

From Servants to Citizens: A History of Victorian Public Service Unionism 1885-1946

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Abstract

The history of Victorian departmental public service unionism had its genesis in the era of 'New Unionism' in the 1880s. On 17 June 1885, a group of approximately 1,000 Victorian public servants packed into Melbourne's Athenaeum Theatre to create Australia's first state departmental public service union. And yet despite its age, Victorian departmental public service unionism has seldom been the subject of serious historical analysis. It has alternatively been posited that public servants are devoid of the 'bonds of class feelings'. Public servants have commonly been treated as a residual class in both Marxist and non-Marxist labour history writings. This dissertation therefore fills an obvious lacuna in Australian trade union historiography. It focuses on the experiences of ordinary Victorian public service unionists and the actions of the various configurations of Victorian service unionism from 1885-1946. The central argument of this history is that public service unionists, with the aid of the public service union, challenged the theoretical and practical limitations placed upon their political and industrial citizenship. Indeed, public servants refused to accept the traditional 'servant' stereotype. Throughout this dissertation the regulations governing the unique employment status of public servants are revealed. What becomes evident is that public service unionists are frequently subjected to extreme levels of political coercion as a direct result of the historical influence of the master and servant legacy. Successive governments were reluctant to frame public servants as industrial employees and thus they continually thwarted the attempts public service unionists to secure expanded industrial rights and recognition.

The themes of growth, crisis and regeneration are apparent throughout this history. In the six decade period under investigation the public service union and its members are forced to navigate through two major economic Depressions and a hostile political environment. At first the union fixed its focus upon the establishment of political rights for public service employees. This campaign successfully concludes in 1916 and the attention of the union turns then to organisational expansion and the imposition of a range of industrial rights. The hopes of the public service union and its members are periodically spiked in line with the intermittent parliamentary

advances of the Victorian Labor Party. By the mid-point of the 1940s the decades long campaign of public service unionists for expanded industrial rights is poised for success. Throughout this history it is obvious that bonds of class feeling, while periodically tested, were developed among public servants and a unique public service work culture was forged.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my immediate and extended families for their support. I pay particular homage to two people. To my loving and generous mother Elli I say thank you for all that you have done in assisting me during the course of this project. To my loving wife Rachel I thank you for sticking by me during what has been a challenging few years; I hope I can return the favour in full.

I dedicate this thesis to the many casual academics across Australia who are doing it tough, and, to the many Victorian public service unionists who are proud of their history.

Declaration

This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of another degree at a university or any other educational institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person or persons, except where due reference has been made.

Dustin Raffaele Halse

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction	-1-
1.1 Research Context: Labour and Trade Union Historiography.....	-2-
1.2 Methodological Approach.....	-10-
1.3 Structure of the Dissertation.....	-14-
Chapter 2 Citizens Who Serve: The Political Rights of Victorian Public Servants 1856-1916	-16-
2.1 The Genesis of the Victorian Public Service.....	-18-
2.2 A Constitution at Last.....	-22-
2.3 The Net of Control Grows Wider.....	-24-
2.4 The 1890s Depression and the Demonising of the Public Service.	-29-
2.5 George Turner: An Unexpected Leader.....	-32-
2.6 A Clash of Populist Ideologies.....	-34-
2.7 Cometh the Hour, Cometh the ‘Iceberg’.....	-37-
2.8 Abolishing Special Representation.....	-42-
2.9 Conclusion.....	-48-
Chapter 3 Victorian Public Service Unionists Answering the Call 1914-18	-50-
3.1 The Balkan Powder Keg Explodes.....	-50-
3.2 Public Servants at the Front.....	-56-
3.3 There will be Poverty, Discontent and Crime.....	-60-
3.4 The ‘Little Tzar’, Mannix and an Expanding Union.....	-62-
3.5 The Blackburn and Hendy Affairs.....	-76-
3.6 Conclusion.....	-82-
Chapter 4 Disunity, Chaos and Rebirth 1918-1921	-84-
4.1 In the Lap of the Gods.....	-84-
4.2 Internal Divisions Intensify.....	-92-
4.3 The Tale of Two Unions.....	-98-
4.4 Conclusion.....	-106-
Chapter 5 The Quest for an Independent Industrial Tribunal Commences 1921-1922	-108-
5.1 A New Beginning.....	-108-
5.2 We Ask for the Same Rights Enjoyed by Others.....	-118-
5.3 Mr. Lawson your Opposition to our Claims is Futile.....	-126-
5.4 Conclusion.....	-134-

Chapter 6 In Pursuit of Commonwealth Industrial Registration 1922-1924	-135-
6.1 The King Can Do No Wrong.....	-135-
6.2 The Formation of the Australian Public Service Association.....	-140-
6.3 The Die is Cast.....	-145-
6.4 Conclusion.....	-153-
Chapter 7 Superannuation and the Rise of Arthur Calwell 1924-1928	-155-
7.1 The Worker Feels he is a Mere Puppet.....	-155-
7.2 Political Battles are Fought With the Gloves Off.....	-164-
7.3 Bringing Advancement Along Labor Lines.....	-174-
7.4 Conclusion.....	-182-
Chapter 8 In the Wilderness: Depression and the Slow Recovery 1928-1938	-184-
8.1 An Orgy of Speculation.....	-184-
8.2 Principles Should Override Expediency Every Time.....	-194-
8.3 The Lost Years and the Slow Recovery.....	-200-
8.4 Conclusion.....	-209-
Chapter 9 The Mecca of Our Hopes: The Establishment of the Public Service Wages Board 1939-1946	-211-
9.1 New Leadership Brings a Fresh Start.....	-211-
9.2 World War Two and the Basic Wage.....	-215-
9.3 Emperor Dunstan and the Rise of the Women’s Division.....	-222-
9.4 The Fight is On: Campaigning for an Independent Tribunal.....	-227-
9.5 Eureka: ‘Fat Albert’ Falls and an Independent Public Service Board is Established.....	-232-
9.6 Conclusion.....	-239-
Chapter 10 Conclusion.....	-240-
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	-242-
APPENDIX 1 Union Leadership 1885-1950.....	-258-
LIST OF PUBLICATIONS	-259-

List of Illustrations

		Page
Figure 1:	“The Submerged Public Servant” <i>PSJV</i> , 29 September 1917.	-62-
Figure 2:	“John McKellar” <i>Labor Call</i> , 12 March 1925.	-166-
Figure 3:	“No Tripe” <i>PSJV</i> , 25 September 1930.	-197-
Figure 4:	“The Marathon Runner” <i>PSJV</i> , 25 September 1936.	-208-
Figure 5:	“Stan Keon” <i>PSJV</i> , 1 November 1940.	-214-
Figure 6:	“The March of Time” <i>PSJV</i> , 1 August 1940.	-219-
Figure 7:	“Surely Not Mr. Premier” <i>PSJV</i> , 1 May 1940.	-221-
Figure 8:	“Among the Immortals” <i>PSJV</i> , 1 November 1940.	-224-

Abbreviations

ACOA	Administration and Clerical Officers Association
ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
ALP	Australian Labor Party
ANU	Australian National University
APSA	Australian Public Service Association
APSF	Australian Public Service Federation
ARU	Australian Railways Union
ASSLH	Australian Society for the Study of Labour History
AWU	Australian Workers Union
CPA	Communist Party of Australia
CPP	Country Progressive Party
CA	Clerical Association
FCU	Federated Clerks' Union
GDA	General Division Association
HEAA	Hospitals Employees' Association of Australia
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
LC	Legislative Council
LA	Legislative Assembly
MP	Member of Parliament
MHA	Mental Hospitals Association
MHEA	Mental Hospitals Employees' Association
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
MLC	Member of Legislative Council
NCA	Northern Collieries Association
NCW	National Council of Women
NSW	New South Wales
OBU	One Big Union
PA	Professional Association
PSA	Public Service Association
PSL	Public Service League
PSJV	Public Service Journal of Victoria
SA	South Australia
SIUC	State Instrumentalities Union Committee
SUA	Seaman's Union of Australia
USL	Universal Services League
UoW	University of Wollongong
VEF	Victorian Employers Federation
VPD	Victorian Parliamentary Debate
VPSA	Victorian Public Service Association
VPSU	Victorian Public Service Union
VRU	Victorian Railways Union
VSSTU	Victorian State School Teachers' Union
VSP	Victorian Socialist Party
VTU	Victorian Teachers' Union

VSSF	Victorian State Services Federation
WA	Western Australia
WIUA	Workers' Industrial Union of Australia
WTA	Women's Teachers Association
WWI	World War One
WW2	World War Two

Chapter 1 Introduction

This dissertation is a history of Victorian departmental public service unionism from 1885-1946. It is the first comprehensive study of state departmental public service unionism conducted in Australia.¹ It will evaluate what Victorian public service unionism is and how it developed during this period. In doing so, it focuses on the lives and experiences of ordinary public service unionists. It also details the inner workings of the union and its leaders through its multiple configurations. More specifically, this dissertation reveals the nature of public service unionism by investigating the distinct work culture that existed among public servants. The central argument of this work is that public service unionists, with the aid of the public service union, challenged the theoretical and practical limitations placed upon their political and industrial citizenship. Indeed, public servants refused to accept the traditional ‘servant’ stereotype. It also becomes clear that bonds of class feeling that developed between public servants were forged in reaction to the historical influence of the master and servant legacy. It is not the contention of this work to suggest that Victorian public servants were especially militant in asserting their claims. Not once in the first 60 non-continuous years of Victorian public service unionism did the membership engage in radical industrial action. At times the advocacy and feeling within the ranks of the union was tested and subsequently waned. Nevertheless, as this history demonstrates the union’s multiple configurations, in the face of often fierce opposition, dared to confront the citizenship restrictions that were imposed upon its members. This introduction commences with an examination of Australian labour historiography. By providing this context the nature and intent of this study

¹ Significant works by Raymond Markey and Peter Sheldon on the New South Wales Public Service Association will be discussed later in this chapter. This is *not* a history of Victorian unions representing police officers, nurses, railways workers, and teachers—who are also referred to as ‘public servants’. As will come to light further in this history, for a brief period, unions representing teachers and police officers associate with Victorian State departmental public service unionism. Yet these specialist non-departmental public servants should not be confused with departmental public servants. The employment conditions and status of teachers, police officers and railways workers have been regulated by a swathe of legislation not applicable to departmental public servants. From this point onwards, unless where explicitly stated, this history will refer to departmental public servants and departmental public service unionism as ‘public servants’ and ‘public service unionism’ respectively.

becomes apparent. The brief historiography helps to explain why this project has been undertaken. Attention will then shift to a discussion of the methodology employed in the writing of this history. Finally, the structure of the dissertation is discussed.

1.1 Research Context: Labour and Trade Union History

The development, study and writing of labour history commenced in Australia in the late 1800s. Its genesis was closely linked to the rise of what is referred to as ‘New Unionism’ and the advent of state Labor Parties. By the end of the 1880s nearly 20 per cent of all Australian workers were unionists.² The high unionisation rate in Australia would even draw the attention of overseas commentators including Sydney and Beatrice Webb and Vladimir Lenin at the beginning of the 20th century. As membership numbers increased so too did the intellectual vitality of the Australian labour movement. Several union activists felt compelled to document the events that were occurring around them. W. E. Murphy wrote multiple chapters on Victoria and Tasmania in *The History of Capital and Labour in All Lands and All Ages* from his viewpoint as a former Melbourne Trades Hall secretary.³ George Black and William Guthrie Spence respectively wrote histories on the New South Wales (NSW) Labor Party and the Australian Workers’ Union (AWU).⁴ In 1923, Marxist historian V. G. Childe wrote a critique of capitalism that called for the enslavement of workers to be put to an end.⁵ The work entitled *How Labour Governs* was the world’s first study of parliamentary socialism. It has been suggested that all these publications, particularly

² See Bradley Bowden, “The Rise and Recline of Australian Unionism,” *Labour History* 100 (2011): 55.

³ W. E. Murphy, “Victoria,” in J. Norton, ed., *The History of Capital and Labour in All lands and Ages: Their Past Condition, Present Relations and Outlook for the Future* (Sydney: Oceanic Publishing Co, 1888).

⁴ George Black, *A History of the NSW Labor Party from its Conception until 1917* (Sydney: George A. Jones, 1926-27); William Guthrie Spence, *History of the AWU* (Sydney: Worker Trustees, 1911).

⁵ V. G. Childe, *How Labour Governs: A Study of Workers Representation in Australia* (London: Labour Publishing Co, 1923).

Black's and Spence's, were of a 'somewhat celebratory nature'.⁶ Indeed, they advanced a variety of Australian exceptionalism that contained overtones of both racism and chauvinism.⁷ From the late 1920s until the early 1940s, the labour history discipline in Australia remained largely dormant. Professor Ernest Scott—based at the University of Melbourne—was one of the few academic historians encouraging students and researchers to examine Australian historical records. University history departments predominantly chose instead to focus upon the British and European 'centres of civilisation'.⁸

In the 1940s and 1950s the study of Australian labour history began to transform.⁹ A new generation of academically-trained activist historians whom had had lived through the horrors and suffering of the 1930s Depression suddenly emerged. Many scholars had lost faith in the Labor Party as an agent of social progression in light of its failure to protect workers during the financial calamity. Many gravitated instead towards the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) and viewed Marxism not only as an ideology but also as a methodology.¹⁰ Brian Fitzpatrick, an accomplished labour researcher and writer, made a significant contribution to the discipline with the publication of *A Short history of the Australian Labour Movement* in 1940. He argued that Australian politics was essentially a struggle between the organised rich and organised working class.¹¹ From the mid 1950s, a group of young academics surfaced at the Australian National University (ANU) and would further develop labour history as a serious academic pursuit. Left wing historians such as Robin Gollan, Ian Turner, Miriam Dixson, John Merritt, Eric Fry and Russell Ward all rotated through ANU's research departments and history school en route to

⁶ John Merritt, "Labour History," in G. Osborne and W. F. Mandle, eds., *New History: Studying Australia Today* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1982), 113.

⁷ See Frank Bongiorno, "Australian Labour History: Trends, Contexts and Influences," *Labour History* 100 (2011): 2.

⁸ See Greg Patmore, *Australian Labour History* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1991), 2.

⁹ See Bongiorno, "Australian Labour History," 5-7.

¹⁰ See Andrew Wells, "The Old Left Intelligentsia 1930 to 1960," in Brian Head and James Walter, eds., *Intellectual Movements in Australian Society* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988). For example Russell Ward and Lloyd Ross.

¹¹ Brian Fitzpatrick, *A Short History of the Australian Labour Movement* (Melbourne: Rawson's Bookshop, 1940).

becoming prominent scholars. We now refer to this generation of intellectuals as the 'Old Left'.

By the beginning of the 1960s the discipline was poised for further transformation and development. It is generally contended that Gollan's *Radical and Working Class Politics: A Study of Eastern Australia 1850-1910* marked the beginning of a new era in the study of Australian labour history.¹² The publication asserted that the labour movement was the undeniable force of social progression. It also suggested that if one wanted to understand Australian history then he or she must examine the lives and status of ordinary workers. A year later in 1961 the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History (ASSLH) was founded and provided labour historians with a new medium through which to engage in serious political and industrial discussion. Gollan became the Society's inaugural president and commented that the organisation 'served as a kind of popular front, politically and intellectually'.¹³ A new journal entitled *Labour History* was created and as Terry Irving and Sean Scalmer have reflected it quickly became a 'means of political expression'.¹⁴ Participant scholars came to view the writing of labour history as a channel through which to redress the shortcomings of conventional historical research. Turner's influential *Industrial Labour and Politics: The Dynamics of the Labour Movement in Eastern Australia 1900-1921* (1965) argued that labour history differed from conventional research methodologies because it was focused on the 'masses rather than the élites as the moving forces in the historical process'.¹⁵ As such labour history was different; it represented a popular, democratic and a political form of historical writing.

A number of significant trade union histories authored by scholars including Ken Buckley, Jim Hagan, Tom Sheridan, L. J. Louis and Gollan were written during

¹² Robin Gollan, *Radical and Working Class Politics: A Study of Eastern Australia, 1850-1910* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1960).

¹³ Robin Gollan quoted in Patmore, *Australian Labour History*, 6-7.

¹⁴ Terry Irving and Sean Scalmer, "Labour Historian and Labour Intellectuals: Generations and Crises," in David Palmer, Ross Shanahan and Martin Shanahan, eds., *Australian Labour History Reconsidered* (Adelaide: Adelaide University Press, 1999): 104.

¹⁵ Ian Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics: The Dynamics of the Labour Movement in Eastern Australia, 1900-1921* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1965), xvii.

labour history's growth period.¹⁶ Some extolled the links between industrial unions and the Labor Party. Many remain unsurpassed in quality and collectively they helped to lay a foundation for later trade union history projects. As to why trade union histories were so popular during this period is a question that warrants a brief comment. Few trade union histories had been published by this point in time and the majority that had were completed by participants, overwhelmingly male, and usually former secretaries or elected officials. Old Left historians recognised that there was an opportunity to fill a gap in the research by producing serious analyses of union activity. Unions were viewed as institutions that served to advance the interests of the working class and of socialism more broadly. Several trade union scholars had working class backgrounds and were therefore interested in tracing their class origins.¹⁷ Researchers were also aided by the growth of trade union archives that enabled them to access empirical data and records.¹⁸ It can also be posited that institutional projects were 'contained' and provided writers with distinct beginnings and clear themes of survival, regeneration and growth. Perhaps the primary reason was simply that trade union analysis in the 1960s was still considered a pillar of labour history writing.

Nonetheless, the work of Old Left was subjected to significant criticism by the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s. Conservatives attempted to marginalise labour history by suggesting it was not a serious academic pursuit and consequently made its participants overly defensive and reluctant to stray far from conventional historical methods. Yet the most telling indictment levelled against the Old Left emanated from within the labour history community itself. Terry Irving, Stuart Macintyre and Humphrey McQueen formed what was unofficially referred to as a 'New Left' and claimed that the work of their predecessors was parochial and

¹⁶ Jim Hagan, *Printers and Politics: A History of the Australian Printing Unions, 1850-1950* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1966); Ken Buckley, *The Amalgamated Engineers in Australia, 1852-1920* (Canberra: Dept. of Economic History, ANU, 1970); Tom Sheridan, *Mindful Militants: The Amalgamated Engineering Union in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); L. J. Louis, *Trade Unions and the Depression: A Study of Victoria, 1930-1932* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1968).

¹⁷ Among them being Gollan and Hagan.

¹⁸ The main trade union archive being the Noel Butlin archives at ANU.

offered no real theoretical analysis.¹⁹ It was argued that labour history was unduly ‘institutionalised’ and as a result that distinct groups and streams of analysis had been ignored. Class relations and not simply class needed to be examined; society as a whole and not just its parts deserved investigation. The opinions of this New Left were framed against a backdrop of the Vietnam War and the rise of multiple liberation movements. Many New Left historians had taken their intellectual cue from four British historians—E. H. Carr, E. P. Thompson, Gareth Stedman Jones and Eric Hobsbawm. Macintyre drew upon Carr’s *What is History* in launching an attack on his older colleagues by suggesting that they uncritically accepted historical ‘facts’ and were too easily drawn to conventional historical methods.²⁰ McQueen pivoted to Stedman Jones in arguing that the labour movement, lulled by ‘the siren entreaties of bourgeoisie culture’, had meekly acquiesced to the introduction of compulsory arbitration.²¹ He railed against the centrality of compulsory arbitration in Australia and inculcated it for dampening the organising spirit of ordinary workers.²² So vexed was McQueen that he even condemned previous labour historians for giving up on revolution: ‘a once radical people corrupted by their own victories’.²³

As these arguments gained traction the pursuit of trade union history was relegated in the overall hierarchy of labour history. It was considered the least redeemable component of the Old Left’s work. Its writers were criticised for being inexplicit in form and unoriginal in method. Many were disparaged for adopting an ‘economist’ version of the past that framed unions as associations concerned only about the wages and conditions of members. Others were condemned for retreating into nostalgia. By the mid 1970s, the focus of labour history had shifted towards social history. *Labour History*, which had by then adopted the sub-title *A Journal of Labour and Social History*, began to publish an eclectic mix of articles on radical feminism, juvenile delinquency, the concept of class, environmentalism, immigration, the anti-war movement, convict protest, the political consciousness of the unemployed, and

¹⁹ This term can be problematic for as Frank Bongiorno comments the new wave of labour historians that emerged in the 1950s had also been dubbed the ‘New Left’.

²⁰ See E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964).

²¹ See Humphrey McQueen, *New Britannia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970): 249.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

homosexuality. This turn was a direct response the call of Stedman Jones who had implored socialist scholars not to retreat to the ‘safe pastures of labour history’.²⁴ Social history was not intended to be a history with the politics removed but instead a ‘history from below’ as E. P. Thompson had envisioned.²⁵ The very methodology and style of labour history was being turned on its head. McQueen’s *A New Britannica* (1970) was published in a *modus operandi* that was unheard of in the labour history community: it adopted a highly informal prose style and appeared in a cheap penguin format that could be purchased for just \$1.55.

And yet the writing of trade union history did not altogether cease to exist. From the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s a number of significant trade union history works were completed. Bruce Juddery’s account of the Administrative and Clerical Officers Association (ACOA) published in 1980—aptly titled *White Collar Power*—demonstrated plainly that there was a unique class consciousness that existed among clerical workers.²⁶ Juddery’s work traversed the major themes in the ACOA’s existence and set a standard for later public service union histories. A year later Jim Hagan examined the concept of ‘labourism’ in his history of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU).²⁷ Hagan’s work was unfairly denigrated as overly lengthy and without a strong theoretical argument. Still, it carried great detail and remains the best analysis of Australia’s peak union body that has been published. Several non-academic but nonetheless interesting participant histories by Issy Wynner, Frank Waters and John Baker also appeared in late 1970s and early 1980s.²⁸ Towards the end of the 1980s the criticism of institutional history had begun to subside as scholars came to the realisation that a wide range of approaches to the writing of

²⁴ Gareth Stedman Jones, “The Pathology of English History,” *New Left Review* 46 (1967): 43.

²⁵ See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963).

²⁶ Bruce Juddery, *White Collar Power: A History of the A.C.O.A* (Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1980).

²⁷ Jim Hagan, *The History of the A.C.T.U.* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1981).

²⁸ Issy Wynner, *With Banner Unfurled: The Early Years of the Ship Painters and Dockers Union* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1983); John. S. Baker, *Communicators and their First Unions: A History of the Telegraphist and Postal Clerk Unions of Australia*, (Haymarket: U. P. C. T., 1980); Frank Waters, *Postal Unions and Politics: A History of the Amalgamated Postal Workers’ Union of Australia* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press 1978).

labour history could be accommodated. Trade union history again began to flourish. John Merritt penned a cleverly constructed history of the early years of the AWU in 1986.²⁹ He challenged Spence's romantic assessment that the AWU was comprised of a 'wandering bush proletariat' that was essential to the nation's fortunes. As Frank Bongiorno recently commented, Merritt's book 'stands as a monument to labour history in this period'.³⁰

Trade union history was further advanced as a result of the advocacy and leadership of Jim Hagan at the University of Wollongong (UoW) from the mid 1980s. Hagan, who became a professor of history at UoW, convinced several trade unions to have their histories written by doctoral candidates. Under Hagan's supervision, Bradon Ellem explored the history of clothing trades unionism in Australia while John O'Brien examined the history of the NSW Teachers' Federation from 1945.³¹ UoW quickly became a vibrant node of labour history in Australia.³² Ellem would go on to Chair the University of Sydney's Work and Organisational Studies discipline and the Union Research Strategy Research Group. At the University of Melbourne, doctoral candidate Allison Churchward wrote a lengthy empirical history of the Victorian Branch of the Australian Railways Union (ARU).³³ Her traditionally styled thesis was supervised by Stuart Macintyre and demonstrated, in part, how far the gulf between the Old Left and New Left had been closed. In the ensuing two decades trade union history projects continued to be produced. Margo Beasley authored an accessible and commissioned book on the Federated Miscellaneous Workers Union in 1996.³⁴ While a little short on context its informal style is a lively read. Arguably the finest trade union history released in past 20 years was that completed by Mark

²⁹ John Merritt, *The Making of the AWU* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986).

³⁰ Bongiorno, "Australian Labour History," 10.

³¹ Bradon Ellem, "A History of the Clothing and Allied Trades Union" (Ph.D Thesis, University of Wollongong, 1986); John O'Brien, "The New South Wales Teachers' Federation, c. 1957-1975" (Ph.D Thesis, University of Wollongong, 1985).

³² Bradon Ellem and Peter Sheldon, "Jim Hagan and Apprentice Historians," *Labour History* 98 (2010): 231-36.

³³ Alison Ruth Churchward, "The Australian Railways Union, Railways Management and Railways Work in Victoria, 1920-1939" (Ph.D Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1989).

³⁴ Margo Beasley, *The Misso's: A History of the Federated Miscellaneous Workers Union* (St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1996).

Hearn and Harry Knowles on the AWU.³⁵ *One Big Union: A History of the Australian Workers Union 1886-1994* (1996) was the first full length history of the AWU to be published and gives a detailed account of the historiography and development of the organisation from its inception in the late 1880s. Other important analyses by Jennifer Curtin on the role of women in trade unions internationally and Raelene Frances on the nature of female labour in Victoria from the late nineteenth century to the 1940s were also published in the 1990s.³⁶

In recent years two union histories have been published. Diane Kirby wrote a compelling account of the Seaman's Union of Australian (SUA) from 1972-1993 that drew heavily upon oral history.³⁷ This history followed from Cahill's early examination of the SUA and is cleverly produced and littered with glossy photos. The latest union history to be released is an updated version of Guthrie Spence's *The History of the AWU* edited by Nick Dyrenfurth, Graham Freudenberg and Paul Howes.³⁸ This commissioned project clearly displays the AWU's commitment to preserving and re-envisioning its own history. Finally, two important works by political and Victorian Labor Party historian Paul Strangio are of particular interest to this project. Strangio's 2004 *Labour History* article on the VPSA secretaryship of Standish (Stan) Michael Keon during the 1940s is a compelling read.³⁹ He correctly observes that Keon brought the union out of its 1930s comatose state and helped to re-invigorate and mobilise public service unionists. This is the only serious historical work published to date that explores the machinations of Victorian public service unionism. The second of Strangio's publications is his analysis of the Victorian Labor Party in *Neither Power Nor Glory: 100 Years of Political Labor in Victoria*,

³⁵ Mark Hearn and Harry Knowles, *One Big Union: A History of the Australian Workers Union 1886-1994* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

³⁶ Jennifer Curtin, *Women and Trade Union: A Comparative Perspective* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1999); Raelene Frances, *The Politics of Work: Gender and Labour in Victoria, 1880-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993)

³⁷ Diane Kirby, *Voices from Ships: Australia's Seafarers and Their Union* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2008).

³⁸ William Guthrie Spence, *History of the AWU* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2013).

³⁹ Paul Strangio, "'Young, Ambitious and Eager': Stan Keon and the Victorian Public Service Association," *Labour History* 87 (2004): 168-86.

1856-1956.⁴⁰ In this perspicuous book he cleverly charts Labor's on-going electoral failure amid the dominance of Victorian liberalism. Tensions between the industrial and political wings of the labour movement are also brought to light throughout the book and number of key figures of Victorian public service unionism feature prominently. What is most evident in dissecting the development of labour history is that the practice of writing trade union histories, in all of their various forms, remains a pillar of the discipline.

1.2 Methodological Approach

So what approach does this dissertation adopt to the practice of writing a trade union history? In answering this question it is useful to take into account the views of acclaimed labour historian Eric Hobsbawm. Hobsbawm is renowned internationally as a giant of the labour history discipline and was widely respected by Old Left and New Left Australian historians. In a 1964 article detailing the status of British trade union historiography he affirmed the importance of 'institutional' history while noting that a 'serious tradition' of trade union scholarship still needed to be developed.⁴¹ Hobsbawm appealed to trade union historians to broaden the scope of the sub-discipline in order to construct increasingly relevant historical works. A decade later in an article published in *Daedalus* he set alight the labour history community by calling for new techniques and methods of analysis to built by all historians.⁴² Yet in presenting these arguments he did not dismiss the writing of traditionally styled histories. Hobsbawm held to the view that 'where the subject has been largely mythologised, the scope for even the most old-fashioned straight historian is still enormous'.⁴³

⁴⁰ Ibid., *Neither Power Nor Glory: 100 Years of Political Labour in Victoria, 1858-1956* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2012).

⁴¹ Eric Hobsbawm, "Trade Union Historiography," *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History* 8 (1964): 35.

⁴² Eric Hobsbawm, "From Social History to the History of Society," *Daedalus* 100 (1971): 20-45.

⁴³ Eric Hobsbawm, "Labour History and Ideology," *Journal of Social History* 7 (1973-4).

In considering Hobsbawm's assessment we are obligated to question if Australian trade union histories have excessively 'mythologised' their subject matters. We also need to reflect on the 'seriousness' of published trade union history in Australia. The preceding historiography demonstrated that there has been an assortment of excellent trade union histories produced by Australian historians. Works by Merritt, Hearn and Knowles, Hagan, Ellem, Juddery, Sheridan, Louis, Kirby, O'Brien, Gollan, Buckley, Churchward and Mitchell are all serious examples of scholarship. And yet a large number of trade union histories fail to meet this designation. Those that fall into this category are usually authored by participant activists in the form of union organisers or previous secretaries. They tend to 'mythologise' the subject matter and get caught up in unduly lengthy analyses. 'Great men' become the focus of attention and the actions of union councils are glorified. References to women and indeed to the attitudes of union members themselves are frequently missing or insufficient. It can be stated that many of these works tell us more about the authors than they do about the objects of examination.

In scrutinizing labour historiography it also becomes apparent that public service unions rarely feature as objects of analysis. The best histories are generally those that dissect the experiences of large militant unions. The AWU has almost been overanalysed as an institution. Unions representing state departmental or core public servants have in contrast received little attention. For decades state public servants have been treated as a residual category in both the Marxist and non-Marxist literature. Journal articles by Raymond Markey and Peter Sheldon on the NSW Public Service Association (PSA)—together with Strangio's study of Keon's VPSA secretaryship and Dustin Halse's investigation of public service political rights in Victoria—stand out as the only serious published accounts on state departmental public service unionism.⁴⁴ More attention has been paid to unions representing railways workers, teachers, nurses and police officers who are classified as a distinct group of non-departmental specialist public servants. That such a significant body of

⁴⁴Ray Markey, "Organisational Consolidation and Unionateness in the NSW Public Service Association, 1899-1939," *Labour History*, 99 (2010): 97-114; Peter Sheldon, "A Middle Class Union: The Early Years of the NSW PSA," *Labour & Industry*, 2, no. 1 (1989): 103-11; Dustin Halse, "Citizens Who Serve: The Political Rights of Victorian Public Servants, 1856-1916," *Labour History* 102 (2012): 157-76.

state departmental public servants has been overlooked by the labour history community is an indication that a more inclusive approach to the writing of trade union history is required. This project is therefore positioned to make a ‘serious’ contribution to studies in Australian trade union history.

When Hobsbawm wrote his 1964 article he noted that unions were ‘an aspect of working class life...and a reflection of that life’.⁴⁵ The New Left had appropriately challenged labour historians in the 1970s to look beyond simple and rigid ‘economist’ considerations. They called on historians to discern that union requests for improved employment conditions are about more than financial advancement. In truth they are often implicitly about a particular work ethos or class consciousness. Trade union historians were thus encouraged to think more laterally when approaching a specific object of analysis. Hobsbawm’s demolition of the boundaries of labour history in 1974 was premised on the conviction that labour history studies should be located within the history of society. He argued that unions should be understood with reference to class relations. It was suggested by Hobsbawm that new research techniques—including oral history, quantitative data, and reflections and an incorporation of methods from other disciplines—should to be taken into account by individual researchers. It was also put forward that institutional histories needed to have clear structures and a degree of lucidity in managing arguments.

The challenge that confronts the contemporary labour historian is to therefore determine how to construct a trade union history. New Left scholars certainly advanced and broadened the scope of labour history research. Nevertheless, as Merritt commented in 1982, the New Left did not construct a ‘viable alternative to the methodology they condemned’.⁴⁶ ‘New labour history’ he argued ‘is better known for its programmatic statements than for its methodological paradigms. It is one thing to counsel perfection, it is another thing to achieve it’.⁴⁷ In fact Hobsbawm’s support of traditionally styled union projects sits somewhat uncomfortably with his call for history to be broadened via new techniques into new

⁴⁵ Hobsbawm, “Trade Union Historiography,” 34-35.

⁴⁶ Merritt, “Labour History,” 121.

⁴⁷ John Merritt, “Editorial,” *Labour History* 40 (1981): v-vi.

areas of analysis. Trade union researchers consequently face a range of constraints with respect to methodology. The call for trade union history to be expanded has not lead to a radical shift in the techniques employed by trade union scholars. There is no one template or prescription that assures success. With respect to this project the timeframe of examination has largely prevented the author from engaging in oral history techniques. It is not ‘heavy’ on quantitative data as union figures and records have been sporadic and inconsistent. It is also the case that this project is not an extension of a line of previous analysis and research. Labour historians in particular have failed to appropriately examine the nature and status of public servants as a distinct social, political or economic class. Victorian public service trade unionism has almost completely escaped the scrutiny of labour historians.

This history might be described in one sense as being ‘traditional’ in structure and form. The aforementioned constraints have meant that the project is not attempting to re-invent the wheel with respect to historical methodology. Neither does it tend towards ideology or historical sociology. The approach adopted stresses that while theory does matter it should be worn lightly. It is an ‘institutional’ history that predominantly draws upon archival union records to chart the development of Victorian departmental public service unionism. It must again also be stressed that this is not a history of non-departmental public servants—for example state railways workers, teachers, police officers and nurses—as they were represented by other trade unions.⁴⁸ It is a history set against the changing tides of Victorian politics and an evolving public service. It does not purport to be a history of the Victorian public service from inception in the 1850s. Historical questions require raw verifiable evidence from which a considered answers can be constructed. This project attempts to present and detail relevant facts and moments in the lives of public service unionists and of the union itself. It is concerned with the values and actions of the both the union’s leadership and membership—and the consequences of those actions. A concerted effort has been made to give voice to the opinions of ordinary public service unionists. In this respect it draws from the example of more recent trade union histories that do not simply concentrate on the workings of union executives or

⁴⁸ As was noted in the first footnote, for a brief periods teachers and police officers were affiliated with departmental public servants. This will be canvassed in later chapters.

councils. Above all this history attempts to craft an engaging narrative that is historically significant and thoroughly original.

1.3 Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is set out in an orthodox fashion. It comprises of eight chronological chapters. Each chapter has a particular thematic emphasis and poses a number of unique questions. The second chapter is an adaptation of a 2012 article published in *Labour History* and provides a theoretical framework for the succeeding chapters. It traces the evolution of Victorian public service regulations from the 1850s until 1916. In doing so it pays attention to historical influence of the restrictive master and servant legacy. What becomes apparent is that public servants sought to challenge the restrictions imposed upon their political rights. Chapter three charts the actions of the Victorian State Service Federation (VSSF) and its members in relation to the events of WWI. It is observed that during the course of WWI the nascent VSSF struggles to maintain a unified front. By the mid-point of WWI the attitudes and loyalties of public service unionists are tested as two conscription referendums threaten to tear the union apart. Chapter four examines the manner in which the union and its members responded to the burgeoning political and industrial radicalism sweeping through Victoria post WWI. The role of female union members comes to the fore as competing constituent associations jostle for power in a rapidly changing union. As 1921 arrives a re-configured public service organisation named the Victorian Public Service Union (VPSU) is formed.

The focus of chapter five rests upon the workings of the newly created VPSU—an organisation that functioned as a peak representative body of public service associations. The conglomerate approach to Victorian public service unionism draws parallels with the burgeoning One Big Union (OBU) movement. The VPSU campaigned to secure expanded industrial rights and invested its faith in the Labor Party at the 1921 State election. Yet the creation of a behemoth peak body produced an intense and uneasy internal dynamic among the disparate public service bodies. Chapter six looks at the VPSU's campaign to secure access to the Commonwealth

Court of Conciliation and Arbitration.⁴⁹ In pursuit of this objective the VPSU transitions into a new organisation named the Australian Public Service Association (APSA) and the brief experiment in peak unionism comes to an end. Links between the Labor Party and the APSA are evident in the wake of George Prendergast's ascent to the premiership. Central to this chapter is an analysis of what constitutes an 'industrial worker' in the Australian legal system. Chapter seven picks up at the end of 1924 and analyses the APSA's campaign for the implementation of a public service superannuation scheme. It also continues the examination of the links between the Labor Party and the union's leadership. Chapter eight canvasses the economic calamity of the 1930s Depression and its impact upon public servants and the APSA. The leadership of the APSA struggles to chart a path out of the financial chaos and plods through the decade in a weakened state.

Chapter nine provides an account of the union's attempts to re-invigorate its fortunes. The union is now led by a newly appointed secretary by the name of Stan Keon. Keon's brash and combative disposition inspires the union's council and the rank and file to more forcefully campaign for the establishment of industrial rights through the implementation of a wages board. By the mid-point of the decade the fortunes of public service unionists, and of the union, are transformed. What will become patent throughout this work is that the story of public service unionism is inherently cyclical. It is one of growth, crisis, and re-generation. In this respect little has changed to the present day.

⁴⁹ Henceforth the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration will be referred to as the Commonwealth Arbitration Court unless otherwise stated.

Chapter 2 Citizens Who Serve: The Political Rights of Public Servants 1856-1916

From the earliest years of its existence, Victoria's political executive has manipulated the operation of the public service. Public servants, in contrast to other sectors of the labour force, were historically unable to realise the full extent of their democratic citizenship. They were constructed both implicitly and explicitly as a threat to the State and the wider community. One solitary article by Rudolph Plehwe narrowly examines the development of political rights regulations pertinent to Victorian public servants. He contends that 'it is not obvious that organisations of public employees should be quite as free as other groups in political matters'.¹ Between 1856 and 1916 public servants were required to refrain from 'political affairs' other than to cast their vote in parliamentary elections. They were unable to join political parties or comment on 'any political question or subject whatsoever'.² Indeed, legal restrictions placed upon public servants remain a defining factor of the relationship between the State and the public servant. The status public servants inherited bore the markings of the master and servant legacy.³ Embodied in numerous Master and Servant Acts, this legacy constituted an extreme form of coercion in labour relations. In justifying their actions, governments have commonly asserted that restrictions are necessary not only to protect the impartiality of the public service, but also to maintain the public's confidence in this impartiality.

Against this backdrop, the Victorian Public Service Association (VPSA) and its successor the Victorian State Services Federation (VSSF), sought to challenge the

¹ Rudolph Plehwe, "Political rights of Victorian Public Employees," *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 42, no. 3 (1983): 374.

² *Government Gazette*, 8 January 1867, 38, Regulation 21.

³ For a brief analysis of the progression of Master and Servant Acts, see Mary Gardiner, "His Master's Voice? Work Choices as a Return to Master and Servant Concepts," *Sydney Law Review*, 31, no. 1 (2009): 57-67.

restrictions placed on the political rights of public servants. The reverberations of mass retrenchments in the late 1870s and early 1890s provided the fillip for public servants to coalesce and communicate their concerns. Forming in 1885, the VPSA would be the first example of Australian departmental public service unionism. This chapter therefore focuses on the development of the union and the manner in which it advocated on behalf of public servants. At the apex of the union's concerns was the desire to see political rights properly established. This drive would flow through into other areas of advocacy. Yet the period's fragile economic environment destroyed the employment confidence of public servants and would place serious pressure upon the infant union. Between 1890 and 1894 a trio of conservative premiers accused an 'overmanned' public service of exacerbating the colony's fiscal woes. Public servants and the public service union came to view themselves differently in the aftermath of these events. They questioned the rationale behind the often-abrupt promulgation of public service regulations and endorsed an agenda of collective resistance.

By tracing the evolution of political rights restrictions this chapter seeks to shed light on Premier William Irvine's notorious assault upon the political citizenship of public servants in 1903. The implementation of special electoral representation marked the watershed moment in the experience of public servants. The *Constitution Act 1903* revoked the right of public servants to vote in the electorates in which they were domiciled. Separate seats were created in an attempt to contain the political character of the public servant. The measure brought to the fore the populist anti-public servant sentiment that pervaded the community throughout the first years of the twentieth century. In the ensuing decade the public service union and the nascent Labor Party challenged the enduring master and servant legacy, and campaigned to dissolve the limitations imposed upon public servants. Despite being routinely dismissed public servants continued to insist that they were entitled to basic political rights as citizens of the State, defined as the right to join a political party and to vote within normal electoral boundary districts. By mobilising the tools of language and the practical elements of protest a unique consciousness emerged and a public service work culture developed. It is within this context that the union and public service began

to challenge the imposed traditional, theoretical and practical parameters of the 'servant' stereotype.

2.1 The Genesis of the Victorian Public Service

The development of Australian public services occurred in a piecemeal fashion throughout the nineteenth century. Colonial governments were initially guided by British principles dating back to the late seventeenth century.⁴ This imported rationale served to shape the political limitations imposed upon colonial public servants. Settled permanently by Europeans in the mid 1830s, the district of Port Phillip moved incrementally towards self-government. Within a decade the settlement's developing centre, already known as Melbourne, had established a municipal council, which controlled markets, drains, street lights, the supply of water and the local police force. Despite this, the colony of New South Wales remained the final arbitrator. In Sydney, Governor George Gipps was reluctant to

⁴ The principles underpinning the British public service evolved over hundreds of years and can be traced back to the English revolution of 1688. The repercussions of this event were lasting as the British parliament deemed it necessary to consolidate its victory and deprive the Crown of its most powerful entitlement, the right to nominate public servants. Over the next century a long drawn list of legislative statutes sought to disarm the Crown by removing public servants from the arena of politics. The political rights of a public servant to vote and to sit in parliament were revoked. It was the first in many steps towards ensuring the Crown be subject to greater accountability. Despite this, the Crown continued to exert influence through a network of personal relationships with members of parliament. See James Christoph, "Political Rights and Administrative Impartiality in the British Civil Service," *The American Political Science Review*, 51 (1957): 77; George Kitson Clark, "Statesmen in Disguise: Reflexions on the History of the Neutrality of the Civil Service," *The Historical Journal*, 2 (1959): 19-39; Emmeline Cohen, *The Growth of the British Civil Service, 1780-1939* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1941); Robin Butler, "The Evolution of the Civil Service: A Progress Report," *Public Administration*, 71, no. 3 (1993): 395-406; Dorman Eaton, *Civil Service in Great Britain: A History of Abuses and Reforms and their Bearing upon American Politics* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1880); Robert Moses, *The Civil Service of Great Britain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1914); Harry Parris, *Constitutional Bureaucracy: The Development of British Central Administration Since the Eighteenth Century* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1969), 34-35; Stafford Northcote and Charles Trevelyan, *Report on the Organisation of the Permanent Civil Service*, 23rd November 1853, Submitted to both Houses of Parliament by Command of Her Majesty in February 1854, Paper 1713.

spend the proceeds of land sales or approve local works. The *Port Phillip Patriot* contended that the district was suffering from the ‘parsimony of the New South Wales Legislative Council’.⁵ The British Parliament believed it would be premature to establish a new colony and so sought to appease the growing separation movement. The district was given six seats in the Sydney-based Legislative Council. Melbournians considered this a farce and agitated for further reform. Inspired by the revolutionary fervour sweeping through Europe, the residents of Melbourne, led by city councillor John O’Shanassy, fiercely opposed the political ascendancy of Sydney. So successful were their calls that in 1850 the British Parliament passed an *Act of Separation* and a year later the colony of Victoria was established.⁶

This transfer of political authority was far from a panacea for the colony’s problems. In the aftermath of the gold rush new demands were made of the political executive as the population boomed. The lure of gold transformed Victoria from a little-known outpost into the new economic frontier of empire. Migrants brought with them a democratic temper and progressive outlook. The diggers were ‘evangelists for Chartism’ as well as men in search of personal wealth. Indeed, the goldfields were a breeding ground for democracy.⁷ Robin Gollan contended that the diggers were determined ‘to prevent the re-creation of the old world relationship in the new’.⁸

Attuned to the groundswell in public expectation, the fledging Victorian Legislative Council quickly became aware of the necessity for further—albeit

⁵ *Port Phillip Patriot*, 6 May 1839.

⁶ For an analysis of the settlement of the Port Phillip District, see Henry Turner, *A History of the Colony of Victoria: Vol. 1* (Melbourne: Heritage Publications, 1973), 96-300; James Grant and Geoffrey Serle, *The Melbourne Scene: 1803-1956* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1978), 3-68; William Henry Archer, “Sir John O’Shanassy: A Sketch,” *Melbourne Review*, 8, no. 31, (1883). Specific to the social and political upheaval in Central Europe, see William Langer, *The Revolutions of 1848* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1969).

⁷ See Geoffrey Serle, *The Golden Age: A History of the Colony of Victoria, 1851-1861* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1963).

⁸ Robin Gollan, *Radical and Working Class Politics: A Study of Eastern Australia, 1850-1910* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1967), 15.

tightly controlled—democratic reform. The development of a constitution was accorded precedence and a Select Committee of 12 members was commissioned to draft the document. Leading figures in Victorian politics including William Foster Stawell, John Foster, Hugh Childers, William Clark Haines, John Nicholson and O'Shanassy dominated the proceedings. Many were cautious of unrestrained democracy. Tradition trumped theory; the science of government was a matter that required experience.⁹ Moreover, Stawell thought that Victorians were 'too money-a-making people to be a very political one'.¹⁰

The most influential figure on the Select Committee was Stawell himself.¹¹ Described as 'autocratic' and 'ill-inclined to brook control or guidance', his legal training and skills as Attorney-General were pivotal to the development of a constitutional framework.¹² The *Argus* would note that during Victoria's political birth he was 'not one of several, but was rather the most conspicuous of the group'.¹³ The constitutional period became colloquially known as the 'Stawellian Regime'.¹⁴ He and Foster were allowed to dictate the language of the prospective *Constitution Act*. Together they aimed to reproduce the leading components of the British legal and parliamentary apparatus. Inspiration was taken from the British *Reform Act of 1832*, specifically the enfranchisement of wealthy landowners.¹⁵ Charles Parkinson observes that the committee's recommendations drew heavily

⁹ Foster held the position of Colonial Secretary, Stawell Attorney-General, and Childers Auditor General. Childers later returned to Britain and became Chancellor of the Exchequer. Both Nicholson and Haines ascended to the Premiership during their political careers; Charles Parkinson, *Sir William Stawell and the Making of Victoria's Constitution* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2004), 14-45.

¹⁰ *Argus*, 21 January 1854.

¹¹ See Parkinson, *Sir William Stawell*, 14-45; Damian Powell, "The Wild Colonial Barrister: Sir William Stawell and the Taming of the Victorian Legal Profession," *Victorian Historical Journal*, 73, no. 2 (2002), 155-180.

¹² See Henry Turner, *A History of the Colony of Victoria*, Vol. 2 (Melbourne: Heritage Publications, 1973), 54; Charles Francis, "Stawell, Sir William Foster (1815-1889)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 6 (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1976), 174-77.

¹³ *Argus*, 14 March 1889.

¹⁴ *Age*, 25 February 1857.

¹⁵ Francis, "Stawell, Sir William Foster (1815-1889)"; Charles Parkinson, "William Foster Stawell and the making of Victoria's constitution," *Victorian Historical Journal*, 77, no. 2 (2006): 114.

on the earlier constitutional experience of South Australia and New South Wales. He further argues that the colony was fearful that ‘any design exhibiting too great an originality might threaten the passage of the new constitution through Westminster’.¹⁶ An alternative argument reasons that the pre-gold elite sought to reaffirm their fiscal and political influence and safeguard conservative interests.¹⁷ Interestingly, Stawell determined that a House of Lords would be unsuitable for the colony and instead recommended the introduction of a Lower House to supplement the Legislative Council.

With little guidance from London, the undertaking gave rise to a brief but fierce debate regarding the status of public servants. The original draft bill proposed that no public servant be permitted to be elected to either House of Parliament with the exception of military and naval officers, and responsible ministers. Underpinning this decision was a desire to safeguard the political neutrality of public servants and to limit the power of the Governor. However, Stawell opposed this suggestion during the second reading debate by arguing that the exclusion of public servants would limit the electorate’s choice of viable candidates. He argued it was practical to have expert public servants in the Parliament as they could provide informed advice that would enable the legislature to operate more efficiently. In addition, Stawell supposed that a public servant’s parliamentary position could be affixed to the chamber in contrast to a particular government. It was envisioned that such a measure might provide a degree of stability during periods of transition.¹⁸

It appears strange that Stawell had such faith in the complete impartiality of the public service. The British experience provided a clear example of the reach and influence of political patronage. Nevertheless, he may have been influenced by

¹⁶ Parkinson, “William Foster Stawell,” 114.

¹⁷ The *Argus*, 13 February 1854, noted that Stawell was a “very rich man” designing a system for other rich men.

¹⁸ Report from the Select Committee of the Legislative Council on a New Constitution for the Colony, Legislative Council, *Votes and Proceedings*, 1853-54, vol. 3, no. 11, 10; Weekly Report of Divisions in Committee of the Whole Council, Legislative Council, *Votes and Proceedings*, 1853-54, vol. 1, 94; George Webb (ed.), *Debate in the Legislative Council of the Colony of Victoria on the Second Reading of the New Constitution Bill* (Melbourne: Caleb Turner, 1854), 73.

the news of the impending British Public Service report, which suggested that individual character judgments could discern ‘good men’ from the rest.¹⁹ In debating the point Stawell declared that if a public servant was ‘a good man and true’ he would be immune to the power vested in parliamentarians.²⁰ A similar faith was placed in the neutrality of government: ‘I am certain no government would be so unwise as to force any officer to resign, or vote against his conscience.’²¹

2.2 A Constitution is Formed

To Stawell’s delight, the Constitution statute passed the Legislative Council on 24 March 1854 and was dispatched to London for consideration. By May the document had reached Westminster. Owing to the Crimean War the Bill experienced long delays. Members of the Legislative Council protested, believing the absence of action to be ‘impolitic’ and ‘unfair’.²² Dr Alexander Thomson (member of the Victorian Select Committee) set sail for London and then followed the responsible minister, Lord John Russell, to Vienna to ensure that the matter was dealt with promptly. Russell was informed that further riots similar to those at Eureka might occur if the Bill were not soon passed. This action served to expedite a resolution. When the Bill finally came before the British Cabinet there was a brief but heated debate over the status of proposed veto powers. The Victorian drafters had wanted the powers of the new government to be specified and for the British Parliament to have no right of amendment or veto. With support from the Colonial Office, Russell and Sir George Grey successfully opposed the measure. They noted that Victorian legislation could still prove detrimental to Britain and that the existing precedents set in Canada should be upheld. Russell and Grey won the debate and the Bill was given royal assent by Queen Victoria on 21 July 1855.²³

¹⁹ Webb, ed., *Debate in the Legislative Council*, 73-74.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Argus*, 14 October 1854.

²³ See Serle, *The Golden Age*, 188-214.

Sir Charles Hotham, Governor of Victoria, received the notification of the assent on 23 October 1855 and on Stawell's advice proclaimed the Constitution on 23 November 1855. The transition to responsible government was based on the principle of a legislature of two elected houses. The Legislative Assembly would be a relatively democratic house of 60 members drawn from 37 districts. Men who could read and write and who owned property valued at £10 or received an annual income of £100 could vote. The new Legislative Council would become a fully elected body. However, it would continue to be more exclusive, requiring members to have land holdings valued at a minimum of £5,000. Voters would qualify in Legislative Council ballots only if they held property valued at least £1,000 or were a university graduate, a lawyer or a naval or military officer. An age requirement of 30 years was also set. Elected members (with the exception of ministers and presiding officers) were not entitled to an income of any sort. The striking dissimilarity between the two Houses reflected the clash between the established pastoral, banking and mercantile elite on the one hand, and the gold rush and urban progressives on the other. Like its other colonial counterparts the Legislative Council was designed to serve as a restraint on 'radical' measures likely to emanate from the more democratic lower house.²⁴

In no way did the statute restrict the right of public servants to be elected to parliament. As a consequence, public servants were briefly given an exceptional standing. Yet, the debate regarding the status of public servants re-emerged after William Haines was elected the colony's first premier. Initially the Haines' ministry attempted to regulate the rules governing parliamentary activity. An 1856 Cabinet minute articulated that public servants could only hold office as long as 'they abstain from political partisanship or action'.²⁵ Members that (in the opinion of the parliament) breached this standard would be instantly dismissed. Moreover,

²⁴ Geoffrey Serle, "The Victorian Legislative Council, 1856-1950," *Historical Studies, Australia and New Zealand*, 6, no. 22 (1954).

²⁵ Cabinet Minutes, 1856, cited in Charles Duffy, *My Life in Two Hemispheres, Vol. 2* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1898), 205-6.

no action was taken to curtail the voting rights of public servants except for the general qualifications on land holdings, wealth and gender.²⁶

Nonetheless, by late 1856 the sentiment of parliamentarians had begun to turn.²⁷ The miners' leading parliamentary spokesman, John Owens, described as 'a preserving advocate of popular rights', questioned the logic of expanding the role of public servants.²⁸ Aware of the possible pressures of politicisation, Owens introduced a motion demanding that paid public servants be ineligible to hold an elected office. After much delay, the premier, aware of the chamber's mood, gave an assurance that the matter would be dealt with properly by legislation. It would take a further two years before these demands were upheld. After much delay, O'Shanassy, now acting as premier, drafted and passed the relevant legislation. The new standard provided that

No person shall hold any office or place of profit under the Crown, or who shall be in any manner employed in the public service of Victoria for salary wages fees or emolument shall sit or vote in the [Legislative] Council or the [Legislative] Assembly and the election of any such person to be a member ... shall be null and void.²⁹

The passage of this new standard momentarily drew to an end the brief, but intense debate concerning the political status of public servants. As soon as political alliances began to coalesce, the mood of the chamber abruptly transformed. It appears that Stawell's standing had diminished as new political leaders emerged. The growing public service was also viewed with suspicion. Politicians were increasingly mindful of the politicisation of the public service.

2.3 The Net of Control Grows Wider

²⁶ Legislative Assembly, *Votes and Proceedings*, 1856-57, vol. 1, A-no. 29.

²⁷ Serle, *The Golden Age*, 311.

²⁸ *Argus*, 27 November 1866.

²⁹ Cited in Plehwe, "Political rights of Victorian public employees," 365.

After the establishment of responsible government both politicians and public servants sought to interpret their positions in relation to the Colony's legal environment. It was a chaotic period in which continual political jostling created a period of parliamentary instability. Victoria was on a path of social, economic and political experimentation. The learning curve was steep. The Colony was short of appropriately skilled and qualified labour. For public servants, democracy remained a relatively foreign concept, ill defined and ever changing.³⁰

It is unsurprising that within this context public servants attempted to uncover the full extent of their participatory capabilities. Inspired by the British Chartist movement, sections within the public service were imbued with democratic leanings. Irregular meetings of public servants were held to discuss a range of employment grievances.³¹ In explosive allegations Charles Gavan Duffy (who later became premier) recorded that after the collapse of the Haines government a 'secret' group of public servants formed under the *raison d'être* of aiding and abetting the re-election of their former masters.³² Rumours abounded that a group of senior public servants had conspired against the short-lived O'Shanassy government.³³ Further allegations followed in 1859 with claims that a public servant had vacated his position in order to participate in election campaigning, misusing his status to 'overpersuade' voters.³⁴

Alert to the community's growing concern, the government established a Royal Commission under the chairmanship of Professor William Hearn, a noted

³⁰ Robert Murray, *150 Years of Spring Street* (Kew: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2007), 19; Serle, *The Golden Age*, 312; Michael Cannon, *Melbourne After the Gold Rush* (Main Ridge, Victoria: Loch Haven, 1993), 123.

³¹ The chartist influence was reflected in the views of gold rush generation migrants. The wealthy aristocracy opposed the movement. See D. Dunstan, "Naked democracy: Governing Victoria 1856-2006," *Victorian Historical Journal*, 77, no. 2 (2006): 232.

³² Duffy, *My life in Two Hemispheres*, 173.

³³ The repercussions of this event were significant. "Big John" O'Shanassy immediately fired the Crown Prosecutor, Travers Adamson, and forced the Police Commissioner, Sir Charles MacMahon, to resign.

³⁴ *Victorian Hansard*, vol. 4, 8 February 1859, 820-21.

conservative voice and academic from the University of Melbourne.³⁵ The resulting report identified ‘radical defects’ in the public service arising from a ‘total absence of rules’.³⁶ Taking heed of the recommendations the Legislative Assembly issued a firm directive insisting that government employees

...refrain from taking part in elections for members of Parliament, beyond the recording of such vote or votes that he may be by law entitled to; and that dismissal from the civil service will be the penalty of disobedience to the order.³⁷

The tools required to further control the public service were conferred in 1862 upon passage of the *Civil Service Act* and a broad regulatory system soon followed.³⁸ Public servants were disqualified from holding an elected municipal council office. The expression of personal opinions was strictly forbidden and discussion ‘upon any political subject or question whatsoever’ was prohibited.³⁹ The *Government Gazette* warned public servants that

All injurious or offensive comments, written or spoken, and affecting directly, or indirectly the personal, official, or public character of His Excellency the Governor, any Minister of the Crown, or any Member of either house of Parliament are hereby expressly forbidden.⁴⁰

³⁵ Hearn was one of the four original professors at the University of Melbourne. He would later go on to become Chancellor of the University and then Leader of the Legislative Council. See Alexander Sutherland, “William Edward Hearn,” *Argus*, April 28, 1888; Geoffrey Blainey, *A Centenary History of the University of Melbourne* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1957); Douglas B. Copland, *W.E. Hearn: First Australian Economist* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1935).

³⁶ “Royal Commission into the Public Service, 1852,” cited in Robert Stewart Parker, *Public Service Recruitment in Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1942) 17.

³⁷ *Government Gazette*, 25 March 1859, 545; 21 April 1859, 845; 22 October 1864, 273; 1 December 1865, 2789. Such was the concern that public servants were engaged in political activity that this regulation was reprinted in the *Government Gazette* intermittently over the next decade.

³⁸ See the *An Act to Regulate the Civil Service* (Victoria) no. 160.

³⁹ *Government Gazette*, 8 January 1867, 38, Regulation 21.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Regulation 23.

In the following three decades few major changes were made to the regulatory environment governing public servants. One minor amendment allowed public servants to simultaneously hold a municipal council position. The impetus for the change came from the VPSA, which formed in 1885 in response to the events of ‘Black Wednesday’ and the continuing threat of retrenchment, and the abolition of public service superannuation on Christmas Eve 1881.⁴¹ The development of the union was unique in that it emerged before many of its interstate counterparts.⁴² Both the *Age* and the *Argus* reported that on the night of 17 June 1885 more than 1,000 public servants gathered at the Athenaeum Theatre in Melbourne for the inaugural meeting of the union.⁴³ It was standing room only as public servants packed the gangways in an attempt to witness the momentous proceeding. As the meeting commenced Mr. Wimble, of the Lands department, defiantly remarked that public servants had ‘a perfect right to form an association’.⁴⁴ To considerable applause he further commented that the ‘principles of the organisation should be self-interest and self-preservation’.⁴⁵ Mr. H. E. Wade, from the Chief Secretary’s department, explained that a range of obstacles had previously prevented an association from forming. One of these was stated to be the ‘curled darlings of South Yarra’.⁴⁶ He also drew cheers upon optimistically stating that ‘a union would benefit all and abolish grievances’.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Etched into the memories of public servants were the events of 8 January 1878 – which became known as “Black Wednesday” – when Premier Graham Berry dismissed hundreds of public servants, together with county court judges, coroners, crown prosecutors and police magistrates. Berry’s enemies in the Legislative Council had refused to pass the government’s budget. Berry was also suspicious that senior public servants were conspiring against him with his conservative opponents and this was the Premier’s dramatic response. For an overview of the events see Alfred Deakin, *The Crisis in Victorian Politics, 1879-1881* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1957). See also *An Act to Abolish the Payment of Superannuation or other allowances in the case of Persons hereafter entering the Public Service 1881* (Victoria) No. 710.

⁴² For example see Ray Markey’s work on the development of the Public Service Association of New South Wales from the end of the 1890s.

⁴³ See the *Age*, 18 June 1885; *Argus*, 18 June 1885.

⁴⁴ *Argus*, 18 June 1885.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁶ *Age*, 18 June 1885.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

However, when a motion to formally create the VPSA was put to the crowd a lone dissenting voice belonging to Mr. Rusden came forward to object. Rusden, from the Chief Secretary's Office, moved that the meeting should be adjourned for a fortnight until representatives of the government could attend and their advice be obtained. His suggestion drew condemnation from the boisterous crowd. One indignant public servant rose to his feet and cried 'we don't want them, Jack's as good as his master here'.⁴⁸ It was a pivotal quip that underlines the sense of industrial feeling and camaraderie that existed among public servants. This was the first time that Victorian departmental public servants had come together to form a union organisation. *Table Talk* put a rather humorous spin on the formation: 'So the Civil Servants have formed an association. It is quite a new idea, and really the younger seems to have some life in him. Jones, of the Scalling-wax office, has coalesced with Smith, of the Red-Tape department, and find each other good fellows whom it was a pity to have not known before'.⁴⁹ The VPSA wasted no time in engaging in the debate regarding the political rights of public servants. It lobbied against legislation depriving municipalities and shires of the services of public servants merely because of their employment status.⁵⁰ Despite being of minor significance at the time, from a historical perspective it serves as an early indicator that the public service union was willing to challenge the firmly embedded master and servant legacy. Other changes included the omission of references to 'offensive language' within the regulations in 1896.⁵¹

Perhaps what is most striking in the emergence of a strict regulatory framework at this juncture is the complete obliteration of the public service ethos. Only years before, Stawell had argued in favour of allowing public servants to sit in parliament. Trust had been placed in the objectivity of the public service. Indeed, the VPSA gave continuous reassurances that it was a respectable body completely

⁴⁸ *Argus*, June 18, 1885.

⁴⁹ *Table Talk*, 26 June 1885.

⁵⁰ Victorian Public Service Association, *Progress Report of the Public Service Association for the Seven Months Ending 17 February*, 1886.

⁵¹ *Government Gazette*, 3 February 1896, 602-608.

loyal to regulatory dictates. However, the perception of public servants, at least publicly, began to change as the political realm matured. In part this can be explained with reference to the rise of political patronage. The rapid turnover of governments from the 1850s created a turbulent political environment in which practical decision-making was entrusted to senior public servants. Nonetheless, politicians increasingly became aware of the power in appearing to fix perceived problems. The public servant was therefore conveniently constructed as a threat through the implementation of political rights legislation. The public servant became the *implied* problem. ‘Naked Democracy’ as Haines had famously noted, was not wanted in Victoria.

2.4 The 1890s Depression and the Demonising of the Public Service

‘The annals of the final decade of the colony of Victoria open under gloomy auspices’, wrote conservative historian Henry Gyles Turner.⁵² The statement of grim reality describes the hopelessness and despair that gripped the entire community in the 1890s. It was a period of catastrophe in which the excesses of the 1880s gave way to venality and greed. Never before had Victoria faced the prospect of total economic collapse. The steadfast faith in imperial capitalism had begun to shatter. Confidence in the political process stooped to a low seldom experienced in the colony. Politicians seduced by power betrayed the people’s trust and succumbed to mass bribery and corruption. Victoria was in crisis.⁵³

The cataclysmic depression and the subsequent political response marked the genesis of a malicious legend that would last almost two decades concerning the political influence of the public service. The historiographic analysis of this period suggests that a general fear of ‘state socialism’ was ubiquitous. Benham and Rickard argue that in Victoria, ‘concern about the public service often became

⁵² Turner, *A History of the Colony of Victoria*, 291.

⁵³ George Tibbits remarked that “Nothing approaching the arrogant pride of the 1880s was to return to Melbourne until the prosperous 1960s;” cited in *Melbourne on My Mind* (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2001), 81.

an obsession'.⁵⁴ Wright suggests that many Victorians viewed the public service as a vast 'impenetrably threatening' bureaucracy.⁵⁵ Eggleston even drew similarities between Victoria's pre-federation economic policy and the Soviet Union.⁵⁶ This 'obsession' fuelled the general suspicion that characterised public servants as 'lazy' and 'inept'. The public service was considered 'too powerful, too large'. It was convenient for government ministers to indict the public service on counts of greed and fiscal mismanagement. The actions of many politicians had exacerbated the land boom of the late 1880s. In an attempt to deflect attacks away from themselves, liberal and conservative figures assigned blame to a politically subdued group. Public servants had little recourse. The VPSA was placed under considerable pressure to distance itself from the growing militancy sweeping through industrial unions.

However, at first the VPSA did advocate on behalf of its members with regards to a range of long standing matters. The early annual reports of the union show that campaigns for salary increments to be paid automatically and for holiday leave to be considered a 'right' as opposed to a 'privilege' were mounted.⁵⁷ Attention was also paid to the reintroduction of a superannuation scheme for public servants. Public service unionists also wanted to see an appeals board instituted. But ultimately the range of scope of the advocacy of the union was restricted. Unsure of its standing, the VPSA limited both its public and private opposition as anything else would be framed as a severe act of disloyalty. The public service could not openly challenge the accusation and ultimately bore the brunt of incessant attacks to its integrity and duty.

⁵⁴ Lorraine Benham and John Rickard, "Masters and servants: The Victorian railway strike of 1903," in John Iremonger, John Merritt and Graham Osborne, eds., *Strikes: Studies in Twentieth Century Australian Social History* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson in association with the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, 1973), 3.

⁵⁵ Raymond Wright, *A People's Counsel: A History of the Parliament of Victoria, 1856-1990* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992), 121.

⁵⁶ Frederic Eggleston, *State Socialism in Victoria* (London: P.S. King and Son, 1932).

⁵⁷ See the Annual Report of the Victorian Public Service Association years 1886-1892, State Library of Victoria.

To the astute observer the dire economic conditions were not the result of excessive public service influence but rather a trio of inept premiers. Between 1890 and 1894 James Munro, William Shiels and James Brown Patterson had barely known what to do to offset economic failure. The *Age* described Munro as the ‘do nothing’ premier.⁵⁸ Lack argues that ‘making him premier was like placing an alcoholic in charge of the taproom’.⁵⁹ Shiels and Patterson were no better. Public service retrenchment and cuts to public works expenditure failed to balance the budgets. Dubious arrangements between land banks and politicians were uncovered to the anger of the electorate. Rumours of embezzlements, bogus balance sheets, insolvency dodges, and falsely optimistic shareholder reports became standard.⁶⁰ Cannon’s apt description of Victorian politics through this era is telling:

...a sort of speculators’ club, where the most blatant ‘log rolling’... became commonplace. Fantastic sums of money were borrowed and spent on extending the rail network; and when rails reached any particular point, it was often found that syndicates of MPs and their associates had bought up the land in advance for subdivision and resale.⁶¹

Years of economic depression had undermined the conditions and wages of public servants. In the hands of anti-labour ideologues the great strikes of the early 1890s compounded the plight of the public service by tainting the entire union movement, including the VPSA, as economically destructive. The government, intransigent to the advocacy of the public service union, embraced policies of slash and burn. By 1892 hundreds of public service positions had disappeared. Despite the cautious pleading of VPSA president Robert Ellery to simply halt the

⁵⁸ *Age*, 18 December 1891.

⁵⁹ John Lack, “David Syme and the Three Stooges? The Bust Premiers: James Munro, William Shiels and JB Patterson, 1890-1894,” in Paul Strangio and Brian Costar, eds., *The Victorian Premiers, 1856-2006* (Melbourne: Federation Press, 2006), 98.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 98-105.

⁶¹ Michael Cannon, *The Land Boomers: The Complete Illustrated History* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1995), 49.

intended wage increments the government chose instead to manipulate the public service for political gain.⁶² Rather than implement serious land and banking reforms Patterson conjured erratic dictates of economy and retrenchment. The *Age* and the *Argus* joined the chorus of criticism writing of ‘the great evil of the public service ... the system of annual increments’ and of ‘reckless revolutionary leaders’ within the union movement.⁶³ In one of his final acts as premier, Patterson toured the countryside declaring ‘labour could never be got cheaper than at present’.⁶⁴

2.5 George Turner: An Unexpected Leader

An individual vignette illustrates the mood of working Victorians. George Davis was angry; he had lost everything and was sleeping in Melbourne’s parks. One day in late 1893 he came across Munro walking down Collins Street and stopped to verbally abuse him. When Munro attempted to brush him aside Davis leaned back and punched him square in the face. Upon the arrival of the police Davis declared he was only disappointed that he had not blackened both of Munro’s eyes. A generous sympathiser paid the £5 fine.⁶⁵ The audacity to attack a former premier in broad daylight is revealing. The public realised they had been duped. The *Age* enunciated the overwhelming sense of despair: ‘Everyday is a new peril when an imbecile holds the reins on the box seat of the national coach.’⁶⁶ Isaac Isaacs, the young and honest Attorney-General, dared to initiate proceedings against the Mercantile Bank and was sacked by Patterson as a result. The people cheered when Isaacs rightly accused the government of instituting ‘what is new to this country—an aristocracy of criminals’.⁶⁷

⁶² *Argus*, 17 February 1894; See Robert Ellery in *Victorian Public Service Association Annual Report*, 1891 and 1892.

⁶³ *Age*, 18 September 1893; *Argus*, 8 April 1891.

⁶⁴ Patterson cited in John Lack, “David Syme and the three stooges?” 104; *Age*, 28 March and 2 April 1893.

⁶⁵ *Argus*, 19 April 1893.

⁶⁶ *Age*, 15 August 1894.

⁶⁷ See *Ibid*, editorials, 22-26 May 1883.

By 1894, the Patterson government was so unpopular that a loose coalition of parliamentary Liberals began to canvass the idea of introducing a no-confidence motion.⁶⁸ Yet, few were willing to take on the responsibility of leading an alternative government at a time of economic crisis. The leading candidate Alfred Deakin maintained federal ambitions and remained on the backbench. George Turner, a ‘quiet little man in a brown suit’ reluctantly took on the job.⁶⁹ He was considered the ‘best of the rest’. Described as ‘myopic, cautious and tactful’ his dullness was fabled.⁷⁰ Confidence in his leadership potential was almost non-existent. Despite these difficulties the motion was brought forward and carried 46-42, and the colony was set to return to the polls again. It was a heated campaign. Patterson argued that the opposition had only opportunistically snatched the vote and lacked unity and cohesion.⁷¹ Central to his campaign platform were continued measures of public service economy: ‘I will retrench you further’, Patterson proclaimed.⁷² Moreover, he alleged that the entitlements paid to public servants were ‘monstrous’.⁷³ In a daring move the VPSA responded forcefully to the Patterson government. It held an emergency meeting to put forward their case against further retrenchment. Dr T.F. Bride, a prominent union figure noted: ‘they had cut to the bone, then they wished to go to the marrow, and the end would be, perhaps, the pulverising of the service bones to manure the broad acres of Croajingolong’.⁷⁴ Perceiving the animosity sweeping through the public service and the union, Turner guaranteed to halt further retrenchments. It was an astute political manoeuvre. Of course, other issues including assurances against further

⁶⁸ The 1894 budget drafted by Treasurer G.D. Carter was a disaster for Patterson. The premier was so embarrassed he offered to withdraw it.

⁶⁹ Benjamin Hoare, *Looking Back Gaily* (Melbourne: E.W. Cole, Book Arcade, 1927), 181.

⁷⁰ Edward Shann cited in William Angus Sinclair, *Economic Recovery in Victoria 1894-1899* (Canberra: Australian National University Social Science Monographs, 1956), 41.

⁷¹ Turner, *A History of the Colony of Victoria*, 320.

⁷² *Age*, 7 September 1894.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Argus*, 6 September 1894.

land taxes and the preservation of tariffs were crucial to enticing a disillusioned public.⁷⁵

Turner won the ensuing election resoundingly. The emphatic victory heralded a five-year rule that was marked by relative political stability and gradual economic recovery. Turner, who was thrown into the leadership position and considered a temporary stopgap, would become Victoria's longest serving premier since 1856. Turner, the boring pragmatist had embarrassed the established conservative gentry, a reality not easily forgotten.

2.6 A Clash of Populist Ideologies

Soon after the 1894 election it became conservative political folklore that the public service had handed the victory to Turner.⁷⁶ While there is no reason to doubt that the public service and the VPSA were overwhelmingly supportive of Turner the inference that their vote corrupted the electoral outcome is unfounded. The final result delivered a decisive victory to a Liberal-Labor coalition. It was indicative of the broad consensus calling for change. Moreover, it marked the beginning of a period of transition in which political ideologies began to coalesce. The working class was convinced it needed a voice within parliament. A popular and increasingly political language began to develop. Peter Love and Ray Markey have traced the importance and impact of populism on the working class and the emerging Labor parties during this period. They argue that populism served to idealise the people's struggle against corrupt financiers and politicians.⁷⁷ In addition, the concept of 'money power' manifested, which was rooted in the belief

⁷⁵ *Age*, 6 September 1894; John Rickard, *Class and Politics: New South Wales, Victoria and the Early Commonwealth, 1890-1910* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1976), 87.

⁷⁶ Frederic Egglestone and Edward Sugden, *George Swinburne: A Biography* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1931), 46.

⁷⁷ Peter Love, *Labour and the Money Power: Australian Labour Populism 1890-1950* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1984); Ray Markey, "Populism and the Formation of a Labor Party in New South Wales, 1890-1900," *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 20 (1987): 38-48.

that governments, banks and capitalists were ‘engaged in acts of conspiracy against the people’.⁷⁸ The bank crash and the subsequent response provided the basis of belief in the concept of ‘the money power’.

For public servants the adoption of a working identity was a necessity. ‘Everything that could be taken from them had been taken, and they felt it particularly now when butchers and bakers bills were a sight to make poor men tremble’, the *Argus* noted.⁷⁹ In the 1880s and 1890s class-conscious solidarity and rhetoric pitted the upright worker against the parsimonious employer. Economic equality was considered a relevant aspiration that could be realised in a country theoretically devoid of rigid British social stratifications. Gollan has argued that through the emergence of new unionism ‘the Australian ethos found a voice’.⁸⁰ The VPSA, emboldened by the election of Turner, was unafraid to espouse this burgeoning working-class voice. Secretary Ernest Joske warned ‘every government which had ignored just claims had been hurled from power’.⁸¹ Unable to protect public servant jobs throughout the depression, the VPSA (despite a near fatal drop in membership) changed its organisational approach and went through a period of initial radicalisation. As jobs continued to be slashed and increments halted the union had little recourse but to engage in the political process. Throughout the 1890s measures of retrenchment had the effect of politicising the public service by strengthening its ties with the Labor Party.⁸²

Of course the search for a solution to growing economic inequality was not simply a matter confined to the public service.⁸³ The Melbourne Trades Hall Council encouraged the wider labour movement to transfer its industrial enthusiasm to the sphere of politics and seek parliamentary representation. The

⁷⁸ Love, *Labour and the Money Power*, 29.

⁷⁹ *Argus*, December 17, 1896.

⁸⁰ Robin Gollan, “Nationalism, the labour movement and the Commonwealth,” in Gordon Greenwood, ed., *Australia: A Social and Political History* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1955), 148.

⁸¹ *Argus*, 17 December 1896.

⁸² Egglestone and Sugden, *George Swinburne*, 101-103; Wright, *A People’s Counsel*, 121.

⁸³ See Rickard, *Class and Politics*, 65-67.

rhetoric of the labour movement adopted a militant undertone. The ‘Fatman’ who controlled the modes of production and manipulated State politics had to be brought down.⁸⁴ Melbourne’s radical labour newspaper *Tocsin* captured the rising working-class sentiment: ‘And Victoria must be made a fit country to live in—yea, if it takes a revolution to cleanse it.’⁸⁵

In contrast, as economic conditions revived towards the end of the 1890s a strong anti-labour and anti-liberal ideology began to take shape. In the Goulburn Valley town of Kyabram, a group of prominent residents met to discuss the evils of excessive State expenditure. Ostensibly, the National Citizens Reform League was organised by rural voters as a means to address metropolitan economic complacency. It contended that in the aftermath of federation, State governments would have fewer functions to perform and accordingly should be downsized. Its targets were public servants and politicians. The concerns were hardly novel. By 1902 the movement boasted a membership of 15,555 and had won the support of both the *Age* and the *Argus*.⁸⁶ The role the media assumed in launching the movement remains unclear. Journalist Thorold Waters of the *Age* wrote that ‘whether David Syme hatched out the political ugly duckling I never quite discovered, but he certainly helped it to waddle’.⁸⁷ Part of the myth of the movement had been that it was non-partisan. However, it can be inferred that Melbourne’s leading conservatives saw the movement as a means to further their political ends. In an attempt to regain the initiative from the Liberal-Labor parliamentary coalition, conservatives appropriated the populist message. Eggleston, who viewed the movement favourably, conceded that it was in part ‘a manufactured press stunt’.⁸⁸ With an intention to incite fear and anger within the

⁸⁴ See Nick Dyrenfurth and Marian Quartly, “Fat Man v. ‘the People’: Labour Intellectuals and the Making of Oppositional Identities, 1890-1901,” *Labour History*, no. 92, (2007): 31-56; Love, *Labour and the Money Power*, 31.

⁸⁵ *Tocsin*, 2 October 1897.

⁸⁶ For an early account of the movement and its origins, see H. L. Nielson, *The Voice of the People* (Melbourne: Arbuckle, Waddell and Fawckner, 1902); Wright, *A People’s Counsel*, 119.

⁸⁷ Thorold Waters, *Much Besides Music: Memoirs of Thorold Waters* (Melbourne: Georgian House, 1951), 68-69.

⁸⁸ Egglestone and Sugden, *George Swinburne*, 81.

community critics of the labour movement portrayed Melbourne Trades Hall as wielding excessive parliamentary influence. Trade union and labour leaders were attacked due to the class nature of their demands.⁸⁹ Sinister anti-urban and anti-public service sentiment abounded. The relative impotence of the VPSA, which remained unaffiliated to Melbourne Trades Hall, was seemingly forgotten. Indeed most unions at the turn of the century were both relatively small and held little bargaining power after being vanquished in the great strikes of the 1890s.

Nonetheless, the populist message resonated with conservatives. The employment security of public servants had been obliterated. Their bargaining position was weak and the VPSA (despite its persistent opposition) had failed to gain the required political traction to ward off measures of retrenchment and economy. Beyond the mid-point of 1890s the VPSA had collapsed. The ideology of Kyabram asserted that the state's economic problems were largely the result of an inefficient and excessive public service. Through a process of political rationalisation the movement determined that an attack upon the public service would encounter little opposition. The subject of the problem became the public servant. The years of scandalous fiscal management under Munro, Shiels and Patterson escaped the community's attention. A quick fix had arrived.

2.7 Cometh the Hour, Cometh the 'Iceberg'

The impact of the Kyabram movement ushered in one of the most extraordinary episodes in Victoria's political history. It was a period in which tensions between competing political ideologies erupted. The conservatives led by William Irvine, were eager to win back the Legislative Assembly after several electoral defeats. Their political strategy was constructed in order to exploit the wave of anti-government contempt that had spread throughout the community. Public service unions were branded as unpatriotic at best and subversive at worst. Prominent business leaders actively reacted to what they perceived as instances of 'class legislation', including the *Factory and Shops Act 1896* and its institution of wages

⁸⁹ Benham and Rickard, "Masters and Servants," 2.

boards.⁹⁰ Irvine received enthusiastic support from the Victorian Employers Federation and the Chamber of Manufactures who quietly went about organising urban, middle-class, anti-labour groups.⁹¹ For the first time a serious attempt was being made to isolate the Labor Party, which had advocated strongly on behalf of public servants.

This was not a simple conflict between capital and labour. Irvine had initially been sceptical of the Kyabram ideology. The dominant rural, farming and anti-city sentiment was distinctly polarising. Perhaps urban conservatives might view the movement with cynicism? Most certainly Irvine would not be beholden to any political grouping. Independent, single-minded and inflexible he was renowned for his 'backbone'. Supporters described him as 'firm, very resolute, but slightly imperious'.⁹² Critics gave him the unfavourable nickname 'the Iceberg'. Unlike some of his parliamentary colleagues he was at times considered a radical. Conservatism for him was a conduit to reform and protect society's traditional institutions, as opposed to the tendency towards inaction.

By June 1902 the ingredients for a dramatic political shake up had emerged. The press had previously called for a coalition between Irvine and Liberal Premier Alexander Peacock. When these talks failed Irvine, angered by a legislature he perceived as devoid of earnest leadership, carried a motion of no confidence against Peacock and assumed the premiership. He realised that the time had come to take full advantage of the populist feeling generated by the Kyabram movement. The 'Reform Premier' was about to exercise his authority.⁹³

The Premiership of Irvine was brief and unsparing. He wasted no time in paring down government expenditure. In July 1902, it was announced that projected

⁹⁰ See Rickard, *Class and Politics*, 168; *Factories and Shops Act 1896* (Victoria) no. 1445.

⁹¹ Benham and Rickard, "Masters and Servants," 4.

⁹² Murray Smith, *Argus*, 18 November 1903.

⁹³ *Argus*, November 27, 1901; J. M. Bennett and Ann. G. Smith, "Irvine, Sir William Hill 1858-1943," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 9 (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1983), 439-41.

public service wage increments would not be paid. As Treasurer, Shiels believed that Victoria's indulgence in 'socialism' had created a state monolith. The 'enlarged' public service was suggested to be 4,000 members overmanned.⁹⁴ Responding to the severe austerity, Dr T.F. Bride, a leading figure in a miniscule offshoot of the VPSA protested directly to Irvine.⁹⁵ He was unequivocal in reminding the Premier that 'the verdict of the people on the Patterson government with respect to this question of retrenchment had been looked upon as giving some guarantee that no deductions would again be made'.⁹⁶ A week later 3,000 public servants assembled at Gaiety Theatre in a show of unprecedented public service defiance. The presence on stage of Judge E. B. Hamilton was a damning indictment upon the government. Numerous Labor parliamentarians also lent their support in a show of solidarity with public servants.⁹⁷ Given that there had been little coordination among public servants in the previous four years the turnout was telling. Rickard speculates that more disturbing 'had been the evident unity in protest of blue and white collar workers'.⁹⁸ One senior public servant succinctly enunciated the mood of the crowd declaring the 'public service had no right of security of tenure [but] neither had the Irvine government'.⁹⁹

Irvine was not perturbed. The show of solidarity served to embolden his resolve. The historical legacy of the master and servant era set a guiding precedent. Following a sweeping victory in the September election Irvine set out to institute a radical political rights reform agenda. The government sought to isolate the voting power of the public service through the institution of special electoral representation. Irvine was alarmed by the increasing strength of public service unions and viewed with suspicion their growing industrial activity. The primary

⁹⁴ *Victorian Parliamentary Debates (VPD)*, vol. 100, Legislative Assembly (LA), 5 August 1902, 375.

⁹⁵ "Dominance of Civil Servants," *New Zealand Tablet*, 30, no. 35 (1902): 18.

⁹⁶ Bride, cited in John Rickard, "'Iceberg' Irvine and the Politics of Anti-Labor," in Strangio and Costar, eds., *The Victorian Premiers*, 121.

⁹⁷ *Age*, and *Argus*, August 11, 1902; This marked the beginning of the large-scale defection of public servants to the Labor Party in Victoria. See Rickard, *Class and Politics*, 190.

⁹⁸ Rickard, *Class and Politics*, 193.

⁹⁹ *Argus*, 11 August 1902.

targets were public servants, police officers and railways workers. The extraordinary scheme for the political segregation of government employees had not been presented to the people at the recent election. It was an entirely experimental and dangerous political undertaking. Egglestone and Sugden noted that it caused ‘a first class sensation’.¹⁰⁰ With the support of the Labor Party, public servants held protest meetings in town halls across the state. At the Collingwood Town Hall in December 1902 public servants declared the proposed special electoral representation reforms to be ‘iniquitous, unnecessary and humiliating’.¹⁰¹ Others asked how they ‘could instill into the minds of children the principles of citizenship when they themselves were deprived of their political rights’.¹⁰² When questioned on the matter Irvine stated simply: ‘We intend to make our precedent’.¹⁰³ The relevant clause in the *Constitution Act 1903* was passed 49 to 38 in the Legislative Assembly and 24 to 13 in the Legislative Council. The measure created three new Legislative Assembly seats and one new Legislative Council seat. Railway employees were provided with two seats in the Legislative Assembly and public servants (including police officers and teachers) one. The combined services were accorded a further seat in the Legislative Council. All permanent public service employees were barred from voting in their residential electorates. The passage of the Bill was secured in part because Irvine had threatened to resign if the legislation was to fail. A considerable majority of the house expressed its opposition against the proposal but insisted that Irvine stay on as Premier. Ironically, public servants were granted permission to represent their constituency.¹⁰⁴

Only a handful of major historical studies have explored in detail the motivations that drove Irvine to this seemingly abrupt decision. Benham and Rickard offer an analysis of the political environment of this era in the 1973 article ‘Masters and servants’. Their explanation of government employees being akin to servants,

¹⁰⁰ Egglestone and Sugden, *George Swinburne*, 99.

¹⁰¹ *Argus*, 11 December 1902.

¹⁰² *Kilmore Free Press*, 23 April 1903.

¹⁰³ Rickard, *Class and Politics*, 191.

¹⁰⁴ *Constitution Act 1903* (Victoria), no. 1864 ss. 4, 10, 20.

unable to challenge the constitutional supremacy of the parliament is revealing. They detail how the government and press intensified emerging class hostilities. Further, they note that ‘it was a man like Irvine who was needed to steer through Parliament such an extraordinary scheme’.¹⁰⁵ Egglestone and Sugden noted that Irvine ‘with his usual insight, saw this [the influence of the public service], and he felt that the problem must be tackled’.¹⁰⁶ Indeed few members had the courage to stake their entire political capital on negating the perceived influence of public servants. For Irvine the wider reform agenda that had been entrusted to him could not proceed unless the public service was neutralised. Increasingly, politicians claimed that appropriation bills were being thwarted by the public service.¹⁰⁷ Irvine was adamant that public servants were exercising undue influence:

Their [public servants] vote is like a wedge in every constituency. They occupy, in many instances, the balance of power, exercised, not in the interests of the community but solely in their own particular interests, which with them are paramount to every other consideration, either of State economy or benefit.¹⁰⁸

Nevertheless, it is hard to envision Irvine being threatened by the voting strength of the public service. Benham and Rickard contest the proposition that Irvine was ‘strongly influenced’ by the memory of 1894.¹⁰⁹ However, the notion that public servants had manufactured the 1894 electoral defeat of Patterson was simply a campaign strategy. While public servants had created a degree of political unrest by extending their industrial activity they were in no position to impose their will on either the people or the parliament. They were barred from making public comment on political matters and the VPSA had collapsed as a result of retrenchment in the 1890s. It seems more plausible to contend that Irvine overplayed the political hand he was dealt. Buoyed by the rapid nature of his ascension, he maintained a confidence in the continuing momentum of the

¹⁰⁵ Benham and Rickard, “Masters and Servants,” 6.

¹⁰⁶ Egglestone and Sugden, *George Swinburne*, 101.

¹⁰⁷ *VPD*, vol. 101, LA, 12 November 1902, 566-71.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 364.

¹⁰⁹ Benham and Rickard, “Masters and Servants,” 6.

Kyabram movement. Powerful employer associations backed his policies of frugality. He was a true reformist who also sought to curtail the power of the conservative dominated Legislative Council. Proud and unrelenting he even threatened to resign in early 1903 if his reform bill was not passed.¹¹⁰ He was dogmatic, unable to change his mind and unwilling to change the subject.

2.8 Abolishing Special Representation

Responses to Irvine's landmark legislation were extreme. Delighted conservatives considered the measure a stroke of genius. Public servants, Labor parliamentarians and opposition Liberals were outraged. 'It is a relic of feudal times' cried Labor member George Prendergast.¹¹¹ Peacock believed it to be the greatest piece of coercion in the history of the parliament.¹¹² 'Does it not', asked Peacock, 'savor [*sic*] too much of revenge'.¹¹³ It was an ominous warning. On 9 May 1903, railway unionists organised a wave of strike action partially in retaliation to the legislation. The introduction of special electoral representation gave rise to a siege mentality among railway workers. They described themselves as the 'voteless men'. The government and the community were perplexed; no sector of the public service had ever before endorsed serious industrial action.¹¹⁴

In response, Irvine recalled parliament and introduced *A Bill to Suppress the Railway Employees Strike*. The draconian Bill provided for a substantial fine or 12 months gaol for those who participated in strike action. It would also prohibit the printing of strike notices and empower the government to break up railway strike meetings. For two days Labor Party members chastised Irvine during parliamentary debate. 'Your day will come, my smooth beauty!' shouted an

¹¹⁰ Egglestone and Sugden, *George Swinburne*, 100.

¹¹¹ *VPD*, vol. 101, LA, 12 November 1902, 570.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, vol. 113, LA, 19 July 1906, 394.

¹¹³ Cited in Wright, *A People's Counsel*, 121.

¹¹⁴ John Rickard, "The Quiet Little Man in a Brown Suit: George Turner and the Politics of Consensus," in Paul Strangio and Brain Costar, eds., *The Victorian Premiers*, 121; Benham and Rickard, "Masters and servants," 1-23.

enraged Dr. William Maloney.¹¹⁵ Fearing harsh reprisals the Engine Drivers' Association capitulated and ordered its members back to work on 15 May. Upon hearing the news Irvine withdrew the most punitive measures from the bill. Strikers lost pension and superannuation entitlements and the strike leaders were dismissed.¹¹⁶

Despite lasting only a week the strike's ramifications were lasting. Conservatives and conservative-Liberals were fused, beginning a partnership that would dominate Victorian politics for much of the twentieth century. The Labor Party viewed the legislation with disdain and would never forgive Irvine. The liberal-labour alliance was dead. Furthermore, the Labor Party became the champion of the public service. Embedded class divisions polarised the political landscape. The *Age*, once considered the guardian of liberalism, sought to humiliate the public service and the labour movement. Public servants were now fully aware of the punitive nature of their employment status. Fidelity and obedience were established as absolute values. Constitutional authority pitted the government elected by the people against the public service. The logic of the old Master and Servant laws was reinforced, with opposition to special electoral representation considered an act of mutiny.

The introduction of special electoral representation was a turning point in Irvine's political career. In February 1904, after suffering from fatigue and ill health he abruptly resigned the premiership. Speculation abounded that he had been so afflicted by the pressures of office he had a nervous breakdown. Accompanied by his wife he took a sabbatical from public life and toured Europe in the spring. Upon his return Irvine quit state politics altogether. Hearing the news, members of the Assembly moved a vote of thanks, normally a mere formality. The vote was divided.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ *VPD*, vol. 104, LA, 13 May 1903, 56.

¹¹⁶ For a detailed analysis of the railway strike, see Benham and Rickard, "Masters and Servants".

¹¹⁷ See Bennett and Smith, "Irvine, Sir William Hill," 439-41; *VPD*, vol. 113, 24 July 1906, 449-87.

Implemented in only one election, special electoral representation was a failure politically and practically for the conservatives. After the sudden demise of Irvine, Thomas Bent took over the premiership. Less than half of the state's 24,000 public servants in 1904 were 'permanent employees' who fell under the legislation's provision. This meant that 9,966 public servants (including railway workers) were on the public service roll in the Legislative Assembly while only 5,611 were on the public service roll in the Legislative Council in 1904. The remaining were classified as 'permanent temporaries' and voted in their home electorates. Moreover, the public service and inner city working-class vote was solidly behind the Labor Party.

Ultimately, the four extra seats created were, in effect, free Labor seats. Aware of this anomaly Bent introduced an Act to abolish special electoral representation and on 26 January 1907 it was granted royal assent. In doing so he acknowledged that the constitutional amendment had been an affront to public servants' political rights. Be that as it may it is critical to recognise that Bent had been a co-architect of the original Bill and voted in favour of its passage through parliament. Together, he and Irvine had used special electoral representation as a temporary political weapon. When it ceased to deliver any advantage to the conservatives its political importance coincidentally diminished.¹¹⁸

In the following decade public servants campaigned fervently to gain expanded political rights. After the collapse of the VPSA in the late 1890s a new body in the Victorian State Service Federation (VSSF) was born in 1913.¹¹⁹ It brought together associations that represented professional, clerical, general, mental and penal officers of the public service. Public servants in Victoria had not been formally represented in a coordinated manner for more than a decade. The

¹¹⁸ Wright, *A People's Counsel*, 119; *Roll of Public Officers* [Entitled to Vote in the Election of Members of the Legislative Assembly, under the Constitution Act, 1903, no. 1864, Section 25], 1904.

¹¹⁹ Initially a loose and informal council of state service associations met from the middle of 1912.

catastrophe of the depression had hollowed out the formal shell of public service organisation. Almost 100 years ago the very first issue of the *Public Service Journal of Victoria (PSJV)* would put forward the following grim statement:

Since the dark days of the nineties, we have perforce walked with humility, and taken our doles with thankfulness. It has even happened that we have been debarred from audience with Caesar. It is but natural, therefore, that the Victorian public service has been denied advantages long enjoyed as of course by officers in the sister states.¹²⁰

Moreover, the *PSJV* echoed the grim sentiment that ‘we have been unable to do more than whisper in corners and chafe inwardly’.¹²¹ In many respects it was a bold move by public servants to again come together to build a union. Premier William Watt would even warn public servants to think carefully before engaging in such an endeavour: ‘I do not propose to sanction the growth within the service of an organisation which may be likely to subvert the principles and practices of the Public Service Act and Regulation’.¹²² Few in the public service seemed perturbed by the comments of Watt. The *PSJV* would suggest that the Premier was simply misguided in his comments.

From the very beginning the reconstructed public service union, the VSSF, made the issue of political rights a top priority.¹²³ Indeed it became the central mission of the organisation. The VSSF took offense at remaining restrictions imposed upon the eligibility of their members to join political organisations, speak at public meetings and ask questions of electoral candidates. In September of 1913, the VSSF unsuccessfully requested to speak with Premier Watt regarding the matters of superannuation and political rights. A piqued union noted that members of the service were ‘surprised’ and ‘disappointed’ by the brusque reply of the Premier: ‘In Victoria it would seem that when employees want to bring under notice to their employer certain views...they are denied the common British right

¹²⁰ *PSJV*, January-February 1913.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*

to be heard'.¹²⁴ The *PSJV* would comment that that 'these men were not asking for anything unreasonable, anything extravagantly utopian'.¹²⁵ By early 1914 the campaign for reform had begun to gather momentum. The Victorian Railways Union (VRU) and the Victorian State School Teachers Union (VSSTU) also injected their protest and a powerful coalition emerged. Determined collaboration between these three bodies soon unsettled parliamentarians. In August a mass petition was presented to the government requesting political rights similar to those enjoyed by Commonwealth public servants.¹²⁶ The unceasing appeals from the VSSF began to tire Premier Alexander Peacock to the extent that he directed his staff to respond, 'I am to add that the premier cannot consent to receive deputations from every section of the citizens on matters of policy'.¹²⁷

At the 1914 November state election the union lobbied both the Labor opposition and ruling conservative government to act quickly on political rights. The union leadership commented that its members should no longer be 'segregated' from other citizens. Labor was commended for its long standing commitment to the 'application of the just a wise principle'. However, many still opposed the granting of rights to public servants: 'some people have inquired why public servants should place such stress upon a matter that has no actual monetary value. Such people have yet to learn that there are things far more precious than those which can be valued in pounds, shillings and pence'.¹²⁸ Soon, both the government and the opposition had agreed, in principle, to address the matter in favour of the public service. Notwithstanding the government's 'tardy' response to the matter, it was congratulated for finally acting.

Still, not all were pleased with this outcome. Sir Walter Manifold, a leading Legislative Councillor, condemned the intention: 'I am totally opposed to the public servants having a vote at all and always have been ... The Patterson Government was undoubtedly turned out by the public servants, and their

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 20 October 1913.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 30 October 1915.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 31 August 1915.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 31 December 1914.

influence on many occasions is notorious'.¹²⁹ In addition, the pressing demands of war would serve as a means by which many began to question the loyalty of public servants. It was deemed inappropriate for public servants to be campaigning for expanded political rights as the world descended into violent conflict. Young Australian men were being sent off to fight on battlefields of Europe and North Africa and the casualties were beginning to mount. Given such grim circumstances an expectation formed that public servants should turn their attention solely to aiding the war effort. Indeed a degree of tension was surfacing between the quest for political rights and the notion of obligation in relation to the events of World War I. In the ensuing years this would be played out as the war continued.

Despite such opposition the *Constitution Act Amendment Act* was passed on 20 December 1916. It was a momentous victory for the public service especially given the pressing demands of war. The Act revoked prohibitions against joining political parties, chairing or speaking at political meetings and asking questions of any candidate.¹³⁰ Public servants were ecstatic. At a mass gathering of VSSF members Peacock was venerated as champion of the public service. The passage of the Act marked the end of a dramatic contest regarding the political rights of public servants.¹³¹ The crowd raised their collective voice to the Premier singing 'for he's a jolly good fellow'.¹³² The Labor Party was also acknowledged for their years of advocacy. Parliamentarians Maurice Blackburn, George Prendergast and James Watson were venerated as true friends of the public service. John William Billson (MLA Fitzroy) remarked: 'It is repugnant to the democratic thought of

¹²⁹ *VPD*, vol. 145, LA, (19 December 1916), 3535.

¹³⁰ *Constitution Act Amendment Act 1916* (Victoria).

¹³¹ Changes to the political rights of public servants since 1916 have primarily concerned the position of public servants wishing to enter parliament. In 1935 members of the public and railway services became eligible to stand for State Parliament, meaning they no longer had to resign their positions in order to run. In 1956 public servants elected to State Parliament gained the right to reinstatement if they ceased to qualify for a parliamentary pension. In 1977 the right to stand for election to State Parliament was expanded to any person "being the holder of any office or place of profit under the Crown or in any manner employed in the public service of Victoria." See *Constitution Act 1975* (Victoria), no. 9077, ss. 3.

¹³² *PSJV*, 31 March 1917.

this state, and to the whole of Australia, that a man, simply because he is employed by the government, should have to sacrifice, on accepting employment, his rights as a citizen.’¹³³ In addition, Billson commented on the performance of public service unions: ‘In the public service there are unions, and in the railway department there are unions, and from my experience of them they do not provoke trouble. They settle more disputes than they provoke.’¹³⁴ Blackburn concurred and suggested that the amendment should have gone further to protect the advocacy functions of public service unions.¹³⁵

2.9 Conclusion

Despite their expertise in government administration, Victorian public servants have seldom been celebrated as the partial architects or drivers of social, economic or civil progress. More commonly, public servants have been subject to accusations of ineptitude and coercion. The public service union fared no better. Public service regulations were a historical extension of the master and servant legacy. The state required total obedience and loyalty from its workers. Both politicians and political parties were able to enhance their standing by criticising the integrity and work ethos of public servants. This critique has not been an isolated phenomenon. It has commonly been prejudicial. In the 1850s Stawell argued that the public servant was simply a non-political entity, driven only by a desire to serve the state. In contrast, later governments contended that public servants were maliciously influencing the political arena. As a consequence numerous legal restrictions were imposed upon public servants. Mainstream voting and representative political rights were restricted. Freedom to articulate a distinct political or policy opinion was denied. Today the right to comment publicly on government policy remains a restricted right.

¹³³ *VPD*, vol. 144, LA (1 November 1916), 2149.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2149.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 2147-48.

The ambition of political leaders is a recurrent theme in the saga of political rights restrictions. Political parties are shown to be self-interested and intent on securing absolute majorities seemingly regardless of the costs. Specific to the Victorian context, the impulse to accept and promote the most extreme public policy agenda was strong. The introduction of special electoral representation serves as a striking illustration of the layered development of policy. Irvine was only the end point in a series of events and movements that collectively grew suspicious of the public servant. The media can be seen to have heightened the community's distrust and resentment of the public service. Sections of the general public also helped mobilise a powerful ideology against the interests of the public servant. Kyabram, a small country town became the symbol of dramatic reform.

However, public servants, aided by the VPSA and later the VSSF, challenged the discriminatory nature of their political status. They dared to question the method and rationale of governance. Politicians attempted to negate the voice of public servants. By discrediting public servants they attempted to control the individual and produce useful and expected subjects. And yet the irony remains that the politicisation of public servants was brought on, in part, by government attempts to sterilise the public service. In opposition to techniques of control, public servants refused to accept being construed as 'the problem'. Ultimately, a unique public service work culture emerged and public servants were able to advance their political standing. The successful campaign to secure expanded political rights would inspire public servants to increasingly voice their claims during World War One (WWI) and beyond.

Chapter 3 Victorian Public Service Unionists Answering the Call 1914-18

A sense of excitement and intrigue was conspicuous within the ranks of the Victorian State Service Federation (VSSF) upon the outbreak of World War One (WWI). Public servants, young and old, were determined to do their duty to the state of Victoria and defend the British Empire. Many would answer the call by enlisting in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). Those who stayed behind filled the void by organising recruitment meetings and joining local defence initiatives. Yet, Australia, by the mid-point of the WW1, was a deeply divided society. The nation's social cohesion was ripped apart by two divisive referendums. Prime Minister William Hughes was hell-bent on forcing compulsory military service upon young men. Deep seated social, political and sectarian tensions that had been dormant in the first phase of the global conflict quickly bubbled to the surface. Workers soon felt the economic pinch as demand for export commodities plummeted and inflation soared. Public servants, having long been subjected to political marginalisation, were now struggling to protect their economic livelihoods. What becomes evident in this chapter is that the union did not remain a unified body throughout the entire duration of WWI. The distinct and often conflicting attitudes of public service unionists were uncovered particularly in reactions to conscription and also to the 1917 Victorian state election. Public service unionists responded to the demands of WWI through the often disparate prisms of religion, class, politics and duty.

3.1 The Balkan Powder Keg Explodes

On 28 June 1914, at 10.45 am, the heir to the throne of the Habsburg Empire, Franz Archduke Ferdinand, was fatally shot while travelling in an open top automobile through the streets of Sarajevo.¹ The brazen assassination was carried out by the youth wing of a radical nationalist Serbian rebel group dubbed the

¹ Archduchess Sophia was seated next to Ferdinand and was also assassinated.

'Black Hand'. Ferdinand's death instigated a month long diplomatic standoff between the rulers of Austria-Hungary, Germany, France, Russia, and Britain. By the end of July the 'Balkan powder keg' was poised to explode as no peaceful resolution to the crisis materialised.² On 23 July 1914, at precisely 6.00 pm, Austrian official Baron Giesl von Gieslingen delivered a ten point ultimatum to the Kingdom of Serbia. The hostile demarche was designed to humiliate and subjugate Serbia's citizens and government. Serbia's Crown Prince Alexander I remarked that it was an 'absolute impossibility for a state which had the slightest regard for its dignity' to acquiesce to the demands of the ultimatum.³ Winston Churchill, Britain's First Lord of the Admiralty, described the unfolding situation from London in the subsequent grim terms: 'Europe is trembling on the verge of a general war. The Austrian ultimatum to Serbia being the most insolent document of its kind ever devised'.⁴ In the succeeding ten days the nations of Europe invoked an array of military alliances and WWI officially commenced.

Upon the outbreak of war the *Public Service Journal of Victoria (PSJV)* issued the following bleak statement: 'The great European Armageddon has come. Never was an event more predicted, and yet so unexpected when it arrived'.⁵ Such sentiment is unsurprising and has been alluded to by Australian WWI historian C. W. Bean who commented that 'a hundred years of peace...had rendered the Briton guileless and unsuspecting even when trouble clearly threatened the rest of the world'.⁶ On 3 August 1914, at 4.30 pm, more than 1,000 public servants gathered at Treasury Gardens to attend an emergency meeting of the public service patriotic movement. Excited members waited in anticipation to witness how the VSSF would respond. Enormous British flags were draped over the balcony of the Treasury Building from which the speakers were positioned. The

² In the late nineteenth century the German Chancellor, Otto Von Bismarck, had correctly predicted that the Balkans region would be a future source of conflict.

³ David Fromkin, *Europe's Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?* (New York: Alfred. A. Knopf, 2004), 195.

⁴ Quoted in Martin Gilbert, *Churchill: A Life* (London: Random House, 2000), 264-65.

⁵ *PSJV*, 31 August 1914.

⁶ Charles W. Bean, *The Story of the ANZAC from the Outbreak of War to the End of the First Phase of the Gallipoli Campaign, May 4, 1915*, 11th ed. (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1941), 11.

union's leadership then stepped to the microphone and publicly pledged the allegiances of the VSSF to 'King and Country'.⁷ Germany was immediately and squarely indicted by the organisation as the architect of the conflict. It was an unequivocal and involuntary reaction to the crisis. One unionist even put a positive spin on the unfolding events: 'we should be proud...of the righteous stand the Empire was making'.⁸

As the conflict progressed a sense of enthusiasm and excitement enveloped the VSSF and its membership. In the initial 12 months of WWI the union organised recruitment meetings upon the request of the state government. On 14 July 1915, at the Melbourne Town Hall, the VSSF convened the largest meeting of public servants since the commencement of the conflict.⁹ Hundreds of union and non-union public servants gathered to receive an update from Premier Alexander Peacock and VSSF President Arthur Martin on how the state was responding to WWI. To commence proceedings the meeting paused to pay tribute to those who had recently fallen at the Gallipoli campaign. Feats of bravery were briefly recorded to the applause of those assembled. Michael McNamara, a senior member of the union's executive, then categorically laid down the expectations held by the organisation and the government: 'Every unmarried man in the service should resign if he was not prepared to volunteer to answer the call'.¹⁰ A cry of 'shame' went out across the Hall when it was suggested that some members were failing to do their duty.¹¹ To conclude the meeting a delighted Peacock commented that he was proud of the action taken by public servants in supporting the government during such a 'strenuous' period.

At this point the phraseology of the VSSF noticeably turned. Union leaders did not expect that WWI would still be raging by the middle of 1915. Articles published in the *PSJV* now began to laud the moral disposition of the British

⁷ See the *PSJV*, 31 August 1914.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Argus*, 15 July 1915.

¹⁰ *PSJV*, 31 July 1915.

¹¹ *Argus*, 15 July 1915.

people and cause while simultaneously denouncing the ‘false standard of ethics’ of the central powers.¹² Members penned letters that employed the invidious epithet of the ‘Hun’ and condemned the ‘brutal methods’ of the ‘barbarised’ German Imperial Army.¹³ Kaiser Wilhelm II, dubbed a ‘tyrant’ who ‘lusted for unfettered world power’, was said to have the ‘blood’ of innocent young British men on his hands.¹⁴ Such animosity might partly be explained by the fact that the German Imperial Army had started to use poison gas against Allied troops at this point. The response of the VSSF to horrific updates filtering through was to call upon unionists to assist in defending Britain and Australia.¹⁵ Full page recruitment posters read ‘To Arms, To Arms’ and ‘This Is The Time To Fight!’¹⁶ Some VSSF members even resorted to poetry in a display of commitment and patriotism: ‘Bravo, then, for the men who fight! Away with the men who play! It’s a fight to the end for honour and friend, it’s a fight for our lives today!’¹⁷

The energy and activity of the VSSF extended beyond encouraging young and unmarried public servants to enlist. In the initial phase of the WWI the whole union was mobilised to aid the war effort. Martin and McNamara constructed a strong working relationship with the Peacock administration and in many respects the union was used as a conduit through which the government could convey its appeal to action. One of the first actions of the VSSF was to help establish a government rifle club.¹⁸ Members were trained to use a range of different calibre firearms and frequently competed in marksmanship competitions. Female members were encouraged to enrol in laborious and time consuming first aid training through the St. John Ambulance Association. This training required more

¹² *PSJV*, 31 May 1915. The ‘central powers’ is the term that is used to describe the coalition of Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria.

¹³ *PSJV*, 30 June 1915; 31 July 1915.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30 June 1915; 31 May 1915.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 31 July 1915.

¹⁶ See the *PJSV* from June 1915 through the succeeding three years.

¹⁷ *PSJV*, 30 November 1915.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 31 July 1915.

of its participants than the musketry instruction.¹⁹ Many public servants gave up their weekends to volunteer at the No.5 Base Hospital on St Kilda Road for men who had returned maimed from distant battlefields.²⁰ Australian war historian Ernest Scott paid homage to the volunteer work of women, including public servants, during WWI: 'Great Britain could not have grappled so successfully with the ordeal cast upon her...if she had not been served by the hosts of women who toiled in factories, offices and workshops'.²¹ A financial commitment to conflict was also evident in the creation of the Victorian State Service Patriotic Fund. An expectation emerged that all public servants should give to the fund on a sliding scale in order to support the dependents of those who had 'gone to the front'.²² One member noted that while his age prevented him from enlisting he could 'wield gold' as it was the 'old man's sword'.²³

In explaining the enthusiasm that pervaded most sections of society in the initial phase of WWI it is important to note that the Australian nation was still in its infancy. Historians have traditionally commented that a deep-seated attachment to Britain was still evident on both an emotional and practical level. Britain was the previous home of a significant percentage of the local population and the source of the Australia's cultural and political institutions. L. L. Robson has poignantly remarked that British imperialism had 'all the depth and comprehensiveness of religion'.²⁴ When Britain entered the conflict there was no option for Australia but to follow. To be an Australian was to be a British subject.²⁵ In addition, as Douglas Newton has remarked, Australian politicians, deep in the throes of a

¹⁹ To be awarded a first aid medallion one was required to sit through a laborious year-long program comprising of lectures and tutorials in general first aid, hygiene, nursing and sanitation.

²⁰ *PSJV*, 30 October 1915.

²¹ Ernest Scott, *Australia During the War* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1941), 701.

²² *PSJV*, 31 August 1914.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Leslie Lloyd Robson, *The First A.I.F.: A Study of its Recruitment 1914-1918* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1982), 16.

²⁵ Alfred Deakin famously coined the phrase 'Independent Australian Britons'.

federal election, competed against each in a blatant love of empire contest.²⁶ Scott argued that there was no group that did not consent to Australia's involvement in the conflict.²⁷ So powerful was the imperial conviction that Ian Turner even claimed that Irish patriots momentarily buried the 'home rule hatchet'.²⁸

It is also necessary to record that the sentiment of Australians at the beginning of WWI has been the subject of significant debate in the disciplines of both labour and political history. Scott's theory of consensus has been challenged and largely dismantled by historians including Marylyn Lake, Raymond Evans, Kevin Fewster and Frank Cain.²⁹ In Victoria the Socialist Party together with Melbourne Trades Hall identified with the Hardie-Vaillant anti-war resolution.³⁰ The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) were explicit in what they wanted: 'Let those who own Australia do the fighting'.³¹ Yet there is no indication of opposition to the nation's involvement in WWI within the VSSF at this point. Instead, the organisation invoked the celebrated phrase of Prime Minister Andrew Fisher who said that Australia would 'stand beside the mother country to help and defend her to the last man and the last shilling'.³² One *PSJV* editorial proposed that the conflict was simply an extension 'the old fight against slavery'.³³ Union members were susceptible to the discourse of duty and fidelity to government.

²⁶ Douglas Newton, *Hell Bent: Australia's Leap into the Great War* (Melbourne: Scribe Publishing, 2014)

²⁷ See Scott, *Australia During the War*.

²⁸ Ian Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics: The Dynamics of the Labour movement in Eastern Australia, 1900-1921* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1979), 69.

²⁹ Frank Cain, *The Wobblies at War: A History of the IWW and the Great War in Australia* (Melbourne: Spectrum Publications, 1993); Kevin Fewster, "The Operation of State Apparatuses in Times of Crisis: Censorship and Conscription 1916," *War and Society*, 3, no. 1 (1985): 43; Marilyn Lake, *A Divided Society: Tasmania during World War I* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1975); Raymond Evans, *Loyalty and Disloyalty: Social Conflict on the Queensland Homefront, 1914-18* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987).

³⁰ James Curtin addressed the Melbourne Trades Hall Council in June 1914 and moved a version of the Hardie-Vaillant resolution. See James Curran, *Curtin's Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 31.

³¹ Tom Barker, *Direct Action*, 22 August 1914.

³² *Argus*, 1 August 1915. This phrase was repeated in a number of variations over the next three months. Fisher became the prime minister on 17 September 1914.

³³ *PSJV*, 31 May 1915.

The employment training and status of public servants readied them to respond. No explicit debate concerning the merits of supporting the conflict can be found in the *PSJV* in the first year of WWI. To a certain extent the conflict was appropriated by the VSSF as an opportunity for its members to show their worth.

3.2 Public servants at the front

*Here's to the Kaiser, the son of a bitch, may his balls drop off with the seven year itch, may his arse be pounded with a lump of leather, till his arsehole can whistle 'Britannia Forever'.*³⁴

From the notebook of an Australian Private 1916.

At the outbreak of WWI the Australian federal cabinet offered to send an expeditionary contingent of 20,000 troops to Britain as soon as requested. Just days later the British Government responded by ciphered cablegram and accepted the offer.³⁵ Among the first to enlist in the AIF were members of the VSSF.³⁶ Hundreds of public servants in the ensuing four years would heed the call and fight on battlefields on the far side of the world. Many volunteered out of an impulse for adventure and excitement.³⁷ Some young men considered enlistment to be an opportunity to travel and see the world. Great wars seldom came around and the opportunity to participate in one was deemed too good to pass up. In the pages of the *PSJV* the conflict was figuratively compared to a 'great game'.³⁸ Reports of young men pushing the recruitment guidelines were common and one individual presenting for enlistment 14 times before being accepted. A boastful

³⁴ Quoted in Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1975), 25.

³⁵ At this point the Australian army was small and not well equipped. Alfred Deakin had been the architect of the Army immediately post federation and it was designed to deal with local and regional affairs.

³⁶ In 1914, 208 public servants enlisted in the AIF. For numerical details see the Public Service Commissioner, *Report for the year 1914* (Melbourne: Government Printer, 1915), 4.

³⁷ See Gammage, *The Broken Years*, 9-12.

³⁸ *PSJV*, 31 January 1918.

union remarked that ‘grit of this kind makes the service proud’.³⁹ Some enlisted out of a sense a hatred of the enemy; the ‘Hun’ was despised. Many more were inspired by powerful religious convictions that had been instilled through the pulpit.⁴⁰ Anglican clergymen regarded the war as pre-ordained by God and that it offered a path back to righteousness through suffering.⁴¹ Accordingly, the conflict took on a redemptive power as means to purge a lost a sinful society.⁴² And of course a large majority of public servants felt that it was their obligation and unwritten duty to enlist.

However, many understandably held reservations regarding the prospect of fighting on the far side of the world. It was a natural and distinctly human reaction to the shocking stories that were beginning to reach Australia from abroad. Those members who were gripped by fear and apprehension were provided with determined encouragement. The *PSJV* instructed its elderly members to do the following:

Have a quiet heart to heart talk, and put the position kindly but plainly and where they see the reason for non-enlistment is only fear...use all their persuasive powers to induce the falterer to habilitate himself...with...the Spirit of a man.⁴³

It is difficult contemporarily to grasp the intensity of the pressure that was placed upon union members to enlist. Jingoism had reached unprecedented proportions. Groups of women were humiliating young men who refused to join the AIF by handing them ‘white feathers’ in public and labelling them ‘shirkers’.⁴⁴ To not enlist in the early stages of the conflict was in part to shame oneself and your colleagues.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 30 July 1915.

⁴⁰ Michael McKernan, *Australian Churches at War: Attitudes and Activities of the Major Churches 1914-1918* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1980), 8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Chapter 2.

⁴² *Ibid.*, Chapter 2.

⁴³ *PSJV*, 30 July 1915.

⁴⁴ See the *Punch* (Melbourne), 15 July 1915.

Heeding the call to enlist were both junior and senior members of the public service and VSSF. The *Herald* glowingly reported that public servants ‘who enlist do it with enthusiasm and little or no thought for themselves’.⁴⁵ Stories of members who were journeying to the front were routinely published in the *PSJV*. Some accounts are confronting in their xenophobic and crude sentiment. Union members found amusement in the antics of the ‘exotics’ they encountered throughout Asia and North Africa. In one entry A. J. Day provided the following reflection:

I managed to get a run ashore. I enjoyed myself fairly well on the whole, but I must say I do not like a mixed population, and the particular smell of the natives is to me an abomination; it seems to stick to your clothes.⁴⁶

Yet the majority of the correspondence received and published by the union highlights the efforts made by troops to keep themselves entertained while waiting in anticipation for what they were about to face. Enlisted men were also greatly appreciative of the books, cigarettes and food items that had been sent to them by their VSSF colleagues. In a letter from Cairo dated 5 May 1915, one soldier thanked the union writing ‘comforts are usually divorced from the soldier’s life, but the little gift brings us back to the friends we left behind’.⁴⁷

Among the first to enlist was Winfield Davis from the Professional Association (PA) of the VSSF. He was assigned to the 1st Light Horse Brigade and set sail from Albany for Egypt where he received further training in the shadow of the Great Pyramids. Soon after he was transported to the exposed peninsula at Gallipoli and went straight into the trenches. Davis reported that he eluded ‘the bullets and flying shrapnel of the wily foe for the short space of two weeks’ before

⁴⁵ *Herald*, 15 June 1915.

⁴⁶ *PSJV*, 30 July 1915.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 30 June 1916.

being badly wounded by a sniper's bullet.⁴⁸ He would survive and return to a position in the public service to significant acclaim. Countless others were not as fortunate as Davis and failed to return from the front. James Prentice Cormack was a public servant in the Lands Department and a union member who fought with the 7th Battalion at the Gallipoli campaign.⁴⁹ He was badly wounded on several occasions but refused to take leave in the medical tents. Finally, he succumbed to sniper fire and was pronounced dead. A heartfelt tribute was penned by the union in honour of Cormack:

No one was so popular with his colleagues generally. One of the best of fellows, and a model of physical development, he was a splendid specimen of young manhood-and he is no more, killed by the lust for power of a people whose brow will bear the brand of Cain for all eternity.⁵⁰

Throughout WWI the VSSF continued to chronicle with pride the heroic feats and commitment of public servants and union members. Some of the union's most senior members, including Harry Kelly and James Fogarty, were venerated for their decisions to enlist and were remembered affectionately from afar as 'comrades'.⁵¹ Albert Jacka was given special attention as the first Australian on whom the honour of the Victorian Cross was conferred.⁵² Jacka was a public servant employed with the Forests Department. His heroics at Gallipoli in which he retook a trench position amid heavy fire by shooting and bayoneting seven Turkish soldiers was reported widely in Australia. Upon his return to Victoria he received £500 and a gold watch from prominent business identity John Wren.⁵³ As the conflict pushed into 1916 and 1917 the stories of public servants at the front became more frequent and more vivid in detail. Amid the chaos of WWI the

⁴⁸ *PSJV*, 31 July 1916.

⁴⁹ Australian War Memorial, *Nominal Roll 7th Battalion B Company*, no. 19, 1915, 7.

⁵⁰ *PSJV*, 31 July 1915.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 31 January 1918.

⁵² *Argus*, 26 July 1915.

⁵³ Kevin Fewster, "Jacka, Albert (1893–1932)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 9, (Carlton: Melbourne University Press 1983).

letters received and published by the *PSJV* illustrated the stoicism and bravery of the troops. W. A. Odgers was a public servant in the Public Health Department and described his experience on the Western Front in the following fashion:

There are a few shells flying about, but none of them are falling near us. I have seen a good deal of Bob Osborne (of our department) lately, and he is looking as well as ever. He is a stretcher-bearer, and did some good work in our recent action. I saw him myself assisting wounded men when shells were falling very thickly in the vicinity. My word, they are a fine lot of fellows.⁵⁴

In total, 1,145 public servants enlisted during the course of the WWI. Another 250 volunteered but were rejected. They fought and died on battlefields in Bapaume, Boulogne, Bullecourt, Pozieres, Gallipoli, Gaza, Ypres, and Villers-Bretonneux. Figures compiled at the end of WWI by the union's secretary Gordon Carter estimated that 181 public servants were killed in action. Numbers of casualties are difficult to calculate but it is certain that hundreds more men would have been left with significant injuries. Premier Harry Lawson wrote to the union at the conclusion of WWI and offered his congratulations:

My experience in the different departments led me to believe that public servants would readily and effectively prove their loyalty to the Empire and their country. The results show that I was well justified in this belief.⁵⁵

In the *PSJV* a simple epitaph was penned in acknowledgment of the sacrifice of union members: 'no body of men in any walk of life, who have been more ready to do their duty than the Victorian State Servants of the Crown.'⁵⁶

3.3 There will be Poverty, Discontent and Crime

⁵⁴ *PSJV*, 30 July 1916.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 31 December 1918.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

In the lead up to Christmas of 1915 a sense of discontent and disillusionment became evident within the ranks of the VSSF. The onset of WWI had a severe impact upon the stability and health of the Australian economy. British manufacturers could no longer fulfil Australian orders and Germany was now shut out as a major export destination. Tens of thousands of ordinary Australians lost their jobs as a result of the dislocation of trade and the inability of business to draw credit. Unemployment among trade unionists jumped from 5.7 per cent to 10.7 per cent in the first six months of WWI.⁵⁷ It was estimated that in Melbourne alone 10,000 jobs were lost. Compounding the concerns of workers was a significant rise in the cost of living. Real wages declined amid an explosive mix of inflation and drought.⁵⁸ From the middle of 1914 to the end of 1915 the price of meat doubled, flour went up 87 per cent, bread 50 per cent, and butter 63 per cent.⁵⁹ In total, the cost of living rose by an astonishing 18.1 per cent. In assessing the grim situation, Melbourne Trades Hall warned the Peacock government that ‘men could not be blamed if they took the position into their own hands and did something desperate’.⁶⁰

Union members were certainly not sheltered from the financial impacts of the on-going conflict. Special interest groups demanded that the Victorian Government tighten its fiscal belt. The Victorian Employers Federation (VEF) accused the government of operating grossly over-manned departments and insisted that the press ‘wake up’ and bring attention to the situation.⁶¹ A push for retrenchment was now in full swing. In the preceding five years the number of permanent public servants had increased from 3,019 to 3,954.⁶² Conservative pundits contended that this increase was gross and unjustified. Yet the union was quick to point out 327

⁵⁷ Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, 72.

⁵⁸ For an example of the impact of the drought upon stock levels see the *Australasian*, 26 June 1915, 25; 13 February 1915, 6.

⁵⁹ On wartime inflation see Marnie Haig-Muir, “The Economy at War,” in Joan Beaumont, ed., *Australia’s War: 1914-1918* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1995), 108-111.

⁶⁰ Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, 72.

⁶¹ *Argus*, 11 August 1915, 8.

⁶² Public Service Commissioner, *Report For The Year 1915* (Melbourne: Government Printer, 1916), 19.

public servants were on active duty. In addition, it noted that there were dozens of new Acts that had greatly increased responsibilities of government departments over recent years.⁶³ Vexed public service unionists challenged the logic of the VEF's economy campaign and suggested that there was a 'sinister motive' behind its timing.⁶⁴ One individual remarked that 'if retrenchment takes place, more taxation will be made; and there will be unemployment, poverty discontent, and crime'.⁶⁵ The demands placed upon those who stayed behind increased significantly as men went off to fight. Most found themselves working longer hours without receiving commensurate overtime payments.⁶⁶ Heightened working expectations caused a considerable amount of disquiet within the VSSF and public service. The *Argus* reported that public servants happily took on the added responsibility but yet the *PSJV* offered quite a different reflection: 'officers are breaking down in health consequent on long hours'.⁶⁷

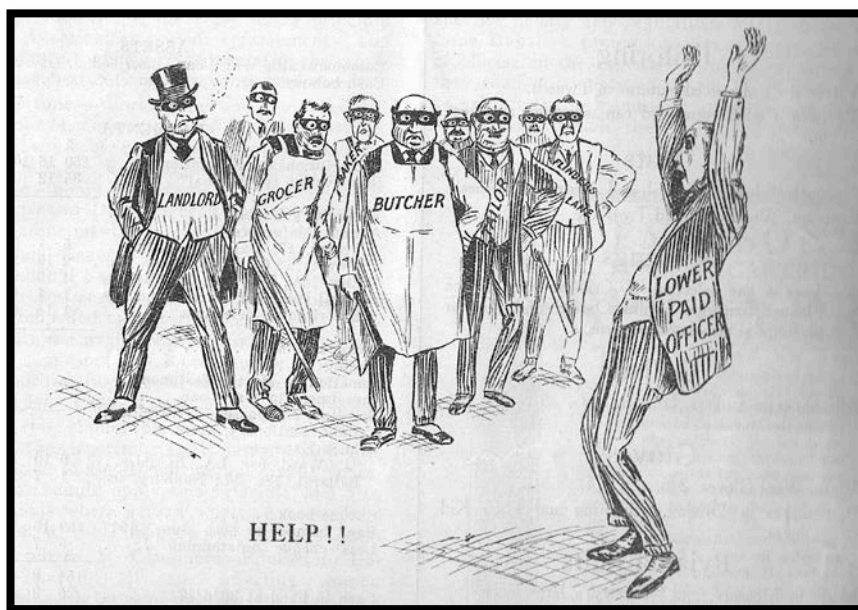


Figure 1: "The submerged public servant" *PSJV*, 29 September 1917.

⁶³ Commenting on the matter the Public Service Commissioner said the following: 'The principal cause of increased number of officers in the Public Service and increased rates of salary is due to legislation passed'. *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁴ *PSJV*, 30 June 1915.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Argus*, 3 August 1915.

⁶⁷ *PSJV*, 30 September 1915.

The VSSF accepted that the government needed to be fiscally prudent as a result of the demands of WWI but it objected to being singled out from the rest of the community. Union members protested against being subjected to ‘special taxation’ and having their working conditions eroded. The campaign to end the political marginalisation of public servants was coming to a successful conclusion and yet the union rank and file now discerned that they were being economically marginalised. Inflation was having a crippling effect on the 75 per cent of public servants who were earning less than £200 per annum.⁶⁸ Approximately half of all public servants were receiving what might be described as working class wages. One union member gave the following bleak assessment:

When they see the pay sheets come round and the miserable pittance dolled out to them, they learn sense and say, would that I know as much as I know now. I would not then have entered the public service.⁶⁹

In response, the VSSF now adopted a more radical approach to the escalating social and political unrest. During the winter of 1915 the notion that a financial conspiracy was unfolding had been popularised by a series of articles published in *Labor Call* by prominent Victorian federal Labor Party MP Frank Anstey. He believed that WWI was an imperialist plot hatched by Britain and financed by Jewish money. Anstey was adamant that the ruling elite would take advantage of the European bloodbath to the detriment of ordinary workers:

The war will put a millstone of debt around the necks of the producing classes of every country. It will grind them to degrading slavery. It will make the monetary power more powerful and opulent than ever. All who remain alive from the slaughter will toil to pay the parasitical classes annual tribute for the money invested in blood.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 30 December 1916.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 30 June 1915.

⁷⁰ *Labor Call*, 15 April 1915. The best examination of the work of Anstey is Peter Love, *Labor and the Money Power: Australian Labour Populism 1890-1950* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1984), 59-65.

Joining with the wider labour movement the VSSF saw the crisis in retail inflation as being caused by ‘the hogs of society, the exploiting rascals of the people’s everyday food who are trading on misfortune and making the poor pay the bill’.⁷¹ A real feeling of industrial discrimination was forming. As Paul Strangio has remarked ‘the appetite for a radical interpretation of the war intensified during 1915’.⁷² In an extraordinary *PSJV* editorial the VSSF questioned whether its members were being exploited for the benefit of others: ‘Are not employers and employees engaged in the manufacturing and supply of goods required by military authorities making bigger profits and receiving higher wages than formerly?’⁷³ It was plain to see that the business community had become a target of the VSSF’s frustration and exasperation. According to one outraged unionist the top end of town was solely driven by ‘profits’ and had ‘no love of country’.⁷⁴

So strong was the level of discontent among ordinary Australians regarding the skyrocketing cost of living that many took matters into their own hands. In the northern Melbourne suburb of Coburg the municipal council erected ‘rolls of dishonour’ containing the names of ‘brigands’ who had ‘exploited the people by raising the price of commodities for the purpose of putting money in their pockets’.⁷⁵ Such cynicism was not unjustified as salaries were frozen by commonwealth and state arbitration courts and wages boards. Workers called upon Labor Prime Minister Andrew Fisher to address the burgeoning crisis by bringing the weight of the Commonwealth Government down upon those who were said to be ‘profiteering’. The federal cabinet responded by committing to hold a referendum on the question of retail pricing regulation.⁷⁶ As historians have argued the measure became a ‘litmus test’ of the ability and desire of the federal Labor Party to have a real impact on the situation.⁷⁷ However, in October, at the

⁷¹ *Labor Call*, 15 July 1915.

⁷² Paul Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory: 100 years of Political Labor in Victoria, 1856-1956* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2012), 123.

⁷³ *PSJV*, 30 April 1915.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 30 June 1915.

⁷⁵ *Worker*, 1 July 1915.

⁷⁶ The Prices Referendum was set for 11 December 1915.

⁷⁷ Lake, *A Divided Society: Tasmania during World War I*, 39.

decisive moment, a war weary Fisher resigned the prime-ministership to take up the post of Australian High Commissioner in London. His successor William ‘Billy’ Hughes—under pressure from state premiers and the Queensland branch of the Australian Workers Union (AWU)—reneged on the referendum commitment. Victorian trade unions were quick to express their dissatisfaction in the actions of Hughes. The Victorian branch of his own party labelled the new prime minister an ‘imperial sycophant’ and it was predicted that in the near future he would be ‘with the crowd of political snobs and Tories’ where he was said to ‘rightfully belong’.⁷⁸

In early phase of WWI the VSSF had largely been preoccupied with recruitment initiatives and agitating for action on prices and working conditions. Yet with the ascension of Hughes to the prime ministership the tide of Australian politics was set to dramatically turn. In many respects WWI served to strengthen the distinct brand of nationalism to which Hughes now adhered. He insisted that all sections of Australia should stand united to defend the ‘motherland’. Dissension would be put down and the grievances of working class citizens would be ignored. Gone was the class conscious idealism that had shaped the political emergence of this former trade union leader. Attention would pivot back to recruitment. When the British War Office sent a ciphered cablegram stating that ‘every available man was needed’ the national recruitment campaign was instantly emboldened.⁷⁹ Hughes had already overseen a national War Census which estimated that there were nearly 600,000 ‘fit’ men available for enlistment.⁸⁰ As a result the Commonwealth Government committed to sending another 50,000 young men to the front. Recruitment meetings now became heated affairs. Protestant clergymen acted as recruiters and targeted the emotional frailties and vulnerabilities of those who had not enlisted. Young and ‘fit’ men were confronted and asked why they were not willing to join the fight. If no satisfactory answers were provided they

⁷⁸ *Labor Call*, 2 December 1915; 13 January 1916.

⁷⁹ Scott, *Australia During the War*, 292.

⁸⁰ Men were deemed fit if they described themselves as being in good health, not having lost a limb, and being neither blind nor deaf. See Scott, *Australia During the War*, 310.

were labelled ‘cowards’ and ‘shirkers’.⁸¹ The Universal Service League (USL) was formed during this period and quickly became an influential political grouping. Branches of the organisation sprung up across the nation. It viewed the policy of voluntary enlistment as depriving the country of the most able young men and remarked that volunteerism was a ‘process of unnatural selection’.⁸² The conscription debate had commenced.

Meanwhile, the forces opposed to conscription began to organise and openly condemn those who attacked young men unwilling to enlist. It was obvious that the guilt of the trappings of WWI had begun to wear off. Even Scott—who typically understated the divisions that had emerged in Australia—would comment that the question of conscription ‘aroused bitter opposition’.⁸³ As has already been noted both the Victorian Socialist Party (VSP) and IWW were actively campaigning against compulsory enlistment. Tom Barker, the 28-year old leader of the IWW, or ‘Wobblies’, who arrived in Australia after five years of service in the British Army, was charged in September 1915 with publishing a poster prejudicial to recruiting. It infamously read ‘TO ARMS!! Capitalists, Parsons, Politicians, Landlords, Newspaper Editors, and Other Stay-at-Home Patriots. Your Country Needs You in the Trenches! Workers, Follow Your Masters!’⁸⁴ Melbourne Trades Hall had also expressed its opposition and in New South Wales unionists carried a motion rejecting conscription unless there was also a corresponding conscription of wealth.⁸⁵ This sentiment closely reflects the writings of VSSF members who had drawn a link between the capitalist class and profiteering. The inquisitorial methods of the recruitment committees had coalesced the opponents of conscription. A myriad of political and ecclesiastical organisations now injected themselves into the discussion. Farmers, urban intellectuals, pacifists and radical clergymen jointly campaigned against

⁸¹ McKernan, *Australian Churches at War*, 79-83.

⁸² *Argus*, 11 September 1915.

⁸³ Scott, *Australia During the War*, 312.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Verity Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism: The Industrial Workers of the World in Australia* (Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 190.

⁸⁵ Joan Beaumont, “The Politics of a Divided Society,” in Joan Beaumont, ed., *Australia’s War: 1914-1918* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1995), 44.

compulsory enlistment.⁸⁶ Women played a prominent role in leading the burgeoning anti-conscription movement. Vida Goldstein and Adela Pankhurst led the Peace Alliance and Women's Peace Army.⁸⁷ As Scott has noted 'women knew all too well the nature of the grim business to which they were giving up their men'.⁸⁸

At the beginning of 1916 the inexorable Hughes left Australia and spent the first six months of the year in London at the invitation of the British War Cabinet. Upon his departure from Fremantle he unleashed a tirade of abuse against the IWW and anti-conscriptionists whom he dubbed 'foul parasites' and 'people who babble about peace'.⁸⁹ In his absence the conscription debate gripped the entire nation. Violent spot fires between opposing camps erupted on the streets. Frederick Katz—the assistant secretary of the Federated Clerks' Union (FCU)—was seized at his Melbourne office by a group of returned soldiers and then smeared with hot tar and feathers for daring to challenge compulsory enlistment.⁹⁰ Just weeks after Hughes had departed Australia the Victorian branch of his own party vowed to revoke the endorsement of any MP who supported conscription. In a defiant statement the party moved that it would 'oppose by all lawful means the conscription of human life for military service abroad'.⁹¹ Ninety-seven trade unions gathered for congress in Sydney and supported a motion declaring an 'undying hostility to conscription of life and labour'.⁹² By this point the left-wing of the labour movement was unified in its antipathy to compulsory enlistment.

When Hughes returned from London in late July 1916 he was determined that Australia should follow the example set by Britain and implement conscription whatever the cost. In England he was lionised by the press for his forceful and

⁸⁶ See Glenn Withers, "The 1916-17 Conscription Referenda: a Cliometric Re-appraisal," *Historical Studies*, 20 (1982-83): 36-47.

⁸⁷ See J.M. Bomford, *That Dangerous and Persuasive Woman: Vida Goldstein*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993).

⁸⁸ Scott, *Australia During the War*, 317.

⁸⁹ *West Australian*, 18 January 1916.

⁹⁰ *Argus*, 23 December 1915.

⁹¹ *Labor Call*, 4 May 1916.

⁹² Beaumont, "The Politics of a Divided Society," 44.

passionate contributions in support of the imperial vision. Nonetheless, Hughes was aware that introducing a bill in the federal parliament to establish a system of compulsory enlistment would divide the Labor Party and possibly bring down the government. Hughes instead went to the party caucus and successfully, albeit narrowly, persuaded a majority of MPs to pass legislation that would see a conscription referendum held.⁹³ He reasoned and was confident that the Australian people would support conscription. A referendum was set for 28 October 1916 and the ‘official’ campaigning kicked off in earnest. A torrent of pro-conscription material was produced by the National Referendum Council and distributed in schools, churches, hospitals, businesses and public offices. The pro-conscription campaign, led by Hughes, was aided by the powers recently conferred upon the government by the draconian *War Precautions Act 1914*.⁹⁴

The three page Act, that had been rammed through the federal parliament, gave security agencies unprecedented powers. Material deemed to be an insult to Britain was routinely seized.⁹⁵ Citizens and institutions suspected of subversion were spied upon by military spooks. Newspaper editors were directed to avoid reporting on the activity of the anti-conscription movement. In Sydney, military intelligence personnel raided the headquarters of the IWW and arrested 12 of its leading members on trumped up charges of treason. Army officers raided the premises of Melbourne Trades Hall and confiscated thousands of copies of an anti-conscription pamphlet. Senator George Pearce, the Labor Minister for Defence, responded to the indignation of Victorian unionists by simply stating that an individual was ‘guilty of sedition if he made or published any statement likely to cause disruption to the community’.⁹⁶ With the assistance of Solicitor-General Sir Robert Garran, the prime minister, dismissive of natural justice, had supplanted the normal machinations of democracy and now governed by

⁹³ Hughes described the cabinet meetings in August as a “A week of civil war in the caucus.” Quoted in Stuart Macintyre, *The Oxford History of Australia: Vol. 4, The Succeeding Age: 1901-1942* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986), 163.

⁹⁴ *War Precautions Act 1914* (Commonwealth) no. 10, 1914.

⁹⁵ Fewster, “The Operation of State Apparatuses in Times of Crisis,” 45.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

autocratic edict. Garran's description of the powers of the Act was telling: 'I had full and unquestionable power over the liberties of everyday subjects'.⁹⁷

As community tensions rose the religious dimension of Australian social and political life was thrust into the spotlight. While the protestant hierarchy was fervently in the pro-conscription camp, the attitudes of the Roman Catholic leadership, and parishioners, were more complex. Both the Melbourne and Sydney Archdioceses initially provided tacit approval to Australia's involvement in WWI. Yet the sentiment of Catholics was slowly changing. It was the brutality of the 1916 Easter uprising in Dublin that hardened the opinion of many Catholics against conscription. The savage execution of 15 Irish rebels by British forces reverberated throughout the Irish diaspora and had a powerful effect upon Victorian Catholics. Irish born Melbourne Archbishop Daniel Mannix, deeply impacted by the news, was brought to tears.⁹⁸ Turning to an old friend he remarked 'Michael, they've shot some of them'.⁹⁹ When Mannix pleaded with the British Government to show clemency to the hundreds of arrested nationalists in Dublin he was branded a 'traitor' and an 'enemy' of freedom loving Australians by Ulster nationalists and the *Argus*.¹⁰⁰ He now publicly declared his opposition to conscription.

A hostile and vitriolic sectarianism that had been dampened by the demands of WWI again revealed itself. Catholics in the public service were closely monitored by the security and intelligence agencies. One such example is a young Arthur Calwell who had gained a clerical position in the Victorian Agriculture Department and was a rising union member. He was followed and interrogated by numerous security agencies and had his house searched by plain clothed detectives. Suspicions had fallen upon Calwell, officially labelled a 'Sinn Feiner',

⁹⁷ Robert Randolph Garran, *Prosper the Commonwealth* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1958), 221-3.

⁹⁸ Alan Gilbert, "The Conscription Referenda, 1916-1917: The Impact of the Irish Crisis," *Historical Studies*, 14, no. 53 (1969), 61.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁰⁰ *Advocate*, 6 May 1916; *Argus*, 5 May 1916.

due to his involvement with the Young Ireland Society.¹⁰¹ It can be concluded that many more public servants would have been subjected to surveillance and intimidation at the hands of government spooks. To scroll through the names of the union's leadership (and the rolls of the constituent associations) is to see a myriad of names of Irish ancestry. As Alan Gilbert has noted at this stage 'Irishness and Catholicity were virtually indistinguishable'.¹⁰² Catholic newspaper, by the mid-point of 1916, were beginning to speak out against compulsory enlistment. The *Tribune* was vehemently opposed the measure while the *Advocate* cautioned its readers against blindly accepting the dictates of government and instead favoured a policy of voluntarism.¹⁰³ As Victorian Labor Party MP, lawyer and intellectual Maurice Blackburn commented 'Catholics who in 1915 would have given their last man and last shilling became overnight eager and resolute opponents of conscription'.¹⁰⁴

And so in October the nation went to the polls. Within 48 hours it was clear that compulsory overseas military enlistment had been defeated: 1, 160, 033 said 'No' and 1, 087, 557 said 'Yes'.¹⁰⁵ Victoria was one of three states to vote in support of the proposal by a narrow margin. The opponents of conscription appealed to a range of impulses and were motivated by matters of class, gender, religion, ethnicity, and nationalism.¹⁰⁶ Research suggests that women, British-born citizens and primary producers tended to vote yes while Catholics and wage-earners tended to vote no.¹⁰⁷ The result demonstrated the extent to which Australia was now polarised. How VSSF members approached the referendum is difficult to assess as during the course of 1916 no official mention of conscription can be

¹⁰¹ See Mary Elizabeth Calwell, *I Am Bound to Be True: The Life and Legacy of Arthur A. Calwell 1896–1973* (Preston: Mosaic Press, 2012), 10-11.

¹⁰² Gilbert, "The Conscription Referenda, 1916-1917," 54.

¹⁰³ See McKernan, *Australian Churches at War*, 112; Jeff Kildea, "Australian Catholics and Conscription in the Great War," *The Journal of Religious History*, 26, no. 3 (2002): 301.

¹⁰⁴ Maurice Blackburn, *The Conscription Referendum of 1916* (Melbourne: The Anti-Conscription Celebration League, 1936), 13.

¹⁰⁵ Scott, *Australia during the War*, 352.

¹⁰⁶ See Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, 113-16.

¹⁰⁷ See Withers, "The 1916-17 Conscription Referenda: A Cliometric Re-appraisal," 36-47.

found. The union was conspicuously silent on compulsory enlistment. As such it is possible to only make calculated inferences by piecing together the available information and pivoting to an understanding of the social and political milieu at this point in Victorian history. With respect to the question of religion it can be delineated that union members would have closely followed the teaching and pronouncements of the denominations to which they adhered. Protestant members would have been influenced by the call to patriotism from the pulpit. The Crown was located within the context of the Church of England; conscription took on a divine and sanctified meaning. The adherents to Catholicism would no doubt have been torn between allegiances to the Victorian Government and then in contrast to the teachings of Archbishop Mannix and the Church in general. Irish Catholics made up a significant proportion of the government positions. Calwell, reflecting on his time in the public service, commented that government employment was especially attractive to Catholics because so many were overlooked in the private sector.¹⁰⁸ Yet the institution of the sacrament and the status of the priesthood would have weighed heavily upon many. The theological disposition of Roman Catholicism emphasised the authority of the Church's teachings. When Mannix spoke he commanded attention and the Catholic community listened.

It is also pertinent to recall that the VSSF was in the middle of a campaign to have the political rights of public servants expanded. Restrictions were imposed upon the eligibility of public servants to join political organisations, speak at public meetings and ask questions of electoral candidates. Commenting on government policy was also prohibited. Amid a climate of fear and retribution brought about by the Commonwealth Government's heavy handed surveillance operations, the union chose to remain silent. In this regard the VSSF made the issue of political rights its top priority. Avoiding actions that potentially threatened this campaign would have been a likely necessity. Perhaps the most relevant conclusion to draw remains that the union, mirroring Victoria at large, was divided by the issue of conscription. Members expressed a loyalty to the state but not necessarily to the British Empire. The rank and file answered to an array of different calls.

¹⁰⁸ Colm Kiernan, *Calwell: A Personal and Political Biography* (West Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1978), 18.

3.4 The ‘Little Tzar’, Mannix and an Expanding Union

Following the October 1916 conscription referendum the political atmosphere in Australia was one of perpetual crisis. The impact of the defeat within the Labor Party was dramatic and unprecedented. In every state, except Western Australia, the Party expelled MPs who had campaigned in favour of conscription. When the 65 member federal caucus met on 14 November, the prime minister came under immediate attack. Hughes together with 23 of his colleagues responded by storming out of the meeting; they never came back. By the beginning of 1917 the dissident block of ex-Labor MPs had joined with opposition Liberals to form the Nationalist Party. With an election scheduled for May, the VSSF, no longer content in remaining silent, now decided to engage in political commentary. In March, an article in the *PSJV* entitled ‘Danger Ahead’ criticised the industrial position of the Nationalist Party and caused a stir within the union.¹⁰⁹ The timing was deliberately inflammatory and it was undoubtedly a veiled attack on Hughes. An analysis of the link between Hughes and former Victorian premier and union buster William Irvine was brought to the attention of readers. The rank and file were reminded of the outrageous legislative record of Irvine in relation to matters of political rights at the turn of the century. It was an attempt to both ‘forewarn’ and ‘forearm’ the union base.¹¹⁰

On 5 May 1917, the Nationalist, or ‘Win the War’ Party, cruised to a resounding victory in the federal election, winning 53 of the 75 House of Representative seats and all 18 Senate places. The Labor Party, rife with dissension, was no match for the commanding Hughes.¹¹¹ In the opinion of conservatives the ‘Labor Party had blown its brains out’.¹¹² The locus of power within the labour movement now

¹⁰⁹ “Danger Ahead,” *PSJV*, 31 March 1917.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹¹¹ See Laurence Frederic Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1979), 262-254; Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, 116-21; Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory*, 123-4.

¹¹² The phrase has been attributed to the *Argus* newspaper. See Love, *Labor and the Money Power*, 71.

shifted to the industrial wing. In the VSSF this rising industrial feeling was evident in the expansion of the organisation. By now additional groups representing Victorian technical teachers, government printers and chaplains, some female teachers, police officers and mental hospitals workers had joined the VSSF. Public servants of all persuasions were caught up in labour movement's drive to regain ground lost on wages and conditions during the conflict. It was viewed as a particular coup when police officers asked VSSF Secretary Gordon Carter to create the architecture for the Police Association.¹¹³ The group's first statement was an expression of loyalty to the VSSF.¹¹⁴ The union now envisioned stronger coordination among public servants. Structurally, the VSSF executive and council acted on behalf of all groups on matters of general interest. Several constituent associations only had a handful of members and relied solely of the organisational capacity of the VSSF.¹¹⁵ But unlike a union peak body, the organisation also retained significant powers to act on behalf of all public service unionists. As such the VSSF more closely resembled a union with the associations acting as divisions.

The remaining six months of 1917 were marred by a level of industrial and political unrest that had rarely been seen in Australia. Historian L. L. Robson aptly described the climate as 'neurotic'.¹¹⁶ Hughes, who in Labor demonology was now compared to 'Judas', was intent on crushing all dissident opposition. The *Unlawful Associations Act 1916*, rushed through the federal parliament in December 1916 and amended in 1917, was used to designate organisations such as the IWW illegal.¹¹⁷ Dozens of dissident IWW members, or 'Wobblies', were imprisoned and some who could not prove their identity were deported to Chile.¹¹⁸ Intelligence agencies, civil and military, harassed, spied upon and

¹¹³ *Argus*, 7 April 1917.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ For example the Government Chaplains Association.

¹¹⁶ Leslie Lloyd Robson, *The First A.I.F.: A Study of its Recruitment 1914-1918*, 177.

¹¹⁷ *Unlawful Associations Act 1916* (Commonwealth) no. 41, 1916; See also Cain, *Wobblies at War*, 98.

¹¹⁸ See Glenn Nicholls, *Deported: A History of Forced Departures from Australia* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson), 54.

prosecuted those who spoke out against recruitment. In August, the Commonwealth Government clashed with the labour movement when New South Wales railways workers initiated a general strike that grew rapidly to include 100,000 wage-earners. The *Worker*, the official organ of the Australian Workers Union (AWU), asserted that the action was a ‘revolt against government tyranny’.¹¹⁹ Approximately 20,000 furious workers attempted to march on the federal parliament in Melbourne.¹²⁰ In total, four million days were lost in the action. Using its vast array of powers the Hughes government smashed the unrest. Unions were deregistered, strike leaders detained on charges of conspiracy, and workers blacklisted and denied their old jobs at the conclusion of the dispute.¹²¹

Against this backdrop an emboldened Hughes announced that a second conscription referendum would be held on 20 December 1917. He invested much of the Nationalist Party’s acquired political capital in the measure: ‘I tell you plainly that the government must have this power; it cannot govern the Country without it’.¹²² As historian Joan Beaumont poetically records the decision threw ‘dynamite’ onto the already heightened tensions. The arguments employed in 1916 were now recycled and unleashed with greater fervour and venom. Supporters of conscription published the notorious ‘Anti’s Creed’, an inflammatory polemic that targeted Catholics, Sinn Feiners, Labor figures, pacifists, and women.¹²³ Pitches in favour of conscription were made in open-air meetings, theatres, ballrooms, churches, government offices, sporting clubs.¹²⁴ The sense of feeling in the pro-conscription camp intensified from August onwards as horrific news filtered back from the Western Front. At the Third Battle of Ypres, in northern Belgium, Australian forces sustained 38,000 casualties. This period represented the greatest and quickest loss of life of Australian soldiers

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Macintyre, *The Oxford History of Australia*, 170.

¹²⁰ The federal parliament was located at spring street until 1927. For an excellent analysis of the 1917 strikes see Rob Bollard, “‘The Active Chorus’: The Mass Strike of 1917 in Eastern Australia,” (Ph.D. Thesis, Victoria University, 2007).

¹²¹ See Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, 144-45.

¹²² Scott, *Australia during the War*, 414.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 417.

¹²⁴ See Beaumont, “The Politics of a Divided Society,” 51-4.

during WWI. The enormity of the loss stunned the nation. Anti-conscription rallies were now routinely and violently set upon by returned soldiers.¹²⁵ And all the while Hughes was touring the country and inciting animosity against those who were campaigning against compulsory enlistment.

Needless to say, the opponents of conscription countered with their own virulent rhetoric and acts of violence. On one such occasion, at the Warwick Railway Station in Queensland, a group of anti-conscriptionists hurled rotten eggs at Hughes as he was attempting to deliver a speech. A brawl ensued and Hughes was set upon. The *Argus* reported that the prime minister was 'hustled and jostled by men twice his size' and emerged from the melee with 'bleeding knuckles'.¹²⁶ At recruitment meetings anti-conscriptionists frequently interrupted proceedings and accosted speakers. Militant unions also employed graphic language to convey what they perceived to be the grotesque nature of WWI. W. Winspear penned a leaflet entitled 'The Blood Vote' that was authorized by future prime minister John Curtin.¹²⁷ Another typical example was 'The Lottery of Death' authored by AWU figure H. E. Boote.¹²⁸ Conscription, he argued, would 'reduce its citizens to the level of cannibals drawing lots for an obscene feast'.¹²⁹ Perhaps the most gruesome example was an article entitled 'The Bucket' that portrayed a field hospital at the front:

In the field at the back the dead are lying. The first has no face, the next has bled to death. The corpses are pulled about as the slaughterman pulls his dead sheep. Intestines and pieces or lungs are in a bucket outside the tent, so the surgeon may get good practice.¹³⁰

By this stage the undisputed leader of the Victorian anti-conscription movement,

¹²⁵ Scott, *Australia during the War*, 417.

¹²⁶ *Brisbane Daily Standard*, 30 November, 1917; *Argus*, 30 November 30, 1917.

¹²⁷ W. Winspear, *The Blood Vote* (Melbourne: Fraser and Jenkinson, 1917).

¹²⁸ Henry E. Boote was the editor of the *Worker*.

¹²⁹ Quoted in Leslie Cyril Jauncey, *The Story of Conscription in Australia* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1968), 281.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

and the *bête noire* of Hughes, was Melbourne's Catholic Archbishop Daniel Mannix.¹³¹ He was a charismatic and controversial spokesman for both Catholics and the working class. With his considerable oratorical skill he attracted crowds of over 100,000 to anti-conscription demonstrations. He denounced Hughes labelling him 'the little Tzar' who had degraded the office of prime minister by invoking 'sectarian and racial prejudice' and accused the conscription movement of 'petty juggling and trickery'.¹³² Mannix spoke passionately about the financial consequences of the conflict by questioning the motives of the British imperialist vision. He pivoted to the peace note issued by Pope Benedict XV that included a call for all nations to abolish compulsory military training.¹³³ In response, Hughes claimed that Mannix 'preached sedition in season and out of season'.¹³⁴

3.5 The Blackburn and Hendy Affairs

As the nation descended further into political chaos the citizens of Victoria were preparing to go to the polls to elect their state representatives on 15 November 1917. Prior to the vote the VSSF executive publicly declared for Labor Party candidate Maurice Blackburn in the marginal metropolitan seat of Essendon.¹³⁵ Circulars were sent to members to encourage them to participate in the local campaign. The union was not an official Labor Party affiliate and had rarely engaged in party political debate. Union members were mobilised in support of Blackburn being briefed that their primary duty was to help safeguard 'normal conditions in the service'.¹³⁶ In adopting a strong political stance the VSSF publicly dismantled the neutrality it had attempted to preserve throughout WWI. In Blackburn, the union chose to support arguably the most divisive figure in Victorian state politics at this point in time. Blackburn was a prominent anti-

¹³¹ The national leader of the anti-conscription movement was Queensland premier T. J. Ryan.

¹³² Scott, *Australia during the War*, 420.

¹³³ See Kildea, "Australian Catholics and Conscription in the Great War," 303.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 304.

¹³⁵ *Argus*, 13 November 1917.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

conscriptionist who had campaigned by the side of Mannix.¹³⁷ He was a scholar, a socialist and an unwavering civil libertarian who possessed a deep empathy for Victoria's working class citizens.¹³⁸ He fused a cerebral disposition with an absorbing geniality and charisma. Blackburn's blatant anti-militarism and pacifist preaching placed him at the forefront of Victorian politics. In campaigning on behalf of Blackburn, restraint was discarded in favour of activism; the union had become a party political participant.

Perhaps at first glance the VSSF's decision to support Blackburn's re-election campaign might appear injudicious. The Victorian Labor Party's electoral prospects appeared bleak. Blackburn was disadvantaged as his electorate of Essendon had voted in favour of conscription in the first referendum. So strong was the feeling against Blackburn that his opponent Tom Ryan broke with the Labor Party in South Australia and migrated to Melbourne to contest the seat of Essendon. Ryan was an MP in federal parliament's House of Representatives and a fervid conscriptionist.¹³⁹ He was described as a 'fiery little man with a fighting chin' and would stand as an endorsed candidate of the Nationalist Party.¹⁴⁰ Ryan dubbed Blackburn a 'traitor of the working classes' and claimed that he was aligned to German causes.¹⁴¹ Not to be outdone the *Argus* remarked that he [Blackburn] was 'a gentlemen who looks kindly upon our monstrous and murderous foe'.¹⁴²

As the campaign progressed the fortunes of Blackburn deteriorated in the face of heated opposition. When the press quoted Blackburn stating that 'the working class had very little to lose by a German victory' his re-election bid was

¹³⁷ *Argus*, 8 November 1917.

¹³⁸ See Susan Blackburn Abeyasekera, "Blackburn, Maurice McCrae (1880–1944)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 7 (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1979).

¹³⁹ Raymond Wright, *A People's Counsel*, 140.

¹⁴⁰ Geoff Browne, "Ryan, Thomas (1870-1943)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 11 (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1988).

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Quoted in Dennis Dodd, "A Prince for the Paupers: A Political Biography of Maurice Blackburn," (PhD Thesis, Latrobe University, 1994), 242-3.

effectively sunk.¹⁴³ Yet despite the unfavourable outlook the union continued to campaign on his behalf. It was a *quid pro quo* as Blackburn had frequently and eloquently advocated on behalf of public servants in the Victorian Legislative Assembly. Witty and mischievous, Blackburn delighted in disparaging the fiscal conservatism of his conservative foes. He was adamant that retrenchment in the public service had put Victorian behind others states and that the political and industrial rights of public servants must be protected.¹⁴⁴ As a friend of the union he would not be abandoned.

However, the decision of the VSSF executive to support Blackburn was not universally popular with the membership. Some thought the action was scandalous. President Martin and Secretary Carter were accused of undermining the political neutrality of the organisation. On the eve of the election the union was starting to split.¹⁴⁵ A faction within the Professional Association (PA) of the VSSF was particularly angered by the endorsement. How could the union executive endorse such a polarising figure? One union member questioned the reasoning of the decision: ‘I emphatically protest against the action of the president and secretary...in supporting the claims of Mr. Blackburn. I consider that by so doing they are laying civil servants generally open to the charge of disloyalty’.¹⁴⁶ Another member using pseudonym ‘not one of the motley crowd’ offered the following candid assessment:

I protest, against the use of members of the branch as a lever to further the interests of any party. It surely will speak very little for the intelligence of public servants if they allow themselves to be directed by the president and secretary as to how they should vote...I am quite sure that the majority of public servants have intelligence enough in this time of stress to place the Empire before any petty selfish motives.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ *Argus*, 8 November 1917.

¹⁴⁴ *PSJV*, 31 August 1917.

¹⁴⁵ Professional Association, “Statement of Withdrawal,” March 1918.

¹⁴⁶ *Argus*, 14 November 1917.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Furthermore, the PA council was suspicious of the newly formed Australian Public Service Federation (APSF)—a loose national body of state public service unions with which the VSSF had decided to affiliate. It feared that the APSF would attempt to dictate the course of action taken by the VSSF.¹⁴⁸ An increasingly vexed PA demanded that the VSSF council and journal committee be reformed. The VSSF was now rife with division.¹⁴⁹ On 15 November 1917, the Economy Party won the greatest number of seats at the Victorian election and its leader John Bowser went on to become premier with the support of the Nationalist Party. Ryan easily won the seat of Essendon. In supporting the rights of Lutheran schools Blackburn had exposed himself to allegation of treason. As Strangio notes ‘this lonely stand left Blackburn more vulnerable to innuendo that he harboured pro-German sympathies’.¹⁵⁰ The *Argus* was not shy in expressing its delight:

One especially gratifying feature of the election was the defeat of Mr. Blackburn for Essendon. He had the support of the Labor Party, of the Mannix Party, of the Public Service Federation.¹⁵¹

It was the newspaper’s opinion that ‘the loyalist public servant declined to obey the instruction of the Public Service Federation’.¹⁵² Labor Party figure Thomas Tunnecliffe advised Blackburn to take a political sabbatical in the aftermath of the election and quipped that the ‘the spirit of madness had not yet passed’.¹⁵³ Disheartened by the election result the VSSF executive moved quickly to defend their endorsement of Blackburn. In a time of such political and social unrest the union’s display of loyalty to Blackburn took on an added meaning. Allegations of betrayal levelled against the union council were both dismissed and ridiculed. Martin and Carter were defiant and would not be moved. The *PSJV* published an excerpt from *Victorian Parliamentary Debates* in which Blackburn championed

¹⁴⁸ *PSJV*, 30 November 1917.

¹⁴⁹ Professional Association, *Statement of Withdrawal*, March 1918.

¹⁵⁰ Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory*, 123.

¹⁵¹ *Argus*, 16 November 1917.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ Quoted in Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory*, 123.

the establishment of an independent public service board of appeal.¹⁵⁴ ‘He was to the last a friend of the Service, and worthy of its whole hearted support’ eulogised the VSSF.¹⁵⁵

In many respects the 1917 state election marked a turning point in the fortunes of the VSSF. Just weeks later, on 20 December, the second conscription referendum was held. On this occasion the measure failed by a wider margin than it had a year earlier: 1,181,747 voted ‘No’ and 1,015,159 voted ‘Yes’. Victoria collectively joined with Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia in opposition. It was a resounding victory for the anti-conscription movement. By the beginning of 1918, division within the union had reached a tipping point. The organisation was an ammunition dump awaiting a stray spark to initiate combustion. That spark was the PA as it could no longer endorse the actions of the VSSF council and railed against the perceived autocratic leadership of the Martin and Carter. A comical sequence of events soon followed when prominent PA member, T. F. Hendy, allegedly defamed Carter at a union meeting. The comments were labelled ‘violent’ and exacerbated previously held suspicions among the ranks of the union executive regarding the loyalty of the PA.¹⁵⁶ Carter initiated civil action against Hendy and was supported by the VSSF council. Lines of allegiance were being drawn. Martin accused the PA council of creating disunity ‘through secret meetings and understandings’.¹⁵⁷ Martin was humiliated by the actions of the PA, the group from which he hailed, and announced his intention to resign the VSSF presidency commenting that the position had become a ‘bed of thorns’.¹⁵⁸

At an extraordinary meeting of the VSSF ruling body the assembled councillors voted in favour of requesting the PA withdraw its affiliation.¹⁵⁹ To compound the crisis the Dairy Supervisor’s Association, a small division numbering only 40

¹⁵⁴ *PSJV*, 30 November 1917. Public servants had no recourse to appeal cases of wrongful dismissal or incorrect classification.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 30 November 1917.

¹⁵⁶ Letter from President Martin. See the *PSJV*, 28 February 1918.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 22 December 1917.

¹⁵⁹ Special meeting of the VSSF council dated 22 January 1918. See the *Ibid.*, 31 January 1918.

members that had only recently been formed under the auspices of the union, was also invited to withdraw its affiliation on account of disloyalty. By virtue of its numerical inferiority the loss of the Supervisor's Association was hardly mentioned. Nevertheless, it was a significant moment in the brief history of the organisation. A founding member at the centre of the union's activity was expelled. A once unified organisation was now caught up in scandalous legal action. Martin and Carter were both deeply embarrassed. Chaos reigned supreme.

News of the tension was picked up by both metropolitan and rural papers. The *Age* reported that 'trouble' had overcome the VSSF; while the *Argus* gleefully noted that the union was not a 'harmonious body'.¹⁶⁰ The *Ballarat Courier* observed that members of the PA had been both 'disruptive and disloyal'.¹⁶¹ In the face of mounting pressure the *PSJV* defended the actions of the union council. One article commented that 'the man or woman who has not faith in the organisation to which he belongs is potentially a traitor to it'.¹⁶² A number of senior councillors including the leaders of the Clerical, Mental and General Associations publicly declared their loyalty. John Lindsay Stewart—the secretary of the General Division Association (GDA)—put forward the following humorous retort:

Ha, ha! Oh! Oh!...every time I think of...the ridiculous position of the Professional Association, I laugh some more. We've had the 'Bing Boys', 'Samples' and all the other funniosities, but it's remained for the comedians of the Professional Association to provide the 'Hit of the season'.¹⁶³

Not to be outdone, members from across the constituent associations of the union offered their opinions. Insults, often personal, were hurled at the PA and its leaders. 'I heard the other day that a member of the Council of the Professional Association not only favoured percentage reductions, but had the temerity to

¹⁶⁰ *Age*, 4 February 1918; *Argus*, 8 May 1919.

¹⁶¹ *Ballarat Courier*, 22 December 1917.

¹⁶² *PSJV*, 29 September 1917.

¹⁶³ Letter from John Lindsay Stewart dated 15 May 1918. See the *Ibid.*, 31 May 1918.

suggest it' remarked one enraged member.¹⁶⁴ Letters of union members published in the *PSJV* called the animosity to be put to an end. Some PA members even expressed their frustration at the continued chaos: 'I cannot make it out! What has come over my brother-officers?'¹⁶⁵ Another wondered 'what will politicians and others honestly think of them?'¹⁶⁶ On 25 April 1918, the PA was officially kicked out of the VSSF. Defiant to the end, the PA pontificated that 'the insidious introduction of active interference in politics has been...the forewarning of the destruction of...unity.'¹⁶⁷

The conflict evident within the ranks of the VSSF mirrors the conflict that by now marked Australian society. For union members WWI no longer held the degree of urgency that it commanded in 1914. The sensibilities of many public servants had been altered. Workers had lost patience; camaraderie and good will were in short measure. These ingredients combined generated a heightened state of internal distrust and animosity. In a number of small and practical measures the commitment of union members to the war effort now waned. Contributions to Victorian State Public Service Patriotic Fund had dropped off significantly.¹⁶⁸ Poignantly, at one of the last recruitment meetings organised by the VSSF council—at the urging of the state government—almost no public servants turned up. The premier, treasurer, and the minister for education looked upon a crowd of just 25. An embarrassed union Vice President, Michael McNamara, apologised to the distinguished guests and prematurely closed the meeting. The *PSJV* called the event a 'disgraceful fiasco' and asked 'under what possible excuse could so many escape from their obligations?'¹⁶⁹ The answer to this question is simple: union members had grown weary of the war.

3.6 Conclusion

¹⁶⁴ Letter from "Conscience" dated 12 March 1918. See the *Ibid.*, 30 March 1918.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 30 March 1918.

¹⁶⁶ Letter from "Unity Before All". See the *Ibid.*, 30 March 1918.

¹⁶⁷ Professional Association, "Statement of Withdrawal," March 1918, 5.

¹⁶⁸ *PSJV*, 29 June 1918.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

In 1914, many VSSF members viewed the war as an opportunity to display their worth and commitment to the state government and British Empire. Young members enlisted in the AIF and shared in the blood sacrifice. Those who stayed behind subscribed to the patriotic fund, organised recruitment meetings, joined rifle clubs and trained in first aid. An expectation developed that public servants, as employees of the state, should answer the call of war and set an example that could be followed by all Victorians. And yet, as WWI progressed the attitudes of union members began to turn. At Gallipoli and on the Western Front the grim reality of the conflict was laid bare. Young and capable public servants died gruesome deaths on foreign battlefields. Many questioned the purpose of war and challenged the imperial vision. As the work conditions and obligations of public servants expanded so too did their grievances. Influenced by Victoria's radical political and industrial milieu, public servants questioned the economics of war and wondered whether business was profiteering at the expense of hard working citizens. When Prime Minister William Hughes put two conscription referendums to the people, union members responded through the prism of their own personal beliefs. Divisions within the VSSF formed in response to a range of political and industrial debates. At the 1917 Victorian state election, the VSSF Executive delved into the realm of party politics and in doing so ignited a bitter internal feud. By the close of WWI it had become evident that the union was deeply divided.

Chapter 4 Disunity, Chaos and Rebirth 1919-1921

Political and industrial chaos marked Australia in the aftermath of WWI. Angry workers exhausted by the demands of war fought to win a fairer portion of the nation's prosperity. Victoria quickly became a cradle of industrial and political radicalism. Proponents of syndicalism, communism and feminism boldly proclaimed their messages. For Victorian public servants the final phase of WWI ushered in a period of disunity. Living through the conflict had hardened the attitudes of union members. By the beginning of 1919 the simmering frustrations of public servants had reached a boiling point. Union members sought to reshape their industrial status. They also worked to transform the political identity of their organisation. This chapter begins by examining the activism and leadership of female union members during their campaign for income equality. It was a patent and bold example of first wave industrial feminism in action. Attention then focuses upon the disharmony and rising hostility that emerges between competing associations within the union. It is observed that certain constituent associations are in favour of adopting a more radical approach in campaigning for an expansion of industrial rights. The chapter concludes by detailing the consolidation of the various constituent associations into the new public service representative body. By the middle of 1921 the journey of public service unionists to see an independent industrial tribunal and superannuation scheme established is poised to begin.

4.1 The Lap of the Gods

By June of 1918, WWI was finally nearing a conclusion. The dogged non-interventionist mantra of American President Woodrow Wilson that his country was 'too proud to fight' was abandoned. The ensuing industrial and military mobilisation of America was both rapid and unprecedented. Millions of young American men were conscripted and every day thousands were shipped to the Western Front. By August, the tide of the conflict had turned in favour of the Allied forces. A resupplied and numerically superior Allied force pressed forward

and gained ascendancy along the Western Front during the Hundred Days Offensive.¹ The AIF, under the guidance of General John Monash, was heavily involved in the fighting. At the Battle of Amiens, Australian soldiers, including a number of former Victorian public servants, spearheaded the attack and won a decisive victory. Pushed back behind the Hindenburg line the German forces were now in full retreat. On 11 November 1918 the fighting ceased. Jubilant public service unionists let out a sigh of relief for WWI had ended.

Yet in contrast peace within the VSSF remained elusive. At this pivotal moment in world and Victorian history public servants faced the prospect of losing their primary representative body entirely. The loss of the Professional Association (PA) was a devastating blow and had a destabilising effect upon the union. Losing President Martin had further compounded the sense of crisis. Faced with the prospect of total disintegration the VSSF executive proactively warned all constituent associations that disloyalty would not be tolerated. Unity became both the immediate and overriding imperative of the union. Michael McNamara, who succeeded Martin as VSSF president, promptly condemned the continued musings of the PA. He pleaded that now was the time to strengthen the bonds of organisation. ‘Strength in Unity’ became the catch cry of the union. It was a message steeped in desperation. Volatility abounded. As an editorial in the *PSJV* stated ‘times are uncertain and the future is in the lap of the Gods.’²

While the union’s constituent associations were distracted by the bitter internal conflict the industrial status of female public servants suddenly came to the fore. That the issue of female labour manifested at this time is not unusual. During WWI women assumed roles within the labour market that hitherto were restricted to men. Female workers began to form new industrial identities and engaged in a process of radicalisation.³ Certainly the heated and increasingly radical political

¹ See Charles Woodrow Bean, *The Australian Imperial Force in France during the Allied offensive 1918*.

² *PSJV*, 31 March 1919.

³ See for example Barbara Cameron, “The Flappers and the Feminists: A Study of Women’s Emancipation in the 1920s,” in Margaret Bevage, Margaret James and Carmel

atmospherics in Victoria had created space into which matters of gender could be discussed and debated. Leading the charge was a small but vocal group of female activists looking to stir the foundations of Melbourne's previously accepted political disposition. Jean Daley, Muriel Heagney, Sara Lewis and Ellen Mulcahy sharpened the focus of female workers everywhere.⁴ These zealous campaigners drew attention to the conditions of working women and emboldened others to challenge the authoritarian views of their male counterparts.⁵ Victoria's feminist leaders shared a vision of a society based on equality and social justice.⁶ It was a vision of a more humane society. Working women refused to be ignored and now sought to stake their claim.

At the heart of the women's rights movement was the neglected matter of equal pay. As scholars have pointed out the gendered construction of Australian society prior to WWI rested upon the assumption that women were subject to the authority of their father or husband.⁷ An expectation also existed that waged work would cease after a woman married. Upon marriage women would assume the domestic duties of the family and become 'the economic dependents of their breadwinner spouses'.⁸ Justice Henry Bourne Higgins embedded this gendered breadwinner model in Australia's industrial relations system when handing down the Harvester Judgment decision in 1907. The decision entrenched the idea that a basic wage should provide 'frugal comfort' for a man, his wife and three children.

Shute, eds., *Worth Her Salt: Women at Work in Australia* (Sydney, Hale and Iremonger, 1982).

⁴ For biographical information see Judith Smart, "Daley, Jane (Jean) (1881–1948)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 8 (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1981); Jennie Bremner, "Heagney, Muriel Agnes (1885–1974)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 9 (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1983).

⁵ See Melanie Raymond, "Labour Pains: Women in Unions and the Labor Party in Victoria, 1888–1918", *Lilith*, no. 5 (Spring 1988): 45.

⁶ Joy Damousi, *Women Come Rally: Socialism, Communism and Gender in Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1.

⁷ See Frank Bongiorno, *The People's Party: Victorian Labor and the Radical Tradition 1875-1914* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 119; Rosemary Francis, "Exercising Political Citizenship: Muriel Heagney and the Australian Labor Party," *Victorian Historical Journal*, 79, no. 2 (2008): 269.

⁸ Francis, *Exercising Political Citizenship*, 269.

Single women would therefore require only a fraction of the male wage. A woman's place was not in industry but in the home. In sum, female waged labour, while permitted, was regarded as a 'necessary evil'. Feminists and female workers, including many public service unionists, considered such an approach unacceptable. The writings of Friedrich Engels and August Bebel inspired the movement to contend that economic equality was the prerequisite for the liberation of women.⁹ For female public servants employed as teachers this rationale seemed particularly relevant. During the course of WWI women replaced male teachers in large numbers. Despite performing identical duties female teachers received only a small percentage, averaging at one third of the rate, of the reciprocal male wage.¹⁰ Successive governments ignored this obvious gender disparity under the pretence of a challenging financial predicament during WWI. Women were to remain in their proper sphere.

Victoria's radical political milieu soon emboldened female teachers to take up the fight for equal pay. Leading the charge was the recently formed the Women's Teachers Association (WTA)—a constituent association of the VSSF.¹¹ The WTA's chief driving force was Florence Ethel Johnson. Biographer W. James McDonald has labelled Johnson 'Melbourne's forgotten feminist'.¹² From her leadership position within the WTA she was also appointed as the VSSF's inaugural women's secretary in 1919. Her advocacy on behalf of all female public servants held her in high esteem.¹³ Johnson together with VSSF Secretary Gordon Carter pressed Premier Harry Lawson—who had assumed the premiership in March 1918—to address the wage differentiation within the state's teaching ranks. Johnson was an exceptional organiser who marshalled the industrial might of the state's female unionists. Mass protest meetings attended by hundreds of

⁹ Friedrich Engels, *Origin of the Family: Private Property and the State* (New York: International, 1970), 43-4; August Bebel, *Women and Socialism* (New York: International, 1971), 1-6.

¹⁰ *Bendigonian*, 12 December 1918.

¹¹ The Women's Teachers Association was formed in 1917 and affiliated to the VSSF upon formation.

¹² W. James McDonald, "Florence Ethel Johnson Melbourne's Forgotten Feminist," *The Victorian Historical Journal*, 51, no. 3 (1980).

¹³ See *PSJV*, 31 July 1919; 31 March 1920.

female teachers and public servants were held at the Athenaeum Theatre in Melbourne in December 1918.¹⁴ Assembled teachers to committed to campaign to see the principle of four-fifths pay established. They also pledged their allegiance to the VSSF at this time of internal unrest. Before long a meticulously coordinated ‘Educate the Politicians’ campaign was in full swing.¹⁵ Carter sent letters to every state MP demanding that the inequality be addressed and would note that ‘the value of the work of the female teacher is fully equal to the work of the male teacher’.¹⁶ For many female teachers this marked the being of an industrial realisation.

At first Johnson, together with compatriot unionist and WTA identity Alice Williams, sought parliamentary support for four-fifths pay claim. A number of leading Labor Party figures including Thomas Tunnecliffe, Edmond (Ned) Hogan, Maurice Blackburn and George Prendergast were lobbied by the WTA.¹⁷ Johnson was able to draw upon the connections she maintained with the Labor hierarchy.¹⁸ After successfully gaining the backing of the Labor Party Caucus the WTA and VSSF elicited the support of the National Council of Women (NCW).¹⁹ While Johnson was not in favour of the NCW—as it was too conservative an organisation in her opinion—she was prepared to enlist its assistance to further the interests of working women.²⁰ The NCW directed each of its affiliates to forward notices supporting the claims of female teachers to both the premier and chief secretary. Pressure was brought upon MPs of all political parties to confront this obvious inequality. Understanding the ability of public opinion in generating support the WTA and VSSF channelled sympathetic newspapers to run editorials espousing the virtues of women teachers. ‘Equal work should be rewarded with equal pay...women were not intended as a medium for sweating’ read one such

¹⁴ See the *Bendigonian*, 12 December 1918; *Geelong Advertiser*, 10 December 1918.

¹⁵ *Ballarat Courier*, 3 August 1918.

¹⁶ *Argus*, 9 September 1918.

¹⁷ A number of other women’s leaders were pivotal figures inside the WTA including Miss McDonald and Miss Fleming.

¹⁸ McDonald, “Florence Ethel Johnson,” 138.

¹⁹ *Argus*, 23 August 1918.

²⁰ McDonald, “Florence Ethel Johnson,” 136.

column the *Gippsland Farmers Journal*.²¹ In the pages of the *PSJV* the matter was championed as a just cause that was long overdue.²² Johnson and Carter were relentless in conveying their message to all who cared to listen. Following considerable campaigning Premier Lawson responded to the demands by giving an assurance that the wages of female teachers would be reset to the late 19th century four-fifths principle.²³ It was a significant achievement in light of the continued economic uncertainty. Nonetheless, as the union realised, until the final the salary bill was given royal assent the wage equalisation was nothing more than a promise.

When the Lawson government introduced the Women Teachers Salary Bill on the eve of Christmas in 1918 a heated debate ensued. The WTA was alarmed by the classification of lower paid sixth class teachers. Their ability to be paid at the four-fifths rate was at first restricted under the proposed salary Bill. Minister for Education, William Hutchinson, argued that the state's finances must be protected. Labor MPs were outraged. Prendergast responded 'there will be no permanent peace until...women are paid equally with men for equal work'.²⁴ Tunnecliffe retaliated by stating that 'the minister is not doing justice to...teachers'.²⁵ Members of the union packed the parliamentary gallery to witness the debate. Emotions ran high. Junior Labor MP John Cain Senior described the scene in the following terms:

There is a rising, seething dissatisfaction, a so-called Bolshevik movement among teachers. In the strangers gallery tonight there were

²¹ *Gippsland Farmers Journal*, 11 October 1918.

²² *PSJV*, 31 December 1919.

²³ The wage setting of female teachers until 1892 was four-fifths of the male salary. Married female public servants were barred from holding permanent public service positions as a consequence of the *Public Service Act 1889*. For a detailed analysis of the status of female teachers see Donna Dwyer, "The Married Woman: The teaching profession and the state in Victoria 1872-1956," (PhD Thesis, University of Melbourne, 2002).

²⁴ *VPD*, vol.151, LA, 20 December 1918, 3467.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3469.

some 50 to 100 young women who are bubbling over with discontent.²⁶

The *Argus* similarly reported that female union members had ‘invaded’ the parliamentary lobby.²⁷ A sense of excitement and anger is powerfully conveyed in the newspaper reports. When parliament adjourned infuriated union members publicly accosted government MPs and threatened to resign en masse from their teaching posts if their concerns were not appropriately met.²⁸ It was a spontaneous display of industrial action. Rarely before in Victoria had female public servants shown such industrial fervour; and rarely before had their male counterparts expressed such co-operative support.

As the debate neared its finality Cain continued to voice warnings and exhibit his unwavering support for public servants. He remarked that ‘the time is fast approaching when the workers of the world, if they are worthy of being called workers, will demand not only a portion but the whole of the products of their labour’.²⁹ Cain’s confronting comments resonated strongly not only with union members but also with government MPs. Backbenchers were now beginning to question the wisdom of restricting the wages of lower paid female teachers. Nationalist MP Robert McGregor mused ‘it’s an extraordinary paradox that barmaids who make men silly should receive more pay than women teachers who try to teach children to be wise’.³⁰ Ultimately, the unceasing pressure prompted Lawson and Hutchinson to attach an amendment increasing the wage setting of sixth class teachers. It was a momentous occasion for the female teachers and the VSSF. Union members were overcome with emotion when the Bill was passed in the early hours of the morning on 21 December 1918.³¹ In the succeeding weeks and months WTA members expressed their appreciation to Johnson, Williams and Carter for their efforts in organising the campaign.³² A ‘grateful quartet’ of

²⁶ *VPD*, vol.151, LA, 19 December 1918, 3375.

²⁷ *Argus*, 20 December 1918.

²⁸ *Ibid*; *Bendigo Advertiser*, 21 December 1918.

²⁹ *VPD*, vol.151, LA, 19 December 1918, p.3377.

³⁰ *Argus*, 20 December 1918.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 21 December 1918.

³² *PSJV*, 31 January 1919.

teachers who were celebrating the decision in Lorne wrote to the VSSF executive and summed up the feelings of their colleagues: ‘we are all indebted to your federation for the great improvement in our status’.³³ Months later a testimonial fund was opened by the VSSF in appreciation of the personal efforts of Florence Johnson and Alice Williams in securing the salary improvement. The citation affixed to the fund read ‘in recognition of the special services rendered by them in connection with the recent increases of salary, in which every woman teacher has participated’.³⁴

The success of the pay equalisation campaign, while despite not gaining complete wage parity, was significant. In the space of 18 months the WTA had formed and elevated the industrial status of female teachers. The WTA was now an integral component of the union. Indeed, women attained a standing within the organisation that was still uncommon in most trade unions.³⁵ Scholars of the historical involvement of women in unions have commonly noted an absence of females in leadership positions.³⁶ Trade unions were guided by a culture of masculinity; they were predominantly men’s institutions that protected the social and industrial interests of members by exploiting the labour of women. The Victorian State School Teachers’ Union (VSSTU)—the behemoth of Victorian teaching unions—had done little to enhance the equal pay claims of female teachers. Carter ridiculed the VSSTU and wondered why the organisation had failed to campaign on the matter over the previous decade.³⁷ Johnson’s rise to the position as the secretary of the women’s division of the VSSF was also a significant step forward for the union. She undoubtedly was one of Victoria’s leading feminists. Johnson, unafraid to speak her mind, boldly opposed the blatant gender discrimination of her era. Her advocacy on behalf of all female public servants extended to include mental hospital nurses, clerks and government

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ *PSJV*, 31 October 1919.

³⁵ There were expectations to this for example in the Clothing Trades Union of Australia.

³⁶ For example see Barbara Pocock, ed., *Strife: Sex and Politics in Labour Unions* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1997), 1; Cynthia Cockburn, *In the Way of Women: Men’s Resistance to Sex Equality in Organization* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 7.

³⁷ *Ballarat Courier*, 20 November 1918.

printing officers. In appreciation of Johnson's efforts the VSSF's 1919 annual report recorded the following tribute:

Though the appointment of this lady was not unanimous at the time, all the members of the Council now admit the wisdom in making the appointment has been borne out by the excellent results obtained.³⁸

4.2 Let's Get Ready to Rumble

The November 1918 Armistice might have forged an international diplomatic solution but it did little to subdue Australia's domestic unrest. The social and political divisions that became apparent during WWI were now increasingly revealed. Prime Minister Hughes and his Nationalist Party colleagues struggled to meet the demands of workers and to fit soldiers back into civilian life. Tensions within the Irish Catholic community also remained elevated. A reconstruction of society was in order and yet Hughes had little interest in the politics of consensus. Historian Stuart Macintyre aptly observed that 'emergency was the mid-wife of the Nationalist Party' and it was emergency that would mark the immediate political future of both the nation and Victoria.³⁹ The Nationalist Party reverted to the political stratagem of denouncing any opposition, fanning alarm and meeting resistance with harsh recrimination. On the industrial front workers who had made notable sacrifices during WWI unleashed an accumulated catalogue of demands. When employment rose sharply inflation quickly followed suit. The economic conditions were conducive to industrial militancy.

Following WWI uncertainty prevailed in regards to the prospects of future economic growth. As one historian has noted 'the omens of progress were sober'.⁴⁰ The economic boundaries of the state were beginning to shrink.

³⁸ *PSJV*, 31 February 1920. One can speculate that the appointment of Johnson was not unanimous due to the issue of gender.

³⁹ Stuart Macintyre, *The Oxford History of Australia, Vol. 4, 1901-1942: The Succeeding Age*, 182.

⁴⁰ Geoffrey Blainey, *A History of Victoria* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 171.

Victoria's traditional export commodities of wool and gold were no longer dependable. Acutely aware of the changing economic conditions the *PSJV* observed that 'domestic confusion' abounded: 'we are, to use a colloquialism, up against it'.⁴¹ The economic unpredictability was not left unchecked as trade unions began to reconsider their standing. The labour movement's ideological centre was shifting.⁴² Laurence Fitzhardinge has suggested that the Victorian Labor Party was marked by a proclivity towards 'impractical ideological purity'.⁴³ Chief among the political ideologues were Blackburn and Tunnecliffe. Blackburn, who was appointed editor of *Labor Call* following the 1917 state election, had a platform from which to preach to the working class. Writings tinged with industrial and political zeal found an enthusiastic audience. Public servants were not impervious to such passion. Mr. Inkster—a VSSF councillor and the President of the Mental Hospitals Association (MHA)—was tellingly quoted in the *Age* stating that 'the old way still prevails, never to give anything away until the employees win it by force. It is little wonder that such a system breeds restless discontent.'⁴⁴ Public service unionists were engulfed by an industrial volatility and radicalism that had seldom been experienced in Victoria.

Across the nation the agitation of workers was escalating in response to the rising consumer price index and a reduction in real wages.⁴⁵ Industrial dislocation and continued economic hardship further served to reposition the ideological core of the labour movement. The prophetic warning of the *PSJV* that 'the aftermath of the war would bring grave trouble' had seemingly come to pass.⁴⁶ Angry crowds of Russian workers and socialists took to the streets of Brisbane and unfurled the banned red flag in protest against the draconian policies of the Commonwealth Government. Clashes erupted as loyalists and ex-servicemen responded by charging the Russian Club. Some carried bayonets and jam-tin bombs. Cries of

⁴¹ *PSJV*, 31 March 1919.

⁴² Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory*, 123.

⁴³ Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger*, 31.

⁴⁴ *Age*, 18 February 1919

⁴⁵ See the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Labour and Industrial Branch Report No.10*, 29-51.

⁴⁶ *PSJV*, 31 March 1919.

‘clear out of Queensland all the dirty Russian mongrels’ accentuated the mobs resolve.⁴⁷ In 1919 the labour movement would also again collectively let loose industrial action on an enormous scale. A total of 6.3 million working days were lost to strike action or lockouts.⁴⁸ Miners in Broken Hill downed tools for 18 months from May 1919 to November 1920 and lost almost £2.5 million in wages. Lockouts and action among seamen and railway workers would threaten the industrial production of Australia.⁴⁹ Tom Walsh, the federal secretary of the Seaman’s Union of Australia (SUA), was a measure of the growing militancy.⁵⁰ Upon being imprisoned for organising strike action he declared that ‘if the government wanted to fight the trade unions very well, let it be war, and we shall see who wins’.⁵¹ The militancy was also obvious in reference to the One Big Union (OBU) objective and sustained interest in the October 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia.⁵² An industrial awakening, even if dressed up in excessive revolutionary maxims, had taken root. It was the most costly series of strikes Australia had ever experienced. The response of Prime Minister Hughes was to circumvent the jurisdiction of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court to penalize and coerce workers.⁵³ A disgusted Justice Higgins resigned as President of the Court in protest remarking that ‘the public usefulness of the court has been fatally injured’.⁵⁴

Public service unionists were now beginning to flirt more seriously with the

⁴⁷ See Raymond Evans, *The Red Flag Riots: A Study of Intolerance* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1988), 105-46.

⁴⁸ Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Labour and Industrial Branch Report No. 10*, 140-141.

⁴⁹ See Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, Chapter 8.

⁵⁰ Susan Hogan, “Walsh, Thomas (Tom) (1871–1943),” *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 12 (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1990).

⁵¹ Quoted in the *Brisbane Standard*, 23 June 1919.

⁵² See Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory*, 129; Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, Chapter 8; Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia*, revised edition. (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2004), 328-331.

⁵³ Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, 194.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Joe Isaac and Stuart Macintyre, eds., *The New Province of Law and Order: 100 Years of Australian Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration* (Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 71.

radicalism engulfing the entire labour movement. This was not evidenced in extreme industrial action but in the changing disposition of public servants. Union members sought to break the rigid political and industrial expectations that the state had placed upon them during the WWI. They demanded that their wage settings be elevated. Many believed that the Victorian Government had taken advantage of public servants for long enough. Section six of the *Public Service Act 1915* had provided for the promotion of public servants without a corresponding increase of pay.⁵⁵ This measure was rectified after the conclusion of WWI but the standard pay of many public servants was adjudged to be below the living wage. Such conditions stoked the growing agitation of union members. Questions concerning the very nature of public service employment were beginning to emerge. The adage that public servants were the recipients of comfortable 'white collar' private sector salaries and conditions was challenged.

In order to advance the concerns of public servants the VSSF at first engaged in a process of organisational introspection. Only a unified body could meet the significant obstacles that were ahead. The organisation's constitution was outdated and needed to better reflect the changing dynamics and concerns of the union. The introduction of a new constitution was intended to draw the respected associations closer together through a process of consolidation. Trade unions across that nation were inspired by the One Big Union (OBU) movement. This movement initially emerged at the end of WWI at a congress of 79 trade unions that assembled in Sydney. A proposal was carried to create a new organisation for all workers to be known as the Workers' Industrial Union of Australia (WIUA).⁵⁶ The VSSF was swept up in this burgeoning sentiment. Yet as soon as the prospective constitutional regulations were put to debate a multitude of differences and tensions began to surface. The rapid expansion of the VSSF over the previous three years to include associations that represented public servants employed as mental hospital workers, police officers, small teaching groups, water and forestry workers, chaplains and printers created an eclectic mix that was

⁵⁵ See the *Public Service Act 1915* (Victoria) no. 2798.

⁵⁶ For a report on the proceedings see the *Worker*, 8 August 1918.

not always conducive to unity.⁵⁷ It would be a challenge for the union to accommodate the concerns of all divisions. What status the union might afford those associations that had only recently joined the VSSF was also a matter for consideration.

For the Clerical Association (CA) these questions were particularly important. As a founding member of the union the CA held substantial influence within the organisation. Michael McNamara held the responsibility of simultaneously being President of the CA and the union. Clerical officers had historically been at the forefront of the union's political and industrial campaigns. The CA occupied a number of seats on the union council. With the expansion of the union the status of the CA was partially diminished. When a series of constitutional meetings were convened in early 1919 it was decided that representation on the VSSF council would be commensurate to membership. Owing to the Spanish Flu pandemic the meetings were limited to only 20 individuals in accordance with emergency health directives.⁵⁸ Following considerable debate a new constitution was ratified at the end on February.⁵⁹ McNamara was also re-elected President of the VSSF for a further year. The most important constitutional changes were the measures to centralise union activity. The executive would receive increased power to speak on behalf of the various associations within the organisation. Union finances were now increasingly to be managed by the secretary. Constituent associations would in future be known as divisions of the union. These changes were an attempt to mirror the process of consolidation that what was occurring within trade unions nationally.

At first the new constitution appeared to enjoy broad approval. Yet the picture of unity was simply a fleeting illusion. Not long after the constitution was ratified

⁵⁷ It is important to note that the Victorian State School Teachers' Union (VSSTU) was not affiliated to the VSSF at this point in time. The VSSTU was the biggest teaching representative body in Victoria.

⁵⁸ Secretary Gordon Carter was overcome with the Spanish Flu and did not attend the constitutional meetings. Arthur Martin, the former president, took over as editor of the union journal. See the *PSJV*, 28 February 1919.

⁵⁹ See *Ibid*; *PSJV*, 30 March 1919.

McNamara, now acting on behalf of the CA, launched a scathing attack upon the VSSF council. It was a strange and chaotic turn of events with the President attacking the organisation he led. McNamara claimed that the VSSF council had not cited the opposition of clerical officers to the new constitution. It was sensationally alleged that the official minutes published in the *PSJV* recounting the debate were doctored.⁶⁰ In an instant the union was overcome by fierce argument and a bitter stand-off developed. A block of union councillors defiantly responded to the allegation by noting that Florence Johnson had immediately corroborated the minutes. The appeal to unity nonetheless fell upon deaf ears. It appears that unrest within the CA had been simmering for some time.⁶¹ A growing animosity is alluded to in the *PSJV* towards the end of WWI. With criticisms blazing the CA and the majority of its 600 members chose to abruptly secede from the VSSF on 31 March 1919.⁶² Again the VSSF was plunged into crisis. McNamara had turned his back on the union he was leading. A stinging rebuke of the CA was published in the *PSJV*:

When defections are dictated by purely narrow motives, the secessionists become merely antagonistic for foolish reasons—they are, in effect, individualists out for their own selfish ends. It is pathetic to look upon the struggles and subterfuges these little people adopt. They appear to suffer from some form of Elephantiasis of conceit, for they brazenly proclaim that they alone, can achieve what the larger number of their fellows have attempted.⁶³

The secession of the CA was instigated primarily as a reaction to the widespread social and industrial unrest that had pervaded Victoria. The organisation and its members were more inclined towards the increasingly militant opinions and tactics being utilised by other trade unions. A principal concern for the CA was the institution of an independent industrial tribunal or wages board to determine the conditions and salaries of clerical officers. It also noted that the VSSF had

⁶⁰ *PSJV*, 30 April 1919.

⁶¹ See *Ibid.*, 30 March 1919.

⁶² See the *Argus*, 16 August 1916.

⁶³ *PSJV*, 30 April 1919.

failed to campaign for a public service superannuation scheme and general reclassification.⁶⁴ The pithy and infrequent comments emanating from the VSSF in support of a wages board would not be deemed sufficient. It had become evident that certain sections of the union were reluctant to campaign for a public service wages board. It was a matter of priorities. The CA fiercely held onto its core beliefs. The venomous political state within the VSSF prevented any hope of consolidation as strong personalities only served to fuel the rift. Within just weeks of the secession the VSSF had established a new clerical division to challenge the CA. An indignant McNamara, together with fellow clerical officer Geoffrey Harrison, wrote and distributed a pamphlet denouncing Secretary Carter the new VSSF organisation.⁶⁵ The unsighted document was reportedly a vicious personal attack. Lawyers retained by the VSSF initiated a libel case on behalf of Carter against the two CA officials.⁶⁶ Camaraderie was extinguished and the battle for the loyalty of unionised public servants had now reached uncharted grounds.

4.3 The Tale of Two Unions

The succeeding two years of Victorian public service unionism would be marred by a bitter internal conflict. Discord within Victorian unions at this point was not uncommon. Yet for public servants to engage in open conflict fully aware that the press was so closely attuned to events made it exceptional.⁶⁷ The secession of the CA was widely reported and served to sustain the feud. In an open letter published in the *Argus* the secretary of the CA, John Brady, accused the VSSF of ‘an inglorious somersault in its convictions by putting kids gloves on their hands and patting the back of the Premier’.⁶⁸ Former VSSF President Arthur McDonald Martin (who had returned to the union) was labelled a two-face who uttered ‘paltry and miserable charitable palliatives’.⁶⁹ To compound the atmosphere of

⁶⁴ *PSJV*, 30 May 1919.

⁶⁵ *Argus*, 8 May 1919.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ There existed significant internal tensions at various points within unions representing teachers, railwaymen, labourers and construction workers.

⁶⁸ *Argus*, 19 August 1919.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

crisis both the Police Association and MHA followed suit and also seceded from the union.⁷⁰ The abdication of police officers was especially destabilising as they were held in high esteem and served to enhance the image and bargaining power of the VSSF. Police officers had initially taken inspiration from the union's political rights campaign and had sought the assistance of Secretary Carter when forming an association in 1917. Immediately after their formation the association sought to join the union and in doing so it hoped to address the unfavourable employment settings of Victorian police officers comparable to their interstate counterparts.⁷¹ The union's pickings apropos to police officers were slim with the only noticeable achievement being the obtainment of conditional overtime pay.⁷² Frustrated police officers were ultimately convinced that they would be better served working in isolation from the union. The MHA concluded that there involvement with the union was no longer beneficial. The principal grievance of the MHA was the perceived loss of independence consequent to the process of centralisation enacted by the union. In total five divisions of the union had left the organisation during the preceding twelve months. The call to unity was blatantly ignored. A great number of public service unionists were now of the opinion that the VSSF was an obstruction to industrial progress. Still more had lost faith in the hope to see the establishment of an increasingly militant union.

Unsurprisingly, the fortunes of the VSSF in 1919 were bleak. Never before had the organisation struggled to maintain its membership. At various moments, especially in the early years of the organisation's history, public servants were simply appreciative that they were being represented. This was no longer the case. Decisive and immediate action was necessary in order to arrest the disintegration of Victorian public service unionism. The remaining VSSF members responded to the crisis by first calling for a leadership shake up. Arthur McDonald Martin was hastily recalled to assume the Presidency and Percy Markham was appointed the union's new secretary. The reconfigured executive team would be tasked with the

⁷⁰ *Argus*, 20 October 1919.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 7 April 1917. Victorian Police officers received almost two weeks less annual leave comparable to their New South Wales counterparts.

⁷² See VSSF 1918 Annual Report in the *PSJV*, 28 February 1919.

monumental challenge of restoring organisational stability. Priority was given to regaining the trust of clerical and professional division public servants. Martin's message to public servants was patent: a unified public service body was the only means through which to secure greater employment conditions. Martin's plea was largely disregarded as by this stage a divergence of political opinions had become entrenched. It can reasonably be speculated that the appointment of Markham may have further infuriated the CA.⁷³ Markham was an active member of the Nationalist Party and at the 1919 Federal election briefly stood as a political candidate in the rural Victorian electorate of Grampians.⁷⁴ The appointment of Markham as the primary salaried officer of the union would have undoubtedly piqued the Labor aligned CA. WWI had changed the manner in which many public servants approached their political citizenship. Political allegiances forged during the preceding three years would not so easily be scorned.

Reverberations within Victorian public service unionism would continue at frenzied pace from the end of 1919 to beginning of 1920. In a defiant move the CA, PA and VSSTU united to form the Victorian Public Service League (PSL) in October 1919.⁷⁵ It was the first time a rival bodies had represented clerical and professional officers. The PSL functioned primarily as a loosely organised meeting point with the constituent bodies holding complete autonomy over their internal processes. Only when broader issues affecting all the respective bodies emerged would common responses be considered. There was also no salaried secretary and therefore no financial apex.⁷⁶ Convincing the VSSTU to join the new organisation was a major coup. VSSTU President, John Braithwaite, assumed the largely ceremonial position of PSL President. The establishment of a rival body greatly infuriated the VSSF and its leadership. At one point in mid 1919 it was believed that the VSSTU's affiliation to the VSSF was imminent.⁷⁷ The

⁷³ The CA throughout WWI and immediately afterwards developed strong ties to the Victorian Labor Party. A number of prominent figures within the organisation were also involved with radical Catholic groups. See the *State Clerical* from 1921-1922.

⁷⁴ *PSJV*, 28 February 1920.

⁷⁵ *Argus*, 29 October 1919.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *PSJV*, 30 June 1919.

group was the most powerful of all the Victorian education unions and had advocated on behalf of teachers for thirty years. With the benefit of hindsight the conduct of the VSSTU was seen by the VSSF to be a smokescreen. Appalled VSSF members derided the perceived audacity and disloyalty of their fellow public servants. The VSSF would not sit idly while a rival body proclaimed to be the supreme voice of public servants.

A battle for the allegiance of Victoria's 4000 school teachers was quick to erupt. That the VSSF was fighting to gain the loyalty of teachers demonstrates that the organisation was moving beyond its departmental public service roots. The *PSJV* declared that the actions of the VSSTU were disingenuous and crafted to generate chaos and confusion. 'Our members will not swallow the statements made against the Federation' proclaimed an enraged Martin.⁷⁸ The VSSF inveighed against the VSSTU and noted that its 'spasmodic efforts of activity never last'.⁷⁹ One VSSF member using the pseudonym 'Fair Play' remarked that the actions of the VSSTU had caused 'strife' in schools in which 'hitherto harmony prevailed'.⁸⁰ D. Black—the organising secretary of the VSSTU—embarked upon a tour of the rural towns in an attempt to coax teachers away from the VSSF.⁸¹ Rival state public service representative organisations were attempting to poach potential members. Horsham, Ballarat, and Bendigo became union recruitment battlefields. In Geelong a confrontation between the VSSF and VSSTU unfolded at a number of public meetings. The *Geelong Advertiser* reported that district teachers had defected wholesale to the VSSF and that a great many teachers accused Secretary Black of misrepresenting the general position of educators.⁸² The paper further remarked that 'the verbal sparring...during the last few days between Mr. Black and Mr. Martin...has not been to the advantage of Mr. Black who has not been discreet in his methods'.⁸³ All tenets of discretion and fidelity among public servants had disappeared. Public servants, charged by years of social and political

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ 'Fair Play' quoted in the Ibid., 30 August 1919.

⁸¹ *Horsham Times*, 12 August 1919.

⁸² *Geelong Advertiser*, 2 June 1919.

⁸³ Ibid., 13 June 1919.

instability, were redefining the role of the public service unionism.

One of the principal differences between the PSL and the VSSF concerned the respective approaches to the industrial regulation of the public service. The associated divisions of the PSL were eager to press forward and campaign for an independent industrial tribunal. Clerical workers were particularly boisterous in their agitation. Frustration was expressed at the absence of organisation in relation to the introduction of a public service wage board. The CA was inspired by the success of the railways workers and their representative body the Victorian Railways Union (VRU) in securing the creation of a railways classification board in 1916 that became operational in 1919.⁸⁴ For the first six months of 1920 the PSL sent deputations to Premier Lawson in the hope of changing the method used to set public service salaries and conditions.⁸⁵ However, the representations were a failure and the Lawson government chose to maintain the status quo. 'Parliament is your wages board' was the government's response. Only a handful of progressive Liberal MPs, save for the Labor Party, supported the claim.

Believing that their efforts were increasingly futile the VSSTU and PA entered into negotiations with the VSSF in February 1920 in the hope of forming a new public service union. It was a most chaotic and abrupt turn of events. Soon a conference of all State public service bodies was held with the aim of finding a means to secure unity.⁸⁶ Over the ensuing six months negotiations continued between the disparate public service representative organisations. At first the CA agreed to participate in the discussions after receiving assurances that any prospective body would preference greater organisation and press for the establishment of an independent industrial tribunal. Nonetheless, the fierce independence of the CA would not be placated and it subsequently withdrew from

⁸⁴ Commonly referred to the Railway Wages Board. See Eddie Butler-Bowdon, *In the Service?: A History of Victorian Railways Workers and their Union* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1991), 35.

⁸⁵ See the notes of the Annual Report of the Public Service League published in the *Argus*, 8 April 1920. Public service salaries and conditions were set by Acts of parliament and by the regulations of the Public Service Commissioner.

⁸⁶ *PSJV*, March and April 1920. The *PJSV* was shortened during these months as a result of the printers' strike.

the discussions. In the absence of the CA, the VSSTU, PA and VSSF concluded their negotiations by ratifying the proposed constitution of a new organisation to be named the Victorian Public Service Union (VPSU). The VPSU was in effect a peak State public service union that claimed 5783 members.⁸⁷

In the meantime, the CA council, attune to the impulse of its membership, began to adopt a more militant and aggressive disposition. Labor MP Thomas Tunnecliffe had assumed the secretaryship of the CA and gladly stoked the fires of militancy. Quoting Frederic Nietzsche he advised Victoria's clerical officers to 'live dangerously'.⁸⁸ 'All signs point to towards a revival of the militant spirit among public servants' he remarked.⁸⁹ The CA's official journal—*The State Clerical*—argued that their vigorous and energetic executive team would drive success. Industrial feeling among the ranks of clerical workers was on the rise. Individuals such as Tunnecliffe, McNamara and Arthur Calwell helped to foster the passions of clerical officers at mass meetings conducted at the entrance to Parliament. Tunnecliffe followed the directions of members and gave notice of a Bill in the Legislative Assembly 'to provide for an industrial tribunal to provide for the wages and conditions of employment in the public service'.⁹⁰ Even though its passage was halted the notice nevertheless displayed the temerity of the CA. The organisation also developed an official 'arrangement of cooperation' with the state Labor Party. John Lemmon, the secretary of the Party, pledged to promote the resolutions of the CA.⁹¹ Single-handedly, the CA council, motivated by its membership, was redefining what the methodology of public service unionism.

The expanding militancy of the CA was also displayed in other actions. In contrast to the VPSU, clerical unionists, displaying the bonds of interstate camaraderie, supported their fellow public servants from Western Australia (WA)

⁸⁷ See *PSJV*, 30 August 1920.

⁸⁸ *State Clerical*, May 1920.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, July 1920.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, December 1920.

who in July initiated strike action.⁹² Their comrades in the west served as an inspiration. While representing the VPSU at the annual Australian Public Service Federation (APSF) conference, Martin, according to the CA, attempted to influence the WA Public Service Association against engaging in strike tactics.⁹³ Yet the CA chose to stand in solidarity with the strikers and set up an emergency assistance fund to support their interstate brethren. Enthusiastic clerical workers donated significant sums of money to be forwarded to WA public servants. In analysing the situation the *State Clerical* reflected on the success of more militant public service bodies. Special reference was paid to the Police Association after it split from the VSSF. 'Now, as always, it is force which counts...the police won because they hold the power in their hands to paralyse the service'.⁹⁴ Even the motto of the CA was telling: 'To arms against a sea of trouble, and by opposing, end them'.⁹⁵

As the end of 1920 approached the relationship between the CA and VPSU hit rock bottom. The *State Clerical* accused VPSU councillors of advising MPs to vote against resolutions that aimed at establishing an independent public service industrial tribunal. Tunnecliffe attacked the VPSU council stating that it had 'used the journal (*PSJV*) to uphold men that have never supported it in any vital issue'.⁹⁶ VPSU Secretary Markham responded by commenting that 'the literary matter of the *State Clerical* is a curious case of for' um agin' um'.⁹⁷ Moreover, he contended that the *State Clerical* had the obnoxious habit of 'boosting up two or three officers of the Clerical Association'.⁹⁸ In the pages of the *Argus* the spiteful quarrel was eagerly reported. For weeks the paper published the counter accusations of Markham and Tunnecliffe.⁹⁹ The year long saga appeared to have no end. There is little doubt that Tunnecliffe received widespread support from

⁹² *State Clerical*, April 1920.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, July 1920.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, August 1920.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, April 1920.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, December 1920.

⁹⁷ Percy Markham quoted in the *PSJV*, 30 November 1920.

⁹⁸ This was clearly directed at Tunnecliffe, McNamara and Calwell. Percy Markham quoted in the *PSJV*, 30 November 1920.

⁹⁹ See the *Argus*, 30 November 1920; 2 December 1920.

clerical officers. Tunnecliffe merged his status as secretary of the CA and political standing within the Labor Party to further the desires of clerical officers during wages Bill negotiations. It is also reasonable to speculate that Tunnecliffe, after losing his seat at the October 1920 State election, was seeking to maintain a political base through his leadership of the CA.

The instability that had permeated Victorian public service unionism in 1920 was a reflection of the radicalism that had infused trade unions in general. Public servants viewed the industrial gains of other unions and aspired to share in such success. In the New Year, despite the seemingly insurmountable obstacles to union consolidation, a fresh opportunity reset relations arose. The CA had long desired to see co-ordination among the public service bodies and made reference to this aim:

With unity, we are an irresistible host, capable of writing our record even upon the face of the sun. Without we are a despised rabble, unworthy of the notice of the meanest master in the crowd.¹⁰⁰

By March of 1921 the push for the CA to amalgamate to the VPSU had gained momentum. The VPSU challenged the CA to find common ground on the impediments to amalgamation. 'If ever in the history of the Victorian Public Service there was a time when the formation of one solid organisation was absolutely essential, that time has arrived' declared the *PSJV*.¹⁰¹ A series of conferences and meetings of all public service bodies was held. The representatives now unanimously adopted four broad goals: securing an independent public service industrial tribunal; an appeals board; a basic wage; and a comprehensive superannuation scheme.¹⁰² Additionally, the VSSTU (numerically the biggest division of the union with 3000 members) agreed to an arrangement that guaranteed the CA similar representation on the VPSU

¹⁰⁰ *State Clerical*, April 1920.

¹⁰¹ *PSJV*, 30 March 1920.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 30 April 1921.

council.¹⁰³ On 1 July 1921, a re-configured Victorian Public Service Union, which including the CA, was formed. The body had over 6000 members. After almost five years of constant internal conflict, public servants, at least for now, had put aside their differences. The hope of an independent public service industrial tribunal loomed large and public servants were now better placed to fight for its introduction. As one clerical unionist stated ‘a wages board will make for solidarity, a very much desired, but very rare quality in the service’.¹⁰⁴ The last edition of the *State Clerical* neatly captured the overriding sentiment of the public servants: ‘We therefore die today that we may live again for greater usefulness.’¹⁰⁵

4.4 Conclusion

The story of Victorian public service unionism from the end of 1918 to the middle of 1921 is one of chaos, confusion, and disunity. Etched into the memories of public servants were the extraordinary circumstances of WWI. In its aftermath, public servants, following years of sacrifice, were convinced that they should be the beneficiaries of greater employment conditions. As this chapter has demonstrated the radicalism that had infused the nation’s labour force was not restricted to the private labour market. state employees were beginning to import the radical political methods and ideas that were being adopted all wage-earners. Guided by the desires of its public service unionists the VSSF sought to readdress the standing of their members. Female workers set the example in campaigning passionately for equal pay. Yet predictably the rhetoric of militant industrial unionism carried consequences. The success of the VSSF had previously been predicated upon the unity that existed among the various branches of public service workers. Soon these branches and their members began to express differing opinions on critical matters. In the year succeeding WWI the union was struggled to adsorb this difference of opinion. Before long the various competing

¹⁰³ The CA had approximately 900 members, General Division 800, High School Teachers 200, Technical Teachers 200, and PA 500. See *Ibid.*, 30 April 1921.

¹⁰⁴ *State Clerical*, June 1921.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

interests threatened to rip the heart out of Victorian public service unionism. The CA and PSL emerged to challenge to VSSF's dominance and to re-orient the public service towards bolder activism.

For much of this period this internal feud had a detrimental impact upon the larger issues that were pivotal to all public servants. Public servants unionists were unable to achieve a steady unity. However, if one looks beyond the very real discord another realisation becomes apparent. Public servants were beginning to redefine the parameters of public service unionism. To a certain degree they chose not to simply endorse the industrial postulations laid down by the state government. The VSSF's first steps towards the radical plane of industrial unionism were tentative, too tentative for many, but steps nonetheless. The PSL and CA toyed with the idea of adopting more militant methods. However, convinced that strength resided in unity the disparate bodies found a common ground. And in that common ground was a commitment to campaigning vigorously for the establishment of an independent public service industrial tribunal; or as Tunnecliffe would remark the 'Mecca of our hopes'.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., March 1920.

Chapter 5 The Quest for Industrial Tribunal Commences 1921-1922

Towards the end of 1921 the industrial and political unrest that had marked Australia post WWI was beginning to subside. Tensions that existed between public service associations had ostensibly been put to rest with the re-configuration of the Victorian Public Service Union (VPSU). With in excess of 6000 members the VPSU forged ahead and campaigned to secure the creation of an independent public service wages board and a system of public service superannuation. The actions of the union were premised upon the simple notion that public servants deserved the same rights as those enjoyed other Victorian workers who had access to the wages board system. In achieving these ends the VPSU would throw its weight behind the Victorian Labor Party at the 1921 state election. The links between the union and Labor Party are conspicuous. Labor was viewed as the only real avenue through which an independent public service wages board could be established. In addition, the union also began to explore the possibility of applying for industrial registration in the Commonwealth Arbitration Court. Yet unity among the divisions of the VPSU would again be tested. A number of constituent associations decide to unilaterally pursue industrial registration in the Commonwealth Arbitration Court. As the end of 1922 approached the future of the union was again clouded in uncertainty. Accommodating the desires of disparate public service bodies and their competing priorities exposed the fragile unity of the VPSU.

5.1 A New Beginning

On 30 August 1921, less than a year after the previous state poll, an election was foisted upon Victorian voters. The premature election had been brought about by the defeat of Premier Harry Lawson's Nationalist government on the floor of the Legislative Assembly. In a bold move the nascent Country Party, led by John Allan, joined forces with the Labor Party to deny the government confidence in

what the *Age* denounced as an ‘unholy alliance’.¹ Country Party MPs were angered by Lawson’s decision to scrap the compulsory wheat pool and, for a fleeting moment, the Premiership hopes of Labor leader George Prendergast were piqued.² Was an alliance with the Country Party a serious possibility? *Labor Call* dared to dream: ‘Wouldn’t it be splendid to make Prendergast Premier! Of all Australia’s Labor leaders he holds the record for length and consistency of tried and tested service’.³ Public servants and the VPSU were closely attuned to the political jostling and they too dared to dream. Might the precarious parliamentary numbers game bring into focus the employment status of state employees? It was, at least for some, a tantalising prospect. Few were better placed to appreciate the unpredictability of Victoria’s political system than VPSU’s new secretary, Thomas Tunnecliffe. On the insistence of the VPSU council the Labor Party veteran penned an election circular that was delivered by union members to every parliamentary candidate.⁴ Two direct questions were posed: Are you in favour of a wages board for public servants and are you in favour of a public service contributory superannuation scheme. Full of expectation the union waited to receive definitive answers to these questions. Perhaps, amid the volatility and electioneering, the fortunes of public servants may improve.

It was not to be. Only the Labor Party offered to unequivocally support the measures. The declared support of Country Party MPs was at best dubious. Most Nationalist candidates did not bother responding to the VPSU’s circular at all, not least the Party leaders.⁵ To a certain extent the dismissive and unfavourable responses offered by both the Nationalist and Country Parties were unexpected. Surely the votes of public servants could not be so easily disregarded? Apparently not. Public servants based in rural locations were especially agitated by the political indifference. A newly formed union branch in Bendigo was ‘seething

¹ *Age*, 29 August 1921.

² *Argus*, 28 June 1921.

³ *Labor Call*, 11 August 1921.

⁴ See the *PSJV*, 30 August 1921. Thomas Tunnecliffe was appointed Secretary of the VPSU in July 1921. It can be speculated that the Clerical Association’s affiliation with the VPSU was predicated on Percy Markham leaving the post of Secretary. No mention is made of Markham after July 1921.

⁵ For an analysis of the responses see the *PSJV*, 30 August 1921.

with discontent'.⁶ Evidently the trials of rural life were sapping the morale of many country based public servants. Retention rates were alarmingly low. Cost of living pressures, poor travel allowances, and substandard access to services presented daily challenges. Of his fellow country colleagues one member, using the pseudonym 'Hopeless', quipped 'they are so used to the ends of chewed steak that they have learned to love them'.⁷

Frustrated and impatient, country clerks called upon the VPSU leadership to decisively confront MPs who were refusing to consider modifications to public service regulations.⁸ Many pointed to the success of the Victorian Railways Union (VRU) and wondered if such an advocacy approach might be transferable to the VPSU. Reluctantly the *PSJV* conceded 'at present there is only one service association powerful enough to control its own conditions of employment and that is the powerful and militant VRU'.⁹ Clearly the influence of Frank Hyett, founder of the VRU, who died in 1919, still resonated throughout the Victorian labour movement.¹⁰ Renowned as a formidable negotiator, Hyett was at the forefront of the VRU's industrial campaign that resulted in the creation of the Railways Classification Board.¹¹ In securing a wages board the VRU set a high standard for other Victorian public service unions. As previously outlined the VRU and VSSF had worked together during the political rights campaign that triumphantly concluded in 1916. Bonds forged between railways workers and departmental public servants throughout the campaign remained strong. Members of the Clerical Association (CA), in particular, stressed that now was the time to adopt a more forceful method of advocacy. In response, the timidity of both the VSSTU

⁶ *Ibid.*, 30 August 1921.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 30 August 1921.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 30 September 1921.

¹⁰ See Allison Ruth Churchward, "The Australian Railways Union, Railway Management and Railway Work in Victoria 1920-1939" (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1989), 85. Frank Hyett was a victim of the 1919 Influenza pandemic and died in April. Such was his standing that as his funeral train passed Glenferrie Oval in Hawthorn the football game in progress was stopped as fans and players stood in silence.

¹¹ See Churchward, *The Australian Railways Union*, 85; Alan Scarlett, "Hyett, Francis William (Frank) (1882-1919)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography* vol. 9 (Carlton:, Melbourne University Press, 1983).

and Professional Association (PA) was beginning to loosen and an enlivened rank and file were increasingly investing their faith in the leadership of Tunnecliffe.

Ultimately, the prospect of a Labor-Country alliance was an illusion. Country Party MPs cognisant to the voice of their rural constituents rejected the possibility of a lasting alliance with the Labor Party. Notwithstanding the vein of rural socialism that permeated the Victorian Farmers Union, the Country Party vehemently opposed a key Labor policy: electoral distribution reform. Echoing the dominant sentiment of regional voters the *Gippsland Times* reminded readers ‘one vote, one value is a Labor doctrine...it is manifestly unfair’.¹² Indeed in 1920 the state’s extreme electoral malapportionment created a circumstance whereby 39 rural votes carried the same weight as 100 metropolitan votes.¹³ Such blatant voting inequality enabled the Country Party to enjoy the benefits of overrepresentation and therefore disproportionately dictate the fate of the parliament.¹⁴ As historian Ray Wright observed ‘throughout the stumbling twenties the character of the parliament was disproportionately shaped by Country Party precocity’.¹⁵

In addition, the major metropolitan newspapers were decidedly antipathetic to the idea of Labor in government and publicly attacked those who advanced such a proposition. Paul Strangio has aptly noted that the press led a scare campaign against the idea of the Labor Party holding the reins of government.¹⁶ Under strict editorial guidance reporters condemned the ‘insidious’ influence of Melbourne Trades Hall within, and over, the Labor Party.¹⁷ Sensationalist columns warned that a Labor government might precipitate an anti-enterprise ‘red dawn’. The *Argus* claimed that Labor’s ‘secret junta rule’ would usher in a ‘tyranny

¹² *Gippsland Times*, 18 August 1921.

¹³ Raymond Wright, *A People’s Counsel*, 174.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 174-176.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁶ Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory*, 122-130.

¹⁷ At this point Edward Cunningham was the editor of the *Argus* and Gottlieb Schuler of the *Age*.

unbearable to free men'.¹⁸ The newspaper also spurned the prospect of an independent public service wages board: 'the present is no time for forcing up wages by ridiculous tribunals...and encouraging class hatred'.¹⁹ Following suit the *Age* implored voters to not plunge the state into the 'sectional self interested...uncharted seas of socialism.'²⁰ Outside of the labour press support for the Labor Party and Victorian public servants was almost non-existent.

Nevertheless, the VPSU was by now accustomed to the media's proclivity for sensationalism and refused to set aside its claims or be intimidated. An ongoing and bitter war of words between the *Argus* and the VPSU had become conspicuous.²¹ Prone to the overdramatic, the newspaper labelled the union an 'extremist' and 'anarchist' organisation. Public servants, according to the publication, were being manipulated by union leaders: 'Workers are listening to fanatical or evil minded advocates of political and social revolution'.²² Such conjured up imagery of a cunning group of union puppet masters was typical of the *Argus*. Moreover, it was purported that public servants viewed the state as an 'enemy of the employed class'.²³ 'There may be no mistake about the policy advocated by this official organ [*PSJV*]' argued the editorial 'a quotation is made with approval that the destruction of capitalism can be brought about only by the abolition of the state'.²⁴ In response, Tunnecliffe, who had also assumed the editorship of the *PSJV*, advised public servants to ignore the '...relentless denunciation of Labor by the press of hirelings of the dominant class'.²⁵ Neither Tunnecliffe, nor the journal committee, took measures to extinguish the conflict. Radical quotes from Tolstoy, Emerson and Kropotkin found their way into the

¹⁸ *Argus*, 29 August 1921.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27 August 1921.

²⁰ *Age*, 29 August 1921.

²¹ The animosity between the VPSU and the print media was referred to in the *PSJV*, 30 September 1921.

²² *Argus*, 9 September 1921.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.* The newspaper was referring directly to the writings of radical political theorist Peter Kropotkin.

²⁵ *PSJV*, 30 August 1921.

PSJV.²⁶ Such writing exhibits the tenacious drive of Tunnecliffe and the influence of socialist values within VPSU. Of the *Age* the union retorted that the newspaper emits ‘columns of poison-gas about “pampered civil servants”, conveniently forgetting how their advertising rates have advanced in recent years’.²⁷ Of course the union’s support for the Labor Party was, by now, most obvious. Two senior union figures, Tunnecliffe and A. J. Pearce, were standing as candidates for the Labor Party in the upcoming Victorian election.²⁸ Labor’s commitment to workers’ rights through the regulation of wages by means of arbitration and conciliation devices was considered sacrosanct. Public service unionists were reminded that the Labor Party was the only parliamentary party willing to implement an independent public service wages board. Indeed the union was moving further towards an affiliation with the Labor Party and Melbourne Trades Hall: ‘To strengthen the radical elements within and to cooperate with kindred spirits without should be the object of the union’.²⁹

On the eve of the election the VPSU set out to hone its ideological platform. In previous ballots the organisation had largely checked its pre-election commentary so as not to antagonise the government. By 1921, however, the Labor Party, supported by the industrial wing of the labour movement, was desperate to win office. Victorian trade unions mobilised in support of Labor candidates. Political action now trumped industrialism and the union movement turned to the field of party politics to have their situation improved.³⁰ The VPSU followed the trend and abandoned its tendency towards neutrality. In an editorial on the day before the election Tunnecliffe stoked the passions of union members by engaging the language and construct of class:

²⁶ From Emerson: ‘Is not the state a question? All society is divided in opinion on the subject of the State. Nobody Loves it; great numbers dislike it, and suffer conscientious scruples to allegiance and the only defence set up is the fear of doing worse in disorganising.’ *Essay on Politics*.

²⁷ *PSJV*, 30 August 1921.

²⁸ Tunnecliffe stood in Collingwood and A. J. Pearce in Kara Kara.

²⁹ *PSJV*, 30 August 1921.

³⁰ Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory*, 149.

Let the public servants realise the class character of the struggle and they will be well advanced towards the realisation of their purpose, but while they as a wage-earning class ally themselves with the historic enemies of workers they cannot hope for any radical reform in their conditions ... concessions will be made ... but such concessions will never be radical in character, and will always preserve the distinction of master and servant.³¹

The editorial reflects the general mood of rank and file members. Class-consciousness within the public service was again advancing amid the lingering influence of the master and servant legacy. A majority of members, it appears, now accepted that their struggle for greater industrial rights and recognition would only find resolution at the political level. But it also highlights that a block of members still chose to distinguish themselves from the more radical ideals of the labour movement. Some believed they were constituents of the cultural elite and therefore held onto a false appreciation of their class standing. To these unionists Arthur Calwell, a rising figure within the VPSU, urged members to ‘drop their smug respectability and realise that they belonged to the working class’.³²

Yet, as the pundits predicted, when the election concluded and the votes were counted the balance of power remained unchanged and Lawson continued as Premier.³³ The Nationalist Party won 31 of the Legislative Assembly’s 65 seats and secured the support of Allan’s six-member faction within the now divided Country Party.³⁴ Labor’s push into the rural electorates failed to capture the imagination of voters and it again won 21 seats. Dissecting the election result the *Age* aptly remarked ‘with all the trouble and expense, [the election] has failed to resolve the political tangle that forced a dissolution’.³⁵ Indeed the conditions for a

³¹ *PSJV*, 30 August 1921.

³² *Ibid.*, 30 July 1921.

³³ Lawson regained Country Party backing by introducing a voluntary wheat pool that in practice was compulsory. See Donald Garden “Lawson, Sir Harry Sutherland Wightman,” *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 10 (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1986), 17.

³⁴ Wright, *A People’s Counsel*, 151.

³⁵ *Age*, 1 September 1921.

repeat of the same circumstance still existed. In a pointed column the *Argus* delighted in Lawson's return and vented its relief: 'Little sympathy need be wasted on a party [Labor] so deficient in ordinary common sense that it cannot appreciate the repugnance of the community to the hotchpotch of ideas represented in the socialism of the German Karl Marx as amended and brought up to date by the Russian Bolsheviks'.³⁶ Putting a different spin on the result of Prendergast's campaign effort the *Herald* later gibed 'when talking a little bolshevism, he displays the all the weariness and lack of enthusiasm which characterized the dancer of whom it was said that he looked as if he had been hired to do it and was afraid that he wouldn't get paid'.³⁷

Despite a sustained effort, the union's electioneering in the lead up to the August poll did little to improve the fortunes of public servants. Prior to the election, union members held a glimmer of hope that Lawson might be receptive to the introduction of an independent public service wages board. Casting long memories the union recalled the benevolent orientation of Lawson's maiden 1900 parliamentary speech in which he spoke passionately of the rights of public servants: 'The state must at all times and under all circumstances treat its employees fairly, justly, humanely, and where possible even generously.'³⁸ Yet as the *PSJV* reluctantly admitted Lawson's reconstructed coalition Ministry gave public servants 'little cause for jubilation'.³⁹ No mention was made of industrial relations reform in Lawson's September policy speech outlining the government's legislative agenda. The Nationalist Party refused to budge on the basic wage of public servants, not least on a wages board. Many public servants felt betrayed by their political masters. Facing an indefinite period of Nationalist rule the anger of some reached boiling point. Dejected union members vented their fury at work colleagues who refused to join the union or participate in the campaigning. How could they not see the benefits of an independent public service wages board? 'We are divided by our distrust for one another' lamented one public servant

³⁶ *Argus*, 31 August 1921.

³⁷ *Herald*, 15 February 1922.

³⁸ Lawson quoted in Brian Costar and Paul Strangio, eds., *The Victorian Premiers: 1856-2006* (Annandale: Federation Press, 2006), 162.

³⁹ *PSJV*, 30 September 1921.

employing the alias ‘Solidarity’.⁴⁰ Forthright as usual an infuriated Tunnecliffe denounced public servants who had the temerity to vote against Labor candidates: ‘Out from our ranks must go every weakling or half-hearted unionist...there is no room for men of the class who, on the morning of the election, sought in the name of the service to assist those who have consistently opposed our claims’.⁴¹

Such acrid commentary points to the increasingly radical sentiment of both the union’s rank and file and its leadership. Tunnecliffe’s literary venom was so ferocious that the *Argus* felt compelled to respond by way of a sensationalist article entitled ‘Class Struggles’. The commentary chided the VPSU: ‘The sentiments expressed [by Tunnecliffe] are unquestionably out of harmony with the views of the great body of loyal and level-headed public servants’.⁴² An adverse response of this kind was hardly surprising. As historian Sybil Nolan has noted the *Argus* maintained an ‘aggressively conservative’ political disposition.⁴³ Of the newspaper the celebrated Australian journalist Montague Grover later reflected: ‘In politics the *Argus* was almost medieval...even those who were most hostile to the Labor Party would repudiate the greater part of the abject Toryism of the *Argus*’.⁴⁴ Certainly to flick through the pages of the publication in the 1920s is to read an overwhelmingly anti-labour evaluation of business and politics. It was, for the most part, a publication that championed Victoria’s establishment while being antipathetic to the concerns of the working class. Unions were routinely accused of exacerbating poor industrial conditions and driving unemployment. Public servants were depicted as an interminable burden and singled out for harsh criticism. Cries of ‘cut to the bone’, aimed squarely at the public service, were routinely rolled out in response to any number of economic and political crises.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 30 August 1921.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 30 September 1921.

⁴² *Argus*, 8 September 1921.

⁴³ Sybil Nolan, “Manifest editorial differences: The Age and The Argus in the 1920s and 30s,” in Muriel Porter, ed., *Argus: The Life and Death of a Great Melbourne Newspaper: 1846-1957* (Melbourne: RMIT Publishing, 2003), 33.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 31-2.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that a number of disgruntled public servants wrote letters to the newspaper in which they too objected to the partisan tone of the *PSJV*.⁴⁵ One technical teacher condemned the tenor of the *PSJV* stating ‘it is just such articles and extremist propaganda that alienate loyal citizens and cause thoughtful public servants to hesitate about giving their adhesion to the policy of the union.’⁴⁶ Another, using the name ‘Vigil’, contended that the unionisation of public servants was motivated by a desire to ‘sow the seeds of sedition and red-ragism throughout the service’.⁴⁷ Yet perhaps unwittingly the author also provided an accurate window into the attitudes of public servants by noting that ‘the service in general is alive to such [*PSJV*] propaganda’.⁴⁸ Indeed the apt remark confirms the emerging propensity towards political activism within the public service. Many rank and file members had even begun to take classes in radical political and industrial theory at the Victorian Labor College. Situated at the very heart of this burgeoning spirit was the chief propagandist Thomas Tunnecliffe. As a political firebrand he reveled in confrontation and proudly wore the criticisms of his conservative foes. Rumoured to be a lieutenant of infamous Melbourne identity and businessman John Wren, his unrelenting disposition and dry wit continued to inspire those more reserved union members. Great pride was expressed within the VPSU upon his victory in the working class electorate of Collingwood. The union was now able to point to one of its own in the parliamentary chamber. Unable to combine the demands of the union executive and the opposition frontbench he reluctantly relinquished the VPSU secretaryship in September 1921. Still, he remained the editor of the *PSJV* and an executive member of the Clerical Association (CA). That Tunnecliffe’s radicalism went largely unchecked serves to underline the evolving political character of the union. Unequaled in stature and revered by the rank and file his analysis of the non-union member was blunt: ‘Let the hirelings of the party in power accept the

⁴⁵ *Argus*, 14 September 1921.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 12 September 1921.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

bribe of their treachery, a potter's field awaits them when 30 pieces have been diced against the honour of their class.'⁴⁹

5.2 We Ask for the Same Rights Enjoyed by Others

Optimism among public servants was in short supply in the immediate aftermath of the 1921 election. For many unionists the defeat of the Labor Party was difficult to accept. The union's dream of gaining access to the state's system of wages boards now appeared increasingly remote. Premier Lawson, in light of Victoria's uncertain economic forecast, would not impose further expenditure liabilities upon the Treasury. Moreover, rising unemployment in 1921 and 1922 only served to reinforce the government's austere fiscal approach.⁵⁰ In any case, the union's scattered and inconsistent advocacy efforts following WWI were, with some obvious exceptions, largely ineffective.⁵¹ The bigger picture was lost. It was for the most part a wasted period in which petty differences and bitter feuds overshadowed the campaign to secure an independent public service wages board. Put simply there were too many competing voices. That legislators so easily ignored the union during this period is no surprise. Some sections of the union still questioned the appropriateness of lobbying their political masters. Clearly, the master and servant legacy continued to cast an ominous shadow.

However, as previously mentioned the organisation was ostensibly able to move beyond its major troubles. Upon the formation of the VPSU it seemed that the last vestiges of ambiguity were excised. Those few remaining union members opposed to the establishment of an independent public service wages board and superannuation scheme were being incrementally whittled out of the organisation. The union's brief issue based election campaign highlighted the benefits of coordinated advocacy. But it was a hastily constructed campaign. Internally the union acknowledged that it had not been properly prepared for the turn of events: 'The political turmoil...has to some extent upset the calculations of the Public

⁴⁹ *PSJV*, 30 September 1921.

⁵⁰ Victorian unemployment reached 11 percent in 1921-22. See the *Victorian Year Book 1922*.

⁵¹ See Chapter two for notes on the achievements of the union prior to 1921.

Service Union'.⁵² Still, union members were acutely aware that Victoria's politicians might never fully accommodate their salary demands and favourably address their citizenship status. As such a new imperative to work together towards a set of common goals had emerged.

In the wake of the election result the *PSJV* turned to the poetic form and invoked the words of Walt Whitman: 'My God, we will not ask for anything, which others cannot have upon equal terms'.⁵³ The journal emphatically stated that the institution of a wages board and superannuation scheme was quite simply a matter of citizenship: 'we ask nothing save the rights of citizens and expect nothing only a rational assessment of our worth'.⁵⁴ If the grievances of public servants were to be addressed nearly all had come to the conclusion that it would be through an independent wages board. It is therefore important to briefly chart the system of wages boards as a phenomenon almost entirely unique to Victoria.⁵⁵ In the early 1890s vivid accounts of women and children working in squalor for subsistence piecemeal wages at inner suburban manufacturing outhouses were published by the *Age*.⁵⁶ So shocking were the accounts that Christian reformers and middle class professionals agitated for the social and economic dislocation created by 'sweated labour' to be immediately remedied.⁵⁷ It was impressed upon state MPs that a solution to the licentious practice might be found in the fixation of wages by an independent body. In June 1896, the Chief Secretary, Alexander Peacock,

⁵² *PSJV*, 30 September 1921.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ New Zealand was the first country to introduce a system of conciliation boards in 1894. See James Holt, "Compulsory Arbitration in New Zealand 1894-1901: The Evolution of an Industrial Relations System," *New Zealand Journal of History*, 14 (1980): 179-200.

⁵⁶ Wesleyan minister Reverend A. E. Edgar appeared before for the 1893-4 Parliamentary inquiry and suggested that wages be fixed by an independent board. As to why the Legislative Council allowed the boards to be established has been a subject of historical debate. For further analysis Matthew Hammond, "Wages Boards in Australia: 1 Victoria," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 29, no.1 (1914): 112-118.

⁵⁷ Jenny Lee, "A Redivision of Labour: Victoria's Wages Boards in Action: 1896 – 1903," *Historical Studies*, 22, no. 88 (1987): 352. Lee notes that "the measure was less the brainchild of the labour movement than of the liberal Christian small-bourgeois and professionals of the Anti-Sweating League." See also Stuart Macintyre, *Colonial Liberalism: The Lost World of Three Victorian Visionaries* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1991).

responded to the escalating crisis by introducing the Factories and Shops Act Amendment Bill.⁵⁸ Peacock delivered an emotional address in the Legislative Assembly in which he reflected on his recent visits to the ‘poor outside workers’ who worked in ‘sweat dens’.⁵⁹ After heated debate in the Legislative Council the amendment was passed and thus the wages board system was established. It was perhaps the most significant achievement of the Turner government and represents what some experts have called an ‘experiment in social legislation’.⁶⁰ Wages boards were empowered to independently set minimum wages and conditions for both men and women in nominated industries.⁶¹ Each board was to have an equal number of elected employee and employer representatives and an independent chairman who could resolve voting deadlocks.⁶²

At first it was not expected that the wages board system would evolve into a permanent method of wage regulation. Legal scholars at the time recorded that it was the intention of legislators for the boards to be limited to ‘checking the abuses which had grown up in a few sweated trades’.⁶³ Looking back on the period, political historian Rohan Price has observed that wages boards ‘were conceived as mere add-ons to the occupational health and safety ideals of the extant *Factories and Shops Act 1885*’.⁶⁴ Historian Jenny Lee has pointed out that Victorian liberal reformers narrowly attributed the erosion of wage standards in the 1890s to ‘the greed of a small number of unscrupulous employers who had taken advantage of

⁵⁸ See *VPD*, vol. 81, LA, 30 June 1896, 93.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁶⁰ Kevin Hince, “Wages Board in Victoria,” *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 7, no. 2 (1965): 164.

⁶¹ Under the *Shop Factory Amendment Act 1896* provision was made for the creation of five wages boards. Prendergast moved a vital amendment during the Legislative Assembly debate that made provision for boards to also cover male workers.

⁶² Usually between four and six. More at the discretion of the responsible Minister. Full-time union officials, or “Trades Hall hangers-on” as one Legislative Councilor remarked, were prohibited from taking seats on a board until 1934. See Raelene Frances, *The Politics of Work: Gender and Labour in Victoria: 1880-1939* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 75.

⁶³ Hammond, “Wages boards in Australia,” 1914, 101.

⁶⁴ Rohan Price, “In Bramble and Chicanery Belated Justice Stands: Early Judicial Interpretations of the Factories and Shops Act 1886 (Vic),” *Labour History*, no. 96 (2009): 39.

the glut of labour to reduce wages'.⁶⁵ Yet such was the maltreatment of workers that the system expanded rapidly and by 1921 there were 170 wages boards in operation.⁶⁶ Union members looked on in envy as railways workers secured a wages board and in 1919 subsequently had their daily wage increased to 13 shillings and 6 pence by way of the mechanism.⁶⁷ In comparison, the basic wage of public servants was set at 11 shillings 9 pence.⁶⁸ In July 1921, the President of the VPSU John Braithwaite had enthusiastically endorsed the wages board system stating that it was 'one of the best systems in the Commonwealth'.⁶⁹ Following the state election a union deputation waited upon the Victorian Treasurer Sir William McPherson to remind him that public servants no longer wanted their wages and conditions set by Parliament and demanded that an independent public service wages board be established. Tunnecliffe, Calwell, Marzorini and Moroney admonished McPherson for failing to take concerns of public servants seriously. Calwell, delivering a parting shot, was unequivocal: 'public servants deserved to have the same rights as any other workingman'.⁷⁰

Yet the VPSU had now discerned that there was another pathway to an independent industrial tribunal. The Australian Constitution gave the Commonwealth Government authority to adjudicate on industrial disputes that extended beyond the limits of any state boundary. But in 1906, the High Court declared in the *Railways Servants Case* that state public service unions could not access the Commonwealth Arbitration Court.⁷¹ It was not until 31 August 1920, when the Amalgamated Society of Engineers successfully challenged the

⁶⁵ Lee, "A redivision of labour," 352.

⁶⁶ See P. G. McCarthy, "Victorian Wages Boards: Their Origins and the Doctrine of the Living Wage," *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 10, no. 2 (1968): 128.

⁶⁷ The Railways Classification Board was created in 1916 but not until 1919 was a decision of the board handed down.

⁶⁸ See the VPSU Annual Report 1921-22 in the *PSJV*, 30 August 1922.

⁶⁹ A mass rally at Temperance Hall took place on the 7 July 1921. Braithwaite was making a comparison with other state arbitration systems. See *Ibid.*, 30 July 1921.

⁷⁰ John Moroney was the secretary of the Professional Association.

⁷¹ The judicial term used by the Court was "ultra vires." Referred to as the *Railways Servants Case* (1906). The judgement stipulated the states should be protected from interference from the Commonwealth and that state railways authorities should not be subject to the system of federal industrial awards.

reasoning of the 1906 High Court ruling, that the door was opened for state public service unions to potentially access the Commonwealth jurisdiction.⁷² Legal scholars have noted that the 1920 decision was arguably the most important and far reaching High Court ruling delivered in the first half of the 20th century. The impulse to protect the sovereignty of individual states from Commonwealth decisions had been superseded. Years later the controversial Chief Justice Garfield Barwick remarked that ‘the so-called reserve powers doctrine...was exploded and unambiguously rejected by this court in the year 1920’.⁷³ Judicial authority Geoffrey Sawer even asserted that it was ‘one of the worst written and organised judgments in Australian judicial history’.⁷⁴ The formerly accepted orthodoxy of state self-governance was practically demolished. Lawson and his fellow Nationalist premiers were deeply concerned that the judgment fundamentally reframed the original meaning of the constitution. Indeed the latent nationalism embedded within the *Engineers’* decision that consolidated the political federation served as a direct threat to those who advocated it was the right of individual states to govern unimpeded.⁷⁵

An intrigued VPSU now paused to consider the potential benefits that might emanate from this changing legal environment. Union members had long taken umbrage at the superior employment conditions enjoyed by their Commonwealth public service counterparts. Commonwealth workers drew higher wages and often

⁷² The 1920 *Engineers Case* rejected the doctrine of immunity of state instrumentalities and reframed the doctrine of reserved state powers. A young Robert Menzies acted on behalf of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. The original case related to state public servants from WA. High Court Justice Henry Bourne Higgins was especially erudite in his determination: ‘there can be no doubt that the Federal Parliament intended State undertakings to be subject to the Court’s powers of conciliation and arbitration’. See transcript of the *Engineers’ Case* (1920) 28 CLR 129.

⁷³ Barwick quoted in Leslie Zines, *The High Court and the Constitution* (Annandale: Federation Press, 2008), 19.

⁷⁴ Geoffrey Sawer, *Australian Federalism in the Courts* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1967), 130.

⁷⁵ See John Rickard, *H. B. Higgins: The Rebel as Judge* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1984), 278-80; Michael Cooper and George Williams, eds., *How Many Cheers for Engineers?* (Annandale: Federation Press, 1997).

worked shorter days.⁷⁶ Wage decisions in the Commonwealth realm were delivered under the authority of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court and drew upon the concept of the living or basic wage as first set by Justice Henry Bourne Higgins in 1907. In the landmark Sunshine Harvester Works ruling Higgins determined that male employees were entitled to a salary that would maintain a family in ‘frugal comfort’. It was an innovative judgment that took inspiration from an encyclical released by Pope Leo XII in 1891 entitled *Rerum Novarum* or *Rights and Duties of Capital and Labour*. As specified by the papal document it was the duty of employers to treat their employees with dignity and respect in order to alleviate the ‘misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class’.⁷⁷ It is no surprise that workers would repeatedly pivot to the basic wage rationality when arguing to have their circumstances improved. Adding to the list of inherent advantages of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court was that union officials could act on behalf of their members during Court proceedings. As Lee has commented in contrast the Victorian wages board system had become a political ‘tug-o-war’.⁷⁸

Quick to set a Victorian precedent in the Commonwealth Arbitration Court was the Victorian division of the Australian Railways Union (ARU).⁷⁹ On 8 February 1921, the ARU became the first group of public servants to secure industrial registration.⁸⁰ The success of railways workers inspired Victorian general division public servants to unilaterally try their luck and pursue registration. Members of the General Division Association (GDA)—a constituent association of the VPSU— were predominantly unskilled and semi skilled workers. GDA President,

⁷⁶ In the aftermath of the 1921 election the Lawson government extended the hours of public servants by 30 minutes from 4.30pm-5.00 pm. See the *PSJV*, 30 November 1921.

⁷⁷ *Rerum Novarum*, Encyclical of Pope Leo XII, 1891.

⁷⁸ Lee, “A Redivision of Labour,” 352. In observing the operation of the Railways Classification Board the VPSU was cognisant to the temporary nature of the wages board system. Railways workers were subject to repeated threats from the Lawson government that their board would be dissolved.

⁷⁹ In 1921 the VRU had amalgamated with other states to form the ARU.

⁸⁰ See Churchward, *The Australian Railways Union*, 221. Militant railways workers who were inclined towards socialism and syndicalism accepted that it was a case of the better ‘the devil we know’.

Mr. A. Lonegrone, begrudged that the organisation's members had long been the 'bottom dogs'.⁸¹ The conditions endured by the lowest classified general division workers were among the worst of all public service employees. Male workers employed as labourers, fruit inspectors, truck drivers and butter weighers were paid minimum salaries that barely breached the basic wage. As might be expected the plight of female general division employees was markedly substandard. Prison nurses, typists and sorters received salaries ranging from 70 to just above 100 pounds or less than half the standard male setting.⁸² Given such abysmal conditions the association—ignoring the direction of the VPSU—lodged an application of registration with the industrial registrar of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court in February 1921.⁸³ Following a nervous wait of ten months the application was approved and ecstatic GDA members took delight in the knowledge that they were now members of a nationally recognised trade union.⁸⁴

A cautious optimism spread throughout the public service in light of the registration of the GDA. Yet most were unsure as to what this registration might mean for public servants. Other constituent associations began to wonder if it might be possible to follow the path set by the GDA. Soon the *Argus* begrudgingly reported that other groups within the VPSU were considering similar action. Clerical workers insisted that Thomas Tunnecliffe retain the advice of esteemed Labor figure Maurice Blackburn to hear his opinion on the situation.⁸⁵ Blackburn, commonly described as a 'fearless friend of the worker', was deeply sympathetic to the cause of communism.⁸⁶ He believed passionately in the complementarity of political and industrial action and had constantly championed the expansion of public service industrial rights.⁸⁷ Professional officers crammed into the Vestibule Room at Melbourne Town Hall to hear the

⁸¹ *Argus*, 18 February 1921.

⁸² See *Victorian Government Gazette*, 5 December 1924, 3927-28.

⁸³ *The Argus*, 2 December 1921.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* The Industrial Registrar's words read 'the union will consist of an unlimited numbers of persons employed in the general division of public service of any state.'

⁸⁵ Minutes of the Clerical Association dated 13 February 1922.

⁸⁶ *Argus*, 3 April, 1944.

⁸⁷ See Susan Blackburn, *Maurice Blackburn and the Australian Labor Party, 1934-1943* (Melbourne: The Australian Society for the study of Labour History, 1969).

advice of constitutional and industrial relations authority Robert Menzies.⁸⁸ An enthusiastic audience listened attentively as the future Prime Minister meticulously outlined the obstacles to registration that might accompany any application. The minutes record that Menzies spoke ‘masterfully’ for more than an hour and commented on the ongoing controversy regarding how an industrial dispute could be defined and what constituted an industry.⁸⁹ Most poignantly he relayed that this was largely an untested area of law and as such that it was difficult to fully comprehend. Prior to concluding he would perspicaciously forewarn the assembled members that an extensive legal challenge would likely be launched in the defence of state rights by the Nationalist governments of Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia.

It did not come as a shock when the forecast of Menzies was proved correct. An infuriated Lawson immediately flagged the government’s intention to appeal the registrations of the GDA and ARU. He was intent on preventing public servants being granted any semblance of industrial recognition. Victoria’s Attorney-General Arthur Robinson delivered a speech to the Law institute of Victoria in which he made explicit the government’s conviction: ‘members of the union [GDA] are servants of the King, and the King is not subject to the provision of the Commonwealth Arbitration Act’.⁹⁰ Lawson was shocked by the growing audacity of public service unions and vowed to intensify the political campaign against the diminution of state rights.⁹¹ One unnamed Minister perhaps best exemplified the government’s frame of mind by glibly stating that ‘so far as we’re concerned ministers direct and public servants obey’.⁹² Nevertheless, the truculent position adopted by the Lawson administration only served to embolden and further politicise the rank and file of the VPSU. As the New Year dawned the VPSU was injected with a sense of urgency concerning its two primary objectives and the

⁸⁸ Ernest Pitt—the president of the Professional Association—called a special meeting of all members on 6 February 1922 held at the Vestibule Room in Melbourne Town Hall. See *PSJV*, February 1922. Robert Menzies had shot to fame after representing the Amalgamated society of Engineers before the high court in 1920.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Quoted in the *Argus*, 8 December 1921.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Argus*, 8 April 1922.

bonds of class feeling further coalesced. The January 1922 edition of the *PSJV* mocked the government's belief that 'the service lacks the stomach for a fight'.⁹³ Non-Labor MPs who had abandoned their support for a public service wages board were the subjects of fierce criticism. In an extraordinary display of indignation the leading editorial pulled no punches: 'Politicians have made promises and betrayed them and their names and numbers are known...these violators of their pledges may be fittingly rewarded for their betrayal'.⁹⁴

5.3 Mr. Lawson your Opposition to our Claims is Futile?⁹⁵

By the beginning of 1922 the rank and file had turned on the government of Harry Lawson. Public servants were agitating to immediately gain access to an independent public service wages board and a system of public service superannuation. News of the struggles of Victorian public servants had spread far and reached the no-nonsense Queensland Labor Premier Edward Theodore. Described by historian Geoffrey Bolton as 'the closest that Australia has come to producing the Great Gatsby' the young Queensland Premier threw his support behind Victorian public servants.⁹⁶ Dubbed 'Red Ted', Theodore was one of the Australian Workers Union's (AWU) original strongmen and chose to defy his Victorian counterpart by penning an open letter to VPSU members encouraging them to continue the fight.⁹⁷ Drawing upon his experience he insisted that Queensland 'had not suffered any inconvenience' after public servants secured access to the Queensland Arbitration Court.⁹⁸ Such broad support inspired the union to press forward with its claims. Members began to question why Lawson and the cabinet-subcommittee, which controlled most public service matters, had not taken heed of the Queensland example. Criticism was directed at Lawson for

⁹³ *PSJV*, 30 January 1922.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28 February 1922.

⁹⁶ Geoffrey Bolton, *A Thousand Miles Away: A History of North Queensland to 1920* (Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1963), 316.

⁹⁷ For biographical information on Edward Theodore see Ross Fitzgerald, *Red Ted: The Life of EG Theodore* (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1994). Theodore was also known as "King Theodore 1."

⁹⁸ Letter from Edward Theodore delivered to the VPSU dated 22 January 1922.

concerning himself with miniscule public service complaints that should have been controlled by the Public Service Commissioner in accordance with his duties:

The absurdity of his valuable time being wasted in discussing petty details as to whether a nurse at the Lunacy Department should receive an allowance for her laundry, or a girl in the country office should be granted 6d for tea money should long e'er this have become apparent.⁹⁹

Letters of protest authored by public servants were laden with deep-seated frustration. One member bemoaned 'sometimes the poor are praised for being thrifty. But to recommend thrift to the poor is both grotesque and insulting. It is like advising a man who is starving to eat less'.¹⁰⁰ Another using the assumed name 'plenty of patches' resorted to verse: 'On our pants, once new and glossy, now are stripes of a different hue; all because McPherson lingers, and won't pay us what is due!'¹⁰¹

A spirited body of union members were now openly and frequently challenging the callous reasoning of the state government and encouraged their colleagues to organise and realise the just nature of their claims. Impassioned calls to action littered the pages of the *PSJV*. One member using the alias 'Militant' beseeched his comrades to take up the fight: 'surely it is time to abandon our milk-and-water methods and to remember that fine words butter no parsnips'.¹⁰² Another dared to question the authority of the Crown: 'it is the public and not the politicians of any political party who employ us'.¹⁰³ Campaigns for fortnightly pay, overtime allowances, long service leave and a return to the standard pre-war finishing time of 4.30 p.m. were gaining momentum.¹⁰⁴ Fortnightly pay was won and would be instituted in 1923. It was a significant achievement and ended the process of

⁹⁹ *PSJV*, 28 February 1922.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 30 May 1922.

¹⁰¹ "Plenty of Patches," *Ibid.*, 30 May 1922.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 30 April 1922.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 30 January 1922.

¹⁰⁴ The Clerical Association also protested that overtime was not being paid to its members from 5-5.30pm. *Ibid.*, 28 February 1922.

paying public servants by annual stipend. The union took the opportunity to remind government ministers that ‘these trivial matters are of vital concern to a large number of persons’.¹⁰⁵ An exhausted mental hospital attendant then powerfully conveyed the overriding frustration of the membership. Using the apt pseudonym ‘One of the Butts’ the author questioned the ill-treatment of his colleagues: ‘is it because they have so long endured the hardships and long hours that the government thinks they are becoming mentally deficient?’¹⁰⁶ Incensed prison warders naturally wondered the same after being forced to work up to 60 hours a week without receiving commensurate overtime payments. Many reacted angrily to accusations of lax working standards made by the *Argus* after a number of inmates at Pentridge Penitentiary unsuccessfully attempted to escape in the first six months of 1922.¹⁰⁷ Warders were indignant when the government failed to defend their professional integrity.¹⁰⁸

As might be expected rural based members were also struggling to have their employment concerns taken seriously. Next to no action had been taken by the Lawson ministry to alleviate the struggles of country public servants in the immediate aftermath of the 1921 election. Reluctantly, the union conceded that the position of an officer ‘outback, say at Mildura or Omeo, was far from an enviable one’.¹⁰⁹ Of course this was a considerable understatement and points to the Melbourne-centric focus of the organisation. So critical was the lack of public service staff in some rural locations that the *PSJV* would remark that ‘not more than two-thirds of officers can secure the time off they are entitled to’.¹¹⁰ Yet astonishingly the *VPSU* executive argued that it should not devote additional resources to campaign on behalf of country public servants. Tunnecliffe would even pontificate that the union should not be exhausted ‘in dealing with matters of

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ See the Penal Officers Union minutes from April 1922. *Ibid.*, 30 April 1922.

¹⁰⁸ *Labor Call* derided the government for implementing what it termed a “policy of Hush” at the prison. *Labor Call*, 14 September 1922.

¹⁰⁹ *PSJV*, 30 April 1922.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

detail which rightly concern the individual association'.¹¹¹ He claimed that the union's constitution placed the onus upon the constituent associations to deal with the 'smaller' issues. To be expected the approach of the executive fuelled the discontent of country members. In Bendigo, upon realising that they had been left unsupported, public servants had no recourse but to take matters upon themselves. Local branch members demanded that the region's MPs attend a special meeting to hear their grievances.¹¹² In a show of solidarity A. J. Pearce, the secretary of the GDA, travelled to Bendigo to join with general division public servants to assist in the advocacy efforts. Country members cheered as he berated the state government for being 'the greatest sweating employer in Victoria.'¹¹³

Back in Melbourne signs of discord among the constituent associations had again materialised. VPSU President John Braithwaite—otherwise known as the 'old warrior'—resigned in February and was replaced by the elected Vice-President Ernest Pitt.¹¹⁴ Union secretary, Henry Hart, abruptly quit and was replaced by John Moroney.¹¹⁵ Both Braithwaite and Hart maintained that their decisions were brought about by their growing responsibilities within the VSSTU. But in truth it was the uneasy political dynamics of the union council that precipitated what might ultimately be termed their abdication. At the March 1922 VPSU council-meeting tensions finally erupted when delegates from the VSSTU refused to commit their members to a wages board petition.¹¹⁶ Furious CA delegates, lead by Francis 'Mussolini' Marzorini, considered the actions of the organisation to be tantamount to treason.¹¹⁷ In reply, the faction representing teachers claimed that the campaign strategies of the VPSU were 'ill-conceived'.¹¹⁸ A bitter factional

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² *Argus*, 3 April 1922. The local MPs were David Smith (Nationalist) from Bendigo West and Luke Clough (Labor) from Bendigo East.

¹¹³ *Age*, 7 March 1922.

¹¹⁴ *PSJV*, 28 February 1922. Pitt was a senior librarian who had joined the Melbourne public library in 1908. For a biographical write up on Pitt see Ibid., 30 August 1922. For a profile on John Braithwaite see Ibid., 26 March 1923.

¹¹⁵ Moroney was concurrently secretary of the Professional Association.

¹¹⁶ Council meeting minutes dated 14 February 1922. *PSJV*, 28 February 1922.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. Francis Marzorini was the President of the Clerical Association.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

exchange had commenced. Certainly a corollary of the 1920 High Court ruling was that state public service unions across Australia were prompted to re-evaluate their standing in relation to the Commonwealth Arbitration Court. Delegates of the financially powerful VSSTU now entertained the prospect of joining with other teaching unions to form a national body rather than remain within an increasingly disparate VPSU.

Rumours of escalating tension between the VPSU's constituent associations would have momentarily pleased the Lawson ministry. However, those now mockingly referred to by the labour press as 'Lawsonites' were growing nervous as additional public service bodies considered applying for industrial registration.¹¹⁹ Lawson, together with Attorney-General Arthur Robinson, feared the repercussions that might follow if the GDA's industrial registration went unchallenged. They were further spooked upon learning that railways workers were preparing to submit their first plaint in the Commonwealth Arbitration Court.¹²⁰ Allowing public service organisations to gain a foothold in the Commonwealth arena could dramatically weaken the government's ability to dictate the fortunes of state public servants. In lodging their appeal against the industrial registration of the GDA on 6 March 1922 the state's legal counsel Stanley Lewis was brusque: 'the Parliament of Victoria has made certain rules and laws and no outside body can do anything to override those rules'.¹²¹ It was a position that advocated strongly in favour of a federalist approach to political administration. In reasoning familiar to union members Lewis then postulated that public service unions were not entitled to registration on account that their members were not engaged in an industrial pursuit but rather 'employed in exercising functions associated with the State'.¹²² Pearce countered by arguing that GDA members were indeed engaged in an industrial pursuit and deserved to be recognised within the Commonwealth jurisdiction.¹²³ Justice Charles Powers

¹¹⁹ *Labor Call*, 15 September 1921.

¹²⁰ See Churchward, *The Australian Railways Union*, 207-250.

¹²¹ *Argus*, 7 March 1922. Justice Charles Powers succeeded Henry Bourne Higgins as President of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*

who heard the case ultimately chose to acknowledge the rights of general division public servants and upheld their registration. GDA members now enthusiastically looked to a possible future in which their wages and conditions would set by the Commonwealth Arbitration Court. Public servants employed as labourers and cooks, bolt-fitters and food inspectors—to mention just a few categories—were delighted with judgment.

To be expected, state premiers, perceiving their powers being diminished, reacted swiftly to the registration of state public service unions by making preparations to challenge the High Court's 1920 decision in London's Privy Council. Powerful lobby groups mobilised to support the impending challenge and to also oppose compulsory wage regulation. On 16 May 1922, the *Argus* heralded the formation of the Single Purpose League whose lone objective was to see to the abolition of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court.¹²⁴ Led by two of Australia's most notorious anti-labour business figures—Hugh Victor Mackay and Guillaume Daniel Delprat—the well-resourced lobby group acted as a fillip for Nationalist state premiers.¹²⁵ Historian David Plowman notes that Delprat and Mackay used their business and political connections to quickly advance the extreme laissez faire ideology of the organisation.¹²⁶ But the attack on compulsory wage regulation did not go unchallenged. *Labor Call*, the *Railways Union Gazette*, and the *PSJV* were among many publications shed light on the surreptitious tactics employed by those opposed to arbitration.¹²⁷ In the second half of 1922 the ARU established the State Instrumentalities Union Committee (SIUC) to defend the rights of government employees to access the Commonwealth Arbitration Court.¹²⁸ The GDA joined the group and participated in pressuring conservative

¹²⁴ See David Plowman, "Industrial Arbitration and the Single Purpose League," *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 53, no. 2 (2011): 209-224.

¹²⁵ Hugh Victor McKay was the owner of the Sunshine Harvester Company and Guillaume Daniel Delprat was the former long-time Managing Director of Broken Hill Proprietary (BHP).

¹²⁶ Both men had unhappy dealings with industrial tribunals and espoused a voluntaristic approach to labour relations.

¹²⁷ *Labor Call*, 30 November 1922.

¹²⁸ See Churchward, *The Australian Railways Union*, 214.

political forces to drop their opposition to arbitration.¹²⁹ During this period it became evident that the GDA wanted to chart a path in isolation to their fellow Victorian public servants. General division members were imbued with a newfound confidence and were now operating outside of the auspices of the VPSU.

Initially, the VPSU decided against joining what was a novel display of trade union cooperation in the SIUC. While perhaps at first this seems unusual the decision becomes clearer when one examines the GDA's actions. Indeed by the middle of 1922 it was apparent that the other constituent associations of the VPSU were sceptical of the unilateral trajectory of the GDA. Why had they not heeded the advice of the union council to pursue registration under the umbrella of the VPSU? Nearly a year after securing industrial registration the GDA had still not availed itself of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court. The enthusiasm that initially accompanied its registration had begun to wane as the complexities of mounting a case were realised. Doubts first articulated by the *PSJV* months earlier resonated loudly:

Their [GDA] hope of reaping any material advantage for their members is discounted to a great extent by the fact that there is no reciprocity between the States in service matters and the difficulties of securing an interstate dispute are many and varied.¹³⁰

As if on cue the GDA now questioned the usefulness of remaining within the VPSU. In a move pregnant with meaning the association's hierarchy, led by Pearce, had stopped attending VPSU council meetings and refused to pay dues owing to the union.¹³¹ It appears that the GDA was firmly of the conviction that industrial registration would be the panacea to their problems. It can also be

¹²⁹ Letters were delivered to the leaders of the three federal parliamentary parties asking them to outline their attitude towards arbitration. Only Labor Party leader Matthew Charlton took the time to respond in which he stated that all state employees should be able access to the Commonwealth Arbitration Court.

¹³⁰ *PSJV*, December 1921.

¹³¹ See the VPSU Annual Report 1921-22 in *Ibid.*, August 1922.

reasonably assumed that the organisation's 450 members concluded that it would only be a matter of time before the association scored a significant victory in the Commonwealth Arbitration Court.

By openly defying the VPSU council the fate of the GDA was effectively sealed. In August, the decision was made to expel the association and its members from the union. Of course the GDA through its actions had in effect chosen to leave the VPSU. General division public servants were not unsettled by the changing circumstances. Nonetheless, it was another significant blow sustained by the VPSU. The capacity and campaigning strength of general division public servants would be sorely missed. To further complicate matters the status of the VSSTU remained uncertain. It had become clear that the hope of developing strong coordination between associations representing public servants, including teachers, as heralded upon the formation of the VPSU, had yet to be fully realised. Too much power had been devolved to the constituent associations of the union. In narrowing the field of activism to the broader issues of securing a superannuation scheme and an independent arbitration mechanism the union ostracised certain sections of its own organisation. Public service unionists would need to find a way to build a cohesive organisation in order to achieve their goals. As one member using the pseudonym 'moonshine' succinctly put it 'we are all tired of chasing moonbeams.'¹³²

5.4 Conclusion

Upon the reconfiguration of the VPSU a sense of purpose and excitement among public service unionists had formed. The union was quick to invest its faith in the Labor Party at the 1921 state election. Labor declared that if it won office it would immediately recognise the industrial rights of public servants through the establishment of an independent wages board. Yet the party failed to win a majority of seats in the Victorian Legislative Assembly and as a consequence the hopes of public servants were dashed. In the wake of the election disappointed

¹³² *PSJV*, July 1922.

union members increasingly vented their frustrations at the conditions under which they were employed. Members looked on in envy as the militant ARU gained access to the Victorian wages board system and the Commonwealth Arbitration Court—and subsequently had their wages elevated. Public servants demanded that they be given the opportunity to present their demands to an independent arbiter. Amid the clamour for recognition a number of constituent associations began to chart their own course independent of the VPSU. As the end of 1922 neared the VPSU considered how it might navigate the ongoing turmoil of Victorian public service unionism to implement a stable footing from which to launch its claims. Finding a way in which to gain access to the Commonwealth Arbitration Court would now become the leading priority of the union and its members.

Chapter 6 In Pursuit of Commonwealth Industrial Registration 1922-1924.

As the end of 1922 drew near the future of the VPSU again appeared uncertain. The quest to secure expanded industrial rights had pulled the various constituent associations of the union in different directions. An impatient GDA seceded from the VPSU and went on to gain registration in the Commonwealth Arbitration Court. Yet the 1920 High Court ruling that gave public servants the opportunity to avail themselves of the powers of the Court was soon challenged by Nationalist Party premiers who were intent on protecting state rights. Prime Minister William Hughes also began to question the suitability and function of Commonwealth Arbitration Court. The VPSU and its members responded by campaigning against those opposed to arbitration. In addition, the organisation continued to call for the establishment of an independent public service wages board and a system of superannuation. However, as will be revealed, the primary focus of the VPSU rested upon securing access to the Commonwealth Arbitration Court. In pursuit of this objective the union transformed into the Australian Public Service Association (APSA). At first this transition appeared successful. When the Labor Party formed government in Victoria in 1924 the fortunes of public service unionists appeared to have further improved. Nevertheless, by the conclusion of 1924 the hopes of public servants were dashed in lieu of changing industrial interpretations and political conditions. Successes during this period were brief and the union quickly found itself victim of circumstances beyond its control.

6.1 The King Can Do No Wrong...

Events moved quickly in the aftermath of the GDA's expulsion from the VPSU. At the national level the New South Wales Public Service Association had taken a leading role in facilitating an exchange of ideas and strategies between various state public service unions. Annual conferences of the Australian Public Service Federation (APSF) had been held since the end of WWI in the absence of a representative from Victoria. In October 1922, the VPSU, seeking to broaden its

national standing, accepted an invitation to participate in the upcoming meeting to be held in Perth.¹ A Victorian delegation comprising of senior union officials in Francis Marzorini and John Moroney travelled to Western Australia and represented the organisation. Common challenges faced by state public servants across country were examined.² At the forefront of the conference agenda was a discussion on the feasibility of forming a federated association of state public service unions for the purpose of seeking industrial registration in the Commonwealth Arbitration Court.³ It was envisioned that such a body would more readily satisfy the constitutional interstate dispute criterion and therefore enable public servants to collectively avail themselves of the powers of the Court. Upon returning to Melbourne the delegation enthusiastically reported on the proceedings and championed the possibilities that might emanate from building stronger links with interstate unions.

Nonetheless, the prospect of creating a federated body of state public service unions was soon put on hold. Attorney-General, Arthur Robinson, convinced his New South Wales and South Australian counterparts to join with Victoria and challenge the 1920 *Engineers'* decision.⁴ A joint application to the Privy Council for leave to appeal the ruling was soon lodged on behalf of the appellants by noted Victorian barrister Owen Dixon—who at the time was widely regarded as one of the brightest legal minds in the country.⁵ The VPSU executive closely followed the proceedings. Its importance to the industrial standing of public servants was enormous. In the pages of the *PSJV* a frank assessment of the current employment status of public servants was delivered:

¹ Victoria had withdrawn from the APSF in 1919 after being overcome by internal disunity.

² Superannuation, appeals boards, the basic wage, control of the public service, responses to retrenchment, and equal pay for equal work were subjects discussed at length.

³ The conference was held between 4-12 October 1922.

⁴ *Argus*, 28 June 1922.

⁵ Dixon would later become a High Court Justice. See Grant Anderson and Daryl Dawson, "Dixon, Sir Owen (1886-1972)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 14 (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1996).

If you accept employment as a public servant you forfeit all your rights of citizenship. Such an attitude is manifestly unjust...and is apparently based on the theory that the King can do no wrong.⁶

The commentary was particularly bold as it stood in stark contrast to the attitude of the Victorian Government. Premier Harry Lawson wanted to prevent any federal jurisdiction from interfering in matters that hitherto were the purvey of the states. He argued that the 1920 High Court ruling was ‘entirely different from the one that was intended by the founders of the constitution’.⁷ Yet the protests of state governments ultimately proved to be unsuccessful as in December the Privy Council promptly refused to grant leave to the appellants and the challenge was effectively quashed. It was a significant moment for public servants and gave hope to union members that they may foreseeably gain access the Commonwealth Arbitration Court.

Opposition to arbitration did not cease in the aftermath of the Privy Council decision. A federal election was scheduled for 16 December 1922 and Prime Minister William Hughes was committed to introducing legislation exempting all state public servants from the jurisdiction of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court.⁸ In his opening campaign speech at North Sydney the prime minister disparaged the Commonwealth Arbitration Court commenting that it had made ‘dashing awards’ that were ‘most unsatisfactory’.⁹ In response, the VPSU railed against the criticism and snidely remarked that politicians were ‘in terror lest their employees should gain access to a court of justice’.¹⁰ The *PSJV* encouraged the rank and file to ‘vote out all who are against you’.¹¹ As the campaigning intensified the populist Hughes became aware of his political mortality and in a desperate final stand turned to petty insults and cheap witticism. Country Party

⁶ See the *PSJV*, 25 November 1922.

⁷ *Age*, 17 October 1922.

⁸ *PSJV*, 25 November 1922.

⁹ The campaign speech took place on 24 October 1922. See the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 October 1922.

¹⁰ *PSJV*, 25 November 1922.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

MPs were labelled ‘hayseeds’ and he likened the platform of the Labor Party to ‘nine-tenths jam and one-tenths Gregory’s powder’.¹² The finest epithets of Hughes were reserved for Victorian Liberals whom he ridiculed as ‘troglodytes’ and ‘a fungus growth watered by the miasmatic vapours of the metropolis’.¹³ Such drollery drew laughter from the half-attentive campaign crowds but failed to impress undecided voters. Political biographer Laurence Fitzhardinge perhaps said it best when he noted that Hughes was now viewed as a ‘kind of clown, no longer to be taken seriously’.¹⁴ When the votes were tallied the ‘hayseeds’ held the balance of power and the prime ministership of Billy ‘Rat’ Hughes came to an abrupt end. No evidence can be found that union’s council or membership were displeased with the outcome of the election.

As the New Year commenced the threat to arbitration diminished and the VPSU found the space and time to refocus on its on-going industrial campaigns. Again the union sent a deputation to wait upon the Victorian Government to lobby for an independent public service wages board. Union President Ernest Pitt together with Moroney and Marzorini implored the acting premier, Sir William McPherson, to rise to the challenge and create a board. Labor Leader George Prendergast joined the deputation and posed a straightforward question to McPherson: ‘there are more than 200 boards for outside workers, why should not such a Board be established for the Service?’¹⁵ Superannuation also remained a vital issue and the campaign to secure its implementation began to intensify. The *Age* provided the campaign with a shot in the arm by unexpectedly supporting a system of public service superannuation. In an extraordinary about face the newspaper would editorialise that the government should be a ‘model employer’ and that the absence of such a provision ‘makes gloomy the future of many’.¹⁶ An astonished

¹² Quoted in Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger*, 509.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Minutes from the VPSU deputation dated 14 March 1923. See the *PSJV*, 26 March 1923.

¹⁶ *Age* quoted in the *PSJV*, 25 July 1923.

PSJV stated that the new found support was ‘as refreshing as the shade of a rock in a desert land’.¹⁷

By the mid point of 1923 a coalition of Victorian public service and railways unions representing in excess of 30,000 workers had come together to lobby for the introduction of a system of superannuation. VPSU President Ernest Pitt was asked to lead the Joint Superannuation Committee and accepted the challenge with enthusiasm.¹⁸ He was quick to remind public servants that their claims for a retirement income were entirely just and in no way ‘extravagant’ as was asserted by the government.¹⁹ Pitt noted that both the Melbourne City Council and the State Savings Bank gave their employees access to superannuation.²⁰ Additionally, it was observed that commonwealth public servants enjoyed the benefits of superannuation. In July, a delegation of 25 union officials, followed by a gaggle of reporters, waited upon McPherson to demand that the government stop ignoring the claims of public servants.²¹ Pitt laid out a range of ethical and financial arguments in favour of superannuation. He noted that at present many retired public servants were being condemned to a life of poverty.²² It was also highlighted that retention rates in the public service were falling as workers pursued more favourable employment opportunities in the private labour market. The Joint Committee peppered state MPs of all persuasions with letters and pamphlets detailing the benefits that would emanate from introducing a superannuation scheme.²³ In the Legislative Assembly a block of Labor MPs took up the fight and goaded McPherson to act immediately to implement a retirement allowance for government employees.²⁴ Thomas Tunnecliffe would pivot to the problem of retention rates and comment that there was ‘no reason why the private

¹⁷ *PSJV*, 25 July 1923.

¹⁸ For details of the campaign see the *Argus*, 30 June 1923; *Horsham Times*, 4 September 1923.

¹⁹ *PSJV*, 25 June 1923.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 25 August 1923.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 25 September 1923.

²⁴ Thomas Tunnecliffe, George Prendergast and John Lemmon were especially vocal on the matter. See *VPD*, LA, vol. 164, 25 July 1923, 262-265; 422; 490-491.

sector should mop up the brains of the public service'.²⁵ He would also channel the union's primary argument: 'I hold that the man or woman who has given the best years of their service to the community...should be adequately provided for in their declining years'.²⁶

6.2 The Formation of the Australian Public Service Association

In the later stages of 1923 the attention of the VPSU turned to the construction of a federated association to represent the concerns of various state public service unions. The impulse to create a new body was driven solely by a desire to gain access to the Commonwealth Arbitration Court. The VPSU had seemingly put its campaign for the implementation of a wages board on hold. A sombre *PSJV* editorial noted that 'every effort to secure a state tribunal has so far failed'.²⁷ The Nationalist Party would not allow the salaries of public servants to be set by an independent industrial tribunal. To compound the union's sense of grievance it was also observed that the independence of the office of the Public Service Commissioner had been completely dismantled.²⁸ Sections II and III of the *Public Service Act 1915* conferred significant powers upon the Commissioner to manage the employment conditions of public servants.²⁹ Previously, the *Age* had wondered whether the Commissioner—who was the recipient of a significant salary—was anything more than a 'political agent' of the Nationalist government.³⁰ Yet in 1923 it became obvious that the government was intent on contravening the Public Service Act. In one such example the sick-pay of public servants was reduced by half against the advice of Commissioner G. C. Morrison. Public servants were being denied promotions and it was suggested by the *PSJV*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, LA, vol. 164, 25 July 1923, 262.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 264.

²⁷ *PSJV*, 25 January 1923.

²⁸ The powers of the Public Service Commissioner had eroded over the previous decade and now the cabinet sub-committee would make determinations on matters including promotions, increments, appeals, sick pay, allowances, and transfers.

²⁹ *Public Service Act 1915* (Victoria) No. 2713.

³⁰ *Age*, 12 March 1923.

that government departments were significantly undermanned.³¹ The union journal would remark that ‘the Public Service Act has been practically suspended and the control of the service has been placed in the hands of the cabinet’.³²

In light of the government’s strong arm approach to industrial relations the VPSU accelerated its discussions with interstate public service unions on the planned creation of a national federated association. A particularly strong bond was forged with the South Australian Public Service Association. Leslie Claude Hunkin, the secretary of the South Australian Public Service Association (who was also simultaneously a Labor Party MP) was tasked with drafting a constitution that would position any prospectus body towards industrial registration. Hunkin was described by Adelaide’s *Advertiser* newspaper as one of the ‘best known’ union officials in South Australia. He had previously been the secretary of the Distributing Trades Union and in 1915 had helped establish the South Australian branch of the Storemen and Packers’ Union.³³ Hunkin was an adroit operator and widely regarded for his skills of industrial advocacy and his knowledge of federal industrial laws. In the ensuing months he worked diligently to accommodate the disparate interests of the respective states unions.³⁴ In September 1923 more than a dozen delegates from the respective state bodies came to Melbourne to discuss Hunkin’s draft constitution. Tensions were palpable as the New South Wales delegation, led by F. C. Wills, condemned the wording of the document and suggested that the autonomy of any prospective state branch would be subsumed by a national general council.³⁵ Hunkin responded by commenting that such an interpretation was ‘fallacious’ and perhaps motivated by the lack of desire of the New South Wales public servants to apply for industrial registration in the Commonwealth Arbitration Court.³⁶ Following considerable debate the VPSU joined with its South Australian and Tasmanian counterparts to formally ratify the

³¹ See the *PSJV*, 25 February 1924.

³² *Ibid.*, 25 January 1923.

³³ See the *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 17 June 1920.

³⁴ See Carol Fort, “Hunkin, Leslie Claude (1884-1984),” *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 17 (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2007).

³⁵ See the minutes of the APSF meeting dated 26-27 September 1923 in the *PSJV*, 25 October 1923.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

constitution drafted by Hunkin. A new body to be named the Australian Public Service Association (APSA) subsequently was born on 12 November 1923.³⁷ The ASPA was created solely for the purpose of seeking federal industrial registration and would not impact upon the autonomy of state branches. There would be no national secretariat. Tasmanian Public Service Association President E. W. Turner stated that his organisation ‘found no difficulty in swallowing the draft’ and that it was clear that state branch autonomy ‘would not be affected’.³⁸ Representative bodies from Queensland and Western Australia held a different view and joined with New South Wales in deciding against teaming with the APSA.³⁹

A radical change in Victorian public service unionism occurred in the aftermath of the creation of the APSA. The individual constituent associations of the VPSU formally disbanded and became divisions of the Victorian branch of the APSA. It was a significant step and served to consolidate the powers of the branch council of the new union. As a corollary of the APSA’s formation, the VSSTU, led by former VPSU President John Braithwaite, chose to break from the new body.⁴⁰ It was a pivotal moment and marked the end of the brief marriage between state school teachers and departmental public servants. It also marked the end of what can be loosely described as the experiment of Victorian state public service peak unionism. With more than three thousand members the VSSTU had long overshadowed the other constituent associations of the now defunct VPSU. As has also been previously mentioned there was a different approach adopted by teachers to questions of industrial militancy in contrast to other groups of public servants. The 1920 *Engineers’* decision also presented teachers with an

³⁷ The VPSU officially ceased to exist on 31 March 1924.

³⁸ See the minutes of the APSF meeting dated 26-27 September 1923 in the *PSJV*, 25 October 1923.

³⁹ Western Australia was a loose federation at this stage and Queensland had access to an industrial court. New South Wales public servants had lost access to the New South Wales state industrial court in 1922. As such the position of the New South Wales Public Service Association in not joining the APSA raises a number of questions. It is likely that the rivalry with the Victorian branch was a deciding factor in the decision to remain separate.

⁴⁰ Minutes of the VPSU council meeting held on 18 December 1923.

opportunity to join with interstate counterparts to form a national teaching body for the purpose of seeking federal industrial registration.

As the VPSU went about transitioning into the Victorian Branch of the APSA a violent crisis of unprecedented proportions was unfolding on the streets of Melbourne. On the eve of the Spring Racing Carnival, a group of 24 constables, stationed at the Russell Street headquarters, refused to parade for their official duties and initiated what remains the only police strike recorded in the annals of Australian history.⁴¹ Striking policemen left their posts in protest against the use of plain clothed detectives or ‘spooks’ that had been closely monitoring police movements. Agitation among policemen had also long been simmering as they had no access to a pension system.⁴² The strike action commenced on the 31 October 1923 and in the succeeding week more than a third of Victoria’s 1800 strong police force walked off the job. The *Age* sensationally labelled the industrial action ‘the blackest page in the history of the city’.⁴³ It was reported that ‘gangs of hooligans’ were roaming throughout city and looting at will. Packs of interstate ‘crooks’ together with the ‘native underworld’ had briefly taken control of large sections of the central business district.⁴⁴ Riots and skirmishes broke out between competing mobs and the remaining ‘loyalist’ policemen. Hundreds of people ended up in the casualty wards at Royal Melbourne Hospital and four people died as result of the violent maelstrom. At one stage the industrial unrest threatened to spread into the public service as prison officers at Pentridge Penitentiary were rumoured to be considering strike action. It was speculated in the press that warders might down batons and release the prison population onto

⁴¹ For an analysis of the 1923 police strike see Gavin Brown and Robert Haldan, *Days of Violence: The 1923 Police Strike in Melbourne* (Melbourne: Hybrid, 1998); Jacqueline Templeton, “Rebel Guardians,” in *Strikes: Studies in Twentieth Century Australian Social History* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1973); Robert Haldan, “The Victorian Police Strike – 1923,” *The Australian Police Journal*, 36, no. 2 (1982); For national newspaper coverage see the *Age*, 1-5 November 1923; *Herald*, 3-4 November 1923; *Barrier Miner*, 5 November 1923; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 November 1923; *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 2 November 1923.

⁴² The appointment of Alexander Nicholson as Chief Commissioner in February 1922 has also been included as a motivation of striking policemen as he was widely disliked.

⁴³ *Age*, 5 November 1923.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 3 November 1923.

the streets of Coburg.⁴⁵ Premier Lawson responded quickly to the chaos by declaring that the striking police had committed an act of mutiny. He then called on General Sir John Monash to take back the city. Within 48 hours Monash had raised a 5000 strong emergency brigade of 'special constables'.⁴⁶ In the coming days the blatant lawlessness had been put down and the 634 striking police officers were immediately dismissed. Never before had Melbourne been overcome by such bedlam. As the dust settled and the crisis passed a forlorn editorial in the *Age* remarked that the city 'looked dissolute and dishevelled...like a man recovering from an orgy'.⁴⁷

In the succeeding months the repercussions of the police strike would be felt throughout Victoria. A Police Pensions Bill was introduced to the Parliament by the Lawson government in the last week of November 1923 and was hastily enacted. APSA officials soon pointed out that if police officers were deserving of superannuation surely public servants were entitled to the benefit as well.⁴⁸ Alert to the heightened industrial animosity permeating through the ranks of the public service the government elected to boost the salary band of most public servants by between 10 and 25 per cent.⁴⁹ Lower paid fifth class clerical and general officers received a substantial increase in salaries to more closely reflect the setting of their commonwealth counterparts. A somewhat ambivalent editorial in the *PSJV* quipped 'some rise eh'.⁵⁰ Undoubtedly the wage increases were a direct response to the 1923 strike and the perceived threat that public servants might embrace similar action. The *Herald* opined that the public service was alive to militancy and hysterically warned readers that 'nothing would save the community from the approaching calamity'.⁵¹ One of the casualties of the turbulent period was Sir William McPherson who resigned as Treasurer after defiantly announcing that he would not support any measures that would impose a further fiscal burden upon

⁴⁵ "General unrest in the civil service," *Barrier Miner*, 3 November 1923.

⁴⁶ *Age*, 3 November 1923.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 6 November 1923.

⁴⁸ *PSJV*, 24 December 1923.

⁴⁹ *VPD*, vol. 166, LA, 6 December 1923, 2847-2849.

⁵⁰ *PSJV*, 24 December 1923.

⁵¹ *Herald* quoted in *PSJV*, 24 December 1923.

the government. *Labor Call's* assessment of the demise of McPherson was candid: 'He had starved the railways, starved the education department, starved the penal department, starved the police department, and starved the public service generally. At last he starved himself out of a job!'⁵² In the opening *PSJV* editorial of 1924 readily observed that McPherson departed 'unhonoured and unsung'.⁵³

6.3 The Die Is Cast

The beginning of 1924 dawned a new hope for the union now formally known as the Victorian branch of the APSA. Public servants were understandably pleased with the recent salary increases and now set their sights on also securing commonwealth industrial registration. The newly appointed union Secretary Francis Marzorini wrote to the *Age* and once again invoked the theme of citizenship: 'why should we, public servants, who are workers and taxpayers, be segregated from the rest of the community when it comes to salaries?'⁵⁴ Under the leadership of President Pitt and Secretary Marzorini the APSA lodged an application of registration with the relevant authority in January.⁵⁵ It was a pivotal moment in the history of state public service unionism and the *PSJV* would remark that 'the die is cast'.⁵⁶ In light of recent salary revisions it was reported that Victorian Ministers were 'astonished' at the decision of the union to seek registration and believed that the method of dealing with public service matters up until the present was 'equitable and beyond question'.⁵⁷ Attorney-General Robinson together with E. J. D. Guinness—the appointed representative of the New South Wales and South Australian governments—immediately flagged an intention to object to the application.⁵⁸ The objections were premised on the

⁵² *Labor Call*, 29 May 1924.

⁵³ *PSJV*, 25 January 1924.

⁵⁴ Marzorini replaced Moroney as secretary at the beginning of 1924. *Age*, 12 January 1924.

⁵⁵ See the *PSJV*, 25 January 1924.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 25 February 1924.

⁵⁷ *Age*, 9 January 1924.

⁵⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 March 1924.

notion that public servants were ‘not engaged in any industry’.⁵⁹ It was argued that union members fulfilled ‘governmental’ as distinguished from ‘industrial’ functions and that they could not be engaged in an industrial dispute extending beyond a state boundary.⁶⁰ An attempt was being made to re-enforce the legal designation of ‘servants’ upon government employees. Public servants were not classed as industrial citizens. Moreover, the APSA’s agitation was also spiked by when the GDA (a former constituent association of the VPSU) objected to the application on the grounds that general division public servants already had access to the Commonwealth Arbitration Court through their registered body. For the rank and file of the APSA it would be an anxious wait to find out if they were to attain the recognition they had long desired.

The wait was short lived. On 14 March 1924, the APSA was issued a certificate of industrial registration by Alexander Stewart—the registrar of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court.⁶¹ Jubilant union members rejoiced in the determination reading that the Victorian branch of the APSA was an ‘organisation of employees in or in connection with the State Public and Semi-Public Service Industry’.⁶² It was the first time that the industrial status of Victorian professional and clerical division state public servants had been recognised. A rapturous *PSJV* article remarked that ‘arbitration has been a new and efficient weapon forged by the genius of workers for remedying their wrongs’.⁶³ So inspired was the union by the outcome that seized the opportunity to once more advance the cause of superannuation. According to the APSA it was the obligation of a ‘civilised community’ to make adequate provision for the aged and infirm.⁶⁴ Labor Party leader George Prendergast was readily quoted in the *PSJV*: ‘It is a crime against the whole population...to throw men out of employment without means to keep them in

⁵⁹ *PSJV*, 25 February 1924. One of the arguments put forward by the appellants was that there is no legal description of the industry in which the APSA is seeking to be registered and that an industry must produce the possibility of a commercial profit.

⁶⁰ See *Ibid.*, 25 March 1924.

⁶¹ The appeal was heard between March 10 and March 14 1924. Alexander Stewart was the Commonwealth Industrial Registrar.

⁶² See the *PSJV*, 30 April 1924.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 25 March 1924.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

their old age'.⁶⁵ One union member lamented that the elderly public servant is 'tortured with the thought that very soon the government...will throw him unprovided for on the scrap heap'.⁶⁶ A fresh hope manifested that the attitudes of Nationalist and Country Party MPs were beginning to transform. An internal union group dubbed the 'young bloods' imbued the organisation with a contemporary tenacity. Arthur Calwell, who was now the assistant secretary of the Clerical Division of the APSA, was singled out for special praise as an orator of 'no mean order'.⁶⁷ He was named as one of the 'militants of the state service' capable of leading the union to future success.⁶⁸ So buoyant was the mood within the union that the *PSJV* editor Thomas Tunnecliffe even had time to publish quirky stanzas on the mountain tracks of Gippsland.⁶⁹

By June there was an additional cause for optimism within the ranks of the APSA because at last the Labor Party in a dramatic turn of events appeared poised to form government. The timely sequence began in mid March when Premier Lawson, who had spent six months of 1923 touring Europe and North America, faced the prospect of losing the support of the coalition Country Party. As Margaret Fitzherbert has commented by 1924 the relationship between Lawson and the Country Party had become 'poisonous'.⁷⁰ Under the guidance of John Allan the Country Party announced that it would contest every seat at the next election. Nationalist MPs were outraged and considered the decision an act of treachery. In retaliation, Lawson bent on retribution, then brazenly dismissed every sitting Country Party minister and formed a new ministry. In the end the position of Lawson was untenable and in late April he would resign and

⁶⁵ Quoted in *PSJV*, 30 April 1924.

⁶⁶ "Cross-eyed" quoted in the *PSJV*, 30 April 1924.

⁶⁷ See *Ibid.*, 25 March 1924.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* The poem was entitled *Where the Bell Birds Call to Me*.

⁷⁰ Margaret Fitzherbert, "Harry Lawson: Sure and Steady," in Brian Costar and Paul Strangio, eds., *The Victorian Premiers: 1856-2006* (Annandale: Federation Press, 2006), 161.

ignominiously retire to the backbench.⁷¹ Alexander Peacock assumed the premiership once again and led an unstable minority Nationalist government for only a matter of weeks before the Labor Party and a disaffected faction of the Country Party combined to force an election.⁷²

Anticipation and excitement swept through the ranks of the Victorian labour movement on the announcement that a state election would be held on 26 June 1924. The *Industrial Herald* proclaimed 'Labor was never nearer victory'.⁷³ *Union Voice* confidently remarked that the 'long night of Toryism will be over'.⁷⁴ *Labor Call* impertinently dubbed Lawson the 'father of fascism in Australia'.⁷⁵ After extolling the virtues of the Labor Party the *PSJV* provided the following honest appraisal: 'public servants should have little difficulty in making a choice'.⁷⁶ The journal further asserted that the Country and Nationalist parties had 'failed to satisfy public service wants, while on the other hand the Labor Party has consistently supported the public service programme'.⁷⁷ One unnamed union leader would boldly submit that 'those who deny us our rights cannot expect us to record a vote in their favour'.⁷⁸ Mass rallies were soon planned and subsequently held by the APSA and VSSTU on the 19th and 23rd of June to demand that wages boards and a system of superannuation for public servants be implemented.⁷⁹ Union officials were directed to work on the campaign in order to advance the interests of public servants. As a postscript to the election the APSA commented that it had been 'unusually active' during the lead up to the poll and that the rank and file energetically supported Labor candidates.⁸⁰

⁷¹ In the wash up Lawson would put forth his name for the recently vacated speakership in the hope that he could retain a position of some stature within any new parliament. To his disbelief his nomination was defeated.

⁷² Albert Dunstan led the breakaway block of Country Party MPs that became known as the Country Progressive Party.

⁷³ *Industrial Herald*, 5 June 1924.

⁷⁴ *Union Voice*, 25 May 1924.

⁷⁵ *Labor Call*, 29 May 1924.

⁷⁶ *PSJV*, 31 May 1924.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 25 March 1924.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 31 July 1924.

⁷⁹ See *Ibid.*, 30 June 1924.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

After the votes were tallied the Labor Party won 27 of the 65 seats in the Legislative Assembly. While not a majority the Labor Party was now the largest party in the Assembly. A group of delegates from Trades Hall promptly, albeit prematurely, anointed Prendergast the ‘future premier of Victoria’.⁸¹ The APSA and its membership was thrilled with the result and remarked that the ‘Prendy’ was ‘one of the very best friends of the service’.⁸² Following three weeks of tense negotiations the Nationalist Party failed to form a coalition. On 17 July 1924, the septuagenarian Prendergast, secured the support of a number of Country Party MPs and was subsequently commissioned to form a minority government.

At once the Labor government under the leadership of George ‘Windy Mick’ Prendergast went about making a number of important administrative decisions.⁸³ Two royal commissions were appointed; one to examine the price of bread and flour and a second to shed light on the condition and efficiency of the police force in the aftermath of the strike of 1923. Measures to assist the homeless and unemployed were introduced. Financial concessions to WWI veterans were established. A number of public health initiatives were implemented to combat mental illness and the rise of tuberculosis and sexually transmitted diseases. The *PSJV* confidently announced that ‘with the advent of the Prendergast government a new era has commenced for the public service of this state. The new government is making an honest attempt to right service wrongs’.⁸⁴ In his opening policy address the new premier announced that legislation providing for an independent public service wages board and a superannuation scheme would be formulated.⁸⁵ The government would also withdraw the Victorian objection to the industrial registration of the APSA that had been jointly lodged months earlier by the Attorneys-General of Victoria and New South Wales.⁸⁶ In another move that

⁸¹ Cited in Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory*, 145.

⁸² *PSJV*, 30 June 1924.

⁸³ For a detailed account of the actions of the Prendergast government see Phillip Deery, *Labor Interlude in Victorian Politics: The Prendergast Government* (Honours Thesis, Latrobe University, 1972), 9-10.

⁸⁴ *PSJV*, 31 August 1924.

⁸⁵ *VPD*, vol. 167, LA, 26 August 1924, 100.

⁸⁶ Western Australia and South Australia had previously been parties to the appeal but removed their objections in response to their changing political circumstances.

delighted the union the cabinet sub-committee that had in effect managed public service employment conditions was abolished. Union members were elated by the initial direction of the newly formed government and hoped that it could hold the reins of power long enough to see its complete agenda enacted. Even the *Herald* would offer their lukewarm approval to the experiment of Labor in office: 'it will do no more harm for our Labor politicians to learn something of the difficulties attached to ministerial office'.⁸⁷ A sense of pride also enveloped the APSA upon the appointment of its own Thomas Tunnecliffe as the new Victorian Chief Secretary.

So pleased was the APSA with the formation of a Labor government that the *PSJV* thought it an opportune time to broach the subject of affiliation with both Melbourne Trades Hall and the Labor Party. The journal would posit the following question: 'why should workers in government employment because of the politics of their 'boss' refrain from being connected with the Labor Party?'⁸⁸ It was observed that the Victorian branch of the ARU had affiliated with the Labor Party recently and as a corollary had advanced its industrial standing. As union members contemplated that possibility the APSA spoke freely on the treatment public servants received from their former employers: 'an examination of the past reveals service injustice and tyrannical treatment writ large'.⁸⁹ As if to dovetail on the back of the rapid pace of political change the neglected status of women in public service began to register genuine attention. Feature articles calling for equal pay appeared in the pages of the *PSJV* in four consecutive editions in the middle of 1924.⁹⁰ A familiar name in Florence Johnson, the former women's secretary of the VSSF and a noted feminist, wrote glowingly of the union's growing commentary on the predicament of service women. She encouraged the union to further campaign in favour of 'uniformity of service conditions irrespective of sex'.⁹¹ Gender equality had been comprehensively overlooked by the union in the aftermath of the teachers equal pay campaign of 1919. Women

⁸⁷ *Herald*, 17 July 1924.

⁸⁸ *PSJV*, 31 July 1924.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 31 August 1924.

⁹⁰ See the May, June, July and August editions of the *PSJV*.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 30 June 1924.

had barely raised a mention in the *PSJV* and the position of women's secretary had ceased to exist as the union went through multiple re-configurations. Now the union would adopt the following claim: 'for positions classed as equal both male and female should be entitled to the same reward.'⁹² However, the extent to which the APSA took the matter of gender equality seriously is contentious. In one article that appeared in the *PSJV* the author reveals what is quite clearly a different opinion: 'the only defence left to the male portion of the race is to co-operate to secure for her as an economic unit the remuneration necessary to prevent her becoming a factor in his degradation'.⁹³

In a cruel turn the APSA's sense of euphoria would quickly fade as the realities of political authority became apparent. Support for Prendergast on the floor of the Legislative Assembly was collapsing. The Labor government was in office but not in power and by September the signs were ominous.⁹⁴ Attempts at appeasing the Country Party through a range of rural policies and concessions eventually failed. Any notion of a honeymoon period offered by the mainstream print media had ended. Rather dramatically the *Age* now dubbed the Labor frontbench 'communistic' and akin to a 'Soviet Ministry'.⁹⁵ To further dampen the mood of the union in October the appeal against the industrial registration of the APSA was heard before the Commonwealth Arbitration Court's President Justice Charles Powers. A lengthy judgement handed down by Powers on 13 October 1924 upheld the appeal on the grounds that the APSA was 'not an association of employees of any recognised or proved specified industry'.⁹⁶ Powers would reason that the 'Association was not a craft association entitled to registration in respect of specified craft occupations in all industries'. The ruling would also posit that the APSA included members that could potentially be covered by 'other registered organisations'.⁹⁷ Justice Powers explained his judgement by noting that

⁹² *PSJV*, 31 July 1924.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ See Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory*, 146.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁹⁶ See the Commonwealth Arbitration Court decision in full in the *PSJV*, September-October 1924. Also see the *Australian Worker*, 15 October 1924.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

of the other public service unions that had received registration many had more specifically identified the industry in which they were operating. In a stunning comment he would also suggest that some public service unions remained registered simply because they had not had their registrations tested. It was a devastating blow for the APSA. A despondent Secretary Marzorini remarked that much time and money had been wasted in pursuit of the industrial registration. An emotive piece of editorial prose in the *PSJV* singled out New South Wales Attorney-General Thomas Bavin for harsh criticism as the ‘arch-priest’ of the forces opposing registration who had denied Victorian public servants their rights of industrial citizenship.⁹⁸

For APSA members the Labor Party was a beacon of hope and led to a brief but critical shift in the way that public service employees were regarded. The Labor Party at once acknowledged the industrial citizenship of public servants and sought to construct a relationship with its employees founded upon rights. By October both Prendergast and Tunnecliffe were cognisant that their days in government were numbered. Handing down its first and only budget the Labor Party increased taxes on the rich and gave relief to low-income earners. Nationalist MP Sir Frederic Egglestone perhaps said it best when he remarked that the Labor ministry only had to be ‘given enough rope and they would hang themselves’.⁹⁹ Even so, as Strangio has pointed out, the Labor Party was realistic enough to know that they were nothing but ‘a short term interloper on the government benches’.¹⁰⁰ On 12 November 1924, Allan and Peacock combined to successfully move a motion of no confidence against the government and days later Prendergast resigned. In what was a fitting epitaph to Labor’s brief reign, in late October, Tunnecliffe, knowing the end was near, tabled two Bills in the Legislative Assembly: one to provide for an independent public service wages

⁹⁸ *PSJV*, September-October 1924.

⁹⁹ *Labor Call*, 28 August 1924.

¹⁰⁰ See Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory*, 151; Peter Love, in Brian Costar and Paul Strangio, eds., *The Victorian Premiers: 1856-2006*, 178-9.

board and another to provide for a public service superannuation scheme.¹⁰¹ They were read only once.

6.3 Conclusion

Union members confronted an uncertain future towards the end of 1922. The right of state public servants to access the Commonwealth Arbitration Court was challenged by Nationalist Party premiers in the Privy Council in London. Prime Minister William Hughes also spoke out against the operation of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court and threatened to radically reduce its powers. In the face of these threats the union moved ahead and campaigned for the creation of a public service system of superannuation. It would also turn its attention to securing registration in the Commonwealth Arbitration Court after the ignominious defeat of Hughes at the 1922 federal election. In this pursuit the VPSU would cease to exist and a new organisation in the Australian Public Service Association was formed. Within months the APSA had successfully received a certificate of registration with the Commonwealth Arbitration Court. Union members and officials rejoiced at the outcome and began to chart how Victorian public servants might avail themselves of the powers of the Court. In the aftermath of the 1923 Police Strike the fortunes of public servants were again boosted as the Nationalist Party government of Harry Lawson agreed to public service salaries increases. One of the eventual corollaries of the strike was seen in the elevation of the Victorian Labor Party amid the political chaos of 1924. With Labor in government the union's hopes of gaining access to an independent public service wages board and a superannuation scheme were bolstered. Yet the elation was brief. Soon the industrial registration of the APSA was revoked after the appeal of the New South Wales government was upheld by the President of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court Justice Charles Powers. The precarious grip of the Victorian Labor Party on the reins of government was also beginning to loosen. While in office the Labor government was not in power. As the end of 1924 neared a no-confidence motion was successfully moved against the

¹⁰¹ *VPD*, vol. 167, LA, 28 October 1924, 1127.

government and Labor's time was up. Dejected union members would once again be forced to face the political realities of conservative rule in Victoria.

Chapter 7 Superannuation the Rise of Arthur Calwell 1924-1928

A spirit of despondency briefly pervaded the Victorian branch of the APSA in the wake of the change of government on 18 November 1924. Union members mused upon what the Labor Party might have accomplished if it had been afforded more time to govern. Promises made by the ousted Prendergast administration to the union rank and file now shattered 'like the proverbial pie-crust'.¹ Commonwealth industrial registration was lost and the planned implementation of a superannuation scheme was clouded in uncertainty. The APSA hastily impressed upon the new premier John Allan that discontent among the ranks of public servants was rising. Union members looked back to the premiership of Harry Lawson with disdain and hoped that Allan might be more conducive to the claims of public servants. The union's persistent lobbying soon paid dividends as the quest for a superannuation scheme came to a successful end. It was a significant moment in the history of the Victorian public service and the APSA. Delighted union members pressed on and clamoured for the creation of an independent public service wages board. Arthur Calwell and John McKellar had taken charge of the APSA and began to forge a stronger relationship with the Victorian Labor Party. When Labor leader Edmond Hogan came to power in May of 1927 the rank and file hoped that immediate action would be taken to establish the industrial rights of public servants. Yet as this chapter details by the middle of 1928 the standing of the Hogan government was precarious and the prospects of public servants looked grim. In the end the promises made to Victorian public servants would remain unfulfilled. The VPSU had legitimate grounds for questioning the value of its close relationship with the Labor Party.

7.1 The Worker Feels he is a Mere Puppet

Labor's November 1924 demise sent the APSA and its members into what can be described as an institutional depression. In an emotive *PSJV* editorial the immediate and overriding mood of public servants was revealed: 'Discontent

¹ *PSJV*, 31 December 1924.

stalks brazenly through the departments. Young and old, married and single alike are dissatisfied with the prevailing conditions of employment'.² As John Allan assumed the premiership he was promptly reminded of the 'sad plight of the unfortunate men and women who have been cast adrift after devoting the best years of their lives to the service'.³ It had not escaped the attention of the union that a number of Melbourne's major banking institutions and business firms had established generous superannuation schemes.⁴ Union officials also warned the new coalition government that 'scores of promising young men' would soon resign if the concerns of public servants were not favourably addressed.⁵ Secretary Francis Marzorini perhaps said it best in pointing out that public servants were simply growing 'restless'.⁶ One union member fulminated that 'the worker feels he is a mere puppet' in the hands of those setting the conditions of employment.⁷ Anxious public servants looked upon their new political masters with a healthy dose of scepticism. Yet the rank and file remained adamant that their claims to an independent industrial tribunal and superannuation scheme were 'just' and rightly proportional to the 'importance of the work performed'.⁸ Indeed, the brief ascension of the Labor Party solidified the conviction of union members that there were no legitimate grounds upon which to restrict their industrial citizenship.

The political oscillations that marked the Victorian Parliament in 1924 can be directly attributed to the internal machinations and posturing of the Country Party. Following the mid-year election the Country Party remained the smallest grouping within the 65 seat Legislative Assembly. Yet, through an astute display of political strategy it in a position to dictate the composition of the Victorian Government by November 1924. Such adroit manoeuvring is more impressive

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. Public service pensions were abolished on 24 December 1881. *An Act to Abolish the Payment of Superannuation or other allowances in the case of Persons hereafter entering the Public Service 1881* (Victoria) no. 710.

⁴ *VPD*, vol. 169, LA, 18 August 1925, 490.

⁵ *PSJV*, 29 November 1924.

⁶ Ibid. Also see the *Argus*, 26 November 1924.

⁷ Contributed letter in the *PSJV*, 29 November 1924.

⁸ *PSJV*, 29 November 1924.

when one considers that the Country Party itself was not a harmonious body. Political historian Paul Strangio has observed that the divisions on the non-Labor side on politics were almost entirely a consequence ‘of the peculiarities of the Country Party in Victoria’.⁹ Rival factions of wheat farming progressives from the Mallee and Wimmera region were increasingly in conflict with dairy farming conservatives located in Gippsland and the Goulbourn Valley. John Allan and his conservative cabal were the dominant grouping within the Country Party. Political scientist Brian Costar contends that Allan’s faction was driven by an innate conservatism that loathed ‘anything that smacked of socialism’.¹⁰ It is therefore astounding that the socialist minority Prendergast government had lasted so long. Historian Bruce Graham explains that the fleeting alignment between Labor and the Country Party was a means by which Allan could secure funding for rural infrastructure projects. It also was designed to send a clear message to the Nationalist Party that he and his colleagues would not be taken for granted.¹¹ When the Nationalist Party leader Alexander Peacock finally re-engaged the Country Party in late 1924 it quickly became apparent that Allan would accept nothing less than the premiership. During the negotiations, Peacock, backed into a corner, acquiesced to the demands of the Country Party and relinquished his party’s claims to half of the ministerial portfolios. An obscure rural based party that had only formed in 1917 was now the supreme political force in Victoria.

For public servants the ascension of John Allan and the Country Party in the new composite government was greeted with a sense of caution. It remained unclear how the premier and his elevated party might respond to the desires of union members. Little was known of Allan’s ultimate policy intentions and governing style. It can be assumed that union officials would have taken the time to examine the premier’s political career and philosophical progression. Allan was born on 27 March 1866 at Lancefield in the Macedon ranges region. In 1873 his Scottish migrant family relocated to the central Victorian farming town of Kyabram where

⁹ See Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory*, 201.

¹⁰ Brian Costar, “John Allan: The First Agrarian,” in Brian Costar and Paul Strangio, eds., *The Victorian Premiers: 1856-2006*, 190.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

they acquired a plot of agricultural land.¹² As a young man Allan soon developed an interest in politics after playing a minor role in the short-lived Kyabram Reform Movement at the turn of the 20th century. The radical small government mantra of the 'Movement' had a powerful and lingering impact upon the communities of central Victoria. APSA officials were understandably apprehensive believing that Allan might draw upon such sentiments and pursue a policy agenda defined by retrenchment and austerity. Of course the long held attitudes of the Nationalist Party were more widely understood by the union. Under the rule of Premier Harry Lawson the concerns of public servants had been readily dismissed. There had been almost no movement on the implementation of an independent public service wages board or system of superannuation. An impassioned *PSJV* editorial spoke of the 'scandalous sweating of men' and a service that had been 'starved' during Lawson's premiership.¹³ One of the chief proponents of public service austerity was former Treasurer and shrewd Nationalist Party powerbroker Sir William McPherson. In the aftermath of the change of government McPherson remarked that he had commonly seen public servants gathered together during business hours 'smoking cigarettes, spitting on the floor and wasting time'.¹⁴ It was a claim directed squarely at the rank and file of the union. An indignant Marzorini responded to the wild allegations by commenting that the habits of public servants were 'at least as clean as those of the people with whom Sir William mixes'.¹⁵

By the end of 1924 the general population had grown weary of the volatile nature of the Victorian parliament. In the space of less than 12 months the government had changed hands four times. Naturally, the *Argus* was especially pleased that the Labor Party no longer held the reigns of power. In contrast, the *Age* was decidedly less enthusiastic and quipped that 'the latest [government] is a hybrid, a species nature never encourages'.¹⁶ It went on to comment that the preceding year was one in which MPs had simply devoted 'their entire energies to political

¹² Lancefield is approximately 60 kilometers north of Melbourne.

¹³ *PSJV*, 28 February 1925.

¹⁴ *Age*, 4 December 1924.

¹⁵ *PSJV*, 31 December 1924.

¹⁶ *Age*, 18 November 1924.

intrigue and pay'.¹⁷ Given the changing allegiances of the Country Party there is some truth to this interpretation. Nonetheless, it is important to note that optimism among the Victorian working class in the aftermath of the transition to Country/Nationalist rule was not entirely extinguished. On one plane a sense of satisfaction was expressed within the trade union movement that the Labor Party had demonstrated that it had the ability to govern.¹⁸ The official organ of the Party was adamant that the coalition government would 'disappear like mist before the morning sun' and that Labor in its glory would again 'occupy the centre of the solar system'.¹⁹ Similarly, the *Railways Union Gazette* was 'exhilarated by the certainty that Labor was destined to triumph again'.²⁰ Of the Labor Party's brief stint in office the *PSJV* reflected that it was 'unfortunate for the service that the Labor government was not given a longer lease of life'.²¹ On the vexed issues of an independent industrial tribunal and superannuation scheme the union further observed that the Prendergast administration 'went much further than its predecessors upon these all important matters'.²²

As the Christmas period passed the APSA and its membership looked to the Allan administration in the hope that it might be more amenable to the implementation of its two primary goals.²³ It was noted by the union that the 'vice-like grip' on the salaries and conditions of the men and women of the public service was a 'blot on the State's escutcheon'.²⁴ Unrest 'born of injustice' was said to be stalking the halls of public service departments and threatening to tear apart the machinery of government.²⁵ Again the union returned to its guiding mantra: 'Public servants do

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ See Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory*, 2012; Deery, "Labor interlude in Victorian Politics," (Honours Thesis, Latrobe University, 1972), 62-4.

¹⁹ *Labor Call*, 13 November 1924.

²⁰ *Railways Union Gazette*, 20 December 1924.

²¹ *PSJV*, 29 November 1924.

²² Ibid.

²³ Federal registration was no longer at the forefront of the union's list of objectives. At this stage the union was waiting to hear the outcome of the Teachers' Union application. This would be unsuccessful and the focus on federal arbitration would further diminish. See the APSA Annual Report of 1925 for a more detailed explanation.

²⁴ *PSJV*, 28 February 1925.

²⁵ Ibid.

not seek differential treatment—their desire is to obtain equal rights with their fellow citizens and taxpayers’.²⁶ The union soon turned its attention to Nationalist leader Sir Alexander Peacock in the hope that he might be more receptive to the claims of public servants. Peacock, who had assumed the position of Treasurer and Minister for Labour, was considered an ‘old friend’ of the union and had been one of the original architects of Victoria’s system of wages boards. Dubbed the ‘strong-man’ of the government he was implored to complete his work and lay the ‘coping-stone of justice’ to the wages board system by implementing a public service board.²⁷ Yet colleagues of Peacock were less enthusiastic about the introduction of a public service industrial tribunal. McPherson together with Chief Secretary Dr. Stanley Argyle were even congratulated by the *Age* for refusing to pay bonuses to public servants who had worked overtime shifts in the Health Department.²⁸ In the face of continued opposition the union also called the rank and file to greater action. It noted that the industrial rights of public servants would never be expanded and secured by taking defeats ‘supinely’.²⁹ ‘Organisation’ and ‘solidarity’ were adopted as the watchwords of the APSA.³⁰ Strengthening the union through recruitment and activism was heavily promoted as the only way in which to win campaigns. Special mention was also made of the ‘weakness and folly’ of ‘nonchalant’ public servants who refused to join the union.³¹ According to the union such individuals would ‘dieth’ to themselves if they remained cut off from their brethren.³²

On the potential implementation of a superannuation scheme for public servants the APSA sensed that a significant opportunity was at hand. The introduction of a pension for police officers in 1923 served as an impetus for public service action. The constant lobbying of the APSA and its members was at last paying dividends

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ *PSJV*, 31 January 1925. See Alan Gregory, “Peacock, Sir Alexander James (1861–1933),” *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 11. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1988.

²⁸ *Age*, 21 February 1925; 26 February 1925.

²⁹ *PSJV*, 31 March 1925.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

as the government committed to listing a Bill to provide for the creation of a scheme in the upcoming legislative session.³³ An excited *PSJV* entry recorded that a ‘gleam of light’ had appeared and that the prospects of unionists were seemingly ‘brighter now than they have been for years’.³⁴ Of course many remained sceptical of the intentions of the Allan administration. No details of the Bill had been released. The *PSJV* acknowledged that uncertainty still existed: ‘Hopes have been dashed so often in the past that among many dubiety will be felt that this is only another mock’.³⁵ Members were warned to be vigilant as they were ‘not yet out of the woods’.³⁶ A sense of urgency overcame the union. One of the two principle objectives of the organisation was now within reach. During question time in the Legislative Assembly the opposition challenged the government to get a move along and table the relevant Bill. Labor MP Arthur Hughes quipped that elderly public servants or ‘twilighters’ would be ‘dead before they get a superannuation scheme’.³⁷ Responding to Peacock’s statement that a Bill was imminent the opposition leader George Prendergast voiced his dismay: ‘Coming on! We have heard that for a number of years.’³⁸ Former union secretary, Thomas Tunnecliffe, sat besides Prendergast in the chamber and made sure that the industrial concerns of public servants were given proper consideration. Turning to verse *Labor Call* implored members to challenge the controls of those who opposed workplace rights: ‘Truckle not to kings and masters, they are men, the same as you’.³⁹ Such reasoning would have inspired many within the service who had links to the Labor Party.

By the mid point of 1925 the agitation of union members for a superannuation scheme had reached its zenith. Promises made by the government that a scheme would be shortly introduced remained unfulfilled. Months passed and still no formal word on an implementation timeframe had materialised. Ernest Pitt

³³ Quarterly Progress Report of the Joint Superannuation Campaign Committee dated 31 December 1924 in the *PSJV*, 31 January 1925.

³⁴ *PSJV*, 30 April 1925.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *VPD*, vol. 169, LA, 8 July 1925, 43.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 137.

³⁹ *Labor Call*, 8 January 1925.

together with Arthur Calwell and John McKellar (the newly appointed secretary) met with Premier Allan and demanded that the matter be given immediate consideration.⁴⁰ In the tense encounter Calwell was unequivocal: ‘while you have been generous to the police you have not been just to us’.⁴¹ Finally, Peacock, keenly aware of the politics of the matter, rose on 11 August 1925 in the Legislative Assembly and tabled a public service Superannuation Bill. After a protracted wait the union rank and file were understandably delighted. The campaign for the measure can be traced to the 1890s and the various reformations of the Victorian branch of the APSA had been at its forefront. A week after the Bill was tabled the second reading debate commenced. Union members packed the gallery to follow the proceedings. Calwell and McKellar were also present. The *Argus* overheard and reported the musings of public servants: ‘this is either the night that makes me or fordoes me’.⁴² In the ensuing debate Peacock confessed that it was a poor reflection on Victoria that a superannuation scheme for public servants had been ‘so long delayed’.⁴³ An offended Tunnecliffe would not allow the government to now claim credit for the implementation of the system. Drawing upon his past experience in the Clerical Association (CA) he reminded MPs that the Nationalist Party and its forebears had opposed the measure for three decades.⁴⁴ And yet to a certain degree Peacock’s limited advocacy on behalf of public servants set him apart from the majority of his party colleagues. As John Chesterman has commented Peacock was no ideologue and ‘could have passed as a Labor man’.⁴⁵ One can conclude that had McPherson been treasurer at this point in time then such a measure might have been indefinitely postponed.

A wave of disappointment overcame some sections of the APSA upon receiving a copy of the Bill. Many of the concerns held by union members had in no way

⁴⁰ *PSJV*, 25 August 1925.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Argus*, 19 August 1925.

⁴³ *VPD*, vol. 169, LA, 18 August 1925, 497.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 497.

⁴⁵ John Chesterman, “Alexander Peacock: The Laughing Pragmatist,” in Brian Costar and Paul Strangio, eds., *The Victorian Premiers: 1856-2006* (Annandale: Federation Press, 2006), 150-1.

been addressed. A meeting of the joint union superannuation campaign organisation was immediately called. Railways unionists joined with APSA members to consider the most appropriate way to respond. Calwell questioned the advantages of a superannuation scheme paid for almost entirely by hard-working union members.⁴⁶ Public servants were being asked to purchase contributory superannuation units that could only be accessed following their retirement at the age of 65. It functioned as a system of enforced savings. As such public servants would fund a large portion of their own superannuation payments between the ages of 65 and 70. One union official quipped that most of public servants would be 'dead' by the age of 70 and therefore the benefits of the proposed scheme would be limited.⁴⁷ To qualify for the full quota of superannuation the majority of public servants would need to work until the age of 65. No provision was made for temporary officers regardless of their length of employment. Responding to the Bill, one member, who went by the alias 'Negligible four-fifth', commented that working until the age of 65 would leave him 'incapacitated, mentally and physically'.⁴⁸ Internal tensions were also beginning to appear as a group of 200 disgruntled clerical officers requested that an extraordinary meeting be called to insist that the union lobby harder for the provision to include a retirement age of 60. Another officer summed up the mood of his colleagues by sombrely remarking that the low salary levels of many public servants would make the 'burden of the contribution to the fund particularly heavy'.⁴⁹

As debate in the Legislative Assembly progressed a number of amendments were made to the original Bill. Both the Labor Party and the Joint Union Superannuation Committee pushed for a more generous system. Temporary offices were now included in the scheme and women were permitted to retire at the age of 60.⁵⁰ Technical teachers formerly excluded were now also able to access superannuation. Premier Allan commented in the Legislative Assembly that 'if you want a contented Service then you have to give them good

⁴⁶ *Argus*, 20 August 1925.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 26 August 1925.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 29 August 1925.

⁵⁰ See *VPD*, vol. 170, LA, 28 October 1915, 1919-1932.

conditions’.⁵¹ In response Labor MP James McDonald challenged the premier’s remark: ‘you think a superannuation scheme would make the public service contented?’⁵² Picking up on the comment the *PSJV* made clear that ‘to hold out to junior officers...the job’s comfort that a superannuation fund will provide for a senile indigence, savours of grim humour few will be able to appreciate’.⁵³ And yet the introduction of a superannuation scheme was a significant achievement union members. Many public servants would be spared a retirement marred by enforced austerity and in some cases poverty. It was noted by the union that while the scheme was not perfect it was the base upon which a more generous scheme would be built.

On 24 of November 1925 the *Superannuation Act* was given royal assent and the measure became operative on 1 January 1926.⁵⁴ APSA President Ernest Pitt was given special praise for the many years he spent leading the campaign. He was also venerated for his ability to bring together the various public service unions to fight for the condition. Both the ATU and the VSSTU expressed their sincere gratitude to Pitt.⁵⁵ When elections for the superannuation board were held the APSA supported the candidacy of Pitt as the representative of non-railways public servants. To the dismay of many the VSSTU ran an opposing ticket on behalf of Ronald McDonald. Given the size and numerical strength of the VSSTU the candidacy of Pitt was doomed and McDonald was elected to the board. Secretary of the Professional Division of the APSA, John Moroney, was indignant and labelled McDonald a ‘would be hero’ who had spread ‘wholly unwarranted rumours’ in a cunning and shameful exhibition of ‘disloyalty’.⁵⁶

7.2 Political Battles are Fought with the Gloves Off

⁵¹ *VPD*, vol. 170, LA, 17 November 1925, 2133.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2213.

⁵³ *PSJV*, 30 November 1925.

⁵⁴ *Superannuation Act 1925* (Victoria) no. 3408.

⁵⁵ *PSJV*, 30 November 1925.

⁵⁶ Letter authored by John Moroney, “State Superannuation Board Election.” Archives of the Community and Public Sector Union Victorian Branch/SPSF, January 1926.

A spring in the APSA's step was evident in the aftermath of the introduction of superannuation. The union quickly turned its attention to securing an independent public service wages board. One union member was certain that greater success would follow in 1926: 'if every member does his best, this year should witness the Tribunal as an accomplished fact'.⁵⁷ Calwell urged members to stand for an independent tribunal and to 'show by their action that they both desire and deserve just treatment.'⁵⁸ Any hope of attaining registration in the Commonwealth Arbitration Court was indefinitely put on hold pending the outcome of the application for registration of the VSSTU.⁵⁹ In the short term a claim was made upon the government to immediately revise the salaries of public servants. When the union compiled the relevant financial figures it became apparent that the salaries of public servants had for the previous 14 years fallen behind the rising cost of living.⁶⁰ Calwell opined that he and his colleagues 'have been unjustly and indirectly taxed the difference between what we have got and what we should have got'.⁶¹ Adding to this sentiment a *PSJV* entry warned that the continuing hardships facing public servants were fuelling dissent and radicalism: 'Propagandist material for strikes and revolutionary change come from the privations of the family'.⁶² Union members were now convinced that the fight for greater industrial rights was trending well and would soon bear fruit.

At the heart of the campaign for a public service wages board were two figures: Arthur Calwell and John McKellar. Calwell had risen steadily through the elected ranks of the union over the previous decade and in 1925 became the President of the Clerical Division. He commenced his public service career in the Agricultural Department as a clerk at the age of 16 and in 1923 transferred to the Victorian

⁵⁷ *PSJV*, 25 March 1926.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ For an analysis of the Teachers' Union application see W. James McDonald, "Some aspects of the unionism and professionalism of teachers in Victoria: The Victorian Teachers' Union, 1926 – 1936" (Master's Thesis: Monash University, 1978).

⁶⁰ According to the union the cost of living had increased by 64 per cent since 1913 while salaries had increased by only 25 per cent in real pound sterling terms. See the *PSJV*, 30 November 1925.

⁶¹ *PSJV*, 25 August 1925.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 30 November 1925.

Treasury. From the beginning of his working life he was committed to advancing the cause of Irish nationalism and political Catholicism. During WWI he advocated fervently on behalf of the anti-conscription movement. As the secretary of the Young Ireland Society at a time of heightened sectarian tension his activities prompted military intelligence officials to briefly place him under surveillance.⁶³ At the tender age of 19 he also became the secretary of the Melbourne branch of the Labor Party. In a biography of Calwell that appeared in the *PSJV* it was perceptively observed that he was destined to be in the ‘ruck where political battles are fought with the gloves off’.⁶⁴ He cut his political teeth



Figure 2: “John McKellar” *Labor Call*, 12 March 1925.

working within the APSA. And yet interestingly Calwell’s political biographers have failed to seriously examine his time within the union.⁶⁵ Even Calwell’s autobiography dedicates minimal attention to his 16 years in the union. It can be speculated that Calwell’s later experience with the union led him to overlook this period in his life. Joining Calwell in the leadership group was John McKellar who succeeded Francis Marzorini as secretary of the APSA in March 1925.⁶⁶ McKellar came to the union as a skilled organiser and a frequent contributor to *Labor Call*. He had stood as a Labor

⁶³ See NAA, Department of Defence, A8911, Arthur Augustus Calwell, 1915-1918; Mary Elizabeth Calwell, *I Am Bound to Be True: The Life and Legacy of Arthur A. Calwell 1896–1973* (Preston: Mosaic Press, 2012), 11. At one-point detectives raided the family home and later interrogated Calwell. All the authorities found was a collection of radical literature and letters on Irish nationalism, trade unionism and socialism.

⁶⁴ *PSJV*, 25 August 1925.

⁶⁵ For example see Colm Kiernan, *Calwell: A Personal and Political Biography*; Calwell, *I Am Bound to Be True*. Calwell was a member of the union for 16 years commencing in 1916.

⁶⁶ *PSJV*, 28 February 1925.

candidate at a number of elections and remained a budding young politician.⁶⁷ One can surmise that his involvement with the Labor Party was a deciding factor in his appointment as APSA secretary. Both men shared a similar passion to expand the fortunes of the union by placing a greater emphasis upon industrial and political action. According to McKellar 'the wheel that squeaked the loudest got the most grease'.⁶⁸

The strong links between the APSA leadership and the Labor Party brought to the fore the question of political affiliation. Calwell and McKellar together with former Secretaries Marzorini and Tunnecliffe were all prominent figures within the party. Marzorini, upon retiring in 1925, recommended that now was the time to officially partner with the Victorian ALP.⁶⁹ He would remark that all those who had placed their faith in non-Labor politicians have been 'led up a blind alley'.⁷⁰ Calwell also encouraged the union to seriously consider political affiliation. Over the previous four years the Labor Party had recruited a number of Victorian trade unions to its ranks. The powerful ARU signed up and was soon followed by the Seamen's Union, Amalgamated Engineering Union and Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Enginemen. By 1926 there was a greater incentive for unions to join the party as its prospects of governing improved.⁷¹ Industrial fundamentalism was on the decline as the labour movement partially shifted its activity to the political arena.

A transition was also occurring within the Labor Party itself. Prendergast resigned as Labor leader on 14 April 1926 and Edmond (Ned) Hogan was elected as his successor. Standing at over 190cm with 'piercing blue eyes' the former timber-

⁶⁷ At the 1925 federal election McKellar unsuccessfully stood as a candidate in the seat of Balaclava. In 1924 he contested the state by-election and general election for the seat of West Gippsland.

⁶⁸ *PSJV*, 25 July 1925.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ See Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory*, 153.

cutter was rumoured to be a 'close confidante and friend of John Wren'.⁷² The *Power Without Glory* version of events has Wren anointing Hogan over fellow aspirant and former union secretary Thomas Tunnecliffe.⁷³ However, it is most likely that they were nothing more than casual acquaintances.⁷⁴ What Hogan did possess was a broad electoral appeal. Peter Love contends that Hogan's farming and rural background was vital for Labor if it was going to 'break out of its urban electoral enclave'.⁷⁵ In observing the upward trend of the Labor Party the APSA wondered if affiliation might at some future moment expedite the establishment of a public service wages board. Union minutes give reference to a special council meeting that was conducted to discuss affiliation. One can only imagine the impassioned pro-affiliation advocacy from the likes of Calwell and McKellar during the discussion. Be that as it may, given the unique employment position of public servants, the union council ultimately decided against pursuing affiliation at this point.⁷⁶ Still, as the *PSJV* noted, a 'growth of political consciousness' was again occurring among the rank and file of the APSA.⁷⁷

During the course of 1926 the Allan administration gave strong indications that the government was preparing to reduce the size of the public service in the lead up to the next election. An audit report commissioned by Chief Secretary Argyle and authored by accountant J. Wallace Ross was tasked with examining the working methods of public service departments. Its pre-ordained findings caused a considerable sensation within the media when released in late 1926. Newspapers

⁷² Pam Jonas, "Hogan, Edmond John (Ned) (1883-1964)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 9, (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1983); Egglestone papers cited in Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory*, 162.

⁷³ Frank Hardy, *Power Without Glory* (Melbourne: Realist Printing and Publishing, 1950). This version is somewhat doubtful although as Hardy writes 'the tentacles of the West octopus reached out to grip all manner of men.' James Griffin, *John Wren* (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2004), 133.

⁷⁴ Sir John Jungwirth, who worked for thirteen Victorian premiers as a private secretary, thought there to be nothing sinister at play: "Wren and Hogan close associates? I never really knew. Certainly confidants of Wren saw Hogan from time to time at Parliament House." Quoted in Griffin, *John Wren*, 133.

⁷⁵ Love, "Elmslie, Prendergast and Hogan," in Brian Costar and Paul Strangio, eds., *The Victorian Premiers: 1856-2006*, 180.

⁷⁶ APSA Council meeting minutes 17 August 1925.

⁷⁷ *PSJV*, 25 March 1926.

declared that the public service was bogged down in ‘Astonishing Red Tape’.⁷⁸ Public servants were accused of being ‘grossly incompetent’.⁷⁹ Ross was quoted as stating that a ‘fetish of foolscap’ had developed.⁸⁰ One of the more extreme suggestions found within the document was a call to abolish both the Public Works Department and the Public Health Commission.⁸¹ In what would surely disturb the union a recommendation was made to give the Public Service Commissioner greater powers to unilaterally determine the working conditions of public servants. However, the report predominantly focused on minor details and rather trivial inconsistencies within government department.⁸² No recommendation was made to provide for an independent public service wages board. In fact it appears that the document was in part politically motivated and written as a way of justifying a round of retrenchments.⁸³ As if to confirm this analysis the *Kilmore Free Press* remarked that the report has brought to light the ‘malignant ills’ of the public service ‘in view of the coming general election’.⁸⁴

Union officials reacted to the Ross Report by questioning the wisdom and suitability of many of its recommendations. It was branded a ‘palpably superficial’ piece of analysis.⁸⁵ Contempt was levelled against the proposal advising that the Public Service Commissioner be granted additional powers.⁸⁶ In the opinion of the union the position of Commissioner was nothing but a political appointment. An insinuation was made in the *PSJV* that perhaps Commissioner C. S. McPherson was ‘lax in the performance of his duties’.⁸⁷ McKellar reacted to the enthusiasm of the *Argus* for austerity by observing that ‘red tape is a

⁷⁸ *Argus*, 29 December 1926. Also see the *Age*, 30 December 1926.

⁷⁹ *Age*, 31 December 1926.

⁸⁰ *Brisbane Courier*, 30 December 1926; *Argus*, 30 December 1926.

⁸¹ *Morning Bulletin*, 27 December 1926.

⁸² For a summary of the report see the *PSJV*, 25 January 1927.

⁸³ Ross spent a considerable amount of time commenting on the arrival of public servants to work in the mornings. Interestingly no time was spent examining the overtime worked by public servants.

⁸⁴ *Kilmore Free Press*, 13 January 1927.

⁸⁵ *PSJV*, 25 May 1927.

⁸⁶ See *Ibid.*, 25 September 1926; *Ibid.*, 25 August 1927.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 25 May 1927. Commissioner C. S. McPherson should not to be confused with senior Nationalist Party MP William McPherson.

commodity used rather extensively by the management...of Melbourne's conservative dailies'.⁸⁸ If the Allan administration was intending to inflame and politicise the sentiments of public servants then they had succeeded. Union members demanded industrial recognition by way of a wages board. A deputation of senior APSA officials met with Allan, Argyle and Peacock to warn them against charting a path towards retrenchments. Allan was duly stunned that the union had the audacity to request more from the government just months after a superannuation scheme had been established. 'Public servants' he retorted 'might have waited a little before they put up further claims'.⁸⁹ Of course the premise of the deputation's logic was founded upon the declining purchasing power of public service salaries. Every other state in Australia had a public service basic wage rate of at least £220. Commonwealth public servants enjoyed a rate of £227. In Victoria the basic wage rate lingered at £208.⁹⁰ The APSA contended that the 'capitalist press' was propagating, in an insidious fashion, the call for greater public service austerity.⁹¹ Opinion editorials published in the *PSJV* responded to the political commentariat by arguing that the country should pursue a policy of nationalisation.⁹² Calwell stated unequivocally that wealth should 'no longer line the pockets of a few individuals' but instead be distributed among citizens.⁹³

A concerted effort was now also made to rein in the few departmental public service associations and unions that stood in isolation to the APSA. 'What could be more like suicide than the folly of competing organisations' questioned the *PSJV*.⁹⁴ Union officials recognised that the campaign to secure a wages board would be strengthened if its membership base expanded. On the prompting of Calwell, in September, the Dairy Supervisors Association and its 100 members voted to disband and join the APSA.⁹⁵ In the Land Tax Office one member A.

⁸⁸ *PSJV*, 25 April 1927.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 25 May 1926.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25 August 1926.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 25 May 1926.

⁹² See Calwell's article "Nationalisation and the Public Service" in *Ibid.*, 25 May 1926.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 25 May 1926.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25 July 1926.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 25 September 1926. Union membership was rising rapidly and totalled 1852 by the end of 1926.

Callinan proudly reported that the ‘non-member no longer exists’.⁹⁶ McKellar declared that ‘Comradeship is replacing the selfish individualism that formerly prevailed in the Victorian State Service’.⁹⁷ But it was the General Division Association (GDA) and its large membership base that the APSA had long coveted. Relations between the two organisations were strained after the APSA started to ‘poach’ rival GDA members to its own recently formed general division.⁹⁸ It was the first salvo fired in a public service turf war that would rage for the next two years. So persistent was the pressure of the APSA that in December the GDA was forced to put the question of amalgamation to a ballot, where, by a margin of two to one against, the vote failed. Still, it appeared that it would be just a matter of time before the GDA would be subsumed by the more powerful APSA.

It is no surprise that such bold action from the APSA coincided with the rapidly changing fortunes of the composite government. Allan’s popularity was in free fall after the government introduced the Electoral Districts Bill in September 1926. Ostensibly, the measure, dubbed the ‘Argyle Blot’, was intended to address Victoria’s extreme electoral malapportionment whereby one rural vote carried a weighting of more than two city votes.⁹⁹ In reality, however, the Bill did little to rectify the gross voting imbalance of the Victorian electoral system. The 65 seats of the Legislative Assembly under the new legislation were divided into three groups: 26 seats in the city of Melbourne (an increase of one) with a quota of 22,000 electors; three urban seats for Bendigo, Ballarat and Geelong with a quota of 15,000 electors; and 36 country seats with a quota of 10,000 electors.¹⁰⁰ Jean Holmes has remarked that ‘the measure ensured an advantage to country interests which lasted almost three decades’.¹⁰¹ As Costar has observed the minor change

⁹⁶ *PSJV*, 25 October 1926.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25 July 1926.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 25 January 1926. By the end of the year the recently formed general division of the APSA numbered approximately 150 members.

⁹⁹ Wright, *A People’s Counsel*, 174.

¹⁰⁰ See Jean Holmes, *The Government of Victoria* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1976), 86.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

was carried out to ‘neutralise the possibility of more radical reforms’.¹⁰² Put simply, it was, and remains, one of the most egregious examples of legislation passed by the Victorian Parliament. Melbourne voters were disgusted and understandably outraged. *Labor Call* quipped that Argyle’s ‘vote stealing’ legislation was ‘born in intrigue and nurtured in chicanery’.¹⁰³ The *Age* was astounded and considered it an embarrassment to Victoria: ‘Was there ever conceived by the mind of a man a more monstrously evil scheme for gerrymandering constituencies and insulting the democracy Parliament exists to serve?’¹⁰⁴ So indignant was the newspaper that it called for the government to be ‘utterly routed and pulverised’ at the forthcoming election.¹⁰⁵

An election was scheduled for 9 April 1927. It would be the first election in which compulsory voting was adopted in the Legislative Assembly. The Labor Party was well positioned to take advantage of the turbulent political milieu and Hogan’s well-oiled campaign machine played upon the disunity within the Allan led composite government. Cartoons depicting Allan and Lawson as a two-headed beast that would bring ‘starvation’ and ‘unemployment’ appeared in *Labor Call*.¹⁰⁶ Former Premier Harry Lawson had taken charge of the Nationalist Party and in a stunning move decided to campaign independent of the Country Party.¹⁰⁷ Political alliances were crumbling. Albert Dunstan—leader of the newly formed Country Progressive Party (CPP)—was also charting an independent path and was poised to be the kingmaker in any new coalition arrangement. After Calwell assumed the presidency of the APSA in February 1927 he made sure that the union actively supported Hogan.¹⁰⁸ In an editorial just weeks before the poll the *PSJV* remarked that having been ‘denied justice for so long’ it was imperative for public servants ‘to consider politics from the point of view of self-interest first

¹⁰² Brian Costar, “John Allan: The First Agrarian,” in Brian Costar and Paul Strangio, eds., *The Victorian Premiers: 1856-2006*, 195.

¹⁰³ *Labor Call*, 16 December 1926. See for cartoon.

¹⁰⁴ *Age*, 29 October 1926.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Labor Call*, 7 April 1927.

¹⁰⁷ *Argus*, 7 April 1927.

¹⁰⁸ Ernest Pitt retired at the beginning of 1927. By this point Calwell had also been appointed to the powerful Central Executive Committee of the Victorian ALP.

and vote for the candidates who support our proposals'.¹⁰⁹ Union members responded to the call by setting up campaign committees to provide assistance to candidates who had declared in favour of a wages board.¹¹⁰ An attitude of expectancy had clearly manifested: 'now that the iron is hot it is time to strike'.¹¹¹ It was absolutely clear that the union would not approach election day timidly: 'to muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn is emphatically not a policy to which this Association is committed'.¹¹² APSA minutes record that the rank and file was 'disgusted' with the treatment it had received from the Allan administration in relation to the implementation of a wages board.¹¹³ The vivid warning of an article penned by McKellar months earlier now resonated loudly: 'blood will be upon their own heads'.¹¹⁴

When the votes were tallied the Labor Party comfortably cemented its position as the largest body within in the Legislative Assembly.¹¹⁵ Hogan had cleverly appealed to both rural and city voters on the way to picking up 28 seats. Yet Labor still did not possess an absolute majority and consequently a round of political negotiations commenced. A jubilant *Labor Call* announced that in the poll's wake there was 'dismay in the enemy camp'.¹¹⁶ The opinion of the normally critical *Herald* was unambiguous: 'the only party that can hope to form a government with any chance of success is Labor'.¹¹⁷ No newspaper was more delighted than the *Age* to see the downfall of the hybrid government. It asserted that Allan had driven Victoria into a 'political morass'.¹¹⁸ In the ensuing weeks Allan's grip on the premiership loosened as his attempts to cobble together a working coalition proved unsuccessful. As Costar has reflected, the Allan-

¹⁰⁹ *PSJV*, 25 March 1926.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 25 February 1927.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 25 March 1926.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ The Victorian Labor Party increased the number of seats it held to 28.

¹¹⁶ *Labor Call*, 15 April 1927.

¹¹⁷ *Herald*, 13 April 1927.

¹¹⁸ *Age*, 11 April 1927.

Peacock administration had only purveyed a ‘veneer of stability’.¹¹⁹ In May, Allan resigned as premier and Hogan was commissioned to form a ministry with the support of four CPP MPs (colloquially referred to as the ‘four black crows’) and two Liberals.¹²⁰ The union was ecstatic and remarked ‘the present situation is...one for congratulation and fraught with prospects more hopeful than public servants have been able to entertain for years’.¹²¹ Union members celebrated upon anticipation of what might await.

7.3 Advancement Along Labor Lines...

Ned Hogan’s ascension to the premiership was viewed as a watershed moment among members of the APSA. The new Labor ministry had less of an accidental feel about it than George Prendergast’s had in 1924. Historian Don Rawson remarked that it was ‘the first Labor government to be effectively in office in Victoria’.¹²² When the parliament was reconvened for the first time after the election it met in the elaborate surrounds of the Legislative Council at Spring Street. Victoria’s Parliament House had been commandeered since 1901 as the location of the Federal Parliament while the nation’s capital city was under construction.¹²³ The presence of the Federal Parliament in Melbourne served to relegate the importance of Victorian politics. *Labor Call* remarked that the return of the Victorian legislature to its traditional home would ‘shift the stagnation of years and bring advancement along Labor lines’.¹²⁴ Certainly the Victorian parliament had shown no interest in passing industrial legalisation of the variety that the trade union movement coveted. But as Strangio has pointed out ‘Victoria belatedly had an ALP government with some prospect of legislating dividends for

¹¹⁹ Brian Costar, “John Allan: The First Agrarian,” in Brian Costar and Paul Strangio, eds., *The Victorian Premiers: 1856-2006*, 188.

¹²⁰ Wright, *A People’s Counsel*, 154.

¹²¹ *PSJV*, 25 April 1927.

¹²² Donald W. Rawson, “The Organisation of the Australian Labor Party 1916-1941” (Ph.D. Thesis, Melbourne University, 1954), 81.

¹²³ The Federal Parliament building in Canberra opened on 9 May 1927. Construction had commenced in 1923.

¹²⁴ *Labor Call*, 19 May 1927.

the labour movement'.¹²⁵ The APSA fully expected that the Hogan administration would take heed of the industrial reforms that had been enacted by Labor governments across Australia.¹²⁶ An editorial in the *PSJV* boastfully claimed that 'the Labor party is historically the party which has always advocated the establishment of democratic institutions for the better management of industry.'¹²⁷ Hogan's election pledge to implement a public service wages board was considered sacrosanct in the opinion of the union.¹²⁸ Public servants had campaigned tirelessly for nearly a decade to see the measure implemented and never before had the right political circumstances prevailed. Yet the political dynamics had now shifted. Surely the concerns of the union rank and file could be accommodated by the new parliament. An opportunity for the Labor Party to grasp the 'matter with both hands' had finally emerged.¹²⁹

A rather jovial and spirited attitude permeated through the APSA in the immediate aftermath of the change of government. A new look *PSJV* was creating a stir among some sections of the membership. Sporting pages, poetry, and a gardening section provided public servants with some lighter reading. However, not all were pleased with the updated format. One member insisted that the revamped journal required 'radical alteration' and took aim at the gardening column authored by 'Agricola'.¹³⁰ Others were delighted with the change and hoped to see more variety. F. T. Moorhouse quipped that the disgruntled critic must have a 'poor sense of humour if he cannot see the only attempt at jocular in the whole publication'.¹³¹ The poorly written and quirky gardening column was just one indication that the union was entering into a period of transformation. Other changes including a marked decline in sectionalism within the union were also occurring. A process of centralisation was shifting power away from the

¹²⁵ Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory*, 165.

¹²⁶ Both the Theodore government in Queensland and the Lang government in New South Wales had enacted a swathe of legislation beneficial to trade unions.

¹²⁷ *PSJV*, 25 April 1927.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 25 May 1927.

¹³⁰ The member went by the name "Casus Belli" which is a Latin expression meaning an act or event that provokes or is used to justify war. See *Ibid.*, 25 April 1927.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 25 May 1927.

divisions to the central council. Sectionalism had previously crippled the union and the senior leadership was cognisant to the fact that to forge ahead the organisation would need to be structurally unified. It is no coincidence that this consolidation of the APSA occurred at a time in which there was an injection of youth within the organisation. Calwell was just 32 when he assumed the presidency. Many of the union's senior figures were also in their late twenties or early thirties.¹³² This group of energetic young men envisioned a bigger and bolder union that could advance the industrial citizenship of public servants.

Conversely, on another front the winds of progress had almost entirely ceased to blow. Over the previous few years the standing of women within the union had been markedly downgraded. Only three women held seats on the APSA's 45-seat council. Women were also conspicuously absent from the executive group.¹³³ In the immediate post war years the union had placed a much stronger emphasis upon campaigning for the industrial rights of women. Radical feminists and union members such as Florence Johnson had demanded that the organisation take action on matters including equal pay. But the union's internal environment changed in the succeeding years and the voice of women was largely silenced. Gone was the notion of the 'flapper' that had once so prominently existed. Bradon Ellem sheds light on this shift by observing that in the late 1920s the absence of war reinforced the role of the woman as 'mother and housekeeper'.¹³⁴ As a consequence the struggle for advancement in relation to gender rights became more difficult. Indications of the APSA's changing attitudes towards women were particularly evident through the 'Ladies Page' of the *PSJV*. In the very first entry of the newly created section the author, 'Topsy Tell', posed a rather ironic question: 'do you know that women are coming to the front in every sphere in

¹³² For a profile on the secretary of the professional division see *Ibid.*, 25 March 1927.

¹³³ There were forty-five APSA central council seats.

¹³⁴ Bradon Ellem, "A History of the Clothing and Allied Trade Union," (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Wollongong, 1986), 296. For ways in which the 1920s were argued to be emancipatory for women workers see Barbara Cameron, "The Flappers and the Feminists: A study of Women's emancipation in the 1920s," in Margaret Bevege, Margaret James and Carmel Shute, eds., *Worth Her Salt: Women at Work in Australia* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1982).

life'.¹³⁵ Seldom were there hints of the brand of radical feminism that had previously existed within the union. In its place was a condescending and gendered column tucked away at the back of the journal that took delight in celebrating the homemaking ability of women. So blatant was the patriarchal tone of the page that one has to query whether a man penned it. One particularly revealing column even suggested that women were in some way complicit in bringing about their inferior status: 'I wonder sometimes if we are ourselves not to blame for some of our grievances'.¹³⁶ While 'Topsy Tell' believed that a 'smile' was the 'most rewarding thing in the world' the female employees of the state government were undoubtedly more concerned with matters of justice and equality.¹³⁷

Be that as it may, as Hogan settled into his premiership the concerns of public servants and APSA had received almost no attention from the government. Union members were reportedly 'discomposed' by the absence of action.¹³⁸ It had been assumed that legislation to provide for a wages board would immediately be introduced during the first parliamentary session. However, as the end of 1927 approached the union had still not been granted a meeting with the premier to discuss the possibility of a wages board. A sense of shock seemed to overcome the organisation. McKellar commented 'I am to point out that deep resentment is felt among our members at the extremely unsympathetic treatment being meted out to the public service by the government'.¹³⁹ A young clerical officer summed up the sentiment of public servants by writing to the *PSJV* and reflecting that Victoria should be referred to as 'Sweatoria'. He noted plainly that if he were to receive a basic wage of £221 it would not have a 'deleterious effect' on his work commitment.¹⁴⁰ A group of junior typists under the age of 21 also lamented their plight in being stuck on a subsistence wage of £143 with no obvious prospect of

¹³⁵ *PSJV*, 25 July 1928.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 25 February 1929.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 25 April 1929.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 25 July 1927.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 25 August 1927.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 25 September 1927.

advancement.¹⁴¹ To further agitate the union, the *Age* was again accusing public servants of poor work standards: ‘there will be seen dozens of officers leaning against doorways and passage walls and warming themselves at fires’. In response the ASPA hit back by remarking that the newspaper had once more ‘girded up its loins and plunged recklessly into indiscriminate and ignorant censure’.¹⁴² Of course the strongest critique was directed at the Hogan government. In November, as the sands of the parliamentary session were about to run out, the frustrations of the APSA could not be contained: ‘the present government threatens to go down to history, so far as the public service is concerned, as the party of unfulfilled promises’.¹⁴³

At last on 14 December 1927 a Bill to create a public service wages board was tabled in the Legislative Council by Labor MP W. J. Beckett.¹⁴⁴ It was a propitious moment for the APSA. The *PJSV* voiced a cautious optimism: ‘there seems every prospect that at last the public service is to have established an independent authority for the determination of salaries and conditions of employment’.¹⁴⁵ In support of public servants one member of the Hogan cabinet was quoted as stating that ‘if a man does a carpenter’s work he should get a carpenter’s wage’.¹⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the more astute observers realised that there was still significant ground to cover in the campaign for a wages board. The next parliamentary sitting day was six months away and given the volatility that had marked Victorian politics the union knew that it could take nothing for granted. An anxious APSA had no option but to patiently wait to find out if the Bill would be listed for a second reading. In an ignominious sign the government’s attempts at passing legislation on a range of matters including employment compensation and rental affordability had been cut down in the Legislative Council. Its

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 25 December 1927.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 25 August 1927.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 25 November 1927.

¹⁴⁴ *VPD*, vol. 175, Legislative Council (LC), 14 December 1927, 3496. Beckett was the Minister for Forests and the Minister for Public Health.

¹⁴⁵ *PSJV*, 25 January 1928.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Totalisator Tax Bill was also easily defeated.¹⁴⁷ According to the *Australasian* the Hogan administration was ‘like a motorist driving in low gear on a steep and tortuous road making much noise and little progress’.¹⁴⁸ The analogy was indeed fitting. It should have come as no surprise that the conservative dominated upper house sought to obstruct so many bills. Perhaps Labor’s biggest achievement was simply to survive the entire parliamentary session.¹⁴⁹

In the ensuing months the hopes of union members plummeted. Salary increments owed to public servants in the 1928-29 financial year were suspended on the account of the worsening fiscal environment. Hogan was adamant that increments would only be paid if the opposition agreed to increase taxes. Public servants were again being appropriated as an instrument of political brinkmanship. An irate union council responded to Hogan by protesting that the ‘retrograde’ measure was essentially a ‘class tax’ that breached the compact that it had made with the Labor Party.¹⁵⁰ Many within the Labor government had deep reservations regarding the tactics being employed. Support for public servants now came from an unlikely source in the Nationalist Leader Sir William McPherson who declared that they had a ‘moral right to increments’.¹⁵¹ So outraged was the union that it dubbed Hogan a ‘wage-pruner’ who had taken calculated steps to ‘lose the goodwill of the service’.¹⁵² Members wrote letters of protest to both the metropolitan press and the *PSJV*. One member contended that ‘it is against the ideals of British justice that a section of public servants should be deprived of increments which are their due’.¹⁵³ Another using the pseudonym ‘Clericus’ stated that ‘many of us who have followed the fortunes of the Victorian Labor Party in season and out of season, and have worked hard in its interests, are deeply chagrined at the unsympathetic treatment meted out to us by the present Labor government’.¹⁵⁴ It

¹⁴⁷ *Australasian*, 2 June 1928.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ The Hogan administration was the first State Labor government in Victoria to last an entire parliamentary session.

¹⁵⁰ *Argus*, 31 May 1928; also see the *Australasian*, 2 June 1928.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 31 May 1928.

¹⁵² *PSJV*, 25 August 1928.

¹⁵³ *Argus*, 16 June 1928.

¹⁵⁴ *PSJV*, 25 January 1928.

was arguably the first time in which the union had so vociferously taken a stance against the Labor Party.

The fortunes of the Hogan administration would soon be dealt a fatal blow as industrial turmoil erupted on the docks of Port Melbourne in September 1928. Weeks earlier the Commonwealth Arbitration Court adjusted the award under which waterside workers were employed. Justice George S. Beeby removed a number of concessions previously won by the Seamen's Union.¹⁵⁵ Wharfies were now required to present for an additional second 'pick-up' in the hope of attaining work.¹⁵⁶ It meant that men were 'hanging around all day begging for the opportunity to work'.¹⁵⁷ Historian Stuart Macintyre has described the degrading work practice as one in which 'men stood like beasts in a stockyard to be scrutinized by the stevedoring foreman'.¹⁵⁸ A general strike among waterside workers soon commenced in protest to the adjustment.¹⁵⁹ In response the ship-owners brought in 'scab' labour under police escort. With one eye on the upcoming federal election the Australian Prime Minister Stanley Bruce was determined to smash the strikers and their union and rushed through the *Transport Workers Act 1928* on the second last parliamentary sitting day.¹⁶⁰ Wharfies were all of a sudden forced to be licensed and if they refused to accept an award or disobeyed lawful instruction then their ticket would be revoked. Union members were apoplectic and clashed with policemen and non-union workers.¹⁶¹ In one such incident a group of angry unionists chased down a taxicab carrying a

¹⁵⁵ For a detailed background to the event see Miriam Rechter, "The strike of waterside workers in Australian ports, 1928, and the lockout of coal miners on the northern coalfield of New South Wales, 1929-1930" (Master's Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1957).

¹⁵⁶ Men had always attended the docks for the morning 'pick up' in the hope of securing work and if they were unsuccessful could head elsewhere in search of a labouring job.

¹⁵⁷ L. J. Louis and Ian Turner, *The Great Depression of the 1930s* (Melbourne: Cassell, 1968), 25.

¹⁵⁸ Macintyre, *The Oxford History of Australia: Vol. 4*, 244.

¹⁵⁹ *Singleton Argus*, 25 September 1928.

¹⁶⁰ *Transport Workers Act 1928* (Commonwealth) no. 37.

¹⁶¹ See the *Argus*, 2 October 1928.

shipyard foreman and pelted the vehicle with scrap metal before threatening the driver with a gun.¹⁶² Both men were taken to hospital in a critical condition.

The unrest placed Hogan in a difficult situation. It was clear that the crisis needed to come to an end and yet the Seamen's Union and Wharf Labourers' Union were both affiliated to the Labor Party. Hogan ultimately capitulated under intense national criticism and sensationally accused the Communist Party in collusion with the Nationalist Party of orchestrating the crisis.¹⁶³ It proved to be an unfounded and quite ridiculous allegation that became the subject of mockery. The judgement of the *Argus* was particularly telling: 'Stupid lies are the last resource of a political party in desperate straits'.¹⁶⁴ On 2 November, the matter came to a head when the morning pick up was cancelled. A large 'mob' of unionists confronted the police guard at Princes Pier in Port Melbourne and violent scenes soon followed. At first the protesters were repelled with batons. As the skirmishes escalated the presiding police inspector ordered his officers to aim low and open fire on the crowd.¹⁶⁵ Allan Whittaker was fatally shot and three other unionists were seriously wounded.¹⁶⁶

In the aftermath of the deadly assault the Hogan government was widely blamed for authorising what was a callous police overreaction. A real sense of hostility had been created between the labour movement and the Hogan ministry. Both the Seamen's Union and Melbourne Trades Hall Council condemned the government for showing such scant disregard for the lives of working class men. So enraged was the Wharf Labourers' Union that it voted to disaffiliate from the Labor Party almost immediately. Just a week later the Nationalist leader Sir William McPherson took advantage of the chaotic situation and successfully moved a no confidence motion against the government in the Legislative Assembly. Hogan

¹⁶² *Singleton Argus*, 25 September 1928.

¹⁶³ *Age*, 19 October 1928.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Age*, 3 November 1928.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.* Also see an article by John Silvester and Andrew Rule, "Truth was the first casualty of the 1928 war on the waterfront" in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 November 2010. Allan Whittaker had previously been shot at 8.30am on the first day of the Gallipoli landing in 1915.

had lost the support of CPP leader Albert Dunstan and was forced into resigning on 22 November 1928. For union members the collapse of the Hogan government occasioned no great shock as doubts regarding its standing had already formed. After a lengthy delay it had finally acted and tabled a bill to see to the creation of a public service wages board in December 1927. Yet Hogan's priorities were elsewhere and in the last six months of his premiership the focus was predominantly on survival. Perhaps if the union had taken the opportunity to affiliate to the Labor Party then the bill might have been introduced earlier and given greater consideration. However, in light of the treatment meted out to waterside unionists, this contention is unlikely. With only five Labor MPs sitting in the notoriously obstructionist upper house the prospect of the bill passing were already faint. In reflecting upon the turn of events the *PSJV* quipped that 'the world appears to be governed by the law of change and relativity'.¹⁶⁷ It was an accurate and somewhat prophetic observation.

7.4 Conclusion

Upon the demise of the Prendergast Labor government in November 1924 a downcast union rank and file again looked to a future clouded in uncertainty. The new Country Party state leader John Allan hailed from rural Victoria and had been greatly influenced by the small government mantra propagated by the Kyabram Reform Movement at the turn of the century. APSA members were understandably concerned that the Allan government might pursue a policy of public service austerity and retrenchment. As such it was determined that the campaign for an independent public service wages board had little chance of succeeding in the current political environment. Instead the union turned its attention to securing the implementation of a superannuation scheme for public servants. The campaign had been given a shot in the arm after police officers gained access to a pension scheme at the end of 1923. Union leaders now called upon the government to act immediately. In August of 1925 the Allan administration responded to the intense advocacy of the APSA and did just that by

¹⁶⁷ *PSJV*, 25 November 1928.

tabling a superannuation bill in the Victorian parliament. Following considerable revision the bill was passed and the *Superannuation Act* was given royal assent on 24 November 1925. It was a significant achievement for the APSA and its members. Retired public servants would now experience the benefits of financial security in their final years.

Buoyed by the success the union quickly turned its attention back to the implementation of an independent public service wages board. APSA President Arthur Calwell together with Secretary John McKellar gave the union a youthful pep and called on all members to organise in support of the campaign. The Executive noted that many of its members received salaries that were significantly inferior to those of their counterparts in other states. Links that existed between the Victorian Labor Party and the union were further strengthened in the lead up to the 1927 state election. The APSA was elated after Labor leader Ned Hogan was commissioned to form a government as the party had promised to act immediately to establish a public service wages board. However, months after Hogan had assumed the premiership the concerns of the union rank and file remained unfulfilled. By the middle of 1928 the government was in survival mode and set aside a public service wages board bill that had been tabled in Parliament during the previous sitting. Infuriated union members condemned the conduct of Hogan and wondered whether the Labor government was at all concerned about the rights of its own employees. Following industrial unrest at Princes Pier in Port Melbourne the Hogan administration collapsed. In Hogan's place stepped Nationalist Party leader William McPherson who was a disciple of small government and austerity economics. Union members once again had their dreams 'shattered like the proverbial pie crust'.

Chapter 8 In the Wilderness: Depression and the Slow Recovery 1929-1938

With the demise of the Hogan government in 1928 the VPSU and its members were again facing an uncertain future. Premier William McPherson had no intention of favourably addressing the industrial concerns of public servants. Yet the ever-changing nature of Victorian politics would see Hogan return to the premiership before the end of 1929. At the federal level James Scullin would lead Labor to the treasury benches. For a fleeting moment the union's hopes of making industrial gains were spiked. Senior Victorian Labor Party figures assured the APSA that legislation recognising the industrial rights of public servants would be introduced and passed. When Wall Street crashed in the last week of October in 1929 the trade union movement collectively placed its faith in the Labor Party to protect the interests and rights of workers. It was a naïve faith. As this chapter demonstrates by the middle of 1930 the impact of the financial Depression could no longer be trivialised. Australia's export market had collapsed and the economy was shedding jobs at an alarming speed. It soon became apparent that the Hogan government intended to acquiesce to the growing calls for austerity. Promises made by the Victorian Labor Party to the ASPA were now heaved on the scrap heap and instead a program of cost-cutting designed by British Treasury official Sir Otto Niemeyer was adopted. Tensions within the union predictably surfaced as various blocks opposed the small government approach of successive Victorian governments. Between 1931 and 1938 the economic fortunes of public servants were grim. With an absence of strong leadership the APSA struggled both ideologically and practically to position itself for success throughout the 1930s. The union was lost in the wilderness.

8.1 An Orgy of Speculation

The demise of Ned Hogan at the end of 1928 forced the APSA to again reassess its standing. Needless to say the union was now accustomed to political

unpredictability and the *PSJV* would comment that ‘changes of government are experiences to which the service is inured’.¹ One of the first actions of the union was to reaffirm that its members would do their duty: ‘the service will give the same degree of loyal service as it gave to any previous administration’.² It was a short but poignant statement. So much of the union’s political capital had been spent in support of the Hogan administration. The new premier, Sir William McPherson, was renowned for his near evangelical commitment to fiscal austerity. During the premiership of Harry Lawson the *Herald* had quipped, in reference to the parsimonious McPherson, that Victoria ‘dislikes a Treasurer who thinks in threepenny bits’.³ The apt moniker ‘threepenny’ subsequently stuck.⁴ Conservative MP Sir Frederic Eggleston would pen in his private diary that McPherson ‘was excessively mean in the little things’ and ‘never had a real picture of the state financial position’.⁵ On no occasion while serving as Treasurer from 1917-1923 did he dare to dip the budget of Victoria into deficit. In fact his refusal to make provisions for a police pension was one of the catalysts of the violent industrial turmoil that descended upon Melbourne in 1923. It was the paradox of McPherson that despite his personal wealth and philanthropic nature he was extremely reluctant to spend the money of taxpayers as a politician.⁶

On the organising front the APSA had entered into a period of significant expansion and consolidation. Union membership was on the rise and reached 2,766 by May 1929.⁷ It was a particularly impressive figure when one bears in mind that at this point there were only 4,106 permanent public servants employed

¹ *PSJV*, 25 November 1928.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Herald*, 4 February 1922.

⁴ In a scathing character profile of McPherson the *Age* had previously commented on 20 July 1928 that he was a ‘pathetic figure who cannot make even a feeble pretense of leading’.

⁵ Sir Frederic Eggleston quoted in Richard Allsop, “William McPherson: ‘Threepenny’ premier and philanthropist,” in Brian Costar and Paul Strangio, eds., *The Victorian Premiers: 1856-2006*, 199.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 197-203.

⁷ For a table of membership figures see the *PSJV*, 25 May 1929. With temporary officers included the possible union membership was approximately 5,500.

by the state of Victoria.⁸ In just four years the size of the union had nearly doubled.⁹ Only the Hospitals Employees' Association of Australia (HEAA) now competed with the APSA for potential members.¹⁰ Such rapid membership growth was aided by the recent employment of organiser H. M. (Bert) Cremean. Cremean had risen through the ranks of the Labor Party in the 1920s with an ambitious group of young men who were determined to advance the cause of political Catholicism.¹¹ His organising skills helped the union to create a delegate structure that would see dozens of public servants join every month. In some government departments the union achieved 100 per cent density. In April a deputation of union officials secured a roundtable meeting with McPherson and a group of MPs from across the aisle to discuss the implementation of a public service wages board. Upon being questioned by union President Arthur Calwell, the premier expressed a willingness to seriously consider the merits of a wages board. It was a promising and unexpected development. Labor MP Bob Solly passionately supported the measure and reasoned that the delay in implementing a board was simply 'because no government has adopted the motto of "do it now"'.¹² He was also adamant that union members should not wait any longer to be awarded industrial rights: 'I want to see public servants put on the same footing as every other industrialist as regards to their conditions of work and pay'.¹³

⁸ Public Service Commissioner, *Report for the year ended 31st December 1929*, (Melbourne: Government Printer, 1930).

⁹ Membership of the APSA in 1925 totaled 1542.

¹⁰ By this point the GDA had less than 200 members and was on the verge of collapsing as most of its members had migrated to the APSA. The HEAA represented public servants working in the Chief Secretary's department primarily in mental hospitals. These workers had previously been affiliated to the VSSF and VPSU under the banner of the Mental Hospitals Employees Association (MHEA) and the Mental Hospitals Association (MHA)

¹¹ See the *PSJV*, 25 January 1929. Cremean had previously worked for the Timber Workers' Union and would later rise to the position of Deputy Leader of the Victorian ALP. Others in this Catholic clique included W. B. Barry, Patrick Kennelly and of course Arthur Calwell.

¹² For a transcript of the meeting see the *PSJV*, 25 April 1929.

¹³ *Ibid.*

But alas once again the union and its members would be dealt a cruel hand. Days after the roundtable meeting the HEAA wrote to the government and objected to the implementation of a public service wages board. It was a malicious act designed to derail the primary campaign of the union. In response the McPherson administration agreed to postpone all decisions regarding a possible wages board. HEAA officials feared that mental hospitals staff would migrate to the APSA in large numbers if a wages board were secured.¹⁴ It was also feared that the APSA would work to prevent HEAA members from representing public servants on any prospective board.¹⁵ An indignant McKellar reacted to the HEAA's objection in blistering fashion: 'That an insignificant clique in the Lunacy staffs, apparently moved by ignorant animosity, is able to thwart even temporarily a gain to the service that the APSA has been struggling for years to obtain is an anachronism for which it is difficult to find fitting language'.¹⁶ Mental hospital staffs were called upon to 'repudiate this spurious union [HEAA] root and branch, and so destroy once and for all the churlish and anti-unionist gang'.¹⁷ According to the APSA the deceptive and mischievous HEAA did 'not even have a plausible reason for its existence'.¹⁸

In the second half of 1929 the nation experienced another round of industrial unrest as tensions erupted in the coalfields of northern New South Wales. Mine owners slashed wages and imposed draconian employment conditions upon workers.¹⁹ Locked out employees called upon the Commonwealth Government of Stanley Bruce to prosecute the Northern Collieries Association (NCA) for breaching an award. Yet Bruce acted against the advice of Attorney-General J. G.

¹⁴ The HEAA had received registration in the Commonwealth Arbitration Court in 1924 but had yet to lodge a plaint for fear that the application might lead to its deregistration as a state instrumentality.

¹⁵ See the *Argus*, 17 January 1929.

¹⁶ *PSJV*, 25 May 1929.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ See the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 June 1929; Miriam Dixon, "Rothbury," *Labour History*, 17 (1972): 13-15; Robin Gollan, *The Coalminers of New South Wales: A History of the Union 1860-1960* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1963).

Latham and instead supported the conduct of the NCA.²⁰ By this stage the prime minister was determined to completely overhaul the Australian industrial relations system and announced that the government would effectively abolish the Commonwealth Arbitration Court.²¹ As the economy faltered towards the end of the 1920s the prime minister claimed that both the Arbitration system and a union movement under communist control were among the primary causes of the stagnation. The intrepid decision to abolish arbitration immediately emboldened the federal Labor Party.²² For the APSA the potential abolition of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court was treated as a 'vital issue' and members were encouraged to 'do all that they could' to ensure the survival of the institution.²³ While having been de-registered from the Court in 1924, the union would state that it 'still desires to have the opportunity, if need be, of approaching the Court'.²⁴ When a bill to repeal the Arbitration Act was introduced in the federal parliament the mutable Billy Hughes and a small group of Nationalist malcontents voted it down. After expelling Hughes from the Nationalist party-room, the prime minister set an election for 12 October 1929. Labor leader James Scullin publicly supported the existing industrial relations system and held Bruce responsible for the rising level of unemployment.²⁵ At stake, according to the *Age*, was the 'fete (sic) of the Arbitration system'.²⁶ The election in part was a referendum on the arbitration system. When the votes were tallied the Nationalist government was utterly routed by Scullin and the Labor Party. Stanley Bruce humiliatingly lost his seat of Flinders to Jack Holloway, the radical secretary of Melbourne Trades Hall. One Nationalist senator claimed that when the new parliament gathered he heard excited MPs singing 'The Red Flag' and 'Solidarity' in the Hotel Kurrajong.

²⁰ The government withdrew a prosecution against the powerful coal baron John Brown. Brown allegedly recommended to workers at one point that they should 'eat grass' if they were hungry. See L. J. Louis and Ian Turner, *The Great Depression of the 1930s*, 28.

²¹ At first the Bruce government had attempted to concentrate power in the federal arena but was blocked by state premiers.

²² This industrial unrest also served as the starting point of a heated factional war within the ALP that would see the party split at a national level in 1931.

²³ *PSJV*, 26 September 1929.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Scullin declared that the Arbitration system was 'one of the main bulwarks of the wage earner'. See the *Age*, 12 October 1929.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

During this period the McPherson administration also started to unravel. It was an almost impossible task to hold together a minority government with the backing of the ever-capricious CPP and an unsettled backbench. Less than a quarter of the Legislative Assembly's sitting MPs now directly supported Premier McPherson.²⁷ Going against his natural political disposition the premier cowered to the demands of the CPP and funded a range of struggling rural enterprise projects.²⁸ It was meant to be a *quid pro quo* that secured the support of the CPP. However, as Strangio has aptly noted, the four CPP MPs led by Dunstan were a 'fickle bunch'.²⁹ Dunstan soon became dissatisfied with the level of assistance that had been provided to farmers in the drought ridden Mallee region and the *modus vivendi* with McPherson collapsed. In the last week of October the Victorian Labor Party joined with the 'four black crows' of the CPP to defeat the McPherson government on the floor of the Legislative Assembly. Labor had moved closer to a parliamentary alliance with the CPP. Victorian voters were asked to go back to the polls to elect their state representatives on 30 November 1929.

In the brief campaign that followed the Labor Party declared that it would restore sane fiscal management and give relief to the unemployed. Rather ambitiously the party also listed a bill to abolish the Legislative Council on its election platform.³⁰ Juxtaposed against the attitudes of union members during the 1927 poll, the APSA was considerably less ebullient this time round. Governments of all persuasions had failed to introduce an independent public service wages board. The union's faith in the Labor Party vacillated slightly. Members understood that a minority Labor government in the Legislative Assembly would struggle to overcome an obstructionist and economically conservative Legislative Council. Calwell even suggested at the 1929 Victorian ALP conference that the party should henceforth refuse to accept a commission to form a government without

²⁷ Wright, *A People's Counsel*, 154.

²⁸ In July three ministers, including a young Robert Menzies, tendered their resignations in protest to the decision of the government to prop up a range of rural enterprise projects.

²⁹ Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory*, 172.

³⁰ *Labor Call*, 7 November 1929.

having an absolute majority in the Legislative Assembly.³¹ However, this bold advice was ultimately ignored. When the votes were counted the Labor Party picked up two additional seats to move to 30 and immediately negotiated a composite agreement with Dunstan's CPP block of four members.³² Hogan accepted the challenge of forming another minority government without any obvious equivocation.

On assuming office both Scullin and Hogan encountered an increasingly volatile financial situation that would soon transform into one of the most profound crises in Australian history. In surveying the economic conditions of the late 1920s it becomes apparent that Australia was tumbling quickly into a debt and deflation trap.³³ Imports had run ahead of exports for eight years and the growing disparity was being concealed by the adoption of new debt. Economist John Maynard Keynes remarked that Australia was so embarrassed by the fall in the price of its export staples that it was craven to borrow at 'whatever rates' it could obtain on the London money market.³⁴ Yet interestingly the prevailing psychology remained one of unbridled optimism. Such optimism was linked closely to the nation's continuing imperial vision. Commenting at the time the noted Melbourne economist Douglas Copland neatly summarised the relationship: 'Australia was only partially the master of its own house'.³⁵ When Scullin warned of the imminent fiscal crisis during the 1929 federal election campaign, few took notice. One of Scullin's biographers tellingly said it best: 'it is often the fate of prophets

³¹ Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory*, 171.

³² The composite government was comprised of 30 Labor MPs, 4 CPP MPs, and 2 Liberals MPs.

³³ For a more detailed examination of the causes of the depression see T. J. Valentine, "The causes of Depression in Australia," *Explorations in Economic History*, 24, no. 1, (1987): 43-62; Siriwardana Mahinda, "The Causes of the Depression in the 1930s: A General Equilibrium Analysis," *Explorations in Economic History*, 32, no.1 (1995): 51-81; W. H. Richmond, "S. M. Bruce and Australian Economic Policy 1923-9," *Australian Economic History Review* (1983): 238-257.

³⁴ Donald Markwell, "Keynes and Australia," *Research Discussion Paper 2000/04* (Sydney, Reserve Bank of Australia, 2000): 14.

³⁵ Douglas Berry Copland, "The Australian problem," *Economic Journal*, 40, no. 160 (1930): 638. For an analysis of the economic relationship between Australia and Britain see Kosmas Tsokhas, "A Pound of Flesh: War Debts and Anglo-Australian Relations, 1919-1932," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 38 (1992): 12-26.

to be ignored; but it does not always follow that the prophet is destroyed by the calamity he has foreseen'.³⁶ Just a week after Scullin assumed the prime ministership the New York Stock Exchange crashed and a global depression was initiated. One senior American banker succinctly put the situation in the following terms: 'We are reaping the natural fruit of the orgy of speculation'.³⁷

At first the seriousness of the developing economic catastrophe was thoroughly underappreciated.³⁸ Seldom were the details of the worsening financial calamity the subject of considered analysis in union journals during the early stages of 1930. The *PSJV* made almost no mention of the parlous financial situation prior to April and instead continued to campaign for an independent wages board. Victorian trade unions were quick to blame the Nationalist Party for driving up unemployment and exacerbating the state's now precarious budget situation. Many naively put their faith in the Hogan administration to simultaneously create jobs and return the budget to a sound footing.³⁹ It was widely believed that the introduction of higher tariffs at the federal level would restore prosperity and safeguard the standard of living.⁴⁰ Such opinions soon proved to be quite absurd. When the APSA finally acknowledged the burgeoning depression it was dismissive and improvident: 'Matters are not improved by lugubrious reiteration of a condition which, after all, is ephemeral'.⁴¹ So convinced was the union that the prevailing situation would soon pass that it even began a concerted effort to have the basic wage of public servants increased. With the election of former organiser Bert Cremean to the Legislative Assembly the APSA's enthusiasm was

³⁶ John R. Robertson, "Scullin as Prime Minister: Seven critical decisions," *Labour History*, 17 (1970): 27-36.

³⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 October 1929.

³⁸ The outstanding analysis of the response of Victorian trade unions to the depression is L. J. Louis, *Trade Unions and the Depression: A Study of Victoria 1930-1932* (Canberra: Australian University Press, 1968).

³⁹ On 13 November 1929 the *Australian Worker* predicted that 'prosperity would flood the land like rays of sun' with a federal Labor government at the helm.

⁴⁰ In April 1930 the federal government imposed a special import duty on 132 items and prohibited the importation of a further 78 items. The duty on all imports was increased by 2.5 per cent in July 1930 and rose to 10 per cent incrementally by July 1931. See L. J. Louis and Ian Turner, *The Great Depression of the 1930s*, 46-58.

⁴¹ *PSJV*, 25 April 1930.

briefly buoyed.⁴² Cremean and Thomas Tunnecliffe assured the APSA that the government understood the exigency of the union's claims and would introduce a wages board based on the South Australian model when the parliament sat again.⁴³

By this stage, however, the assurances of the Labor Party held almost no weight. Unemployment smashed though 20 per cent and showed no signs of slowing. In 1930 the national income fell by an astounding 10 per cent. Government finances plummeted at an unprecedented rate as tax receipts dried up. Australia's grim financial situation was now brought to the attention of the British Treasury. Prime Minister Scullin had months earlier asked Britain for an emergency loan to cover Australia's short term overdrafts on the London money market. An increasingly alarmed Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Snowden responded to the request by dispatching a team of experts from the Bank of England to assess the health of the Australian economy. The delegation was led by the Oxford educated Sir Otto Niemeyer who adhered to a distinctly English brand of financial orthodoxy.⁴⁴ Niemeyer embarked upon a whirlwind fact-finding tour in which he met with business leaders and politicians from across the country. By the middle of August he was prepared to present his evaluation of the Australian economy to a gathering of premiers and finance ministers in Melbourne and forthwith told the audience that the 'cold facts must be faced'.⁴⁵ His diagnosis was predictably blunt: 'In short, Australia is off budget equilibrium, off exchange equilibrium, and faced...considerable unfunded and maturing debts both internally and externally'.⁴⁶ At a time in which unemployment was rising and incomes were falling the deflationary prescription put forward by Niemeyer called for deep cuts to government spending and an immediate cessation of borrowing.⁴⁷ In the

⁴² Cremean won the seat of Dandenong.

⁴³ *PSJV*, 25 March 1930.

⁴⁴ For an account of the Niemeyer mission see Peter Love, "Niemeyer's Australian Diary and other English Records of his Mission," *Historical Studies*, 20 (1983): 261–277; Alex Millmow, "Niemeyer, Scullin and Australian Economists," *Australian Economic History Review*, 44 (2004): 142-160.

⁴⁵ *Argus*, 22 August 1930.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ For a detailed report on Niemeyer's recommendations see *Ibid.*, 22 August 1930.

ensuing days the assembled politicians consumed their dose of financial medicine and consented to what was coined the ‘Melbourne Agreement’ on 21 August 1930. Hogan was adamant that the state of Victoria would abide by the resolution.⁴⁸

Victorian public servants vigorously opposed the cost cutting principles of the agreement when announced to the public at the end of August. Union officials were ‘dismayed’ and ‘astonished’ by the actions of the Labor Party.⁴⁹ It was viewed internally as an act of betrayal. One member poignantly summed up the overriding attitudes of his colleagues: ‘Why the public servant should be marked out for immolation is hard to understand’.⁵⁰ In a display of cross sectional unity the APSA and VTU put aside their differences and lodged a joint protest against the cost cutting plan. The State Instrumentalities Union Committee (SIUC), of which Calwell had become secretary, also declared against the economy policy of Melbourne Agreement. Members were urged to be ‘militant’ in their actions.⁵¹ Newspapers were subsequently peppered with daily letters from the APSA that harshly criticised the reasoning and motivation of the Melbourne Agreement. McKellar wrote to the *Herald* and accused the press and the government of mounting a ‘vindictive’ and ‘mentally bankrupt’ campaign against public servants and the union.⁵² An enraged *PSJV* declared that its members would not accept being treated as the ‘scapegoat’ for the ‘financial sins’ of the whole community.⁵³ An expectation existed within the APSA that any taxation meted out to its members should also be equally levelled upon all wage earners. Underpinning the intransigence of the union was an unwavering commitment to its prevailing goal. With an air of defiance the *PSJV* would firm to its position: ‘the time is overripe for the recognition of the industrial rights of public servants’.⁵⁴ In July and August the APSA was adamant that under no almost circumstances would the union

⁴⁸ *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate*, 29 August 1930.

⁴⁹ *PSJV*, 25 August 1930.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 25 June 1930.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 25 August 1930.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 25 June 1930.

accept salary reductions given that since 1908 the real wages of public servants had decreased by nearly 20 per cent. Only time would tell if this position mantra would hold firm.

8.2 Principles Should Override Expediency Every Time

Alas, as the seasons changed so too did the economic fortunes of public servants. Previously uttered anti-austerity proclamations would be spectacularly disavowed by the APSA in ensuing three months. On 18 September 1930, the executive of the union met with Hogan and various members of the Victorian cabinet to discuss the government's financial predicament.⁵⁵ It soon became evident that the meeting was not a discussion but an ambush of sorts. Calwell and McKellar were informed that unless the rank and file of the union accepted significant salary reductions then mass retrenchments would likely follow. Hogan's request appeared to be a breach of the directions of a special conference of the Victorian Labor Party that had met during the previous week and stipulated that wage reduction would not be imposed upon workers.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, in response the APSA council held a number of emergency meetings over the next three days in an attempt to formulate a response to the demands of the Hogan administration. On the afternoon of 22 September 1930, the council resolved to recommend to union members that they accept salary reductions to the amount of £180,000.⁵⁷ A few hours later, at eight o'clock, a special general meeting open to all APSA members was held.⁵⁸ One thousand union members crammed into Unity Hall on Bourke Street Melbourne to listen to the recommendations of the council. It was not lost on those gathered that what was occurring was perhaps the most important meeting in the history of the organisation. Calwell commenced proceedings by outlining the grim financial situation and the inability of the

⁵⁵ For summary of events and meetings concerning the matter see *Ibid.*, 25 September 1930.

⁵⁶ See the *Horsham Times*, 16 September 1930.

⁵⁷ This represented approximately 6 per cent pro rata rate of the entire wages bill of the public service.

⁵⁸ For decades Unity Hall located at 636-38 Bourke Street in Melbourne was the headquarters of the ARU.

Victorian Treasury to raise credit on the London money market. He assured those present that Premier Hogan was not attempting to ‘fool’ the APSA into accepting what calculated to average six per cent wage cut. Calwell frankly put it to the rank and file that if they were unwilling to negotiate a conditional but comprehensive program of salary reductions then the Hogan administration would fall and public servants would face the wrath of a more conservative government.⁵⁹

As the meeting progressed the voices of dozens of public servants were heard. It was a tense and heated event. Members got up and spoke passionately both for and against the wage cutting proposal.⁶⁰ One member urged her colleagues to ‘think carefully before voting for the resolution’. Ms. Lee reminded those assembled of the widespread attempts by the press to ‘sway minds’ towards the edicts of unnecessary economy.⁶¹ An uncompromising Mr. Campbell labelled the gathering a ‘tragedy’ that should never have occurred.⁶² He too would contend that the austerity cry was fuelled by the media’s tendency towards ‘propaganda’ and irrational thought. In a particularly poignant moment Mr. P. G. Kennedy quoted passages of the *PSJV* dated from July in which Calwell strongly opposed salary reductions. He would also question why the APSA would acquiesce to salary reductions when organisations representing others sections of the public service were resisting such pressures.⁶³ In the opinion of Mr. J Nicholls it was important for the union to hold steady to its guiding ideals: ‘principles should override expediency every time’.⁶⁴ Perhaps he summed up the situation best in the following pithy observation: ‘the service was led to believe that a worse fate

⁵⁹ See an article entitled “Grave Financial Position” in the *PSJV*, 25 September 1930, 75-6.

⁶⁰ See the minutes of the Special General Meeting dated 22 September 1930 in *Ibid.*, 25 October 1930.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Both the Police Association and ARU were opposed to the imposition of salary reductions.

⁶⁴ See the minutes of the Special General Meeting dated 22 September 1930 in the *PSJV*, 25 October 1930.

would be in store with another government, but what had the present government ever done for public servants?’⁶⁵

Yet the plucky protests of certain sections of the APSA were drowned out by those who supported the recommendation of the council. Just prior to midnight a motion to accept salary reductions was carried by a two to one majority.⁶⁶ Many were convinced that their livelihoods were in jeopardy and thus saw no other option. A sense of fear had pervaded the APSA. In agreeing to accept an across the board 6 per cent whole of service salary reduction the union imposed a number of prescribed conditions.⁶⁷ The *Argus* was exasperated that the union had the audacity to set rationing conditions at such a time of fiscal uncertainty and rising unemployment.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the union rank and file would not agree unconditionally to wage reductions. The agreed motion stipulated that any prospective government economy measure must be applicable only to the current financial year and the salaries of government ministers, teachers, police officers, lunacy staff and the public service commissioner must be subject to similar reductions. In addition, all increments owed to public servants must be paid. And most importantly during the current parliamentary session the Labor government must introduce and pass legislation to create an independent public service wages board. It was a remarkable undertaking as the salary reduction was significant. On one plane it can be argued that the organisation had completely lost sight of the bold identity that it had attempted to mould over the previous five years. Yet the initial response is slightly more complex than has been suggested by historians such as L. J. Louis who contend that the union timorously retreated from the fight and shed any semblance of militancy.⁶⁹ The trade off in gaining access to a public service wages board was a victory in itself. Numerous public servants speaking in favour of the resolution at the special general meeting pivoted to the notions of ‘sacrifice’ and ‘duty’. Members wore their designation employment public servants with a sense of pride and the *PSJV* stated that the union was ‘prepared to

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ See the *Australasian*, 27 September 1930.

⁶⁷ See the “Proposal for reduction of salaries” in the *PSJV*, 25 September 1930.

⁶⁸ See the *Argus*, 20 September 1930.

⁶⁹ See L. J. Louis, *Trade Unions and the Depression*, 74-5.

assist the government in its present serious financial difficulties and make sacrifices for the public benefit'.⁷⁰

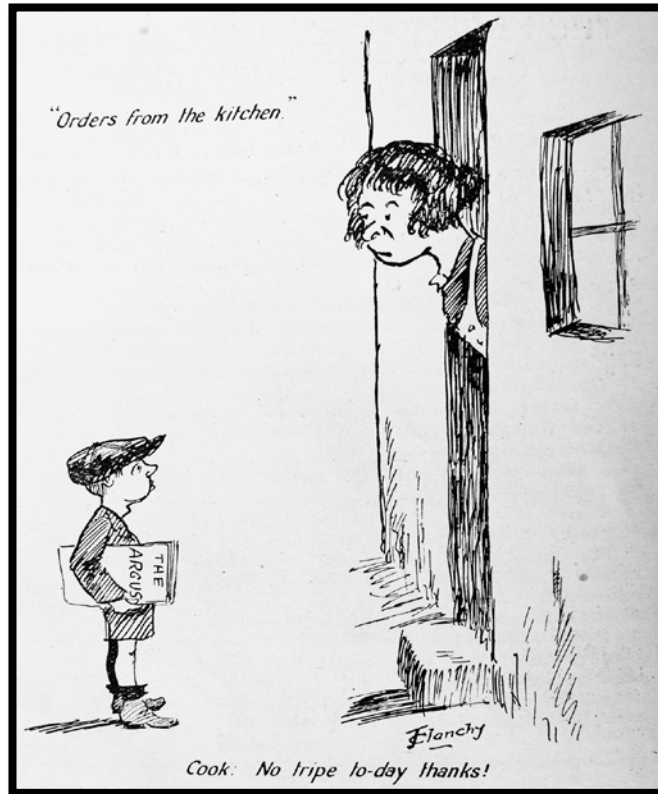


Figure 3: “No Tripe” *PSJV*, 25 September 1930. The *PSJV* ridiculing the anti-public service austerity articles of the *Argus*.

The position of President Calwell in this situation should also not be understated. Calwell appeared to be particularly influential in swaying the decisions of members to support salary reductions. By now he was a leading figure within the Victorian Labor Party after having been elected to the powerful central executive committee in 1926 and the federal conference in 1930. He was the also vice-president of the party and consequently had direct access to the parliamentary leader and caucus. When Calwell spoke he was channelling Hogan and the Victorian Government. Yet there is a considerable degree of ambiguity regarding just who Calwell was acting on behalf of when recommending salary reductions. Calwell’s dual responsibilities as the vice-president of the Victorian Labor Party

⁷⁰ See the “Proposal for reduction of salaries” in the *PSJV*, 25 September 1930.

and president of the APSA was a direct and striking conflict of interest. There is no doubting that he was on the path to Labor pre-selection and was actively seeking a seat to contest. Louis infers that Calwell was primarily driven by his party affiliation and was ‘especially anxious to save the government’.⁷¹

Ultimately the acquiescence of the union to the demands of the Hogan administration would act as the trigger for the onset of arguably the bleakest period in the union’s history. On 24 September 1930, the Hogan government handed down a ‘balanced budget’ in line with the Melbourne Agreement principles. Hogan declared in the Legislative Assembly that public servants ‘had met their obligations as citizens’ by offering to accept conditional salary reductions.⁷² The premier then publicly thanked Calwell and McKellar for their intervention with union members on behalf of the government.⁷³ But the budget’s savings provisions did not satisfy the Nationalist and Country Parties and on 30 September the opposition leader Stanley Argyle gave notice that he would move a no confidence motion against the government.⁷⁴ Hogan immediately turned to the APSA executive to request that the conditional arrangements attached to the proposed public service salary reductions be dropped in order to pass the budget and save the government.⁷⁵ In a remarkable turn of events at the beginning of October the APSA council agreed to withdraw the conditional arrangements that had previously been formulated with the support of members.⁷⁶ Hogan would modify the public service savings measure and survive the no confidence motion. Two weeks later the rank were given the opportunity to express their opinion on the actions of the union executive and council. Only 180 members attended the meeting and a slim majority ratified the decision of the union council. The votes

⁷¹ *PSJV*, 25 September 1930.

⁷² *VPD*, vol. 183, LA, 24 September 1930, 2759.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 2759.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 30 September 1930, 2820.

⁷⁵ In a somewhat bizarre move the government introduced a public service wages board bill at the beginning of October. The bill went nowhere and lapsed during the second reading debate. It is likely that it was used as a tool to entice the union into accepting unconditional cuts. See *Ibid.*, 30 October 1930, 3477-86.

⁷⁶ See the APSA Council minutes dated 6 October 1930.

recorded that 55 voted for the motion and 51 were against it.⁷⁷ It can be speculated that the 70-80 other members that were in attendance walked out in protest. Whatever the case the fortunes of public servants had been sealed two weeks prior and the vote was tangential.

In agreeing to absorb an unconditional salary reduction the APSA had stunningly abandoned the core of its industrial advocacy. This was not lost on leading editorial in the October edition of the *PSJV* as it agreed that the actions of the union seemed 'paradoxical' to the ideals it professed.⁷⁸ It is reasonable to suggest that if the updated salary reduction package had been put to union members at the meeting on 22 September it would have been voted down. The rank and file had invested their faith and trust in the leadership of Secretary McKellar and President Calwell and were subsequently duped. Morale within the service was now completely shot. The union's opposition to the at times hysterical cries for austerity was ignored. Bold activism among union members in opposition to the cuts almost instantly had evaporated. Some members took comfort from the fact that more draconian cuts to state public services had been passed by the governments of Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australian.⁷⁹ As the year of the year approached the wage cutting measure was introduced to the Victorian parliament and on 3 December the *Public Service Salary Reduction Act* was passed.⁸⁰ During the second reading debate of the Bill Nationalist MP Robert Menzies questioned whether in passing the Bill 'we are forgetting our moral sense'.⁸¹ Labor MP Maurice Blackburn opposed the Bill and commented that 'the position taken up by ministers seems to me to be entirely wrong'.⁸² Labor luminary George Prendergast also voted against the Bill in what was an embarrassment for the Hogan cabinet. Former union secretary Thomas Tunnecliffe and union organiser Bert Cremean were conspicuous in their silence during the debate and voted in favour of the measure. To further compound the

⁷⁷ *PSJV*, 25 October 1930.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ For details see *Ibid.*, 24 December 1930.

⁸⁰ *Public Service Payments Reduction Act 1930* (Victoria) no. 3946.

⁸¹ *VPD*, vol. 184, LA, 3 December 1930, 4315.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 4321.

privations of the APSA the travel allowances of public servants were slashed and many did not receive the increments to which they were entitled. Blackburn, invoking Lord Tennyson, summed up the position of his party leader best: 'his honour rooted in dishonour stood, and faith unfaithful kept him falsely true'.⁸³

8.3 The Lost Years and the Slow Recovery

It is not an exaggeration to state that the 1930s were the bleakest years in the union's history. During the 1920s the union had coalesced and campaigned forcefully for the introduction of a public service wages board. The union had briefly gained registration in the Commonwealth Arbitration Court in 1924. Superannuation was secured and fortnightly pay was implemented. But as the New Year dawned the APSA sent out a 'plea for unity'.⁸⁴ Score of members resigned from the APSA in lieu of the salary reductions.⁸⁵ The union responded in part by publishing a two-page letter authored by P. R. Biggin entitled 'The APSA Justified—A Member's Appreciation'.⁸⁶ It smacked of desperation. Arthur Calwell would resign from his position as union president in February and leave the union to pick up the pieces of a disastrous 12 months. The timing served as an omen and dented the morale of the rank and file. Calwell cited illness as the reason for his resignation. And yet his illness was short lived and he would soon join the Federated Clerks' Union (FCU).⁸⁷ It has been claimed that Calwell had no choice and was unwillingly forced out of the APSA by the Labor Party.⁸⁸ This is an unpersuasive contention and fundamentally underplays Calwell's political expediency. At the most pivotal moment in the history of the organisation the president had effectively abdicated. Calwell would increasingly turn his attention to federal politics and vacate any interest he had in securing industrial rights for

⁸³ Ibid., 4321.

⁸⁴ *PSJV*, 24 December 1930.

⁸⁵ See the APSA council minutes in Ibid., 24 December 1930; 24 January 1931; 25 February 1931; 25 April 1931.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 24 December 1930.

⁸⁷ The FCU was affiliated with the Victorian Labor Party.

⁸⁸ See Calwell, *I Am Bound*, 17.

state public servants. Following fifteen years of activism and involvement with the union his departure only elicited minimal attention in the union journal.

As the APSA council prepared to elect a new president the nation descended further into political and financial crisis in 1931 and 1932. Unemployment trapped more than a quarter of all workers by the start of 1931 and would soon approach 30 per cent.⁸⁹ Industrial production fell by 70 per cent between 1928 and 1932.⁹⁰ In 1931 real national income was reduced by 5.8 per cent.⁹¹ To compound the grievances of workers the Commonwealth Arbitration Court slashed the basic wage by 10 per cent in January 1931.⁹² Every government in Australia was facing a credit emergency. Even high yielding short-term loans had been checked by the London money market. In excess of 150,000 Victorians were barely surviving by accessing relief payments or ‘sussos’ as they were popularly known.⁹³ Still, the grim reality of the crisis cannot be adequately conveyed through raw statistics. Major Australian cities were desolate places in which never ending dole queues, evictions, foreclosures, and hunger were disturbingly common. Australia had not been experienced a catastrophe of this magnitude since the depression of the early 1890s.

In the wider labour movement a crisis of organisation and direction was also unfolding. In the early months of 1931 the federal Labor Party split three ways.⁹⁴ Prime Minister Scullin was under attack from both the ‘right’ and the ‘left’ wings of the party. The right was led by Joseph Lyons who had served as acting prime minister in the later stage of 1930 while Scullin was in London attempting to sell

⁸⁹ See the *Commonwealth Year Books 1931 and 1932*.

⁹⁰ See Love, *Labor and the Money Power*, 120-135; C. B. Schedvin, *Australia and the Great Depression: A Study of Economic Policy and Development in the 1920s and 1930s* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1970), 212.

⁹¹ Schedvin, *Australia and the Great Depression*, 212.

⁹² The award was made on 22 January 1931. For a transcript of the judgment see E. O. G. Shann and D. B. Copland, *The Crisis in Australian Finance, 1929 to 1931: Documents of Budgetary and Economic Policy* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1931), 102-3.

⁹³ Shann and Copland, *The Crisis in Australian Finance*, 98.

⁹⁴ For an account of the split see McMullin, *The Light on the Hill: The Australian Labor Party 1891-1991* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992), 164-175.

additional bond notes to British bankers. Lyons felt at odds with his colleagues who were increasingly espousing an expansionist monetary and fiscal policy. He strongly supported Niemeyer's deflationary policy of government expenditure and deficit reduction. Lyons resigned from the federal cabinet in January and in March from the party itself. He and five of his colleagues joined with Nationalist MPs to form the United Australia Party (UAP).⁹⁵ On the 'left' was a block of militant trade unions and politicians led by populist New South Wales Labor premier Jack Lang. The 'Langites' condemned the rationale of the 'Melbourne Agreement' and called for a radical debt repudiation and expansionist fiscal policy to be adopted. Lang was prone to outbursts of astonishing vitriol and spoke of financial crisis being caused by 'London Jews' and 'vultures of finance'.⁹⁶ Caught in the centre was the faction led by Scullin and federal Treasurer Edward (Ted) Theodore who had been a strong supporter of Victorian public service unionists in the early 1920s. This faction called for a moderate expansionist policy and proposed that there should be a fiduciary currency issue of £18 million.⁹⁷ These competing philosophies came to a head when the nation's political leaders met in Melbourne in May. During the conference the assembled leaders heard from a committee of prominent economists led by University of Melbourne academic Douglas Copland. Copland was the key architect of the advice and called for a significant reduction in government expenditure and wages. By the end of the three-day meeting there was consensus on a range of broad reaching efficiency and wage reduction measures that closely resembled the rationale of Niemeyer's Melbourne Agreement.

Following the adoption of the deflationary resolution the fortunes of Victorian public servants were sealed. Hogan's support for what was dubbed the 'Premiers' Plan' laid bare his conservative fiscal instincts. He was instantly derided by the Victorian trade unions and Melbourne Trades Hall.⁹⁸ Many unionists viewed the 'the Plan' as a sinister plot hatched by the 'Money Power'. The APSA would

⁹⁵ Labor MPs James Fenton, James Guy, Moses Gabb, John Price and Charles McGrath followed Lyons in crossing the floor in the federal parliament.

⁹⁶ Love, *Labor and the Money Power*, 109-132.

⁹⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 January 1931.

⁹⁸ Louis, *Trade Unions and the Depression*, Ch. 5.

offer the following scathing analysis of the wage cutting plan: ‘to appease the God of balanced budgets the public services of Australia are offered as a special sacrifice, they are the victims, without choice, without alternative’.⁹⁹ The union would also sarcastically ridicule the fiscal conservatism and greed of Australian banks who were endeavouring to impose a 10 per cent wage cut on their own employees: ‘naturally no bank could be expected to continue the overdraft to a man who admitted he was in extreme difficulties’.¹⁰⁰ In the Legislative Assembly the government introduced measures that would reduce the salaries of public servants by a flat rate of 10 per cent. In justifying further public service wage reductions the premier contended that the actions of the government ‘were based on the principle of equality of sacrifice’.¹⁰¹ An astonished APSA denounced Hogan’s logic and observed that the ‘other alleged participants in the sacrifice...may only boast the superficial merit of adherence’.¹⁰² At a mass meeting of the union hundreds of members protested against the government’s actions. It was resolved that ‘a cut in service wages is a class tax’.¹⁰³ Recently elected union president Amergin Oisín O’Dowd led a delegation of members to lobby Hogan directly in an attempt to soften the proposed cuts. Yet the efforts ultimately proved futile and on 24 September the *Financial Emergency Act 1931* was given royal assent.¹⁰⁴ Union members were both outraged and disillusioned. As 1932 arrived T. F. Conboy, secretary of the Ararat sub-branch of the APSA, summed up the preceding 12 months: ‘we are on the eve of the finish of another year, and I think I can safely say that it has been one of the hardest and most distressing years that the members of the public service has ever passed through’.¹⁰⁵

In a portent of things to come in November 1931 the Scullin government faced the electors and was utterly routed by UAP. The Labor brand at the federal level

⁹⁹ *PSJV*, 25 June 1931.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *VPD*, vol. 185, LA, 8 July 1931, 996.

¹⁰² *PSJV*, 25 June 1931.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 25 July 1931.

¹⁰⁴ *Financial Emergency Act 1931* (Victoria) no. 3961.

¹⁰⁵ *PSJV*, 25 January 1932.

had been tarnished beyond repair and the party would remain in opposition throughout the rest of the 1930s. By the beginning of 1932 the fortunes of the Hogan administration were similarly set to plunge. During the Christmas period Hogan had suffered a nervous breakdown and was in and out of hospital. In March, on doctors' orders, he set sail for Europe to take a prolonged convalescence. Yet by the New Year the premier's political standing within the party was a shadow of what it once had been. With Hogan side-lined, the Victorian Labor Party, attuned to the industrial wing of the labour movement, held its annual conference in January and resolved to expel any member that continued to support the wage-cutting Premiers' Plan.¹⁰⁶ The party organisation and industrial wing were in direct conflict with Hogan's faction of parliamentary loyalists who were bent on complying with the plan. With Hogan still in Europe, the acting premier, Thomas Tunnecliffe barely knew what to do and the parliamentary party went into a state of paralysis. When Tunnecliffe refused to comply with the Premiers' Plan the opposition leader Stanley Argyle moved a no-confidence motion against the government.¹⁰⁷ After a brief debate the motion was successfully passed on 13 April and an election was called for 14 May. The *Age* quipped that the government's demise was a 'case of suicide, and not assassination'.¹⁰⁸

In the lead up to the Victorian election the APSA mobilised in opposition to an expansion of the austerity housed within the Premiers' Plan. The executives of the APSA and the Victorian Teachers Union (VTU) held talks and decided to join forces to form the Teachers' Public Service Defence League.¹⁰⁹ It was a determined display of industrial feeling among union members who had suffered severe setbacks in 1930 and 1931. The *PSJV* asserted that 'every public servant must, if not on the grounds of industrial justice at least for his own protection, declare his opposition to the extension of the 10 per cent cut in real wages'.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ For an analysis of the conference proceedings see Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory*, 198-9.

¹⁰⁷ *VPD*, vol. 188, 12 April 1932, 29-33; 13 April 1932, 39-76.

¹⁰⁸ *Age*, 27 April 1932.

¹⁰⁹ See the *PSJV*, 26 April 1932. Teachers unions amalgamated in Victoria in 1926 to create the Victoria Teachers Union (VTU)

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

After having been subject to an average salary reduction of 17 per cent over the previous two years hundreds of APSA members joined one of the Defence League's 11 electorate working groups. Local door knocking campaigns were conducted to educate voters on what the union perceived to be inequity of the plan.¹¹¹ Working groups lobbied candidates to reject government expenditure cuts and instead protect public services. So strong was the sentiment among trade unions against government cost cutting that Tunnecliffe and the majority of the Victorian Labor Party campaigned against the Premiers' Plan. Chaos soon ensued as Hogan nominated from England as a Premiers' Plan Labor candidate in his local seat. Labor was a rabble. All Argyle needed to do was to step aside and watch Labor Party implode. When the votes were tallied the Labor government had clearly done just that and sustained a crushing defeat that saw its Legislative Assembly numbers reduced from 30 to 16.¹¹² For the union the result translated into further cuts to the conditions and salaries of its members.

The succeeding four years were difficult ones for public servants and the APSA. It had become evident that the union was suffering from a dearth of practical and ideological leadership. In the wake of Argyle's ascension to the premiership the union embarked upon a campaign to have the wages of public servants restored to the 1929 setting. Yet the advocacy was entirely ignored and the *Financial Emergency Act* was re-enacted. The 1932 state election had been a referendum not just on the Labor government but on the Premiers' Plan as well. Argyle was a myopic and incidental premier who faithfully carried out the dictates of austerity. His administration found additional savings by leaving the vacancies of retiring public servants unfilled and also removed the £208 basic wage safety net.¹¹³ By the middle of 1933 the triumvirate organisational structure of the APSA at the national level had collapsed with the Tasmanian branch leaving and the South Australian branch working independently. The loose and ultimately unproductive federation was brought together to secure commonwealth industrial registration and yet there had been almost no interstate collaboration since the late 1920s. It is

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² *Age*, 15 and 16 May 1932.

¹¹³ The basic wage was removed in 1933. See the *PSJV*, 25 October 1933 for details.

somewhat peculiar that the Victorian branch would continue to operate under the APSA name for a number of years ahead. During this period the only industrial gain of note was won in 1933 when the union obtained increases in annual sick leave credits of 8 days full pay and 8 days half pay.¹¹⁴ But this was little consolation to members. At the beginning of 1934 a weary APSA president A. O. O'Dowd stepped down after having led the union during the tumult of the previous three years. A despondent editorial in the union journal rhetorically inquired 'what of our future?'¹¹⁵ A call was put out for fresh faces to step forward to take on the challenge of leadership: 'many members of the Executive and Council have served the Association for a goodly number of years and would only too gladly welcome young men who will come forward and take their places. In fact, it is imperative that they should'.¹¹⁶ A brutally honest *PSJV* was less than enticing in putting out the job description: 'the fight for the preservation of public service rights does not promise to be any less strenuous in the future than it has been in the past'.¹¹⁷

From 1934 to 1936 the focus of the union almost exclusively rested upon the restoration of public service salaries and pensions to the pre-depression settings. Countless deputations waited upon the Argyle administration to lobby for a change in the official austerity policy. Mass meetings of union members were held to make known the discontent felt by public servants. By 1935 the changing political landscape and improving economic conditions gave rise to the possibility of public service conditions being restored. In the wake of the 1935 state election the newly installed Country Party leader Albert Dunstan assumed the premiership by forming a minority government with the support of the Labor Party. It was an extraordinary break from the UAP and ended the three year reign of Argyle. Legend has it that Arthur Calwell was the architect of the arrangement. He allegedly approached notorious Melbourne gambling and business identity John Wren to act as an intermediary and persuade Tunnecliffe and Dunstan to consider

¹¹⁴ See the Annual Report of the APSA in *PSJV*, 26 February 1934.

¹¹⁵ *PSJV*, 25 January 1934.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

the prospect. Calwell did not hesitate in later claiming credit for the Labor-Country alliance stating 'it was my idea and mine alone'.¹¹⁸ Yet as Costar and Griffin have both commented this contention is unpersuasive and more an example of Calwell's imaginative memory.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, the elevation of Dunstan was fortuitous for public servants as he had previously committed to restoring public service salaries if the government's financial circumstances permitted.¹²⁰ On 22 April 1936 a group of APSA members led by Secretary McKellar and President J. R. Nicholls met with Dunstan and argued that the conditions were now present to return the wages to a more appropriate level.¹²¹ Under pressure from the APSA and the Labor Party the Premier announced during his budget speech on 4 August that public service wages would be restored to the 1929 settings from 4 October.¹²² The news was received by union members with 'intense relief and appreciation'.¹²³ For six long years public servants had been in the wilderness struggling to make gains in their industrial standing. Now at last their claims had been recognised.

¹¹⁸ Arthur Calwell, *Be Just and Fear Not* (Melbourne: Lloyd O'Neil, 1972), 40-1.

¹¹⁹ See Brian Costar, "Albert Dunstan: The Jumping Jack Premier," in Costar and Strangio (eds) *The Victorian Premiers*, 218; Griffin, John Wren, 311-12.

¹²⁰ Dunstan led the United Country Party that had come together in September of 1930.

¹²¹ See the *PSJV*, 25 May 1936.

¹²² See *VPD*, vol. 199, LA, 4 August 1936, 717.

¹²³ *PSJV*, 25 August 1936.

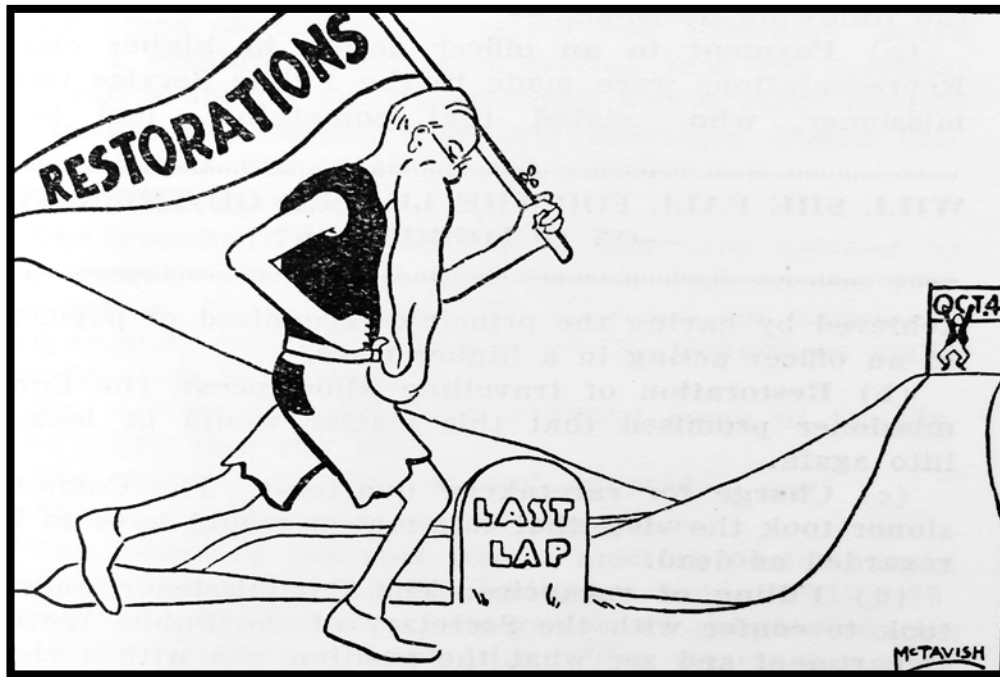


Figure 4: “The Marathon Runner” *PSJV*, 25 September 1936.

In reflecting upon the tribulations of the previous six years one union member, F. J. A, penned a letter in which he astutely detailed the failings of the APSA and its membership. The author commenced by noting that ‘we [public servants] thought whatever came or went our position was secure and nobody bothered very much about the things that governed our salaries’.¹²⁴ It was then observed that ‘we believed what we were told...by the politicians...and when the cuts came we had to hastily marshal our forces in an endeavour to counteract the vicious class taxation that was thrust upon us’.¹²⁵ Finally, the author left readers with a provocative statement and question: ‘the stranger who lets one win an occasional pool is usually looked upon with grave suspicion. Who was the dealer?’¹²⁶ Indeed, the 1930s was a comparatively bleak period for the union. Membership numbers had fallen from nearly 3000 to below 2000 and the bonds of class feeling among public servants had remained somewhat dormant. Public servants were treated as useful subjects by successive governments. Amid a raging Depression, the APSA

¹²⁴ “Poker-With Guns under the Table,” *PSJV*, 26 October 1936.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

hesitated and would too readily invest its faith in a Labor Party that never ruled from a majority position.

Nonetheless, in the aftermath of the restoration of wages and pensions the APSA organised the first 'Civil Service Ball' in Victoria in an attempt to re-establish 'the morale and prestige of the public service'.¹²⁷ A lively crowd of 560 public servants flocked to the Earl's Court Ballroom in St. Kilda on 20 October and were treated with performances from the Taxation Ballet and the Charles Rainsford Orchestra. Members of the Dunstan government and nearly all of the public service heads of departments were in attendance. The union commented that in the years ahead it hoped the night would be repeated and become one of 'THE' events of social season.¹²⁸ Following years of hardship union members danced the night away and hoped that the end of the 1930s would be more favourable to public servants.

8.4 Conclusion

When William McPherson assumed the premiership in 1929 the APSA cautiously made the best of the situation and approached the government to lobby for the creation of a public service wages board. Yet the union's campaign was effectively scuttled by the HEAA and the prospect of securing a public service wages board was extinguished. In the second half of 1929 the nation was again rocked by industrial unrest as mine workers clashed with owners in the New South Wales coalfields. The strike action set off a chain of events that led to the fall of the Bruce federal government. Political change was occurring in Victoria after the ever-capricious CPP joined with the Labor Party to bring down the Nationalist government. With Hogan at the helm the APSA envisioned that public servants would win more favourable treatment. This was especially the case when former union secretary Thomas Tunnecliffe was appointed Victorian Chief Secretary and former organiser Bert Cremean won the seat of Dandenong. But as the months passed and the mid-point of 1930 arrived the entire nation was caught

¹²⁷ *PSJV*, 25 September 1936.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

in the midst of a financial emergency. Unemployment soared and government finances deteriorated. When the London money market checked the flow of credit an increasingly desperate Prime Minister Scullin called for assistance from the Bank of England. A delegation led by British economist Sir Otto Niemeyer was dispatched and soon arrived in Australia to ostensibly formulate an economic blueprint to steer the government's haemorrhaging finances back to stability.

In the ensuing months Australia's political leaders, including Hogan, followed Niemeyer's prescription and agreed to slash government expenditure and cut wages. An ill-prepared APSA was caught off guard and scrambled under the leadership of Arthur Calwell to formulate a response. In a proactive move the union upon perceiving that retrenchments were imminent, agreed to conditional salary and pension reductions. Within days the Hogan government was asking Calwell to drop the attached conditions and accept an across the board 6 per cent salary reduction. Fearing for their jobs and what a change of government may bring, the union Council acquiesced to the demands. Many thought it a betrayal by the Labor Party. In the succeeding five years the public service conditions would deteriorate further as cuts to wages averaged out at 17.5 per cent. Caught in a constant cycle of lobbying to have salaries reinstated the direction and organisation of the union was tested. Following years of union stagnation the organisation's lobbying finally paid dividends when the Dunstan government restored public service wages to their pre-depression setting in 1936. Attention would now turn to reigniting the campaign for an independent public service wages board.

Chapter 9 The Mecca of Our Hopes: The Establishment of the Public Service Wages Board 1939-1946

The 1930s was for the most part a barren wasteland for the Victorian branch of the Australian Public Service Association (APSA). The *PSJV* would label the period the ‘quiet’ years of public service unionism.¹ An improvement in sick pay allowances in 1933 and the restoration of wages in 1936 to the pre-Depression setting were the only industrial achievements of note. Yet the fortunes of the union would be transformed upon the appointment of a new secretary by the name of Standish Michael (Stan) Keon at the end of 1938. This chapter examines the manner in which the organisation, led by Keon, blazed a new trail by shedding its timidity and re-orienting towards bold activism. Keon’s involvement would transform the fortunes of the organisation. The Victorian Public Service Association (VPSA)—as it was branded from 1939 onwards—was quick to notch a number of significant industrial wins. These victories further imbued the rank and file with steadfast confidence and served as a fillip for the campaign to establish an independent public service wages board. The VPSA unashamedly channelled its animosity in the direction of Premier Albert Dunstan while forming a closer relationship with the re-invigorated state Labor Party. By the mid point of the 1940s the union’s 25-year campaign for an independent public service board was finally in poised for success.

9.1 New Leadership Brings a Fresh Start

By the end of the 1930s the APSA was a dispirited and divided organisation. In July 1938 the Clerical Division called for a plebiscite to be held on the question of seceding from the union. A majority of voters recorded that they did not believe that the APSA was properly ‘promoting and protecting’ the interests of members.² While clerical workers were dismayed at the direction and operation of the organisation they

¹ See for example the VPSA Annual report of the APSA 1936 reprinted in the *PSJV*.

² *PSJV*, 25 August 1938. Out of 1007 voters only 488 believed the APSA was acting in the best interests of members.

ultimately voted to stay within the APSA.³ During the ballot Secretary McKellar voiced his disapproval and labelled it a ‘reprehensible’ act.⁴ Nonetheless, the plebiscite result served as an indictment of McKellar’s leadership over recent years. McKellar, the inaugural secretary of the APSA who had been appointed in 1925, resigned following the vote. After nearly a decade and a half of service he was given two months wages and an indifferent send off:

In the period of the last fourteen years...what an array of problems has arisen...The younger members of the Service do not realise all the pioneering work done in the early years of the APSA. If the General Secretary in Victoria has not a string of spectacular victories in his belt he has an array of minor victories in the face of fierce odds...It requires high courage for a man no longer young, who, realising the difficulties in front of him, tenders his resignation...Let he who is ready to cast stones consider whether he would be game enough to do the same with his own official position in these days of stress.⁵

McKellar’s resignation would mark the commencement of a new era for Victorian public service unionism. The union changed its name to the VPSA in the middle of 1938. This action was symbolic of a fresh start. Of far greater importance was the selection and appointment of a new secretary. The membership *en masse* had grown frustrated and dissatisfied with the performance of the union executive. The rebellious inclination of certain sectors of the organisation, as patently displayed by clerical officers, had not completely been extinguished. In order re-vitalise the organisation the VPSA council decided that what was needed was a more ambitious secretary. The search for a ‘young man’ to assume the role was conducted by the council and quickly concluded at the end of 1938 with the appointment of an inexperienced 25-year old named Stan Keon.⁶ Upon reflecting on this period Keon readily acknowledged that he

³ *PSJV*, 25 August 1938.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 25 February 1939.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 25 February 1939. Some were more appreciative of McKellar’s service including Ararat sub-branch Secretary, T. F Conboy, who stated ‘you have been a tower of strength to our organisation, and you will be very difficult to replace’. *Ibid.*, 25 January 1939.

⁶ See *Ibid.*, 26 December 1938. A minority of the VPSA Council members raised objections to the appointment of Keon and argued that there were other more capable candidates.

was plucked from relative obscurity:

I battled around at odd jobs for a while, then I managed and edited the *Irish Review* with Bessie Calwell, Arthur's wife. I did a couple of projects for the Hospitals and Charities Board, battled round the country, rode the 'Rattler', worked for Radio Corporation, went back to Suttons, and then got a job as a secretary of the Public Service Association.⁷

Why the council settled on Keon over the nine other interviewed candidates is a matter of conjecture. Strangio contends that Keon's link to Arthur Calwell and the Catholic network operating within the union might have played a role in his selection.⁸ This is a logical connection to draw for as Robert Murray observes there was still an ongoing and patent 'Masons versus Catholics' sectarian dimension within the public service at this point.⁹ Indeed, when scanning the union's leadership honour boards the Irish genealogy is evident.¹⁰ Whatever the case it would have been obvious to the Council that Keon, in comparison to his predecessor, was an entirely different prospect. To what extent the council was prepared for the transformation that Keon would initiate is another question.

In the December 1938 issue of the *PSJV* the leading editorial argued that a 'stronger and more virile' union needed to be developed.¹¹ With Keon at the helm the VPSA immediately began to chart a new course and live up to this call. Keon made his ideas and political leanings known from the very beginning through the pages of the union journal of which he had assumed the editorship. In one fiery article in July the Dunstan government was taken to task for 'harbouring a dangerous illusion' in thinking that public servants were 'content'.¹² The government was ridiculed for allowing the salaries and conditions of Victorian public servants to fall behind those of their Commonwealth

⁷ Quoted in Paul Strangio, "'Young, ambitious and eager': Stan Keon and the Victorian Public Service Association," *Labour History* 87 (2004): 168-9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁹ Robert Murray, *The Split: Australian Labor in the Fifties* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1972), 97.

¹⁰ See Appendix 1.

¹¹ *PSJV*, 26 December 1938.

¹² *Ibid.*, 25 July 1939.

and interstate counterparts. It was also pointed out that too many public servants were taking flight for positions in the private sector after receiving more attractive employment offers. This tried and tested criticism had been advanced by the union for years but it was now given a renewed impetus:

The attitude of the Government towards the many urgent Service problems awaiting resolution is strongly reminiscent of our old friend Micawber, who gaily signed a promissory note with a 'Thank heavens that's paid'.¹³



Figure 5: "Keon" *PSJV*, 1 November 1940.

In another sign of change a 'bigger and brighter journal' was also promised and delivered in November 1939. The revamped publication shed the drab brown jacket and included new and updated sporting, gardening, social, medical and women's sections. Humorous cartoons now frequently appeared in the publication. It also had a changing

¹³ Ibid.

colour imprint of the Victorian parliament on the front. Strangio has aptly noted that this would serve as ‘an omen of Keon’s future trajectory’.¹⁴ The VPSA’s new president, Joseph McDonald, explained the new look by stating that the previous journal ‘had outlived its usefulness, and a change was long overdue’.¹⁵ Most members appreciated the new format. One officer thanked the union for ‘speaking out frankly on the disgraceful condition the Victorian Service’.¹⁶ Another commented that ‘all the staff are doing a good job’.¹⁷ However, not all were pleased with the transformation in progress. As Strangio has pointed out in some quarters ‘any semblance of industrial militancy, still carried a whiff of illegitimacy’.¹⁸ A disgruntled public servant from the Law Department lambasted the new ‘petty, bad-tempered rag’ and went on to angrily remark that ‘gossip and sport may suit the typists and junior fifths, but for my part something more solid than aimless elegies would be appreciated’.¹⁹ These comments reflect an elitism that was still pervasive among the ranks of senior public servants.

Be that as it may, the VPSA Council supported the enthusiasm and energy that Keon injected into the union. President McDonald wholeheartedly endorsed the direction that Keon had taken the VPSA in the initial months of his secretaryship. New sub-branches were formed and re-formed in Bendigo-Casltmaine, Kerang, Geelong, Rochester, Sunraysia, Swan Hill and the Goulburn Valley to compliment those already in operation in Maffra, Ararat, Ballarat and the Wimmera. Membership numbers were also rising impressively with more than 50 new public servants joining the VPSA in the month of August and dozens during the corresponding months of 1939.²⁰ It was the most encouraging organising period that the union had experienced in ten years.

9.2 World War Two and the Basic Wage

The brooding cloud of World War Two (WW2) forms an on-going backdrop to the

¹⁴ Strangio, “Young, Ambitious and Eager,” 170.

¹⁵ *PSJV*, 1 November 1939.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1 December 1939.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25 September 1939.

¹⁸ Strangio, “Young, Ambitious and Eager,” 170.

¹⁹ *PSJV*, 1 December 1939.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 25 August 1939.

union's history from 1940 onwards. Adolf Hitler's vision of a thousand year Third Reich had officially commenced on 1 September 1939 with Germany's blitzkrieg invasion of Poland. After Britain declared war on Nazi Germany on 3 September, the VPSA affirmed its 'unswerving loyalty to His Majesty King George VI...and the governments of the State of Victoria and the Commonwealth of Australia'.²¹ A number of young public servants swept up in the patriotic fervour soon joined the home militia. Others were simply called up for duty. At the end of 1940 the *PSJV* recorded that 153 public servants had enlisted.²² Occasional letters of enlisted members were published by the union. In one such correspondence a member who had been sent away on basic training made the following droll observation:

I was fondly hoping to spend the solitude of my lonely night watches up here in having a real good think about things in general. Imagine my disgust when I was paired with [a] love-sick elocutionist. A proper drip he is too; believes in poetry and all that sort of stuff.²³

Yet the union's initial reaction to WW2 was much more subdued juxtaposed against the initial reaction in 1914 of the VSSF to commencement of WW1. Indeed in the succeeding six years the events of WW2 were by no means the central focus of the organisation. When references to the conflict were made they pivoted to the strained industrial conditions created by the enlistment of public servants. There is some speculation that Keon's ambivalence to WW2 set the tone of the union's response. Keon was a radical Irish nationalist who had been heavily involved in the Catholic Young Men's Society (CYMS). He grew up and worked in industrial Richmond at a time when it was colloquially known as 'Irishtown'. Strangio observes that Keon 'mythologised' Irish culture and 'gave vent to anti-Anglo sentiment' through his involvement with the *Irish Review* magazine.²⁴ The horrific and bloody events of the Easter Uprising in Dublin in 1916 were never far from the memory of Melbourne's Irish diaspora.²⁵ Browne even contends that 'he [Keon] wrote to several of his friends urging

²¹ *PSJV*, 25 September 1939.

²² *Ibid.*, 1 December 1940

²³ *Ibid.*, 1 November 1939.

²⁴ Strangio, "Young, ambitious and eager," 174.

²⁵ See Tony Abate, "A Man of Principle? A Political Biography of Standish Michael Keon"

them not to enlist in a “British” war’.²⁶

As soon as WW2 began the union campaigned to have the salary discrepancy of enlisted men met by the Victorian Government.²⁷ Months later the *PSJV* accused the government of passing ‘the buck’ by wilfully ignoring the economic interests of those on active service.²⁸ Dunstan’s Ministry was designated ‘War Profiteer No. 1’.²⁹ Throughout WW2 the union continuously accused the government of ‘profiteering on patriotism’.³⁰ In one pointed commentary Keon summarised the position of the Dunstan’s administration:

...the washing of the hands and the cries of “We are not guilty” were more reminiscent of the uneasy cries of Macbeth, for the ghost of the government’s treatment of its own employees hovered uneasily in the background, and will, incidentally, as far as this Association is concerned.³¹

The reaction of the VPSA to WW2 may seem atypical at first but it was in line with the actions of many trade unions during the early phase of the conflict. Initially the war appeared a world away and did not threaten the Australia’s domestic interests. As Beaumont has remarked ‘Australia entered the conflict against Germany because of a concern for international morality’.³² A consensus among the major political parties had formed that the nation should be at war and yet its involvement was subject to on-going debate. Prime Minister Robert Menzies had immediately promised to send an Australian Imperial Force (AIF) contingent of 20,000 men to the Middle East in 1939 to assist the British. But in the years ahead this force would find itself recalled to Australia for home defence purposes. Industrial action would also rise markedly in

(Master’s Thesis, Victoria University of Technology, 1994), chap. 2; Strangio, “Young, Ambitious and Eager,” 174.

²⁶ Browne quoted in Strangio, “Young, Ambitious and Eager,” 174.

²⁷ See the *PSJV*, 25 September 1939; 1 November 1939.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1 November 1939.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ See for example *PSJV*, 1 November 1939; 1 July 1940; *Argus*, 10 February 1942.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1 November 1939.

³² Joan Beaumont, “Introduction,” In Joan Beaumont ed. *Australia at War: 1939-45* (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 1996), 3.

1940 to a level that had not been seen in Australia since the late 1920s. The growing influence of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) was increasingly evident within the trade union movement and held responsible for much of the strike action.³³ During the Depression the CPA's standing had risen quickly as workers and unions found the aggressive campaign modality of the organisation increasingly alluring. The Seamen's, Carpenters', and Plumbers' Unions were controlled by communists. There was also significant communist influence in the Railways, Shop Assistants' and the Federated Clerks Unions (FCU). One report suggests that the CPA had 232 members in positions of leadership in Victorian trade unions in the early 1940s.³⁴ When Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union and Hitler's Nazi Germany jointly signed a non-aggression pact in August 1939 the antipathy of Australian communists towards WW2 was cemented.³⁵ Loyal adherents to communism in Australia now actively campaigned to subvert the 'imperialist' war effort. The posture of the CPA would only change upon Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941.

It is within this context that the VPSA embarked upon an ambitious suite of industrial campaigns. One of the first issues to be confronted by the new union Executive was the £172 adult basic wage setting. The Victorian basic wage was a relic of the restoration of public service salaries. In 1936 the Commonwealth public service basic wage was £172. But in the ensuing four years it had increased rapidly and was now fixed at £222. The pre-Depression Victorian public service adult basic wage had been £208 and by 1940 every other state in Australia had a public service basic wage of not less than £210. Over the previous 18 months the union had periodically raised the matter with the Dunstan ministry to no avail. The government's response had always been that economic and financial conditions must be right before the basic wage could be raised.

³³ See Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds: The Communist Party of Australia from Origins to Illegality* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1998), chap. 14.

³⁴ See Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory*, 252.

³⁵ The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was signed on 23 August 1939 in Moscow.



Figure 6: ‘The March of Time’ PSJV, 1 August 1940.

Needless to say the union scoffed at the notion that current financial conditions were not conducive to an increase in the basic wage. Indeed the argument against raising the setting was particularly weak in view of the actions of other states. As such in 1940 the basic wage restoration campaign became a focus of the VPSA. With every passing year the basic wage of public servants had decreased in real terms. McDonald and Keon led the initiative and met with Premier Dunstan in April to request that this blatant disparity be closed.³⁶ Former union organiser and Labor MP, Bert Cremean, also joined the delegation to support the case for an increase in the basic wage.³⁷ In a lengthy discussion Keon remarked that the setting was ‘unjust’ and should immediately be rectified. Dunstan was initially reluctant to act but by September the campaign had built considerable momentum and the government agreed to lift the basic wage to its

³⁶ See the PSJV, 1 April 1940.

³⁷ Cremean was Deputy Opposition leader by this stage. Former union Secretary Thomas Tunnecliffe had been appointed Speaker of the LA in 1937.

previous setting of £208.³⁸ This was the first of many victories for the VPSA in the 1940s.

At the April meeting with Dunstan the VPSA delegation concurrently raised the matter of the five-day working week. All other Australian states with the exception of South Australia had implemented the measure and it was adjudged to be only a matter of time before Victoria would follow suit. It was embarrassingly observed that New Zealand again led Victoria in the progressive stakes after having introduced the truncated week. McDonald bluntly pressed the premier to stop delaying its inevitable introduction: 'I think you, yourself, would not like to be the last in on the 5-day week'.³⁹ Keon stated that 'you have heard our representations on this matter so often that you should be more familiar with the arguments in its favour than I am'.⁴⁰ In compiling a dossier on the situation the union recycled the words of Dunstan in 1936 when he had expressed that the government would do 'everything possible to bring about a decision as early as possible'.⁴¹ Four years later and the discussions again bore little fruit. The premier would refuse to commit to action and the meeting would end without a favourable resolution. On parting ways Dunstan promised to examine the matter and thanked the union for its presentation. In what would prove to be an insincere response he replied 'I am glad that you have come along to refresh my memory'.⁴²

³⁸ See the *PSJV*, 2 September 1940.

³⁹ *PSJV*, 1 April 1940.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1 May 1940.

⁴² *Ibid.*



Figure 7: ‘Surely Not Mr. Premier’ *PSJV*, 1 May 1940.

By this point the patience of the VPSA and its members had been extinguished. In the following month the union organised two mass meetings to protest against the inaction of the Dunstan government regarding the institution of a five-day week. On 7 and 8 May, it was estimated that the consecutive rallies drew crowds of 2,000 and 1,000 people respectively.⁴³ It was appropriately referred to as a ‘milestone’ in the organisation’s history. From the steps of Parliament House the speaking party led by President McDonald explained that ‘we have not come here to threaten the government...but to show them clearly without a shadow of a doubt that the service is unanimous in its request for the five-day week’.⁴⁴ Keon audaciously proclaimed that the rallies were intended to ‘instruct’ the government. He recounted to those assembled that a man on the tram had approached him and remarked ‘Good Heavens! What’s happened with your show? Have they gone all Bolshie holding mass meetings at a time like

⁴³ See the *Herald*, 7 and 8 May 1940; *PSJV*, 1 June 1940.

⁴⁴ *PSJV*, 1 June 1940.

this?’⁴⁵ Keon firmly dismissed the suggestion that the meetings were in some way ‘menacing the unity of the Empire’.⁴⁶ In his pugnacious and bellicose style he asserted that ‘there could be no more favourable time for the introduction of this reform’.⁴⁷ Support for public servants would also emanate from Cremean in the Legislative Assembly. On 8 May, he snidely asked Dunstan if he was aware that ‘2,000 public servants yesterday offered to work Saturday afternoon if their contention that the five-day week means greater efficiency, economy and better service to the public, could be disproved?’⁴⁸ In further questioning he commented that ‘the five-day working week is the order of the day’.⁴⁹ Dunstan’s reply was typically contemptuous: ‘when the Government reaches a decision it will be a sound one’.⁵⁰

9.3 Emperor Dunstan and Rise of the Women’s Division

The campaign for a five-day week was effectively in limbo by August 1940. Dunstan would use the veneer of WW2 as justification for not acting to bring the Victorian working week in line with majority of states. Yet on a range of other industrial matters the VPSA’s fortunes were soon advanced. In September, the government moved in the Parliament to the implement the union’s primary objective—a public service wages board.⁵¹ The prospective board would replace the office of Public Service Commissioner with a three-member panel. The Governor-in-Council would appoint two members including a government representative and an ostensibly independent Chairman. The third seat would be determined by the vote of public servants. As has been observed it was a ‘strange formula for independence’ as the Bill was explicit that the Board would serve in an ‘advisory’ capacity only.⁵² Moreover, all decisions were

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid. Browne describes Keon as ‘intense, pugnacious, ambitious, intelligent’. See Geoff Browne, “Keon, Standish Michael (Stan) (1913-1987),” *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 17 (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2007).

⁴⁸ *VPD*, vol. 209, LA, 8 May 1940, 144. Public servants would work until 11.30 on Saturday.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 179.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 180.

⁵¹ See Ibid., vol. 209, LA, 3 September 1940, 509-22.

⁵² Strangio, “Young, Ambitious and Eager,” 175; See also the *Public Service Act 1940* (Victoria) no. 4751.

subject to the approval of the Governor-in-Council. In the Legislative Assembly the prolonged second reading debate drew the ire of some the Labor MPs. Dunstan was renowned for avoiding policy decisions and appeared as if he was attempting to stonewall his own Bill. When a lengthy adjournment was proposed Labor MP John Cain quipped sarcastically ‘Why not adjourn it forever? You do not want it!’⁵³ Cremean would join the fray and plainly insist: ‘the time has arrived for honourable members to show whether or not they believe a public service board should become established as fact.’⁵⁴

Following an adjournment of more than a month the Public Service Bill passed through both parliamentary chambers and was given Royal Assent on 28 October 1940.⁵⁵ Dunstan took credit for the scheme and would remark that ‘it is necessary for the employees themselves in their own interests to have a representative on a tribunal of this nature’.⁵⁶ In the pages of the *PSJV* the union’s delight was obvious: ‘we are naturally elated at this success which has crowned a quarter of a century of arduous agitation’.⁵⁷ President McDonald reported on the establishment of the mechanism in explicit terms: ‘we have a Board clothed with more extensive powers than expected, and more important still, great potential for extension’.⁵⁸ It was noted that public servants for the first time would have a direct voice in all service matters.⁵⁹ Of course the rank and file was cognizant to the fact that the Board’s constitution contained structural limitations. And yet the union’s overriding attitude was to wait and see the Board in operation before campaigning to have its independence legislatively cemented. In early 1941, elections to determine the public service representative were held and VPSA council member J. V. Dillon was elected ahead of President McDonald.⁶⁰ Some members of the public condemned the VPSA for running a ticket on behalf of Dillon and McDonald and stated that the position was a judicial appointment and therefore

⁵³ *VPD*, vol. 209, LA, 3 September 1940, 521.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 519.

⁵⁵ The Bill passed through its final stages on 22 October 1940. See *VPD*, vol. 210, LC, 22 October 1940, 1162; *Public Service Act 1940* (Victoria) no. 4751.

⁵⁶ See *VPD*, vol. 209, LA, 3 September 1940, 511.

⁵⁷ *PSJV*, 1 November 1940.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Dillon won the ballot 1,027 to 838. See the *Argus*, 4 February 1941.

should be free from the interference of the union.⁶¹ Yet the wages board system of elections had long been the cornerstone of Victoria's industrial relations system. One of the first acts of the Board was to recognise the VPSA as an official organisation under its jurisdiction.⁶² So chuffed was the union upon the creation of the Board that it commissioned a cartoon of Dunstan positioned alongside French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte and Roman Emperor Julius Caesar.

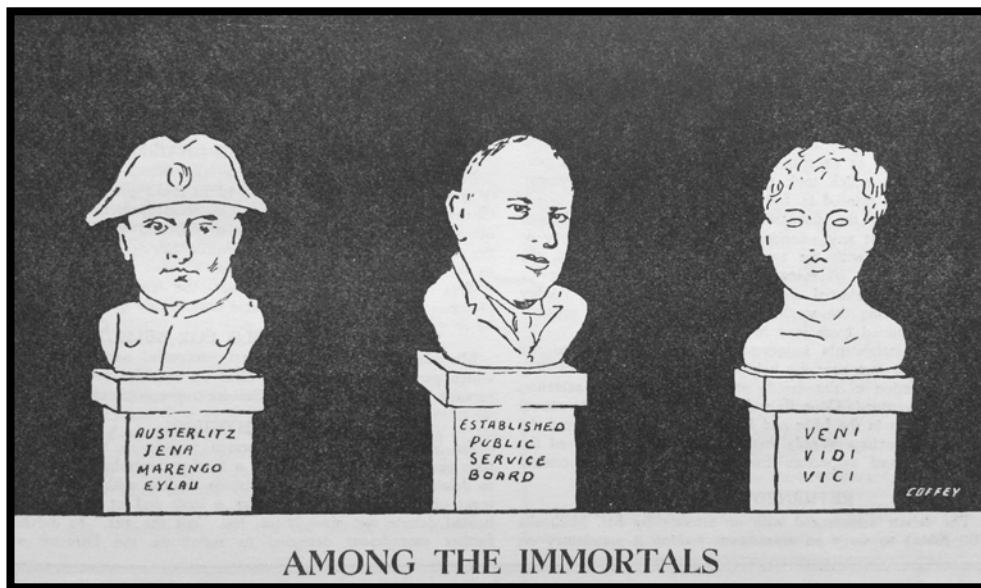


Figure 8: 'Among the Immortals' PSJV, 1 November 1940.

The ensuing 18 months was a successful period for the VPSA. A total of 1,335 new members joined the union during the course of the 1941.⁶³ With a growing membership the union now operated on a stable financial footing. On the industrial front the VPSA would make a general public service salary increase its primary goal.⁶⁴ Much time and space had been dedicated in the union journal to examining Victoria's rising cost of living.⁶⁵ Members were unsurprisingly restless and the *Argus* reported that Victorian public service unions were threatening to jointly attack the Labor-United Country Party

⁶¹ Letter authored by R. C. C. Dunn in the *Argus*, 12 April 1941.

⁶² See the VPSA Annual Report for the Year Ended 31 December 1941 reprinted in the *PSJV*, 2 February 1942.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ See *Ibid.*, 1 February 1941.

⁶⁵ See for example *Ibid.*, 1 February 1941; 1 August 1941; 1 July 1942.

(UCP) alignment in order to elicit a resolution to the situation.⁶⁶ A critical Keon quipped that in the opinion of conservative politicians ‘every claim for an increase is a sin’.⁶⁷ Yet in July 1941, the Dunstan government finally responded to the growing animosity by including a comprehensive public service salary increase in the Budget.⁶⁸ It was the first whole of service salary increase since the 1926 re-classification.⁶⁹ The VPSA gleefully announced that ‘our number one objective for 1941 has been achieved’ and gave measured praise to Premier Dunstan:

We do not desire to hold up Mr. Dunstan as a paragon of virtue from the Public Service viewpoint, but taking a long view of Service history the present government has been relatively outstanding in so far as Public Service reforms are concerned. May it long continue to be so.⁷⁰

Progress was also made in the relation to the status of female public servants. On 27 November 1940 a spontaneous meeting of female public servants had been conducted and a new Women’s Division was subsequently created.⁷¹ Keon and the Council immediately gave their unequivocal support to the group. The hitherto sexist and antediluvian attitudes towards women within the union were being challenged. The organisation had only recently been more likely to give female members advice on ‘how to be beautiful’ and ‘how to lose five pounds’.⁷² Articles had crudely spoken of ‘curing the man-hater’ and that ‘women wish that they had been born men’.⁷³ With the support of the council, the Women’s Division now championed the concerns of female officers. One of the initial actions of the Division was to agitate to have the salaries of female typists increased by £6 to the 1929 setting.⁷⁴ The campaign was supported by nearly 700 relentless members who had joined the Division by the end of 1942. Women were now increasingly filling positions vacated in the public service by enlisted men and

⁶⁶ *Argus*, 22 May 1941; 24 June 1941.

⁶⁷ *PSJV*, 1 February 1941.

⁶⁸ *VPD*, vol. 211, LA, 30 July 1941, 500-01.

⁶⁹ See *PSJV*, 1 February 1941.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1 August 1941.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 2 December 1940.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 1 December 1939; 1 January 1940.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 1 January 1940.

⁷⁴ This would bring the salary of typists up to the 1929 setting. See *Ibid.*, 2 December 1940.

therefore the industrial concerns of women received substantial attention. A campaign to have the standing of hundreds of temporary female officers elevated to a permanent setting was also in full swing by 1942. Emma Tootell, a public servant from the Law Department, had assumed the inaugural leadership of the Division and railed against the injustice confronting women trapped by insecure employment. In July, the Division's campaign was victorious and 300 temporary workers were granted permanency.⁷⁵ It was a tremendous achievement for the nascent Women's Division. Both Keon and Labor MP Bert Cremean were warmly thanked for their tireless efforts on behalf of the campaign.⁷⁶

To cap off the achievements of the VPSA during this period the government agreed in August to peg the wages of public servants to changes in the cost of living. A jubilant union editorial would give the following context to the importance of the measure: 'thus, at long last, we write *finis* to an unhappy story of eighty years pursuit of a living wage'.⁷⁷ With membership of the VPSA reaching 4,000 the organisation appeared poised for further success towards in 1942 and beyond. Yet tragic news also emerged during this period. In January and February the first reports of VPSA members killed in action were published in the *PSJV*. Eight VPSA members representing the AIF, Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) and Royal Australian Navy (RAN) had made the supreme sacrifice on distant battlefields. Victor Barclay of the Lands Department would be lost with HMAS Sydney off the Western Australian coast near Shark Bay.⁷⁸ The grim news would serve as an omen of events ahead. As Strangio has also accurately observed the mid point of 1942 marked the beginning of a sharp deterioration in relations between the VPSA and the Dunstan government. At the heart of this deterioration would be the question of the independence of the Public Service Board.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ *Government Gazette*, no. 280, 2 September 1942, 3221-22.

⁷⁶ See the *PSJV*, 1 May 1942.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 1 September 1942; See also *VPD*, vol. 213, LA, 25 August 1942, pp. 692-3.

⁷⁸ See the VPSA Annual Report for the Year Ended 31 December 1941 reprinted in the *PSJV*, 2 February 1942.

⁷⁹ Strangio, "Young, Ambitious and Eager," 175.

9.4 The Fight is On: Campaigning for an Independent Tribunal

A souring of relations between the VPSA and the Dunstan government occurred from 6 April 1942 following the cabinet's unilaterally decision to extend the working fortnight of public servants by five and a half hours without compensation.⁸⁰ Dunstan's ploy was to appeal to the patriotic sentiment of public servants in the hope that they would heed the call of duty. However, the premier comprehensively misread the mood of the public service officers. A defiant Secretary Keon immediately gave vent to the indignation of the rank and file in the *PSJV*: 'we are surprised that such an "old-timer" as the premier could possibly have thought the service would accept such an imposition without vigorous protest, and without fighting him every inch of the way'.⁸¹ At a mass protest meeting held on 14 April the nearly 800 members in attendance briefly toyed with the idea of simply refusing to work the additional hours.⁸² 'The war effort would not benefit one iota if the whole service worked without any payment at all' noted the customarily brusque Keon.⁸³ The VPSA council then called upon the federal government to intervene under the National Security (Industrial Peace) Regulations. E. J. Ward, the Federal Minister for Labour and National Service, did just that by referring the matter to the Commonwealth Arbitration Court.⁸⁴ In the meantime Dunstan, now mockingly dubbed 'Uncle Albert' by the VPSA, moved to have the extension 'rubber stamped' by the Public Service Board.⁸⁵ J. V. Dillon, acting in consultation with the VPSA, refused to attend the scheduled hearing and instead urged the premier take into consideration the

⁸⁰ The new hours would be 81.5 per fortnight. See the *Argus*, 8 and 22 April 1942. See also the *PSJV*, June 1944 for a history of the extension.

⁸¹ *PSJV*, 1 April 1942.

⁸² *Ibid.* The next day the VPSA Council advised members that they should work the new hours.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Ward had the power to refer the matter under National Security (Industrial Peace) Regulations. For an analysis of the national security emergency powers see George Williams, *Labour Law and the Constitution* (Annandale: Federation Press, 1998), 25-6.

⁸⁵ Costar records that Dunstan's list of nicknames also included 'Fat Albert, Alibi Albert, Albert the Great, Albert the Wrecker, Billy Bunter, Humpty Dumpty, Iscariot Dunstan and the Jumping Jack Premier'. See Costar, "Albert Dunstan," in Costar and Strangio, eds., *The Victorian Premiers*, 215.

injustice of the new regulations.⁸⁶ Four days later the ‘Government’ section the Board ratified the extension upon the direction of Dunstan.

The VPSA would lose all faith in the current functioning of the Public Service Board in light of its meek acquiesce to the premier’s dictates. According to the union the ‘Government’ section of the Board dutifully obeyed the ‘master’s voice’.⁸⁷ An irate Keon condemned ‘the Dunstinian doctrine of divine right’ and ridiculed the Ministry’s ‘Alice in Blunderland’ approach to policy formation.⁸⁸ By this point the Victorian Labor Party had also grown tired of the policy inertia that had come to define the premiership of ‘Fat Albert’. In July, the Party finally withdrew its support for Dunstan after he challenged the Uniform Tax proposals put forward by Labor Prime Minister John Curtin. Costar observes that the Labor Party’s frustrations had begun to crystalize earlier when the premier failed to address the on-going problem of electoral malapportionment.⁸⁹ Wright simply contends that Labor was ‘weary of always being fobbed off’.⁹⁰ Dunstan now loosely clung to minority office by gaining the temporary support of the United Australia Party (UAP). In the Legislative Assembly a number of Labor MPs took the opportunity to criticise the government for refusing to implement a properly independent public service wages board. Member for Melbourne, Thomas Hayes, accurately forecasted that ‘unless an independent tribunal is appointed the employees’ organisations will continue to approach the parliament’.⁹¹

In the second half of 1942 the ‘hours dispute’ would eventually end up before the High Court. Dunstan challenged the legality of VPSA having its claim heard by Commonwealth Arbitration Court. In prosecuting its case the union retained the services of Robert Menzies—who had resigned as prime minister in August 1941 and remained the Federal member for Kooyong—and announced that ‘the fight is on’.⁹² It

⁸⁶ For a detailed timeline of Dillon’s actions see the *PSJV*, 1 May 1942.

⁸⁷ *PSJV*, 1 April 1942.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 1 May 1942.

⁸⁹ See Costar, “Albert Dunstan,” in Costar and Strangio, eds., *The Victorian Premiers*, 223.

⁹⁰ Wright, *A People’s Counsel*, 167.

⁹¹ *VPD*, vol. 213, LA, 29 July 1942, 410.

⁹² As Chapter Four notes Menzies had a long association with Victorian public servants having represented the union in the mid 1920s. See Chapter Four and the *PSJV*, 1 June 1942.

was a costly undertaking and yet the organisation would insist that no one was better placed to represent the interests of union members than Menzies.⁹³ Support for public servants also emanated from Thomas Tunnecliffe in the Legislative Assembly during the September budget debate: ‘He [Dunstan] stands today just rigid, as unwilling and unmalleable as when we first came behind his party’.⁹⁴ Labor MPs argued that an independent public service wages board was necessary to manage situations like those currently before the High Court. When the judicial proceedings got underway Justice Hayden Starke commented that ‘this Association [VPSA] is not registered. It does not seem to have a body to be kicked or a soul to be damned’.⁹⁵ Responding to this assertion Menzies remarked ‘I would not say that. It is being kicked in a very tender part of the body at the moment’.⁹⁶ Ultimately, the High Court ruled against the VPSA just prior to Christmas. The precedent set in the 1920s that prevented public servants from accessing the Commonwealth Arbitration Court was again re-employed by the full bench: public servants were not engaged in an industrial dispute and therefore any Arbitration Court ruling be would be invalid.⁹⁷ A disappointed VPSA commented that ‘the Premier has succeeded in establishing the fact he, and not the Arbitration Court, is empowered to prescribe the rate of compensation to be paid’.⁹⁸

By the beginning of 1943 a virulent contest between Premier Dunstan and the VPSA was being played out. Previously measured praise bestowed upon the government was now utterly disavowed. With an election set for June the VPSA openly attacked the government’s legislative record. Keon argued that Dunstan’s continued condemnation of Labor Prime Minister Curtin was an ‘attempt to distract attention from the damning exposure of the miserable results of eight years of Dunstanism’.⁹⁹ Labor Leader John Cain joined the chorus and accused the premier of ‘sweating’ his employees.¹⁰⁰ New VPSA President Sam Jennings was adamant that the UCP was detrimental to the

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *VPD*, vol. 213, LA, 29 July 1942, 1236.

⁹⁵ *PSJV*, 2 November 1942.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *PSJV*, 1 January 1943.

¹⁰⁰ *VPD*, vol. 14, LA, 16 February 1943, 2877.

campaign for an independent public service wages board. The union paid close attention to the May policy speeches of the three party leaders. It was observed that both the UAP and Labor Parties supported the creation of an independent tribunal.¹⁰¹ In contrast, the UCP announced that it favored the appointment of three ‘independent’ representatives by the Governor-in-Council.¹⁰² It was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Keon did not mince his words in assessing the UCP’s policy:

As a means of creating three well-paid jobs in which party hacks may recline during the senile stage of their life, or into which any Cabinet members who show any sign of having a mind of their own can be promoted, the premier’s proposals have considerable merit...As a serious attempt to cope with the Service claims for an independent Board, it is simply absurd. However, it is more than a joke; in effect it is a declaration of war on the Service.¹⁰³

An array of stunning attacks on Dunstan continued to flow in the ensuing months. The VPSA claimed that the premier had assumed ‘dictatorial powers over the Service...to wreak his will upon it at his pleasure’.¹⁰⁴ He was denounced for directing a ‘campaign of victimization’ against public servants. It was noted that the union’s recent campaigns for holiday pay, long service leave and permanency laid strewn on the battlefield like ‘slaughtered innocents’.¹⁰⁵ Such language was highly provocative when one bears in mind the ongoing horrors of WW2. The *Argus* picked up on the burgeoning animosity and ran the headline: ‘Public Servants against the Ministry’.¹⁰⁶ Any semblance of political neutrality was now discarded. ‘The only way to get out of politics’ reasoned the VPSA ‘is to get into them’.¹⁰⁷ Labor Party advertisements occupied a prominent space in the *PSJV* and read ‘Mr Dunstan is a “NO! NO! man. He is a non-co-operator. Put him and his reactionaries out of office!’¹⁰⁸ In one final communication before the

¹⁰¹ See the *Argus*, 26 May 1943.

¹⁰² See the *Age*, 26 May 1943; *Portland Guardian*, 3 June 1943.

¹⁰³ *PSJV*, 1 April 1943.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 1 May 1943.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 1 June 1943.

¹⁰⁶ *Argus*, 11 June 1943.

¹⁰⁷ *PSJV*, 1 May 1943.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

election Keon urged the rank and file ‘to exercise both his vote and his influence in such a manner as to prevent, if possible, a further term of Dunstanism’.¹⁰⁹

In the aftermath of the election the UCP would increase its numbers in the Legislative Assembly by three to now hold 25 seats. Despite the Labor Party’s primary vote being 20 per cent higher than that of the UCP, it secured only 22 seats.¹¹⁰ When parliament resumed in July a vexed Cain noted that out of approximately 850,000 electors ‘the government was able to command only 128,000 votes’.¹¹¹ In providing a number of ‘after-thoughts’ on the election a clearly piqued Keon used the *PSJV* to inveigh against Victoria’s system of ‘disenfranchisement’.¹¹² Cain also shone light upon the government’s poor management of the public service and noted that officers were ‘seething with discontent’.¹¹³ Dunstan disingenuously responded by stating ‘I offered them a tribunal but they did not want it’.¹¹⁴ Moreover, he replied to Cain’s accusations by claiming that ‘Mr. Keon is bullying, bouncing, and bluffing you, and you are dancing to his tune all the time’.¹¹⁵ Indeed by this point Keon was intricately involved in Labor Party politics. He was known to spend a considerable amount of time in the corridors of Parliament House and as Strangio observes ‘there is little doubt that Keon did have the ear of Cain and the Labor Party by that time’.¹¹⁶

Agitation for electoral reform was so great following the election that in September the Labor Party successfully moved a no-confidence motion against Dunstan with the support the UAP.¹¹⁷ The plan was for UAP leader Tom Hollway to assume the premiership with Labor’s support. A ‘mutually agreed upon electoral package’ would then be introduced and passed.¹¹⁸ During the backroom discussions it was also agreed

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ See the *Herald*, 13 and 14 June 1943; *Age*, 13 June 1943.

¹¹¹ *VPD*, vol. 215, LA, 20 July 1943, 86.

¹¹² *PSJV*, 1 June 1943.

¹¹³ *VPD*, vol. 215, LA, 20 July 1943, 90.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹¹⁶ Strangio, “Young, Ambitious and Eager,” 175.

¹¹⁷ See *VPD*, vol. 215, LA, 7-9 September 1943, 500-683.

¹¹⁸ See Wright, *A People’s Counsel*, 168.

that action would be taken to introduce an independent public service wages board.¹¹⁹ Hollway was poised to step into the top job following Dunstan's resignation on 10 September 1943 and yet in a totally unexpected turn of events Governor Sir Winston Dugan commissioned Cain to form a government.¹²⁰ Cain, guided by the Party's central executive committee, agreed to the request and hastily formed a government.¹²¹ Amid continued chaos the ambitious Hollway negotiated a new alliance with the UCP and Dunstan's premiership re-commenced.¹²² The UAP justified its about face by arguing that electoral reform was more likely to be gained in partnership with the UCP. 'Half a duck is better than no dinner' quipped UAP Attorney-General Ian MacFarlan.¹²³ Cain's five day stillborn premiership was but one more example of a failed Labor interlude on the government benches.

9.5 Eureka: 'Fat Albert' Falls and an Independent Public Service Board is Established.

In the VPSA's annual report for 1943 it was communicated that the previous 12 months had been a period of 'substantial achievement'.¹²⁴ This statement was a significant embellishment of the truth. The union had failed to make inroads on securing long service leave, the five-day week or permanency for a large number of temporaries. In 1944 the fortunes of the VPSA would be similarly bleak. One of the conditions of the UAP's alliance with the UCP was that an independent public service wages board would be created.¹²⁵ But by the end of the year the relevant Bill was nowhere to be seen. Comprehensive electoral redistribution reform would also be deferred indefinitely. Be that as it may, in the face of the government's intransigence the organising work of

¹¹⁹ See Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory*, 248.

¹²⁰ *Argus*, 11 September 1943.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 16 September 1943. Cain presented the situation to the Labor Central Executive Committee. After deliberating on the matter they recommended that Cain accept the commission.

¹²² Hollway assumed the position of Deputy Premier.

¹²³ *VPD*, vol. 215, LA, 21 September 1943, 705.

¹²⁴ VPSA Annual Report for the Year Ended 31 December 1943 reprinted in the *PSJV*, January 1944. (Note: numbered dates no longer appear in the *PSJV*).

¹²⁵ See the *Argus*, 16 September 1943.

the union continued in earnest. In March, more than 2,000 teachers and public servants gathered at Assembly Hall to jointly ‘demand’ that Dunstan implement independent wages boards for their respective sectors.¹²⁶ It was the largest meeting of public servants that Victoria had witnessed in decades and an impressive display of rank and file activism. Approximately 500 public servants failed to gain admittance and stood on the street awaiting news of the proceedings. Keon remarked to the boisterous crowd that a ‘war’ would be declared upon the government if the next Public Service Board Chairman was not an independent County Court Judge as opposed to a Dunstan ‘yes man’.¹²⁷ The premier, ever unperturbed, responded to the unrest in typical fashion by labeling those present at the meeting ‘malcontents’ and a ‘noisy minority’.¹²⁸ The *Sun-News Pictorial* editorialised that all Dunstan does was ‘mutter the old procrastinating word—‘tomorrow’’.¹²⁹ Offering their take on the situation the newspaper gave voice to the overwhelming sentiment that was now emanating from Melbourne’s press:

Recent wrangles and deadlocks between the State Cabinet and public service organisations over high appointments are apt to continue unless the Board’s chief is similarly lifted above petty rivalries and personal ambition.¹³⁰

In the succeeding months of 1944 the government did not move to cement the independence of the Public Service Board. John Paul has remarked that Dunstan was deeply suspicious of the public service and his *modus operandi* was one of inaction.¹³¹ Keon’s previously uttered appraisal of the state cabinet rang disturbingly true for union members: ‘never have so many promised so much and done so little’.¹³² The *PSJV* scornfully likened the premier’s actions to those of ‘the fatuous fiddler, Nero, watching the work of his hand consume the city of Rome in vast conflagration’.¹³³ It was an

¹²⁶ See the *Argus*, 23 March 1943, *Herald*, 23 March 1923; *Horsham Times*, 24 March 1923.

¹²⁷ *Age*, 23 March 1943.

¹²⁸ *Herald*, 25 March 1944. See the *PSJV*, March 1944 for a detailed response of the event.

¹²⁹ *Sun-News Pictorial*, 27 March 1944.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14 February 1944.

¹³¹ See John. B. Paul, “The Premiership of Sir Albert Dustan,” (Master’s Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1960), 413.

¹³² *PSJV*, February 1944.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, August 1944.

unflattering analogy. The union's only achievement of note in 1944 was gaining a satisfactory resolution to the 'hours' dispute. The VPSA Council had continuously insisted that the hours of members revert to their previous setting and that overtime payments be restored. As members looked to 1945 they warmly welcomed the restoration.

By the beginning of 1945 the VPSA's ongoing campaign to secure a properly independent Public Service Board had seemingly gained traction. Labor MPs continued to urge the government during question time to address the long held complaint of the VPSA. When the government introduced a Bill to amend the *Public Service Act 1940* in May the union looked on attentively. To the dismay of the VPSA and its members the measure only further entrenched the oversight powers of the Governor-in-Council apropos to the Board. In his tediously verbose style the premier commenced the Bill's second reading debate in August by proudly suggesting that it could be considered alongside other eminent examples of Victorian public service reform.¹³⁴ He tellingly listed the *Constitution Amendment Act 1903*—which as chapter one explained restricted the political citizenship of public servants—among the great reforms. It was all but conceded by the union that the Bill was 'designed to make the Public Service Board subservient to the ruling political influences of the moment'.¹³⁵

In responding to the Bill the VPSA was especially venomous. The government was charged with 'incredible folly' and the measure was dubbed the 'Dunstan Blot'.¹³⁶ The prophetic biblical damnation 'Woe Unto You' was vengefully quoted.¹³⁷ It was observed that 'the feelings of members are beyond expression at the effrontery of the sponsors of the Bill'.¹³⁸ Cabinet ministers were accused of undermining democracy by supporting the Dunstan's 'disastrous dynasty'. In the leading August *PSJV* editorial the headline banner lamented 'How Long, O Lord, How Long'.¹³⁹ Keon concluded the

¹³⁴ See *VPD*, vol. 219, LA, 8 August 1945, 3605-06.

¹³⁵ *PSJV*, July 1943.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, August 1943.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, June 1943.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, July 1943.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, August 1943.

article in typically dramatic form: ““Who will rid us of this turbulent Premier?””¹⁴⁰

The preceding cry was a portent of things to come.¹⁴¹ The VPSA was now determined to assist in bringing an end to the era of ‘Dunstanism’. That objective was given life when Hollway and Cain once again began to secretly plot the downfall of the premier.¹⁴² Hollway could no longer stomach the alliance with the UCP after having been personally humiliated by Dunstan’s refusal to grant teachers and public servants an independent wages board.¹⁴³ When a no-confidence motion was introduced to the Legislative Assembly on 29 August an exasperated Dunstan was quick to lay part of the blame at the feet of the ambitious VPSA secretary:

At no time have I endeavoured to satisfy Mr. Keon, who at present is busily engaged in attempting to divide the parties. He is telling members of the Liberal Party why they ought to vote against the Government, and at the same time he is busily doing everything possible to ensure his success at the Labor pre-selection ballot for the Richmond seat. The Public Service Association is supposed to be non-political.¹⁴⁴

Just weeks later on 2 October the reign of ‘Iscairiot Dunstan’ (as he had recently been dubbed by one disgruntled UCP MP) was brought to an end when he finally lost the confidence of the house. Sitting right beside him in the Legislative Assembly all along was the chief co-conspirator and Deputy Premier Tom Hollway.¹⁴⁵ Dunstan’s previous remarks concerning Keon’s political activity had been correct. The union’s secretary had been right in the thick of a fierce Labor pre-selection battle for the prized industrial seat of Richmond. It was a three-way race between Keon, Jimmy Loughnan and the

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² See Kate White, *John Cain and Victorian Labor 1917-1957* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1982), 113-15.

¹⁴³ See, Kate White, “A Political Biography of Thomas Tuke Hollway,” (Master’s Thesis, La Trobe University, 1975), 86.

¹⁴⁴ See *VPD*, vol. 219, LA, 29 August 1945, 3805. The UAP changed its name to the Liberal Party in March 1945.

¹⁴⁵ See Wright, *A People’s Counsel*, 174-78; *Age*, 29 September and 3 October 1945.

incumbent Ted Cotter—who had held the seat since 1908.¹⁴⁶ Loughnan was considered the presumptive favourite after receiving the backing of John Wren’s political machine and the approval of Labor Party ‘Kingmaker’ Pat Kennelly.¹⁴⁷ Yet in a surprise result Keon easily defeated Loughnan. Strangio notes that the VPSA effectively ran Keon’s campaign and that its members had been ‘quietly infiltrating the Richmond branches’.¹⁴⁸ President Jennings later reasoned that the VPSA’s determined support of the secretary’s campaign was motivated by a desire to ‘put a ferret in the burrow’.¹⁴⁹

In the lead up to the election the VPSA would publicly champion the Labor Party. It was enthusiastically noted that Cain had promised to ‘immediately’ pass legislation to establish an independent public service board and provide long service leave if Labor won government. Dunstan was chastised and Hollway fared only marginally better in the pages of the *PSJV*.¹⁵⁰ A decidedly frank pre-election editorial asserted that public servants who vote for the non-Labor parties ‘are obviously beyond advice from any quarter’.¹⁵¹ In a parting observation Keon vividly summarized just what was at stake for members:

In casting their vote on November 10 public servants would do well to bear in mind that...their conditions for the rest of their working life will be determined by the result of the elections on that date.¹⁵²

When the election results were announced the Labor Party picked up nine additional seats to take its Legislative Assembly tally to 31. The *Argus* proclaimed it an electoral ‘rout’.¹⁵³ Keon was victorious in the seat of Richmond and VPSA Councillor Frank Crean in the electorate of Albert Park. Former union figure Thomas Tunnecliffe was

¹⁴⁶ See *Labor Call*, 19 July 1945.

¹⁴⁷ See Strangio, *Neither Power Nor Glory*, 257.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

¹⁴⁹ Sam Jennings quoted in Strangio, “Young, Ambitious and Eager,” 180.

¹⁵⁰ *PSJV*, September 1945.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Argus*, 12 November 1945.

also re-elected to the seat of Collingwood.¹⁵⁴ A cautiously optimistic entry in the *PSJV* opined that this was ‘Labor’s opportunity’ and that the party ‘must choose between timidity and boldness’.¹⁵⁵ With the support of two independents, Labor accepted the challenge and formed a minority government before the end of the month. The VPSA’s prospects appeared better than at any time in the union’s history.

In December, the newly minted premier, John Cain, upheld his pre-election promise and introduced a Bill to amend the Public Service Board.¹⁵⁶ It importantly stipulated that Board determinations on public service salaries and conditions would be binding and no longer subject to the approval of the Governor-in-Council.¹⁵⁷ The only disclaimer in the provision was that a ruling could be disallowed if both houses of Parliament passed a resolution against its application within 30 days of its presentation.¹⁵⁸ To the delight of VPSA members the Bill also provided for the establishment of six months long service leave for every employee who had served for at least 25 years.¹⁵⁹ Reflecting on the measure the *PSJV* simply stated that the ‘long drawn out struggle of the public service for justice had to be fought’.¹⁶⁰

Following a brief delay the Bill was read for a second time in March 1946. Premier Cain commenced the debate by forcefully arguing that Victorian public servants should be provided ‘with conditions comparable with those operating in other public services and in private employment’.¹⁶¹ Keon was chosen by the government as the speaker to succeed Cain. He had been champing at the bit to present the case for an independent Public Service Board. With extreme confidence he rose in the chamber and berated the UCP for its decade long mismanagement of the public service. The arguments of

¹⁵⁴ It appears that no other union had as many former members and/or officials in the Victorian parliament. Crean had formerly worked in the Taxation office and had been a VPSA Councilor. Creman had died in May of 1945 after suffering complications from surgery.

¹⁵⁵ *PSJV*, November-December 1945.

¹⁵⁶ *VPD*, vol. 220, LA, 4 December 1945, 83.

¹⁵⁷ See the *Argus*, 6 March 1946; *Public Service Act 1946* (Victoria) no. 5124.

¹⁵⁸ See the *Public Service Act 1946* (Victoria) no. 5124. The specific section of relevance is Part 1, section 50, no. 3.

¹⁵⁹ See *Ibid.* The specific section of relevance is Part 3, section 64, no. 1.

¹⁶⁰ *PSJV*, January 1946.

¹⁶¹ *VPD*, vol. 220, LA, 5 March 1945, 610.

opposition MPs were labelled ‘futile, foolish, and false’.¹⁶² In full oratory flight, Keon gleefully observed that many UCP MPs presented like young children ‘dragged screaming from the tart shop’.¹⁶³ Keon’s relentless indictment of Dunstan was striking for a junior MP. So incensed was the former premier by the barrage of criticism that he interjected and queried whether Keon was ‘instructing’ the government. The VPSA secretary seemed altogether nonplussed and remained steadfast in his assault: ‘The difference between the present Bill and the Dunstan Bill’ he declared ‘could be likened to the difference between heaven and hell’.¹⁶⁴

Notwithstanding a last minute attempt by the opposition MPs to moderate the Bill, the measure passed unadulterated through both houses and on 17 May the *Public Service Act 1946* was given Royal Assent.¹⁶⁵ With that the ‘Battle of the Bill’ was concluded and the VPSA celebrated. A jubilant *PSJV* let out a cry of ‘Eureka’.¹⁶⁶ Keon and the VPSA Council were venerated by members at the union’s mid-year annual conference. One member simply and eloquently stated that Keon was ‘a most human man’.¹⁶⁷ In an exposition of the Act the union would make the following definitive statement:

Our new charter...places the relationship between the Government and the members of the Board upon a completely new footing. It fairly and squarely places the Service on the same basis as the Government. Our relations with the Government are crystalized as between that of employee and employer.

Nearly thirty years after the VSSF had begun the campaign for an independent public service wages board the members of the VPSA now rejoiced in knowing that they would no longer be subject to the political whims of the Victorian Parliament. The

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 19 March 1945, 822.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 815.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 820.

¹⁶⁵ See *VPD*, vol. 221, LC, 15 May 1946, 2027-30; *Public Service Act 1946*.

¹⁶⁶ *PSJV*, April 1946.

¹⁶⁷ ‘Mr. Cooke’ quoted in the *PSJV*, July 1946. Members representing country branches and the Women’s Division also rose to express the gratitude to Keon.

master and servant legacy that had constricted the industrial citizenship of public servants had finally been dismantled.

9.6 Conclusion

By 1938, the APSA—soon to be renamed the VPSA—had reached an historic crossroads. For almost a decade, a weakened and demoralised union had plodded along without any great purpose or vision. The lingering consequences of the Depression threatened to tear the union apart. For a brief moment clerical officers flirted with the prospect of leaving the organisation before ultimately voting to stay with their unionist brethren. At this critical juncture the union Council turned to a young and brash Irish Nationalist in Standish Keon to lead the organisation out of the wilderness. His 1939 appointment would turn out to be an inspired decision. From 1940-1942 the VPSA notched several telling campaigns wins including the restoration of the basic wage, permanency for female temporaries, the institution of indexed wages and the introduction of a Public Service Board. On the membership front the union surged ahead and experienced a four fold increase.

However, relations between the VPSA and Premier Albert Dunstan deteriorated markedly from the end of 1942. Rank and file agitation for long service leave, the five-day week and a properly independent wages board bubbled out onto the streets. Dunstan, or 'Fat Albert'—as he was unflatteringly branded—became a target of the VPSA's criticism and ridicule. Keon took particular delight in repeatedly lambasting the premier in the pages of the press and the *PSJV*. As it had periodically done in the past, the union shed its political neutrality and threw its weight behind the Labor Party. When John Cain led Labor into government in 1945 the VPSA's actions were soon justified. In 1946, the independence of the Public Service Wages Board was cemented. It was the most significant achievement in the organisation's history in two decades. The industrial rights of public servants were established. Union members had finally arrived at the Mecca of their hopes.

Chapter 10 Conclusion

On 17 June 1885, more than 1,000 Victorian public servants gathered at the Athenaeum Theatre for the inaugural meeting of an organisation named the Victorian Public Service Association. As the proceedings commenced a senior public servant from the Chief Secretary's Office, Mr. Rusden, questioned the appropriateness of public servants discussing industrial matters in the absence of state government representatives. In response, a public servant, whose name we do not know, rose to his feet and retorted 'we don't want them, Jack's as good as his master here!' It was a simple, emotional and spontaneous remark. And yet its meaning was profound. At the first meeting of a state departmental public service union held in Australia, an ordinary public servant dared to challenge the prevailing master and servant legacy; a legacy that restricted the political and industrial citizenship of government employees.

In the ensuing 60 years of non-continuous Victorian departmental public service unionism, the bonds of class feeling among public servants were frequently displayed. Public service unionists, in the face of extreme coercion and manipulation (particularly by the hands of Premier William Irvine in 1903) would protest against the restrictions imposed upon their political citizenship. In 1916, the fruits of their activism paid off as public servants secured expanded political rights. While the world was pre-occupied with the horrors of World War One, the public service union mobilised to support a divisive anti-conscriptionist Labor MP in Maurice Blackburn. During the course of the 1920s the various configurations of Victorian public service unionism would campaign to see the industrial rights of public servants expanded and recognised. Indeed, public service unionists wanted the same industrial rights afforded to railways workers, boot makers and factory hands. In campaigning to gain access to the Commonwealth Arbitration Court, and to an independent public service wages board, the union and its members came into direct conflict with successive governments. It made bold political statements predominantly in support of the Labor Party.

Of course this history does not purport that Victorian public service unionists were especially militant lodging their claims. For long stretches, the industrial activism of public service unionists waned or was non-existent. The 1890s Depression would lead

to the collapse of the VPSA. In the 1930s the Victorian Branch of the Australian Public Service Association crumbled under the weight of another economic calamity. At other points in the history of Victorian departmental public service unionism the actions of public servants were also marked by timidity.

However, after bleak periods, often precipitated by Victoria's unstable and inherently conservative parliamentary disposition, or by moments of internal feuding, the activity of the public service unionists would invariably rise again. This was most patently witnessed in the transformation of the union following the appointment of Standish Keon as secretary in the late 1930s. All that was needed to ignite the activist passions of public servants was a spark, which Keon happily provided. By the mid-point of the 1940s the campaign for an independent public service wages board finally was realized after Labor, led by John Cain, took office. In securing their own wages board, the industrial citizenship of public servants was for the first time officially recognised. They could now be treated as employees in contrast to 'servants'.

The establishment of Victorian public service industrial rights serves as the theoretical bookend of the history. This recognition has its genesis in the successful campaign for political rights in 1916. Victorian departmental public servants were (and still are) subject to a unique employment relationship. Victorian public servants and public service unionists contributed to the fabric and architecture of the state. Despite this they have seldom been afforded historical attention. This history fills this lacuna, and in doing so demonstrates that the bonds of class feeling, and a specific public service culture, expressed individually and most prominently through the union(s), was evident in Victoria from 1885-1946.

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Appendix 1

Union Leadership 1885--1950

<i>President</i>	<i>Year</i>
Robert Ellery (VPSA)	1885-1895
A. S. Kenyon (VSSF)	1913
Michael McNamara (VSSF)	1913-1915 & 1918-1919
Arthur McDonald Martin (VSSF)	1915-1918 & 1919-1920
J. J. Hocking (PSL)	1920
John Braithwaite (PSL & VPSU)	1920-1922
Ernest Pitt (VPSU & APSA)	1922-1927
Arthur Augustus Calwell (APSA)	1927-1931
Amergin Oisin O'Dowd (APSA)	1931-1934
Jack Nicholls (APSA)	1934-1937
R. W. Cook (APSA)	1937-1939
Joseph McDonald (VPSA)	1939-1943
Samuel Jennings (VPSA)	1943-1952

<i>Secretary</i>	<i>Year</i>
Arthur McDonald Martin (VSSF)	1913
S. S. McKenzie (VSSF)	1913-1914
J. F. Fraser (VSSF)	1914-1916
Gordon Carter (VSSF)	1916-1920
Percy Markham (VSSF)	1920-1921
Thomas Tunnecliffe (VPSU)	1921
Henry Hart (VPSU)	1921-1922
John Moroney (VPSU)	1922-1924
Francis Marzorini (VPSU)	1924-1925
John McKellar (APSA & VPSA)	1925-1939
Standish Michael Keon (VPSA)	1939-1950

List of Publications

Halse, Dustin. "Citizens who Serve: The Political Rights of Public Servants 1856-1916," *Labour History*, 102 (May 2012): 157-176.