Donald James Cameron:
Senator for Victoria, 1938–1962*

Graeme Osborne

As a young man in Melbourne, Don Cameron, replete with red tie, could be seen boating on the Yarra. Sixty when he took his seat in the Senate in 1938, he left reluctantly in 1962, at eighty-four the oldest man in the federal Parliament, compelled by ill health to abandon plans for a fifth term. Once described as a 'mild chap' with an 'engaging character', he was genial, courageous, sometimes prudish, and was respected for his steadfastness and competence, and his focus on issues rather than personalities. Widely read in current affairs, philosophy and the social sciences, especially economics, with an extraordinary gift for involvement and hard work, he entered Parliament with a varied life experience behind him.

He had been a printer, plumber, contractor, prospector, soldier, wharf labourer, carpenter, journalist, editor, seaman, cook, trade union and Labor Party official, and socialist organiser. Overall, he possessed a 'lifelong devotion to the classical teachings of socialism', the ideals of which formed the basis of his political philosophy in the union movement and in the Senate, but which at times led to political ambivalence.[1]

Donald James Cameron was born in North Melbourne (then Hotham), Victoria, on 19 January 1878, the first child of Alexander Cameron (a Glaswegian slater) and Mary Ann, née Nairn. He attended City Road State School and, thereafter, South Melbourne College, leaving at fourteen to begin a printing apprenticeship. In 1919 he recalled spending 'most of his early boyhood days in the Gippsland bush' and being initiated into 'wage-slavery', working for Melbourne plumbers and slaters (one of whom was his father). In 1895 he went prospecting on the Western Australian goldfields. Unsuccessful, he completed his apprenticeship in Coolgardie (then a 'brawling frontier town in the grip of a gold boom') on the *Coolgardie Miner*. There, in 1896, he participated in his first strike, claiming later to have concluded that such actions can result from 'unnecessarily provocative or stupidly incompetent management'. He

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[1]   Victor Courtney, *All I May Tell: a Journalist's Story*. Sydney, Shakespeare Head Press, 1956, p. 50; *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 10 July 1960, p. 57; *Herald* (Melbourne), 20 August 1962, p. 3; *Argus* (Melbourne), 17 August 1951 (supp.), p. 1.

remained in Western Australia, working in a variety of occupations until 1899, when he returned to Melbourne and married New Zealand-born Georgina Eliza Werrin, on 26 April 1899, according to Free Christian Church rites.

Between 1901 and 1902 Cameron was a volunteer in the Boer War with the 5th (Victorian) Mounted Rifles. Wounded, and thereafter carrying a bullet in his thigh, it was, he stated later, the 'turning point' that revealed to him in 'language written in the sufferings and blood of men, women and children, what capitalism … stood for' and led him to lifelong opposition to conscription. During World War I he was a leader in the anti-conscription cause, becoming president of the Western Australian Anti-Conscription League during the Labor Party split. He was a persistent campaigner, often pursued by mobs. One of his sons recalled him coming home one Sunday afternoon 'during the [conscription] campaign, hatless, his clothes torn and suffering from the physical violence caused by … soldiers who attacked him' after a meeting.[2] Cameron entered the labour movement through trade unionism, after he and his young family moved to Western Australia in 1903. He became permanent secretary of the Plumbers' Union in 1912 and part-time secretary of several other unions. He represented the plumbers on the Metropolitan District Council and attended interstate union conferences, finally returning to Melbourne in 1919. On his departure from the West the *Westralian Worker* commented that 'few … can equal Don as a rough-and-ready propagandist.' He possessed 'a virile personality', and was 'endowed with … fine qualities as a comrade and a man.' From serving as the Marine Stewards Union delegate to the Melbourne Trades Hall Council he went on to become, in 1927, a foundation member of the Australian Council of Trade Unions. He was president of the Melbourne Trades Hall Council from 1930 to 1931 and assistant secretary from 1933 to 1938.

Cameron's socialism had begun after his Boer War experience and developed in Western Australia before and during World War I. At a farewell organised by the Social Democratic League in Perth, he was described as 'the most striking personality … W. A. had produced'. After his return to Victoria in 1919 as organiser to the Victorian Socialist Party (VSP), he became the VSP's general secretary (1920–32) and editor of the *Socialist* (1920–23). Cameron found the group in decline. Unfettered internationalism, implying opposition to the White Australia policy, ran counter to Cameron's sense of what was required by Australian labour, and the ailing VSP was wound up finally in 1932. At the 1937 ACTU Congress he demonstrated his continuing retreat from international socialism when he moved an isolationist amendment expressing suspicion of Russian policy and of the League of Nations. In his 1958 history of the VSP, he confirmed his preference for evolutionary rather than revolutionary socialism when he lauded English socialist Fred Henderson for his view that socialists were persuaders, whose aim was to encourage, not impose, socialism.[3]

[2] Graham Dunkley, 'Cameron, Donald James', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 7; *Westralian Worker* (Kalgoorlie), 7 February 1919, p. 6; *Labor Call* (Melbourne), 1 November 1917, p. 8; *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates* (henceforth *CPD*), 9 March 1950, p. 556; D.J. Murphy (ed.), *Labor in Politics: the State Labor Parties in Australia 1880–1920*. St Lucia, Qld, UQP, 1975, p. 369; *Westralian Worker* (Kalgoorlie), 24 January 1919, p. 4; *Punch* (Melbourne), 26 February 1925, p. 23; Biographical sketch, Cameron Papers, MS 1005, box 5/31, National Library of Australia (NLA).

[3] George Crawford, *Footprints: History of the Plumbers' Union*. Beaumaris, Vic., George Crawford, 1997, pp. 22–4; *Westralian Worker* (Kalgoorlie), 7 February 1919, p. 6; 7 March 1919, p. 2; 21

Equally active in the ALP in Western Australia and in Victoria, having survived an expulsion attempt in 1910 in Western Australia, he attended his first interstate Political Labor Conference in 1915 in Adelaide. In 1917 he was defeated as a Labor candidate for the Western Australian Legislative Assembly seat of Canning. He was a member of the Victorian state executive from 1928 to 1949, Victorian branch president in 1932, and a Victorian delegate to federal conferences from 1934 to 1948. He stood unsuccessfully for the federal seat of Balaclava in 1929, the Senate in 1931 and at a by-election for Fawkner in 1935. In 1932 Cameron became one of the two Victorian delegates on the Federal Executive, a position he held until instructed by the Victorian executive to resign in 1934. He was at the epicentre of the anti-Scullin/pro-Lang movement in Victoria that helped to bring down the Scullin Government. It was, therefore, as seasoned anti-conscriptionist, labour movement veteran, and outspoken democratic socialist that Cameron won his way into the Senate in the 1937 general election (from second position on the Victorian Labor ticket). He took his seat in July 1938. He was re-elected at the general elections of 1943, 1949, 1951 and 1955.[4]

The Cameron who entered Parliament in 1938 had travelled a hard road. The fresh-faced, lean, blue-eyed, dark-haired Boer War volunteer was no longer. Now a stocky veteran with a shock of grey hair topping a face lined by years of industrial and political combat, in photographs he stared unsmiling at a world poised to plunge once again into an armed conflict that would demand further sacrifices from workers still recovering from the Depression. His opponents soon learnt that the newcomer was not easily intimidated. Quick to grasp and use standing orders, he was equally capable of gently-mocking irony, biting critique, reasoned debate, or lengthy recitations of well-researched facts and statistics gleaned from voracious reading. In April 1940 Cameron silenced interjectors with the observation:

> Like Epictetus of Ancient Greece, who always tried to teach his students to think for themselves instead of being the mental dependants of so-called superior persons or authorities, I would feel that I had not said anything worth saying if the honorable gentlemen opposite applauded me, or maintained the sleepy silence for which they are so famous.

When Labor took office in October 1941, Cameron, though outside the War Cabinet and frustrated by the difficulties in aircraft production brought about through lack of a

February 1919, p. 5; *Labor Call* (Melbourne), 4 June 1931, p. 5; *Westralian Worker* (Kalgoorlie), 14 February 1919, pp. 5, 6; Robin Gollan, *Revolutionaries and Reformists: Communism and the Australian Labour Movement 1920–1955*. North Sydney, George Allen & Unwin, 1975, pp. 41, 42; Frank Farrell, *International Socialism and Australian Labour: the Left in Australia 1919–1939*. Sydney, Hale & Iremonger, 1981, pp. 91–2, 100, 127, 203; Letters, Cameron to Edgar and Lloyd Ross, 1935, 'The Socialist Party of Victoria. Its Growth and Decline', Cameron Papers, MS 1005, boxes 5 and 10, NLA.

4   *Bulletin (Sydney)*, 20 April 1932, p. 13; *Labor Call* (Melbourne), 17 December 1931, p. 10; Patrick Weller and Beverley Lloyd (eds), *Federal Executive Minutes 1915–1955*. Carlton, Vic., Melbourne University Press (MUP), 1978, p. 162; John Robertson, *J.H. Scullin: a Political Biography*, Nedlands, WA, UWA Press, 1974, pp. 437, 447–8; *Argus* (Melbourne), 22 June 1931, p. 8; 29 August 1931, p. 9; Bede Nairn, *The 'Big Fella': Jack Lang and the Australian Labor Party 1891–1949*, Carlton, Vic., MUP, 1986, p. 277; L.J. Louis, *Trade Unions and the Depression: a Study of Victoria, 1930–1932*. Canberra, ANU Press, 1968.

central controlling authority, played a careful and useful role in Australia's wartime production regime. Aided as he was by Prime Minister Curtin's choice of the BHP managing director, Essington Lewis, as departmental head, Cameron served as Minister for Aircraft Production from October 1941 to February 1945. He was also Minister Assisting the Minister for Munitions (October 1941 to February 1942) and a member of the Production Executive of Cabinet (November 1941 to February 1945). In addition he was Acting Minister for the Navy, for Munitions and for Aircraft Production during March and April 1945, and Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate from 1946 to 1949. By all accounts he was a competent and hard-working minister; he had served a sound apprenticeship on a number of Senate committees, notably the Regulations and Ordinances Committee.

In 1940 Cameron had charged that the policy of the second Menzies Ministry was 'War and defence plus big profits and big salaries' and asserted Labor's would be 'War and defence minus big profits and big salaries'. By 1944 he claimed some success, for Labor, he argued, had been able to improve both war production and working conditions. Australia's performance had been exemplary and visitors from allied countries 'had expressed amazement that so much had been done in Australia' in the production of aircraft, armaments and munitions in such a short period. As regards war production, such sanguine statements were in part political, in part war propaganda, but they contained some truth, as Paul Hasluck suggests. Cameron acknowledged that he was less satisfied with industrial conditions—coalminers still laboured dangerously while mine owners profited.

In many ways, the most difficult matter for Cameron was conscription. Australia's soldiers at the time were divided into two separate components: the AIF (voluntary), which could serve overseas, and the Australian Military Forces (conscripted), which could serve only within Australia. When, from 1942 to 1943, Curtin proposed to expand the zone of service for conscripts beyond Australia, Cameron resisted fiercely, despite fears that the Labor Party might again split. Working closely with fellow Victorian Arthur Calwell, and Henry Boote, editor of the *Australian Worker*, he engaged in a debilitating struggle that wounded Curtin deeply. Cameron was also among those ministers who sought during 1944 and 1945 to pave the way for full bank nationalisation, a proposal Curtin opposed.[5]

When Curtin appointed him Postmaster-General in the Cabinet reshuffle of February 1945, the *Argus* observed that Cameron 'should make a good PMG … he is an earnest and tireless worker … well liked by his staff … has a fine command of English … and never signs a document without reading it first.' Cameron believed that Australia

5   Photos, MS 1005, box 7, NLA; *CPD*, 22 April 1940, p. 285; Geoffrey Blainey, *The Steel Master: a Life of Essington Lewis*. South Melbourne, Macmillan, 1971, p. 164; Lloyd Ross, *John Curtin: a Biography*. Carlton South, Vic., MUP, 1996, pp. 225–6, 299–308; *CPD*, 19 July 1944, p. 181; Paul Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1939–1941*. Canberra, AWM, 1956, pp. 73–89; *The Government and the People 1942–1945*. Canberra, AWM, 1970, pp. 336–8, 350; Patrick Weller (ed.), *Caucus Minutes 1901–1949*. vol. 3, Carlton, Vic., MUP, 1975, p. 21; Teleprinter messages between Curtin and Cameron, 27–28 April 1943, MS 1005, box 1, NLA; Letters, Cameron to K.J. Kenafick, Kenafick Papers, MS 2048, box 6, NLA; Letter, Cameron to Boote, 7 November 1941, Boote Papers, MS 2070, box 1/1/287, NLA; Ross McMullin, *The Light on the Hill: the Australian Labor Party 1891–1991*. South Melbourne, Oxford University Press (OUP), 1991, pp. 222–4, 232.

should lessen its dependence on the commercial media within Australia and on British imperial telecommunications internationally. In the broadcasting segment of his portfolio, Cameron, like Senator Ashley before him, had to deal with the ABC, now seeking even more independence in a climate still influenced by wartime restrictions. He was faced immediately with the unexpected resignation of the ABC's long-time chairman, W.J. Cleary. With Curtin's support, Cameron recommended R.J.F. Boyer, a commissioner since 1940, as the new chairman.

In the years that followed, Cameron and Boyer helped shape postwar radio. Cameron further implemented recommendations made by the Joint Committee on Wireless Broadcasting of 1941 as well as appointing new commission members in order to ensure a Labor majority. Later, he supported the retention of Boyer as the ABC's chairman despite Cabinet opposition. After Curtin's death, Cameron retained the portfolio in the ministries of the new Prime Minister, Ben Chifley. He oversaw the introduction of parliamentary broadcasts from 10 July 1946, and the launch, on 1 July 1947, of the ABC as a news-gatherer, in the face of Boyer's opposition on grounds of cost. In October 1948 he moved the second reading of the Broadcasting Bill—a clear statement of the Chifley Government's intention to nationalise the ABC. The legislation provided for the establishment of the Australian Broadcasting Control Board for the purpose of overseeing commercial broadcasters. Funding now came from consolidated revenue instead of from licence fees.

Cameron's approach to the ABC was ideological and pragmatic. He saw the ABC as a means of redressing the media imbalance faced by Labor but also as a tool for 'raising' the cultural taste of ordinary Australians, in contrast to Chifley who viewed radio essentially as relaxation. Cameron's prudish side occasionally appeared, as in his description of a broadcaster who advocated contraception as 'despicable', and in his attempt to ban radio stars, Ada and Elsie, and Jack Davey, for 'telling blue jokes'.[6]

Cameron, who had carriage of the Overseas Telecommunications Bill of 1946, saw the maintenance of Australia's own post and telecommunications services by government as critical to national interests. Though amended in the Senate, the legislation provided for the establishment of the Overseas Telecommunications Commission (OTC), which ensured that overseas, as well as internal, telecommunications were not privately controlled. Cameron's choice of Giles Chippindall as Assistant Director-General of OTC in 1946 (by 1949 Director-General) brought a tough, experienced administrator to a task that was politically, as well as technically, demanding, and who was capable of implementing ministerial policy. Cameron ensured better working conditions for staff of the Postmaster-General's Department, especially linesmen, country postmasters and rural staff. Ann Moyal, Australian telecommunications historian, describes Cameron as 'an able Postmaster-General who steered through the formation of OTC and presided over the

6   *Argus* (Melbourne), 3 February 1945, p. 11; Frank Dixon, *Inside the ABC: a Piece of Australian History*. Melbourne, Vic., Hawthorn Press, 1975, pp. 14, 71, 134–49, 176–7, 185–94; Joint Committee on Wireless Broadcasting, report, 1942; K.S. Inglis, *This is the ABC: the Australian Broadcasting Commission 1932–83*. Carlton, Vic., MUP, 1983, pp. 82–3, 123, 128–30, 133–4, 148, 150; *CPD*, 19 June 1946, pp. 1542–4; 27 October 1948, pp. 2132–8; Alan Thomas, *Broadcast and Be Damned: the ABC's First Two Decades*. Carlton, Vic., MUP, 1980, pp. 111, 157–8, 165; *Herald* (Melbourne), 8 November 1948, p. 4; *Argus* (Melbourne), 17 August 1951 (supp.), p. 1.

portfolio through the remarkable years of postwar telecommunications and postal growth.'[7]

The Chifley Government lost office in December 1949 and Cameron spent the remainder of his time in the Senate in vigorous opposition, optimistically interpreting the mid-decade Labor split as a necessary new beginning. In March 1950 he attacked the Menzies Government's 'preparations for war', particularly the proposal for compulsory military training. As the Korean War unfolded, he criticised the use of inflation to erode workers' wages, a theme he had pursued since he entered Parliament. In March 1951 he was a member of the all-Labor Senate Select Committee on the Commonwealth Bank Bill 1950 (No. 2) that led Menzies to call for a simultaneous dissolution. In 1954 he questioned the Government's courage in failing to extend recognition to China: 'Are we to be merely the dependants of the United States of America?' In 1957 he advocated an eight-point program along traditional Labor lines, but which included censorship of the media and cinema, clearly indicating that Labor considered it was a hostile media that was impeding the party's return to power. He attacked the proposal for a new parliament building, recommending the money be used for government-funded housing and called for fairer treatment of women in employment and marriage.

He gave his last Senate speech on 1 March 1962, his term expiring on 30 June. For more than an hour, the now silver-haired, increasingly deaf octogenarian traversed his familiar themes including the fundamental importance of education for all, and practical experience for politicians. Again, he warned that unless 'the Government controls the controllers of the monetary system' there would be unemployment. It was, according to observers, a fine speech.[8]

On Tuesday 21 August 1962 the Senate was informed of his passing the day before at Malvern Private Hospital in Melbourne. As senators spoke of him, their recollections were remarkably alike. Cameron appeared to have lived his life mindful of a warning he had given in 1911:

> The man who is a leader in his union gives his time, his brains, and his energy to the cause of unionism and the advancement of his fellow workers … But take that man and place him in Parliament to represent the cause of the worker, and straightaway he creates an invisible barrier between himself and those who laboured with him … and finally placed him in Parliament … There must be no mercy shown to those who deviate from the path that leads to the ultimate goal of unionism—equality of opportunity and the right of every man to enjoy the whole fruit of his own labours.

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[7]   *CPD*, 18 July 1946, pp. 2681–96; 7 August 1946, pp. 3786–8; *Herald* (Melbourne), 26 July 1949, p. 4; 1 March 1947, p. 5; Graeme Osborne and Glen Lewis, *Communication Traditions in Australia: Packaging the People*. 2nd edn, South Melbourne, OUP, 2001, pp. 126–9; Ann Moyal, *Clear Across Australia: a History of Telecommunications*. Melbourne, Nelson, 1984, pp. 180, 205.

[8]   *CPD*, 9 March 1950, pp. 552–60, 21 June 1951, pp. 183–7, 5 August 1954, pp. 49–57; Eight Point Plan, MS 1005, box 7, NLA; *Herald* (Melbourne), May 15, 1957, p. 13; *CPD*, 1 March 1962, pp. 270–7.

Cremated at Springvale in Melbourne on 22 August, Cameron left his wife of sixty-three years, and three of their five children—Alexander, Donald and Roy Angus. His estate, valued at £23 173, was distributed in equal shares between his wife and two of his three surviving sons.[9]

9   *CPD*, 21 August 1962, pp. 295–6; Letters, Senator Kennelly to Roy Cameron, 8 March 1962, Allan Hartready to Gough Whitlam, 23 July 1967, MS 1005, box 5, NLA; *Westralian Worker* (Kalgoorlie), 14 August 1911; *Herald* (Melbourne), 20 August 1962, p. 1; 22 August 1962, p. 3; *SMH*, 21 August 1962, p. 4; *Argus* (Melbourne), 11 December 1937, p. 3; Ross, *John Curtin*, op. cit., p. 267; Cameron file, Australian Dictionary of Biography, ANU.