

## ***Andrew Fisher: Prime Minister of Australia***

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As David Day correctly argues in this major political biography, Andrew Fisher has been strangely neglected by Australian historians and political scientists. He was, after all, the first majority leader of a social democratic labour government in the world. Moreover he was returned with the support of half the electorate, which no subsequent ALP leader has managed. Nor did he waste time on faction fighting, desert the party like so many of his contemporaries, or fail to implement the programme on which he was elected. Yet his life was blighted by two major tragedies — one political, the outbreak of the First World War while he was in office, and one personal, his decline into dementia and consequent early death in 1928, aged sixty six. A very similar fate befell his political opponent and contemporary, Alfred Deakin, who has been much better remembered.

This neglect of one of Australia's most popular and effective prime ministers is admittedly due to the untimely deaths of his two intending biographers, Clem Lloyd and Denis Murphy. But even so Fisher had virtually disappeared from political textbooks and histories well before. His contemporaries, King O'Malley and Billy Hughes, have enjoyed a far better treatment. Only his fellow coal miner, Joseph Cook, has disappeared into the mists of time. He deserted the labour movement before Federation and was only prime minister for a year. It may be that Fisher did not conform to the stereotypes of more radical labour historians. He did not leave the party over conscription for overseas service but founded the Australian navy. He was never a Marxist but a Presbyterian lay preacher. He never passed through the many small radical parties within the early labour movement, but simply grew up in a trade unionist and Co-operative family on the Ayrshire coalfields. He was an immigrant – but so were many labour leaders prior to 1920. He had no relationship – friendly or hostile – with the Communist Party, as it did not exist while he was politically active.

Fisher came to Australia in 1885 aged twenty three with his basic beliefs and experiences already established. He was part of the great surge of migrants who came to Queensland in the 1880s and who were an essential element in making that colony and State a labour stronghold for forty years. David Day has captured the atmosphere of the Ayrshire coalfields very well, with its trade union, co-op shops and nonconformist religion. I would have liked a bit more on these formative influences, if only because my grandmother was born in Kilmarnock at about the time Fisher was leaving for Australia. One coincidence, of which David Day does not make enough, is that Fisher established an early and close friendship with Keir

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Hardie, the founder of the British Labour Party, who was also a coal miner from east of Kilmarnock. While Fisher was prime minister, Hardie visited him in Australia. Hardie was pleased to learn that the labour politicians were all honest working men, with not a lawyer or graduate among them. There is reason to suppose from their correspondence that Hardie was the most important intellectual influence on Fisher, and hence on the Australian labour governments. Both were shattered by the outbreak of war in 1914, which British Labor hagiography usually blames on Hardie's death in 1915. Fisher was more of an imperialist, but handed on the baton to Billy Hughes who was far more so.

Fisher's formative influences remained with him throughout his life. Kilmarnock was the town in which Robert Burns' first book of poems was published. Fisher was even more devoted to the national bard than most Scots of his generation. Burns was a radical and man of the people, which has always endeared him to the Scottish labour movement, despite him also being taken up by the Scottish expatriate bourgeoisie. Kilmarnock was also noted for the fervour of its religious life, having three divisions of Presbyterianism when Fisher lived in the nearby mining village of Crosshouse. The later influence of Marxist labour historians has tended to discount the religious influence on miners, yet it was central to their lives both in Scotland, the English northeast and midlands and among immigrant miners in Australia. The other miner to become prime minister, Joseph Cook, was a Primitive Methodist lay preacher in north Staffordshire (He was not Welsh as David Day wrongly states). Both Cook and Fisher subscribed to the radical wing of their respective religions, as Fisher was a Free Presbyterian. Labour movement oratory was formed in the preaching rounds of Methodism and Presbyterianism, as well as in union meetings and election campaigns. It began to die only with the spread of the mass media and of years of power, when speeches were written for politicians by young graduates wedded to bureaucratise. Yet Fisher was not a great orator, as his Scottish accent presented a barrier to understanding.

The core of this study describes and analyses the programme which governments headed by Fisher were able to implement in the years before the World War. Unlike Hughes, Holman, and other contemporaries, Fisher was uninfluenced by Marxism. His model was derived from the Scottish radical tradition of Keir Hardie, the welfare socialism of the Webbs and the Fabians, and the practical solutions developed in trade unions, friendly societies and co-operatives. The driving force was the creation of a new united nation, based on the security of welfare provision, the protection of fledgling industries, the arbitration of wages and conditions with trade union participation, and – as David Day does not hesitate to underline – the maintenance of racial purity on the basis of British immigration and the White Australia policy. The ideal model was not a socialist utopia but the workingmen's paradise so often depicted in the years before the depression of the 1890s. The instruments were large scale assisted British working class immigration, tariffs around local industries, the Commonwealth Bank, a military and naval force based on universal training, centralisation in a national capital and developing a sense of nationhood not tinged with anxiety about neighbouring Asian powers. This laid

the basis for what Paul Kelly and others have described as the Australian settlement, which influenced public policy through to the 1970s.

All was going well until the outbreak of war in August 1914, with Fisher's unfortunate offer of every man and every shilling to the British cause. This promise alone might be the reason for his neglect by Australian nationalist historians. Yet his entire generation was either British by birth or by recent parentage, especially in his own State of Queensland. His predecessor, Cook, and his successor, Hughes, were both British born and bred. But the issue of conscription for overseas service shattered the unity of the labour movement. It led, eventually, to the rise of Irish Catholic influence in every State, which was not the case prior to 1916, although it might have been predicted in New South Wales. The brutal repression of the abortive Dublin rising of 1916 ensured this. The rise of militant Marxist, syndicalist and pro-Soviet ideas in the trade union movement was also important in shifting the political emphasis away from the cautious reformism favoured by Fisher and those like him. Fisher gave up, but did not desert the party, ending his political career back in Britain as High Commissioner and then declining into dementia, without returning to Australia.

This is a fascinating account, set firmly in its time and the dual settings of Scottish and Australian labourism. Some critics have found the story a little dull, but I did not. After all, Billy Hughes was more exciting, but he was also destructive, a demagogue and a traitor to his early loyalties and beliefs. Fisher left behind the foundations of a stable, productive and equitable society, which was essentially what he set out to do from his early days. Forces beyond his control prevented him from leaving behind a viable and unified labour movement. ▲