Labour and the politics of Empire

Britain and Australia
1900 to the present

NEVILLE KIRK

STUDIES IN IMPERIALISM

general editor John M. MacKenzie

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Labour and the politics of Empire

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BRITAIN AND AUSTRALIA 1900 TO THE PRESENT

Neville Kirk

I would like to dedicate this book to Kate, Bob and Ella Kirk
and the memory of Charlie Brown. They will be glad to know
that it is no longer 'almost finished'.

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GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

It is one of the enlivening characteristics of recent historical writing that historians are beginning to abandon the old, and very tired, framework of the individual nation-state. We are increasingly appreciating that history in and of one country is a great deal less illuminating than approaches that adopt a trans-national focus. This book constitutes a significant contribution to this new and exciting trend. Here Neville Kirk convincingly demonstrates that the history of the Labour/Labor parties in Britain and Australia, together with their search for and exercise of governmental power, can be considerably illuminated by being studied in parallel. Their origins were not dissimilar. The ideologies which inspired them and which they proceeded to adapt, sometimes severely, within a global context were closely related. Socialism, in all its variants, was by its nature an international political philosophy which socialist or labourist parties had to embrace in some national shape or form. The objectives of both parties, at least as defined in their political rhetoric, were in each case to create fairer societies in which workers (theoretically) exerted as much influence as the capitalist and other elites which imagined that they had a natural right to govern. Yet both had to adopt pragmatic approaches to specific circumstances, circumstances which embraced a mix of international and local dimensions. These necessitated adaptations which forced (it may be argued) significant elements of divergence as the twentieth century progressed. Moreover, both political systems seemed for some time to be inseparably connected through the imperial and Commonwealth networks of a British world system, one which progressively lost its European epicentre.

Kirk's purpose is also to demonstrate that conventional interpretations, based upon elements of class struggle and essentially domestic and national conditions, can be modified in the light of these comparative perspectives. Labour discourses were just as likely to run along the lines of issues of race, nation, patriotism and empire, as well as those of class, working conditions and standard-of-living issues. In all of these, Labour/Labor politicians were forced to respond to the issues of the day, not least to the manner in which they were framed by the other parties and politicians with whom they contested the search for electoral power within a democratic system. Moreover, there was always an international dimension. Such parties had to respond to issues of war and aggression, as in the First and Second World Wars, and to international ideological clashes, notably that between the supposedly free market and capitalist United States and communist Russia or China – with related local wars – and later to clashes involving militant, radical elements in Islam. Increasingly, as the twentieth century wore on and the possibility of nationalised means of production and related command economies in Anglophone countries progressively retreated, such parties also had to find

ways of responding to the pressures and dilemmas of running capitalist economies within international financial systems while still remaining true to some vestiges of their commitment to social justice.

The contexts in which these political, rhetorical and ideological battles were conducted changed over time. The conditions of the period before the First World War were very different from those of the so-called interwar years, and were again transformed in the era after the Second World War. Further change came in the developing circumstances of the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Moreover, the capacity of these parties – at opposite sides of the world – to respond to their problems and opportunities were also very different. Their successes came and went in a political cycle that was seldom in tandem. Yet they did set about learning from each other, particularly in the modern era. Each kept a close watch on the other's fortunes, not least on the manner in which they manipulated their respective electorates. Press 'barons' were held in common, raising the same issues of placating international power centres connected to the marketing of newspapers. It is indeed intriguing that in 2010 the political systems of both countries have produced coalitions, one without the Labour party, the other with.

Kirk has made an admirable start to the analysis of the fortunes of these two parties in settings that demonstrate both similarities and differences. This book is a major contribution to trans-national studies and the examination of Labour politics (or indeed any politics) across the British world. But the author would be the first to acknowledge that this is not the last word. More can yet be written about (for example) the responses of these two parties to developing decolonisation after the Second World War, to changing diplomatic relationships within a global system of nation-states, with the United Nations, with the new Asian 'tiger' economies, with the complexities of multi-cultural societies, with aspects of world-wide religious fundamentalism, and with the ever-changing, and often difficult to comprehend, politics of the United States, of the Middle East, of Africa and Latin America. Some of these are woven in and out of Kirk's assessments in fascinating and illuminating ways, but more can yet be written about all of them. But his book will be a starting point for all such future studies.

John M. MacKenzie

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACTU Australian Council of Trade Unions
ALP Australian Labor Party
ASIO Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation
ASU Anti-Socialist Union
AWNL Australian Women's National League
AWU Australian Workers' Union
BLP British Labour Party
BNP British National Party
CPA Communist Party of Australia
CPGB Communist Party of Great Britain
DLP Democratic Labor Party
EEC European Economic Community
GLC Greater London Council
GST Goods and Services Tax
ILP Independent Labour Party
IWW Industrial Workers of the World
LRC Labour Representation Committee
NEC National Executive Committee (of the Labour Party)
NHS National Health Service
NUM National Union of Mineworkers
NUX National Union of Ex-Servicemen
RSSILA Returned Soldiers' and Sailors' Imperial League of Australia
SDF Social Democratic Federation
SDP Social Democratic Party
TNT Thomas National Transport
TUC Trades Union Congress
UAP United Australia Party
UN United Nations

PART I

Setting the scene

CHAPTER ONE

Subject matter, debates and issues

The main focus of this book rests upon the ways in which questions of empire and commonwealth, nation, race and their interplay with class have influenced the character and fortunes of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the British Labour Party (BLP) from their formation at the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day. Primary, but by no means exclusive, focus rests upon Labour's electoral fortunes in the two countries. While there have been many individual studies of these parties within their respective national contexts and some interest in their 'third way' politics,[1] there has not appeared a comparative book-length study of the kind undertaken here.[2] Concern also rests with the neglected trans-national dimension. The latter has manifested itself in important, but variable, personal, institutional and ideological connections, exchanges and mutual influences between the Australian and British labour movements during the chosen period.

The aims of my study are to fill gaps in the literature and, more ambitiously, to make a new and original contribution to the further development of imperial, comparative cross-national and trans-national history. It is based upon extensive secondary- and primary-based research in Britain and Australia over several years. The primary sources consulted have unearthed much undiscovered and neglected material in personal papers, newspapers and journals, the records of political parties and accounts of visits, exchanges and encounters among members, observers and critics of the Australian and British labour movements.[3]

The book offers new explanations and points of emphasis in relation to Labour and other forms of working-class politics. Explanations of these politics in Australia and Britain have traditionally been heavily rooted in domestic 'bread and butter', socio-economic factors, including the much-debated issue of social class. In turn these factors have been located predominantly in the structures, conditions and subjective,

nationally based experiences of industrialisation, urbanisation, demography, living standards, working conditions, economic trends, policies and management and workers' relations with employers and other groups. 'Traditionalists' have not neglected other factors, including domestic patterns of working-class culture, sources of commonality, difference and conflict in communities (for example, class versus status) and the nature of local and national political cultures (the nature and extent of democracy, the coercive or liberal nature of the state, the attitudes and actions of ruling classes and so on). However, these 'other factors' have often been seen as largely secondary to, or derived from, the 'hard' underpinnings of domestic material life, while the cross-national comparative and trans-national aspects of workers' politics have been largely absent from traditional accounts.[4]

Since the 1970s and 1980s there have been two main challenges to traditionalism. First, the structures, representations and feelings of gender – of historical constructions of femininity and masculinity – have been fruitfully incorporated into the framework of political analysis. This has sometimes been to the detriment, but at other times to the enrichment, of class analysis. In any event it has acted as a very useful corrective to the traditional common sense that workers were white, male and production based and that labour politics largely had little or nothing to do with women and questions of gender.[5]

Second, there has taken place a very strong academic reaction, especially in Britain, against the predominantly class-based materialism of the traditional orthodoxy in favour of the importance, and in some cases overriding importance, of political factors – the languages and representations of political actors and institutions and the influence of political institutions themselves – in the determination of political outcomes, including Labour politics. This reaction has been underpinned by the notion that socio-economic factors, such as industrialisation and urbanisation, do not necessarily or sufficiently produce or 'give' political outcomes and that these outcomes involve far more than class consciousness. For example, rather than expressing a simple causal link between class and left politics, industrial workers have historically displayed a wide range of political preferences and allegiances. These range, in the cases of Britain and Australia, from Conservatism, to Liberalism, to Labour, to communism and to various forms of 'populism'.

Some historians, especially in Britain, have argued that what mattered most in the construction of these political allegiances and identities were political rather than material or 'social' factors. Others, more so in Australia than in Britain, have adopted a more eclectic and less dualistic approach. While they have welcomed the new or perhaps a

renewed emphasis upon the 'political', they have also maintained that the latter, especially in its 'primacy of politics' form, has underplayed and even ignored the 'social' to the detriment of accurate and balanced historical scholarship. This 'other' group often see themselves as further developing E.P. Thompson's practice of *engaging*, rather than separating and isolating, the cultural, political and socio-economic aspects of being and consciousness, the 'cultural' and the 'social', in flexible, non-reductionist ways.[6] This 'Thompsonian' practice of flexible engagement centrally informs the present study.

'Traditional' and 'revisionist' accounts have greatly advanced our knowledge and understanding of labour movements in general and labour politics in particular. This book could not have been conceived and written without them and accordingly engages at appropriate moments with their key concerns. In this context it is important to inform the reader that while my primary concern rests with the ways in which nation, empire and race have engaged with class, I also attempt to pay due attention to their interplay with those aspects of gender and politics relevant to my subject matter. For example, as we will see at various points in this study, gender influenced the key issue of Labour and anti-Labour loyalty to nation and empire.

Whether consciously or not, the neglected factors of empire, nation and race have been widely assumed to have exerted far less influence upon working-class politics than the socio-economic and/or politico-cultural factors outlined above. In the eyes of many historians, workers' undoubtedly important 'bread and butter' concerns with jobs, housing, living standards and social-welfare provision – with 'making ends meet' – have constituted the staple diet of popular politics. The factors of nation, empire, citizenship, patriotism and race have, on balance, appeared to be less immediate and relevant, and, apart from periods of war and crisis, often been seen far more as the preserve of mainly rich and powerful males than of working-class men and women.[7] My study seeks to make a contribution towards redressing the balance. It concludes that, on balance, nation, empire and race exerted far more, albeit variable, influence upon Labour and anti-Labour politics in the two countries in question than so far suggested in the relevant literature.

At the same time, however, it must be recorded that scholarly neglect of these factors has been much more evident in relation to the history of Britain than that of Australia. An important reason for this is to be sought in the different locations, combined with the different, conflicting, similar and shared experiences, of the two countries within the British imperial and commonwealth systems.

Before moving to a consideration of the supporting empirical evidence, it is first of all necessary briefly to highlight three aspects of imperial

historiography which shed important light on the question of British neglect and the complex and at times contradictory nature of British and Australian imperial experience.

First, many historians of Britain traditionally assumed that up to the post-World War Two period of decolonisation and increasing black and Asian immigration, the country largely formed its own national, class-based and homogeneous, 'white', 'island' history, rather than having been shaped, albeit to varying degrees over time, by influences imported from the countries and subjects of its worldwide empire.[8] This inward-looking, racialised assumption was, and continues to be, frequently accompanied by the notion that influences passed, mainly in 'top down' fashion, far more from the British imperial 'core' to the 'colonial periphery' than vice versa. These influences, moreover, were perceived, on balance, to be far more 'enlightened' and beneficent than 'coercive' and harmful in character and effect.[9]

Second, there has recently emerged the increasingly influential view-point, articulated most strongly by Australian scholars, but also by some British scholars working within the paradigm of 'the British World', that during the first half of the twentieth century most Britons and Australians willingly shared mainly beneficent notions of 'British-ness' and the British Empire. These notions are perceived to have developed far more out of common, similar, mutual and reciprocal experiences than the 'core–periphery' model would suggest. Moreover, in opposition to the radical-nationalist and mainly anti-British school of Australian thought, proponents of the view of 'the British World' strongly maintain that Australian nationalism and empire patriotism were compatible elements. The ALP, for example, expressed its nation-alism within a framework of loyalty to the 'enlightened' empire and to a 'pure' form of 'white', British 'race patriotism'. Lastly, it is claimed by Stuart Ward and others that this sense of a shared British identity collapsed in the wake of decolonisation and imperial decline during the third quarter of the twentieth century.[10]

It will be observed that this second school of historiography high-lights not only the fundamentally shared, consensual and 'organic' nature of British-ness, but also its wide purchase upon relatively equal 'white' imperial subjects in Britain and Australia. In contrast, the first school emphasises not only the largely 'top down' export of Brrish-ness from the metropolitan heartland, but also, whether explicitly or not, notions of imperial domination and colonial subordination, of superiority and inferiority, of colonial childhood or 'immaturity' devel-oping, at least in the 'white' Australian case, into the 'maturity' of 'adulthood'. On balance, however, both schools, at least with reference to imperial and commonwealth relationships between Britain and

Australia, favour the 'enlightened', as opposed to 'coercive', view of British imperialism.

Third, a bundle of discrete, but related, issues revolve around the extent and depth of imperial and imperialist consciousness among the British population, the nature and influence of support for and criticisms of the Empire at home and abroad and whether cultural studies of the British and other empires have suffered from insufficient attention to politics and materiality.[11]

While I attend to this bundle of issues at relevant points in the book, my immediate concerns are twofold in character. First, with reference to the first school of thought, I maintain that not only radical, but also largely conservative 'top down' and 'core–periphery' modes of thinking influenced, at various points in time, the 'bottom up' perspectives on empire, race and nation of the British labour movement. Second, in terms of 'the British World' paradigm, I suggest that alongside its early and mid twentieth-century support for British-ness, 'white' race patriotism and the enlightened British Empire, the ALP also expressed criticisms of aspects of the imperial tie.

The empirical evidence in support of my first proposition may be summarised in the following way. Despite its historically subordinate position within British society, a capacity to challenge conservative definitions of the nation, to criticise 'coercive' imperialism and a tradition of class-based interest in and support for labour movements and subaltern groups throughout the Empire and beyond, the British labour movement has also been a part of the ruling imperial nation, a very part of the motive force of the British Empire. Members of that movement and the wider working class routinely encountered in their daily lives 'top down' imperial ideas, practices and symbols – in comic books, in the press, in public ceremonies and monuments, in architecture, in the music hall, the cinema and radio and in their personal and domestic memorabilia – which highlighted, above all else, notions of British superiority and Britain's global and imperial 'civilising' 'duties' and 'mission' towards 'colonials', the 'coloured races' and others.

These 'top down' ideas, practices and symbols also expressed the viewpoint that there was mainly a *one-way* flow of influences from the metropolitan 'core' to the colonial 'periphery'. Reciprocal influences from Australia and other parts of the imperial 'periphery', especially the 'coloured' parts, upon Britain were perceived, on balance, to carry far less weight. They often appeared to be remote and indirect, of 'Little Englander' or 'Little Britisher' concern only in so far as they impinged upon 'prevailing domestic issues and concerns'. The latter, in the eyes of the British labour movement, revolved around 'bread and butter' living and working conditions, relations with employers,

governments and the state and the condition of their *own* labour movement.[12]

As we will observe throughout this study, British labour movement leaders who focused upon Australian experience between 1900 and the present day often expressed viewpoints reflecting the complex, changing, ambiguous and contradictory nature of their movement's and their own experiences within the British Empire and Commonwealth. On the one hand, there is no doubt that at various points in time some leaders, albeit in all probability a minority over the period as a whole, took a keen interest in, expressed genuine admiration for and even sought to draw domestic inspiration and lessons from the impressive achievements of their Australian labour movement 'comrades and cousins'. On the other hand, many placed their abiding faith in the deeply ingrained elitist and imperialist view that metropolitan labour had far more to teach and far less to learn from its 'colonial' counterparts on the 'periphery'. In some cases labour leaders and their institutions expressed a combination of these views.

Genuine admiration, cooperation, mutuality and reciprocity characterised the following three cases. First, the socialists Margaret and Ramsay MacDonald, Keir Hardie, Tom Mann and Dora Montefiore formed part of what Andrew Scott has termed that 'remarkable procession' of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century British labour movement activists who visited Australia and New Zealand and who were largely united in their praise for these countries as being more 'advanced' than Britain.[13]

This was reflected in the Australian case in, for example, the early achievement, by international standards, of votes for both men and women (the latter were enfranchised at both federal and state level by 1909), and in the remarkable and rapid gains made by the infant ALP and Australian trade unionism. Formed nationally in 1901, the ALP gained federal office in 1910 with 50 per cent of the vote and stayed in power for most of the period up to 1916. This was at a time when the young BLP remained largely in the shadow of the Liberal Party and entertained no prospect of national office in its own right. By 1918 the Australian trade union movement had surpassed the nineteenth-century British pioneer to top the world's league table of union density.

The movement in 'old' Britain needed to understand and take on board relevant lessons from 'new world' Australia, the latter a country in which the labour movement was effectively exerting its 'domination' or 'rule', according to Hardie and many other like-minded British, Irish and European labour movement commentators upon and visitors to Australia. 'Some day', concluded Hardie, something 'similar' would happen in Britain.[14]

Second, on the death of Hardie's 'old friend and colleague' from Ayrshire, Andrew Fisher, in 1928, Arthur Henderson, as secretary, sent a letter of 'deep regret' on behalf of the National Executive Committee of the BLP to Mrs Fisher. In the letter Henderson not only extolled the contribution of Fisher to the Australian movement – having emigrated from Scotland in 1885 the latter had become Prime Minister of the first majority Labor government in Australia's history (1910–13) and Prime Minister again in 1914 and 1915 – but also highlighted the fact that Fisher's successes in Australia 'had their place in assisting the growth and development of our own Party in this country'. Fisher's period as 'Premier' [sic] of the Commonwealth had given British labour, 'a standing throughout the world that it had not previously attained and its influence upon our struggles here at home was altogether beneficial and helpful', according to Henderson.[15]

Third, during the 1980s and 1990s Tony Blair and some of his colleagues visited Australia not only to win the approval and backing of Rupert Murdoch and his *Sun* newspaper for their 'modernising' political 'project', but also to discover the secrets and learn lessons from the unprecedented and continuous federal election victories achieved by the ALP, under 'modernisers' Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, between 1983 and 1996. The aim was to apply these lessons, where appropriate, to British politics in order to overturn the long period of Conservative rule dating from Margaret Thatcher's victory in 1979.[16]

It is also important to note that Blair's thinking and practice were influenced significantly by the Australian Peter Thomson, a community-minded Anglican cleric who was keen to build links between 'social entrepreneurs and the business sector' and end the 'dependency' culture, and the future ALP leaders Kim Beazley and Geoff Gallop (they became the party leader and premier of Western Australia respectively), whom he met as an undergraduate student at Oxford University and with whom he has stayed in contact. Thomson, who died in early 2010, declared that 'What people in Britain don't understand about Tony Blair is that basically he's an Australian.'[17] In turn Blair's 'apparent success' in 'reforming' the BLP and New Labour's victory in 1997 awakened a 'keen interest' among 'a number of Australian Labor Party members' who wished to heed the 'possible lessons for the ALP' in the wake of Paul Keating's federal defeat in 1996 at the hands of the Liberal veteran John Howard.[18]

On the other hand, for much of the period covered in this book British labour leaders continued to see their movement and their country as not only the pioneer but also the 'true' home of imperial and worldwide organised labour, the 'essential' source of the ideas, practices and personnel which had inspired, and continued greatly to

influence, the birth and development of labour movements on an international and global scale. To be sure, in opposition to a crude 'core–periphery' model, and as seen above, they realised that there indeed was far more than a one-way flow of ideas and influences at work. But the crucial point to note is that the dominant British labour movement perception was that, for the most part, it was not an *equal* reciprocal process. The balance was seen to rest far more in favour of the outward movement from Britain rather than the inward flow from Australia.

Let me give two brief examples. First, in his capacity as a member of the Empire Parliamentary Delegation to Australia, Arthur Henderson, while genuinely well intentioned in his praise for the achievements of the Australian movement and observing that workers' living standards were higher in Australia than Britain, could still reach the somewhat ambiguous and possibly patronising conclusion in 1927 that 'Australia may yet become the Greater Britain of the Southern Seas'. This could be interpreted as suggesting that, despite their 'promise' and shared British-ness, Australia and Australian labour still had some way to go before reaching the more 'advanced' and 'mature' state of the 'mother country'.[19]

Second, Australian-born Marion Phillips, who won a scholarship to the London School of Economics in her early twenties and who became the British Labour Party's Chief Women's Officer in the post-1918 period, rejected her privileged Australian background (Phillips had been born into an eminent Jewish family in the St Kilda district of Melbourne and graduated from Melbourne University) as 'crude and uncivilized' in comparison with the 'intellectual, artistic and cultural life' of her adopted Britain and Europe.[20] We will see throughout this book that British labour historiography has taken much of its character and direction from this mainly insular and at times elitist metropolitan labour movement tradition.[21]

In contrast, as a 'settler' colony within the British Empire, albeit of an increasingly 'mature' and 'independent kind' within the 'Commonwealth family', Australia's very modern existence and character were fundamentally shaped by an 'outside' force: British imperial 'rule'. This inescapable 'fact of life' took concrete form in what Manning Clark aptly termed the facts and symbols of 'dual loyalty' to their own country and Britain. These were seen in defence ties and naval requirements, the design of the flag, the currency and postage stamps, the presence and continuing power of British-born Governors-General and state governors, the widespread celebration of Empire Day and the massive and continuing popularity of the monarchy. In sum, Australians' position vis-à-vis the 'mother country' and questions of dependence,

autonomy and nationhood – of radicalism, nationalism and patriotism towards Britain and the British 'race' – were at the very core of their experience and consciousness.[22]

To be sure, we will observe in the course of this book that, as argued by Ward and other leading proponents of 'the British World' viewpoint, the very strong British imprint upon Australia's and the ALP's consciousness declined, with some qualifications, considerably from the 1960s onwards. Britain henceforth turned more to Europe and Australia looked less to the 'mother country' and the British Commonwealth and increasingly more to the USA for 'protection' and the Asia-Pacific region for trade. In terms of my period as a whole, however, I endorse Michael Davie's view that Britain and her Empire figured much larger in Australia and Australian consciousness than Australia did in Britain and British consciousness.[23]

In terms of the period between 1900 and the late 1930s, this study, as noted above, also endorses the thesis of 'British world' scholars that the Australian movement reconciled its local patriotism with loyalty to British-ness and the Empire. Yet I also wish to highlight the point that this process of reconciliation was by no means devoid of criticism and conflict.

At times criticisms of both these phenomena were sharp. For example, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, the Australian labour movement in this period, along with its British counterpart, consistently condemned those aspects of British-ness and the British Empire associated with class-based and national oppression and exploitation (their records on racial oppression were far more mixed), hereditary 'aristocratic' privilege, coercion and opposition to democracy and equality of opportunity. These aspects constituted the antithesis of the attempt to construct a 'Workers' Paradise' in Australia rooted in democracy, social justice, openness and, despite its gendered and racialised limitations, the egalitarianism of 'mateship'. The mainstream Australian movement also sought greater independence and autonomy for its country within the desired framework of a generally more 'enlightened' and egalitarian empire, while a minority of its constituent parts offered an outright rejection of imperialism in general and British imperialism in particular. Lastly, there were strong criticisms of the 'mixed race' character of the British Empire. Organised workers in Australia saw themselves as being 'more British than the British' in their racial 'purity' and their 'whiteness'.[24]

I will elaborate upon these criticisms at relevant points in the text. At this juncture I wish to make three general observations. First, nations and empires are constructed and reconstructed over time rather than simply 'given' or 'fixed' once and for all time. Second, they may

be seen to contain varying elements and combinations of consensus and conflict, voluntarism and coercion, contestation, agreement and accommodation, domination and subordination. Third, I suggest that in their eagerness to distance themselves from the radical-nationalist school of Australian history, complete with its key tenet of hostility and conflict with Britain, advocates of 'the British world paradigm' run the risk of exaggerating the consensual and harmonious aspects of early to mid twentieth-century British-ness and the British Empire and underestimating both the criticisms made by Australian labour and the points of difference and conflict between Australia and Britain.

Although part of the British Empire, the majority of early and mid twentieth-century Australians, as noted above, rejected its 'mixed race' character in favour of 'whiteness'. 'Race' and racial conflict, of course, were already well established features of Australian life, in part as a result of the 'encounters' between the indigenous Aboriginal people and 'white' 'settlers' and the presence and animosity towards Asian and other immigrants during the nineteenth century. The formal seal was placed on the racialised character of the country when the policy of 'White Australia' was adopted as a key plank of Federation and the New Commonwealth in 1901.

Given this context it is not surprising that the issue of race, in addition to those of nation and empire, has strongly informed Australian historiography in general. At the same time, however, all three issues have traditionally exerted far less influence upon the study of labour politics. Notwithstanding recent signs of change, the majority of Australian labour historians have traditionally taken their cue from British 'traditionalists', such as Eric Hobsbawm, in seeking explanations for labour politics first and foremost in 'underlying' socio-economic factors, such as trends in the economy, workplace relations and developments in trade unionism.[25]

Cross-national comparisons

The explanations and emphases presented in this book are set within a cross-national comparative approach to the study of the Labour and other kinds of 'popular' politics in Australia and Britain. As noted above, this approach has been either neglected by or absent from most of the relevant and predominantly nationally focused literature.

I maintain that the strengths of the comparative approach greatly outweigh its weaknesses. Above all, it provides us with a wider and potentially more fruitful way of studying my subject matter than the nationally based approach. Even though traditionalists and revisionists

alike have employed general explanatory categories, such as industri-
alisation, urbanisation, class and political languages to explain politics,
they have mainly applied these to the specific national contexts of the
two countries in question. The dominant assumptions, whether made
implicitly or explicitly, have been that the nation-state constitutes
the natural object of historical investigation and that the particular
manifestations of the general phenomena in question – industrialisation,
class structure, the languages of class, populism, liberalism and so on
– were unique or 'peculiar' to the particular nation-state under review.
Resort to the comparative method, whereby we compare two or more
case studies and tease out and explain commonalities, similarities and
differences between or among them, allows us more accurately to
decide whether these assumptions are indeed correct.[26]

In its examination of nationally based comparisons and contrasts,
the cross-national mode of comparative analysis operates at a high
level of generalisation. As such it runs the risk of paying insufficient
attention to developments at other levels, such as the local, the regional
and the global. A further potential pitfall is the presentation of somewhat
superficial generalisations and insufficiently complex, contextualised,
new and original arguments. This often results from a sole or undue
reliance upon secondary sources and the conclusions derived from them,
the failure sufficiently to quarry and question the relevant primary
material and rigorously to engage the evidence against existing theo-
ries and arguments in an attempt to produce fresh conclusions and
hypotheses. It is also important to gain a thorough knowledge and
understanding of the individual case studies under review in order to
avoid errors of fact and judgement concerning different national and
related histories. Lastly, we must be careful to ensure that we are
comparing 'like with like' case studies across national boundaries, and
that we are sufficiently alive to their differences as well as their
similarities of character and context.

For example, we may usefully compare the languages of politics,
patterns of voting and electoral outcomes in Britain and Australia,
while being at the same time fully aware that Australia had achieved
political democracy earlier than Britain and that, unlike the latter, it
had a federal system of government, from 1924 onwards compulsory
and preferential voting for federal elections and more extensive state
intervention, regulation and protection in its general system of political
economy.[27]

The nub of my argument is that we should both be alive to the
potential methodological and substantive strengths and weaknesses
outlined above and engage with the historical evidence at a variety of
appropriate geographical, spatial and societal levels. This exercise must

be conducted in a 'scientifically' open-minded and critical rather than a closed and predetermined 'ideological' way. If we adhere to these principles, then we can employ the comparative method in new and productive ways. This is a key methodological thread running throughout this study.[28]

Trans-nationalism

My comparative approach is accompanied by an interest in relevant trans-national matters. I concern myself not only with comparative commonalities, similarities and differences, but also what John French has termed the trans-national phenomena of 'super-national processes' and 'extra-national connections', and their effects upon the ALP's and the BLP's attitudes and practices towards questions of nation, empire, race and class.[29] While imperialism, capitalism, urbanisation and industrialisation are examples of these 'super-national' processes, 'extra-national connections' link people, ideas, cultures, institutions, goods, services and so on, and their movements, encounters, exchanges and mutual influences, across national boundaries.[30]

There were considerable migratory flows between Britain and Australia and important labour movement visits, encounters, exchanges, influences and connections between the two countries during the period under review (Figures 1 and 2). Brief attention has already been drawn above to these processes and connections, and they will be considered in more detail at relevant points throughout this study. For the moment reference to the important biographical case study of Andrew Fisher and his relations with British labour leaders serves to underline the full importance of trans-national connections.

Fisher was born in the coalmining village of Crosshouse, near Kilmarnock, in Ayrshire in 1862. Upon the retirement of his coalminer father on grounds of ill health, Andrew ended his formal schooling and began work in the local pit at around the age of ten in order to supplement the family income. In 1879, aged only seventeen but already noted locally for his integrity and leadership qualities, he was elected secretary of the Crosshouse district branch of the Ayrshire Miners' Union. Two years later he was to be found alongside 'the already legendary' Keir Hardie 'in the forefront of a prolonged miners' strike that convulsed the Ayrshire coalfield', according to Fisher's biographer, David Day.[31]

The strike was lost, but it marked the beginning of an enduring but necessarily 'intermittent' association between 'the two rising political reformers'. Both shared commitments not only to the political and industrial struggles of the labour movement, including the fight for

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Figure 1 Keir Hardie in the company of fellow British socialists Tom Mann, H.H. Champion and Ben Tillett, and the Victorian labour activist J.P. Jones, in Melbourne, 1908

socialism, but also to education and teetotalism. Hardie, of course, went on to become Britain's first Labour MP in 1892, the leader of the socialist Independent Labour Party, founded in 1893, and a key figure in the Labour Party.

Fisher was sacked from his job as a result of his prominence in the strike of 1881 and a further dispute in 1885. 'Blacklisted' locally, he emigrated to Queensland. Working first as a coalminer and subsequently as a gold miner and engine driver, he endured further unemployment and 'blacklisting' for his labour movement activities. Fisher soon gained prominence in the Gympie labour movement as a candidate of the local Labor Party, formed in 1891, and as one of the founders of the *Gympie Truth* in 1896. Liverpool-born Henry Boote became the editor of this newspaper and a close friend of Fisher. Boote subsequently became 'the most outstanding Labour journalist in Australia' as editor of the Brisbane-based *Worker* and the Sydney-based *Australian Worker*.[32]

It was during the period from his election as a federal Labor candidate in 1899 to his death in 1928 that Fisher became most widely
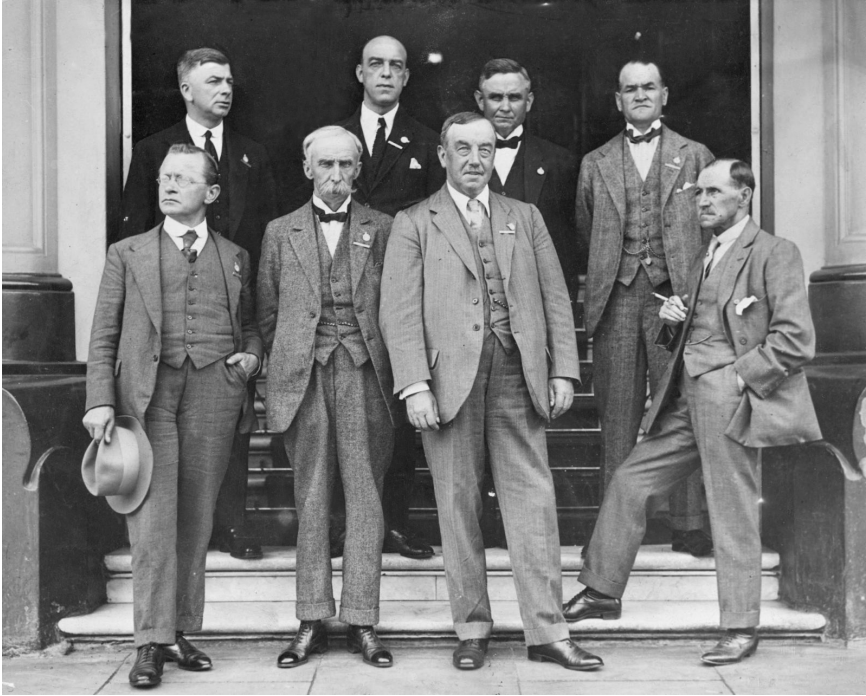
[15]

Figure 2 Arthur Henderson and other Labour MPs in the Empire Parliamentary Association Delegation to Australia, 1926

known and admired nationally and internationally. Instrumental in the formation of the Commonwealth Labor Party in 1901, he was a minister in the first federal Labor government formed by John Christian Watson in 1904. In 1908–9 Fisher served as both treasurer and prime minister in the second minority Labor government. In 1910 he successfully led Labor to victory as a majority government and, as noted above, the ALP remained in office for most of the period up to 1916. In 1915 Fisher retired as prime minister on health grounds and became the Australian High Commissioner in London until his period of office ended at the beginning of 1921. He then returned to Australia, but resisted attempts to restore him as leader of the ALP. Between 1922 and his death Fisher lived in London. However, his deteriorating health meant that it became impossible for him to fulfil his hope of obtaining a seat in the House of Commons.[33] Fisher had been 'one of the most successful Australian politicians' and left an enduring legacy of 'reforms and national development', according to D.J. Murphy.[34]

Throughout his career Fisher retained strong, if not completely harmonious, links with his comrades in Britain. He was probably closest to Hardie. The latter was a conspicuous companion during Fisher's trips to Britain in 1902 and 1911. During the latter Fisher not only attended the royal coronation and the Imperial Conference, but paid two trips to Ayrshire, where he was feted by the Miners' Union at a banquet in Kilmarnock presided over by Hardie and at a celebration organised by the villagers of Crosshouse.

At the banquet Hardie spoke warmly of Fisher's continuing comradeship and his achievements in Australia. Fisher and the Australian movement represented the 'future', the 'rule of the common people'. Yet at the same time he took issue with the Fisher government's moves 'to establish naval and military forces and to introduce conscription', albeit 'for home defence, and not for the exploitation of other peoples'. In response Fisher offered a vigorous defence of his policies. He saw them as being a vital response to Australia's exposed position in the Asia-Pacific region and the possibility of invasion, especially from 'non-white' 'inferior' and 'degraded' Asiatic and South Sea islander peoples.[35]

Before leaving Britain in 1911 Fisher accompanied Hardie on a visit to the coalfields of South Wales and Hardie's constituency of Merthyr Tydfil. At Tonypandy, the scene of bitter industrial conflict and the death of a miner in the previous year, 'thousands of miners gathered to hear Fisher give them encouragement in their fight'. In such ways did labour solidarity and racism appear as perfectly 'natural' bedfellows to Fisher and Australian labour.[36]

Four years earlier, on his 'world tour', Hardie had visited Fisher in Australia and signed a fundraising postcard expressing 'Fraternal Greetings from the workers in the Old Home Land to their comrades in the new'. The aim of both groups was the same: 'The Economic Emancipation of earth's toiling millions' (Figure 3). While in Australia Hardie also received beautifully illustrated 'Addresses of Welcome' from the Sydney Labor Council and the Political Labor League of New South Wales (see cover illustration) and from the Women's Political Labor League of New South Wales in December 1907. The former declared that 'Your Australian Comrades and friends share your conviction of the solidarity of Labor throughout the world', while the latter thanked Hardie for his 'earnest and consistent advocacy of Womanhood Suffrage'.[37]

In February 1930 Ramsay MacDonald unveiled a stone memorial above Fisher's grave at Hampstead cemetery. As Day observes, 'Nearly overcome with emotion, and describing Fisher as "my old friend"', MacDonald declared him to have been '"a great servant of the British

A. FISHER, M.P. (Australia)　　　J. KEIR HARDIE, M.P. (Britain)

Fraternal greetings from the workers in the Old Home land to their Comrades in the new. The aim of our world wide movement is the same – the Economic Emancipation of earths toiling millions.
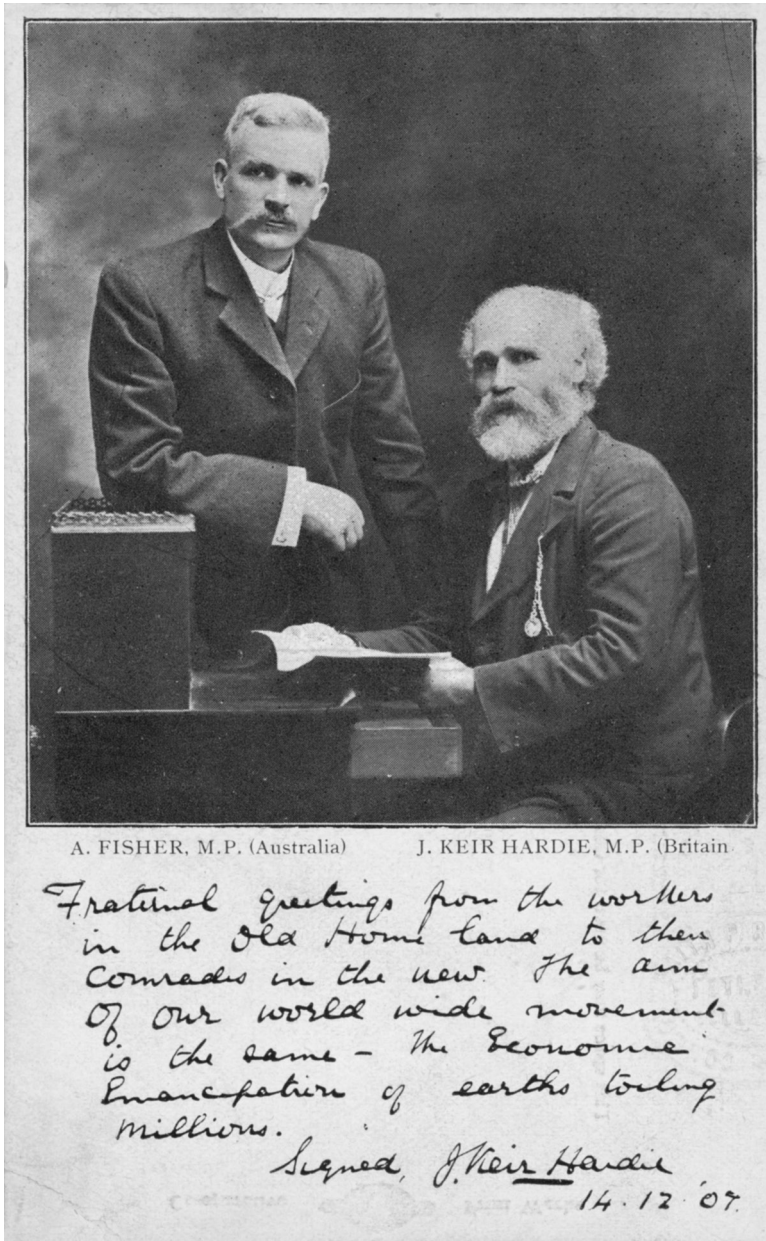
Signed, J. Keir Hardie
14·12·07.

Figure 3 Andrew Fisher and Keir Hardie, December 1907

Empire"', and '"more than a Prime Minister"'.[38] It was not only labour solidarity and 'whiteness' that could, and at times did, coexist 'naturally', but also the causes of organised labour, the nation and the British Empire.

The wider comparative context

The case for the comparison of Labour politics must be seen as part of an argument in favour and set within the context of the wider comparative study of labour, society and politics in Australia and Britain. The latter is also mainly a new subject area for historians.[39]

The case for a wider comparative picture is based to a great extent upon the deep and enduring connections between the two countries.[40] From the point of view of political economy these have revolved around British 'settlement' in 1788, the traditionally very close economic ties and the shifting interplay of continuity and change, conflict and consensus between the two countries.

For example, notwithstanding the growth of a strong spirit of independence and nationalism in Australia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including nationalism of an anti-British republican kind, and the undeniably serious decline of the 'British connection' and British influence, albeit unevenly, from the mid-twentieth century onwards, the British monarch remains to the present day the head of state of Australia. Furthermore, between 1996 and 2007 Prime Minister John Howard and his ruling Liberal-National coalition were strongly committed to the 'western' alliance, with the USA and Britain at its core, and the 'celebration' and staunch defence of 'our Anglo-Celtic past'. Despite its stated commitment to the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, its celebration of diversity and its wish to represent not only Anglo-Celts but 'All Australians', including those born in Australia and those 'who have come from afar', Kevin Rudd's Labor government, which succeeded the Coalition in office as a result of the November 2007 federal election, also reaffirmed Australia's strong attachment to the West, especially the USA.[41]

In terms of demographic connections, the development of the Australian labour movement from the mid nineteenth century onwards owed much to the organisational skills and ideologies of radical migrants from Britain, both 'unfree' and 'free'. As Paul Pickering and others have shown, British trade unionists, Chartists and other radical 'pioneers' exported their 'trade of agitation' to Australia, New Zealand and other 'settler' and colonial societies, while two of the New Commonwealth's early Labor Prime Ministers, Fisher, as noted above, and William Morris, 'Billy', Hughes, were born in Britain.

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