

From Chris Curtis

Correspondence re David Marr's *Political Animal*

Sent to – but rejected by – *Quarterly Essay*

Dear Sir,

David Marr makes a better attempt than most on the left to get inside the head of supporters of the Democratic Labor Party ("Political Animal: The making of Tony Abbott", Issue 47, 2012), but he does not succeed, and his understanding of the ideological war that Democratic Clubs were engaged in is completely wrong.

He presents the Democratic Clubs and the DLP as Catholic organisations when they were not and reads into them motivations which they did not have while neglecting almost completely one of the main factors that motivated both; viz, the rise of totalitarian communism in the post-war period. In the case of the DLP, different readings of communism had led to the split in the Labor Party, though the DLP developed many Labor policies in a more modern and centrist direction as younger, more radical people joined the party. In the case of the Democratic Clubs, communism was the ideological enemy, but there was also the day-to-day reality of campus violence, exclusively the province of the various extreme left factions in my experience in four years at La Trobe University.

Communism was an ideology every bit as evil as Nazism, Fascism and Japanese Imperialism, which the world had defeated at enormous cost by 1945. In the years following World War Two, communism enslaved hundreds of millions of human beings in Eastern Europe, in China, in South-east Asia and in Cuba. It imprisoned, tortured and murdered millions of people, while cloaking itself in the rhetoric of progress and humanity. It controlled many trade unions in Australia. It is completely unsurprising that men and women in the Australian Labor Party were vehement opponents of communism and that they organised industrial groups to defeat communists in trade unions.

Far from Bob Santamaria being responsible for "splitting the ALP and founding the Democratic Labor Party" (page 8), Dr Evatt was. He launched an attack on the Victorian branch of the Labor Party in 1954, at the very first time in the state's history that there was a long-term majority Labor government in office. That led to the Split and deprived Labor of office in Victoria for the next 27 years. Robert Murray's *The Split*, Gavan Duffy's *Demons and Democrats*, Ross Fitzgerald's *The Pope's Battalions* and Brian Costar's, Peter Love's and Paul Strangio's *The Great Labor Schism* give detailed accounts of the period.

The Democratic Clubs were not affiliated with the DLP and did not require their members to be members or supporters of the DLP, though they shared a philosophical

outlook with that party, but university politics ended up being about something far more basic than policy stances.

David Marr states that Democratic Clubs were "tiny" (page 6) or "small" (page 10), that Tony Abbott "learnt in the Democratic Club how small constituencies can cause big trouble" (page 39), that their membership was "carefully controlled" (page 6), that Democratic Clubs "were controlled from beyond the university gates" (page 12) and that they "infiltrated] rival organisations" (page 6).

None of this is true of the Democratic Club that I belonged to. Anyone could join the La Trobe University Democratic Club and did. It was not a secret society. Its officers were elected by the members of the club. Decisions were made at meetings of the club.

The Democratic Club had strong support on campus. The students' representative council that I was elected to was elected with 41.8 per cent of students voting. Those on the moderate ticket, about half of them members of the Democratic Club, averaged 651 votes. Those on the left ticket averaged 557 votes. Six of the 19 members elected to the SRC were or had been members of the Democratic Club. Those six plus two members of the Moderate Students Alliance and one independent moderate faced off against nine from the left with, in a foreshadowing of Family First's Steve Fielding, an evangelical Christian holding the balance of power. With his support, moderates won positions as president, chairman, secretary and treasurer. I was elected to the public affairs committee with 12 votes, meaning that some on the left must have voted for me too, even though I was a member of not just the Democratic Club but also the DLP. Obviously they did not see me as extreme.

We never infiltrated any other organisation.

David Marr says that Democratic Clubs had an "extreme" position, "as far to the right as the Maoists and Trotskyists on campus were to the left" (page 6), that they planned to make SRC fees "voluntary" (page 15) and that "they were accused of rough-house tactics" (page 6). He lists the concerns of Bob Santamaria as "the Pill, homosexuality, rampant materialism, married women in the workforce, environmentalists, drugs, abortion, anarchy on campuses, economic rationalism, dissident theologians, divorce without proof of guilt and the cult of the moral autonomy of the individual" (page 11), as if his concerns must by osmosis have been the concerns of Democratic Clubs.

In my four years at La Trobe University, the Democratic Club never supported voluntary student unionism, the idea being as silly as voluntary municipal councils. It never published a word on homosexuality or abortion and never had a policy on either (though I, as a DLP candidate in the 1973 state election, supported the legalisation of homosexuality). It had no policy on gay marriage, though I imagine if anyone had invented such an idea in that era, it would have been regarded as being as silly as carnivorous vegetarianism. It never had policies on the Pill, rampant materialism, married women in the workforce, drugs, abortion, economic rationalism, dissident theologians, divorce without proof of guilt or the cult of the moral autonomy of the

individual. It did not discuss environmentalists, but it did have policies on the environment, social welfare, poverty, employee shareholding, foreign aid and the role of the university, some of which are to the left of the modern ALP:

"To us monopoly capitalism and state capitalism are each as evil as the other...

"Our program is one of voluntary collectivism...

"Associated with this principle of voluntary collectivism is that of decentralism – a policy objective now increasingly recognized as pressingly urgent as the human, social and ecological cost of centralisation of population, industry and power becomes daily more evident...

"The ethical ideal is that man should keep of his produce sufficient for his own needs and should give of the surplus to those unable to meet their own needs..." (The Democratic Club Aims and Ideals, Orientation Week 1972)

The Democratic Club would have preferred to debate ideas, but its main activity had to be to support scholarship, democracy and civilisation against violence. In fact, all the violence on campus – the damage to property, the blockades, the bashing – was the work of extremists on the left. This extremism is what led to the moderate majority SRC being elected in 1972. While universities had a reputation for violence, the truth is that the majority of students had no time for violent extremists, whose modus operandi was the mass meeting, not the democratic electoral structures.

David Marr is willing to believe assertions made against Tony Abbott by his political opponents (page 16). I do not and cannot know if they are true, but my experience of the era was that prominent students on the left had no compunction about telling bare-faced lies if it suited them. This is hardly surprising: if you think bashing people is acceptable, what is a little lying?

The Democratic Clubs were hardly extreme. Of those La Trobe University Democratic Club members whose ultimate political destination I am aware of, four ended up in the ALP and one in the Australian Democrats.

David Marr misses the salient facts in regard to the DLP. He says, "No young man of ambition would bother with the DLP" (page 30) in reference to Tony Abbott's political decision after leaving the seminary (1984 or later). The DLP disbanded in 1978, though a few dissident members created a new DLP, but only in Victoria. There was no DLP for Tony Abbott to join in the 1980s.

The DLP certainly believed that Sir John Kerr acted constitutionally in 1975, but I know of no one in the party ever thinking of Kerr with the "reverence" (page 38) that David Marr says the DLP had for him.

David Marr says Tony Abbott would be the "the first DLP prime minister of Australia" as a prelude to mentioning his "Catholic values" (page 91). The majority of DLP voters were probably Catholics, but the DLP was not a Catholic party. Its values were Labor values. Fred Riley, president of the Victorian branch, was an atheist socialist.

The first DLP prime minister was Kevin Rudd, though some more traditional Labor members who went with the DLP at the Split might give the honour to John Christian Watson. Kevin Rudd had the best understanding of Australia's geo-political position of any prime minister. He had a nuanced approach to China, wary of its authoritarian political structure but seeking to integrate it into the community of nations. He gave pensioners a much-needed increase. He had a real commitment to education (though that is not an endorsement of nonsense like performance bonuses for teachers, another example of the extent to which right wing ideas that the DLP would not have had a bar of have infiltrated the Labor Party).

Tony Abbott's assertion that "inside the Liberal Party the DLP was alive and well" (page 55) is absurd. The DLP senators would not have simply opposed Work Choices as Tony Abbott did in cabinet for social justice reasons (page 64). They would also have opposed the Howard government's earlier Workplace Relations Act as Tony Abbott did not.

They would also have opposed Tony Abbott's "one big idea in Health", "for the Commonwealth to take control of all the nation's hospitals" (page 59), and his paid parental leave scheme to give parents up to \$75,000 for staying home for six months (page 71).

The DLP's policies on welfare, the environment, industrial relations, foreign affairs, land rights and even education are today more to be found inside the ALP than the Liberal Party. It should be noted that the Liberal Party's SES funding scheme gives more money to high-fee private schools that take well-off students from poor areas than it does to low-fee private schools that take poor students from well-off areas. This scheme is so bad for private schools that almost half of them have to be compensated for its inadequacies. The compensation puts them on Labor's more generous education resources index. Those few people in the country who have actually understood the Gonski report fervently hope that the government will not accept its recommendation to continue the Howard government's SES funding model but will instead return to the ERI model, itself more in line with DLP thinking.

The only significant area in which the Liberals can claim to be closer to the DLP is on defence, and that is only since the demise of Kevin Rudd.

David Marr says that "Values Abbott will have his way on some issues because the DLP is also alive and well inside the ALP" (Page 91). This is to position the DLP as a party of moral conservatism, which it was, but to ignore all the other aspects of the DLP. The DLP is alive and well inside the ALP because of Labor's continued commitment to social justice. I argue that Victoria is the jewel in Labor's crown (with the Kennett government an annoying destructive aberration and the Baillieu government an annoying lacklustre aberration which we can hope to be rid of in two years) precisely because the DLP preserved a section of the Labor vote outside the clutches of the Liberal Party for 23 years.

The original DLP was a compassionate party committed to human rights and social justice. It was the first of our parliamentary parties to oppose the White Australia Policy. It advocated land rights for Aborigines, had a Torres Strait Islander candidate for Parliament four decades ago and welcomed refugees into its organisation. It opposed capital punishment, supported equal pay for women, pioneered environmental concern, sought higher welfare payments and a guaranteed annual income, supported the right of unionists to take industrial action and advocated decent treatment for asylum-seekers.

Its environmental objective, "The protection and conservation of our natural environment and the planned use of natural resources in recognition of the close relationship between man and nature and the finite nature of the earth's resources" (The DLP Looks Ahead, 1977) would, with one word different, not be out of place in a Greens' manifesto.

It was at heart a moderate social democratic Labor party. So, while there are some with past DLP connections who have - inexplicably to my mind - moved on to the Liberal Party, there are others, including almost all the former officers of the Victorian Branch with whom I keep in touch, who became either ALP members or ALP supporters after the DLP's disbandment in 1978.

While the current DLP is not in any legal sense the successor of the original DLP, it does have a philosophical affinity with the original party. With that in mind, we ought to note that Senator John Madigan voted with the Greens against the government and the opposition on asylum seekers and with the Greens against the government and the opposition on the government's attack on single mothers, putting him to the left of the modern ALP on some issues, a position the original DLP holds in relation to the current ALP. The DLP remains to the left on the class-based left-right continuum of the original labour movement, though not on the identity-based left-right continuum of today.

While the thought may dismay those on both sides, had Tony Abbott the good fortune to have been a Victorian and thus president of the Democratic Club at La Trobe University in the early 1970s rather than a New South Welshman and thus president of the Democratic Club at Sydney University in the mid 1970s, he could very well have ended up as an official in a DLP union who became an ALP member when those unions re-affiliated in 1986.

The reality is usually more complicated than the stereotypes.

Yours sincerely,

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