ANDREW FISHER: Triumph and Tragedy

Next month is a landmark moment in Australia's political history – the centenary of Andrew Fisher's election as Prime Minister. He was one Australia's longest serving prime ministers, enjoying three separate terms in office comprising nearly five years in total. Only nine prime ministers served longer than Fisher, and only one of those, Bob Hawke, was a Labor prime minister. Fisher was in power for longer than John Curtin, Ben Chifley, Gough Whitlam and Paul Keating and just a few weeks short of the Liberal, Alfred Deakin. Yet he is little known and his achievements are little celebrated.

Fisher has long deserved better. After all, he was the first Labor Prime Minister, indeed the first prime minister of any party, to be elected to power with majorities in both houses of parliament. This was a dramatic political change that ended the era of minority governments and forced non-Labor MPs to coalesce in a single party, thereby ushering in the basically two-party system that Australia has had, for better or worse, ever since. Fisher's landmark election in 1910 is important for another reason. It marked the first time that an avowedly socialist leader had ever been elected to lead a nation anywhere in the world.

The Labor Party might have been expected to include Fisher within its pantheon of political heroes, but until fairly recently had not done so. It may have believed that Fisher was somehow tainted by association with his successor, the Labor 'rat' Billy Hughes, or that his apparently enthusiastic commitment of Australian forces to the First World War

was too jingoistic for modern Labor to celebrate; or his embrace of ‘white Australia’ was too controversial for our multi-cultural times.

Fisher did not help his own cause by retiring and dying in Britain, where his papers remained until the 1970s. This obstacle made it difficult for historians and potential biographers to get to grips with Fisher. Indeed, in the century that has elapsed since Fisher’s historic electoral victory in 1910, there was no serious biography written about him. Tragically, two biographers who began books on Fisher in recent years died before they could complete their work.

In the absence of a biography, Australians have had to rely for their assessment of Fisher largely on the jaundiced views of his political opponents, particularly Deakin and Hughes, and their biographers, who were loath to credit Fisher with anything. Yet Fisher’s life was marked by great political triumphs.

It was triumphant enough for Fisher to rise from his humble beginnings as a youthful Scottish coal miner of limited education to lead his local union branch at the age of just seventeen, and to organize a popular campaign in his Ayrshire village to broaden the franchise in Britain. But even the extended franchise left Fisher and most of his coal-mining colleagues without the vote, while his work with the union left him without a job after the mine-owners blacklisted him.

Emigration to Australia in 1885 held out the prospect of something better. It was a chance for economic advancement in a political environment where working people enjoyed greater rights and freedoms than in Britain, although there was still no political party in the Australian colonies that represented the interests of working people. With his limited work experience, Fisher naturally gravitated to the coal mines near Harvey Bay, where he soon built himself a house. However, after being thwarted in his attempt to become a mine manager, Fisher shifted to the gold mining town of Gympie, which thereafter became his political base.

Fisher might have been content to advance himself in the gold mines, where he worked as an engine driver on the surface, controlling the machinery that lowered the men into the shaft and lifted them and the gold-bearing rock to the surface. It was a position of great responsibility where the lives of his fellow workers depended upon his steady hand. It was this sense of responsibility for his fellow man that saw Fisher devote himself to representing their interests, firstly within the increasingly assertive union movement and then within the growing Labor Party ranks of the Queensland Parliament, where Fisher was briefly a minister in the minority Labor government of 1899.

Unlike many Labor activists in Queensland, Fisher was a keen federationist. Although the proposed Constitution was drafted in ways to thwart the popular will and prevent the adoption of a socialist agenda, Fisher believed that the interests of working people would be best served by embracing federation. He argued that when the Labor Party gained power in the federal parliament, as it surely would, the Constitution could be changed to

reflect their interests rather than the interests of the people of property. Fisher also supported federation because it would also allow for a stronger Australia in an increasingly dangerous world, where the British Empire was facing challenges from the rising empires of Europe, Asia and North America.

Fisher was right about the inexorable rise of the Labor Party, although it would take ten years before it would win sufficient support to control both houses of parliament. Prior to then, there were two minority Labor governments, led by Chris Watson in 1904 and by Fisher in 1908-09. Watson's government was too brief, less than four months, and too weak to achieve anything, other than to establish Labor's right to govern. Fisher's minority government lasted nearly twice as long, but only because Fisher kept the doors of parliament firmly shut for most of that period.

During that time, he decided on the site for the national capital and laid the basis for an Australian navy that would be dedicated to the defence of Australia, rather than create a unit of an imperial fleet. In Fisher's view, defence self-reliance was a sign of national maturity and a necessary pre-condition for creating a 'national spirit'. The core of his proposed navy was a flotilla of twenty-three fast torpedo destroyers that would guard against invasion. The Japanese navy had used the same ships with great effect when it had swooped without warning on the Russian Pacific fleet at Port Arthur in Manchuria in 1904. The torpedo destroyers were used again the following year, when the Japanese decisively defeated a second Russian fleet which had been sent all the way from the Baltic Sea.

Although far distant from Australia, the Japanese success confirmed the worst fears of Fisher and other Australian politicians about the threat of an Asian invasion. More importantly, it showed that such an invasion could come without warning, that beachside residents of Melbourne or Sydney might wake up one morning to find hostile Japanese battleships offshore. The failure of the Russian reinforcements to reach Port Arthur in time to prevent its surrender also confirmed the fears of those who worried that Britain's Royal Navy might be unable to reach Australia in time to prevent a Japanese fleet forcing the surrender of its main cities. For Fisher and his colleagues, the remote possibility of a Japanese invasion became an obsession.

The lessons of the Russian defeat made it more important than ever for Australia to boost its local naval defences and not rely on the Royal Navy. But Fisher's announcement in February 1909 of the torpedo destroyers coincided with a naval scare in Britain, where it was claimed that the German navy would soon have more battleships than Britain. It prompted New Zealand to offer to buy a battleship for the Royal Navy, which provoked a public campaign in Australia to pressure Fisher into doing likewise. Mass meetings in major cities, and feverish editorials in the conservative press, called for Fisher to abandon his naval scheme and buy a battleship for Britain.

This was Fisher's 'John Curtin moment', a test of his political courage and principles. And he was not found wanting. With the Melbourne *Age* calling Fisher 'feeble' and the *Argus* describing him as 'deaf', Fisher stood firm, noting that it took 'a stronger man to

stand against an hysterical wave than it does to go with the current'. While the Liberal leader Alfred Deakin buckled under the pressure and joined the conservative clarion calls, and a worried Billy Hughes urged Fisher to offer a battleship if Britain declared it to be essential, Fisher refused to budge, telling Hughes to 'be steady' in the face of the clamour. In doing so, Fisher showed great political courage and a far-seeing appreciation of Australia's real needs.

As for the army, Fisher was likewise committed to putting the defence of the continent before the demands of the fading empire. Rather than a standing army that could be deployed at short notice at Britain's behest in far-off conflicts, Fisher and his colleagues wanted to create an Australian militia composed of all able-bodied men, who would be trained in infantry skills and stand ready to defend their communities from invasion. Fisher had no qualms about conscripting Australians to defend their own country, but he was steadfastly opposed to conscripting them for wars overseas. Again, he had to face down opposition to his training scheme, with some critics arguing that military training could make war more likely.

Providing Australia with the means to defend itself, after more than a century of dependence upon Britain, was one part of Fisher's vision for Australia. Fearful of an expansionist Japan, and conscious of Australia's relative 'emptiness', Fisher wanted to build up a strong Australia, not only by boosting its defence forces but also by boosting its population. He introduced a number of measures to encourage people to have more children and to reduce infant mortality, including a maternity allowance which was paid

to women, whether married or not, upon the birth of their child. Despite concerns by the labour movement about immigration threatening Australian jobs, Fisher also worked hard to encourage immigration from Britain while ensuring that jobs could be found for the new arrivals.

Having travelled extensively throughout Australia, including crossing the Nullarbor by car and camel, Fisher was acutely conscious of Australia's 'empty spaces', which left the nation vulnerable to taunts about not having the right to possess a continent that was not being developed and peopled. One of Fisher's answers to the problem was to impose a land tax on the undeveloped estates of the squatters, hoping that it would force them to sell off their land and make it available for newly-arrived immigrants and aspiring farmers. Like many Australians, Fisher did not recognize the limitations of the Australian landscape and envisaged a time when a million sheep might be grazing on the Nullarbor.

With this optimistic mindset, Fisher also took over the administration of the Northern Territory and sent a trio of high-powered officials to develop its pastoral and mineral potential. He pushed ahead with the trans-continental railway linking Adelaide to Perth, planned another railway from Adelaide to Darwin, and wanted to create another inland railway from Adelaide to Brisbane. On a more controversial note, he expelled many of the Pacific Islanders working in the sugar industry, ensuring that white sugar would be grown, cut and processed only by white men. And he alarmed some of the men of money by establishing the Commonwealth Bank, which he hoped would reduce the power of the overseas-controlled private banks and mobilize more capital for national development.

All these measures were part of a massive legislative program that exceeded by far anything that had been done by previous governments. It was one of the great benefits of leading a majority government which also had control of the Senate. Fisher could actually do things that Watson and Deakin could only talk about doing. But there was a limit to what was possible. The Constitution, and the three judges of the High Court, constrained Fisher's power to implement Labor's socialist agenda.

Of course, Fisher's notion of socialism was not the socialism of Marx or Lenin. How could it be? Australia was not the land of Russian serfs or even the land of unenfranchised British workers. It was a land where white people had enjoyed the franchise for half a century and where they mostly enjoyed the economic bounties that the continent had to offer. As a result, Fisher's socialism was one of incremental improvement rather than revolutionary overthrow. It was about the State making capitalism fairer and providing a safety net for those who had fallen on hard times.

As Fisher explained, the aim of the Labor Party was 'to see that every child born into the world should have a fair start in life; if a wife lost her husband, to see that she was not overburdened in bringing up her children…' As for socialism, it was about providing 'social justice to every person who acted justly', which would included employers, and ensuring that 'every man should have his just due, and every woman also.'

It was vaguely defined, and smacked somewhat of Ben Chifley later ‘light on the hill’ speech, but it was not empty rhetoric for Fisher. He truly believed that Labor was destined to enjoy the support of the great majority of Australian voters and therefore to enjoy long-term control of the parliament. With this control, and his steady hand at the helm, Fisher was confident that Australians would gradually become the happiest and most prosperous people in the world, as he promised them they would be after his historic election win in 1910. But there were limits to what Labor could do.

It was limited by its revenue and its limited taxing power. Fisher could have borrowed funds to implement his agenda but he was opposed to governments living beyond their means and believed that public borrowing should be used only for expenditure on capital items that boosted the nation’s productivity, and not on social welfare measures or even on defence. Labor was also limited by the Constitution. In June 1908, the High Court had already tossed out the deal that Labor had done with Deakin to introduce New Protection, which required employers to pay fair wages to workers in industries that enjoyed the benefits of Australia’s system of tariff protection.

Fisher had argued prior to Federation that Labor should accept the conservatively-drafted Constitution, believing that it would be a relatively simple matter to change it later so that the powers of the Commonwealth Government could be broadened in ways that would allow Labor’s agenda to be implemented. Specifically, he wanted to take control of commerce and industrial relations from the States, so that consumers could be protected from price-gouging by monopolies and workers could be guaranteed a fair wage.

To Fisher, it was straightforward: voters would recognize that Labor's political program was in their interests and they would vote accordingly. He did not foresee the difficulties that referenda would face from voters who were suspicious of giving federal governments additional powers and susceptible to partisan fear campaigns, sometimes mounted by his state Labor colleagues.

When he lost the first referendum vote in 1911, Fisher blamed it on people being opposed to a proposal that combined all the measures into one vote, all of which had to be accepted or rejected. So he went back to the people with re-drafted and separate proposals in 1913, confident that having the referendum coincide with the federal election would ensure it passing. Instead, he not only lost the referenda, but also narrowly lost the election.

Perhaps more important than Fisher's socialist agenda, was his nation-building agenda. There were many aspects to his coherent and over-arching scheme. It was about building up the power of the Commonwealth government over that of the States, at a time when state premiers complained about no longer being able to attend imperial conferences in London and the Queensland premier cheekily referred to himself as the prime minister of Queensland.

It was about building national institutions and the imposing edifices that went with them, such as post offices, customs houses and offices of the Commonwealth Bank. Fisher

hoped that the Commonwealth Bank would absorb the existing State banks and become the national bank. The buildings were intended to engender a national spirit among Australians as they went about their business in cities and towns.

When they went to London, Australians would be similarly struck with the grandeur of Australia House on the Strand. Fisher had taken a close interest in all stages of its building, from the time when he walked the streets of London to decide on the most suitable site, setting it far from the other dominion buildings around Trafalgar Square, to its later decoration with Australian materials and motifs. Fisher hoped that the States would close their separate offices in London and rent space in the new national building.

There was the national capital, with its clearly Australian name, and which Fisher had begun by laying its foundation stone in 1913 and appointing Walter Burley Griffin to execute his grand design. There were the national symbols that Fisher created, such as the postage stamps, which displayed a kangaroo instead of the king, with the animal set against the outline map of Australia, with the word Australia underneath. There were the Australian bank notes that Fisher introduced for the first time, which displayed scenes of development and progress, from the irrigation scheme on the Goulburn River to gold mining in Bendigo.

On the front of the bank notes was the new coat of arms, designed by Fisher's close friend, the artist Hugh Paterson. Instead of being dominated by the divisive Cross of St George, which was the central motif on the old coat of arms, Fisher's coat of arms had all

the State shields, draped with sprays of wattle and topped with the Commonwealth star. Instead of the old slogan ‘Advance Australia’, which Fisher believed to be demeaning as it implied that Australia was backward, there was just the word ‘Australia’ beneath the shield.

To further engender an Australian spirit, Fisher established an Art Advisory Board and a Historic Memorials Committee to commission Australian artists to paint national scenes and portraits of historic Australian figures and events. The board was chaired by Paterson, who convinced Fisher to impose a punitive duty on imported paintings, as a way of lending further support to Australian artists.

Many of these measures were introduced in a flurry of activity just prior to the 1913 election. Although his government had introduced many popular and progressive measures, it had alienated some Australians by seeming to be more concerned with the nation than the empire of which it was a part. Fisher had also aroused fears about Labor’s political program, with talk of nationalizing industries if the referendum proposals were passed. As a result, Labor lost control of the House of Representatives while retaining control of the Senate.

Power passed from one former coal miner to another, the Liberal leader Joseph Cook. With Labor blocking Cook’s legislation in the Senate, the new government was never going to last long. However, when Cook tried to break the logjam by calling an election in June 1914, the domestic focus of the campaign was overtaken by events in Europe. As

the empires of Europe inched towards war, Fisher faced a repeat of the arguments that he had confronted so courageously in 1909. This time, in the context of an election campaign when loyalty to empire was paramount, Fisher's courage was found wanting.

Cook seized upon the looming conflict as an opportunity to paint Labor as disloyal to Britain. With many in the labour movement, including a young John Curtin, being opposed to any involvement in overseas wars, Cook tried to drive a wedge in Labor's ranks by committing the country to war before it had even begun. 'If the old country is at war, so are we', declared Cook, later offering to send 20,000 men 'to any destination desired by the home government'.

With election meetings turning into patriotic rallies, Fisher was swept up in the fervour. In 1909, he had told journalists that it takes 'a stronger man to stand against a hysterical wave than it does to go with the current'. But now he went with the current, and did so in a way that gave it added impetus. At an election meeting in Colac on 31 July 1914, Fisher told the crowd that, if Britain went to war, Australia would support Britain to 'our last man and our last shilling'.

There was nothing equivocal in Fisher's unfortunate commitment. There were no provisos about only committing the resources that were spare after Australia's defence had been secured. Or supporting Britain with food and raw materials rather than with all its menfolk. And the commitment was made at a time when people cared more about their personal honour, with Fisher making it a matter of honour for able-bodied

Australian men to fulfill his pledge by joining up. He would not be compelling them to go. Conscription would remain just for the militia. About that, Fisher stayed firm.

Both Cook and Fisher had made the same commitment about supporting Britain. But the terms of Fisher's statement was more resounding and swept away any doubts that people may have harboured about the Labor Party being ambivalent about the empire. The party may have won the election anyway, based on Fisher's successful record as prime minister. But his strong commitment to the war was probably instrumental in giving Labor an overwhelming victory on 5 September 1914, with 31 Labor senators to just five conservatives, and 42 Labor MPs to 33 conservative MPs in the House of Representatives.

The victory seemed to vindicate Fisher's conviction about Labor becoming the natural party of government. And he believed that he could simply resume where he had left off after his election loss of 1913, embarking on a new program of nation-building works that would take up the economic slack caused by the war. But the war that was expected to be over by Xmas dragged on into 1915, and increasingly consumed the attention of Fisher and the resources and manpower of Australia.

Cook had committed Australia to send an expeditionary force, with Fisher dispatching the first echelon of the Australian Imperial Force to Europe in November 1914. Soon after, he allowed the troops to be landed instead in Egypt for basic training in the expectation that they would then be sent on to Europe. Like many Australians, Fisher saw

the battlefield as a test of Australian manliness. It was about making 'Australia's name in the world what it ought to be', with Fisher confident that Australian troops would 'do credit to us all.'

When Britain then decided to send the Australians in Egypt to invade Turkey, Fisher was informed by the governor general, Munro Ferguson, who claimed in his diary that Fisher was 'pleased' by the news. Fisher was not asked for his approval by the British government. It would not have occurred to British ministers to do so. Nor did it occur to Fisher to insist on proper consultations before Australian lives were committed to a particular campaign.

Neither did Fisher ask the Australian commander in Egypt, General Bridges, for details of the coming campaign and whether it was likely to be successful. Bridges certainly had some qualms, telling Munro Ferguson of the 'considerable risk in sending untried troops on a job of this sort'. But his warning did not reach Australia until after the battle had begun. Neither did Fisher ask for a report from Australian officials in London, where there were certainly serious doubts about the wisdom of the Dardanelles campaign. In the view of Fisher and the British government, Australia had committed the troops and they were now Britain's to deploy.

Fisher welcomed news of the landing at Anzac Cove, using it to continue his campaign to imbue Australians with a national spirit. He told parliament that their 'gallant soldiers' had 'made history that will inspire Australians in all ages to come.' And when General

Bridge fell to the bullet of a Turkish sniper, Fisher declared that ‘no greater honour can come to any man than to die fighting for his King and country.’

Too many would die fighting at Gallipoli for no good purpose. Indeed, this military side-show had been foolish from the beginning and was unlikely to succeed with the limited forces and inadequate equipment that were committed to it. With the troops having barely secured a bridgehead on the peninsula, and little likelihood of them being able to break out, a search began in London for a political scapegoat. As the main proponent and architect of the campaign, Winston Churchill fitted the bill perfectly and paid with his political office. But there was little public questioning in Australia, where censorship was rigorously applied.

Fisher believed that it was inappropriate to voice criticism of the British handling of the campaign while the war was still going. Moreover, he was only dimly aware of the awful bind in which Australian troops were placed at Anzac Cove and was misled by the military censorship into believing, as Munro Ferguson confided to London, that the campaign was ‘one of orderly and continuous progress.’ It was only as the injured Australian troops began to trickle back to Australia, and their stories began to circulate, that Fisher started to have doubts about British military leadership and to harbour dark premonitions about the campaign’s eventual outcome, and what it might mean for his political career.

Still he pressed on, supporting an Australia Day pageant on 30 July which had a procession of patriotic floats showing glorious aspects of Australian history, cars carrying Fisher's daughter and other young girls dressed to represent the states and the Commonwealth, and culminating with cars carrying wounded soldiers. A few weeks later, he presided over a massive funeral for General Bridges, which brought the centre of Melbourne to a standstill. Although Fisher sent his young journalist friend, Keith Murdoch, to Gallipoli to provide a confidential report, he did not question the continuing campaign, as a new offensive in August sent thousands more Australians to their death without any advantage being gained.

All the patriotic outpouring, and the furious blood-letting at Gallipoli, increased the political pressure in Australia to introduce conscription. To his credit, Fisher remained vehemently opposed to it, not only on principle but because he rightly feared that it would tear the nation apart. He might have stayed on to fight this battle, but his health had worn away over the previous year and he was no longer up to the task. The years of working in the mines had damaged his lungs, and the dementia that would eventually kill him was affecting his mental faculties. There was also the lure of the lucrative position as High Commissioner in London, which guaranteed him a handsome income for five years to support his large family.

Fisher's resignation as prime minister in late October 1915 opened the door to Billy Hughes, who quickly abandoned Fisher's plan to introduce his referenda proposals again

and compounded Australia's manpower problems by offering Britain 50,000 more troops. With voluntary enlistment declining, it could only be done by conscription.

Fisher had proved his potential for greatness in 1909, when he was leader of a minority government and stood against the tide of imperial jingoism. His leadership of the historic Labor government from 1910-13 had confirmed his greatness, as he combined his passion for social justice with a nation-building vision. They were triumphant years for Fisher, for the Labor Party and for Australia. He planned to do even more after the 1914 election, but his lofty ideals and ambitions were brought low by the demands of the war, the damage to his health and the seductions of material security.

It is a tragedy for Fisher that he is most known for his memorable statement about supporting Britain to 'our last man and our last shilling'. While the statement helped to ensure his election in 1914, it had lamentable consequences for Australia and the hundreds of thousands who honoured his unequivocal commitment. It was a tragedy too that he lacked the courage to question the British management of the Gallipoli campaign even after its deficiencies were clear and before thousands more were sent to a senseless death. The final tragedy came with Fisher's resignation, which ushered in the divisive Billy Hughes and his madcap drive to win the war at any cost. After Fisher had done so much to build up Australia, he had handed power to a politician who would tear the country apart and ensure that the cost of the war to Australia was much heavier than it might otherwise have been.