

Australian Biographical Monographs

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# Arthur Calwell

TRANSFORMING AUSTRALIA THROUGH IMMIGRATION

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Connor Court Publishing

## Series overview

Connor Court's *Australian Biographical Series* on past leading Australian political leaders and other important figures seeks to provide an overview for those who are unfamiliar with the subject and to highlight the person's particular importance, controversies, and contributions to Australia's progress.

The monographs are scholarly rather than academic in focus, placing emphasis on a clear narrative, but with careful attention to referencing to ensure views expressed are supported by appropriate sources and evidence.

The Series was initiated because of the decline in the study of Australian history at our schools and universities. Consequently, there has been a lack of knowledge or, even worse, distorted views, of some of Australia's leading historical figures who deserve to be remembered, better understood for their achievements, and, as each volume also highlights, their flaws.

It has been nearly fifty years since there has been a biography of Arthur Calwell, Labor federal member from 1940-1972, Minister for Immigration and later leader of the Opposition. His massive immigration program in the immediate postwar period began the transformation of Australia to a multicultural nation. Calwell served under the best (Chifley) and possibly the most difficult (Evatt) of the Labor leaders, remained loyal to the Labor cause when it split in the mid 1950s when its future looked bleak. Yet, after becoming leader in 1960 he almost defeated then Prime Minister Menzies at the 1961 election and

did much to restore Labor's faith in itself as well as to renew policy for the nation. However, two subsequent election defeats in 1963 and 1966 meant Calwell had to make way for the younger Gough Whitlam in 1967. He retired at the 1972 election which saw Labor finally back in office. So, this is a story of conviction, belief and for Labor federal members, during the long period of 23 years in the political wilderness, of immense resilience – personally as well as politically.

This new monograph, researched by Professor James Franklin with Gerry O Nolan not only refreshes our memory about Arthur Calwell, the long serving politician, but also Calwell the man, including his Catholic religious beliefs which figured far more prominently in public life and personal considerations than for most politicians today.

James Franklin's previous books on Australian history are *Corrupting the Youth: A History of Philosophy in Australia*, *The Real Archbishop Mannix*, with Gerry O Nolan, and *Catholic Thought and Catholic Action: Scenes from Australian Catholic Life*. He is Honorary Professor at the University of New South Wales, Sydney and editor of the *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society*.

■ Scott Prasser

## Introduction

On 7 December 1947, Arthur Calwell, Australia's first Minister for Immigration, stood at the dockside in Port Melbourne to meet *HMAS Kanimbla*. The ship brought some 850 refugees from the Baltic states. They were the first shipment of over 170,000 Displaced Persons, Eastern European refugees from the Red Army who had been languishing in camps for years. These "New Australians", as Calwell termed them, were followed by millions of other non-English-speakers in the decades ahead, transforming Australia from "a dull inbred country of predominantly British stock" (Calwell's words)<sup>1</sup> to the dynamic multicultural nation of today.

The arrival of the *Kanimbla* was the culmination of an extraordinary planning effort after a period of extreme frustration, during which Calwell's many efforts to find immigrants to satisfy Australia's new "Populate or perish" policy had come to nothing. He signed an agreement only on 21 July 1947 with the International Refugee Organisation (IRO). The first refugees were selected very quickly by Australian agents in Germany and were got through the ravaged German transport system for embarkation at Bremerhaven on 30 October. They were hand-picked to head off a feared xenophobic reaction in Australia, which was unused to significant numbers of non-English-speaking immigrants. As Calwell later wrote in his autobiography,

We would bring one shipload with nobody under fifteen and nobody over thirty-five, all of whom had to be single. ... Many were red-headed and blue-eyed. There was also a number of natural platinum blondes of both sexes. The men were handsome and the women beautiful. It was not hard to sell immigration to the Australian people once the press published photographs of that group.<sup>2</sup>

Photographed next to Calwell, they looked better still. The publicity campaign was an unqualified success, paving the way for huge numbers of Eastern and Southern European and later Asian immigrants.

Arthur Calwell's reputation has suffered from being seen from the future looking back. Most recollections of him as a public figure date from the 1960s, when he was an aged and unsuccessful leader of the Federal opposition. Just failing to win the 1961 election despite gaining some 50.5% of the two-party-preferred vote, his chances waned as he vainly fought the popularity of the Menzies-Holt government and its Vietnam commitment and defended the outmoded White Australia Policy. The 1950s were a difficult time for him too, when he was a loyal deputy Labor leader to the barely sane Dr Evatt and embroiled in the agonies of the Labor Split of 1954-5. Memories of those hard times have overshadowed his achievements of the 1940s and his leading role in the Curtin and Chifley governments, especially as Minister for Immigration.

Growing up before World War I in crowded inner-city Melbourne, with its cramped cottages built on sixteen-foot frontages, the young Calwell was surrounded by poverty and misery, and, like many others, committed

himself to Labor politics to relieve it – and often to the more socialist of Labor policies, though he was always staunchly anti-Communist. In a political career of over fifty years, he never wavered in support for the party and in unrelenting work on its behalf. As he expressed clearly in his 1963 manifesto, *Labor's Role in Modern Society*, he was supremely confident that he knew what was good for the average Australian, he knew where he was going and where he wanted himself and the Labor Party to go.

He was equally committed to his Catholic faith – indeed, he was the most flamboyantly Catholic of all major Australian political leaders. Archbishop Mannix was both hero and mentor, for the fifty years from the day Calwell saw the new coadjutor Archbishop arrive at Spencer Street Station, to the day he wept at his deathbed – despite serious differences during the Split of the 1950s. He was created a papal knight in 1964 for his services to immigration.

Support for Ireland was another early enthusiasm, and like his other interests, pursued with great thoroughness. Calwell learned Irish Gaelic and addressed part of the great Richmond Racecourse meeting of 1917 in Gaelic. In 1918 he was arrested and interrogated by security forces for his role in the Young Ireland Society, which was suspected of sympathy with Sinn Fein. His admiration for Ireland implied a lower degree of enthusiasm than most Australians felt for the British Empire and the domination of Australian public life by Protestants of British ancestry and conservative opinions. The immigration program gave him the opportunity to make changes to that – in the longer term, massive changes.

A rather lanky, bespectacled and beak-nosed man, with a thatch of hair in which there was a glint of red, Calwell had an extraordinarily precise vocabulary and the gift for a telling and often cutting phrase. The language was backed by strong emotion. While some saw him as a great hater, according to his own account:

I've always been a rather a volatile character in Australian politics. I blame all that on to my grandmothers. When the Welsh blood cooled down, the Irish blood warmed up and so I was never out of strife. But I have no regrets. I fought the good fight according to my own views, and I took some pretty heavy defeats. I have no regrets about those defeats, and I have no bitterness to anybody.<sup>3</sup>

The times after 1950 were unkind to him and he saw little but defeats, some the fault of others and some not. But Australia at the time of his death and later was a very different country from the one it would have been without his success with immigration in the 1940s.