book review


The title of Paul Ormonde's biography of Jim Cairns — *A Foolish Passionate Man* — may describe the actions of the subject at certain times, but hardly does justice to a complex and towering figure of Australian post-war politics.

James Ford Cairns, former Deputy Prime Minister, leader of the parliamentary left, central figure in the great anti-Viet Nam war demonstrations of the early 1970s and now devoting his energies to "the alternative Confest movement", needs little introduction to the vast majority of *ALR* readers.

Yet the tendency to remember only the traumas of those last few months of the Whitlam government and a certain elitism in the left towards the Confest movement has resulted in many of Cairns' former admirers becoming all-knowing critics.

Each of us has our own experiences, memories and prejudices of Cairns. I remember him standing in a sea of people in Bourke Street, Melbourne in May 1970 and saying: "Nobody thought this could be done, but it has been done .... Nobody need feel worried about the will of the people. The will of the people is being expressed here today as it has never been expressed before."

On the left there are very different views of Cairns. Views which have divided the left, led old friends to draw apart and younger forces to misunderstand the influence that this man had on Australian political life.

These are estimates which are strongly coloured in hindsight by the events of Terrigal, the Morosi affair and, more recently, his rejection of organised politics and his embrace of an "alternative movement".

Paul Ormonde's book has many defects but its strength is that it outlines clearly, and in popular form, the record of Cairns' enormous achievements. These went well beyond the traditional achievements of academia, bureaucracy and government; they made him one of the most important forces for peace, social equity, civil rights, democracy and social change that Australia has seen. Cairns is a man who fought subservience to the United States, for a new role for Australia, for a new relationship with Asia, an end to nuclear war, a social system based on social equity and dignity and, in general, for a new set of humanist values.

Cairns in government

For orthodox capitalist economists and some leftwing observers as well, Cairns' sin as Minister for Trade and later as Treasurer between 1972 and 1975 was that he refused to trade jobs for lower tariffs, or a lower rate of inflation. In an interview in 1974, he said:

> If reducing tariffs is going to put somebody out of work, I'll put quotas on to get them back to work again — even if it means that fewer goods are sold here from developing countries. My first responsibility is for the people I am able to prevent getting hurt. And they're here in Australia. I think this is realistic.

As the economic problems confronted by the Whitlam government grew, Cairns became increasingly concerned by unemployment and by the tendency for the well organised to achieve substantial wage rises, as he saw it, at the expense of the under-organised. In 1974 he wanted the Whitlam government to introduce a "people's budget". He said:

> I don't want anyone to be out of work. It's not the government that will be putting people out of work, it's the system and our responsibility is to pick up what the system does and we will pick it up
The attempt to do this led Cairns increasingly towards the decision of the 31st Federal ALP Conference at Terrigal in February 1975 which so outraged the left at the time. Cairns, as principal architect of a basic change in Labor’s policy commitment to socialisation, explained:

I am a socialist in that I believe in co-operation and equality and I deplore avarice and aggressiveness. I know that the capitalist system is exploitative and leaves many genuine desires of many people unfulfilled. I also know that ours is a capitalist economy. I know that the jobs of most of our people depend on private industry — most of it part of the multinational system. It’s time for the ALP to say quite clearly and categorically that our socialist objective does not prevent recognition that the basic needs of the Australian people are dependent at this stage of our development on a profitable private sector.

He went on to say “We cannot have a socialist party until we have a society of socialists. We have few socialists in Australia.”

At the time, Cairns’ pragmatism was seen by most forces on the left as a shocking retreat. While many of his critics were justified, it could also be said that the left did little during the period of the Labor government to generate the sort of mass movement necessary for a more radical departure from capitalist economics. Cairns came to believe that only through his approach could more radical change occur in the future.

Ormonde’s book traces the development of Cairns’ thought about economics and social change from his early days as a policeman and economics lecturer, through to the present. But because Ormonde opts almost exclusively for a psychological view of Cairns, he provides us with the bare bones of Cairns’ life without putting them into the context of the body politic. As a consequence, much of the meat and even the marrow is missing.

The discussion of the Terrigal conference, for example, takes no account of the very real expectation within the labor movement (following the election of the Labor government in 1972) for a redistribution of wealth. Nor does Ormonde comment on the reaction of the left to Cairns’ position at Terrigal, the variations in that response, the strains it put on Cairns, let alone the importance of that debate in the more recent discussion of the possibilities for social change with a Labor government in office or, more generally, the prospects for socialism in Australia.

These weaknesses occur throughout the book. The discussion of federal intervention in the Victorian branch of the ALP, of the Moratorium, of Cairns’ involvement in various peace and civil liberty campaigns, all reflect either a lack of understanding of the dynamics of the labor movement, or a lack of concern to find the man by putting him in context.

The book’s strength is also its greatest weakness — it has the accessibility and the shallowness of a page-four leader in the Melbourne Herald.

But based on a wide range of personal interviews rather than a more rigorous examination of historical record — and, to be fair, Cairns has no personal papers or diaries — the book suffers from impressionism concerning Cairns’ personality/psychology and a certain subjectivity of interpretation of fact.

The Leader?

To give a few examples. While much is made of Cairns’ relationship with the Communist Party in an early period — he briefly considered joining in 1946 — the role of the Communist Party in the anti-Viet Nam struggle is almost buried. The fact that Bernie Taft and Jean McLean were vice-chairpersons to Cairns in the Victorian Moratorium is forgotten. While not always agreeing with the CPA about tactics in the Moratorium, Cairns has never run away from acknowledging the important contribution of Australian communists to that campaign, not just on May 8, 1970, but over a long period of activity in the years preceding it. It appears, however, that some of Ormonde’s interviewees would like to play down the CPA’s role. Different interpretations could also be placed on other events — the march of the Dead demonstration in 1969, the breaking through of the barricades in the second Moratorium, the civil liberties struggle with the Melbourne City Council.

One feature of the book is the projection of Cairns into an unreal role as the pivot of events. For example, Ormonde describes (p.72) Cairns’ role in the fight against the terrorist Croatian organisation called the Ustasha. The facts are correct, yet Ormonde leaves the impression that Cairns began this campaign, thus ignoring the critical importance of Marian Jurevic and the publication of considerable material in the communist newspapers, Guardian and Tribune.

While this may not be Ormonde’s intention, his
repeated projection of Cairns as the crucial figure in this and many other campaigns does a disservice to Cairns who has never claimed such a role, and does a disservice to the many people who made those campaigns happen. Cairns became a unifying and very beneficial figurehead for many organisations. He was a most articulate spokesperson, able to project ideas and information well beyond the narrow confines of the left of the labor movement. But, by focusing on the individual, in isolation, Ormonde seeks to build an idol — an idol that he then seeks to show as having feet of clay.

Few Australian politicians have more than one biography written of their lives. This volume will remain for a long time as a popular and useful record of an important man and a vital time in Australian politics. For the average reader its weaknesses will go unheeded. But they disappoint those who were participants in a series of historical events which will affect Australian social and political life for many years to come and which, in many respects, remain unanalysed.

In Cairns, one has a highly ideological figure seeking radical social change by a variety of means: in social movements, in the streets, in the mass working class party, in government, and now in the "alternative movement". His life is integral to the political history of Australia, and a biography which placed him fully in that context would allow for a radical examination of the Australian labor movement and the left without some of the constraints placed on most political histories. Ormonde has written the book he sought to write — a popular biography of one man — and has achieved some success. But one hopes that Ormonde's book will encourage others to take up the challenge where he has left it.

ALR price increases

Rising costs of all kinds, including postage and the new sales tax, have forced us to increase the price of Australian Left Review to $2 as from this issue, March 1982. The size of this issue is increased to 56 pages. However, we hope to increase the size of ALR to 64 pages as from the next issue.

The price of ALR has stood at $1 for four years now (since March 1978) so we believe that the new price will still be good value for money.

Although we are currently printing ALR only four times a year, a subscription is still for six issues. Subscriptions are $12, including postage, $8 for students, apprentices, unemployed and pensioners. Renewals will be at the new rate. Surface or airmail postage will be added to overseas subscriptions.

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