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The Allan Martin Lecture 2006

John Hirst

*Labor's Part in Australian History:
A Lament*

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The Allan Martin Lecture *2006*

History Program
Research School of Social Sciences
College of Arts and Social Sciences
The Australian National University

9 May 2006

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Labor's Part in Australian History: A Lament

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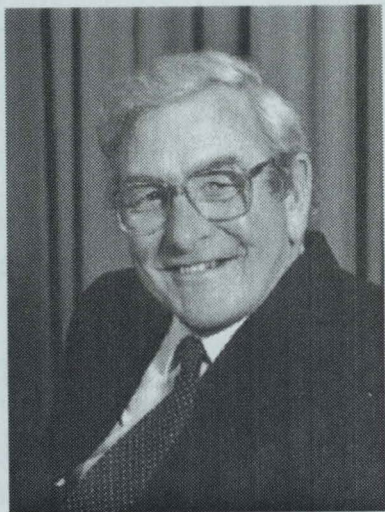
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Allan William Martin 1993

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The Allan Martin Lecture

History Program
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The Inaugural Allan Martin Lecture was delivered by Dr Inga Clendinnen in the Coombs Lecture Theatre, The Australian National University on 4 May, 2004. It was the first of an annual series to honour the late A. W. Martin (1926–2002). The lecture series will bring a distinguished scholar whose work is relevant to Allan's intellectual, institutional and social interests to the History Program, Research School of Social Sciences, The Australian National University for at least a week to give a public lecture and one or two seminars of a more specialised kind, and to be available to staff, graduate students and other scholars in the Canberra area to discuss current intellectual developments. The History Program might, from time to time, combine the Annual Lecture with a small conference to which people from beyond Canberra might be invited. The Lecture will take place in April or May each year.

The Lecturer will be selected by a committee comprising the Head of the History Program, Research School of Social Sciences, a postgraduate student of the History Program, and a former staff member or student. In choosing the Annual Lecturer, the committee will attempt to balance national and international scholars and scholars at different stages of their careers.

The Lecture will be an occasion for a reunion of current and former staff, students, and visitors of the History Program.

The Lecture will be associated with a brief summary of the scope of Allan's historical interests and activities to illuminate his professional activity over a period of fifty years.

Allan William Martin 1926–2002

Allan Martin was an intellectual, institutional and social pioneer whose career as a historian spanned the second half of the twentieth century. When most Australians went to England for their postdoctoral work, he chose the fledgling Australian National University, where he was the first doctoral student in History in the Research School of Social Sciences, graduating in 1955. When few historians wrote about Australia, his thesis focused on nineteenth-century New South Wales politics; and he insisted on the importance of cross-disciplinary work when this was unfashionable. His first major book, *Parliament Factions and Parties: The First Thirty Years of Responsible Government in New South Wales* (1966), was written with his longtime friend and collaborator, the political scientist Peter Loveday; and he edited *The Emergence of the Australian Party System* (1977) with Loveday and political scientist Robert Parker.

After serving his apprenticeship at the University of New South Wales, the University of Melbourne and the University of Adelaide, Allan Martin accepted the Foundation Chair in History at La Trobe University in 1966, at the same time as his wife Jean Martin became Foundation Chair in Sociology. The department he established at La Trobe was distinguished by its global reach, establishing strong programs in North and South American History as well as the more usual British and Australian fields. He and Jean Martin again moved together when he returned to the Research School of Social Sciences as a Senior Fellow in 1973 and Jean took up a position as Professor

of Sociology. After Jean's death in 1979, Allan married Beryl Rawson, a distinguished Professor of Classics, providing once again a model of intellectual partnership to younger scholars.

Allan Martin became fascinated by the individuals who created and changed the political system, and his work increasingly became biographical. Beginning with the article, 'William McMillan: A Merchant in Politics' (1955), Allan subsequently wrote two major lives of Australian politicians, *Henry Parkes: A Biography* (1980) and *Robert Menzies: A Life*, 2 vols (1993, 1999). He provided biographical material for the use of the profession in *Members of the Legislative Assembly of New South Wales* (1959) and a number of entries in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* and *Dictionary of National Biography*, and his *Letters from Menie: Sir Henry Parkes and His Daughter* (1983) made those valuable social documents more widely available. He came as close as he ever would to autobiography in his article on 'The Country' in *Australians from 1939* (1987).

Allan Martin was an innovative teacher whose most influential work was often in graduate and honours seminars. His only article on teaching, in *Teaching History*, is still much sought after. He reflected on his experience at La Trobe in an edited volume on *Universities Facing the Future* (1972) and contributed a chapter on Menzies and the Murray Committee to *Ideas for Histories of Universities in Australia* (1990), edited by F. B. Smith and P. Crichton.

THE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

FROM THE FIRST SETTLEMENTS TO THE PRESENT TIME

The history of the United States is a story of growth and development. It begins with the first settlers who came to the New World in search of a better life. These early pioneers faced many hardships, but they persevered and built a new society. Over time, the United States grew from a small colony into a powerful nation. It fought wars, both against Britain and among itself, but it emerged stronger and more united. The United States has always been a land of opportunity, where people from all over the world have come to seek a better future. Today, the United States is a global leader, with a strong economy and a commitment to freedom and democracy. The history of the United States is a testament to the power of the human spirit and the ability of a nation to overcome adversity and build a bright future.

Labor's Part in Australian History: A Lament

Thank you for your welcome. I am very conscious of the honour the university has bestowed in making me the Allan Martin lecturer for this year.

For most of my life I have voted for the Labor Party and I may do so again. I have voted for the Labor Party, but I do not have the instincts of a proper Labor man. I do not think that Labor parliamentarians should be compelled to vote as caucus directs; I do not believe that Billy Hughes who left the Labor Party in World War I and Joseph Lyons who left it in the great Depression were rats, as the party called them; I think the Labor Party's elevation of anti-conscription into a shibboleth was damaging not only to the party but to the nation.

Tonight I will be lamenting these aspects of Labor's career. You may think that lamenting is not the proper business of an historian — should we not explain what happened and not waste time on regrets? If you think this, let me say that I have an excellent precedent in the proper Labor people who have written histories of their party and who have wasted a lot of time on endorsement and praise. If you think, rightly, that is a cheap shot, then consider my lecture of lament as a way of establishing more precisely what Labor has in fact done to this polity.

I am continuing a theme begun by my revered supervisor and professor Allan Martin. The most influential paper he wrote was an attack on the place that Labor had been accorded in Australia's history by the academic historians.¹ It was entirely

characteristic of Allan that he refused to allow this paper to be published. In the 1960s it circulated in manuscript, copied and recopied on that shiny, slimy and unstable paper which the first photocopiers used. I saw and devoured a copy as a post-graduate student in Adelaide. The paper was, in Allan's words, 'a Thinks piece' and this probably explains why he did not want it published. It did not meet his rigorous standards of demonstration and proof. I am offering you a Thinks piece this evening. If we upheld Allan's standards, it would never be published.

Allan's paper contested the claim that Labor was the first real political party in Australia; that it was responsible for every good thing that happened in Australian politics after its formation in 1891; and that it alone was the vehicle for the realisation of Australia's progressive destiny. Allan urged historians to climb down from this metaphysics and allow (in his words) 'humanity and purpose to people unfortunate enough not to belong to the chosen race' — a rare note of sarcasm in his cool prose. I'm not so niggardly in my own writing. Nor would Allan accept the view that Labor's success was the result of the working class being large and the middle class small.

Much of his own academic work was devoted to elaborating and validating the claims made in this subversive paper. He was the first to understand the inwardness — one of his favourite words — of the politics before parties in New South Wales. What he called faction politics operated from about 1860 to the 1880s. Then the system began to break down and parties began to emerge, the protectionist party and the free-trade or liberal party, which were operating when Labor appeared on the scene in 1891. That put paid to Labor as the first party.² Allan made a close study of the reforming free-trade

government of George Reid in the 1890s. Reid relied on Labor support but that maestro was far from being a creature of the Labor party and his reform agenda was his own.³ With his colleague Peter Loveday, Allan directed a major work on the emergence of the party system in Australia from 1890 to 1910.⁴ In these years Labor was one party in a system of three and this study was interested in establishing among other things how much influence it had — even to ask this question was to subvert the claim that Labor was solely responsible for the progressive legislation of this era.

Because of this work academic historians can no longer write about the Labor Party as they once did. On the whole their sympathies are still with the Left but academics along with everyone else now find it hard to invest the Labor Party with a special virtue and any sort of pre-eminence. There are still true believers in the party itself. Graham Freudenberg, who wrote speeches for Labor leaders Calwell, Whitlam and Hawke, has written: 'More than any other political party in the world, the Australian Labor Party reflects and represents the character of the nation which produced it'.⁵ The same sentiment was expressed by Paul Keating, whose speeches were not written by Freudenberg: 'We are the people who make Australian history. We are the ones who nominate the heroes, we anoint the heroes of Australia, our Party sets the ethos of Australia'.⁶

Freudenberg also wrote the official history of the Labor Party in New South Wales to celebrate its centenary in 1991. He identified his subject as an indigenous Australian institution, a response to Australian conditions, in the most profound senses native born. He then notices that most of its founders were British born, that the intellectual influences operating on it were Henry

George and Edward Bellamy, Fabianism, and Socialism.⁷ George and Bellamy were Americans; Fabianism was English; Socialism was European. A true native product! Freudenberg should have acknowledged, which few scholars still do, that the very notion of a labour party was British. Britain provided the models and inspiration for the craft unions that operated in Australia from the 1850s, the new unions of the unskilled in the 1880s and of unions creating a labour party in the early 1890s. In a dependent, loyal colony Britain was the legitimator of working men entering politics on their own account.

In Britain the Labour Party was an institution of the industrial cities of Scotland and the north of England and grew fairly slowly outside its heartland. In Australia there was not a large industrial working class on which to base a working class party — and yet the Labor Party grew much more rapidly here than in Britain. It made a spectacular debut in New South Wales in 1891 winning 35 seats out of 141, a quarter of the Assembly, and immediately held the balance of power. It became the model for the parties in South Australia, Queensland and Victoria, which did well, but not this well. By 1910 there were Labor governments holding a majority of seats in the parliaments of New South Wales, South Australia and in the Commonwealth; by 1911 in Western Australia; by 1915 in Queensland. Labor in Britain did not have a majority in the House of Commons until 1945.

How is this phenomenal success to be explained? Paradoxically the class party from Britain flourished here because class mattered less. In Britain the Labour Party was, and was seen to be, the party of the working class, a group quite rigidly separated geographically, in status and style of life from the rest of the population. In Australia there was not this sharp

break between workers and the rest, that terrible abyss which haunted the minds of the English lower middle class. In Australia the working class and a good deal of the middle class sent their children to the same state schools, were members of the same friendly societies and the same mechanics institutes.⁸ In Australia the workers were more self-confident and respectable; the bourgeoisie less cultivated and fearful. So long as Labor had policies that appealed to them there was less to inhibit those outside the ranks of the unions and manual workers from supporting the party. Labour in Britain was the party of the working class; in Australia it was the party of those who worked and on this basis could be persuasively presented as both a class and a national party. Most importantly Labor could attract the votes of those who worked harder than the working man — the small farmers. Getting their vote widened Labor's geographical reach and enabled it to build majority support across the electorate. Here I am following in Allan's footsteps and explaining Labor success without having to posit a large, assertive working class.

In New South Wales, where the party had its great initial success, there were other factors working in its favour. Though, as Allan demonstrated, the free-trade and protectionist parties preceded Labor, they did not predate it by much. Politically-conscious working people were supporters of either protection or free trade, but they had not had time to become rusted-on supporters of the free trade or protectionist parties. We know how hard it is to change old political allegiances. In Britain, Labour struggled against the workers' attachment to the Liberal Party which had long supported causes dear to working people. In Victoria and in New Zealand, Labor support grew slowly

because radical Liberal parties had won the trust and allegiance of working people.

The parliaments in the Australian colonies were rough-houses compared with the parliament at Westminster and of all the Australian parliaments that of New South Wales had the lowest reputation. Since manhood suffrage was introduced in the 1850s disreputable men had gained seats and parliamentary proceedings lost their gentlemanly tone. Respect for parliament evaporated very quickly. In the Supreme Court in Sydney in 1861 the chief justice at the top of society and a criminal at the bottom shared a joke at the politicians' expense. The criminal was being tried for escaping from gaol. Before the case began he asked that he be given another judge because it was the chief justice who had given him the harsh sentence that had put him in gaol. The criminal said the chief justice might have 'prejudicial feelings' against him. The judge, thinking he had said 'political feelings', replied, 'Why should I have political feelings against you. Are you a member of parliament?' To which the criminal replied, 'Not yet'.⁹

The 1880s were the heyday of drunks and demagogues in the New South Wales Assembly. In a *Bulletin* cartoon of this time a man in a bowler hat approaches a man sitting on a park bench who is dressed in top hat and tails. Excuse me, says the first man, are you a member of parliament? Certainly not, says the man in the top hat, I am a gentleman.¹⁰

Thus it was impossible to say in Sydney that workingmen had not the breeding or the learning to enter the parliament. That was a place where all the old standards had already been flouted. The respectable tradesmen whom Labor selected for parliamentary seats, many of them teetotallers, were a cut above the sort of popular candidate who had been elected previously.

I have been explaining why a British institution flourished in a new setting. The Labor Party did so well, so quickly that you can see why Graham Freudenberg was tempted into calling it an indigenous movement. So where is the lamentation? It begins now. With rapid success came high expectations, then disappointment and anger, crises and disruption. As Labor resolved its crises it adopted policies and practices which in my view still have a baleful effect on the polity. I will discuss the consequences of the first two crises, the split in the early Labor Party of New South Wales and the split in the federal party over conscription in 1916.

The first crisis produced Labor's unique discipline: the control of the parliamentary party by the movement outside and the control of individual parliamentarians by the caucus. This was the system developed in New South Wales within two years of the party's formation. The times were unique. In 1890 the trade unions after growing rapidly and scoring notable victories stumbled into a general strike and were defeated. Trade unionists were appalled at the government assisting employers by protecting non-union or scab labour. Humiliation for organised workers and governments openly wielding force against them was not meant to happen here. There was briefly among the working class that galvanising anger that comes from a sense of betrayal. The unionists were now determined to form their own party, a project they had been toying with for some time, and with its outstanding success expected that it would immediately make a difference.

After its first election Labor held the balance of power. Holding the balance of power, of course, does not give all power. How much power depends on the state of the whole game. If the

third party is divided by the issue which separates the other two; or if its demands are opposed by the two majors, then its power will not be substantial. The Labor members faced both these problems. They were themselves divided over free trade and protection, the issue which produced the two-party divide. The old hands in the parliament soon used this to embarrass and confound the newcomers. Labor tried to fix the problem by declaring that free trade and protection should be decided by the people at referendum. But then in 1892 the protectionist government of George Dibbs prosecuted the leaders of a bitter strike at Broken Hill; the men were found guilty and were imprisoned. There was no indication that the free-trade party would have acted more benignly but the labour movement demanded that its parliamentarians join with the free-trade opposition to vote Dibbs out. Some members refused — because Dibbs was a protectionist, the doctrine they favoured. This was too much for the organisation. The government was locking up its union brothers and its parliamentary party could not stop or punish the perpetrators. The labour movement virtually started its political party again with the distinctive tight discipline. It called the new body the Solidarity Labor Party. Those who would not accept its rules were thrown out or left.¹¹ This New South Wales system was slowly adopted by the Labor parties in the other colonies and immediately by the federal party on the inauguration of the Commonwealth.¹²

Other Labor parties have carried into politics the principle of solidarity which unions had learnt was essential for success in a strike. The Australian party carried solidarity to an extreme.¹³ Its principle is fundamentally at odds with the notion of parliament as a deliberative assembly with members

responsible to their electorates. But it is no surprise that early Labor had no respect for parliamentary tradition since these newcomers suddenly seemed able to control parliament for their own purposes and the parliament in question was that of New South Wales, which had already debased itself.

In the short term the tight discipline did benefit the party when it was one player among three, but in the long term it was a disaster for the party. When divisions were strong within the party the discipline did not hold it together but forced the contenders asunder. Three times the federal party split—in World War I over conscription, in the 1930s over how to cope with the Depression, and in the 1950s over communism. After each split the party took a long time to recover, which explains why the party which allegedly embodies the Australian ethos ruled Australia so infrequently.

With each split the party came to believe more firmly in the necessity and virtue of solidarity so that Labor seemed sometimes to believe more strongly in solidarity than in its programme. With each split the organisation came to distrust politicians more, though its aim continued to be the production of politicians. Thus it was constantly seeking new ways to control, marginalise and humiliate its own representatives.

The party faithful and its devoted historians do not question the benefits of Labor's discipline. They never link the unique discipline of this Labor Party with its unique tendency to split. In their eyes the splits are evidence of the necessity of the discipline; it has led to the uncovering of so many traitors.

According to Labor lore the people who have been thrown out or left the party are rats who deserted to the conservatives.¹⁴ This is wrong on two counts. First, there has

not been a conservative party in Australia for the rats to join. It is a conceit of the Labor Party that all who are opposed to it are conservative. Second, the rats did not join any pre-existing organisation. Billy Hughes and the other supporters of conscription formed a National Labor government, which governed briefly on its own with Liberal support and then merged with the Liberals to form the Nationalists with Hughes remaining as Prime Minister. Lyons, the treasurer in the Labor government in the Depression, became the leader of a new body, the United Australia Party. The anti-communists who left in 1955 became the Democratic Labor Party. There are some rats that not even the Labor faithful can describe as deserting to the conservatives — most notably those in the Depression who supported the plan of Jack Lang, premier of New South Wales, not to pay interest to British bondholders.

It is in the treatment of Hughes, the prime rat, that the Labor faithful perpetrate the grossest distortions. In the governments that Hughes led after the split he promised that no part of the Labor edifice would be touched; he declared in fact that he was still a Labor man. He had not left the party; the party had left him. While Nationalist Prime Minister he created new government-owned enterprises, Amalgamated Wireless and the Commonwealth Oil Refineries. He even managed to persuade the Nationalists to put to the people a constitutional referendum to give the Commonwealth power over monopolies. Labor opposed it because it did not go far enough and the measure was lost. Hughes lost the prime ministership in part because his new colleagues thought that he was still too much the socialist. And they were not mistaken. In 1919, as Nationalist Prime Minister, Hughes declared he was still a socialist.¹⁵

What Labor's distorted view of Hughes reveals is its unwillingness to face the truth that its discipline has driven out of its ranks genuine social democrats. Labor believed much too readily that if you were not within its ranks you must be with the capitalists. A looser discipline might not have prevented the split in World War I but it might have avoided the other two. It would more certainly have led to a party that kept more of its talent and attracted more talent to it. As it was, the social democratic cause in this country was led not so much by a party as by a tribe, fratricidal within and hostile to everyone without.

Remember this is a history lecture. I am not talking about today's party. I don't know how to talk about today's party. I am still in mourning over the loss of Qantas and the Commonwealth Bank.

Labor's opponents envied the efficiency of the Labor machine and its ability to mobilise thousands of volunteer workers at elections. They were still operating under the old system of having to pay their campaign workers in money or in kind. But they were genuinely appalled at Labor's exacting of a pledge from its candidates to vote as the majority of the caucus directed. They used this practice relentlessly in the electorate to attack Labor but seemingly with little effect since Labor's vote continued to rise. In the early Commonwealth, Deakin the leader of the radical Liberals governed with Labor support. This was the continuation of the alliance between middle-class reformers and working people which had been standard in Victoria. Deakin could agree with most of Labor's immediate objects but he could not agree to take the Labor pledge which would have bound him to all the platform and the caucus view of how he should vote on every issue. He had to think of

whether he could join the Labor Party because he himself thought that for good government the three party system would have to be reduced to two, and his party was the smallest and shrinking under the Labor advance. The Labor movement outside did not like to see its parliamentarians co-operating with any other groups and since Labor looked soon set to win a majority of seats it did not have to worry about Deakin's scruples. Deakin finally had no alternative but to merge his radical Liberals with the free-trade party and present a united opposition to Labor.¹⁶

This fusion occurred in 1909. This made Deakin Prime Minister with his old allies the Labor members on the Opposition benches and behind him his former free-trade opponents. Just after the fusion was accomplished the first Speaker of the House of Representatives, Frederick Holder, died. He had been an independent Speaker in the Westminster style dissociating himself from the parties and with the parties agreeing not to run candidates against him in his electorate. The way to continue this practice was to allow all members a voice in the selection of the next Speaker. Deakin as Prime Minister would not risk this. He was afraid that Labor would caucus and produce a block vote for its candidate. Instead he called a caucus of his supporters and the candidate they chose was installed as Speaker. Labor members had a high old time denouncing Deakin's rule by caucus. The Labor leader Andrew Fisher offered a free vote if Deakin would allow the same. Deakin pushed on with his candidate. It was not one of his great moments.¹⁷

That was the end of the independent Speakership. Speakers thereafter always came from the governing party; they changed when governments changed. Speakers made little

attempt to hold themselves aloof from the party battle. Labor Speakers always and Liberal Speakers sometimes actually attended party meetings where tactics in the House were discussed. In the 1990s Leo McLeay ran Keating's campaign to unseat Hawke while occupying the Speaker's chair. In no other Westminster-style polity has the speakership been so debased.¹⁸

This was the first case of Labor's opponents imitating Labor's discipline. Plainly if the Labor ranks were highly disciplined non-Labor could not afford to allow too much leeway to their own members. Nevertheless, for a long time Labor's opponents continued to present themselves as the defenders of parliamentary government as against the Labor machine which regarded parliament simply as the body to implement the Labor platform. This was an important distinction for Menzies and the Liberal Party he founded. Don Chipp gives a touching account of the trepidation with which he approached Menzies to tell him that he could not vote for a government measure and finding the old man quite relaxed and indulgent.¹⁹ Nowadays, though Liberals are not pledged to vote with the party, defections are very rare. Both major parties are committed to showing no division among their ranks. Neither wants the floor of the House to be the place where decisions are made. This does not mean of course that backbenchers are without influence; they may oddly have more influence because leaders are desperate for rebellion not to be officially registered.

Party discipline now controls Question Time. Backbenchers of the governing party no longer use this opportunity to prod and rebuke their own ministers. Grown-up people read out questions written for them which are designed

to allow ministers to boast of their achievements and to rubbish the Opposition. Question time is a party battle. This is not question time as I remember first hearing it. I checked on this by taking down the 1959 Hansard and opening it at random. I was looking at question time of 10 March 1959. I was then 16 and Menzies was prime minister. The Liberal backbencher Malcolm Fraser asked a Liberal minister whether it was true that wool was to be replaced by synthetics in the manufacture of army uniforms and blankets. The Liberal backbencher James Killen asked a minister whether he had the power to prevent the export of koala bears. Mr Riordan, a Labor member, asked the Minister of Territories whether it was true that a widow in the Northern Territory was being prevented from mining on her own freehold land. Clyde Cameron later a Labor minister asked Prime Minister Menzies quite unaggressively whether he had followed up his (Cameron's) suggestion that Aborigines residing on mission stations should receive the benefit of social service legislation in the same way as other people. I had remembered correctly — a general probing of the administration from both sides of the House.

There is a view that the unusually tight discipline in both Australian parties reflects something of the Australian character and in particular the low standing of its politicians and an instrumental approach to politics.²⁰ John Howard considers that division is death in Australian politics and one hesitates on such a matter to question the judgement of a prime minister who has won four general elections. I am blaming Labor for the move to unusually tight party discipline on both sides. Howard does not; he seems simply to regard it as a necessity. Perhaps Australians now do see political parties as sporting teams in

which everyone should be kicking in the one direction. They see stability in government as requiring unanimity in the party. They might not be able to imagine a system in which a party supports a government but the party members not in the cabinet query and vote against measures that the cabinet brings to the parliament.

This is the system that operates in the mother of parliaments at Westminster. It is a matter of regular report that a government's majority on this or that measure dropped as its supporters absented themselves or voted on the other side, or that a measure was carried only with Opposition support. The House of Commons still matters in a way that the House of Representatives does not. Voting on the other side is not described in Britain or anywhere else as far as I can see as 'crossing the floor'. That is the term reserved for *joining* the party on the other side. In Australia we are so unused to people voting against their party that we use the term for it that elsewhere means a complete switch of party allegiance.

Imagine a Labor government in Australia taking the country to war with a third of the party voting against the war in parliament and the decision being upheld by the vote of the Opposition. Impossible. That shows how far our polity now differs from Britain's where Tony Blair took the country to war against Iraq in this fashion.

Australia had a Labor government at the time of the first Gulf war. Bob Hawke was keen to support the war but faced strong opposition from his left wing. He spent hours arguing with them. These divisions were not aired in the parliament. He did not need their support or their votes because the Opposition supported the war but he wanted to preserve Labor

unity. Only after the war had begun was there a full debate in parliament. In his memoirs Hawke, in a revealing admission, says he *allowed* a debate.²¹ I was incensed at this and then I found in the debate that one of the left dissenters *thanked* the prime minister for facilitating a debate. Clearly neither the prime minister nor his critic thought that parliamentary sanction was essential for the upholding of the decision to go to war. Barry Jones, that awkward conscience of the party, pointed out that the House of Commons and the American Congress had their debates *before* the decision for war was taken. The left dissenters spoke against the war in the House but they did not vote against it.²²

The government sent two naval frigates to the war. The Left extracted a promise from the Prime Minister that this would be the limit of the commitment and that there would be No Conscription.²³ In 1991 the issue that had torn the party apart in 1916 still mattered. I now go back to the second great crisis in Labor's history and its consequences.

The issue on which the party split in 1916 was conscription for service overseas, that is for service on the western front in France, but the deeper cause was the dissatisfaction of radical trade unionists with the parliamentarians and the Labor governments they had run. Again it was discontent with seeming success that caused the crisis.²⁴

The trade unions had founded the party but soon after they almost faded away, broken by losses in strikes and severe economic depression. That left the parliamentarians in charge and they shaped the programme that brought Labor's outstanding electoral success. In the early twentieth century the unions began to grow again as prosperity returned and as they were

given official encouragement under the new arbitration system. The new generation of union leaders was contemptuous of the sobriety and caution of the Labor governments and of the concessions that the parliamentarians had made to win support of the farmers and the small local branches in suburbs and country towns. They had the warrant of Labor's name for wanting the party to be based on the working class and to deliver more to the working class. They developed the view that has been poisonous in Australian Labor that the Labor programme was not immediately and fully implemented because the politicians preferred the comfortable and quiet life. That view successfully blocked the thought that the Australian people might not want the Labor programme to be immediately and fully implemented.

The tension in the party was reaching breaking point when Labor returned to office just on the outbreak of war. In the second year of the war Billy Hughes became Prime Minister and in 1916 he decided that conscription was necessary to reinforce the Australian troops. At this point the movement outside took its stand against the politicians. The Labor platform allowed for compulsory military training of boys and young men, a policy that Hughes had championed and Labor had implemented in office, but it was silent on the issue of conscription for overseas service. However, the organisation resolved against conscription for overseas service and made it plain that any politician who supported this measure would be punished. Hughes failed to shift them from this position so he decided to appeal over the heads of the organisation and to put the issue to the people at referendum. The Australian people voted narrowly against conscription, a great victory for the

Labor machine-men, which they took to indicate that the time for a true Labor Party was dawning. They expelled Hughes and all the pro-conscription politicians from the party. But then Hughes, leading his new party the Nationalists, had a landslide win against Labor in the general election of 1917 on the cry that he was determined to win the war and Labor was not. This was the first landslide against Labor. The party never looked again, as it did before the war, that it was about to take command of Australian society.

Among the anti-conscriptionists in the union movement some were opposed to the war; more had doubts about the war and Labor's support for it. Who can blame them? The slaughter was appalling and of all the things the Labor Party was formed to do no-one had envisaged that it would be sending thousands of young men to fight and die for the British empire in Europe. The war put huge strains on all governments. On a Labor government it was immense. It was Labor's ill fate in Australia to have peaked too soon. The labour parties in Britain and in New Zealand were divided over the war but these divisions were not fatal because Labor there was not running the war.

In the referendum campaign opposition to the war or even doubts about it could not be mentioned; there was still general support for the war and a Labor government was prosecuting it. An argument had to be developed that made conscription wrong even for a war you supported and even when a mass mobilisation was required. The anti-conscriptionists advanced the argument that conscription was an invasion of human rights; in no circumstances could a government compel a person to fight and kill. By the end of the war Labor had fully internalised this argument and written it into its platform. Conscription for

overseas service was already wrong; conscription for training now became wrong; conscription for the defence of Australia was wrong. Even on the invasion of Australia the government should do no more than call for volunteers.

I need hardly point to the contradiction of the Labor Party adopting this extreme libertarian position. The people who believed in compulsory unionism and the nationalising of industry became the great advocates of individual freedom when the survival of the country was at stake. Solidarity in strikes but not against an invader!

Because of Labor's opposition to conscription, social democracy and soldiering became separated in World War I. Hughes told the anti-conscriptionists to stick with him and see the war through and then Australia would be at Labor's feet. That could not be. We see a hint of what might have been on the first Anzac Day. Hughes, the umbrella repairer now Labor Prime Minister, celebrated with the King and Queen at Westminster Abbey. George Pearce, former carpenter, the Labor minister of defence who had organised the army for Gallipoli, led the celebrations in Melbourne, the capital. By the next Anzac Day Hughes was leader of a Nationalist government and his standing as the 'Little Digger' brought votes to Labor's opponents.

In Australia, alone of all the major combatants in World War I, the government did not mobilise its population to fight. It called for volunteers and went on calling for volunteers ever more shrilly until the war ended. Conscription of course would have silenced the recruiting drum and stopped the circulation of white feathers. Since Australia's soldiers had volunteered to serve they had a greater claim on the nation. The Returned Services League became a power in the land, more supportive of the Nationalists

than of Labor. Labor complained about the RSL, but it was its own anti-conscription victory that had given the RSL its status. Labor's win against conscription also bequeathed to the nation the great bitterness between those who had served and those who had not.

Labor's policy after the war was to keep its distance from the empire and its European entanglements and concentrate on the defence of Australian territory. The policy of anti-conscription had been developed to limit involvement in the empire's wars, but if Labor was no longer to rely on the empire, why would it hobble Australia's own defence effort with the principle of no conscription? But it is futile to consider anti-conscription as a policy relating to defence. It had long since ceased to be that. It became instead the test of the genuine Labor man; the issue that had unmasked all those Labor rats.

Reality broke in upon the party with the outbreak of World War II. It accepted that there could be compulsory training and conscription into the militia for the defence of Australian territory, but on no-conscription for overseas service Labor would never yield. Once the enemy overseas was not in Europe but occupying the islands to the north of the continent from which it was bombing Darwin, the case for yielding seemed overwhelming, but still not to the Labor Party. Labor, taking office just as Japan entered the war, resisted all urgings to create one army that could fight anywhere. It persisted with two armies, one of conscripts that could fight only on Australian territory and the other of volunteers who could go anywhere — with all the inefficiencies that this entailed.

Meanwhile American conscripts were being sent across the Pacific to defend Australia and to prepare for the counter thrust against the Japanese. It was the American General

Douglas MacArthur who told Prime Minister Curtin that he would have to abandon Labor's policy. MacArthur did not want to take Australian conscripts north against the Japanese; he wanted to preserve all that glory for the Americans. He was concerned at the stories appearing in the American press about Australia's odd policy on conscription, which threatened his capacity to attract troops and supplies to this part of the world.

Curtin had great trouble persuading the party to change its policy. Four state branches supported and two opposed, which gave him a narrow majority at the national conference. He failed to get agreement on one army. He had to settle for conscripts serving in MacArthur's South-West Pacific zone, but not the whole of it. The equator was set as the northern limit. In Borneo, if the Japanese could stick north of that line which bisects the island they would be safe from Australian conscripts.

The concession to the cherished policy was very grudging and it was to be temporary only. After the war no-conscription for overseas service was reinstated even though the Japanese advance had shown up its absurdities.

Arthur Calwell led the opposition to Curtin on the change of policy. 'To me geography does not matter', he declared, 'Whether the compulsion is for the South-West Pacific or for Europe, it is still military conscription for overseas service, and, therefore abhorrent to the traditional democratic principles of this country'.²⁵ He had fought against conscription in World War I and he lived long enough to lead Labor's case against conscription for the Vietnam War when he invoked anti-conscription as the great Labor tradition, overlooking the fact that the party had not been able to maintain that policy in World War II.

The Vietnam war certainly gave new life to anti-conscription and with more point since opinion was divided on the war itself and the conscription was partial only (depending on birth dates) and so did not embody the equity of universal service. But I fear that anti-conscription in its pure form — when you oppose conscription even for wars you support — still has a hold on the Labor Party.

It might be urged that this does not matter much because we can defend ourselves with superior air and naval forces and we don't require a large army. But we have trouble maintaining the numbers even in our very small army, which is now being used more regularly. Earlier this year Admiral Chris Barrie, a former chief of the Defence Force, urged the introduction of conscription because he could see no other way of maintaining a credible force. He gained almost no support. The Minister of Defence ruled it out. The Labor spokesman said he favoured only voluntary national service. The defence experts pointed to the burden that training large numbers imposes and that a modern army requires fewer men with more skill.²⁶ I am always surprised at this argument because many European nations with high-tech armies have maintained conscription in our own time.

One of the opponents of Barrie's suggestion said it would be 'politically devastating'.²⁷ There's the rub. I am not advocating conscription now. I am pointing to the odd burden this polity carries: what is regarded as a standard option elsewhere is here highly problematic. That is Labor's mark upon the polity. It is a burden on Labor itself — it wants a more independent Australia but its ancient faith prejudices it against the full mobilisation of Australia's resources in defence, which is what independence could well require. With the Left I can doubt whether the

American alliance will always protect us, but I doubt more the Left's commitment to defend Australia in the absence of the alliance.

I hope my laments have not got too much out of hand. I hope that I have explained how the things I regret came to be. My regrets in summary are these. The Labor Party has cared too much for itself and not enough for the central institutions of the polity. Its discipline has damaged itself, the social democratic cause and the quality of the parliament. Though it wants a more independent Australia it can not yet think clearly about what that might entail.

Those who have lived within the Labor tribe have loved it. They think it is the essence of Australia. But I doubt whether it was the ideal vehicle for fully realising the social democratic potential of this place.

This is my tribute to Allan Martin.

Notes

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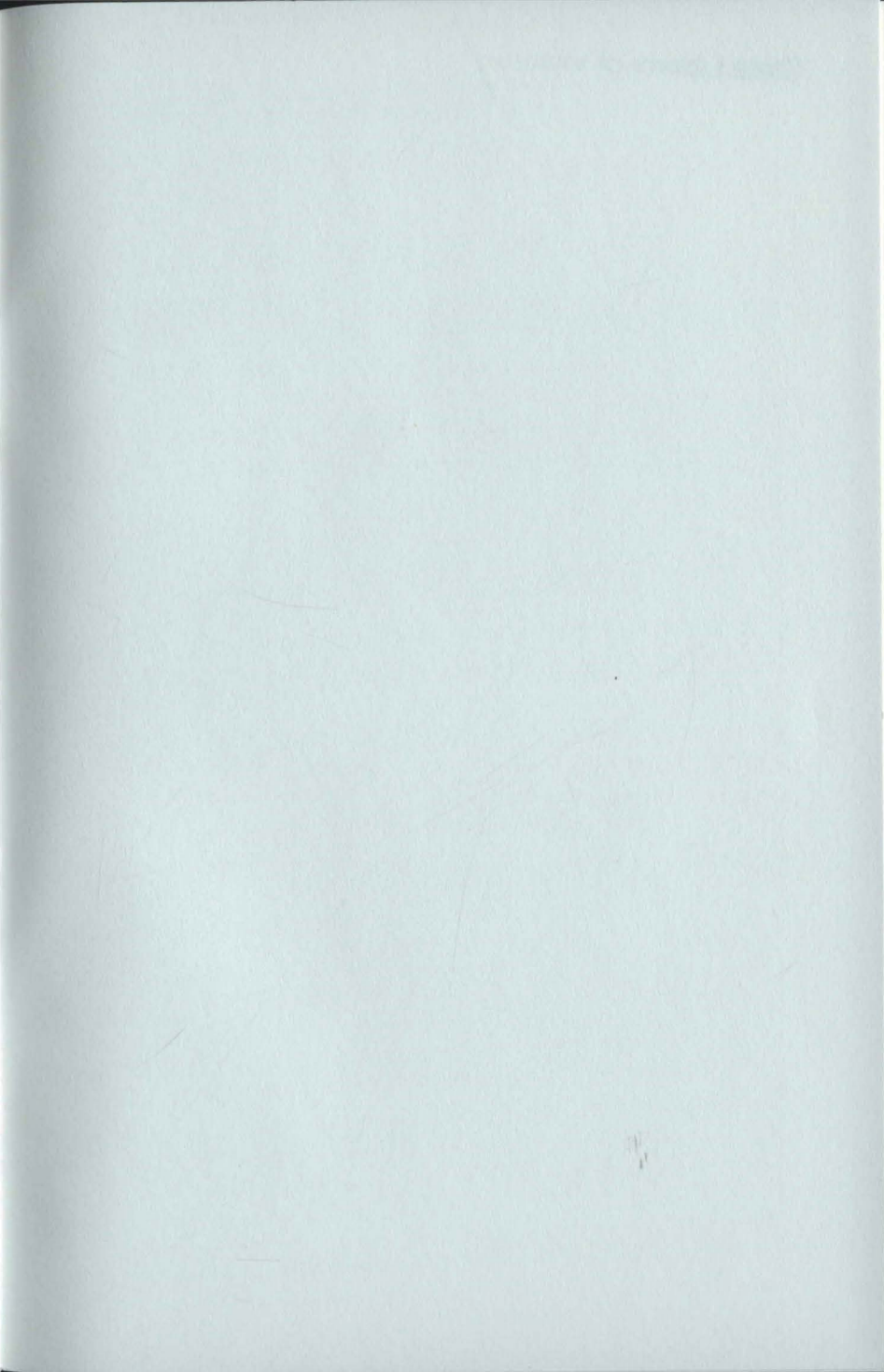
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John Hirst is a professor of History at La Trobe University, Melbourne. He has written books on convicts, the origins of democracy in New South Wales, Federation, Albert Facey, and the republic as well as a guide to government and law in Australia, which was distributed to each school in the country. His most recent books are

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In his Allan Martin Lecture for 2006, John Hirst reflects on his unease with some of the Australian Labor Party traditions. He does not think that Labor parliamentarians should be compelled to vote as caucus directs. He does not think that Billy Hughes and Joseph Lyons were 'rats', or that Labor was right in refusing to join national governments in both world wars. And he believes that the Labor Party's elevation of anti-conscription into a shibboleth was damaging to the party and the nation. In this lecture he laments these and other aspects of Labor's career.