METHODISTS IN SOUTH AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC LIFE

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This article is developed from a paper given at the Workshop on the History of Methodism in South Australia*, held by the* Historical Society of the Uniting Church in South Australia *in Adelaide, 19 November 2011. It surveys the involvement of Methodists in South Australian public life from the nineteenth century until the 1960s. It focuses particularly on the public debate over the alcohol trade and shows strong Methodist involvement in local option polls, the Temperance movement, and the adoption of six o'clock closing. By the late 1930s prohibition was a lost cause but restrictions on trading hours were well-supported by Methodists. On the left, the Methodist social conscience looked to a reconstruction of society and, on the right, sought to protect the weak from the worst aspects of that society. South Australian Methodism was broad enough to encompass both approaches.*

I once heard a Congregationalist minister, out of awe, not spite I hasten to say, refer in a South Australian context to 'those ubiquitous Methodists.' Cornish miners at Burra and Moonta later spreading through the Northern Adelaide Plains and the Mid-North, plus competition between the nineteenth century Methodist denominations, meant a Methodist place of worship, so it seemed, in every little hamlet. These impressionistic demographic observations need to be buttressed by Census data. I have chosen 1911. By then, Methodism, in its various forms had been in South Australia for seventy five years, had been united, institutionally at least for ten but was sixty six years away from that wider union that occurred in 1977.[1] So 1911 is a convenient mid point.

The following table is informative:

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[1] At the 1911 Census, despite union being ten years old, small minorities of respondents still used such designations as 'Primitive Methodist,' 'Bible Christian,' 'Free Church Methodist,' and the like. Interestingly the one 'Welsh Methodist' respondent is listed under the 'Presbyterian' heading. *Census Of The Commonwealth Of Australia, 1911* – Religions, 758.

Denomination	Numbers in Australia	Numbers in South Australia
Church of England	1,710,443	113,781
Presbyterian	558,386	25,568
Methodist	547,641	100,402

Methodism stands out. Commonwealth-wide the ratio of Methodists to Church of England was 8:25 while the equivalent figure for South Australia was 22:25.[2] It has further been argued that, given a higher than average degree of nominalism among Church of England respondents, and the very large Methodist Sunday Schools, Methodism could, at the time, fairly lay claim to being the largest denomination in the State. There was also considerable growth. Arnold Hunt noted that at the 1891 Colonial Census, the Methodist population of South Australia was 76,575.[3]

In public affairs, Methodists were punching above their weight. A consideration of the achievements of Samuel Way, John Verran, Shirley Jeffries, Norman Makin, along with many others, may help to confirm or deny that perception but, again, some numerical data is indicated.

The *Survey Of The Biographical Register Of The South Australian Parliament 1857-1967* by John Playford, Howard Coxon and Robert Reid includes references to religious affiliation.[4] It has been suggested that this source is unreliable and given the magnitude of the task almost certainly this is so, but it is unlikely that there is a systematic bias for or against any particular denomination, so while the individual designations may, in some cases be misleading, the overall position merits examination. A further difficulty is that, of the 512 Members of Parliament listed, 158 are given no affiliation. From what is known of the religious temper of the times, it beggars belief that all 158 would have been agnostic.[5] Clearly Playford *et al* were unable to locate the necessary information. Again there is no reason to conclude that this would bias the numbers against any particular Church. Using then the

[2] I have decided to stick to the 'Church of England' nomenclature; 'Anglican' came later.

[3] Arnold D. Hunt *This Side Of Heaven* (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1985), 105.

[4] John Playford, Howard Coxon and Robert Reid, eds. *Survey Of The Biographical Register Of The South Australian Parliament 1857-1967* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1985).

[5] In fact only one such is listed, Ron Loveday, a long-time member for Whyalla.

information for the 447 whose religious affiliation is identified, we obtain the following:

Denomination or religion	Number identified	% of total
Church of England	158	35.4
Methodist	86	19.2
Congregationalist	50	11.2
Roman Catholic	44	9.8
Presbyterian	36	8.1
Baptist	22	4.9
Churches of Christ	21	4.7
Lutheran	9	2.0
Jewish	7	1.6
Other	14	3.1[6]

What immediately strikes one is that, from a Methodist population that, roughly half way through the survey period, amounted to 88% of the Church of England equivalent, 86 Members of Parliament were produced, this being only 54% of the Church of England equivalent. So this admittedly crude numerical analysis does not back up the presumption that there was a high number of Methodists in South Australian public life during this period.

But if quantity fails, does quality at least in part succeed? Another assumption, taken, in part from British experience, suggests a lively Methodist involvement in the early Labor Party and the nascent trade union movement. Local trade union leaders were invited to speak at two successive Primitive Methodist Conferences in the 1890s.[7] Rev. Hugh Gilmore of the Wellington Square Primitive Methodist Church supported the striking waterside workers in the same period, espoused the Single Tax doctrines of Henry George and was influenced by the liberal theology of the German seminaries. His son, Hugh Jr. was a pre-World War One State President of the Labor Party. Cornish miner and Methodist Richard Hooper was the first Labor member of the House of Assembly, elected in 1891 for the seat of Wallaroo. Tom Price, the first Labor Premier in South Australia was a Methodist from Wales. His successor, on the Labor side, John Verran is oft-quoted as maintaining that he was 'an MP because he was a PM – Primitive Methodist.' When he spoke in his electorate,

[6] For the record, they 'Other' comprised Unitarian 9, Salvation Army 2, Quaker 1, Rationalist 1, Agnostic 1

[7] Hunt p. 205.

those in attendance were never sure whether to expect a sermon, a political speech or a temperance message.

Verran's successor, Crawford Vaughan has, at various times, been claimed for the Unitarians, the Methodists and the Church of England. Like Price and Verran before him, and Bob Richards later, he was a 'dry' on the liquor issue (more of that later). The Conscription split in the Labor Party weakened the Methodist and, more broadly, the Nonconformist influence on that side of politics but Methodist Bob Richards was Premier in 1933 and led the Party until 1949.[8]

The above is limited to Methodist influence on the Labor side in the State Parliament. Federally, one could hardly omit reference to Broken Hill-born Norman Makin, Member of the House of Representatives from 1919, Speaker of the House from 1929 to 1931, a Minister in the Wartime Labor cabinets, Australia's first ambassador to Washington and to the United Nations and the inaugural President of the UN Security Council. A pattern maker by trade, he was a Methodist lay preacher and Sunday School teacher. When Rev Alan Walker brought the 1953 'Mission to the Nation' to Adelaide, Makin was his support speaker at the Botanic Park Labor Ring.[9]

On the conservative side, and given the strength of Methodism in rural areas, one presumes that the Liberals would have claimed a majority of Methodist votes outside the Copper Triangle. Methodist influence probably reached an apex under the long Premiership of the Baptist Sir Thomas Playford. One thinks of Sir Shirley Jeffries his Minister of Education, Colin Rowe, his Attorney General, and Speaker Sir Robert Nicholls. In earlier times, there had been Sir John Bice, Sir John Colton and Sir Frederick Holder.

In this survey, I do not limit myself to those Methodists who were elected to the Parliament or called to the Bench such as Sir Samuel Way who was in both categories. I include those, clerical or lay who, from their Methodist standpoint, became involved in the social and political issues of their day, particularly those to do with liquor, gambling, vice and Sunday observance. To cover the whole field would be a monumental task, so here I will concentrate on the liquor issue.

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[8] There was no Roman Catholic leader until M.J. O'Halloran from 1949 and three since, Frank Walsh, Des Corcoran and Mike Rann.

[9] I was in attendance, along with other senior Sunday School students from the Prospect North Methodist Church.

A good deal of Methodist energy was expended on what were called 'Local Option Polls.' Local Option was an interesting subspecies of what was called 'the initiative and referendum' something that was espoused, with declining enthusiasm, it must be admitted, by the early Labor Party, and which continues to haunt the constitutional arrangements of some of the American states. The father of local option in South Australia was the Bible Christian David Nock, philanthropist and Member for Light from 1875-78. During his brief parliamentary career, he steered though the legislature what came to be known as the 'Nock Act.' It provided that, on petition of a 'sufficient' number of electors – 500 or one tenth of the local option district – a proposal to alter the number of liquor licenses in the area could be submitted to a vote of the electors, the district coinciding with the local State electorate or a designated portion thereof. The voter could choose between the options of reducing the number of licenses in the area by one third or one sixth, no change, or giving the Licensing Court the discretion to grant additional licences.[10]

Temperance enthusiasm was building in the last two decades of the nineteenth century as witness the formation of the Women's Christian Temperance Union under the leadership of Methodists Selina Thorne and Mary O'Brien. The WCTU campaigned vigorously for women's franchise on the assumption, it is argued, that women would vote for temperance advocates, who, on election, would restrict trading hours thereby increasing the likelihood that husbands would come home sober with pay packet reasonably intact. In the short-term, the introduction of adult franchise, a deal between Charles Cameron Kingston and the Labor Party, whose support Kingston needed to form a government, probably did help the cause, at least marginally.

In February 1906, for example, polls were held in Adelaide, North Adelaide, West Torrens, East Torrens and Wallaroo. All except Adelaide reduced the number of licences and Cornish Methodist Wallaroo achieved a combined reductionist vote of 72.5%. In the following year, East Torrens voted for a further reduction though the 'dry' vote had dropped. Amendments to the Act in the same year combined the first two options into a single vote for reduction and provided that the polls be held on the same day as a

[10] If there was no absolute majority for the first option, its votes were added to those of option number two and so on. The system was based on the reasonable assumption that the 'reductionists' had a 'second preference' for no change.

General Election.[11] This latter provision led to larger turn-outs which weakened the 'dry' vote.

Nonetheless, the big victory was the adoption of six o'clock closing in 1915. The Bill followed upon a petition for early closing bearing 37,000 signatures and presented to the House of Assembly. By the time the referendum required under the legislation took place, Great Britain had passed its 'Defence of The Realm' Act which had mandated six o'clock closing. Electors in South Australia could plump for any hour from six to eleven o'clock, the latter being the status quo. In all, 56.9% favoured six and 34.8% favoured the later time. Temperance enthusiasm, it seemed, was at the flood. One commentator concluded, 'The temper of a majority of the people is distinctly in favour of restriction, and temperance advocates state that, with the women's votes, they expect to be able, at no distant date, to carry total prohibition for the whole Continent.'[12]

From 1919, the temperance lobby, now taking its inspiration not from DORA (The Defense of the Realm Act) but from the Volstead Act in the USA, began to agitate for prohibition. In the following year, petitions totalling 54,000 signatures and praying for a referendum on the issue, were presented to the Parliament but a motion for such a poll, introduced into the Assembly was not put to the vote, becoming one of the 'slaughtered innocents' at the end of the session.

The Presbyterian Premier Peake's refusal to facilitate a vote provoked an 'indignation meeting' at Willard Hall where the Rev. H. Escourt Hughes, in high dudgeon, really let himself go: 'These miserable men – timid surely and toadying and time serving to one particular party!...The members of Parliament should be grabbed by the hair of their heads and shaken. If someone can suggest how to bring them to their senses, I will be in the 'scrap.'[13]

He was outdone by a Mr. Jolly who suggested horsewhipping those who had thwarted their object. Cooler heads called for candidates in those electorates not served by members of a temperance persuasion. In fact, only two ever stood as straight out prohibitionists at least over the next decade. One R.W. Bowey,

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[11] This and much that follows is from my Ph.D. thesis, Don J. Hopgood, 'Psephological Examination of The South Australian Labor Party from World War One to the Depression,' Flinders University of South Australia, 1973, 342 – 364.
[12] *Round Table* Vol. VII p.173.
[13] *Observer* (27 November 1920): 20. A Baptist, Hughes wrote *Our First Hundred Years: The Baptist Church of South Australia* (Adelaide: South Australian Baptist Union, 1937).

gained 841 votes in the Mid-North electorate of Wooroora. He was member of the Liberal Party and an organiser for the Temperance Alliance. Not having made it to the House of Assembly, he is not covered in the Playford survey but was a Methodist.[14]

A few months before the 1924 State Election, Rev. C. E. Schafer of the Glenelg Methodist Church announced the formation of an 'Early Closing League' to campaign for the closing of liquor bars on Saturday afternoons.[15] The Methodist paper *Australian Christian Commonwealth* appealed to women voters to join a branch of the League, wear a pink ribbon, and pray: 'Take my vote and let it be / Consecrated Lord to Thee.'[16] The League joined forces with the Temperance Alliance and waited on Anglican Premier Barwell, who had replaced Peake, asking that a referendum be granted on prohibition and that the Licensing Act be amended to close liquor bars and wine shops at noon on Saturdays. Barwell refused the first on the grounds that it was 'unconstitutional' and said that the second would have to be a private member's bill on which he would not bind his party.[17] He added that he was a temperance advocate but had been drinking whisky for twenty years without suffering any ill effects.[18] This parting shot seems to have disturbed the delegation as much as the Premier's refusal to grant their requests. Schafer announced that he would campaign actively in Barwell's electorate to have him unseated.

Others rallied to the cause. The Methodist Conference, meeting only a month before the election, endorsed the programme of the Early Closing League. Rev. Frank Lade was in a fiery mood: 'They believed that Methodism was the spearhead of the movement in South Australia. They must drive that spear home and thrust it in the most vulnerable part of the monster that was defiantly straddling the continent. If the vulnerable part was the electorate of Stanley, that was where they must thrust the spear.'[19] Labor ran no candidates thereby freeing the League from accusations of bias in its

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[14] I went to Sunday School with his grandchildren.

[15] Charles E Schafer b. Melbourne 1868, d. Adelaide 1941, ordained 1891, spent long years of circuit work in Port Pirie, Broken Hill, Hindmarsh, Glenelg, Prospect, *et al.* Very active in the 1915 Early Closing Referendum, he successfully moved at the 1917 Methodist Conference that what became known as the Memorial Hospital be set up.

[16] *Australian Christian Commonwealth* (25 January 1924): 7.

[17] This was a somewhat specious response. Certainly a referendum *per se* is only consultative but one could pass a bill that provided for the desired outcome subject to a referendum.

[18] *Australian Christian Commonwealth* (1 February 1924): 3.

[19] *Advertiser* (7 March 1924): 13. Stanley was Barwell's electorate.

direction.[20] Those on the ballot were the sitting Liberals, Barwell and Nicholls, the Country Party challengers Augey and Badman and an independent, Duncan Menzies. The League unofficially backed Nicholls and Badman, noting that they were Methodist lay preachers and were the only Stanley candidates to favour early closing.

That a measurable though small proportion of Stanley voters followed the 'Early Closing' ticket cannot be denied. Nicholls and Badman were 546 and 586 votes respectively above the totals of their running mates. *The Observer* reckoned the pure 'Early Closing' vote in Stanley was around 570. This was well in excess of the temperance effort in other electorates but not enough to unseat Barwell who retained second place in the two member electorate with a lead of 912 over Badman.

The temperance campaign did not expend its substance purely on Stanley. The issue took up as much space in the correspondence columns of the press as all the other matters to do with the election combined. Schafer, Lade, and the Congregationalist Smeaton, the sole survivor of the Labor Conscriptionists, now running as a Liberal, hurled thunderbolts at H. Penfold Hyland, 'Barossa Grape-grower' and others who were quite ready to return the compliment. The Alliance circularised all candidates re their attitude toward a referendum and published the results on the Friday before the poll alongside the signatures of representatives of the Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Congregational, Church of Christ and Adventist denominations plus the WCTU, the Salvation Army and the Rechabites. The list strongly favoured the Liberals. There were no endorsements in Adelaide and, not surprisingly, Barossa.

The 1924 election was the high water mark of temperance and prohibitionist campaigning through the twenties and, probably thereafter. There was a series of local option polls on the day of the 1927 election and not one district, including Wallaroo, returned a reductionist majority. The Methodists seem to have sniffed the air. A motion before its Conference to allow prohibitionist speakers to speak from the pulpit was defeated. It is an interesting commentary on the loss of confidence of the temperance movement that the most it was prepared to ask for in 1930 was Saturday afternoon closing. By then, however, the cause had a new champion in the Parliament.

Shirley Williams Jeffries, a son of the Methodist manse, was elected as a Liberal candidate for North Adelaide in 1927. Jeffries'

[20] South Australia had multi-member electorates at the time. Stanley had two members.

father brought his family to Australia in 1890 settling there after eight years in Queensland. He was President of the South Australian Methodist Conference in 1904. His son was admitted to the Bar in 1910 and moved through the ranks to become senior partner in a law firm. In 1929, he introduced a Private Member's Bill for a referendum on Saturday afternoon closing. It failed on the second reading 14 votes to 27. Defeated in 1930, he was re-elected in 1933. He became Minister of Education and advocated religious instruction in State Schools, a measure that was enacted in 1940.

Interestingly Jeffries' main opponent on the liquor issue in the Parliament was Labor's Stan Whitford, also listed as Methodist. A perusal of his typescript autobiography does not betray a close involvement in the affairs of his Church. Interest in the issue waned in the early thirties as the dire economic conditions of the time claimed the attention of all, but a revival occurred late in the decade surrounding the figure of E. H. Woollacott. The Rev. Harry Woollacott, on being appointed full-time Superintendent of the Methodist Church's Social Service Department was for over twenty years, his denomination's public voice on matters to do with liquor and gambling. A confidant of Sir Thomas Playford who had replaced R. L. Butler as Premier, Woollacott later claimed to have involved himself in Liberal Country League pre-selections in an attempt to get temperance friendly candidates.[21] I recall a letter to the editor in which the writer used the term 'Woollacottism' as a label for what he regarded as the extreme Methodist position on liquor and gambling, its 'unswerving hostility' to the liquor industry as reaffirmed time and again at its Conferences.

But the Jeffries-Woolacott partnership really only maintained the status quo. If there was no liberalisation, neither was there any movement toward prohibition. Whitford led two attempts at a broadening of opening hours, in 1935 and again in 1938. Both failed, the second by one vote.[22] The climax of the agitation against Whitford's 'Booze Bill' was a Youth Protest Rally on 28 September, 1938 when an estimated 3,000 young people marched down King William Street to the Adelaide Town Hall where the crowd

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[21] The Liberal and Country League was formed in 1931 following an amalgamation of the Liberal and Country Parties.

[22] Judith Raftery, 'God's Gift Or Demon Drink? Churches and Alcohol in South Australia between the Two World Wars,' 28. http://www.sahistorians.org.au/175/documents/gods-gift-or-demon-drink-churches-and-alcohol-in-s.shtml accessed 13 February 2012. This article also appeared in the *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia* 15 (1987): 16-41.

overflowed into the adjacent Pirie Street Methodist and Stow Congregational Churches. The crowd, now estimated at 6,000, passed a resolution opposing alteration to the legislation except by referendum.[23] But talk of prohibition was in the past. It was a stalemate.

The dam finally broke in the 1960s with the Royal Commission into the liquor industry. Again Methodism took a hand with the fight against relaxation being led by Rev. Arch Simpson, secretary of the Alliance, but the forces on the other side were too well organised. A prominent Catholic lawyer, Leonard James King who took the brief for the liquor industry, was shortly thereafter elected to the Parliament, became Attorney General and, five years later, trod the path taken by the Methodist Sir Samuel Way all those years ago, to the presidency of the Supreme Court.

Methodism's 'unswerving hostility' arose from its keen social conscience and its bitter appreciation of the impact of liquor on individuals, families and both public and private assets. Concerned for the regeneration of society, it believed that this could only be achieved through the redemption of the individual. Ivor Bailey in his *Mission Story*, an account of the life of what was then called the Adelaide Central Methodist Mission, quotes the pioneering English missioner Hugh Price Hughes on the Methodist approach to social evils: 'We have practically neglected the fact that Christ came to save the nation as well as the individual, and that it is an essential feature of His Mission to reconstruct human society on the basis of justice and love.'[24]

Reconstruction however meant, for the most part, not so much Single Tax, nor Socialism, nor Fabianism but rather more services to the unfortunate and legislation to counter such particular vices as were seen to have brought them to such a pass. Rev. Samuel Forsyth's Depression-era Kuitpo settlement was strategically placed in the South Mount Lofty Ranges miles away from the seducing influences of saloon and racetrack. The dilemma of the social progressives in Methodism was that their army, the people in the pews, were humane but fairly conservative in outlook. Even the strong rural 'no' vote in each of the World War One Conscription

[23] Raftery, 'God's Gift Or Demon Drink?,' 24.
[24] Ivor Bailey, *Mission Story* (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1987), 6.

Referenda, campaigns in which the Church had vigorously advocated 'yes,' could be seen as an endorsement of the status quo.[25]

The whole thing cries out for a deeper analysis than I have been able to pursue. Were Methodists in public life because they were Methodist or were deeper factors involved? An examination of 'maiden' and other speeches in Hansard may tell us much of the motivation of those who served in the Parliament but then it may not. In voting against the first Casino Bill to come before the House, I proclaimed my Methodism but one suspects some did not wear their hearts on their sleeves.[26] That, however, does not rule out the influence of the 'Gentle Jesus' prayer from age four, all those Sunday School lessons and long term exposure to the strident advocacy of the pulpit.

I am also acutely aware of the paucity of the references to women in the above. A more comprehensive treatment would, of necessity, include information on the work of Kate Cocks and the more prominent of those who served in the Deaconess Order.

Methodism did, at the very least, pull its weight.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise him who saves the drunkard's woe

It was a social conscience that, on the left, looked to a reconstruction of society and, on the right, sought to protect the weak from the worst aspects of that society and, where possible redeem them from the 'slough of despond.' Methodism was broad enough to encompass both approaches and motivated enough to want to do something about it.

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[25] In 1916, the 'no' vote in the staunchly Methodist, but also staunchly Labor, Copper Triangle reached 72% in Kadina, 75% in Wallaroo and 78% in Moonta. Hunt, *This Side of Heaven*, 291.

[26] Indeed, on another occasion, a member on the other side of the chamber, and a fellow Methodist to boot, was heard to refer to me, more in frustration than in anger I presume, as a 'Bible bashing ...', and, well, the rest was alliterative.