

PG2694

NATIONAL PARTY OF AUSTRALIA – VICTORIA

THE VICTORIAN NATIONAL PARTY has its origins in the Victorian Farmers' Union (VFU), which was established in 1916. The VFU drew its most militant and enthusiastic support from farmers in the marginal wheat lands of the state's Mallee region and already boasted 130 branches and 2836 members by the time the union held its first conference in September 1916. During the period 1917-20 the VFU secured support from small graziers, dairy farmers and fruit growers who helped it to grow rapidly so that by 1920 it had 547 branches with some 14,817 members.

The VFU was the most highly organised of the state farmers' organisations and secured the return of four of its candidates at the 1917 Victorian state election. At the 1920 state election it increased its representation to 13 members in the 65 member Legislative Assembly. The introduction of preferential voting meantime assisted the VFU to return its first member of the House of Representatives following its candidate's success at the Corangamite by-election in December 1919.

The VFU suffered a major setback in 1925 when radical Mallee wheat farmers broke away and established the Primary Producers' Union (PPU). The following year the PPU announced that its Country Progressive Party (CPP) aimed to contest all constituencies on the Northern Wheat Belt at the 1927 Victorian state election. The VFU responded in March 1927 by renaming itself the Victorian Country Party (VCP) and broadening its membership which hitherto had been restricted to primary producers. At the 1927 state election four Country Progressive Party candidates were returned, at least one of them with Labor Party preferences. The Victorian Country Party's representation was reduced to ten members. A merger of the two parties was gradually effected during the period May 1927 to September 1930; however, Bruce Graham contends that this was accompanied by a move leftwards on the part of the Victorian Country Party, which endorsed the Country Progressive Party's more radical economic objectives including a compulsory wheat pool, a rural bank, bulk handling of wheat and relief from the mortgage system. At the special 'Unity Conference' of the VCP and the CPP on 23 September 1930, it was proposed that the new amalgamated party be known as the United Country Party, and it styled itself in this way during the period 1931-47.

By April 1935 the Victorian parliamentary party's strength was sufficient for its leader, A.A. Dunstan, to form Australia's first all Country Party government. It retained office until September 1943. Dunstan then led a composite Country Party-United Australia Party government until it was defeated at the polls by the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in October 1945. After the Legislative Council refused supply in 1947, the Country Party found itself the minority partner in a composite government, led by the Liberal Party's Thomas Holloway. At the 1950 election, none of the parties

won sufficient votes to govern in its own right, and an all Country Party government, supported by the ALP, held office from June 1950 until December 1952. Three years later, the Liberal Party won a majority in its own right.

In July 1975 the Victorian party followed the lead of its Queensland counterpart and adopted the name, National Party of Australia–Victoria. The uniform shortened name, The Nationals, was endorsed by the NPA's Federal Conference at Canberra in 2003.

The NPAV, like the NPA in other states, is an autonomous organisation operating under its own constitution and rules and with its own platform and policies. Its Central Council is the party's supreme governing body between Annual Conferences. Day-to-day administration of party affairs between meetings of the Central Council was originally in the hands of an Executive Committee. But in June 1984 a new Management Committee was created with enlarged functions in relation to finance, field staff and candidate endorsement. Annual Conferences have the power to develop policies and amend the party's constitution, but conference decisions are not binding on the parliamentary party. Although the parliamentary party operates under its own rules, these must be consistent with the party's constitution. In the event that the parliamentary party decides to act contrary to party policy, it is incumbent on the parliamentary leader to explain why to the Central Council and the Annual Conference.

From the outset, both men and women were eligible for full membership of branches in the 'General Section' of the VFU. A separate Women's Section was established in 1918, with its own Central Executive, and its own Annual Conference. The Women's Section secured a large membership across many active branches. Although a handful of these persisted into the 1990s, many have been wound up or amalgamated with General Section branches. The Young Country Party (for members aged between sixteen and thirty) has operated in the state since 1948, when its first branch was established at Shepparton.

The Victorian party's records are outstanding in terms of their extent, completeness and inclusiveness. They embrace all major Central Office record series, significant numbers of record series from a range of General Section and Women's Section branches, and extant records from the short-lived PPU and CPP (PG2694, items 31, 53 and 589). Yet surprisingly there is, thus far, no book-length history of the NPAV, comparable to the histories of its NSW counterpart by Ulrich Ellis (1958), Don Aitkin (1972) and, mostly recently, Paul Davey (2006). Correspondence in the Victorian Central Office records (item 598) reveals that the General Secretary attempted in 1953 to encourage Ellis to undertake a Victorian party history, but a reluctant Ellis responded that he was already heavily committed with public relations and advisory work on behalf of the NSW party and with the researching and writing of his NSW (1958) and Federal (1963) party histories.

Further Reading:

B.D. Graham, *The Formation of the Australia Country Parties*, Canberra, 1966.

Brian Costar, 'Victoria' in Brian Costar and Dennis Woodward (eds), *Country to National: Australian Rural Politics and Beyond*, Sydney, 1985, pp. 95-108.