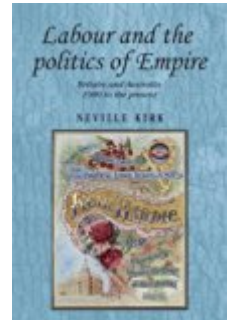


Neville Kirk. *Labour and the Politics of Empire: Britain and Australia 1900 to the present.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011. 319 S. \$105.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7190-8079-1.



Reviewed by Evan Smith

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Commissioned by Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

This is a well-written and widely researched comparative and transnational history of two of the most significant Labour/Labor parties in the Anglophone world, Britain's Labour Party and Australia's Labor Party (referred to by Neville Kirk as the BLP and the ALP). Kirk highlights the similar trajectories of the two parties over the course of the twentieth century (and into the twenty-first century), as well as the continuities and breaks within the histories of each party, with the fortunes and misfortunes of both often overlapping in some way. What Kirk clearly demonstrates is that at different points in their intertwining histories, the parties looked to each other for inspiration, particularly in the years leading up to the First World War and the early interwar period, and then again in the 1980s and 1990s. It is remarkable that this was not simply the case of the Australian party on the periphery of the British Empire looking toward the British party in the colonial metropole, but often the BLP looking to the ALP for guidance. Kirk shows that the electoral victories of the ALP at the state level, then at

the federal level in the lead up to 1914, provided great inspiration for Labour in Britain, demonstrating that a workers' party could wrestle parliamentary control away from traditional political parties. At the other end of the century, the "modernization" of the ALP under two prime ministers, Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, gave "modernizers" (not just those involved in the New Labour/Blairite project) in Britain a blueprint for how to revitalize the party and shift away from the traditional view of "tax and spend" Labour. As a comparative (and quite all-encompassing) history of the two parties, this book would serve anyone interested in the story of labor politics in both countries very well.

However, the book's title also mentions "politics of empire," and the introduction explicitly refers to the author's interest in the impact that colonialism/imperialism had on both parties. Indeed, Kirk states that "my study ... concludes that, on balance, nation, empire and race exerted far more, albeit variable, influence upon Labour and anti-Labour politics in the two countries in ques-

tion than so far suggested in the relevant literature" (p. 5). In the introduction, the author does a good job in outlining how ideas of nationhood, "race," and empire affected labor politics in Britain and Australia, and how the two parties operated within the British Empire/Commonwealth. He mentions the reciprocal relationship between the BLP and the ALP, which functioned on a more equal level than the traditional concept of the "core/periphery" framework of the British Empire might suggest. He also notes that labor politics, particularly in Australia, were tied to ideas of "race" and "whiteness" during the first half of the twentieth century and that both parties attempted to fuse workers' rights with a sense of national identity. The arguments set forth in this introductory section as well as Kirk's depth of research and familiarity with the literature form a tantalizing monograph.

The second section, "The Growth of Independent Labour," continues with some of the arguments set out in the introduction. In particular, Kirk outlines the notion that Australian nationalism, as expounded by the early labor movement, was not celebratory of the British Empire, emphasizing an Australian path to socialism/social democracy away from Britain while maintaining the importance of the "white" British "race." He also describes the ways in which both parties sought to "protect" workers' rights by campaigning against the use of colonial labor in Britain and Australia, which points to a difference between labor relations in settler colonies and other parts of the empire. However, Kirk does not expand on these arguments and he sacrifices some of the details of these arguments for other aspects of the narrative.

As the book looks at the interwar period and the Cold War era, arguments about nation, "race," and empire are further subsumed by the narrative of the two parties and rarely focus on these ideas for more than a few paragraphs at a time. The third and fourth sections, "The Politics of Loy-

alism" and "Mixed Fortunes," are indicative of this approach. Kirk spends a large part of these two sections discussing the accusation by the Right that both the BLP and the ALP had "betrayed" the nation, and the British Empire/Commonwealth more broadly, by their links, whether they actually existed or not, to the international communist movement. This discussion tends to overshadow some of the key events, concepts, and movements that were occurring within the British Empire/Commonwealth at this time, with little indication given to how both parties reacted to these developments. For example, decolonization and migration within the commonwealth—two phenomena that irreversibly changed the operation of the British Commonwealth—increased greatly in the late 1940s while Labour sat in power in London and Canberra, with Clement Atlee's government overseeing one of the most significant events in the history of British decolonization, the independence of India/Pakistan. However, Kirk does not discuss how Labour managed this moment or in general, Labour's handling of the decolonization process, other than acknowledging that Labour favored a multiracial and "democratic" commonwealth. The same goes for how both the ALP and BLP handled migration from the commonwealth, with Kirk mentioning it briefly and describing how the ALP's Arthur Calwell favored "white" commonwealth migrants, but not much more. Other issues of "race," nation, and empire in the commonwealth, such as Irish independence, the Suez Crisis, the 1951 ANZUS Treaty, the treatment of Aboriginal Australians by the ALP before the Gough Whitlam era, and Britain's attempts to join the European Economic Community, receive minimal analysis in this book.

The last section, focused on Labour since the 1970s, "Traditionalism, Modernisation and Revisionism," includes some discussion of how both parties have changed their thinking on "race" and nation in an increasingly globalized and postcolonial world, such as the establishment of multicultural communities in Britain and Australia, and

popular views of the history of colonialism in both countries. These are, once again, dealt with too quickly. For readers interested in both labor and colonial/postcolonial history, this book focuses too heavily on the narrative of the comparative history of the ALP and the BLP rather than a comparative history of how these parties dealt with questions of "race," nation, and imperialism that the empire brought up over the last century.

Anyone interested in labor history and thinking of delving into the world of colonialism and postcolonialism would benefit from reading this book as an introduction to the topic, but for more seasoned readers in these areas, this book lacks depth. As stated at the beginning of this review, *Labour and the Politics of Empire* is a very good book about the history of Labour/Labor in Britain and Australia, but not as good as a history of the politics of empire.

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