Joseph Cook's Contribution

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When the People's Convention met in Bathurst, in November 1896, Joseph Cook—destined to become Australia's sixth prime minister from June 1913 to September 1914—was the member for the New South Wales Legislative Assembly seat of Hartley (based at Lithgow). He was over two years into his four-year term as the Postmaster-General in George Reid's government. This paper asks two questions. The first is: did Cook contribute in any significant way to the federation cause? The second is: what role, if any, did he play at the Bathurst Convention?

English-born Cook was twenty-four years of age and recently married when he migrated (on his own) in 1885 from the coal-mining town of Silverdale in Staffordshire to the coal-mining town of Lithgow in New South Wales. A religious man throughout his life (brought up as a Primitive Methodist), by the time Cook was joined by his wife, Mary, and the first of their nine children early in 1887, he had begun his self-education in book-keeping and shorthand which propelled him from his working class origins to positions in the early Labor Electoral League in Lithgow, and ultimately to the beginnings of his long career as a professional politician.

Cook's biographers—Bebbington, Crowley, and Murdoch—in writing about his personality, characterise him as dour, solemn, aloof and humourless (although Bebbington attempts to disclaim such a characterisation).[1] The major challenge facing Cook's biographers has been to explain the continual changes in his political views and the overturning of his earlier

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[1] See G. Bebbington, *Pit Boy to Prime Minister: The Story of the Rt. Hon. Sir Joseph Cook, P.C., G.C.M.G.,* University of Keele, n.d., pp. 91–3; F.K. Crowley, 'Cook, Sir Joseph (1860–1947)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography,* vol. 8, p. 96; and J. Murdoch, *Sir Joe: A Biographical Sketch of Sir Joseph Cook,* Silverdale Historical Publication, Stoke-on-Trent, 1979, pp. 1–2, and 8. Murdoch's fuller, more considered biography *Sir Joe: A Political Biography of Sir Joseph Cook,* Minerva Press, London, was published in 1996.

principles and allegiances. As his chief biographer notes, 'he occupies a distinguished place in left-wing hagiography as the first and one of the worst traitors to Labor'.[2] During his long parliamentary career, from 1891 to 1921, Cook changed from being a pro-republican, pro-trade unionist freetrader and Labor member to becoming a pro-monarchical, anti-Labor, protectionist politician in successive conservative governments. Can his remarkable survival and electoral success as a politician over so many years be explained simply by unprincipled opportunism, or—as Cook himself would explain—by his capacity to change his views as he matured?

Any claims that Cook was a political figure who contributed significantly to the federation movement would appear, at first sight, to be dubious. Influenced by Reid, whom he admired and tried to emulate, Cook spoke against the 'Yes' case and voted 'No' in the first referendum in New South Wales in 1898, although he later campaigned vigorously for the 'Yes' cause in 1899. It can be argued that for most of his political career Cook was renowned more as an oppositionist than an achiever in public and political life. During his last two years in the New South Wales Legislative Assembly before federation, and then for another eight years when he became the first member for Parramatta in the federal Parliament, Cook was in opposition. He made his name as a tenacious debater and ruthless parliamentary tactician, who later had difficulty initiating policies when in government.

His biographers give him credit principally for his major role in the Defence Act of 1909 (which introduced compulsory military training), for the double dissolution of 1914, and—in his last public act as prime minister in September 1914—for pledging Australian military forces to the defence of the British Empire on the eve of the European war.[3] Yet, Cook was a great political survivor, returning to ministerial positions in the Hughes Nationalist governments, after taking his Liberal colleagues into coalition late in 1916. Thereafter, Cook served as deputy prime minister and minister for the Navy until July 1920, when he became federal treasurer. In November 1921 Cook resigned from Parliament to become Australia's High Commissioner in London, a post that he relished filling until 1927, when he returned to Australia. He lived in Sydney until his death in 1947.

Against this background summary of Cook's life and political career, we can now turn to the two questions posed at the outset of this paper, and investigate Cook's contribution to federation in the year of the Bathurst People's Convention: 1896. From 17 to 21 January that year Cook, as the host postmaster-general, chaired an intercolonial Post and Telegraph (P&T) conference in Sydney which was to mark a major breakthrough in negotiations over the long-awaited Pacific cable scheme. This led to an agreement among the Australian colonies to collaborate with New Zealand, Canada and Britain to operate a government-owned submarine cable service across the Pacific to challenge the long established monopoly over the cable routes into Australia enjoyed by the private British Eastern Extension Company.[4] These intercolonial conferences of ministers and their departmental advisers responsible for

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[2] J. Murdoch, *Sir Joe: A Political Biography*, p. xii, op. cit.

[3] Crowley, op. cit., pp. 98–9.

[4] 'Report of Postal and Telegraphic Conference … held in Sydney [17–21] January 1896', *NSW Parliamentary Papers 1896,* vol. 4, pp. 925–46.

telegraph, cable and associated services, which had commenced in the 1860s, had become annual or biannual events by the 1890s.[5]

Cook displayed skill and tact in guiding his fellow colonial ministers, during the January 1896 P&T Conference, towards agreement on a series of resolutions which marked a turning point in the achievement of 'practical Federation'—what I have called 'technological federalism'.[6] In his opening address to the conference, Cook spoke of the 'federal spirit which was animating most of our Australasian national endeavours at the present time'.[7] Among the most notable practical outcomes for federation emanating from the January 1896 P&T conference was the agreement by the colonial Postmasters-General that there should be equal financial contributions from each of the colonies towards subsidising the proposed Pacific cable (rather than contributions based on their respective populations). This agreement anticipated the federal principle underlying, for example, the equal representation of the states in the Senate, contained in the Constitution drafted just two years later. Another important factor which emerges from this and other intercolonial P&T conferences was the significant influence exerted by the peripheral colonies—Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia—when bargaining with the more populous metropolitan colonies of New South Wales and Victoria over international cable routes into Australia.

When the Bathurst People's Convention met towards the end of the year, Cook was not able to attend during the first two days because he was hosting another intercolonial conference of postmasters-general in Sydney.[8] However, on the evening of Tuesday 17 November, Cook and several of his counterparts journeyed by train to Bathurst for a public meeting in the evening, at which four of them, including Cook himself, addressed the Bathurst delegates and citizens on the subject of federation. At the conclusion of the meeting, John Quick moved a vote of thanks to the Ministers of the Crown, requesting that they convey 'to their respective governments a desire for an early meeting of the Statutory Convention for the purpose of arranging the Federal Constitution.'[9]

Thus, the year 1896 did indeed constitute a high point in Cook's positive contribution to the cause of federation: notably, in his capacity as the host minister who chaired two significant intercolonial ministerial conferences—one of them coinciding with the Bathurst Convention. Cook continued to play a significant mediating role in fostering technological federalism at several subsequent P&T conferences in 1897 and 1898—that is, before he completed his term as postmaster-general in Reid's New South Wales government in August 1898. As I have argued at length elsewhere, the series of important annual intercolonial P&T conferences held between 1891 and 1898 both anticipated and influenced the movement towards practical federation which culminated in the sessions of the 1897–98 Federal Convention at which the

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[5] K.T. Livingston, 'Anticipating federation: the federalising of telecommunications in Australia', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 26, no. 102, April 1994, pp. 100–104.

[6] K.T. Livingston, *The Wired Nation Continent: The Communication Revolution and Federating Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. 16.

[7] Cook's opening address in 'Report of P&T Conference … January 1896: Report of Proceedings', p. 6 [internal pagination].

[8] *Argus* (Melbourne), 20 November 1896.

[9] *Proceedings, People's Federal Convention, Bathurst, November 1896*, Gordon & Gotch, Sydney, 1897.

Australian Constitution subsequently endorsed by the vote of the people in the Australian colonies at the series of referenda between 1898 and 1900, was drafted.[10]

Joseph Cook certainly earned his reputation as an effective, intransigent oppositionist politician rather than as a policy-maker in government during the subsequent two decades of the federal Parliament. Nevertheless, he deserves to be recognised as having played an influential, mediating role in leading the Australian colonies towards technological federalism in the mid-1890s, in these crucial years which preceded Australia's political federalism in 1901.

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[10] Livingston, *The Wired Nation Continent*, op. cit., pp. 129–159.