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‘Nick Dyrenfurth and Frank Bongiorno, A Little History of the Labor Party, Second Edition’

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Nick Dyrenfurth and Frank Bongiorno, *A Little History of the Australian Labor Party* (UNSW Press, 2024), 304pp. Paperback. A\$27.99. ISBN: 978-1-7422-3821-0.

This insightful book tells the story of the party which, arguably, has shaped Australia more than any other. Although a partisan account – both authors have written widely on the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and it includes a foreword by Wayne Swan (National President of the ALP) – this is, on balance, to its advantage, by giving insiders' perspectives. Indeed as Bertrand Russell wrote in his *Autobiography*, 'a man without a bias cannot write interesting history – if, indeed, such a man exists. I regard it as mere humbug to pretend to lack of bias. Moreover, a book, like any other work, should be held together by its point of view.' This book certainly tells an interesting story and has a clear point of view; that the ALP has and should continue to play an important role in Australia.

First published in 2011, this new edition updates the story for the end of the Gillard/Rudd governments in 2013, the years in opposition and the first two years of the Albanese administration. The book is underpinned by its detailed account of the early years of the ALP. Its opening chapter, 'Political Birth: Origins to 1913,' explains how successful the ALP was, both at state and, particularly federal level. It formed the first Labor government in the world (Queensland in 1899) and the first national Labor government (John Watson's in 1904); indeed, until the party split over conscription in 1916, the ALP had spent more time in federal government than any other. As chapters 2 and 3 explain, covering the period to 1972, appropriately entitled 'Labor Wars' and 'Unity and Disunity', the ALP was much less successful thereafter. Splits were frequent and, after losing five federal elections in a row after 1916, it spent most of the next half-century in opposition in Canberra. In contrast, it became increasingly successful at state level – for example, it was governing in five of the six states by 1925 and dominated power in New South Wales, Western Australia, Tasmania, and Queensland for much of this period.

Despite an improvement at the federal level after 1972 (the Whitlam, Hawke and Keating administrations are discussed in Chapter 4 ('Old Labor or New'), the Liberal/Coalition parties continued to hold power at the national level for most of this period while the ALP has regularly won at state level. In Chapter 5 (Hard Labor), after John Howard won four federal elections in a row, Dyrenfurth and Bongiorno speculate whether Labor had become 'the natural party of state government...large numbers of electors saw state Labor as better able to deliver services such as education, health and transport but trusted its opponents with key federal responsibilities: the big economic picture and national security' (p. 174).

The conclusion of the book (Chapter 6 - Back to the Future?), is cautiously optimistic by pointing to the ALP's ability to adapt to changing circumstances and 'rise to the challenge of renewing social democratic policies' (p. 258). In this context, they note that, while the Albanese government has been condemned for doing too little, too slowly, similar criticisms were made of both the Whitlam and Hawke governments in their early stages. Is this optimist comparison realistic? The authors correctly point to the decline in major party membership, and the rise of the Greens, however they perhaps fail to reflect the impact of the significant decrease in the major parties' share of the primary votes and seats. In 1983 (Hawke's first victory) the ALP won 49.5% of the

primary votes in the House of Representatives and the two major parties 93%, together with every seat. Even in 2010, these were as high as ALP 38% with the two parties winning 81% and 145/150 respectively. But in 2022, the ALP share of the primary vote was down to 32.6%, the two major parties together won just 68% and only 135 of the 151 seats. This diffusion of the two-party system and the rise of both the Teals and the Greens mean that now, unlike in the 1970s and 1980s, voters have a more serious alternative to the ALP or the Coalition. In 2025, the collapse of the Coalition vote resulted in an ALP landslide despite its primary vote share being under 35% and the combined two-party share falling again. The ongoing rise in votes for the Teals and minor parties means that, if future election results are closer than this one, the chances of a hung parliament remain strong.

These comments notwithstanding, this is a well-written book, and the authors tell a very compelling story which remains as relevant today as when it was initially written.

Bill Apter