

1927 CHILD ENDOWMENT, ACTU FOUNDED, OPEN HOUSE IN CANBERRA

Contents

NSW pioneers child endowment.....	2
ACTU founded	6
First Parliament House opened in Canberra.....	11

NSW pioneers child endowment

The world's first child endowment legislation was enacted by the New South Wales Parliament on 26 March 1927. It was the work of one of Australia's greatest reform governments, led by the most controversial Premier in the history of the State — John Thomas Lang.

Lang's first job, at the age of seven, was selling newspapers on the Sydney streets to help support his family which had been left virtually destitute when rheumatic fever cut short his father's watchmaking career. His mother hawked bits of cheap jewellery from door to door; a sister worked long hours as a housemaid.

It was 1883 and capitalism reigned unfettered: pensions for invalids, the unemployed, and the aged were unknown; to most people, unthinkable.

But, as Lang educated himself at night school and then battled to the top of the political tree, he never forgot what it was like to be disadvantaged and poor.

As Labor leader in the 1925 State Parliamentary elections, he used full-page advertisements showing a widow with three children at her feet begging for food — a poignant picture which, together with promises of a child endowment scheme, won the majority of the women's vote and helped put him in power.

To his friends and supporters the new Premier was 'the Big Fella' — a reference both to his physical stature and his autocratic determination.

The Widows' Pensions Bill was introduced shortly after the election and provided £1 a week for a widow and half that amount for each of her children under the age of fourteen. The Opposition claimed the State could not afford this, with one member going so far as to equate it with communism, and warning it would 'contribute to immorality'.

Lang retorted that a widow with young children often had to have them adopted or made wards of the State, which provided her with a pittance from the Child Welfare Department for their support. The Bill was passed, and the first pension payments reached the widows of New South Wales in time for Christmas 1925.

Lang, who also held the Treasury portfolio, next introduced the Child Endowment Bill, which initially provided for the payment of 10 shillings a week for each child under the age of fourteen. But, as Lang later wrote:

To my surprise and consternation opposition to the measure came not only from the Opposition, but also from the Trades Hall where some of the unions regarded it as a thin wedge that would result in the reduction of the basic wage, at that time 42 shillings a week. The union fear was based on the fact that the basic wage in theory provided for the needs of a man, wife and three children.

The Premier pacified union leaders by promising that under his government the wage structure would not be changed, but the Legislative Council, where the National Party Opposition was in the majority, was not so easily won over.

It insisted that endowment should be part of the basic wage which, in effect, meant that this would be reduced by the amount of endowment a family received. They also insisted that it should be paid to the father, instead of to the mother, as the Labor Bill proposed.

However, after several meetings between representatives of the two parties and threats from Lang to go to the voters for a mandate to abolish the Legislative Council, a compromise was finally reached. This halved the amount of endowment to 5 shillings a week per child, and limited it to mothers of families receiving the basic wage.

For the next fourteen years New South Wales was the only State to provide a regular payment to mothers. In 1941 the Menzies Government established a Federal endowment scheme under which all mothers, irrespective of income, received 5 shillings a week for children under sixteen — except the first, for whom no payment was made until 1950.

Fourteen years later, dependent students aged between sixteen and twenty-one were included. Although there have been some increases in endowment, particularly in 1976 when tax rebates for dependent children were abolished, the lack of indexation over the years greatly reduced its real value.

During his first term as Premier, Lang also restored the forty-four-hour week, which had been increased to forty-eight by the Full Bench of the Arbitration Court in 1922, a year after similar legislation had been passed in Queensland.

The Labor Government also legislated for compulsory workers compensa-

tion, with a special commission to consider claims. When insurance companies proved reluctant to provide such cover, the Government Insurance Office was founded to compete with them. The Women's Status Bill provided for women to serve as members of the nominated Legislative Council, while another Bill provided for universal adult suffrage in local government elections.

Yet, despite his concern for the under-dog and the worker, Lang revealed himself early as an autocrat. In May 1927, for instance, he resigned; then, after being offered a new commission by the Governor, he appointed a Cabinet without reference to the caucus.

When 'vicious' newspaper criticism upset him, he introduced a Bill to impose a halfpenny tax on each copy sold in the State. Although it was declared unconstitutional by the High Court, it earned for Lang the lifelong animosity of the Press — apart from such party organs as the *Labor Daily* — and contributed to his defeat in the 1927 elections.

ACTU founded

Australian trade unions united under one banner for the first time in May 1927, with the formation of the Australasian Council of Trade Unions (A.C.T.U.) at a congress in Melbourne attended by 152 delegates from all States.

Although one major body, the Australian Workers Union, refused to take part at first, for mainly political reasons, the meeting did create a new and powerful voice with which organised labour would henceforth address employers — both in negotiation and in confrontation.

This united front, albeit still somewhat incomplete, was the culmination of a long struggle that had seen individual unions, and even groups of unions, crushed by powerful capitalists and 'scab' labour, particularly during the bitter strikes of the 1890s.

Strikes and unions are, for many people, inseparable. Australia's first strikes, however, took place before the first formal trade unions were established. According to Joe Harris, in his pictorial history of the Australian labor movement, *The Bitter Fight*, coopers in Sydney downed tools and used pickets as early as 1824.

In 1829 typographers at the *Australian*, striking for more pay because of a devaluation in the local currency, were joined by carpenters in Sydney and the crew of a whaling boat. The strike ended only when the authorities stepped in to stabilise the currency.

A shipwrights society, formed in 1829 or 1830, is generally regarded as

being the first trade union established in Australia. By mid-nineteenth century, most skilled trades had some form of union or association.

Within a few years, various skilled building workers in New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, and, by 1873, South Australia, had won an eight-hour day, mainly because a shortage of labour caused by the goldrushes had put them in a strong bargaining position.

Agitation to extend shorter working hours to other jobs continued. The trade union movement, as Harris points out, to a great extent 'grew out of the eight-hour day struggles', waged under the slogan of 'Eight Hours Work, Eight Hours Recreation, Eight Hours Rest'.

What the workers wanted was not more money, but more time to enjoy what they earned and to use in educating and improving themselves.

The first Intercolonial Trades Union Congress, aimed at creating closer links between unions, was held in Sydney in October 1879 under the auspices of the Sydney Trades and Labour Council. About forty delegates from New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Queensland, and New Zealand deliberated on the legalisation of trade unions, factory and workshop legislation, workmen's compensation, and like matters.

Much of the discussion was devoted to the eight-hour day question, which led to a resolution:

That, in the opinion of this Congress, it is imperative that the working day of eight hours should be the legal day's work throughout the whole of the colonies, and in all Government contracts a clause should be inserted,

as in the Victorian Government contracts, making it absolute that each contractor should employ men under the eight hours' system only.

Unions, at first, had been confined to skilled craftsmen. But, gradually, a 'new unionism', representing the mass of semi-skilled and unskilled workers, began to emerge as these men and women, too, sought the advantages both in working hours and wages which the journeymen had won for themselves through united action.

A miner named William Guthrie Spence played a crucial role in this regard by creating the big intercolonial Amalgamated Miners Association and the Amalgamated Shearers Union of Australia. These new unions, as one historian has pointed out, 'tended to see themselves as organisations representing a class rather than a trade'; so too did many of the transport workers and others with limited skills who became organised at about the same time.

The 'new unionism', according to its Brisbane organ, the *Worker*, believed 'passionately' that 'labour is one and that nobody but the worker has the right to wealth'; it also condemned the 'superiority manifested by the mechanics' [journeymen], adding that 'no good will come of the labor movement until this scurvy idea is wiped out'.

In recognition of the new additions to its ranks, the intercolonial meeting of unions was renamed the Trades and Labor Congress.

New unionism, more left-wing in its outlook, also urged labour to take a direct part in politics, which it saw as an important means to win what the movement regarded as essentially a class struggle. The Maritime Strike of

1890 was to achieve that goal — and provide a turning point in the history of organised labour.

The strike began in August 1890 when officers on coastal ships walked ashore in protest at the shipping companies' refusal to allow them to affiliate with other unions of the Maritime Labour Council. Other transport workers, including the Seamen's Union, struck in support; so too did miners and shearers in Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia, and New Zealand.

Soon over 50 000 unionists — out of an estimated 55 000 in the whole country—were on strike. But the various employers presented a united front and refused to yield in any way. Instead, they brought in strikebreakers, called 'free labour' by them, and 'scabs' by the strikers. Finally the strikers were starved back to work — on the conditions laid down by the employers.

Pre-strike calls for active labour participation in politics were given a new urgency by this ignominious defeat. That same year a Labor Electoral League was formed in New South Wales, while Victoria, Queensland, and South Australia soon followed with Labor political parties of their own.

In the first elections for the Federal House of Representatives, Labor candidates won fourteen of the seventy-five seats, although the Australian Labor Party was not officially formed until December 1902. Less than eight years later the first Federal Labor Government took power with Andrew Fisher as Prime Minister.

Federation also saw the introduction of a Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration to deal with national unions, which increased rapidly in

size and number, both through federation and amalgamation. As this trend continued, it became inevitable that a national coordinating body of all unions would follow.

Widespread strikes, in 1917 and 1919, brought some support for the left-wing concept of 'One Big Union' of all workers which, its protagonists hoped, would eventually take over and run the country.

Waterside workers, seamen, ironworkers, and miners, in fact, voted to join a Workers Industrial Union of Australia, but the idea gradually fizzled out. What did remain, however, was the growing realisation that some national umbrella body was needed — and this, finally, led to the All-Australian Trade Union Congress which created the A.C.T.U. in 1927.

In the years that followed, the new body proved its worth as a rallying point and a clearing house for Union matters on a national level.

Eventually it won over even the Australian Workers Union, which had feared left-wing domination and refused initially to affiliate. Known as the Australian (instead of Australasian) Council of Trade Unions since 1943, it is today the main voice of the Australian worker.

First Parliament House opened in Canberra

Exactly twenty-six years after his father had opened the first session of the Australian Federal Parliament in Melbourne, the Duke of York unlocked the doors of Parliament House in Canberra with a golden key on 9 May 1927.

The Commonwealth Government, at last, had a permanent home — albeit in a ‘temporary’ building with a leaking roof — and everyone with pretensions of being someone was there to see its opening in the ‘bush capital’.

It was a day of festive pomp and mutual backslapping: the future King George VI brought greetings from his father the King and delighted various politicians, including Prime Minister Stanley Bruce, by dishing out honours.

Imposing Dame Nellie Melba sang the national anthem and was joined enthusiastically in the refrain by the crowd. About 2000 troops paraded in hot and dusty splendour while R.A.A.F. aircraft flew overhead in salute, one crashing less than half a kilometre away and killing the pilot.

Apart from that mishap, it appears that a fine time was had by all, save possibly the workmen who had to bury 20,000 meat pies — the result of overzealous public service catering.

The creation of an Australian Capital Territory was written into the Constitution when the six colonies federated to create the Commonwealth, on the first day of the twentieth century.

It was a jealous alliance, reflected by the agreement to locate the national capital within the borders of New South Wales (to keep the largest State

happy). The land — to be ceded to the Commonwealth — was to be not less than 259 square kilometres in size and was to be further than 161 kilometres from Sydney (to placate other States).

It was further agreed (to keep the Victorians content) that until the capital had been developed and a Parliament House built, the Federal Legislature would meet in Melbourne; no one, at the time, expected this arrangement to last for almost thirty years.

Choosing the site of the new capital was a major problem. While virtually every New South Wales town that was sufficiently distant from Sydney keenly promoted itself, Federal parliamentarians had a great time criss-crossing the countryside at government expense to investigate, and then pontificate, on the relative merits of each.

Eventually, after eight years of debate, the Yass-Canberra area was selected and the transfer to the Commonwealth finalised in January 1911. The area was nine times larger than that provided for by the Constitution, its 2300 square kilometres including a 5 square kilometre area for a port at Jervis Bay. This was increased to 72.5 square kilometres in 1915.

An international competition was announced for the design of a city to house 25 000 and one which King O'Malley, Minister for Home Affairs, insisted should be the 'finest Capital City in the world!'

But, because O'Malley included himself as an adjudicator — despite a lack of any architectural qualifications — the Royal Institute of British Architects, and its affiliated bodies throughout the Empire, black-banned the contest.

Nevertheless, 137 entries were received, the winner being a thirty-five-year-old American named Walter Burley Griffin, with a Finn second and a Frenchman, third.

However, Griffin's winning design, which used free-flowing curves to blend the city with its setting, was considered too extravagant, ambitious, and costly by influential public servants, who provided plans for a hybrid alternative which an eminent British town planner likened to 'a third-rate Luna Park'. Parliament approved the public servants' alternative plan and gave permission for work to start immediately.

As preparations were made for the laying of the foundation stone of the 'Federal Capital column' around which the city was intended to grow, there was intense speculation over its name. Among more than a thousand suggestions put forward by the public were Austrapolis, Cooeeoomoo, Kookemuroo, Kookaburra, Marsupiala, Boomerang City, Engirscot (for England, Ireland, and Scotland), Federalia, and Thirstyville.

The crowd was kept in suspense about the Government's decision until after the Governor-General, Lord Denman, Prime Minister Andrew Fisher, and King O'Malley had each tapped the foundation stone with a gold-and-ivory trowel.

Then, precisely at noon, Lady Denman opened a golden container, took out a slip of paper, and announced: 'I name the capital of Australia, Canberra'.

This had been the local name for some time, but its meaning was, and still is, uncertain, with suggestions ranging from 'a place of winds' to the Aborigi-

nal name for a young kookaburra, 'Kanburra'.

Common-sense over the design fortunately prevailed before too much building had begun, with Griffin being invited to Australia in October and appointed Federal Capital Director of Design and Construction.

But he was constantly hampered by bureaucrats who presumed to know what was best for the project. This interference and obstruction did not cease even after a Royal Commission, set up in 1917 to investigate complaints, found in favour of the architect.

When Edward, Prince of Wales, on a visit to Australia in 1920, was invited to lay yet another stone in a very far from completed Canberra, he was prompted to remark that the city seemed to consist chiefly of foundation stones.

In its rush to get the project completed as cheaply as possible, the Government opted for many 'provisional' structures, of which Parliament House was one.

But Griffin was not there to see even this completed, for at the end of 1920, his job was taken over by the Federal Advisory Committee on which he was offered a seat but refused; nor was he present when Parliament House was officially opened.

It was a clash between architect and officialdom which, in many respects, would be repeated more than forty years later with the building of the Sydney Opera House.

Yet, despite its temporary nature, the Parliament House which the Duke of

York opened on that sunny day in May was an impressive structure built almost entirely of Australian materials, apart from such notable exceptions as the Speaker's Chair, which contained oak from Nelson's flagship H.M.S. *Victory*, or the coat of arms carved from timber more than 500 years old that once graced Westminster Hall.

It was a place, said Prime Minister Bruce in his address to the Duke, 'within '[whose] portals will be framed those laws which will mould the destiny of a people'.

That certainly happened in the years that followed, during which Australia grew into an important and thriving nation, united today as never before.

Now a new Parliament House has been built and is in use some 700 metres behind the old one on Capital Hill.