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Labour History November 2009 featured six articles in a special issue devoted to anti-union employer strategies; also an article by Brad Bowden looking into an example of employer support for union formation in Brisbane 1857-90; the Cairns Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander Advancement League (by Sue Taffe); the Australian Left's support for the creation of the State of Israel, 1947-48; and a further article reassessing the 1919 Melbourne waterfront strike. Conference reports, book reviews etc filled out the remainder of the 272-page volume. The May 2010 journal includes papers giving an historical analysis of the relationship of social democratic parties and business, and the November 2010 will publish articles based on papers presented at the recent **Red Green and In-between** conference held by the Brisbane Labour History Association.

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Editorial

Jeff Rickertt

As John Howard prepares to assume the leadership of world cricket, *The Queensland Journal of Labour History* continues to put runs on the board, achieving with this issue what Howard the cricket tragic never could: double figures. On the occasion of our 10th edition, we raise our bat to the many contributors and BLHA stalwarts who made this milestone possible.

Labour history is a broad field, encompassing all facets of working class experience, the economic and social relations which underscore that experience, and the industrial, political and cultural achievements of working people. This issue of the journal captures some of this diversity, while also highlighting the link between past and present. With tensions currently rising between unions and the ALP at both state and federal level, Danielle Miller offers a timely article on the relationship between Labor leaders and the Labor Party, using Queensland premiers Ryan and Gair as case studies. Readers can decide for themselves which of these giants of Queensland labour history represents the closest parallel to our current premier.

Moving to the industrial sphere, my article on the early unionising of Australia's telephonists draws attention to the particular difficulties confronting workers in service industries and Government employment. Long before the rise of call centres, these pioneers of telephony overcame bullying, sweatshop conditions and management use of sexism as a divide and rule strategy, to form a national union which was able to win significant and lasting improvements in working conditions.

If telephonists' employment relations often turned on the issue of gender, the story of Aboriginal labour in Queensland exposes some of the most vicious racism imaginable. Ros Kidd's article lays bare the decades of abuse, exploitation and theft perpetrated against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, often by the very authorities that were charged with responsibility for their welfare. The resulting deprivation continues to this day, for as Kidd reminds us, successive governments, including the current incumbents, have refused to repay what is lawfully owed.

In this issue we review two books, as well as the *Flames of Discontent*

segment at the Woodford Folk Festival and the recent Red Green Conference, convened jointly by the BLHA and Griffith University to examine how the labour movement can and should respond to the global climate emergency. We honour two tireless activists for peace and justice: Connie Healy and Joan Shears. And we say farewell to two comrades who died recently: Mt Isa's most famous Wobbly, Pat Mackie, and socialist and acclaimed folk singer-songwriter, Alistair Hulett.

News of the loss of two other comrades arrived as this issue went into production. Jeannie O'Connor,

communist, poet, matriarch and stalwart of the Seamen's Union of Australia Women's Committee, died in February. We are also deeply saddened by the death of Ross Laurie. A longstanding member and supporter of the BLHA, Ross was a gifted historian and teacher and a partisan of many progressive causes over the decades.

On a personal note, this is my first issue as journal co-editor with Dale Jacobsen. The journal is one of the BLHA's most important contributions to the study of labour history and I look forward to working with Dale and the BLHA community to build on what has been achieved already.

BLHA

President's Column

Greg Mallory

As I write this column full preparation is underway for the 'Red, Green and In-between conference'. I would like to thank the red-green committee (of which I am a member), Janis Bailey, Dale Jacobsen and Ross Gwyther, for all their hard work in organising what is shaping up to be a major event. I would also like to thank the sponsors

and speakers and presenters. A report of the conference is included in this issue..

AGM and BLHA Executive

A new Executive was elected at our AGM in December. We have a number of new members, a blend of youth

and experience. Congratulations to the new members, John Spreckley, Avalon Kent, Doug Devonshire, Jeff Rickertt and Danielle Miller. Bob Reed continues in the position of Vice-President and Jason Stein now holds positions of Secretary and Treasurer. I would like to thank Dale Jacobsen for her work as Secretary over the years. Dale will stay on as journal editor.

Events

The BLHA *Flames of Discontent* event at the Woodford Folk Festival, the launching of the Don Henderson CD, was a great occurrence with the ‘cream’ of the Woodford musicians performing. Plans are already underway for another major exciting event at Woodford next year. The Alex Macdonald Memorial lecture will be held in June and the Executive is considering a number of speakers. It is also envisaged that a number of our members will present their research work at an afternoon seminar later in the year.

Federal Matters

At the AGM of the ASSLH, held in November in Sydney, I was elected to an Executive position. Previously I held the position of Brisbane Branch representative. Julie Kimber from Melbourne was elected to an Executive position as well and this is the first time non-Sydney members have been elected to these positions. I am also to continue on as Federal Branch Liaison

Officer and I have taken responsibility for organising a Constitutional Committee to review Federal and all branch constitutions. I have asked Bob Reed to be a member of this committee. Jason Stein will take on the role of Brisbane Branch representative on the Federal Executive.

Thanks Again

I once again wish to thank members who have given great support to the BLHA over the years. I would in particular like to thank ‘Uncle’ Bob Anderson, ‘Snowy’ Heilbron and George Britten, who have hardly missed a BLHA event since 2000.

* * *

In Memoriam

Pat Mackie 1914-2009



Pat Mackie died on 14 November 2009 in a Sydney nursing home. He was aged 95. Pat is remembered for his role in the Mt Isa dispute of 1964-65, but had a life-long involvement with the union movement as a rank and file militant in numerous places around the world.

Pat was born in New Zealand on 14 October 1914. His father was Australian. Pat went to sea very early in his life, mainly because he wanted

to get to America. However, from 1934 to 1949, the many difficulties he encountered along the way took him to numerous places: back to New Zealand, Australia, Panama, Tahiti, Hamburg, London, Antwerp, Mexico, Vancouver, Montreal and New York. During these times he not only threw himself into intense union activity, but married, fell in love a number of times and wrestled professionally. One of Pat's most notable achievements was, in 1946, to be the Captain of Picket Captains on the New York waterfront during a lengthy strike. The pickets encountered police on horses trained to rear up at them and the police viciously swung batons at the picketers. Armed gangsters were paid to go to the picket line to start fights. The unionists threw marbles under the legs of the poor horses in order to counter these gruesome charges and the picketers held their own against the thugs and gangsters.

In many parts of the world Pat had various differences with the police which led him to spend time in jail on numerous occasions. His final year in North America was spent in a number of Montreal prisons on charges indirectly

related to his union activities. Pat was deported to New Zealand but in 1949 ended up in Sydney. He heard there was money to be made from mining at Mt Isa and he decided to work his way up from Sydney. He stopped off in Brisbane and worked as a painter for a few weeks after obtaining the job through the union based at the Brisbane Trades Hall. An incident with the Brisbane police triggered his early departure to Bundaberg. In Bundaberg he observed police pushing around and arresting an Aboriginal man. When he followed the police to their station to complain to the sergeant of the brutality handed out to the Aborigine, he was threatened with arrest. Pat claims that it was the most brutal act towards a fellow human being that he had ever encountered despite himself having been the subject of arrest from a number of the world's police forces. This is an interesting observation of racism in Queensland in the post-war years.

Pat arrived in Mt Isa in 1950 and worked for Mount Isa Mines (MIM) but was soon labelled a trouble-maker and decided to go out of the town and mine independently. He did this for over 10 years and despite having various ups and downs was able to make a reasonable living. His dream was to save up enough money to build a Tahiti Ketch, a small boat that would take him sailing around the world. Pat would often visit Mt Isa to pick up supplies and became a local identity. Another interesting aspect to this period of Pat's life was his name

actually becoming Pat Mackie. He was originally a Murphy, became Eugene Markey, Pat Markey and eventually Pat Mackie. The reasons for all these changes are too involved to go in to here, but a lot had to do with misspelling of his names on pay slips, and the way he entered a number of countries.

Pat was re-employed by MIM in 1961 and became embroiled in the bitter dispute in 1964. Pat became a house-hold name in Australia for his involvement in this dispute. It was a fiercely bitter battle, starting off with a dispute over working conditions, ie the state of the showers, and escalating into wage demands. Pat was not only 'sacked' from his employer MIM, but also from his own union, the AWU. However, he had the support of the 4000 workers and the community, and the dispute lasted nine months. He was attacked in Parliament (State and Federal) and attempts were made to deport him. The Queensland State Government instituted a 'state of emergency' which seriously attacked civil liberties in Mt Isa. Pat had to be smuggled back into the town after one of his 'southern tours'. Pat went on various speaking tours to southern cities and towns and was escorted around Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane by wharfies and members of the ALP Left, including Jim Cairns. He also had involvement with Clyde Cameron and the Council for Membership Control (CMC) of the AWU, being involved in setting up a branch in Mt Isa. The dispute was settled in April 1965 and

the workers made some considerable gains, but Mackie and 44 other miners were never to be re-employed. Mackie left Mt Isa in April. In his book, *Mount Isa: Story of a Dispute*, he describes the resolution as ‘a triumph of the human spirit’.

Elizabeth Vassilieff, in the Preface to the book, *Many Ships to Mt Isa*, gives an excellent description of Pat Mackie’s attributes.

He sees his own needs very simply, voices them fearlessly and becomes a phenomenally effective workers’ spokesman and trade union organiser, a power to be reckoned with in the industrial world. His strength lies in his formidable combination of his magnetic personality with high abilities in three functions of leadership: in clearly analysing the workers situations; in democratising their organization; and in brilliant powers of oratory, enabling him to unite the rank and file and fire them with unshakeable loyalty. He becomes the object of punishing hostility from all the forces of the establishment, union bureaucrats as well as employers, who feel their interests threatened by his existence

Pat was a unionist who was not frightened to use ‘direct action’ tactics in disputes. As Pat says when discussing some of the tactics used in disputes in New York, which included pouring excess soap into washing machines in a laundry where cheap labour was

employed, so that the next morning the whole building was covered in soap suds:

I had to live and work there, especially on the east coast and New York, to grasp the fierce reality of the class struggle and to know how ruthless the employers are, constantly on the attack against workers’ conditions and wages, and the need for the never-ending day to day fight with no holds barred, for workers to maintain what standards they achieve.

Pat was a member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, the Wobblies) and it is evident that his style of union activism and organisation was in line with the wobbly tradition. He was a unionist first and foremost. He worked with communists; at one stage nearly joined the Canadian party. He maintained a position against forces that tried to eradicate communists from the union movement. However, when confronted as to his ideological position, he would clearly define himself as a wobbly, working tirelessly to improve the working and living conditions of the rank and file.

Pat was well known for his distinctive red cap and in 2007 a Queensland musical celebrated his achievements and was called *Red Cap*.

Greg Mallory

Alistair Hulett – Scottish Singer and Socialist



Alistair Hulett performing at Woodford Folk Festival, 2008. Photo Doug Eaton

In 2008, the BLHA proudly welcomed Alistair Hulett to the *Flames of Discontent* concert at Woodford Folk Festival. As one of the defining voices in Scottish folk music with a sense of social awareness, we knew he would do us proud.

Alistair has been involved in folk music from the mid-sixties, and considered himself a Socialist in the Marxist tradition, believing that the way forward in society was for the producers to take control of the means of production – for the Working Class to take political and economic power.

He truly was the voice of the people, and will be sadly missed. He passed away on 28 January after a brief battle with cancer.

A moving tribute by his friend Dave Rovics can be viewed at: <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2010/rovics290110.html>

Dale Lorna Jacobsen

Two Fine Women Honoured

It is with delight that the Brisbane Labour History Association acknowledges the dedication and life-long commitment of two of our members.

Joan Shears – AOM



Although politics, to use Joan's words, were not a constant topic of conversation around the breakfast table, both her parents were in the Labor Party and she imbued their values as a child. During the war she met an Englishman, Bryan Shears, and in 1946 sailed to the UK to join him. They married in 1947 and returned to Australia as Ten Pound Poms in 1949. They already had a babe-in-arms and in due course had six more children.

This large family meant that domesticity took up any spare time. However, in 1976, when the older children had left home, they were able to go on a working holiday to Western Australia. Her experiences there radicalised her. In caravan parks she saw poverty and impoverishment and the condition of marginalised people, many of them Aborigines, living in camps and old car bodies. One such camp in a gully close to Perth had been burnt out by

a bushfire and many people were left homeless. A conversation with an old Aboriginal man gave her insight into the lives of the dispossessed for the first time.

When she returned to Brisbane there were protests in the streets against nuclear power and for rights for Aborigines. Joan joined this movement and ever since has been active in peace and social justice issues, sometimes in a leadership role. This commitment has taken up most of her energies and she wryly comments on the fact that their dining table cannot be used for meals because it's invariably covered with material connected to some worthwhile cause.

Joan's many friends in the progressive movement experienced great satisfaction when she was awarded the AOM in the 2010 Australia Day Honours List, 'For service to the promotion of peace, nuclear disarmament and social justice issues.'

Joan is very keen to acknowledge the contribution of others and welcomes the award because it will bring awareness of Peace issues to a wider public.

RedReunion

Connie Healy – BLHA Life Member



BLHA President, Greg Mallory, presents Life Membership certificate to Connie Healy

When asked for information regarding the detail of her achievements, Connie Healy said: ‘I’m afraid I can’t think of anything much that I’ve done, but it seems to have taken up a whole lifetime; apart from having kids, doing the washing up etc.’ That sums up Connie Healy: with a totally modest attitude towards what we all recognise as her activism, leadership and scholarship in spheres of politics, labour, and social movement activism.

Life membership of the BLHA is awarded to those who have made a contribution to one or more of the following: activism; the creation and dissemination of ideas in the labour movement and/or associated social movements; the study and preservation of labour history. Connie fulfils each of these criteria ‘in spades’, as they say.

Connie has been a part of the making of labour history in this state through her long involvement with organisations such as the Communist Party of Australia, the Eureka Youth League

in South Brisbane during the 1940s, and the Queensland Peace Council. She has worked for various unions – most notably the Waterside Workers Federation, leaving a secure job at a bank to take up a role more aligned with her political and social justice sympathies. In gender terms, Connie is a path-breaker, working full time for most of her life, demonstrating that women should be equal in an equal world.

In 2000, Connie published *Defiance: Political Theatre in Brisbane 1930-1962*, based on her MA thesis. This book came out of Connie’s own personal history of activism, so was truly a history from within, underpinned by careful scholarship. Connie has written extensively about historical events and people she has known. Three articles have appeared in this journal: *Recollections of the ‘Black Armada’ in Brisbane* (#2, March 2006); *Eva’s Story* (#8 March 2009); and *The Chinese Presence in Queensland* (#9, September 2009). Connie also wrote five contributions to *Radical Brisbane: an unruly history*, published in 2004, and two entries for the supplement to *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

Connie has been an active member of the BLHA from its early days in the 1980s, holding the position of Treasurer and, for many years, as a member of the executive. She has donated her papers, ‘*Connie Healy Collection*’, to the Fryer Library to preserve that material and allow researchers, writers and scholars access to it.

Janis Bailey

Party Servants, Autonomous Operators or Somewhere in Between: A Study of Queensland Labor Leaders and Party Control

By Danielle Miller

The Australian Labor Party (ALP) was created, as Dean Jaensch put it, ‘to be the instrument of the trade union movement’, and in keeping with this the party developed strategies to limit the power of the parliamentary wing and its leadership.¹ As one Australian Workers’ Union (AWU) official stated in 1921, Labor parliamentarians were just ‘paid servants of the party.’² Yet even a cursory examination of Labor’s history suggests the story of power relations within the ALP is complex. In recent decades the party has undergone significant changes which have seen the parliamentary wing greatly increase its authority. It is debatable, moreover, that Labor politicians, especially Labor leaders, were ever mere servants of the extra-parliamentary party.

The ALP emerged prior to Federation and each state branch had ‘its own structure, rules, norms and dynamics’, which influenced the way Labor operated in that particular environment. Each branch therefore deserves to be examined separately.³ This paper

will focus on the Queensland branch; specifically, the premierships of Thomas Joseph Ryan (1915-19) and Vincent Clair Gair (1952-57) will be used to explore the power available to Labor leaders in the party’s first 70 years.⁴ The impact of individual leadership styles will also be assessed. In the cases of Ryan and Gair, leadership style had a significant effect on internal party relations. After examining their premierships it can be argued that while leaders of this era had, at the very least, to pay lip-service to party structures, and party harmony was reliant on their adherence to policy on issues of great significance to the party, a leader could still exercise considerable influence.

T.J. Ryan



Thomas Joseph Ryan (photo courtesy John Oxley Library)

T.J. Ryan was a leader greatly respected by his contemporaries and one who

continues to be held in high regard by the party he led.⁵ Part of his success was undoubtedly due to his willingness to show respect for the party's power structures. Yet a close examination of his premiership suggests Ryan was an astute leader who recognised that while there were certain matters in which following the party was crucial, there were other areas where he could exert his own authority.

In the early years of Ryan's leadership there were doubts regarding this worldly barrister's working-class credentials and whether he would seek to dominate the party. Shortly after Ryan's election, the Blackall newspaper, the *Western Champion*, predicted that Ryan would not long be a Labor parliamentarian, and following Ryan's rise to the leadership the *Worker* published an article urging vigilance to ensure the party did not become subsumed by such a strong personality.⁶ However, these concerns soon faded as Ryan quickly illustrated his drive to legislate in favour of Labor concerns and his respect, perhaps feigned, for the party's power structures.

Ryan was aware of the importance of not being seen as a domineering leader and adopted a consensus approach to the leadership. His approach was evident in the fact that he often remained quiet in meetings of the Parliamentary Labor Party (PLP) (a feat difficult to imagine in the modern party room) and took care to maintain healthy relationships with

the executive and union movement.^{7 8} The government also introduced an array of reforms desired by the party, from state enterprises to a system of arbitration and conciliation.⁹

It would be wrong, however, to view Ryan as a mere cipher. His quiet persuasiveness was evident from the beginning of his premiership. The selection of cabinet and assignment of portfolios can be quite a fraught activity; 1915 was no exception. When Labor was selecting the first cabinet of the Ryan government there was substantial opposition to the allocation of one of the few positions to the upper house, yet Ryan and his moderate supporters were convinced that Labor needed a minister in the Legislative Council. The Premier's view eventually won through.¹⁰ His view also prevailed in the debate regarding the Agent-Generalship appointment. When challenged over these arrangements, Ryan made sure to provide a strong argument and to organise the numbers to defeat caucus opposition.¹¹

Labor's quest to abolish the Legislative Council provides another example of Ryan as savvy politician. The demise of the Council had long been amongst the party's top priorities and the number of bills either lost or mutilated in the Council only increased the impetus for the Ryan government to implement this plank of the platform.¹² While the party was united in its overall purpose there was strong disagreement within caucus

over whether Labor should attempt to inundate the Council or hold a referendum.¹³ Ryan favoured increasing the number of Labor members to gain the support necessary to abolish the Council through legislative means.¹⁴ In the end, however, a majority of caucus members preferred holding a referendum on the issue, and Ryan acquiesced. The referendum turned out to be a disaster, the poor wording and the decision to hold the vote on the same day as the federal election and local-option polls undoubtedly contributing to its defeat. The party executive had warned the government of flaws in their plan, but was ignored.¹⁵ Justin Harding contends that Ryan proceeded with the referendum to appease those in the party who supported this approach while ‘covertly’ continuing to move ahead with stacking the upper house with Labor nominees.¹⁶ Harding goes on to argue Ryan’s approach can also be seen as an attempt to restore his authority over the PLP:

the Premier was determined to use the issue as a showdown with the CPE [Central Political Executive]. The PLP’s pig-headed refusal to even consider the Executive’s objections to the referendum lends weight to this contention, especially considering that Ryan lost the Presidency of the party by one vote to Billy Demaine the year before. Ryan’s defeat was generally regarded as an attempt by the

organisation to assert control over the PLP.¹⁷

This incident reveals Ryan’s understanding of the party and the fact that while he paid lip-service to being the party’s servant he was not always willing to follow directions wholeheartedly.

The issue of conscription was one debate that had the potential to split Ryan from the party. Instead, it revealed his understanding of the party and the importance of following its lead when facing potentially divisive issues. The debate arose when Labor Prime Minister, William (Billy) Hughes, proposed the introduction of conscription, arguing that it was the best way to prosecute the war. The policy raised a number of concerns for the party and came to be strongly opposed by much of it, including the Queensland branch.¹⁸

While the lack of personal papers makes it difficult to assess accurately Ryan’s views towards conscription, there is evidence that he was not entirely convinced by the ‘no’ campaigners. The Under-Secretary of the Home Secretary’s Department, W.J. Gall, argued that Ryan and Labor colleagues Hunter, Huxham, Hardacre and Coyne all supported the introduction of conscription.¹⁹ Gall’s view is supported by the language Ryan employed in the early stage of the conflict. The *Sydney Sun* reports that he spoke often of the

need for ‘reinforcements’, as well as the importance of ‘standing by the mother country.’²⁰ Historians, however, generally take the view that he could see both sides of the debate.²¹ Regardless of his personal views, the strength of the extra-parliamentary position meant that he had to conform to the consensus opinion in order to avoid splitting the party.²² Such an understanding was crucial for the success of a leader of this era and it was an approach that paid dividends, considering his was the only Labor government to survive the conscription split.²³

The premiership of T.J. Ryan is a clear case of the need to take into account the personality and personal standing of the leader as a factor that has an impact on internal party power relations. While the support the Labor government received from non-labour sections of the populace, such as small farmers, and the decline of union militancy, contributed to the authority available to the PLP and its leader, the impact of Ryan’s personal approach should not be underestimated.²⁴ The Premier worked hard to gain the party’s trust and only then was he able to exert some personal influence. Even so, his authority was tempered by the need to show respect for the party’s ‘technical supremacy’.²⁵ It must also be remembered that Ryan shared the party’s general philosophy. Had he tried to introduce policies radically opposed to party thought, it is probable he would have met substantial opposition. Essentially, the case of

T.J. Ryan reveals that humility was a required ingredient for the success of parliamentary leaders in this era. With humility a leader could exert personal influence, albeit it in a limited way.

V.C. Gair



Vincent Clair Gair (photo courtesy John Oxley Library)

While Ryan’s premiership provides a clear case of successful parliamentary leadership, Gair provides an example from the opposite end of the spectrum. In contrast to the popular Ryan, Gair attracted a great deal of censure from within his own party and was eventually expelled over his refusal to follow the directions of the organisation. The Gair premiership highlights the strength of the party organisation in this period and reinforces the notion that leaders

had to demonstrate respect for party power structures in order to maintain harmony and their position.

This era must be seen in the context of the Cold War. International ideological conflict was echoed in the ALP with both communists and the anti-communist 'groupers', associated with the Catholic Social Studies Movement, looking to expand their spheres of influence within the union movement. The Premier's position became increasingly problematic after the federal leader denounced the groups and the powerful AWU began to distance itself from them.²⁶

While Gair had little sympathy for those on the left wing of the party and was undoubtedly committed to the anti-communist cause, he was not close to the powerful AWU either. His ties to the Movement and eventual split with the party must be seen in this wider context and can be interpreted as an attempt to challenge the considerable authority wielded by the AWU.²⁷ Fitzgerald and Thornton suggest that just as Gair was unwilling to be the servant of the party it is equally unlikely he would have been willing to act as a servant of the Movement; rather, they hypothesise, the Premier believed that an alliance between grouper unions and those in the rank-and-file associated with the Movement would be capable of dominating the party and this would obviate the need for him to accommodate the party's traditional

power-brokers in the unions.²⁸ His decision not to seek closer links with the extra-parliamentary party would prove to be an enormous tactical error.

While the early part of Gair's premiership was relatively peaceful, for the most part it was characterised by underlying tensions between the PLP and the extra-parliamentary organisation. From 1952 the relationship between the government and the Trades and Labor Council (TLC) began to sour, with the Premier and his ministers refusing to meet with TLC deputation on several occasions.²⁹ He also continued to distance himself from the AWU.³⁰ Together these moves served to further alienate the industrial wing and heighten tensions within the party.

In the build-up to Gair's expulsion a number of points of conflict emerged between the Premier and the extra-parliamentary organisation, led by Queensland Central Executive and AWU leaders Jack Schmella and Joe Bukowski, as well as Jack Egerton from the TLC. Such disputes ranged from pay increases for politicians, the Government's approach to dealing with petrol companies, and even the hiring practices of the University of Queensland.³¹ These small skirmishes contributed to the overall feelings of animosity between the two camps.

The tensions within the party were heightened at the onset of the 1956

shearers' strike, during which the Gair government took the position that pay disputes should be solved in the courts and refused to intervene on behalf of the shearers.³² The situation worsened when Gair introduced a state of emergency and collaborated with the anti-Labor federal government, bringing in troops to ship the wool south for sale.³³ The government's actions further alienated the AWU and brought the TLC and AWU into an alliance that would come to haunt Gair in his final days as Queensland's premier.³⁴

Simmering in the background was the ongoing dispute surrounding the extension of annual leave entitlements from two to three weeks. This conflict began with major unions and the party executive pushing for the extra week's leave, and the Premier firmly rejecting the claim. Gair was not against introducing legislation in favour of extra leave, but he strongly resented being directed by the QCE or the larger Labor-in-Politics convention to bring in the changes within a certain time period and argued the government could not afford the measure.³⁵ The issue reached boiling point at the 1956 convention. The Premier was called on to implement the proposal, but he remained unmoved and argued that it was unconstitutional for the organisation to direct the government on the timing of the introduction of legislation, a position that party leaders flatly rejected.³⁶ In response to

Gair, Jack Egerton proclaimed: 'The Premier can have his Constitution, and the Premier can have his Premiership, and we will not presume to direct the Government. But we will presume – and only because it is forced upon us – to direct the Parliamentary representatives of the Australian Labor Party.'³⁷ After the convention, pressure continued to be exerted on Gair to implement the measure, yet he maintained his position.³⁸ This incident was characteristic of Gair's approach to dealing with the union movement and party organisation generally. It also showcases Gair's unwillingness to even pay lip-service to the notion that parliamentary leaders are meant to act as the party's delegates.

In due course a number of charges were brought against the Premier and on 25 April 1957 the QCE expelled him. Gair's expulsion was the result of a number of factors, not least significant the personality clashes between the key party players of the time. The Queensland branch of the ALP in the 1950s was populated with big personalities and acrimonious relationships. The enmity between the Premier and the AWU's Joe Bukowski dated back to their youth, where Bukowski was known for bullying weaker boys, such as Gair, a history that undoubtedly fuelled their adulthood disputes.³⁹ Indeed, Gair, Bukowski and Egerton, exhibited similar domineering characteristics, making personal animosity almost

an unavoidable element of the power struggle.⁴⁰ What is most important, though, are not the specific reasons for Gair's expulsion, but the fact the party could expel a premier who had gained office with a substantial majority.

Despite Gair's electoral success, the organisation was still willing and able to topple him when they perceived he was not serving their interests. The expulsion of Premier Gair is a prime example of the danger that ALP premiers then faced when they attempted to defy the organisation, thus proving the J.A. McCallum quip: 'A labour leader may stoop to conquer, but, none the less, stooping, not conquering, appears to be his characteristic position.'⁴¹ The Gair premiership serves as a clear example of the strength of the extra-parliamentary organisation of the ALP in this era.

Conclusion

Ryan rose to prominence at a time when the idea of the leader as a delegate of the party was still very much in vogue and Ryan understood his designated role and worked more or less harmoniously with the organisation. In the post-Ryan decades when Labor largely dominated the political arena, the PLP was able to gain greater leeway over the legislative agenda. As long as the leaders retained reasonably close links to the major party power-brokers, premiers could get away with domineering behaviour, as Forgan Smith's premiership testified.

Gair came unstuck when he alienated both the AWU and the TLC. It is not far-fetched to speculate that if Gair had been of a different temperament the split might not have occurred. But Gair was an entirely different character to Ryan.⁴² Gair's premiership clearly illustrates that in this era, when party heavyweights clashed with the leader, even if that leader had the backing of much of the PLP, the premier would not come out on top.

Notes

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- 2 Jack Lang, *I Remember*, Invincible Press, Sydney, 1956, p.24.
- 3 Scott Bennett, *Affairs of State: Politics in the Australian States and Territories*, Allen and Unwin, North Sydney, 1992, p.3.
- 4 For instance see: Ian Marsh (ed.), *Political Parties in Transition?*, The Federation Press, Sydney, 2006. Dean Jaensch, *The Hawke-Keating Hijack: The ALP in Transition*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989. Ian Ward and Randal G. Stewart, *Politics One, 3rd ed.*, Palgrave Macmillan, South Yarra, 2006, pp.134-172.
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- 15 Justin Harding, 'Ideology or Expediency? The Abolition of the Queensland Legislative Council 1915-22', *Labour History*, Vol. 79, 2000, p.166.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p.168.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p.166.
- 18 Australian Labor Party (Queensland Branch), 'Official Record of the Eighth Labor-in-Politics Convention, 1916', in Fryer Library, University of Queensland, UQFL129, Papers of D.J. Murphy. There was a concern that conscription would target the working class. A fear also existed that militant unionists could be singled out (*Brisbane Courier*, 28 Oct 1916. Blackburn, Maurice. 193-. *The Conscription Referendum of 1916*, Ruskin Press, Melbourne, p.12). The debate also raised questions about Australia's obligation to the British Empire, a pertinent question for those Laborites of Irish Catholic background, particularly in view of the British government's harsh response to the Easter Rebellion of 1916.
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- 22 Murphy 1975b, p.189.
- 23 Brian McKinlay, *The ALP: A Short History of the Australian Labor Party*, Heinemann Publishers Australia, Richmond Victoria, 1981, p.46.
- 24 Birrell, p.iii.
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- 27 *Queensland Parliamentary Debates*, 22 Oct 1959, p.846.
- 28 Ross Fitzgerald and Harold Thornton, *Labor in Queensland: From the 1880s to 1988*, University of Queensland Press, 1989, pp.58 & 141.
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- 36 Australian Labor Party (Queensland Branch). 'Official Record of the Twenty-second Labor-in-Politics Convention', *The Worker*, Brisbane, 1956, pp.75, 76-105.
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- 38 Frank Mines, *Gair*, The Arrow Press, Canberra, 1975, pp.69-70. *The Courier Mail*, 28 March 1957.
- 39 Anne McMurchy, 'Pastoral Strike, 1956', in *The Big Strikes, Queensland 1889-1965*, D.J. Murphy (ed.), University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1983, p.257.
- 40 Murphy, 1980, p.497.
- 41 Cited in Aaron Widavsky, 'Party Discipline Under Federalism: Implications of the Australian Experience', in *Comparative Political Parties: Selected Readings*, Andrew J. Milnor (ed.), Thomas Y. Crowell Company, New York, 1969, pp.200-201.
- 42 This is a view that Denis Murphy, one of the most prolific scholars of the Queensland branch, also puts forward. See Murphy, 1980, p.497.
- * * * *Qui dolor magnis renis quia plit, omnimusam, sin cus sit il millanderi rac non mistius rehenimus aut vendem faccatures rempos maionsequos estempe hlacepudi que ea dem ipitatur rest perepro beaquibus dem fugiaes pa doluptatus sundit volori am ecatet as repelen diostia doluptur? Qui ratusdant modia sitinus di blaut ellam quatint excestem ut eat. Core suntum fuga. Uptat. Git modis mihitate nobitassint veror aceat que que misinvelist is simporepero enti tem quid quiducipsa ius eossimus quia aut mil iumque nem sim que conecat debissedi optis et volesec uptatur*

Who Paid for the Lucky Country?

By Dr Ros Kidd

One of this nation's enduring myths is that the Australian economy was built on the sheep's back, that Australia's wonderful rural wealth during the late 19th and much of the 20th century made us the lucky country we are today. We hear little about the huge nameless army of unpaid and underpaid Aboriginal labour upon which this wealth depended; generations of workers who even now are rarely acknowledged. I believe this is because official files that chart the critical value of the Aboriginal labour force reveal also the entrenched and shameful exploitation of work and wages by the governments that controlled Aboriginal employment into the early 1970s.

Around the turn of the 20th century each state government, and the Commonwealth government in the Northern Territory from 1911 to 1978, carefully crafted laws controlling Aboriginal lives and labour. It is clear from official files that Aboriginal workers have been a massive and vital component of Queensland's economic development. Legislation from 1897 to impose a complex network of surveillance and control effectively designated almost half the state's Aboriginal population as wards of the state. Until 1968 in rural areas and until 1979 on government settlements,

Aboriginal legislation over-rode the whole raft of industrial protections enjoyed by every other Australian worker. In operating this 'protection' regime into the early 1970s, the government incurred a range of legal obligations. Those relating to controlled employment included a duty to secure safe workplaces and a duty to negotiate a rate of pay reflecting the worker's best interests. In its role as banker for Aboriginal wards, the government held a duty to safeguard all wages and savings, and a duty to fully protect the integrity of all Trust accounts. Attention to official records reveals how successive Queensland governments failed to execute these legal obligations.

The Conscripted Workforce

By the mid 1880s over 1000 Aborigines were already in permanent work in Queensland, predominately in rural areas where white labour was scarce. Payment was generally scant food and shelter, but many were given adulterated liquor or opium dregs (a legal drug until 1905), addiction to which secured compliant workers and access to their wives and children. Until the late 1890s there were no employment protections for any Queensland workers, excepting the dubious security offered by *Masters and Servants* laws, under which breaches by workers were criminal offences, while breaches by employers were a civil matter usually adjudicated

by local police magistrates or justices of the peace, members of the employer's social cohort. Absconding workers could be arrested and returned to work out their contracted time, although this provision was regarded as ineffective against Aboriginal workers.

The 1897 *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* was introduced to impose a framework of controls over all aspects of inter-racial relations. Rather than strengthening or replacing existing laws to eradicate abuses, the 1897 Act and 1901 Amendment Act encompassed only the *Aboriginal* half of the equation. These laws prohibited Aboriginal access to liquor and opium, set aside reserved areas for Aboriginal use and confinement, and initiated a network of police 'protectors' to oversee Aboriginal interests. Any person of Aboriginal parentage, excepting 'half-caste' males over 16 years of age living separately from Aborigines, could be declared a ward of state and exiled to a reserve, losing rights and responsibilities regarding movement, marriage, children, education, employment and finances. Under this legal framework, which persisted into the early 1970s, Aboriginal lives were hostage to official decree.

Control of Aboriginal employment was a major component of the government's protection regime. Operating as employment broker for all Aboriginal labour through its agents, the police

protectors, the government controlled where workers were sent, what work they were hired to do, provision of food and shelter, their wage rate and their access to any of this wage in cash. In theory work contracts were twelve-month 'agreements' but in practice people who refused such relocations were routinely removed to government settlements. If employers refused to accommodate wives and families, these dependants were sent to the reserves, further fracturing families and communities.

The government deployed its captive labour pool to meet the needs of its rapidly expanding rural economy, especially in areas where white labour was scarce due to harsh conditions and poor pay. An 1899 government survey listed over 2000 permanent workers south of Rockhampton. By 1907 there were more than 3000 contracted Aboriginal workers across the state. By 1920 the figure was nudging 4000 government-controlled workers in the pastoral industry alone, rising to 4500 in the early 1930s and 5000 in the mid 1960s. Only after 1972 were Aboriginal workers free to choose their employment.

Workplace Conditions and Wage Rates

How well did the government's 'protection' regime safeguard the interests of these thousands of conscripted workers? Initially there

were no limits on how many hours were worked, how hard the labour, how bad the treatment, provision of food and living quarters. Official files show that from the earliest days the government knew abuses occurred. Yet minimum conditions were not introduced until 1919 and even then there were no inspections to enforce them, despite constant evidence of assaults and abuses. In 1921 the chief protector admitted shelter for many Aboriginal workers was 'worse than they would provide for their pet horse, motor-car or prize cattle.'¹ In 1936 on one station families were forced to live in the open with no protection from the rain or cold winds; in the 1940s it was reported most employers in the Gulf area thought 'anything is good enough for a nigger.'²

Only in 1956, after the system had run for nearly 60 years, did the government instruct industrial inspectors to include Aboriginal employees in their tours of rural areas. Even then, as the records show, abuses continued; in 1959 one group of stock workers were housed in an open shed without any bedding, light or table and paid only tobacco and matches each week for their work.³ Other files record sexual assaults, wet living quarters, rough handling, beatings with chains, lack of water and cooking facilities, toilet pans emptied near sleeping sheds, and widespread hookworm and ill health, especially among children. Meanwhile, under this employment regime, Aboriginal

workers who absconded because of physical or sexual abuses, scandalous conditions, overwork, lack of food, or perhaps to seek better pay or visit their families, were pursued by police and forcibly returned. White workers, in contrast, could choose to work for their own benefit.

While young men were more likely to be retained on the settlements as unpaid labour, young girls 'between school and marriageable age' were routinely dispatched to remote locations as domestics, some being rostered out year after year with only a week's break between. Many were subject to physical and sexual abuse. Children under 12 were also contracted to external employment, although after 1919 this needed endorsement by the chief protector. As late as 1957 the director of Native Affairs admitted child labour was still prevalent in rural Queensland.⁴ Observing that many children suffered broken limbs through their work, he suggested 'undersized and weedy' children should not be put to hard labour, adding: 'We try to look on these people as human beings.'

Not only did the government fail to safeguard the work environments of its conscripted workforce, it also breached its duty of care for workers by selling them cheaply to its key constituency, the pastoral industry. From 1901 the government set a minimum monthly wage of about \$46 (today) for workers in the sea trades and half that for those

on the mainland, around one-eighth the white rate. Regulations in 1904 listed wage rates for children under 12 years, amounting to \$5.80 a week. By 1907 over 3000 pastoral workers averaged about around three per cent the white rate.⁵ In 1919 the government lobbied to exclude Aboriginal workers from the Station Hands Award, striking a deal with the pastoral industry to freeze Aboriginal wages at 66 per cent the white rate.⁶ This discount belied a raft of testimonials over many years confirming many employers considered Aboriginal workers to be equally or better skilled than their white colleagues. Workers were responsible for maintaining their families on this fractional wage; failure to do so triggered removal to a reserve.

Records show the government frequently failed to demand even the 66 per cent, despite continuing confirmation from surveys that Aboriginal workers were often superior horsemen and knew the country better than their white counterparts. It was frequently said that many stations would not survive without the Aboriginal workforce, effectively gifted to them at bargain-basement wages. Unstated, although obvious from different records, was the additional benefit of a vast pool of captive man- (and woman) power for whom leaving abusive employment triggered police pursuit and capture.

In the 1920s and 1930s, when white rural labour was described as ‘often useless’ and Aboriginal labour ‘indispensable’, Aboriginal workers were sold at around 40 per cent the award rate. Rates for the 4500 workers fell to only 31 per cent in 1949 and stood at 59 per cent in 1956, when a departmental survey confirmed the pastoral industry was entirely dependent on Aboriginal workers, particularly in remote areas where white stockmen were rare. The inspector said the entrenched mentality was to pay ‘as little as possible for Aboriginal workers’, while ‘white men of markedly less ability and industry receive higher wages and better living conditions than Aboriginals who are better workmen.’⁷ By the mid 1960s the 5000 Aboriginal workers were paid only 70 per cent the award rate. In defiance of the equal pay judgement of 1966, workers under state control were termed ‘trainees’ and still sold at a discount, although most had decades of skill and experience.⁸ Only after 1972 were Aboriginal pastoral workers free from conscripted employment. For the first time elderly family members and wives who had been compelled to work for free on the stations could refuse such exploitation.

Wages, Savings and Trust Accounts

The government ran its contract-labour system for 70 years. It gave employers the right to pay into workers’ hands between 30-80 per cent of wages. Decade after decade protectors and

auditors warned the government that workers were not getting this 'pocket money', yet the system continued. An internal inquiry in 1932 found it could be 'reasonably assumed' that workers were cheated of this payment.⁹ In 1943 protectors described the pocket money system as a farce and a direct profit to employers; in 1956 they said it was useless, futile and out of control, with workers 'entirely at the mercy' of employers who simply doctored the books. Yet the government rejected auditors' calls for external inspectors as 'too costly.' In the mid 1960s there was still no departmental control over the payment of pocket money.¹⁰



Aboriginal cooks at Forest Home Station, Queensland, 1908. Courtesy Fryer Library, UQ, UQFL79, Box 4.

From 1901 the government assumed the right, through its network of police protectors, to retain or sell Aboriginal property, to take direct control of wages and to restrict withdrawals by account holders. A trust account, the Aboriginals Protection of Property Account, was opened in Cooktown the following year, absorbing wages of

any employees who were said to have deserted or died, and disbursing funds to remaining relatives, or 'for the use of Aborigines generally.' Over several decades the distribution to families in any one year was around one third the levies into this Account. In contrast, the equivalent of almost \$460,000 in 1921 and \$450,000 in 1931 was used for settlement development and to subsidise consolidated revenue.¹¹

Workers could only access their money on request to the protector, who frequently refused. Fraud on controlled savings by both employers and protectors was so common that a system of thumbprints was introduced in 1904 to endorse withdrawals. Official control over women's wages began around 1905 following the practice of several protectors, including the superintendent at Yarrabah, who already took direct receipt of all wages, leaving only a fraction as pocket money during the contract period. When John Bleakley took over as chief protector in 1914 he expanded the compulsorily contracted workforce, increased minimum wages, and demanded every worker's wage be paid direct to local protectors. The 30 per cent increase brought to 5000 the savings accounts under government control, holding almost \$3.5 million. By 1919 the government controlled over 6000 accounts holding over \$6 million, to which workers were frequently denied access.¹²

In 1921 thumbprints were re-introduced to counteract continuing police fraud on Aboriginal accounts. An internal inquiry in 1922 revealed there was no official supervision of the 8000 rural savings accounts. Police practices were so unreliable the inquiry report urged workers be allowed to appeal dealings on their savings, a recommendation the government dismissed out of hand.¹³ This inquiry also exposed misappropriation by the government from the Aboriginals Protection of Property Account and from a second Trust fund, the Aboriginal Provident Fund, which was started in 1919 through further levies on Aboriginal wages of five per cent from single wages and two and a half per cent from married wages. In theory this was an insurance fund for times of sickness or unemployment, but in practice the bulk of these Trust monies was diverted for capital expansion and maintenance expenses on missions and settlements, as well as for departmental costs. Of £2517 (almost \$124,000) taken from workers' wages in 1922, a year of extreme drought and hardship, less than eight and a half per cent was released to relieve family suffering.

The 1932 public service inquiry uncovered continuing negligence and misappropriation, and concluded that government refusal to allow account holders to vet dealings on their savings meant 'the opportunity for fraud existed to a greater extent than with any other Governmental accounts.'¹⁴ Pilfering on

the Aboriginal savings accounts under government control was found to be 'frequent', and the department admitted – after 35 years of management – there were no real controls over the 95 country police charged with protecting the interests of these wards of state. In order to 'minimise fraud by members of the Police Force who are Protectors', it was decided to manage all accounts from Brisbane, except for a small residue.¹⁵ But this did not benefit Aboriginal workers. Because of the £258,596 (almost \$15 million) of private Aboriginal savings in its control, the government promptly diverted £200,000 (\$11.572 million) – over 75 per cent – to generate an investment bonus for consolidated revenue. This replicated a profitable, but unauthorised, policy initiated in the early 1920s of investing the 'idle portion' of the Property Account and the Provident Fund. Savings bank interest of two and a half per cent was now also appropriated by the department, a step that was subsequently noted as 'not in accordance with Regulations.'¹⁶ Account holders, meanwhile, continued to live – and die – in poverty, without ready access to this financial return for their labour.

During the depression years of 1929-1932 the government introduced a further tax of five per cent on Aboriginal savings, and withdrew £91,000 (over \$5 million) from the Trust funds, money that was never repaid. In 1941, when another inquiry

again detailed the ongoing negligence and unauthorised financial dealings, the government forced the chief protector to resign to avoid charges of incompetence.¹⁷ The Aboriginal Welfare Fund was set up the following year, legitimating the retention of bank interest and investment revenue, and the taxes on savings. It blunted criticism of misappropriation by blurring the expenditure fields of Aboriginal requirements and departmental expenses, declaring that outlays could be made ‘providing for the benefits to Aboriginals generally.’ This Fund was frozen in 1993 after decades of disputed dealings.

From the mid 1950s the government offered massive amounts of private savings to regional hospitals for development projects, declaring they were ‘surplus to requirements’ of account holders, an obscene suggestion given the entrenched appalling poverty. Poverty which, it should be remembered, was used to define *Aboriginal* failure of enterprise and management, triggering removal and confinement on reserves. It was not until 1968 that workers were given bank books showing a balance for their savings. Many found to their horror they held pitiful credit despite decades of conscripted work and financial privation. Those who queried head office were told that the records were too inconclusive to calculate the accuracy of their accounts. Only from

the early 1970s could people control their own accounts.

Conclusion

It is clear that the prime motivator for the government-run Aboriginal labour market was the needs of rural industries – the supply of as many men and women as required *for a price that the market claimed it could bear*. Records confirm that the pastoral industry in Queensland would not have survived without the thousands of men, women and children forcibly contracted at cheap rates from the turn of last century. This conscripted labour was, as the head of the Queensland department boasted in 1948, ‘a valuable asset’ to both the industry and the State.¹⁸ Although there was no legal duty to pay full wages prior to 1968 when equal pay was introduced nationally, Queensland had a stated policy from 1919 to pay pastoral workers 66 per cent the white rate. Examination of the records for every year between 1931-1961 confirms that the government did not demand even this discounted amount for this critically valued workforce. The wage portion supposedly paid direct to workers as pocket money was so poorly supervised that it was condemned regularly in every decade and into the mid 1960s. The pastoral workforce numbered between 3000 and 5000 people in the 50 years to 1968. The government knew that potentially an average of 50 per cent of their wages may never have been paid.

The remainder of wages went directly to police protectors where audits and inquiries frequently revealed it was prey to fraud and negligent defaults.

Surviving records show unarguably that the government presided over a system it knew was blighted by frauds and failures to protect Aboriginal wages, savings and Trust funds. Official negligence resulted in massive financial losses to pastoral workers whose labour, wages and savings were controlled by the State for a 70-year period. Legislative and administrative control of Aboriginal lives, employment and finances from the turn of last century carried with it a legal duty to protect and enhance the best interests of the designated dependants. Queensland's Labor administrations since 2002 have sought to avoid accountability by offering affected workers a maximum \$7000 payment conditional on a signed indemnity, an indemnity the government well knows will not represent informed consent in the absence of records of all financial dealings on a claimant's account.

Even in the 21st century, it seems, the Queensland government continues to profit from the vast army of Aboriginal workers whose labour has been critical to its rural prosperity.

Notes

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- 2 2 June 1941, Queensland State Archives (QSA) SRS 505-1 1D/2.
- 3 26 November 1959, QSA 505-1 1E/25.
- 4 23 January 1957, QSA TR1227:258.
- 5 Harvester Award 1907 was 42/- a week. Aboriginal payment 1901 was 5/- a month.
- 6 22 November 1943, QSA SRS 505-1 Box 196.
- 7 22 October 1956, QSA SRS 505-1 Box 16.
- 8 28 May 1965, QSA SRS 505-1 1A/29.
- 9 9 November 1932, QSA A/58856.
- 10 11 October 1965, QSA SRS 505-1 1B/69.
- 11 23 October 1924 QSA A/69449, 6 November 1935, QSA A/70627.
- 12 *Annual Reports*, 1914 and 1919.
- 13 15 February 1923, QSA A/69452.
- 14 9 November 1932, QSA A/58856.
- 15 15 March 1933, QSA A/58856.
- 16 19 March 1931, QSA A/58856.
- 17 29 July 1941, 12 August 1941, QSA A/4291.
- 18 *Annual Report*, 1948.

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‘For general protection we came together’: the Unionisation of Australia’s Telephonists, 1901-1919

By Jeff Rickertt

Telephony emerged in what Humphrey McQueen has labelled Globalisation Mark III, a third wave of colonialism precipitated by the rise of the modern nation states from around 1860.¹ Eric Hobsbawm has called it an ‘age of empire’, an era of global capitalist development characterised by ‘an increasingly dense web of economic transactions, communications and movements of goods, money and people linking the developed countries with each other and with the undeveloped world.’² As always with empire building effective communication systems were essential. What was new about Mark III was the emergence of dedicated communications technologies which enabled messages to be transmitted independently from the transportation of people and goods. Through the cable networks of telegraphy and then telephony, communications was transformed from a function of travel to an industry in its own right.

The development of the switchboard was crucial to telephony’s success. Telephone services existed in Australia before the switchboard but it was the switchboard that created a network and

made it an industry. Under licence to the Victorian government, the Melbourne Telephone Company opened Australia’s first telephone exchange in September 1880 with a switchboard installed in the stock exchange building in Collins Street, just over two years after the world’s first exchange began operating in Connecticut, USA. Brisbane followed quickly but unlike Melbourne its exchange opened under state control. In October 1880 five Queensland government offices were linked by the exchange located in the GPO in Queen Street, other offices followed as the lines were laid, and the existing private telephone operators such as brewers Quinlan, Gray and Co were soon induced to subscribe.³ By 1887 every Australian colony operated at least one telephone exchange.

The new technology gave rise to a new labour force. In telephone exchanges around Australia, young men and women began to be recruited to serve as telephone ‘attendants’, also known as operators or telephonists. These young workers were mostly inexperienced in the ways of unionism and they entered an industry devoid of any traditions of resistance or mutual aid, where managerial prerogative was paramount and the opportunities for organising or even fraternising were negligible. As one official instruction decreed:

Operators on duty are required to face the switchboard at all times, and the attention of each operator

must be concentrated upon her own work. The operators must not indulge in conversations with each other when on duty, neither must they engage in conversation with subscribers or with operators at distant offices apart from what may be necessary for the transaction of the exchange business.⁴

For the workers it was an intolerable situation but a difficult one to overcome. Despite occasional public outbursts of resistance during the 1880s and 90s, Australia's telephone exchange operators began the 20th century without a union to call their own. By the outbreak of World War I, however, Sydney telephonists had produced two, and by the end of 1914 telephone staff in Melbourne had formed the nucleus of a national association. Over the next five years union activists successfully built a national organisation, secured an arbitration Award, sank deep roots into the workforce, and mounted campaigns with enough disruptive impact to attract press attention and management condemnation. This article provides an account of this remarkable but little known episode of early 20th century unionising.

Telephony under PMG: A Regime of Class Pressure

By the time an Australian nation was created in 1901, bringing together into one body the separate colonial Postal and Telegraph departments, around

33,000 offices and homes across the country were equipped with a telephone.⁵ By 1911, the number had reached 100,000.⁶

While this expansion signalled the burgeoning commercial and public interest in the new technology, it gave no indication of the true health of the vast new Postmaster General's (PMG) Department. For a decade governments and PMG central management struggled unsuccessfully to mould an integrated and efficient bureaucracy out of the different structures, technologies, development priorities and management philosophies and practices inherited from the colonial departments. The difficulties were magnified by the resistance of many senior managers at state level, resentful of their loss of power in the federation and defensive of their fiefdoms, and by tight expenditure discipline exercised by Treasury.

In 1908 the Deakin Government relented to pressure from the Labor Party to appoint a Royal Commission into the Department. The inquiry found an organisation in disarray. Financial losses, Treasury parsimony and the moribund state of the administration meant the Department was not keeping up with developments in technology and the rising demand for services. Managers and workers alike testified strongly that much of the equipment in the telephone exchanges, especially in the large centres, was obsolete and

unable to meet the demands placed on it.

The exchange workers bore the brunt of this crisis. Expanding workloads in city exchanges combined with long hours of duty without breaks in poorly ventilated rooms caused serious physical and mental strain on telephonists. Manager Blackstone opined that ‘telephone attendants should not handle more than four or five calls per minute,’ yet conceded, ‘in Sydney the girls are sometimes handling twelve and thirteen calls per minute.’⁷ Lillias McLeod, telephone attendant at the Sydney GPO, provided a more vivid account of the situation:

Some one has termed the work of the telephone attendants as ‘sweating’ – it is even worse than that; it is white slavery. It cannot be called sweating. It is physical exhaustion.⁸

This situation was managed by a regime of tight control, evident in three ways. Administrators went to great lengths to create a uniform supervisory structure across the country. In small country centres, the chain of command was revised in 1906 specifically to impose greater discipline on operators. From 1909 the Department adopted a national policy of promoting attendants into supervisory roles, thereby creating a cadre of supervisors well-versed in the tricks of the trade. With access to clerical and higher public service

positions denied them, many single women spent years in these jobs, building careers as experts in keeping watch over Australia’s army of telephonists.

Control was also imposed through breaking the labour process into discrete parts governed by an array of detailed regulations. In 1901 instructions and rules were introduced to cover most work practices, representing one of the earliest examples in Australia of ‘scientific management’, a movement initiated in the 1890s by American engineer Frederick W Taylor. The rise of Taylor’s ideas in Australia is normally dated from the 1910s but there were definitely aspects of Taylorism in the practice in telephone exchanges of breaking down tasks into constituent elements which were then measured by the clock and codified as instructions and time standards to maximise efficiency. Telephonists’ bodies were even measured to ascertain the optimal balance between reach and dexterity. In 1905 PMG’s Chief Electrical Engineer John Hesketh returned from a tour of the United States and Europe where he had investigated the latest developments in telephony and telegraphy. His recommendations showed the influence of scientific management theory:

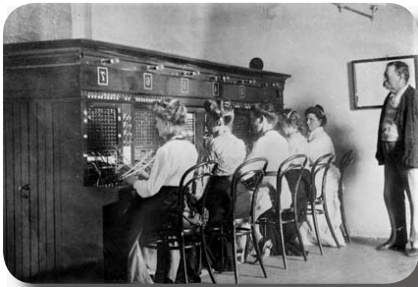
- I. All calls should be answered within an average of five seconds.
- II. Connexion should be completed with the called subscriber –

If connected to the same exchange
– in 30 seconds

If connected to another exchange
joined by junction lines – in 35
seconds

If connected to another exchange
by toll lines, periods varying with
the traffic over such lines.

III. On the conversation being
concluded, and the proper signal
given, it should be possible to call
the exchange again in 10 seconds.⁹



Telephonists under scrutiny, 1890.
(NAA: Image J2879. QTH666)

On the strength of such formulas, a revised set of operating instructions was introduced in 1906, and in 1909 telephonists were issued with a list of standardised replies, leaving them with little opportunity for exercising any discretion on the job, even in their interaction with subscribers, as the customers were then known.¹⁰ Set responses, much later known as standard phrases, were to become a feature of operating work for the rest of the industry's history and a forerunner of the automated and voice recognition technology of today.

Finally, the close supervision and the rules of the job were brought together in a punitive regime that provided line managers and their superiors with a schedule of penalties to wield against anyone found infringing the regulations. It was the severity and pettiness of this form of discipline that most inspired a sense of injustice in the exchange room. 'There have been times,' complained Lillias McLeod, 'when it has appeared that the administration of the exchange aimed at detecting the attendants in faults rather than in assisting them to give the best possible service.'¹¹ The attendants singled out the use of the disciplinary Departmental Regulation 40 as a particular bone of contention. Its provisions for laying charges against staff and fining them were used widely and often vindictively. Even displaying one's humanity could result in a fine, as Edith Jones discovered to her cost. Jones claimed to hold a world record for answering 780 calls in an hour, yet early in her career she too was fined. 'My chief offence was talking and smiling,' she recalled in 1909.¹²

First Unions

The pressure on telephonists eventually triggered a collective response. In 1903 male telephonists from branch exchanges in Sydney founded the New South Wales Telephone Exchange Association (NSWTEA), the first known union of Australian telephonists. The exact circumstances

of its formation are unknown but its representatives' evidence to the 1910 Royal Commission indicates membership was open to male attendants, monitors and supervisors. In those years there were more men than women working on exchanges in metropolitan Sydney. Of the 500 attendants, 286 were men.¹³ By 1908 the union boasted 221 members including 40-50 from the country districts.¹⁴

The decision of the NSWTEA to close its books to women left female telephonists in Sydney with no alternative to forming a union of their own. On 22 April 1907 they launched the Women Telephone Attendants' Association (WTAA) in order that, according to Lillias McLeod, 'the girls as a body could fight the injustice inflicted upon them by an officer who has since been removed to another state.'¹⁵ This officer's name was Mr Monaghan and he was said to have gloated, 'Now we have Regulation 40, we will put the fear of God into your hearts.' According to McLeod, 'He did more than that, he put the fear of man into our hearts as well.'¹⁶ Monaghan's practice of luring telephonists into breaches of the regulations and then fining or in some cases dismissing them galvanised support for a collective response and his transfer to Melbourne was celebrated as the Association's first victory.¹⁷ As McLeod demurely put it, 'He found that the girls in Sydney had obtained their weapon of defence, and,

perhaps, he thought the better course was to retire.'¹⁸

In a particularly lively exchange at the Royal Commission, McLeod outlined what unionism meant to her and her comrades: 'For general protection we came together, as we believe union is strength'. 'Has it proved so?' she was asked. 'It has,' was the reply, 'That officer [Monaghan] said we would rue the day we formed an Association, but that day has yet to come.'¹⁹ By this stage, the Association had 160 members and its President, Mildred List, was confident the 40 or so non-members 'intended to join.'²⁰

Before the 1910 Royal Commission both the men's and women's Associations were at pains to appear united. Lillias McLeod argued that female monitors were more severe than their male counterparts, adding that her Association had no grievance towards monitors: 'Our only trouble is that we are overworked.'²¹ For his part the President of the NSWTEA, William Fitzpatrick, emphatically endorsed the Royal Commission evidence from the women's union and condemned the impact of Regulation 40 on all attendants.²² Both found common ground in their complaints about obsolete equipment, staff shortages, poor amenities and Departmental hostility towards unionism. Yet the potential for union amalgamation, consolidation and growth was never realised. Despite their promising start,

neither union grew beyond its New South Wales origins and both had disappeared by 1914.

A National Union

The organisational, technological and financial crises revealed by the 1910 Royal Commission did not abate, however, despite initiatives to unify and upgrade the service. When the first complete balance sheet and profit and loss accounts for the Department were produced in 1912-13, they revealed a total departmental deficit of £407,102 and a loss for the telephone branch of £221,758.²³ The problem continued into the war years. The telephone branch did not record a profit until 1916-17, and even then it was touch and go, the surplus amounting to a mere £17,234.²⁴

Under the direction of Electrical Engineer Hesketh, the flat rate system of telephone charges was gradually replaced with a measured rate system designed to bolster revenue. Superficially this amounted to a shift from Treasury subsidies to a user-pay regime. But in practice the move to reduce a subsidised service by shifting costs to the subscriber entailed intensifying the exploitation of switchboard operators who now had to record more details of each call. This occurred in conjunction with a more generalised intensification of work often described in the most benign of bureaucratic language. 'Every effort is being made to promote efficiency,

and thereby reduce expenditure,' declared PMG Secretary Oxenham in 1913. Telephonists reported a marked increase in workloads and levels of responsibility and skills. When Justice Powers of the Arbitration Court inspected telephone exchanges in 1917, he concluded 'that during the busy hours at the Central telephone Exchanges, no other officers in the Public Service are made to work at the same pace, or under the same pressure as the telephonists.'²⁵

The drive to maximise the Department's return on its investment in labour spurred Hesketh to embark upon a new investigation of the merits of automatic telephone switching equipment. His 1912 report emphasised the role of automation in minimising labour costs and maximising control over the labour process:

The question of staff has a very important bearing in arriving at a decision as to adopting an automatic switching mechanism. In this regard, not only the cost, but also the difficulty of discipline and the difficulty of obtaining an adequately trained staff immediately the necessity arises must be taken into consideration.²⁶

Trials of the first public automatic telephone exchange began in Geelong on 6 July 1912. By 1924 the Department boasted 20 automatic and three semi-automatic exchanges, servicing nearly

20 per cent of the total subscribers connected.²⁷

Governments and the Public Service Commissioner also helped hold down expenditure on labour by pegging wages. Despite rises in the cost of living, the maximum wage for telephonists in 1917 languished at the rate set in 1908, and the 1917 minimum wage was still at its 1911 level.²⁸ Commenting on the furore generated by staff evidence to the 1910 Royal Commission, Prime Minister Deakin remarked: 'Nowhere have we had such a large body of public servants as discontented with their present lot and future prospects.'²⁹

The Fisher Labor Government which came to power in April 1910 responded to the unrest by passing the *Arbitration (Public Service) Act 1911*, for the first time allowing public service associations to submit claims to the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration for the determination of awards, thereby countering the power of the Public Service Commissioner to set the wages and conditions of public servants. Although initially opposed by some associations which feared the impact of industrial arbitration on their more genteel modes of operation, the new act contributed to a period of growth and consolidation of public service unionism. By the outbreak of World War I, 10 unions had registered and four had decided to apply.³⁰

The intensifying pressure inside telephone exchanges and the wider public service encouraged a new surge of organising amongst telephone exchange workers, culminating in 1914 with the creation of Australia's first national telephonists' union. Details of its early history are sketchy as the first minute books appear not to have survived. A short history in typescript held by the CEPU claims the founding meeting was held at the Ribiras Hotel in Bourke Street, Melbourne.³¹ The dates on surviving membership application forms completed by the founding members suggest the inaugural meeting was held shortly before September 1914.³² It was registered in Melbourne on 14 November as the General Division Telephone Traffic Officers' Association and then renamed the Commonwealth General Division Telephone Officers' Association on 6 January 1915.³³ It was usually known as the Commonwealth Telephone Officers' Association (CTOA), even before it officially adopted the shorter title in 1924.³⁴

The CTOA's rules gave it coverage of all classifications of telephone exchange workers – operators, monitors and supervisors, men and women. It soon became a genuinely national union, with branches in West Australia, South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, although in an era without mass air transportation distance ensured the federal structures would be dominated by Melbourne where

the PMG Department's headquarters was located and remained even after Canberra became the national capital. Melbourne's preeminent role was formalised at the Association's first conference in June 1916, when, in the shadow of the union's first Award hearing, delegates from Victoria and interstate resolved that the Victorian Branch Committee should become the Executive Committee and its officers be given full power to act in the interests of all State branches.³⁵

Although the CTOA covered both sexes, it may have had its genesis in the earlier Victorian Women Public Servants' Association (VWPSA), founded by Vida Goldstein and others in August 1901. According to an account of telephone exchange unionism published in *The Woman Voter*, the VWPSA eventually became a purely commonwealth public service organisation 'which ultimately developed into the Commonwealth General Division Telephone Officers' Association.'³⁶ Though this claim of a direct connection between the two organisations has not been corroborated, it is entirely plausible.³⁷ Even if one organisation was not formally transformed into the other, it is likely that the CTOA attracted many of the best telephone exchange unionists active in the VWPSA. If not the formal successor, it was a logical next step and natural home for a generation of unionists who had cut their teeth on the

equal pay and suffrage struggles of first wave feminism.



Life on the boards, Central Telephone Exchange, Brisbane, 1906. (NAA: Image J2879, QTH30)

A National Award

The CTOA's first plaint to the Commonwealth Arbitration Court, filed in an interim format on 12 May 1916, dominated Association affairs for over 12 months.³⁸ The union's wage claim ranged from a 115 per cent pay increase for first year telephonists, to a 47 per cent increase for those with eight years of service.³⁹ The claim was intended partly to address the failure of Treasury and the Public Service Commissioner to maintain real wages against the cost of living, calculated to have risen 32.9 per cent between 1904 and 1914. But the union also aimed to rectify what the union's advocate, Frank McCart, argued was unfair treatment in comparison with the treatment of clerical and professional officers. It was a work-value claim,

calculated against the salaries paid to officers in other divisions of the service for a similar class of work, and against salaries paid by cable companies, insurance companies and banks.⁴⁰

Despite the strength of their case, the telephonists' pay claim ultimately foundered on the sexist assumptions of the basic wage principles enunciated in the 1907 Harvester Award. On 22 June 1917 Justice Powers handed down his decision:

In deciding upon the salaries to be paid – as most of the employees are over 21 years of age – the first thing to be decided is whether the work is man's work or woman's work. This is necessary for two reasons:

1. Because the Court does not fix any lower rate for a woman's wage than for a man's, if the work done is man's work; but if the work done is recognised as woman's work the wages fixed are those determined by the Court as fair, on the evidence submitted, for the class of work in question.
2. Because if the work is man's work, the minimum wage to be fixed for an adult is a wage sufficient to keep a man, his wife, and a family of three children in reasonable comfort. If it is woman's work, a wage sufficient to keep a single woman in reasonable comfort.⁴¹

Thus the fiction was maintained that women were never family breadwinners while men invariably were, even though many women attendants and supervisors supported families, while most of their male counterparts did not. Despite the empirical evidence, Powers declared telephony women's work and set pay rates accordingly. Over 50 years would pass before this discrimination would formally end.

After wages, the union's most important claims related to hours and breaks. The CTOA requested an ordinary day that would not exceed six hours, regardless of the size of the telephone exchange or the differences in workloads between localities and times of the day. Consistent with this argument, the union also claimed that no-one should work more than three hours without a break.

Ironically, on these issues Powers' sexism could have worked to the telephonists' benefit. 'I think it is advisable,' he declared, 'to allow breaks because girls, generally speaking, cannot continue to stand the strain.' In general he accepted the evidence of excessive, prolonged pressure as a problem. 'I do not think any reasonable man could complain of delay in obtaining a reply to his particular inquiry if he saw the telephonists under the strain of answering 240 calls in addition to his own, in the space of one hour during the busy hours.'⁴² His sympathy, however, was not translated

into satisfactory concessions. He saw no way to fix shorter or uniform hours, although he appealed to the Department to limit the hours to six in the Central Exchanges 'as soon as it is proved to be practicable at a reasonable cost.'⁴³ Predictably, management and the Public Service Commissioner subsequently found 'no sufficient warrant' for such an alteration.⁴⁴ Powers' only concession on breaks was to allow telephonists in the Central City Exchanges a break after three and a half hours or two and a half hours if they were standing continuously.⁴⁵

Fighting On

After the ruling, workloads and work intensity remained the principal causes of discontent. On 5 November 1919, against the background of the federal parliamentary election in which the maladministration of the Commonwealth Public Service was an issue, about 200 Sydney telephonists held a mass meeting over the failure of the Department to increase staff numbers to a level commensurate with the expansion of services. Many similar grievances had been heard before in royal commissions and plaint hearings but this was an unprecedented public airing of dissatisfaction. The chairperson of the meeting explained she 'thought it was time that the public knew what the telephone girls had to put up with.' She herself had answered 369 calls in an hour during that day although regulations stipulated an

acceptable hourly workload of 187 calls. The meeting unanimously resolved 'that the members of this union from to-morrow, and until our grievances are redressed, abide by the regulations to the letter.'⁴⁶

The next morning the work-to-rule commenced from 7am in the Sydney central exchange and from 9am in the suburbs. The press reported difficulties in raising the city exchange, the union reported its members were working at 'a comfortable rate.' Postmaster General William Webster publicly attacked the action, describing the workers as 'a small and unreasonable section of the services.' In a pitch aimed both at winning public support and undermining the workers' unity by appealing to the principle of loyal service, he argued 'the people who pay will be penalised in a manner which I do not think the majority of the officers would support.' His general tone, however, was defensive. He revealed that under pressure from the union he had ordered the provision of extra staff and facilities be expedited. He insisted that in light of post-war difficulties they should be prepared to 'suffer [him] a little longer.'⁴⁷

The union executive was quick to rebuke Webster for his comments:

Now we are asked to bear with the department a little longer. We have two strenuous and weary years of hard work waiting, killing ourselves, and penalising the

general public. We consider that at this stage we are quite justified in taking the action we have. Mr Webster says our grievances are political. We do not live in a political world; his world is quite a different one to ours.

Our PMG asks us to consider the people who employ us. We desire to ask, Is the consideration to come from our side alone? We consider that we are giving the people who employ us every consideration, and instead of so much talk it would be better to see our PMG carrying out the duties appertaining to his high office during his stay in Sydney by assisting the telephonists to give an honest and efficient service.⁴⁸

Melbourne telephonists expressed support for the executive's sentiments by implementing their own work-to-rule on 9 November.⁴⁹

Despite its success, the 1919 campaign marked the end of an era. Decades would pass before a Postmaster General would again have cause to criticise the industrial behaviour of the Department's telephonists. This decline in combativeness mirrored the general retreat of Australian working-class militancy after the historic peak of 1917. But there were also specific factors in play. As a union operating on a national stage and within the framework of arbitration, the CTOA was drawn inexorably into creating an apparatus and a mode of activity which muted the power and the passion of the workplace. Management did its best to

encourage this process by adopting co-optive measures modelled on American company unionism. The centrepiece of its strategy was the Postal Institutes, created, according to Postmaster General Webster, to improve the character and work of the staff and to make the work of supervision more effective and less irksome.⁵⁰

Union activism, meanwhile, became a specialised function of those with expertise in industrial advocacy, establishing a tradition of commitment and self-sacrifice by the few rather than self-activity by the many as a hallmark of the union's industrial behaviour. Such was the spirit of dedication to leadership, it was not unusual for office bearers to serve decades. The first federal president, the indomitable Jane Roddy, served as either president or federal secretary for 33 years, long enough to witness the rise of Kathleen Hester to federal secretary in 1942, a position she held until 1965. The earlier WTAA tradition of looking to the rank and file as the agent of change disappeared for over 60 years. When it eventually resurfaced in the 1970s it would herald a spectacular revival of unionism in Australia's telephone exchanges, with the Queensland branch playing a particularly combative role. A new generation of telephonists, few of whom had ever heard of Lillias McLeod, discovered for themselves that a fighting union could be a powerful weapon of defence.

Notes

- 1 Humphrey McQueen, 'Federation, Globalisations and the Environment', *Overland*, 165, Summer 2001, pp.10-11.
- 2 E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire 1875-1914*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1987, p.62.
- 3 PMG Dept Files, National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA), Brisbane: Postmaster General's Department (hereafter PMG Dept), J3088, QPT1.
- 4 PMG Dept Files, NAA (Melb): PMG Dept, B6286/2, 6264, p.136.
- 5 Ann Moyal, *Clear Across Australia: A History of Telecommunications*, Thomas Nelson, Melbourne, 1984, p.83.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.97.
- 7 Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, Minutes of Evidence taken before the Royal Commission into the Postal Service, *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Papers*, Vol. IV, 1910, p.1180. Hereafter referred to as 1910 Royal Commission.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.1741.
- 9 Reports by John Hesketh, Electrical Engineer, PMG Dept, *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Papers*, Vol. II, 1905, p.1466.
- 10 PMG Dept Files, NAA (Melb): PMG Dept, MP341/1, 1910/3075.
- 11 *1910 Royal Commission*, p.1739.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p.1766.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p.1176.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p.1766.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p.1749.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*, p.1760.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p.1750.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p.1760.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p.1765.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p.1762.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p.1766, 1767.
- 23 *PMG Dept Annual Report*, 1912-13, p.10.
- 24 *PMG Dept Annual Report*, 1914-15, p.30; 1915-16, p.17; 1916-17, p.13.
- 25 *Commonwealth Arbitration Reports*, 1917, p.300. Hereafter *CAR*.
- 26 *PMG Dept Annual Report*, 1912-13, p.36.
- 27 *PMG Dept Annual Report*, 1923-24, p.15.
- 28 1917 Plaintiff Hearing Transcript, p. 2, copy held by the National Office of the CEPU, Melbourne.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p.107.
- 30 Gerard E. Caidon, *Career Service: an Introduction to the History of Personnel Administration in the Commonwealth Public Service of Australia 1901-1961*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1965, p.114.
- 31 Author unknown, History of Association, p.1. Typescript held by the National Office of the CEPU, Melbourne.
- 32 Applications for CTOA Membership, held by the National Office of the CEPU, Melbourne.
- 33 *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette*, No. 95, 21 November 1914, p.2562; No. 2, 9 January 1915, p.10.
- 34 The CTOA eventually became the Australian Telephone and Phonogram Officers' Association. In April 1988 it amalgamated with the ATEA.
- 35 Minutes of 1st CTOA National Conference, 29 May-2 June 1916, held by the National Office of the CEPU, Melbourne.
- 36 *The Woman Voter*, 5 July 1917, p.3.
- 37 Claire McCuskey, 'The History of Women in the Victorian Post Office', MA Thesis, La Trobe University, Melbourne, 1984, p.118.
- 38 *CAR*, 1917, p.295; CTOA Federal Executive Minutes, 11 May 1916.
- 39 *CAR*, 1917, p.304.
- 40 *CAR*, 1917, pp.2-3.
- 41 *CAR*, 1917, p.306.
- 42 *CAR*, 1917, p.300.
- 43 *CAR*, 1917, p.310.
- 44 *Commonwealth Public Service Commission Annual Report*, 1917-18, p.23.
- 45 *CAR*, 1917, p.300.
- 46 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 November 1919, p.6.
- 47 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 November 1919, p.6.
- 48 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 November 1919, p.12.
- 49 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 November 1919, p.6.
- 50 PMG Annual Report, 1917-18, p.34.

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