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

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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.

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