

## Paranoia and Prejudice: Billy Hughes and the Irish Question 1916–1922

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*Archbishop Daniel Mannix was accused of nurturing the Sinn Féin 'pest' - a view with which Australian Prime Minister Hughes would have agreed. (Daily Telegraph of 22 November 1917)*

On 17 August 1917 Australian Prime Minister William Morris Hughes wrote to his British counterpart David Lloyd George:

*As I have told you by cable: the Irish question is at the bottom of all our difficulties in Australia. They—the Irish—have captured the political machinery of the Labor organisations—assisted by syndicalists and I.W.W. people. The Church is secretly against recruiting. Its influence killed conscription.*

*One of their archbishops—Mannix—is a Sinn Féiner—And I am trying to make up my mind whether I should prosecute him for statements hindering recruiting or deport him.*

*As I write we have a great strike slowly unfolding itself ... The I.W.W. and the Irish are mainly responsible for the trouble. In a sense it is political rather than industrial. The fact is we wiped the floor with them [in the elections] on May 5<sup>th</sup> and they are now trying to take the reins of Govt out of our hands.<sup>1</sup>*

The strike to which Hughes referred was the New South Wales general strike of 1917, which became a federal concern when it spread to wharf labourers in Melbourne, while the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was a revolutionary working-class movement that originated in the United States in 1905 and came to Australia in 1907. It rose to prominence during World War I, when its members were accused of acts of sabotage, including arson, aimed at subverting the war effort.<sup>2</sup>

Hughes made his concerns public during the 1917 conscription referendum campaign when, in a manifesto to Australian soldiers serving abroad, he warned: 'Behind Dr Mannix are arrayed the Independent [sic] Workers of the World and the reckless extremists responsible for the recent strike, the pacifists and the pro-Germans ... Behind the NO campaign are all the Sinn Féin, I.W.W., and anti-British influences in our midst.'<sup>3</sup> A few months earlier he had cabled Keith Murdoch, his confidant in London, that 'the bulk of Irish people led by Archbishop Mannix ... are attacking me with a venomous personal campaign'.<sup>4</sup>

What are we to make of these extraordinary claims? According to Hughes' biographer LF Fitzhardinge, Hughes' 'picture of the [general] strike bore little relation to reality—it was indeed pure fantasy. But it fitted Hughes' increasingly distorted vision of events in Australia'.<sup>5</sup> Given that paranoids too can have enemies, was Hughes nevertheless justified in making these allegations? Verity Burgmann's research into the IWW in Australia indicates that Hughes' claim of IWW responsibility for the general strike was wide of the mark,<sup>6</sup> but what of the Irish and the Catholic Church: were the Irish, as Hughes claimed, in league with the IWW and led by Archbishop Mannix in some sort of sinister plot to take over the government of Australia? Was the Church secretly against recruiting? Or was the prime minister seizing upon a convenient scapegoat for his failure in October 1916 to persuade the Australian people to support conscription—while at the same time stirring up anti-Irish and anti-Catholic prejudice for political gain in a domestic environment riven by sectarianism?

## The Irish question and Australia

There is no doubt that during the First World War the Irish question was a significant issue in Australia, though whether it was 'at the bottom of all our difficulties' is questionable. In a country populated almost entirely by people of British and Irish stock of fairly recent origin, it is not surprising that fundamental issues in Anglo-Irish relations should command local attention and influence local controversies. This was particularly so after the British government, under the Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, introduced the third Home Rule Bill into the Westminster Parliament in April 1912.

In early 20<sup>th</sup> century Australia there was a strong correlation between religious affiliation and the three main national or ethnic groups that constituted European society: the English, the Irish and the Scots. Competition between these groups reflected not only theological differences but also complex ethnic rivalries, particularly those between Irish Catholics on the one hand, and English Anglicans and Scots-Irish Presbyterians on the other. These rivalries pre-dated European settlement in Australia but, reinforced by local events, they had become endemic in the political system.<sup>7</sup>

When the British government announced its intention to grant Irish Home Rule, it was therefore not simply divergent opinions on vexed constitutional issues that made the Irish question so divisive in Australia. The Home Rule debate quickly became entwined with wider sectarian issues, particularly the demand by Catholics for state aid for their schools. At a meeting held at the Sydney Town Hall on 14 March 1912 to protest against the British government's announcement, a banner on the platform proclaimed, 'Mark the men who support bursaries to Roman Catholic schools.' William Robson MLC, in his speech to the meeting, raised the subject of the Bursary Endowment Bill, recently introduced into the New South Wales Parliament. He claimed that the state government was giving in to the unreasonable demands of the Catholic Church which was 'trying to get hold of educational powers'.<sup>8</sup>

## The War and conscription

Sectarian tensions, which had intensified during the Home Rule debate, subsided after the outbreak of the war in August 1914. Partly this was due to the shelving of the issue in the United Kingdom—when the Home Rule Bill was enacted in September 1914 but suspended for the duration of the war—but also because Protestants and Catholics in Australia were prepared to set aside their differences and support the war effort. However, in reality, this display of national unity was a fragile façade.<sup>9</sup>

The Catholic Church joined with the Protestant Churches in supporting Australia's participation in the war. However its commitment, unlike theirs, was not based on theological and imperial considerations of the kind that characterised Prussianism 'as a threatening form of state religion ... inspired by a unique sense of mission to impose its hegemony by force over the world'.<sup>10</sup> Rather, Australian Catholics had a pragmatic, even utilitarian, view of the international conflict, regarding the war as unfortunate but necessary in order to forestall German and Japanese expansion in the western Pacific, while foreseeing that increased tolerance and the satisfaction of their grievances, especially state aid, might flow from sharing in the blood sacrifice.<sup>11</sup>

As a consequence, in less than two years Australia's wartime unity cracked under pressure from events that occurred on the other side of the world. When news of the outbreak of violence in Dublin during Easter week in 1916 began to reach Australia, Irish-Australian Catholics at first deplored the rising as misguided and a threat to the promised implementation of Home Rule. However, following the execution of the leaders and the imposition of martial law, Irish Catholics became critical of British rule in Ireland, provoking a Protestant backlash. Sectarianism, which had lain dormant since the outbreak of war, flared up and intensified as criticism of Britain was regarded by many Protestants as disloyal to the British Crown, already under threat from without but now also from within.<sup>12</sup> It was in this highly-charged atmosphere that the first conscription debate occurred.

When in August 1916 Prime Minister Hughes returned from a visit to London, having been persuaded by the Army Council of the necessity for increased Australian reinforcements, he was determined to introduce conscription for overseas service—despite the difficulty he knew he faced in gaining the support of the labour movement.<sup>13</sup> Because he did not have the numbers in the Senate to pass the necessary legislation, Hughes decided to take the issue to the people in a plebiscite, hoping thereby 'to coerce the hostile Senate if the vote turned out to be in favour of conscription'.<sup>14</sup>

Whether the anti-conscription senators would have backed down as the prime minister hoped will never be known, for the vote went against conscription. As we have seen, the reason Hughes gave to Lloyd George was the influence of the Catholic Church. But this claim is simply without foundation. There was nothing in Church teaching that prohibited compulsory military service and during the referendum campaign the Vatican's representative in Australia, Archbishop Bonaventura Cerretti, issued a statement making it clear that conscription was not an issue of faith or morals upon which the Church could direct its members:

*The members of the Catholic Church are free citizens, and as such should record their votes in accordance with the dictates of conscience. It would be altogether unreasonable to involve the Church, as a Church, in an issue which its members, as citizens in common with others, are called on to decide. ... The question of conscription does not affect the Church as a Church ...*<sup>15</sup>

Not surprisingly, therefore, Catholics held differing personal views on the government's proposal, including individual bishops, of whom only two expressed their views publicly. Archbishop Patrick Clune of Perth was reported in newspapers across Australia as saying, 'Whoever believes in the righteousness and justice of the war we are engaged in ought not to hesitate to vote for compulsory military service in Australia',<sup>16</sup> while Archbishop Daniel Mannix, coadjutor Archbishop of Melbourne, spoke against conscription at two public functions. At the time Mannix was little known outside Victoria; certainly he was not the national figure he would become during the 1917 campaign. Among the Catholic laity there were also differences of opinion that found their way into the press, while Catholic newspapers adopted divergent viewpoints.<sup>17</sup>

Although the Catholic Church's official silence was in stark contrast to the almost monolithic support of conscription by leaders of the Protestant churches<sup>18</sup>, Hughes' claim—that the Catholic Church was secretly against recruiting and that its influence killed conscription—cannot be sustained. In fact, shortly after the 1916 campaign, he acknowledged as much when he wrote to Conservative Party leader Andrew Bonar Law, 'What an unholy alliance this is between men who have no religion [the IWW], who openly scoff at anything that savours of religion and the great Catholic Church. Of course it is not the Church AS SUCH but the Irish who see in England's peril Ireland's opportunity'.<sup>19</sup> Two weeks before the vote he repeated this allegation against the Australian Irish when he told the commander of the Australian Imperial Force, General William Birdwood, 'The overwhelming majority of the Irish votes in Australia which represents nearly 25 per cent of the total votes has been swung over by the Sinn Feiners and are going to vote No in order to strike a severe blow at Great Britain.'<sup>20</sup>

As a result of his concerns, Hughes made a number of attempts to remove the Irish question as a negative influence in the campaign. According to PS Cleary, the prime minister privately approached the editor of the *Catholic Press*, Tighe Ryan, with a proposition that 'he would use his influence to have the Home Rule Act put into operation at once, if the *Catholic Press* ceased its opposition to conscription.'<sup>21</sup> Although Ryan did not accept the offer, Hughes still made the representations. On 12 September he drafted a cable to the Secretary of State for the Colonies in which he argued that the Irish question was having a very strong and disturbing influence upon the referendum campaign. Keith Murdoch followed this up by informing Lloyd George:

*We are apprehensive about the vote in Australia, because (1) 25% of our population is Irish, and is very sore; and (2) a great many people think the war nearly over. Our only possible help now would be some relief in the Irish situation, and a statement or interview from you, to be published ONLY in Australia, concerning the gravity of the war situation.*<sup>22</sup>

After receiving from Murdoch a report of his approach, Hughes issued a statement claiming the British government intended to abolish martial law in Ireland as a result of his representations.<sup>23</sup> However, this was incorrect, as Tighe Ryan demonstrated by publishing in the *Catholic Press* a House of Commons ministerial statement indicating that the British government's intention was different to that expressed in the prime minister's statement.<sup>24</sup> The transparency of Hughes' manoeuvre in seeking to attract Irish-Australians to the 'Yes' camp did not impress the pro-conscription *Freeman's Journal*. Noting that the statement had come at an 'auspiciously suspicious moment', the paper argued that even if it were true:

*As matters stand, it is far too obvious that the promise to free Ireland from martial law arises from no belated sense of justice, or from an awakened conscience, or from an appreciation of the futility of trying to cow the Irish race by despotism, but from a sordid desire on the part of the English Coalition Government to help Mr Hughes conscript Australia. No matter how much a decent man may favour conscription, he would hardly like to see it won by opportunistic methods.*<sup>25</sup>

Hughes' pro-conscription colleague WA Holman, the New South Wales premier, also made representations to the British government about Ireland. He instructed his state's Agent-General in London to try to persuade

the British Cabinet that it would assist in inducing the people of Australia to vote 'Yes' if the government were to end martial law and to state its commitment to Home Rule. Holman had hoped by this means to woo the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney Michael Kelly into publicly supporting a 'Yes' vote. Historian Lloyd Robson described how Acting Agent-General Timothy Coghlan even tried to convince John Redmond, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, to send a message to Australia supporting conscription. Redmond refused, saying that he and his colleagues were busy opposing it for Ireland. In any event, the British Cabinet was not prepared to change its policy in relation to Ireland. Robson concluded, 'Thus it was that the British Cabinet helped to defeat the conscription proposals of W.M. Hughes.'<sup>26</sup>

In the end, the voters rejected conscription by a narrow margin<sup>27</sup>; they would do so again in December 1917, but by an increased margin.<sup>28</sup> After the result of the first plebiscite was announced, it was not long before the finger was being pointed at the Irish Catholic community for being behind its defeat. It became the orthodox view, among contemporaries and many historians, that the Easter Rising and England's response to it was a major factor influencing Irish-Australian voters to oppose conscription. Subsequent research has cast doubt on this view.<sup>29</sup> Although Irish Catholics strongly opposed conscription, the research suggests that they were influenced more by their working-class background than by events in Ireland or their religious adherence. While working-class Irish Catholics tended to vote against conscription, many who had attained high social status were fervent supporters. In 1917, however, the government's failure to exempt teaching brothers and seminar-ians became an issue that may have influenced some pro-conscription Catholics to vote 'No'.<sup>30</sup>

In Patrick O'Farrell's opinion, events in Ireland did not teach Australian Catholics anything they did not already know from their knowledge of Irish history and their own struggles over the past fifty years. Rather, it served to remind them 'that the dominant forces in Australian society sought to exclude or demean Catholics of Irish origin.'<sup>31</sup> Naomi Turner, in her two-volume history of Australian Catholicism, has written, 'Realistically, [Australian Catholics] looked at the Australian situation with its direct effects on them, rather than that of the Irish.'<sup>32</sup>

## Taking the reins of government—Mannix, Sinn Féin and the IWW

The perceived role of the Irish Catholic vote in the plebiscites was to become the occasion for some of the most vitriolic attacks ever made on the Australian Catholic community. Catholic assertiveness in public affairs was to provoke a Protestant backlash—the fury of which was magnified by the humiliation Hughes and his pro-conscription supporters had suffered as a result of the rejection of the government's proposals. Charges of disloyalty and plotting to overthrow the Empire added a more sinister dimension to the customary sectarian taunts. After the first vote, the *Methodist*, in an article headed 'The Roman Catholic Menace' warned its readers of 'the personal predominance of Roman Catholics in the trades unions and the political labor leagues' and added:

*Roman Catholicism is subtly working ... to secure ascendancy and control. That church is working in the interests of disloyalty and of sectarian advantage, and is throwing dust in the eyes of Protestant electors all the time, especially of the working classes.*<sup>33</sup>

Epithets such as 'Shirkers', 'Sinn Feiners', 'IWWers' and 'pro-German' became commonplace. Allegations began to circulate in otherwise responsible circles of an association between the Catholic Church and the IWW. Rev. WF Wentworth Shields, the Anglican Bishop-elect of Armidale, accused the Catholic body of being 'drawn together into an evil partnership with the IWW'.<sup>34</sup>

Although individual Catholics were undoubtedly attracted to the IWW, the Church was fundamentally opposed to the revolutionary organisation's philosophy and methods. In an article entitled 'Ethics of the IWW' published in the *Catholic Press* shortly after the plebiscite, PS Cleary set out the Church's objections to the IWW.<sup>35</sup> However, such arguments did not persuade the bigots, who were able to point to the fact that, according to the *Sun* newspaper, among members of the IWW arrested in late September 1916 was 'Peter Larkin, Roman Catholic'. Larkin was Irish, the brother of Jim Larkin, the Irish trade union leader who had led the workers during the Dublin Lockout of 1913.<sup>36</sup>

The growing anti-Catholic animus was stirred up even more in January 1917, when Archbishop Mannix described the war as 'an ordinary trade war', reported in some papers as 'a sordid trade war'.<sup>37</sup> This and other public utterances by Mannix, critical of the government's war policy, elevated him to national status and earned him the role of bogey man in the minds of the government's supporters. In May 1917 he succeeded Archbishop Thomas Carr as the Archbishop of Melbourne, raising his profile even more. He soon assumed the mantle of leader of the opposition, answering calls for a greater war effort in support of the Empire by pointing to Britain's betrayal of Ireland and arguing that the duty of Australians was to Australia first. He soon became the accepted spokesman of most Irish Australians, while at the same time he became a lightning-rod attracting much of the rising anti-Catholic and anti-Irish bigotry.<sup>38</sup> But Mannix was not the only Irish Catholic to challenge the prime minister and the 'win-the-war' party.

Many Catholics, outraged by the circulation throughout the country of anti-Catholic pamphlets and cartoons in 1916 and 1917, blamed Hughes. Catholic newspapers argued that because these attacks on Catholics were harmful to recruiting, regulations should be made under the *War Precautions Regulations* to proscribe the offensive material.<sup>39</sup> Hughes, who was a prolific regulation-maker, refused to do so. Bishop John Carroll of Lismore denounced 'the vile anti-Catholic cartoons with which Australia has been flooded' and alleged that 'the Prime Minister was responsible, inasmuch as he had the power to put a stop to the vile insults offered to Catholic citizens.'<sup>40</sup>

In addition, Queensland premier Thomas Joseph Ryan, the Catholic son of an illiterate Irish farm labourer and an Irish mother, emerged after the 1916 vote as another leader of anti-government opinion.<sup>41</sup> It was in his state that Hughes suffered the indignity of being struck by an egg thrown by an Irish Australian, Bart Brosnan. The incident occurred on 29 November 1917 at Warwick. To make matters worse, an Irish Australian policeman, Sergeant Kenny, refused to arrest the egg-thrower, according to Hughes' account of the incident. As a result Hughes drew up a regulation to establish a Commonwealth police force. In a telegram to the Governor-General, he explained: 'This will apply to Queensland where present position is one of latent rebellion. Police is honeycombed with Sinn Feiners and I.W.W. ... There are towns in North Queensland where the Law ... is openly ignored and I.W.W. and Sinn Féin run the show.'<sup>42</sup>

Hughes' difficulty with Irish Australia seems to have struck a chord with Lloyd George, who on 25 April 1917 told Frances Stevenson, his personal secretary and mistress:

*At every stage...the Irish question is a stumbling-block in the conduct of the war. It ought to have been settled last year. ... It has done much harm in Australia. Hughes begged me last year to settle it for the sake of Australia, but I failed to do so. Twice since then he has sent me messages saying that it is essential that the matter be settled.'*<sup>43</sup>

On 1 January 1917 Lloyd George had told the War Cabinet that Hughes would not be able to attend the proposed Imperial War Conference in London 'as the lack of settlement in Ireland was causing trouble in Australia'.<sup>44</sup> In fact, Hughes had a number of domestic political issues that made travel to London problematic. Moreover, he was sceptical as to whether Australia would gain any benefit from the conference—though one item he wanted on the agenda was Home Rule for Ireland, which he argued was an imperial issue. Lloyd George, while declining to put Home Rule on the agenda, urged him to go, saying it could be discussed with the British cabinet before the conference.<sup>45</sup> He added the plea:

*But you will recognise that it is not possible for me to settle the Irish question just as I please. The consent and co-operation of the Irish parties is essential. ... The best help you can render is therefore to induce the Australian Irish to put pressure on the Irish leaders to accept any settlement which would not involve compelling Ulster by force of arms to accept Home Rule. It must also be based upon whole-hearted Irish assistance in winning the war.'*<sup>46</sup>

On 12 March 1917 Hughes cabled Murdoch:

*Position here extremely difficult. Election promises to be most bitter on record. The struggle is between outside labour executives*

*composed of at least 75 per cent Irish, who now control industrial and political labour organizations and the rest of the community who are unorganised.*

*Syndicalism and I.W.W.ism are of course rampant in executives, but real strength behind them is the Church; not as such, but as organised Irish vote determined at all costs to force Home Rule.*

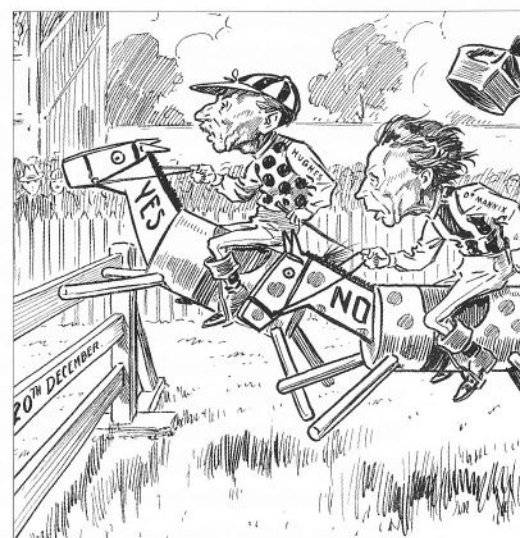
*I have explained all this to Lloyd George previously and urged him to treat Home Rule as Imperial question, which it most certainly is ... An unsettled Ireland seriously weakens Empire in field and in eyes of neutrals. Irish have right to local self-government...*

*In any case Australian recruiting is practically at a standstill. Irish National Executive here has carried resolution to effect that until Home Rule granted no Irish Catholics shall join forces. This is being acted on and in such a way that the non-Irish population are going out of Australia to fight or as railway workers, carpenters etc. The Irish remain behind and in any election their voting strength is greatly increased.<sup>47</sup>*

On almost every count, Hughes' allegations were wide of the mark. It is true that after the Labor Party split in 1916, the Irish-Catholic influence in the party increased and their representation in various party bodies exceeded their proportion of 23 per cent of the population.<sup>48</sup> However, it was not to the extent of the 75 per cent he alleged in relation to labour executives. For instance, Catholics in the Federal Caucus rose from 21 per cent before the split to 26 per cent after it, while in New South Wales, where the split was most severe, the proportion of Catholics in the caucus in 1917 was 54 per cent compared to about 30 per cent between 1901 and 1913. In the party organisation, the proportion of national conference delegates with an Irish background rose from 30 per cent in 1916 to 50 per cent, according to Labor historian LF Crisp.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Hughes' claims about the IWW and the Church's support for it is without foundation, as mentioned above, while according to Patrick O'Farrell, 'the INA [Irish National Association] was regarded as a fringe organisation of little consequence or relevance to the mainstream'.<sup>50</sup> As regards recruiting, it was not at a stand-still in March 1917, averaging just over 6000 per month in the last three months of 1916 and over 4800 per month in the first three months of 1917, with the decline occurring across the whole population and not just among Irish Catholics. During the war Catholics enlisted roughly in line with their proportion in the population and, as Lloyd Robson demonstrated, by surveying a sample of AIF enlistments, the support of the Australian Irish Catholic community for the war continued unaffected by the Easter Rising and its suppression by the British government.<sup>51</sup>

Apart from the errors of detail in his argument, Hughes demonstrated a fundamental lack of appreciation of the attitude of Irish Australians to the Irish question. While radical organisations such as the INA shared Sinn Féin's desire for an independent Irish republic, they represented a minority of Irish Australian opinion, which overwhelmingly supported Home Rule. Despite this, Hughes was prepared to brand Australian Home-Rulers as Sinn Féiners, even though he himself favoured Home Rule and the Senate had passed a resolution supporting it in March 1917.<sup>52</sup> Because the Australian public were unaware of Hughes' representations to the British government to end martial law and implement Home Rule, 'the image which Hughes projected publicly was of the abrasive anti-Sinn Féiner, constantly harassed by his disloyal Irish republicans, intent ... on "control of the Commonwealth government"'.<sup>53</sup> This was an image Hughes was happy to promote, given the fact that more than 75 per cent of the electorate was Protestant and ill-disposed toward Sinn Féin's agitation for Irish independence at a time when Britain and the Empire were fighting for their survival.

When a government is publicly committed to a particular view of the world, public servants, anxious to please their political masters,



*Some commentators regarded the 1917 conscription referendum campaign as a contest between Australian Prime Minister Hughes and Archbishop Daniel Mannix. (Melbourne Punch, National Library of Australia)*

are sometimes tempted to proffer advice that fits that world view. This seems to have happened in the case of the 'Sinn Féin Seven', arrested and detained under regulations banning Sinn Féin, introduced following demonstrations of support of the organisation at the St Patrick's Day parade in Melbourne in March 1918. On 3 November 1917 Major George Steward, head of the Counter Espionage Bureau, had written to the prime minister, 'we are now in possession of actual evidence that the Sinn Féin movement is rapidly developing, in, at any rate, Melbourne and Sydney'.<sup>54</sup> This evidence, comprising correspondence intercepted by British intelligence, along with other documents seized in police raids, would provide the grounds for the arrest in June 1918 of seven Irish-Australians alleged to be collecting money to assist armed rebellion in Ireland by the purchase of German arms. The government chose not to prosecute the men and instead set up an inquiry headed by Justice John Harvey of the New South Wales Supreme Court, who ultimately found that there were sufficient grounds to justify the men's continued detention. However, rather than corroborate the prime minister's allegations of a Sinn Féin plot to take over Australia, the episode confirmed that the number of Irish Australians actively supporting the Irish revolutionaries was pathetically small and their activities extremely limited—the amount involved seems to have been no more than £20.<sup>55</sup> Initially, the Irish Catholic community protested at the arrests, believing them to be yet another baseless attack on Irish Australia. However, as the evidence emerged, the protests fell away and Irish Australia distanced itself from those it recognised as extremists.<sup>56</sup>

## Australia and the Empire

When the war ended, it might have been expected that Hughes would no longer be concerned by the Irish question. But that was not the case, for, in Hughes' mind at least, the Irish question continued to pose a threat to Australia, though the reasons were different. No longer did the Australian Irish threaten to take over Australia in order to achieve self-government for Ireland; rather self-government for Ireland itself threatened Australia's national security by undermining the Empire. What Hughes feared most was the centrifugal effect of the growing independence of the constituent parts of the British Empire. Anything more than Home Rule for Ireland would in his view have a knock-on effect. That prospect did not unduly concern Canada and South Africa, who were already pushing the bounds of freedom within the Empire, but for Australia and New Zealand, situated in a potentially hostile region and a long way from the Home Fleet, anything that weakened the British Empire was a threat to their own security.

Once again Hughes found himself aligned with Protestant empire loyalists against Ireland's leading advocate in Australia, Archbishop Mannix, the man whom Hughes had elevated to national prominence and had failed to silence, despite diplomatic appeals to the Vatican.<sup>57</sup> Events had moved on since 1916 and 1917, both in Australia and Ireland. Erstwhile Catholic allies of Hughes in the conscription debates were now siding with Mannix over Ireland in a context in which the overwhelming majority of the Irish in Ireland no longer considered Home Rule a sufficient answer to the Irish question. In the elections for the Westminster parliament in December 1918, Sinn Féin won seventy-three of the 105 seats in Ireland, with unionists winning twenty-six and the Home Rule party six. In accordance with Sinn Féin's abstentionist policy, its members declined to take their seats, instead, meeting on 21 January 1919 in the Mansion House in Dublin where they proclaimed themselves Dáil Eireann and endorsed the Irish Republic. On the same day, two policemen were shot and killed in an ambush at Soloheadbeg, County Tipperary—commonly regarded as the beginning of the Irish War of Independence, a conflict fought because the Allies, who had professed during the war to be defending the rights of small nations, declined to apply their lofty principles to themselves. Two and a half years later, when a truce was finally declared and negotiations for a political settlement began in London, Ireland had undergone a vicious conflict during which the British state had unleashed on the people of Ireland the ill-disciplined and murderous Black and Tans and Auxiliaries in order to defeat the Irish Republican Army.

In Australia, news of atrocities on both sides fuelled local sectarian fires. Amidst it all, Irish Australia kept up its criticisms of British oppression in Ireland, while demanding self-determination for Ireland—the new buzzphrase that had displaced Home Rule—though the Australian Irish never gave up the idea of a self-governing



Ireland within the British Empire, just like Australia. The Royal Navy's abduction of Archbishop Mannix on the high seas in August 1920, to prevent his landing in Ireland, further inflamed local Irish anger—as did the decision of the Hughes government a month before to deport Fr Charles Jerger, a German-born Catholic priest, who from the age of four had lived in England and Australia, but who during the war had allegedly made disloyal statements. But Hughes' vindictiveness in this case was outdone a few months later with the expulsion from Federal Parliament of Hugh Mahon, the Irish-born Labor member for Kalgoorlie.<sup>58</sup>

Mahon's crime had been to denounce British rule in Ireland as 'this bloody and accursed despotism'. He did so after learning that the Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence McSwiney, had died in a British prison on 25 October 1920 after seventy-four days on a hunger strike that had attracted world-wide publicity. Mahon's speech was widely reported in Australia and there was an outcry in the metropolitan dailies, for whom Sinn Féin and talk of Irish independence were the equivalent of treason. Inspired by the weight of public opinion, Hughes moved in the House of Representatives for Mahon's expulsion. In his speech on the motion, Hughes denied Ireland's right to secede from the Empire and asserted Australia's dependence on Britain, her 'Rock of Ages'. Rather than defend Mahon's right to freedom of speech, the Labor opposition demanded he be tried by a judge and jury. The expulsion motion was carried on party lines. Fitzhardinge wrote that Hughes 'seemed much less concerned with the substance of Mahon's words than with the possible political effect of ignoring them. It seems, then, that he hoped to conciliate the right-wing and ultra-Protestant sections of the public'. However, Fitzhardinge acknowledged the possibility that brute politics may also have played a part, with Hughes wishing to pick up Mahon's seat in a by-election. That, in fact, occurred when Mahon, who recontested the seat, was defeated.<sup>59</sup>

On 6 December 1921 the negotiations in London ended with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, which assured Ireland of her place in the British Empire on the same terms as Canada and Australia. To many Irish who had fought the long war, this was not enough and between June 1922 and May 1923 the Irish Civil War was fought over the issue. To Hughes, on the other hand, it was too much: 'Hughes had always supported Home Rule, but to him, as to many others, the very existence of the Empire seemed at stake; an independent Ireland seemed to him compatible neither with the security of Britain nor with the permanence of the Imperial tie.'<sup>60</sup> One year after the Treaty was signed, its terms were implemented with the establishment of the Irish Free State. For most Australians, the Irish question now had an answer that to them was reasonable and appropriate; for Billy Hughes, it soon ceased to matter. The times were a-changing in Australia too, and two months after the founding of the Irish state he was no longer prime minister—dumped once again by his own party.

Hughes is not the only Australian prime minister to vilify an ethnic minority so as to play upon the fears and prejudices of the Australian people for political advantage, though he may have been the first and set the mould. During the war his utterances on the impact of the Irish question on Australia, both public and private, echoed the rhetoric of outspoken propagandists of the Protestant majority: the identification of the Australian Irish with Sinn Féinism; the linking of Sinn Féin with the IWW; the allegation that Sinn Féin was anti-British and pro-German. Did he believe the rhetoric or was he seeking to get his way, both in his dealings with Lloyd George and with the Australian people? Hugh Mahon had his suspicions. Long before his falling-out with Hughes he disclosed that during the first conscription campaign Hughes sought 'support from the Orange Lodges by representing that the Catholics were violently hostile to that policy'.<sup>61</sup> However, some contemporary commentators, including conscription supporters such as WA Holman, believed that his tactics were counter-productive and alienated wavering voters. Others were not so certain. Given that the Australian people were being asked to impose conscription on themselves, it was not the anti-conscriptionist but the conscriptionist vote that was surprisingly heavy. HV Evatt wrote:

*In Australia, it had long been a political axiom that too close a relationship between the objects of any political party and the those of the Catholic Church was likely to be fatal to the success of such party. Upon this footing the net result of Hughes' tactics might well have been to assist the political side which he subsequently supported, and also the chances of a Yes majority at the conscription referendum.*<sup>62</sup>

Hughes' obsession with the Irish question at times demonstrated signs of paranoia and prejudice, raising the question whether it was bigotry or was it belief that inspired him in relation to the issue. The answer would appear to be yes on each count. Hughes was driven by both bigotry and belief—though political calculation cannot be dismissed as a factor. What is clear, however, is that his interest in the Irish question did not arise out of a concern for Ireland or the Irish people, but from the conviction that Australia depended for her security on the British Empire and that any threat to the Empire's unity and strength was a threat to Australia. If in addressing that threat a political advantage could be gained, then that was a welcome bonus.



#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Letter quoted in LF Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger 1914–1952*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1979, p. 276.
- <sup>2</sup> See Verity Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism: the Industrial Workers of the World in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 192–202; Frank Cain, *The Wobblies at War: a History of the IWW and the Great War in Australia*, Spectrum, Melbourne, 1993; Ian Turner, *Sydney's Burning*, Alpha Books, Sydney, 1969.
- <sup>3</sup> Reproduced in BA Santamaria, *Daniel Mannix: the Quality of Leadership*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1984, p. 90.
- <sup>4</sup> From a cable sent in April 1917, quoted in Fitzhardinge, p. 286.
- <sup>5</sup> Fitzhardinge, p. 272.
- <sup>6</sup> In her detailed study of the IWW in Australia, Burgmann considered the claim by contemporary commentator Vere Gordon Childe that the IWW, also known as the Wobblies, had 'partly inspired' the general strike of 1917 and concluded: 'To the extent that IWW ideology had penetrated significant sections of the workforce, including that involved in the initial walk-out, this is true, but it was not a Wobbly strike. Apart from the fact that by this stage ... the Wobblies were suffering severe state repression and had too little energy left for masterminding an intrigue such as a general strike, the conduct of the strike shows no stamp of IWW influence.' (Burgmann, p. 175). See also Ian Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics: the Dynamics of the Labour Movement in Eastern Australia 1900–1921*, Hale & Remonger, Sydney, 1979, pp. 142–4, 150.
- <sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the meaning of 'sectarianism' in the Australian context see Jeff Kildea, *Tearing the fabric: sectarianism in Australia 1910–1925*, Citadel Books, Sydney, 2002; Michael Hogan, *The Sectarian Strand: Religion in Australian History*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1987, pp. 4–8; Mark Lyons, *Aspects of Sectarianism in New South Wales circa 1865 to 1880*, Ph.D. thesis, Australian National University, 1972, pp. viii–xxi.
- <sup>8</sup> *Freeman's Journal* (hereafter FJ), 21 March 1912, pp. 31, 36; *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) 15 March 1912, p. 9.
- <sup>9</sup> The absence of public attacks on the Irish Catholic community in the first 20 months of the war may also have had something to do with the government's instructions to the censor on ways of 'minimizing harmful agitation and resentment among our people of Irish descent' (Fitzhardinge, pp. 60–61).
- <sup>10</sup> John A Moses, 'Australian Anglican leaders and the Great War, 1914–1918: the 'Prussian Menace', conscription and national solidarity', *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 25 no. 3, October 2001, pp 306–323, 309; see also Robert D Linder, *The Long Tragedy: Australian Evangelical Christians and the Great War, 1914–1918*, Openbook Publishers, Adelaide, 2000.
- <sup>11</sup> Kildea, *Tearing the Fabric*, pp. 116–118. See also Michael McKernan, *The Australian Churches at War: Attitudes and Activities of the Major Churches 1914–1918*, Catholic Theological Faculty, Manly, 1980, p. 30; Michael McKernan, *The Australian People and the Great War*, Nelson, Sydney, 1984, p. 19; Michael McKernan, 'Catholics, conscription and Archbishop Mannix', *Historical Studies*, vol. 17, 1976, pp. 299–314. Although Japan was on the Allied side in the war, fear of Japan had been an important element in the evolution of defence policy in Australia since Japan's victory over China in 1895 (Henry P Frei, *Japan's Southward Advance and Australia from the Sixteenth Century to World War II*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1991, p. 2). It was believed that Britain's defeat in the war would leave Australia exposed to the perceived imperial ambitions of Germany and Japan in the south-west Pacific.
- <sup>12</sup> FJ, 4 May 1916, p. 25; *Catholic Press* (hereafter CP), 11 May 1916, p. 21. Even Archbishop Mannix initially described the rising as deplorable and its leaders as misguided (*Advocate* 6 May 1916, p. 25). See Kildea, *Tearing the Fabric*, pp. 134–136; Peter Overlack, "'Easter 1916" in Dublin and the Australian press: background and response', *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 54/55, 1997, pp. 188–193; RP Davis, 'Tasmania and the Irish revolution, 1916–22', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association: Papers and Proceedings*, vol. 21

- no. 2, 1974, pp. 69-88.
- <sup>13</sup> Fitzhardinge, pp. 171-172; Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics*, pp. 98-104.
- <sup>14</sup> HV Evatt, 'Australia on the home front 1914-1918', *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 9, 1937, pp. 69-75 at 69-70.
- <sup>15</sup> CP, 5 October 1916, p. 25; FJ, 5 October 1916, p. 23.
- <sup>16</sup> This was in a cable to the Defence Minister, Senator GF Pearce of Western Australia, which was reported in the newspapers, including those in the eastern states (Bobbie Oliver, *War and Peace in Western Australia: the Social and Political Impact of the Great War 1914-1926*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1995, p. 117). The *SMH* in fact published the text of Archbishop Clune's cable twice (21 October 1916, p. 16; 27 October 1916, p. 6).
- <sup>17</sup> For a description of these divergent views see Kildea, *Tearing the fabric*, pp. 138-142.
- <sup>18</sup> It was not absolute, however. For example, a group of nine ministers from various Protestant denominations signed a 'Manifesto from Protestant ministers—'Conscription and Christianity'—opposing conscription. A copy is in the Riley Collection in the La Trobe Library, Melbourne. For a description of some of the activities of Protestant pacifists and anti-conscriptionists see Bobbie Oliver, *Peacemongers: Conscientious Objectors to Military Service in Australia 1911-1945*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, 1997, pp. 40-43.
- <sup>19</sup> House of Lords Record Office, Bonar Law Papers BL/53/4/15, quoted in Jill Kitson, *Patriots Three: Billy Hughes, Lloyd George and Keith Murdoch During World War I*, ABC Books, Sydney, 2005, p. 75.
- <sup>20</sup> Cable 14 October 1916, Hughes to Birdwood, quoted from *Smith's Weekly* 24 October 1936 in HV Evatt, *Australian Labour Leader: the Story of WA Holman and the Labour Movement*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 2nd edn, 1942, p. 415.
- <sup>21</sup> PS Cleary, *Australia's Debt to Irish Nation-Builders*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1933, p. 250.
- <sup>22</sup> House of Lords Record Office, Lloyd George Papers LG/E/4/2/12, quoted in Kitson, p. 75 but cited as F/4/2/18.
- <sup>23</sup> Fitzhardinge, pp. 202-203.
- <sup>24</sup> JF O'Loughlen, 'Tighe Ryan and the Catholic Press', *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society*, vol. 5 no. 1, 1976, pp. 32-37 at p. 37.
- <sup>25</sup> FJ, 19 October 1916, p. 23.
- <sup>26</sup> LL Robson, *The First AIF: a Study of its Recruitment 1914-1918*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1982, pp. 91-93.
- <sup>27</sup> The 'No' majority was only 72,476 out of a total of 2,247,590 formal votes. Three states recorded 'Yes' majorities (Victoria, Western Australia and Tasmania) and three 'No' (New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia) (Scott, Ernest, *Australia During the War*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, vol. XI of *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18*, 1936, p. 352).
- <sup>28</sup> The 'No' majority was 166,588 out of a total of 2,196,906 votes cast. This time Victoria joined the 'No' majority while Tasmania's 'Yes' majority was only 379 out of a total of 77,383 votes cast. (Scott, *Australia During the War*, p. 427).
- <sup>29</sup> Peter Bastian, 'The 1916 conscription referendum in New South Wales', *Teaching History* vol. 5, 1971, pp. 25-36 and J Alcock, 'Reasons for the rejection of conscription—1916-1917', *Agora* vol. 7 (1973), pp. 185-194 survey some of the literature on the issue while Turner, in *Industrial Labour and Politics*, pp. 113-116 canvasses a number of the hypotheses, concluding that it was the farmers, normally non-Labor, who were the decisive factor in the referendum's defeat. Also, Glenn Withers, 'The 1916-1917 conscription referenda: a cliometric re-appraisal', *Historical Studies* 20 (1982), pp. 36-46 provides a statistical analysis of the voting figures in order to test some of the theories.
- <sup>30</sup> See Jeff Kildea, 'Australian Catholics and conscription in the Great War', *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 26, number 3, October 2002, pp. 298-313.
- <sup>31</sup> Patrick O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, New South Wales University Press, Kensington, 1993, pp. 270-273.
- <sup>32</sup> Naomi Turner, *Catholics in Australia: a Social History*, Collins Dove, North Blackburn, 1992, vol. 1, p. 305.
- <sup>33</sup> *The Methodist*, 25 November 1916, p. 25.
- <sup>34</sup> CP, 23 November 1916, p. 19.
- <sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, 9 November 1916, p. 11.
- <sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, 28 September 1916, p. 25; FJ, 28 September 1916, p. 25.
- <sup>37</sup> Reports of Mannix's speech appearing the next day in the *Age*, and during the week in the *Advocate* and the *Tribune* used the word 'ordinary'. However, in an early edition of the *Argus* the expression 'a sordid trade war' appeared. In later editions, however, the word 'sordid' is illegible as if the printing plate has been mutilated. In the 3 February 1917 edition of the *Australasian*, a weekly newspaper published by the *Argus*, the word 'sordid' has been omitted altogether (Cyril Bryan, *Archbishop Mannix: Champion of Democracy*, The Advocate Press, Melbourne, 1918, pp. 72; photographic copies of the articles are reproduced at pp. 232-235). Even the Governor-General in a despatch to London reported that Mannix had said 'sordid trade war' (Robson, *The First AIF*, p. 148).
- <sup>38</sup> Fitzhardinge, p. 286.
- <sup>39</sup> See, for example, CP, 19 April 1917, pp. 26-27; FJ, 26 April 1917, p. 22; 10 May 1917, p. 25.
- <sup>40</sup> CP, 26 April 1917, p. 27.
- <sup>41</sup> DJ Murphy, *TJ Ryan: a Political Biography*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1975, p. 11.
- <sup>42</sup> Fitzhardinge, pp. 291-295. It was quite a mêlée and, as might be expected, accounts are confused. Even Fitzhardinge seems to be unclear as to whether Brosnan was arrested or not and whether it was Bart or his brother Pat who threw the egg that hit Hughes.
- <sup>43</sup> Quoted in *Patriots Three*, p. 82, cited as HLRO [House of Lords Record Office] Lloyd George Papers FLS/4/4.
- <sup>44</sup> Fitzhardinge, p. 252.
- <sup>45</sup> John O'Brien, 'The Irish revolutionary movement and WM Hughes, 1916-1922', in Anne E. O'Brien (ed.), *Studies in Irish, British and Australian Relations, 1916-1963: Trade, Diplomacy and Politics*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2005, p. 32.
- <sup>46</sup> Fitzhardinge, p. 255.
- <sup>47</sup> House of Lords Record Office, Lloyd George Papers LG/F/28/2/1, quoted in *Patriots Three*, p. 81.

<sup>48</sup> *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia for 1911*, vol. 1, p. 200.

<sup>49</sup> Figures for the federal caucus are derived from my own calculations relying on Colin A Hughes and BD Graham, *A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics 1890–1964*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1968; and Joan Rydon, *A Biographical Register of the Commonwealth Parliament 1901–1972*, ANU Press, Canberra 1975. The NSW caucus figures are taken from Jim Hagan and Ken Turner, *A History of the Labor Party in New South Wales 1891–1991*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1991, p. 114, while the conference figures are taken from LF Crisp, *The Australian Federal Labour Party 1901–1951*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1978, p. 316. Crisp used a rather crude index relying on ‘patronymics and available family details’.

<sup>50</sup> O’Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, p. 274.

<sup>51</sup> LL Robson ‘The origin and character of the First AIF, 1914–18: some statistical evidence’, *Historical Studies*, vol. 15, no. 61, 1973, pp. 740–41. See also Jeff Kildea, *Anzacs and Ireland*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2007, ch. 3.

<sup>52</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 81, pp. 11050–61.

<sup>53</sup> O’Brien, ‘The Irish revolutionary movement’, p. 33.

<sup>54</sup> National Archives of Australia: A3932/1 SC417.

<sup>55</sup> Report of Justice Harvey, p. 7 (National Archives of Australia: MP367/1 512/1/907).

<sup>56</sup> See Kildea, *Tearing the Fabric*, pp. 189–191; O’Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, pp. 273–278.

<sup>57</sup> For an account of the Australian government’s attempt to persuade the Vatican to silence Mannix, see Santamaria, *Daniel Mannix*, ch. 7.

<sup>58</sup> For details of these extraordinary events during 1920 see Kildea, *Tearing the Fabric*, pp. 213–227.

<sup>59</sup> Fitzhardinge, p. 456.

<sup>60</sup> Fitzhardinge, p. 452.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Santamaria, *Daniel Mannix*, p. 89. For obvious reasons, Mahon’s assertions regarding Hughes need to be assessed with caution. However, the quoted words were made public in May 1917 well before his expulsion from parliament.

<sup>62</sup> Evatt, *Australian Labour Leader*, p. 411. He attributed the idea to ‘One or two able authorities, including Maurice Blackburn MP’.

