CLICHES ON AUSTRALIAN POLITICS, 1900-1950*

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The Australian legend is now hoary enough to have inspired a reaction among the historians — what has recently been called the Counter-Revolution in Australian Historiography.¹ This paper is not intended to be part of such a counter-revolution. It is an impressionistic survey of the literature on twentieth century politics in Australia, with an eye to those persistent themes which are the symptoms of legend building. Because these themes are often borrowed at third or fourth hand, they have been called “cliches”, but the term is meant to imply no judgement of truth or falsity. For the most part the work required to make this judgement has not yet been done.²

However, it is suggested that the cliches form a pattern, that from them can be built up a composite picture of Australian political history as seen by those writing about it, and that this picture is based upon faulty assumptions. The composite picture may be summarised as follows:

(a) There is a uniquely Australian ideology and style of politics which matured at the turn of the century under Deakin and Fisher. This will be called for convenience “Australianism.”

(b) This Australianism has been a continuing tradition in Australian politics, moulding the attitudes of all parties. Consequently, political history from 1900 to 1950 can be interpreted in its terms. The parties which conformed most closely to the Australianist norm were, as a direct result, electorally successful. Those which departed from it were unsuccessful.

Finally, it is argued that this picture tends to favour the Australian Labour Party. Some of the reasons for this are examined and some deficiencies in the orthodox approach noted.

The first fourteen years of the Commonwealth were, by general agreement, vintage ones. In these years of social idealism and experimentation Australia earned its world reputation as a social laboratory. As Crawford has put it:

The vigorous experimental quality of colonial democracy was never more confidently in control than in the years which followed the formation of the commonwealth, and continued, a halcyon period, up to the outbreak of war in 1914.³

This “halcyon period” may be extended back in time⁴ but does not go beyond 1914.

Though most writers suggest that Labour supplied ideas, social dynamic, or both,⁵ Alfred Deakin and his radicals are given credit for the achievements of the period. It is also generally agreed that the second Fisher Government continued to act in the same spirit. “Humanitarian liberalism, whether of the Deakin or Fisher variety”⁶ dominated pre-war Australian politics. However, pro-Labor writers carry this further, claiming 1910-1913 as “a climax to the period”⁷ or asserting that the Fisher Government “rounded off Australian liberalism.”⁸ After that it was brought up hard against the limits of the Constitution.⁹

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Credit is not given to socialists. "Le socialisme sans doctrines" is the most overworked cliche in the Australian armoury, trotted out again and again to explain that what contemporaries regarded as socialism was nothing of the kind. Australia was never threatened by a socialist revolution. The Labour party won the co-operation of the middle class liberals by concentrating on "what was practical and immediate." Indeed, the Australian attitude to socialism was one of amusement. The "socialism" of the Labour party was not the sort of socialism which socialists in Europe profess; that was repugnant to Australians.

The old Australian experimentalism which some people called socialism was not really socialism at all; it was rather the practical utilitarianism reached by John Stuart Mill in his later days, running towards State action under the pressure of circumstances. Australians understood that sort of thing ("It is my brand of socialism", said Fisher) and still understand it. It has become almost a part of their national character.

Perhaps it is a fraud to assert that there has ever been such a thing as Australian socialism.

This is commonly explained by reference to the class structure. Australia has had nothing like the British ruling class. It was "a new British community without the wrongs, injustices, poverty and class-barriers of Britain. Equality was the keynote ..." Consequently, Australians are opposed to class distinctions, or at least think themselves to be so. Testimony to Australian egalitarianism stretches from Froude in 1886 to MacKenzie in 1961, and the following extract, written at the turn of the century, could be from any period:

There is a free-and-easy style about Australia and Australians which is absent from older countries ... People out there mix more freely with one another than they do in England; there are not the same class distinctions nor the frigid stiffness that is encountered in the old world ... Material wealth confers a certain rank, but no authority. Since there is not the same class distinction, we should not expect the class war of Europe. Indeed, for some writers any overt conflict becomes "a legacy from the European malcontents who introduced the class hatreds of their continent to a country where no hereditary classes existed."

The Governments of 1900 to 1914 are regarded as typically Australian in their suspicion of pretension and eagerness to provide equal opportunities. Perhaps it can be held that the attempt to prevent the growth of privilege went too far, that in their solicitude for the weak they formed a society whose "instinct is to make merit take a place in the queue." But one thing is certain: 1880-1914 was the matrix of the future. In those years "the whole tone of Australian life changed ... This is when Australian social democracy was born." In a "compromising bargaining temper" successive governments followed a policy of piecemeal radicalism. Little regard was paid to economic factors when these conflicted with the provision of a "fair and reasonable" standard of living. Then, as now, the State was regarded as a vast public utility, whose job was to provide the social capital necessary to tame a difficult country.

They were equally typically Australian in their disregard for theory. However, in books on Australian politics "theory" and "theoretical" are not common words. "Doctrinaire", with its full pejorative content, is used instead — particularly in describing socialism. The radical governments before World War I had no tinge of the doctrinaire. Greenwood's estimate of the beliefs shared by radicals and Laborites would win wide acceptance: "a belief in ex-
per experimentation, a sense of Australianism, a recognition of the necessity for
remedying social injustice by State action, and, in the larger view, an optimistic
acceptance of the social democratic doctrine of progress.\textsuperscript{25} This is still true
of Australians in general. They do not seek to reason to an intellectual posi-
tion and then apply their principles to particular situations, preferring a “direct,
blunt simplicity”\textsuperscript{26} even in their leaders.

The underlying philosophy of Australian society today is virtually a denial
that first principles and clearly defined aims on the nature of man and society
are necessary and that easy-going experimentalism will sooner or later work
out for the best.\textsuperscript{27}

Indeed, the political attitudes of these Lib-Labs have become “a settled part
of the Australian outlook.”\textsuperscript{28} They imply both an ideology\textsuperscript{29} and a style of
politics which is peculiarly Australian, and which for the sake of brevity will
hereafter be called “Australianism.”

So many writers accept this concept, and apply it to their interpretation of
Australian political history, that it ranks as the central cliche. Though few are
so self-conscious as to realise it, they share Crawford’s thesis, spelled out at
the end of his \textit{Australia}:

It has been the argument of this book . . . that Australian political life has
developed a strong and resilient tradition of practical but experimental com-
promise . . . With all its faults, this was a militant, idealistic tradition, tem-
erpered in the end by a readiness to come to practical compromises, if only
after the heat and dust of conflict. Fundamentally, it consisted in a readi-
ness to experiment by adaptation to circumstances rather than by the whole-
sale imposition of doctrinaire systems.\textsuperscript{30}

Yet such work as has been done on the 1900-1914 period already casts doubt
on this Australianist interpretation. In many ways the politics of the period
merely reflect an imperfect adaptation to the new federal system, which was
characterized by major readjustments in the party and interest group structure
and some uncertainty about the future distribution of political power.\textsuperscript{31}

There is good reason to emphasise the transitional character of the period.
These were years in which national as opposed to colonial politics first de-
veloped. Various interests had to adapt their behaviour to a new decision-
making process, for in 1900, when the formal structure of federalism was
set up, very few interests were organised at the national level. The most
striking feature of political activity in the years following federation was the
wavelike organisation of groups as they were affected by the new centralisation
of public power. Trade unions, employers, manufacturers and merchants,
farmers and liquor interests all began to organise nationally at this time.\textsuperscript{32}
Moreover, it was to be some time before the political parties fully controlled
preselection and endorsement of candidates, particularly for the federal par-
liament.\textsuperscript{33} It is not surprising that a “compromising, bargaining temper”\textsuperscript{34}
and a concentration on what was “practical and immediate” was the dominant style
of politics. Just such haggling for minor concessions and absorption in short
term ends are characteristic of interest group activity.

So it may well be argued that the turn of the century was a period of con-
fusion, and one in which interest groups were unusually active and influential.
It may further be argued that to this day Australian interest groups enjoy a
relatively influential role vis-a-vis the parties.\textsuperscript{34} But this ad hoc adjustment
of competing claims, this “compromising, bargaining temper”, is not proof
of a deliberately chosen pragmatism in Australian politics. Nor should it
automatically be linked with a devotion to “social idealism and experimenta-
tion.” It may simply reflect the fact that our society is still fluid.
Most writers implicitly agree that for Australians this century can be divided into 1900-1914, 1914-1918, 1919-1939, 1939-1945, and 1946 plus, though the depression years are sometimes separately treated. The first world war is seen as a watershed. Though only a few popularisers peddle the platform rhetoric of nationhood won on the slopes of Gallipoli, it is generally agreed that war organization, the conflict over conscription, and the industrial clashes of the later war years changed the nature of Australian society. And the change was not a change for the better. Just as it exhausted the population, the war "seemed to exhaust the creative impulse that ushered in the century." Under its stresses the revolutionary struggles of the outside world seemed to have more relevance. "An ideological doctrinaire tone", which had little relation to the Australian tradition, developed.

At the same time social achievements were few. The twenties were years of disillusionment. People were too busy making money to worry about social problems and though Australians continued to believe that their country was a social laboratory, it had ceased to be such. By the end of the decade Australia's social services lagged behind those of several European countries. There was, of course, tremendous material progress, but it was "a wretched decade, adding little but wealth to our possessions." "The sense of conscious social mission" which had been characteristic of the pre-war period was forgotten. "The first generous instinct had spent itself, in much the same way as the promise of Sturt's swift flowing rivers was lost amid bewildering swamps and marshes."

The dominant Bruce-Page Government is given the credit for this material progress. Most writers mention the stabilisation of Commonwealth-State financial relations, and some also note that it raised the rates of some social services. This latter, together with its opposition to bolshevism and pacifism, was enough to show its concern for "the Australian way of life." Its reward was electoral support over a considerable period of time. However, even those who give the Bruce-Page Government the benefit of all the doubts they can muster, damn it by faint praise. Thus to Greenwood, who makes all the above points in its favour, it was "by no means wholly illiberal." Again, though the voters were prepared to accept it as the current exponent of Australianism, the parties supporting it were "the not wholly legitimate heirs of the nationalist tradition", and the best we can say of them is that they did not "altogether abuse their inheritance."

Much more in the majority style is indictment of the "comfortable businessmen's Parliament" which allowed the Government to sell the experiments in State ownership initiated by Labour. And even Greenwood takes the standard line that the A.L.P. let the non-Labour parties dominate by default. The doctrinaire tone it had developed during the war was allowed to overshadow its habitually Australianist attitudes:

The Labour party ... did much to lose support. There was a turning away, despite the efforts of the politicians, from the pragmatic, gradualist approach, which had paid such dividends under Fisher and Hughes, to a more doctrinaire and semi-revolutionary outlook.

Though under Bruce and Page "the folklore of modern industrial capitalism basically modified Australian traditions" (to give the strongest interpretation) or the Government "took up attitudes which Labour felt were hostile, harsh, and perhaps reactionary" (to choose the most moderate), the A.L.P. itself was at the time so far from Australianism that it had even less electoral appeal.
Symptomatic of the Labour party's "semi-revolutionary outlook" was the adoption of the Socialisation Objective in 1921. The socialism embodied in this Objective was the European kind, which we have seen is supposed to be repugnant to Australians. Before the war the A.L.P. had doctrines, but only the "old nationalistic doctrines" which "appealed directly and powerfully to the instinct of the Australian people." In 1921 the Labour party was under heavy pressure from its competitors in the Labour movement, the I.W.W. and One Big Union advocates of direct action. The Objective had to be adopted "to keep the union movement in line." But the effect of its adoption has been to load the "practical men of the Labour movement" with a doctrinal albatross which they have ever since had to carry. They have had to call themselves socialists.

The contention that the Bruce-Page Government only dominated elections until the Labour party reasserted its claim to its rightful inheritance is often supported by indirect evidence. Firstly, it is noted that after the war interest in politics, as measured by the percentage of electors bothering to vote, declined greatly. "This decline alarmed the federal politicians", who therefore followed Queensland's example and introduced compulsory voting for Commonwealth elections. Although some supplementary causes of this decline, such as the spread of motor cars, movies, and radio are suggested, it is clear that the prime cause is considered to have been the abandonment of Australianism in federal politics. The non-Labour coalition was preferable to Labour but even it did not follow the "practical utilitarianism" which had become part of the Australian character. Instead of social experimentation, the electorate was being offered material development and it therefore lost interest.

Secondly, it is sometimes argued that "with Labour out of office in the Commonwealth Parliament from 1917 to 1929, the State elections became the centre of interest." In the State Labour parties the "practical men" were still in control. Leaders like Storey in New South Wales, Theodore in Queensland, and Lyons in Tasmania enjoyed considerable electoral successes because they followed the policy of social advance which the electors still "really" wanted. Because the State Labour parties did not desert Australianism, "in the States the story was different." Labour oriented as this view must seem, it is supported by writers opposed to Labour because they share Australianist assumptions. Eggleston, for instance, argues that the State Labour parties are more successful than the federal party because "they have not departed from a Liberal policy" and for him this means that they have not departed from Australianism. "The real ideology of the Australian community is Liberal and not socialist," and since the State Labour parties have been opportunist enough to realise this (read: continued "the old practical and gradualist approach") they have been supported by the voters.

This second argument is a variant of Hancock's distinction between the "idealists" and the "practical men" in the Labour movement. However neither Eggleston nor the pro-Labour writers explain how J. T. Lang is to be fitted into this picture. From 1925 to 1927 Lang was in power in New South Wales and produced a considerable amount of social welfare legislation. Indeed, the first Lang Government led Australia in the provision of child endowment, widow's pensions and the 44-hour week. Though it was not the contemporary view, this presumably means that he was then in the category of the moderate "practical men." But in 1930 Lang attacked international Jewry for deliberately fomenting the depression and campaigned against the Melbourne Agreement. During the campaign and in his second term in office he showed the
minimum respect for constitutional niceties. He must therefore be taken out of the category of the "practical men." But how does he fit into the "idealist" category? Throughout his long life Lang has shown an impressive ignorance of socialism, and he was certainly never so obsessed by ideals as to lose sight of electoral considerations. Hancock himself later tried to salvage the distinction by calling Lang so "practical" a politician that he surrendered his conscience to the "idealist" and thereby "won a power which no other Australian Premier has ever possessed." However, neither explanation gets around the fact that this blatantly un-Australianist Labour leader continued to command considerable support in the electorate as well as the party after he had shown his "true" colours. Partridge illustrates the difficulty of reconciling this with any notion of Labour's "real", Australianist soul when he suggests that Lang "is not of course to be taken as typical of the movement as a whole", yet a few pages later has to admit that "although it was intellectually incoherent, Lang's policy was well calculated to appeal to the prejudices of large sections of the Labour movement." With the wisdom of hindsight the post-1930 crop of writers treat the material progress of the twenties as unsound, uneasily based upon "an uncritical belief in the limitless possibilities of the continent." Unemployment levels remained high throughout the whole decade and with little regard for economic consequences ambitious development and migration projects were undertaken. It was an era of "muddled thinking and muddled living", with "an ugliness underlying the slick gloss of financial and political varnish." However by 1929 Labour had returned to Australianism even in the federal sphere. "The influence of the revolutionary years of 1917-1919 in Europe had weakened" so that by the 1927 Federal Conference of the A.L.P. the more extreme Methods had been deleted from the Labour Platform. "What remained was quite an accurate description of Labour outlook, anything but the root-and-branch socialism suggested ever since by anti-Labour propagandists." The politicians and the A.W.U. leaders, both of whom are usually equated with the "practical men" and "both of whom remained true to the traditional methods", had regained control of the movement from the "idealist." The Labour party had returned to Australianism. On the other hand, the Bruce-Page Government had been retreating steadily from Australianism. The final symbol of this retreat was the proposal to abolish the federal arbitration system, and Labour was returned to power by "the aroused will of the people." The electorate had rejected the idealists of both parties.

Naturally this clear cut Australianist interpretation of events cannot explain the defeat of every government brought to the polls during the depression, and with the exception of Lang's New South Wales Government, the States are ignored. However, the struggles of the ill-fated Scullin Government and the doubt and confusion which followed its collapse "sharply focused and accentuated the elements of weakness in the Australian way of life." For the first time the electorate began to doubt Australianism. The depression "left permanent and important marks on the Labour movement" and "a permanent uneasiness on the margin of Australian political consciousness." The voters were contented to leave themselves in the hands of the "good, moderate, un-enterprising Lyons Government" for the whole of the "grim thirties." Though Labour Governments were in power in three States during the thirties, no attempt is made to argue that they were more moderate than federal Labour and...
therefore more successful. The comparative success of Lang’s State Labour party in its struggle with the moderate Federal Labour party would certainly make such an argument a difficult one. It is simply assumed that during the thirties Australianism lay dormant. Safety first was the motto, and nothing of significance was done on the domestic front. Australians were content to concentrate upon “a search for markets and for security.”

Predictably, since the books are fewer and the passions of policy-making closer, it is more difficult to paint a composite picture of the forties. Some writers acclaim them as years of outstanding achievement, while others condemn them as a near miss from communism. But as in the case of earlier decades, both acclaim and condemnation are delivered in Australianist terms. It remains the central cliche informing all the others. So for Crawford the forties stand out as “one of the decisive epochs in the shaping of the Australian community” because social justice “was at this time crystallized into a comprehensive policy.”

Murtagh is equally enthusiastic. For him the Chifley Government ranks as “the most successful administration in Labour history, its record of achievement far outstripping that of the Fisher Government of 1910-13.” However the bank nationalization proposals had an awkward tinge of theoretical (i.e. European, or doctrinaire) socialism about them. Both treat them as an aberration, a momentary slip from grace. “On the whole” and “in the perspective of time”, we will see Chifley’s policies as “a typical experimental compromise” of the familiar kind. Chifley was not a doctrinaire socialist. Indeed, “in his spirit and personality, he expressed, as no other Labour leader before him, the original ideals and mystique of the Australian Labour movement.” Davies and Serle also praise the “magnitude of the achievements of the Curtin and Chifley Governments”, but since their purpose is to persuade the Labour party that it is socialist, they rake through the legislation of the forties in search of proof. For them the attempt to nationalize the banks was “gal-lant” but, being also “unhappy”, it is ignored in one short sentence.

Even those critical of Labour in the forties express their criticism in Australianist terms. Partridge who doubts that the forties were really significant, compares them unfavourably with “the more vigorous intellectual life at the turn of the century.” Whitington believes that Curtin’s policies were sincere and like the reformist policies of Deakin and Fisher, but that the Labour party took a turn for the worse after Curtin’s death. By actually trying to implement the Socialisation Objective, the party moved away from the Australianist spirit. Clark, who is strongly Catholic and anti-communist, forgives Curtin for tolerating communists at a time when both Britain and the United States were doing the same. But Chifley could have backed the Industrial Groups and did not. He was a “class-war leader” and “a materialist, a lover of power” who has only won a reputation for moderacy because of the determined propaganda of his admirers. Finally, Eggleston argues that the forties saw Labour forget “the austerity of the Liberal politics of the first decade.” Since to him only the Liberals represent “the Australian way of life” and foster “the Australian pattern of culture”, again the criticism is in Australianist terms.

Partly through historical accident, partly through the sympathies of the bulk of writers, the composite picture which emerges from the cliches favours the Australian Labour party. The A.L.P. happened to be in power both in New South Wales and the Commonwealth, during the three “traumatic ex-
experiences" undergone by Australians in this century: the two world wars and the depression. Since these three periods have been more thoroughly studied than any other, there has been a tendency to generalise from them — to treat the abnormal as the normal. Moreover, these three crises are widely believed to have "rapidly accelerated social change and focused the problems of the nation," making the governing Labour party an indissoluble part of the Australian ethos. Often it is not clear whether "Australia" or "Labour" is meant to be the vital entity; which is the chicken and which the egg. The first world war and the depression split both. During the second world war they both found their maturity. Most writers simply do not see any necessity to cut the cord that binds them. 98

The Labour party's own claims to be the chosen vehicle of Australian nationalism 90 are strongly supported elsewhere. "Next to the Sydney Bulletin," wrote Hancock, "it was the most emphatic product of Australian sentiment." 91 "Labour more than other parties asserted the principle of Australia First", wrote Penton. 92 And a supplementary proposition is also common: that the non-Labour parties are more "British", i.e. non-Australian, in their attitudes than the Labour party. To Bruce and Menzies "not loyalty to and love of Australia, but loyalty to and love of England and its Empire, was their guiding star." 93 From Crisp's biting "they talk much of the bonds of Empire" 94 to Greenwood's grudging "not wholly legitimate heirs of the nationalist tradition", 95 the non-Labour parties are condemned as giving only secondary loyalty to Australia.

This identification of the A.L.P. with Australian nationalism complements its identification with the ideology and style of politics which has been called "Australianism." Thus Australian society is widely regarded as egalitarian and so is the "Australian" Labour party. 96 But Britain and the Old World are regarded as the source of social distinctions, and the "non-Australian", non-Labour parties are suspected of hankering for such distinctions. Labour leaders are simple, direct types of the sort Australians prefer, but non-Labour leaders are often aloof and "intolerant." 99 The same distinction runs through the list of attitudes regarded as part of Australianism. Thus the Labour party believes in "the inevitability of uninterrupted economic progress" 99 and expresses more than any other party a national temperament which is inexperienced and inexpert, but hopeful that by political action it can mend the world. 99 Like that of Australians in general, its distrust of intellectuals is taken as beyond dispute, 100 and in the true Australianist tradition it is both utilitarian and pragmatic. The A.L.P. wants "to improve the economic environment of the people, so that some change of moral and intellectual improvement may result," 101 and State socialism is not its "real" aim. Hancock's picture of the struggle between the "idealists" and "practical men" has won wide acceptance. Only the "practical men" are in the mainstream of the Labour and Australian tradition. 102 When the A.L.P. does adopt doctrinaire aims, this is at the expense of its real self. Afterwards it has to fight to "re-establish its identity and restore its lost self-confidence" 203 for "the truth is that Australian Labour, even when it professes to be militant and revolutionary, does not believe half of what it says." 204

The Labour party's "real" self is practical and pragmatic because it is a direct reflection of Australian society. The cruder version of this argument explicitly describes Australianism as a social movement and treats the parties as passive reflectors, whose success or failure can be explained in terms of their fidelity to the movement. In 1918 Northcott wrote:

The sociological history of the last quarter of a century is therefore the logical development of that of the previous century. It is the history of the struggle
of a social ideal to manifest itself. That ideal became an impulse to the political organization of a new party and a resolvent of previously existing parties. It formed the watch word of the new party, and gradually, partially and perhaps sullenly secured the grudging acquiescence of other parties. Nearly forty years later Brady gave it a modern ring, but left the substance unchanged. "The social and economic environment of Australia," he wrote, "created the Labour party and explains its success. The same environment also determined that its chief political opponent must in policy follow, however hesitantly, the same road."

An extension of the same argument is used to attack the "non-Labour parties' frequent changes of name. Thus Penton claims that the non-Labour parties have "no inner impulse to change", but are forced by Labour's electoral successes to suggest change by adopting a new name. McCallum sees the new names as the regeneration of their protective liberal colouration and Eggleston is sensitive to the charge, apologising for the conservatives who cannot afford to sail under their own name. On the other hand, the Labour party has no need to change its name. Indeed, "Australian Labour Party" is an asset for which factions within the party are prepared to do battle, and remains the symbol of "a character, and a place in the national archives that no other party so far has possessed."

IV

Ten years ago Louise Overacker surveyed publications on Australia useful to the political scientist and found that "for many periods there continues to be a lack of the basic historical studies necessary for a definitive interpretation of men and events, and until more of these gaps are filled in it is unlikely that Australia will find 'its Dicey, its Bagehot, its Jennings, its Bryce and even its Brogan.' Though the position is slowly improving, this comment still stands. So it is not surprising that certain themes, having been advanced by one observer, have then been taken up by others without question. The more often this process takes place, the more firmly established these themes become. They rise to the status of truisms without ever having been tested in the crucible of particular cases.

It has been argued here that these "cliches" form a pattern, that from them can be built up a composite picture of Australian political history as seen by those writing about it. This picture assumes a uniquely Australian ideology and style of politics, which has been called "Australianism", and uses it as the norm. Political parties which adhere to this Australianist norm are rewarded by the voters, while those which depart from it are promptly punished. It has been further argued that this picture favours the Australian Labour Party and in particular that strand of opinion in the A.L.P. which Hancock attempted to identify as the "practical men."

Stated baldly in this way there are obvious crudities and inconsistencies in the Australianist interpretation. It has been noted in passing that recent research throws doubt on the central cliche, the belief that in the period 1880-1914 Australians developed a "strong and resilient tradition of practical but experimental compromise." It has also been noted that the Australianist version of the twenties, which explains Labour's eclipse in the federal sphere by deviation from the Australianist norm and its success in the states by adherence to it, fails to account for J. T. Lang's successes in N.S.W. But these are only individual failings in an approach which is itself conceptually unsound. The Australianist interpretation uses the same terms to represent different in-
terests at different times and in different places. The most pervasive example of this is the use of "Labour" and "non-Labour" to differentiate between the political parties, a usage which not only implies Labour initiative and non-Labour resistance, but obscures the very ebb and flow of interests supporting the various parties which it is the business of political history to elucidate.

Though, as its supporters so often point out, the Australian Labour Party has not changed its name for many years the party has by no means remained the same since its inception. Not only has the formal structure changed, as for example in the relations between the State and Federal organisations, but the interests supporting the party have widened and their relative importance has varied as the Australian society has developed. When the maritime strike took place Australia was still an agricultural, mining and pastoral country. Even as late as 1917, the N.S.W. railway strike involved no factory workers. However, the Labour party in the twenties, and especially the N.S.W. Labour party, had to cope with the increasing strength of the "industrial" unions centred on the Sydney Trades and Labour Council. It was they who were largely responsible for the concessions to militancy made by the federal party, so it is hardly surprising that Lang's successes cannot be explained in terms of State party moderacy. It must be conceded that the story is a very complex one, and not yet fully known, but clearly to treat the Labour parties of 1891 and 1929 as identical can be very misleading.

Yet it is only if the changing nature of the Labour party is ignored in this way that the confident distinction between "idealists" and "practical men" can be maintained. Two points need to be made here. Firstly, the distinction involves a sleight of hand. In the earlier context of "social idealism and experimentation", the idealists are the advocates of social justice. Political action, like the arbitration system, was the ideal of a unionism which found its characteristic expression in the Australian Workers' Union, and "idealist" is here meant as a compliment. But in the later context "idealist" is used pejoratively. It means ideologue or revolutionary, and the reformists of the A.W.U. oligarchy have become "practical men" who, like the politicians, want primarily to keep the Labour party in government.

Secondly, the distinction assumes that there is something less characteristically Australian, or even Labour, in the attitudes of these later "idealists" than in the attitudes of the "practical men." But can this simply be assumed? Perhaps the ideals of the industrial unions were now also characteristically Labour. The industrialists distrusted the politicians and tended to favour direct action, attitudes which are still important in the Labour movement today. Though in pre-industrial States like Queensland and Tasmania the A.W.U. remained in the saddle throughout the inter-war period, in New South Wales it met defeat. Lang won the industrialists' support, and it should not be forgotten that in N.S.W. Langism until the end of the thirties commanded more electoral and party support than the official Labour party. Indeed, Crisp believes that if the handful of federal Labour men had not maintained their stubborn resistance "Langism might well have taken over the A.L.P. across the country." So an accurate description of Labour's "real" attitudes has to include some elements which are usually glossed over: the xenophobia, anti-Semitism, authoritarianism, industrial militancy and disregard for constitutional procedures which Lang exploited but did not invent. The sober reformism which the Australianist interpretation of the Labour mainstream presents as Labour's "real" attitude, is only one attitude among several. If, for instance, Lang had won in the thirties it is not difficult to imagine a version of events which would place him in the mainstream of Labour tradition.
The same general point must be made with respect to the term “non-Labour.” Used to describe all the parties which have opposed Labour, it simply obscures the very important differences between them. Again the picture is complex and so far incomplete, but clearly the Protectionists and Free Traders were supported by different interests, and these interests varied from State to State. And though they managed to sink their differences sufficiently to fuse against the Labour party, those differences remained. Fitzhardinge saw this when he described the “continual struggle, sometimes visible, sometimes beneath the surface, between two sections; one deriving from the conservative Free Trade party of the Reid-Cook Opposition, and one from Deakin’s Liberal-Protectionist party.” And these differences did not remain confined within the one party. The most curious blind spot in our political history is the attempt to lump the Country party into “non-Labour” whether it fits or not. Even Fitzhardinge counts it as part of “anti-Labour” and Webb, who defends this “whipping-boy of Australian politics”, does so by calling it “a regional and autonomous extension of the main non-Labour party.” Yet surely the most striking feature of the inner-war period in the federal sphere is the influence of the Country party? The same industrialisation which altered the balance of power among the trade unions, and thus affected the Labour party, caused the Nationalist and United Australia parties also to concentrate their attention on the cities. While the country delegates to party conferences complained that they were being given nothing for the country, the countrymen broke away and began winning seats from both Labour and Nationalists. The small pastoralists, dairy, sugar, wheat and fruit farmers did not see themselves as “non-Labour.” They saw the two existing parties as “non-Country.”

Similarly, the identification of Australianism with the Labour party, and particularly with one faction within that party, entirely ignores the claims of the Country party. Yet the range of Australianist attitudes are often attributed to countrymen and the Bruce-Page administration in particular has claims to be called “idealistic” in the complimentary and reformist sense. This Government consolidated the nation-building of the pre-war period, extended the umbrella of protection to country interests, and provided, no matter how mistaken its assumptions, the investment base from which Australia “took off” into her industrial revolution in the thirties and forties. Though it failed to understand or cope with the militancy of the industrial unions, it shared this failure with the “practical men” inside the Labour movement. Sir Earle Page rightly calls it “an administration dedicated to extensive reform.” And there is a nice touch of irony in the terms which he chooses to justify his record. Impeccably Australianist, he explains that “in all these efforts we were guided, not by ideological motives, but by strict business principles and the desire to get the best results for the electors and the particular interests that were being penalized . . . my approach has always been dictated by practical considerations.”

NOTES—
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68


44. Ibid., p. 252.


46. K. Tennant, op. cit., p. 257.


50. W. K. Hancock, loc. cit.


53. W. K. Hancock, op. cit., pp. 201-205.


55. Ibid., p. 257.

56. C. Clark, op. cit., p. 217.


63. M. Barnard, op. cit., p. 61.

64. K. Tennant, op. cit., p. 261.

65. A. A. Calwell, op. cit., p. 66.


70. W. K. Hancock, loc. cit.


74. Ibid., op. cit., pp. 174-177.

75. Ibid., op. cit., pp. 361-364.


77. By the 1936 Unity Conference, the Federal Labour party had become so weak that the party was re-united on Lang's terms.


86. C. Clark, op. cit., pp. 207-208.

87. W. K. Hancock, op. cit., pp. 145, 144, 156.

88. J. G. Murtagh, op. cit., p. 159.


90. A. A. Calwell, op. cit., p. 60.

91. W. K. Hancock, op. cit., p. 177.


93. B. Penton, op. cit., p. 50.


96. But see W. K. Hancock, op. cit., p. 166.
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103. L. F. Fitzhardinge, op. cit., p. 77.


107. B. Penton, op. cit., p. 50.


114. H. Mayer, op. cit.


118. These included such established unions as the seamen and coalminers.


121. L. F. Fitzhardinge, "Political and Public Life" in J. Groom (comp.), Nation Building in Australia, Sydney, 1942, p. 86.

122. ibid.


126. ibid., p. 111.