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The last Secretary of the Stonemason’s Union before the union amalgamated with the BWIU.

Dr Peter Love is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at Swinburne University of Technology and an Executive Member of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History.

Dr Julie Kimber has a PhD in Industrial Relations from the University of New South Wales and is an Executive Member of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History.

All three are members of the 888 Organising Committee at Trades Hall.

Martin Kingham, Peter Love and Julie Kimber will review the 1856 campaign by Melbourne building workers for the 8 Hour Day, the significance of that campaign as a foundation for a civilised citizenship in colonial Victoria and its implications for the present WorkChoices assault on community standards. They will also discuss the central themes of the events organised for April-June this year to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the 8 Hour Day.

Martin Kingham is Victorian Secretary of the CFMEU’s Construction Division, and a star witness at the Cole Royal Commission into the Building Industry...
Book Review


Australian society contains inequalities. Political, economic and racial inequality produces conflict and social protest movements are an expression of that conflict. As Cahill points out in the introduction to this important little book, the social movements that flourished in that heady decade, 1965-75, were necessarily connected to the society in which they existed. Frequently, they were also connected to Australia’s past; to see them merely as ephemeral, derivative of overseas events or distinctly ‘sixties’ phenomena, ignores precedents and traditions in the history of social protest. The mobilisation against the Vietnam war, for instance, is one of the many social movements with a pre-history – in this case stretching back to opposition to the Boer war.

_A Turbulent Decade_ emanated from a conference organised by the Sydney branch of ASSLH in late September 2001. The conference proceedings form the core of this book. Consequently the veterans and activists - thirty-eight of them - from that period speak directly to the reader. Their reflections and recollections alternate between the poignant, amusing, nostalgic and anecdotal, gently triumphalist, intensely personal, and sometimes courageous (as dissident action often is). They cover social movements that espoused the counter-culture, women’s liberation, gay and lesbian rights, aboriginal land rights, opposition to conscription and apartheid, and the labour movement.

The emphasis of the speakers was overwhelmingly on Sydney but there is much to resonate with Melbourne readers active in those years. 67 Glebe Point Road, Glebe - now, ironically, an antique shop - was more than once referred to as the home base of several Left movements; the parallel site in Melbourne was 120 Greville Street, Prahran, simply known as ‘The Bakery’. Similarly, La Trobe University students were confronted by the heavy-handed Inspector Platfuss during violent demonstrations in Waterdale Road, Heidelberg. His counterpart at Sydney University was the notorious Senior Sergeant Longbottom. One conference speaker recounted how Longbottom was seen taking notes during one episode of draft-burning on the university lawn. He retreated to his car, locked all doors but, after one student poured sugar into the petrol cap, was unable to start it. The students then bodily carried his car, with Longbottom still inside, onto the middle of Parramatta Road. The apotheosis of social protest may not have been reached with this incident but it is reflective of an anti-authority tradition whose trajectory can reach from the Wobblies to the tactics of S11 protestors.

One chapter in this book is devoted to the changes, struggles and gains of trade unions. The alliance forged between the Builders’ Labourers Federation and community and environmental groups during the Green Bans movement in the early 1970s bestowed a legacy to the future not only through the preservation of the Rocks or Victoria Street or Kelly’s Bush. It is also a pointer to the increasing strength today of ‘social-movement unionism’ identified by writers such as Kim Moody in *Workers in a Lean World* (London, 1997), where unions participate in or lead community-based struggles against injustice and inequalities in and beyond the workplace. In the late 1990s, for example, Werribee residents worked in concert with relevant trade unions to thwart the development of a toxic waste dump at a nearby quarry. Notwithstanding the diminishing space for collective action, the fight does go on.

This small book, then, represents both a snapshot of a decade, a reminder of the longevity of social protest history, and a repository of some lessons for the future.

Phillip Deery

For copies contact the Sydney Branch, ASSLH: PO Box 1027 Newtown NSW 2042

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Book Review


This book is not the first, nor I suppose the last, to look at the way the USA controls and manipulates governments and nations to meet the needs of the Empire. For some Americans believe there is a US Empire; just as there was a British Empire, a Soviet Empire, a Spanish Empire, and in the distant past a Roman Empire.

Indeed, as the author points out at one stage in the book, all empires have a great deal in common. They convince some of their people that they are really doing what they do for the good of everyone. This belief in their innate “superiority” leads to the use of force (against, if needs be, the whole of the world’s population), so that others accept their rule under the rubric that what is for the USA is good for all.

Those who resist are deemed to be the enemy (how often have we heard Bush use the word “evil”?). The dilemma with this neo-con approach to world affairs is that it opens the USA to the risk of it being in perpetual warfare. And with this the possible seed of its own destruction, draining away the blood and treasure of the Empire, the
Bush doctrine might, collapse in economic ruin after all.

To varying degrees this has happened to all ‘great’ empires, most obviously the Roman, in more recent times the Spanish, the French, and later the British. All empires come to ruin and decay.

The quagmire which the US finds itself in the Middle East provides us with ample evidence that the US might be about to face a crisis in spectacular fashion. For the Middle East it is not the first time that this region has seen this event played out on its sands.

In John Perkins’ book he tells of his career as an “economic hitman.” An economist, he was drawn into the world of international finance. As he says, his job was to convince third world governments to undertake enormous loans from US banks and corporations - arguably, with the military, another arm of the Empire.

Once these loans had been granted, the ‘great’ corporations then moved on the country in question, knowing that the nation would be unable to cope with loan repayments. This would create a cycle that would see the US Empire’s “police”, the I.M.F and the World Bank, move in to put the country under defacto US administration. In the process, this opens the way for the involvement of companies such as the Bechtels and the Halliburtons. When these takeovers occur there would sometimes be resistance in the country in question. In this context, the CIA or similar bodies would use right-wing militias to stage a coup or decimate the local left. Thus, in 1953, when a nationalist reformer, Mossadegh, sought to place the oil industry under national control, there was a US led coup in Iran, which restored the Shah, and under his rule the US then had 26 years of open plunder of Iranian oil resources.

These events, as Perkins’ book shows, have been repeated again and again. In 1973 the US overthrew Allende in Chile, though this was but one of a string of such coups in Latin America. In the Middle East they have had mixed success, even with the help of their loyal ally, Israel, which has repeatedly assisted the US in the region - support which always been handsomely rewarded.

More recently, we have seen the invasion of Iraq, and attempts to bring down Chavez in Venezuela, because he represents challenge to US domination in Latin America. They may have embargoed and threatened Cuba, but Chavez is proving a greater challenge, given his oil wealth, and his determination to use it at home to institute a socialist revolution.

Perkins’ book recounts his part in some of these events, but in 2001 he realised that these actions were leading to what another US historian calls “Blowback” and he saw the events of Sept 11, 2001, as evidence of this blowback.

Like Perkins, other historians and commentators have identified this trend. “The Decline of American Power” by Emmanuel Wallerstein, and “Blowback” and “The Sorrows of Empire”, by Chalmers Johnson have also charted this course of events.

To his credit Perkins is now regretful of this work he did in his earlier life. He now writes and talks of these events and runs a non-profit organisation dedicated to help repair some of the damage.

This is a disturbing book, but a useful and timely one, for the American Empire is still bringing suffering to a host of people. Perhaps the only comforting thought is that it may be destined for defeat. Having learned nothing from Vietnam, it now engages in another such effort in Iraq. As Perkins shows, all of this is deliberate, but the end could prove fatal to the Empire and its ambitions.

Confessions of an Economic Hitman is available at the New International Bookshop, Trades Hall, Victoria Street, Carlton 3053. RRP $24.95

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Comment:

A View from a Country Branch

What’s it like being a member of a country branch of the ALP in one of the bluest of the blue-ribbon conservative seats in Australia?

I put the question to our February branch meeting – to the 14 of us present that night.

Those who had been members of branches in Labor-held or in marginal seats commented on the feelings of confidence and excitement they experienced in those branches before they came to Shepparton.

Here, it is just hard yacka. We have a few small wins by using contacts with Labor ministers at State level to highlight local problems. And occasionally there is a memorable moment. I can still remember the reaction of long-time Labor voters up here when John Cain won government in the early 80’s. They called to one another across the street and proudly proclaimed their Labor links. Normally before then, and even now, it doesn’t pay to be too openly Labor in this area.

One of the mysteries of this electorate is that it has a socio-economic profile which should see a Labor member in the state seat of Shepparton. Instead, the working class and pensioners in this town vote conservative.

Part of the explanation goes back to the Cold War days, to the Labor split, to the fear of a socialist threat to private property and farms and some pretty
mindless union militancy which hurt low income workers more than the bosses. Those days have long gone, yet Labor’s image hasn’t changed. So for a long time now it has been a struggle to get sufficient supporters to hand out on polling days.

Many unionists who were strong supporters, even if not branch members, used to help out on election day, but since the mid eighties unions are much weaker and fewer are interested in the ALP. Our branch membership has also been stagnant. We are down to about 15 active members.

Part of the reason is the reluctance of the local daily paper to encourage debate on political issues. There is very little questioning and analysis even of local government issues. The local press has to sell advertising to survive and is not going to frighten the horses.

But the main reason is to be found within the ALP itself. There is no commitment to branch development with clear strategies and programs. Many in our branch share the perception that the State office is putting more energy into factional activities than into helping win seats in this Upper House electorate if we had a good chance of winning two seats in this electorate to represent us.

Selection panels to decide who shall pre-selected. The same issues of personal ambition, even if not branch adherence, were much stronger. The local TAFE and three university campuses. We have a large part-time/seasonal work force and many low income pensioners who get little out of the ALP. They could be won for Labor. But, we need help to do that. And being taken for granted is not the help we need.

Frank Purcell
Frank is a member of the Shepparton ALP branch.

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Comment:
Ballarat Breakthrough – Politically Speaking

The current political profile of the Ballarat region is one that local “old time” adherents of the Labor Party thought would never come.

While there has been one defection from a former Labor MLC, the whole region elected Labor members over each of the last two State and Federal elections.

The scenario was a faraway dream in the late 60’s through the 70’s and into the 1980’s. The stalwarts of that period had suffered over two decades of Liberal Party representation, often in frustrating and overwhelming circumstances. The major cause of frustration came from gaining a majority of first preference votes but eventually losing through the awarding of the DLP preferences to the Liberal Party. This was especially true for Federal elections.

David Williams was particularly disadvantaged by this in the 1970’s. He stood three times and lost on preferences. David eventually made a breakthrough in 1979 by winning a by-election to the Victorian Upper House. Unfortunately, it was for a period of only six months. In 1980 John Mildren built on this breakthrough by winning the Federal seat against Jim Short.

My involvement as Labor candidate began in 1973. At that stage there was a constant but minority support for the Labor Party at the State level. State politics was dominated by Sir Henry Bolte and subsequently Sir Rupert Hamer. The Ballarat region had lost Labor members, J J Sheehan, Ballarat South (a friend but not related), in the mid 50’s, and Jack Jones MLC, Ballarat Province, a couple of years later.

The result of my first election in 1973 was regarded as a success because of a swing to Labor. We were left with 6% to make Ballarat a Labor Seat.

As Labor candidate again, in 1976 we received a further swing. Over those two elections, the Liberal majority had been whittled down to 2%. These swings, by comparison to the present era can only be described as modest. But to us it was reason for celebration. It should be remembered that at a State level, Labor representation in the Parliament was also “modest”.

Again in 1979, as Labor candidate I was mildly confident of success. David White MLC, took Ballarat South and me under his wing. His visits about every three weeks were a source of great encouragement and energy. The incumbent Liberal member Bill Stephen had retired and a new Liberal candidate, Joan Chambers, had been pre-selected. The same issues of...
decentralisation, education, particularly the neglect of school buildings, and maintenance of local jobs in State industries like the Railway Workshops were prominent. On top of these came the issue of abortion. The Right to Life campaigned vigorously for Joan Chambers against me. Interestingly, they did a complete about turn for the 1982 election.

Many supporters believe that issue cost us the 1979 election in Ballarat South.

The loss by a mere 196 votes was unanticipated and a disappointing result.

Finally, in 1982, under the State leadership of John Cain, we made the breakthrough at the State level. I was elected to represent Ballarat South in the Legislative Assembly as a Labor member for the first time in 27 years. The previous Labor member had been J J (Jack) Sheehan who lost due to the split in 1955. So after a drought, politically speaking, of between two and three decades, the Federal seat and one State seat were in Labor hands. This lasted for a period of twelve years – 1980 to 1992.

That twelve year period featured a mixture of great satisfaction and traumatic difficulty. The changes to various Ministries such as Forest and Lands were difficult due mainly to changes in practices and job cuts. However, the passing of landmark legislation on Workers’ Compensation and Occupational Health and Safety were magnificent reforms.

At a local level, among many other things, the relocation of the State Data Centre to Ballarat was a major coup given the flow-on effects it has had. The developments in IT at the University are largely related to the early developments within the State Data Centre. An early and major effect of a Labor Government was the replacement of temporary class room accommodation by permanent buildings at the Wendouree Secondary College under Education Minister, Robert Fordham. This had been promised by the Liberal member for Ballarat North, Tom Evans, during at least the three previous election campaigns.

The Federal seat of Ballarat returned to Liberal hands in 1990 and the State seat of Ballarat South – now renamed Ballarat East, was won by the Liberals in 1992.

But we have had our revenge, with Labor winning the Federal and all State seats in the region in recent years. This was spoiled by the defection referred to previously. But Labor still dominates-a scenario that was a mere dream in the late 60’s and early 70’s.

Frank Sheehan

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Biography:

Albert Gerson, The Industrial Herald and the Labor Movement in Geelong

One of the most remarkable pioneers of the Labor Movement in Geelong - was Albert Gerson. In the years prior to the First World War, Gerson emerged as a young activist and journalist.

He was involved with the Clerk’s Union, and later married Eileen, who was the child of one of the founders of the Clerk’s Union in Victoria. Together their marriage spanned more than 50 years of Labor activity.

Gerson first rose to attention during the Conscion Referendum Campaign of 1916, when he became the subject of a series of fierce attacks on him by the conservative Geelong Advertiser.

Gerson refused to play “God Save the King” at an anti-conscription rally. The Geelong Advertiser dubbed this “The Gerson Disloyalty.” This, for Gerson, was proof of the need for a Labor newspaper in Geelong and in 1919, he and his wife established the Industrial Herald, a weekly Labor paper, dependent on advertising for survival.

Gerson’s dogged pursuit of advertising allowed him to keep the Industrial Herald alive until 1958. The little four page weekly carried articles from sources as diverse as Lenin, Ramsey MacDonald, Scullin, Curtin and Chifley, every State and Federal Labor leader over almost 40 years, as well as news about Labor and Trade Union activities in Geelong.

One of the secrets of his success was the regular football and racing tipping competitions, for which he awarded substantial prizes to the accurate tipster. All this was accompanied by a host of small advertisements for local businesses from all over Geelong and surrounding districts. In the 1940’s he purchased a modest office in Geelong for the paper, calling it “Industrial Herald House.”

He also, with his wife, ran a job agency for young women, and a Concert Party, which raised funds for local charities and the needy, during the terrible years of the Great Depression.

In 1929, he was campaign director for Arthur Lewis who won Corio for Labor under the leadership of Scullin. In 1931 he accepted an honorary post as Secretary of the Geelong THC, and was himself Labor candidate for the seat of Barwon on several occasions.

Often a critic of Labor governments and politicians, from whom he seldom expected much, he never ceased to believe that a better society was possible, and never ceased to work for socialism. He died in Geelong in 1974.

After his death, with the help of his daughter, Mrs Alma Chinn, I was able to place files of the Industrial Herald in the State Library of Victoria, and with the help of Mr Gordon Bryant, then a Minister in the Whitlam Government, copies were placed in the National Library in Canberra.

The files are now on microfilm and are readily accessible to all. They impart a remarkable picture of the Labor Movement in a major provincial city. They are also testimony to the dogged determination of Albert and Eileen Gerson who showed that their dream of a Labor newspaper in Geelong was attainable, and kept it alive for almost 40 years.

Brian McKinlay
Vale Bill Hartley
1939 – 2006

For a man who spent most of his life in the midst of controversy, Bill, who recently died in Western Australia, where was helping to establish an indigenous radio station – was unexpectedly amiable, likable and good humoured.

Bill was State Secretary of the ALP in the early 1960’s and in the latter part of his life he was an official with the Australian Manufacturing Workers’ Union.

He had many interests, in particular trying to forge more understanding with Middle Eastern countries, 3CR Radio Station, and the Epilepsy Foundation.

To his family and many friends we extend our eternal thanks and condolences.

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Vale Frank Gasparini
1921 - 2006

Frank was the last Secretary of the Stonemason’s Union before the union amalgamated with the Building Workers’ Industrial Union (BWIU). Frank was Secretary from 1955-1964 and after the amalgamation was an organiser with the BWIU until 1988. He had been selected by the CFMEU to lead the march on the 21st April, celebrating 150th anniversary of the 8 Hour Day.

His union colleagues declared that he was a kind person in every way possible.

To his family and union friends we extend our eternal thanks and condolences.

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Vale John Corsetti

The following is a reproduction of a eulogy given at the funeral of John Corsetti. Sadly, John Corsetti’s life ended on January 27, 2006, after a lengthy struggle with cancer. John’s funeral was held at Fawkner, and as a testament to the high esteem in which he was held, was attended by hundreds of mourners.

John was a man who was born with more that the usual measure of talent, personality and character. John had a passion for football, cycling and singing, and on the face of it, could have been an outstanding success at any of these activities if he had chosen to dedicate himself to one of them. At various points in his life he indulged each of these passions in turn, but his real and lasting passion, apart from his family, was to make a difference – to people’s working lives, and by any measure he succeeded.

John’s working class roots in an Italian immigrant family, and his early exposure – he talked of sleeping as a young child in a bin of finished garments under his mother’s sewing machine while she worked in a factory – to the appalling and exploitative working conditions suffered by his mother and their community doing piece-work in the clothing trade, inspired John to work tirelessly on behalf of workers, seeking improvements in working conditions. John always gravitated to situations where he saw injustice and risks to workers.

The following provides some insights into John’s remarkable career.

John’s passion, commitment and insight led him into a role in health and safety on behalf of the members of the AMWU at a time when this was not the norm. He was one of the first OHS Officers designated by a Union, and this then became a role model for others. John was a pivotal person working with Dr John Matthews and others in laying the foundation for workers’ rights to be represented and to have a say on health and safety.

John and his colleagues in the Metal Workers were at the vanguard of what was at the time, ground breaking health and safety legislation. They, with others, were the driving force to implement these arrangements in the manufacturing industry to usher in a new era in Victorian workplaces, thereby laying the foundation for the legislative environment we have and take for granted.

John was an original member of the Victorian Occupational Health & Safety Commission and served on that body from 1985 to 1992. As one of only five representatives of the Victorian Trades Hall Council on the Commission, he represented all Victorian Workers. In this role he and the other original Commissioners were recognized in 2004 with the Victorian WorkSafe Award for Outstanding Leadership and Contribution to Health and Safety. He went on to be an organizer and ultimately to lead the AMWU – one of the largest and most influential unions in the country – as Victorian General State Secretary.

There are very few who could claim to have made such a significant difference over such a sustained period
to protect and improve the working lives of ordinary people. Of course, humility and a self-deprecating character would not allow him to bask in such achievements. He always claimed his role was part of a larger movement and considered himself ‘lucky’ to have had the opportunity to contribute ‘in some small way’. This was typical of the man.

In seeking justice, John was able to work equally well with both sides of the political spectrum. This is attested to by as many ‘bosses’ and employer representatives contacting John and visiting him during his illness as there were people from the labour movement. The regard he was held in, and the respect that everyone who knew him had for him, was as remarkable as John himself. As one employer representative from John’s Victorian Occupational Health and Safety Commission days, said:

they weren’t always on the same side of an issue and didn’t necessarily see everything the same way but John’s commitment and integrity was always evident and he had the respect and even the friendship of many who could have been said to be on the other side.

John was known to have had a great deal of admiration for the previous Prime Minister, Paul Keating. In the week prior to his death, much to his delight and amazement, he received a personal letter of support from Paul Keating.

John was one of the great contributors of his generation, and he leaves a legacy that will live on, as he lives in the hearts and minds of his family, friends and colleagues.

Branch News & 888 Events:
The Time of their Lives: Victorian Workers' Campaign for the Eight Hour Day.

Guest Speaker: Dr Peter Love

Tuesday 14 March at 5.15 pm for coffee, 5.45 for talk.

Royal Historical Society building at 239 A Beckett Street (enter via William Street door) Free to RHSV Members, $5.50 for non-members.

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The countdown is on for the start of the 888 celebrations. The Melbourne branch has been busily organising a conference examining the history of the Eight Hour Day and struggles for shorting working hours:


June 21-22, 2006

Melbourne University

Please send enquiries to: pilove@infoexchange.net.au or juliekimber@unswalumni.com

The labour history conference will be followed by a conference focussing on the challenges and dilemmas of different forms of working-time regulation confronting Australian and other workers at the start of the 21st century:

New Standards for New Times: The Eight Hour Day and Beyond.

June 22-23, 2006

Melbourne University

Please send enquiries to: Iain.Campbell@rmit.edu.au or Cathy.Brigden@rmit.edu.au

These conferences form just one part of the much larger celebrations being planned in and around Victoria. These include a re-enactment of the original march by workers demanding the 8-hour day in Victoria (April 21); comedy festivals; community events; performances; and exhibitions. For more information check out the website: http://www.8hourday.org.au

Wednesday Night Forum

May 10, 2006

Guest Speaker: Trevor Barr

Whither Communications Policy?

Trevor’s talk will canvass a range of issues in current communications policy and make some recommendations for urgent action in key areas.

Trevor Barr is Professor of Media and Telecommunications at Swinburne University and currently Program Manager of the Smart Internet Technology CRC. Trevor’s books, published by Oxford University Press, Penguin, Allen & Unwin and Rigby, have been standard references in university media and telecommunications courses for many years and influential in policy formulation. In May 2001 he was invited to deliver one of the prestigious Alfred Deakin Lecture Series as part of The Federation Festival in Melbourne. The Sydney Morning Herald has chosen him as one of the 20 influential thinkers about major future issues facing Australia.

A Quiz Night! will be held on May 20th to raise funds for the ACTU's Your Rights At Work campaign. NTEU office: South Melbourne. Prizes, fun and a great cause. Enquiries: juliekimber@unswalumni.com