

CHAPTER II

THE POLITICAL SCENE

WHEN Mr. Cook forced the double dissolution he calculated that the Liberal party would be returned at the general election with substantial majorities in both Houses of the Federal Parliament. The Labour party, regarded simply as the political instrument of the trades unions, was not strong enough to win the election. Its leaders were well aware that, although the massing of the working-class votes in certain urban constituencies in the capital cities gave them a solid core of support, which would be faithful in all eventualities, victory would depend upon the disposition of the thousands of voters who were not pledged to either party, but whose political sympathies were swayed by independent interests, judgment, and feeling. The Liberal party managers reckoned that this "middle" vote would for the most part swing to the support of the Government, in order to put an end to the paralysing conditions which had prevailed in Parliament during 1913-14. The manipulators of the Labour political machinery were not confident that the estimates of their rivals were misjudged. In public both sides maintained the defiant optimism which proclaims the inevitableness of triumph; but in private there was a more pallid hope among the Labour leaders than in the opposite camp. The principal newspapers of the Commonwealth unanimously supported the Government; the Labour party commanded extremely meagre press influence. No dispassionate judge of the prospects would have said that the election was a foregone conclusion; probably most would have considered that the Liberal Government had the better prospects.

Between the two party leaders there was not much to choose in respect to character and ability. Both Mr. Cook and Mr. Fisher began life in cognate occupations; both had entered the political field through the Labour movement, Mr. Cook in New South Wales, Mr. Fisher in Queensland. They did not differ greatly in type of mind, intellectual equipment, grasp of principle, or depth of knowledge. Mr. Cook was, however, the better public speaker, more fluent, less rigid (where no principle was concerned), more resourceful, with

an ampler vocabulary. In addition to his quarter of a century of political activity, he had been a constant preacher in the Methodist Church; and perhaps the habit of delivering addresses on extra-political topics on Sundays gave him more facility than was possessed by his rival, who did not ordinarily make speeches more than six days per week. Neither leader, however, was particularly inspiring; the word "orator" would not be properly employed in characterising them. Mr. Cook had more polish, more finesse, than Mr. Fisher; Mr. Fisher more force, more fervour, than Mr. Cook. Mr. Fisher's rigidity was an asset to his party, and attracted the confidence of the unattached voter; but they were not the kind of leaders who command the allegiance of multitudes, who elevate policies into creeds, who fuse emotion with reason through the fire of genius. They were, in short, a pair of respectable, experienced politicians who in the lottery of party play had drawn winning tickets, and happened to be at the head of their respective political hosts at a moment of extreme importance.

The coming of war made demands upon the time and energies of the members of the Government which was advantageous to the Labour leaders, who were able to devote their attention mainly to electioneering. The volume of business requiring attention in the departments, the urgency of most of it, the freshness and complexity of the problems, kept Mr Cook and his colleagues chained to their offices in Melbourne, while their opponents were traversing the constituencies. The ablest man on the Ministerial side, the man whose character and status carried most weight throughout Australia, was Sir William Irvine, but he, as Attorney-General, was the least to be spared of all Ministers, except the Minister for Defence, because his advice was required on a multitude of points, often at a moment's call. The incessant exigencies of administration were a serious handicap to members of the Government at a time when, in normal circumstances, their personal advocacy would have made a more effective appeal throughout the country than could be the case when the principal members were obliged to attend to the pressing business of the war.

On the other hand, the real leader of the Labour opposition was Mr. Hughes, and he was a tireless and fiery spirit, at

times as fierce as a dervish or as solemn as a prophet. The speeches of the Labour candidates were largely echoes of the pronouncements of Mr. Hughes. He drafted the party manifesto; he pressed his pet project of cancelling the dissolution, till it was too late for revocation; he carried on a campaign by voice and pen, sparkling, ruthless, impetuous; his unflagging energy breathed determination and hope into the rank and file of the party. Above all, he showed a thorough appreciation of the stern realities of the war. That issue, and all it meant to the British political system, was never out of his thoughts in everything he said and wrote. If any elector had any doubt as to whether the Labour party, if returned to power, would direct all the resources of Australia towards the support of the British cause, the emphatic asseverated pledges of Mr. Hughes left no room for question. Those who considered that war policy must come first, and that domestic policies were entirely subsidiary, might well conclude that Mr. Hughes was at least as dependable a leader in that direction as any other of the foremost men in the political arena.

II

The general election took place on Saturday, September 5th. The polling results published on the following Monday made it sufficiently clear that the Labour party had won a decisive victory. The percentage of voters to electors enrolled was, for the House of Representatives, 73.53, a larger number than that recorded for any previous Federal election. When the counting was concluded, it was found that 31 seats in the Senate had been won by the Labour party, and only 5 by the Liberals, whilst in the House of Representatives the Labour party had captured 42 seats, the Liberals 32, leaving the odd seat to an Independent, who might be counted as generally a Labour supporter. In face of this emphatic verdict there was no course open to the Cook Ministry except surrender, and on September 10th the Prime Minister placed his resignation in the hands of the Governor-General.

At this date Mr. Fisher and Mr. Hughes were not available for consultation, not having returned to the seat of Government from their respective States. In accordance with

custom, therefore, the members of the Cook administration attended to the ordinary departmental business till their successors could be appointed. The Federal Labour party had since 1910 acted on the principle—laid down by a Labour conference in 1905—that the members of ministries supported by it should be chosen not by the Prime Minister, but by the whole parliamentary party. Until the members of the party could assemble in Melbourne, therefore, Mr. Fisher could not accept a commission from the Governor-General. But on September 17th the new Cabinet was complete, consisting of the following members:

Prime Minister and Treasurer	Mr. Andrew Fisher
Attorney-General	Mr. W. M. Hughes
Minister for Defence	Senator G. F. Pearce ¹
Minister for Trade and Customs	Mr. F. G. Tudor ²
Minister for External Affairs	Mr. J. A. Arthur ³
Minister for Home Affairs	Mr. W. O. Archibald ⁴
Postmaster-General	Mr. W. G. Spence ⁵
Vice-President of the Executive Council	Senator A. Gardiner ⁶
Assistant Ministers	Mr. H. Mahon ⁷ Senator E. J. Russell ⁸ Mr. J. A. Jensen ⁹

¹ Rt. Hon. Sir G. F. Pearce, K.C.V.O.. Member of C'wealth Senate 1901/38. Minister for Defence 1908/9, 1910/13, 1914/21, 1932/34; Acting Prime Minister, 1916; Minister for Home and Territories, 1921/6, External Affairs, and i/c Territories 1934/37; of Perth, W. Aust.; b. Mount Barker, S. Aust., 14 Jan., 1870.

² Hon. F. G. Tudor. M.H.R., 1901/22; Minister for Trade and Customs, 1908/9, 1910/13, 1914/16; of Richmond, Vic.; b. Williamstown, Vic., 27 Jan., 1866. Died 10 Jan., 1922.

³ Hon. J. A. Arthur. M.H.R., 1913/14; Minister for External Affairs, 1914. Barrister, of Bendigo, Vic.; b. Fryerstown, Vic., 1875. Died 9 Dec., 1914.

⁴ Hon. W. O. Archibald. M.H.A., S. Aust., 1893/1910; Member of C'wealth House of Reps., 1910/19; Minister for Home Affairs, 1914/15; Trade and Customs, 1916/17; of Adelaide; b. London, 3 June, 1850. Died 28 June, 1926.

⁵ Hon. W. G. Spence. M.L.A., N.S.W., 1898/1901; Member of C'wealth House of Reps., 1901/19. Postmaster-General, 1914/15; b. Orkney Islands, 1846. Died 13 Dec., 1926.

⁶ Hon. A. Gardiner. M.L.A., N.S.W., 1891/95, 1904/7. Member of C'wealth Senate, 1910/26, 1928. Assistant Minister for Defence, 1915/16; of Sydney; b. Orange, N.S.W., 1867.

⁷ Hon. H. Mahon. M.H.R., 1901/17, 1919/20; Postmaster-General, 1904. Minister for Home Affairs, 1908/9, External Affairs, 1914/16. Journalist, of Kalgoolie, W. Aust.; b. Tullamore, Ireland, 6 Jan., 1858. Died 28 Aug., 1931.

⁸ Hon. E. J. Russell. Member of C'wealth Senate, 1906/25. Clerk; of Brighton, Vic.; b. Warrnambool, Vic., 10 Aug., 1879. Died 18 July, 1925.

⁹ Hon. J. A. Jensen. M.H.A., Tas., 1903/10 and 1922/36; Member of C'wealth House of Reps., 1910/19. Minister for Navy, 1915/17; Minister for Trade and Customs, 1917/18. Of George Town, Tas. Died Nov., 1936.

This Ministry remained in office till October, 1915, but with a few modifications of personnel. Mr. Arthur, a young Victorian barrister, died in December, 1914, and was succeeded as Minister for External Affairs by Mr. Mahon. The work of the Defence Department was found to be so heavy that a separate department was created to administer naval affairs, and this was placed under the control of Mr. Jensen in July, 1915.

Four of the members of the Government thus launched remained in office during the whole of the remainder of the war period, namely, Mr. Hughes, Senator Pearce, Senator Russell, and Mr. Jensen. The two first named, with the Prime Minister, were the ministers who signified most in the direction of policy.

III

Mr. Andrew Fisher, in his fifty-second year, now became for the third time Prime Minister. His first Ministry (1908) had lasted only seven months, his second (1910) twenty months. Now he was at the head of a cabinet which commanded a majority giving promise of long endurance. A Scotsman of Robert Burns's county, born in 1862, he brought his Ayrshire dialect with him when he emigrated at the age of twenty-three, and the "burr" of it would frequently remind his hearers of his nativity after thirty years of life in Australia, especially when he became excited in the midst of a parliamentary tumult. The pressure of necessity gave him few opportunities of acquiring education in his boyhood, for he was working in Scottish coal mines from his tenth year. As a coal miner he first found employment in Queensland, but it was on the Gympie goldfield that he found his feet as a politician. The Queensland Labour party began to take shape in the early nineties, and the Gympie electorate offered a favourable opportunity for an ambitious young political aspirant anxious to try his fortunes. In 1893 he secured election to the Queensland Legislative Assembly, lost the seat at the next election in 1896, won it again in 1899; and, when Federation came, offered himself as a Labour candidate for Wide Bay, which, as a larger Commonwealth constituency, contained the district wherein Mr. Fisher was well known. He

had already made his mark, as shown by the fact that when Mr. Anderson Dawson¹⁰ formed the first Queensland Labour government in 1899, he was given the portfolios of Minister of Railways and Minister of Public Works. But no more than a taste of office was vouchsafed by that venture, as the Dawson Government endured only five days. Entry to the first Federal Parliament in 1901, however, kindled higher ambitions. Mr. Fisher was one of the most strident of the stalwarts who supported the leader of the Labour party in the House of Representatives, and when Mr. Watson¹¹ became Prime Minister in 1904 the Ministry of Trade and Customs was entrusted to the vigorous Ayrshire-Queenslander whom his associates, including many of his opponents, called "Andy." In 1907 Mr. Watson retired from the leadership, whereupon the Federal Labour party elected Mr. Fisher as its leader; indeed, he succeeded by a kind of right, as he had acted as deputy-leader during the previous three years.

A strong-looking, square-jawed, firmly-built man, iron grey, fresh-complexioned, Mr. Fisher gave an impression of alertness, downrightness, and sincerity. His voice was harsh, even raucous, a voice capable of penetrating a hurricane or adding noticeable volume to the plaudits at a football match on Saturday afternoons. He had none of the graces of speech, the minimum of humour—or at least only enough to laugh at the more obvious humorous sallies of others—and no gift of eloquence of the polished sort. He could be vehement in attack, with the directness and clang of a hammer. But, despite his frequent ebullitions of the "*perfervidum ingenium Scotorum*" in speech, Mr. Fisher was essentially a cautious man. That he attended carefully and shrewdly to his private affairs was well known to his friends. He had a cultivated instinct for the value of money. He was assiduous in his attention to the details of administration, prompt in arriving at decisions, but essentially moderate in the courses which he favoured. One characteristic in particular endeared Mr.

¹⁰ Hon. A. Dawson M.L.A., Q'land, 1893/1901; Member of C'wealth Senate; 1901/6, Minister for Defence, 1904, b. Rockhampton, Q'land, 16 July, 1863. Died 20 July, 1910.

¹¹ Hon. J. C. Watson M.L.A., N.S.W., 1894/1901; Member of C'wealth House of Reps., 1901/10. Prime Minister of Australia, 1904; Hon. Organiser of Repatriation, 1915/16; President of National Roads and Motorists' Assn., of N.S.W., since 1920. Company director; of Sydney; b. Valparaiso, 9 April, 1867.

Fisher to those who knew him: his friendliness. The gentleness and affection which were so charming in his family circle were, in his relations with others, translated into a genial comradeship. He delighted in "doing a good turn" to anybody, and if he could oblige a friend he did it in a manner which gave grace to the act. He was a very easy man to work with, and obtained the most willing service from secretaries and officials because he treated them as personal friends with whom he was associated for the common good. If his conversational range was limited, it was nevertheless always a pleasant experience to spend an hour with him, because he was so frank, so free, so unspoiled, so quiet and willing to listen to views which did not coincide with his own. A more friendly man there was not in the politics of Australia in his time than Andrew Fisher; and the messenger who thought he was calling him "Andy" behind his back was hardly disconcerted when invited to do it always.

IV

Throughout the war period, the man who dominated Australian politics was William Morris Hughes, thrice Attorney-General, and Prime Minister from 1915 till 1923. The story of the career of this remarkable man is a romance exhibiting the triumph of natural ability over severe physical disadvantages and impediments of circumstance. He was born in Wales on the 25th of September, 1864, and received his earliest education at the Llandudno Grammar School. In his boyhood he spoke Welsh, and retained in manhood enough of the language to give quaintness to many an amusing anecdote. He once whimsically alleged, in addressing a Welsh audience in Melbourne, that it was intolerable that the people of Australia were allowed to grow up in ignorance of the Welsh tongue, "the finest language in the world, and without doubt that in which the first human courtship ran its course in the Garden of Eden." If the "Celtic temperament," as some believe, is rich in the qualities which exhibit themselves in exuberant energy, facility in speech, intensity and courage, perhaps Mr. Hughes is partly explicable by attributing to him a liberal endowment of it. But the

manifold experiences of an extraordinarily varied life, and the knowledge of mankind acquired in the course thereof, were probably of more substantial value.

His father, who was a carpenter, removing to London, young Hughes completed his education at St. Stephen's (or the Baroness Burdett-Coutts') school, Westminster. He was a quick pupil, particularly at his French, and, before he was thirteen, became a pupil teacher. The Baroness had him to stay at her home at Highgate. The school was periodically visited by Matthew Arnold who was then an inspector of schools under the Board of Education. He was friendly and encouraging to Hughes, and offered to get him a stool in Coutts' Bank; and we may be sure that it would have rejoiced the heart of that liberal critic, the poet of "The Scholar Gypsy" and the apostle of sweetness and light, could he have known that this shy lad would, after being somewhat of a scholar gypsy himself, emerge to fame as the Prime Minister of a great dominion.

A strange thing happened while he was still a lad. On London Bridge he saw another boy looking over at the unloading steamers. The youngster told him that he was the son of a Yarmouth skipper, and had come down by train from that town but had not the money to return. Young Hughes lent him thirty shillings, never expecting to see the money again. But after many days came a letter from Australia, returning the sum borrowed, and containing also the advice that this was a country where prosperity might be won. Surprised and impressed, Hughes determined to put the counsel to the test; and in 1884 he landed at Brisbane, full of hope but with no money, no prospects, and no endowment of robust health. During the next six years he was tempered in the rough school of experience. He was by turns a drover, a boundary rider, a seaman and a steward in a coastal vessel, a cook on a timber reservation, a fencer on a sheep station, a supernumerary in a Shakespearean theatrical company, a locksmith, an umbrella mender, a newspaper writer, and a bookseller. He took any work that offered. Always he was a student, but the rough life that he had led left him with one very serious defect. Once when after assisting to bring

cattle by train from Nyngan to Orange, he had arrived worn out, on a bitter night, and slept on the ground in the station yard, he caught a chill which resulted in the deafness from which he never recovered. One of his best portraits is a bronze bust in which the sculptor—a French artist—has represented him in a familiar attitude, with hand to ear to catch the words of a speaker. It was often said of him in the course of his political career that he found his deafness occasionally serviceable as an excuse for not having heard what it was not convenient for him to hear; and this reputation accompanied him to the Peace Conference at Versailles. A German chronicler describes a quarrel between President Woodrow Wilson and “the Australian Prime Minister, a man who knew how to put his defective hearing to good use.”¹² The jibe would have had more point if he had been a man who was ever at a loss for an effective reply in any contingency. But poignant retort was one of his never-failing accomplishments. In any company the liveliest of companions, there was hardly a story which he could not match with one drawn from his own experience and relate with pungency and verve. In public speech and under stress of excitement he could be waspish, a maker of stinging phrases, a “Rupert of debate” with all the recklessness of that flashing cavalry leader; but in the social circle his humour bubbled incessantly, and his wit sparkled with untiring zest.

The physical equipment of Mr. Hughes seemed to contradict the idea that he was capable of such energetic efforts as might fatigue a man of powerful frame. He was slight in build, and had a weak digestive apparatus; to feel thoroughly well was a rare experience for him.¹³ Yet protracted effort did not

¹² Karl Friedrich Nowak, *Versailles*, English translation by Thomas and Dickes, 1928, p. 66

¹³ There are many instances, ancient and modern, to remind us that a frame apparently weak may be the habitation of a vigorous character. The Latin epigram is one testimony to that effect

“Corporis exigui vires contemnere noli
Consilio pollet, cui vim natura negavit”

We may also remember Macaulay's description of Luxembourg and William of Orange when they encountered each other in battle: “It is probable that among the hundred and twenty thousand soldiers who were marshalled round Neerwinden under all the standards of Western Europe, the two feeblest in body were the hunchbacked dwarf who urged forward the fiery onset of France and the asthmatic skeleton who covered the slow retreat of England.” A more modern instance is that of the hero of South American independence, Simon Bolivar, “puny and ill-proportioned in body, of a worn, anxious and melancholy countenance.”

seem to exhaust him, and his alertness of mind appeared to acquire freshened facility as increasing demands were made upon him. His own comment upon his physical disabilities was that if he had had a "constitution" he "would have been dead long ago!"

Within ten years of Mr. Hughes's landing in Australia he was in the thick of political struggles. The great maritime strike of 1890 was disastrous for the trades unions which entered upon it, but out of it emerged the Labour party as a new force in Australian politics. Mr. Hughes in his extreme Labour days was never an advocate of the strike method of adjusting the relations of capital and labour. He discouraged strikes, though not always successfully. He stood strongly for "collective bargaining" through the instrumentality of industrial organisation, combined with political action. The lesson of 1890 was enforced by him as one which enjoined the dual method of advancing labour interests. After the strike he organised the waterside workers of Sydney and became the first secretary of their union, and he continued his intimate connection with the union until long after he became a member of the Federal Parliament. In 1894 he offered himself as a candidate for the representation of the Lang electorate in the Legislative Assembly of New South Wales, and was successful. As a member of parliament he favoured the creation of that system of "machine politics" which, though strenuously condemned by many Labour advocates at the time, was one of the factors which made the party formidable by reason of its disciplined solidarity in the coming years. Mr. Hughes, that is to say, favoured the compelling of members of the party to subscribe to a pledge which bound them, "on questions affecting the fate of a government, to vote as a majority of the Labour party may decide at a duly constituted caucus meeting."

With the coming of Federation Mr. Hughes transferred himself to the Commonwealth Parliament as member for West Sydney in the House of Representatives. During the first three years he made his mark as a critic under the leadership of Mr. Watson, the astute, chivalrous, and clear-minded leader whose services the Federal Labour party had the good fortune to command at the beginning of this new

phase of its history. His ready wit, his audacity, his power of scathing invective, made him a very effective lieutenant to his more urbane leader, and it was a foregone conclusion that when his party attained office an important portfolio would be available to him. The opportunity came in 1904 when the Deakin administration fell. In the previous year Mr. Hughes had completed his legal course at Sydney and been called to the bar. He might have had the attorney-generalship in the new Watson Government if he had been inclined to take it. But there were good reasons why he should not. He had as yet no standing as a lawyer, and it was important that the Labour party, at its first coming into office in the Commonwealth, should present to the country an appearance of competence which would gain for it general confidence. Another reason was that it was understood that Henry Bournes Higgins,¹⁴ a Victorian member whose position in the legal profession was unquestionably high, was prepared to take office in the government, though he had never been a proclaimed member of the Labour party. Mr. Hughes therefore accepted the Department of External Affairs and Mr. Higgins entered the Cabinet as its official legal member. He, however, had gone to the High Court bench when the second Labour Government came into office in 1908 under Mr. Fisher's command, and Mr. Hughes then took the attorney-generalship, as he did also in the second Fisher administration. Now, in the government which was to face the problems of war in 1914, Mr. Hughes was again Attorney-General.

V

In the Senate, Government business was in the capable and experienced charge of the Western Australian Senator, George Foster Pearce, who resumed the office of Minister for Defence, which he had held in the two previous Fisher ministries. He was by birth a South Australian, born in 1870. In his early manhood the great era of Western Australian gold-mining began, and he, a carpenter by trade, went to the diggings to

¹⁴ Hon. Mr. Justice Higgins. M.L.A., Vic., 1894/1900; Member of C'wealth House of Reps., 1901/6; Attorney-General, 1904; Justice of the High Court of Australia, 1906/29, and President of C'wealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration, 1907/21; of Malvern, Vic.; b. Newton Ards, Ireland, 30 June, 1851. Died 13 Jan., 1929

improve his fortunes. Trade union organisation attracted him, and he rapidly acquired influence in the movement, becoming secretary of the United Trades Council at Perth in 1896. The presidency of that body was conferred upon him three years later. He was therefore a leading man in Western Australian Labour politics when Federation was achieved. It was natural that he should become one of the Labour party's candidates at the first Federal election. He gained one of the Senate seats, and, despite drastic changes in political grouping, was still a Western Australian senator after 35 strenuous years, thus achieving the distinction of being the only member of the Senate with an unbroken record of service throughout the years preceding the war, through the war years in which he was continually a minister, and through the post war period. Other Labour senators had claims of seniority over him when the Watson Government was formed in 1904; but in 1908 he became a member of the first Fisher cabinet. During his second period of office as Minister for Defence, in 1910-13, it fell to his lot to initiate the system of compulsory military training, in accordance with the recommendations of Lord Kitchener's report on Commonwealth defences; and it was also under his administration that the Royal Military College was established at Duntroon in 1911. Senator Pearce therefore was an experienced administrator of the department which bore the brunt of the organisation of armies when he was again put in charge of the Defence Department in 1914.

Aptitude for assiduous application to business, and lucid exposition, distinguished Senator Pearce as an administrator and a parliamentarian. He took great pains to understand the technique of army organisation. He was willing to learn from his experts, and, when a course of action was determined upon, he backed them up in a manner that won their confidence because they knew that they had his. In the Senate, a period as chairman of committees (1906-8) made him familiar with parliamentary practice, a knowledge which he turned to good account when he became the chief exponent of government policy in that chamber. He always thoroughly understood the business in hand, and was at his best in explaining the text and purpose of a piece of proposed legislation, however

complicated it might be. Mastery of detail was his outstanding quality. Some critics said that he gave too much attention to detail; but the line between the "too much" and the "too little" is hard to draw, and it certainly is not a defect for a parliamentary leader to be familiar with the intricacies of the bills which he has to explain and the mass of political business which has to be transacted. In this capacity Senator Pearce had learned much from the first leader of the Senate, Richard Edward O'Connor,¹⁵ whose early removal to the Bench deprived the House of a striking personality, as a few years later his death deprived the judiciary of a brilliant and learned judge. O'Connor set a standard in Senate leadership, and, though Senator Pearce was his opponent in politics, he was, perhaps not quite consciously, his pupil, and one of whom his master would have thought well.

In the administration of his department Pearce was prompt, decisive, and prone to prolonged exertion. There are ministers who find a difficulty in arriving at decisions, and postpone action for weeks. Nothing is more exasperating to the officers of a department than to have at the head of it a minister who takes papers home in his bag, sleeps upon them, forgets them, and holds up business while he is making up his slow and hesitating mind; or who allows important questions to slip into the background of his consciousness while he concerns himself with the more spectacular business of politics. There were ministers of this kind in Australia during the war, perfectly earnest men, but dilatory in their determinations. Pearce was the very opposite kind of minister. There are hundreds of files of papers with his minutes written upon them, and the dates show with what expedition he attended to matters of business, and how keen he was that the Minister's office should not be the sticking-place where decisions lagged for lack of propulsive energy. Nor is it true that he allowed himself to be controlled by his officers. Being a man of practical good sense, he naturally took the best advice he could get, and the saying that "Pearce will always listen to what you have to say" was justified. On purely technical matters

¹⁵ Hon. Mr. Justice O'Connor. M.L.C., N.S.W., 1887/98; Member of C'wealth Senate, 1901/3; Justice of the High Court of Australia, 1903/12; b. Sydney, 4 Aug., 1851. Died, 18 Nov., 1912.



5. RT. HON. ANDREW FISHER, PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA, 1914-15

*Photo by Boothorn, Melbourne
Aust War Memorial Collection No H1666*

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6 THE FISHER GOVERNMENT, 1914-15

Top row (left to right). Hon W O Archibald, Hon J A. Arthur
 Hon H. Mahon, Hon E J Russell, Hon J. A. Jensen. *Centre* Hon.
 A Gardiner, Hon W M. Hughes, Hon. F G Tudor, Hon. G. F Pearce,
 Hon W. G Spence. *Bottom.* Rt Hon Andrew Fisher

*By permission of the Commonwealth Government
 Aust War Memorial Collection No. A2819*

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he was anxious to know what conflicting views there might be concerning points which had to be settled. But he took trouble to form his own opinions, and never spared himself in seeing for himself, if the question were one as to which personal inspection was desirable. He would then write upon the file a short, clear, often emphatic minute of instruction, and the initials "G.F.P." at the end thereof meant always that the Minister would take full responsibility for what was done. It is literally true that thousands of decisions had to be made by him on matters of the utmost urgency and importance during the war, and it is doubtful whether any one of them was delayed a day through lack of attention by him.

VI

Of the other members of the Ministry, Mr. Spence was the veteran founder of the most powerful trades union in Australia, the Amalgamated Shearers' Union, afterwards enlarged into the Australian Workers' Union. Once the *bête noir* of the squatters and their advocates, he had become in the ripeness of his years a genial, pleasant-spoken, mild-mannered man. Mr. Tudor was the representative of the strongest Victorian Labour constituency, Yarra; not an outstanding man, but assiduous and trusted by his party. He was to be a more prominent political figure after the raising of the conscription issue, when he became the official leader of that section of the Labour party which refused to follow the leadership of Mr. Hughes. Mr. Arthur did not live long enough to make his mark, as he died in December, 1914. He was a young lawyer of scholarly aptitudes, with a suave and easy manner. Mr. Mahon was the member for Kalgoorlie, an Irishman with "a past" born of the storm and stress of Irish Parnellite politics, and an undeviating loyalty to the Church of his fathers; a journalist who wielded a pen capable of rendering serviceable aid to the causes to which he devoted himself. Mr. Archibald and Senator Gardiner were stalwarts of the Labour party, the former from South Australia, the latter from New South Wales. Mr. Jensen, of Scandinavian origin, was a Tasmanian representative. When in July, 1915, the navy, hitherto administered by the Defence Department, was

given a department of its own, he was placed in charge of it. Later in the war, after he had been transferred to another office in the Government, his administration of the naval department fell under very grave criticism in connection with certain government business activities.¹⁶ Senator Russell, a Victorian, was the youngest member of the Ministry.

The new government entered upon the control of Commonwealth affairs in what appeared to be fairly favourable circumstances. It had solid majorities in both Houses of the Federal Parliament. The Liberal opposition was resolved to assist in everything relating to war policy. There was not a breath of suspicion as to the *bona fides* of the Labour party's leaders when they pronounced themselves convinced that the prosecution of the war was the most urgent of all issues, and that they intended to exert themselves to the utmost to this end. The country entrusted them with the responsibilities of office because it was convinced that they meant what they said upon this crucial point. No member of the cabinet had uttered a syllable that could be interpreted as casting a doubt upon his complete acceptance of the pledges repeatedly given by Mr. Fisher and Mr. Hughes. The war was a great, a strenuous, an absorbing business; but upon the local political horizon there was not a cloud when Parliament settled down to the work of the session.

VII

The disposition of the Opposition to assist the Government in war policy was clearly manifested in the handling of two bills of great importance, the Trading with the Enemy Bill and the War Precautions Bill. Both were in charge of Mr. Hughes. The former made any active trading with any country with which the Empire was at war a statutory misdemeanour. The second reading of the War Precautions Bill was moved in the House of Representatives on October 28th. Its aim, as Mr. Hughes explained it, was to prevent the disclosure of important information, to give power to deport and otherwise deal with aliens, to interrogate them and obtain information in various ways, and to enable officers

¹⁶ See p. 282

to be appointed to carry into effect any orders or regulations which might be made under the measure.¹⁷ The enormous powers conferred upon the Government by clause 6 could not escape attention. It provided that:

Any person who contravenes or fails to comply with any regulation or order made in pursuance of this Act shall be guilty of an offence against this Act. Penalty, one hundred pounds or six months' imprisonment or both.

Mr. Hughes informed the House that he had told the Leader of the Opposition privately that the Government had a reason for wanting to get the bill through quickly. "I assure you," he said, "that the present law is not sufficient for our purpose." Mr. Cook answered: "I must accept that statement." It was pointed out in the course of the debate that the bill was fraught with danger in consequence of the powers which it gave to frame regulations to do nearly everything that the Government might desire to do. "Would it not be more dangerous," asked the Prime Minister, "to take too little than too much power?" Sir William Irvine pointed out that the powers given were "enormous," but, he declared, "if the Government say that it is essential to have these powers I raise no objection."¹⁸ Mr. Watt¹⁹ thought that the Government was wise in asking for the widest powers.²⁰ Not a voice was raised against the bill. The Opposition was completely compliant; the supporters of the Government said nothing whatever. The bill was passed through the House of Representatives without a single division or a single amendment; was sent up to the Senate the same day; and the standing orders were suspended in that House to enable it to pass through all its stages without delay. That was done, and the War Precautions Bill became an act of parliament within the shortest possible time allowed by parliamentary procedure. Yet scores of the most far-reaching regulations were made under that act and its later amendments; it legalised the censorship; it gave control over newspapers; it penalised

¹⁷ *Parliamentary Debates, 1914, Vol. LXXV, p. 369*

¹⁸ *Parliamentary Debates, 1914, Vol. LXXV, p. 372.*

¹⁹ Rt Hon. W. A. Watt. M.L.A., Vic., 1897/1900, 1902/4; Premier of Victoria, 1912/14; Member of C'wealth House of Reps., 1914/29; Minister for Works and Railways, 1917/18, Treasurer, 1918/20; Acting Prime Minister, 1918/19; Speaker, 1923/26. Investor and Company director; of Toorak, Vic., b. Kyneton, Vic., 23 Nov., 1871.

²⁰ *Parliamentary Debates, 1914, Vol. LXXV, p. 373.*

the spreading of reports likely to cause disaffection or public alarm; substantially it established military control; and it was, according to legal opinion, wide enough to have enabled the Government to inaugurate conscription by regulation if it had been politically expedient to do so.

The provision in the Defence Act which virtually required the Commonwealth Government to pass this act, rendered possible that centralisation of authority which was found to be imperative in the Australian federation in war-time. The State governments themselves, usually so jealous of their powers, were at various times forced to seek this centralisation—for example, in the wheat control—through the obvious need for Australia to act as a unit in war-time. Until the case of *Farey v. Burvett*,²¹ the Commonwealth Government itself was uncertain as to the limits of its powers; but, after the decision of the High Court in that case, it was clear that it had power to make laws with respect to everything that might contribute to victory in war. The result was that during the war, in respect of everything that affected the carrying on of war, the federation was practically unified, the power of the central government being unlimited. It is related that Mr. Bavin²² entered the room of Mr. Garran, Solicitor-General for the Commonwealth, to consult him on a point that had arisen. "Would it," he asked, "be an offence under the War Precautions Regulations——?" "Yes," said Garran, without waiting for him to finish. Bavin retorted: "That's the soundest and shortest opinion I've heard you give."

The one serious parliamentary storm of the months between the outbreak of the war and the end of the year 1914 did not relate to a question of policy or administration connected with the war itself, but to a bill to amend the Commonwealth Bank Act. The purpose of the bill was to increase the capital and powers of the bank, which at this time was the object of some amount of suspicion by a group of members of the Opposition. Sir William Irvine moved an amendment for the appointment of a select committee to inquire into the

²¹ See p. 642.

²² Hon. Sir Thomas Bavin, K.C.M.G., M.L.A., N. S. Wales, 1917-35; Premier, 1927/30. Judge of Supreme Court, N. S. Wales, 1935; of Sydney; b. Kaiapoi, N.Z., 5 May, 1874.

control and development of the Commonwealth Bank, the transfer to it of the management of the note issue, and the relations between the bank and other financial institutions. The issues were not such as ordinarily electrified the parliamentary atmosphere, but tempers became somewhat frayed as the sittings were prolonged into the hot December weeks. The Speaker called an Opposition member to order for irrelevancy; the ruling was challenged by Mr. Massy Greene,²³ the member for Richmond (New South Wales); the leader of the Opposition supported his follower, and the contest between Mr. Greene and the Speaker waxed furious. Ministerial supporters loudly upheld the Speaker's ruling, and Mr. Cook denounced them as "howling dingoes."

At length Mr. Greene was suspended by the House, and Mr. Cook, declaring that he would not "take any further part in the proceedings on account of the tyrannical way in which the Speaker conducts them," led the Opposition members from the chamber. The Prime Minister then submitted and the House carried the motion that "The right honourable member for Parramatta, Mr. Joseph Cook, be suspended from the service of the House until he returns with Mr. Speaker's consent and apologises to Mr. Speaker." Mr. Cook made his peace on the following day by writing a letter to the Speaker in which, whilst declaring that he had been "smarting under a very keen sense of injustice," he nevertheless recognised that the expression used by him in the heat of debate was one which should not have been uttered, and he therefore unreservedly withdrew it and tendered an apology. The apology was offered and accepted on the last day of meeting in 1914; and the incident would not have been worth mentioning in this place except that it illustrates the striking difference which at this time prevailed between the substantial unanimity with which Parliament dealt with issues relating to the war, and the passion which was apt to burst into flame when ordinary political questions were under consideration.

Mr. Fisher's tactful management of business, and his anxiety to meet the convenience of the Opposition in the

²³ Hon. Sir W. Massy Greene, K.C.M.G. Member of C'wealth House of Reps. 1910/22; of Senate, since 1923; Minister for Trade and Customs, 1919/21; Minister for Defence and for Health, 1921/23; Asst. Treasurer, 1932/33. Company manager; of Sydney; b. Wimbledon, London, 6 Nov., 1874.

arrangement of parliamentary work, contributed materially to the maintenance of good relations on war questions. Mr. Cook would have liked Parliament to postpone all other business than that relating to the war. Ordinary social legislation, he held, should wait for more propitious times. Parliament should devote itself exclusively to the one predominant issue, leaving the Government "free in the exercise of its executive functions and responsibilities to do what is needful for the vigorous prosecution of the war."²⁴ But Mr. Fisher considered this a mistaken idea of the function of Parliament. "I think," he said, "we shall be no less able to provide the fighting power necessary, here and elsewhere, if we carry on our ordinary avocations, including our parliamentary duties, than we should be if we were to retire altogether from parliamentary service, and simply await events."²⁵

²⁴ *Parliamentary Debates, Vol. LXXVI, p. 2364.*

²⁵ *Ibid., p. 2368.*