SOME ASPECTS
OF THE FEDERAL POLITICAL CAREER
OF ANDREW FISHER

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ABSTRACT

Andrew Fisher was prime minister of Australia three times. During his second ministry (1910-1913) he headed a government that was, until the 1940s, Australia’s most reformist government. Fisher’s second government controlled both Houses; it was the first effective Labor administration in the history of the Commonwealth. In the three years, 113 Acts were placed on the statute books changing the future pattern of the Commonwealth.

Despite the volume of legislation and changes in the political life of Australia during his ministry, there is no definitive full-scale biographical published work on Andrew Fisher. There are only limited articles upon his federal political career. Until the 1960s most historians considered Fisher a bit-player, a second ranker whose main quality was his moderating influence upon the Caucus and Labor ministry.

Few historians have discussed Fisher’s role in the Dreadnought scare of 1909, nor the background to his attempts to change the Constitution in order to correct the considered deficiencies in the original drafting. This thesis will attempt to redress these omissions from historical scholarship.

Firstly, it investigates Fisher’s reaction to the Dreadnought scare in 1909 and the reasons for his refusal to agree to the financing of the Australian navy by overseas borrowing. It will consider the proposition that Andrew Fisher, while wanting an Australian Navy, was not prepared to go to foreign lenders for finance, believing that, overall, Australia was rich enough to pay for her defence without burdening future generations with debt.

Secondly it enquires into his attempts in his second ministry of 1910-1913 to correct the Constitution, by referenda, in the areas of trade, commerce, and labour in order to be able to carry out the fighting platform of the Labor Party.
This is to certify that the thesis comprises only my original work except where indicated in the preface; due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used; the thesis is 30,000 words in length inclusive of footnotes, but exclusive of tables, maps, appendices and bibliography.

Signed:   E. W. Humphreys

Edward William Humphreys.
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Firstly to my mother, Alice Humphreys (née Coutts), a London working-class Mum, who worked hard to ensure that her children took full advantage of the limited education available.

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INTRODUCTION

Andrew Fisher was Prime Minister of Australia three times—1908-9, 1910-13 and 1914-15 — a total of 4 years and 10 months. He was not only the longest-serving Labor Prime Minister before Bob Hawke (1983-91), but before Hawke’s three successive wins Fisher was the only Labor leader to win government at two general elections and to lead three Labor governments.1 More importantly, with control of both chambers 1910-13, Fisher led the first federal Ministry with a parliamentary majority, for until then Australia had known only minority federal governments. Their Senate majority was so substantial, a clean sweep, that Labor was assured of control of the Senate irrespective of the outcome of the 1913 general election. Fisher's Ministry was not only the first fully effective Labor administration in the history of the Commonwealth but also arguably the most reformist government until Labor's wartime governments of the 1940s. It began the Federal Labor tradition of engrossing Federal power and in three years (1910-13), 113 Acts were placed on the statute books.2 With Hawke, Fisher shares the misfortune of being supplanted by an ambitious deputy who led Labor to division or defeat.

The general outline of Fisher's life and political career is accessible from general histories and biographical dictionaries, and a small number of journal articles deal with limited aspects of his federal political career.3 It is striking that, despite the extensive historiography of the Labor party, and the proliferation of biographies of the party's leaders at State and Federal levels, no extensive and

1 Until Hawke, Labor Prime Ministers were effectively one-term Prime Ministers: Scullin won in 1929, but his government collapsed as a result of defections and was defeated in parliament in 1931; Curtin came to government with the support of independents in 1941, and won only one election (1943) before dying in office in 1945; Chifley won in 1946 but was defeated in 1949; Whitlam won in 1972, retained government when forced to an election in 1974, but electoral defeat followed his dismissal in 1975; Keating won in 1993 but was defeated in 1996.
definitive scholarly full-scale biographical study of Andrew Fisher has yet been published.\(^4\)

One of the possible reasons for historians largely ignoring Fisher is that his personal papers were for long not available in Australia - until 1971 and later 1981.\(^5\) When Fisher's papers did become available, they proved disappointingly thin and incomplete. While there is much on the public record, the non-Labor press during Fisher's ministries was usually vehemently anti-Labor.\(^6\)

Fisher emerges from his earliest biographical sketches in various Australian reference encyclopaedias from the 1920s to the 1940s as a Federal political figure who pales in comparison with giants such as Liberal leader Alfred Deakin and Labor's W. M. Hughes. Invariably he is presented as handsome in appearance and manner, with his neat moustache and fetching Ayrshire burr, but as a man of modest abilities, pragmatic and even plodding. The earliest entry, in the *Australian Encyclopaedia* (1927), is unsigned but the hand of the editor, A.W. Jose, is clear. Jose, Australian correspondent to *The Times* from 1904, a keen observer of Federal politics, and a confidante of Alfred Deakin, viewed Fisher as a passive figure who made 'his name as a slow-moving but upright and hard-headed politician'.\(^7\) Twelve years later, Jose for his entry on Fisher, 'Australian statesman', for *The Dictionary of National Biography 1922-1930* (1937),\(^8\) still considered Fisher as a man '[whose] ability was at that time considered mediocre, but the leader of the federal labour party, Christian Watson, appeared to have all the ability needed'.\(^9\) Jose valued Fisher essentially as a moderating influence on the excesses of the Federal Labor Party. Drawing upon this article, 'private information' and 'personal knowledge', Jose projected his view of Fisher as high-principled, sound and sober, but essentially of mediocre ability. He concluded that 'Fisher's career [was] a triumph of


\(^6\) Ellis in 1922 states 'Practically the whole of the Press was against him', 21.


character', his three outstanding qualities being his personal modesty, his exact knowledge of his own limitations, and his strong devotion to the Empire.

Jose is, however, one of the few historians to reveal Fisher's strength of character in facing a restive Caucus. While accepting the principle that Cabinet should be chosen by the Caucus, Fisher insisted that the leader should allot the portfolios, a policy that has held firm till this day. Jose's representation of Fisher very much mirrors Jose's own politics as a Liberal and an Empire loyalist. And this view of Fisher continued to be influential for a generation: Percival Serle (1949) wrote that 'there were men of greater ability than Fisher in the ranks of Labour, but none so dependable, and he was elected leader'. Serle stressed Fisher's modest, sincere, hardworking and courageous dependability as Labor leader, and the 'prolific record' of his Ministry 1910-13. The subtext is that Fisher was a distinct second-ranker, who held his party together in government in 1910-13, and is to be remembered for his moderating influence. This judgement is repeated almost word for word in A.H. Chisholm's *The Australian Encyclopaedia* (1958). It is striking that neither Jose nor Serle nor Chisholm make reference to Labor's preoccupation with constitutional change, and Fisher's role in the referenda of 1910 and 1913.

By the time of the appearance in 1955 of Gordon Greenwood's *Australia*, for long the standard single volume social and political history, these stereotypical views of Fisher had become entrenched. Greenwood's own chapter on 'National Development and Social Experimentation 1901-1914' appraised pre-war Federal politicians against the standard set by Deakin — Fisher was judged 'capable, tenacious and wholly sincere, but somewhat uninspired'. Labor leadership went to the 'passionately sincere' Fisher rather than Hughes, the party's most dynamic figure. And yet, taking the long view of Federal Labor history, Greenwood compared Fisher more than favourably with Second World Wartime leaders Curtin

10 Fisher certainly knew when he needed expert advice. For example see his correspondence with Sir Timothy Coghlan on conversion of State debts, Sir Timothy Coghlan Papers, NLA, MS6335, Folder 7, Fisher to Coghlan 16 January 1907, 3 June 1908.
11 A strength revealed when he threatened the Premiers over the Surplus Revenue Bill 1910, see CPD, 55, 415.
and Chifley, and up to the time of his writing Fisher's second term of office from 1910 to 1913 remained the most notable in Labour's federal record.\(^{16}\)

In the 1960s a number of distinguished Australian historians wrote about Fisher, either from personal acquaintance or out of necessity because Fisher was an associate of the subject of their major biographies. M.H. Ellis, the mercurial journalist and historian, and distinguished biographer of early colonial figures, included a sketch of Fisher in his notable series on Australian Prime Ministers for the *Bulletin* in 1962. Ellis was familiar with the physical and social milieu of the Queensland bush that shaped Fisher, and he had been a journalist in Brisbane.\(^ {17}\)

Indeed, in 1962 he claimed to have known 'Andy Fisher' from 1908, and was therefore in a position to endorse the view of Fisher as 'the most inarticulate Party leader, not to mention Prime Minister, who ever sat in office in Australia', adding for good measure 'or for that matter, anywhere else'. Ellis was an acerbic writer, and his strongly anti-Labor views seep like acid through his portrait of the simple, modest, unoriginal, cautious Scot as a prodigious reader and borrower of ideas. It is important to note that essentially Fisher offended Ellis because Ellis believed he was a party man who followed rather than led, which gave him 'an advantage in a party which mistrusted the brilliance and independence of such men as Hughes'. Despite the exaggerations of Ellis's portrait, it does have the virtue of appreciating Fisher as a challenging figure, a socialist and a centralist, rather than merely as a moderating influence on Labor radicalism. The weakness is that Ellis, appalled by the discipline and power of Caucus and convinced that Fisher was a mere translator of the will of Caucus, could not appreciate what skills Fisher displayed as leader and manager. I will argue that Ellis misinterpreted Fisher's relationship with Caucus and also the 1913 general election results.

To the biographers, Fisher appeared as a bit player in the first large-scale dramas of early federal politics. Laurie Fitzhardinge, the biographer of Fisher's successor as Prime Minister, W. M. Hughes (*That Fiery Particle* (1964)),\(^ {18}\) drew on W. Farmer-Whyte's *William Morris Hughes: His Life and Times* (1957), Hughes's recollections, and on the memoirs of Malcolm Shepherd,\(^ {19}\) secretary to a succession of Prime Ministers, for his view of Fisher. Fitzhardinge had the most to say about

\(^{16}\) Greenwood, *Australia*, 222, 224-5.
\(^{17}\) For biography see, ADB 14, 95.
\(^{18}\) Fitzhardinge, *William Morris Hughes*, Fitzhardinge was very careful to quote his sources.
Fisher's qualities though apparently confused over some dates and incorrect in referring to Fisher's 'naive pleasure of the trappings of office'. He considered Fisher the ablest member of the Queensland group, a man with an impeccable orthodox Labor background, though without eloquence. Both Hughes and Shepherd were egocentric, highly ambitious, and given to big-noting themselves, so their views of Fisher should be approached with some caution.

In 1965 J.A. La Nauze published a two-volume study of Alfred Deakin that, for a profile of Fisher, relied upon the memories of Hughes and the memoirs of Shepherd. There followed Robin Gollan's 1968 study of the origins and early history of the Commonwealth Bank, a study that rescued Fisher's reputation from the hoary legend that the bank had been 'King' O'Malley's sole invention. From the 1970s there were signs of a breaking away from the dominant view of Fisher. A reassessment started to emerge. For the first time some of Fisher's papers became available in the National Library. The view of Fisher as a worthy but unoriginal plodder was gradually revised; his employment as a supporting character in the drama of the early Federation period was ending. The fact that he was Prime Minister three times with considerable accomplishments to his career was now being acknowledged. Historians Dennis Murphy and Clem Lloyd were central to this process of revision, although their untimely deaths prevented the production of full-scale biographies.

In 1970 Geoffrey Marginson, a Queenslander, offered ('Andrew Fisher—The Views Of The Practical Reformer') a still useful analysis of Fisher's concept of the responsibility of government to 'legislate in the interests of the whole of humanity rather than a class', and covered his career in colonial politics. The anthology was edited by Dennis Murphy who later contributed to the Australian Dictionary of Biography (1981) what, to that date, was the best short account of Fisher's career. Murphy's judgement was convincingly impressive and balanced, drawing upon the Fisher papers in the National Library. He omitted, however, to consider the Dreadnought scare of Fisher's first term which might have illuminated the nature of

19 See Malcolm Booker's comments The Great Professional. A Study of W. M. Hughes. Sydney: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1980, Preface; Punch (Melbourne) 6 July 1911, 4, Shepherd was so proud of this article he featured it whole in his memoirs.
20 Fitzhardinge, Hughes, 252.
23 Marginson, "Andrew Fisher".
24 Murphy, "Fisher, Andrew", 502-7.
Fisher’s nationalism and imperialism. Murphy saw Fisher as a radical on the left of his party, a man who foresaw the coming of a 1910 Labor Government. Like Patrick Weller, editor of Caucus Minutes 1901-1949, Murphy did not believe Caucus completely controlled Fisher. He considered Fisher one of the most successful Australian politicians and his record 'lasted beyond the divisions that Hughes left in the Labor Party and Australia'. Within days of Fisher’s departure in 1910, Hughes incompetent handling of Caucus was perceived. Theseus in the Argus commented:

Mr. Fisher; he sits between the strong factions; they clash against his impassivity, wear themselves out, and all's over. After less than a month of Mr. Hughes, the quarrels of the caucus have begun to blaze within Parliament.

Scott Brodie, in Australia's Prime Ministers (1988), Peter Edwards' “Fisher, Andrew” (2004), and Clem Lloyd's “Andrew Fisher” (2000) all judged Fisher as one of Australia's most underestimated leaders, the man who prepared the Labor Party for the 1910 election, and who felt certain of victory. Scott Brodie offered an affirmative evaluation of Fisher's capabilities and achievements in his 'creating a coherent force out of the fiercely opposed factions of the Labor Party'. Lloyd, perhaps, relies overmuch on historians Jose, Ellis and Murphy, and the memoirs of Fisher's secretary, Malcolm Shepherd, and he ignores the works of later historians such as Brodie, Murdoch and Marginson. On the other hand, Lloyd insists that Fisher's most incisive critic was his private secretary, Malcolm Shepherd, who concluded that 'despite defects, some substantial, Fisher's earnestness, decency, intelligence and sincerity far outweighed the blemishes'. More recently W.K. Anderson has written about Fisher's honesty and integrity, as displayed by his refusal to accept gifts with any political strings.

John Murdoch's short study of Fisher, A Million to One Against, (1998) is an overall study of the man and overturns the characterization of Fisher as a merely friendly not exceptionally brilliant man, showing he was 'no means merely a well-meaning figurehead . . . but instead a most important part of the Labor successes

26 Argus, 22 October 1910, 6.
27 Brodie, Australia's Prime Ministers, 65-6.
30 Anderson, ”Andrew Fisher”, 189-207.
31 Murdoch, A Million to One Against.
up to 1914. As to his performance as a public speaker, Murdoch states that though few ever classified him as a good orator, his debating skills had been honed at public meetings in his younger days and all his life his speeches radiated sincerity and honesty, the hallmark of his personality. This quality is confirmed by Fisher’s contemporary Herbert Campbell-Jones, a reporter and Chief of Staff of the *Argus* (Melbourne) 1895-1911, who wrote

> Speech making came to him naturally . . . [he] never hesitated to discard notions which had proved impracticable, deceptive or opposed to the public interest.

It is obvious from this review of the historiography of Andrew Fisher in Federal politics that, since the earlier works of the historians of the 1960s, a more positive view has emerged from the fresh research. Yet the most intense research to date, that of Bernard Attard addresses aspects of Fisher’s career after he left Federal Parliament. Attard nevertheless regards Fisher as one of Labor’s most successful Prime Ministers.

We are beginning to understand that, despite the defects highlighted by earlier writers, despite being a party leader supposedly of secondary talent, that Fisher was able, as the record reveals, to oversee drastic and constructive parliamentary legislation and administrative change. Such backhanded assessments can hardly explain why Fisher was elected Party leader, and re-elected leader six times. The man must have had more than a pleasant nature to lead between fifty to seventy ambitious Labor politicians, including Hughes. The amount of work that Fisher had to master is revealed by his Cabinet note of 8 August 1910, which deals with subjects from the appointment of an entomologist for Papua to arrangements for the Land Assessment Act, the Defence Act, and amendment of the Constitution.

Although this thesis does not attempt an extensive and definitive scholarly biography of Fisher, it extends the revised assessment of Fisher. His Federal

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32 Ibid, xiii.
33 Ibid, 24-5.
36 For summary of the legislation passed by Fisher’s Labor governments see Fisher Papers, NLA MS2919/3/393-413.
political career spanned sixteen years, and this thesis illuminates two specific and key aspects of his governance and federal career: his handling of the Dreadnought scare and of the referenda of 1911 and 1913. These form the basis first, of my revision of the misunderstandings that earlier historians had about Fisher and, second, of my reinterpretation of the evidence of his character and achievements. These episodes were chosen because they have not been properly examined and because they give us the chance to ask some hard questions about Fisher. How, as Prime Minister in 1909, did Fisher respond to the nation-wide emotional clamour for Australia to make a gift to the ‘Mother country’ of a Dreadnought battleship, during the race for naval supremacy between Britain and Germany? Once Labor had legislated most of its immediately achievable program, how did it intend to implement its ambitious plans for social justice and industrial fairplay through ‘New Protection’ and the restriction of monopolies? How did Fisher and Labor handle the referenda required to enlarge Commonwealth powers so that Labor could achieve its wider objectives?

Chapter One reviews the history of the ideology of the Labor party and Andrew Fisher’s impact on the Federal scene for the years 1901-1908. Chapter Two analyses the Dreadnought episode and shows that a common view that Fisher simply echoed Deakin and completed the Liberals’ defence policy is not tenable. It also argues that Fisher was resolute, even canny, in his response to a newspaper-created ‘crisis’. While wanting an Australian navy as early as November 1901,38 Fisher was not prepared to finance it by borrowing.39 He asserted that Australia was wealthy enough to pay for her defence without burdening future generations. He did not just simply complete the Deakin program, but in fact kept the wider defence program on course because he would not agree to the massive subsidy required to give a Dreadnought to an overseas navy. The result was an Australian navy, onstream and available to defend Australia at the outbreak of the First World War. I will argue that had Fisher not refused to donate the vessel, there might have been no deterrent to Admiral Von Spee entering Australian waters. His stand also confirmed his implacable refusal as Treasurer to borrow for defence in peacetime.40 The Fusion Government intended to raise £3,500,000 by a loan;41 and this was the

38 See CPD, 6, 7415, 19 November 1901, debate on British New Guinea.
39 It would have been necessary to go to foreign lenders.
40 See his attitude to A.G. Stephens in 1909, Murdoch, A Million to One Against, 102.
41 CPD, 54, 6539.
issue on which Fisher fought Deakin’s government, not whether there should have been an Australian Navy.

Chapter Three enquires into Fisher’s attempts — in his second ministry, 1910-1913 — to carry out the fighting platform of the Labor Party, requiring changes in the Constitution by referenda in 1911 and 1913. It will consider the 1911 referendum as a duel between Fisher and Deakin; the Fusion wanted revenge for the 1910 defeat. Fisher had beaten Deakin twice—on the issue of the gift of a Dreadnought and then in the 1910 general election. In 1911 Deakin stumped the country. Fisher did his best but was restricted by the necessity to leave Australia to attend the Coronation of King George V. It will examine the importance of the referenda, concerned as it was with the extension of Commonwealth powers at the expense of the States in the areas of trade, commerce, and labour. Combines, commercial trusts and financial institutions were considered by Labor to be the chief enemies of the workers. Historians have asserted that Fisher took little part in the referenda, but this chapter will argue that his contribution to the 1911 referenda, touring Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, was substantial, and equal to that of Hughes and others, despite the two trips that took him out of the country at a vital time. Fisher and an eager Caucus could see no reason to delay the referenda because of Fisher’s overseas obligations. The chapter will assess the timing restraint placed by the Constitution, Federal Parliaments’ history of not sitting between December and May, and the absence of Fisher. It will consider whether Fisher misinterpreted the 1910 results, believing that the same majorities that voted Labor to power would sanction amendments to allow its program to be realised. The 1910 election win was based on individual electorates and the work of individual Labor organizations getting out their particular vote. A general election required a party to have the support of a majority of seats in the House of Representatives and this did not require a majority of votes. In the 1910 general election, the Labor Party had received only 49 % of the overall vote. A referendum to be successful requires ‘in a majority of States a majority ['YES votes] of the electors voting . . . and a majority of all the electors [in Australia] voting’.42 It would need more work and education to explain to the electorate what it was all about. There was no distribution of official literature; the vote was very much along party lines.

42 Section 128 of the Australian Constitution.
I will point out that, despite the increase in the enrolled vote in 1911, the number of ballot papers issued was fewer than in 1910, and the 'Yes' vote in all States other than South Australia was down compared with the Labor vote in 1910. I will argue that, generally, 1911 demonstrated the lack of effort of the Federal Labor Party in educating, as opposed to haranguing, the voter, and in getting out the vote.

Even so, Fisher's determination pushed the 1913 referenda, which nearly succeeded. His effort to increase the powers of Federal Parliament obtained a higher overall percentage of the vote, than that achieved by any Labor Prime Minister since, other than Chifley in 1946. By 1913 the subject was more amenable to the electorate and maybe electors were beginning at last to understand Labor's argument for the necessity for the changes. Arguments had been printed and circulated. The failure to obtain the approval of the electorate cannot be regarded as a failure of Fisher as a party leader. The results of all referenda, until 1999, reveal that the electorate is extremely loathe to increase the power of Federal Parliament.

43 The Chifley 1946 referenda related to social services, organised marketing of primary products and terms and conditions of industrial employment. Only the social services provision was favoured by a majority of States. In 1984, Hawke, on 'Terms of Senators' obtained 50.64% of the overall vote, with a majority only in New South Wales and Victoria.

44 See Appendix B.
CHAPTER ONE.

ANDREW FISHER AND THE FEDERAL LABOR PARTY 1901-1908.

ANDREW FISHER IN CONTEXT

Fisher’s response to the scare and his policies on constitutional reform can only be understood in the context of the ideology of the Labor Party, the political instability in the first eight years of the Commonwealth, and the attitudes that Australians had to national and imperial defence.

The national policy of the Labor party provided the context for the decisions of Andrew Fisher and the Labor ministries of 1904, 1908, and 1910-13. Early Federal Labor parliamentarians had to struggle with the problem that the party was organized primarily at the Trade Union and State levels, and only secondarily at the Federal level. From Fisher’s point of view, however, many State politicians retained a narrow parochial outlook,¹ as instanced by the action of New South Wales delegates at the 1902 Conference.² The development of the official Labor party ideology can be perceived from the three Commonwealth Political Labor Conferences held in 1902, 1905 and 1908.³ In 1908, during a speech in the House, Fisher referred to the discipline of the Party whereby every member had the right to vote as he pleased, except on platform questions, to which they were pledged to their constituents.⁴ Indeed, Deakin’s reasons for opposing the Labor party was the rejection of the Labor approach to politics — a rejection of the Caucus, the pledge, the structure and the exclusiveness of the Labor party.⁵

Everything about Fisher’s background inclined him to accept the class-based solidarity and discipline of the Labor Party. Fisher came from a long line of coal miners, and had been a miner since early childhood; he emigrated from Scotland in 1885, where the strength of his nature and the determination had already been

¹ An outlook even as late as 1916, see the Governor-General to A. Bonar Law, 16 May 1916, NLA, A6661/1, Item 379.
² CPLC 1902, 5-7.
³ Round Table 'The Labor Movement in Australia,' September 1912, 8, 660.
⁴ CPD, 46, 11667. CPD; 47, 129 &135; Caucus Minutes, 50; Caucus Minutes, 189, Fn. 5. See Sawer, Australian Federal Politics, 15.
forged by his experience as a union organiser with a history of being blacklisted by employers. He settled in Gympie where he became 'one of the significant members of the Gympie Labour movement'. In 1893 he was elected to the Queensland Legislative Assembly, and became a co-founder of the Gympie Truth in 1899 because of his conviction that his defeat in the 1896 Queensland election had been due to opposition from the local press. Re-elected in December 1899, he was a member of the Dawson Government, the first Labour government in the world. Although they were in office for only six days, 'the new ministers uncovered evidence of incompetent administration and corruption by their predecessors'. It was those years, in the Queensland parliament, that provided Fisher with valuable experience, especially the knowledge of the political corruption involved in State and bank borrowings.

In 1901 he moved to the new Federal parliament as the member for Wide Bay. He was now dealing with men whose responsibilities were broader and more powerful. On 20 May 1901 the Caucus, composed of all members of each Chamber, agreed on a basic Fighting Platform of five planks: a White Australia, adult suffrage, old age pensions, a citizen army and compulsory arbitration. It resolved that 'all questions affecting the platform shall be bound by the majority vote of the caucus'. A tight discipline was imposed upon the Federal Labor members to abide by the Caucus majority decisions. There was no recorded discussion on the need for an Australian navy and there were no comments upon the shortcomings of the Constitution.

As early as 1902, the Commonwealth Labor Conference adopted a general platform that included:

- Item 4. Nationalisation of Monopolies;
- Item 6. Restriction of Public Borrowing;
- Item 10. Uniform Industrial legislation: amendment of the Constitution to provide for same.

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9 Caucus Minutes, 45.

10 Ibid, 50.

11 Ibid, 84.

The longest debate recorded at the conference was on Frank Tudor’s motion that 'all industrial legislation be taken over by the Federal Government'. The resolution was passed by only 13 to 10 votes, with the whole New South Wales contingent (5) against the resolution.\textsuperscript{13} It was the first indication of future disagreement within the Federal Labor Party between advocates of increased federal powers and state-righters. The conference opposed the proposal for an increased subsidy for the maintenance of an Imperial Naval squadron. It considered that any money available for naval defence should be used to form an Australian-owned and -controlled navy to protect the country from blackmail by a Japanese 'strong cruiser'.\textsuperscript{14} There was also a desire to restrict expenditure on military defence to the annual amount spent immediately preceding the 1899 Federal Referendum.\textsuperscript{15} While the 'Fighting Platform included 'Citizen Defence Force' and 'Restriction of Public Borrowing', the General Platform included 'Citizen Military Force and Australian-owned Navy'. The Conference urged that there should be no foreign borrowing except for the conversion of State loans,\textsuperscript{16} and that public borrowing be reduced to a minimum, 'and necessary loans to have a statutory provision for sinking funds'.\textsuperscript{17} Queenslanders put and seconded this motion: both were aware of the political corruption involved in the Queensland banking scandal.\textsuperscript{18}

At the 1905 Conference the Fighting and General Platform resolutions contained exactly the same wording in regard to public borrowing and defence. There was no recorded discussion upon the two subjects and no resolutions noted, although this was less than six weeks after Japan was triumphant at the naval battle of Tsushima. The Conference made the aim to achieve uniform industrial legislation a Fighting plank.

The Brisbane 1908 Conference, with Fisher as President, was more spirited than the previous two.\textsuperscript{19} The opening debate on Industrial Legislation already showed a division in the ranks, along Commonwealth and States lines.\textsuperscript{20} This division could be seen fifteen months later in a Caucus meeting when Senator J.C.

\textsuperscript{13} CPLC 1902, 5-7.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, Official Minutes 8-10.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, Official Minutes 9, Official Report 10.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, Official Minutes 9, Official Report 12.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, Official Minutes 10.
\textsuperscript{18} Spence, Australia's Awakening, 236-239.
\textsuperscript{19} Official Report of the Fourth Commonwealth Political Labor Conference. With Preface by the Secretary, Trades Hall, Brisbane, Monday, July 6, 1908, "Worker", preface.(Later referred as CPLC 1908).
\textsuperscript{20} CPLC 1908, 7-12.
Stewart (Queensland) and W. Webster (Gwydir, NSW) moved an amendment regarding the report on the Interstate Commission Bill.\textsuperscript{21}

In his Presidential Address, Fisher made no reference either to borrowing or defence; his prime concerns seemed to be the lack of an authentic history giving the rise and progress of Labour, and the absence of searching statistics dealing with the social condition of the people.\textsuperscript{22} Apart from his Presidential Address, it appears that Fisher took no part in the later debates. A motion to make the 'Amendment of the Constitution to ensure effective Federal legislation for New Protection and Arbitration' a plank in the Fighting Platform was passed unanimously.\textsuperscript{23} Included in the Fighting Platform as Plank 3 was 'Nationalisation of Monopolies', further expanded in Item 3 of the General Platform, as 'Nationalisation of Monopolies—if necessary, amendment of Constitution to provide for same'.\textsuperscript{24} Two months later in a Caucus meeting Fisher moved

\begin{quote}
that . . . in view of the judgement of the High Court [in King v Barger]\textsuperscript{25} that steps be taken to amend the Constitution to empower the C-wealth Parliament to give as effective protection to the workers and consumers as to the manufacturers—Carried unanimously.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

This subject appeared to lapse in Caucus until 7 July 1909, when Tudor successfully moved a motion that a Constitutional amendment should be drawn up to provide for a 'new protection Trade Union Label'.\textsuperscript{27}

During the initial debate on defence Senator Needham was the only speaker to refer to the need for an Australian navy; then followed at great length a debate that led to General Platform, Plank 8, being amended to Plank 5 reading 'Citizens Defence Force with compulsory military training and Australian-owned and controlled navy'.\textsuperscript{28} The Fighting Platform plank, however, still only read 'Citizens

\begin{footnotes}
\item[21] \textit{Caucus Minutes}, 245.
\item[22] CPLC 1908, 13. See also suggestion of creation of a Federal Statistical Department, CPD, 15, 2953, 31 July 1903.
\item[23] CPLC 1908, 25.
\item[24] Ibid, 42.
\item[25] The Commonwealth claimed under the \textit{Excise Tariff Act} 1906 excise duty and penalties from the defendants who had not provided fair and reasonable conditions of employment so as to entitle them to exemption. The High Court, three to two, held the relevant sections of the Act were invalid as it attempted to regulate conditions of employment, a subject not within any head of Commonwealth power. See Sawer, \textit{Australian Federal Politics}, 83.
\item[26] Caucus Minutes, 216.
\item[27] Caucus Minutes, 232. \textit{Caucus Minutes} notes this appears to be an addition written by Watkins vertically in the margin.
\item[28] CPLC 1908, 20.
\end{footnotes}
Defence Force'. The conference decided that 'military and naval expenditure be allotted from proceeds of direct taxation'.

The 1902 Conference had 'Restriction of Public Borrowing' as Plank 6 on both the Fighting and General Platforms. It passed resolutions that 'the Conference urges that provision be made against foreign borrowing, except for the conversion of state loans', and that 'public borrowings be reduced to a minimum, and necessary loans to have statutory provision for sinking funds'. The 1905 and 1908 conferences contained the same planks of 'Restriction of Public Borrowing' and no discussion was recorded. This restriction had always been one of the main features of the Federal Labor's financial policy, and the cost of the Australian fleet was to be paid for out of revenue.

By 1912, six of the planks including an Australian-owned and controlled navy had been made law. These—with the exception of the four planks in relation to new protection, nationalization of monopolies, Arbitration Act amendment and navigation laws — comprised the whole of the policy put forward at the 1908 conference in the fighting platform.

It is appropriate here to consider the federal political history of Andrew Fisher in the period before becoming Prime Minister in 1908. From the start he was determined to ensure recognition of the Labor Party's influence in the Federal Parliament. In 1901 there was a question regarding the practice of recognition of parties other than His Majesty's Government and His Majesty's Opposition, for the Labor party was neither. It was Fisher who made it very clear:

if we fail [to get our rights as a party] by petition, we shall get them by means of the inherent power of the party . . . There will be no begging and praying on behalf of the labour [sic] party in this House while I am a member of that party . . . [and] it should be clearly laid down what position we occupy. The business of the House cannot proceed without a coalition of both sides, if the Labor party is to be ignored.

He was no friend of New South Wales, in his sarcastic phrase 'the grand old mother State' with its 'city of the beautiful harbour'. He objected to what he considered as undue pressure by merchants of Sydney resulting in the New South Wales Government bringing pressure upon the Commonwealth to alter its

29 Ibid.
30 CPLC 1902, Official Minutes 9; Official Report, 12.
32 CPD, 6, 8124.
33 CPD, 33, 3020-22; CPD, 35, 5562.
administrative procedures, and to the 'clamouring of politicians of the State' regarding the location of the Federal Capital: 'the grand old mother State desires to direct the national policy'. In 1905 he pointed out that during the first Federal Parliament the New South Wales politicians impressed upon fellow members that federation would never be properly consummated until the Federal capital was established in that State. He observed

'It seems to be assumed . . . in New South Wales that that State is not merely the mother State, but all Australia. The . . . people of the other States are almost tired of the carping and critical attitude . . . by the Parliament of New South Wales in regard to our action in this matter [the Federal Capital question].'

When Mr Kelly asked whether his strictures on the New South Wales politicians applied to his leader, J.C. Watson, Fisher forthrightly and honestly replied 'I make no exception'.

Before 1901 each of the six colonies had its own little militia and some had a small naval force. All contributed towards the upkeep of a squadron of the Imperial Navy, which was maintained in Australian and New Zealand waters. Thus the country's defence depended upon the British navy controlled from Whitehall. Very early in the history of the new Commonwealth, the question of the efficiency and composition of the defence system forced itself upon public attention. As early as November 1901, during the debate on British New Guinea and the defence of Australia, Fisher had asserted:

'The sooner we recognise . . . we are a nation and require a fleet of our own the better it will be for all concerned . . . if we are going to protect ourselves . . . [and] maintain every inch of territory that we can claim our own, we must necessarily have the means of protection.'

The 1887 naval agreement with Britain was renegotiated in 1903 increasing the subsidy to £200,000. Nevertheless many found the idea of a subsidized navy objectionable. Fisher objected to the monetary contribution because of the suggestion that the defence of Australia should be delegated to others than Australians. By taking from them the opportunity to defend themselves, it had

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34 CPD, 33, 3020-22.
35 CPD, 27, 3632-3.
36 CPD, 33, 3020-22.
37 CPD, 6, 7416.
taken from them the incentive to develop a national feeling.\textsuperscript{38} Later, during the debate on \textit{Supply}, he considered that

\begin{quote}
we shall receive the greatest benefit to the Commonwealth by encouraging the belief amongst Australian citizens that they are equally capable and worthy of governing and of filling the highest positions in the army and the navy.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

He believed it was necessary to encourage voluntary military service and was opposed to any form of conscription. He held strongly to the belief that, when there was an actual invasion or a danger of one, a wise government would first call for volunteers.\textsuperscript{40}

His views on the cost of defence and the need for the electorate to be consulted were enunciated further in the debate on the 1903 Defence Bill, and on the deficiencies in the Defence Force. He openly opposed the views of J.C. Watson, his leader, and of W.M. Hughes on the question of compulsory military training and conscription. In a verbal outburst he attacked the attitude of his leader, Watson:

\begin{quote}
I venture to tell the leader of the Labor party that it is not a question to be dealt with without an appeal to the electors . . . this is practically a mild form of conscription . . . here we have a proposal which has not been discussed by the people but which is of the very first importance. It should be carefully put before the electors before it is dealt with by us.\textsuperscript{41}
\end{quote}

During the debate Hughes foreshadowed his actions of 13 years later with the query 'why not have a referendum on the subject?' By contrast, Fisher assailed Hughes' desire to concentrate on the physical aspects of training. He asserted that 'scientific improvements . . . have proved that the small man with the better intelligence is the best fighting machine'. When the diminutive and slightly deaf Hughes chimed in with 'I shall not deny that assertion' Fisher harshly responded, 'the mere fact that the honourable and learned member comes within that category does not detract from the soundness of the contention'.\textsuperscript{42}

Fisher had always been opposed to borrowing, even for public works. He considered loans for 'non-productive purposes' placed unjustifiable burdens on posterity. During the 1905 debate on \textit{Supply}, \textit{Additions for New Works and Buildings} he declared that he was emphatically opposed to a policy of carrying out new works

\begin{footnotes}
\item[38] See CPD, 14, 2465, Fisher's speech 22 July 1903 on the Naval Agreement Bill.
\item[39] CPD, 17, 5182.
\item[40] CPD, 15 2953.
\item[41] CPD, 15, 3103-4.
\item[42] CPD, 15, 3104.
\end{footnotes}
by 'means of loan moneys'. Had Parliament not adopted that policy from the very establishment of Federation, the financial condition of the States would have been very much worse than it is. He went on to explain that works constructed out of revenue had been done perhaps 40 per cent cheaper than if constructed out of loans money. To enter upon a borrowing policy would be to reverse the pledges that many had given to their constituents. He trusted that the non-borrowing policy laid down at the initiation of the present Parliament would continue for some years to come.43

His earnest arguments expressed binding decisions from the Inter-State Labor Conference of 1908, but clearly also reflected his own convictions. One of Fisher's first actions after having been elected to Government in April 1910 was to repeal the Naval Loan Act. Therefore, in 1909, Deakin's supporters could anticipate that proposals would be put forward for direct taxation, especially as a graduated land tax was one of the planks of the Labor Party's Fighting and General platform and had been fully discussed at a Cabinet meeting.44

Fisher's opinions upon the press varied according to the context in which he discussed the subject. In 1896 he co-founded the Gympie Truth to counter the anti-Labor influence of the Gympie Times.45 Nine years later in the debate on the Electoral Bill, however, he is recorded as saying:

In Queensland we have always thought it a glorious privilege . . . to be denounced by the whole of the press. Indeed most of our success in Queensland has been due to the fact that in many cases nine-tenths of the press has denounced the radical candidates.46

He was never really impressed with 'the contemptible tactics adopted by the Age' and at the same time claimed that newspaper criticism had no terrors for him. He considered that far too much attention was paid in Parliament to the views of the press.47

The Federal Parliament had the power to deal with Invalid and old-age pensions. Fisher constantly brought this matter to the attention of Parliament. In 1906 during Committee stage of the Budget Fisher, cunningly, put in a baited hook. He commented, innocently, that the idea of introducing the penny postage was a

43 CPD, 26 2110-2111.
44 Fisher Papers, NLA MS2919/3/363-370, Cabinet Meeting 18 March 1909.
45 ADB 8, 503.
46 CPD, 30, 7128.
47 CPD, 33, 3019.
'grand one', and 'one of the objects of the Federal union was to bring about uniformity in this and other matters. But can we afford to do so now?' When Sir John Forrest, the Treasurer, replied 'Yes',

Fisher snapped back immediately, and attacked,

I am exceedingly glad to hear it. . . . What is the question of first importance before this House which has not yet been dealt with? . . . It is that of old-age pensions. Where is the policy of uniformity in that connexion? . . . we find the Ministry urging the need for uniformity in our postal service . . . and ignoring this more urgent and vital question.48

A year later when Austin Chapman, the Postmaster-General, introduced a Postal Rates Bill, Fisher declared that it would have shown better taste had they conserved the finance and provided old-age pensions as had been promised 'at the last two general elections'.49

As early as 1904 Fisher had made known his attitude to the extension of the Commonwealth powers to improve and secure the social and working conditions for workers. During the Committee debate on the Conciliation and Arbitration Bill Fisher moved that the provision should be applicable to all workers including State public servants.50 If the argument was that the amendment interfered with State rights, 'the corrective will be administered by the competent judges of the High Court—by men who are an honour to the Australian Judiciary'.51 However, if the argument was that the Federal parliament should not exceed its powers, he would reply that he was not one of those who believed the Parliament should be careful not to exceed its powers. He did not believe that the Parliament, before taking any action, should submit any doubtful question as to its legislative powers to the High Court. On the contrary, he opined that 'as a general principle [Parliament] must extend to the utmost [its] powers under the Constitution, provided of course, that the majority of members are prepared to accept the risk'. He finished with the avowal: 'it is our duty to submit a proposal to give effect to our views, and undoubtedly a newly-elected Parliament should be able to declare its opinion in these matters'.52

48 CPD, 33, 3017-18.
49 CPD, 36, 775.
50 CPD, 18, 1043. Caucus had decided that the Leader J. C. Watson should move the amendment. Caucus Minutes has said that Watson probably left this amendment, which he possibly did not expect to be carried, in Fisher's name. In any case it brought down Deakin's government and thus increased Fisher's reputation.
51 CPD, 18, 1041.
52 CPD, 18, 1044-1045.
Some two years later, during the debate on the Constitution Alteration (Special Duties) Bill, to circumvent Sect 87 the 'Braddon Blot', Fisher predicted, the day will come when this Parliament will have so many powers that it will practically have, so to speak, original jurisdiction . . . that this will be practically a sovereign Parliament. Notwithstanding the fact that we have a written Constitution, there is a spirit of unification amongst the people. Their desire is to have one national Parliament which will deal with all questions affecting Australia as a whole. . . the people say our powers are too restricted . . . The people will demand the exercise of larger powers by the Commonwealth Parliament.

But, it was the formulation and structure of the High Court, and the political background of the first three judges, that was going to be the biggest impediment to the assumed powers of the Commonwealth. Despite the history and lengthy debates over the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Act, the Court's decision that State railways were excluded from the jurisdiction of that Act made the Labor Party realise that the Federal Parliament did not possess the ultimate legislative power in Australia. More significant was the decision that the legislation, The Excise Act, 1906, designed to implement the 'New Protection', was invalid and declared unconstitutional. The final arbiter of the Constitution had become the High Court, which Labor believed was denying the people the benefit of legislation that their elected parliament had passed. The invalidating decisions following so close upon each other strengthened Labor's antagonism to the Constitution as it stood. Therefore it was not unexpected that the Labor Party should provide for constitutional amendments designed to remove the barriers in its path. The July 1908 Labor Party Conference in Brisbane served notice of Labor's intentions by sponsoring amendments designed to implement the doctrine of 'new protection', to extend the scope of the Federal arbitration

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53 CPD, 33, 3443.
54 CPD, 33, 3888-9.
56 CPD, 13, 632 ff.
57 This Act had a chequered history, Federal Parliament opened 9 May 1901, the Conciliation and Arbitration Bill was introduced 5 June 1901, discharged 26 March 1902; introduced 7 July 1903, adjourned 9 September 1903; brought before second Parliament 2 March 1904 received assent of Senate 9 December 1904.
59 Crisp, Parliamentary Government, 276.
machinery, and to make possible the nationalization of monopolies by the Commonwealth.

After the 1908 Conference, and during the Address-in-Reply to the Governor-General’s Speech Fisher attacked the Government for ‘its tender feeling for the manufacturers which resulted in the excise not being collected’. He referred to the little circular sent by the industrialist H.V. McKay, at the time the legislation was passed, appealing for protection against “Trust” competition. Parliament gave him the protection, under the promise that he would pay to his workmen the wages prescribed by the Arbitration Court. Yet, when Justice Higgins prescribed certain rates of pay, McKay appealed to the High Court, not on the question of the rates, Fisher observed,

but on the question whether the Constitution empowered the Parliament to do what it had done... now we are told... it is wrong to ask the people to amend the Constitution so as to give us the power to make protection “actual as well as possible”.

He attacked McKay’s underhandedness and approved an appeal to the people to amend the Constitution.

Nevertheless, the question of amendments to the Constitution does not appear to have been discussed by the 1908-09 Ministry until 19 March 1909, when Fisher noted that Hughes would deal with ‘New Protection’ and the ‘Industrial powers of Commonwealth’. He indicated topics for a future speech to include

that the Cmwlth shall have the power to do justice in industrial matters to every citizen of Australia... and the Commonwealth Courts to adjudicate in all industry matters which are not or cannot be provided by State laws,

He recorded that the Cabinet unanimously agreed this should affect all industrial workers and there should be a new subsection 40 to Section 51 to make laws to cover monopolies, trusts and combinations in restraint of trade which would not be limited by any power to the States.

The Caucus followed on 7 July 1909 with a motion that an amendment to the Constitution should be drawn up to provide for the giving of parliament power to provide for ‘new protection Trade Union Label’.

60 CPD, 47, 132.
61 CPD, 47, 133.
62 Ibid.
63 Note in Fisher’s handwriting, Fisher Papers, NLA. MS/2919/3/371, 373, 19 March 1909.
64 Caucus Minutes, 232.
At the beginning of March, prior to the Cabinet meeting, Fisher's policy speech to be presented at Gympie had already been drafted. At Gympie's crowded Olympic Theatre on 30 March 1909 he threw down the gauntlet to Deakin. He asked the people of Australia to give the Federal Parliament equal powers with the States to ensure it giving effect to industrial laws, and to ensure that when a judgement is given by the Court in favor of employees it will have the same enforcing powers as that given by Parliament in favor of employers.

To loud applause, he promised to introduce into Federal Parliament a Referendum Bill by which the people will be able to decide for themselves whether the Federal Parliament should have the power beyond all legal doubt to enforce that question [New Protection] . . . I am sure they will decide it in our favor.

On the subject of defence, the policy included compulsory military training, and a naval building scheme. The programme contemplated that twenty new ships would be built in Australia and did not include a vessel of the Indefatigable or Dreadnought class. He reaffirmed Labor's policy that the Naval Agreement of 1903 would be continued, but Labor would establish its own navy to operate around Australia's coast.

In April 1910 when Fisher returned to office as Prime Minister, Labor's control of both Chambers gave him the opportunity to implement the party's policies and realize their objectives. With the new majority in the Senate, which would still exist irrespective of the outcome of the next general election, he could hope to control the actions of that future Federal Parliament. This hope would eventually encourage him to reintroduce the referendum in 1913 and in 1915.

This survey of Labor party policy making and Fisher's declared attitudes on key Labor policies suggest one who was radical, a centralist and an anti-monopolist, to the left on the party policy. Even before the construction of the general and fighting platforms, his Federal speeches reveal that he wanted an Australian-owned navy, that he opposed borrowing, was suspicious of conscription, favoured a change

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65 Pearce's comment to a deputation of the Australasian Society of Engineers. *Age*, 2 March 1909, 5. However Shepherd has written that the speech was not drafted until a week before it was presented.
67 *Mr. Fisher's Policy Speech*, 5.
in the Constitution to increase industrial powers, and even desired unification. Two of these items will be tested against Fisher’s performance during the *Dreadnought* crisis of 1909 and his handling of the constitutional referenda of 1911 and 1913.

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68 Britain would maintain a naval force on the Australian Station with Australia contributing not more than £200,000 a year.
CHAPTER TWO

THE DREADNOUGHT SCARE

Andrew Fisher's handling of the Dreadnought scare of 1909 displays his considerable political acumen. It brought out the strength of his nature and the determination already forged by his experience as a union organiser with a history of being blacklisted by employers. Yet historians have largely ignored Fisher's response to the Dreadnought scare.¹ This overall picture of the reactions of Fisher and Deakin to the situation shows that, whereas Deakin was ready to make short term political capital out of the issue, Fisher did not allow himself to be flustered or stampeded.

Fisher had been Prime Minister, leader of a minority government, for 29 days when Federal Parliament adjourned on 11 December 1908.² Remembering how the 1904 Labor ministry had been defeated with Deakin playing some part in the negotiations, Fisher was wary. Prior to the recess Fisher had been careful not to announce any contentious issues that might turn the electorate against him. It was better at this stage to keep a low profile. As a result the press constantly attacked him on the grounds that since the prorogation federal politics had been in a state of suspended animation.³ Fisher was confident, however, that at a coming election, providing he did not antagonise the electorate, the Labor party would obtain a majority in the House. As neither enrolment nor voting was compulsory, the trade union and Party branches were working to ensure an increase in the enrolment of Labor supporters.⁴ He knew that the men of power, both the Free Traders and Protectionists, although publicly attacking each other,⁵ were reluctantly coming to the conclusion that it would be necessary to provide a united front against the Labor party.

¹ La Nauze, Alfred Deakin, has briefly commented on the scare.
² CPD, 49,5; See also CPP - 1909- Vol.1.
³ Argus, 2 February 1909, 4.
⁴ This was proved at the 1910 general election with the results of the increased fifteen seats, e.g. Hunter (NSW), Bourke (Vic.). See also Age, 8 February 1909, 7.
⁵ Register, Adelaide, Editorial, 5 March 1909, 6.
Thus, during the recess, Fisher realised that he would have to make the most of his ministerial powers and Labor’s opportunity before being dismissed soon after recall. He would have to deal with the likelihood that the Governor-General, as in 1904, would not agree to a dissolution and that parliament would have another ten months to run. The Federal parliament expected to have met on 10 March was further prorogued up to 14 April. Now was the time to work on a pre-election speech which would outline Labor policy, and produce what he saw as a national policy for his national government.6

This was also the time to make the wider electorate aware of the appearance and personality of the leader. He travelled into the States where he was not known: Western Australia and South Australia. Accompanied often by G.T. Allen, Secretary to the Treasury, Fisher was able to remain apprised of the financial situation of the Commonwealth. The 1908 Federal budget for the first time had made no provision for any payment of surplus revenue, above the Braddon payment, to the States.7 By February 1909 Fisher was aware that the financial position of the government was becoming critical.8 It was estimated that, by March, the deficit would probably be eight hundred thousand pounds. With the commencement of payment of old-age pensions in July, estimated to cost a million and half pounds, the following year’s financial situation did not look good. As a man with a reputation for sound financial policy, he had no desire to be the first Treasurer since Federation to post a deficit, particularly as a Labor Treasurer.

Senator Pearce (Minister for Defence) had already written to Fisher pressuring him to order three torpedo destroyers.9 On being informed of the news of the establishment of a German naval depot in the Bismarck Archipelago,10 Pearce responded that he intended to bring the whole matter before the Cabinet.11 Meanwhile Captain Creswell, then considered to be the Australian naval expert, had written on 4 February 1909 that torpedo craft, capable of being built in Australia, were our best defence.12

As a result, after a lengthy Cabinet meeting the Government announced that it had ordered two torpedo boats and would proceed with the construction of an

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7 See Section 94 of the Constitution.
8 See figures quoted in Mr. Fisher’s Policy Speech, 11-15. See Argus, 1 February 1909, 7.
9 Pearce to Fisher letter 21 January 1909, see Fisher Papers NLA MS 2919/6/89-91.
10 Age, 27 January 1909, 6.
Australian shipbuilding yard to build a third.13 This was consistent with Labor's long-standing policy — but political considerations were relevant as well.14 It was the first instalment of a programme designed to support the claim at the next election that Labor had done something about defence where its predecessors had only talked. On 8 February 1909 the Age praised the action and submitted that the Fisher Government had earned national approval by its sensible and statesmanlike decision to lose no further time in founding the Australia navy.15 Fisher had followed a principle he had elucidated during an earlier Defence debate.16 Creswell was delighted,17 and he followed with a further Memorandum to Pearce dated 22 February 1909 (after the three torpedo destroyers had been ordered), stressing the importance of torpedo destroyers as the most effective defence, giving the greatest value for expenditure, and able to be Australian-built.18 Creswell pointed out the need to consider cost: 'the whole aggregate of a nation's sea force is never concentrated for one attacking blow' — 'and that even 'Dreadnought . . . tactics must be influenced by the movements of torpedo craft'.19 Creswell advocated torpedo destroyers, not Dreadnoughts.

Having accepted the advice of Creswell and Allen and having made his decision, Fisher was immovable.20 After the scare had subsided he submitted a memorandum on Naval Defence that Australia would 'establish a naval Force . . . constituting the torpedo flotilla . . . ',21 driving home the fact that he would not be providing a Dreadnought, not even for Australian defence.

However, the Argus and politicians of the Opposition and Corner parties attacked the action as being unconstitutional and hasty.22 Also, the decision to build two of the boats overseas raised a groundswell of objections all over the country.

13 Argus, 6 February 1909, 16. Fisher Papers, NLA MS2919/6/64.
15 Age, 8 February 1909, 6.
16 CPD, 17, 6129, 14 October 1903.
18 Macandie, Genesis of Royal Australian Navy, 229.
21 Fisher Papers, NLA MS2919/6/43-45, Dudley to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 15 April 1909. The memorandum was probably in response to Collins discussion with R. McKenna, First Lord of the Admiralty; see Fisher Papers NLA 2919/6/6, Collins to Fisher, 2 April 1909.
22 Argus, 8 February 1909, 6; Argus 12 February 1909, 5; Argus, 12 February 1909, 5. La Nauze, Alfred Deakin, has argued that that the government had no special information to justify its ordering of
with demands that the ships should be built in Australia. During Fisher’s visit to Perth, a deputation attended him, regretting the construction of torpedo boats abroad. Even after tenders had been approved Fisher rejected attempts from persons willing to build the two torpedo boats for an amount below the approved British tenderers on the grounds that ‘[he] could not think of bargaining with the firms after they had tendered . . . and had the approval of the Government advisors’.24

The Dreadnought scare erupted during the Parliamentary recess, on Thursday, 18 March 1909. The Age published a two-column article based on the statements in the House of Commons, headed ‘Naval Supremacy—Germany’s Strength in Dreadnought Can Construct as Fast as Britain—Minister’s Striking Admission’.25 The following day the Age gave the news of Germany’s strength in battleships of the Dreadnought type and the ability to construct ships as fast as Great Britain.26 It was treated as a normal news item, one column of news between the column ‘About People’ and a column on the American tariff and its effect on Australian trade. But it was the editorial which was the catalyst — the manipulative agent that sparked the Dreadnought political crisis for Andrew Fisher. The Age report announced that

the question arises—Is Australia rich enough and loyal enough to provide Britain with the wherewithal to build a Dreadnought . . . there can be but one answer . . . the people of the Commonwealth will be eager to make the gift, if their rulers will but offer it to Britain 27

Did the Age writer expect the overwhelming reaction to his comment? Was it the editor’s casual comment on his last editorial for the week or a deliberate attempt to bait the Labor government? Only ten days previous to the ‘scare’, the Age in its editorial had been scathing about subsidising ‘Great Britain’s navy’ and relying on others ‘rather than ourselves, and pay in coin for the reliance’.28 The conservative Henry Gyles Turner was surprised by this volte-face that appeared to

destroyers during the recess, see La Nauze 557. However, the establishment of a German naval station on Bismarck Archipelago should have been sufficient reason for worry.
23 Argus, 13 February 1909, 6 and 17.
24 See note in Fisher Papers NLA MS2919, Box12, No series reference, 12 March 1909.
25 Age, 18 March 1909, 5.
26 Age, 19 March 1909, 5.
27 Age, 19 March 1909, 4.
28 Age, 8 March 1909, editorial, 6.
show the Age converted to Imperialism. The Age had commented time and again on the need for Australia to have its own navy, and on the likely scenario that in an event of war Britain would withdraw her ships from Australian waters. But now the Age wanted a gift to be given to Britain to be used in Home waters.

However, throughout his Federal parliamentary career Fisher had continued to propound the belief that defence should start at home—Australia. As early as November 1901 during the debate on British New Guinea and the defence of Australia he commented:

The sooner we recognise . . . we are a nation and require a fleet of our own . . . if we are going to protect ourselves ...[and] maintain every inch of territory that we can claim our own, we must necessarily have the means of protection.

This attitude was supported, a year later, by the Labor Conference declaration that any money available for naval defence should be used in the formation of a navy that would be owned and controlled by the Commonwealth.

Fisher reiterated his attitude to Australian naval defence of Australia at a Labor demonstration in Hobart’s Town Hall where he had proclaimed that the subsidy of £200,000 a year was a paltry method of undertaking or sharing in naval defence . . . [Australia] should not solely depend on others for defence . . . ultimately the defence of this land must rest on its sons.

Fisher had attended the Premiers’ conference in Hobart, where the main theme was finance. Upon his return to Melbourne the defence problem engaged a great deal of attention. The dominant question was ‘Where is the money to come from’.

Through the whole Dreadnought crisis Fisher’s maintained his support for Australia providing for her own defence and a strong objection to borrowing. Only six weeks earlier in his speech at the annual luncheon of the Australian Natives’ Association he had asserted that Australia was not spending enough money on defence, and that there was no hope of having any efficient sea defence unless ‘we

29 Turner, The First Decade of the Australian Commonwealth, 203.
30 Age, 4 February 1909, 6.
31 CPD,6, 7416.
32 CPLC 1902, Official Minutes 8. Fisher was not in attendance, but would of course have been fully cognisant of Labor policy as defined by successive party conferences.
33 Age, 8 March 1909, 7. This was no; an electoral ploy, Fisher stressed these view at the 1911 Imperial Defence Conference, see Fisher Papers NLA MS1538/15/695.
34 Age, 13 March 1909, 4.
have our own navy, controlled by our own people, cooperating always with the mother country'.

At Perth he made it clear that the state of affairs in Europe and the Near East had made it obvious that the country had time and opportunity to prepare its defence, but were the people prepared to defend their country? Fisher had always considered the navy as the first line of defence. He was aware of the decline in the relative strength of the Royal Navy and the admission of the British Prime Minister and First Lord merely confirmed the belief of the need for Australia to have its own navy. In November 1908 Fisher had been notified that advisors of the King had estimated that while there was no immediate danger from Germany, war was inevitable: 'Germany would postpone war until 1916'. As Prime Minister, he may have been aware of The Times and British establishment feeling that they preferred Australia to spend money on its own defence.

By Monday, 22 March, the Age was commenting on the widespread reactions to the Dreadnought proposal made in the Friday edition. The Age ran four full columns under the headline 'AUSTRALIA'S DREADNOUGHT — 'THE AGE' PROPOSAL— GREAT ENTHUSIASM EVOKEO'. The original article had engendered generous financial and emotional demands, and spirited debates. The Age pushed its proposals, printing comment upon comment on the public meetings around the country, and claiming that they only partially reflected the extent to which the national spirit has been stirred by the splendor of a great patriotic idea. It attempted to formulate and control public policy and attacked the government's hesitation to comply with national demand. The Dreadnought movement spread to Sydney and every other Australian capital city. There were demands that Australia help restore Britain's superiority in Dreadnoughts by donating one, as the New Zealand government promised immediately, even though the funds would probably have to be borrowed from Britain. This was the dominant note of the spirited

35 Argus, 2 February 1909, 6.
36 In reply to an interjection that the railways (trans-continental) were the first line of defence, Worker 9 March 1909, 12.
38 See Jose to Deakin, 2 April 1909 in Deakin Papers NLA MS1540/16/601-2. Jose points out that 'home' 'dread in wartime that [Australians] will get scared and indignant and rebellious if the ships are taken away and used elsewhere.'
39 Age, 22 March 1909, 7.
40 Age, 22 March 1909, 7.
41 Unlike Fisher, the New Zealand Prime Minister, Sir Joseph Ward had never advocated a New Zealand navy. See Worker, 25 March 1909, 28.
public meetings, many chaired by lord mayors and mayors throughout Australian cities and suburbs, endorsing pro-Dreadnought resolutions. There were subscription lists of donors. Around the country politicians and supporters of the non-Labor parties were vociferous in their demands, and long letters to the editor, supporting the idea, were published. In Sydney a cinema audience of over 4,000 rose and cheered a film showing H.M.S. Dreadnought.

The generation, by the press, of the desire to aid Britain in this way became synonymous with the word Dreadnought. Fisher was speaking mildly when, some months later, he looked back on the scare and commented that he considered that we were performing our public duty to Australia by refusing to join in such a newspaper-made, though patriotic, hysterical policy agitation. He affirmed that whilst he warmly appreciated the spirit of the proposal of the Age, the whole resources of the Australian Commonwealth were at the disposal of the mother country should there at any time be any trouble; while the gift of a Dreadnought would not be to defend Australia, but solely to protect England against a great European nation. The Age continued the vitriolic attack, with innuendo and sarcasm, claiming that many union members wanted a definite proposal from Fisher or the Labor Party would sustain an irretrievable blow.

The leader writer did not try to back up this attack by quoting any union officials, or any union. Five days later the Trades Hall Council in Melbourne refuted this claim by resolutely supporting the refusal of the Federal Government to offer a Dreadnought to Britain. The Council considered that the Dreadnought movement was merely to distract the workers' attention from the political and industrial reforms so urgently needed, and that such proposals would inflict further taxation upon the workers of the Commonwealth. It drew attention to the thousands of starving unemployed in the Commonwealth. Meanwhile, Deakin was touring the country delivering the Liberal policy speech. At Murwillumbah, New South Wales, on the Saturday, he declared

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42 Norris, Emergent Commonwealth, 146. But, see Turner, First Decade, 206, and Wise to Fisher 31 March 1909, NLA MS2919/6/3.
43 Age, 22 March 1909, 7; Age, 23 March 1909, 8.
44 Age, 22 March 1909, 8.
45 Age, 22 March 1909, 7.
46 CPD, 50, 1323-4.
47 Age, 22 March 1909, 7.
48 CPD, 54, 6658.
49 Age, 23 March 1909, 7.
50 Age, 27 March 1909, 11.
that the proposal [of the Age] bore a very close relation to
the financial proposals of the Premiers,51 for a Dreadnought
meant, in round numbers, a million of money, and there was
not a million of money in the coffers of the States to-day, so
that would have to be taken into consideration as a financial
question. The spirit of the offer, however, was a splendid
one.52

Deakin, however, did not say whether he would offer a Dreadnought, and how he
would finance it. Fisher commented that he preferred not to comment until he had
the complete text of Deakin's speech before him.53 With the six State Governments
so homogenous in political outlook, this was a co-ordinated opportunity to exploit
the 'scare' and coordinate their opposition to the Labor Government. One perceptive
correspondent warned the Prime Minister to tread warily as assistance to Britain
was 'the ticket that would unite Joseph Cook and Deakin'.54 This warning was later
made by the Age in an editorial warning that by alienating themselves from the
mass of Australian popular opinion '[Labor] had probably signed the warrant for
their early dismissal from office'.55

Fisher was prepared, however, to let Deakin make political capital out of the
scare, for Deakin's attitude was ideal for Fisher's strategy. If Deakin wanted the
Dreadnought, then let Deakin find the money. Deakin would either have to borrow
the money, and increase customs and excise, or institute direct taxation. The first
would not endow him to possible Labor voters, and Deakin's own supporters would
certainly oppose the second. Fisher, however, possessed a more stoical nature and
had more political nous than Deakin conceded. He had found his battlefield. It
would mean that the removal of Labor from office at this critical stage would leave
the hot potato of the Dreadnought in the hands of Deakin and company.

At the end of the month, when his Gympie address showed there was no
prospect of his endorsing the Dreadnought proposal, the Premiers of New South
Wales and Victoria made flamboyant offers to provide a Dreadnought between them
if the national government refused its duty.56 However, if the States' offer had been
accepted, they would have had to resort to borrowing, probably from the United

51 Referring to the Premiers' Conference in early March.
52 Age, 22 March 1909, 7.
53 Age, 22 March 1909, 7.
54 Norris, Emergent Commonwealth, 147 and fn34: La Nauze, Alfred Deakin, Ch. 24, discusses the
Dreadnought crisis and Fusion. He seems to imply - but stops short of a direct statement - that the
crisis facilitated the merger of the two parties'.
55 Age, 30 March 1909, 6.
Kingdom. The Premiers' Conference had already revealed that the States' financial position was precarious. This was a perfect example, that after nine years of Federation, State politicians still were not willing to accept the overall authority of the Federal Government in matters of national policy. There was even a demand for the recalling of Federal Parliament. When asked whether he intended to tolerate this interference in Federal matters, Fisher is reported to have replied that there was no danger of the States interfering in Federal matters and it would be impertinent for him to interfere with the communications now passing between them. In any case, he was going right on just as if the thing had not happened.

If the Federal government borrowed on the market it would be for not less than £5,000,000 involving an interest payment of £200,000 a year. And under the current Braddon clause it would mean raising £800,000 additional revenue. There would be no alternative but direct taxation. A scheme had been drawn up and approved by the Parliamentary Labor Party before the last election and since then the Cabinet had already discussed in detail provisions of any direct taxation. To offer a Dreadnought would 'furiously cripple the country' and the government would not be able to build the vessels announced in their policy.

Fisher cautiously followed his plan to make no contentious decisions, and let Deakin hoist himself on his own petard. Labor was preparing to win a general election, and did not want to be burdened with the albatross of a Dreadnought funding. With funds not available in Australia it would mean borrowing and Federal Labor's policy since the 1902 Conference had been 'no public borrowing'. In this case, Fisher would have been opposed in Caucus, for action contrary to party policy, causing a conflict he was at pains to avoid. Better by far to leave the borrowing to the Fusion, which later had to bring in the Naval Loan Bill to finance the Dreadnought. When questioned about the requisition to recall Parliament together early his response was

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57 Age, 31 March 1909, 8; see Fisher Papers NLA, MS2929/6/10-15 and MS2819/6/33-34, acrimonious cables and correspondence between Deakin and Fisher.
58 Age, 29 March 1909, 10.
60 Age, 27 April 1909, 5.
61 See CPD, 54, 6539.
I shall be glad to give those who send it a courteous reply when I get the requisition'. With this [he] turned cheerfully to other matters.62

It was another example of Fisher's intransigence: what H.E. Boote, in 1928, recalled as 'an immovable rock in the midst of shifting and not infrequently dangerous currents'.63

Fisher had already displayed his steadiness in the acrimonious correspondence with Deakin over the date for the recall of Parliament. There was another agenda behind the demand; the Fusion needed the recall before it could oust the Labor Ministry. Before the Dreadnought scare erupted Fisher and Deakin had been exchanging letters regarding the meeting of Parliament. Such correspondence appears to have been initiated on 10 March, the day Parliament was due to open until prorogued to 14 April.64

This earlier question of the meeting date may have been the reason for the telegrams sent to Fisher during the scare, requesting recall. It may also account for Fisher's stubbornness or determination not to alter the date. Fisher believed that there was no peace in giving way merely for the sake of peace.65 It is probable that the other political parties were ready to pounce on 10 March and were now frustrated. Nevertheless, on 3 April Fisher cabled Deakin that he had arranged that parliament 'shall meet for transaction [of] business [on] 26th May. Doing this out of courtesy because your name appears on unsigned telegram just handed me ...'66

In 1904 after his defeat on the Arbitration Bill, Deakin had resigned and supported, his successor, Watson for three and a half months. Realising that Reid had accumulated the numbers to eject Watson, he joined in the vote to defeat the Labor government. At that time Fisher attacked Deakin's move67 and now could see a repeat of the action. There was no way he would facilitate a repeat of the situation.

On 22 March, Fisher had reassured the Governor-General that while Australian policy was to provide for its own defence 'in the event of any emergency

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62 Age, 29 March 1909, 10.
65 CPD, 17, 6141, 14 October 1903.
66 Fisher Papers, NLA, MS2919/6/12-16.
67 CPD, 21, 12 August 1904, 4238 ff.
the resources of the Commonwealth would be cheerfully placed at the disposal of
the Mother Country'. 68 Fisher sent the same pronouncement in a telegram to A.W.
Jose, *The Times* correspondent. 69 The following night, at Lismore, Deakin said the
offer of a Dreadnought was one of the ways in which the people of Australia
had indicated as possible for them to make a contribution without
raising the difficult question of constitutional control, which would
arise under most circumstances of this kind . . . what they had to
think was how £2,000,000 was to be raised. 70

Again, there was no report whether Deakin did or did not endorse a gift of a
Dreadnought.

Not all Australians were carried along with the generated emotion to spend a
million or two on the offer of a free Dreadnought to Britain. Many expressed
misgivings; some declared their outright opposition. Naturally one of the critics was
Sydney's Cardinal Moran, a Labor sympathizer; 71 W.A. Holman, a New South Wales
Labor leader, 72 ridiculed 'the shrieking brotherhood who clamoured for the building
of Dreadnought-class battleships . . . those patriots had their eyes on the next
Birthday Honours'. 73 Moreover, on a smaller scale, the Melbourne *Herald* made a
gigantic effort to raise £450 to send cadets to camp. The result was an 'ignominious
fiasco'. 74 On the other side of Australia, in Perth the Chamber of Commerce
considered that 'the question . . . needed closer attention before a decision could be
arrived at'. 75 On the same night, the Perth branch of the A.N.A. considered letters of
protest against the gift of a Dreadnought, 'on the grounds that the Commonwealth
needed all the funds that could be raised for the transfer of the Northern territory,
construction of trans-Australian railways, small arms factory, Federal capital and an
Australian navy and that there was no proof that Great Britain was in need of aid . . .
if money were available it should be devoted to the Australian navy'. 76 In
Queensland, the Premier, Mr Kidston, stated that 'if more ships were wanted then
Britain, by raising a ship building loan, could settle the question at once'. 77

68 Fisher Papers, NLA, MS2919/6/115.
69 A. W. Jose Papers, University of Melbourne Archives, ACC65/12.
70 *Age*, 23 March 1909, 7.
71 For biography see ADB la, 577-581. See *Age*, 23 March 1909, 7
72 ADB 9, 340-347.
(Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1979), 169-170 fn2.
74 *Worker*, 1 April 1909, 18.
75 *Age*, 25 March 1909, 8.
76 Ibid.
77 *Age*, 23 March 1909, 7.
After pro-Dreadnought Town Hall meetings in Melbourne, Sydney, Perth, Hobart and other cities, the *Age* once again attacked the Fisher government as being 'more obstinately entrenched than ever behind its stupid, unseeing and unpatriotic policy of negation'.

Fisher in reply to the resolutions adopted at the Melbourne Town Hall meeting stood firm and replied by letter that in his policy speech at Gympie he would deal fully with issues regarding the offering of a Dreadnought and the idea of calling Parliament together to discuss its defence policy. He had taken expert advice, and his policy was ready for publication. Therefore, somewhat unwisely, but in keeping with his determined and reasoned nature, he announced it was a matter of indifference to the party whether his refusal to gift a Dreadnought 'was misunderstood or not'. If the party agreed to the course of action then in Fisher's mind the country would agree to the policy. For as A.G. Stephens had written of Fisher, 'he puts Labour first, not Australia first, and escapes from the accusation of placing party before country by the sophism that the party is the country or the most important part of the country'. Fisher intended to pursue a steady, persistent and determined policy of Australian naval defence for the protection of Australia and for the assistance of the Empire in times of emergency and would be proposing a naval policy adequate to the needs of the situation.

He had already made it plain at the Premiers' Conference on 8 March that a new naval policy had already been inaugurated, and that he did not feel at liberty to disclose the policy of the Government until he did to the people of his own electorate later in the month. From this attitude he was not prepared to budge.

The *Bulletin* summed up the 'scare': the money would be borrowed from England, the ship built in England and would be manned by and commanded by Englishmen—thus showing that Australia had no money, no shipyard, and that Australians could not fight and could not command or organise. Fisher as Prime Minister went to Gympie to deliver his policy speech to his constituents, and the country. It was unprecedented for a party policy speech to be given nine months before a general election was due. With the knowledge that the other parties were gathering against him, however, it was probably the Labor party's last chance to obtain a national platform to publicise its defence strategy, and he announced the

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78 *Age*, 27 March 1909, 11.
79 *Age*, 27 March 1909, 11.
80 See quote by Marginson, "Andrew Fisher", 189.
81 *Age*, 24 March 1909, 7.
82 CPP, 1909, Vol 2, 12.
government's programme in the coming session. It gave the electors abundant time to consider and discuss the ramifications and advantages to them. The central passage in the 34,000-word speech was the outline of Labor's proposals on defence. He had chosen to disregard the public outcry regarding the acquisition of a Dreadnought. In return, he looked at a policy for the long-term of Australia's naval defence. He proposed a three-year plan for a fleet of coastal destroyers. He considered that the offer of a Dreadnought was 'not a policy at all, it was merely a spectacular display . . . you could not encourage your young men by giving a Dreadnought to Britain'.

Deakin, initially hesitant, now called for Australia to emulate New Zealand's offer of a battleship. However, New Zealand had never proposed her own navy. Speaking at a banquet in Ballarat on St George's Day, Deakin pointed out that until the last few years Australia's defence had been based on the theory that Britain's control of the seas was absolute. The basis of that theory had now been swept away. The offer of a Dreadnought was an acknowledgement of Australia's obligation and a testimony that all their fortunes were linked: He regretted that the Australian Ministers should have taken the narrow view. Surprisingly, he compared the offer of a two million pound battleship in the same light as previous offers of £5,000 to the Shackleton expedition, and a contribution to the building of the Queen Victoria statue in London. The Age in an editorial commenting upon Deakin's address advised that the Ministry had rejected Deakin's suggestion that the question of a Dreadnought should be settled on non-Party lines. It implied that the Ministry had throw down the gauntlet, that if the resolution making the offer to Great Britain were carried it would resign and ask the Governor-General for dissolution. Meanwhile, Hughes in his usual Machiavellian style was looking for a political way out of the Dreadnought situation. He cabled Fisher suggesting how the problem could be placed upon Great Britain's shoulders. In his straightforward manner,
Fisher, replied 'Keep to policy outlined at Gympie. Be steady, Cannot entertain Dreadnought proposal. Inadvisable speak about despatch.'

The Governor-General's Speech of 26 May 1909 contained no mention of the building of a Dreadnought. Instead the speech announced the building of the three modern torpedo boat destroyers, a policy of naval construction for the building in Australia of similar vessels. Although Fisher's Gympie speech had been within the framework laid down by Deakin, he had pursued each element further. He had contained hints of more drastic action to come, such as the currency, land taxation, nationalisation of steel and constitutional amendments. Whether on not it was Fisher's intention, his speech would certainly push any waverers into a free-trader-liberal association — a Fusion.

A move by the 'Fusion' of the other parties had been expected, and on 26 May, prior to the opening of Parliament, Fisher, in Caucus, declared that the Government was determined to stand by the Gympie policy speech. A Cabinet meeting had followed and it was agreed 'to certain action on the occurrence of events, which seem pending'. Meanwhile the Opposition federal parties had met and formed a Fusion 'generally' with Deakin elected leader, whereupon Deakin formally informed Fisher of the withdrawal of his party's support from the Labor Ministry. Immediately after Fisher had ceased speaking on the Address-in-Reply to the Governor-General's speech, William H. Kelly (Wentworth, NSW) proposed that the debate be adjourned. This was passed thirty nine to thirty votes. The Fusion attack had come sooner than expected. Fisher took this as a motion of no confidence and tried for a dissolution, which was refused by the Governor-General. Prepared for a dissolution, Labor MPs had been busy organizing their electorates and were ready. Fisher's expectation that, as in 1904, the Governor-

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90 Shepherd's Memoirs 140-141. Accepted by Malcolm Booker 121 and Meaney 180.
91 CPD, 49, 6.
92 La Nauze, Alfred Deakin, has discussed Deakin's part in the Fusion in La Nauze Chapter 24.
93 See Age 8 February 1909, 7, Frazer's comments.
94 Caucus Minutes, 228..
95 Fisher Papers, NLA, MS2929, Box 12, 'Cabinet Minutes, 1910-1912'.
97 CPD, 49, 126. Kelly's indecent haste was to ensure that Pearce did not represent Australia at the coming Imperial Conference, see La Nauze 567.
98 Mc Mullin, Light on the Hill, 67 claims that Fisher was bewildered and angry, whilst the Argus 28 May 1909, editorial claims that Fisher 'did comport himself with dignity and was not betrayed into merely rancorous taunts'.
99 See Cabinet's submission to the Governor-General, Hughes Papers, NLA, MS1538/15/611. See Dudley's reply, refusing dissolution, 1 June 1909, Fisher Papers, NLA, MS/2919, Box 12 and Sawer, 66.
General would not agree to dissolution of the House of Representatives was justified.

The Fisher government resigned on 29 May and on 2 June 1909, the third Deakin or first Fusion ministry took office and held to the end of the parliament on 8 December 1909. The federal politics of Australia had now resolved itself into a two-party system. However the new government, composed of two divisive elements, had no programme, and despite the earlier requests that it was essential that parliament should be called together to transact business, it now requested and received an adjournment of three weeks.

When Deakin assumed office in June, he cabled the offer which he was now publicly committed to make: an Australian Dreadnought or 'such addition to [the Empire's] naval strength as may be determined by the Naval and Military Conference in London'. The Labor Party was angry at the offer being made without consultation with Parliament. In accordance with a decision of Caucus, Fisher moved a motion of censure. This motion failed and in the House of Representatives the subject appeared to have died, until on 25 August 1909 Fisher asked whether there was any information regarding the conclusion of the Imperial Defence Conference and the financing of the Australian naval unit. Fisher surmised that the final price tag from the Imperial Defence Conference would be far in excess of the cost of the original Dreadnought. He was also aware that Deakin would be unable to finance the naval unit out of Customs and Excise revenue. Deakin would either have to resort to direct taxation, anathema to the Liberals, or borrowing overseas. Either way Fisher had grounds for an attack, but first he had to ensure that the government's offer of a Dreadnought still stood.

During the Budget debate Fisher enquired whether the Prime Minister would tell if the members of the Government 'are as determined now as they were four months ago [April], to present a Dreadnought to Great Britain?' Deakin's reply was that 'they were not quite ready yet' and that 'the offer stands; [Fisher] has seen the offer that was communicated.' For Fisher, the time was not yet ripe to reopen the subject; better to wait until Deakin was committed to either taxation or borrowing.

100 Sawer, Australian Federal Politics, 66.
101 See Senator Needham's attack on the decision, CPD, 49, 235-36, 2 June 1909.
103 Caucus Minutes, 230. CPD, 49,359. The debate carried over two days; see CPD, 49, 359-411 & 439-468.
104 CPD, 51, 2573.
105 Ibid,
Meanwhile, Fisher used the time to emphasise his views on the scare. Whilst Fisher agreed he had seen the offer, he still considered that the number of public men who had take up 'the screaming cry' of the Dreadnought scare had dishonoured the reputation of the race. He had always understood that 'we were a race of people who never really got afraid'.

He stated that the defence policy of the previous Government, Labor, was more effective than the present. It had not only announced a policy but had sent a secret despatch to London setting out clearly and distinctly its unambiguous views regarding the naval defence of Australia. By contrast, the Fusion government’s offer, in June, was not a policy at all and was never intended to be. It was merely a ploy for party purpose 'which has served well'.

He now not only took the chance to cut from under Deakin any possibility that Labor would agree to a borrowing policy, but to claim that the people would accept the necessity of further taxation to finance the services of the Commonwealth. He threw in another brake on Commonwealth borrowing; he was not prepared to go on the market to borrow until the States’ debts were consolidated.

Fisher pursued the matter. A week later, in a question to the Prime Minister, referring to the Imperial Defence Conference Agreement, he asked whether the Australian naval unit would be 'wholly owned and controlled by this government'. He followed this question with another: had the government decided how to finance the naval unit. To which Deakin replied 'Not yet. Deakin had a serious financial and political problem — he had to procrastinate until forced into making a decision. His problem was that at the 1909 Imperial Conference, the Admiralty had presented a scheme, which conceded Australia her own navy, a more expensive navy than any Australian government would have contemplated before 1909, if Australia was willing to bear the cost. Though concerned with the cost, but after the government’s offer of a Dreadnought, Deakin had no choice than to accept the Admiralty scheme. The Fusion had begun to realise that its offer might involve budgetary difficulties as well as political criticism. The situation in the British Parliament was sufficient proof of this fact. Meanwhile, negotiations had begun for a loan, which was the only method of finance the Fusion Cabinet was prepared to contemplate. In mid-

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106 Ibid.
107 CPD, 52, 2573-4.
108 CPD, 51, 2768.
September, Deakin cabled acceptance of the general principles, and promised that construction would begin as soon as parliamentary permission was secured.

It was not until 24 November that the question of the unit was raised again, when Joseph Cook, Minister of Defence, moved the motion on the Imperial Naval Defence Australian Unit: 'to provide the proposed Australian unit of the Eastern Fleet of the Empire. . . . leaving question of Ways and Means for further consideration'. The capital cost to Australia would be £3,695,000 for the creation of an Australian squadron, built and organised from Australian resources, with its base in Australia. This to a considerable extent vindicated Labor's naval policy, though the scale of expenditure proposed was probably higher than Labor would have freely accepted.

Fisher requested that the Minister explain the basis of the calculation of the annual cost, and asked whether the calculation of repayments included interest and a sinking fund. Fisher had always sought to foster an Australian-owned and controlled naval unit and therefore was prepared to support Cook. His attack would wait until Sir John Forrest, Treasurer, attempted to provide the necessary funds. Cook's manner in moving the adoption of the Conference report provoked a Labor minority into making a farce of the debate by repeated closure motions, and Cook was finally exasperated into gagging the debate himself, whereupon the proposals as tabled were approved by thirty-nine to nine with Fisher supporting the motion.

The question of the new naval unit seemed to lapse until the discussion in Committee (Consideration of Governor-General's Message) on 30 November 1909. The Treasurer (Forrest), opened the debate with the motion that an appropriation of revenues and moneys be made for the purposes of a Bill [Naval Loan] for an Act to authorise the raising and expending of the sum of £3,500,000 for the purposes of naval defence.

Immediately, Frazer (Kalgoorlie, WA) interjected: 'The seventh borrower come to light!' The six States had borrowed overseas, and now the Commonwealth was to join them. In the hurry to bring the Bill forward Forrest had no copies available before the House, so the members were therefore discussing it without the

\[ ^{110} \text{CPD, 54, 6251.} \]
\[ ^{111} \text{CPD, 54, 6252.} \]
\[ ^{112} \text{CPD, 54, 6253.} \]
\[ ^{113} \text{CPD, 54, 6259. The Labor members present divided eight to nine with K. O'Malley, J. Page, F.G. Tudor and J. Thomas opposing it. However, none of the four had contributed to the debate. Later in 1916, all four were opposed to Hughes' conscription referendum.} \]
\[ ^{114} \text{CPD, 54, 6539.} \]
details before them. Deakin had decided to go for borrowing rather than increasing taxation. Now Fisher knew his line of attack. If Deakin had been prepared to go for direct taxation, the ground would have been cut from under Labor, and Deakin may have received the acclaim and support of Labor and other supporters at the coming general election. Fisher immediately made capital of the decision and attacked the Government's proposal because the Government had no mandate from the people for a loan policy. But first he stressed that he was not waiting for the debate upon the second reading of the Bill, as he feared that once again the Government might intervene to prevent him making any remarks at all. His initial attack was to doubt the reason for the loan, implying it might not be for naval defence purposes. He emphasized his absolute opposition to loans for defence, the cost of which should be met from taxation.\textsuperscript{115}

Fisher had made it very clear, more than once at the Premiers' Conference in Hobart, that he viewed with the utmost political horror a seventh borrower in Australia going on the money market. He felt that the desire of the people of the Commonwealth was to have one borrower instead of several, and it would take something drastic for him to launch out into a borrowing policy until there was some arrangement between the States and the Commonwealth.\textsuperscript{116} He pointed out that in April he had communicated a secret despatch to the Imperial Government setting out clearly and distinctly the Government's views regarding the naval defence of Australia and co-operation in this connection with the Mother country. In the debate, over the next two days, Fisher kept returning to parliamentary procedure and constitutional practice, stressing that on the eve of closing Parliament they were not in a position to give full consideration to a principle of the greatest importance connected with the country's financial arrangements. The Government was seeking to involve the Commonwealth in a policy on which the people had never been consulted. The more straightforward and constitutional course would have been to wait for the results of the coming election.

He declared that, in 1903, he had taken up the same position.\textsuperscript{117} Fisher was not raising a new concern for Federal Parliament. The question of direct taxation being implemented and used as method of providing the funds to supply the cost of the naval unit had been raised early in Federal history. Edmund Barton, in his policy

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{116} See CPP, 1909,Vol, 2, 16,17.
\textsuperscript{117} CPD, 14, 2465.
speech of 17 January 1901, considered that ‘there must be no direct taxation by the Commonwealth unless the pressure of some great national emergency and not even then if it can be avoided’.\textsuperscript{118} The debates from October in 1901 to September 1902 on the tariff proposals in Sir George Turner’s Budget brought out Labor preference for direct taxation and conservative preference for indirect taxes.\textsuperscript{119} As previously mentioned, Joseph Cook echoed the sentiment during the 1907 budget debate.\textsuperscript{120}

Continuing the debate in 1909, Fisher preferred, in times of peace, that no liability should be incurred for defence purposes until the Government had brought down a Budget providing for the necessary funds to pay for it. To borrow was to shift the obligation to posterity. In the three years before the ship was ready for the defence of Australia, Australia should be able to raise the total amount of £3,500,000.\textsuperscript{121} In detail he attacked the insufficiency of the sinking fund being provided, and he asserted the fact that the fleet would be obsolete before the loans were repaid.\textsuperscript{122} He contended that, when in 1902 the electors confirmed Parliament’s action to refuse to adopt a borrowing policy, it was an affirmation that without the people’s direction the Commonwealth should abstain from borrowing.\textsuperscript{123} He avowed, as in the Gympie speech, that he held the strongest views on borrowing, he had not thought a Commonwealth Government would have been prepared to become a seventh borrower, when the people created the Commonwealth with the idea that there should be but one Australian borrower and one consolidated State debt until all State debts were consolidated the Commonwealth should refrain absolutely from borrowing.\textsuperscript{124} Earlier, in August he had declared that until the Parliament had before it the agreement entered into at a secret conclave between the Commonwealth government and the Premiers of the States, the House ought not seriously discuss any financial proposals of the Government, because that agreement might undoubtedly change the position.\textsuperscript{125} He stressed that if Australia once commenced to borrow, there would be no end to the

\textsuperscript{118} Sawer, \textit{Australian Federal Politics}, 16.
\textsuperscript{119} CPD, 8.11100 ff.
\textsuperscript{120} CPD, 38, 2463.
\textsuperscript{121} CPD, 54, 6661.
\textsuperscript{122} CPD, 54, 7702.
\textsuperscript{123} CPD, 54, 6656.
\textsuperscript{124} CPD, 54, 6656. At the 13 April 1910 General Election, a referendum for the amendment of the Constitution giving the Commonwealth unlimited power to assume the States’ debts received the endorsement of the electorate, see \textit{Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1901-1912}, No 6: 1913, 781.
\textsuperscript{125} CPD, 51, 2574.
practice. On the motion, he emphasised that he would be compelled to vote against it, not because it was money to provide for Australia’s defence, but because it was the inauguration of a loan policy not supported by the people, and introduced so near the end of the Parliament.

He alleged the proposal ostensibly to help the Mother Country rested upon the hysterical campaign for the gift of a Dreadnought. The current Government could not be trusted; it would not hesitate to borrow to wipe out a deficit. The first time it found itself in financial difficulties of its own making, it had proposed to issue Treasury Bills to overcome the problem, and now, without a word of warning, Ministers asked Parliament to authorise them to pledge the credit of the Commonwealth in the money markets of the world. After obtaining confirmation of the facts from Deakin, Fisher pointed out that the new Australian unit would cost Britain £450,000 a year, calculated on the basis of the discontinuance of the Australian subsidy of £200,000 and the payment by Britain of £250,000 a year towards the upkeep of the Australian unit. He argued that the £250,000 had been generously offered, by Britain, at the Imperial Conference, as a quid pro quo, to smooth the way for the proposal now before the Australian Parliament. A more robust, Australian-minded Government would have said:

You had difficulties... and, seeing that we were prepared to give £2,000,000 for a Dreadnought for you, we ask you to keep the £250,000 for your own defence, leaving us to provide the whole of the money for the defence of this part of the world.

When Colonel Foxton interjected, 'Without borrowing?' Fisher snapped back, 'Good heavens, yes! The idea of defending our own country without borrowing seems to shock some people.' He reiterated his attitude against the borrowing five days later during the Supplementary Debates. He again asserted, that by raising Customs and Excise to pay for defence, the Government had taxed the toiler with a

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126 CPD, 54, 6658.
127 CPD, 54, 6541.
128 Forrest had considered the issue of short-term Treasury Bills to cover the deficit that would arise during the eighteen months until the cessation of the Braddon Blot payments to the States. See, D.I. Wright, "The Politics of Federal Finance: The First Decade." Historical Studies 13, no. 52 (1969): 460-76.
129 CPD, 54, 6659.
130 Neville Meaney claims the £250,000 represented roughly the interest on the loan that the Commonwealth had agreed to raise see, Neville Meaney, The Search for Security in the Pacific, 1901-14. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1976, 185.
131 CPD, 54, 6659.
132 CPD, 54, 6659.
large family as heavily as the wealthy that ought make a larger contribution. In what was virtually a pre-election speech, Fisher continued:

it is too late in this session to discuss the matter . . . . [the Commonwealth] is more likely to prosper under an energetic and progressive Government than under a conservative and borrowing Government. . . . and a Government who began their operations by breaking their pledges to their constituents, and by entering on a policy of borrowing, do not commend themselves to my favourable consideration.133

The whole subject of the urgency for approving the Naval Loan Bill raises questions. Why was it submitted only eight days before the termination of a parliamentary term and with a general election due within three months? Responding to an enquiry from Egerton L. Batchelor (Boothby), Forrest had replied 'The Government will require money before the new Parliament meets.'134 Yet no action was taken to raise the funds,135 and payments that had fallen due by July had been met out of ordinary current revenue. Whilst Fisher insisted that the country should not enter upon the work until it could afford to pay for it,136 Deakin’s answer was a plea of urgency: to wait for an election to approve direct taxation would mean a delay of at least six months,137 at a time ‘when the relations between the great powers may be fairly described as critical, and within a few years are likely to be still more critical’.138 On 8 December 1909 the British Government was advised that provision had been made for the necessary funds, and the Admiralty should arrange without delay for the construction of an armoured cruiser of the Indefatigable type.139

Deakin’s opening Ministerial policy speech for the 1910 General Election campaign was irresolute and indecisive. He commenced that short portion of his speech relating to naval defence with the comment:

there was first the visit of the American fleet which gave a splendid object lesson of naval power. Next there was the offer of a Dreadnought which sprang from us in the hour of Imperial anxiety.140

He skipped carefully and quickly over the question of raising a loan, but implied it would be for only a short period. Again there were no facts or figures as in Fisher’s

133 CPD, 54, 7203.
134 CPD, 54,6673.
135 See Fisher’s speech, CPD, 55, 682.
136 CPD, 54, 6666.
137 CPD, 54, 6656-64 (Fisher), 6664-71 (Deakin).
138 CPD, 54, 6666.
139 Fisher Papers NLA MS 2919/6/65, part of information given to Fisher from Pearce, 11 March 1913.
speech at Gympie. Meanwhile, Fisher again declared that defence was effective only when the country intending to defend itself found the money and the men. He ridiculed Deakin’s naval policy to strengthen England’s naval power by the gift of a Dreadnought: ‘A noble ambition, and this is the way Mr. Deakin has of cleverly putting things so as to hoodwink the people’.\textsuperscript{141} He claimed that Canada had adopted Labor’s policy, and that Canada’s fleet was to belong to Canada. He later asserted that the offer of a Dreadnought had been a ‘mere political cry in Great Britain, and the Labor party here saved Australia from being committed to such an outlay’.\textsuperscript{142}

Two weeks before the election, at an over-flowing meeting at Melbourne Town Hall on 30 March was not the time for Fisher to debate policy. It was the time to point out the shortcomings of Deakin’s policies and refute his arguments. A time to drive home an attack on the leaders of the Fusion. The first to suffer was Cook for his lack of knowledge on the River class of boat. Fisher then turned his attack upon the duplicity of Deakin, ‘your great citizen and Australia’s orator, the Prime Minister’. In referring to the Dreadnought scare Fisher conceded that the Labor government had declined to give the mother country two million pounds in the shape of a Dreadnought because it had ‘a policy of its own — a policy well thought out, and not hysterical —not a policy for a month or a day or an hour, but one that would lay the foundations of a sound national defence policy’. He jested, when they came to power did the present Government send a Dreadnought? ‘[No] The Prime Minister said “a Dreadnought or its equivalent.” There is no man in the world so capable as your distinguished Prime Minister of making that little addendum!’\textsuperscript{143} Fisher played on the emotions of the audience and scorned Deakin’s claim that the Australian naval unit was in the mind of the Fusion Government when the public was asked to offer Britain a Dreadnought. Later, the Government instead of ‘offering the mother country something they sent home a high commissioner ...to ask John Bull for £3,500,000 so that we may build a navy’. To a clamour of applause he bellowed ‘This Government has humiliated the Commonwealth as no other Government has done’.\textsuperscript{144}

\textsuperscript{140} Argus, 8 February 1910,7.
\textsuperscript{141} Brisbane Courier, 10 February 1910, 5.
\textsuperscript{142} Sydney Morning Herald, 24 February 1910,8; Brisbane Courier, 24 February 1910, 5.
\textsuperscript{143} Argus, 31 March 1910, 9.
\textsuperscript{144} Argus, 31 March 1910, 9.
The April 1910 General Election resulted in Labor being returned with a majority in both chambers, and within two months the subject of the *Naval Loan Act* had been resurrected. The overwhelming electorate majority has been attributed variously to the electorate’s disgust at the ‘laxity of principle involved in the fusion of two sections professing to be diametrically opposed to each other’, the trade union and Labor branches success in ensuring increased enrolment and voting, in New South Wales, opposition to Premier Wade’s Coercion Act, the intrusion of sectarianism and the Catholic vote, the opposition of an influential press, the *Age* and *Bulletin* (Sydney), even ‘alienation’, a negative reaction to candidates and to punish the party or candidate. Irrespective of the reasons, Fisher had accomplished, by organization and political acumen, what no other politician had achieved in ten years of federation. He had defeated the establishment, those who believed they had ‘the right to rule’, an achievement not again accomplished until James Scullin’s victory in 1929. To Fisher the Fusion party of Deakin and Cook was an anathema — a class party devoted to securing its own interests first, whatever its label.

On 22 June 1910 in Caucus, the repeal of the late government’s *Naval Loan Act 1909* was agreed, and on 13 July 1910 Fisher, as Prime Minister, introduced a Bill for that purpose. At the second reading of the Bill, Fisher opened the debate with a strong declaration of his stance towards borrowing: ‘only in the case of war or great national necessity should we borrow for Defence purposes’ and under no circumstances should money be borrowed overseas for defence. In the Fisher Papers there is an undated handwritten note of a Cabinet meeting: ‘Naval loan Act repeal Approved: if the Treasurer can see his way to finance Defence ???’

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145 See Rickard, *Class and Politics*, 247-253. La Nauze, *Alfred Deakin*, discusses reasons for the result 601-602. For Deakin’s views on the reasons for his defeat see La Nauze 603-604.

146 William Holman’s comments see H. V. Evatt, *William Holman*, 177.

147 For example see the figures in the new fifteen seats captured.


151 See Forrest to Deakin, 24 May 1910, ‘depressed ... at the “tumbling down” of our castle.’ Deakin papers NLA MS1540/16/604-3

152 See, Marginson, “Andrew Fisher”, 189.

153 Caucus Minutes, 258.

154 CPD, 55, 381.

155 CPD, 55, 682. The assent of the Senate was reported to the House on 18 August 1910, CPD, 56, 1774.
otherwise. At the time of the meeting it would appear that there was some doubt as to the finance available.

The question of the naval subsidy was finally resolved during the second reading of the *Naval Defence Bill*. It was agreed under Senator Pearce's portfolio, at the Cabinet meeting of 8 August 1910, that Australia did not propose to accept the £250,000 subsidy from Great Britain. Hughes later made the statement in parliament that Australia would accept nothing from Great Britain, but 'pay for the whole fleet ourselves'. Fisher at the Imperial Defence Conference in 1911 again brought up the question of providing funds for defence from current revenue. During a discussion regarding the possibility of a future attack by Japan, he stated that it was necessary to get the best fleet that money could buy, and 'to pay annually sufficient money to develop and keep up to date a naval unit of our own to be controlled by the people in Australia'.

Fisher, throughout the debates, was conforming to the Platforms decided and approved at various Commonwealth Labour Political Conferences from 1902 to 1908, concerning the provision against foreign borrowing, except for the conversion of State loans, the restriction on public borrowing, the provision that loans have a statutory provision for sinking funds, and the principle that the Navy should be Australian-owned and controlled — broadly that naval and military expenditure should be from proceeds of direct taxation and not an obligation on future population.

In January 1912, during the Conference debate on Plank 13, 'Naval and military expenditure be allotted from proceeds of direct taxation', F.H. Bryant put the point that in keeping the Plank, 'it would be a check on any future Dreadnought or other “scare” in regard to which a Labor Government might be adversely criticised'. Nevertheless, the Dreadnought question did not die. The naval correspondent to the London *Morning Post* quoted Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, as saying that Australia was an unsuitable station for 'vessels of

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156 Fisher papers, NLA, MS 2919/3/385.
158 CPD, 59, 6253, 10 November 1910.
159 Extract from Minutes of Committee of Imperial Defence 1911 in Hughes Papers, NLA MS1538/15/695.
160 CPLC 1902, Item No.26, 9.
161 CPLC 1902, Fighting Platform No.6, 2; CPLC 1908, Fighting Platform 6, 23; CPLC 1908, Fighting Platform No.7, 42.
162 CPLC 1902, Item 27,10.
163 CPLC 1902, Item No. 17, 8, CPLC 1908, General Platform, No. 5, 42.
164 CPLC,1912, 19.
that class'.

Fisher, when questioned, responded: 'I prefer to take the opinion of the experts whom we consulted . . . but one thing is definite, the vessel is coming to Australian waters as soon as it is completed'.

The second Fisher government was not able to adhere entirely to the professed intention to avoid borrowing. In December 1911 it borrowed £2,460,476 from the Australian Notes Trust Fund. Fisher still proclaimed, however, that it should be the duty of the people to pay for defence out of revenue, so that in time of need loan resources would be available. And his government in its Budget Estimates for the year ending June 1913 proved it was possible to pay for the construction of a Fleet Unit out of income.

Fisher's attitude, on borrowing and an independent Australia capable of its own defence, may have owed something to his Scottish frugality and the overall desire for independence, not available to a Scottish miner. In the working class of this period there was a fear of debt— you only acquired what you could pay for. To borrow meant financial disaster, one was 'living beyond your means'. Also, he would have remembered the political corruption involved in borrowings by the Queensland government. He had left Scotland for a 'new life' in Australia. He was always fighting for independence of some sort. Geoffrey Blainey has stated that education and social class shape writers. This surely also applies to politicians.

La Nauze has maintained that it was Deakin's ordering of the Australia on 8 December 1909 ensured that it was 'the most powerful vessel in the Pacific in August 1914'. However, if Fisher had not stood his ground, the likelihood was that HMS Australia, like HMS New Zealand, would probably have been in the North Sea—useless for the defence of Australia. We would not have had that flagship— HMAS Australia. Events proved that ultimately, only an Australian navy could defend Australia.

165 Argus, 11 April 1912, 7.
166 Argus, 12 April 1912, 6.
168 Fisher at Wangaratta, Argus, 27 February 1913, 7.
170 Spence, Australia's Awakening, 236-239.
172 See La Nauze, the footnote on page 584 on the argument of the timing on naval warfare in the Pacific.
CHAPTER THREE


During an interview at Sydney late in April 1910, given on his journey south from Queensland, Fisher pledged that he and his Government would do all it could to carry out its programme. When questioned on the nationalisation of monopolies he became restive and ambivalent, pointing out that the Victorian Government had nationalised a coalmine without any public outcry. Fisher's position had now changed dramatically since his joust with Deakin over the Dreadnought affair. Now he was the presumptive head of a government, which for the first time had an absolute majority, and the only restriction to its powers would be the Constitution. He preferred caution in public statements. Fisher's Ministers were relatively inexperienced in public affairs. At least a third of the members had no previous parliamentary experience. They would look to Fisher, who probably had the most parliamentary and Ministerial experience.

Fisher now became the catalyst and tactician for all the legislation that the party had worked on over the years. It was his responsibility to prioritise and co-ordinate the government's legislative programme in the House. He soon found himself, however, planning two lengthy interruptions to his heavy work schedule. King Edward VII died on 6 May 1910 and the Union of South Africa was to come into being on 31 May 1910. As Prime Minister, Fisher would be expected to attend the gathering of the Dominion Prime Ministers in South Africa in late 1910, and the new King's Coronation sometime in 1911. Fisher always believed that the importance of the Labor Party should be recognised, and its leader respected; representation at international Dominion events would augment that recognition and respect. But sea travel would necessitate long periods out of Australia, so he would have to concentrate his energies on obtaining approval of as much legislation.

1 Age, 25 April 1910, 7; Argus, 25 April 1910, 5.
2 Fitzhardinge, William Morris Hughes 251.
3 CPD, 6, 8124, 3 December 1901.
4 McMullin, Light on the Hill, 76.
as possible before he departed. The drafts of the Bills proposed changes in the constitution and the preparation of the referendum having been completed, it was sensible to delegate to Hughes as Attorney-General, the detailed and legal presentation, while Fisher concentrated upon the public presentation.\(^5\)

Fisher’s Cabinet had already worked to lay the ground for constitutional change. On 12 June 1910, Cabinet approved the draft of the Constitution Alteration (Legislative Powers) 1910 Bill.\(^6\) The proposals were given to Caucus on 21 June 1910, and over four days were read and explained.\(^7\)

On 1 July 1910, the Governor-General’s Speech included proposals for the amendment of the Constitution by referendum early the next year.\(^8\) Fisher could claim a mandate from the people as the general proposals had been included in his Gympie speech; and the Labor Manifesto issued by the Commonwealth Labor Party included the ten Fighting Planks.\(^9\) Labor’s intentions could not have been clearer.

Cabinet did not begin detailed planning for the referendum until 26 September,\(^10\) the day on which Fisher became aware that 18 members of Parliament had been invited to England for the Coronation.\(^11\) It was therefore obvious that Fisher and Caucus knew of the date of the Coronation, and could have possibly arranged a more convenient date for the referendum. Perhaps because of the rush to organise his departure just eight days later, arrangements for the referendum were not considered until 8 November 1910, by which time he was out of the country.

The *Argus* leader of 28 September attacked the delay and the rushing through of the bill late in the session, claiming that the object was to give the community little time for deliberation. It complained at the additional cost (£70,000) to the community at holding a referendum at a time other than at a Federal general election, when all previous referenda had been held.\(^12\) The Government argued that the referendum proposals would stand on their own merits with in theory no association with individuals.\(^13\) It seems likely that, having been six

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5 See Fisher Papers, NLA, MS 2919/3/398.  
6 Fisher Papers, NLA, MS2919/3/389.  
7 Caucus Minutes, 258-261.  
8 CPD, 55, 8.  
9 Argus, 5 March 1910, 20.  
10 Argus, 26, and 27 September 1910, 6.  
11 Caucus Minutes, 270.  
12 Argus, 28 September 1910, 12.  
13 Argus, 28 September 1910, 12.
months in office, Fisher would not have wanted to wait another thirty months before implementing Labor's Fighting Platform.

The Labor government had passed a considerable amount of important legislation,\textsuperscript{14} and had achieved five of the ten Fighting Platform planks included in its Federal Manifesto.\textsuperscript{15} The passing of Bills that required Parliamentary approval had taken priority and the House had been sitting for an average of twelve hours a day. But the Party was prevented from implementing its planks on New Protection, nationalisation of monopolies and arbitration by restrictions placed on Commonwealth authority by the Constitution, or its interpretation by the conservative High Court. With a change in the Constitution the entire platform would be achieved.

It was the extent and the manner of the change proposed by the Labor Party which caused a conflict. A surprising number of the Opposition agreed that the constitution needed some alteration, though not as much as Hughes proposed.\textsuperscript{16} Some Opposition members may have accepted the specific power in regard to monopolies, but Labor required that the four proposals be accepted or rejected \textit{en bloc} and since no Fusion member favoured all of them, they necessarily voted against the Bill. The legal profession considered that some aspects of the proposals would raise a host of legal problems.\textsuperscript{17} There was in addition an overall objection to unification.\textsuperscript{18}

On 4 October 1910 Fisher told Caucus and a few hours later, Parliament, details of the coming Legislation, which including the proposed bill for the referendum dealing with the nationalisation of monopolies.\textsuperscript{19} The \textit{Argus} commented that 'he reeled [it all] off in the matter of fact tones of one who would not have to do any of the work'.\textsuperscript{20} With Labor's overwhelming numbers in the House and Senate there was little need for much debate at all. The following day Fisher left for South

\textsuperscript{14} See Summary of The Legislation Passed By The Labour Government in Fisher Papers, NLA, MS2919/3/393-7.
\textsuperscript{16} Fitzhardinge, \textit{William Morris Hughes}, 262.
\textsuperscript{17} See, later, Charles Powers (Commonwealth Crown Solicitor) to Hughes, 6 December 1912, Hughes Papers NLA MS1538/15/358-361.
\textsuperscript{18} Sawer, \textit{Australian Federal Politics}, 98-99.
\textsuperscript{19} Caucus Minutes, 271; CPD, 57, 4044.
\textsuperscript{20} Argus, 5 October 1910, 12.
Africa, and Hughes asked for leave to bring in the Bills necessary for the alteration of the Constitution.\textsuperscript{21}

On 18 October 1910, Hughes as Acting Prime Minister opened the Second Reading of the requisite Bills\textsuperscript{22} which were passed 3 November 1910.\textsuperscript{23} In the Senate, the bills passed almost without debate.\textsuperscript{24} Within Caucus certain actions were taken which might have affected an already precarious vote. After Fisher had left the country, some Labor members attacked Ministers for not specifically including disputes involving railway workers. This resulted in a hurriedly convened meeting of Caucus. Discussion within Caucus was adjourned for five hours after which the amendment was accepted.\textsuperscript{25} That night, Hughes, in the House, moved an amendment specifically including railway servants in Arbitration proceedings. The States would interpret this as the Commonwealth being able to take over the railways without responsibility for financing or management.\textsuperscript{26} Fisher, a steadying influence, might have persuaded the Caucus that there should be no hasty change at such a late stage. \textit{Melbourne Punch} considered the inclusion of the railway servants in the Arbitration proceedings had 'turned a level chance into an odds-against chance'.\textsuperscript{27} Within two weeks of Fisher's departure there were quarrels within the Caucus that were beginning 'to blaze within Parliament'.\textsuperscript{28} Did this presage Hughes' leadership manner to come in 1916?

Two members of Caucus later tried to have safeguards included in the referendum dealing with trade and commerce, and monopolies, that would have allowed the referral to the electors of any monopoly to be nationalised. Senator Rae moved a resolution which would have introduced 'initiative and referendum',\textsuperscript{29} but this was rejected. And on 26 October 1910 D.H. Hall at the Caucus meeting had moved that:

\begin{quote}
There be embodied in the referendum proposal an amendment making it clear that the Commonwealth
\end{quote}

\begin{thebibliography}{29}
\bibitem{22} CPD, 58, 4696 ff. and 4715.
\bibitem{23} CPD, 59, 5395-5413; CPD, 59, 5614.
\bibitem{24} CPD, 59, 6170-84.
\bibitem{25} Caucus Minutes, 273-4.
\bibitem{26} Argus, 28 October 1910, 4.
\bibitem{27} Melbourne Punch, 17 November 1910, 749.
\bibitem{28} See ‘Theseus’ in Argus, 22 October 1910, 6.
\bibitem{29} Caucus Minutes, 272-3.
\end{thebibliography}
Parliament does not seek power to take monopolies already publicly owned by the state or Municipality.\textsuperscript{30}

Hughes, who was presiding, opposed the motion and it was lost. Possibly Hall’s amendment would have placated some State Labor parliamentarians. In parliament, Hughes failed to emphasise that nationalisation referred only to injurious monopolies. Then, on 8 November, Charles McDonald (Kennedy, Qld) proposed to Caucus that the date of the referendum should be ‘the week ending on the 29 April’.\textsuperscript{31} The date was fixed at 26 April, which limited Fisher’s options. The House adjourned on 25 November 1910, and after being prorogued a number of times did not meet again until 5 September 1911, the longest recess since Federation.

Under Sec 128, the end of May 1911 became the deadline for the referendum. Fisher would return to Australia from South Africa, to commence the campaign, but he had to leave again in April to be in England for the King’s Coronation on 22 June 1911. Sixty eight years later, Dr. H.V Evatt claimed that Hughes planned his referendum for [26] April 1911 as at that time the Commonwealth Labor Government had already carried out many of its electoral undertakings, but the New South Wales Labor Government had not yet convened Parliament.\textsuperscript{32}

The Chief Electoral Officer for the Commonwealth considered that either 22 March 1911 or 29 March 1911 would be a suitable date.\textsuperscript{33}

Fisher was able to stay in Australia for only three months between his return from South Africa and his departure for the Coronation. To argue that his presence might have influenced the results would be to draw a long bow. There was no great media coverage, many electors would have only known the man through cartoons and the newspapers, and the national press was firmly against the alterations. It would need the Prime Minister touring the country and explaining the reasons for the alterations and the benefits to be derived, as he had done in 1910. In the limited time available this was not possible.

Fisher returned from South Africa on 29 December 1910 and it was not until 17 January 1911, in Hobart, that he announced he would begin campaigning on 28 February 1911.\textsuperscript{34} Fisher had inexplicably allowed two months to be frittered away.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid, 273.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 274.
\textsuperscript{32} Evatt, William Holman, 196. Holman and the majority of the NSW government opposed the proposals.
At Sydney on 23 January 1911, Fisher expressed mild surprise at the resentment in various quarters against the referendum proposals:

it is the right of the people to say if they wish the Constitution to be amended in the way proposed, or if they prefer it to remain as it is. It is our duty as ministers, to see that the position is made so clear that every elector will understand the issues involved.35

This in fact Fisher and the Labor Party failed to do. What Labor failed to comprehend was that, more so in 1911, eleven years after a new Constitution, electors were unlikely to vote “Yes” for something that they were unable to understand. The news that Fisher intended to mount a referendum campaign, instead of leaving the decision to the electorate, sparked a deputation from the local Liberal League to Tasmanian State Premier (Sir Elliott Lewis). They questioned the legality of the referenda themselves and requested the State Government to take the lead in organising a campaign of opposition.36

On the evening of 28 February 1911 the Melbourne Town Hall was packed to over flowing to hear Fisher speak. The Trades Hall band had led an enthusiastic crowd of 8,000 to the meeting.37 Fisher’s speech commenced with a history lesson on the initial Federal Conventions and the attitude of some of the Founding Fathers to the Constitution. He pointed out that ten years had elapsed between the first and second conventions,38 and the latter convention had produced a better constitution. He considered, therefore, that if another convention were called there might have been an even more democratic, far-reaching Constitution. He maintained that, within a few months of the Federal Parliament’s assembling, “the Prime Minister [Edmund Barton], Sir William McMillan, Mr. Higgins and a dozen others”39 considered that powers should have been given to the Commonwealth for legislation affecting industrial life and guaranteeing the uniformity of conditions of employment throughout Australia. Appeals had been made from time to time to the states to allow the federal parliament to exercise power in the interests of the Commonwealth, but nothing had been done. He went on to assert that the Federal Parliament should have unlimited control regarding trade and commerce. He

33 NAA, Referendum 1911 Series A6006, Control Symbol 1910/12/31, Barcode 426308.
34 Mercury, Hobart, 18 January 1911, 6.
35 Fisher Papers, NLA, MS2929/10/60 — "Extract SMH, 24 January 1911".
36 Mercury, 21 January 1911, 4.
37 Age, 1 March 1911, 9; Argus, 1 March 1911, 13, 14.
38 At the 1891 and 1897 Conventions.
39 Age, 1 March 1911, 9.
claimed that Tasmania already had the ‘dreadful powers’ and that Tasmania had done none of the things that the Federal Government was being charged with being likely to do. Statements by Sydney Labor men asserting that the referendum would mean that Australia would be governed from Melbourne he branded as ‘paltry, useless, misleading, trumpery and unworthy of any public man’.40

Fisher’s speech was not well received. It lacked conviction, for the argument was thin, the prepared statement having gone missing in the mail.41 Expecting to have the manifesto in his hands for his opening speech, Fisher appears not to have made his own characteristically thorough preparations. Certainly, his speech was not up to quality of his 1909 Gympie speech. His later speeches, however, were better formulated and better focussed.42

Fisher and Labor might have been wiser to have sought approval for constitutional changes, by separate referendum, spread over time, but the Parliamentary members were eager and new to the national scale of Federal politics. The Party does not seem to have fully appreciated that, unlike the earlier referendum of 1906 and 1910, this one was going to be fought along party lines, for it was not simply a machinery change. Unfortunately, Labor had not done enough to educate the electorate, and the electorate was induced to treat the amendments as a Federation v States issue. The advantage was with the Opposition, who could focus upon a direct and concentrated attack. The Sydney Morning Herald, in a column parallel to Fisher’s Melbourne speech, gave clear detailed and explicit reasons why the people should reject the alterations.

[it would] give the commonwealth unrestrained powers to regulate every phase of industrial life in the city shop and factory on the farm in the mine, and on the wharfs . . . to every individual the changes would mean loss of time, expense and general confusion.43

Having opened the campaign, Fisher made the most of the time at his disposal before leaving for the Coronation. The role played by the monarch in Australia’s federation was never anticipated as a major one, but now the Majesty of England had impinged on the future policy and industrial relations of Australia.

40 Ibid. Would there have been the same reaction if Federal Parliament had been based in Sydney?
41 For a history of the ‘missing manuscript’ see Age, 28 February 1911,7; Argus, 2 March 1911,7; Argus, 9 March 1911,7.
42 Worker, 9 March 1911, 13.
43 Sydney Morning Herald, 18 March 1911,16.
Fisher toured Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia in an effort to encourage a "Yes" vote, returning to Melbourne on 30 March, leaving him only five days before his departure for England. Traversing the same ground as his speech at Melbourne Town Hall, again and again he referred to the history of Federation and quoted from leaders of the federal movement to show that they considered greater powers should be vested in the Commonwealth. He also attempted to relate the issues to local matters.

On the day Fisher left for Brisbane, the Argus reported a distinct breach between Labor members of New South Wales State Parliament and the Political Labor League on the subject of the referendum. The referendum proposals as drafted were far more drastic than envisaged at the Brisbane Labor Conference. Among other proposals, the federal government would have the power to nationalize the business of any State government or municipality.

When Labor parties in the States were in opposition they sympathised with and encouraged Federal Labor, but in 1910 they governed in two States, New South Wales and South Australia. Thus these State Labor governments stood to lose power and authority. Melbourne Punch considered that with the advent of Labor control in the States 'there will be a complete brake applied'.

Many interests were temporarily united in opposition, from radicals to the financial and industrial groups who were content with the complexity of dispersed sovereignty so long as their particular interests remained undisturbed. The strongest opposition came from the national press, for the Labor Party had little press support apart from the Worker. The debates on the coming referendum split the country, mainly between rural and city interests, but also between property owners, and the professional classes and wage earners. As in the 1910 General election, with the emergence of the two-party system the electorate could identify with one side or the other. But there was also tension between Federal and State levels among Labor's supporters.

The campaign against the referendum appears to have been stronger in New South Wales and Victoria than the other States. On the day following Fisher's

44 For itinerary, see Argus, 2 March 1911, 7.
45 Brisbane Courier, 6 March 1911, 7.
46 Brisbane Courier, 7 March 1911, 4.
47 For the arguments see Evatt, William Holman, 192-194.
48 Melbourne Punch, 27 October 1910,626.
49 La Nauze, Alfred Deakin, 615.
50 Evatt, William Holman, 201-203.
speech, the Victorian State Ministerial Party, organised a Committee, under the leadership of Premier Murray, and a campaign opened at the Melbourne Town Hall on 10 March. The *Argus* indicated that the Committee opposed the manner in which the proposals were put forward rather than the principles behind the proposals.\(^{51}\)

To Deakin the transfer of such legislation to the Commonwealth was a step toward unification. He had once declared 'I was and am a federalist',\(^{52}\) and in defence of Federalism was 'perfectly willing to go down with my flag flying, sinking with it rather than swimming with the successful majority'.\(^{53}\) Deakin was convinced that Labor wished to destroy Federation and that by the 'acquisition of centralized power over social and industrial affairs the independence of the States would be at an end'.\(^{54}\) Alfred Deakin opened the Federal Liberal Opposition campaign at Ballarat. In Victoria about 100 meetings were arranged from Melbourne to Echuca, from Snake Valley to Dimboola.\(^{55}\) Deakin and the Liberals fought an emotional campaign centred on the defence of Federation and the Constitution. New branches of the People's Party were formed throughout the State to organise the "No" vote.\(^{56}\) The Fusion, shocked by their defeat in 1910 and by Labor's superior organization of the vote (voluntary at that time), pulled out all stops to counter Labor's campaign. The Fusion's 'born to rule' mentality\(^{57}\) had been undermined by Labor's 1910 victory, but Deakin as one of the 'Fathers of Federation' saw the referendum as a means of avenging the defeat in 1910.

State governments, farmers and graziers and other groups were opposed to the possible Commonwealth control of the State railways.\(^{58}\) After opening the campaign in Victoria, Deakin travelled to New South Wales where he addressed a large meeting at the Sydney Town Hall to warn against the transfer of the control of the State railways to the Commonwealth. In 1903 and 1904, Barton and Deakin had opposed vehemently the inclusion in the Conciliation and Arbitration Bill of industrial disputes concerning the state railway employees. The Sydney meeting passed a resolution pledging itself to work for a "No" vote.\(^{59}\) The Master Builders'
Association of New South Wales, and in Queensland the Premier, Digby Denham, attacked the referendum proposals as an assault upon that ‘great instrument’ the Constitution. The Brisbane Courier ran a long editorial accusing Fisher of intending the destruction of the Commonwealth by replacing Federation with unification.

Cardinal Moran, an ardent Labor supporter, did wish the referendum success, otherwise the Catholic Archbishops appeared to be neutral on the subject. There appeared to be no unanimity among Catholics, much less a Catholic vote. A large proportion of the Labor voters being of Irish decent, the fight for States’ rights against Federal control was compared to the Home Rule principle by politicians of both persuasions. W.A Holman (NSW, Attorney-General), speaking at the St Patrick’s Day Rally in 1911, suggested that the Home Rule similarity should be considered: ‘autonomy should not readily be taken away from constituent States’.

The Argus commented that the Labor leaders had an advantage in the campaign over the Opposition. They appealed to an animated united party, idealists to whom, though ‘utterly mistaken and impractical, [the proposal] was nevertheless inspiring’. Moving to another tack on 13 March, the Argus listed fourteen constituencies that had Labor representatives in both State and Federal parliaments, who were not ‘local’ members. It pointed out that at the 1910 General election, these constituencies polled 66,903 Liberal votes, but that this did not reveal the full strength, for some Liberals had not voted because in the ‘safe’ Labor seats their vote made no difference. ‘But in the poll on the referendum every vote counts’.

After more than a week of campaigning Fisher became more aggressive. At Ipswich and Toowoomba he stated that if the proposals were not carried ‘they would come again in a way that would make their opponents fall down from fright’, and declared that ‘public opinion would soon demand more drastic

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60 Argus, 1 March 1911, 14; Argus, 9 March 1911, 7.
61 Fisher Papers, MS2919/10/68 cutting headed “BRISBANE COURIER 24-1-1911”.
62 Argus, 14 March 1911, 7.
63 Quoted by Father Doyle at St. Arnaud, Age, 25 April 1911, 10.
64 Within the United Kingdom, ‘Home Rule’ had again come to the fore with the December 1910 general election.
65 See cartoon on Worker, FrontPage with three members of Loyal Orange Lodge singing a ‘Home Rule’ Chant.
66 Evatt, William Holman, 201.
67 Argus, 9 March 1911, 6.
68 Argus, 13 March 1911, 6. Emphasis in original.
69 Argus, 14 March 1911, 7.
amendments than were now asked for.'\textsuperscript{70} That is, Fisher threatened even more radical proposals for Constitutional change, asserting that the people would insist on such proposals. Just how the government planned to secure more radical changes if the current proposals were rejected, and why 'public opinion' should be any different from opinion as registered by voters at the referendum, is hard to say. To promise inducements was in the briefs of all politicians, but it was injudicious and illogical to threaten voters. The strain of the legislative workload and the campaign may have led Fisher to become indiscreet. Such statements were uncharacteristic of Fisher, and they would come back to haunt him in 1912 at a meeting in Rockhampton where he was questioned as to the meaning of his statement.\textsuperscript{71}

Andrew Fisher, 'confident of a positive outcome',\textsuperscript{72} sailed to attend the Coronation of King George V and the Imperial Defence Conference.\textsuperscript{73} But this time Fisher's confidence was misplaced. He misinterpreted the 1910 results. The 1910 election landslide was based on the results of individual electorates and the work of individual Labor organizations getting out their particular Labor vote. It was possible to win the majority of the seats in a general election without obtaining the overall national majority which was needed for a referendum. In 1910 the Labor Party had received only 49\% of the total vote and polled 42,744 votes more than the Liberals, yet won seventeen seats from that party. In the case of a referendum it was the total number of States votes and the overall national vote that counted. Should Labor supporters fail to turn up to vote, there would be little hope of an overall national majority.

Fisher had time to write to Hughes, 19 April 1911, on the run to Ceylon. He noted that he was anxious about the coming result with State rights so deep rooted, but it was Labor's duty to Australia to make the Constitution a workable one.\textsuperscript{74} The following day, the newspaper published six columns of results. They were sent to Fisher on board RMS \textit{Otway}— somewhere in the Indian Ocean.

\textsuperscript{70} Argus, 16 March 1911, 8.
\textsuperscript{71} Argus, 23 April 1912, 9.
\textsuperscript{72} McMullin, \textit{Light on the Hill}, 73.
\textsuperscript{73} It is baffling as to why the referendum were held in the absence of Andrew Fisher, Prime Minister and Leader. But consider the sailing only every fortnight of suitable passenger liners, the length of the recess, 25 November 1910 to 5 September 1911; the arrival in London, 16 May 1911, the date of the Coronation 22 June 1911, the timing inappropriate it might be, but could not be helped.
\textsuperscript{74} Hughes Papers, NLA MS1538/15/90, Folder 3.
The referendum obtained a majority in only one State, Western Australia. Overall only 40% of voters favoured change. In New South Wales a direct negative vote was given in 12 out of the 17 Labor seats, widening the split between the Federal and State Labor parties, and the "Yes" vote was only 53% of the Labor votes in 1910, and in all other States, except South Australia, the "Yes" vote was way down against the Labor Vote in 1910. Yet there was no corresponding increase in the "No" vote. It was obvious that the Labor Party supporters had not turned out to vote. This time the Fusion parties had been drumming up enrolment. The opponents were jubilant. D.W. McCay of the Argus wrote to Deakin:

I would give more'n fourpence to be on the Otway today. 
Don't you hear the great Tribune saying "I can see, 
Shepherd, that it will no do for me to be away again." 77

To present the campaign as a clear-cut battle between government and Federal Opposition would be misleading. A battle would mean each side had a planned battle campaign. Deakin was a skirmisher: he attacked the referendum on a political level, and purported to believe that the referendum was an attack upon the Constitution, of which he was one of the remaining Fathers. In this Deakin was indirectly supported by the State/Federal rivalries. Hughes's protagonist was Holman, who after the State election on 14 October 1910 had just become the Attorney-General in the first Labor Government in New South Wales. Holman did not want his new authority undermined. On a personal note, Fisher appeared to be relaxing after his hectic South Africa voyage. Admittedly the Federal Party had been very busy between 1 July and 25 November, sitting long hours in both Houses, with no time constraints on debates. They had passed a considerable amount of important legislation and all federal politicians may have needed a holiday. January to April in Australia could be very hot and debilitating.

After Fisher had left for South Africa, Hughes two-hour speech in the second reading of the first Bill was generally recognised as his best to date. But of what use was a brilliant speech in the House, a speech that may or not have been

75 For the statistics, see Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1901-1911, No.5 -1912. (Melbourne: Commonwealth Bureau of Census & Statistics), 954-955.
76 Argus, 6 March 1911, 8; Argus, 9 March 1911,7; Argus, 13 March 1911,6.
77 Deakin Papers, NLA 1540/16/658, D.W. McCay to Deakin, 27 April 1911.
78 La Nauze, Alfred Deakin, 614-5.
79 Evatt, William Holman, 187-205.
80 Fitzhardinge, William Morris Hughes, 259.
publicised in the electorate? Better to have concentrated his eloquence in explaining the facts to the voters. If Hughes had any nous as Acting Prime Minister, he should have used the period before Fisher’s return in educating the people. Perhaps Fisher should take some blame for not insisting that this should be carried out in his absence. Was it political foolhardiness? Hughes in his campaign gave more prominence to rhetorical attacks on trusts and combines and less to constitutional argument.\(^{81}\)

It is unlikely that the absence of Fisher affected the vote. What were needed were the Labor organizations to get out the voters as in 1910. It might be that the results did represent the electors’ attitude to changes in the Constitution, but what they did portray was the lack of effort by the Federal party in educating the voter instead of haranguing them. Also had Fisher dogged Deakin and made a more direct confrontation with Deakin it might have dramatised the issues. The outcome might have been closer, but based on the actual results there was little likelihood of success. Before Federation it had been emphasised to the electorate that the Constitution being drafted was the best for the interests of Australia—now, within twelve years, one set of politicians opposed by another set of politician wanted to change it, without clearly explaining the advantage to the voters.

The *Round Table* traced, in some length, some of the reasons for the heavy adverse vote from the point of view of the man in the street. The article also considered that people who voted Labor in 1910 because of their disgust at the Fusion had no doubt returned to support the Liberal cause on a predominantly Labor class issue. Also New South Wales and South Australia Labor governments were mainly out of sympathy with the Federal Labor proposals, and Labor electors may have looked to their local members for guidance.\(^{82}\) In the absence of expert psephologists, people fell back on the arguments of corruption, ignorance or apathy as the reason for the results.\(^{83}\)

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\(^{81}\) Ibid, 263.

\(^{82}\) "Australia." *The Round Table: Quarterly Review of the Politics of The British Empire No 5*, December 1911, 145-56.

Fisher wrote to Hughes from the RMS Otway whilst in the Mediterranean on 2 May 1911, expressing his disappointment at the result and commenting upon the probability of the opposition receiving outside funding.\(^{84}\) Fisher confirmed approval, by telegram, of Hughes's suggestion that the Government proposals should again be placed before the electorate at the next general election.\(^{85}\) The Times Financial correspondent in Melbourne, writing [12 April] before the results of the referendum, commented that

practically all the commercial interests of Australia are solidly arrayed against the alteration . . . [however] if the . . . questions were separated some of them would undoubtedly be supported by the commercial world.\(^{86}\)

After the result had been declared The Times quoted the Worker as declaring that New South Wales trusts and combinations contributed £100,000 to a “No” campaign.\(^{87}\) Forrest had been organizing a political fund immediately after the April election,\(^{88}\) and Joseph Cook wrote to Deakin that New South Wales Liberals had been collecting funds ‘held by Federal people’.\(^{89}\) By contrast, there was no central Federal Labor Parliamentary fund independent of the State parties.

At the luncheon welcoming Fisher, during a Reuter’s interview, Fisher first declared that the referendum result

in no way reflected upon the position of the Labor Party which had desired to give Parliament, and not party, greater control over matters of trade and commerce.\(^{90}\)

During his visit to the United Kingdom, he consistently referred to the shortcomings of the Constitution in his speeches, asserting that the Commonwealth required greater powers.\(^{91}\) So he did not regard the fight for constitutional change as being over.

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The requirement for changes in the Constitution had not been dropped: the Governor-General’s Speech on 5 September 1911 noted that the ever-increasing

\(^{84}\) Hughes Papers, NLA MS1538, Folder 3.
\(^{85}\) The Times, 4 May 1911, 5.
\(^{86}\) Ibid, 28 April 1911, 5.
\(^{87}\) Ibid, 5 May 1911, 5.
\(^{88}\) See Deakin Papers, NLA MS1540/16/605, Forrest to Deakin 24 May 1910.
\(^{89}\) Deakin Papers NLA MS1540/16/653, Cook to Deakin, February 1911. Certainly Melbourne during the General Election had sent £1,500, distributed equally to Forrest, Kidson and another. See Deakin Papers, NLA MS1540/16/644, E. Littleton Groom to Deakin, 16 December 1910.
\(^{90}\) Reuter’s interview, The Times 16 May 1911, 5.
\(^{91}\) See his speech at the Ayrshire Miners’ Union dinner, The Times, 19 May 1911, 6.
exactions of the Trusts make an extension of the constitutional powers of the Commonwealth imperative.92 Replying to a remark by Alfred Deakin during the Address-in-Reply, Fisher conceded the Opposition their joy at the results, however he would not cease to advocate the receiving of such powers as early as the electorate will permit.93

When Joseph Cook asked 'then the Government propose to submit the questions again?' Fisher replied 'Certainly, because we are convinced . . . that anything materially less than that would be practically ineffective for the people's benefit'.94 He agreed that the policy of the party was determined and had to be endorsed at a representative conference, but the party did not 'shift its sails to suit the passing breeze'.95 Fisher accepted that a party with new ideas would receive setbacks at times, but expediency would not compromise party principles.96 When it was pointed out that the New South Wales Labor Government had been against the referendum, he replied:

> it matters not to us if there were ten Labor governments against us. I believe the verdict at the referendum was given because the people did not understand the questions . . . we had [few] opportunities of putting the questions to them from the platform, and we had little press support. We shall take care to do that later on.97

The Party had been suspicious of various aspects of the voting at the referendum including defects in postal voting.98 It now moved to eliminate irregularities.99 Sir John Forrest admitted in May 1910 that 'my people on the gold fields will vote a dozen times and impersonate dozens of people and can . . . do it with impunity'.100 On 4 December 1911 the second reading of the *Electoral Bill* was moved.101 The Act abolished the postal vote, extended the principle of absentee voting, and imposed obligations on political organizations and on individuals to disclose expenditure in connection with an election. It required newspapers to mark

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92 CPD, 60, 7.
93 CPD, 60, 137-138.
94 CPD, 60,139.
95 Argus, 5 September 1911,6.
96 Argus, 7 September 1911,6.
97 CPD, 60, 139.
98 CPD, 61, 1577, Senator Millien's comments, 19 October 1911.
99 See the details listed in Argus 27 Nov 1911, 15.
100 Forrest to Deakin 24 My 1910, Deakin Papers NLA 1540/16/604/2.
101 CPD, 63, 3633.
paid election comment as ‘advertisement’ and to print the signatures of the authors,\textsuperscript{102} and provided for compulsory enrolment (but not compulsory voting).\textsuperscript{103}

On the first day of the Fifth Commonwealth Labor Conference, 8 January 1912, Fisher freed himself to participate in the debates by proposing J. Earle (Tasmania) as president. The Conference discussed the failed referendum at length. Lewis McDonald (Qld) moved a resolution requesting that a majority of votes of all electors of Australia should be sufficient to decide any question ‘without a majority of the States’. It was in effect a movement for unification.\textsuperscript{104} Watson suggested a general discussion of the unification proposal. If that obtained general support there would be no need to discuss the other proposals. When Somerville (WA) stated that he considered that Australia was far too big a country to be governed by one government, he was acclaimed by some members. Fisher suggested that discussion should be on the subject of “Unification”, submitted by Tasmania, and opened the debate.\textsuperscript{105}

Fisher acknowledged that he was not in favour of the motion; however the present division of Australia into six States was not beneficial for the people. Moreover, for Labor’s needs, the Constitution was not a workable one it did not give effect to the will of the people. It was time to point out to them the benefits of a redistribution of the powers of the Federation and the States. The Federal convention of 1890 had been too restrictive in granting powers to the national parliament, and thus, currently, the Commonwealth and the States were at variance among others on public health, shipping, and railways. He prophesied that unless steps were taken, in a number of years there would arise a new party appealing for a brand new Constitution: ‘it derived on the Labor party to take the lead’. The powers requested at the recent referendum were the minimum prerequisite to enable the national parliament to protect the interests of the whole people. In the future, it might be necessary to re-distribute the powers, giving ‘the whole of the political power to the Commonwealth in a larger and more general way’.\textsuperscript{106}

This speech gave his opponents much ammunition, and there were many other delegates who evidently did not support Fisher’s attitude on unification. Watson moved that the Conference go into Committee and in committee, the

\textsuperscript{102} Did not apply until writs are issued, Argus, 28 February 1913, 7.
\textsuperscript{103} CPD, 63, 3633; see Argus, 28 February 1913,7 on limitation of expenditure
\textsuperscript{104} CPLC 1912, 9.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid, 10.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid, 11.
resolution for unification was defeated by 19 votes to six. It was not until the third
day that J.C. Watson moved a resolution to amend the Commonwealth Constitution
to give the full powers sought on 26 April 1909. This motion was carried
unanimously. A further resolution was then carried that 'the referendum proposals
be again submitted to the electors at the next federal election'. On the Fifth and
concluding day of the Conference Fisher speaking to the motion for the adoption of
the report and the federal platform, asserted:

it was appropriate that the matter of the amendment of the
Constitution should be given such a prominent place for
several of the planks could not be carried out until the
Constitution had been amended.

On 12 June 1912, Caucus included the referendum in the coming Ministerial
programme, and on 17 July, a Bill to amend the Referendum (Constitution
Alteration) Act 1906-10 was introduced. This Bill was to bring the provisions of
the Act into conformity with the Electoral Act as introduced on 4 December 1911.
The next time the matter was raised, in Caucus, was on 29 August 1912, with a
resolution that

at the last Referendum, considerable confusion of thought
was occasioned by the five questions submitted to the
electors being embodied in two Acts of Parliament, the
questions to be submitted at the next Referendum should be
embodied in four separate Acts.

Federal Labor now moved to minimise the New South Wales party's opposition. A
committee was appointed to meet the New South Wales State Labor Party on the
question of the referendum proposals. The adoption of a fighting platform for
'Effective Federation' should have cut the ground from under the N.S.W. objectors,
but prominent members of the N.S.W. Labor Party, such as George Beeby (N.S.W.
Minister for Lands), still opposed the referendum.

In Caucus, on 6 November 1912, the six referendum questions were
adopted. Weller has pointed out that question 'No. 4 extended the jurisdiction of
federal arbitration to state railway workers. This space was left blank in the

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107 Ibid, 15.
109 Ibid, 46.
110 Caucus Minutes, 297.
111 CPD, 64, 895.
112 Caucus Minutes, 306.
113 Ibid, 308.
114 Argus, 11 November 1912, 15.
minutes. Copies of the referendum proposals were to be sent to each of the state parties, and the Prime Minister would arrange the time for speakers on the proposals. A memo was circulated to all Labor members:

Owing to Referendum proposals requiring statutory majority at all stages, it is absolutely essential that every member must be continuously in attendance at parliament from now on to the end of the session. This order must be imperatively obeyed.

Whereas in 1911 there had been no official federal statement to define or explain the referendum to voters, the Fisher Government now intended to convince the State Labor parties and their members to support the referendum, and to educate the public. A further amendment of the Referendum (Constitution Alteration) Act 1912, 1906-10 empowered the Government to send out to the electors the arguments for both sides. Fisher commented that the proposal was akin to the action taken by some State Parliaments prior to the passing of the draft Constitution Bill. But he was more than two years late in coming to this conclusion. The debates on the individual bills were lengthy. The Senate sat all night: five speeches on the Constitution Alteration (Trade and Commerce) Bill had taken 10 hours. The House adjourned on 21 December 1912, was continuously prorogued, and it did not sit again until 9 July 1913, (after the 31 May 1913 general election), with a Liberal government.

Once again touring Queensland, Fisher had not the slightest doubt of the party's success. Speaking at Maryborough he declared the success of the referendum inevitable. When asked how he accounted for the anticipated change in public opinion he asserted that this time the party would 'speak from thousands of platforms . . . and the questions will be placed before the people in a different light from that to which they have been accustomed'. This time, the amendments were not submitted on the authority of the Government and Parliament alone, but as a part of the official Labor program, formally adopted by the Labor Conference —

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115 Caucus Minutes, 313.
117 See REFERENDUMS to be held on Saturday, 31st May 1913. Melbourne. (Commonwealth Electoral Office, 1913), Petherick Location, NLA, No 329.994 AUSTRALIA.
118 CPD, 69, 7156 & 7696. In some States, official statements setting forth the text of the proposed laws and textual alterations of the constitution had been exhibited for public information at all schools and public buildings.
119 Argus, 18, December 1912, 15.
120 See Barlin, House of Representatives Practice, 778.
making an appeal to the solidarity of the Labor Party that had been wanting in 1911.\textsuperscript{122}

With the referendum and the general election on the same day, Fisher travelled widely attending conferences of various organizations.\textsuperscript{123} On 31 March 1913 Fisher delivered the Labor Party’s policy speech at the Bungalow, Maryborough, to an audience of 3,000. Commenting upon the coming referendum, he gave this justification for raising the issue again so soon. and for persisting with the referendum:

Where the public interests are involved on a question which the electors alone can decide it is not for the Government to consider whether it is popular or not; it is its duty to submit them for decision at every convenient opportunity.\textsuperscript{124}

It might seem that for Fisher the outcome of the referendum had become an obsession. Whether it was due to his dedication to social justice, or his commitment to party solidarity and the discipline imposed by Caucus, he displayed only optimism. But Fisher was not merely being obstinate. All useful legislation regarding industrial matters having been passed, there appeared to be little option but to take up the question of the referendum again. Section 128 meant that it was easier if Labor had the advantage of its control of both Houses. Surely Fisher made the right decision. Not until 1943 did the Labor party again control both Houses when John Curtin attempted to enlarge the Federal powers.

This time the previously rejected proposals were put to the electors as five distinct amendments together with a sixth, the purpose of which was to give jurisdiction to the Commonwealth over industrial relations in the State railway services (but not over the trade and commerce of railways). Accordingly, the six questions were combined on one printed slip.\textsuperscript{125} Fisher, referring to the referendum in the course of an interview, remarked that he had no doubt they would be carried this time— or some other time. ‘It is as sure as the sun will rise and set tomorrow’.\textsuperscript{126} The Labor Party hoped that the referendum, being held in conjunction

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\textsuperscript{122} "Australia." The Round Table: Quarterly Review of the Politics of The British Empire 11, no. June 1913 (1913), 542.

\textsuperscript{123} On 26 February 1913, he spoke at Wangaratta and Beechworth, see Argus 27 February 1913, 7.


\textsuperscript{125} Argus, 25 January 1913, 20.

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
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with the Federal elections, would mean greater public interest and a greater turnout, than on the previous occasion, and a larger 'YES' vote, since enrolment, though not voting, was now compulsory.\textsuperscript{127}

The general election held on 31 May 1913 resulted in a small swing to the Liberals, in the House, thirty-eight seats against Labor's thirty-seven.\textsuperscript{128} But Labor still maintained control of the Senate. In regard to the referendum, the majority of electors in three of the six states, Queensland, South Australia, and Western Australia, voted "YES", whereas, the average overall Commonwealth "YES" vote was 49.5%. This was a great improvement on the 1911 results, when only Western Australia cast a majority "Yes" vote. The Commonwealth "NO" vote majority of 25,000 (average) votes on each question was an improvement compared to 250,000 votes (average) in 1911. There had been an increase of 418,000 in enrolment (probably due to the new compulsion), but a dramatic increase of 785,000 (63%) to whom ballot papers were issued. For the second time the Federal Labor Party had nailed its referendum policy to the mast and been rejected. But Fisher maintained his intention to persevere until they won. On his return to Melbourne, he put on a brave face, pointing out that the Labor Party, though not obtaining the majority of seats, had secured the majority of votes for both Chambers. Soon after he was interviewed at home, giving no indication that the political situation disturbed him.\textsuperscript{129} In later statements, Fisher indicated that he was pleased by the increased "Yes" vote and anticipated resubmission of the proposals to referendum.\textsuperscript{130}

When the Speaker and the Chairman of Committees declined to continue in the Chairs, the Liberals had only equal numbers left on the floor of the House. With the overwhelming Labor majority in the Senate, Labor was determined to make government and legislation impossible. On 16 April 1914, just two days after the opening of the second session, Senator George McGregor moved six bills for constitution alteration,\textsuperscript{131} These were carried in the Senate, on 11 June 1914, and the Bills were sent to the House in an attempt to create the formal conditions

\textsuperscript{128} There had been a redistribution in 1912 affecting the nine seats lost by Labor; five of these were recovered in the 1914 election.
\textsuperscript{129} Argus, 6 June 1913, 8.
\textsuperscript{130} Argus, 18 July 1913, 8; Brisbane Courier, 18 July 1913, 6.
\textsuperscript{131} CPD, 73, 59-60.
required by Section 128. They were read the next day for the first time in the House by Fisher, but lapsed when parliament was prorogued.

Cook set about forcing a double dissolution using as a test Bill The Government Preference Prohibition Bill. He pushed the Bill through committee with a 44-hour sitting, and it was finally carried on the casting vote of the Speaker. Cook requested dissolution of both Chambers simultaneously and the Governor-General approved his request on 4 June 1914, subject to Cook obtaining Supply 'for a period sufficient to cover the elections'.

Fisher opened the Labor Party campaign with a policy speech at Bundaberg, on 6 July 1914. Even with conflict imminent in Europe, Fisher admonished Cook's and Forrest's intentions to borrow for defence in times of peace, because if credit were pledged in times of peace and prosperity, the country would have neither reserve nor resources in times of danger. He proclaimed that the 'great vital problems [all interconnected] that confront us in Australia today' were industrial unrest, the increased cost of living, and the operations of trusts and combines. He insisted that these were matters of national importance, distinct from party. Fisher pronounced Labor party policy to be the amendment of the tariff, new protection, initiative and referendum, opposition to borrowing for defence, and the development of an Australian owned, manned and controlled navy.

In Europe conflict between the Powers was erupting. Hughes in a highly emotional state, and taking political advantage of the situation, before England declared war, drafted a letter to Fisher demanding that the election be cancelled and suggesting a truce with Cook — presumably a coalition between the parties. Fisher, as calm as during the Dreadnought crisis, responded 'I am absolutely in disagreement with your views. Believe me: there is no panic here'. Fisher is mostly remembered for his political speech at Colac, 31 July 1914, where he declared 'we Australians will help and defend her (Britain) to our last man and our...
last shilling', words he had used in a speech, on Australia's defence, to the Working Men's United Empire League in Britain, in 1911. When the nation went to the polls on 5 September 1914, the war had been in progress a month. The Labor Party won back the five seats lost at the 1913 election, and government. The Governor-General's Address included 'Proposals to amend the Constitution at an early date'. On 29 October 1914 Caucus approved the resolution that the referendum proposals 'be submitted to the people in April'. It was not until 13 April 1915 that Hughes explained the proposed Amendments to the Constitution, which were similar to those rejected in the previous Referendums. Fisher had made a statement that the Government believed that the referendum proposals should be brought before the people as soon as possible and certainly no later than Christmas 1915. The government was also considering a proposal to introduce compulsory voting. The six Constitution Alteration Bills were introduced on 18 June 1915 and passed despite fierce opposition from the Liberals. The past two years had been a strain on Fisher and in October he announced his resignation and advised the Caucus that owing to the strain on his health he had decided to 'be an applicant for a position in the public service, namely the position of High Commissioner. Hughes was elected Leader of the party. Writs were issued for the submission to the Electors on 11 December 1915 of proposed laws for six alterations of the Constitution. Then on 11 November, a week after being elected leader, Hughes announced a change in policy and brought in a Bill to withdraw the writs. This was in exchange for a promise from the Premiers to cede the requested powers to the Commonwealth until twelve months after the War. The Writs were withdrawn on 11 November 1915. Fisher during his period as Prime Minister may not have appeared so dynamic or charismatic as Hughes. With an absolute majority in both Chambers his

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143 Argus, 10 July 1911, 7.
144 CPD, 75, 8.
145 Caucus Minutes, 383.
146 Ibid, 393.
147 Ibid, 403.
148 CPD, 77, 4188, 4221, 4223, 4224, 4226, 4227.
149 CPD, 79, 6945.
150 Caucus Minutes, 426-27.
153 Caucus Minutes, 430.
job was unchallenging. This may be compared with the consistency of his actions when in opposition. The pity is the overseas engagements, to the Union of South Africa and the Coronation, uncontrollable by the Labor Party, also threw out the Labor program over twenty-four months. If Fisher had taken in 1911 the same attitude as he took to the 1913 referendum there is a greater probability it would have been passed, certainly by 1913. To have left the planning and timing to Hughes was a mistake, for Hughes never really accepted that the electorate had to be educated, not browbeaten. The 1916 and 1917 Conscription referendums were examples of this. Fisher accepted the decision of the Caucus, Hughes appeared frustrated by it.

To the last Fisher, when questioned about the relations of the Federal and State governments after his retirement from the Ministry, reiterated his belief in the need for 'something in the way of unification': 'Think of it, seven Parliaments for 5,000,000 people. We want something in the way of unification at least as stringent as the constitution of the Union of South Africa'.

Fisher died 22 October 1928 and had seen six referendums including 15 submissions for the alteration of the Constitution. Of these only the first two were carried. Since his death, there have been twenty-nine further submissions of which six were carried. It would appear that unless there is an emotional support for the item submitted, such as the removal of discrimination against people of the Aboriginal race (27 May 1967), the average Australian voter votes 'No'. Future referendums would confirm the lack of bipartisan support for a proposal virtually ensures its defeat. But where the defeat is not inflicted in all States, the result may contain a more than complex explanation as to why one or more States voted affirmatively. Accordingly it was with the 1911 and 1913 referendums.

Gordon Greenwood and Bob Birrell have commented that if the proposals including those of the 1919 in modified form had been accepted 'they would have laid the foundation for a fundamental expansion in the federal government's powers across the social and economic spectrum'. Most Australian political leaders have experienced failure with referendum, but few have gone closer to success than Fisher in 1913.

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155 See Argus, 3 February 1916, his interview on arrival in England as High Commissioner.
CONCLUSION

Fisher defined and championed Labor's independent nationalist position. The man had staked his position as an Australian nationalist early in the life of the federal parliament. In the debate on British New Guinea, he emphasised a need for a national spirit and an Australian fleet.¹

The Fisher Papers reveal the wide and varied subjects during Cabinet meetings that needed his co-ordination.² The wide and eclectic subjects listed in his Cabinet Meeting notes show a man of great administrative capacity with the ability to delegate and coordinate a heterogenous group of politicians on varying subjects and place them within the contemporary political mould. It was under his leadership the system of standing committees in Caucus was created.³ He was reluctant for the Commonwealth to become a borrower until the States debts had been taken over. It could be argued that this reveals Fisher's steadiness of character, as well as his and Labor's intense desire that Australia should have a navy of her own⁴ rather than merely contribute to Britain's navy, and their abhorrence of borrowing to provide Britain with a naval subsidy.

Without his attitude in 1909, and purchase of the three torpedo destroyers, would there have been Imperial Conferences with the Admiralty agreeing to an Australian navy owned by and controlled by Australia? Would the Admiralty have given back Garden Island and the naval base in Sydney? Fisher had grabbed the nettle and ordered the ships. His determination and stubbornness is again revealed in his attitude to the appointment of the Chief Executive of the Commonwealth bank.⁵

This thesis has revealed the quintessentially radical Labor man who on the referenda went further than the party originally intended. He was a determined anti-monopolist and a centralist. The timing of the referenda was unfortunate, however. All other major legislation had been passed, and to safeguard and improve the social and economic conditions of the people of Australia the

¹ CPD, 6, 1416.
³ Caucus Minutes, 29.
⁴ An Australian controlled navy had been included in the General Platform at the 1905 and 1908 Labor Conferences.
presumed obstacles of the Constitution had to be removed. The timing was Labor’s choice and the date appears to have been made by Hughes and the Caucus while Fisher was out of the country the first time, thus placing a further restraint on the second visit. It may have been assumed that Hughes as Attorney-General should handle the referenda, but it turned out to be a mini-election in which Deakin appears to have sought vindication for his stand as a Father of the Federation and revenge for 1910 election.

Records, parliamentary, and press, reveal that throughout Fisher’s federal political career, to the foremost what he believed was the necessity to alter the Constitution. The reintroduction of the referenda in 1913 revealed this continuing desire to pass further industrial legislation for the improvement of Australians.

He strongly resisted the idea of the Commonwealth becoming debtor to foreign financiers, the ‘seventh borrower’, to purchase a Dreadnought for Britain. Apart from his principles against borrowing, it was contrary to the Labor Party platform. He was aware of the Commonwealth’s financial situation and as an honourable Labor man would not want to be the first Treasurer to finish the year with a deficit. Obviously the money was not available because of Deakin and Forrest’s need for the Naval Loan.

The Fisher Government’s eight attempts, in April 1911 and May 1913, indicated the party’s clear determination to reshape the Constitution, as did the Curtin and Chifley Governments sponsoring five attempts between 1944 and 1948, and twelve of the party’s twenty-five attempts were proposed by the Whitlam and Hawke Governments. Of these, only Chifley obtained the country’s approval, to one relating to Social Services.

How did Fisher’s contemporaries assess him? H.E. Boote, the labour journalist, with whom Fisher founded the Gympie Truth in 1896, later recalled that the staff of the Gympie Truth looked up to him for leadership because of his unique qualities. He was a sound thinker with a steadfastness of character. He was recognised as ‘a faithful champion of social justice — loyal to his class, courageous in the advocacy of their cause, and absolutely incorruptible’.6

---

His personal honour led him to refuse gifts carrying any political connotations. A contemporary press report, Amicus Curiae, in 1912, dispassionately summed up his qualities of leadership, duty, and principles:

When Mr Fisher is defeated he will cherish the precious knowledge that all is lost save honour—an honour which no individual ever called in question, because no one ever doubted it.

Further evidence of the high regard in which his contemporaries held Fisher was the number of federal politicians who wrote to him about the conscription referendum of 1916.

The last word must be left to Charlie Collins a Gympie Truth staff member who knew Fisher from 1886, and after Fisher’s death in 1928 recalled on Fisher’s last visit to Brisbane he had said:

Charlie, let the movement keep straight on. Stick to principles and the votes will be found to come. Have patience and confidence in the future, as we have had in the past, and the future of the Labor Movement is assured in this great Commonwealth.

From this short study it is clear that if we need to understand why Fisher made the decision not to offer a battle cruiser to England, there is a need to go beyond the current historical studies, which have concentrated on other political personalities of the period such as Deakin and Hughes.

Fisher, more than Hughes, was in the Labor tradition of strong commitment to the expansion of Commonwealth power. He was a radical centralist for socialist reasons but also because he was a nationalist. As a Labor leader he was effective and held the Caucus together, for eight years, whilst Hughes was involved in conflict within a few weeks of becoming Acting Prime Minister. Some may argue that he had a downside with his stubbornness. But some peoples’ ‘stubbornness’ is another’s determined attachment to principle.

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7 See W.K. Anderson, "Andrew Fisher" 204-205. Fisher Papers, NLA MS2919/1/69-70. 8/9 July 1912 re attempted bribery, MS2919/2/62-81, MS2919/2/82-83; Argus, 23 July 1915, 8; Argus, 7 October 1915, 6; Argus 20 October 1915, 7.
8 Amicus Curiae, Argus, 23 November 1912, 7.
9 See Caucus Minutes, 34 fn, 97; Fisher Papers NLA MS2919/1/292-4, 301-2,314,347-9,358,359.
10 Worker, Brisbane, 31 October 1928, 6.
## APPENDIX-B.

### REFERENDUMS AND RESULTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Date of referendum</th>
<th>States in which majority of electors voted in favour</th>
<th>Percentage of formal votes in favour</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Qld, WA, Tas...</td>
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<td>State Debts</td>
<td>13.4.10</td>
<td>All except NSW</td>
<td>54.95</td>
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<td>Legislative Powers</td>
<td>26.4.11</td>
<td>WA</td>
<td>39.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monopolies</td>
<td>26.4.11</td>
<td>WA</td>
<td>39.89</td>
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<td>Trade and commerce</td>
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<td>Qld, SA, WA</td>
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<td>Corporations</td>
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<td>Industrial Matters</td>
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<td>Railway Disputes</td>
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<td>Qld, SA, WA</td>
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<td>Trusts</td>
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<td>Qld, SA, WA</td>
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<td>Legislative Powers</td>
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<td>Vic., Qld, WA</td>
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<td>Nationalisation of Monopolies</td>
<td>13.12.19</td>
<td>Vic., Qld, WA</td>
<td>48.64</td>
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<td>Industry and Commerce</td>
<td>4.9.26</td>
<td>NSW, Qld</td>
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<td>Essential Services</td>
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<td>State Debts</td>
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<td>Aviation</td>
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<td>Marketing</td>
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<td>SA, WA</td>
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<td>Social Services</td>
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<td>54.39</td>
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<td>Industrial Employment</td>
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<td>Rents and prices</td>
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<td>Democratic Elections</td>
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<td>47.20</td>
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<td>Local Government Bodies</td>
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<td>46.85</td>
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<td>Senate Casual vacancies</td>
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<td>Referendums</td>
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<td>Retirement of Judges</td>
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<td>80.10</td>
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<td>Terms of Senators</td>
<td>1.12.84</td>
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<td>Interchange of Powers</td>
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<td>Fair Elections</td>
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<td>Parliamentary terms</td>
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<td>Establishment of Republic</td>
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<td>Preamble</td>
<td>6.11.99</td>
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**ABBREVIATIONS**

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>ADB</td>
<td>Australian Dictionary of Biography.</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANU</td>
<td>Australian National University, Canberra.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPD</td>
<td>Australian Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates.</td>
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<td>CPP</td>
<td>Australian Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers.</td>
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<td>CUP</td>
<td>Cambridge University Press.</td>
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<td>MUP</td>
<td>Melbourne University Press.</td>
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<td>NAA</td>
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<td>NLA</td>
<td>National Library of Australia, Canberra.</td>
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<td>OUP</td>
<td>Oxford University Press.</td>
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Humphreys, Edward William

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Some aspects of the federal political career of Andrew Fisher

Date:
2005

Citation:

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File Description:
Some aspects of the federal political career of Andrew Fisher

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