

Jim Cairns dead at 89

# The rise and decline of an Australian Labor reformist

**Nick Beams**  
**14 October 2003**

The death last Sunday of the former deputy leader of the Australian Labor Party, Dr Jim Cairns, at the age of 89, sees the passing of a man who at one time was one of the most respected, even admired, figures in Australian political life.

During the political radicalisation of the 1960s many thousands of young people, this writer included, as well as significant numbers of workers and trade unionists, were followers of Jim Cairns. Quiet, but firmly spoken, he seemed to embody a deeply-held commitment to social equality, justice and opposition to all forms of racism, exploitation and war—principles which his supporters believed should form the basis of a program for the reshaping of society.

But it must be said that while Cairns' physical demise occurred just two days ago, his political death took place more than a quarter of a century earlier.

The year 1975 started with Cairns at the apparent peak of his political power occupying the posts of treasurer and deputy prime minister. By its end, following the sacking of the Whitlam government by the Governor-General Sir John Kerr in November and its subsequent defeat in the December election, Cairns was finished as a political figure. He remained in parliament until 1977, but then quit his seat and over the next 20 years or so was to be seen as a rather pathetic figure selling his self-published books at various markets in Melbourne.

To trace out the political career of Jim Cairns is to follow the rise and decay of the political program he represented—left social reformism—and its organic incapacity to address the two key questions of political life: the operation of the laws of the global capitalist economy and the ruthless power of the capitalist state apparatus. And it is to show how its advocates, above all those who are the most sincere in their beliefs, end up becoming crucial political props for the very forces they claim to oppose.

Jim Cairns was born in 1914 to a mother whose husband left for the war never to be seen again. Raised by his mother and his grandparents, Cairns absorbed the Methodist social outlook that formed a central part of their lives and what he was later to call the “universal human values that come through the Bible”.

A bright student and champion schoolboy athlete, he first took a job as a clerk before entering the Victorian police in 1935 and becoming a detective. Cairns began part-time university study, gaining a PhD and Master of Commerce from Melbourne University. After studying on a Nuffield scholarship at Oxford, he returned to Melbourne in 1951 and lectured on economic history. In 1955 he entered federal parliament.

From the outset, Cairns was associated with the “left” of the Labor Party which in the 1950s defined itself in opposition to the anti-communist Industrial Groups that were associated with Roman Catholic political operative B. A. Santamaria and Melbourne's Archbishop Mannix.

But Cairns' political outlook was not simply defined by his factional allegiance. In particular, he was an opponent of the racist White Australia immigration policy, which at that time was a foundation plank of Labor Party policy and firmly adhered to by both right and left wings.

During the political movements of the 1960s, particularly those associated with the opposition to the Vietnam War and Australian involvement in it, Cairns acquired a wide following. However, from the very outset he sought to ensure that opposition to the war remained within the framework of the Labor Party's program and parliamentary politics in general.

The issue of the Vietnam War acquired growing political significance in Australian political life after the decision in April 1965 by the Menzies Liberal government to commit troops to support the American presence. The ALP was as firmly committed to the American alliance as the Liberals—even more so as it had been forged in 1941 under the wartime Labor leader John Curtin.

Thus the Labor leaders asked no questions about the so-called Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964, the pretext used by the US to begin military operations against North Vietnam. In February 1965 Labor's Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee, of which Cairns was a member, issued a statement supporting American strikes against the North. The US report to the United Nations Security Council that air strikes in the south of North Vietnam were aimed at “resisting aggression” and that it “would not allow the situation to be changed by terror and violence” was “unexceptionable,” the committee declared.

Labor opposition to the war began to develop when Prime Minister Harold Holt sent conscripted troops to fight in 1966. However, in the election of that year Labor suffered a heavy defeat and Arthur Calwell stepped down from the Labor leadership to be replaced by Gough Whitlam.

Whitlam was determined to increase the control of the parliamentary leadership over the formulation of party policy. This brought him into conflict with the party apparatus, particularly the left-dominated Victorian branch. The issue flared when Tasmanian executive member, and now independent Senator, Brian Harradine was blocked from membership of the national executive. Harradine, who was widely accused of being aligned with Santamaria's Industrial Groups, declared that “friends of the Communists” were working to prevent him taking his place and supporting Whitlam.

Whitlam responded by resigning his position as leader and insisting that the parliamentary party endorse him and his drive to “reform” the Victorian branch. Cairns stood against him as the left candidate and the closeness of the vote—38 to 32—forced Whitlam to make something of a tactical retreat.

Whitlam's drive to “reform” the Labor Party took place under

conditions where political opposition to the Liberal government was rapidly growing, so much so that in the 1969 election the ALP won a majority of votes and only failed to win government by virtue of the distribution of parliamentary seats.

While opposition to the Vietnam War and the growing radicalisation of students and youth was taking place to a great extent outside the structures of the ALP, Labor “lefts,” together with members of the Communist Party of Australia, played a key role in formulating the demands of the antiwar movement. As a leading Labor figure, Cairns occupied a crucial position as chairman of the Victorian Vietnam Moratorium Committee and it was in that capacity that he led a 100,000-strong demonstration which blocked the centre of Melbourne in May 1970—at that time the largest protest march in the city’s history.

Cairns’ crucial role was to use his political authority to ensure that the antiwar movement remained within the confines of parliamentary politics. As he later explained, he wanted to bring the political parties “into line” with the mass opposition to the Vietnam War that had been revealed by the street demonstrations.

Whitlam’s biographer and onetime speechwriter Graham Freudenberg explained: “By taking charge of the popular protest, he [Cairns] ensured that it did not become purely a channel for anti-Americanism. Under his leadership, the Moratorium movement developed into the most sophisticated and disciplined instrument of popular protest ever fashioned in Australia.”

When the Labor government came to power in 1972 Cairns was made minister for trade and secondary industry and played something of a background role. But that was to change when he became deputy leader and then treasurer in 1974.

In December Cairns was introduced to Junie Morosi, a member of immigration minister Al Grassby’s staff. He appointed her to the position of office coordinator and she rapidly became his closest confidant. An immediate press campaign began insinuating impropriety in the relationship, which Cairns helped to fuel with a press interview during the ALP’s biennial conference in February 1975. Cairns told the media that he felt a “kind of love” for Morosi. In a radio interview last year he acknowledged that he had had an affair with Morosi.

Whatever the precise role Morosi played in what his closest colleagues regarded as the destabilisation of Cairns, it was politics, not personal relationships, that was central to his demise and that of the Labor government.

The Whitlam government had come to power committed to a program of social reforms, and amid expectations in the working class that after 23 years of rule by the Liberal governments there would be improvements in wages, social services and living standards. But the coming to power of the Labor government coincided with the break-up of the long post-war economic boom. In 1971 the foundations of the post-war international monetary system had been shattered with the removal of the gold backing from the US dollar, giving rise to a period of rapid inflation, intensified by the quadrupling of oil prices in 1973-4.

In the face of rising inflation, workers in all sections of industry embarked on a series of struggles for wage increases. The year 1974 recorded the highest level of strikes since the turbulence of 1919. By the beginning of 1975, Treasury officials were demanding the delivery of a “short, sharp shock” to the economy to bring down inflation by pushing up unemployment and curbing wages militancy.

Whitlam made it clear that there could not be a repeat of 1974 and wage demands had to be cut back. Unemployment was starting to rise and the growing crisis of the world economy saw the development of the deepest recession since the 1930s.

Cairns’ speech to the ALP’s federal conference was a confession of the bankruptcy of Labor reformism and its adherence to the capitalist economy and the system of private ownership and profit.

“At present,” Cairns told conference delegates, “the economy is determined by what happens in the private sector. The government has some power to determine the general level of economic activity, but the main powers lie in the private sector. The private sector is not only Australian, it is international. Despite our understandable and justified aspiration for a better society, we must now operate within the system.

“I am a socialist in that I believe in co-operation and equality, and I deplore avarice and aggressiveness. I know the capitalist system is exploitative and leaves many genuine desires of many people unfulfilled. I also know that the jobs of most of our people depend on private industry—much of it part of the multinational system. I know, therefore, that we must follow policies generally in the interests of the private sector.”

But pledges such as this were not enough. In June, Whitlam, anxious to demonstrate his willingness to implement the measures being demanded by Treasury officials and the big business and financial interests for whom they spoke, sacked Cairns as treasurer and Clyde Cameron, another “left”, from his position as Labour minister. In carrying out his purge, Whitlam was to use the same method that was employed against him just five months later—he had the Governor General Sir John Kerr remove the commissions of both his ministers.

Speaking to the Labor Party conference in his home state of Victoria in June, Cairns made clear his complete capitulation. There would have to be spending cuts no matter what government was in power and whoever was treasurer. Opposing any fight against the policies of Whitlam, and his use of the governor-general to carry out his purge, Cairns declared: “Whatever happens ... [we must] maintain unity and solidarity in the face of defeat for individuals and sections.”

Five months later when the Whitlam government itself was sacked in the infamous Canberra Coup of November 11, 1975, Cairns was already a spent force. Like all the other members of the government, he raised no opposition to Whitlam’s acceptance of the dismissal. Nor did he object to the trade union leaders who worked might and main to prevent the eruption of a general strike in the aftermath of the coup, fearing, in the words of the then Australian Council of Trade Unions president Bob Hawke, “the unleashing of forces the like of which we have never seen.” The capitalist state, in the form of the governor-general, had chosen to act, and the Labor reformists totally capitulated.

After the experiences of 1975, Cairns underwent a political reassessment. But like so many others before him, he concluded that his failure to change society lay not in his reformist politics but in the psychology of individuals. Turning to Freud and then to Wilhelm Reich and his theory that cultural and political problems arise from sexual repression, Cairns concluded that it was futile to try to change the structures of society and that it was necessary to start with the individual.

In an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1999 he explained that the “Old Left” had failed because it did not understand that “hegemony, the profound cultural supremacy, was not formed in the economic or political structures but in the family. We have to go back to families.” Or, as he explained in a radio interview last year, change had to come not from the outside but from the inside with the keys being “personal growth” and “personal transformation.”

Contained within Cairns’ life is the rise and collapse of the program of social reformism and the party that once espoused it.

Today, it is inconceivable that any figure in the Australian Labor Party could command the support which Cairns once enjoyed. The Labor leaders are either considered to be irrelevant or are regarded with deep hostility.

Cairns attracted support because of the program he was seen to embody—the construction of a society based on social equality and the ending of all forms of repression.

In the new epoch of the ruthless operation of the “free market” and the

launching of imperialist wars this perspective is more valid and necessary than ever. But Cairns' life is a demonstration of the fact that the era of piecemeal reforms is well and truly over and that it can only be realised through an independent political struggle for an international socialist program aimed at the complete overturn of the capitalist profit system.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**