

STUDIES IN IMPERIALISM

Labour and the politics of Empire

Britain and Australia
1900 to the present

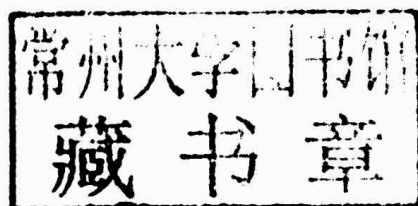
NEVILLE KIRK



Labour and the politics of Empire

BRITAIN AND AUSTRALIA 1900
TO THE PRESENT

Neville Kirk



MANCHESTER

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Manchester and New York

distributed in the United States exclusively by

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Published by Manchester University Press
Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9NR, UK
and Room 400, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA
www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

Distributed exclusively in the USA by
Palgrave, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010, USA

Distributed exclusively in Canada by
UBC Press, University of British Columbia, 2029 West Mall,
Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z2

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 978 0 7190 8079 1 *hardback*

ISBN 978 0 7190 9131 5 *paperback*

First published by Manchester University Press 2011

First digital paperback edition published 2014

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Printed by Lightning Source

STUDIES IN IMPERIALISM

general editor John M. MacKenzie

When the 'Studies in Imperialism' series was founded more than twenty-five years ago, emphasis was laid upon the conviction that 'imperialism as a cultural phenomenon had as significant an effect on the dominant as on the subordinate societies'. With more than eighty books published, this remains the prime concern of the series. Cross-disciplinary work has indeed appeared covering the full spectrum of cultural phenomena, as well as examining aspects of gender and sex, frontiers and law, science and the environment, language and literature, migration and patriotic societies, and much else. Moreover, the series has always wished to present comparative work on European and American imperialism, and particularly welcomes the submission of books in these areas. The fascination with imperialism, in all its aspects, shows no sign of abating, and this series will continue to lead the way in encouraging the widest possible range of studies in the field. 'Studies in Imperialism' is fully organic in its development, always seeking to be at the cutting edge, responding to the latest interests of scholars and the needs of this ever-expanding area of scholarship.

Labour and the politics of Empire

MANCHESTER
1824

Manchester University Press

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Shurlee Swain and Margot Hillel

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

GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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

Generous financial assistance made it possible for me to carry out the research and writing of this book in Britain, Australia and Canada during the past decade. I am extremely grateful to the following funding bodies: the Leverhulme Trust (Study Abroad Fellowship), the Australian National University (the award of Visiting Fellowships in the Humanities Research Centre, the National Europe Centre, the History Program, Research School of the Social Sciences and the Australian Dictionary of Biography), the University of Sydney (Work and Organisational Studies, Faculty of Economics and Business) and Manchester Metropolitan University (Manchester and European Research Institute). The University of Toronto, the Australian National University and the University of Sydney also kindly provided me with office space, computing and other facilities. Academic and administrative staff in these universities were invariably welcoming and helpful. I am grateful for their support.

I also owe a massive debt of gratitude to the many librarians and archivists who guided me to and through the relevant material in the Labour History Archive and Study Centre, the People's History Museum, Manchester, the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, the National Library of Scotland, the National Library of Australia, the Noel Butlin Archives Centre at the Australian National University and the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. I am especially grateful to Darren Treadwell of the Labour History Archive and Study Centre, and Pennie Pemberton of the Noel Butlin Archives for their unstinting efforts on my behalf.

My past and present comparative and trans-national research has derived great benefit from the encouragement, support and critical engagement of a truly international group of colleagues and friends. In terms of the research for this particular book, I would like to thank the following: Rick Halpern and his colleagues at the University of Toronto; Paul Pickering and Melanie Nolan, the Australian National University; Chris Lloyd, University of New England; Sean Scalmer and Stuart Macintyre, the University of Melbourne; Greg Patmore and John Shields, the University of Sydney; Chris Wrigley, University of Nottingham; Kevin Morgan, University of Manchester. Kevin, Chris Wrigley, Stuart, Sean, Melanie and Paul very kindly read and offered extremely valuable comments on the text, as did two anonymous readers and one reviewer for Manchester University Press. I would like to thank them deeply for their hard work, constructive criticisms and generosity. I am grateful to Teny Wyke for compiling the index.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Aspects of the research were presented at seminars and conferences at the University of Toronto, University of Reading, the Newberry Library, Chicago, the People's History Museum, Manchester, University of Melbourne, the Australian National University and the University of Central Lancashire. I am grateful to participants for their valuable comments.

Neville Kirk, New Mills, August 2010

ABBREVIATIONS

ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
ALP	Australian Labor Party
ASIO	Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation
ASU	Anti-Socialist Union
AWNLI	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

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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,