

JOHN CAIN (CANE) SENIOR (1882-1957)

Hardworking fruit seller becomes Victorian Premier

John Cain Sr was born John Cane to parents Patrick and Julia Cane in Greendale near Bacchus Marsh in 1882. He was the eldest of five children.

Early in John's life, tragedy struck when his hardworking father died. John was then sent to live with relatives. John rarely spoke of his childhood or family life and changed his name to Cain and his religion from Catholic to Anglican. After gaining a strong reputation for hard work by farmers who employed him after he left school at 13, he moved to Northcote. There he sold fruit and rabbits door to door until he opened his own fruit shop in 1911.

While working in the Goulburn Valley, John had taken an interest in politics and union issues and became known as outspoken in his views. As a small businessman, John became active in the Victorian Socialist Party and developed a friendship with John Curtin, who was later to become Australian Prime Minister. A few years later John joined the Australian Labour Party and unsuccessfully tried for a place in parliament.

John realised that he needed to prepare himself if he wanted a political career, so he sold his shop and took on various union positions becoming a strong anti-conscriptionist during WWI. In 1917, he was elected to the Legislative Assembly as member for Jika Jika and his political career was established. He held that seat for 40 years.

During the Depression years, John was minister for railways, which included responsibility for

electrical workers. He was also vice president of the Board of Land and Works.

In 1926, John had married Dorothea Grindrod, a successful businesswoman who owned five milliner's shops. John was 44 at the time of his marriage. Dorothea proved to be a wonderful partner and a great supporter of John's career. They had two children, John Cain Jr (later Premier of Victoria) and Dorothea Joan.

John senior was Premier of Victoria three times, the first time for only four days and for two years between 1945 and 1947 and again in 1952-1955; with a majority in both houses.

As the political agenda became increasingly fraught over the years, John became involved in many political intricacies. The 'Labor Party Split' in 1955 saw the fall of the third Cain government and Liberal party member Henry Bolte became premier.

John died in Townsville in 1957 while leader of the opposition and was accorded a state funeral at Preston Cemetery.



John Cain Sr, 1954

Find out more

McMullin, R. *The Light on the Hill: the Australian Labour Party 1891-1991*, (1991)

Murray, R. *The Split*, (1970)

White, K. *John Cain and Victorian Labour 1917-1957*, (1982)



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Jan is a professional historian who has worked across the fields of heritage, education and tourism. She has taught at several universities, including Monash University where she delivered the master of public history course. She is also a former Chair of the Heritage Council of Victoria. Jan was appointed to The Greater Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust in 2010.



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