

Social Reform in Melbourne: Past, Present and Future

The Salvation Army Melbourne Project 614,

Level 1, 69 Bourke Street, Melbourne

Program: 4 September 2026

Melbourne has been a crucible of social reform since the gold rush era of the 1850s, from the eight-hour movement and struggle for land reform through later movements concerned with unemployment, urban life and housing provision, working conditions and wages, planning and the environment, anti-poverty and community development, the rights of women and First Nations peoples, and multiculturalism and migrant justice. The aim of this one-day symposium is to explore social reform in Melbourne in its various dimensions, reflecting on how social and political change has been achieved in the past, and what such experiences have to offer to reformers today and in the future.

Program

Registration from 8.30am

Session 1 (9.00-9.30): Opening and welcome

- Welcome to Country
- Introduction

Professor Frank Bongiorno (Director, Vice-Chancellor's Centre of Public History, University of Canberra)

Major Brendan Nottle, Commanding Officer, Salvation Army

(9.30-11.00) Session 2: Colonial Foundations (1850-1900)

This session will explore early social reform movements and discuss their continuing legacy in struggles for labour rights, fair wages and gender justice.

Chair: Frank Bongiorno

- Shorter hours: the long struggle (Sean Scalmer, University of Melbourne)
- Getting equal: Women's rights and reform movements, 1850-1900 – Zoe Smith, University of New South Wales (Zoe Smith, University of New South Wales)
- Labourism and the Common Good: The Colonial Labour Movement as Australia's Democratic Post-Liberal Tradition (Nick Dyrenfurth, John Curtin Research Centre)

Morning Tea (11.00-11.30)

Session 3 (11.30-12.45): Then and Now (The Salvation Army and Social Reform)

This session will compare the Salvation Army's activities in two eras of social reform: the Federation era, when it began its activities at 69 Bourke Street, and the present, when the Salvation Army continues to provide services to 500 people a day from the same building alongside other activities in support of those experiencing homelessness.

Participating Chair: Bill Shorten, Vice-Chancellor and President, University of Canberra

- 'The Salvation Army - The Melbourne Way Pt 1 (John Cleary)
- 'The Salvation Army - The Melbourne Way Pt 2 (Brendan Nottle)

Lunch (12.45-1.30)

Session 4 (1.30-3.15) Industrial Society and the Quality of Life

Here, we examine how social reform movements responded to the emergence of a mature industrial and commercial society in Melbourne in the twentieth century, focusing on the history and legacy of movements concerned with alleviating urban poverty and unemployment. How did social reform in this period recast the very image of the city, moving it away from the developmental ethos associated with peak industrialisation to new patterns of urban living?

Chair (TBA)

- 'I was a stranger and you took me in': Social Christianity and Housing Reform in Melbourne (Graeme Davison, Monash University)
- The problem of poverty (Shurlee Swain, Australian Catholic University)
- By-Laws and Better Behaviour: Melbourne's Quiet Progressive Era (Andrew May, University of Melbourne)
- Migrants, Multiculturalism and Melbourne (Alexandra Dellios, Australian National University)

Afternoon Tea (3.15-3.45)

Session 5: (3.45-5.15) The Present and Future of Reform

Chair (TBA)

- Truth-Telling Before 1770 (Lynette Russell, Monash University)
- Is Social Democracy Finished? Democracy, Inequality and the Battle for Australia's Future (Hon. Kim Carr)
- What does social justice mean now? (Mark Zirnsak, Uniting Church in Australia)

Conveners:

Bill Shorten

Brendan Nottle

Frank Bongiorno