

Optimised Study Guide — The Great Depression in Australia

Optimised, exam-focused study guide for the Great Depression in Australia (Unit 3, Elective 1, Component C03-U3E1). Grounded in the 2020–2025 SCSA exams and marking keys, especially the recurring "impact on different groups" essays (2020 Q3, 2023 Q2), the 2023 Q3 on the 1931 Labor Split, and the 2024 Q2 on the Bruce-Page government. Covers the onset and causes, the impact on different social groups, competing economic responses (Premiers' Plan, Theodore, Lang), the 1931 Labor Split, and political radicalisation. Leads with exam priorities and marking-key expectations.

The Great Depression hit Australia harder than almost any other developed nation — and it hit unevenly. This is the most reliably examined Australian topic: questions ask you either to *assess the impact on different groups* or to explain the political earthquake it triggered, the *1931 Labor Split*. Organise your knowledge for both.

Two marking-key steers that decide marks. (1) For the recurring impact essay (2020 Q3, 2023 Q2): the focus must be the **impact**, **NOT the causes**, you must reference a **minimum of two groups**, and top answers stress that **groups were not affected equally**. (2) For the 1931 Labor Split essay (2023 Q3): give both the **reasons** (the clash over how to handle the Depression) and the **consequences** (the ALP's collapse and a decade out of power).

How this content is examined

- **Essays.** "Impact on different groups," "reasons for and consequences of the Labor Split," and "extent to which Bruce-Page policies shaped Australia's Depression experience" (2024 Q2).
- **Source analysis.** Photographs of the unemployed, the susso, or eviction need precise contextual knowledge.

Answer the verb. Examine/Assess the impact = investigate and judge effects (here, by group) — not causes. **Assess the reasons and consequences** = give both halves and judge their significance. **Analyse the extent** = weigh how far a factor was responsible.

1. The impact on different groups (the staple essay)

Choose at least two and stress the inequality of suffering:

- **The unemployed (worst hit).** Unemployment reached around **30% (roughly one in three)** by 1932. Relief — the **susso** (sustenance) — varied by state and was meagre. Men "jumped the rattler" (rode freight trains) searching for work; **evictions** were common and **homeless camps** appeared around cities.
- **Women.** A **double burden**: stretching scarce resources as homemakers, and sometimes becoming the breadwinner (women were cheaper to employ); central to holding families and communities together.
- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.** Already the most disadvantaged; suffered increased unemployment yet were **excluded from dole payments** in many states — deepening inequality.
- **Middle class and wealthy.** Less severely affected; many small businesses failed, but the rich "carried on much as before," and some even profited by hiring desperate workers at low wages — highlighting Australia's inequity.
- **Political groups.** Radicalisation at both ends — the **Lang Laborites** on the left and the paramilitary **New Guard** on the right. (The ALP counts as a "group" for this question.)

2. Competing economic responses

- **The Premiers' Plan / Melbourne Agreement (1930–31):** PM Scullin and the premiers accepted **Sir Otto Niemeyer's** (Bank of England) **deflationary** medicine — cut spending, cut wages, keep paying British debts.
- **"Red Ted" Theodore:** argued for **inflation** — printing money to stimulate demand (blocked in the Senate).
- **NSW Premier Jack Lang:** radically rejected paying **interest on British loans** ("the Lang Plan").

3. The 1931 Labor Split

- **Reasons:** the ALP tore itself apart over these incompatible responses. **Lyons** (pro-Niemeyer) resigned from cabinet and, with others, joined the Nationalists to form the **United Australia Party (UAP)**. On the left, supporters of Lang broke away as **Lang Labor**.
- **Consequences:** Lang Labor joined the opposition in a **no-confidence motion** that brought down Scullin's government, forcing the **December 1931 election**. The ALP was crushed; **Lyons became PM (UAP), governing 1932–39**. Labor stayed out of federal power until Curtin in 1941.

4. Historical perspectives

- **Deflation vs stimulus:** did orthodox austerity (the Premiers' Plan) deepen and prolong the Depression, or was it unavoidable given Australia's debt and dependence on Britain?
- **How responsible was government?** The 2024 question asks how far Bruce-Page (and successors') policies shaped the experience — versus global forces beyond Australia's control.

5. Recurring exam question patterns & what high answers do

- **"Assess the impact on different groups."** High answers: cover several groups, stress unequal impact, stay on *impact* not causes.
- **"Assess the reasons for and consequences of the Labor Split."** High answers: link the split directly to the economic-policy clash, then trace the political fallout.
- **"Analyse the extent to which Bruce–Page policies shaped the experience."** High answers: weigh domestic policy against global causes.

Recall self-test. Can you:

- Describe the impact on the unemployed, women, Aboriginal people and the wealthy — stressing inequality?
- Define susso, "jumping the rattler," the New Guard and Lang Labor?
- Contrast the three economic responses (Premiers' Plan/Niemeyer, Theodore, Lang)?
- Explain the reasons for the 1931 Labor Split and name the new parties (UAP, Lang Labor)?
- Trace the consequences to the December 1931 election and Lyons's government?
- Argue both the deflation and stimulus interpretations, and weigh government vs global responsibility?