

The Origins of the ALP

A Marxist analysis

Jim McIlroy

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A Marxist Analysis

By Jim McIlroy

The Australian Labor Party has stood at the centre of Australia's political life for more than a century. As the country's oldest political party, it has dominated the politics of the labour movement for all of that time. It continues to do so today, but its hold is increasingly in question.

Nevertheless, the ALP remains the single biggest block to the development of the socialist movement, and has held the great majority of the Australian working class in the straitjacket of parliamentarist reformism for the last 100 years.

The ALP was founded in the early 1890s, following the defeat of the great Maritime and Shearers' Strikes. While its main impetus was from the developing trade union movement, it had a certain base among middle-class and farmers' sectors.

Radical and socialist elements played an important role in the initial push for a labour party, under the slogan "Socialism In Our Time", but were defeated by a combination of the parliamentarians and the union bureaucracy. By the early 20th century, the ALP had become entrenched as a reformist, parliamentarist party, accurately described by Vladimir Lenin in 1913 as a "liberal capitalist party" — a political agency of the capitalist class within the labour movement.

This pamphlet will summarise the early development of the Labor Party and draw some historical comparisons with the evolution of social-democracy on an international scale. It is crucial to analyse the origins of the ALP in order to understand and relate to its rightward trajectory today.

The scope of this text is limited to dealing with the founding period of the ALP, up to the early years of the 20th century, when its basic character was essentially formed.

Based on a talk given in December 2003 at the 21st Congress of the Democratic Socialist Party. The DSP dissolved into the Socialist Alliance in 2009. *Jim McIlroy* is a longtime leader of the DSP and a member of the Socialist Alliance.

Despite substantial changes in its structure, internal political struggles and developments in society generally which have influenced the policies and course of the party over more than a century, the fundamental nature of the Labor Party as a liberal capitalist party, based on the trade union bureaucracy, has not changed.

From its formation period to today, an ongoing debate has occurred within the left and union movement about the nature of the ALP, and how to relate to it as part of a strategy for social change and, most importantly, socialist transformation. The struggles which took place from the 1890s by socialists to influence the course of the formation of the party led, within 10 years, to frustration and splits, as the reformist identity of the Labor Party became entrenched.

From then on, the debate continued about whether, or to what extent, the ALP can be regarded as a “working-class party”. And, following from this, the discussion has been maintained about the tactic — or even strategy, for some poor souls — of relying on work within the Labor Party as the main path to a socialist transformation of Australian society.

The explosive rise of the revolutionary Industrial Workers of the World to challenge Labor hegemony over the union movement in the period leading up to, and during, World War I, and the development of the Communist Party of Australia from the 1920s onwards, have presented concrete alternative organisational vehicles to socialists, over remaining locked within the straitjacket of the ALP.

More recently, with the marked rightward shift of the ALP over the past two decades — together with most Labor and social-democratic parties worldwide — in the context of an international neoliberal capitalist offensive, some have argued that the Labor parties have now been qualitatively transformed from workers’ parties with procapitalist leaderships into outright capitalist parties, in the course of this major escalation in the class war.

The argument in this pamphlet is that Lenin’s original characterisation of the ALP in 1913 as a “liberal capitalist party” was correct at that time, and remains correct to this day — with the proviso that the term “liberal” is only relative. For example, the Liberal Party under Prime Minister John Howard is now so far to the right of the political scale that “liberalism” has put former Liberal leaders like Malcolm Fraser and John Hewson to the left of the ALP on some issues like refugee policy.

The importance of clarifying the nature of the ALP from very early in its history is that it provides a better framework for understanding its rightward trajectory in recent times. It is not necessary to search for some mythical turning point at which it may have been changed its character from a “workers’ party with a procapitalist leadership” to an out-and-out “capitalist party”.

By understanding the fundamental character and role of the Labor Party as incorporating the Australian working class into the framework of the nation-state and the capitalist system, and struggling to hold it there through wars, depressions and recessions, and political upheavals, we can better comprehend its shift to the right in a period of general reaction on a worldwide and local scale.

The specific policies of the ALP may vary over time in a more progressive or conservative direction, depending on the course of the class struggle, especially the pressure of popular movements in society at the time, as well as the influence of militant movements in the unions, the strength of alternative, progressive and socialist parties and organisations (including the IWW, the CPA and the Greens today), and also — subject to the above — on the weight of left-wing forces within the ALP.

Today, the crisis of leadership of the Australian working-class movement is more severe than ever. The much-vaunted “end of communism”, with the collapse of the Soviet bloc, and the decline and fall of the CPA, has left a huge vacuum on the left of the political spectrum in Australia. Despite the growth the Greens since the 1990s, the socialist and militant labour movement is at a crossroads.

With the foundation of the Socialist Alliance, the prospect of a new socialist force emerging on the Australian political scene is very real. This makes clarity on the Labor Party question a necessity if the socialist movement is to go forward successfully right now.

The informational content of this pamphlet relies on a number of important works and authors in the field of labour history. It does not claim original research, and relies on substantial quotes from these historians to make many of the key points — all of which are in the existing material, and in many cases can best be illustrated by direct quotation from these reputable sources.

Beginnings

The origins of the ALP go back to the early days of unionism, and gradual extension of parliamentary representation from members of the colonial ruling class alone, into broader strata of Australian society.

Trade unionism in Australia found its beginnings in the Chartist movement in Britain. Leaders and members of the Chartist movement were transported out to Australia as convicts in the 1840s, and influenced the development of the early workers' movement. Growing democratic struggles, culminating in the Eureka Stockade rebellion of 1854, combined with an expanding working class to push forward union organisation, as well as the pressure for increased democratic rights in general.

A flood of immigrants and growing industries combined to create a new working class, which began to organise to defend its interests. Some trade union activity had developed before 1850, and some unions and tradespeople had taken industrial action, but these unions were as much cooperative, social welfare bodies as unions in the modern sense.

The turning point in industrial and political activity was the struggle for the eight-hour day. That movement began in 1856 when stonemasons working on the construction of Melbourne University downed tools and marched through the city in a demonstration of support for the principle of the eight-hour working day.

That movement developed, and a worker of the time by the name of Charles Don defended the eight-hour day movement against those conservative forces who said it was "perfectly suicidal" and the work of "stupid, mischievous blockheads". He asked the critics, who had built the city of Melbourne? "Was it built by the rich, the wealthy, the kid-gloved, the fine-handed? No," he told a workers' meeting in Williamstown in 1857, "by the horny-handed sons of toil."¹

The growing political awareness of the emerging working class did not, however, generally lead its members into political activity. There were occasional efforts to elect working men to the colonial parliaments with the backing of the trade unions, and in 1859 the first successful attempt occurred, when Charles Don was elected to the Victorian

parliament for the seat of Collingwood. Don, however, was not the first of a new wave, but a lone (and as it turned out, unpromising) first example of the working-class representative elected to parliament. In New South Wales, Angus Cameron was elected to parliament in 1874 with the endorsement of the Sydney Trades and Labor Council, but disagreements between Cameron and his backers soon saw an end to the link between them.

The difficulties that lay in the path of the election of labour-backed members were several. Members of the colonial parliaments were unpaid, and it was difficult for a man to earn a living and be a member of parliament at the same time. Again, the trade unions, while unified in each colonial capital through a trades and labour council, lacked any form of organisation in the electorates; and the interests of the small craft unions, which were the characteristic form of union organisation, were often contradictory. Thus, for a generation after the gold rushes, there were no serious campaigns to secure the election of labour members.²

As a background to this situation, the Australian unions, like their English counterparts, were mainly made up of skilled workers. Industry was in its early stage, and the development of the Australian union movement was in its infancy as well.

At that time many unions were branches of the English parent bodies. But the change which eventually resulted in the creation of the Australian Labor Party was the development of New Unionism, which was a movement of unskilled and semiskilled workers, especially the miners, the shearers, the general rural workers and the seafarers.

Under the conditions operating in the 19th century they were the most distinctively proletarian sections of the working people. That is to say, capitalist ownership was highly concentrated in the areas where New Unionism appeared. Consequently, the basis of capitalist exploitation was clearer to the workers there than in some other sections of industry.

So the new unions developed mass membership and for the first time sought to organise on an industry-wide basis, as distinct from operating as a skilled trades group only. Thus the New Unionism became the basis for the sharp confrontations which are known as the Maritime and Shearers' Strikes of the early 1890s.

And that was a defining moment in the development of the Australian Labor Party.

1890 turning point

W.G. Spence, who was a leader of the Amalgamated Miners Association of the time, and a representative of the New Unionism, said: "The great turning point in the history of Australian labour was undoubtedly the maritime strike, as it is termed, in

1890.”³

It was in fact the violence and intensity of the Maritime and Shearers’ Strikes of 1890-94 which led some union leaders such as Ernie Lane (brother of the more famous William Lane) to describe the situation as “revolutionary”. And some sections of the Australian capitalist class strongly agreed.

It is very clear that, at the very least, the sharp class conflict of those years led to a strengthening of class consciousness and a burgeoning of socialist ideas, of various sorts.

Workers became more aware of the increasing class unity of the employers, and the implacable hostility of the business press. It developed a feeling by workers of the need to identify their class interests and strengthen their level of industrial and political organisation.

For example, when the shearers went out in 1890, the *Sydney Morning Herald* editorialised against the strike under the heading, “Class War — the Commune”, about the dangers of following the Paris Commune:

... twenty years ago the civilised world was struck with horror on seeing the defeated Communards of Paris in the frenzy of discomforture trying to destroy the national monuments of greatness and the treasures of art, and to involve society in one common ruin. Little was it then supposed possible that in the happy Australian colonies our working classes — the most fortunate, the best paid, and the most prosperous body of workers in the world — would be summoned by their leaders to take part in a ruinous war against society, inspired by similarly desperate feelings and just as destitute of any rational purpose.⁴

In fact, history shows rather the frenzy of the reactionaries of France against the Paris Communards, and the massacres of the workers which took place in 1871 were horrendous. However, the *Herald* editorial does indicate just how alarmed the ruling class of Australia was at the possibility of a similar uprising in this country.

In reality, the situation was not quite so insurrectionary in Australia in the 1890s. As Spence commented later:

The effect of the maritime strike was to galvanise into life the hitherto latent idea that voting power carried with it not only the choice of the parliamentary representative, but also of the work he was expected to do when sent to the legislature ... The idea of self-government came to him [the worker] in a new light, and he saw that he must not only vote, but must make the platform, and select his own political war-cry.⁵

Essentially, the conclusions that the leaders of the labour movement drew were, one, that they had to develop the trade union movement and broaden it as well. Two, that they needed to create a national federation of unions to better coordinate the

movement. And, three, they interpreted the direct intervention of the state, the police and the law courts against the workers — most clearly illustrated in the 1891 and 1894 Queensland shearers' struggles and the Broken Hill miners' strike of 1894 — to mean that they had to organise a separate political party in order to counter this power disadvantage in the struggle with the employers.

However, this conclusion which was reached by the more advanced working-class leaders, such as William Lane, envisaged a reformist, rather than a revolutionary policy. It was based on a belief in the possibility of the workers winning control of parliament and using it to serve their own ends. If the state had acted against the workers, it was argued, this was only because the workers had neglected to enter parliament and capture a majority. At the same time, it should be noted that most of the statements made by union leaders in the period 1891-93 clearly envisage that the workers, having organised politically, and secured a parliamentary majority, would not behave as other parties, but would go all-out for the destruction of capitalism and its replacement by a new order, which was not called socialist, but in which the land would belong to the people, monopolies would be abolished, and labor would be fairly remunerated ...

The ultimate conclusion of William Lane and some others was that the prospect for a new social order in Australia was virtually lost with the defeat of the Queensland shearers in 1891. The conclusion that the best way to promote socialism was to withdraw from a difficult capitalist environment and build a communist utopia in Paraguay was a conclusion born of defeat and despair, but it was nevertheless a harmful conclusion. The conclusion itself is the clearest exposure of the basic theoretical weakness of Lane, and of his imperfect understanding of the class society, and his essential idealism and utopianism. His withdrawal not merely took some of the most capable Australian unionists away from the Australian struggle, but the confusion it caused amongst the socialists who remained contributed to the ineffectiveness in the following years. Australian socialism over the years 1893-1905 was narrow and sectarian, lacking the broad union support it had had during the days of Lane.⁶

Union preparation

During 1890 and 1891, the defeat of the maritime and shearers' strikes meant that the union movement had lost almost all the gains won from the capitalist class in the years before. The employers' demands for "freedom of contract" struck against the very basis of unionism itself. In the midst of a major depression, in which unemployment had soared, this threat to the future of unionism had a galvanising effect:

The idea of separate political organisation for labour did not originate in the failure of the maritime strike in 1890, but it was immensely strengthened and given earlier

realisation because of that experience. The reports given by the various parliamentary committees to the Intercolonial Trades Union Congresses after 1886 make it clear that the trade union movement in all colonies was moving in the direction of separate political organisation. What held it back was partly the tradition that trade unions were nonpolitical, but even more so the weakness of class consciousness on the part of unionists. The exception was Queensland, where the strength of New Unionism combined with the influence of William Lane had produced a considerable measure of class consciousness before 1890, which was reflected in the preparation of the scheme for a Federation of Australasian Labor (1889) and in the actual launching of a Labor Party on August 1, 1890, a fortnight before the maritime strike broke out. Elsewhere it required the bitter experience of the strikes to produce sufficient class consciousness for the launching of Labor parties.

In all colonies the trade union movement was directly responsible for organising the early Labor parties, and from the outset labour's political organisation has been closely linked with its industrial organisation. The connection with the trade union movement was closest in Queensland where the trade union movement, after establishing itself as the Queensland Provincial Council of the ALF in 1890, merely extended its organisation into the political arena by dispatching organisers to establish Workers' Political Organisations in the electorates, the method being very like that used to build the unions in earlier years. In New South Wales, the parliamentary committee of the Trades and Labor Council was instructed to draw up a political platform and rules for an organisation to be known as the Labour Electoral League. At first the funds of this organisation were managed by the Trustees of the Trades and Labor Council, although the League functioned as an organisation separate from the trade unions. From the outset Labor Party conferences represented both Labour Leagues and Trade Unions.

In Victoria, the first Labor Platform was drawn up by the parliamentary committee of the Trades Hall Council prior to the 1889 election, although the electoral organisation did not start until 1891, again on the initiative of the Trades Hall Council. In August 1891, the first political conference of the Victorian Labor Party drew up a constitution and established an organisation of the Progressive Political League. The sequence of events in South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia was very similar to that in Victoria.⁷

The political basis for the formation of these Labor parties was unclear, and contested, from the start. However, the limitations of the objectives of the parties in the various colonies soon became apparent:

Although a considerable measure of class consciousness was a prerequisite for the

establishment of the Labor parties, the general objective of these parties was social reform, not socialism. Only the Queensland party stated an objective that was openly anticapitalist, although not specifically socialist. The ideals of the “just division among all citizens of the state of all wealth production”, and of the reorganisation of society to secure “social justice” were Jacobin or radical-liberal, rather than socialist ideals, and perhaps reflected the influence of small producers and small farmers in the drafting of the program. In all other colonies, and in Queensland from 1893 onwards, the programs were merely a collection of specific measures; some ... born out of the experience of the strike; others, like the demand for improved factory acts and a statutory eight-hour day, were longstanding objectives; some, like the proposals for electoral reform were designed to give full realisation to the democratic principle of universal suffrage; some, like the fifth plank in the New South Wales 1896 platform, were designed to consolidate capitalism rather than to inaugurate socialism. The restrained character of Labor’s objectives irked the socialist minority within the party and from time to time, notably at the 1905 Federal Labor Conference, attempts were made to insert some sort of socialist objective. But until 1921 all that was achieved were specific planks for the nationalisation of coal, silver, copper and iron mines in the New South Wales 1896 platform, and the “collective ownership of monopolies” objective in the 1905 Federal platform.⁸

Broader impetus

The impetus for the formation of a Labor Party was broader than the trade unions. The Australian Socialist League, formed in May 1887, announced a meeting for “the purpose of forming an Australian Labor Party”. The call was not fulfilled and, while the ASL could claim the credit for being the first working-class body to propose a Labor Party, it was left to the NSW Trades and Labour Council to launch the party as a practical project.

In 1874, the TLC had set up a Parliamentary Committee to act as a lobby group, and successfully sponsored a worker for parliament. Direct representation was hindered, however, by the heavy financial burden on the unions — it was this realisation that prompted the TLC at the Inter-Colonial Congresses of 1884 and 1886 to support payment of members of parliament.

It was not until mid-1890 that the TLC moved seriously towards parliamentary action — the decision to commit trade union funds to form Labor Electoral Leagues was in one sense a measure of desperation as reactions against the strikes hardened. While the union leadership sought some form of refuge in parliamentary action, the mass of the working class saw the Labor Leagues as a means to defeat both the

capitalists and their parliamentary machine.

The collapse of the Maritime Strike in November 1890 accelerated TLC interest in taking concrete organisational steps for a political party. On November 28 the executive passed a motion for the establishment of the Labor Electoral Leagues, and the TLC parliamentary committee was delegated to investigate the establishment of branches in all electorates. The impetus for this formation originated within the movement itself, only socialist groups such as the ASL exhibited any external pressures for independent political action.

In the early years of its existence, the ALP's trade union origin and connections gave it a cohesion that no existing capitalist political groupings had possessed in Australia. This was despite the fact that the party suffered from a lack of definition over program and composition.

The division which evolved between the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary wings was in reality the most concrete statement of the party's ambiguity. Many of the prospective candidates for Labor representation still retained strong links with established capitalist parties. The imprecision of the party structure gained reflection in the fratricidal conflicts over the pledge of loyalty to the ALP program. It had to be firmly established that the ALP candidate was not a free agent, but was bound to a common program.

Statements by early trade union leaders and MPs indicate the contradictory limitations of their approach to the Labor Party project.

Amalgamated Miners Association president W.G. Spence, one of the major figures of the early union movement, and later a federal Labor MP, saw the Labor Party as "introducing cooperation instead of competition ... not because we are going to abandon the principles which guided men in the days of the old unionism", but because "we must unite on the common platform when we speak, and when we vote for reforms that are necessary".

And, again: "Our only hope is with the mass of the people, and above all, with the wage-earners", he wrote. But also: "There are only two parties now; the Anti-Social Party — those who are against society and in favour of class dominance — and the Labor Party, which stands for justice, for right, for high moral principles ... Labor is not for class but for all."⁹

George Black, one of the founding Labor representatives in the NSW Legislative Assembly in 1891, said, on the one hand, that "The men we represent are the wage-earners — those who labour with hand or head, with either mind or muscle". However, on the previous day, he had stated: "We have been told that we have come to this House to represent a class. Well, that well may be, but that class is the class of all

classes. It is a class which is as wide as humanity — so wide that you may describe it as the class out of which all other classes are built up.”¹⁰

While the origins of the ALP were primarily from the trade unions, there were not the only force involved. In his classic 1923 work, *How Labor Governs*, Vere Gordon Childe points to the diversity of the ALP’s initial supporters, who included democrats and Australian nationalists, small farmers, prospectors and mining proprietors, small shopkeepers, the Catholic Church, and “certain business interests, notably the liquor trade”. Childe added:

The heterogeneous elements supporting the Labor Party have naturally led to serious conflicts of interest. The democrats do not necessarily sympathise with the aims of unionism, and may very well be opposed to state interference with private enterprise. Nationalism is diametrically opposed to that internationalist sentiment which is characteristic of the socialist movement. The militarist policy, which the White Australia ideal has forced on the Labor Party, is distasteful to many industrialists [meaning unionists].¹¹

New South Wales

In 1891, the decision by the NSW unions to field Labor candidates occurred in the context of deep economic and political upheaval. The boom which had prevailed in Australia virtually since the 1850s gold rushes ended with a mighty crash at the end of the 1880s:

... The economic crisis had stimulated a new radicalism in Australia as key sectors of society, gravely disturbed with the widespread evidence of social collapse, sought answers to the new problems that confronted a people who had come to expect continued prosperity and constant expansion as the natural order of economic being.

The economic and industrial crises of the early 1890s had come at a time when the long-established two-party system in the colonial parliaments was starting to collapse. The older political parties, loosely organised and loosely grouped around leaders who identified themselves as either liberal or conservatives, had been revealed as merely different faces of a hostile establishment during the industrial crises of 1890-91. Despite furious debates about the causes of free trade and protection, the two parties had no policy, nor even a coherent view, on what should be done about the worst economic crisis ever to affect Australian society. The personalities, the parties, and the old economic issues that had been the basis of a whole generation of debate and development in colonial society, had begun to appear irrelevant.

Any new radical party that emerged at this time was bound to become the focus for all those who now sought radical social change in Australia. The Australian Labor Party

would assume the mantle of Australian radicalism, now discarded by the liberal politicians, and it would become the natural home, not only of socialist idealists and trade union activists, but also of an assorted array of middle-class liberal reformers, radical nationalists and supporters of social causes for which there was little sympathy within the two existing establishment parties. To a degree unexpected by its founders, the new Labor Party would become a coalition of disparate elements, often linked more by hostility to the forces of Australian conservatism than by any clear bonds of common policy. Thus Labor would attract working-class voters, sections of the progressive middle classes, some intellectuals, and the more severely disadvantaged among rural workers and small farmers ...

At the outset of the [1891 NSW election] campaign the TLC had drafted a platform for the new Labor candidates to advance. It included a range of proposals, none very radical and few that were even very new. They included electoral reform — particularly in regard to certain aspects of the electoral law that allowed for plural voting and discriminated against working-class and itinerant voters; free education; the eight-hour day; legislation to prevent sweated labour; workers' compensation; a land tax; support for federation; and several other matters that affected workers, notably miners. These relatively bland, not to say innocuous, proposals were condemned by conservative editorial writers, one of whom saw the program as “fearful and wonderful”.¹²

The TLC also moved to establish an electoral organisation, with the first Labor Electoral League being established in Balmain in April 1891. Soon, branches were set up in other Sydney suburbs and in rural towns and mining areas.

The selection of Labor candidates and their stance was initially a hit and miss affair, due to the “speed with which the leagues had been established, the general vagueness about policy and organisation, and the great difficulties in communications that existed between the leagues and the executive committee in Sydney”.¹³ Even the initial support given to Labor by former colonial Governor Sir George Grey, because of his strong liberal beliefs, couldn't mollify the conservative press:

... On the eve of polling for the [Sydney] city electorates, the *Sydney Morning Herald* warned of the danger of supporting Labor candidates. It would lead, it said, to “a system of representation of class interests, the ultimate effect of which would be to degrade parliament into a nominee chamber of the Trades and Labour Council”.¹⁴

In the elections, the Labor Party won 15 seats out of 42 in the greater Sydney area, and another 20 from rural NSW electorates, with some independents aligned with the Labor group.

The result surprised the new Labor members and astonished the conservative parties and their supporters in the press. The *Sydney Morning Herald*, in its self-appointed role

of guide and philosopher-friend to the Labor members, warned them that they had been placed in “a position of power ... of responsibility for which they could not have been prepared”. This fact was all too well known to the new band of Labor members, few of whom had ever expected to grace the benches of the Legislative Assembly of New South Wales. One of them later wrote: “We were a band of unhappy amateurs ... made up somewhat as follows: several miners, three or four printers, a boilermaker, three sailors, a plasterer, a journalist, a draper, a suburban mayor, two engineers, a carrier, a few shearers, a tailor, and — with bated breath — a mine-owner, a squatter, and an MD.”

Labor’s success in New South Wales was to have an immense and immediate impact throughout Australia. In the country’s senior colony Labor suddenly had the numbers in parliament to decide which of the two non-Labor parties should be the government. The New South Wales elections of 1891 marked a watershed in Australian political history. Afterwards, all issues, events and actions would relate to and have a bearing on upon the growth of the Labor Party, which would now hold the balance of power, and would in time move towards the centres of political power and authority.¹⁵

Queensland

The connection between the early Labor Party and the trade union movement was closest in Queensland, where the Queensland Provincial Council of the Australasian Labour Federation extended its organisation into the political arena by sending organisers to establish the Workers’ Political Organisations in the electorates, in a similar way that the unions themselves had been built in earlier years:

In Queensland, five months after the adoption [in mid-1890] of the political program by the central council of the [Australasian Labour Federation], the ALF central executive drew up a scheme for the political organisation of labour. The organisation was to be firmly based on the trade unions. The scheme provided for a “labour caucus” in each electorate ... to select official labour candidates ... However, the Queensland shearers’ strike, which broke out early in 1891 and which left the trade union movement weakened and to some extent disillusioned, in conjunction with regional, sectional, and personal interests, resulted in a development somewhat different from that envisaged by the ALF leaders at the end of 1890 ...

Thus the steps to form political organisations were taken in an atmosphere of deep class antagonism. In the strike struggle itself, the political moral was consistently pointed by the *Worker* [newspaper of the ALF]. As the strike was beginning, [editor] William Lane announced that “capitalism understands thoroughly that its real fight with labour is at the ballot box”. In the middle of the strike a special general council

meeting of the ALF prepared an electoral program, which potential labour candidates would be urged to accept. The program included electoral reform, educational reform, state intervention in agriculture, industry, and finance, old-age pensions, and the repeal of various acts considered contrary to working-class interests. Throughout the colony, but particularly in Brisbane and its environs, local political organisations were founded usually on the initiative of the ALF. Various known as People's Parliamentary Associations, Workers' Political Associations and Workers' Political Organisations, they were based in varying degrees on the principles of organisation laid down by the ALF executive. That all was not going smoothly from the point of view of the trade union leadership is, however, evident from comments in the *Worker*. In August it commented:

“Loose methods of selecting parliamentary representatives must be dropped and a workable method of choosing representatives, who, though coming from different localities, will unite solidly in supporting generally agreed upon measures, must be inaugurated ... Nor is it good enough that any man should be able to call himself a Labor candidate and weaken the political power of the Labor Party by splitting up the Labor vote.”

Similarly, the ALF organiser wrote disparagingly of various types of prospective labour candidates, who would be of no benefit to labour. At the top of the list was “the self-assertive, loud-mouthed obstinate man who knows nothing except that he is determined to run whether he is selected or not”.

The authority of the ALF had been weakened by the strike defeat. Eleven of its leaders were in prison and the unions were £5000 in debt at the end of the strike. The Defence Committee in its final manifesto called for political representation. Events in New South Wales at first encouraged the Queenslanders and then emphasised the dangers to be avoided. William Lane had hailed the New South Wales elections with: “New South Wales has retrieved the maritime disaster by sending her Labour Defence Committee into parliament, there to hold watch and ward over the rights of citizens who toil.” Ten months later the *Worker* was commenting sadly, “a surprising success placed in parliament a Labor cohort stronger than ever seen before in history — and this cohort of Labor delegates went to pieces without accomplishing anything”.¹⁶

After 1892, the Queensland Labor Party was increasingly separated from the ALF, which developed the view that the industrial movement should be protected from excessive influence by politicians. The ALF adopted a resolution in February 1893 that no Labor MP should be allowed to hold a position in the union movement. Thus:

The Labor Party entered the [Queensland] election contest of April 1893 with an election manifesto that bore little evidence of the socialist theory incorporated in the

political program of the ALF. It advocated economies in government expenditure to meet the financial crisis, and opposed the government policies of land grant railways and the recruitment of South Sea Island labour. Electoral reform, including the formula of one man one vote, and a tax on the great estates were the two most distinctively “labour” policies, although opposition to coloured labour was one of the themes most frequently stressed in the election campaign.¹⁷

Victoria

In Victoria, although 10 Labor candidates were elected to the colonial parliament at the start of the 1890s, the relative strength of liberal MPs in competition with the conservatives, and their support for progressive policies such as labour legislation reform, made it harder for Labor to make headway initially. This had the effect of weakening the support of some unionists for Labor, and slowed the development of the Labor Party in Melbourne compared to Sydney:

The Melbourne Trades Hall Council was much less interested in either the federation of labour or the representation of labour. In response to a letter from Brisbane, the council decided in May to support a scheme of federation “if necessary”. The Parliamentary Committee appears to have been nobody’s responsibility, and the council was without a committee until May, its appointment being adjourned from meeting to meeting. When early in 1891 the council did take some action to obtain direct labour representation, the matter was handed over to a special convention. The attitude of the Melbourne Trades Hall Council before, during, and after the maritime strike bears out Coghlan’s estimate. He wrote:

“The movement in Victoria, whether federal or local, was not democratic. There was no real consolidation between skilled and unskilled labour, and the unions in many cases represented only a small proportion of the trades for which they stood.”

They were, he added, “on the whole, narrow and exclusive bodies with high entrance fees, designed to restrict the numbers in the trade, in order that constant employment at high wages might be obtained by those within the union circle”.¹⁸

It was partly under the influence of the events in NSW and Queensland that the Melbourne Trades Hall Council decided to take action. The Progressive Political League of Victoria was established in May 1891 at a political convention, with a program fairly similar to that of the NSW Electoral League. However:

The PPL was at pains to minimise the differences between itself and the liberals. “Our program contains nothing”, said the [THC journal] *Commonweal*, “despite the assertions of the Conservatives to the contrary, more than has been advocated for years past by economists and liberals”. This view was accepted by the [Melbourne] *Age*, which

commented: “The Labor candidates are nothing more than Liberals under a new name. There is nothing whatever in their program to distinguish them from the men who made the Liberal Party the power it has been since 1877.” The Trades Hall Council itself did not make any clear distinction between liberal and labour. At the 1892 [Victorian] election nine members who associated themselves with the PPL were returned. The *Commonweal* exhorted them not to make the mistake of New South Wales.

“It is clearly understood that our party is to avoid the serious mistakes made by the Labor Party in New South Wales, notably that primary error which placed the party in a position of hostility to all other sections in Parliament. The Victorian Labor Party constitutes itself a wing of the Liberal Party, and is prepared to support a Liberal government so long as that government promotes genuine democratic legislation in the interests of all classes, workers included. New Zealand should furnish us a model.”¹⁹

In Victoria, socialism had a later influence on the Labor Party than in NSW or Queensland.

It is a curious feature of Victorian political history that the colony in which socialism made so little impact during the turbulent early 1890s became the state that spawned the most popular socialist party to emerge in Australia before 1920. The Socialist Party of Victoria, formed in 1906, had almost 2000 members at the peak of its popularity. By contrast, the story of socialism in Victoria before 1898 is bleak. Most of the historical discussion about the relationship between socialism and the Labor Party in the 1890s has therefore focused on New South Wales, where there was a small but active band of socialists, including W.M. Hughes and W.A. Holman, or on Queensland, the home of William Lane, the utopian dreamer who organised the ambitious and ill-fated “New Australia” colony in Paraguay. Lane’s endeavour captured the imagination of generations of historians; on the rare occasions when historians have turned their attention to Victorian colonial socialism, however, they have found a relatively weak socialist movement, little romance and no tragedy on the scale of Lane’s failed experiment.

The organised socialists were more prominent in Victorian politics from the late 1890s, and socialist ideas played a crucial part in the emergence of an independent Labor Party. The early 20th century was Victorian socialism’s golden age. The socialist appeal to working-class consciousness received a more favourable reception in the early 1900s than in the early 1890s, when socialist activity was confined mainly to the fringes of a labour movement married to liberalism and protectionism ...

From about 1906, however, organised socialists felt increasingly alienated from the Labor Party, culminating in an open breach in 1907. One reason for this alienation was change within the Labor Party itself, particularly the gradual emergence of a moderate laborism that straddled the liberal and socialist traditions. The Labor leadership

and sections of the rank and file continued to profess an evolutionary socialism after 1907; but, as we have already seen, their views about the role of the state were not always easily distinguishable from those of other liberals and progressives.²⁰

The development of Labor parties in South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia followed something the same pattern as in the other states. By the time of federation at the beginning of the 20th century, the incorporation of state socialists and the unions under the political wing of the Labor Party was well advanced. As Gollan observes:

Thus out of a trade union movement for which an idealist socialism had acted as a cohesive ideological force emerged Labor parties whose political policies bore little evidence of the socialist objective ... the function of the Labor parties was to put into effect policies of a kind that had been supported by radicals before the development of militant trade unionism made a Labor Party possible. They were able to do this because their trade union origin gave them a cohesion that no political parties had previously had in Australia. Their further function was to deprive the trade unions of the class militancy which had given the Labor Party birth, but this also led in time to a revival of militancy and a constant struggle between the political Labor Party and sections of the industrial movement.²¹

Despite this ongoing struggle, the ALP established its overall political domination of the trade union movement — despite challenges from the IWW and the CPA in their own time — and continues this hegemony to this day.

What Sort of Party?

So what was this party as it was formed in the decade of the 1890s? There's a very strong argument put forward by Ray Markey in his important book, *The Making of the Labor Party in NSW: 1880-1900*, that the process of the formation of the ALP was closely related to the development of the federation of the Australian colonies into the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901.

Markey notes that “the social, political and economic program of the new Commonwealth — ‘New Protection’, arbitration, the beginnings of the welfare state, and White Australia — was developed in the preceding two decades”.

[The role of the Labor Party] was central to the development of the new Commonwealth's political program. Through the Labor Party, the working class was tied to the political program enacted by the Commonwealth in the early 1900s. This program, and the Labor Party's role in its development, therefore, indicated the incorporation of the working class into the new Commonwealth.

Incorporation took the political form of a national settlement between classes. The working class was offered a “stake” in the new nation with the political program of “New Protection”. Manufacturers received state subsidies and a protective tariff in return for payments of “fair and reasonable wages” to workers. Apart from some specific legislation, the primary mechanism for this exchange became the arbitration system at state and federal levels. Workers also received the old-age pension, and protection from “cheap” Asian labour through the White Australia policy. The settlement extended to small farmers as well, who gained government subsidies and, theoretically, assistance in land settlement because of a land tax designed to encourage subdivision of large estates.

This program greatly expanded the role of the state. The old-age pension and the apparently benevolent aspects of arbitration, in regard to wages, extended the legitimising and integrative functions of the state. Because of the conditions attached to it, the pension also extended the state's powers of social discipline, as did arbitration. The arbitration system guaranteed trade unions' existence, but subject to state regulation

designed to limit strike action for the good of “the community”. In the latter role, arbitration extended the repressive agency of the state. Finally, White Australia and the umbrella policy of New Protection marked the early development of a national social policy administered directly by the state.¹

National settlement

The process of the formation of the ALP as a national force was dominated from NSW. The party was the key vehicle for the integration of working people into a the new Australian nation-state, based on a new capitalist national consensus, at the beginning of the 20th century:

The enabling legislation for the New Protection program was quickly enacted in the early 1900s. This was possible because the program had been politically synthesised in the 1890s. The Labor Party played a central role in this process. In so doing, the party reconciled a rebellious working class to the national settlement.

The New South Wales Labor Party was the primary influence in the Australian Labor Party’s (ALP) role in the process of incorporation. The nature of the ALP was largely determined in New South Wales in the 1890s. The only other colony to produce an independent Labor Party prior to 1900 was Queensland. Apart from the strength of its presence in the early federal parliamentary Labor Party, the New South Wales party developed the system of discipline which characterised the ALP, in the members’ pledge and the caucus system. Most importantly, the New South Wales party synthesised most of the policies which became part of the national settlement. State arbitration, White Australia, the old-age pension, and assistance to smallholders became the most prominent planks in New South Wales Labor’s platform in the 1890s. True, it was in Victoria that the alliance between liberal protectionist manufacturers and workers originally produced the concept of conditional protection or “fair wages” for labour in return for support of the tariff. State arbitration was also enacted by liberals in other colonies prior to New South Wales, and White Australia was a major plank of the Queensland Labor Party. However, the New South Wales Labor Party first brought the working class to the full range of policies which were offered in exchange for support of protection in the early Commonwealth. The New South Wales Labor Party first developed these policies into a unified program.

New South Wales Labor policy at the end of the 1890s was the product of the ideology of Laborism. Laborism was based on the assumption that the state could be “captured” by parliamentary means and wielded in an impartial manner, to the benefit of the working class, in association with a strong trade union movement which restricts its operations to the industrial sphere. This ideology dominated the Labor Party at the

end of the 1890s as a result of the party leadership which emerged at that time. There were two major elements of this leadership: first, the urban professional politicians, such as Hughes, Holman and Black, who had a utopian socialist background; secondly, the populist AWU, in which the major social base was smallholders who sheared part-time, and shearers who aspired to land ownership. Both utopian socialist and populists viewed the state as a neutral institution. The utopian socialists, in particular, believed it was possible to avoid the class conflict they abhorred, by use of the state.²

Markey notes the significant impact of “an employer-organised counterattack against the unions in the 1890s, when the depression aided their telling defeat of the union movement. This occurred in a series of major strikes in which the unions were decimated, and the existence of unionism itself became an issue.”

Yet, the Labor Party was able to consolidate itself as a political force in the same period. In the process, it expanded upon its original working-class base to seek a populist electoral base, including small landholders and urban white-collar workers. This was necessary, if the party was to seek achievements in the parliamentary arena, because of the decimation of the organised working class during the 1890s, especially in the city. The Australian Workers’ Union (AWU) was particularly important in this regard, for it delivered a large number of country seats to Labor. As part of this process of Labor Party consolidation, the leadership was assumed by the AWU agrarians, and utopian socialists who had been quite divorced from the class conflict and mobilisation which occurred at the industrial level in the 1880s and 1890s. This populist and utopian leadership, which was largely responsible for the development of “Laborism” as a distinctive ideology with a distinctive policy at the end of the 1890s, dismantled the party’s early social-democratic policy, and restrained the more specifically working-class radicalism which had briefly flowered in the late 1880s and early 1890s.

One of the clearest indications of this was in the Labor Party’s major contribution to the refurbished role of the state as an arbiter and regulator of social divisions in the early 1900s. The state’s legitimacy as this regard received a severe setback in the large strikes of the 1890s, when it intervened so blatantly on behalf of the employers. Its role in the 1890 maritime strike was a major motivation for the labour movement’s political organisation at that time. Labor’s disgust with the role of the state also built upon and much older and deeper working-class distrust of the state. Ironically, however, the Labor Party eventually became the strongest advocate of an expanded role for the state. Urban working class distrust of the state lacked consistency, and was ambiguous enough not to seriously hinder this development. But it would be a mistake to interpret Laborism as an inevitable outcome of the trade union influence on the Labor Party, rather than of the peculiarities of the Labor leadership, which assumed control of the

party from the unions.

The policy and leadership of the Labor Party were the outcome of intensive internal struggles. Initially, this occurred between the Trades and Labour Council, representing a class-conscious working-class movement, and the utopian socialist intellectuals who quickly assumed prominence on the party's central committee. The TLC was defeated at an early stage in its attempt to maintain control of the party it had established. A further struggle for control then took place between the utopian socialists and the AWU, which ended in a rapprochement between the two groups and a joint consolidation of authority within the party. The new populist-utopian hegemony was challenged once more by union militants and "left" socialists, whose base was largely amongst the urban working class and coal miners. However, the challenge failed because of the decimation of this base in the 1890s, and because of the militants' inability to develop a distinctive, programmatic alternative to Laborism. Defeat within the party, therefore, denied the radical, class-conscious elements of the working class a direct role in shaping the national settlement of the early 1900s. Instead, they were temporarily subjugated and absorbed into a populist Labor Party under a moderate, parliamentary-oriented leadership.

Nevertheless, the nature of the national settlement of the early 1900s, which Labor's policy facilitated, was also the result of widespread class conflict, which challenged the populist-utopian vision of the New World in Australia. Although the working-class mobilisation of the late 1880s was crushed in the great strikes of the 1890s, the national settlement recognised the need to create some form of rapprochement with working-class organisation.³

Ideology of 'Laborism'

By 1900 a distinctive ideology dominated the Labor party, largely as a product of the type of leadership which emerged in the late 1890s. That ideology may be called "Laborism". The term has been commonly used in Australia, and Britain, to delineate the ideology of labour movements which act on the principle "that the capitalist state could be managed to the advantage of the working class by a combination of a strong trade union movement with a Parliamentary Labor Party".

In this way, at the turn of the century:

Laborism held that fair dealing was available and obtainable in a capitalist society. Its vision was still that of a nation built by labour about to enter the paradise of the working man.⁴

Furthermore:

Despite frequent criticisms of the role of the state in the 1890s, few, if any, labour men

saw the state as an instrument of class domination. Mainstream labour thought depicted the undesirable characteristics of the role of the state at that time as aberrations, not inherent in the institution, and, therefore, capable of correction by political intervention. Working-class organisation was important in this regard, but not as an oppositional force to the existence of capitalism itself. Consequently, Laborism embodied a pluralist and populist, rather than a class, view of capitalist society ...

The most common explanation for the emergence of Laborism, either explicitly or implicitly, has been that it was a natural outgrowth of the trade union influence in the establishment of Labor parties, tempered by other influences such as socialism and liberalism ...⁵

However, Markey argues that:

... Australian Laborism at the end of the 1890s was the specific product of the professional politician/agrarian party leadership which emerged at that time, rather than that of the trade unions. As we have seen, this leadership wrested control of the party from the urban trade unions. Its professional politician element was dominated by utopian socialist intellectuals who originated outside the union movement. Its other main force, the AWU, was also atypical of unionism because of its agrarian smallholding base.

The party envisaged by the urban unions when they established the LEL [Labour Electoral League] in 1891 was to be a class-based organisation, pursuing class political strategies in parliament, in much the same way as the early German Social-Democratic Party. Although its relationship with the unions was different from that of the German social-democrats, the 1891 New South Wales Labor Party's platform was typically social-democratic, in the sense that it concentrated on two major areas: political reform and industrial legislation. In the context of New South Wales politics these were strategies of class politics, and there was a decline in the priority Labor attached to these policies as its new leadership assumed control of the party.

European-style social-democracy and Laborism, therefore, were discrete phenomena in New South Wales in the late 19th century, even though the moderate parliamentary strategy which characterised the New South Wales party at an early stage also eventually characterised European social-democracy. In New South Wales the two political phenomena had different social bases: social-democracy was based on the working class, especially in the city; Laborism was based largely on intermediate social strata, especially small rural landowners — in other words, it represented a populist social base. This populist influence also distinguished Australian Laborism from the British variety. A populist social base was necessary for the Labor Party to achieve parliamentary success in a society which was in the early stages of transition to industrial capitalism,

and which, consequently, had a relatively large population of intermediate social strata, or wage-earners who aspired to that position.

The influence of populism on Labor was largely responsible for the nature of the party's ideology and policy at the end of the 1890s. After the early decline of a social-democratic policy, it was gradually replaced with state arbitration, White Australia, agrarian reform, and political reform as an ideal in itself, rather than as a class strategy, especially in the form of republican nationalism. Most of these policies involved an extension of the role of the state. The populist and utopian socialist elements of Labor's leadership viewed the state as neutral, capable of being wielded in the interests of "the people". The utopian socialists, who had not been involved in the unions' industrial struggles of the late 1880s and early 1890s, also believed it desirable, and possible, to avoid class conflict. However, even the opponents of this view, largely the left socialists and union militants, were distinguished more by an instinctual, and often inconsistent, distrust of the state, rather than a full appreciation of its function as an instrument of class domination.⁶

'Socialism in our time'

Verity Burgmann, writing in *'In Our Time': Socialism and the Rise of Labor, 1885-1905*, outlines the important role played by socialists in the founding of the Labor Party. However, despite an early political struggle, these "state socialists" were soon overwhelmed by parliamentarians and union bureaucrats in the contest for control of the developing party.

The evolution of the views of these socialists, who generally had illusions in the possibility of a "parliamentary road to socialism", meant that they either fell by the wayside or were eventually incorporated into the reformist Labor machine:

The experience of the maritime strike turned most reformist socialists into state socialists. They concluded that the solution to the ills of the working class was the complete nationalisation of all the means of production, distribution and exchange, to be effected by working-class representation in parliament, by the formation of Labor parties. This indicated a change in strategy on the part of reformist socialists.

Previously, they had mostly envisaged the gradual and peaceful transition to socialism as occurring through the building up of a system of cooperatives, of worker-owned and worker-controlled enterprises in production and distribution of all manner of commodities. This kind of socialism differed from the utopian socialism of William Lane, as it sought, not to create one single community in a remote location that would convince the world that socialist living was possible and desirable, but to build step by step and within the immediate capitalist environment, cooperatives based on different

kinds of industry, until the cooperatives had out-competed the capitalist enterprises, and the reign of true socialism begun. Many reformist socialists clung to the cooperativist strategy throughout the 1890s, even evincing a dislike for the new-found statist style of reformist socialism.

However, it is undeniably true that the majority of reformists from 1890 on were state socialists, believers in the parliamentary road to socialism. What is often not fully appreciated in accounts of this period is that these state socialists truly and sincerely believed that the Labor parties they were building would soon be legislating for the socialist millennium, that the reconquest of surplus value was about to take place, in parliaments throughout Australia. The postmortem on the maritime strike by the Labour Defence Committee in Sydney concluded:

“Once the worker determines — as he has determined — that the very basis of modern industry is antagonistic to his welfare — once he questions the right of any man to interpose a partition between himself and the fruits of his labour — he must set about the work of reform where it seems that reform can alone be obtained — and that is in parliament.”

D.M. Charleston, one of the three Labor men elected to the South Australian Legislative Council in May 1891, declared that, in selecting Labor representatives with the aim of effecting reform through parliament, unionism had a glorious work to achieve: “the complete emancipation of labour, the securing to it the full results of its toil.” Then Charleston predicted, “our fair land will indeed be the land of promise flowing with milk and honey, and the cry of want will no more be heard in our streets”.

Discontent was widespread amongst the toilers, and it was the socialist agitators who most forcefully and persuasively proposed solutions to this discontent. The building of Labor parties that would end the reign of private enterprise was one of the several solutions put forward by socialists, by the reformist state socialists. Their role in this process ... was crucial.⁷

The tumultuous period of the early 1890s, industrially and economically, bred a widespread feeling that the capitalist system could not survive. There was a strong, perhaps naïve, view that the irrationality of the system would promote its own downfall:

The most striking feature of first-wave socialism was its confidence. Both revolutionaries and reformists eagerly anticipated the reign of “Socialism In Our Time”. The basis of this confidence was the conviction that capitalism was doomed. For some socialists, capitalism was destined to go down in the course of historical development because it was inefficient in its utilisation of natural and human resources; for others, capitalism would surely pass away because it was inequitable, and the vast majority of people who suffered from its operations must inevitably rise up against it; for yet others, it was the

immorality of capitalism that ensured its demise, as the triumph of right over wrong was one of the laws of human progress. Thus the appropriation of surplus value, which formed the central component of the socialist critique of capitalism, was for some socialists productive of inefficiency, for others of injustice, for others of immorality.

... All socialists faced the future with a degree of confidence that ranged from certainty to at least great optimism. As it turned out, their confidence was misplaced. Yet the defeat of first-wave socialism in Australia was no more inevitable than was its victory.

On the empirical evidence available, it appears that one reason for the failure of first-wave socialism to realise “Socialism In Our Time” was the extent to which its energies were diverted into reformist strategies. Without exception, all the reformist strategies proved themselves incapable of bringing about socialism. William Lane’s utopian colony that was to inspire the world peacefully to follow its example, collapsed in disarray as an experiment in socialism. The cooperatives established in Australia were likewise failures: the village settlements all disbanded, or went over to individualised farming; the manufacturing cooperatives lasted only as enterprises that succumbed to the need, within a capitalist environment, to operate as a capitalist concern, following capitalist rules of the game. Most significant of all, however, was the failure of the state socialist reformist strategy.

State socialists worked devotedly to build the Labor parties in the respective colonies, and in all colonies except Tasmania, they were a significant force in the early development of these parties. Laborism, the working-class but nonsocialist outlook enunciated by the conservative wing of the trade union movement, was comparatively uninspiring as a mobilising agent. A set of pragmatic responses, an adaption of colonial liberal values to a working-class reality rather than an ideology in its own right, Laborism was not the vital life-force within the working-class movement that, like socialism, encouraged the working class to develop a distinctively new party, a Labor Party independent of liberal ideology and practices. There was not even much of a ‘debate’ as such between socialism and Laborism, because Laborism, by comparison with socialism, had little to say for itself. Laborism won the day, became the dominant “ideology” of each Labor Party within a decade of its formation, not because of any greater following amongst the activists who initially built the Labor parties on the mainland, but simply because the socialists who worked so hard to produce these parties were fundamentally mistaken in their belief that socialism could be reached through the parliamentary process. Though socialism sowed the seed, Laborism reaped the harvest.⁸

Socialist hopes dashed

The early optimism of the state socialists soon ran up against the realities of a parliamentary system which quickly shaped the new Labor parties into electoral machines, separated from the interests of the workers, and corrupting the MPs with its privileges and perks. The socialists were soon outnumbered and pushed aside, and their ambitious plans thwarted:

The hopes of socialists within the Labor parties were dashed, and astonishingly quickly.

It has generally been assumed that disillusion with Labor occurred only when Labor was in office, when Labor governments disappointed the socialists amongst their supporters by not instituting more thoroughgoing reforms, by not appearing to begin to commence to start the gradual ushering in of socialism. On the contrary, socialists were disappointed with the Labor parties within months of their parliamentary debuts. The problem was not Labor reforms, but Labor parties. The attitudes and responses acquired with such startling rapidity by Labor MPs appalled and distressed the state socialists in the extra-parliamentary Labor parties. Moreover, every attempt to make the MPs toe the line ended in disaster; and often those who led the charge of the movement outside parliament against the representatives of the movement inside parliament, ended up using the kudos received for their efforts to secure preselection in winnable seats, then joined forces with the MPs they had previously denounced. It was socialists, in the main, who established the institution of the Pledge, the system of voting in parliament as the majority in caucus determines. This was intended as a means of bringing wayward conservative Labor MPs into line, a form of left control over the right within the party: it quickly became one of the many ways in which the right within the parliamentary party could control the left within the parliamentary party. Furthermore, the parliamentary parties became increasingly powerful *vis-à-vis* the extra-parliamentary parties. It did not escape the notice of Labor socialists that there was something contradictory about parliamentarians being so well represented on party bodies that were formed for the purpose of controlling the parliamentarians.

Long before Labor parties came to office, and became subject to all the pressures from the ruling class not to proceed with any substantial reforms, the vast majority of Labor MPs lost the will and the desire to legislate for socialism, even if such legislation were possible. The process of degeneration, from the socialist standpoint, began at birth; in opposition, not in office. Vere Gordon Childe, in his monumental work, *How Labour Governs*, writes as though Labor betrayal is predominantly a feature of Labor governments rather than Labor parties. He notes: "To avoid giving offence to middle-class supporters Labor governments have followed a vacillating policy and have tried to govern in the interests of all classes instead of standing up boldly in defence of the one

class which put them in power.” However, long before Labor parties were given the opportunities, in government, to “sell out” the workers, the Labor MPs, as a body, had already grown away from the workers.⁹

Payment of parliamentarians had been a longstanding demand of the democratic reform movement, aimed at making entrance to parliament available to working people. In the past, only the wealthy, with independent incomes, could afford to be parliamentarians. However, the gaining of this reform turned out to be a two-edged sword:

Ironically, payment of members, the much-lauded reform that in fact made the existence of Labor MPs possible, was a crucial factor in distancing Labor MPs from Labor electors, the vast majority of whom were much lower-paid than MPs. The lifestyle of the Labor MP on £300 per annum was quite different from that of a worker on, say, half that salary; it was incomparably different from that of the many unemployed workers. The Labor MP ceased to be representative of the class of people who elected him.

Labor MPs also became members of a club, and a very exclusive club. They rubbed shoulders daily with representatives from the other side of politics, and discovered they were not such bad chaps after all. They were invited to vice-regal functions, and were treated with at least outward respect by those who would formerly have ignored or despised them. They were given ostentatious gold passes with which to travel free on the railways. Newspaper reporters asked them their opinions. Women found them more attractive. The Labor MPs, in the main, loved it. Their new-found status was as members of parliament, not as representatives of the labour movement; they came to think and feel as parliamentarians, not as representatives of the labour movement. They did not need to cross the floor of the house to become “rats”. Labor parties were full of them. They absorbed the mores of the club, and a club created in the image of its maker, liberal democracy. Labor MPs sought anxiously to please and impress other MPs, civil servants, governors’ wives, the leading men in the community. Championing the workers came down lower and lower in their private and public priorities. The Labor MPs, and there were always a few, who resisted the siren entreaties of the parliamentary club, were accordingly isolated within their parliamentary Labor Party, became possibly a figure of fun, and were powerless. Such people were exceptional as constituency MPs: they were social worker and ombudsman in one, and like social workers and ombudsmen, they redressed grievances without changing the structures that produced grievances. They were unable to do what they hoped to do when they entered parliament. The club was not in favor of socialism, and most Labor MPs had taken out membership of this club.

Soon, the Labor socialists were faced with a choice. Either take a stand on principle, and confront the transformation of the Labor parties into reformist electoral machines, or adapt to this process by becoming a loyal internal opposition. This was the origins of the Labor left, which continues to this day as a ginger group within the ALP, but one which fails to challenge the fundamental issue of the procapitalist role of the Labor Party in Australian society:

Outside the parliamentary Labor parties, Labor socialists who neither left in despair nor ceased to be state socialists, displayed a remarkable ability to find excuses for each betrayal and to assure themselves that, with a slight change in tactics in internal party politics, with getting the numbers on this vote or that (especially a socialisation objective), with the defeat of right-wing Labor MPs at preselection battles, betrayal would never again happen. This whole process happened over and over again in this period, and is still going on today. Socialists within the Australian Labor Party must surely be amongst the most patient people on this planet. Many useful reforms that have improved the working and living conditions of Australian workers have resulted from Labor governments, but Australia is further from socialism than it was in the 1890s. The state socialists failed dramatically to realise “Socialism In Our Time” through parliament, and in attempting to do so, did much to disarm the forces of first-wave socialism.¹⁰

The ALP & Socialism

By the early 20th century, the ALP was an entrenched parliamentarist party, dominated by Laborism, not socialism.

“Socialism has not seduced the Australasians”, French writer Albert Metin observed in *Socialism Without Doctrine* (1901), his famous work on the social conditions and labour movement of Australia at the turn of the century. “We have some socialists here”, the secretary of the Melbourne Trades Hall told Metin, “but we don’t agree with them. They are *extremists* and we are above all practical men.”¹

One trade union member, when asked by Metin what his program was, replied: “Ten bob a day.”

According to historian V.S. Clark, in *The Labour Movement in Australasia*:

Australian socialism is distinguished from Continental socialism by the same features that distinguish the Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights from the crystallisations of political theory in the documents of the French Revolution. It has been called a “socialism without doctrines”. Its object is to secure instruments by which workers may control industry. It seeks tools rather than proclaims theories, and does not try to harmonise practical attainments with a preconceived ideal of society. Therefore the socialism of Australasia is unique, and worthy of study as a phase — though still incomplete, and possibly not abiding — of Anglo-Saxon history.²

The attitude of E.J. Russell, a member of the Socialist Party who was elected to the Senate as a Labor candidate in 1906, reveals the impact of parliamentarism on even a radical MP:

If I were asked tomorrow to vote by way of a referendum on the question, “socialism or no socialism”, I would vote on the “no socialism” ticket. I would not be a party to forcing it upon an unwilling people even if I could ... I am a democrat first, and then a socialist ... I am a straight-out Laborite, prepared to proceed on socialistic lines only as far as the people’s education will allow them to go.³

Australian socialism meant “the desire to be mates”, according to William Lane’s paper *The Hummer*.

‘Socialist bureaucracy’

The myth of a “lost socialist past” has allowed some militant workers to retain a faith in the ALP as a potential force for radical social change to this day. Yet, in his 1916 work on “The Social Roots of Opportunism”, the Russian Bolshevik revolutionary Grigory Zinoviev closely observed the real character of the Australian Labor Party:

... the reactionary role of the “socialist bureaucracy” appears nowhere so ostentatiously as in Australia, that veritable promised land of social reformism. The first “Labor ministry” in Australia was formed in Queensland in December 1899. And ever since then the Australian labour movement has been a constant prey of leaders on the make for careers. Upon the backs of the labouring masses there arise, one after another, little bands of aristocrats of labour, from the midst of which the future Labor ministers spring forth, ready to do loyal service to the bourgeoisie. All these [premiers and prime ministers] Holmans, Cooks and Fishers were once workers. They act the part of workers even now. But in reality they are only agents of the financial plutocracy in the camp of the workers.

The caste of the “leaders” here appears quite openly as a unique type of job trust for functionaries. The Labor Party as such comes to the surface only during parliamentary elections. Once the elections are over, the party disappears again for three whole years. The party conventions are only conventions of party functionaries. They are not in any sense composed of real representatives of the mass of labour. The party leader is elected by the convention and functions as such until the next election at the succeeding convention. If the party gets a majority in parliament, the leader becomes prime minister and forms a “Labor ministry”. The powers of this leader are almost unlimited. It went so far that the “Labor” minister of New South Wales, Holman (a former carpenter), proposed at the party conference of 1915 that the leader be given the power to change the *program of the party* at his own discretion, if this should be necessary for its “salvation”. We have recently had quite a striking example of the means whereby Fisher, Holman and Company “save” the party. These leaders have proved to be the worst sort of chauvinists. The majority of the workers pronounced themselves against the introduction of conscription in Australia. But Fisher and his friends continue to represent the views of the bourgeoisie.⁴

Prime Minister Andrew Fisher’s federal ALP government, which came to office in 1910, proved its value to the capitalist class as a whole by standing apart from the more short-sighted capitalist factions. It set up the Commonwealth Bank and stopped the private banks issuing their own currencies.

The Fisher Labor government also commenced building the Transcontinental Railway to help unify the nation, and introduced compulsory military training for

youth over the age of 14. When the Fisher government fell in 1913, Vladimir Lenin, leader of the Russian Bolsheviks, wrote:

What sort of peculiar capitalist country is this, in which the workers' representatives predominate in the upper house, and until recently did so in the lower house as well, and yet the capitalist system is in no danger?

The Australian Labor Party does not even call itself a socialist party. Actually it is a liberal bourgeois party, while the so-called Liberals are really conservatives.

Capitalism in Australia is still quite youthful. The country is only just taking shape as an independent state. The workers are for the most part emigrants from Britain. They left when the British workers were ... Liberals ...

In Australia, the Labor Party is the unalloyed representative of the nonsocialist workers' trade unions.

The leaders of the Australian Labor Party are trade union officials, everywhere the most moderate and "capital-serving" element, and in Australia, altogether peaceable, purely liberal.

In Australia, the Labor Party has done what in other countries was done by the Liberals, namely introduced a uniform tariff for the whole country, a uniform land tax and uniform factory legislation ...⁵

Thus, even before the great split in the social-democratic Second International at the beginning of the first world war, Lenin regarded the ALP as fundamentally a capitalist party, representing above all the conservative, procapitalist layer of officials at the head of the union movement.

Social base of labour reformism

The conservative role of social-democracy around the world has its roots in the development and degeneration of the Labor and social-democratic parties in the period leading up to World War I.

Although the desertion of these parties from working-class internationalism with the declaration of war in August 1914 defined the end of the Second International as any kind of progressive force, the process of destruction had been occurring over a considerable period of time before that.

According to Lenin, in his 1916 work, "Imperialism and the Split in Socialism", the conversion of the Second International into a procapitalist formation had a social as well as ideological basis. The development of imperialism, as the highest stage of monopoly capitalism, created the objective conditions in which it was possible for opportunism to develop as a predominant force in the workers' movement in the advanced capitalist countries.

A resolution adopted by the founding congress of the Comintern (the Communist or Third International) in 1919 explained:

The general course of development had given the bourgeoisie in the wealthiest countries the opportunity to tempt and buy off the upper layers of the working class — the labour aristocracy — with crumbs from its enormous profits. The petty-bourgeois “fellow-travellers” of socialism swelled the ranks of the official social-democratic parties and gradually altered their policies in a bourgeois direction.

From the leaders of the peaceable labour movement, the heads of the trade unions, the secretaries, editors and officials of social-democracy there developed a caste — a labour bureaucracy with its own selfish group interests, essentially hostile to socialism.⁶ Lenin, in his “Theses on the Fundamental Tasks of the Second Congress of the Communist International”, further expanded on the origins and role of this layer:

... One of the chief causes hampering the revolutionary working-class movement in the developed capitalist countries is the fact that because of their colonial possessions and the super-profits gained by finance capital, etc., the capitalists of these countries have been able to create a relatively larger and more stable labour aristocracy, a section which comprises a small minority of the working class. This minority enjoys better terms of employment and is most imbued with a narrow-minded craft spirit and with petty-bourgeois and imperialist prejudices. It forms the real social pillar of the Second International, of the reformists and the “centrists”; at present it might even be called the social mainstay of the bourgeoisie. No preparation of the proletariat for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie is possible, even in the preliminary sense, unless an immediate, systematic, extensive and open struggle is waged against this stratum ...⁷

The different British settler states that formed Australia had shared in the British Empire’s superprofits from the exploitation of its Asian colonies. These superprofits enabled the emerging independent Australian capitalist class to convert accidental divisions within the working class into more lasting ones — to foster an aristocracy of labour among the better-paid, skilled sections of the working class.

Basing themselves on these workers, a conservative layer of officials consolidated at the head of the unions. The union bureaucracy sought to harmonise the interests of labour and capital, which meant in reality supporting the social status quo.

In government, the ALP has always acted within the limits imposed by the institutions of the capitalist state — its parliamentary system, courts, army, police and civil bureaucracy. ALP governments have defended capitalist property relations and worked unashamedly to create the most favourable conditions for the accumulation of capitalist profits.

Parallels with Britain

The development of the ALP and Laborism in Australia has a parallel, if variant, path with the origins of the British Labour Party. And this development falls within the general sphere of the rise and degeneration of social-democracy on an international plane.

In his important article, “Imperialism and the Split in Socialism”, written in 1916 at the height of World War I, Lenin analysed the material basis for the opportunist trend in Britain and the degeneration of European social-democracy in general, culminating in the betrayal of working-class interests by all the major social-democratic parties in 1914.

“Is there any connection between imperialism and the monstrous and disgusting victory opportunism (in the form of social-chauvinism) has gained over the labour movement in Europe?” Lenin asked. “This is the fundamental question of modern socialism.”

Lenin sought the origins of this historic split in the international socialist movement by returning to the writings of Marx and Engels:

These two trends, one might even say *two* parties, in the present-day labour movement, which in 1914-16 so obviously parted ways all over the world, were *traced by Engels and Marx in England* throughout the course of *decades*, roughly from 1858 to 1892.

Neither Marx nor Engels lived to see the imperialist epoch of world capitalism, which began not earlier than 1898-1900. But it has been a peculiar feature of England that even in the middle of the 19th century she already revealed at least *two* major distinguishing features of imperialism: (1) vast colonies, and (2) monopoly profit (due to her monopoly position in the world market). In both respects England at that time was an exception among capitalist countries, and Engels and Marx, analysing this exception, quite clearly and definitely indicated its *connection* with the (temporary) victory of opportunism in the English labour movement.

In a letter to Marx, dated October 7, 1858, Engels wrote:

“... the English proletariat is actually becoming more and more bourgeois, so that

this most bourgeois of all nations is apparently aiming ultimately at the possession of a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat *alongside* the bourgeoisie.”

... In a letter to Kautsky, dated September 12, 1882, Engels wrote:

“You ask me what the English workers think about colonial policy. Well, exactly the same as they think about politics in general. There is no workers’ party here, there are only Conservatives and Liberal-Radicals, and the workers gaily share the feast of England’s monopoly of the world market and the colonies.” ...

[Engels wrote to Sorge on] September 14, 1891: at the Newcastle Trade Union Congress the old unionists, opponents of the eight-hour day, were defeated “and the bourgeois papers recognise the defeat of the *bourgeois labour party*.” ...

That these ideas, which were repeated by Engels over the course of decades, were also expressed by him publicly, in the press, is proved by his preface to the second edition of *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, 1892. Here he speaks of an “aristocracy among the working class”, of a “privileged minority of workers”, in contradistinction to the “great mass of working people”. “A small, privileged, protected minority” of the working class alone was “permanently benefited” by the privileged position of England in 1848-68; whereas “the great bulk of them experienced at best but a temporary improvement” ... “With the breakdown of that [England’s industrial] monopoly, the English working class will lose that privileged position ...” The members of the “new” unions, the unions of the unskilled workers, “had this immense advantage, that their minds were virgin soil, entirely free from the inherited ‘respectable’ bourgeois prejudices which hampered the brains of the better situated ‘old unionists’” ... “The so-called workers’ representatives” in England are people “who are forgiven their being members of the working class because they themselves would like to drown their quality of being workers in the ocean of their liberalism”.¹

Party ‘fit for imperialism’

In his revealing book, *Labour: A Party Fit for Imperialism*, Robert Clough clearly analyses the background to the formation of the British Labour Party in the development of the labour movement within the unique conditions of British capitalism from the mid-19th century onwards:

The final defeat of Chartism in 1848 ushered in a period during which British capitalism held unchallenged sway throughout the world. From 1850 to 1875 British capitalism, with the markets of the world under its domination, rapidly expanded and was able to relax the extreme pressure [on the workers’ movement] which had been ever present in the 1830s and 1840s. Wages rose and conditions improved especially for the skilled craftsmen who more and more assumed the leadership of the working class. These

privileged workers turned aside from Chartism to build up their craft unions and cooperative societies. [According to G.D.H. Cole] “The spirit of rebellion died and proposals for radical reconstruction of society were brushed aside.”

During the third quarter of the century, annual rates of expansion averaged 2-3%, although the increase in productivity was much greater. So, while wages as a share of national income declined, real wages rose substantially — perhaps by as much as a third. By far the greater part of these increases accrued to a privileged stratum of skilled workers and craftsmen — the labour aristocracy. This stratum, some 10-15% of the working class, earned a weekly wage approximately double that of unskilled workers. It organised itself into unions which for the first time had a trained staff of full time officials, with high subscriptions providing for a range of friendly benefits such as unemployment and sickness benefit. Such unions carried out trade practices which hinged on preventing unskilled workers from getting into the trade ...

The labour aristocracy was building for itself a stake within the capitalist system, a fact which soon found political expression.²

While sections of the trade union leadership played a significant role alongside Marx and Engels in the establishment of the First International (the International Working Men’s Association), they were often in conflict.

The International was a major force behind the establishment of the Reform League — which was formed in 1865 to agitate on two demands of the original Charter — universal male suffrage and the secret ballot. Despite the influence of Marx and Engels, the trade union leaders on the standing committee of the Reform League made serious compromises with the liberal bourgeoisie.

In 1866 and 1867, Liberal politicians and manufacturers made large donations to the league. In return, the league watered down its demand for male suffrage with the phrase “registered and residential”, thus deliberately excluding the large mass of labourers, casual workers and the unemployed.

The trade union leaders then, in exchange for payments, mobilised the working class vote behind the Liberals in the 1868 General Elections. Marx commented at the time on the “so-called leaders of the English workers” who “are more or less bribed by the bourgeoisie and the government”.

This political division was revealed again over the Irish question, when Marx defended the Irish nationalist Fenian movement within the International in 1869 and condemned Liberal Prime Minister Gladstone for his brutal policies and hypocrisy in Ireland. English union leaders opposed Marx and defended Gladstone, while three unions resigned from the International. Despite this, the International was able to organise huge demonstrations in support of Fenian prisoners. As Engels noted later,

“the masses are for the Irish. The organisations and labour aristocracy follow Gladstone and the liberal bourgeoisie.”³

The strength of British capitalism allowed the bourgeoisie to make concessions to the working class without threatening its economic or political power, and the labour aristocracy was only too happy to accept. In 1874, Engels summarised the development: “Wherever the workers lately took part in general politics in particular organisations they did so almost exclusively as the extreme left wing of the ‘Great Liberal Party’ ... In order to get into Parliament the ‘Labour leaders’ had recourse, in the first place, to the votes and money of the bourgeoisie and only in the second place to the votes of the workers themselves. But by doing so they ceased to be workers’ candidates and turned themselves into bourgeois candidates.”⁴

As noted in Lenin’s analysis quoted earlier, Britain’s monopoly industrial position disappeared forever in the last quarter of the 19th century, faced with the rising challenge of Germany, France and the United States. Nevertheless, Britain possessed a vast empire, to which major additions were made in the 1880s and 1890s. The plunder from this empire was to act as a cushion protecting British capitalism from the full impact of the new competition.

In this context, reformism and opportunism consolidated in England in that period. Britain’s colonial dominance allowed it by and large to continue to maintain the conditions of the labour aristocracy through the final decades of the century. Economic benefits were largely concentrated in this upper layer of the working class.

This period then was one of political stagnation. British imperialism could still afford to make concessions to the labour aristocracy, in return for which it expected, and usually got, social peace. The exceptions were the free speech demonstrations in London of the later 1880s, and the explosion of unskilled unionism in 1889-90, particularly among the dockers and gasworkers. Both these events drove sections of the working class into alliance with Marxists and revolutionaries; the fact that many of the dockers were Irish (and a large proportion of their strike committee as well) probably facilitated such a development. Not only would the craft unions with their Lib-Lab politics prove incapable of defending the mass of the working class, they were in fact utterly hostile to the revolutionary methods that the new unions used, especially during the [1889] dockers’ strike ...⁵

However, [the new unions’] alliance with the Marxists could not be sustained under the combined attack of the ruling class and its labour aristocrat allies, and within two to three years, the new unions had lost the majority of their members, falling from 300,000 in 1890 (25% of TUC [Trades Union Congress] membership) to 80,000 in 1896. By 1900 they constituted less than 10% of the membership of the TUC. They

began to ape the organisational and political methods of the old craft unions in order to preserve themselves, rejecting recruitment amongst the casual and unskilled labourers in favour of those in stable employment, for instance, municipal gasworkers. In other words, the new unions themselves became corrupted by the prevailing trend of opportunism.⁶

The Independent Labour Party & the Fabians

Following the passage of the 1867 Reform Act, some workers, mainly miners, had been elected to the British Parliament on a Liberal ticket. But under severe international competition, the Liberal capitalists who controlled the mining and cotton industries showed themselves to be just as ruthless as their Tory counterparts in other industries. And it was the defeat of a strike in the cotton industry in 1892 that led to the first organisational break in the Lib-Lab alliance — the formation of the Independent Labour Party (ILP).

Keir Hardie, who was the prime mover behind the founding conference in 1893, was in favour of organisational independence from Liberalism, but not political independence. Hence the conference rejected the name “Socialist Labor Party” in favor of “Independent Labour Party” because “they had to appeal to the vast mass of workers outside, and not only to Socialists” — in other words, to those skilled workers who possessed the vote but who were still quite happy with Liberalism. More than that, the name was a signal to the Liberals that there were no fundamental political disagreements between the two parties, at least none that might prevent them arriving at electoral agreements, open or otherwise.⁷

The main leaders of the ILP were also members of the Fabian Society; Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald included. While the main base of the ILP was the skilled working class, a sizeable section of its membership came from the professional middle class. Radical Liberalism had as much impact on the ILP as the Fabians, not just in organisational and political terms, but because they had links with wealthy donors whose contributions were crucial to the ILP at the turn of the century.

The Fabian Society, which was to prove so influential with both the ILP and the Labour Party, was an organisation of middle-class socialists formed in 1884, although of significance only from the late 1880s. Never numbering more than a few hundreds, it saw its purpose as primarily educational. It consciously rejected the class struggle; indeed, it held the working class in complete contempt, as one of its leading figures, Beatrice Webb, argued in 1895: “judging from our knowledge of the Labour movement we can expect no leader from the working class. Our only hope is in permeating the young middle-class man.” And: “What can we hope from these myriads of deficient

minds and deformed bodies that swarm our great cities — what can we hope but brutality, meanness and crime.”

Throughout the 1890s, Fabians, the ILP and radical Liberals were to establish a close alliance through the experience of municipal socialism ... This meant that middle-class socialism was to play a vital role in formulating the political standpoint of the Labour Party.⁸

The early response of the craft unions to the ILP was one of hostility. The 1895 TUC Congress approved a number of measures to isolate it.

However, the pressure on British industry from the 1890s onwards forced a number of confrontations in which the unions suffered significant defeats. The Lib-Lab alliance was no longer sufficient to defend the interests of the craft unions, and the 1899 TUC therefore voted to convene a conference to set up a Labour Representation Committee (LRC).

The founding LRC conference was held in February 1900. Delegates came from 65 unions with 568,000 members, and from political organisations such as the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), the ILP and the Fabians.

The interests of the labour aristocracy dominated the proceedings: an SDF proposal that there be a “party organisation separate from the capitalist parties based upon a recognition of the class war” was dismissed out of hand in favour of Hardie’s formulation ... that “this conference is in favour of working class opinion being represented in the House of Commons by men sympathetic with the aims and demands of the Labour movement”, passed by 102 votes to three. Such representatives were “to form their own distinctive labour group and act in harmony with its decisions”. In other words, the Committee was to be first and foremost a parliamentary body.⁹

According to Tom Nairn, writing on “The Nature of the Labour Party”, in the celebrated *New Left Review* book, *Towards Socialism*, published in 1965, the British labour movement was historically dominated by nonrevolutionary elements.

Both major currents which made up the original Labour Party “accepted — the Fabians by conviction, the ILP socialists for want of an alternative — the *evolutionary* character of socialism. Socialism had to be constructed piece by piece, over a long period of time ...”

The logical consequence of evolutionism was, in concrete terms, parliamentarism ...

The common subjection to these ideas, and to this fatal context of political action signified the permanent hegemony of Fabianism. The Fabians were the technicians of reform — the perhaps the most able reformers of this kind produced by socialism in any country ...

... In the Labour Party, Fabianism became the dominant, right-wing leadership

tradition, the source of the ideas governing most of the action of the party ... The ILP became the Labour left wing, in chronic instinctive protest against the leadership, but intellectually subordinated to it and incapable of effectively replacing it. Labourism, therefore, acquired from the beginning a *peculiarly weak left*.¹⁰

The British Labour experience, while different from the development of the Labor Party in Australia, has significant similarities. While the Labor parties in the Australian colonies were founded earlier, and became a successful parliamentary force in both the states and federally, much sooner than the British Labour Party, their political trajectory and social base had much in common.

As a white settler-state outpost of the British empire, Australia fully benefited from the super-exploitation of England's colonies. At the same time, the advantages of an expanding economy, abundant natural resources and land, the wealth gained from the gold rushes of the 1850s onwards, and a chronic labour shortage, which pushed real wage levels much higher than in the English homeland, meant that the Australian working class achieved living standards considerably above the comparable sectors of the English workers.

Thus the white Australian population in general, and the best-off sections of workers in particular, gained from the monopoly status of British colonial power in the 19th century. Moreover, members of the Old Unionism (traditional craft unions) maintained a relatively privileged position in Australia compared to the unskilled labourers of the New Unionism.

Insofar as the ALP developed an official theoretical base, it was similar to, and influenced by, the British Fabians. And the sidelining of the original "state socialists" meant that the Labor left in Australia was weakened from early on — although the fortunes of the ALP left have waxed and waned over the course of the last century, along with fluctuations in the general class struggle.

"If it (the Australian Labor Party) can be labelled at all as socialistic, it is with a Fabian or reformist label. Its policy in the past has been a gradual striving after nationalisation and state socialism, with whatever instalments and palliatives it can obtain in the process", G.V. Portus observed.¹¹

'Bourgeois labour parties'

Lenin, in "Imperialism and the Split in Socialism", went on to explain the general character of the "bourgeois labour parties" (or social-democratic parties) established in the great majority of advanced capitalist countries — just as in Britain and Australia:

The bourgeoisie of an imperialist "great" power *can economically* bribe the upper strata of "its" workers by spending on this a hundred million or so francs a year, for its

superprofits most likely amount to about a thousand million. And how this little sop is divided among the labour ministers, “labour representatives” (remember Engels’ splendid analysis of the term), labour members of war industries committees, labour officials, workers belonging to the narrow craft unions, office employees, etc., etc., is a secondary question ...

The last third of the 19th century saw the transition to the new, imperialist era. Finance capital *not* of one, but of several, though very few, great powers enjoys a monopoly ... It was possible in those days to bribe and corrupt the working class of *one* country for decades. This is now improbable, if now impossible. But on the other hand, *every* imperialist “great” power can and does bribe *smaller* strata (than in England in 1848-68) of the “labour aristocracy”. Formerly a “*bourgeois labour party*”, to use Engels’ remarkably profound expression, could arise only in one country, because it alone enjoyed a monopoly, but, on the other hand, it could exist for a long time. Now a “*bourgeois labour party*” is *inevitable* and typical in *all* imperialist countries; but in view of the desperate struggle they are waging for the division of the spoils, it is improbable that such a party can prevail for long in a number of countries ...

... In *all* countries, the bourgeoisie has already begotten, fostered and secured for itself “bourgeois labour parties” of social-chauvinists ... The important thing is that, economically, the desertion of a stratum of the labour aristocracy to the bourgeoisie has matured and become an accomplished fact; and this economic fact, this shift in class relations, will find political form, in one shape or another, without any particular “difficulty”.

On the economic basis referred to above, the political institutions of modern capitalism — press, parliament, associations, congresses, etc. — created *political* privileges and sops for the respectful, meek, reformist and patriotic office employees and workers, corresponding to the economic privileges and sops. Lucrative and soft jobs in the government or the war industries committees, in parliament and on diverse committees, on the editorial staffs of “respectable”, legally published newspapers or on the management councils of no less respectable and “bourgeois law-abiding” trade unions — this is the bait by which the imperialist bourgeoisie attracts and rewards the representatives and supporters of the “bourgeois labour parties”.

The mechanics of political democracy works in the same direction. Nothing in our times can be done without elections; nothing can be done without the masses. And in this era of printing and parliamentarism it is *impossible* to gain the following of the masses without a widely ramified, systematically managed, well-equipped system of flattery, lies, fraud, juggling with fashionable and popular catchwords, and promising all manner of reforms and blessings to the workers right and left — as long as they

renounce the revolutionary struggle for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie ...

The fact is that “bourgeois labour parties”, as a political phenomenon, have already been formed in all the foremost capitalist countries, and that unless a determined and relentless struggle is waged all along the line against these parties — or groups, trends, etc., it is all the same — there can be no question of a struggle against imperialism, or of Marxism, or of a socialist labour movement ... There is not the slightest reason for thinking that these parties will disappear *before* the social revolution ...

The only Marxist line in the world labour movement is to explain to the masses the inevitability and necessity of breaking with opportunism, to educate them for revolution by waging a relentless struggle against opportunism, to utilise the experiences of the war to expose, not conceal, the utter vileness of national-liberal labour politics.¹²

In his report on “The Tasks of the Third International” to the 1919 Congress of the Comintern, Lenin further denounced the pernicious role of the postwar successor to the Second International, the social-democratic so-called Socialist International founded in Berne, Switzerland, that year. Lenin condemned the role of Ramsay MacDonald, British Labour leader and mouthpiece for Fabianism, as the international figurehead of this revived “yellow International”.

He identified this combination of social-democracy and Labourism as “an organisation of agents of international imperialism operating within the labour movement” — a critique which remains essentially accurate to this day:

“Fabian imperialism” and “social-imperialism” are one and the same thing: socialism in words, imperialism in deeds, *the growth of opportunism into imperialism*. This has now become, during the war of 1914-18 and since, a *universal* fact. The failure to understand it shows the great blindness of the Berne yellow International, and is its great crime. Opportunism, or reformism, inevitably had to grow into a phenomenon of worldwide importance, *socialist imperialism*, or social-chauvinism, because imperialism brought to the fore a handful of very rich, advanced nations, engaged in plundering the whole world, and thereby enabled the bourgeoisie of those countries, out of their monopolist superprofits (imperialism is monopoly capitalism), *to bribe the upper strata of the working class ...*

... the Berne International is in fact, from the angle of its real historical and political role, and irrespective of the goodwill and pious wishes of particular members of it, *an organisation of agents of international imperialism* operating *within* the labour movement, permeating *that movement* with bourgeois influence, bourgeois ideas, bourgeois lies, and bourgeois corruption.¹³

Furthermore, in his speech to the Second Congress of the Comintern on “Affiliation to the British Labour Party”, Lenin characterised this formation as a “thoroughly

bourgeois party”:

... Of course, most the Labour Party’s members are workingmen. However, whether or not a party is really a political party of the workers does not depend solely upon a membership of workers but also upon the men that lead it, and the content of its actions and its political tactics. Only this latter determines whether we really have before us a political party of the proletariat. Regarded from this, the only correct, point of view, the Labour Party is a thoroughly bourgeois party, because although made up of workers, it is led by reactionaries and the worst kind of reactionaries at that, who act quite in the spirit of the bourgeoisie. It is an organisation of the bourgeoisie, which exists to systematically dupe the workers with the aid of the British Noskes and Scheidemanns [the counter-revolutionary leaders of German social-democracy at the end of World War I].¹⁴

Considering the despicable role of British Labour PM Tony Blair today in collaborating with US Republican President George Bush in leading his party and the world into the imperialist onslaught in Iraq, we can see that nothing much has changed in the decades since then. The fundamental nature of these Labour and socialist parties is to defend the capitalist system to the hilt, and to act by any means necessary to prevent any militant or socialist outbreak among the working class which they seek to control, “quite in the spirit of the bourgeoisie”.

A New Britannia

The idea of the government getting into power, as is sometimes said, and then taking advantage of the fact that they are in power to do all sorts of revolutionary and impossible things never occurs to the Labor man in Australia.

— John Storey, New South Wales ALP Premier, 1920.

The above quote introduces the chapter on “Laborites” in Humphrey McQueen’s pathbreaking book, *A New Britannia*, originally published in 1970. McQueen’s book struck like a bolt of lightning in the field of Australian labour history when it was first issued.

McQueen rejected the traditional left view of the history of the labour movement, as epitomised in Russell Ward’s *The Australian Legend*, which promoted the link between the growth of a radical national identity, from the convict period onwards, with the development of the labour movement in general.

“Racism was the most important single component of Australian nationalism. It is in their discussion of racism that the radical historians have failed most seriously because they attempt to minimise its significance even when, like Robin Gollan [in *Radical and Working Class Politics*], they are painfully aware how widespread was its influence”, McQueen writes.¹

He later notes:

... The social phenomenon of Laborism is precisely the product of the peculiar position which Australasia occupied in British capitalism. In the field of international relations, Labor was in the forefront of the clamour for white supremacy, which in turn led the ALP into militarism ...

The appearance of Laborism as a distinctive political form in the 1890s was by no means a break with the past. In every respect it was a fulfilment of what had gone before. The Labor parties carried these social forces through into actual programs in both foreign and domestic policy. Labor was by no means a passive vehicle for these forces: it was their active protagonist.²

Outgrowth of liberalism

Discussing the origins of the Labor Party, McQueen writes:

The popular explanation of the foundation of the Labor Party follows the account given by one of the participants, George Black, in the *History of the NSW Labor Party*: “The New South Wales Labor Party in 1891 was the creation of the maritime strike. The workers then discovered that the strike was an expensive and largely futile method of obtaining reforms.”

This passage was not a comment on the birth of the Labor Party at all. Rather it was another example of the rejection of strikes by the people who formed the Labor Party. It confirms our view of their attitudes without telling us anything about the actual order of events.

Instead of seeing the Labor parties as the result of unions’ expulsion from the mainstream of Australian life, the parliamentary organisations should be viewed as the upshot of the unions’ growing confidence within the social system and acceptance by society at large ...

While no single year, such as 1890, can be identified as a turning point for the labour movement in Australia, the Labor parties were not merely the organised expression of a set of previous demands for better wages, shorter hours, a state bank and the break-up of the big estates. In the very act of their coagulation, the forces calling for these policies began to undergo the vital metamorphosis from protest groups into a political party which sought what it perceived as power within Australian society. Each colony-state proceeded at its own pace, though after 1901 all were accelerated by the fortunes of the Federal Labor Party.

As outgrowths of the old liberalism, the Labor parties retained much of its ideological architecture and were consequently greatly influenced by the belief that the British constitution abhors classes. Conservatives used this argument against any form of direct class representation and opposed Labor parties *per se*. By the 1880s, this view held little sway over the Australian labouring classes who were becoming certain that “class interests needed class sympathies to fight for them”. In this belief they had the support of most liberals: labour should return its own members who, with the wisdom that comes with experience, could be taken into Liberal ministries. Direct class representation did not justify direct class rule ...

The inheritance of class passivity which dominated the Australian labour movement before 1890 meant that even when it was directly and openly assaulted by the state during the strikes of 1890-94, its overwhelming response was to recapture this past. The state had been temporarily seized by the capitalists and what it required was a return to neutrality ...

Given the experience of the Australian labouring classes in the 19th century this redirection was not too difficult. By the time proletarian consciousness gained strength in the early years of this century, the Labor Party had secured its organisational tribunate with which it repelled or absorbed proletarian protest. Moreover, there were certain demands which, while dear to the hearts of the labourers, were concerned with the fate of Australian society in general. Foremost among these was the “White Australia” policy ...

An important factor in Labor’s assumption of its “national” role was the experience of being in office. This learning initially took place in some form of coalition, so that the electorate and the party could have time to adjust to the altered position ...

... It was to take longer periods in office in their own right to complete Labor’s transformation from a pressure group to an ark of the national covenant. Of course, the Labor Party was convinced of this role long before the electorate. In November 1903 the Victorian Labor weekly, *Tocsin*, proclaimed that “the word ‘Labor’ is synonymous with ‘Australian’ ... without a Labor Party nationality is practically impossible.” It went on to present the consequences:

“The Labor Party is the national party; therefore it cannot be the representative of any coterie or clique. The Labor Party stands for all Australians. Its ideas and aspirations are as wide and expansive as the seas that wash the Australian shores.” ...

In his discussion of the British Labour Party, Ralph Miliband points out that it “has not only been a parliamentary party; it has been a party deeply imbued by parliamentarism”. This situation applies equally to the ALP but with a vital addition: not only has the ALP rigorously confined itself to parliamentary activity and opposed industrial action to gain industrial ends. At every level, and for every demand, it has sought to circumscribe mass pressures within the organisational structures of the state. This integration it has called socialism ...

... The ALP is the highest expression of a peculiarly Australian petit-bourgeoisie whose origins have been traced above. The unionists and others who have found it necessary to oppose the Labor Party are indicative of a difference class, of a proletariat. It is this class which can have no solution to its problems other than the establishment of a communist society.³

‘Monopolising capitals’

In his afterword to the 1986 third edition of *A New Britannia*, McQueen updated and partially revised his analysis of the origins of the ALP. In particular, he attempted to provide a firmer balance between subjective and objective forces influencing the development of Labor in the context of the history of Australian capitalism and the

working-class movement.

He writes:

The argument in *A New Britannia* went like this: from the convicts of the 1780s through to the unionists of the 1890s, there had been a mounting experience in Australia of individual advancement and racial hatred. Those social forces combined in the Labor Party which, therefore, could never be a socialist organisation. In short, a hundred years of history had set the nature of the new body before its birth ...

A New Britannia drew heavily on [particular] ideas of Marx, Lenin and Lukacs. I argued that instead of a revolutionary socialist consciousness, 19th-century Australia had produced the false consciousness of racism, chauvinism and dreams of escape into landed proprietorship. The Labor Party gave organised expression to these propositions.

Some fancy footwork was needed to explain how the false had triumphed over the true. My answer was to deny that there had been a proletariat in 19th-century Australia at all; if there were no proletariat, then there could be no true consciousness. That explanation might be of interest to an historian of ideas. As an account of what happened, it is ridiculous ...

In 1970, I explained the nonsocialist and nonrevolutionary nature of the Labor Party by referring to Australia's labouring people as a peculiar kind of petit-bourgeoisie. Peculiar was the right word for my definition which combined rising aspirations with the bountifulness of material conditions ...

... In the closing decades of the 19th century, capitalism entered its monopolising phase. *A New Britannia* attempted to explain the appearance of the Labor Party without acknowledging that the whole system was also being reshaped.⁴

McQueen goes on to explain that he uses the term "monopolising capitals" to denote the new stage of capitalism, analysed by Lenin as imperialism or monopoly capitalism. This stage involved the concentration of capital, including the banks, into gigantic cartels, trusts and combines, now known as multinational corporations, and the extension of control by the major capitalist states over the colonial world.

Such changes established the grounds for a regrouping within the labouring people. Monopolising capitals could not produce a Labor Party directly. That outcome had to be achieved at the reformation of labour markets and an extension of state activities ...

... Far from being a deliberate device created by the ruling strata, the Labor parties came into existence to oppose the interests of monopolisers. The initial burst of political activism, around 1889-93, was a reaction by diverse smaller interests against a variety of capitalist combinations, but was especially roused by the linking of banks with pastoral companies, a tendency which became more menacing during the next decade.

Instead of isolating the emerging Labor parties from these simultaneous

developments, the ALP needs to be analysed as yet another outcome of the rearrangements brought on by a growth of the mass market state. The entire Labor movement consolidated itself around that state: the party with the establishment of Federation, the unions through the arbitration systems.⁵

The most appropriate solution to McQueen's dilemma regarding use of the term "peculiar kind of petit-bourgeoisie" to refer to the Australian working people, in the original text of *A New Britannia*, is to use instead Marx, Engels and Lenin's category "labour aristocracy" to define the main force involved in the rise of the Labor Party.

In the final instance, despite the influential role of "state socialists" in its early formation period, the Australian Labor Party became, by the start of the 20th century, a liberal-capitalist party *sui generis* — a reformist, thoroughly parliamentarist party, of a special kind, based on the labour aristocracy and the trade union bureaucracy

It is in this context, that McQueen's analysis of the link between the development of imperialism (monopolising capitals) and the role of the Labor Party in integrating the working class into the Australian nation-state becomes crucial.

As Gollan notes, coming from a somewhat different starting point:

The Labor Party grew to maturity while these important changes ["new protection", regulation of industry, social service legislation, and industrial arbitration, as well as Australian nationalism and the White Australia policy] were being made in the function of the state. The existence of the Labor Party was partly responsible for them, since in the main the changes were carried through by parliamentary alliances of the Labor Party with liberals. Because of its relatively greater unity, the Labor Party was often the decisive factor in having such policies adopted, but it was not usually the initiator of such legislation. During this period the Labor Party was finding a policy, and it found it in the course of its parliamentary experience, frequently adopting as its own ideas that had been developed by middle-class liberals. Policies were hammered out under the pressure of making practical political decisions. Inevitably, because it was not directed by any coherent political theory, it became a party of practical politics, suspicious of theory and increasingly alienated from the militant trade unionism and idealist socialism that had given it birth. As its policy thus took shape there was conflict within the party and between it and the industrial movement, but by 1910 the Labor Party had become firmly established as a party with a liberal rather than a socialist theory. The Labor Party grew out of a movement that was implicitly directed against the basis of the capitalist system, but it became a party whose function was to modify the capitalist system and make it acceptable to the movement of which it was part.⁶

The struggle between militant and socialist sections of the trade union movement and the Labor Party has continued in one form or another over the past century. It is on

the rise again today, as a new generation of workers and class-struggle union leaders challenge the hegemony of ALP reformism and class-collaboration within the Australian labour movement.

Summary

1. The origins of the Australian Labor Party were primarily from the organised trade union movement, but also from some rural and middle-class sectors, and some small business-owners.
2. Early experiments at labour parliamentary representation go back to Charles Don in Collingwood, Melbourne, in 1856, arising out of the eight-hour working day movement. For a couple of decades after that the political organisation of the mainly craft unions was haphazard.
3. The rise of the New Unionism movement, based mainly among the unskilled and, especially rural, working class, gave impetus to a growing political organisation and class consciousness in the 1880s.
4. The Maritime and Shearers' Strikes of the early 1890s galvanised the class struggle in Australia, and polarised both the employers and the workers into greater organisation. The defeat of these strikes accelerated the formation of the early Labor Party organisations in the various colonies.
5. Socialists, particularly from the Australian Socialist League, played a key role in the early foundation of the Labor parties, under the general slogan of Socialism In Our Time, especially in NSW and Queensland. Although their ideology varied from state socialism to utopian communitarianism, they were united in the belief that capitalism was doomed and that a form of socialism was inevitable.
6. Some union and socialist leaders, such as William Lane, after playing a central role in the 1890s strike struggles, became rapidly disillusioned, and headed down the blind alley of utopian socialism. Lane led his followers to the hopeless experiment of New Australia in Paraguay.
7. Other socialists in the ASL and similar organisations attempted to win the developing Labor parties to a socialist perspective – but were rapidly overwhelmed by the electoralist and careerist trajectory of parliamentarians and trade union officials. These state socialists, in general, did not have a clear class understanding that parliament could not be transformed into an “instrument to be wielded by

the workers in their own interests” (to paraphrase Karl Marx) — but rather remained a key institution of the capitalist state — despite the best intentions of these socialist co-founders of the Labor Party.

8. The ASL finally realised the futility of attempting to change the ALP into a socialist party, and split from it in 1898, to form the Socialist Labor Party. The SLP contested elections against the ALP in the early 1900s, with limited success, and eventually ossified into an isolated sect.
9. Other socialist organisations, such as the Victorian Socialist Party, flowered in the mid to late 1900s, prior to World War I, but were later overwhelmed by the explosive development of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) — based on a militant, class-struggle socialist perspective. The IWW launched the biggest industrial and political challenge to the ALP of any left party in Australian history, prior to the Communist Party. Although that challenge ultimately failed, it left an indelible mark on the Australian labour movement to this day.
10. By the early 1900s, the ALP was firmly set on its course as a reformist, electoralist formation, dominated by parliamentarians and the trade union bureaucracy.
11. The predominant ideology of the ALP was, and still is, Laborism — class-collaborationism. The Labor Party played a critical role in the incorporation of the workers’ movement into the federation of the Australian colonies at the beginning of the 20th century. This involved the integration of the labour movement into the framework of the “national interest”, via support for protectionism, nationalism, industrial arbitration and the White Australia policy.
12. Lenin accurately described the Australian Labor Party in 1913 as a “liberal capitalist party” — whose initial role was to unify the country, and to carry out nation-building reforms which the old capitalist parties were unable to undertake.
13. In his 1916 analysis of “Imperialism and the Split in Socialism”, Lenin pointed out, following the observations of Marx and Engels, that the English working class of the 19th century had already become divided by the development of a “labour aristocracy” — based on the provision of relatively higher wages and privileges, as a result of the British ruling class’s monopoly of superprofits from exploitation of its colonies. This had the flow-on effect of conservatising the dominant sector of the trade union movement in England.
14. The better-off sections of the Australian working class, as co-beneficiaries of British colonial hegemony, in addition to the relative advantages of a chronic labour shortage and a rapidly growing economy, experienced even greater relative privilege as inhabitants of an outpost of empire, than their British colleagues. This provided the objective basis for the development of an Australian Labor Party founded on

class-collaborationism and the ideology of Laborism.

15. Just as the British Labour Party developed as successor to the British Liberals, as the reform party of capitalism in that country, with the backing of the majority of the British working class, so the ALP took over the mantle of Australian reformism from the various liberal parties and MPs of the Australian colonial parliaments. The special character of the Labor parties — as distinct from traditional liberals — is their domination by the trade union bureaucracy, and their structural links to the organised workers' movement.
16. In this respect, contrary to the traditional “Trotskyist” analysis of the British-style Labour Parties as fundamentally workers' parties, with procapitalist leaderships, these Labour Parties are essentially liberal capitalist parties, with the difference that they are instruments of the trade union bureaucracy rather than the direct representatives of the liberal bourgeoisie.
17. As an aside, it is useful to query the longstanding left analysis in Australia that the ALP is qualitatively different from, for example, the US Democratic Party, because of the historic direct link between the Australian union movement and the ALP, and the lack of such formal ties in the case of the US Democrats. In practice, despite the vastly different origins of the two parties, the US union bureaucracy has invariably backed the Democratic Party, and strong financial and political ties have developed over the course of a century. The difference between the ALP and the US Democrats is quantitative rather than qualitative in nature.
18. The social base for labour reformism, analysed by Lenin in 1916 in relation to the degeneration of the Second International as a whole, applies just as much to the ALP as to the British Labour Party, or the German, French or Italian Socialist Parties. Just as the socialist parties decisively failed the test of proletarian internationalism posed by the onset of interimperialist conflict in World War I, the ALP federal government of the time was just as chauvinistic. Labor Prime Minister Andrew Fisher declared in August 1914 that Australia would “defend Britain to the last man and the last shilling”.
19. Since that time, the ALP has been the Australian capitalist class's alternative party of government to the conservative parties (now the Liberals and Nationals), being entrusted with management of the state machinery in all of Australia's most serious crises in the 20th century — including two world wars.
20. Since the 1980s, the ALP has moved strongly to the right — implementing the Australian ruling class's neoliberal offensive under the leadership of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, from 1983 to 1996. This has been accompanied by a significant decline in the direct working-class base of the Labor Party — both in terms of

branch members and primary electoral support.

21. While the ALP retains its base in the trade union bureaucracy, it faces a serious and growing crisis of support from working people — with the Greens being the main electoral beneficiary at this stage.
22. The Labor Party can now be defined as a “liberal capitalist party” in relative terms only — with the Liberals under John Howard moving to the far right, and the whole mainstream political spectrum shifted dramatically in a rightward direction. Only in the final instance today can the ALP be regarded as the “lesser of two evils” in Australian mainstream politics.
23. Nevertheless, the purpose of clarifying the origins and nature of the ALP as a liberal capitalist party from early in its history is to understand that its recent headlong rush further to the right is relative and quantitative. The ALP has not been qualitatively transformed from a workers’ party into a capitalist party, but has continued its fundamental role as an agency of the ruling class within the workers’ movement.
24. The task of building a genuine working-class alternative — a socialist party — to eventually challenge the Labor Party for leadership of the Australian workers’ movement, is now more urgent than ever.

Appendix

In Australia

By V.I. Lenin

A general election recently took place in Australia. The Labor Party, which had a majority in the lower house — 44 seats out of 75 — was defeated. It now has only 36 seats out of 75. The majority has passed to the Liberals, but this majority is a very unstable one, because 30 of the 36 seats in the upper house are held by Labor.

What sort of peculiar capitalist country is this, in which the workers' representatives predominate in the *upper* house and, till recently, did so in the lower house as well, and yet the capitalist system is in no danger?

An English correspondent of the German labour press recently explained the situation, which is very often misrepresented by bourgeois writers.

The Australian Labor Party does not even call itself a socialist party. Actually it is a liberal-bourgeois party, while the so-called Liberals in Australia are really Conservatives.

This strange and incorrect use of terms in naming parties is not unique. In America, for example, the slaveowners of yesterday are called Democrats, and in France, enemies of socialism, petty bourgeois, are called Radical Socialists! In order to understand the real significance of parties, one must examine not their signboards but their class character and the historical, conditions of each individual country.

Australia is a young British colony.

Capitalism, in Australia is still quite youthful. The country is only just taking shape as an independent state. The workers are for the most part emigrants from Britain. They left the country at the time when the liberal-labour policy held almost undivided sway there, when the masses of the British workers were *Liberals*. Even now the majority of the skilled factory workers in Britain are Liberals or semi-Liberals. This is the result of the exceptionally favourable, monopolist position enjoyed by Britain in

the second half of the last century. Only now are the masses of the workers in Britain turning (but turning slowly) towards socialism.

And while in Britain the so called Labour Party is an *alliance* between the nonsocialist trade unions and the extremely opportunist Independent Labour Party, in Australia the Labor Party is the *unalloyed* representative of the nonsocialist workers' trade unions.

The leaders of the Australian Labor Party are trade union officials, everywhere the most moderate and "capital-serving" element, and in Australia, altogether peaceable, purely liberal.

The ties binding the separate states into a united Australia are still very weak. The Labor Party has had to concern itself with developing and strengthening these ties, and with establishing central government.

In Australia the Labor Party has done what in other countries was done by the Liberals, namely, introduced a uniform tariff for the whole country, a uniform educational law, a uniform land tax and uniform factory legislation.

Naturally, when Australia is finally developed and consolidated as an independent capitalist state, the condition of the workers will change, as also will the *liberal* Labor Party, which will make way for a *socialist* workers' party. Australia is an illustration of the conditions under which *exceptions* to the rule are possible. The rule is, a socialist workers' party in a capitalist country. The exception is: a liberal Labor Party which arises only for a short time by virtue of specific conditions that are abnormal for capitalism in general.

Those Liberals in Europe and in Russia who try to "teach" the people that class struggle is unnecessary by citing the example of Australia, only deceive themselves and others. It is ridiculous to think of transplanting Australian conditions (an undeveloped, young colony, populated by liberal British workers) to countries where the state is long established and capitalism well developed.

Notes

Beginnings

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- 4 Quoted in Robin Gollan, *Radical and Working Class Politics* (Melbourne University Press: Melbourne, 1967), p. 134.
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- 6 Churchward, p. 21.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 9 Quoted in Peter Conrick, "The Origins of the Labor Party", *Direct Action*, No. 33, December 21, 1972.
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- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.
- 16 Gollan, pp. 144-146.
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- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 129.
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 143-144.
- 20 Frank Bongiorno, *The People's Party: Victorian Labor and the Radical Tradition 1875-1914* (Melbourne University Press: Melbourne, 1996), pp. 135-136.
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- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.
- 4 J. Hagan, *The History of the ACTU* (Longman Cheshire: Melbourne, 1981), p. 14.
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- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 198-199.
- 7 Verity Burgmann, *In Our Time: Socialism and the Rise of Labor, 1885-1905* (George Allen & Unwin: Sydney, 1985), pp. 14-15.
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- 1 Metin, *Socialism Without Doctrine* 7 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
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1977), p. 54. 9 *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 2 Quoted in Gollan, p. 151. 10 Tom Nairn, "The nature of the Labour
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- 3 Quoted in Bongiorno, p. 6. 11 Quoted in Churchward, p. 30.
- 4 Grigory Zinoviev, "The Social Roots of
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Socialism", appendix to Lenin, *Imperialism,
the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, pp. 132-
136.
- 5 See appendix, this pamphlet.
- 6 Adler ed., *Theses, Resolutions & Manifestos
of the First Four Congresses of the
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- 7 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 31 (Progress
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- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 14-15.
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A new Britannia

- 1 Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia*
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revised edition), p. 29.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 233-234.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 234-251.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 253-257.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 261-264.
- 6 Gollan, p. 153.

The Australian Labor Party is the single biggest block to the development of the socialist movement in this country. It has held the great majority of the working class in the straitjacket of parliamentarist reformism for the last 100 years — although today this hold is increasingly being called into question.

Under the slogan ‘Socialism In Our Time’, radical and socialist elements played an important role in the initial push for a Labor Party, but were defeated by a combination of the parliamentarians and the trade union bureaucracy.

By the early 20th century the ALP had become entrenched as a reformist, parliamentarist party, accurately described by Lenin in 1913 as a ‘liberal capitalist party’ — a political agency of the capitalist class within the labour movement.

Yet despite the clear record of the past century and the ALP’s ever-more rightward trajectory today, some sections of the left continue to mistakenly regard Labor as some sort of workers’ party, albeit with a procapitalist leadership.

Jim McIlroy’s Marxist analysis of the ALP’s formation shines a bright light on the party’s real nature and helps illuminate the way forward for the socialist movement.

Resistance books