

CONVICTION POLITICS: HOW CONVICTS SHAPED AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRACY AND THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

A/PROF TONY MOORE (MONASH UNIVERSITY) & DR MIKE DAVIS (GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY)

Associate Professor Tony Moore (Monash University) and Dr Mike Davis (Griffith University) give us an insight into the international digital history project 'Conviction Politics' (located in the Monash Arts School of Media, Film and Journalism). This project is researching the story of radicals and rebels who were transported to Australia as political prisoners and how they, and the many ordinary convicts who resisted the exploitation of their unfree labour, played an integral part in creating Australian democracy and our unionism.

This exciting new online resource for teachers, which melds well with many of the NSW syllabuses, will bring Australian history to life!

How did Australia go from being one of the least-free places on earth in the early nineteenth century to a country that was quite democratic by the 1860s? When did democracy actually begin in Australia? Why is it that a robust labour movement emerged early in Australia? For generations, the history books have provided the answers to these questions by pointing to the Eureka Rebellion in the 1850s, the strikes of the 1890s and Federation in 1901. Ignored is the contribution of the convicts, the *raison d'être* for Britain's annexation of the east coast of Australia, who were imported *en masse* to labour in the colonies.

But new research, funded by the Australian Research Council along with generous support from industry partners (notably the NSW Teachers Federation), is rewriting this chapter in Australian history. Newly digitised convict records reveal a very different story of Australian democracy, where from the early decades of settlement, Australia's first workforce resisted exploitation through inventive solidarity in the face of coercion, while a vanguard of transported rebels, industrial protesters and radical agitators changed the political direction of the colonies.

Led by Monash University's Associate Professor Tony Moore, the four-year interdisciplinary, international project called *Conviction Politics* brings together leading history, media studies and information technology academics, from Australian Catholic University, Griffith University, University of New South Wales and University

of New England as well as two international universities (University of South Wales and University College Dublin), media practitioners, archive collections, museums, and unions spanning Australia, the United Kingdom and Ireland. As well as the NSW Teachers Federation, partners on the project include Roar Film, the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, the Trade Union Education Foundation, Libraries Tasmania, the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union and the National Museum of Australia. UK partners are the Trades Union Congress, the People's History Museum and the Scottish Records Office.

The project connects collective convict protest to the early development of political and social democracy in colonial Australia, as well as to the emergence of trade unionism, documenting, for the first time the extent and character of convict activism. It especially offers fresh perspectives on the role of 'political' transportees in the mobilisation of the wider convict and free population for reform.

The familiar view is that the convicts sent to Australia were petty thieves and uneducated scoundrels, the criminal and unwanted citizens of Britain sent to the fringes of the known world. But arriving with the criminals were about 3900 political convicts transported for their involvement in political movements in Britain who have been largely forgotten in Australian history.

One of the first political prisoners sent to Australia was Thomas Muir, a young Scottish lawyer who was convicted of sedition in 1793 for advocating universal suffrage and the reform of the British parliament. He was transported to New South Wales for 14 years. Before making a daring escape from the colony, and eventually finding his way back to Europe, Muir argued that he and four other convicts, transported for political crimes at the same time, had the rights of free Britons in the colony. With this, the seeds of freedom and democracy were planted in Australia.

Many other political convicts were to follow. Among them were Luddites who smashed machines to protest against factory wages and working conditions and to assert greater control over their labour. Others included disenfranchised agricultural workers who demonstrated against mechanisation and harsh working conditions, early trade unionists, including the Tolpuddle Martyrs transported for forming a union of agricultural labourers, and Irish rebels demanding self-determination.

Many British working-class political reformers from the late 1830s to 1850s, known as Chartists, were transported to Australia. They brought with them radical ideas about freedom and democracy. One of them was John Frost, a leader at the ill-fated Newport Rising in South Wales, who from his exile in Australia, became a leading campaigner for the anti-transportation movement. Another was London tailor William Cuffay, the son of a West Indian slave accused of plotting an uprising following parliament's rejection of the Chartist petition in 1848. Transported for levying war on Her Majesty, Cuffay became a crusading Tasmanian union leader who helped reform the draconian Masters and Servants Act (1867).

The Chartists are considered a failed movement in their home country, but their ideas thrived in Australia, which was one of the first countries in the world to introduce the secret ballot, the right to vote for men and payment for members of parliament – all Chartist demands. Indeed, the democratic reforms demanded by the Ballarat Reform League mirror the six points of the Charter – unsurprising given the number of Chartist immigrants and other liberal reform movements, notably Young Ireland revolutionaries, who were present on the

gold fields and in the Eureka Stockade protest. The colonial constitutions and subsequent reforms achieved in the late 1850s and 1860s in NSW and Victoria, that extended male franchise, bear the marks of Chartism, while the Selection Acts, providing small land grants, are influenced by the Young Ireland program. Peter Lalor, the leader at Eureka, was brother of Young Ireland theorist James Finton Lalor, while Young Ireland women, led by activist Anastasia Hayes, sewed the Southern Cross Flag flying at the stockade. One Young Ireland prisoner, medical student Kevin O'Doherty, became Queensland's first health minister, campaigning against the kidnapping of Torres Strait Islanders to work as indentured slave labour in that colony's plantations.

The dispossession of Australian Indigenous people was criticised by political exiles pledged to decolonisation, such as the Young Ireland movement. Our project's transnational frame connects capitalist commodification of land and criminalisation of customary ways of life in both the old and colonial world. We interrogate an imperial system that transported landless labour from Britain and the British Imperial world in order to facilitate the integration of land, seized from indigenous people, into the settler capitalist economy. Convicted First Nations resistors, such as 'Musquito' and 'Bulldog' from Australia; Māori from Aotearoa/New Zealand, such as Hohepa Te Umuroa, and Khoisan from the Cape Colony such as Booy Piet are, therefore, an important cohort of political prisoners.

The project will also look at the 160,000 ordinary convicts who represent a mass transportation of unfree labour, akin to plantation slavery in the Americas, deployed in the Australian colonies to build their infrastructure and to toil 'on assignment' for employers. Many of these convicts were politicised and struggled for their rights. Faced with harsh conditions, limited food, punishment and unpaid labour, many convicts engaged in collective action as a means of resistance. Such is the persistence of a nineteenth century ideology that we term 'Convictism', justifying exploitation on the basis of inherent criminality (just as racism was deployed to justify plantation racism in America), that in the 2020 debate about colonial-era slavery in Australia, the bondage of convicts to masters and the imperial state barely rated a mention.

Research by project investigators Michael Quinlan and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart has revealed that convicts were tried in the colonies for 400,000 acts of resistance, many of them for work-related dissent. Absconding, strikes and refusing to work were common among the convict population. Some even tried to escape as a form of protest and a way of resisting government authority. Most significantly, the project has discovered that convicts were forming combinations, approximating trade unions, for collective bargaining as early as the 1820s – considerably backdating unionism’s emergence in Australia.

Conviction Politics maps the patterns of resistance and political impact of tens of thousands of working men and women coerced into one of the largest forced global labour migrations in human history. This is the untold story of our democracy and the fair go. It needs to be promoted and understood, especially by the young and by those alienated by the current political orthodoxies and by the precarious working conditions they produce. The project will demonstrate, through both hard empirical data and engaging, innovative storytelling, that Australian egalitarianism and the rights we take for granted were achieved by the willingness of many thousands to resist unfair laws and to bravely endure martyrdom, sacrificing their own freedom and sometimes their lives.

Most political and ordinary convicts were young, and some used the new media of their day (songs, pamphlets, stories, cartoons, banners, poetry, badges, posters, novels, memoirs and even tattoos!) to communicate idealistic ideas such as freedom of speech and assembly, strength in unity, working class political participation and national self-determination free of empires. *Conviction Politics* harnesses the new digital media of today to communicate these still potent ideas to a wide audience, and especially to young Australians and those who teach them. In collaboration with the Tasmanian media production house, Roar Film, the project has produced an online ‘transmedia’ text and audio-visual Hub. This Hub links partners and presents, to the public, the project’s discoveries in the form of mini-documentaries, original songs, digitised archive material and data visualisations. You can see the Hub’s trailer [here](#).

Harnessing the powerful content of the online Hub, the development of resources for school and worker education is an integral part of the project. Importantly for teachers, *Conviction Politics*’ Hub now makes available over 60 short documentaries, 8 original songs, 24 long reads, over 110 short reads, and a treasure trove of images. We invite you to peruse this content [here](#). You can view a video walkthrough of the Hub, explain its functionality and scope [here](#).

Content already available on the Hub features original music composed and performed by Conviction Politics Musical Director Mick Thomas, and Melbourne’s all-female Ladychoir, including Tess Hildebrand-Burke, Kirsty Joosten, Emma Heeney, Sophie Koh and Angie Hart.

Some of the experts and descendants of convicts interviewed for our digital stories include: Senior Economist Alison Pennington; data researcher Dr Monika Schwarz; project academic investigators Tony Moore, Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, Michael Quinlan, Mike Davis and Nick Carter; Tasmanian academics Kristyn Harman and Greg Lehman; media personality and Irish rebel descendant Steve Vizard; ACTU Assistant Secretary Scott Connolly; author Tom Keneally, and singer Billy Bragg.

The *Conviction Politics* Hub was successfully launched at the end of 2021 at Monash University in Melbourne by ACTU Secretary Sally McManus and at the People’s History Museum in Manchester by Trades Union Congress South West Regional Secretary Dr Nigel Costley ([watch here](#)). The launches were part of the *UK/Australia Season 2021-22*, a prestigious cultural and educational exchange programme between the UK and Australia, organised by the British Council and Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The launches received substantial media attention, with articles in the *Manchester World* ([see here](#)) and the *Byline Times* ([see here](#)). Tony Moore was interviewed on ABC radio Melbourne and Hobart, radio 6PR Perth, and National Radio News, with additional material on the project appearing on WIN-TV Hobart. Monash University *Lens* also published a substantial multimedia article about the project ([see here](#)).

Our team will continue to add more documentaries, text, images, and music to the Hub, and will be working with the NSW Teachers Federation to design curated pathways through the content for teaching and learning modules relevant to the primary and secondary school curricula *and syllabuses*. This work will connect Australian colonial history to the great reform and revolutionary movements sweeping the world, and embed the convict experience within the story of imperial dispossession, labour exploitation and its discontents.

Conviction Politics also includes content linking the experience of political transportees and convicts to issues in contemporary Australia, such as unfair labour laws, insecure work, automation, growing inequality, encroachment on human rights such as free speech and right to strike, increasing surveillance, and movements for decolonisation such as campaigns for Indigenous sovereignty, and for an Australian republic.

The project's [Sensilab team](#) has also been developing a series of convict lifeline visualisations. Bringing together information from various digitised and transcribed sources like conduct records, marriage registers, trial records or freedom certificates, these aim to present a convict's life course in one visualisation. Project researcher Monika Schwarz has also been leading the development of a completely new analysis of Female Factories, prisons where female convicts laboured and lived together. By looking at incidents of repeated collaborative action, such as work stoppages, escapes, and riots, we can treat these incidents and their participants as a social network, connected with a larger network of resistance. The records kept by the colonial bureaucracy inadvertently reveal how these networks of women were organising themselves against the system.

Project investigators Hamish Maxwell-Stewart and Michael Quinlan have also recently published a groundbreaking book entitled *Unfree Workers: Insubordination and Resistance in Convict Australia 1788-1860* (published by Palgrave Macmillan, e-book available [here](#)).

This new work explores the role that penal transportation played in the development of capitalism in Australia and for the first time reveals the many ways in which the active collective resistance of convicts shaped both workplace relations and institutions, helping to forge an activist labour movement.

A travelling Conviction Politics Digital Exhibition will be inaugurated in 2024 at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and subsequently hosted at the NSW Teachers Federation.

More information can be found on the Conviction Politics website:

<https://www.monash.edu/arts/media-film-journalism/conviction-politics>

Multimedia Hub:

<https://convictionpolitics.web.app/>

Please contact Conviction Politics, with your feedback, and ideas for documentaries, local convict stories, and for class projects email project manager Isabel Lu (Isabel.lu@monash.edu).

APPENDIX 1

OTHER RESOURCES TO OBTAIN FOR YOUR SCHOOL'S LIBRARY INCLUDE:

- ***Tony Moore's lively book Death or Liberty: rebels and radicals transported to Australia 1788-1868***, Allen and Unwin/Murdoch Books, is available at <https://www.murdochbooks.com.au/browse/books/history/Death-or-Liberty-Tony-Moore-9781741961409>
- ***The ABC screen documentary adaptation Death or Liberty produced*** by Roar Film <https://www.roarfilm.com.au/projects/death-or-liberty/>. To be purchased at <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/deathorliberty>.
- ***Unfree Workers: Insubordination and Resistance in Convict Australia 1788-1860*** is available at <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-981-16-7558-4>.

PROJECT PERSONNEL

Chief Investigators:

- Tony Moore (Monash University)
- Hamish Maxwell-Stewart (University of New England)
- Michael Quinlan (University of New South Wales)
- Nick Carter (Australian Catholic University)
- Mike Davis (Griffith University)
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Partner Investigator:

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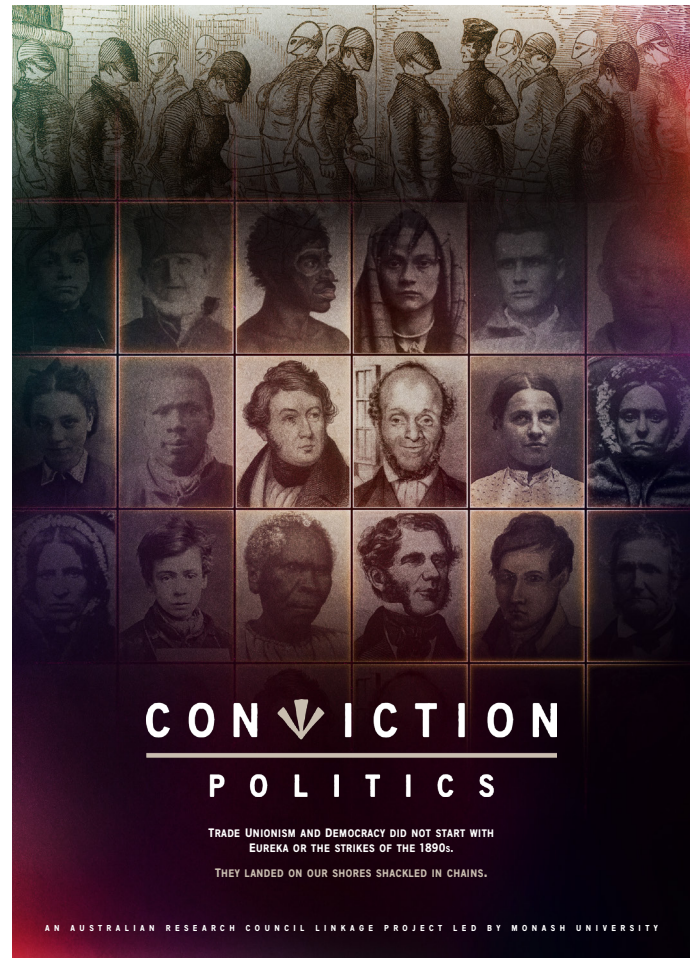
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Project Flyer ([download here](#))



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



A/PROF TONY MOORE

Associate Professor Tony Moore is Associate Professor of Communications and Media Studies at Monash University and former Director of its National Centre for Australian Studies. Tony is author of the critically acclaimed *Dancing with Empty Pockets: Australia's Bohemians since 1868* (2012), *Death or Liberty: Rebels and Radicals Transported to Australia 1788 – 1868* (2010), adapted as a TV documentary (2015) and *The Barry McKenzie Movies* (2005). Tony is lead investigator on the ARC Discovery Project *Fringe to Famous: Australian culture as an innovation system* (2014) and the ARC Linkage Project *Conviction Politics: the convict routes of Australian democracy* (2019): <https://www.convictionpolitics.net>

Tony was specialist consultant on the major exhibition *Bohemian Melbourne*, held at State Library Victoria 2014-15 <https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/search-discover/galleries/bohemian-melbourne>

He is a former ABC TV documentary maker and commissioning editor at Pluto Press and Cambridge University Press. His documentaries include *Bohemian Rhapsody: rebels of Australian culture*, *TimeFrame history of ASIO*, *Lost in Space: Australians in their cities* and *Nobody's Children*.



DR MIKE DAVIS

Dr. Mike Davis is Senior Lecturer of History at Griffith University in the School of Humanities, Languages and Social Science. Prior to joining Griffith University in 2012, he held appointments at the University of Tasmania and The University of Queensland. His publications include *Crowd Actions in Britain and France: From the Middle Ages to the Modern World* (2015); *Liberty, Property and Popular Politics: England and Scotland, 1688-1815* (2015); and *Political Trials in an Age of Revolutions: Britain and the North Atlantic, 1793-1848* (2019).