

Review Article

Class and Politics in Australia

Class and Politics: New South Wales, Victoria and the Early Commonwealth, 1890-1910. By John Rickard. Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1976. 378 pp. Aust. price: \$15.95.

The Emergence of the Australian System. By P. Loveday, A.W. Martin and R.S. Parker. Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1977. 554 pp. Aust. price: \$10.95 soft cover, \$19.95 hard cover.

MARX did not systematically explore the relationship of political parties to society, but his comments on one form of party — the proletarian party — have set the terms of subsequent debate. He believed that as the class structure and class struggle developed, so would proletarian consciousness. In turn, this would lead to political action as the 'proletariat advanced directly to the centre of the stage as a party'.¹ Party, then, was a simple projection of class. It was the class conscious workers acting politically.

Many historians today discuss parties in similar terms. Parties are said to be 'based' on classes, to 'represent' them, to be their 'instruments'. More cautiously, they are seen as political agents for interest groups or as vehicles for ideals originating in the wider society. On this view, parties in general resemble the proletarian party: they are derivative and dependent, not autonomous. In this sense both Marx and many 'liberal' historians have analyzed parties within the framework of a 'society-centred' paradigm.

Lenin's approach was radically different. He argued that the workers could attain true class consciousness only if tutored by a 'vanguard' armed with socialist ideals developed outside the class struggle by the '*bourgeois intelligentsia*'.² In other words it was the vanguard or party which moulded the workers into a revolutionary class. Lenin thereby stood Marx on his head and substituted a 'party-centred' paradigm for the 'society-centred' one.

At first the new doctrine made little progress, for historians who placed political organization at the core of their accounts were generally as little inclined to

1 Quoted Rosanna Rossanda, 'Class and Party', in R. Miliband and J. Saville, eds., *The Socialist Register*, 1970, p.218. See also Monty Johnstone, 'Marx and Engels and the Concept of the Party', *The Socialist Register*, 1967.

2 V.I. Lenin, *What is to be Done?*, London, 1963, esp. pp.62-63, 71-72; and Rossanda, pp.221-4.

explore the impact of parties on class as to analyze the effects of class on parties. Then in 1969 the political scientist Giovanni Sartori took up the Leninist view and gave it a new respectability. He argued that 'society-centred' interpretations had two fatal weaknesses: they did not define satisfactorily the sense in which a party could 'represent' a class; and they failed to explain the development of class consciousness. Objective class conditions, he noted, were not a sufficient explanation of class consciousness, for they could just as easily result in mere status awareness. If a social stratum were to develop into a class, with a sense of distinctive interests and a propensity to class action, then there had to be a class 'persuader'. The most likely candidates for this role were the union and the party. His conclusion, which he admitted was only a suggestive hypothesis, echoed Lenin: 'The party is not a "consequence" of the class. Rather, and before, it is the class that receives its identity from the party. Hence class behaviour presupposes a party that not only feeds, incessantly, the "class image", but also a party that provides the structural cement of "class reality".' So organization and ideology emanating from the parties become the central concepts in the analysis of political life. Class consciousness, where it exists, is robbed of its explanatory power and reduced to an epiphenomenon.

In this context, the publication of the two books reviewed here assumes special importance. The first, John Rickard's *Class and Politics*, is the most sophisticated treatment of Australian politics written predominantly within the framework of the 'society-centred' paradigm. The second, *The Emergence of the Australian System*, edited by Loveday, Martin and Parker, recognizes that in important respects society affected the parties but is heavily influenced by Sartori's approach. The result is a clash of assumptions and interpretations raising important questions for the writing of political history.

Rickard, like most modern class analysts, starts with E.P. Thompson's dictum that class is not a category but a relationship. He attempts explicitly 'to study the concepts of labor and anti-labor in relation to each other' and to explore their social bases.⁴ Thus, the sub-disciplines of labour history and business history are fused into an unusually satisfying class history in which the inter-dependence of the contending classes is lucidly analysed.

Rickard's theme is the emergence between 1890 and 1910 of a two-party system based on Labor and anti-Labor parties. He argues that rising working class consciousness led to the formation of Labor parties in New South Wales and Victoria in the 1890s; that after 1900 Labor's growing power and independence helped provoke an increasingly united middle-class response; that the introduction of compulsory arbitration institutionalized the classes while seeking to contain their rivalry; and that the politicians, falling into line with an increasingly polarized electorate, fashioned a two-party system in which class was 'the major determinant of political loyalties'.⁵

3 Giovanni Sartori, 'From the Sociology of Politics to Political Sociology', in S.M. Lipset, ed., *Politics and the Social Sciences*, New York, 1969, p.84. It should be noted that although Sartori's hypothesis is that party precedes and conditions class consciousness, he allows that in other respects parties may be influenced by society.

4 Rickard, p.2. The use of the terms 'labour' and 'Labor' in Australian historical writing requires comment. The former refers to the labour movement, the latter to the Labor Party. A few authors, including Rickard, substitute 'labor' for 'Labor'. The form 'labour parties' is used when the New Zealand Labour Party and the Australian Labor Party are mentioned together.

5 *ibid.*, p.307.

Rickard's approach involves two major departures from the traditional Marxist model. In the first place he rejects the way in which

The Marxist tradition has tied the notion of class to conflict. In Australia there are elements of conflict, but they remain surprisingly elusive. The ferocity of a strike situation often seems lost in an aftermath of political apathy. Just when there is a whiff of anger in the air, it is dissipated in cynical detachment. A consciousness of identity, even a consciousness of shared interest, are one thing; but the concept of class conflict—of interests *diametrically* opposed—is another. In many ways class awareness among Australian workers was very strong during this period, but this did not imply any sustained commitment to the class war.⁶

It is possible to quibble with this analysis. In particular, to look for a continuation of the class war in the *political* sphere in the aftermath of a strike is to look in the wrong place. An observer whose eyes remained fixed on the shop floor would see far more. Yet on the major point, despite semantic difficulties over the meaning of 'conflict', Rickard is correct. Class conflict in Australia has rarely been between '*diametrically* opposed' groups, for most workers have supported or at least tolerated the capitalist system. The argument has not been over whether capitalism or socialism should produce the wealth but over how it should be distributed. Class conflict at the point of production has been endemic, but it has also been severely limited.⁷

Rickard again departs from Marxist orthodoxy in delineating class boundaries. Australian Marxists have in recent years recognized the importance of class consciousness but have assumed, with E.P. Thompson, that it emerges from 'the productive relations into which men are born—or enter voluntarily'.⁸ If, as usually happens, relationship to the means of production is regarded as the most important component of productive relations, then white collar employees belong 'objectively' with manual labourers in the working class. Whether this classification is useful depends on the questions asked. Certainly, it is defensible in the industrial sphere where employees at all levels are locked in limited economic conflict with employers over the distribution of the product of the labour. Such a classification is, however, irrelevant to most questions which concern historians. White collar workers, products of a distinctive work situation,⁹ have in all periods sought to distinguish themselves from manual workers, identifying themselves as middle class and acting politically with their employers. In short, while the traditional Marxist class divisions are fundamental to the anatomy of conflict in the office or factory, they contribute little to the analysis of *political* conflict. Rickard therefore simplifies his task greatly by abandoning the Marxist categories and placing white collar workers where they themselves thought they belonged—with the employers in the middle class. In doing this he makes the pattern of class consciousness, not relationship to the means of production, the

6 *ibid.*, pp. 310-11.

7 This conclusion is compatible with the more sophisticated forms of Marxist analysis. See, for example, Stuart Macintyre's brilliant 'The Making of the Australian Working Class: an Historiographical Survey' *Historical Studies*, XVIII, 71 (Oct. 1978), esp. pp.249-53.

8 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth, 1968, p.10.

9 The point is developed in David Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker*, London, 1958. Lockwood argues that distinctive 'market' and 'status' situations also affect the class consciousness of white collar workers.

criterion of class boundaries.

Rickard has unfortunately not applied this definition of class consistently. When he argues that compulsory arbitration institutionalized class conflict in Australia, by implication he places employers on one side and manual and white collar workers on the other.¹⁰ He thus returns unwittingly to the Marxist categories. This would be permissible if he were discussing arbitration as such, for models of class suitable for political analysis are not always appropriate to industrial action.¹¹ His chapter on arbitration, however, is not an essay on labour relations but an exploration of arbitration's relationship to class and politics. He should therefore have continued to use the politically relevant model of class which he employs elsewhere. His conclusion about the impact of arbitration on class and politics would have been less clear-cut. Certainly, as he suggests, arbitration institutionalized the working-class consciousness of blue collar workers, but it cut across the middle-class identity of white collar ones. Indeed, the New South Wales Society of Stenographers opposed compulsory arbitration because it would place its members on the 'same level as an ordinary manual calling'.¹² Arbitration thus consolidated the class position of some employees but implicitly denied that of others.

Not even the most sophisticated model of class can stand alone as an explanation of mass political allegiances. Rickard's version is no exception. Realizing this, he argues that although between 1890 and 1910 class became the major axis around which political loyalties divided there was 'intermittent interference from a rival axis, namely, the city versus the country'.¹³ The point is particularly pertinent to the situation in Victoria where the farmers' political representatives flirted with the Labor Party even after 1910. There was also interference from a public sector versus private sector axis, for many middle-class public servants supported Labor after being attacked by anti-Labor politicians during the 'anti-socialist' campaigns of the early twentieth century.¹⁴ By employing three axes, rather than one, Rickard has constructed a model of electoral behaviour which is not only clear but has greater explanatory power than its rivals.

The Emergence of the Australian Party System treats similar themes but is a very different book. It concentrates more on parliamentary politics and political organization; it uses more advanced statistical techniques to analyze parliamentary voting patterns; and its scope is far wider. Whereas Rickard treats only New South Wales, Victoria and the early Commonwealth between 1890 and 1910, Loveday, Martin, Parker and their co-authors (De Garis, Jaensch, Joyce,

10 Rickard, ch.x, esp. pp.274, 286.

11 This point could be developed at length, for neither historians nor social theorists have grappled satisfactorily with the partial disjunction between political and industrial conflict. Here it will be sufficient to note that we should distinguish clearly between political class and industrial class, tailoring our categories to the requirements of particular questions and historical situations. For the application of somewhat different 'political' models of class, see R.S. Neale, *Class and Ideology in the Nineteenth Century*, London, 1972; and C.N. Connolly, '“The Middling Class” Victory in New South Wales, 1853-62: a Critique of the Bourgeois-Pastoralist Dichotomy', *Historical Studies*, XIX, 76 (1981), 369-87.

12 Rickard, pp.300-1.

13 *ibid.*, p.304.

14 *ibid.*, pp.191-5. Rickard is perhaps not sufficiently aware of the significance of this axis. He points to the emergence of pro-Labor sentiment amongst public servants but does not note explicitly that it cuts across a 'class' interpretation of politics.

Rawson and Weller) survey the whole of Australia. Moreover, an excellent first chapter by Loveday and Martin carries the story back to the mid-nineteenth century, and Loveday's conclusion places the development of Australian parties for the first time in a proper theoretical and international perspective. His success in pulling the themes together is a tribute to the book's strong editorial direction. The editors are not forced to plead that 'the book's unity lies in its diversity' because they have persuaded all but one author to agree on the relevant questions and methodologies.¹⁵

The book's tone is set by Loveday, who seems to have mediated Sartori's influence to the project. Loveday castigates Rickard and other historians for making parties into 'vehicles for something else—principles, classes, interests', instead of regarding them as 'political formations in their own right, with a life of their own'.¹⁶ He describes Rickard's class interpretation as 'innovative but inconclusive' for two reasons. The first is that Rickard's argument that class is the major determinant of political loyalties is circular because he 'draws heavily, if not exclusively, on politics for his evidence of the development of classes and their changing relationships'.¹⁷ The objection seems to be based on a confusion between logical circularity and mere overlap of subject matter. An argument claiming that political parties have affected Australian history, for example, does not become circular because its evidence is drawn 'heavily, if not exclusively' from Australian history. Moreover, Rickard's evidence goes far beyond politics in the narrow sense, being based on extensive analysis of industrial conflicts, trade unions, employer organizations, pressure groups and contemporary comment on class relationships.

Loveday's second objection, based explicitly on Sartori, is that even if Rickard establishes a correlation between class and party he fails to show that party is a result of class rather than class a result of party.¹⁸ The element of truth in this criticism is that Rickard is not always sufficiently aware of the extent to which politicians and parties fostered the emergence of class. Yet we should not exaggerate this deficiency, for he is less chained to the 'society-centred' paradigm than most historians who accept its overall perspective. He stresses that by introducing compulsory arbitration the politicians promoted the spread of unions and employer organizations, and that these in turn may have fostered class consciousness.¹⁹ He also notes, albeit far too briefly, the influence of labour organizers like Tom Mann, and shows how the New South Wales premier, J.H. Carruthers, sought to promote and manipulate middle-class consciousness in order to strengthen the Liberal party.²⁰ Rickard could have taken the argument further but he has made a valuable start.

Sartori's suggestion that parties may precede and cause class consciousness

15 The exception is Rawson, who ignores most of the questions asked by the other authors and restricts himself to investigating why Victorian parties differed from those elsewhere. He concludes that the electoral system explains the differences more satisfactorily than the social and ideological considerations advanced by other historians. The argument is stimulating, cleverly sustained and at least partly correct. But cf. Rickard, ch.ii, which makes points which Rawson does not fully meet.

16 Loveday, Martin and Parker, pp.485, 487.

17 *ibid.*, p.486.

18 *ibid.*, pp.486-7.

19 Rickard, esp. pp.274, 286, 298-9, 310.

20 *ibid.*, pp.181-3, 191.

must be tested empirically in each historical situation. The evidence indicates that although the emergence of Labor and anti-Labor parties in Australia between 1890 and 1910 did much to disseminate and consolidate class consciousness amongst the general public, the impetus for their formation was not merely political but stemmed from growing class consciousness among the dedicated few. The relationship between the parties and society was a reciprocal one, but the initial impulse came from the society. This emerges just as clearly from Loveday's account as from Rickard's. Indeed, the endorsement of Sartori's 'party-centred' hypothesis seems to be largely nominal, for no contributor to *The Emergence of the Australian Party System* is able to explain the emergence of a two-party system based on Labor and anti-Labor parties without resorting to Rickardian notions that the parties broadly represented classes or interests. In Queensland, Labor is seen as 'representing working class interests' while the non-Labor party is said to have 'partly represented capital'.²¹ In South Australia, Labor 'was formed as a deliberate manifestation of the interests of a class' and its appearance provoked the formation of a 'party of resistance' which was 'the instrument of metropolitan capitalists and absentee landlords'.²² In Western Australia, although regional influences were important, many Labor leaders were 'conscious spokesmen for the working class'; and the National Political League, formed to oppose them, stood for 'the business community'.²³ Even Loveday is forced to work within the 'society-centred' paradigm, arguing that the parties grew out of 'the stresses consequent upon economic development', and a series of major disruptions: strikes, depression and federation.²⁴ In order to link these events with the development of parties he invokes theories of emergent sectional consciousness. 'Politically active sections', he says, 'were created by the process of economic growth and social differentiation as growing numbers of people with common interests . . . discovered the advantages of organised group action across the boundaries of particular electorates'.²⁵ These 'sections' asserted their 'collective interests . . . against other interests', especially after the strikes and depression of the 1890s.²⁶ The labour movement, for instance, conscious of its distinctive interests, insisted upon its 'own pledged candidates and rejected other men, often sitting members, who had once enjoyed endorsement as liberal "friends of the labouring classes"'.²⁷ The suspicion arises that some of Loveday's 'sections' are simply Rickard's 'classes' and that the rise in sectional consciousness which he describes is often merely class consciousness under another name. Indeed, at one point he states that the strikes of the 1890s strengthened 'the working men's sense of their separateness as a class' and aided the formation of Labor parties.²⁸ This, of course, is precisely the argument of the first two chapters of Rickard's book. The argument of subsequent chapters is vindicated when Loveday describes how other 'sections'—groups belonging to

21 Loveday, Martin and Parker, pp.117, 166.

22 *ibid.*, pp.252-3, 273, 297.

23 *ibid.*, pp.331,347-8, 351.

24 *ibid.*, pp.460-4. One of these 'disruptions' — federation — is of course a political disruption and cannot be incorporated with the 'society-centred' paradigm. Rickard, who uses the paradigm flexibly, also notes the influence of federation (pp.165-7, 175, 185.).

25 Loveday, Martin and Parker, p.464.

26 *loc. cit.*

27 *ibid.*, p.465.

28 *ibid.*, p.462.

Rickard's middle class—sought to defend their interests against the presumed threat of Labor by combining to form anti-Labor parties. He notes, for example, that 'conservative movements, developing independently in the electorates . . . eventually provided not only the rank and file organisation for a permanent anti-Labor federal party but also the slogan of anti-socialism and much of the ideology that went with it'.²⁹ So much for Sartori's hypothesis that parties can be accounted for in purely political terms and that class and ideology are their creations.

Loveday's unwitting confirmation of Rickard's 'class' interpretation indicates the importance of specifying clearly the problem being investigated. *The Emergence of the Australian Party System* explores many issues, including the decline of faction politics, the rise of political organization, the growth of party solidarity, the roles of ideology and political leadership, and the relationship between the elected politicians and the party machine. Some of these phenomena, as Loveday notes, can be accounted for in organizational and political terms. Others must be explained by reference to sectional interests, not class ones. Yet this does not invalidate Rickard's 'class' interpretation, for he applies it to a quite distinct and very precise question: why did a two-party system based on Labor and anti-Labor parties emerge? In answering this question he can afford to admit that political and constitutional factors affected the party system. The introduction of single member constituencies, for example, encouraged the amalgamation of parties which did not want to split the anti-Labor vote by fielding rival candidates. Yet such considerations in no way explain why the amalgamation resulted in a party system polarized on Labor versus anti-Labor lines. To explain this, we must show how the anti-Labor vote came to be politically important. We must also explain why the other parties did not seriously consider amalgamating with Labor. In this respect, the most relevant explanatory variable is that singled out by Rickard: rising class consciousness among both politicians and the general public. Loveday and his co-authors provide evidence which confirms this but do not see its full significance because they have not defined the question sufficiently precisely. Instead of assigning the 'class' interpretation its narrow but vital role, they focus on broader questions and come to the unsurprising conclusion that class does not explain everything about the emergence of the Australian party system.

Martin and Parker note in their introduction to *The Emergence of the Australian Party System* that 'we would look in vain for any single overarching explanation or interpretation of what was happening in all the polities'.³⁰ This is correct but it misses the point. The broad problem of 'what was happening in all the polities' involves a potentially limitless number of questions, each requiring an individual answer. This makes any 'overarching explanation' impossible. What we must do is divide the issue of party development into its constituent parts, isolating specific questions to which testable and, perhaps, unequivocal answers can be given. Rickard has dealt with one such question convincingly. *The Emergence of the Australian Party System*, on the other hand, poses many questions and provides the evidence and much of the argument for clear and satisfying conclusions; but because the questions are not always distinguished sufficiently clearly the treatment of class is hesitant and ambiguous. The book might have

29 *ibid.*, p.459.

30 *ibid.*, p.4.

been a landmark in the writing of Australian political history, and in some respects it still is. In its comprehensiveness, in its use of advanced statistical techniques, in the methodological rigour of its comparative method, it stands alone. Yet lack of conceptual clarity at crucial points diminishes its impact.

For New Zealand historians both books will be a source of fruitful trans-Tasman comparisons. Most obviously, the sequence of events in New Zealand was remarkably similar to that charted by Rickard in Victoria, New South Wales and the early Commonwealth:

1. Expansion of the trade union movement in the 1880s.
2. An upsurge in working-class consciousness and political activity in the wake of the 1890 maritime strike.³¹
3. A period of 'Lib-Lab' cooperation from the early 1890s during which labour's potential for independent action was largely contained.
4. Rapid development of trade unions and employer organizations from about the turn of the century, spurred by compulsory arbitration.
5. Disintegration of the 'Lib-Lab' consensus.
6. Emergence of a 'two-party' system based on labour and anti-labour parties.

In New Zealand the process took longer and was not completed until the formation of the National Party in 1936. The similarity of the sequence, however, suggests that the same dynamic was at work. The way is thus open for an analysis of the origins of the New Zealand party system which builds on the insights of the books reviewed here.³² If the questions are clearly formulated, if relevant class categories are consistently applied, and if the strengths of both the 'party-centred' and the 'society-centred' models are fully utilized, a New Zealand study could set new standards in the writing of political history.

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31 In New Zealand, the upsurge was weaker and enthusiasm faded more rapidly, especially by comparison with New South Wales.

32 Len Richardson has begun the task. He incorporates some of the strengths of Rickard's approach in his chapter on politics from 1890 to 1933 in a forthcoming history of New Zealand to be edited by W.H. Oliver and published by Oxford University Press.