded to him in 1963. In correspondence between him and Monsignor Montini, the future Pope Paul VI, there was a reference to "his humble efforts in the cause of distressed humanity". The testimonial accompanying the knighthood mentioned not only his work for migrants but also spoke of "the signal service you have rendered to the well-being of the Church and the advancement of Catholic affairs". It was a strong rejection of the criticisms directed at him by some fellow Catholics. One example of an episode when his behaviour was Christian in the very best way was the forgiveness and

support he offered to his would-be 1966 assassin, Peter Kocan, helping him to overcome his mental deficiency and to become a widely esteemed Australian poet.

This book complements very satisfactorily the main biographies of Calwell, published a good number of years ago and too few in number: *I am Bound to be True*, the excellent biography by his daughter Mary Elizabeth Calwell, 2012; *Calwell, a Personal and Political Biography* by Colm Kiernan, 1978; and Calwell's autobiography *Be Just and Fear Not*, 1972.

In this review I have spoken well of Arthur Calwell, without ignoring his faults altogether. I should reveal that I had a friendly rapport with him in the last half-dozen years of his life after interviewing him in his office in Canberra's old Parliament House for the Melbourne Catholic *Advocate* (16 February 1967). The interview took place on his last day as Leader of the Opposition before reluctantly handing over to one of his foes, Gough Whitlam. My knowledge about and interest in him grew from what I learned when his former longtime and profoundly loyal personal secretary, Joan O'Donnell, became a working colleague and friend of mine in the Commonwealth public service. She was there with me at the time of his State Funeral and burial, which she helped the Government and family to organise in July 1973. I attended both and saw something of the reactions of a grieving friend and admirer of Calwell, Robert Menzies, remaining in his car, and a less distraught Whitlam, standing emotionless by the graveside.