

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



B.A. Santamaria

1915-1998

Political Activist

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 6 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

Australian Biography: B.A. Santamaria

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SYNOPSIS

Bartholomew Augustine (Bob) Santamaria—political activist, ardent anti-communist, committed anti-feminist and devout Catholic—had one of the most controversial careers of 20th century Australia. While his intelligence and leadership always inspired enormous loyalty in his followers and admirers, he was condemned by his enemies as Machiavellian, destructive, even evil.

The first in a two-part **Australian Biography** special looks at the fascinating political career of someone whose commitment to the Church was the foundation of his involvement in politics. His passionate anti-communism and the strategies he adopted in leading a grassroots anti-communist organisation, known as The Movement, led to the formation of the Democratic Labor Party, which is credited with keeping the Australian Labor Party from power for two decades. On the one hand, this earned him the profound respect of those who welcomed on to the Australian scene such a brilliant anti-left strategist, but on the other, it incurred the hatred of some of his oldest allies.

This is a rivetting interview with an articulate and passionate intellectual. In it, Santamaria explains the motivations behind his dramatic life and provides insight into how it felt to be one of the most reviled yet intriguing figures in Australian politics.

The second part of this remarkable **Australian Biography** special looks beyond the political facade of Santamaria and seeks the personal side. What sort of father was the founder of the socially conservative National Civic Council? How did he apply his masculinist views of the family to his own life? What did this opponent of the women's liberation movement really think of women?

This in-depth interview, the last recorded before his death, reveals a personal side of Santamaria rarely seen even by those close to him. He talks intimately about religion, family, society, and his view of his own place in it.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

B. A. Santamaria is perhaps most known for his steadfast involvement in opposing the influence of communism in Australia. He spent many years organising union support against communist and 'hard-left' elements in Australian politics.

Throughout the 1930s and 40s, communistic ideas gained increasing support within the trade union movement. The Great Depression brought enormous suffering to workers, to which neither of the major political parties was responsive. In those years, the trade unions were considerably strong collectives, with enough clout to bring governments and businesses to the negotiating table.

There was also an official Communist Party in Australia at the time. In 1945, party membership was over 16,000 and comprised of a very disparate membership, including unionists, activists, students and workers.

In April 1950, then Prime Minister Robert Menzies introduced into Parliament one of the most controversial pieces of legislation in Australia's history—the Communist Party Dissolution Bill. As the name suggests, the main provisions of this bill made the Communist Party, and associated organisations, unlawful and dissolved them. People who were party members were to be 'declared'. This prevented them from employment in the public service, holding office in a trade union or working in certain industries.

While the legislation was passed, the High Court ruled it constitutionally invalid. The Court held that Parliament was acting outside its powers. The constitutional powers being used were the 'defence powers', enabling the federal government to make laws for the country's defence. Menzies took the matter to the public through a referendum. Again, though, he was unsuccessful.

During this same time, the Korean War broke out, drawing in China, the Soviet Union and the United States of America. While this was only in the early stages of the Cold War, Korea cemented the tone of a more ideological war that would last for decades. Communism was perceived as a real threat to Western security, both internal and external. The US Administration introduced its own internal program to eliminate communist or 'un-American' influences. Joseph McCarthy, a US politician, led a vigorous 'witch-hunt' to identify communist supporters.

In Australia, moves against the Communist Party continued in spite of the High Court ruling. People such as Santamaria and Daniel Mannix organised opposition to communism through the 'industrial groups'. They mainly targeted the unions and more left-wing elements of the Australian Labor Party (ALP). Suspicions in Australia grew when a Soviet diplomat, Vladimir Petrov, defected and suggested possible espionage in Australia by the KGB.

Discussion questions

- How did Santamaria organise opposition to communism?
- Why might communist ideas have appealed to workers in the 1930s and 40s?
- Do you think it is ever desirable to ban political parties in a democracy?
- What were the perceptions of communism then? How real were they?
- How is the issue of 'terrorism' since 2001 similar to that of communism in the 1950s?

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

The Church

Santamaria had a very close and interesting working relationship with Archbishop Daniel Mannix. The Archbishop was known for speaking out against a number of important political issues at the time, including conscription and communism. He also developed a strong role for the Catholic Church in social justice issues.

Mannix brought Santamaria on to help develop this precise role for the Church, particularly in developing the networks to effect the Church's ambitions. This network of people became known as 'The Movement'. In its early stages, The Movement was concerned with specific social justice issues, such as those affecting rural areas. However, by the early 1940s, its agenda focused on combating communism in the unions.

In order to do this, Santamaria relied on parish networks to get their message out and recruit membership to the cause. In particular, they could target parish members who were trade workers and organise them into 'industrial groups'. As he says, '... [we] had the normal structure of the parishes to act as the foundation stone on which to gradually build up [our] forces'.

This raises important questions about the role of religion as a social

institution. Like all institutions, religious organisations have a chosen structure, set of values and interests. At the same time, they are spiritual institutions that attract people on the basis of spiritual belief. These two aspects of religion—the social and the spiritual—often come into conflict. Indeed, the history of many religions (and the stories within their texts), deal with conflict between the social and spiritual manifestations of a faith.

Perhaps this is one reason why religions have such rich and fascinating histories.

Discussion questions

- How would you describe Santamaria's religious outlook? For him, what is most important about religion?
- According to Santamaria, why was religion the best avenue for organising anti-communist sentiments?
- What do you understand by the spiritual and social aspects of religion? Give some examples of these differences.
- Do you think it was appropriate for the Church to be involved in quite potent political issues?

Family

Family is obviously quite important for B.A. Santamaria; just as important, he says, as land. Its importance extends beyond his personal life, becoming a core part of his vision of society.

For Santamaria, family is not just about personal relationships, but a vital economic unit or institution within society. This unit has cashflow, income, members with different needs and workers—it is a microcosm of what we normally consider an economy. It is a system operating with a set of rules designed to sustain and produce. When we consider the family in this light, it becomes much more of a social or public institution, and less a private one. Traditionally, the family was seen as a personal space quite detached from the social.

In the interview, Santamaria explains his idea about the roles of people in a family. For him, there are ideally set out roles for the husband and wife. The husband ensures income to the family by participating in a public world, while the wife maintains the domestic or 'private' economy. These are the rules of the family system, or at least Santamaria's idea of it.

A conservative outlook, this view has been challenged over the past 50 years. Feminism is an obvious source of criticism for such views. However, another major problem for this view is the reality of social change. In Australia, the past five decades have witnessed major changes in the workforce, family structures, people's aspirations and the cost of living. For example, in many nuclear families it is necessary for both parents to work full-time in order to secure a steady household income.

Discussion questions

- What are some of the 'rules' in Santamaria's vision of family?
- Do you think his ideas about family reflect the social reality? Why/why not?
- Think about what 'family' means to you. How else can we think about families? What different forms can they take?
- How has Santamaria's view of family been challenged in recent decades?

SOCIAL IDEAS

Communism

Communism is an understanding of society that stems largely from the work of Karl Marx, a 19th century political economist and philosopher.

He is well-known for his analysis of capitalism, especially the way in which economics shape relationships between people in a capitalist society. Generally speaking, he argued that a person's freedom was relative to their relationship to forces of production, or the economy. For example, the economic class to which they belonged.

This analysis of society was continued and developed by others, having a dramatic impact around the world in many different ways. Examples include Cuban communist activists such as Che Gueverra and Fidel Castro, and the French communists who organised the resistance movement against Nazi occupiers.

The most notable example of a communist state was Russia, where a centuries-ruling monarchy was overthrown and replaced by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The Soviet Union was commonly identified as the hostile counterpart to democracy, a definite trait of Russia under Premier Josef Stalin. However, its greatest threat was economic, militaristic and ideological—all of which were significant aspects of the Cold War.

Communism remains a significant tool for analysing society. Its impact on social justice and the development of social ideas cannot be undervalued.

Discussion questions

- What are some features of communism? List five and compare with others in your class.
- Where have you heard about communism? What images do you associate with it?
- What is capitalism? How does it differ from communism?
- What were some of the sources of conflict in the Cold War?
- Class difference is an important focus of communist and socialist thought. What do you understand by 'class'? Do you think we live in a society with class differences?
- What reasons does Santamaria give for opposing communism?

Feminism

Another considerable challenge to conservatism in Santamaria's period was feminism. Santamaria was stridently opposed to feminism, and no doubt would have included it in what he regarded as 'a broad cultural crisis'.

Feminism, as a set of ideas that challenge social norms, has a significant history. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) is often referred to as one of the first feminist thinkers. However, feminism is popularly identified with the 1960s and 70s. This is a period when feminist ideas were radically developed and opened up long-accepted social practices for scrutiny. Social institutions such as the economy, the family, politics, the legal system and art were shown to produce and maintain relationships of power based on gender.

Despite the many differences within feminist thought, all variants explode certain social myths. One of these is the notion that a person's sex or gender naturally dictates their social role. Another significant myth was the separation between public and private life.

In the past, much was done to contain women in the 'private sphere'—the home. The public sphere of work, business, politics and competition was largely closed to them.

Feminism has been important not just in liberating women, but also challenging the social norms that limit men. After all, a major focus of these ideas is how gender socially makes or 'unmakes' people generally.

The feminist movement has had an amazing global reach. In Australia, the movement is associated with thinkers such as Germaine Greer and Eva Cox, and organisations such as the Women's Electoral Lobby. The movement's achievements have touched many aspects of life including employment, the arts, the family, sexuality and business.

Feminist thought continues to grow and respond to the ongoing changes in society.

Discussion questions

- What does Santamaria say about feminism? Why do you think he would take that position?
- How might Santamaria's views on the family sit with feminism?
- A well-known feminist writer, Catherine MacKinnon, says: 'the personal is political'. What do you think she meant? Give examples of what we see as personal/private and political/public.
- What are some of the achievements of feminism? Think of a current issue concerning gender relations.
- Do you think feminism is still popularly accepted? If so, in what way?

PROPAGANDA

Propaganda is defined as organised propagation of a doctrine by use of publicity and selected information. There are two key aspects of propaganda:

- it contains a political message
- the message is conveyed through very limited or carefully selected items of information.

Propaganda also tends towards the sensational and is driven by simple but potent phrases, images and music. One of its earliest uses was during the First World War, both to rally support on the homefront, and to disillusion enemy troops. The most elaborate use of propaganda was in Nazi Germany.

The program contains two show-reels from the Democratic Labor Party. Both are warning of the threat of communism from Asia. Discuss the questions below in relation to these two items.

Discussion questions

- What do the show-reels suggest about communism?
- Are the show-reels propaganda? Why, or why not?
- What is the difference between propaganda and political information, such as pre-election posters?
- Can you think of any recent examples of items that could be considered propaganda?

ACTIVITIES

1. Diary entry Imagine you are in one of the following situations and write a diary entry. Mention how you feel, what is going on around you, and how that is affecting you and those around you.

- a worker on strike during the Great Depression
- a member of the Communist Party during Menzies' time as Prime Minister.

2. Research topic A high-profile political activist, Santamaria witnessed some important moments in history. Select one of the following events or issues and write a brief summary of what happened, the long-term effects and why you think the event was significant.

- McCarthyism in the USA
- the Petrov Affair
- Australia in the Korean War
- the Spanish Civil War

3. Collage Work in groups. Grab two sheets of cardboard. Write 'male' on one sheet, and 'female' on the other. Find clippings from magazines and newspapers that reflect social understandings of male and female. Use these clippings to make a collage for both. Discuss your reasons for selected images as you go along.

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