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Why there was some socialism in Australia: Aspects of the making of an Australian labour electorate 1890-1930

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Once it seemed plausible that all developed capitalist countries would become developed welfare states with strong workers parties and high levels of trade union membership. From this perspective Australia had reached the end of political history sooner than others. History now seems to have reversed. Labor and social-democratic parties are recast into parties of the ‘centre-left’, like American Democrats or Canadian Liberals, whilst trade unions are in decline. These events demonstrate mass support for labour parties is not an inevitable result of capitalist development, but a fact that has to be explained. In this paper I examine aspects of the emergence of the labour electorate in Australia, with particular emphasis on NSW, and draw international comparisons with working-class electoral behaviour in Europe and the United States. Labour history has moved beyond the institutions of the organized male manual proletariat but Labor voters remain the forgotten people of labour history. My conclusions are hypotheses for future exploration rather than definite findings:

- There is no forward march of Labor to power from 1890 to 1910, rather electoral dynamics after 1901 are fundamentally different than the 1890s
- Labor’s electoral breakthrough in the early 1890s is the result of the political mobilisation of union members
- By 1901 Labor’s support base has become significantly more diverse than in the early 1890s, but the core Labor electorate consists of unionists in particular geographical regions
- Labor’s overall electoral stability after 1910 is accompanied by the party becoming more of a class party and less of a ‘peoples’ party
- The working-class electorate that Labor secures by 1910 is divided, to use Gramsci’s terms, between a class-conscious minority and an economic-corporate majority.

Australian labour history has interpreted the rise of the Labor party as an inevitable process. It has been more concerned with criticising or celebrating the result of this process. Labor’s critics from the left argued that Labor had taken over the role of liberalism. However, this did not answer the question of why it should be a labour party that should become the vehicle of liberalism. Why did Australian liberalism, apparently so entrenched in colonial society and culture, decline so quickly? Australia diverged from other English-speaking countries where liberalism was the dominant force on the left and trade unions were a minor prop for liberal parties. Australia was more similar to Europe where by 1914 social democracy had widely supplanted liberalism as the dominant force on the left.

So constant a political backdrop has the labour electorate been in Australia since 1910 that historians have taken it for granted. The natural electoral base of labour politics has been identified as the ‘working class’. Labor’s electoral triumph of 1910 is seen as inevitable rather than the result of contingent events. The categories of union member, (manual) worker and Labor voter are often implicitly identified. The electors whose behaviour has been commented on are the ‘non working class’ Labor voters: white-collar workers, small businesspeople and farmers. Their electoral significance has been assumed (with little empirical evidence) but then either celebrated or deplored. The Labor votes of (male) manual workers and their wives of male workers have been taken for granted. It is non-Labor workers who are seen as the anomaly.

Challenges to the ‘class politics’ interpretation of Australian electoral history have generated controversy as demonstrated by the reception of David Kemp’s early work and the current moral panic around ‘wedge politics’.

The strange death of lib-labism

In the early 1890s Australian labour made a dramatic electoral breakthrough. Before then trade unions had been involved in politics: they had supported reforms to trade union law, industrial regulation and reductions in immigration. A few colonial MPs had a background of trade union activism and in parliament these individuals often gave particular attention to ‘trade union’ issues but their support for such causes was merely an aspect of their general liberalism. This type of union political activity, known in Britain as ‘lib-lab’ politics was the norm in English-speaking countries before 1914. Union activists participated in liberal politics and where formalised liberal parties did exist, such in Britain and to a lesser extent Victoria, unionists who were elected to parliament were elected as liberals. In the United States by 1914 the theoretically non-partisan American Federation of Labor was closer politically to the Democrats than the Republicans. Even in Imperial Germany until the 1890s most Protestant working-class voters probably supported the liberals.

To authors of the old left such as Bob Gollan and Brian Fitzpatrick Australian lib-labism was merely a phase of the development of class-consciousness towards support for an independent labour party. But lib-labs generally opposed independent labour politics. Recent Australian scholarship, such as that of Ray Markey, has placed more emphasis on ‘material’ factors, in particular transformation in the labour process and associated
deskilling in the later nineteenth century, as encouraging a consciousness of class identity and support for independent labour politics. Recent work on the rise of the German Social Democrats, such as Jurgen Kocka, has also argued that deskilling and work intensification encouraged working class rejection of liberalism. But Markey and Kocka admit that in 1890 few would have predicted the rise of political labour in Australia and Germany.6

Australian Labor’s electoral breakthrough in the early 1890s, particularly in NSW, has plausibly been attributed to the trauma of the maritime strike and the resultant upsurge in class-consciousness. Qualitative evidence for this has been identified in the extent of community support for strikers and the class leadership of the NSW Labor Council. The uncertain class position of many Labor activists and the distance of many Labor MPs and candidates from engagement in class conflict has been interpreted as evidence of the original sin of parliamentary labourism rather than evidence of the composition of the Labor electorate. Bruce Scates has challenged this interpretation. To him the diversity of Labor activists is evidence that they, like the Greens a century later, represented a radical community defined by ideology and aspiration and whose members often occupied an ambiguous class position.7

The membership of a party, and particularly its parliamentary composition, does not necessarily reflect its electorate, but Scates seems to assume this. Markey estimates NSW union membership as about 60,000 in 1891. I estimate there were about 34,000 Labor votes in 1891. The NSW Labor electorate in 1891 probably largely consisted, especially in urban areas, of trade unionists alone, although where unionists were geographically concentrated the party probably won broader support. Markey’s interpretation is more plausible than that of Scates. If Labor was a party of unionists then most manual workers (who were not unionists) did not vote Labor.8

The making of an electoral ghetto

Only twenty years after the electoral breakthrough of the early 1890s Labor swept to national office. But 1891 to 1910 was not a ‘forward march’ by Labor. Labor support fluctuated. In NSW its vote fell from 16 percent in 1894 to 11.4 percent in 1898 and rose to 18.7 percent in 1901. Nor can we assume that Labor had at least established a solid base. The stability of the Labor vote does not indicate that the same voters were voting Labor from election to election. Jonathon Sperber suggest that for the first fifteen years of the German empire the Social Democrats failed to retain more than half of their voters from one election to the next. American third parties of the left have sometimes polled well, but they have been unable to hold this support from election to election.9 I suggest that by 1901 Labor had established a core vote, as the German social democrats did by the mid 1880s, but this core vote was defined more by locality than class and that from election to election the party won and lost a floating vote.

The elections of NSW in 1901 and 1894 provide a point of comparison. In 1894 the party had consolidated after the divisions that followed its 1891 triumph. In 1901 Labor’s vote rose to 18.7 percent, only just behind the Progressives. Electoral boundaries were unchanged from 1894 to 1901 and this was the last poll before female enfranchisement. The geographical distribution of the percentage Labor vote by electorate in 1901 was however largely unrelated to the distribution in 1894. Even if we exclude those electorates contested by Independent Labor MPs in 1894 only 19 percent of the 1901 Labor vote is explained by the 1894 Labor vote.10 In Queensland, despite Labor’s greater internal stability, and its more secure position on the left of the political spectrum after the liberal-conservative fusion of 1891, only 13 percent of the 1902 Labor vote is explained by the 1893 Labor vote.

These correlations are in part misleading. The new Labor parties did develop electoral strongholds although even these, as the 1905 split in Queensland showed, were vulnerable to the defection of sitting members.11 Most Labor voters who lived in these electorates were probably loyal to the party but outside these areas the Labor vote was highly variable and often extremely low. The reduction in the number of NSW Labor candidates from 68 in 1894 to 54 in 1901 was an admission by the party it was confined to an electoral ghetto. This interpretation of electoral behaviour is supported by a regression of the 1894 and 1901 absolute votes for political parties in NSW (Table 1).12

| TABLE 1: FLOW OF THE VOTE NSW 1894-1901 (T-STATISTICS ARE IN BRACKETS) |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1894 Labor                  | 1894 Free Trade             | 1894 Protectionist          | 1894 non-voters             | Net new voters              | R-Sq                        |
|                             |                             |                             | 1894-1901                   |                             |                             |
| 1901 Labor                  | 1.42 (4.72)                 | 0.16 (0.71)                 | 0.54 (1.7)                  | -0.08 (0.26)                | 0.16 (0.99)                 | 49.4 percent                |
| 1901 Liberal                | 0.15 (0.56)                 | 0.74 (3.97)                 | 0.07 (0.27)                 | -0.01 (0.04)                | 0.71 (5.45)                 | 78.9 percent                |
| 1901 Progressives & Others | -0.91 (2.76)                | -0.37 (1.45)                | 0.29 (0.78)                 | 0.39 (1.21)                 | 0.39 (1.21)                 | 42.3 percent                |
| 1901 non-voters             | 0.21 (1.2)                  | 0.15 (1.16)                 | 0.26 (1.41)                 | 0.46 (2.6)                  | 0.39 (4.18)                 | 53.3 percent                |

This analysis suggests that Labor did have a loyal vote. Its gains in 1901 came largely from the Protectionists. However it was not mobilising new voters. The Liberals who were moving towards a new distinctively anti-Labor appeal mobilised new voters. Only 49.4 percent of the 1901 Labor vote is explained and this suggests a highly localised electorate in which vote flows reflected particular local circumstances, rather than a uniform shift to Labor.

The development of Labor’s electoral base in the 1890s has been disputed. Markey presents it as a story of class demobilisation: Labor responded to the decline of urban unionism by the electoral pursuit of the intermediate strata and thus demobilized further its remaining unionist vote. Scates instead identified an exclusion of non-union radicals and the consolidation of control of the party by professional politicians. Markey’s description is more accurate at the level of the electorate. Labor’s consolidation as a coherent parliamentary force encouraged loyalty to its sitting MPs but also established the party as a repository for a floating protest vote. Labor represented only part of the manual working class. In some electorates most manual workers voted Labor at levels of support comparable to those after 1910, but in most electorates this was not the case. From 1894 to 1901 Labor support grew in its strongholds but not across the electorate: the distribution of Labor vote was more uneven in 1901 than 1894 despite fewer candidates (Table 2). Labor’s electoral advance in 1901 might seem to foreshadow the imminent demise of liberalism. However as Lenin famously argued averages are deceptive when they ignore qualitative differentiation in the population. Labor was a party of class and place and in 1901 its advances were place as much as class driven. Recently there has been an upsurge of interest among Australian labour historians in geography. This work has drawn on economic geography but not on political geography, such as the work of Richard Johnston, and this paper is an attempt to repair this omission. Johnston’s analysis of British politics in the 1980s showed that Labor retained substantial parliamentary representation only because its low level of support was unevenly distributed. Spatial concentration assists new party breakthroughs in plurality electoral systems. An ecological regression analysis of electoral behaviour is inherently spatial, but in Australia it has been non-geographers, Glenn Withers and Chris Leithner, heavily influenced by the individualist framework of neo-classical economics, who have analysed electoral history. Indifference to spatiality has reduced the value of their work.

TABLE 2: DISTRIBUTION OF NSW LABOR PERCENTAGE VOTE BY ELECTORATE 1894, 1901, 1930 AND 1932

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My interpretation of Labor’s 1901 support base is bolstered by Withers’ analysis of the 1901 federal election. He finds that about 40 percent of the Labor and protectionist vote is explainable by social variables and 28 percent for the Free Traders. This suggests that parties of state intervention, such as Labor and the Protectionists, were more likely to attract support from particular constituencies, but the social indicators for Labor support are of low levels of significance.

The forward march of Labor?

In 1901 Labor, like the contemporary Greens, was a small party of the radical left. By 1910 it is either in office or the official opposition in all states and the Commonwealth. Historians have tended to explain Labor’s rise as a process by which it broadened its support from the working class and unionists (the two being seen as identical) to become a broadly based people’s party. My interpretation is different. From 1910 to 1910 Labor became less of a people’s party and more of a class party, but the class mobilisation was of a particular sort. To use the terminology of Gramsci it was a corporate mobilisation rather than a hegemonic mobilisation.

We lack any quantitative analysis of Labor’s electoral upsurge after 1901 but some insight can be drawn from a consideration of the geographical distribution of the Labor vote and Withers’ examinations of the 1901 and 1917 elections. The federal election of 1917 is not a good example of electoral alignment established by the Fusion. In 1917 the electoral pattern established in 1910-14 is challenged. There was a 7 percent swing against Labor, but this was much higher in metal mining and outback areas, and there was a small swing to Labor in many agricultural areas. Despite this Withers still found that 54 percent of the Labor vote is explained by social variables. This is a substantial increase from the 40 percent explained by social variables in 1901. In particular there was a significant correlation between the Labor vote and manufacturing employment, which was absent in 1901.

Compared to the 1890s the decade 1901-10 appears placid but it is one in which working-class position (taken in the conventional sense of manual employment) becomes far more important in determining electoral
behaviour. However 'class' identity had multiple meanings. In 1891 a portion of the working class engages in several activities as a direct expression of class identification: participating in industrial action, joining a union, attending rallies and voting Labor. These workers (a minority of the working class) did not see these activities as separate; rather they were aspects of a social movement. This form of political involvement contrasted with previous forms of working-class political activity. In NSW isolated lib-labs had pursued the corporate interests of trade unions. In Victoria liberal ideology was more clearly defined as a hegemonic political project, just as in Britain, precisely because of the strength of conservative opposition.

The early Labor parties are influenced by visions of immediate radical social transformation, however ill defined. Once the euphoria of the early 1890s evaporated Labor parties failed to find a medium-term between utopian socialism and trade-union pressure group politics.22 Only after 1901 did Labor find a medium-term policy that gave most workers, apart from a politicised minority, a plausible reason for supporting Labor.

Australian working-class political interventions in the nineteenth century, as was also the case in Britain and the United States, had rarely diverged from hegemonic liberalism. Unions wanted the state to do what it already did better, to police workplace safety better, to be a better employer. Often they wanted the state to do less: not to subside immigration. Workers did not ask the state to intervene in the economy to redistribute resources. Even Victorian protectionism did not attempt to directly regulate market outcomes. Protectionist ideology never gained a national hold on the working class unlike immigration restriction.23 National politics after 1901 is transformed because of intellectual and organisational innovation. Industrial arbitration, and in particular Higgins' development of the living wage concept, offered a plausible argument that government regulation can directly affect living standards. The material labour process underwent little change but the relations of production were altered with a consequent impact on the political structure that then reinforced further the changes in the relations of production. Free traders lost ground within Labor ranks once Labor protectionists linked protection to arbitration as a safeguard of workers' living standards.24

The idea that state action can affect the distribution of income between broad economic groups, such as employers and workers, was a new one, even if protectionism had tended in this direction. The concept that the state could directly impact on material welfare was a form of what Michael Mann has called ideological power. It gave Labor an advantage in appealing to voters, in particular protectionist voters who accepted the idea of government intervention. If voters' ideas of the economy are reformed in this period so are their ideas of politics, the physical act of voting takes on a different meaning: that of voting for a party to form a government to regulate economic outcomes. Foucault's concepts of governmentality and power/knowledge could be applied to further elucidate this process. Arbitration is a new form of government while partisan identification is a new form of knowledge. Effective resistance to Labor's appeal came only from free trade liberalism, which had a coherent alternative view of society and the economy.25 This may explain why in Australia, unlike Canada, social democracy supplanted liberalism. Lipset and Marks argue that unlike American socialism the ALP did not have to contend with pre-existing partisan alignments, but this does not explain why Labor was more successful in shaping partisan account than the liberals.26

To perceive arbitration as a form of ideological power illuminates the debate about the impact of arbitration on trade union growth. Recent scholarship has argued that trade union growth in 1910-10 was not the automatic result of arbitration. However, union membership had diverse meanings, the opportunity to participate in the determination of income distribution, as a member of a corporate group was more attractive to many workers than enrolment in a radical social movement. The statutory recognition extended to unions by arbitration made them more respectable. A similar process occurred under the Accord as public hostility towards unions declined perhaps, due to the respectability of unions as corporate partners.27 The new union members of 1901-10 were not unwilling signatories but they were mostly not joining unions to participate in a class struggle. Labor politicians' support of arbitration, sometimes against union activists, may have indicated a better judgement of what union members (rather than activists) wanted. Arbitration, as Peetz suggests facilitated union membership, but it delegitimized strikes and by implication encouraged anti-union feeling.28 Labor electoral support has always exceeded levels of union membership (except perhaps at the party's very inception); workers who choose not to join unions account for part of this discrepancy.29

Labor's working-class constituency is divided between two groups: one with a hegemonic class-consciousness and the other with an economic-corporate consciousness. Labour historians, such as Bob Ollman, have tended to see the rise of the Labor party as a process by which all workers decided that all politics was relevant to them. The willingness of union leaders to affiliate their unions to a political party is taken as evidence that union members, and even all workers, agreed. However survey evidence has consistently shown that trade union members at the most support trade union involvement in 'politics' as a pressure group not as the affiliate of a political party.30 In the 1930s only a fraction of members of trade unions affiliated to the ALP turned out to vote in Labor pre-selection ballots. By 1910 Australian workers believed that politics was relevant to their living standards, this was a change from the nineteenth century, and they supported Labor as the defender of economic regulation. A significant minority of Labor voters looked beyond this and had a hegemonic consciousness but they were an electoral minority, even if they were much more electorally loyal to Labor than other workers. Their loyalty also sustained Labor against challenges from the socialist and Communist left. Historians have
been reluctant to admit that the working class was ideologically divided, just as they have been reluctant to admit the independent influence of religion on electoral behaviour.31

Queensland politics in the 1890s demonstrates the electoral limits of an appeal to hegemonic class-consciousness. Despite the alliance of liberal and conservatives against Labor, in an environment of strong class conflict, Labor could not appeal to the majority of manual workers and remained an electoral minority. This contrasted with voter response to the 1909 federal fusion of liberals and conservatives. Interwar Britain is similar. Once the Liberals and Conservatives coalesced against Labour in 1931 it was reduced to a permanent minority.32

By 1910 Australian Labor had broken out of the electoral ghetto it occupied in 1901 and had come to monopolise the left of the political spectrum. However, Labor’s rise was accompanied by the emergence of the right as a significant political force. Labor’s rhetoric and policy inherited much of the tradition of colonial liberalism but not its entire support base. In the later nineteenth century, conservative forces were marginalised in Australian politics. The ‘masses’ had the numerical advantage over the ‘classes’. The electoral struggle between the ‘working class’ and the ‘middle class’ is much more equal. Jack Lang and Graham Berry may have both been popular demagogues but Lang never duplicates Berry’s electoral triumphs.33 The left’s constituency shrunk because the development of capitalism made more voters dependent on property-owners for income and industrial arbitration by its definition of manual workers as a corporate group encourages the group identity of non-manual workers.

Before Australian Labor formed governments in its own right around it exercised substantial influence over legislation through its alliances with liberals but in addition trade unions participated in the quasi-legislative process of arbitration. Before the series of Labor victories around 1910 voters could see what labourism in government meant. The successful ‘reform’ mobilisations in NSW and Victoria after 1901 demonstrate the right’s early ability to mobilise voters. Once in government at a state and federal level Labor alienated further non-manual working class electors, and won over former working-class protectionists by its record of moderation in government. Federal Labor’s loss of rural seats in 1913 whilst gaining the working-class Protectionist strongholds of Bendigo and Ballarat illustrated this process.34 Workers’ disillusionsment with Labor is a trope of Australian labour history but at the electoral level middle-class and farmer disillusionment was more significant. The German case was similar; there once the Social Democrats had to exercise power after 1918 they lost the votes of white-collar Protestants to the right. Like Australian Labor the Social Democrats were vulnerable to the charge that they were a trade-union special interest party.35

The federal election of 1910 is a crucial stage in the development of a Labor electorate in Australia but the consolidation of this electorate is not complete until the 1930s. In 1917 Labor suffered heavy losses among key groups of manual workers. The extent to which Labor’s support base was still unstable is demonstrated by a comparison of the 1913 and 1917 elections in NSW. The swing against Labor statewide was only 3.7 percent but it was uneven; only 54 percent of the 1917 Labor vote by electorate was explained by the 1914 vote. In 1932 the anti-Labor swing was 14.8 percent but 92 percent of the 1932 (Lang) Labor vote is explained by the 1930 vote. The extent to which Labor votes by electorate are explainable by the social composition of the electorate also increased substantially from 1914-17 to 1930-32. American evidence suggests that shifts in political allegiance occur less through individual voters changing their partisan identification than through mobilisation of non-voters or first-time voters rejecting the political allegiance of their parents.36

Conclusion: Labourism’s end?

The foundations of the transformation in Australian politics during 1890 to 1910 require further analysis. The new left were correct to argue against the old left that Labor support was not an automatic reflection of capitalist employment, but their ‘materialist’ alternative reduced political allegiance to an epiphenomenon of industrial employment. The approach I have proposed emphasises the relations of production, as did the old left, but defines these more broadly to include regulatory structures such as arbitration and protection.37 This analysis enables the contemporary woes of industrial and political labour to be placed in a historical context. The election result of 1996 has been interpreted as a demonstration of a distinctive working-class disillusionment with Labor. In fact the core Labor constituency of unionised workers who identify as working-class, which would include those voters with a hegemonic consciousness, did not show a distinctive shift against Labor in 1996.38 What has occurred is that this constituency has shrunk whilst Labor has failed to develop an equivalent of the protection/arbitration couplet, to appeal to economic-corporate voters.

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10 This percentage is the R-square value for the linear correlation between the two variables.


12 This evidence of Free-trade/Liberal success in recruiting new voters is supported by Withers' finding from a multivariate analysis that young males were likely to support Free Trade in 1901 (G. Withers, 'Statistical Determinants of the Results', in M. Simms, (ed.), 1901: the forgotten election, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2001, p. 240).


18 Withers, 'Statistical Determinants of the Results', in Simms, 1901, p. 240.


21 Rickard, Class and Politics, pp. 138, 221.


Lipset & Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here*, pp. 60-61. The durability of New Zealand liberalism however challenges my emphasis on arbitration.


