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## THE CHAMELEON

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On Christmas Day, 1885, Joseph Cook departed Plymouth Harbour on board the RMS *John Elder*, bound for Sydney, New South Wales. Like so many working-class Englishmen before him, he embarked with a measure of hope and optimism. He had just turned 25 and, leaving behind his pregnant wife Mary, his mother and a number of younger siblings, in their North Staffordshire village of Silverdale, he was only too well-aware that he still had responsibilities. Weighty responsibilities.

This was something he had long been used to. When his coal-miner father died, far too young, Joe was the oldest male in a large family and not yet a teenager. Life was tough for all of them, the years dark, drawn out and pitiless. Down in the mines himself from the age of nine, Cook dug coal for the next 15 years in the pits of his village, from the first months as a small child, pushing and pulling the heavy wagons, attending to the pit ponies and greasing tubs, up to his active role in trade union work and, afterwards, industry strikes as a young adult.

Cook had to knuckle down, but he longed to find a way out. He had bigger dreams.

In his mid-20s opportunity arose and, with his family's agreement, he grabbed it, off to Australia with a fierce determination to make a go of a new life. And he did. Five years after arrival in the distant antipodes he was elected as a member of the NSW Legislative Assembly, and not long after that, he became a cabinet minister in the reformist colonial government of George Reid. In 1901, he was elected as a member of the Commonwealth parliament – the highly talented Federation parliament – where he served for over 20 years, and during which time, for 15 months in 1913–14, Cook became Australia's sixth prime minister. In 1921 he was appointed to the post of Australian High Commissioner in London, his adopted country's third High Commissioner, where he served for six years before returning home to enjoy a comfortable retirement by choice in the leafy surrounds of Sydney's eastern suburbs.

On the face of it, Joseph Cook's impressive CV, along with his long, happy marriage and brood of successful children, has all the hallmarks of a heroic migrant narrative. Rags to riches: from a rude miner's hut, onward and upward, eventually to experience the splendours of marvellous Melbourne and its elegant parliament building, and after that a return to the home of Empire, London, to be wined and dined by royalty and a bevy of the well-to-do – even serenaded, on several special occasions, by his friend, the Grand Dame herself, Nellie Melba.



And yet, despite these multiple citations of success, with Joe Cook appearances can be deceptive. Like most of our country's early prime ministers, he is virtually forgotten today. The reason, however, is not simply generational airbrushing, memory loss due to the inevitable passing of time. With Cook there are several possible explanations for his marginalisation – at once political, cultural, religious and, above all, personal, reaching deep into the character of the man.

Cook's place in the history of Australian politics has never enthused historians, even during his own lifetime. The only 'Cook' mentioned by WK Hancock in his landmark volume, *Australia*, published in 1930, is Captain James Cook. In RM Crawford's acclaimed short history, published in 1952 and also entitled *Australia*, Joe Cook again fails to rate a mention. While he does appear in JA La Nauze's comprehensive account of second prime minister, Alfred Deakin, and Laurie Fitzhardinge's enduring biography of seventh prime minister, Billy Hughes, both published to considerable acclaim in the mid-1960s, neither historian is inclined to apportion any praise to Cook. He is treated in an oddly perfunctory manner that hovers on the dismissive. Frank Crowley, responsible for Cook's entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, rightly sums up that Cook has 'generally received an unfavourable appraisal in Australia'.

Why is this? In one of the two biographies of Cook, *Pit Boy to Prime Minister*, written by Silverdale resident, Graham Bebbington, and published in a local heritage series in Staffordshire, the interested reader not surprisingly engages with Bebbington's embellished recognition of hometown hero Joe's manifold qualities: his combative parliamentary style, for example; the undeniable claim that he was an adroit political survivor who not only won each election he entered, but did so with expanding majorities; his profile as a self-made man with a career based on hard work and abundant resources of energy; and Cook's loyalty to the leaders under whom he served.

However, Cook's other biographer, John Murdoch, his more authoritative biographer, in a trenchant volume entitled *Sir Joe* (1996), forensically exposes Cook's seismic faults of character, motivation, capacity and political behaviour. Furthermore, the positive comments made about Cook by those who worked closely with him are, more often than not, accompanied by revealing caveats. Comments are tacked on about his 'unhappy deficiencies of temper', his absence of 'personal charm', the lack of a constructive side, his reliance on negations, on 'pious or sentimental catch words'.

Cook's long line of stern critics, many drawn from the Labor side of politics as we will discover, have never been inclined to pay lip service to any sort of sympathetic or flattering analysis. They have described Australia's sixth prime minister as stiff and unbending in his personal dealings, someone who, as the always quotable Billy Hughes put it in the early days of the fledgling Labor Party, 'suspects a trick in everything'. Cook has been characterised as niggling, humourless, pedantic, devoid of imagination or, worse, an individual without moral vision. Someone fundamentally incapable of ever becoming a leader of substance.

But the most damaging charge, the one which resonates throughout the literature, is Cook's capacity to 'transplant readily, and grow in any soil'. These are the words in 1906 of highly respected federal politician Thomas Ewing, and they go to the nub of the matter. Cook, he observed at close quarters, had 'no political roots'. A number of Ewing's peers in both the colonial and federal parliaments worked with Cook over a 30-year period, and few would have disagreed with his perspicacious assessment. They knew that Ewing's turn-of-phrase had nothing whatsoever to do with any talent that Cook had for adaptability. It referred to his repeated, calculated abandonment of previously held beliefs, values and principles, according to the personally rewarding pathways opening up in front of him at any given time. History is full of ageing public figures whose politics became more conservative, more reactionary, more self-serving, with age. Joe Cook is the example *par excellence* of this pattern.

He started out in Australia as an outspoken republican and within years was a confirmed monarchist and British Empire spruiker; he was a prominent trade unionist who later dismissed unions as divisive organisations disseminating hatred; a socialist, who became socialism's avowed opponent; a Single Taxer who morphed into a land tax enemy; an egalitarian who became one of monied Australia's most strident advocates; a fiscal Protectionist, then Free Trader, then Protectionist once more; and a fiery critic of the NSW Upper House, the privileged Legislative Council, only to become, with no hint of embarrassment or shame, a sanctimonious spokesperson for those same controversial privileges, which he had convinced himself were in the community's best interests.

In my recent monograph on Labor's first prime minister, Chris Watson, launched in the parliament by the Presiding Officers a few months ago, I referred to Cook as an individual 'determined to wash away the soot and grime of his past by whatever means necessary'. I was not aware at the time that mine was not an original turn of phrase, for I subsequently discovered that in the late 1880s a prominent journalist of the era, TJ Hebblewhite, got to know Cook during the English miner's first years in Lithgow. Editor of the *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, Hebblewhite penned a series of 'recollections' for the newspaper some years later. Cook intrigued him: 'I fancy my friend Cook did have secret premonitions from somewhere that some day he would, for the last time, wipe the coal grime from hands and face, and enter upon a larger life'. To gain this prize, however, Cook chose to abandon the tight connection to his family's background, his community, his political party and his class, and with invective and a calcifying heart he became an arch-antagonist of the legions of less fortunate Australians whom he had left in his wake.

Shortly after he accepted the offer from then NSW Premier George Reid to become a minister in Reid's Free Trade government in early August 1894, the Sydney *Truth* newspaper exploded with anger at such a brazen, self-interested decision:

*Of all the animals in the political menagerie, the 'Chameleon' is probably the most despised and degraded. And of all the Chameleons that ever turned coats in the New South Wales Parliament, the champion is the present Postmaster-General, Mr Joseph Cook.*

These days, Cook is recalled by the left side of politics as a 'Labor rat', a term coined in 1892 to describe the first group of Labor men, led by Cook, who deserted the party – and, more culpably, many of them switched sides. In this lecture I will examine Joe Cook's political and ethical journey. If one were to apply a well-used literary metaphor, it might be suggested that, having willingly entered a Faustian pact, Cook single-mindedly saw it through to the end. He died with no regrets.

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So there you have it, Joe Cook's life in a snapshot. Now let's fill in a few of the details, to better understand him, and his English and Australian stories.

The bucolic village of Knutton Heath, tucked away in a Staffordshire valley in England's West Midlands, changed its name to 'Silverdale' during the 18th century in response to the proliferation of fluttering outcrops of birch trees. However, when an engineer, Francis Stanier, recognised the area's potential for economically viable coal, in no time at all two speculative mines were opened, and others soon followed. A population of about 2,000 in 1851 more than doubled within 10 years, the once-scenic valley transformed, almost overnight, into a typical industrial age site--according to one observer 'a smoke beclouded chaos'.

Living conditions for the rapidly expanding miner population in Silverdale were grim. Candle light, earthen floors, communal wash houses and toilets, and open fires for cauldron or kettle cooking. These were the immutables of everyday life for the mining families, their often windowless, rat-infested homes, cramped and smoky. In one of these dwellings Joseph Cooke was born on 7 December 1860, the second

child, and first son, of William and Margaret Cooke. Though father William was remembered as a disciplinarian, the Cooke children had a secure home environment. But like all miners' offspring, they knew that accident and tragedy were never far away. When Joe was four, his older sister Sarah died of unknown causes. More deaths were to follow.

As a youngster, Joe began working first in Mine No. 6, the despised 'hell 'ole', a 'horror mine', we are told, 'with many steep gradients, a sweltering atmosphere, and an ever-present risk of fire'. On 8 April 1873 Joe's father died in a shocking mining accident, and, aged 12, he was now the family's only source of income, shouldering a near-impossible burden for years. Was he resentful? Cook's main biographer, John Murdoch, thinks so, but if he was, he carried on stoically for a number of years, his fortitude and resolve able to keep the family of seven – mother and six kids – together. Not only that, he kept diligently reading anything he could get his hands on. He also learned the skills of public speaking, he became a sought-after lay preacher, and in his later teens he joined a branch of the Liberal Club in homage to Britain's liberalising era of William Gladstone.

None of these extra-curriculars beyond the coal face would have been possible if not for the foundation of faith, direction and support given to Cooke, and his family, as committed members of what was termed the 'Primitive Methodist' Church. Sometimes disparaged as the 'Ranters', or the 'Clowsites', the Primitive Methodists advocated virtuous behaviour--behaviour which rejected the temptations of alcohol, gambling, dancing and tobacco. The Cook family embraced the church's approach, especially the encouragement given to keen young parishioners to better themselves through the church's social opportunities and activities. The local High Street chapel that the Cookes attended had a small library that fertilised such aspirations. In his early teens, Joe steadily worked his way through the collection, not content to borrow only religious and historical texts, but grammar and arithmetic books as well. He was known to use the pit tubs as blackboards for writing practice, and the church's chapel leaders soon recognised his untapped potential. By the time he was 16, young Joe had become a lay preacher attracting large congregations with a clenched-fist, tub-thumping style of delivery. He was on the rise.

In the early 1880s, miners in northern England and Scotland agitated for better working conditions, only to be routed by the combined might of employers backed by the forces of the law. Like so many miners (among them Australia's 5<sup>th</sup> prime minister, Andrew Fisher, in Scotland, during the same period), militant Joe Cook was sacked. His situation got worse in October 1884 when his family was subjected to the shock of one more tragedy. Younger brother Albert died in another terrible accident of consequence. Joe felt he had to extract himself, regardless of the consequences, and driving him towards a life-changing decision was a young woman who had become a strong influence on him. He had begun a relationship with a young school teacher from nearby Chesterton, Mary Turner, the daughter of a local coke-burner, and herself one of seven children. No-one in the family knows how and when they met, but it was probably at a church function in late 1884. Mary was already an Assistant Mistress at the Chesterton Girls' Boarding School, and she and Joe hit it off immediately. Their personalities, their aims for a better life ahead, coalesced.

The relationship blossomed and, during 1885, Joe participated in discussions in the Turner home that regularly turned to distant New South Wales – in particular, to a small town called Lithgow, west of Sydney. Mary's elder brother William had found work on the railway in Lithgow and he spoke highly of its expanding coal industry and promising future. Some Silverdale miners had already re-located there. With Mary pregnant in the summer of 1885, the marriage took place with a certain haste in August. Gossiping heads in the village might have been turned, but there was never a chance of the pregnancy disrupting the plans of this budding power couple. Both were filled with ambition to better their situation. For Joe, Mary was 'the best of wives'. For Mary, Joe was a partner with untapped ability – eager, promising, pliable. A handsome work in progress.

It was decided that Joe would leave England on Christmas Day 1885, while Mary and baby would follow on as soon as both could travel. During the seven-week journey to Australia and a new beginning, Cook impressed his fellow-passengers as a man on a mission. He cut a fine figure, close to 180 centimetres tall, clear blue eyes, an impeccably groomed beard and moustache, and a muscular physique shaped by years of hard, physical toil. He walked in an abnormally upright way, back erect, giving him a posture of confidence.

And there was some depth to this 'Innocent Abroad'. On the ship, his commitment to self-education continued unabated as he poured over the books that were his closest companions. For the long journey he packed as many as he could. Several had been presented to him before leaving Silverdale: a revised edition of the Bible, *Lord Tennyson's Works*, the *Life and Epistles of St Paul* and Charles Dilke's *Greater Britain*. Each volume was well-chosen for the Methodist man on the move--the travelling evangelist, imbued with some of the original spirit of St Paul and John Wesley.

Another writer whose works found a place in Cook's suitcase was the renowned American essayist and poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson. For Cook, Emerson's appeal did not lie in celebrated essays such as 'Nature', 'The American Scholar' and the more esoteric 'Over-Soul' and 'The Transcendentalist', but rather in those essays written by Emerson in the early 1840s which Cook thought were speaking directly to him, and those like him – namely, 'Man the Reformer' and 'Self-Reliance'.

According to one of Cook's daughters, her father once said that 'he owed most of his mental development to Emerson' and it is not hard to understand why. In 'Man the Reformer', Emerson challenges his readers to find inspiration as

*A reformer, a benefactor, not content to slip along through the world like a footman or a spy, escaping by his nimbleness and apologies as many knocks as he can, but a brave and upright man ....*

Cook surely imagined himself grasping the opportunity in the new land ahead to become just such a brave individual of political, social and cultural consequence. Were his years of devoted self-reliance and self-education, his Primitive Methodist faith, about to reap their just rewards?

Cook disembarked in Sydney on 12 February 1886, his arrival the endpoint of an extraordinarily fruitful period of new migrant talent to Australia. In a matter of 14 months no less than four of the coming Commonwealth's first seven prime ministers arrived: Billy Hughes in December 1884; Andrew Fisher in August 1885; Chris Watson in January 1886; and Cook the following month. All four would make major contributions both to the establishment of the fledgling Labor Party and to the first decades of Federation politics. Even allowing for the belief that he had in his own ability, Cook could never have imagined, as he made his way to Lithgow, the speed with which events would sweep him along over the next several years. The moulding of Joe Cook was about to begin.

In the 1880s and '90s, Lithgow experienced a growth boom fuelled by the opening of several collieries. From the moment he arrived, Cook kept his head down. Desperate to get Mary and baby Syd out to Australia as soon as possible, he got a job without delay as a skilled miner at the Vale of Cilwydd colliery; he built a small cottage with walls of split log, pleasing his family when he named the modest dwelling 'Silverdale'; and the quality of his mining expertise saw him appointed, less than a year after arrival, as a check-weighman, a position that literally hauled him up and out of the mine and gave him responsibility for weighing the coal leaving the mining site. The significance of the new job was that it was the miners who elected him to do it, and it was Cook who paid their wages. This was the first tangible sign of his popularity among his peers, and it was an endorsement that would serve him extraordinarily well at the ballot box in the not-too-distant future.

In Lithgow, Cook fell under the spell of a radical journalist named John Farrell, the activist editor of the *Lithgow Enterprise* newspaper, but also one of the most underrated social, political and cultural figures in pre-Federation Australia. Farrell was himself radicalised by the controversial William Lane's Queensland paper, the *Boomerang*, as well as the *Bulletin* and the *Worker*, to all three journals of which he contributed stories, poems and articles. He had become a disciple of the American Henry George, the 'Prophet of San Francisco', whose classic work, *Progress and Poverty* (1879), exerted a profound impact on the whole of the Western world in the 1880s and '90s. In some of these years *Progress and Poverty* outsold the Bible. George's main contention--that society's 'unequal distribution of wealth and privilege' could be ended with the imposition of a single tax on unimproved land--absolutely horrified those with property – just as it electrified a generation of the under-privileged, together with many progressive politicians and social commentators, who imagined a better, more equal society. Some of Henry George's outspoken adherents identified themselves as 'Single Taxers'.

Joe Cook was first exposed to the hurricane energy of Farrell and his journalist companions in the Spring of 1887. Through the recollections of one of them, *Goulburn Evening Penny Post* editor, TJ Hebblewhite--mentioned earlier--we have a vivid picture of Cook as he wrestled with the challenges of the next chapter in his life. Hebblewhite recalled that Cook became known in the Farrell office, in his words,

*... as the 'opium-eater' because of the way he had of frequently falling into sudden fits of silent introspection. When in this contemplative mood Mr Cook was like a reposeful statue of Buddha, with eyes turned inwardly and hands reverently crossed in his lap.*

Farrell was of the opinion that Cook 'saw visions' and, taking a shine to the young Englishman, he felt he was 'responsible for 'bringing out' Mr Cook and giving him his start in the varied and stormy life of politics'. At this point young Cook was a 'crimson' republican, anti-royalist, anti-capitalist, and opposed to monopolies of any kind.

Henry George himself came to Australia in 1890, and spoke to packed houses wherever he went, including in Lithgow, on a tour organised and promoted by John Farrell. A glowing introduction to the American was given by one of the locals--a bright new Free Trade convert, Vale of Cilwydd mining employee, our own Joseph Cook. The first of Cook's many abrupt changes of political belief was now official. A zealous Protectionist in England, he was now re-born as an equally passionate Free Trader, the honorary secretary of Lithgow's Single Tax League branch.

Cook had successfully put down roots in a community appreciative of his talents--a local identity with a popularity boosted by his activities as a Protestant Orangeman, a life-member of the Freemasons and a stand-out in the local debating club. But more significant than any of these was his election, in January 1889, as the General Secretary of the Coal Miners' Mutual Protective Association of the Western District, the western miners' union, a post he would hold right through to his election to the NSW Legislative Assembly in 1891. It was this industry position, with its degree of power and influence, that thrust Cook into the regional spotlight during a highly volatile period for working class communities across the continent. The *zeitgeist* aided his rapid political advancement.

These formative years for Cook almost exactly coincided with two of the most damaging strikes in Australia labour history: the Maritime Strike lasting from mid-August to October 1890, when wharf labourers stopped work, triggering industrial conflict across the country; and the Shearers' Strike, from January to June 1891, when NSW and Queensland shearers went out on strike over pay and the right of freedom of contract. The governments in both colonies dealt severely with the strikers, charging some of them with conspiracy and gaoling them. It was time for working men to stop talking about political representation. Something had to be done. They needed to put able men into the parliament itself.

With an election in NSW due in June 1891, the Trades and Labour Council took the initiative and founded a new political entity, the Labor Electoral League, authorising the creation of branches across the colony. The immediate problem, however, was finding worthy candidates – and finding them in a hurry.

Joe Cook derived incalculable benefit from the network of friends and political contacts to whom he was exposed at the beginning of the 1890s. The stage was set for him. It was 1891, and he was about to be lifted out of the small Lithgow pond and dropped into the ocean of Sydney life – into the colony's Legislative Assembly, a forum so unruly that the *Daily Telegraph* described it at the time as a 'saturnalia of disorder'.

When union delegates met in Lithgow to establish their own branch of the Labor Electoral League, Cook's leadership was front of mind, and he was elected president. The region's seat of Hartley, covering the Blue Mountains region, elected two members to the parliament--and Cook was chosen to be one of them.

Apart from demonstrating an ability to excel in the cut-and-thrust of an election campaign, Cook provided the voting public with a clear outline of what he stood for--a *Coal Mining Regulation Act*; an eight-hour working day; land reform; female suffrage; the abolition of plural voting; temperance; and compulsory education for underprivileged children. His labour movement credentials were further bolstered by his republican stance and also, in the Lithgow area, his support for an Australian federation.

It must be remembered that in 1891 there were no rigid party lines in the parliament, only the fiscal alternatives of Free Trade and Protection. The LEL candidates – the Labor Party in its infancy – entered the campaign as a very loose grouping of mostly working men with no leader, no platform and no history in politics. There was informal discussion that, if elected, League parliamentarians would vote in a block, bound by a solidarity 'Pledge'. But nothing was locked in, and the haste with which LEL candidates were chosen produced low expectations. Across the labour movement, many were pessimistic about the outcome.

Imagine, then, the jubilation felt by the workers of NSW when the final results were posted. In a total of 141 seats, the infant LEL Party gained no less than 35 new members. On these numbers, Labor had the balance of power. Billy Hughes, in the first of his two autobiographical volumes, captured the impact of the historic result better than anyone:

*... at the June elections although the [elected Labor men] did not put an end to the Old Order, they certainly gave its upholders the fright of their lives. The foundation of their being seemed to have crumbled under their feet; monstrous apparitions now stalked brazenly through their sacred corridors, from which the vulgar multitude had been hitherto rigidly excluded. A well-brought up hen who by some unhappy fate had hatched out a brood of pterodactyls could not have been more overwhelmed than were the members of the old parties at the sight of these rude and uncouth figures who took their places on the cross benches.*

Joe Cook was one of those pterodactyls, elected in Hartley with a solid majority on the back of a vote of confidence from the coal areas across the region. His life was about to change, along with the rest of the Labor contingent. But the euphoria created by the astonishing result, did not last long. The new kids on the block had to reckon with the hoary old practices, alliances and animosities entrenched in the Assembly, and at the same time find solutions to the structural shortcomings in their own organisation. They barely knew one another, and worse, 19 of the 35 had Protectionist beliefs, while the other 16 were Free Traders – some of these, Single-Tax Free Traders, including Joe Cook.

Could they manage to vote in the Legislative Assembly reliably as a solid block? They could not. Indeed, cracks in the labour movement soon widened as accusations and recriminations surfaced. For the next three years, from 1891 to the next election in 1894, the source of most disagreement was the issue of a solidarity 'Pledge', both in and out of the parliament. Two men emerged as the leaders of the two contending sides: Joe Cook and Chris Watson. Cook, and virtually all the Labor members in the parliament were anti-Pledge; Watson and the wider union movement were pro-Pledge.

Cook's former Lithgow mentor, John Farrell, writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, described Cook and his parliamentary rebels as 'deserters from the Labor Party', making use, it appears for the first time, of the enduring phrase 'Labor rats' to describe the men who took part in 'the great exodus' from the union mainstream. Billy Hughes, a Pledged solidarity candidate in the next election, spat out that Cook was a 'discredited, incompetent, exposed trickster', a 'gospel-grinding dead-beat'.

Battle lines were drawn, the split irreversible. There was no going back. Two separate groups of Labor candidates headed to the historic NSW election on 17 July 1894.

It was an election to remember, not only because the Legislative Assembly was reduced to 125 seats, but also because for the first time they were all single-member electorates in an election conducted on the principle of one-man-one vote. The new arrangement contributed to an overdue changing of the guard, with brilliant politician and internationally recognised Free Trade theorist, George Reid, becoming NSW premier for the first time. Cook was easily re-elected in a split Labor vote, which saw 14 Pledged candidates returned (including significant new faces, Chris Watson and Billy Hughes), and 11 unpledged Labor men.

Master tactician Reid, knowing that he needed the support of the Labor members to get legislation passed, shored up that support with a surprise invitation to Joseph Cook to be Postmaster-General in his cabinet of Free Traders. The manoeuvre locked in the block of unpledged Labor votes, and when Reid asked Chris Watson to be a member of the powerful Standing Committee on Public Works, he secured the pledged members as well.

The relationship that Reid established with Cook and Watson flourished for most of the next five years, 1894–99, resulting in a raft of socially progressive measures. For historian MH Ellis, notoriously parsimonious with compliments, it was 'a success rate for legislation unparalleled in the colony's history'. But Joe Cook, his surprise appointment as a minister of the Crown was the start of a decade-long period during which his attitudes, views, beliefs, allegiances and political orientation changed completely.

An assortment of claims that he made in a speech in Lithgow shortly after the 1894 election makes interesting reading with the benefit of hindsight. He argued that he was 'a trades-unionist, and intended to remain one'; he believed that 'labour organisations prudently conducted must tend to the benefit of the people'; and, above all else, he declared that 'whatever the future brought, his efforts would always be directed to helping those who did the toiling, but got little of the sweets of life'.

By 1904, not a single one of these statements contained a skerrick of truth. Cook's interest in life's sweets, by then, had a new and quite different application. The rightful recipients were no longer the toilers, but the toffs.

The NSW Postmaster-General portfolio for Cook came with a salary of £1,500 a year, an amount sure to capture the attention of a former Staffordshire miner. Upwardly mobile Joe and Mary Cook built a



spacious, two-storey house in the middle of Lithgow, commensurate with their improved financial circumstances. For the citizens of Lithgow, it was visible evidence that the Cooks might soon outgrow their small mining town.

As Postmaster-General, Cook put a distinctive stamp on a demanding ministry. He was a 'hands on' boss, his personality and practices imposed in the first few months when he initiated an efficiency review aimed at savings for the government purse. He found them, too, through retrenchments, underpaying mailmen in the field, increasing the workload of employees across the service and closing unprofitable post offices at certain times in the day. He was happy to hire female telephonists, knowing that he could pay them one-third of the male wage. No opportunity for frugality was too small. Cook ignored the human cost, as his working-class sympathies washed away.

As 1901 and nationhood got closer, Cook also convinced himself that Britain's involvement in the Boer War was both justified and necessary, an opinion that put an end to his youthful flirtation with republicanism--and re-constructed him as a fierce defender of the cause of Empire. Cook's personal and political attitudes had begun to imitate those of the very different company he was keeping, especially the cluster of self-satisfied individuals anchored at the reactionary end of Reid's Free Trade Party. Cook found them to be most amenable dinner companions, and if Billy Hughes was right that in 1894 Cook was an awkward presence in the drawing rooms of the rich, then the former Staffordshire miner worked terribly hard to ingratiate himself, adopt new mannerisms, mimic affectations and find a place. His new set of friends encouraged his devotion to the task of lifting himself up and out of his class. They flattered Cook, fond of saying that he was living proof of what was possible in a free-enterprise economy which discouraged rebellious behaviour, while encouraging industrious habits and rewarding obedience.

The labour movement took a different view. It was disgusted by Cook's political re-alignment, epitomised by the reaction of labour leader and newspaper editor, Ginninderra-born political activist, Harry Holland. A committed socialist and editor, Holland was scathing in his denunciation of Cook's behaviour, on 22 September 1900 writing that:

*The little Bethel politician's career should make all decent men ashamed. Hypocrisy reincarnated in the person of 'Oily' Joe Cook!*

It was a description of Cook that would appear regularly in the labour dailies, and on occasion in the mainstream press, for the rest of his political career.

With the Federation about to re-configure the map of Australian politics, George Reid's Free Trade Party approached Cook to be their federal candidate for the coveted seat of Parramatta, and he won it easily. On the strength of the victory, the Cooks moved to Marrickville, in Sydney, a quiet, leafy suburb in the urban heart of the new electorate. They now had six children, and taking up residence in a smart, middle-class Sydney home it was farewell to the grime and isolation of Lithgow. In a statement of finality, Joe sold off the contents of his Lithgow house right 'down to the last pot stand'. The Cook family was moving on up.

Curiously, Joe struggled in the first Commonwealth years, but he was once again handed an opportunity by his old mentor, George Reid. Though Reid omitted him from the ministry of his short-lived, federal government in 1904-5, Cook was re-vitalised when Reid offered him the position of deputy chairman of the newly formed Australian Liberal League – an organisation, the sole purpose of which, was to combat the rise of socialism. The League threw itself into Australia's first 'Red Scare' campaign, and Cook also became Reid's main weapon and propagandist in the parliament. His eagerness to go on the attack impressed his conservative colleagues, who responded by electing him unanimously as the Free Trade Party's new deputy leader.

A long article in 1906 that Cook wrote for a local Parramatta newspaper, provides a revealing insight into the extent of his political and ethical overhaul. An election, he declared, was not a contest of ideas and policies at all, but a 'battlefield', a 'study in political warfare'.

A poem that appeared in a labour journal at the time summed up the broader movement's response to this new version of the former Lithgow miner:

*When Reid's lieutenant, Joseph Cook,  
Was delving in the mine,  
His voice would ring in bitter tones  
Against the 'Coal Combine'.  
Like Henry George, Cook held that men  
Had no exclusive right  
To coal on land which God had made –  
Nor water and sunlight.....*

*How sad that men who once could hold  
The thorns back while we pass  
Should now bestrew the toiler's way  
With briars and broken glass;  
Why did they change their sympathy  
For bitter, cold neglect? –  
Because they now eat better food,  
In better clothes are decked!*

Was Cook worried by the bad press? Probably not. In his new guise as a conservative establishment warrior, his party colleagues liked what they saw. So when Free Trade Party leader, George Reid, retired from the leadership in 1908 to become Australia's first High Commissioner in London, Cook was elected to replace him. As far as he was concerned, he had the blessing of God. In defiance of his critics, Cook's rise to prominence continued.

In early 1909, the three leaders of the non-Labor parties – Alfred Deakin, Cook and the Western Australian Sir John Forrest – began discussing a new compact, a 'Fusion' party, that would give them the numbers to terminate Labor's second government—Andrew Fisher's first—and on 27 May 1909, the coup took place, amidst some of the wildest scenes in the history of the Commonwealth parliament. Deakin was labelled a 'Judas', and when parliament resumed the next day, Billy Hughes responded to the withering accusation, saying it was

*.... not fair – to Judas, for whom there is this to be said, that he did not gag the man whom he betrayed, nor did he fail to hang himself afterwards.*

Labor's William 'Jawbone' Webster, the Lancashire-born former quarryman, critiqued incumbent Free Trade Leader Joe Cook:

*His has been no sudden change. It has been a slow, but continuous, change, and he is so thick in the hide today that he cannot be penetrated even by the sharpest of weapons. No doubt the honourable member*

*will enjoy the emoluments of office. But while he enjoys them, the bitterness will enter into his soul. The ghosts of his former principles will haunt him night and day.*

Deakin and Cook approached the next election in April 1910 with unabashed confidence, Deakin anticipating 'a sweeping victory' and Cook predicting his side as a 'hands down' certainty. But the Fusion experiment was annihilated, giving way to Andrew Fisher's second Labor government, a government which proceeded to run full-term with majorities in both houses, from 1910 to 1913, totally transforming the political landscape. It introduced 113 acts into the parliament in what one historian has described as 'an exhilarating wave of policy inception, innovation and embellishment, seismic in its impact'.

Of greater long-term significance than any of these initiatives, however, was the new reality for federal politics in Australia. The country's two-party system had begun. Joe Cook was demoralised by Labor's seemingly unstoppable momentum. It seemed that his instinct for political survival, unshakeable Methodist faith and self-belief were all he had going for him.

But 1913 was another year, and it was one full of surprises. In January, Alfred Deakin retired from politics altogether, and Cook was elected narrowly as leader of the now Liberal Party. And he did have one more significant thing in his favour-- as another election got closer, there was a growing perception in parts of the country, rural areas in particular, that Labor had moved the young nation along at a pace too rapid. With the drums of war beating ever louder in Europe, a nationwide unease was setting in, a fear of what lay ahead. This anxiety helped Cook, and when Australians went to the polls on 31 May 1913 the Liberal Party obtained the narrowest of victories, 38 seats to Labor's 37, in the House of Representatives. Joe Cook, the former Staffordshire coal-miner, had become Australia's sixth prime minister.

Confronted by a tricky task in and out of parliament, Cook needed to be an individual with Alfred Deakin's intelligence and political savvy, Edmund Barton's high-mindedness and Andrew Fisher's christian charity. But he had none of these qualities. The warrior in him, the coalpit-hardened, single-minded, God-fearing Methodist refused to consider compromise. In office, he went about dismantling as much of Labor's progressive legislation as he could, but the emphasis on negativity came at a cost. In 15 months, Cook's Liberals only managed to pass 27 Acts, 15 of which were financial measures. He had once again failed to read the pulse of the Australian electorate when he brought on a double dissolution election to improve his situation, only to lose again to Fisher's Labor Party by a big margin. Cook had only recently been made a Privy Counsellor, his first public honour, but he had precious little else to take away from a golden opportunity in office, in power, that he had squandered.

On 4 August 1914, four weeks prior to the Australian election, Great Britain had declared war on Germany when it failed to respect Belgium's neutrality; less than two months after the election, over 20,000 Australian and New Zealand troops left Albany in Western Australia, about to see their first combat at Gallipoli. During the terrible four-year conflagration – the Great War, the 'war to end all wars' – the Australian political environment changed irrevocably. Joe Cook, a perennial survivor, had a role of some consequence in the upheavals that lay ahead.

As the war dead and wounded continued to rise at an alarming rate, arguments for and against conscription were constantly in the news. Cook's Liberal Party was committed to its urgent introduction, as was Billy Hughes, by then the Labor Party's prime minister and an uncompromising pro-conscriptionist. It was a most unlikely pairing, given the insults the two had traded in the past, but party alignments, loyalties and long-held factional beliefs of many federal parliamentarians were about to be battered by unanticipated change.

When Hughes introduced a plebiscite to gain approval for conscription in late 1916, Cook joined him on the podium to prosecute the 'yes' case. Bullying, intimidation and the calculated humiliation of those opposed to conscription were used by both Cook and Hughes in pursuit of their goal. Anti-conscriptionists, they accused, were quitters, shirkers and cowards. But the 'no' case secured a narrow majority. Twice. A second plebiscite was also defeated in late 1917.

For Joe Cook, there was an unexpected upside to the plebiscite results. It became clear that the Labor Party was on the brink of self-destructing over the issue, with the anti-conscriptionists in its ranks, a majority in Caucus, prepared to expel the pro-conscriptionists from the party, including Prime Minister Hughes if necessary. At a special Caucus meeting on 14 November 1916, smouldering with rancour and threats, Hughes and 24 of his Labor colleagues, under intense pressure to conform to the majority will, left the room in protest. There would be no reconciliation, as Hughes hastily cobbled together a new ministry of a new party. The so-called 'National Labor Party' began its brief existence, with cross-bench, pro-conscription support.

Joe Cook could not believe his good fortune, and in short order he joined Hughes in another new party, another 'fusion': the National Party. Bitter opponents for over 25 years in two parliaments, Cook and Hughes found themselves on the same side, together in a ministry made up of four former Labor Party members and six former Liberal Party members. Hughes insisted on being party leader and he got his way.

None of Hughes' peccadilloes of personality mattered enough for Cook to challenge him, despite his party having more ministers in the new party. He was prepared to work with Hughes, and be loyal to him, in spite of the clashes in the past.

In April 1918, Cook travelled with Hughes to London to attend the Imperial War Conference. He had not been back to the country of his birth since his original departure 32 years before, and on arrival he informed British journalists that he was 'delighted to see these shores again'. He spent the next 17 months in England and Europe, a period which spanned the dramatic change in Allied fortunes on the Western Front in the summer of 1918, the Armistice on 11 November 1918 and the Versailles Peace Conference, which began in January 1919.

Cook joined the prime minister for most of the significant political engagements, well-aware that the 'Little Digger', as the Anzacs had dubbed Billy Hughes, hogged the limelight whenever he could. With the eyes of the world focused on the Europe, Hughes was loath to forego any part of the stage to his deputy. Cook recognised this, and as usual deferred.

The first three months in England were a dizzying time for Joe. He was sworn in by King George V at Buckingham Palace as a member of the Privy Council on 24 June. A few days later he was received by the King, again at the Palace, and a couple of weeks after that it was time for the fineries to be trotted out once more for a swish Palace garden party. In August, Cook's many years of strident advocacy of the Empire cause, and Australia's place in it, were recognised by the sovereign when the former coal miner was made a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of St Michael and St George – a GCMG – for his services 'in high and confidential offices within His Majesty's possessions and in reward for services rendered to the Crown in relation to the foreign affairs of the Empire'.

There is little doubt that on his first visit back to England Cook was thrilled with his minor celebrity status at the privileged edge of the class system. And he was also gratified by the enthusiastic attention he

received after he accepted an invite to visit his birthplace. A genuine, homegrown success story, he was treated like royalty in Silverdale and nearby Chesterton, Mary Cook's village of old.

Joe Cook and Billy Hughes arrived back in Australia on 24 August 1919, disembarking in Fremantle to a rapturous reception. Home after so long away, Prime Minister Billy Hughes recognised immediately that his popularity in the streets bore no resemblance to the prickly mood in the Nationalist party room. However, for Hughes' party opponents plotting his downfall, a decisive course of action became much more difficult after the federal election held on 13 December 1919 that resulted in a big win for the Nationalist Party. Cook was appointed Navy minister, and later Treasurer. He got very defensive, even apologetic, about his shortcomings as the nation's finance manager when his stubbornly deflationary budgets drew widespread criticism, and he decided to make it known to party colleagues and supporters that he was very interested in the job of Australian High Commissioner in London. He had thoroughly enjoyed his time there a few years earlier, and the position appealed as a chance to take his lifelong partner, Mary, back to England.

Cook felt he had earned the post, having loyally maintained support for a prime minister who puzzled, and at times infuriated him. For instance, there was the time when Cook tried to work through a complex idea with Hughes, one sufficiently difficult that it was taking him some time to explain. It got too much for the impatient prime minister, who exploded: 'It's no bloody good, Joe. You might as well piss up against the Pyramids and imagine you're irrigating the Nile Valley'. At such moments, the post of High Commissioner in London made a great deal of sense. Cook pursued it, and in November 1921, he announced his departure from politics. Soon after, Hughes announced his deputy's appointment as Australia's next High Commissioner, taking over from former Labor prime minister, Andrew Fisher.

On arriving in London, Cook threw himself into the job of promoting Australian government policies and initiatives. He identified the twin tasks of increasing immigration to, and investment in his adopted country, as crucial. Consistent with the xenophobic mood of the era, it was a request with racial overtones: 'We will welcome all good citizens from any white country, [Cook declared] but for preference would have to be a white and British Australia'.

In London, Cook was not popular with the Commission staff. Many of them compared his at-times churlish behaviour with the down-to-earth decency of his predecessors, second High Commissioner Andrew Fisher, and first Commissioner George Reid. Despite the fact that during Cook's five years in the post the Commission's work increased fourfold, in the same period he inexplicably reduced the staff from 321 to 199. He also reduced administration expenses by about a third, apparently determined to gain the approval of the Treasury bean-counters in Melbourne. Cook's behaviour behind the closed doors of the High Commission in the Strand bore little resemblance to what was regularly commented on in England as his irrepressible 'bonhomie and accessibility' in upper-crust London society circles. There, he was a model of affability and confected manners, once more cuddled into the folds of Empire, his dutiful obedience commended.

But all good things come to an end. On 14 June 1927 Joe's term as High Commissioner concluded. The *Evening Dispatch* was pleased that he was returning 'to the land of his adoption with honours thick upon him and with the knowledge of great services rendered to the British Empire'. And it was heart-warming for Sir Joseph and Lady Mary that, as they stood on the Tilbury dock with two of their children, preparing to board the *Orsova* in August 1927, they were given a final, emotional farewell by their internationally renowned friend, Nellie Melba, who produced a moving rendition of the Scottish song, 'Will you no come back again'. The Cooks would not, but for the rest of their lives they retained the happiest of memories of their sojourn together in the land of their birth.

When they arrived home, Joe was 66 years old. He could easily have chosen to extend his political career, or at the very least maintain an involvement in politics, but he opted not to. Instead, he looked forward to a long and contented retirement. In the 1930s, both Joe and Mary were asked to write their memoirs, and both declined. Indeed, for reasons that remained his own, Joe destroyed many of his personal papers. This was the nation's loss. He died in his own home in Trahlee Road, Bellevue Hill, on 30 July 1947, and a number of obituaries followed in Australia, London and Staffordshire. There was a State funeral at Wesley Chapel in Castlereagh Street, Sydney, but it was the absentee list that had a number of people talking. That list included Labor's Prime Minister Ben Chifley; Governor-General William McKell; Leader of the Liberal Opposition, Robert Menzies; Federal Country Party leader, Arthur Fadden; and the Lord Mayor of Sydney. All were formally represented, but it was hardly a good look for the last public event for a former prime minister.

Sadly, Mary was absent as well, because of illness. Three years after Joe's death, she too died, having suffered through the onset of dementia towards the end. Her ashes were placed close to those of her husband, a fitting symbolic closure to a relationship that forever remained a loving one.

In Volume V of *A History of Australia*, Manning Clark labels Cook 'the eternal outsider', and he was. After removing himself from the working class into which he was born, he chose to become a spokesperson for money and privilege; he chose to adopt a hostile attitude towards measures aimed at making Australian society more democratic, more equitable; and he worked with single-minded purpose to rub shoulders with those men whom he had convinced himself were born to lead, in Australia and in England. He longed to be one of them, and the horrors of the Great War played their part in him more or less achieving that goal. Was the former coalminer ever fully accepted into those circles of political and social prominence? Cook felt sure he was, though there were many who had observed him during his decades in politics and beyond who held a different opinion. For them, the man who had elevated himself from Silverdale pit boy to Australian prime minister had somehow lost his way, his moral compass, in the process losing touch with the values and teachings he had absorbed in the early stages of his life through family, church and works of inspirational literature. This was Joe Cook's tragedy.

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