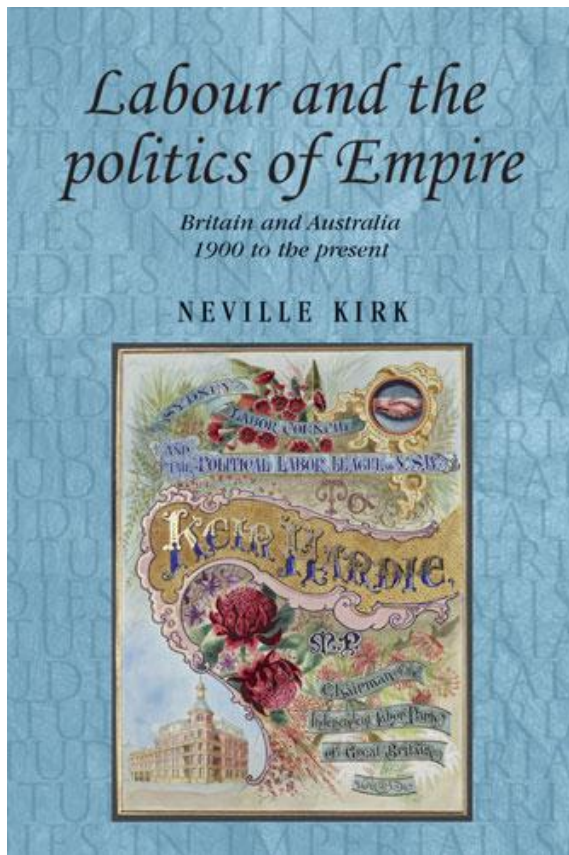


*Labour and the Politics of Empire: Britain and Australia 1900 to the present* by Neville Kirk. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011, pp. xiv + 319, GBP £70.00 (AUD \$99.99) Hardback, ISBN: 9780719080791.



*Labour and the Politics of Empire* is a welcome and engaging book that emphasises the role of empire, nation and race in the development and electoral fate of the British Labour Party (BLP) and Australian Labor Party (ALP). Neville Kirk's work is a comparative study, in which he evaluates the two parties on the basis of their similar structures and social contexts. He also deploys a trans-national framework to explore 'supernational processes' and 'extra-national connections' on the parties' attitudes and practices. (14) He states his approach is a 'Thompsian' one of flexible engagement. That is, in following E.P. Thompson, he seeks to engage rather than separate or isolate the cultural, political and socio-economic aspects of being and consciousness (5) — which is timely given the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *The Making of the English Working Class* this year.

Kirk's book is divided into five largely chronological sections. Part I (Chapters 1 and 2) overviews methodology and discusses shortcomings in the current literature. Part II (Chapters 3 and 4) assesses the formation and growth of the parties between 1900 and 1916 and their 'essential strength...rooted in the trade unions'. (59) This section emphasises the ALP's electoral success as a result of its development of an Australian national identity based around race, and in transcendence of the 'politics of class'. (80-81) Comparatively, it explores the limited opportunity for the BLP to gain power. The interwar years are the context for Part III (Chapter 5 and 6) and Kirk discusses nationalist 'loyalty' and its importance to nation and empire in this period — in particular he relates this to the international context of socialist/Bolshevik movements. Part IV overviews the period from the 1940s to the 1970s (Chapters 7 -9) and analyses the connections and break between the ALP and BLP at a time Australia shifted its focus from the United Kingdom to the United States. This section, in my view the most interesting of the book, explores the context of declining empire, decolonisation, migration and the White Australia Policy. Part V examines the 1980s to the present, and the fortunes of the two parties in the neoliberal era. It is in this section the comparative framework usefully illuminates the increasingly similar policies and practices of the parties despite their different origins and histories.

The book is to be commended for its clear language and structure, something only possible as a result of the extensive research evident in the work. Kirk's endeavour is not only admirable in scope, but a useful reorientation for labour history in relation to the book's key concerns. The importance of race, nation and nationalism in the sustainability and flexibility of its reformist project is something often lacking or downplayed in discussion of the ALP. Yet, despite the strengths of the book, there are problems in the scope of the

analysis and its effort to illuminate the relationship of the parties to their respective labour movements and working classes. Two issues seem key in this regard.

Firstly, although Kirk is right to emphasise the inattentiveness of previous studies to the issues of empire, nation, and race, at times he does this at the expense of a full and integrated analysis of the economic and class processes bound up in the political events under consideration. For example, the discussion of the 1970s crisis is insufficiently connected to the electoral successes and failures of the parties in the 1980s and 1990s — and periodising these periods separately creates a problem for the narrative. Kirk relies too heavily on connecting electoral fortunes to whether governments are seen as good economic managers, and underplays the wider social impact of the end of the long boom on the working class and ‘their’ Labo(u)r parties. Alternatively, there are problems with the discussion of neoliberalism. For example, in the final section of the book Kirk states that the ALP was ‘disheartened by the defeat of their party in 1996 and the growing ‘hegemony’ of Howard’s ‘extreme’, ‘neoliberal’ ideology. (238) Given the Hawke-Keating government oversaw most (if not all) of the key ‘neoliberal’ changes prior to their defeat — including introducing enterprise bargaining — this emphasis on Howard as the radical neoliberal policy maker obscures the significance of the ALP’s neoliberal reform to that party’s wider unravelling, declining membership and falling support in traditional working class areas. In this way, the lived experience of the Hawke/Keating government is left insufficiently elaborated and as a consequence the narrative relies too heavily on the successful framing by Howard that he would govern for *all* (rather than how the ALP created the conditions for that argument to gain traction).

The second difficulty is that there is an unsatisfactory discussion of what occurred politically from ‘below’ in Britain and Australia. This is posited sharply in the discussion of the formation of the ALP in the pre-federation colonies, where there is no mention of decisive impact of the key strike defeats in the 1890s (such as the Maritime Strike of 1890 and the Shearers Strike of 1891). (54-55) While there is argument as to whether the formation of the ALP was a sign of weakness of the labour movement after these defeats, or a sign of strength that a party could be formed and gain office quickly at the state and national level, it is clear the disputes were enormously important. An absence of discussion of the impact of labour and other movements is also evident in the more contemporary analysis. For example, the ‘poll tax’ proposed by Margret Thatcher’s government is mentioned in the context of her resignation and the subsequent BLP election campaigns, but there is no discussion of how the campaign against the proposal and the Poll Tax riot impacted on electoral fortunes. (265, 268, 270) Ultimately we are left with a narrative that sees the actions of politicians and parties as the primary drivers in making and remaking society, and the actions of the working class or subaltern groups often fade from view. These shortcomings undermine Kirk’s efforts to put a ‘Thompsian’ framework at the centre of his analysis. In seeking to prioritise the neglected areas of empire, nation and race, Kirk has unnecessarily downplayed class in general and the role of the working class, labour and subaltern forces as active creators of history in particular.

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