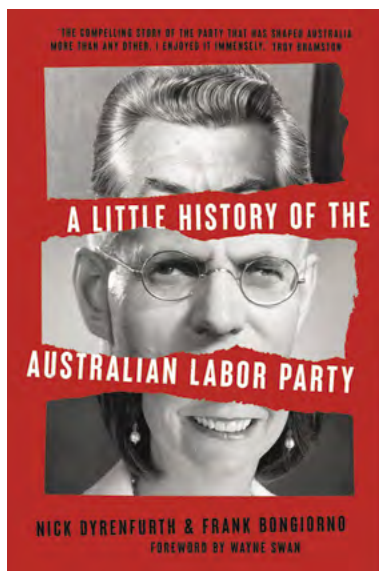


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A Little History of the Australian Labor Party

By Nick Dyrenfurth and Frank Bongiorno

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Historians Nick Dyrenfurth and Frank Bongiorno have compiled the 133-year saga of the Australian Labor Party (ALP). Covering all state/territory branches as well as the federal level, this is a sweeping recount that might require some degree of prior knowledge from younger readers.

The contents page lists six broad and arbitrary chapters, but each section could have been further divided into the specific eras of federal government/opposition. Thankfully the preface contains a chronological timeline of the reign of every ALP

Premier and PM, and the index is comprehensive as well.

This text could complement other secondary sources within the VCE Australian History Study Design, as well as serving as a useful reference for the F-10 History Curriculum at Years 9 and 10 in particular.

The Introduction contains a valuable assessment of the ALPs current predicament, with the message being that the very dynamics that keep the party volatile have also inspired its long-term resilience and occasional vitality. Notably, in 1910 Australia had the world's first majority labour government anywhere in the world—thirteen years before the UK.

Spearheaded by the resurgent trade unions during the 1890s Depression, when the nation was anything but a 'workingman's paradise', the ALP evolved from a distinct network of grass-roots branches in each state. The party's formative culture of 'raucous nationalism and moderate socialism' (p.37) intersects with the idea of Australia as a 'social laboratory' around the time of Federation—as presented in the Level 9-10 curriculum (VC2HH10K09/10/11/12). Not least, this includes Labor's fundamental attachment to the 'White Australia' ideal, which remained in the ALP Policy Platform until 1965 (p.117). Whitlam's subsequent modernisation of the party and the social reforms of the 1970s, in migrant rights and gender equality (VC2HH10K05/06), is awarded attention in this text.

With regard to progress on Indigenous rights (VC2HH10K34), the book outlines the campaigns and policies of consecutive Labor governments since Whitlam, with their varying degrees of success. For Australia's World War II experience (VC2HH10K19), we have the iconic prime ministership of John

Curtin and the cementing of the welfare state, as well as Ben Chifley's post-war reconstruction programs which established Labor's 'big picture' nation-building ethos. However, there is little consideration given to the strategic US alliance forged by Curtin during World War II, and its controversial legacy.

Curtin also features during the World War I conscription debate, which triggered the first of three destructive splits in the ALP and confirmed that the inherent Catholic involvement in the party was a mixed blessing. While H. V. Evatt's remarkable win against Menzies' Communist Party referendum in 1951 is ranked by the authors as 'one of the outstanding achievements of any ALP member in public life' (p.104), Labor's leading role in post-war international affairs receives slim coverage. Yet there is space devoted to Medicare, the Accord, and the conflicting perspectives of the 1980s Hawke/Keating macro-economic reform.

This is an updated edition of the 2011 publication, and the final 50 pages or so are long-winded considering they cover only the past 13 years. They examine the fortunes of the state ALP administrations, alongside an uneven performance federally, across an era where the combined major-party vote slipped to the lowest on record (p.246) and the Greens emerged as a challenger on Labor's left (p.196). Indeed, the recent malaise of Australian democracy simply entrenches what the authors portray as a 'crisis of ideology, identity, and purpose' (p.4) that has confronted Labor since the 1970s.

On the back of rapid social transformation and ever-declining union membership, it remains to be seen whether the authors are correct in suggesting that Labor's adaptability and capacity for policy renewal will ensure its future relevance (p.258).