

# The Foundation of the Australian Labor Party

BY  
BRIAN FITZPATRICK

**T**HE story of the origins of political Labor in Australia has a twofold interest for me. It appeals to me as a student of Australian history and, as well, a democrat practising and advocating as best I can some of the principles upon which, fifty years ago, the battered Unionists of New South Wales built the Australian Labor Party.

But while for this double reason I rejoice in an opportunity of writing a sketch of political Labor's foundations, I have to point out that there is to be a standard authority on this subject; and that being so, I commend readers to it for a full and just account. I refer to Mr. Justice Evatt's "Australian Labor Leader," which at the time of writing is in course of publication by Angus & Robertson. Rate the present sketch no higher than an appetiser before a full meal.

After John Norton's visit to Paris in 1886, as Australian (really, New South Wales) delegate to the Trade Union International, the President of the Sydney Trades and Labor Council of that day, the seamen's leader, E. W. O'Sullivan, said that his performance overseas was "a distinct triumph for the Australian Labor Party."

This makes odd reading (in a gigantic publication of 1888 entitled "The History of Capital and Labor . . ." and so on

through another 866 words.) For in fact there was on semblance of an Australian Labor Party organisation until April, 1891, when what has since been regarded as the first Federal Conference of the A.L.P. was held at Ballarat.

## First Labor Platform.

At that Conference it was decided to try to make the Australian Labor Federation, the fighting Queensland Union organisation, into what its title claimed it to be, namely, an all-Australian body.

And the actual nucleus of the A.L.P. was not formed until June of that year, when the New South Wales Labor Electoral League adopted the first Labor Platform, which had to be endorsed by all Labor candidates for election as members of the Legislative Assembly.

Three years earlier, when O'Sullivan wrote, the Australian militant Trade Union organisation was at its top, and it was this he would have had in mind in his reference to the "Australian Labor Party."

But in 1891, when the first Labor Party appeared, the Trade Union organisation could not be spoken of as a movement, for it was at a standstill, stopped by the owners and the Governments, with their strikebreakers and their stormtroopers, on the eve of the day when Labor had felt it would inherit the earth.

What was new in the Australian Labor world, in 1891, was not Labor politics, which already had a history of more than thirty years. Even the organisation of a political representation of the working class, through parliamentarians sent to the House of Unions and Labor Councils, was not new; it had been practised for nearly twenty years.

What was new was Labor's political organisation in the electorates. It must be noted that the reason for this sudden departure, taken in 1890, can easily be misstated, and usually is.

The Labor Movement did not abandon direct action by the Unions as a strategy, and substitute a strategy of parliamentarians, for a direct action strategy supposed to be discredited by the failure of Labor in the great strikes and lockouts of 1890.

General Secretary of the Australian Council for Civil Liberties, which, working in defence of democratic rights, has parliamentary officers, all from the A.L.P., like Maurice Blackburn, M.H.R., C. E. Martin, M.L.A. (N.S.W.), and W. Slater, M.L.A. (Victoria). Brian Fitzpatrick is the author of "British Imperialism and Australia, 1783-1833," and of a companion volume, "The British Empire in Australia, 1834-1939," which is in process of publication by the Melbourne University Press.

During many years past, Labor had used both political and industrial action. However, hitherto political action had not been regarded very seriously at a time of economic prosperity when the threat of strike was often enough to force the employers to make concessions.

But now at the opening of the 'nineties the Unions were prostrate or about to be prostrated—the open class war was still being waged bitterly in Queensland in 1893—and it was realised that the strike could not be used, as far as most Unions broken in 1890 were concerned, for many years to come.

No responsible Labor leader, in 1890, believed that the workers could achieve through politics what they had failed to achieve by the general strike, namely, the subordination of Capital to Labor. But there was a general realisation that, pending the recovery of the shattered Unions, the workers could have no other resort for protection of their past gains than by organising a Labor vote to place a substantial Labor Party in Parliament.

## Second Wind.

The formation of the New South Wales Labor Party did not mark the abandonment of direct action or any other Labor method or aim; the Party was created in order to give the Unions a chance to get their second wind.

Fortunately for the student of Labor history, T. R. Roydhouse and H. J. Tapereil have left for us in their book, "The Labor Party in New South Wales" (Sydney, 1892), a satisfactory account of the Party's beginnings.

Diverse ideas from diverse ideologies went to form the 16 planks of the first Platform. Henry George and single tax, the gas and water Socialism of the young Fabian Society in England, the "one man, one vote" radicalism of the remarkable Sir George Grey (Imperial Proconsul and Colonial politician), the propaganda of Hyndman and Bellamy, all were drawn upon to lay the foundation of Australian Labor politics.

And, mixed up with advocacy of such illusory projects as "Federation on a na-



The Eight-Hour Movement, outside the Melbourne Trades Hall, epitomises the successful accomplishment of one of the first objectives of the A.L.P.—"Eight hours' labor, eight hours' recreation, eight hours' rest."

tional as opposed to an imperialistic basis," the real stuff of Labor's struggle appeared—the eight-hour day, reform of Mines, Employers' Liability, Masters and Servants, Trade Union Acts, and, in general, "any measure that will secure for the wage-earner a fair and equitable return for his or her labor."

These were matters that concerned the Trade Union Movement now interrupted; these were the matters that would concern the new Labor Party.

There was no female suffrage yet in New South Wales, but the men of the Unions, instructed by the quickly organized local electoral leagues, flocked to the polls to vote for endorsed Labor candidates at the election of '91.

### 36 M.Ps. Elected.

These candidates, most of whom were in their middle thirties or even younger, were returned to the number of 36 (another, for Bourke, had not subscribed to the central platform), and when the House met Labor showed 35 members, as compared with 45 Free Trade members of Parkes's Government party, five Independents, and 50 Dibbs Protectionist Oppositionists. The Labor Party had polled 31½ per cent. of votes cast for successful candidates, and won 28 per cent. of the seats in the Legislative Assembly.

The Party's spectacular debut brought both Government and Opposition awooping. Parkes's July programme included the abolition of plural voting and the £40 candidate's deposit, the enactment of mines and factories legislation, and so on—this, from the Premier who had sent troops and armed blacklegs against the strikers of 1890!

And when in October Dibbs succeeded in turning Parkes out, he borrowed Parkes's borrowed programme and offered it back to the Labor Party as payment for their support.

Naturally enough, the debutants' heads were turned. Some of them considered themselves Protectionists, some Free Traders; and there were splits in the Party in July, when eight Protectionists were expelled from the Caucus, and in December, when the Party divided almost evenly on a tariff question. Soon, however, the Caucus principle was established. Labor voted as a party, and young men of ability came to Macquarie Street in the Labor interest.

**Facsimile of the first Rules and Platform of the A.L.P. The pioneers sought to solve in rules and platform the same problems we face to-day. The platform shows the many origins of Labor theory. Socialism and Single Tax, social reforms and anti-Chinese feeling all appear. Many of them still appear in to-day's platforms, as, for example, the plank dealing with Chinese-made furniture.**

They included W. M. Hughes and W. A. Holman, who lived to lead Labor, mislead Labor, and to vie with one another—Hughes in the Federal sphere and Holman in the State—for title as the most distinguished reactionary in Australian history. But in 1890 these men belonged to Labor's future, who now lie unhonored in the debris of Labor's past.

## RULES AND PLAT

OF THE

# LABOUR ELECTORAL LEAGUE

OF NEW SOUTH WALES.

### —RULES.—

#### OBJECTS.

1. To secure for the wealth-producers of this colony such legislation as will advance their interests, by the return to Parliament of candidates pledged to uphold the platform of this League.
2. To secure the due enrolment of all members of the League who may be entitled to a vote in any electorate.
3. To bring all electors who are in favour of democratic and progressive legislation under one common banner, and to thoroughly organise such voters with a view to concerted and effective action at all Parliamentary elections in the future.

#### QUALIFICATION OF MEMBERSHIP.

Any duly qualified elector of this colony, who is prepared to subscribe to the following platform, to be eligible for membership upon payment of subscription. No person to be eligible for membership in more than one branch of the League.

#### ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION.

The subscription to the League to be 4s. per annum, payable half-yearly in advance.

#### APPLICATION OF FUNDS.

The funds of the League are to be devoted to expenses of thorough and effective political work.

#### TREASURER AND TRUSTEES.

The Treasurer and Trustees of the Trades and Labour Council of New South Wales to be the Treasurer and Trustees of the funds raised by the Central Committee of the League.

#### CENTRAL COMMITTEE (HOW CONSTITUTED).

The Central Committee of the League shall be the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades and Labour Council of New South Wales, with the addition of one delegate from each branch.

#### BRANCHES.

Branches of the League shall be instituted in every electorate within the colony where practicable, said branches to elect their own officers and have absolute control of all funds raised by their own members, save and except the sum of 6d. per member per year, which shall be forwarded to the Treasurer of the Central Committee for general purposes.

#### DISTRICT CANVASSING COMMITTEES.

Canvassing committees to be established in connection with each branch at every polling booth in the electorate in which the branch is instituted.

#### SELECTION OF CANDIDATES.

Each branch to have absolute freedom in the matter of selecting candidates for Parliament in its own electorate. The Central Committee of the League to advise in the matter of such selection only when requested to do so by any branch.

#### EXPENSES OF PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS.

Branches shall devise such means for raising the necessary funds for contesting Parliamentary elections as may be deemed most expedient.

#### MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT NOT TO HOLD OFFICIAL POSITIONS.

No Member of Parliament shall hold any office in connection with the League, and upon any officer of the League being elected to the Legislature his office shall be declared vacant.

#### CANDIDATES FOR PARLIAMENT (HOW SELECTED).

Candidates for Parliamentary honours shall be selected by ballot. Ballot papers to be sent by post to every member of the branch in which the election takes place, the same to be returned to proper officers within such time, and under such conditions, as shall be deemed necessary to prevent fraud. All candidates to give a written pledge to resign on being called upon to do so by a two-thirds majority of the voters.

#### LABOUR MEMBERS.

All Labour Members elected to the Legislature to sit on the cross benches.

#### RULES OF DEBATE, &c.

The rules of procedure and debate observed by the Trades and Labour Council to be the rules of this League.

### PLATFORM.

1. Electoral reform, to provide for the abolition of plural voting; the abolition of money deposits in Parliamentary elections; extension of the franchise to seamen, shearers, and general labourers by means of a provision for the registration of votes; extension of the franchise to policemen and soldiers; abolition of the six months' residential clause as a qualification for the exercise of the franchise; single member electorates and equal Electoral Districts on adult population basis; all Parliamentary elections to be held on one day, that day to be a public holiday, and all public-houses to be closed during the hours of polling.
2. Free, compulsory, and technical education, higher as well as elementary, to be extended to all alike.
3. Eight hours to be the legal maximum working day in all occupations.
4. A Workshop and Factories' Act, to provide for the prohibition of the sweating system; the supervision of land boilers and machinery; and the appointment of representative working men as inspectors.
5. Amendment of the Mining Act, to provide for all applications for mineral leases being summarily dealt with by the local wardens; the strict enforcement of labour conditions on such leases; abolition of the leasing system on all new goldfields; the right to mine on private property; greater protection to persons engaged in the mining industry, and Inspectors to hold certificates of competency.
6. Extension to seamen of the benefits of the Employers' Liability Act.
7. Repeal of the Masters and Servants Act and the Agreements Validating Act.
8. Amendment of the Masters and Apprentices Act and the Trades Union Act.
9. Establishment of a Department of Labour, a National Bank, and a national system of water conservation and irrigation.
10. Elective magistrates.
11. Local Government and decentralisation; extension of the principle of the Government as an employer, through the medium of local self-governing bodies; and the abolition of our present unjust and injurious method of raising municipal revenue by the taxation of improvements effected by labour.
12. The federation of the Australasian colonies upon a National, as opposed to an Imperialistic basis; the abolition of the present Defence Force, and the establishment of our military system upon a purely voluntary basis.
13. The recognition in our legislative enactments of the natural and inalienable rights of the whole community to the land—upon which all must live, and from which by Labour all wealth is produced—by the taxation of that value which accrues to land by the presence and needs of the community, irrespective of improvements effected by human exertion; and the absolute and indefeasible right of property on the part of all Crown tenants in improvements effected on their holdings.
14. All Government contracts to be executed in the colony.
15. Stamping of Chinese-made furniture.
16. Any measure that will secure for the wage-earner a fair and equitable return for his or her labour.