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Review - Michael Hogan (editor), Labor Pains; Early Conference and Executive Reports of the Labor Party of NSW

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Abstract

The first volume of this monumental work spans the years 1891–1905, the second 1906–1911, and the third 1912–1917. Each volume is preceded by an Introduction, and each is comprehensively indexed. The publication of the three volumes was supported by the Sesquicentenary of Responsible Government in NSW Committee, established by the Carr Labor Government.

Reviews

Michael Hogan (editor), *Labor Pains; Early Conference and Executive Reports of the Labor Party of NSW*, three volumes, Federation Press, Sydney, 2006–2008; \$60 each volume singly, \$135 the set.

Reviewed by Jim Hagan, University of Wollongong

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The first volume traces the birth of the Party itself. A resolution of the Trades and Labour Council resulted in the formation of a number of locally-based Leagues which presented candidates for the 1891 election held in the wake of the great Maritime Strike. The infant Party was surprisingly successful, winning 35 seats, a sizeable number in the Legislative Assembly of the day, but well short of a majority. If the new Party was to achieve anything, it could do so only through a disciplined use of its numbers which would allow it to bargain over legislation with the two major groupings of Free Traders and Progressives. It achieved this discipline—painfully—by requiring its parliamentary members to decide on tactics in Caucus, and then to vote as the majority of Caucus decided. It was some years before the wounds caused by this surrendering of independence healed over, and the Party almost disappeared from sight in the later elections of the nineties.

Party discipline within Parliament was not the only serious problem the new Party faced. How was the Party—in—Parliament to relate to the Party outside of Parliament? Individual Leagues were reluctant to yield their choice of candidate to an Executive chosen by Conference, and Conference itself needed to establish some understanding with Labor Parliamentarians about the way the policy it had decided on would be implemented. Conference debated the great variety of policy proposals put to

it by the Leagues and the affiliated unions, ranging from simple administrative matters to matters of high principle. Energetic and noisy Socialists aimed for nothing less than the eventual replacement of capitalism. But Conferences settled for a much more pragmatic platform which aimed at establishing the eight hour day, votes for women, early closing, closer settlement, and the abolition of the Legislative Council, at that time appointed, not elected.

What has impressed the Editor most about this period on the Party's history is its 'strong internal democracy.' Debate was genuine, and in 'strong contrast to the stage-managed media events that are the modern Labor Conferences.' (p.10) Conference continued in its role as the genuine maker of Party policy into the second period (1906-1911), but a shift away began soon after 1904, when the Party won enough seats to become Her Majesty's Opposition in the Legislative Assembly, and the prospect of a Labor Government became a reality. The most important structural change was the increasing power of the Party Executive, which became the organizer of policy committees and set the Conference's agenda as policy-making became more complex with the increase in size and diversity of the Party's membership. Women voted for the first time in NSW State elections in 1904, became full members of the Party, and broadened the policy reach of Conference. White collar employees began to appear in greater numbers, and their unions and others began to confront the power that the Australian Workers' Union had exercised. The Executive itself began to challenge the influence on Conference of Labor members of Parliament, especially after the appointment of a full-time salaried Secretary in 1908.

This conflict reached crisis point in the period covered by the third volume (1912-1917). Labor narrowly won the elections of 1910, and JST McGowen became the State's first Labor Premier. But the most influential (and certainly the most able manoeuvrer and debater) among the Labor Members was William Holman, who succeeded McGowen as Premier in 1913. Holman solved the problem of the relationship between his Government and the Executive by ensuring that Conference elected a majority of his supporters to it. But many Conference delegates were unhappy with the lack of progress that Labor's policy seemed to have made since 1910. The villain was the Legislative Council, but Holman refused to take decisive action against it. A so-called 'Industrial Section' emerged as Labor's first organised faction. By Draconian discipline and the violation of the secret ballot through voting in pairs, it captured a clear

majority of places on the Executive. The crisis came over the issue of conscription for overseas military service in 1916. Labor Prime Minister Hughes decided to put the issue to a referendum of all Australian electors, and advocated a 'Yes' vote, supported by Holman. The NSW Executive decided on 'No'; Holman refused to obey, and led half of his Caucus out of the Labor Party. He, and most of them, joined their parliamentary opponents in a National Party, and formed an anti-Labor Government.

There is no official record of the Conferences which debated these events. The Editor culled his accounts from the Press of the day, choosing the one that gave greatest detail. The Press reports are a mixture of précis and at times almost verbatim reporting. Sometimes they tell us a lot about matters other than those being debated. Take, for example, these comments that followed after the Policy Committee had recommended to the 1911 Conference that a motion from St. Leonard's Political Labor League 'be moved in the following form:

"That no wives of teachers or other married women be permitted to teach in schools in any capacity, provided that widowed teachers be eligible for employment by the Department.

Miss Gardiner [the 'Lady Organiser' who visited Leagues] spoke warmly against the latter, as it would debar the wife of a teacher taking the sewing class in bush schools, but she wanted female teachers to leave the service after they got married. If a man couldn't keep a girl she had no right to encourage him to marry her.

Mr. Miller (Storemen) mentioned a case where a married woman retained a school, although her husband was in a good position. Periodically the lady would have to retire pending the arrival of a little immigrant. This disorganized the school, and was not a good subject for the elder girls to talk about.

The St. Leonard's resolution was carried on division by 63 to 30.'

The Editor, the Sesquicentenary Committee and the Publisher are to be congratulated on their significant contribution to the understanding of the political history of New South Wales.