

T J RYAN¹

Roger Scott

In May 1915, Queensland saw the election of the Labor government of Thomas Joseph Ryan. He was sworn in on 1 June. An extraordinary age of reform and change took place over the next few years in Queensland. Many of these achievements resonate with contemporary struggles, especially in relation to the trade union movement.

A little over two years ago I accepted an invitation from the Leader of the Opposition, Annastacia Palaszczuk, to create and lead something to be called the TJRyan Foundation.

I had a clean sheet. I also had only the haziest impression of why Ryan should be singled out for recognition above all others in ALP history. I refreshed my memory by re-reading the excellent biography written by my former University of Queensland colleague and ALP activist the late Denis Murphy. This was published under the simple title, *T J Ryan – A Political Biography*.²

I sought any corrective to Denis's own partisanship by reading more conservative historians of Ryan's own era. None was forthcoming – even the quirky conservative Charles A Bernays opined, 'among the long array of leaders and other prominent politicians we have had, it can truly be said that he is unequalled in his common sense and direct methods.'³

And then I studied the extraordinary range of Ryan's achievements which had led to his unique place in Queensland history and his wider and longer-term influence. How many remember, for example, that he legislated to allow women to sit in Parliament? That he inaugurated the abolition of capital punishment generations before this was universal in other states or in Britain? That he wanted locals appointed as governors and that he wanted the removal of imperial honours?

Murphy offered a concise summary of the ALP under Ryan and his successor Theodore:

Its essential feature was a pragmatic and practical approach to political issues, with little reliance on political theory, but with a strong streak of idealism and nationalism – and a determination to use the power of the state to provide for a more equal distribution of wealth.

Its other aims were to ensure that employees worked in safe and reasonable conditions, to provide state assistance for the aged, the invalids, and children and to assist "selectors" (small farmers) and to provide for government by the people on the basis of majority rule.

State business enterprises were seen as a means of breaking the economic and therefore the political and social power of monopoly capitalism.⁴

¹ This is the full text of an address by Professor Roger Scott at an event at Parliament House, Queensland, on 1 June 2015, marking the centenary of the day on which the Ryan Government was sworn in.

² Denis Murphy, *T J Ryan: a Political Biography*, University of Queensland Press, 1975.

³ Charles A Bernays, *Queensland Politics during sixty years, 1859-1919*, Government Printer, 1920. Bernays was Clerk of the Legislative Assembly.

⁴ Denis Murphy, *Labor in Politics – the state labor parties in Australia 1880-1920*, University of Queensland Press, 1975, p.129.

Thus I came to appreciate the wisdom of Annastacia's choice of name for the organization and its continuing relevance to Queensland politics. So I looked again at the statue of Ryan in central Brisbane, a unique tribute to the memory of a great leader – or, more accurately, as inscribed at the base of the statue, '**scholar, jurist and statesman**'.

(1) Scholar

Let me start with Ryan as a scholar. Ryan was a graduate, an extraordinarily rare commodity in the Queensland labour movement then, and for another two generations. Now we have a Minister with a PhD (although he kept that well hidden in his campaign literature).

Ryan was proud of his learning and unafraid to defend it against the assumptions of most of his trade union colleagues. He made important contributions to education, expanding state primary schooling and working closely with the longer-established church and independent grammar schools to provide scholarships for working-class children.

His name lives on in the wider community in the annual award of the T J Ryan medals awarded over the years to those who distinguished themselves as scholars and reincarnated more recently as contributors to community life.

His work in education was assisted by another famous Queenslander, J D Story as the under-secretary of the Department of Public Instruction. So I have a unique connection of once having been the holder of the J D Story Chair of Public Administration and now the Executive Director of the T J Ryan Foundation. Between them, Story and Ryan cast long shadows over education and the public service all the way into the current era.

Unlike Story, who survived into the 1960's as the first Vice-Chancellor of the University of Queensland, Ryan died young in 1921 - not defeated but exhausted.

The other connection I have with Ryan I share – almost absurdly - with former Premier Campbell Newman. Campbell and I attended (not at the same time) the same Grammar School where Ryan had earlier taught. I went there in the 1950's as a scholarship-boy son of a bus driver. But, given the class immobility which characterizes such institutions in places like Launceston, it is absolutely certain that Ryan would have taught the grandfathers of some of my classmates.

And he taught them Latin. Mr Shorten last week graced the pages of the *Courier Mail* – an unlikely event in itself. But he started his column with the information that he learnt Latin at school.

'Don't get me wrong, it does come in handy,' he said. 'But whenever I go overseas I wonder if I would have been better off learning a language that people actually speak.'

As President of the University of Queensland Friends of Antiquity, this cut me to the quick, apparently aligning Mr Shorten with local philistines.

When I expressed a contrary view, way back in 1990, I was a mere bureaucrat. As Director-General, I was at the disposal of Education Ministers - and teacher union officials like John Battams – and literally at the disposal of the Head of the Cabinet Office. Unlike Mr Shorten, though, one K Rudd preferred Chinese as a compulsory subject rather than computer coding. But I remain in Ryan's camp when it comes to education and scholarship.

(2) Jurist

As a jurist, Ryan moved to study law part-time while teaching in central Queensland. He was clearly a prodigious student.

His engagement with the union movement flowed from his commitment to defending union rights in the courts. Once he came into parliament in 1909, the law remained his great strength and time commitment.

As Premier from 1915 to 1919, he chose to retain the demanding portfolio of Attorney-General and to travel overseas and interstate in that role.

His skill as a jurist was particularly in the field of Commonwealth-state relations and in the separation of powers between Executive, the Judiciary and the Legislature. A difference from the more recent past in terms of the expertise and understanding of Premiers and Attorney-Generals. This demonstrated achievement in jurisprudence made him a wholly credible and widely supported candidate for Chief Justice in the later stages of his career.

Murphy reports that there is plenty of contemporary testimony that Ryan's capacities as a jurist were widely admired, even by his opponents and those who lost out to him in court arguments. Here is another mark of difference between his era and the current environment. Through absolutely no fault of her own, the current Attorney-General has a lot of ground to make up before she can return us to the shared values and attitudes of the Ryan era.

3. Statesman

But we are here tonight to honour Ryan in the third category nominated on his statue - as a statesman. If ever a politician deserved the unique honour of a statue in Brisbane like this one, it was Thomas J Ryan.

From being sworn in on 1 June 1915, Ryan rose to become arguably the most successful progressive leader in Australian history.

Ryan's strength was his extraordinary grasp of the nature of politics as a combination of compassion and determination.

He made Queensland the dominant influence for social reform during his generation and beyond.

Let me quote a section from Tom Cochrane's paper which also appears on the Ryan Foundation website:

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.⁵

The Anzac mythology rests on an assumption of national unity and common purpose. What has been hidden has been the vigorous contest which was occurring which challenged that myth. There has been a hugely successful propaganda campaign to paper over the tensions of the period.

Ryan was the major figure in that national contest. He found allies in unlikely places within the Catholic Church hierarchy. But he was the main political leader opposing conscription in a contest which divided rather than united an emergent nation. On two occasions, he resisted the populists in his own party and the conservative forces imbued with imperial ideals. On two occasions, the electorate voted in referenda to validate his opposition.

He bestrode the ALP nationally as a colossus and eventually could not resist the urgent summons to work at the national level.

⁵ Tom Cochrane, *T J Ryan - A Centenary Note*, http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/dbase_upl/Research_Report_28_TJRyan.pdf.

But a particular reason to celebrate are his achievements within Queensland and in specifically in the field of industrial relations and labour law.

As Premier and Attorney-General he built the superstructure of industrial relations, particularly workers compensation, unemployment insurance, conciliation and arbitration and the facilitation of union access to work-places. All issues formulated a century ago but under threat less than a year ago.

He was also a genuine democratic socialist who believed in the efficacy and desirability of services being provided by government. He saw that equality and social justice meant that wealth distribution should not be left to the vagaries of the market and the consequent exploitation of private capitalism.

The list of state-operated industries and state-sponsored marketing boards would make the eyes of members of the H R Nicholls Society water – for example, state-owned butchers shops, state-owned hotels, state-owned mines and state-owned steel works, even state-owned insurance companies.

He would have been a kindred spirit of Robby Katter rather than Bob Hawke in his critique of monopoly capitalism. Ryan came from a farming background and never forgot it. Like the Katters, he saw himself as a friend of the battling farmers fighting against the big banks, foreign ownership and monopolies like CSR. Murphy reports that Ryan considered struggling farmers as rural workers and spoke openly of a natural alliance between farmers and workers. He kept the ALP alive in the bush long after the employment base of unionism had moved to the cities.

Ryan's success in Queensland led him to move by invitation onto the wider national stage to take on the might of William Hughes. He accepted this call despite the alternative attraction of becoming a leading jurist and despite the debilitation of poor health.

When he died soon afterwards, the outpouring of emotion was channeled into public subscriptions paying for the statue in Queens Gardens, which remains with us as both a memorial and a reminder of the need to defend his legacy.

Murphy records Ryan's own diary entry describing why he had decided not to become a jurist or retire on legitimate health grounds but to move instead onto the national stage:

I have found that the great body of the Australian public would stand with a man when he was willing to fight, particularly for a good cause. That has been my experience in the past and I hope it will be in the future.

After he died out on the campaign trail, his statue provided an epitaph as well as a tribute to our main speakers⁶ tonight:

The life that ceased in mid-career
The light of other men shall be
With purpose high and conscience clear
Who'll seek to serve the state as he.

⁶ Queensland Premier, Annastacia Palaszczuk, and Leader of the Federal Opposition, Bill Shorten.