

A FABIAN judged by HISTORY

This short article is by the author of "How Labour Governs," the Study of Australian Labour politics reviewed in The PLEBS two or three months ago.

IN 1902 the Hon. W. Pember Reeves did good service to the Labour Movement here by giving a well-written and fair account of the sort of Fabian legislation inspired by the Labour movements in the Australian colonies and New Zealand, combined with a study of its results up to that date. His work undoubtedly possessed much of permanent value, but a verbatim reproduction of his twenty-year-old book—by a patent process in Saxony—seems hardly called for*. The epoch treated by Mr. Pember Reeves has in the interval been discussed with greater accuracy, richer documentation and deeper insight by Sir Timothy Coghlan, not to mention a host of cheaper and less verbose volumes. The use of the present tense in 1923 for the description of topographical and social conditions which were fast disappearing in 1902 is actually misleading.

In reading our author's delightfully written introductory account of Australia, a native of that Dominion is at once struck by the extraordinary changes that exploration, irrigation, and the expansion of agricultural settlement have wrought in the economic geography of the continent. Equally startling is the transformation that has come over the face of politics with the advance of the Labour Party. Andrew Fisher, E. G. Theodore, and others, have given the lie to the statement that Labour leaders, recruited from the unionist ranks, seldom show "shining talent or exceptional force."

But, for a critique on the judgments of a kindly Fabian faced after twenty years with the verdict of history, this book forms a treasure house of material invaluable to the student. The story of the Labour Party in Queensland is described as "picturesque" but "pathetic," because it failed to extort between 1891 and 1901 the grudging modicum of betterment legislation that its more opportunist brother party in New South Wales had received by bargaining. Yet, while the latter, despite repeated purgations, is still rendered impotent through the corruption and consequent internal strife which is the legacy of that epoch, the Queensland Labour Party, as a result of its more uncompromising policy in the past, gave birth

* *State Experiments in Australia and New Zealand.* By the Hon. W. Pember Reeves. (New Impression, 2 vols., 21s. Allen & Unwin).

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at length to a real Labour Government. The latter did more in a single year to improve the real status of the workers than thirty years of political diplomacy had achieved in other States and in New Zealand; and, surviving four general elections, it has established a record in longevity for the Pacific!

On the other hand the alliance in New Zealand between unionism and Liberalism which placed our author in office, is held up as the dawn of a new era. But its most prominent result was the creation—in the teeth, it is true, of bitter hostility from the great landowners and the merchant princes—of a numerous class of ultra-conservative small landowners and “cockroach” capitalists. In reliance on their votes the reactionary Massey Government has been able to rule the proletariat on approved American lines, with armed Pinkertons, ruthless conscription, and a censorship that excludes not only The PLEBS but even Brieux from the Dominion. In the hands of this class Pember Reeves’ crowning achievement, compulsory arbitration, has become a weapon for lending to yellow unions the backing of the State, as in the Waihi strike and the general strike of 1915. To-day the genuine unions, almost shattered by the instrument so thoughtfully devised for their moral elevation, have had to begin to build up a radical, almost Bolshevik, Labour Party whose leaders and sentiments would gravely offend the taste of gentlemanly Fabians.

And what of the high hopes entertained twenty years ago of Compulsory Arbitration? The forecasts have been fulfilled—partially and with reservations. The system has indeed won acceptance from the mass of the workers—but only as a safeguard against bad times; and by most employers—but only as a screen against strikes during boom years. It has—alas—often been proved that the Arbitration Court can “coerce” a striking union, but not that “it can force an employer to carry on business if he refuses to do so.” If a profit cannot be made under the terms of an Award, the employer shuts down his works, as the Broken Hill mine-owners did in 1921; and of course such inaction is not a “lock-out” against which the Court can intervene!

This book gives us an account of the work of the system (interrupted by the fact that the patent process has failed to reproduce six whole pages of Volume II!) during a period of rising markets. The author was conscious of the synchronism; yet he never paused to ask whether the real benefits conferred on the workers under Awards of the Court were anything but the reflex of the enhanced bargaining power given them by the trade revival. That it should seem profitable to reproduce such a work to-day is the best commentary on the value of the Fabians to the British Labour Movement.

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