

## **The Australian Prime Ministership: Origins and Evolution**\*

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The Australian prime ministership has seldom seemed so confounding as in recent years. We have seen a higher rate of turnover in the office than at any time since the first decade of the Commonwealth. Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott each confidently entered the office only to be broken by it in swift succession and now, in less than 12 months, the buoyant hopes that accompanied the ascension of Malcolm Turnbull have dissipated. Yet despite the tribulations of recent incumbents, there is little question that the prime ministership is still the main prize in Australian politics. It is also the most closely observed office in the land; indeed, relentlessly so. Political scientists use the term ‘personalisation’ to describe the modern phenomenon of leader-centred politics.<sup>1</sup> They postulate that as the hold the established parties exercise over voters has waned leaders are taking their place. Leaders are ‘standing in’ for the party and are increasingly important in providing the cues for the public to interpret and make decisions about politics. Whether this phenomenon is as pronounced in Australia as it is in some other comparable democracies is arguable, but there is little question that in our intensely mediatised age leaders are more prominent than ever before. This is a paradox of the contemporary prime ministership: never has it loomed so omnipotent in the nation’s life and yet been so apparently brittle in the experience of incumbents.

What do we know, however, about the origins of this office that bulks so large in the nation’s collective political psyche? What expectations did the founders of the Commonwealth have for the prime ministership when they designed the Constitution in the final decade of the 19th century? Were those expectations principally grounded in Westminster precedent or were they influenced by their own experiences of executive government in the Australian colonies? And how did the office grow into a position of national leadership from its rudimentary beginnings at Federation in 1901, and which office holders contributed most to that development and how? It is to these questions that we address ourselves today.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Ian McAllister, *The Australian Voter: 50 Years of Change*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2011, pp. 241–6.

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## Pre-history

Answering the first question is easy enough. Australians apparently know little about the genesis and initial development of the prime ministership or its early occupants. One clue to this ignorance is that when polls have been conducted asking members of the public to rate former prime ministers the results have been skewed to contemporary holders with meagre recognition of leaders predating Bob Hawke, especially among younger cohorts.<sup>2</sup> This unfamiliarity with the nation's political origins and founders was emphatically demonstrated by surveys on that subject carried out a decade and a half ago during the centenary of Federation. The results so disconcerted authorities that they commissioned advertisements embarrassing citizens by asking, 'What kind of country would forget the name of its first prime minister?'<sup>3</sup> The surveys showed that Australians were more acquainted with the names of America's founding fathers than those who had forged their own nation.

Arguably, scholars have to accept some responsibility for the impoverished state of public knowledge. While we have many accomplished biographies of prime ministers and excellent accounts of the making of the Commonwealth, we have lacked a study that charts the development of the prime ministership. Filling this lacuna is the objective of the study my colleagues, professors James Walter and Paul 't Hart, and I are undertaking. We are halfway through this epic task with the first volume, which chronicles the office's evolution up to the mid-20th century, published early this year.<sup>4</sup> One of the first questions we needed to resolve in writing that volume was where to begin. Should the account commence in 1901 or should it include some pre-history of the prime ministership? As the historian among us, I was charged with writing the early chapters and I decided an appropriate starting place for my research was the Federal Conventions of the 1890s. Surely, I figured, the delegates to those august gatherings had given consideration to the prime ministership and articulated their expectations of the office.

I was disappointed. Poring through hundreds of pages of proceedings of the conventions, I discovered the delegates barely mentioned the office. What did catch my eye, however, is that among the delegates were several prime ministers! For example, when on St Patrick's Day 1898 the final session of the 1897–98 Federal

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<sup>2</sup> Essential Report, 'Australia's Best Prime Minister', 30 January 2012, <http://www.essentialvision.com.au/tag/john-curtin>.

<sup>3</sup> Kate Krinks, 'Creating the Active Citizen? Recent Developments in Civics Education', *Research Paper no. 15 1988–99*, Parliament of Australia, Canberra, March 1999. See also Anna Clark, *History's Children: History Wars in the Classroom*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2008, pp. 22–3; and Civics Expert Group, *Whereas the People ... Civics and Citizenship Education: Report of the Civics Expert Group*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Strangio, Paul 't Hart and James Walter, *Settling the Office: The Australian Prime Ministership from Federation to Reconstruction*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2016.

Convention concluded in Melbourne one of the last formalities discharged by its president, New South Wales lawyer and politician Edmund Barton, was to move that the convention ‘cordially invites the Prime Minister of each colony’ to supply copies of the draft constitution to the voters of their respective jurisdictions.<sup>5</sup> I was intrigued by this nomenclature since my understanding was that by the late 19th century ‘premier’ had become the standard term for the chief executive of each of the colonies, displacing earlier appellations that had included ‘colonial secretary’ and ‘chief secretary’.<sup>6</sup> Further research revealed that, consistent with its status as the ‘mother colony’, it was in New South Wales, but also and less explicity in South Australia and Tasmania, that it had been most customary to attach the title of prime minister to the head of government.<sup>7</sup> What accounted for the liberal assignment of that term to the leaders of the colonies at the Federal Conventions is not entirely clear, but possibly it was a means to forestall petty jealousies among them and avert the damaging impression of a hierarchy of colonies.

Whatever the reason, the presence of plural ‘prime ministers’ at the Federal Conventions strongly suggested to me that it would not be enough to treat the proclamation of the Commonwealth on 1 January 1901 as a kind of year zero in the practices of executive office. Instead, we would have to delve back further to understand the origins of the Australian prime ministership. That view was reinforced by my investigation of the backgrounds of the 80 or so delegates who comprised those conventions. Not only were these men creatures of colonial politics, but as one historian has put it, ‘their individual careers present a picture of profound government experience’.<sup>8</sup> The numbers speak for themselves. Cumulatively, the delegates boasted in excess of 1,000 years of service in the colonial legislatures and hundreds of years of ministerial office. Twenty-five of them occupied the position of premier by the time of Federation.<sup>9</sup> Their combined total of chief executive office experience

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<sup>5</sup> Australasian Federal Convention 1897–98 (Third Session), Melbourne, 17 March 1898, p. 2466.

<sup>6</sup> For example, in Victoria the head of government formally became known as the premier following an administrative restructure in 1883. See Raymond Wright, *A People’s Counsel: A History of the Parliament of Victoria 1856–1990*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992, p. 90. For an account of the evolution of the nomenclature of the head of government in colonial Queensland see Denis Murphy, ‘The Premiers of Queensland: The 1978 Clem Lack Oration of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland’, pp. 1–3, [https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/eserv/UQ:205013/s00855804\\_1977\\_78\\_10\\_3\\_87.pdf](https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/eserv/UQ:205013/s00855804_1977_78_10_3_87.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Solomon Encel, *Cabinet Government in Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1962, p. 24. See also Colin A. Hughes and B. D. Graham, *A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics 1890–1964*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1968, pp. 58–60, 85, 197–200 and 211.

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey McDonald, ‘The Eighty Founding Fathers’, *Queensland Historical Review*, vol. 1, 1968, p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> This number includes Victoria’s William Shiels, who briefly stood in for Henry Wrixon at the 1891 Convention in Sydney.

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approached nearly 100 years.<sup>10</sup> In short, the constitution-framing forums of the 1890s were brim full of experience of colonial governing practice.

In this light it began to make sense that the prime ministership should have been inconspicuous in the deliberations of the Federal Conventions. Deeply schooled in the workings of responsible government in the colonies, the delegates brought with them highly developed assumptions about the role of head of government. Moreover, when their work was fulfilled and Federation was realised in 1901, assumptions about how executive government would operate were further buttressed by the composition of the early Commonwealth parliaments and governments. Nearly three-quarters of the members of the House of Representatives and senators elected at the inaugural federal ballot of March 1901 were veterans of the colonial legislatures and among the successful candidates were no fewer than 13 former or serving heads of government.<sup>11</sup> There was an impressive concentration of that executive experience in the ministry of Edmund Barton, Australia's first prime minister. More than half of the Barton ministry that met the parliament for the first time in May 1901 were former colonial premiers—William Lyne from New South Wales, George Turner from Victoria, Charles Kingston from South Australia, Philip Fysh from Tasmania and John Forrest from Western Australia. Between them these men had a total of around three decades of experience as head of government, while the remaining members of Barton's team had all held portfolios in colonial administrations. Boasting such an abundance of leadership experience, it was small wonder that it was dubbed the 'cabinet of kings'.

So volume one of our history of the prime ministership necessarily predates 1901. Indeed, it begins by examining the Westminster inheritance, briefly tracing the development of the office from the early 18th century administration of Robert Walpole, who is conventionally identified as the first British prime minister, through to the era of the great political titans, Benjamin Disraeli and William Gladstone, in the second half of the 19th century. Yet, if the model of chief executive was from the outset based on British precedent, what was more interesting to me is how the distinctive features of parliamentary democracy in the Australian colonies conditioned that model during the half-century that preceded Federation.

In the time we have together today I cannot go into significant detail about the patterns of colonial politics. However, in summary, a combination of factors—the small-scale parliaments and geographically fragmented populations, the dilution of ideology (the pragmatic quest for economic development mostly trumped principle) and the relative social and economic homogeneity of the Australian colonies—caused

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<sup>10</sup> These figures are based on data extracted from the various state parliament websites.

<sup>11</sup> Gavin Souter, *Acts of Parliament: A Narrative History of the Senate and House of Representatives, Commonwealth of Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1988, p. 51.

parliamentary politics to remain primarily based on factions well into the latter decades of the 19th century, whereas in Britain two-party government had already dawned. The dominance of factional rather than party politics and the attendant fluidity of parliamentary alignments accounted for the chronic instability of colonial politics as measured by the high turnover of ministries.

The crucial point for us is that the slow transition to party politics had important consequences for the nature and practice of executive leadership and the authority of office holders. Faction leadership was highly personalised<sup>12</sup>: followers deferred to a leader on the basis of their individual merit-based claims to pre-eminence, not their occupation of a formalised position. Henry Parkes, arguably the pre-eminent faction leader of the colonial era, invoked the notion of leaders ‘as “superior” men’ and insisted that ‘a man should become leader by commanding others’ sympathy by superior acquirements’.<sup>13</sup> Typically, faction leaders relied upon a nucleus of regular followers whose fidelity to a ‘chief’ (as faction leaders were commonly referred to) was built on respect for the leader’s qualities but also affection. To stitch together a government, however, faction leaders almost invariably had to woo supporters outside the orbit of their loyalists. This might require a temporary power-sharing arrangement with another faction and/or harnessing the support of non-aligned members. Preferment and patronage lubricated this process, but the creation of alliances was also facilitated by doctrinal flexibility. Perhaps the paramount attribute required by a faction leader, however, was an expert command of parliamentary proceedings and strategy. Indeed, gaining and staying in office usually hinged on parliamentary performance—oratorical skill was important—tactical manoeuvre and cunning.

What then of the authority of faction as opposed to party leaders? Faction leaders were not bound by the same constraints imposed by parties. As Patrick Weller writes, in factions ‘leaders were not obliged to consult their followers; since there was no formal position of leader, their leadership was undisputed and faction leaders were not subject to re-election’.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, because of the absence of the formal bonds of solidarity and organisational sanctions associated with party, their authority was less predictable and more contingent than that of a party leader. As Weller further explains: ‘The corporate identity of the party may have created some constraints on the leader, but at the same time he had the advantage of greater security and stability in his following than a faction leader could expect.’<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See here, in particular, Peter Loveday and Allan William Martin, *Parliament, Factions and Parties: The First Thirty Years of Responsible Government in New South Wales, 1856–1889*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1966, ch. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Patrick Weller, ‘From Faction to Party: The Role and Authority of the Leader’, *Political Science*, vol. 26, no. 2, December 1974, p. 42.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

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Other factors hedged the authority of government leaders in the colonial era. There was ambiguity of title and the role mostly lacked statutory recognition or separate remuneration. Office holders also had little access to supporting resources. Departments dedicated to providing bureaucratic assistance to government heads generally did not come into existence until the 20th century, with leaders previously dependent upon small secretariats based within other departments.<sup>16</sup> This limited their ability to direct and coordinate the work of other ministers, which was already a common difficulty in multi-faction governments where there were competing focal points of power in cabinet. In a broader sense, the absence of disciplined party groupings made for a power balance that favoured the parliament over the executive. Leaders found it difficult to impose a legislative program upon parliament with bills often ending up being enacted in markedly different form to that introduced by the government.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, because of the pervasive localism of elections and the fact that campaigns seldom revolved around clearly defined policy manifestos, office holders rarely were able to wield a mandate to subdue a wilful legislature. Colonial upper houses were yet another powerful constraint on executive authority.<sup>18</sup>

For all this, strong heads of government did emerge in the colonial era. Prominent examples were: Parkes in New South Wales, Graham Berry in Victoria, Samuel Griffith in Queensland and John Forrest in Western Australia. Some of these were beneficiaries of temporary party consolidations, but for the most part leadership predominance was principally made possible by the exceptional qualities of the individual office holders. It is also true that by the time colonial representatives were designing a constitution for a federation in the 1890s, the transition from faction to party politics was underway. The combined forces of the growth of population and electorates, the expansion of parliaments, the diminution of geographic fragmentation and the increased economic and social stratification were eroding the moorings of the faction system and creating the conditions for party development. The emergence of labour parties was, of course, a harbinger and catalyst of party settlement. Nevertheless, that metamorphosis from the old paradigm of faction-based parliamentary politics and person-centred leadership to a party-dominated system was still in train; as Peter Loveday and A. W. Martin have written, the period was ‘an amalgam of the old and the new’.<sup>19</sup> And that transition continued into the first decade

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Joanne Scott, Ross Laurie, Bronwyn Stevens and Patrick Weller, *The Engine Room of Government: The Queensland Premier's Department, 1859–2001*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2001, chs 1–3.

<sup>17</sup> David Clune and Gareth Griffith, *Decision and Deliberation: The Parliament of New South Wales 1856–2003*, The Federation Press, Annandale, 2006, p. 39.

<sup>18</sup> Victoria's Legislative Council earned a reputation for being the most intractable of the upper houses. See Geoffrey Serle, ‘The Victorian Legislative Council, 1856–1950’, *Historical Studies, Australia and New Zealand*, vol. 6, no. 22, May 1954, pp. 186–203.

<sup>19</sup> Loveday and Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

of the Commonwealth and was reflected in the early development of the prime ministership.

### **The Federal Conventions**

I noted earlier that the prime ministership was a largely overlooked subject at the Federal Conventions and suggested that part of the reason for this is that the framers of the Constitution came to those forums with a very well-developed understanding of the role of head of government. Nevertheless, there was debate among delegates about what form the executive ought to take in a federated Australia that could potentially have had important ramifications for the head of government and authority of the office. That debate turned around whether the core principle of responsible government—executive accountability to the lower house—was compatible with a federation in which the upper house in its capacity as a guardian of state rights was to enjoy virtually coequal powers with the lower house.<sup>20</sup> In the end, the delegates decided that this was not an insuperable contradiction.

But what is striking for our story is the assertion by the instigator of, and perhaps most articulate contributor to, this debate, the Queensland premier and future chief justice of the High Court, Samuel Griffith, that the Australian colonists were responding to different imperatives to those that had animated the American founding fathers at the end of the 18th century. Whereas the latter, Griffith observed, had ‘been frightened by the tendency’ of the executive in the United Kingdom to ‘overawe Parliament’, the challenge for the Australian constitution makers was not guarding against an oppressive executive and crown but creating a federation in which the rights of the smaller colonies (states) would be balanced against New South Wales and Victoria, which were expected to carry greatest sway in the lower house of a national parliament.<sup>21</sup> Griffith did not elaborate on why executive power in 19th century Australia should be regarded as comparatively tame, but surely it was a corollary of the slow consolidation of the party system and the record of colonial legislatures successfully constraining governments. Indeed, that history seemed to have imbued the Federal Convention delegates with a general insouciance towards the prospect of a strong executive. There is little evidence of them harbouring the anxiety that had haunted the creators of the American republic that the chief executive might in time morph into a de facto monarch.

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<sup>20</sup> For a useful summary of that debate see Brian Galligan, ‘The Founders’ Design and Intentions Regarding Responsible Government’, *Politics*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1980, pp. 1–10.

<sup>21</sup> National Australasian Convention 1891, Sydney, 4 March 1891, p. 35. See also Samuel Walker Griffith, *Notes on Australian Federation: Its Nature and Probable Effects*, Government Printer, Brisbane, 1896.

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To the contrary, the Australian constitution makers seemed to welcome the prospect of a powerful prime minister. As I have said, the convention delegates remained frustratingly clammed up about the position of chief executive. The earliest and most substantial exception came in Sydney in 1891 in the context of them batting away a heterodox proposal from the former governor and premier of New Zealand, Sir George Grey. Parading his credentials as ultra democrat, Grey advocated that the position of governor-general be an elected office, ‘open at all times to that man in Australia who is deemed the greatest, and worthiest, and fittest’.<sup>22</sup> Ignoring the practicality that a rival popular mandate would upset the equilibrium of the political system, he rhapsodised about a statesman equivalent to Abraham Lincoln rising up through the office. Little more than a minor sideshow from the main constitutional debates, for our purposes the interest in Grey’s proposal was that delegates found it so heretical that they were galvanised to articulate their otherwise unspoken assumptions about the pre-eminent place the prime minister or premier (the title was not settled for another decade) ought to occupy in a federated Australia.

Signalling dissent from Grey, the New South Wales delegate, Sir William McMillan, asked:

who in this country wishes to be better than the prime minister of federated Australia? Who cares to be the governor of federated Australia when the prime minister is the first man in power in the country? His position will be the blue ribbon of the highest possible ambition ...<sup>23</sup>

The Victorian, Alfred Deakin, was especially incredulous that Grey should confuse the governor-generalship as ‘the summit of Australian ambition’, whereas in reality it would be ‘little better than a glittering and gaudy toy’. There would be ‘nothing’ in the office ‘to arouse the ambition of those who claim to stand on the liberal side of the community’.<sup>24</sup> And Deakin dismissed as ‘almost grotesque’ the notion of an Antipodean Lincoln being consigned to the role. Such a colossus would occupy only one rightful place in the political firmament of the coming federation:

If we ever possess a man of his rude, rugged, magnificent nature ... What should we do with such a man? I trust that we should make him premier of Australia ... the office for which he was fitted ... and [in which] he could fulfil his own destiny and the destiny of his people.

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<sup>22</sup> National Australasian Convention 1891, Sydney, 1 April 1891, p. 563.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, 12 March 1891, pp. 272–3.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, 1 April 1891, pp. 570–1.



According to Deakin then, no shadow of doubt existed about what would be ‘the highest office in the commonwealth—that is, the premiership’.<sup>25</sup>

### **Fulfilling the office’s promise**

As it turned out, it was Deakin who settled the choice of the title ‘prime minister’ for the chief executive in a federated Australia during the preparations for the inauguration of the Commonwealth. For reasons unrecorded but possibly because of a concern that it would be deemed presumptuous for an Australian national leader to assume the equivalent title of his British counterpart, in late 1900 Barton, the putative head of government, wrote to Deakin flagging reservations about the ‘constitutional propriety’ of appropriating the title prime minister. In reply, Deakin evinced no such qualms and instead argued it would have the benefit of differentiating the federal leader from the chief executives of the states and by implication assert the Commonwealth’s status in relation to the former colonies. He advised Barton: ‘the head of the Federal Government ought to be termed the “Prime Minister”—a good old English title which will have the advantage of distinguishing him from State “Premiers”’.<sup>26</sup> Prime minister it became.

Establishing its title was one thing, but a much greater challenge would be to realise the potential of the office. It is that story to which I wish to devote the remainder of this lecture. How did the major occupants of the office during the first half of the 20th century gradually transform the prime ministership into an institution that was worthy of being described as the ‘blue ribbon of the highest possible ambition’?

This was not a given in the early decades of the federation. There were significant constraints on the office. The Constitution itself circumscribed the Commonwealth government and, consequently, checked prime-ministerial authority, especially in the thorny areas of economic management and industrial relations. Concluding that the office’s limitations were unequal to the challenges of nation building, a majority of incumbents sought greater power by amending the Constitution. That proved mostly futile—only four of 24 referenda initiated during the first half of the 20th century passed. Another fetter on prime ministers was the dearth of administrative infrastructure. Vignettes from the first days of the Commonwealth evoke the primitive nature of the early organisational arrangements: Barton’s private secretary, Atlee Hunt, managing the fledging business of the federation on a desk perched on a balcony of the Treasury Building in Macquarie Street, Sydney, that was exposed to

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Alfred Deakin to Edmund Barton, 24 October 1900, Papers of Sir Edmund Barton, MS 51, Series 1, Item 718–9, National Library of Australia (emphasis in the original). See also John Andrew La Nauze, *Alfred Deakin*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1962, pp. 261–2.

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the elements;<sup>27</sup> Barton later reminiscing that when he commuted between Sydney and Melbourne he carried the ‘whole federal archives in his Gladstone bag’;<sup>28</sup> Barton and his closest ministerial colleagues cooking chops and making billy tea in the open fireplace of the garret-like living quarters that had been commandeered for the prime minister in the upper level of Melbourne’s Spring Street Parliament.<sup>29</sup>

Administrative support for prime ministers remained limited for many years. A Prime Minister’s Department was created in 1911, but was little more than a small secretariat for decades. Though loyal private secretaries served incumbents, ministerial offices were a distant innovation. The Commonwealth public service, which began with a mere 1,400 staff, most of whom were customs officers, stayed modest in size and weak in policy generation until World War Two. The immature party system was another impediment to executive authority at the outset of the Commonwealth and even when the system settled in 1909 the fractiousness of the parties remained a thorn in prime-ministerial sides. And they frequently had to butt heads against uncooperative state premiers and other rival power centres.

It would be through improvisation and by virtue of their skills, zest and wits that the holders of the office incrementally grew the prime ministership into a platform for national leadership. No grand design guided them and nor was progress linear. The project stalled during the interwar period—a time of mostly thwarted prime-ministerial ambitions. Each major incumbent of the first half of the 20th century, however, made a distinctive contribution to developing the prime-ministerial repertoire. So, to conclude today’s lecture let us turn to those leaders and their contributions.

First is Alfred Deakin, the most beguiling of Australian prime ministers. Three times office holder during the politically topsy-turvy post-Federation decade, we label Deakin the ‘ringmaster’ of the early Commonwealth. In many respects, Deakin was a transitional figure from the colonial to the Commonwealth eras. He practised a person-centred leadership redolent of the ‘chiefs’ of pre-1900 factional politics. Through the cultivation of personal affiliations, parliamentary tactical guile, oratorical virtuosity and clarity of purpose, he achieved much to outfit a nation that, as he had written in 1901, was beginning life as little more than ‘a piece of political carpentry’.<sup>30</sup> It was principally under his leadership that the newly created federation obtained stability and by the end of its first decade the Commonwealth had obtained a status

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<sup>27</sup> Hunt later reminisced about the Commonwealth’s primitive administrative beginnings in a series of articles published in the *Argus* under the title ‘Federal Memories’. See *Argus*, 5 December, 12 December, 19 December and 26 December 1931 and 2 January 1932.

<sup>28</sup> Geoffrey Bolton, *Edmund Barton*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000, p. 229.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 238–9.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in La Nauze, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

and influence few would have anticipated at the time of its inauguration. The nation-building edifice constructed by his governments was all the more remarkable given the fluidity of the party system and the fact his Protectionist grouping was dwindling in parliamentary strength. His deft statecraft is an instructive example for contemporary leaders as we enter an era where minority governments and unstable parliaments may again become the norm.

Also three times prime minister, Andrew Fisher's most significant government was his second of 1910–13. It was a watershed not merely because it was Australia's first majority government and the first majority national labour or social democratic administration anywhere in the world, but because it unambiguously ushered in the party-based prime ministership. This was symbolically underscored when after Labor triumphed at the April 1910 election—a victory inextricably connected to the settlement of the party system occasioned by the 1909 fusion of the non-Labor parties—Fisher refused to accept the offer of a commission to form a ministry until confirmed as leader by the Labor caucus.<sup>31</sup> With that action he signalled emphatically that his prime ministership was based not on individual claim; he would instead occupy the office solely by virtue of his position within the party. In government, Fisher diligently nursed the relationship between caucus and cabinet and faithfully abided by Labor's platform. From Fisher's time party management became the *sine qua non* of effective national leadership: a task fumbled by many of his successors. Fisher was also stylistically different to the colonial political elite that had dominated the first decade of the Commonwealth. He was the first 'everyman' prime minister. He was also pioneering in travelling the country extensively; indeed those wide-ranging expeditions combined with Labor's sweeping Commonwealth-wide victory of 1910 and his government's active promotion of national sentiment arguably qualifies Fisher as Australia's first truly national prime minister.

As Australia's World War One leader, Billy Hughes was unquestionably a colossus. He demonstrated how a crisis could be exploited to extend the reach of the Commonwealth and to stretch the authority of the prime-ministerial office. War also brought an unprecedented focus on the federal government and this, combined with Hughes' outsized personality, compelled attention upon the prime ministership. The office became the most influential and resonant in the land. And yet this proved to be a contingent and transient inflation of authority. Bloated by wartime power and capricious of nature, Hughes had neither the inclination nor patience to systematically and enduringly transform the prime ministership as an institution. What is more, by catalysing a split in the Labor Party in 1916 Hughes destabilised the only recently

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<sup>31</sup> Patrick Weller (ed.), *Caucus Minutes 1901–1949: Minutes of the Meetings of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1975, (Minutes 26 April 1910), p. 254.

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settled party system, an upheaval which had baneful consequences for his prime-ministerial successors on both sides of the political aisle. Even on the international stage, Hughes's legacy was mixed. By force of his extraordinary will Hughes demanded and obtained a voice for Australia on the international stage, as reflected most vividly by his rambunctious display at the Paris peace negotiations. But he had little interest in reforming imperial relations in a way that would furnish Australia and the other dominions with greater independence lest it erode the bonds of empire. In the final analysis, Hughes's prime ministership was most of all an early and dramatic lesson in the perils of excessive leadership predominance.

Stanley Bruce marked a break from the office holders of the first two decades of the Commonwealth. He was the first prime minister who had not sat in one of the colonial legislatures—that and the fact he had spent substantial parts of his early life outside of Australia endowed him with a distinctly non-provincial mindset. To a greater extent than any of his predecessors, he enunciated a vision for national development. When he presided over the opening of Parliament House in the new capital of Canberra in May 1927, he implored his fellow legislators to 'think and act nationally'.<sup>32</sup> Intent on restoring order following the erratic Hughes, the methodical Bruce professionalised and modernised the cabinet system. He was an early advocate of evidence-based policy. He began the practice of drawing in expert advisers and establishing commissions of inquiry to supplement the institutional resources available to him. Bruce made progress in resolving the problematic imbalances in Commonwealth-state relations especially in the area of finance, only to be ultimately undone by his impatience with the constraints on the Commonwealth's power. In the end, his period of office and that of his successor, James Scullin, illustrated the constrained authority of the prime minister's office in the circumstances of disorderly political parties, a still meagre administrative apparatus, and the Commonwealth's limited economic clout.

A three-time election winner, Joseph Lyons stands out in the interwar period for leading a government that appeared relatively stable and popular. Both in policy and institutionally his was, however, largely a holding pattern prime ministership. Lyons played a relatively restrained role in his own government. He presided over a divided cabinet and party that had little stomach for strong direction. Lyons practised a conciliatory and cautious leadership that made him the 'honest broker', liked by the public and tolerated by business and media elites as palatable compared to the alternative prime-ministerial candidates. Unlike Bruce, he displayed scant interest in modernising the machinery of executive government. Where Lyons did add a further element to the prime-ministerial repertoire was in the area of public performance. His warm and reassuring persona and skilful exploitation of the revolution in mass media

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in *Brisbane Courier*, 10 May 1927, p. 13.

in the 1930s, particularly his adroit use of the fledgling medium of radio, helped forge a genuine and enduring bond with the public. He was Australia's most accessible and probably most popular prime minister to that time, and arguably its first 'media' performer.

Licensed by another crisis, World War Two, and heeding the lessons of the previous four decades, it was John Curtin and Ben Chifley who consolidated and built upon the elaborations of their predecessors. They used the exigency of war to successfully bring about a decisive and permanent realignment of financial power between the Commonwealth and the states. Galvanised by the barren Scullin years, they understood their first task was to carry their party with them, and then to persuade the public. They assiduously worked the cabinet, caucus and Labor organisation, pursued a coherent reform program sustained by a cause rather than personal aggrandisement. They also needed the best possible program advice, and adept administrators to implement policy. They called on experts of all stripes. They created new agencies with direct access to the prime minister, to manage the 'total war effort' and advise on post-war reconstruction. This made them the best supported and advised prime ministers of the first 50 years. It also laid the foundation of the modern Australian Public Service, and of a Prime Minister's Department that would eventually become the central co-ordinating agency it is today. In addition, through stirring wartime oratory and conscientious cultivation of the press gallery, Curtin fostered the public connection.<sup>33</sup> Curtin and Chifley also established the efficacy of a leadership tandem. Their nation-building partnership anticipated that of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating in the 1980s—an irony since in a 1990 speech Keating dismissively referred to his Labor predecessors as a 'trier' (Curtin) and a 'plodder' (Chifley).<sup>34</sup> The historical record says otherwise.

The prime ministership as a platform for national influence was not really settled until the 1940s. Its 'levers' thereafter became: the financial muscle to cajole premiers; an effective and properly resourced federal public service; disciplined party organisations; command of communication channels; and an understanding that party discipline and a cabinet operating with due process were essential. It was such developments that led Labor minister John Dedman to observe in 1949 that 'the office

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<sup>33</sup> Since our first volume was published further insight into Curtin's media management practices has been provided in Caryn Coatney, *John Curtin: How He Won Over the Media*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> Mark Ryan (ed.), *Advancing Australia: The Speeches of Paul Keating, Prime Minister*, Big Picture Publications, Sydney, 1995, pp. 3–8; Paul Kelly, *The End of Certainty: The Story of the 1980s*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1992, pp. 621–2.

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of the Prime Minister is becoming more and more the pivot around which the whole government machine turns'.<sup>35</sup>

This is not to say that the office's evolution has not continued in the more than half a century since. There have been further accretions of Commonwealth power at the expenses of the states. The bureaucracy has vastly burgeoned. Ministerial staffers arrived on the scene and have grown in number and influence. The international dimension of the role has expanded dramatically. The advent of the 'celebrity' medium of television recast the relationship between leaders and the public. More recently, party bases have dwindled substantially from their mid-20th century peak and electoral volatility has increased. Moreover, intensifying globalisation has altered the locus and freight of decision making, while the digital revolution has further disrupted long-existing patterns of political communication. It is this story we deal with in the second volume of our study. Yet that ongoing development does not diminish the achievements of Curtin, Chifley and their fellow early prime ministers to realise the office's potential by mid last century. Remembering the lessons of their hard-won gains might even help today's leaders find the role less confounding.



**Question** — Thank you very much for a very stimulating presentation. You mentioned the prime minister taking over the role of kingship. He certainly has seemed to do so in the declaration of war. How did that happen and how can we stop it in the future?

**Paul Strangio** — We have had some interest in making that a decision that would have to be endorsed by the parliament. In the period we are talking about here, Australian prime ministers did not have that power because of the constrained foreign policy making capacity. So this is a development of the post-war period effectively. I have not been able to cover the entire story of the development of prime ministerial authority in that first half-century, but part of it is the gradual development of foreign policy and the presence of prime ministers on the world stage. That story you are talking about, that sort of unilateral power, really comes in the second volume and we will be dealing with it there.

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<sup>35</sup> John Dedman to Ben Chifley, 30 March 1949, quoted in Leslie Finlay Crisp, 'Central Co-ordination of Commonwealth Policy-Making and Dilemmas of the Prime Minister's Department', *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1967, p. 34.

One of the more absorbing things about prime ministers on the international stage in the first half-century is that they used to disappear for so long. It is hard to get our heads around, for example, that when Hughes went off when the war was still on in 1918, he was away for around 18 months. There was a common pattern: when they left the country there was instability. They were constrained in that foreign policy power, but when they did go away it tended to undercut their domestic power. So certainly when we get into the second volume we are talking about dramatically inflated power in terms of foreign policy-making decisions about war and so forth.

**Rosemary Laing** — I think the growth in the scale of the office is an interesting phenomenon, and was probably inevitable. I think many people will be familiar with the stories about Chifley taking phone calls from Canberra housewives because his phone number in Old Parliament House was one digit different from the Kingston butcher's number, and the Prime Minister of Australia at the time would quite happily pass on orders to the local butcher's shop. It is just unimaginable that that sort of thing could have happened even very soon after that time. From the 1950s onwards the scale of the office was much elevated.

**Paul Strangio** — It is reflected in the comparable buildings. All of you I think would be familiar with Old Parliament House and its intimacy. I did refer in the lecture to that beautiful scene of Barton cooking chops and making billy tea in his garret-like living quarters in Spring Street. A lot of what was going on in parliamentary terms occurred in Spring Street, Melbourne. It was not until 1927 that parliament moved to Canberra. So the intimacy of the office and the modesty of the office is striking. For example, when Fisher was prime minister he decided to acquire a prime ministerial vehicle and it caused quite a stir.

Fisher is an interesting figure in many ways because he was a very humble, modest man but, at another level, when he travelled, for instance, he was very prickly about receiving all the honours due an Australian prime minister. It was not for him so much, but because he was a Labor prime minister. He felt acutely that sensitivity that a Labor prime minister should not be treated any differently when he travelled. The modesty of the office is striking, that is right. Compared to the premiers and so forth, there was a real sense that they had to build the authority and the prominence of the office incrementally.

**Question** — I am interested in the prime ministers you omitted to talk about and am intrigued by your comment about the 'hapless' Scullin. My first question is: can you complete the picture there? My second question is: why didn't you mention Menzies and talk a little about that, considering he is our longest serving Prime Minister?

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**Paul Strangio** — That is a very good question. I had to be selective today. In the volume we have not looked at prime ministers individually. We have tended to treat them either in groups or in pairs. For example, we treat the first Commonwealth decade as a decade, but argue that it revolves around Deakin. Then we treat Fisher and Hughes together, in part to underscore their stylistic difference. Fisher is the group leader, then Hughes comes along and he is at the opposite end of the spectrum of prime ministerial types—domineering, authoritarian and so forth—and he blows the party system away. So we wanted to highlight different things. We do look at Scullin, but we group him with Bruce in terms of two prime ministers who felt acutely the constraints of the office and the constraints of the Commonwealth in battling with issues to do with the economy, particularly industrial relations. Industrial relations is a running sore through much of the first half-century of the Commonwealth. The famous aphorism about Scullin’s prime ministership is that his government was in office but not in power. And in large part that’s true. It was an extraordinarily difficult prime ministership because of party disorder and party ill-discipline, the lack of economic powers, the competing power bases of premiers such as Jack Lang in New South Wales, and the lack of an administrative apparatus. So many of the weaknesses of the office almost seem to compound during Scullin’s period and I think it is also in part a reflection of his own rather timid leadership style. His most magnificent moment was when he travelled overseas and asserted the appointment of Sir Isaac Isaacs as governor-general, the first Australian governor-general, but in many ways his was a hapless prime ministership.

We do look at Menzies’ first prime ministership, but only briefly. As much as anything that is about learning. In the second volume we will devote two chapters to Menzies, one on his own and the second one with him and his three immediate successors. So he of course bulks large in that second volume.

**Question** — Your reference to Isaacs stimulates me to ask: are there any examples where the British government, either publically or behind the scenes, expressed any view on the selection of any of our prime ministers in the first 50 years of the Commonwealth?

**Paul Strangio** — There is no evidence of that. There is certainly evidence of extensive correspondence during different periods. One of the most interesting periods was under Munro Ferguson, the Governor-General during Hughes’s prime ministership. Munro Ferguson, although a great supporter actually of Billy Hughes, writes a beautifully observed commentary on Hughes’s excesses as a prime minister. So we get close, intimate observations of the eccentricities of his leadership style—his unwillingness to listen, the way that he would often disappear, that he would always have pet schemes that went nowhere, the way he always thought he was the cleverest man in the room. I am slightly going off on a tangent here, but the more I read about



Billy Hughes, the more another prime minister kept on coming to mind, a more recent prime minister! One of the things we are trying to achieve is to see those recurring patterns. But to go back to your point, no, there was no evidence of that. There was certainly unhappiness in Britain about Scullin and his desire to have Isaac Isaacs as governor-general. There was certainly some frostiness between Menzies and Churchill when Menzies was there during early World War Two, but there is no evidence of the British trying to interfere as such.