

A Day to Remember: The Warwick Egg Incident 100 Years On

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Introduction

On 29 November 1917 when the Warwick Egg incident occurred families across Australia were learning of the monstrous toll of the Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele). With newspapers hailing the battle as a great success, it was left to telegram boys to convey the appalling truth. In eight weeks the Australian Imperial Force had suffered more than 38 000 casualties, 8000 of them killed.

Yet, while the military war ground on in France, Belgium and Palestine, in Australia a political, social and industrial war was occurring on the home front. And no more so than in Queensland where Prime Minister Billy Hughes and Labor premier TJ Ryan were the principal combatants. In that domestic war, the Warwick Egg incident was a minor but, in many ways, significant event.

The facts

The following is a brief narrative of the incident as gleaned from eye-witness statements:¹

When the Brisbane to Sydney mail train pulled into Warwick at 2.59pm, Prime Minister Hughes alighted and was escorted by members of the local National Political Council towards a part of the platform where he was to address a meeting of a few hundred people assembled in Grafton Street. As he approached the spot, two eggs were thrown, one of which hit the prime minister's hat. Witnesses differed as to who threw the eggs: some said it was Paddy Brosnan,² some his brother Bart,³ others were unsure. In any event, Hughes' supporters retaliated and a fight occurred about two to three metres from the prime minister during which Bart was injured and Paddy was removed from the railway station.

When the egg hit Hughes' hat, the prime minister had turned and rushed back towards the train. Snr Sgt Henry Butler Kenny,⁴ who was in plain clothes, grabbed Hughes and calmed him down and brought him back to the speaking point. Kenny asked the crowd to give the prime minister a fair hearing.

After Hughes had been speaking for a few minutes Paddy Brosnan reappeared among the crowd in Grafton Street and began interjecting. He approached the platform his hand in the air. Hughes called out, "Arrest that man" and in an excited state jumped from the platform into the crowd and headed towards

¹ The narrative is derived from witness statements and other documents compiled by police in the days following the incident (Queensland State Archives Item ID2036411, Correspondence).

² Patrick Matthew Brosnan, b. 1/11/1877 to Bartholomew Brosnan and Catherine (née Hayes), m. 12/9/1932 to Mary Laracy, d. 31/7/1954 at Sandgate, Brisbane, bur. Nudgee Catholic Cemetery, Toowoomba.

³ Bartholomew Francis Brosnan, b. 8/4/1880 to Bartholomew Brosnan and Catherine (née Hayes), d. 20/1/1935 at Warwick, bur. Warwick General Cemetery, Warwick.

⁴ Henry Butler Kenny, b. 27/1/1875 at Inverell to Michael Henry Butler Kenny and Mary (née Moore), m. 20/4/1904 to Martha Helen Moles, d. 27/1/1949 at Newmarket, Brisbane, crem. Mt Thompson Memorial Gardens, Holland Park, Brisbane. For a description of Kenny's career see Laurie Pointing, *Keeping the Peace*, Vol 2, Boolarong Press, Brisbane, 2014, pp. 23-29.

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Paddy. Before he got there a policeman arrested Paddy and took him away. (He was later fined 10s for creating a disturbance in a public place.⁵)

Hughes returned to the platform and went on with his address punctuated by cheers, hoots and interjections. After he finished speaking Hughes returned to the train. On his way back he asked Snr Sgt Kenny if the men had been arrested. Kenny said they would be if Hughes laid an information, to which Hughes replied that he was the Attorney General of the Commonwealth and that he was ordering Kenny to arrest them under Commonwealth law. Kenny said he took his instructions from the Queensland government, to which Hughes replied that he would deal with him.

Exactly thirteen minutes after Hughes' train had arrived at Warwick it pulled out of the station, a seething prime minister on board.

It was not long before lurid descriptions of what had occurred at Warwick were being circulated around the country.

The *Brisbane Courier* in its report on the "extraordinary and disgraceful riot at Warwick" said that "the moment [the prime minister] stepped from his carriage he was surrounded by a howling mob" and that after the egg was thrown "the Prime Minister was in the thick of it ... but when he emerged it was his hand, and not his face, that was bleeding". The report added that "Mr Hughes demanded in his capacity as Attorney-General of the Commonwealth that [the police] should take action against his assailant, Senior-Sergeant Kenny declined to do so".⁶

Such descriptions were disseminated by Hughes himself and his supporters (starting with the train's next stop at Stanthorpe) to suggest that Queensland under TJ Ryan was lawless and controlled by a government disloyal to the British Empire.⁷ On returning to Sydney Hughes claimed that to prevent his addressing the electors, "I was assaulted by a howling mob before I opened my mouth" and that "the police ... stood by and encouraged mob rule". He added that like Ryan, the police "are doubtless Sinn Feiners too".⁸ The metropolitan newspapers favouring conscription, lapped it up, portraying Hughes as a gallant hero taking on the mob.⁹

Following an inquiry the Queensland Commissioner of Police, Fred Urquhart, issued a report that put the lie to the Hughes' version. The report was based on eye-witness statements, including one by the vice-president of the Queensland pro-conscription committee which confirmed Hughes had not been assaulted (except for the egg hitting

⁵ *Darling Downs Gazette* 4 December 1917, p. 5; *Warwick Examiner and Times* 5 December 1917, p. 2. Brosnan was convicted of a breach of s 92 of the *Liquor Act 1912* (Qld), which prescribed a maximum penalty of £3.

⁶ *Courier* (Brisbane) 30 November 1917, p. 7.

⁷ *Argus* 30 November 1917, p. 6.

⁸ *Argus* 4 December 1917, p. 7.

⁹ On a motion of no confidence in the government moved on 15 January 1918, Labor member JH Catts, after quoting the same words from articles on the incident appearing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Daily Telegraph* said, "Exactly the same words appeared in the *Age*, the *Argus*, and the *Glen Innes Examiner*. This report did not come from Warwick, where the incident is supposed to have occurred, but it was wired from Wallangarra. It was manufactured on the train journey between the two stations... . If, in a Court case, all the witnesses gave their testimony in exactly the same words, it is highly probable that they would all be arrested and charged with perjury (CPD HR 15 January 1918, pp. 2967-2968).

his hat) and which exonerated Kenny.¹⁰ Further proof of Hughes' exaggeration is provided by barrister PB MacGregor, who advised the Commonwealth Crown Solicitor that the only recourse arising out of the incident was a charge of common assault against Paddy Brosnan. In other words, there had been no breach of Commonwealth law by anyone, including Snr Sgt Kenny.¹¹

Context of the Warwick egg incident

But it is not the specifics of what happened in Warwick that day that I wish to address. Rather, I will concentrate on what the event represented in the context of the bigger picture of Australia one hundred years ago.

Although many incidents of political violence occurred during the conscription campaigns of 1916 and 1917, such as meetings being disrupted and speakers pelted with eggs or tomatoes, the Warwick Egg incident stands out for three reasons:

- firstly, it involved an assault on the prime minister of Australia that attracted widespread press attention at the time and assumed legendary status for years thereafter;
- secondly, it led to the establishment of the Commonwealth police force (dubbed by Hughes' opponents as "Henzacs" "hatched" from the Warwick Egg), which was the forerunner of the Australian Federal Police;¹² and
- thirdly, and most significantly for our purposes, it was symptomatic of the deep divisions then within Australian society, which were exacerbated by the emotions of the hard-fought political campaign over conscription: Irish Australians versus British Australians, Catholics versus Protestants, labour versus capital, empire loyalists versus Australia-first nationalists, and the Queensland government versus the federal government.

Today it is difficult to comprehend how deeply those divisions ran, particularly those along ethno-religious lines. Sectarianism, in the sense of the conflict between Protestants, then mostly of British descent, and Catholics, then almost exclusively of Irish descent, was a significant factor in social and political discourse in early 20th-century Australia.

Those days are largely behind us and today the Christian denominations are more likely to be working together to fight religious indifference rather than squabbling with each other. But in the 1910s it was very real, and often the rhetoric was vicious.

But sectarianism had been endemic in Australia from the start of the colony in 1788. Through most of the 19th century about one quarter of immigrants to Australia were Irish while three quarters were British. And often the prejudices and divisiveness of the Old World accompanied them. Nevertheless, for the most part Catholics and Protestants coexisted peacefully, but occasionally there would be a flare up, sometimes around the

¹⁰ *Daily Standard* (Brisbane) 4 December 1917, p. 5; Queensland State Archives: Item ID2036411, Correspondence.

¹¹ National Archives of Australia: A5522 M737 re Assault on Prime Minister at Warwick. As indicated in this file, it was decided not to charge Paddy Brosnan after he had been sentenced to two months imprisonment for assaulting a heckler at an anti-conscription meeting in Warwick the night after the Warwick Egg incident. For an account of the hearing of that charge see *Warwick Examiner and Times* 8 December 1917, p. 5.

¹² *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette* No 215 (12 December 1917), pp. 3341-42; *Westralian Worker* (Perth) 15 February 1918, p. 5; 28 March 1919, p. 5; *Australian Worker* (Sydney) 23 January 1919, p. 10.

Twelfth of July, as in Melbourne in 1846 when shots were fired, or on St Patrick's Day, as in Sydney in 1878 when rioting broke out. And, all the while, charismatic sectarian warriors, from their pulpits and in the religious press, loudly and frequently warned their co-religionists of the evils inherent in Catholicism or Protestantism, as the case may be.

As a result of the ethno-religious divide in Australia, events in Ireland, such as the rise of fenianism or the push for home rule, often impacted on local politics. In the early 20th century these divisions widened. From 1910, Labor governments began to take office around Australia, raising Catholic expectations that their demand for the restoration of state funding of Catholic schools, abolished in the 1880s, would be addressed. So they ramped up the political pressure, prompting a Protestant backlash. Also at about this time, the Liberal government in Britain introduced a bill to give home rule to Ireland, a move that was supported in Australia by Catholics of Irish descent but largely opposed by Protestants of British descent. Soon both issues became entwined in bitter public debates.

Another source of division in early 20th-century Australia concerned industrial relations. Australia had a strong labour movement, which in the 1890s had engaged in a series of major strikes, particularly in Queensland, that often turned violent, sometimes with fatal consequences. Ultimately the strikes were defeated and those in the labour movement who preferred political action came to the fore. Newly formed labour parties had early successes, electing members to the colonial parliaments and facilitating legislation for compulsory arbitration, resulting in what HB Higgins called "a new province of law and order" in industrial relations.

In Queensland Anderson Dawson in 1899 formed the first Labor government in the world, albeit a short-lived minority government. But by 1910 Labor majorities were being elected to parliaments around Australia.

These successes served to raise working-class expectations that the workers' paradise was at hand. But to win and hold power the Labor Party needed to appeal to all sections of the community, and many workers were soon disillusioned by the moderation of Labor politicians. The rise of working-class militancy and organisations such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) threatened a return to the industrial unrest of the 1890s.

The outbreak of the First World War acted as a circuit breaker. And for a time the political, social and industrial divisions, threatening to disrupt the peace and harmony of the nation, subsided. Protestants and Catholics joined together in support of the war effort, as did the Labor Party and the majority of the labour movement – it was the Labor leader Andrew Fisher who pledged that Australia would support the British Empire in the war "to the last man and the last shilling".

But the uneasy truce was shattered during Easter week 1916 when Irish rebels seized the GPO in Dublin. At first Australian Catholics deplored the rising, but when the British military authorities declared martial law and began executing the rebel leaders and interning thousands of Irish men and women, they began to criticise the British government, provoking a Protestant backlash with claims that the Irish and their progeny in Australia were disloyal to the Empire.

The sectarian and industrial divide widened during the first conscription referendum campaign. When Prime Minister Billy Hughes returned from a visit to London in August

1916, where the British generals had impressed upon him the need for more recruits, he was determined to introduce conscription despite the difficulty he knew he faced in gaining the support of the labour movement, even though he was a Labor prime minister.

The Defence Act prohibited conscription for overseas service and would have to be amended. However, anti-conscriptionist Labor members controlled the Senate and could block an amending act. Hughes' decided to appeal over their heads to the people by holding a plebiscite, in those days called a referendum, which would give him a strong moral argument to persuade the senate to pass the legislation.

Amongst Catholics there were differences of opinion on the conscription issue and there was no official line.

The Catholic hierarchy was divided on the issue, with Archbishop Patrick Clune of Perth publicly supporting it and Archbishop Daniel Mannix of Melbourne publicly opposing it. Both were Irish-born. Catholic newspapers throughout Australia adopted divergent viewpoints. Catholic spokesmen were at pains to explain that the Catholic Church had not and should not adopt an official attitude to the issue because it was a civil matter and not a religious one. But it was precisely that fact which Protestant critics relied on to justify their attack on the Catholic Church as not supporting the war effort and for being disloyal.

On 28 October 1916 the voters rejected conscription by a narrow margin. The No majority was only 72,476 out of a total of 2,247,590 formal votes, a margin of 51.6% to 48.4%.

Hughes and the mainly Protestant empire loyalists blamed the "disloyal" Irish Catholics for the referendum's defeat. Even before the vote was taken Hughes had told the commander of the Australian Imperial Force, Lieutenant 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."¹³

After the result he told Colonial-Secretary Andrew Bonar Law, "[T]he selfish vote, and shirker vote and the Irish vote were too much for us".¹⁴ But, in truth, it was the labour movement, a majority of whom were Protestants, which had led the campaign against conscription, resulting in its defeat.

But whatever the reality, the perceived role of the Irish Catholic vote in the referendum was to become the occasion of some of the most vitriolic attacks ever made on the Irish Catholic community in Australia. Tensions rose during 1917 with the belligerent Archbishop Mannix criticising the war as an "ordinary trade war". Epithets such as 'Shirkers', 'Sinn Feiners', 'IWWers' and 'pro-German' became commonplace among militant Protestants who accused Australian Catholics of Irish descent of disloyalty.

Also, during 1917, the level of industrial disputes in Australia reached heights which had not been seen before and which have not been seen since. In New South Wales there was a general strike in August-September. Embittered workers facing rising unemployment

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ Letter 6 November 1916 to Andrew Bonar Law quoted in LF Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger 1914-1952*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1979, p. 215.

and declining living standards due to wartime austerity measures, resented the fact that capitalists were profiting from the war. They fought bitterly to preserve what they could of the early fruits of the workers' paradise that in 1915 had seemed attainable when Labor was in power federally and in all states bar Victoria.

These disputes, mostly over better pay and conditions, often became entangled with other issues such as conscription, the contest between socialism and reformism, and the fight for control of the labour movement. The success of the Bolsheviks in Russia during 1917 inspired the more radical element of the movement to push for greater influence.

The federal election held in May 1917 was bitterly sectarian, with Archbishop Mannix becoming heavily involved in a public slanging match with Hughes, making Mannix the focus of much of the debate over the war. Hughes took it personally, telling his confidant in London Keith Murdoch (father of Rupert), "[T]he bulk of Irish people led by Archbishop Mannix ... are attacking me with a venomous personal campaign".¹⁵

In the result, Hughes' Nationalist Party secured an overwhelming majority. The way was open for him to introduce compulsory military service, but during the campaign, in order to neutralise conscription as an issue, he had promised not to do so without a further referendum.

In November 1917 the federal government decided once again to refer the issue of conscription to a vote of the people. The result of the bitter campaign was that social friction, which had been steadily increasing over the previous twelve months, became even more severe. More so than in 1916, Catholics identified with the anti-conscription cause. Catholic bishops who in 1916 supported conscription, such as Sydney's Archbishop Michael Kelly, now opposed it because the government refused to exempt seminarians and teaching brothers.¹⁶ Mannix, who now had a national profile, was seen as a leading opponent of Hughes and conscription, arguing that Australia had done enough and that if Britain would cease its military occupation of Ireland it would not need Australian conscripts.

Another outspoken critic of the federal government's war policy was the Labor premier of Queensland, Thomas Joseph Ryan, an Australian Catholic of Irish descent. In 1916 and 1917 Ryan was the only state premier to oppose conscription. Desperate to censor Ryan's anti-conscription rhetoric, Hughes personally led a raid by the military on the Queensland Government Printing Office to seize copies of Hansard No 37 containing parliamentary speeches opposed to conscription. In addition, Hughes threatened to prosecute Ryan if he repeated his words outside parliament. Ryan accepted the challenge and was duly prosecuted but the Commonwealth's case was dismissed with costs.¹⁷ The raid and the government's prosecution of Ryan are but two examples of Hughes' frequent use of censorship to silence opposition to conscription.¹⁸

To Hughes, the perceived influence of the Irish in Australia was alarming. He told the British prime minister Lloyd George in August 1917, "[T]he Irish question is at the bottom of all our difficulties in Australia. They — the Irish — have captured the political

¹⁵ From a cable sent in April 1917, quoted in Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger*, p. 286.

¹⁶ Jeff Kildea, "Australian Catholics and conscription in the Great War", *Journal of Religious History*, v.26, no.3, Oct 2002, pp. 298-313

¹⁷ *Daily Mail* (Brisbane) 28 November 1917, p. 6; 7 December 1917, p. 5; Denis Murphy, *T.J. Ryan: A Political Biography*, UQP, St Lucia (Qld), 1990, p. 320ff.

¹⁸ Kevin J. Fewster, "Expression and Suppression: Aspects of Military Censorship in Australia during the Great War", PhD thesis, UNSW 1980.

machinery of the Labor organisations — assisted by syndicalists and IWW people. The Church is secretly against recruiting. Its influence killed conscription.” Speaking of the general strike then taking place in New South Wales, Hughes added, “The IWW and the Irish are mainly responsible for the trouble. In a sense it is political rather than industrial. [...] [T]hey are now trying to take the reins of Govt out of our hands”.¹⁹

The governor general, Sir Ronald Munro-Ferguson, concurred, advising the British colonial secretary in March 1917 that the Queensland government was in the hands of the Irish Roman Catholics.²⁰ Outspoken Protestants agreed. The *Methodist* newspaper was quite explicit in its attitude:

Romanism at heart is disloyal and desires the downfall and dismemberment of the Empire as a great Protestant power. ... [T]he attitude of Romanists, as a whole, and of the great majority of their priests and bishops, is conclusive as to the utterly disloyal spirit of that communion.²¹

It was against this background that Hughes found himself in Warwick on his way back to Sydney following his raid on the Queensland Government Printing Office. Along the way he gave speeches at Ipswich and Toowoomba in which he claimed that Queensland was in the grip of Sinn Féin and pro-Germans.

At Warwick, Hughes’ worst fears were confirmed when the Queensland police officer, Senior Sergeant Henry Kenny, a Catholic of Irish descent refused to arrest the egg throwers, saying he answered to the Queensland government only. This led Hughes to draft a regulation establishing the Commonwealth police force. In advising the Governor-General on the regulation, Hughes wrote, “This will apply to Queensland where present position is one of latent rebellion. Police is honeycombed with Sinn Feiners and IWW [...]. (At present I only propose appoint Commonwealth Police Force at Warwick ... but there are towns in North Queensland where the Law [...] is openly ignored and IWW and Sinn Féin run the show.)”²²

When the votes were counted the outcome of the referendum on 20 December 1917 was an increased majority against conscription. The No majority was 166,588 out of a total of 2,196,906 votes cast. The No vote had increased from 51.6% to 53.8%.

Conscriptionists had no doubt as to the reasons why the vote was lost. The governor-general in his report to the colonial secretary wrote, “The organised opposition was composed of the Labour Party and the Roman Catholics. This body, organised and capably led by Archbishop Mannix comprises the Irish element which would be hostile to any proposals of the Government.”²³

However, some, including leading members of Hughes’ own party, blamed the prime minister’s behaviour during the campaign. Many criticised his belligerence towards Mannix and Ryan, arguing it only served to give them and their anti-conscription

¹⁹ Quoted in Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger*, p. 276.

²⁰ Governor General to Secretary of State for the Colonies 2 March 1917 (Novar Papers, MS 696/1788, National of Australia) quoted in D. J. Murphy, “Thirteen Minutes of National Glory: The Warwick Egg Incident, 1917”, *Queensland Heritage*, Vol 3 no 3, 1975, pp. 15-18.

²¹ *The Methodist* 8 December 1917, p. 7. See also, for example, an attack on the loyalty of the Australian Irish by Archdeacon Hindley in a sermon at St Paul’s Cathedral, Melbourne, as reported in *The Argus* 27 August 1917, p. 4.

²² Quoted in Fitzhardinge, *The Little Digger*, p. 294.

²³ D. J. Murphy, “Religion, Race and Conscription in World War I,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 30 (1974), 160.

message national prominence. Some singled out his response to the Warwick Egg incident, particularly the establishment of the Commonwealth police force, which many regarded as an unnecessary extravagance.²⁴ DR Hall, the Nationalist Attorney-General for New South Wales, claimed that “the erratic tendencies which prompted that decision have ever been a source of danger to Australia”. He called on his federal colleagues to replace Hughes as leader.²⁵ That did not happen and Hughes continued as prime minister for another five years until his party eventually axed him in February 1923.

Conclusion

In 1914 many Irish-Australian Catholics had believed that the war would provide an opportunity to prove their loyalty and to gain acceptance. They had hoped that by sharing in the blood sacrifice they would be rewarded with increased tolerance and the satisfaction of their grievances, especially in the case of state aid for Catholic schools. During the first two years of the war this hope looked as if it might be realised as the nation united behind the war effort, with Catholics enlisting in proportion to their numbers in the population. However, the sectarianism that re-emerged in the aftermath of the Easter Rising and during the conscription campaigns dashed those hopes for a generation.

Similarly, the hopes of the working class that the series of Labor governments elected after 1910 would deliver the workers’ paradise were dashed as wartime austerity, political timidity and the split in the labour movement over conscription threatened to return industrial relations to the battlefield they thought they had left behind in the 1890s. Whereas in 1915 all but one of the seven governments in Australia was Labor; when the egg was thrown in Warwick in 1917 none of the governments in Australia was Labor except for Queensland.

The fractiousness that had infected political, social and industrial life in Australia from 1916 onwards was reflected in Warwick on 29 November 1917, when a couple of working-class Catholics of Irish descent, the Brosnan brothers, threw eggs at Prime Minister Billy Hughes, an English-born Protestant Welshman who, having ratted on the labour movement and allied himself with the party of capital to send Australian conscripts to war, had defamed the Australian Irish and had sought to muzzle dissent. But standing in his way was the Irish-Catholic Queensland premier, TJ Ryan, and, on that day in Warwick, an Irish-Catholic Queensland policeman, Snr Sgt Henry Kenny.

Truly, a day to remember.

²⁴ It is difficult to say what, if any, effect the Warwick Egg incident had on the local vote in the 1917 referendum. Darling Downs, the federal electorate in which the town was located, was a safe anti-Labor seat. It had elected a Liberal to the House of Representatives in 1914 (56.9%) and a Nationalist in 1917 (56.1%). In 1916 it had narrowly voted Yes in the conscription referendum (50.48%), while in 1917 it voted No (51.25%). While all electorates in Queensland except for Lilley voted No in 1917, Darling Downs had the smallest majority for No. While all electorates in Queensland swung towards No in 1917, Darling Downs recorded the smallest swing. As regards the town of Warwick, it had voted Yes in 1916 (52.22%) and No in 1917 (53.23%) (TA Metherall, “The Conscription Referenda, October 1916 and December 1917: An Inward-Turned Nation at War”, PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 1971, Appendix 1-C; *Warwick Examiner and Times* 22 December 1917, p. 5; Conscription Referendum 1917 Returns Qld).

²⁵ *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney) 21 December 1917, p. 6. On 14 January 1918 at the Grand Council of the National Federation of New South Wales a motion was moved with the support of Nationalist premier WA Holman calling upon Hughes to resign (*Sydney Morning Herald* 15 January 1918, p. 7).