



The University of Newcastle

History Club

Department of History

STUDENT RESEARCH PAPERS
IN
AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

No 4

1979

Price : 50 cents

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Printed at the University of Newcastle.

PREFACE

This issue continues the practice, begun in 1976, of publishing the best original research papers done in the Australian History course. The series is now well established as a useful contribution, particularly to the history of Newcastle and its environs. Students are encouraged to work with primary sources from the University Archives, the City Archives, local collections up and down the Hunter Valley and private documentation that may surface during their searches.

This year students were offered a three-fold choice: to find their own primary research topic, to use a given set of primary documentation (e.g. The Bigge Report, the Newcastle Morning Herald) to answer a specific question, or to do a conventional assignment based largely on secondary sources. The four papers offered this year are from the first two categories. They represent some, though not all of the most original and best presented studies. Other papers which we did not have room to publish, but which deserve special mention were:

Susan Bentley	The Life and Times of 'Mona Vale'
Cathy Berecny	The Effectiveness of Newcastle as a Place of Punishment and Rehabilitation
Doug Cassidy	The Fight to Survive: The Great Depression in Newcastle 1930-33
Mark Clement	Socialism in Newcastle: The Elections of 1885 and 1895
Stephen Dunn	The Impact of the 1843 Depression on Hunter Valley Living Standards: An Examination of the <u>Maitland Mercury</u> .
Toni Flanagan	The Coal Monopolies held by the Crown and the A.A. Company in New South Wales
Eva Higgs	Security and Newcastle in the War of 1914-1918
Leonard Notaras	The Effectiveness of Newcastle as a Place of Punishment and Rehabilitation
Anne Pill	Cooks Hill: Its Contribution to the Development of Newcastle
Janelle Redmond	Beginnings of a Town: Life in the Cessnock District 1900-1906
Kim Tait	The Decline of the Lake Macquarie Aborigines in the early Nineteenth Century
Mark Watchorn	Camden Haven 1870-1930

All the local history papers, as with those of previous years, are available for public perusal in the Local History Collection of the Newcastle Public Library.

John Turner, Margaret Henry, Peter Hempenstall

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SOCIALISM IN NEWCASTLE: THE ELECTIONS
OF 1885 AND 1895

BY

PAUL KIEM

SYNOPSIS:

Though socialism might have expected a following among the working class during this decade, given the onset of the 1890s Depression and the industrial strife, the elections of 1885 and 1895 show that it was not at least an election issue locally. The 1885 election was fought and won by establishment politicians who believed the workers' cause should be advanced but socialism does not surface. The 1895 elections revolved around Reid's challenge to the Upper House and socialist sentiments were at best vague and ineffectual. The reason lies in the electorate's disinterest, given the working man's ability to achieve a measure of economic and social equality in New South Wales without resorting to radical solutions.

Having experienced a lengthy period of relative prosperity which came to an end in the late 1880's, New South Wales entered the last decade of the nineteenth century beset by industrial disputes and economic depression. Trade unions had been extending their influence for some time, but the failure of the great maritime strike of 1890 helped to convince labour leaders that they would have to seek other means of promoting the interests of the working man. Political action was seen as the most obvious avenue, hence the formation of the Labor party. Some also turned to the ideas of radical socialism and as a philosophy it gave significant impetus to both the union movement and the newly established political party. However socialism never really attained any widely based popular support in New South Wales. The parliamentary election campaigns of 1885 and 1895, as reported by the Newcastle Morning Herald, show little sign of any socialist influence. Notwithstanding the activities of an enthusiastic minority, socialism was not emphasised in the Labor platform. It would seem that, despite the severity of the times, socialism did not achieve any success in practical terms because it held little appeal for the electors; radical solutions were unacceptable when the majority expected change to occur without altering the essential order of existing society.

By 1880 the workers of New South Wales enjoyed the democratic privileges of universal manhood suffrage and the secret ballot but there was no payment of members. So, unable to afford to represent themselves, they gave their support to whoever was most sympathetic to their cause in the Legislative Assembly. Although there was a crude political spectrum ranging from those who favoured free-trade to those who were protectionists, candidates were independent and held a variety of views. Until the formation of the Labor Party in 1891, there was no specific working class position. Largely, however, the workers looked to the development of their trade unions to safeguard their interests. In prosperous times the unions flourished and they had such practical functions as policing wage rates and organizing members'

sick benefits and funeral funds. W.G. Spence revived the Amalgamated Miners' Association in 1878 and went on to organize the Shearers' Union. Skilled tradesmen had pioneered the union movement but the latter part of the 1880's saw the organization of unskilled workers. With amalgamation and strengthening, the fight began for the closed shop principle whereby employers could only employ union members. At the same time export incomes were beginning to fall; employers may have sensed the coming financial crisis and so prepared to resist this extension of union power. Confrontation came with the Maritime Strike of 1890. Beginning with marine officers in Melbourne, it later extended to wharf labourers, shearers and miners to include 50,000 men in four colonies.¹ Eventually the strike was broken - employers could rely on a large pool of unemployed for "scab" labour which worked under police protection. Although the causes are by no means straightforward, it may be said that this strike came at a time when the employers would not accept the unions' desire to consolidate their power over wages and conditions. Certainly the general aim of the unions during this period was to clarify their position, rather than to promote radical causes. For example, the Amalgamated Miners' Association at Silverton declared its object: "to maintain the privileges and customs at present appertaining to mining in this district..."²

Further defeats followed for the unions. In 1891 the Queensland pastoralists beat the shearers and in 1892 the mines at Broken Hill enforced freedom of contract over the closed shop. Workers were forced to accept lower wages and conditions imposed by employers. Furthermore the economic depression reached a crisis point in 1893 with the failure of a number of banks. Over 25% of craftsmen became unemployed and the figure was probably higher for the unskilled.³ Under these circumstances socialism might have been expected to gain a following.

Socialist ideas did gain some prominence in Australia in the 1880's and 1890's due to the activities of a number of individuals, groups and journals. The year 1887 saw the formation of both the Australian Socialist League (A.S.L.) in Sydney and William Lane's Bellamy Society in Brisbane. These were in practice peaceful, but their idea of socialism embraced the anarchic and the revolutionary. Moreover, socialism was perceived by the general community as a revolutionary doctrine; it fulfilled the role of communism in relationship to present day capitalist society. The contemporary conception of socialism as a radical alternative to existing laissez-faire capitalism was given by A.S.L. leader W.H. McNamara: "Socialism in a nutshell meant that every man should own the results of his own labor, that the wage system should be abolished, that everyone should have a natural share in the land and the products of labor--in short that the means of production, distribution and exchange should be declared and treated as the common property of all."⁴ The distinction between revisionism, communism, anarchism and other shades of socialism was somewhat blurred, but the A.S.L. served as the Australian representative of the Second International and it was diligent enough to inaugurate a May Day procession in Sydney in 1892. At least until 1898 the A.S.L. had an influence in the Labor Party. After the 1895 elections seven out of the eighteen Labor M.L.A.'s were socialists.⁵ Significantly, the socialists had a policy which held that the Labor Party should not cooperate with the older political groups.⁶

There was a socialist influence within the union movement. L.G. Churchward asserts that, after the strikes of 1890-3, "statements about the identity of interests of capital and labor tended to give place to statements about the need to protect the class interests of the workers, and the necessity for the ultimate overthrow of capitalism."⁷ Socialist ideas were further propagated by journals such as the A.S.L.'s Radical, Lane's Boomerang and the popular Sydney Bulletin. A leading article in

the Bulletin of 1888 declared: "There is no brotherhood between Capital and Labour..."⁸ And sometimes the work of a growing community of writers and poets reflected the social ills of the time in a radical tone:

"We'll make the tyrants feel the sting
Of those that they would throttle;
They needn't say the fault is ours
If blood should stain the wattle."

Henry Lawson⁹

More cautious elements of society were sufficiently aroused to issue warnings. The Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, Cardinal Moran, lectured on the danger of socialism tainting democracy;¹⁰ Sydney Morning Herald editorials saw communism implicit in a miners' manifesto that went beyond industrial matters and called for an "equal distribution of wealth."¹¹

Not only then were the times favourable to the growth of socialism, but there existed much enthusiastic rhetoric and a pot-pourri of radical ideas. But did socialism have any real acceptance amongst the general community? An examination of the election campaigns of 1885 and 1895 gives a good indication of the relevance of socialism for the electorate because it shows what candidates had in their platforms and whether they thought there was anything to be gained from advocating a policy of radical reform.

In the elections of 1885 in Newcastle, candidates seemed to be in general agreement on most issues. Differences of opinion are evident on the recent Sudan expedition and on the current Land Bill, but on all other issues, candidates held similar positions. They supported the principle of the eight hour day, favoured payment of members and were opposed to assisted immigration. In all this there is an appeal to the workers but the very unanimity of the appeal, by politicians of sufficient means to support themselves in parliament, emphasises that it did not spring from socialism. Indeed, what is most evident from the Newcastle Morning Herald's reports of the election period is the already widespread acceptance by society of the

need for the advancement of the worker. Editorializing on the Sydney eight hour demonstration, the Herald saw no danger to employers or society from trade union activities: "Trade Societies, which were looked upon at one time as little better than hot-beds of revolutionary sentiment were at last acknowledged under certain conditions by the law. From that moment till the present the path of unionism has been a succession of triumphs."¹² Far from being suspected of threatening existing society, the Labor movement was accepted as a legitimate part of it. Advocacy of the eight hour principle seemed to be embraced by all candidates as good politics. Apart from that, there were no specific or urgent working class causes. When Thomas Walker announced, "I am a democrat, and for this reason I consider it a farce to have manhood suffrage without payment of members",¹³ he was voicing a sentiment in favour not so much of the workers as of their middle-class parliamentary representatives. That middle-class attitudes, catering to a non-radical working class, really shaped the election issues is seen in the attitude to pensions. Relatively enlightened society, prodded by an active union movement, had accepted the eight hour principle but had not considered the need for pensions for all. Condemning the proposal for civil servants' pensions, George Perry says: "I contend that out of their liberal salaries they ought to be compelled to make provision for old age in the same way as the working man has to do".¹⁴ No candidate saw an alternative as being to extend pensions to the working man.

James Fletcher's popularity as a candidate in 1885 epitomizes the irrelevance of socialism in the election. Hailed during the campaign as an eight hour man and the workers' candidate, his popularity is witnessed by his statue, erected through public subscription, in Newcastle's Fletcher Park. The plaque on this statue remembers him as the "miners' friend" and

yet his career and public speeches were hardly those of a socialist. Although he was a miners' chairman in 1860, he rose to be a colliery manager and a founder of the Newcastle Morning Herald. During the election campaign he is reported to have given this response to a question regarding a wharf labourer's strike: "...that he never asked for a wage when he was a working man unless he felt that he deserved it, then he never rested till he got it."¹⁵ A politic answer perhaps, but it is a platitude which epitomizes the outlook, widely endorsed by the electorate, of a relatively enlightened but nonetheless establishment politician. Socialism was an irrelevant doctrine to an electorate where, in 1885, the extent of the workers' aspirations was a fair day's pay for a fair day's work.

Spanning the period 1885 to 1895, we see considerable change. By 1895 N.S.W. had experienced bitter strikes and lock outs, depression and high unemployment. There was now payment of members and the Labor Party was in existence. Moreover, there was a ferment of socialist rhetoric and ideas. The 1885 campaign showed no socialist influence but by 1895 it would be reasonable to expect an upsurge of socialism in the electorate which would be reflected by campaign issues and manifestos.

On the contrary, the 1895 campaign had as its main issue the challenge by the Premier, George Reid, to the upper house. The election was brought on by the refusal of the nominee chamber to pass legislation sent up by Reid's freetrade Ministry. The Labor Party had supported Reid's measures and in fact took most of the credit for spurring him on towards greater democracy: "He could assure them this Government, who had introduced so many democratic measures, was not democratic by choice, but simply because they know their political lives depended upon the Labor Party."¹⁶ In reality such claims seemed to spring from a desire to establish an independent image in the electorate. The Labor Manifesto declared: "The position of the toiling masses to-day is proof of the hollowness of past political parties and a justification of adding to the Labor party till it is strong enough to take

up the work so long neglected."¹⁷ Nonetheless, in practice it is impossible to discern any specific Labor policy, let alone socialist influence. The pattern of Labor candidates' speeches was generally to applaud Reid's measures, albeit whilst taking credit for them, and then to join in the general cry for upper house reform.

Socialist sentiments came through only vaguely and absolutely ineffectually. Mr. D. Watkins, Labor candidate for Wallsend, is reported to have said that "his education taught him that there was no amelioration of the working classes in the two doctrines of freetrade and protection. The only remedy was co-operation or State-workmanship."¹⁸ However this is very mild, especially when considering that the freetrader Reid was declaiming against "the forces of monopoly and class selfishness", which were arrayed against his government.¹⁹ Even confirmed socialists within the Labor Party must have felt constrained through electoral expediency to adopt a low profile. Griffith, the candidate for Waratah, was a member of the A.S.L. but contented himself with only a mild criticism of Reid and the Ministry in election speeches which were otherwise indistinguishable from the others.²⁰

Commenting on Griffith's campaign, the Herald says, "the most the enemies of the League can say is that Mr. Griffith committed an error of judgement in recommending to the workers of the district the claims of a certain Labour paper, which, after a short and chequered life in Sydney, died in bankruptcy."²¹ It is a rare, veiled reference and the tone is enough to dismiss socialism as a non-issue.

In one editorial the Herald does mention the Labor Party in uncharacteristically ominous tones: "But away from the defined statement of the party's aspirations, there is an unknown territory which the public have not yet explored."²² This may have been a perfunctory reference to Labor's A.S.L. members but more likely, in line with the rest of the editorial, it is a reaction to Labor's continued claims that it really held

power, and not Reid. The actual harmless exaggeration of these claims is seen in the election results. The return of only eighteen Labor candidates represented a drop of more than 50% from 1891 and part of the reason must have been the party's co-operation with Reid in not contesting many of his freetrade seats.²³ This co-operation was a poor manifestation of socialist zeal! One perceptive correspondent of the Herald exposed the irony of a situation where Reid could pose as the workers' champion, and be tacitly backed by the Labor Party, and yet derive his main support from merchant importers and capitalists.²⁴ Summing up the issues in an editorial entitled "The Campaign", the Herald gives most emphasis to Reid's battle with the upper house. Indeed, any misgivings concerning the health of society, which one would expect to be directed at socialism if it were at all significant, take on a very different tone: "Sir Henry Parkes, and many other leading politicians, are inquiring whether it is necessary to burn down the Legislative Council in order to make liberty fit for popular consumption, or to alter the constitution in such a manner as to make one man the dictator of New South Wales."²⁵

Judging from the Herald reports, socialism had as little success with the electorate in 1895 as it did in 1885. There are very few, and then only vague references to socialist ideas by Labor candidates and there are no attacks made on radical socialism by opponents, as would be expected if it were an issue. Also, A.S.L. members of the Labor Party have obviously compromised their principles by co-operating with Reid. Thus, in a newspaper which did its best to report on all issues, ranging from General Gordon's fate in Africa to complicated intrigues in Eastern Europe or the N.S.W. Parliament, socialism was not significant enough to attract attention.

Reasons given for the failure of socialism in N.S.W. range from the Irish workers' heed of Cardinal Moran's intimations on the dire consequences for both spirituality and democracy, to the basic philosophical and

practical inadequacies of the would-be revolutionary leadership. Nonetheless, it would seem that any battle waged between Cardinal Moran and the socialists was of a largely esoteric nature. For the election campaigns indicate that the people as a whole were just not interested. Socialism had no real appeal for the people of colonial Australia; they lived in a society which, notwithstanding economic downturns, was evolving in such a way that it would be able to cope with the problems which socialism claimed to be able to solve. There was no demeaned and downtrodden pauper class without hope of ever bettering itself. N.S.W. in the decade 1885 to 1895 was indistinguishable from its earlier colonial history. And, although not a classless society, it was a society where there was some chance of moving up. James Fletcher's career is a good example of this. The small scale of secondary industry meant that there was no large and uniform industrial working class. In fact this class might better be typified by independent miners and bush workers with their own selections. Socialist commentators excuse the workers' failure to embrace socialism on the grounds that they did not constitute a mature working class.²⁶ An alternative is that they were an indigenous working class and therefore quite different from the industrial proletariat of Europe for whom socialism was prescribed.

Even though the 1890's were a time of severe hardship, they could not immediately alter conditions and attitudes which had developed throughout the colony's history. Egalitarianism had emerged as a cherished ideal and, at least relative to the old world, it was regarded as an actuality. This is why socialism made little headway in capturing the imagination of the people. Socialist doctrines were confused, and lost all their import, as they were equated with the familiar notion of egalitarian mateship. In giving socialism an Australian flavour - "Socialism ... is the desire to be mates...",²⁷ William Lane distorted its energy and true meaning. Socialism was revolutionary but the mateship semi-myth is relatively harmless and

N.S.W. society had enough latitude for it to exist and negate the need for more disruptive beliefs. The literature of the age was also instrumental in directing the peoples' idealism elsewhere than socialism. Notwithstanding Henry Lawson's occasional angry outburst and his commemoration in a bar at Newcastle Workers' Club, his writings did more for mateship and Australian nationalism than they ever did for revolution. Socialism lost all its thrust in trying to impress men who identified with "Clancy of the Overflow" and "The Man from Snowy River" and who were soon to be duped by sentiments such as those expressed in "The Star of Australasia". Caught up in a welter of mateship, racism, emergent nationalism and sheer parochialism, the working class ignored socialism and William Lane left in despair of ever changing Australian society.

In practical terms, Australian society had no need of socialism and the Labor movement never seriously considered it. Despite the class conflict evident in the great strikes and lock-outs, it can be said that the unions were only attempting to assert their control over wages and conditions. P. O'Farrell declares: "Workers generally desired some kind of reconstruction of society and a vague and indefinite socialism was the creed into which a general dissatisfaction was channelled".²⁸ Vague and indefinite are the key words; furthermore it is difficult to distinguish the indefinite socialism from the peculiarly Australian ideal of mateship or even an inherited English concern for "fair play". The unions were given fair play in their efforts on behalf of the workers. As was suggested earlier, the eight hour movement and the principle of a fair day's pay for a fair day's work were accepted by society at large. Thus, when strike action failed, the Labor movement turned not to socialism but aligned itself even more with existing society, with the creation of the political Labor Party. The Labor Party gave workers a stake in the system. In turn the system catered for the workers; even without the promptings of the Labor Party, Australian society already had sufficient scope for human values. For

example, "in New South Wales Labor held the balance of power for most of the time but the concessions made in return for its support were quantitatively and qualitatively little different from the measures sponsored in Victoria and South Australia by relatively independent liberal governments."²⁹

Because capitalism was civilized through a relatively painless process of concession and reform, socialism was regarded as unnecessary and the workers of N.S.W. must have sensed this. Government in Australia had always played a big role, from the days of an autocratic penal colony governor to the state built railways, and in the 1890's it could be persuaded to adopt certain social responsibilities without too much trouble.

And so, despite the classic Marxist scénario of class polarisation in terms of strikes and lockouts and the potential for the final demise of capitalism in an ultimate depression, socialism never attained any significant following amongst the people of N.S.W. This was because it ignored the unique nature of colonial society where expectation of economic and social equality was a reality which was recognised and able to be dealt with without resorting to radical solutions. Recognition must be given to the role of socialist ideas in giving a certain drive and philosophical presence to the early Labor Party, but it is also obvious that these ideas remained the province of a minority and were such that they were not able to be tested amongst the electorate. Nairn sums up: "The socialists' role was vital to the healthy development of the Party, but it could not be over-played without risking popular support: the two governing factors were the minority status of the advanced thinkers and the parliamentary adherence of the Labor Party."³¹

FOOTNOTES

1. Figures quoted by de Garis in A New History of Australia, F. Crowley (ed.), Melbourne, 1974, p.230.
2. Rules of A.M.A., adopted 15th April, 1890, Silverton N.S.W., quoted in: The Australian Labor Movement 1850-1907, R. Ebbels, Melbourne, 1965, p.106.
3. Crowley (de Garis), op. cit., p.225.
4. Radical, 5th November, 1887 quoted in P. O'Farrell, "The Australian Socialist League and the Labor Movement 1887-1891", Historical Studies, May, 1958, p.154.
5. P. Ford, Cardinal Moran and the A.L.P., Melbourne, 1966, p.181.
6. Australian Radical, 17th March, 1888, quoted in O'Farrell, op.cit., p.155.
7. Ebbels, op. cit., p.20.
8. Bulletin, 11th August, 1888, quoted in Ebbels, op. cit., p.162.
9. From Henry Lawson's poem "Freedom on the Wallaby", L. Cantrell, The 1890's: Stories, Verse & Essays, Brisbane, 1977, p.109.
10. Ford, op. cit., p.164.
11. Sydney Morning Herald, 30th & 31st August, 1888, quoted in R. Gollan, The Coalminers of New South Wales, Melbourne, 1963, p.75.
12. Newcastle Morning Herald, 8th October, 1885, editorial.
13. Newcastle Morning Herald, 10th October, 1885, election notice p.6.
14. Newcastle Morning Herald, 10th October, 1885, election notice p.6.
15. Newcastle Morning Herald, 12th October, 1885, p.4.
16. Newcastle Morning Herald, 6th July, 1895, report of speech by Labor candidate Griffith, p.5.
17. Newcastle Morning Herald, 2nd July, 1895, p.5.
18. Newcastle Morning Herald, 16th July, 1895, election speech of D. Watkins, p.5.
19. Newcastle Morning Herald, 2nd July, 1895, report of Free trade meeting, p.5.
20. Ford, op. cit., p.181.
21. Newcastle Morning Herald, 22nd July, 1895, p.5.
22. Newcastle Morning Herald, 12th July, 1895, editorial.
23. Ford, op. cit., p.181.

24. Newcastle Morning Herald, 20th July, 1895, letter to editor p.6.
25. Newcastle Morning Herald, 19th July, 1895, editorial.
26. Lenin's opinion quoted in Ebbels, op. cit., p.243.
27. The Hummer, 16th January, 1892, attributed to W. Lane, quoted Ebbels, op. cit., p.166.
28. O'Farrell, op. cit., p.159.
29. Crowley (de Garis), op. cit., p.244.
30. N.B. Nairn, Civilizing Capitalism: the Labor Movement in New South Wales, 1870-1900, Canberra, 1973, p.148.

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