Nationalism and the New Radicalism, 1885-1890

We are for this Australia, for the nationality that is creeping to the verge of being, for the progressive people that is just pushing under the veranda that still in 1861. Behind us lie the past, with its crushing engines, its falling domes, its drifted acres, before us lie the future and where Australia is glancing, this Australia of ours that burns with the feverish energy of youth!

Time will justify any encroachment and justify any grip, hence the tendency of efficient to its present stage costs. Frederickeners had in strong convictions, often accompanied by hamartia, never without some human battle in field or senate, waged under terrible disadvantage. Nothing is rarer than for Pompey to laugh away his birthright, nothing is harder than for him to weep it back again.

The great strikes of the nineties stand out quite clearly as the culmination of a period of Australian history. In retrospect it is tempting to paint them merely as class battles, as struggles between the opposing forces that history has created. They were that, but they were also struggles between men who had a more or less clear idea of their own purposes. Those who took part in them were fighting for principles that had become accepted in the years before the strikes. Unions fought for the principles of unionism, and against them employers posed the principle of freedom of contract. But behind these opposing principles were the attitudes and convictions that made men prepared to fight.

Between 1885 and 1890 the wide extension of trade-union organization was the visible expression of the ideas of the working class. We have seen that a unionism with a new emphasis developed in those years with the organization of the unskilled and semi-skilled workers and particularly of the bush workers. We have seen also that the leaders of the new unions departed from many of the tenets that had been fundamental to unionism previously. They believed that the whole of the working class should be organized in unions, and that between the unions there should be a maxim of unity. But...
events on the other side of the world. Part of the effect was a reaction against contemporary English tendency, but part also was in sympathy with the reaction to the new imperialism as a whole; in its positive aspect it was the assertion of the validity of values which were thought of as distinctively Australian.

In the establishment and extension of self-government and democracy, radicals had found themselves at odds with the upper classes in Australia and with the British government. But because the society was so new to have acquired a settled way of life and a set of distinctive beliefs, and because the British government never restored the aspirations of the colonists to the breaking-point, the movement for self-government had not articulated a distinctively national position. John Dunmore Lang saw a nation in the future, developing within independent institutions. He both fought for rights of self-government. The Melbourne people who demonstrated in 1856 denounced the Legislative Council and the squatters, in whose efforts to gain British support they saw a submission of the rights of self-government. From the Tories came democratic opinion was colored with the belief that there was no possibility of creating a political and social democracy in Australia than in the old world. But it was not until the eighties that there was any fully explicit statement of the principles which Australians believed were enshrined in their national outlook.

A recent writer has argued with convincing evidence that the beliefs and attitudes which in the eighties became accepted as distinctive Australian were largely a product of the life of the bush workers in the Great Divide, in New South Wales, Queensland, and in a lesser extent, Victoria. Convicts attracted one another and to the frontiers. The contrast with bondage and an intractable natural environment, the struggle for the land, the remoteness from the evidence of state power, moulded a class of men different in important respects from those of any other country. The

1 Ward, The Australian Legend.

American frontier bred the individualistic farmer. Australia, to the north of the mountains, with a pastoral industry controlled by a scatter of squatters, produced a rural working class characterized by its manly independence whose obvious side was a levelling, a communal collectivism, and whose sum was comprised in the concept of manhood. To such men 'unionism came as a new religion', and through their union they in turn influenced greater or less degree the union movement as a whole. But their influence penetrated deeper than that because in the eighties a self-conscious nationalism began impressed their outlook on broad sections of the Australian people as the distinctively national.

The national ethos which gained more or less coherent expression during the eighties in the nationalist press, and in the novels and other in formal literature, may be reduced to a few simple principles. First in importance was the dignity and equality of man. 'I cannot', wrote Joseph Furphy, 'think it is anything worse than a badly-mannered and crumple ignorance which makes men eager to subvert a human equality, self-evident as human variety and impossible as any mathematical axiom.' Similarly the Bulletin commented on the appointment of Lord Carrington as Governor, 'in giving democracy anything which fosters the belief that distinction of any description in the natural and just reward of the accident of birth is monstrous.' The source of infection was seen as Britain. The young Henry Lawson, soon to be accepted as Australia's first truly national poet, warned that there was a danger that Australians might find the good old English gentlemen over them; the good old English squire over them, the good old English lord over them, the good old English aristocracy rolling round them in cushioned carriages, onerously delving to put their eyes on the 'common people' who tell, stare and rot for them; and the good old English throne over them all.2

Within Australia the danger to democracy was believed to be with the upper classes. Furphy has his socialist agitator say, 'I tell you that from the present social system of pastoral Australia comes the patriarchal disposition, tempered by Bryant and May-to actual bondship and pauperism, is an easy transition, and the only thing that can prevent this broadening down is a vigorous rally of every man with a clear head and a heart in the right place.'

1 Ibid., p. 197.
2 J. Furphy, Such is Life, p. 109.
3 13 January 1886.
4 Republican, 15 October 1885.
5 Right's Romance, p. 98.
Furphy's Australians were the itinerant workers of the outback, rough and unlettered, but thoughtful and useful, 'mateship' was a first article of their creed. For Lawson, too, the bushmen symbolized a way of life that he identified with Australia. 'Rogged and bare, he wrote of his friends and critics, this bushmen helped each other in times of difficulty and trouble. However unworthy some of this might be, they seemed to recognize the ideal of mateship.'

The majority of people in Australia in the eighties did not long have they ever lived, the life from which the national myth was fashioned. But many who had passed their lives in the narrow streets of Sydney or the sprawling suburbs of Brisbane saw in it something with which they sympathized, for political democracy had existed for a generation and social stratification had never been accepted as more than a tiny minority. What the nationalist writers had to express something that was recognizable to all Australians, and with which many could identify themselves. Similarly, they were equally impressed by the importance of preserving Australia free from influences that would undermine those values Joseph Furphy believed Australia to be a 'virgin continent'.

To keep her free of such a heritage was the express aim of the Australian nationalist. Such a concept of the nation was essentially a class view. As Huxley puts it, 'agreement for workers it was impossible to discard the passions of class and of nationalism, so incrustedly were they interwoven.' The idealized way of life was that of the common people, who, as we have seen, had become, by the eighties, a working class. On the other hand the threat to the ideal future seemed to lie with the imperialists, both English and Australian, who were seeking closer ties between Britain and her colonies—and in Australia these were drawn from the upper classes.

The squatters and their allies were not, like the great mass of immigrant settlers and their children, compelled by circumstances to break their connections with England and accept Australia as their only home. They went to and from one hemisphere.

\[\footnote{W. R. Hamock, Australia, p. 96.} \]
WHEREAS the exclusion of Chinese had originally been seen by the workers as a policy with an economic sanction, during the conflict became linked also with Australian national feeling, the Australian façade was so white. The nationalism press assisted in creating a campaign against the admission of Chinese, and the policy of the British government and the Australian imperialism was represented as calculated to undermine the future of the white nation. In Queensland, William Lane employed his great journalistic talent to argue that the Chinese were a danger to the social life and the moral standards of the people. He painted with heavy hand the horrors of opium dens and the insidious attractions of fast-tin with its poppy, orientalism, the inscrutable faces of the players, and the plague and disease of the surroundings. His readers were undoubtedbly with Lane when he wrote of an opium den in Brisbane:

and it angered me to see these men so smooth-faced and placid and contented, their placid nature nurtured by the drug that kills the passionate white man, and to think that in this stinking band of Mongolians were as much at home as if they were in distant China, and that all this was in Brisbane, in the heart of the colony that we hope to make a great white state.”

The assumption of the racial superiority of white men was tempered in the viewpoint of the Australian nationalist by the conviction that the employing class in Australia was prepared to sell their country’s birthright for cheap labour. The squatters and the British government were regarded as being in league to foil the white democratic Australian nation a slave population that would destroy for ever the possibilities for the future they visualized. It was assumed, further, that imperial-minded Australians, who in return for favours from the ruling class of Britain were putting the interests of Britain before those of Australia, might well in the future become the traitorous associates of a dominant Chinese who would seize control of the country and enslave the white Australian workers. In a serial story, “White or Yellow” which was in the Boomerang for three months, William Lane developed this theme. It is a story set in Queensland in 1858 when the Chinese, in collaboration with a minority of wealthy Europeans, had established an autocracy. The native Australians have become slaves serving their brutal oriental masters. A rising of the Australians against the despots provides Lane with an opportunity of describing a

revolutionary race war of Australian democracy opposing the combination of jack-booted Chinese and their sympatico European collaborators, who are pictured as being remarkably like the Boomerang’s impression of the Queensland imperialists of 1888. The Order of Saint Michael and Saint George, which was in Lane’s opinion the price demanded by Australian politicians for imperial allegiances, had in 1906 been replaced by a dragon emblem on the breast of the associates of the new masters. Racial prejudice, brutal and at times fanatical, was perhaps an inevitable aspect of Australian nationalism developing under the conditions we have described.

The British government remained apparently unaware of the implications of Australian nationalism. In 1889 the Colonial Conference met in London and there it was made clear that feeling in Australia was either unknown or ignored. Richard Jebb writes of the original conception of the Conference as a meeting between the Colonies (collectively, sectionally or individually) on the one hand and the British Government on the other; the former being in the position of vessels invited to confer with their overlords, who would graciously listen to their representations.19

It was this attitude, implicit in the conference and demonstrated in relation to the question of Australian defence and the exclusion of the Chinese, that added fuel to the fires of Australian nationalism. Australians were no longer prepared to be treated as colonies. One reason to this situation was the demand for a greater degree of independence within the empire—the objective to which High-borns had devoted his life and of which in the eighties Alfred Deakin became the most ardent advocate. Imperial federation was conceived as a possible solution to this difficulty by Deakin and men like thought like him, but already Deakin was also beginning to formulate the idea of what in practice became dominion status. On the other hand, the more radical nationalists turned to republicanism, in open opposition to imperialism. The Australian advocates of imperial federation or any solution short of complete independence were regarded as prostituted instruments of British imperialism whose privilege and titles had been paid by an imperial government that had become quite shameless in the lavish bestowal of such dignity of its approval. The imperial navy scheme under which Australia was to contribute towards the upkeep of a squadron of the British Navy was received by the nationalist press with most bitter
criticism. In paragraph and cartoon the Australian flag was held in contrast with the white enigma, and the United States was presented as pointing the way to Australia’s destiny. The refusal of the British government to agree to the complete exclusion of Chinese on the grounds that it would exclude British subjects from British colonies, was received in the same way. The policy of the colonial governments agreed to at the intercolonial conference in 1888—to restrict but not prohibit Chinese immigration—was seen as a result of pressure by the British government. William Lane characterized it as “utterly insufficient, purblind and absurd,” typical of “perfidious Albion.”

The English republican and secularist movement provided the bulletins fired in Australia. A Republican Union was founded in Sydney in 1887 and a year later it became the Republican League, with branches in Melbourne and Adelaide. The annexation of New Guinea inspired its formation and Australian national feeling was its emotional raison d’être, but much of its propaganda was drawn directly from contemporary English sources. Republicans were unable to read the works of Morrison Davidson, Howard Evans and Max Nordau. The most prolific of the republican pamphlets, George Black, who later became a Labour member of parliament and still later a conservative minister, delighted in attacking the person and pretensions of monarchy. “Let us,” he wrote, “look down through the open ’mousethe mists of blood, the strokes of torture fires, and the vapours of lascivious sweat that sheared the throne, in order to examine critically the character of past English rule.”

From time to time the Bulletin expressed itself in equally unbridled language. It referred to our own rulers, the record of whose lives “constitutes one of the meanest and bloodiest pages in the annals of mankind. Stumbling insubordination, unbridled lust, reachy superstition, ignorance, stupidity unfaithful, meanness inconceivable, bill the dreary page from top to bottom.” But more generally, republican propaganda concentrated itself with opposing to imperialism. Many Australians who were not anxious to attack the Queen agreed with Henry Lawson—“Why on earth do we want

Victorian unionists were less republican than those of the other two colonies. The upper class in Australia were economically and culturally bound to Britain; were even admitted to their circle on a basis of near equality by the ruling class of Britain. Consequently Australian national feeling was an essential part of the class feeling generated in the conflict between classes in Australia. The same conflict created a trade-union movement, in whose creation nationalism was one of the catalysts, but after 1885 socialist ideas were another.

At the same time, the road to socialist ideas in Australia was broken by the writings of the American Henry George and the

1840 American Revolution, 7 January 1888.
1841 Framework of the Republican League: Admission of the office of Governor; Preservation of parliament; abolition of the Upper House; abolition of all similar obstructions of the powers and the promotion of liberty in all its forms. Constitution of the blood; federation of the Australian colonies under republican rule. Republican, 8 February 1888.
1842 By the way, 16 May 1891.
1843 Industry, 23 April 1892.
this might well be the explanation of the paradox of poverty and price. It appealed to the same groups, too, because it was an extension of the free-trade argument, since the tax being intended to replace all other taxation. The general tenor of the ideas was supported by the growing weight of opinion on the question of land reform. The Land Tenure Reform Association, numbering among its members John Mill, Professor Thorold Rogers, John Morley, Sir Charles Dilke and Alfred Russell Wallace, had been active in Britain since 1870. Its work went beyond the land problem itself and the writings, particularly of Thorold Rogers and Alfred Russell Wallace, were being read by many of those to whom George also appealed. They advocated nationalization of the land, but both George and the land nationalists contributed to the broad stream of collectivist opinion.

During 1876 land nationalization leagues were established in Brisbane, Gympie and Charters Towers, Sydney and eight central western country towns, and later in Melbourne and Adelaide. At first these Leagues discussed and advocated the policies of the English Land Tenure Reform Association, but during 1878 the direct influence of George becomes evident. 'Out in the great bush where men have time to think,' wrote John Morley, Progress and Poverty was read with understanding and passed from hand to hand until the sublime truth of it was impressed on many. Single-tax leagues were formed, and single-taxers indigenized the land nationalization leagues. The influence of George's theories on the policy of the trade union movement has already been noted. It will be seen further that, in the nineties and after, the idea of the single tax contributed to Labour Party political policy. Up to 1890, however, its most important effect, as in Britain, was in initiating a line of thought that led on to socialism, even though George himself was strongly opposed to socialism.

The socialism that influenced the broad masses in Australia was the socialism of Edward Bellamy. Like George, Bellamy had little to say that was new. He merely selected his ideas from those that were common to English socialists of the early nineteenth century, the Christian socialism of Horace Greeley and that group of rebel spirits who taught and tried to practice socialism in the United States. Nor was his method of presenting his ideas new. He followed the tradition of the utopian novel which had contributed to literature More's Utopia, St. John's, A History of the New South Wales Political Labour Party, pt. 4, p. 122.

NATIONALISM AND THE NEW RADICALISM

Social and economic equality. Socialism would be introduced not by class warfare but by the conviction in men's minds that it was by itself desirable.

In Queensland, William Lane as editor of the Boomerang and later the Worker taught a socialism that was in all essentials the creed of Bellamy. His thought had been greatly influenced by the English Fabian socialists, American social experiments, and particularly by Lawrence Gronlund's Co-operative Commonwealth.11 He revised Looking Backward after its publication in 1889 as a book that embodied most completely the ideas that he was already teaching.

He founded a Bellamy Society,12 and wrote that in Looking Backward was to be found a picture of his ideal society.13 He accepted Bellamy, but at the same time went beyond him because he saw in the trade-union organization of the working class the possibility of people working co-operatively for social ends—something that nationalism, co-operative socialism living in microcosm within capitalist society. But he believed that by propaganda and example people of goodwill of all classes would come to see the correctness of his viewpoint. He tried to awaken the conscience of Queensland by bringing into the light the lives of the most denuded and oppressed section of the community. He scored the slums of Brisbane and wrote detailed reports of what he had found.14 Feeling the tragedy of the sick, he saw, he used all the tricks of nineteenth century sensationalism to make the improvement of their lot the responsibility of all who read his reports. The condition of the people he interviewed was no change.15

But Bellamy, in the industrial waste of the new environment, and unfettered by the social and economic controls that result in the more unpleasant features of nature, the human race is constantly improving. Hence, as one critic of Bellamy expresses it, 'the unloved in human nature will be gradually eliminated, while "gifts of person, mind and disposition: bravery, wit, eloquence, kindness, generosity, goodness" will be perpetuated'.16

The ethical sanction for the co-operative commonwealth, Bellamy found in Christianity. Socialism, he claimed, involved nothing less than a literal fulfillment on a complete social scale of Christ's instruction that all should feel the same solicitude and make the same effort for the welfare of others as for their own.17 Man would be changed by a socialist organization of society and would become much closer to the Christian ideal. He would already have commenced that mutuality before a socialist organization was possible because Bellamy believed that the transition to socialist society would occur as a result of the changed attitude of people. People would become aware of the illogicality and brutality of existing society which would be gradually changed from political democracy.

of the old, he strove for a comprehensive organization of the working class. He was largely responsible for the formation of the Bundane Trades and Labour Council in 1882, and he drafted the plan of the Australian Labour Federation in 1889, by which the Queensland political labour movement adopted a socialist objective. He was the adviser and friend of the leaders of the trade-union movement and the inspiration of the solidarity action with the London dock workers in 1889. In fact, Lane’s role was to solidify the movement in Queensland to the socialist ideal. In the other colonies, there was no figure comparable with Lane to channel socialist ideas in the working class, but reach them where they did. William Guthrie Spence, himself a follower of Henry George, resided in 1890 that the workers desired a reconsecration of society although they differed as to what it should be.

The socialism of Bellamy was the belief that influenced the broad masses, but in Sydney and Melbourne there were small socialist groups—the nucleus from which the left wing of the labour movement grew—that were even in the eighties striving for theoretical purity. In Melbourne, an anarchist club was started in 1886 and in Sydney, the Australian Socialistic League in the following year. They were really debating societies, very small in membership where the ideas of contemporary socialism were discussed. Members called themselves followers of Hyndman, Annie Besant, Karl Marx and Kropotkin, but their interpretations of these various schools of socialist and anarchistic thought revealed a gargantuan confusion of what their various leaders stood for. One of the leading anarchists for example, claimed to be an adherent of Marx but insisted that the best exposition of his viewpoint was to be found in Grenville’s ‘Co-operative Commonwealth’, the writings of Sydney Webb, Bernard Shaw, Annie Besant and in W. H. Dawson’s ‘Business and State Socialism’.

The theoretical confusion in the revived English socialist movement was worse confounded when it was transferred half way around the world to Australia. Until 1894, a number of fundamental opposers to the movement were represented in the English Social Democratic Federation because the differences between them had not been clearly worked out. Bernard Shaw wrote ten years later that the reason why ‘Anarchists and Socialists worked then shoulder to shoulder, as comrades and brothers, was that neither one nor the other had any definite idea of what he wanted or how it was to be got’. The struggle in the Social Democratic Federation in 1884, the formation of the Socialist League, and the increasing separateness of the Fabians was a result of the conflict that emerged as the socially different socialist doctrines took shape. The Australian socialist group, being wholly dependent on the ideas of the leaders of English socialism, who were themselves only in the course of clarifying their own position, were naturally struggling in a sea of confusing principles.

There appears to have been little agreement in the Australian Socialist League on any question except that the distribution of wealth in capitalist society was unfair and that some kind of common ownership of the means of production was necessary. On immediate political issues there was the usual divergence of opinion. The conservatives of the league, W. H. McNamara and J. E. Anderson, for example, held conflicting views on strikes as a means of improving the conditions of the workers. State education had its supporters and opponents. Free trade and protection were argued honestly. In fact, the manifesto of the League gave a fair picture of its character—it aimed to foster public interest in the great social questions of the day by promoting inquiry in every possible manner; and to circulate and publish literature throwing light upon the existing evils of society, and the methods necessary for their removal.

The League did the purpose of providing a forum in which people who were later to play a part in politics received their introduction to socialist ideas. It also kept at least a few people in touch with events in the labour movement in other parts of the world. The Paris Commune was regularly celebrated and was pointed to as an object lesson for all workers. The executions of the first Chicago anarchists in 1887 caused a thrill of sympathy in the ranks of the league, and memorial services were held on the anniversary of their death. Probably many of the members were more interested in events in other countries than those in their own. This was particularly true in Melbourne, where the anarchists were joined by a German socialist club in establishing a branch of the Australian Socialist League in 1888. There, as in Sydney, anarchist and socialist ideas were debated.

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14 Ibid., August to December 1890.
15 The Royal Commission on Strikes, p. 150.4
16 Australian Radical, 5 February 1894.
17 The Royal Commission on Strikes, pp. 349-350.4
18 W. H. McNamara in a pamphlet, ‘Social and Capitalistic or Pauperized Population and People’s Radikal’, Radical, 9 November 1897.
19 Ibid., 9 November 1893.
21 Australian Radical, 15 November 1888.
The Socialist League was a tributary of the main stream of political life in Australia, but it was also the direct descendant of the various organizations constituting the left wing of the labour movement through which the doctrines of the International Workingmen's Association of the World and Marxism reached some Australian workers. The socialism that did reach the workers was an idealist socialism on which Frederick Engels made the penetrating comment, 'socialism is the expression of absolute truth, reason and justice, and must only to be discovered to conquer the world by virtue of its own power.' The socialist commonwealth appeared to these socialists as a rational social organization which, by contrast with existing society, must appeal to people of all classes who could be brought to think about it. To these socialists, Engels remarked, 'Society presented nothing but abuses; it was the task of the thinking intellect to remove them.' The socialism that influenced the Australian labour movement was of this kind.

Directly, it encouraged the extension of trade unionism to unions in fighting down the barriers between the trades, it fostered the growth of nation-wide unity of trade unions. It gave the workers a justification for their claims for the betterment of their position, and it provided for some trade unionists what was at the nature of a religious ideal to work towards. But because its emphasis was on the common interest of all classes in achieving a socialist society, it did not prepare trade unionists for the realities of class warfare, which their very organization made inevitable. Hence was convinced that the majority of employers would see the justice of the demand for radical social and economic readjustment. He believed that only the ruthless employer would resist the just claims of trade unionists, and it was against him that strike action would be directed—be he did not foresee that the employers as a class and, with the backing of the state would ultimately act to suppress the 'dangerous ideas' with which the working class had become infected. In May 1890 he was writing that it was socialism 'that is moving the world. We are all socialists only some of us don't know it,' and in the middle of the maritime strike he could still write that there is 'many a heartick employer, feeling humanity stirring within him, will come to join either openly or secretly in the fight to overthrow the wage system, to idealise labour, to conquer Want and Hate and Greed and Vice, to establish peace on earth and goodwill among men.'

This attitude is also directly expressed in policy statements by...

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19 Felix, p. 590.
20 Worker, 5 May 1890.
21 Ibid., 1 October, 1890.