

## RESEARCH REPORT NO 28: T J RYAN - A CENTENARY NOTE

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*[In May 1915, Queensland saw the election of the Labor government of Thomas Joseph Ryan. One hundred years ago to the day, its assumption of office on 1 June took place. An extraordinary age of reform and change then took place in the next few years in Queensland]*

Only a few weeks ago, two events occurred in Australia which received unprecedented saturation levels of political and media coverage. They were unrelated, but for anyone also aware of the significance of 2015 as a centenary year in Queensland politics and society, these two events could give one pause to consider what was happening in Queensland almost exactly 100 years before.

The first of these events was the Anzac Centenary, the commemoration of the military landing in Turkey that came to be the best known single event of Australia's actions in World War One, and the second was the pending and then actual capital punishment of Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran in Indonesia.

In the case of the Anzac centenary, and indeed the entire time of Australia's involvement in the First World War, it is worth remembering that the Premier of Queensland shot to national prominence as the most senior political leader in Australia, willing to voice an alternative in the turbulent and apparently unstoppable rush to bring conscription to the country. Never an opponent of the war per se, Ryan, a formidable intellect committed to examining arguments on their merit and their supporting evidence, challenged not only the pro conscription rationale of the day, (that this was the only way to raise the numbers necessary for the continuing action and slaughter in France), but also the unrelenting censorious assault on those who had the contrary view.

In the case of capital punishment, the Ryan government was to usher in a wave of reform including its abolition. It is almost breathtaking to think that the ethical, moral and legal issues that were canvassed as the Queensland Parliament debated and then legislated the abolition of capital punishment almost a century ago, all surfaced in an Australian outcry on the same issue all this time later.

Opposition to conscription, and to capital punishment, were but two of a string of moral stances and commitment to change embraced by first the Ryan governments, (1915 to 1919), and their successor, the Theodore governments (1919 to 1925). Indeed, much of the reform program successfully put in place during the Theodore period was initiated during Ryan's time but had been delayed or deferred as the (unelected) Upper House of the day, succeeded in blocking legislation.

Central to understanding the significance of Ryan is to understand the energy and momentum for reform, the intent to achieve social equality through change, and the redistribution of wealth, which accompanied the election of the first Ryan government 100 years ago. There have been other times and jurisdictions in Australia where the same pattern of a pent-up energy for reform has found expression in the election and subsequent activism of a reform government (1972 nationally, being probably the best example). However, what was extraordinary in the second decade of the 20th century in Queensland was the way that this energetic program was pursued in one of the most turbulent periods in Australian history ever known.

And it was turbulent. As a nation state Australia was literally a teenager, and there remains a view that at least some of the nationalistic fervour evident in the early years of committing shillings and men to the First World War was motivated by a sense of purpose in proving itself in engaging in this European calamity of ambiguous aims and aspirations. There has probably never been anything that had such a pervasively devastating effect in this country. Initially not particularly conspicuous, this effect grew through time and with legacy effects throughout the population right through the 1920s, the Depression and beyond.

Into this deteriorating state of social cohesion and fracturing common purpose, arrived TJ Ryan. The Labor government which assumed office in June 1915 was the first such to govern with a clear majority in the lower house. It arrived with a purpose, and set to work with energy and urgency. Ryan himself was one of those Labor leaders that did not come from a union background. Rather he had been a teacher, initially in Victoria and Tasmania before Federation, and then in Queensland at the grammar schools in Maryborough and Rockhampton. In fact, unlike later Queensland Labor Premiers, Ryan had a particular and clear interest in education. But his principal calling was the law, and he has been regarded then and since, as possessing consummate skill in understanding how the law and constitutional provision might be used to advance socially and economically democratic agendas.

In terms of his personal style he was also both an assiduous worker and a commanding presence, who had a particular skill for reducing apparently complex arguments to simply grasped issues. According to his biographer, Dennis Murphy (who this author believes was personally strongly affected by Ryan's career and achievements in terms of his own political aspirations), 'it was this capacity for simplicity in argument, assiduous work, and attention to detail, combined with an easy manner' that led to his early popularity and success. By October 1909 he had been elected as the member for Barcoo.

Six years later he led what was by all accounts a capable Parliamentary majority, with a number of talented political lieutenants, and several strong and supportive senior public servants. The program of this 1915 government was to pursue social democratic reform on both economic and socio-legal fronts. Economically, the overall aim was to pursue the objective of the production, distribution and exchange 'of all wealth for the benefit of the whole community'. Conservative governments had already had some experience of seeking, unsuccessfully, to regulate monopolies, but the Ryan Labor objective was to move on this more purposefully. In this, the government stood to have the support of smaller landholders and farmers, particularly in acting against monopolies such as CSR, or groups that were seen as being run by city-based merchants. The great areas of production and capital investment in Queensland at the time were sugar, meat, and land itself, particularly pastoral leases. Into each of these areas of investment the Ryan government ventured, seeking to dilute and dissipate price rings and anti-competitive practices. Although it is clear that Ryan believed that the Commonwealth government needed greater power to regulate monopoly, in the absence of such a reform he sought to act using State government mechanisms to deal with monopoly practices.

It is worth remembering that the word 'profiteering' was an often used and heavily laden term during the Great War years. There is some evidence that even before Ryan came to power, his predecessor conservative Premier (Denham), had been disappointed by the behaviour of the meat companies who sought to secure profits in all possible ways, exploiting the new markets quickly developing as the evidence grew that the First World War would not be a short-lived affair. Contesting the power of monopoly capital by such means as developing competitive State enterprises, was one strategy of the Ryan government. Another was to develop new approaches to the arbitration and conciliation of labour disputes, to support better conditions, to develop workers compensation (in association with a new State Government Insurance Office), and to bring down prices through strategies to reduce the power and influence of monopolies. An essential ingredient at this time was to seek to break up large land holdings to allow for increased farming, and to support closer settlement with policies on immigration and water conservation, all in the context of seeing common purpose between primary producers on smaller holdings, and wage earners.

As the war developed, Ryan's support for Australian involvement was never in question. But by 1916 the Commonwealth government, Prime Minister Hughes in particular, had determined that

conscription must be introduced in Australia. Ryan had taken soundings on the issue of conscription while in London in early 1916. He had discussed the way it would be greeted in Australia with former Prime Minister Andrew Fisher (by now the High Commissioner in London), and also with Sir John Simon, a British Liberal opposed to conscription, as well as General Birdwood from the AIF. Ryan's position may initially simply have been to make sure that any decision was well based on the evidence. He may also have had some premonition about the divisiveness of the issue politically within the Labor Party.

So his initial aspiration was to keep the Labor Party together, something which was achieved, while it split in every other State and federally in Australia. But a position of not supporting conscription rapidly propelled Ryan to national prominence as the only significant political leader of the anti-conscriptionists. The other public figure of national prominence in opposition to conscription was Archbishop Mannix.

There is not the space here to talk about conscription referenda in detail, but suffice to say that anti-conscription stances were readily confused with anti-war stances, and the sectarianism of the time in which Catholics were seen as saboteurs (there were rumours that St Brigid's Church in Red Hill had caches of German arms in 1917!), increased social tension in a nation now well into experiencing the true trauma of the conflict.

The use of the 'gag' on anti-conscription arguments in the daily press by Prime Minister Hughes was so great that even conservative papers objected. Premier Ryan and his ministers famously sought to have printed and distributed an edition of the Queensland Hansard in which emphasis was given to portions of speeches against conscription which would otherwise not be reported. These tensions rapidly took the form of conflict between the Premier of Queensland and the Prime Minister of Australia. Hughes's vitriol, including the charging of both Ryan and Theodore with conspiracy ('with Germans'), - and in another case, the establishment of the Commonwealth (now Federal) Police as a Prime Ministerial reaction to what he saw as the inadequacy of State Police protection after the Warwick 'egg' incident - insured that Ryan became a national leader and hero for those opposed to conscription, whose view was to be upheld, as it turned out, in the referenda of both 1916 and 1917. Prior to the 1917 result Ryan had travelled to Sydney, where one conservative newspaper figured the size of the crowd receiving him at 200,000! Indeed, it can be argued that Ryan's eventual vacating of the position of Premier of Queensland in 1919 to take up the challenge of Federal politics (an intent which at a personal level is by no means clear even some time later than the conscription referenda), stemmed from the extraordinary tensions and hostilities of 1916 and 1917.

But probably the most important legacy as we look back from 2015 to Ryan's leadership of Queensland, is in the area of social and legal reform. From the time of his election onwards the government pursued a legislative program which ultimately saw not only the introduction of economic and social reforms aimed at improving standards of living and working conditions, but also significant initiatives in empowerment, as in the case of the right of women to stand for Parliamentary office, and to be admitted to juries.

But in almost all of these initiatives, the legislative program of Tom Ryan's government was thwarted by the obstruction presented by the unelected and mostly deeply reactionary Legislative Council. Although Ryan was able to win the confidence of the Queensland Governor he was never able to achieve a situation in which the Legislative Council would endorse the legislative intent of the Assembly, but a referendum for its abolition failed in 1917, a failure which was partly attributed to a mistaken tactical decision to put it to the people on the same day as the Federal election of that year.

The Legislative Council obstruction remained for the duration of Premier Ryan's period in office, so that much that had been passed through the lower house did not become law until Ryan had gone, and his successor Premier Theodore was able to finally resolve the issue through its abolition in 1922. Taken together these reforms, and other executive decisions from 1915 to 1922 saw, inter alia, the abolition of property qualifications for jurors, the legislation of retiring age for judges, executive commutation of prisoners' terms of imprisonment, other proposed reforms in the legal practice arena, the establishment of an office of public curator, and finally, the abolition of capital punishment.

One of Ryan's signal achievements, and a very personal one, saw his legal skills deployed on several occasions to resist attempts by opponents to thwart the intention of the Executive arm of government in Queensland by legal action. This activity involved travelling to England to appear before the Privy Council, and to establish the 'bona fides' of the Queensland government, as in the two prominent (unlinked) cases of Mooraberrie and McCawley.

Premier Ryan favoured the idea that the people could express a view through a process of 'Referendum and Initiative', though these did not become a durable feature of the Queensland political landscape. He was also quite clearheaded that Australia needed some powers to be transferred to or adopted by the Commonwealth, and not retained by the States – particularly those concerned with regulating monopoly capital, and his successor Theodore developed strong views about the banking system for similar reasons.

Ryan himself, when he became Premier, held one other portfolio, that of Attorney General. His great skill was in combining political reform with legal craft in optimising and protecting the progress that his and then Theodore's government was to make.

There is no doubt that his personable style, his skills as a speaker as well as a lawyer, his capacity to apparently be at ease with both political opponents and conservatives (he maintained friendships with those with whom he had done battle), as well as loyal party members and comrades, contributed to his success. Only 38 years old when he became Premier, his rise to national prominence through the heat of the conscription debates and social and political schisms of the time conferred on him an apparently inevitable status as the logical future leader of Labor nationally, (possibly even somewhat against his own career plans). So it was that he left Queensland politics in 1919 and entered the Federal arena.

A contemporary of both Ryan and Theodore once said to this writer that it is easy for latter day commentators to lose the sense that these two leaders were 'giants' of their age. Both had an imposing physical presence that accompanied their dominant influence on Queensland in these extraordinary years, though to Ryan is often attributed the superior skill in managing conflict in complex environments.

However, before he left office in Queensland, both he and his wife Lily had become gravely ill with the Spanish influenza during a visit to England in early 1919. We can suppose that his physical resistance was impaired in a way that affected the degree to which he succumbed and died of a later respiratory infection while on the hustings for a Federal colleague in Central Queensland in 1921. Looking back, we can only surmise that had he not been struck down, he may well have become Prime Minister of Australia in the 1920s and so led the chartering of a different course for the nation into the Depression years.