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978-0-521-13804-8 - Labor's Conflict: Big Business, Workers and the Politics of Class

Tom Bramble and Rick Kuhn

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## LABOR'S CONFLICT

### Big business, workers and the politics of class

Once widely regarded as the workers' greatest hope for a better world, the ALP today would rather project itself as a responsible manager of Australian capitalism. *Labor's Conflict: Big Business, Workers and the Politics of Class* provides an insightful account of the transformations in the Party's policies, performance and structures since its formation.

Seasoned political analysts Tom Bramble and Rick Kuhn offer an incisive appraisal of the Party's successes and failures, betrayals and electoral triumphs in terms of its competing ties with bosses and workers.

The early chapters outline diverse approaches to understanding the nature of the Party and then assess the ALP's evolution in response to major social upheavals and events, from the strikes of the 1890s, through two World Wars, the Great Depression, and the post-war boom. The records of the Whitlam, Hawke, Keating, Rudd and Gillard governments are then dissected in detail. The compelling conclusion offers alternatives to the Australian Labor Party, for those interested in progressive change.

**Tom Bramble** is Senior Lecturer in Industrial Relations in the School of Business at the University of Queensland.

**Rick Kuhn** is Reader in Political Science in the School of Politics and International Relations at the Australian National University.

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[More information](#)

## Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page vii</i>
<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>1 Labor's love's lost?</b>	6
<b>2 In the beginning: Labor's first quarter century</b>	25
<b>3 Between the wars</b>	43
<b>4 Hot war, cold war, split</b>	55
<b>5 Labor after 70 years</b>	69
<b>6 The Whitlam era</b>	83
<b>7 Economic rationalism under Hawke and Keating</b>	104
<b>8 Labor in the wilderness</b>	126
<b>9 The Rudd–Gillard government</b>	143
<b>10 The Labor Party today: what's left</b>	168
<i>Notes</i>	194
<i>Index</i>	221

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## PREFACE

The authors of this book have been involved in radical politics for between 30 and 40 years, for most of that time as members of Marxist organisations, Socialist Alternative and its forerunners. Apart from a brief period in the early 1980s, when Rick was in the ALP, our relationships with the Labor Party have been from the outside. Because the ALP is a large and powerful organisation, historically associated with the left, it has affected the course and potential of all our political activities. This has taken different forms. As Labor has long been committed to managing Australian capitalism we have been highly critical of the Party. We opposed Labor governments in the late 1980s when they destroyed a militant trade union, the Builders' Labourers' Federation, and today we actively support campaigns against the Gillard government's treatment of asylum seekers, gays and lesbians, construction workers and Indigenous people. On the other hand, because Labor seeks to appeal to a working class voting base, and because a sizeable number of people believe that the Party is dedicated to achieving progressive social reform, we have also worked alongside ALP members and responded to initiatives of Labor leaders in various struggles against particular odious manifestations of the capitalist system. In recent years, these have included campaigns against WorkChoices, the invasion of Iraq and the Howard government's attacks on refugees. We took account of these different circumstances as we worked alongside ALP members when they were drawn into struggle without sharing their illusions as to the core purpose of the Party.

An accurate understanding of the Labor Party and the logic of its development has been an important practical question for us. In this book we present our analysis of the ALP, drawn from historical and more recent evidence. We do so with the aim of explaining not only to those who have been repelled by the record of recent Labor governments why the Party behaves

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii Preface

in the way that it does, but also to convince those who hold the sincere belief that Labor can serve as an avenue for progressive social change that their hopes are misplaced and that an alternative road is possible.

We are grateful to Ben Hillier and Jo Mettam, who provided assistance in our research. Many other people, with very diverse political views, provided us with information, insights and useful opinions. We would like to thank Liam Byrne, Diane Fieldes, Bob Gould, Mike Grewcock, Dick Gross, Sarah Ireland, Bill McCormick, Humphrey McQueen, Greg Patmore, John Percy, Sally Quilter, Eric Petersen, Stuart Rosewarne, Liz Ross, Andrew Scott, Scott Steel (Possum Comitatus), Frank Stilwell, Paul Strangio, Fleur Taylor, Joo-Cheong Tham and Norman Thompson. We are indebted to our readers, both the anonymous assessors provided by Cambridge University Press, and also those who we selected, Tom O'Lincoln and, in particular, Mick Armstrong, whose insights and guidance shaped our ideas. Without Mary Gorman's support and understanding, Rick would not have been able to participate in the project of explaining the contemporary Labor Party. Tom would like to thank Kaye Broadbent for her love and support during the writing of this book. We dedicate it to all those who share our desire for a world liberated from capitalism.