

Review: *Arthur Calwell*

By Stephen Holt

James Franklin and Gerry O Nolan, *Arthur Calwell Transforming Australia Through Immigration* (Australian Biographical Monographs 20, Connor Court Publishing, 2024). pp. 100. \$19.95 Paper.

During the Great War, a majority of Australian voters reaffirmed a commitment to whiteness, just as they did in the 2023 Voice referendum. In two national plebiscites, they voted against conscription for overseas service because many of them feared that an alien labour force would fill the jobs vacated by conscripts. 'Vote No and Keep Australia White' was the winning slogan.

James Franklin and Gerry O Nolan have just published a short account of how Arthur Calwell, Labor's federal leader in the 1960s, was stamped for life by the anti-conscription campaigns of 1916 and 1917. Their account is the latest volume in the ongoing Australian Biographical Monograph series. They draw on existing published material spiced with the odd tantalising archival reference.

This monograph can be read from cover to cover in an hour or so. Overall the two authors present a succinct account of how Calwell's doggedness helped to ensure that Australia's days as, in Calwell's words, 'a dull inbred country of predominantly British stock' ended after 1945.

Born into straitened Irish-Australian circumstances in *fin de siècle* Melbourne, Calwell was a lifelong socialist and Catholic. He bonded with Archbishop Daniel Mannix in the anti-conscription years and, the authors note, became Mannix's favourite lay confidant. Eventually Bob Santamaria supplanted him in this role. This switch was facilitated after anti-conscriptionist sentiment in Victoria morphed into anti-communism.

In the 1930s Calwell, who worked as a state public servant during the day, took on many extracurricular responsibilities including as a trustee of the Melbourne Cricket Ground. He served on the central executive of the Australian Labor Party's Victorian branch and acted as the unofficial assistant for Dr William Maloney, the federal member for Melbourne.

Calwell entered federal parliament in 1940. In 1943, after clashing with John Curtin on the issue of conscription, he became Minister for Information. His appointment in 1945 as Minister for Immigration finally allowed him to show his true mettle to a national audience. Wartime fears of invasion from the north had strengthened the nation's attachment to the doctrine of 'populate or perish'. After 1945, there had to be immigration, but the migrants, to be accepted, had to be white.

The authors provide a good overview of the shipping and accommodation issues that Calwell addressed in order to get the post-war migration program up and running. Other governments and international agencies had to be finessed. In their summary of these events, the authors convey a sense of Calwell's tremendous capacity for hard work.

Calwell's success as Immigration Minister had adverse consequences for his party. The arrival in Australia of people displaced from war-ravaged Europe had the effect of bumping many formerly looked-down-upon people of earlier settler stock up the social pecking order. Calwell's fellow Irish-Australians were notable in this regard. After 1955, they could swing over to supporting Robert Menzies by voting for the breakaway Democratic Labor Party, which then directed its second preferences to the Liberal and Country parties.

An ever patient Calwell succeeded to the federal leadership after H.V. Evatt retired in 1960. The authors present a clear summary of the 1961 credit squeeze and the adverse reaction that allowed Calwell to come within a single seat of victory in that year's election. Support from the *Sydney Morning Herald* in the election sat oddly with Calwell's insistence that the Australian press was to a large extent sustained by 'financial crooks' and 'mental harlots'.

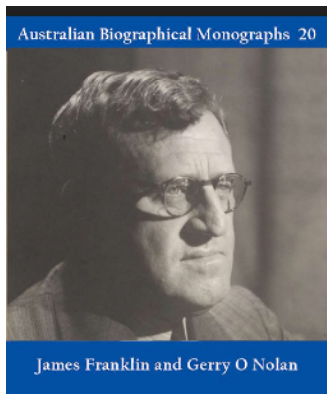
The likelihood of becoming Australia's Prime Minister did not cause Calwell to water down his commitment to socialism. Peter

Love's *Labour and the Money Power* (1984) has already delineated the Labor school of socialism to which Calwell belonged. Its perspective was populist rather than Marxist. The enemy was 'monopoly capitalism'. Calwell planned to convert the 1964 federal election into a campaign targeting the faceless monopolists who lorded it over the Liberal Party. But Menzies had other ideas. He called an early election in 1963 which he turned it into a vote against the equally faceless backroom operators who lorded it over the ALP.

Calwell's final attempt to become Prime Minister came in 1966. It marked the last great expression of his half-century of opposition to conscription for overseas military service. Harold Holt, aided by a visit from LBJ, gazumped him by turning the poll into a referendum to support the Australian-American alliance.

A consideration of Arthur Calwell's public life is bound to stimulate thinking about some of the great issues in the modern history of Australia. In Calwell's case the commitment to whiteness never varied but also helped to play a part in the formation of a more varied Australian society as well as sustaining a particular brand of socialism. The monograph before us, brief though it is, does help the reader to get to the essence of Arthur Calwell's thinking and achievements.

Stephen Holt is a Canberra historian. He is currently writing a biography of the Labor powerbroker Pat Kennelly.



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CALWELL