

**Dr Nick Dyrenfurth**

**John Cain Foundation Lecture Abstract**

**The Power of Ideas: rediscovering Australian Labor's lost traditions**

‘Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue’. At first glance, English folklore sits oddly amid a discussion of ideological directions for progressive politics in Australia. Yet in many ways this bridal rhyme is a handy guide to the task confronting Labor-orientated thinkers and activists in the early twenty-first century.

Since the 1980s, it has become something of a cliché to assert that the organised labour movement is in crisis, in Australia and globally. It is also received wisdom to suggest that the crisis of labour has triggered a decline in the relevance of social democracy, the dominant form of working-class politics since the late nineteenth century. The Global Financial Crisis (GFC), the worst economic downturn in 80 years, failed to realise predictions of a social democratic renaissance. In Australia, the woes of social democracy seem particularly acute. The ALP's vote at the 2013 federal election was its lowest in a century. Aside from electoral weakness, the party is beset by organisational, cultural and ideological frailties.

Australian Labor is not alone in facing such challenges. Most of the world's labour and social democratic parties are struggling to define themselves in a post-Cold War world defined by free-market economic globalisation, a strong decline in union density linked to the erosion of traditional forms of blue-collar working-class identity, the rise of the information society and

consumerist culture, the breakdown of community-based forms of solidarity, and the seeming conquest of mass poverty. Public support for traditional social democratic institutions, economic redistribution and, in some places, the welfare state has weakened.

Electoral speaking, with the exception of France, parties of the centre-right currently govern in most European countries, as well as Australia, Canada and New Zealand. The former social democratic stronghold of Sweden handed an unprecedented second-term to a centre-right governing alliance during 2010. The Right's electoral hegemony exists even if we accept that social democracy has become in the late historian Tony Judt's words 'the prose of contemporary European politics', what some describe as the advent of a new 'progressive conservatism'. On the Left, some commentators argue that Green parties represent an existential threat – social democracy has 'served its historical purpose' as the driving force of change – or argue that the future of social democracy is 'Green'.

Explorations of the current crisis of Australian social democracy are not always historically well informed and sometimes overstated. 'Social democracy', Tony Judt wrote, 'has not only come to power in many countries, it has succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of its founders'. Much of the success enjoyed by social democratic parties, including the ALP, was attributable to the powerful ideas generated by leading activists and thinkers. This lecture then makes a case for rediscovering the rich history of Labor, radical and progressive thinking as a means of reviving Labor's 21<sup>st</sup> century political mission. We begin with a reconsideration of early Australian Labor's ideological inspirations of the late nineteenth century – craft unionism, Chartism, ethical and state socialism, popular radicalism, producerism and English Fabianism, as well as the seeming odd bedfellows of Marxism and Methodism; chart a course through the dominance of the labourist ideal during the

ideological upheavals of the twentieth century's two world wars and revolution; examines social democracy's post-war 'golden age', the Whitlamite 1960s revolution and the crisis associated with the 1970s 'failure' of Keynesianism, and concludes with a survey of the twenty-first century thought, notably the ideas of 'Third Way' politics and 'Blue Labour'. As we shall see, Australian Labor is at its best when engaged in the transnational marketplace of ideas. It is a vibrant tradition the party and its supporters must urgently re-learn.

### **Presenter Biography**

Dr Nick Dyrenfurth is an adjunct research fellow in the National Centre for Australian Studies at Monash University in Melbourne. Nick is the author or editor of seven books on Australian politics and history, including *Mateship: A Very Australian History* (2015), *A Short History of the Australian Workers Union* (2015), *A Little History of the Australian Labor Party* (2011, with Frank Bongiorno), *Heroes and Villains: the rise and fall of the early Australian Labor Party* (2011), *All That's Left: what Labor should stand for* (2010, co-edited with Tim Soutphommasane), and *Confusion: the making of the Australian two-party system* (2009, co-edited with Paul Strangio). Nick is also a leading media commentator, having written for *The Age*, *The Australian*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *Guardian Australia*, *Australian Financial Review*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Canberra Times*, *The Saturday Paper*, and *The Monthly*, and frequently appears on television and radio. Nick is a former advisor and speechwriter to the Hon. Bill Shorten, Leader of the federal Opposition. He is the current federal secretary of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History.