

## CHAPTER 3

### Campaign and Counter-Campaign

By early March it was clear that other hands were more than willing to carry forward the 'recognition of God' campaign. At a special meeting on 1 March the New South Wales Council of Churches, which represented the major Protestant churches and the Church of England, resolved to embark upon a campaign to obtain signatures for the following petition to the coming Federal Convention:

1. That in the preamble of the Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth it be recognised that God is the Supreme Ruler of the world, and the ultimate source of all law and authority in nations.
2. That there also be embodied in the said Constitution, or in the standing orders of the Federal Parliament, a provision that each daily session of the Upper and Lower Houses of the Federal Parliament be opened with a prayer by the President and Speaker, or by a chaplain.
3. That the Governor-General be empowered to appoint days of national thanksgiving and humiliation.

Petition blanks were to be sent to ministers of religion throughout New South Wales. These forms were to be accompanied by circulars from the heads of various denominations, inviting the help of clergy and others in obtaining signatures. The heads of churches in other colonies were to be invited to co-operate by promoting similar petitions.<sup>1</sup>

The Council of Churches' campaign had taken shape during precisely that time in which all its members, except the Church of England, were busy trying to prevent Moran's election to the Convention. It had indeed been at the Council's January meeting that the question of mounting some sort of 'recognition' campaign was first considered. At a special 10 February meeting of the Council, the matter was further discussed and it was resolved:

That this Council considers it of utmost importance that in the Constitution for federated Australia there should be a recognition of God as the Supreme Ruler, and that provision be made for such acts of common worship as should be deemed suitable for a legislative body.

A subcommittee was also formed to inquire into the practice in the United States and Canada and to suggest an appropriate course of action. This subcommittee presumably composed the text of the petition cited above, and formulated the proposal to send the petition blanks to ministers of religion, and to heads of denominations in other colonies.<sup>2</sup>

In organizational terms, the Council of Churches' plan of campaign was in one way fairly effective. It took advantage of the fact that the point at which the minister of religion would in practice mainly be forced to solicit signatures, namely during or at the close of religious worship, was precisely the point at which the most likely potential signatories, namely the members of his church, would be least inclined to demur at signing. However the weakness of such a plan lay paradoxically in the very feature that gave it strength, for the fact that it was a system of signature collecting which depended on a mild but real form of situational duress weakened its validity as an indicator of electoral feeling. While such a system could and did produce tens of thousands of signatories, for instance in Victoria on the question of scripture in state schools, its political effectiveness was likely to vary inversely with the awareness of politicians as to how it actually worked. Such numerically massive petitions would always carry some sort of political weight, and at times would reflect a genuine consensus. The point however is rather that, in general, their political persuasiveness would not be as great as their sheer numerical strength would suggest.

In certain respects, the earlier campaign to 'keep out the Cardinal' was now of assistance to the Council of Churches. It had considerably heightened both lay and clerical awareness of and interest in the federal question. It obviously strengthened the political morale of many Protestant clergy. The Convention elections, triumphantly declared a writer in the *Presbyterian and Australian Witness* on 26 March, had given a much needed lesson to the newspapers. The result had shown that the Protestant churches were 'not effete and

destitute of influence'. However, in certain respects the anti-Moran campaign now was a source of considerable embarrassment. Moran, after all, had himself been a strong supporter of 'recognition'. It was all very well to say, as did E. T. Dunstan, that 'If a Constitution was to be built up, it should be free from priestly control on the one hand, and a God dishonouring secularism on the other.'<sup>3</sup> Yet such a distinction, while in itself coherent, was bound in the hurly-burly of colonial politics to appear to many as artificial. In any event, energetic Protestant clerical involvement in and since the 1894 New South Wales election, especially over the local option issue,<sup>4</sup> would certainly have made Dunstan's avowal appear to many secularists, and to many Catholics, as less than honest. 'The combined Protestant churches', mocked a writer in the *Catholic Press*, 'are now, without the slightest sense of humour, working to have the Creator recognised in the Federal Constitution as the source of all authority and all law.' The *Bulletin*, he added with satisfaction, 'will scarcely help them in this with the same enthusiasm and zeal with which it supported their crusade against the Cardinal.'<sup>5</sup>

Nor indeed were all non-Catholic churchmen convinced of the propriety of the 'recognition' campaign. Some, such as the Unitarian George Walters, spoke strongly in support of strict Church-State separation: 'The majority of so-called Protestant churchmen', he wrote to the *Daily Telegraph* on 17 March,

are exultant because they have 'kept out the Cardinal' from the Federal Convention; but they are themselves playing the very game to which they have made such loud and effective objection... There is a movement on foot to secure what is called 'the recognition of God' by some formal words in the new Constitution. What is this but the intrusion of theology into the domain of politics?

The Seventh Day Adventist *Bible Echo* was even more trenchant. 'The friends of religious legislation', it declared on 29 March, 'are showing great activity at the present time. A new nation is to be formed, and they desire to capture, and, we are sorry to say, corrupt and misdirect it at the outset.' By and large however, non-Catholic church leaders willingly fell in with the Council's campaign.

Ironically, the problem facing the New South Wales Council of Churches was structurally similar to Moran's. Having displaced Moran as a central figure in the 'recognition' campaign it had now itself, hopefully in partnership with councils of churches in the other colonies, to secure for the colonial churches, and more broadly for the theistic perspective, a central and reputable place in the new Commonwealth. These councils however would face great obstacles. The *Sydney Morning Herald* earlier had described the 'recognition' proposal at Bathurst as a 'debating society' question;<sup>6</sup> and clerical intervention in politics normally was regarded by politicians as an intrusion, which for practical reasons might need to be suffered, but only rarely was welcome. Federation was practical business, which at a certain level tended also to be patriotism. However, except where participation in the federation movement was an expression of personal piety, it was not a religious matter. Religious remnants in the colonies from the days of establishment, such as proclamations by Governors of days of prayer for rain, were tolerated without discomfort by practical politicians. Although such remnants often were subject to mockery,<sup>7</sup> practical politicians ignored them: such survivals pleased some, and caused no serious inconvenience. Yet while these vestiges might be tolerated, it would be out of place in their 'enlightened' age to seek actually to *introduce* them. This undoctinaire but deeply ingrained secularism was the main obstacle which the councils needed to overcome, or circumvent. Nor were all churchmen, at this point, optimistic. 'We confess', said the *Southern Cross* on 19 March, 'that we are not too sanguine that the new Australian Commonwealth will in any way acknowledge religion. The secular idea has temporarily captured the public mind.' They perhaps would receive a more sympathetic reception from the Convention delegates (such as the New South Wales Presbyterian banker, J. T. Walker) who were not themselves professional politicians, than they would from those who were. Yet in the final analysis it was obvious that if the churches were to have any hope of securing for themselves in the coming federation something like the public status and position they desired, they would need to operate with threats and promises rather than prayer and persuasion.

The councils of churches in Victoria and South Australia responded with enthusiasm to the invitation from the New South Wales Council to participate in the petitioning campaign.<sup>8</sup> In the early days of the first session of the Federal Convention, which was held in Adelaide, 'recognition' petitions poured in. About 14100 signatories came from New South Wales, 16700 from Victoria, and 7000 from South Australia. Two small petitions came from Tasmania, and the Catholic bishop of Adelaide signed a petition on behalf of Roman Catholics in South Australia and the Northern Territory.<sup>9</sup> Even allowing for the situational duress no doubt often present in the way signatures were collected, it was an impressive performance.

However, the recognitionists did not, somewhat to their surprise, have it all their own way in the petitioning field. About 7800 persons signed the following counter-petition:

We, the undersigned adult residents... believing that Religion and the State should be kept entirely separate, that Religious Legislation is subversive of Good Government, contrary to the principles of Sound Religion, and can result only in Religious Persecution, hereby humbly but most earnestly petition your Honourable Body not to insert any Religious Clause or Measure in the Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth which might be taken as a basis for legislation, but that a Declaration be made in the Constituion stating that neither the *Federal Government nor any State Parliament shall make any law respecting religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof*.<sup>10</sup>

No doubt the recognitionists expected opposition, but the *form* it took was unexpected. T. L. Suttor, writing about the Australian colonies of the 1860s and 1870s, has perceptively remarked that secular liberalism, while pervasive, was hard to pin down: 'not Prometheus, but a reputation, a rumour, a breath of wind'.<sup>11</sup> In the 1890s, secularism was clearly evident in many aspects of colonial life. Yet characteristically it was always both more and less than those persons, parties, journals and institutions which manifested it. It was present not so much as a distinct entity with a specific and in principle quantifiable causal weight, but rather as an extensively ramified but harmoniously converging network of impulses, conceptions, tolerances and aversions. However, and this was the surprising point, the opposition to the 'recognition' campaign was in many ways *not* like this. The counter-petitions bore that reliable hallmark of disciplined organization – an identical text.

The group responsible for circulating the counter-petitions, while not specially shrouding its identity, made little effort to draw attention to itself. The counter-organizers were one of the colony's fringe Protestants denominations.

An amusing but perhaps not typical exemplar of emerging Protestant consciousness of the opposition organization was the Victorian Protestant journal the *Southern Cross*. On 26 March it noted,

Somebody in Melbourne, who wisely shrouds his personality in mystery, is, it seems, getting up a secular petition against any recognition of God in public affairs. The petition emerged into light in Maryborough, and the correspondent of the *Age* in that town sent it down for insertion in the columns of the great organ of secularism in Melbourne.

By 9 April the *Southern Cross* had discovered the culprit:

It is curious to learn that this petition, that God and religion may be 'ignored', is largely signed by Seventh Day Adventists. This is a new proof that this remarkable body is made up of cranks; and in the case of cranks – religious or other – nobody can be quite sure at what point, or how suddenly, reason may lapse into bankruptcy.

To their astonishment, recognitionists became aware that the main villain was one of their own kind. The active association of a small fringe religious group with militant Church-State and Religion-State separationism was unusual, although the association of Unitarianism (which generally postulated a sharp distinction between the religious and the political) and separationism does provide a parallel. Yet why did the Adventists take this particular line? What in their eyes was the rationale for their energetic campaign? To answer, it is necessary to say something of the background and character of Australian Seventh Day Adventism.

On the afternoon of 3 January 1875 in Battle Creek, Michigan, U.S.A., a Mrs Ellen Gould White received what she considered to be a divinely inspired vision. Mrs White's writings

then occupied, and still do, a special position in the Seventh Day Adventist movement. In the Adventist view Mrs White, while not quite of the standing of the biblical prophets, stood especially close to God; and to her had been revealed God's plan for mankind during the latter days. The 3 January vision was however in one respect a bother to her. In it she had, she believed, been shown places to which God's word was next to be carried. But when she came to record the vision, she hardly was able to remember any of the places revealed to her. However, there was one that she could recall without difficulty – Australia.<sup>12</sup>

The first Adventist missionaries came to Australasia in 1885. Shortly after, to lead the mission, came A. G. Daniels, the son of a Unionist surgeon who had been killed in the Civil War. He was a convert, who for some years had been personal secretary to Mrs White.<sup>13</sup> In 1897 the Adventists in Australia were little more than a thousand strong. The president of the Australasian Union Conference in that year was the same A. G. Daniels.<sup>14</sup> Mrs White had been living in Australia since 1891.<sup>15</sup> The Adventists' dietary views, and their belief in God, at some broadly identified time, although probably not in the near future, would wind up human history, troubled few people. The former, because of its essential privacy, hurt nobody; the latter was a view often held by Catholics and Protestants. However the Adventists viewpoint on Sunday observance caused much trouble. The main difficulty was not that, like the Jews, they believed in worshipping God on the Saturday. It was rather that, in contrast to the generally quietist colonial Jewry, they were firm believers *also* in freedom to work on Sunday. This latter practice was to a certain kind of Protestant provocative and offensive. Indeed, in both the United States and Australia, 'sabbath desecrating' Adventists had been prosecuted in the civil courts on charges of sacrilege. In Sydney in 1894 some Adventists had been sentenced to a spell in the stocks under a 1677 statute of Charles II.<sup>16</sup>

The Adventists, while broadly identifying with the 'middle class', tended to be low-income earners.<sup>17</sup> Many were craftsmen, teachers, printers, farmers or ran small businesses. The basis for their intransigence on the Sunday question may partly have been economic. In the economically depressed conditions of the 1890s, perhaps two days of 'rest' was more than many thought they comfortably could afford.

By 1897 the Australian Adventists had come seriously to fear that the 'recognition' of God in the federal Constitution would enable the federal parliament to exercise an implied power to legislate for nation-wide Sunday observance. This fear derived partly from their Australian experience, but stemmed more fundamentally from certain experiences of the parent church in the United States. There, arising in part from legal and political difficulties created by Protestants who were scandalized by the Adventist position on Sunday observance, the adventists had become enthusiastic and dedicated proponents of liberty of conscience, and of the strict separation of Church and State.

By the late 1880s in the United States, many church and church-related groups (including, prominently, the National Reform Association, which since its formation in 1863 had agitated vigorously for the insertion of a religious amendment in the Constitution of the United States)<sup>18</sup> were placing considerable pressure on Congress to legislate on such issues as temperance, Sunday observance, and the 'recognition of God' in the United States Constitution. On the temperance issue, petitions to Congress from church-related groups, such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union, were prolific. In 1892 Sunday observance interests harried Congress into tying a Sunday closure provision to its \$5 million grant to the Chicago World Fair. Congress on that occasion had been besieged by petitions from religious groups. In 1894 (twice), 1895 and 1896, 'recognition of God' amendments to the Constitution were introduced in Congress.<sup>19</sup> The Adventists, at first somewhat dismayed, had developed by 1890 what was for a small group an effective counter-strategy. Under the auspices of the National Religious Liberty Association, an organization they set up in 1889,<sup>20</sup> they produced numerous separationist pamphlets, lobbied energetically, and collected a large number of signatures to counter-petitions. In 1890 they secured a quarter of a million signatures to one of their petitions to Congress.<sup>21</sup> Thereafter they remained enthusiastic pamphleteers, lobbyists, and petitioners.

In the Australian setting, similar moves from Women's Christian Temperance Unions, Lord's Day Observance societies, and the councils of churches in the various colonies, evoked among Adventists not only the same fear but eventually the same resort to petitioning, pamphleteering and lobbying. The similarity should not surprise. A number of Australian Adventist leaders, who mostly at this stage were Americans, had participated in the massive 1890 counter-petitioning campaign.<sup>22</sup>

By 1897 the Australian Adventists were effectively placed to organize a vigorous counter-campaign. The ground for such a campaign had, over the previous four years especially, been well prepared. In May 1894, arising out of concern that they would increasingly become subject to legal prosecution for Sunday violation, the Adventists launched a quarterly journal entitled the *Australia* (from 1895 the *Southern*) *Sentinel and Herald of Liberty*. They followed American precedent. Since 1886 the American Adventists, moved by a similar concern, had published a 'religious liberty' journal entitled the *American Sentinel*. The Australian counterpart, according to its title page, was 'set for the defence of Liberty of Conscience, and therefore uncompromisingly opposed to a union of Church and State, either in name or in fact'. The editorial in the first issue declared, with a terseness and conciseness (in a sense an Americanness) that always was one of its characteristics, that

The *Sentinel* is set for the defence of the rights of men. As its name indicates, it is to be a Sentinel guarding these sacred rights, and a Herald of True Liberty. We refer especially to civil liberty and to religious freedom. By 'liberty' we do not mean license; not do we by 'freedom' mean lawlessness.

We advocate that liberty which guarantees to every man the enjoyment and free exercise of his natural rights. We plead for the freedom to worship God, or not to worship him, according to the dictates of conscience.

We are not of those who would detract from the importance of religion or the utility of civil government. We believe that the Church and civil government are both of divine origin. We believe that the Church was established by God for man's spiritual welfare; and that civil government was ordained by the same authority to protect men in the exercise of their rights.

But while we believe that both the Church and the State are ordained of God for the good of man, we also hold that they are ordained for entirely separate lines of work; that each has its particular sphere and that the realm of one is in no sense the realm of the other.

Believing this, we are decidedly opposed to the union of Church and State. We do not mean that we are opposed simply to the union of some particular church with the State. We are opposed to the union of *any* church or *any* combination of churches with the State. And more, we are opposed to anything and everything tending towards a union of religion and the civil power.

We see dangerous movements in this direction. From every quarter we hear appeals from the Church to the State for help. Monster petitions are being sent to the governments of every country for religious legislation. Powerful combinations are formed to speak for the church with authority. And such has been the progress in this line that in some instances the Church has ceased to petition, and now *demand*s! Under these powerful influences the State is beginning to 'bend', and thus the liberties of men are endangered.

Against this whole line of work the *Sentinel* raises the note of warning. With men it has no controversy; but to all principles and measures which imperil the civil and religious liberties of men, it stands uncompromisingly opposed.

The *Sentinel* mostly confined itself to these themes and rarely promoted the more distinctive dietary or eschatological Adventist views. Since 1888 the Adventists had produced another journal, a monthly entitled the *Bible Echo*, for that specifically denominational purpose. The first issue of the *Australian Sentinel* was widely and favourably noticed in the colonial press.<sup>23</sup> By 1897 its quarterly circulation had reached 4000.<sup>24</sup> Two things are evident from this circulation figure and the generally friendly reception by the secular press. First, a sizeable portion of the community must have been in sympathy with the Adventists' position on Church and State. Second, and this is the point more especially to note, the Adventists had established some sort of contact with many of these people.

How could such contacts be turned to good effect? How was the reservoir of community antagonism to clerical political involvement effectively to be tapped? It was precisely at this point that the Adventists were well placed. The normal method whereby Adventists evangelized and distributed much of their literature was by systematic door-to-door visitation. Adventist members each month personally delivered the *Bible Echo* and other Adventist literature to subscribers and to other possibly interested persons.<sup>25</sup> Many copies of the *Sentinel* were also distributed in this way: each quarter, there simply was a further piece of literature for the door-to-door canvassers to deliver.

This means that by 1897 the Adventists not only possessed an extensive network of addresses of persons likely to be in sympathy with them on the Church-State and Religion-State issue, but often had personal contact with such people. The way thus was open for conducting a speedy, extensive and *personal* circulation of counter-petitions. A survey of the areas from which the counter-petitions emanated confirms this view, since these nearly always were areas where the Adventists had congregations, or companies of sabbath-keepers.<sup>26</sup>

The Adventists were limited however by the fact that, owing to the sheer smallness of their organization, large areas of the community remained in which they lacked the necessary pre-existing network of personal contacts. Nevertheless, for the alert politician, that very organizational weakness embodied a message. If such extensive support for the counter-petitions could be raised in a relatively restricted set of areas, what must be the feeling on the issue in the community generally?