

A NEW BRITANNIA

Humphrey McQueen scratches for a living in Canberra. Since the appearance of the first edition of *A New Britannia* in 1970, he has published another thirteen books, and a couple of million words in articles, columns and reviews. He does his bit to keep alive the principles of social equality through the Socialist Alliance and its journal *Seeing Red*.

A
NEW
BRITANNIA

Humphrey McQueen

UAP

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*For my mother and father
in loving memory*

*'My true name is Labour, though priests
call me Christ.'*

Victor Daley

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Preface to the Fourth Edition

A New Britannia deserves to be read as a statement of its time. In the late 1960s, the mood was established by the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China, the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the May Days in France, the Prague Spring and the O'Shea strike. At its best, and its worst, this is a book with the wind in its sails.

The first edition appeared late in 1970. In 1975, a second reprint let me correct a few more errors. A new 'Introduction' stressed that the book was an account of the Australian Labor Party. Changes to the text were minimal. In 1985, Penguin Books decided on an illustrated edition, which required resetting the text. Again, any temptation to rewrite was resisted. Almost all the nearly one thousand adjustments were stylistic, with the aim of clarifying views held in 1970. Footnoted information was taken into the text. Additions to the chapters on 'Japs', 'Socialists' and 'Laborites' strengthened the intention of investigating the Labor Party.

Rather than recast the argument in 1986, I added an 'Afterword', sketching my understanding of Laborism and racism in the context of monopolising capitals ('Lenin's Imperialism'). In proposing a research strategy, the 'Afterword' remained faithful to the argumentative spirit, if not the descriptive tone, of the original. That 'Afterword' has been expanded for this edition, principally by bringing the analysis up

to the globalised present. In 1986, I quipped that, by then, I knew too much to write *A New Britannia* but not enough to rewrite it. Today, I see how it could be rewritten. A schema is set out in the revised 'Afterword'. Surveying the materials from a different perspective, my 1996 biography of Tom Roberts could have been subtitled *The making of the Australian petit-bourgeoisie*.

Meanwhile, the historical profession has suffered a loss of nerve in its scope and scale. No doctoral student today would be allowed to attempt the expanses of Russel Ward or Robin Gollan. More than ever, students are directed to topics that could hardly matter less in a tiny patch covering less than a decade. Meanwhile, the effort to enrich class analysis with gender and ethnicity has ended up by jettisoning concern with state power and capital accumulation. For example, *Australian Historical Studies* escaped from politics as the view from Government House verandahs to slump into an anti-quarianism masquerading as post-modern.

Humphrey McQueen
Canberra

1 January 2004

Historians

I do not believe that this re-writing will come from the Universities, though they will greatly assist the work of the creative writer. It will not come from the Universities, because they, instead of being the fiercest critics of the bankrupt liberal ideal, are its most persistent defenders. Then too they have been made afraid by the angry men of today with their talk about 'corrupters of youth'.

C. M. H. Clark, 1956

The Australian legend consists of two interwoven themes: radicalism and nationalism. In the minds of their devotees, these concepts were projected into 'socialism' and 'anti-imperialism'. Nineteenth-century Australia was seen as a spawning ground for all that is politically democratic, socially egalitarian and economically cooperative, while our nationalism is anti-imperialist and anti-militarist. According to this view, an arch of Australian rebelliousness stretched from the convicts to the anti-conscription victories of 1916–17, buttressed at strategic points by the Eureka stockade and the Barcaldine shearers.

The legends included Russel Ward, Geoffrey Serle, Ian Turner, and to a lesser extent Robin Gollan and Brian Fitzpatrick. None of these historians would object to being described as socialist; some welcomed the title Marxist, as I do. The difference between us is that for them socialism had become a thing of the past, something to lament, and, lamenting,

touch up with rosy hues ere the pall of death become too apparent. Their tale was a sad one, a tale of decline, a ballad of a once radical people led astray by their own victories. In essence, they pictured radicalism, and with it socialism, as chances gone for ever. There was little to which to look forward beyond king-making and wire-pulling in the ALP.

It was the historians who had suffered the decline. There had been a time when they sought in Australia's past a proof and a justification for their own socialist hopes. This quest was historically determined and yet universally valid. The necessity arose with the challenge of fascism, a system which appealed to tradition to solve the disorder and despair resulting from the wars and depressions generated by monopolising capitals. Revolutionaries sought to combat fascism by establishing the validity of revolution as a tradition. In the struggle for a popular front, and in the great patriotic war, the definition of revolutionary became increasingly elastic. Anyone who had ever expressed a democratic sentiment was enlisted into the fight, as were all manner of nationalists. The *Workers Weekly*, 15 September 1935, pictured the Communist Party as 'the real inheritor ... of the Dunmore Langs, Parkeses and Wentworths'. Instead of the radical-nationalist interpretation of Australia being the preserve of liberals and whigs, it was promoted by the people who should have been demolishing it, namely the communists.

When the great disillusion came in the 1950s, the tradition that had been laid as a seed-bed for the future was 'All ashes to the taste'. By 1970 the legend was anti-radical and counter-revolutionary. By harking back to great days of yore, it played the brigand of contemporary hopes and debased current struggles. Australian socialists had to exorcise its spectre to approach the tasks of revolution with the understanding that Lenin provided in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* and Mao provided in *The Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan*.

The most influential account of radical nationalism, Russell Ward's *The Australian Legend*, is concerned almost exclusively with domestic affairs. It traced the growth of a national character within Australia. Ward glossed his account with the addition of the frontier thesis. As developed in the 1890s by F. J. Turner for the United States, the frontier thesis had justified individualism as the dominant spirit in American life. Ward reversed this process for Australia and argued that our frontier produced a collectivist ethos because geography and legislation made it impossible for the small farmer to succeed, or for anyone to live in isolation. Although I reject Ward's account of the typical Australian, there is merit in considering yet another version of the frontier thesis. Instead of confining the discussion of nationalism to developments within Australia, it will be beneficial to examine Australia as a frontier of white capitalism. Such an examination would combine events in Australia with Australia's position in the world. Only by relocating settler Australia in the mainstream of world developments will it be possible to understand the nature of our radicalism or of our nationalism.

Australia's prosperity, based on wool and gold, was the prosperity of expanding capitalism. Geographically, Australia was a frontier of European capitalism in Asia. The first of these circumstances gave rise to the optimism that illuminated our radicalism; the second produced the fear that tarnishes our nationalism.

It is not my purpose to deny that nineteenth-century Australia was radical or nationalistic. It was often both, though not as completely so as is sometimes supposed. Not all the conservatives were transitory Englishmen. Australia produced its own crop, one of the most notably being the first W. C. Wentworth with his proposal for a bunyip aristocracy. Nor were all the nationalists radicals. Radicalism and nationalism cannot be equated. Many conservatives were nationalists.

My purpose is to reveal the components of this radicalism

and nationalism and, in penetrating beneath the surface of words, confront the experiences and attributes that were their substance and dynamic.

A brief sketch of these components may prove helpful, providing it is not taken as a substitute for the workings of the argument. Primarily, *A New Britannia* is an essay on the ideology of the Australian labouring classes up to and including the Great War. The aim is to show why they could not produce a socialist party. Instead, the ALP embodied the values of a petit-bourgeoisie.

Chapter by chapter, the argument runs like this:

Nationalists: Australians wanted the Empire to be strong so that it could protect them, but they did not always trust Britain to put Australia's interests first.

Racists: The threat from the north made Australian nationalism essentially racist.

Invaders: Australians developed a siege mentality.

Sub-imperialists: In their attitudes towards the indigenes of Oceania, Australians took up the racial chauvinism of European imperialism.

Japs: Before 1914, Australian fears settled on Japan.

Militarists: In order to keep Australia 'white', democratic militarism became an essential part of Australian nationalism.

Navalists: In order to keep Oceania under 'white' control, navalism became an essential part of Australian nationalism.

Poets: These attitudes were expressed in the versifying of Lawson and others.

Pianists: Property became a paramount concern of Australian workers; this aspect was symbolised by the piano.

Immigrants: In the main, the settlers were the upwardly striving section, those who were dissatisfied with their lot in Britain and thus sought independence and comfort within the more elastic colonial economy.

Convicts: The convicts were largely professional criminals who believed in nothing so much as individual enterprise. The

convicts did not establish a tradition of 'mateship'. Their acceptance of the acquisitive values of capitalism, and their not infrequent successes, set the pattern for the free labourers who succeeded them.

Diggers: Gold had three important effects in the formation of the petit-bourgeoisie consciousness of nineteenth-century Australian labourers. First, it often provided an amount of ready capital so they could escape wage-slavery. Secondly, the discovery of gold eased the process of capital formation in Australia; the source of capital accumulation, the surplus value of workers, could be softened in Australia. Most important was gold's effect upon the outlook of the people. Gold mining strengthened the ethos of acquisitive competition and underwrote a possessive individualism.

Selectors: Most of those who came to Australia wanted to escape from urban industrialisation far more than from a system of individual enterprise. Nineteenth-century Australian politics were dominated by questions of land ownership and use. From the earliest days, there were demands to 'unlock the lands'. At every point in the campaign to establish a yeomanry, the people were ideologically subordinate. They thought they were avoiding the problems presented by capitalism by escaping into self-proprietorship. They were also organisationally dominated by bourgeois liberals.

Democrats: A most important fact about settler Australia is 'that its entire history occurred after the French and Industrial revolutions'. This timing meant that the issues that split European society into irreconcilable classes were more easily contained within a framework for collaboration.

Socialists: 'Socialist' ideas in Australia were part of the largely pre-industrial environment in which they flourished. Moreover, the requirements of a colonial economy demanded governmental intervention. It was therefore no novelty when the labour movement demanded a program of public works to assist the unemployed, or when they insisted that these works

be carried out under a system of day labour. Reeves's phrase 'colonial governmentalism' is a truer description than 'state socialism'. This dependence on the state had consequences in the development of labouring-class expectations.

Unionists: The chronic labour shortage meant that wages in Australia were higher than those obtaining in Britain. This experience conditioned class consciousness. The motto of the unions speaks volumes for their purpose. Although the wording changed from 'United to relieve not combined to injure' to 'Defence not Defiance', the meaning remained clear. Union leaders wanted nothing better than to talk to their employers; and when the employers refused to talk, the officials and rank-and-file wanted the government to make them.

Laborites: The Labor parties that emerged after 1890 were in every way the logical extension of the petit-bourgeois mentality and subordinated organisations that preceded them. There was no turning point. There was merely consolidation, a confirmation of much that had gone before. Nothing in the behaviour of the Labor Party in the 1920s gave any indication that it had changed. Thirty or so 'state enterprises' were not 'socialism by stealth'. They were never intended to replace capitalism. More telling was the rich tradition of strike-breaking by Labor governments.

Afterword: This evolutionary line of argument is rejected in favour of an account of the origins of the Labor parties which relies on the disruptions produced by the switch from free trade to monopolising capitals (Lenin's 'Imperialism') in the final quarter of the nineteenth century. The Labor parties are seen as a response to this rupture, not as the outgrowth of the previous hundred years. The version of this self-criticism given in 1986 was amended in 2003 to include the current phase of so-called globalisation.

PART ONE

No-Global and anti-war movements, buttressed by a rebuilding of unions towards defiance.

In the 1890s, the Labor Party began as a reaction against monopolising capitals. Since the 1980s, it has been riding shot-gun on their juggernaut. The Australian Labor Party was never more than nominally socialist. The protracted campaigns to dilute and to delete its socialist objective have been symbolic politics. Today, the Party does not merit even the title of 'labor'. It's time for activists and analysts to jettison that term. The organisation should be referred to only by its initials, as no more than 'the ALP'. The title 'labor' has a finer past and deserves a nobler future than to be associated with a machine that has denied it, not thrice, but seven times seven.

Select Bibliography

As a work of re-interpretation, *A New Britannia* relies on secondary sources. Because I have constructed an argument out of them, the works listed should not be seen as corroborating my conclusions; rather they are expressions of my indebtedness.

At times, primary sources were consulted, the principal ones being:

- Historical Records of New South Wales*
- Historical Records of Australia*
- Official Reports of Intercolonial Trade Union Congresses, 1879-91
- Shearers' Record*, Melbourne, 1888-91
- Shearers and General Labourers' Record*, Melbourne, 1891-93
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- Tocsin*, Melbourne, 1897-1906
- Labor Call*, 1906-1918

Newspapers and parliamentary debates were checked for particular points, for example, the Melbourne *Argus* for conscription in 1916-17.

The remainder of the bibliography is divided into two. The first part contains works which were of general interest or do not refer specifically to a single chapter. The second part is a

series of chapter sources and reading guides. Both parts remain selective.

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