

WAR, ECONOMIC CRISIS, AND WORKING-CLASS POLITICAL ACTION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PARLIAMENTARY SOCIALISM AND POLITICAL LABOUR IN AUSTRALIA AND BRITAIN 1918-1921

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An interesting effect of the rise of Syriza and Podemos has been the shifting dynamics of the response to economic crisis from one based predominantly in the streets or the city square, to the relationship between activist movements and parties in the parliamentary realm. Meanwhile, traditional parties of progressive reform such as British Labour have offered a less than inspiring response to a crisis for which, due to their last tenure in office, they are in part complicit.

While addressing an earlier period of radical challenge and change in this paper, I do so with these unfolding dynamics in mind. I focus on the period of social polarisation and transformation in the latter years of World War One; the emerging post-war order, and the impact of this period on the political cultures of two dominant organisations of political labour: the British Labour Party (BLP), and the Australian Labor Party (ALP). I offer a comparative reading of the two organisations' adoption of similar objectives ostensibly aimed at leading the movement to the realisation of socialism within a parliamentary system. In Britain this was the famous Clause 4 of Labour's 1918 Constitution, pledging the party to a programme of nationalisation under socialised conditions. In Australia, it was the socialisation objective of 1921, which had a strikingly similar aim.

The intention of this comparative approach is not to suggest that these organisations were identical, or shared the same experience. Rather, it is to consider the similar role they played as realms of political contestation within a context of crisis and transition, and how this dynamic helped shape them.

Analysing political labour

To analyse the political cultures of these organisations I propose a unique integration of two conceptual models built upon critique of Jürgen Habermas' concept of the bourgeois public sphere. The first is the work of Alexander Negr and Oskar Kluge on

the distinctive sphere of the proletariat that acted as a centre for the articulation and dissemination of a working-class identity.¹ In this conception, the movement is understood to be differentiated between the ‘delimited proletarian sphere’ which is enmeshed with the bourgeois sphere and sections that reject it.² The delimited sphere can be considered to contain the parts of the movement that advocate an advancement of the position of the working class, often requiring a radical challenge to the existing power balance, but within the bounds of capitalist relations. The dominant moderate leadership of political and industrial labour occupied such a position.

Significant left-wing forces also operated in this proletarian sphere, organising as subaltern counterpublics as identified by Nancy Fraser. Such counterpublics were sites of identity formation, where non-dominant groups ‘invent and circulate counter-discourses,’ and from which they actively projected their interests out towards broader publics.³ Operating within the proletarian sphere, they engaged in contest with moderates as they sought to convert it in a socialist direction.

The British Independent Labour Party (ILP) operated in this fashion, as a membership-based organisation that affiliated to the Labour Party and with many active members within the trade unions. It used this position to advocate for Labour to adopt a socialist programme.⁴ In Australia a powerful group of Labor socialists fulfilled this role with a strong section based in Victoria that was influenced by the political legacy of the infamous radical Tom Mann and his Victorian Socialist Party (VSP). Mann himself had been a member of the ILP. Both organisations operated within the broader sphere, attempting to lead it in a socialist direction.

This contestation is evident in many aspects of party life, but this paper’s scope limits it to one particular forum; the party conference. Political labour’s conferences were important sites in which the theoretical abstraction of the concepts outlined can be seen practically operating. Writing on Negt and Kluge, Margaret Kohn remarks that their conception of the sphere is ‘easily romanticized because it is an ideal rather than a

¹ Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward and Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, (Minneapolis: London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xlviii, 1

² *Ibid.*, 32

³ Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition*, (New York: London: Routledge, 1997), 81

⁴ Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*, 14-5. Perry Anderson, “Origins of the Present Crisis”, *NLR*, I/23, 1964, 44

recognizable place.⁵ Whereas Kohn sought to correct this through her study of the Italian Chambers of Labor, I do so with recourse to the conferences of the parties under examination. In this, I recognise such meetings as important sites and spaces of symbolic meaning creation – as suggested by Kevin Callahan in his study of the Second International – but also centres of power.⁶ This is in concurrence with Lewis Minkin's study of Labour conferences in a later period as a site of power distribution within the movement, and a place where the left-right divide was often at show.⁷ For my purposes, these conferences serve as vital moments of debate and contest in which the structural and ideological implications of these clashes can best be identified; the pivotal moments where the material and philosophical components of political culture were shaped and (re)defined.

The two objectives under examination, Clause 4 and socialisation, are products of a vital moment of change and transition within these parties of political labour, a product of the deep social polarisation of the period and contestation at the heart of the movement. The scope of this paper precludes a detailed discussion of the expansive literature that exists on both of these labour parties – though there is a notable point of agreement within this work: that the objectives were largely symbolic, and indicative of the fundamentally moderate character of these parties.⁸ Whether a ‘sop to the professional bourgeoisie,’⁹ the taming of the ‘socialist tiger’ into a ‘sacred cow’ the objectives’ fates are considered in studies of both parties as the natural result of their set character.¹⁰

⁵ Margaret Kohn, *Radical Space: Building the House of the People* (Ithaca: London: Cornell University Press, 2003), 40.

⁶ Kevin J Callahan, *Demonstration Culture: European Socialism and the Second International, 1889-1914* (Kibworth: Troubador Publishing, 2010), xv-xvii

⁷ Lewis Minkin, *The Labour Party Conference: A Study in the Politics of Intra-Party Democracy*, (London: Penguin, 1978), xv, 5

⁸ Australia: Brian Fitzpatrick, *A Short History of the Australian Labor Movement*, (Melbourne: Wilke & Co, 1944), 137-8; Ross McMullin, *The Light on the Hill: The Australian Labor Party 1891-1991*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 126-7; Graham Freudenberg, *Cause for Power: The Official History of the New South Wales Branch of the Australian Labor Party*, (Haymarket: Pluto Press, 1991), 129-133; Nick Dyrenfurth and Frank Bongiorno, *A little history of the Australian Labor Party*, (Sydney, UNSW Press, 2011), 69. Britain: Matthew Worley, *Inside the Gate: A History of the British Labour Party between the Wars*, (London: IB Taurus, 2005), 12. GDH Cole, *A History of the Labour Party From 1914*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948), 45-6. Ross McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party 1910-1924*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974) 91-7. Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism: A Study in the Politics of Labour*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1964), 60..

⁹ McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party*, 97

¹⁰ Ian Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics: The Dynamics of the labour movement in Eastern Australia 1900-1921*, (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1979), 226

I reject the tendency of this literature to assert an essential nature to these parties, against which the worth of the objectives are judged. I seek instead to insert a sense of contingency into understanding the nature of these parties, and the creative contestation that existed at their core. I disagree with the consideration of these objectives in this regard as merely symbolic – they were vital to the debate over labour's programme and purpose, crafted in the heat of political battle as their meaning was fought over by many who considered their adoption crucial to the realising of a better society – the spirit in which they will be discussed here.

These objectives were adopted in a time of deep social polarisation and radical working-class protest. From the latter stages of the war and into the initial post-war years the economic crises resulting from the pressures of total war, and the inspiration radicals took from the Russian Revolution, emboldened these subaltern counterpublics to seize the initiative, and imprint a socialist character on both these parties of labour. It also led party moderates to seek a means to contain this burgeoning spirit of revolt within their project of gradualist reform, for which they utilised the radical rhetoric of socialism while denuding such objectives of practical effect.¹¹ In both instances it was counterpublics operating within the labour movement, emboldened by this radical mood that led the charge to adopt socialisation. In Australia socialists within the unions who were connected to the VSP were the dominant force behind this process. In Britain, it was the ILP that did the same, with radicals from the organisation connected to a number of the militant actions taken by the working class, particularly in Glasgow.¹²

Australian Labor's transformation

'[T]here had been lightning changes all over the world, and the programme of the Australian Labor Party was considered by some members as growing obsolete.'¹³ With these words EJ Holloway opened the All-Australian Trades Union Conference in June 1921. Holloway, the Conference President, explained the task of those assembled as to bring Labor's ideology in 'line with modern thought,' and to reflect the 'mental revolution' that had taken place within the international workers movement.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid., 182-202

¹² Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, 34-6. Pelling, *A Short History of the Labour Party*, 39-40.

¹³ *All Australian Trades Union Conference (AATUC)*, (Melbourne: Labor Call Print, 1921), 3

¹⁴ Ibid.

This moment was imbued with great significance for Australian Labor. The first thing to note is that this conference, charging itself with the construction of a new objective for the party, was not a meeting of the party itself. Rather, it was a gathering of the Australian trade union movement, confident in its power to sway the party to its will. This event was part of a dual process through which Labor's political culture was forged in the heat of social polarisation and mobilisation.

The first stage of this process took place in 1916 when, on the initiative of the trade union movement, the Labor Party formally expelled a sitting Labor Prime Minister from its ranks, ensuring union control over the party machinery in the process – a defining moment in the relationship between industrial and political labour.¹⁵

The origins of this moment can be found in the unsettled relationship between parliamentarians and the broader movement following Labor's foundation by the trade union movement. After foundation, the trade union movement used its sway within party structures to develop procedures attempting to ensure their control over parliamentary representatives. Such measures included enforcing the supremacy of party conference over the parliamentary caucus in determining Labor policy, and the pledge of principles Labor MPs were expected to sign and abide by.¹⁶ This was part of the construction of a strong political section of the proletarian public sphere, a well-organised party that drew on the strength of Australia's large trade union movement to contest for government. In this, they were supported by the moderate leadership of the movement who led the delimited proletarian sphere, most notably the powerful Australian Workers Union (AWU), which organised primarily in rural industries.¹⁷ Critical support for Labor was afforded by a number of socialist organisations, most notably the VSP.

In 1904 Labor briefly gained its first experience of government on a Federal level, a success bettered in 1910 when the party was elected as the majority government of the nation. Alongside this, Labor governed several Australian states. The authority of government tended to grant sitting MPs greater authority within the movement, but also placed pressures on these members to implement policies opposed by the broader labour movement, or to prevaricate on implementing legislation the unions demanded.¹⁸ These

¹⁵ Vere Gordon Childe, *How Labour Governs: A Study of Workers' Representation in Australia*, (Parkville: Melbourne University Press, 1923), 30-4

¹⁶ Ibid., 30-70

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

tensions were exacerbated following August 1914. In that year, the parties of the Second International famously failed to live up to their pledge to unite in opposition to the war. Re-elected in September 1914, Labor was forced to assume a position on the conflict, and to implement it through the state machinery.

From 1914-6 the Labor government alienated both the moderate and the socialist sections of the movement, as its strong commitment to the war effort contrasted to its perceived inaction in combating the rising cost of living and other economic pressures borne by the working class.¹⁹ In late 1915 the belligerent Billy Hughes ascended to the Prime Ministership. Hughes made two fateful decisions that led to these tensions erupting into all-out conflict between his government and the broader labour movement. First, he repudiated the government's promise to introduce a referendum measure aimed at combating rising prices. He then proposed to hold a plebiscite on the question of conscription for overseas service, provoking the opposition of moderates and socialists in the movement.

A powerful grouping of socialist leaders operated in Victoria, made up of members and former members of the VSP. It counted amongst its number Holloway, and a young radical named John Curtin. Curtin was the secretary of the Timber Workers Union, and notably would later serve as Australia's wartime Prime Minister 1941-5. Writing in his union's newspaper Curtin expressed the anger of many in the movement arguing that the Labor government had deviated from its purpose of representing the working class, pointing out that if the economy could be commandeered for the war effort by the state, then surely similar measures could be used to eradicate poverty amongst Labor's constituency. He wrote:

For Labor stands—if it stands for anything—for the substitution of national control, public management, and social organisation for the existing monopoly, anarchy, and rascality conditioning the production and distribution of the means of human subsistence.²⁰

Ultimately, the unions were narrowly successful in defeating the Hughes government, creating an irrevocable split in the movement. In December 1916 the Federal Labor Conference formally expelled Hughes and all his followers from the ALP in a move that entrenched trade union control over the party. James Scullin, a notable moderate with

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "The Famished Legion", *Timber Worker*, 10 February 1915, 2

connections to the AWU moved the formal motion to expel Hughes and his followers. Scullin would later ascend to the Prime Ministership in 1929. In the wake of this fateful meeting, Scullin explained the motivations for union opposition to the Prime Minister and his allies: ‘Hughes defied the movement. For that, and that alone, he has been expelled.’²¹

This was a defining moment in which the unions asserted their control over parliamentary Labor. Those MPs led by Hughes had strayed away from the objectives of the movement, creating distance between themselves and the leadership of the proletarian sphere. Radicals and moderates within this sphere were able to unite in ousting Hughes, but this did not mean the contest was over between them.

The structural character of the party was entrenched in 1916 but questions about the party’s purpose continued throughout the remaining years of the war. Australia was not immune from the radicalising sentiment gripping the international movement, with militant action on the upsurge. Moderate unions such as the AWU were threatened by this direction and sought to dampen radical enthusiasms without isolating themselves from a rank-and-file that was shifting to the left.²² This militant sentiment spurred attempts to direct Labor in a socialist direction, culminating in the socialisation objective of 1921. As Holloway’s opening statement demonstrated, this belief in the need for social transformation was largely a product of the war experience. It is not far to travel from Curtin’s questioning of why the state could not be used to alleviate social ills, to the proposal for a socialist objective. Curtin attended this union conference in 1921.

The focus of the conference was the motion that ‘the socialisation of industry, production, distribution and exchange be the objective of the Labor Party,’ moved by EF Russell, a Victorian socialist representing the Agricultural Implement Makers Union (long-aligned with the VSP).²³ This motion can be viewed as the actions of a subaltern counterpublic seeking to assert itself and its project on the broader proletarian sphere: the winning of Labor to parliamentary socialism. It is worth noting that other minority left-wing forces were also present at this conference, including anti-political syndicalists, and a number of union leaders who would be associated with the formation of the Communist Party of Australia. But it was the Victorian Labor socialists who

²¹ “Removing a Cancer”, *Evening Echo*, 13 December 1916, 2

²² Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, 182-202

²³ AATUC, 5

spearheaded the successful argument and carried the most votes on the conference floor.²⁴

Winning Labor to this direction required challenging the leadership of the delimited sphere, those moderate labour leaders who held such power within the movement. Their willingness to accept a rhetorical commitment to socialisation was not imbued with the enthusiasm of the socialists for its direct application. Few moderates agreed with Russell's statement that 'the only way in which the working-class can achieve its emancipation is by the complete overthrow of the capitalistic system.'²⁵ The moderate Jim McNeill from the AWU put forward a contrasting reading of the objectives purpose intended to constrain its limits, arguing that socialism could not be achieved 'by revolution: but, as in the past, by evolution.'²⁶

This contest continued at the December conference of the Labor Party. The nature of affiliation and delegate election led to the power of the socialist left being diminished, with the Victorian delegation dominated by AWU figures such as Scullin rather than socialists. Fatefully, an independent Victorian MP named Maurice Blackburn was also present. Without the strong radical presence of the trade union convention the objective was re-interpreted at this conference by these powerful figures to diminish its radical content. But they did so in a manner that would ensure that the party did not overtly distance itself from its social base. As Scullin argued the intention of the Conference was 'to prevent a revolution by force.'²⁷ Crucially, Scullin stated that the socialist objective was 'ultimate and not immediate.' That is, it was an abstract principle rather than an immediate demand.²⁸ This was not the intention of Holloway and others when they spoke in favour of socialisation, but it was a means through which to denude the motion of any immediate practical impact, and to avert the victory of the counterpublic. This ensured that in the day-to-day the moderate direction of Labor could be retained, even as loftier aims were proclaimed for a distant future. This was entrenched by a series of motions moved by Blackburn, concerned with ensuring that a Labor government would not nationalise all private property.²⁹

²⁴ Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, 219

²⁵ AATUC, 5

²⁶ Ibid., 8

²⁷ ALP *Ninth Commonwealth Conference*, (Melbourne: Labor Call Print, 1921), 27

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 30-2

Labor had its socialist objective, but not as the socialists had envisaged. It had been granted a certain abstract nature by this later conference, but this was still an important moment of creation. The interaction of these forces had crafted the party's orientation and outlook. From this stage onwards, Labor would continue to be strongly connected to union power, and committed to a gradualist parliamentary project. That this was so came down to a series of factors, but it is important to recognise that each was contingent, depending on the actions of the forces on the ground, not pre-determined. The nature of Labor was defined by those who worked within the party and the movement.

British Labour's Reconstitution

'We stand in the midst of a political and economic system which is perishing.'³⁰ With these words WF Purdy welcomed delegates to the British Labour Party's conference in January 1918. Assembled to consider the proposed new party constitution these delegates participated in a major recalibration of political labour. Three important meetings would take place that year, in January, February, and June, by the end of which the foundations of modern Labour were laid in place, with the ideological hue of the organisation set by the acceptance of the infamous Clause 4 socialist objective, at this early stage Clause 4 was known as Clause 3d.³¹

This was a key point in Labour's development, the forging of a strong political entity that operated as the primary political expression of the proletarian public sphere. Whereas Australian Labor was able to operate this way owing to its well-developed structures, the organisational diffuseness of British Labour had hindered it from providing this strong level of leadership within the movement. Founded in 1900 as the Labour Representative Council and renamed the Labour Party in 1906, the BLP was an affiliate-only organisation without individual membership. This enabled membership-based socialist organisations such as the ILP that had affiliated to the party to exert an influence beyond their numbers.³² The 1918 constitution altered this situation by introducing individual membership, while simultaneously ensuring that union affiliates would retain overall control over the party's decision-making bodies.³³

³⁰ *Report of the Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, (London: The Labour Party, 1918), 96

³¹ *Ibid.*, 140

³² Pelling, *A Short History of the Labour Party*, 9

³³ Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, 39

This was a period of questioning and contest for Labour. As Purdy, who chaired the conferences, expressed, it was a widely held belief that the contemporary system was perishing owing to the stresses placed on it by total war. A new social order was to arise, but its nature was not yet determined. It was Labour's task to 'increase our political and industrial power, and hasten the day when we can control the machinery of the State,' for the purposes of 'reconstruction.'³⁴ The expansion of the franchise in this year to include women over the age of thirty and a new swathe of working-class men led many Labour members to believe that control of the state may not be too far away.³⁵

The conferences were a site of contestation over the nature of the post-war order that Labour would create, between the moderate leadership of the delimited sphere and the socialists. The moderates utilised the work of labour intellectuals such as Sidney Webb to frame a socialistic vision for the party that could relate to the polarising movement, but did not seek total overthrow of existing class relations. The socialists sought to institute an entirely new form of workers power, a different manner of ordering society where 'workers all over the world' would 'take affairs into their own hands and work out their own salvation,' as the radical MP and ILP member WC Anderson put it.³⁶ This attitude was framed by the experience of the war, where standards of living for the working class decreased, and the state demonstrated a capacity to operate sections of the economy. This prompted a similar questioning to that in Australia, if the state could commandeer sections of the economy to prosecute the war, then why could it not do the same to eradicate social ills?³⁷ This questioning was granted urgency by the action spurred by deepening social polarisation, increasing strike action, rent strikes, and the formation of stewards committees on the radical Clyde.³⁸

Such radicalism framed the presentation of the new constitution by the party Executive to the conference, introduced by Henderson who argued that if the party was to propose 'remedies going right down to the roots and almost if not entirely demanding a reconstruction of society,' the first task would be to organise political labour to contest the election and fight for government.³⁹ An indication of the tensions between

³⁴ Ibid., 96

³⁵ Pamela Graves provides vital consideration of the gendered dynamics of these changes: *Labour Women: Women in British Working-Class Politics*, 23, 109-10

³⁶ *Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, 102

³⁷ Ibid., 97

³⁸ Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, 34-6. Pelling, *A Short History of the Labour Party*, 39-40.

³⁹ *Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, 98

moderates and radicals came as Henderson delivered his speech, advocating ‘a reconstruction of society...based upon the principles of citizenship,’ to which a critical delegate interjected ‘and continued wage slavery,’ indicating that Labour’s program for change was not as far-reaching as some radicals desired.⁴⁰

The main point of tension in January, however, was not the constitution but the issue of Labour representatives remaining in the wartime government, a situation condemned by radicals.⁴¹ Whereas Henderson and other parliamentary leaders defended the arrangement as indicative of the special conditions of wartime, socialists such as John Bromley of the Locomotive Engineers and future ILP MP condemned Labour representatives for assisting ‘the capitalist class in crushing Trade Unionism.’⁴² While the moderates ultimately won the day, this was indicative of the rising tensions within the movement, and the growing sentiment that the time of sacrifice for the war effort was over.⁴³ This was confirmed as the constitution, including Clause 3d, was accepted at conference the following month.

The dynamics of contestation were particularly visible at Labour’s June 1918 conference in London, where delegates debated the meaning and interpretation of the socialist clause. Purdy’s address highlighted the increasingly radical mood, arguing that if in the cause of ‘social reconstruction the so-called rights of private individuals encroach on the public good, those rights must go.’⁴⁴ This statement received a hearty ‘Hear, hear,’ from delegates.⁴⁵

Labour’s role in wartime government was again the subject of debate, demonstrating just how entangled this experience of executive responsibility and the question of Labour’s project, and the means to achieve it, was in the minds of the movement. The Executive proposed an end to its truce with the government when it came to bye-elections, with this motion soon boiling over to broad assessment of the Labour member’s actions. Trade unions are often depicted as a single bloc of like political mind, usually conservative.⁴⁶ This debate disproved this; the powerful Miners

⁴⁰ Ibid., 100

⁴¹ Ibid., 116-7

⁴² Ibid., 117

⁴³ Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, 36

⁴⁴ *Report of the Eighteenth Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, (London: The Labour Party, 1918), 25

⁴⁵ Ibid., 25

⁴⁶ See: Tom Nairn, “The nature of the Labour Party—1”, *NLR*, I/27, 1964, 38-64. Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*, 17-8, 25.

Federation delegates disagreed with each other over the continuation of the alliance. GE Winteron from the Richmond Trades Council articulated the growing scepticism of many when he stated his fear that the ‘idea seemed to be not to create a great political movement, but to create a machinery for placing certain representatives in the House of Commons.’⁴⁷ Bromley similarly expressed his disdain and that of the ‘rank and file’ who were ‘sick and tired of the truce and all connected with it.’ Beneath the surface of the working class there was a ‘smouldering volcano of hatred against the Government’ that the party would suffer from if bound to the executive.⁴⁸

The contestation over the Clause itself is evident in a series of programmatic resolutions debated at this time. These resolutions were intended to follow the overarching declaration of Clause 4, incorporating the programme to realise reconstruction. The MP Jimmy Thomas introduced the first of these motions on ‘The Task of Social Reconstruction.’ He argued that ‘the real root cause of the manifest unrest among workers’ was ‘because they recognised the cause of the misery, poverty, and degradation in which they had lived.’ This was the inequity of the system itself, no longer tolerable when ‘the most ignorant people now understood that if the State could spend eight millions a day on the destruction of humanity, they could at least find some millions for the reconstruction of humanity.’⁴⁹

Immediately a member of the British Socialist Party (BSP) moved to ensure that this programme was as clearly radical as possible by inserting the party’s dedication to socialisation into it.⁵⁰ This socialist delegate launched an attack on the Fabian society, who he accused of engineering a conservative programme that did not explicitly call for socialisation, stating that having ‘failed to convert capitalists to Socialism,’ the Fabians were ‘now engaged in attempting to get the Labour Party to accept capitalism.’⁵¹ A similar process occurred as the conference discussed the second resolution, in favour of increased production. FO Roberts, a delegate from Northampton, identified himself and his section of the party as ‘closely associated with the advanced wing of the Labour Movement, the Socialist Movement, for something like 30 years,’ and using this to explain his insistence that socialisation be referenced in the resolution.⁵²

⁴⁷ *Eighteenth Annual Conference*, 34

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 36

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 43

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 44

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 44

⁵² *Ibid.*, 45

This amendment to the second resolution was successful. The amendment to the first resolution was not. Interestingly, in the discussion concerning the BSP amendment, Sidney Webb spoke in the debate to state that there was no need to repeatedly ‘ring the changes on the old shibboleths,’ by restating the dedication for socialisation.⁵³ The point was, Webb asserted, not to persistently appeal ‘to the converted,’ but rather to ‘appeal to the 20 million electors.’⁵⁴ Ultimately, the executive supported an amendment to its motion ensuring that it was clear that socialisation would include production, distribution, and exchange.⁵⁵

The ultimate effect of this wrangling was to entrench what was to be known as Clause 4 in the constitution, and to promote a series of programmatic points for the party to follow. This could be considered a significant victory for the subaltern counterpublic operating within the Labour Party. For instance, the ILP had proclaimed an objective strikingly similar to Clause 4 in 1893, and had tirelessly advocated its adoption by Labour.⁵⁶ The broader role played by the ILP within the radicalising ranks of the workers’ movement, and the impact this had on the ideological climate in which the conferences took place was also an important factor in its adoption. Ostensibly, they had achieved their aim, of ensuring that British Labour was heading in a socialist direction.⁵⁷ This of course, was not the case. The structural reality of the constitutional changes were such that they benefitted the moderates within the proletarian sphere who were willing to adapt to the radical mood, but not to be transformed by it.

Over the course of these three conferences Labour underwent a form of transformation that was strikingly similar to that undertaken in Australia – although the form of these processes were different. These changes were both structural and ideological. The first was a recalibration of the organisation that ensured union control over the processes of party organisation. The second was the setting of Labour’s ideological limits. A socialist objective was proclaimed, but this was to be restricted to measures within the established democratic system, not revolutionary change. As Webb noted, it was necessary to convince not just the converted, but a broader constituency of the benefits of Labour-in-power.

⁵³ Ibid., 44

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ “Debate at the Inaugural Conference on the Object of the Party, 1893”, in Henry Pelling (ed.), *The Challenge of Socialism*, (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1968), 187

⁵⁷ Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*, 61

This was a crucial moment for Labour, in which the party's position was forged in the heat of contest. There was general agreement that reconstruction needed to take place, but no such accord on what lines this should take. The debate and disagreement that took place in these forums were indicative of the differentiation between these different sections of the movement, the broad proletarian sphere and subaltern counterpublics that differed in their vision of what Labour could, and should achieve. Immediate demands, such as Labour's role in government, and broader aims, such as socialisation, were clearly linked in this contest.

Clause 4 was the product of Labour's experience of government, the crisis of the war, and the social polarisation that saw the radicalisation of a section of the working-class movement. These factors shaped the Clause and the manner in which it was applied throughout the party programme, and how it was interpreted and read by those within the movement. It was crafted and shaped by both moderates and radicals, who each had differing designs as to its result. It reflected their contest over Labour's vision and purpose. That Labour was not in power from 1918 affected this, allowing these forces to continue a disparate reading of the Clause and its intentions for longer than if faced with the immediate challenges of government. Although Labour did achieve office briefly in 1924, by this point the radicalisation of the immediate post-war period and the belief in reconstruction had receded. These factors aided the moderate section of the movement in maintaining its control, and gradually distancing themselves from commitment to the objective.

Conclusion

Both British Labour and Australian Labor underwent a process of transformation in this period, spurred by the economic and political crises of the war. The similarity of debate over the objectives is striking, and as this paper has argued, indicative of processes common to both parties – though, of course, not identical. They represent the creative contestation that occurred within these parties of political labour, as subaltern counterpublics sought to win the movement to their programme. In both examples, the moderate leadership was content to utilise radical rhetoric to retain political connection with a polarising movement, but sought to contain the practical application of such sentiment. Seen in this manner, the objectives were important instruments of power, ideological signifiers directly related to a variety of issues that the movement was

contesting: the role of labour in government, the limits of the parliamentary strategy, and the nature of the new order to emerge from the ruins of the old.

This paper has demonstrated an analytical model through which to identify and conceptualise these important dynamics. In the twenty-first century these organisations have been tarnished through their direct involvement in the neoliberal restructuring of their national economies. The rise of Syriza and Podemos can appear to offer a radical new alternative, but with Syriza in particular the pressures of power have already begun to impact an organisation that is itself riven with division between left and moderate sections.

This is the contemporary relevance of developing an analytical means to interpret parties of political labour in transition during periods of crisis in a manner that averts the essentialism of previous interpretations. The future is as unsettled as the past. Though these parties have undergone serious erosion in their ideology, electoral support, and membership, they do retain that key link to the working-class movement through the trade union connection. Historic periods of transition demonstrate that possibilities exist for such organisations to alter drastically. After all, both were tarnished through participation in war government, but both were successful in renewing themselves. Clause 4 may have been removed, plots may be hatched to repudiate the socialisation objective, but the political culture at the heart of these parties is an unsettled thing, and 1916-1921 demonstrates that in such periods drastic change remains possible.