

ABSTRACT

**The Australian High Commissioner's Office
Politics and Anglo-Australian Relations, 1901-1939**

Bernard Paul Attard

St. Antony's College

D.Phil Thesis

Hilary Term, 1991

The thesis is a history of the office of Australian High Commissioner in London from its creation in 1909 to the eve of the Second World War. It tests the validity of the conventional view that the office was invariably used as a political reward and, prior to the 1930s, marginal to the conduct of Anglo-Australian relations. It sets the office in the context of colonial representation in London since the 1850s, and notes the limits to the position of the High Commissioner created by the Agents-General of the Australian States and the institutions established by the Imperial government for the conduct of Anglo-Dominion relations. The careers of the first five High Commissioners are examined with reference to the principal issues in Anglo-Australian relations during their High Commissionerships, and their roles are analysed in terms of their relations with the Commonwealth government, the British authorities and, to a lesser extent, the Agents-General. The thesis argues that there was always scope for a High Commissioner to play a diplomatic role within Anglo-Australian relations, and that the post also gradually acquired functions in a more general system of inter-imperial consultation which mirrored the wider political development of the Dominions. The Australian government, however, was also hampered by a limited choice of candidates and invariably appointed senior politicians, as exercises in patronage, but also because they were the most eligible representatives. Yet, reflecting underlying values in Australian political culture, legislators were determined to create a non-political High Commissionership. The combination of political appointments and a non-political office, however, meant that High Commissioners often found it difficult to adapt to the demands of their new position and did not enjoy the full confidence of the government.

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The thesis is a history of the office of Australian High Commissioner in London from its creation in 1909 to the eve of the Second World War. The office is of significance because of its uniqueness in Australian public life, and because of the importance of Australia's relations with Britain during the period. The thesis tests the validity of the conventional view that the High Commissionership was invariably used as a political reward and, prior to the 1930s, marginal to the conduct of Anglo-Australian relations. The core of the thesis consists of separate Chapters on the careers of the first five High Commissioners, which are examined with reference to the principal issues in Anglo-Australian relations during their terms. These are treated as case studies in the High Commissioner's relations with the Commonwealth government, the Imperial authorities, and the Agents-General of the Australian States. The appointment of each High Commissioner is also analysed in some detail. The thesis argues that the conventional view of the High Commissionership underestimates three factors. Australian Governments had a limited field from which to choose representatives, and their relationship with them was constrained by the conception of the High Commissionership as a non-political office. Moreover, during its early history in particular, the office's scope was narrowed by the institutions already established for the conduct of Anglo-Australian relations, especially the Colonial Office and the Agents-General, and by the Imperial government's control of imperial foreign policy. Finally, historians have tended to overlook the importance of

issues like trade and finance, rather than foreign relations, as the major external preoccupations of Australian governments, and thus miss where the High Commissioners often made their most important contributions.

The Agents-General of the Australasian colonies (Chapter One, section i), by their administration of government orders, immigration and borrowing; promotion of colonial trade; social and ceremonial functions; and occasional advocacy of colonial regional ambitions were obvious models for a future Australian High Commissioner. But after 1901 the continuance of separate State immigration and borrowing programmes would seriously limit the scope of his duties. The creation of a Canadian High Commissionership in 1880 (section ii) established the form in which other Dominions would be represented in London and another model for Australian representation. The Canadian government, however, had geographical and constitutional advantages, not being handicapped by the existence of strong provincial governments, not enjoyed by Australia, and during the nineteenth century appointed High Commissioners who, politically, were closely connected with it. Australian legislators in 1909, reflecting underlying values in Australian political culture, rejected North American attitudes to the distribution of public office. Conscious also of the instability of colonial and Federal governments, they insisted on creating a non-political High Commissionership whose holder would act in a completely non-partisan manner. Yet, while establishing a fixed term of five years, it was otherwise impossible to prevent a Ministry from making patronage appointments.

Despite the existence of High Commissioners and Agents-General, the Imperial government firmly controlled the conduct of imperial policy, inviting as little consultation from the Dominions as possible (section iii). Through the Colonial Office and the Governors-General, it also controlled the official conduct of Anglo-Dominion relations. The Colonial Office itself was determined to prevent the High Commissioners from handling policy issues and to protect the position of the Governors-General as the channel of communication. Yet, despite the indifference of many of their colleagues, a minority of Australian public figures always conceived of

the High Commissioner as having diplomatic functions, if only within Anglo-Australian relations.

The office's actual creation was delayed until 1909, largely because of the instability of the first Federal governments; but the Commonwealth's administrative needs had led to the establishment of a small London office in 1906 (section iv). The anticipation that this would soon acquire new responsibilities through the transfer of State powers to the Commonwealth and the creation of an Australian navy, as well as boom conditions in the economy, formed the immediate background to the introduction of the High Commissioner Bill by the Fusion government (section v). Contrary to the commonplace view, the Bill itself attracted bi-partisan support and was welcomed by the Labor front bench. The debate largely focussed on the future of the Agents-General and the manner of appointing the High Commissioner.

The appointment of the first High Commissioner (Chapter Two, section i) immediately raised difficulties which would recur throughout the period. The High Commissioner would have to be someone of considerable standing in public life; but the limited range of choice meant that Cabinet would invariably appoint a senior politician, while Prime Ministers were always under pressure to reward their colleagues. Sir George Reid (1910-15), however, was a High Commissioner acceptable to all parties; moreover, it was emphasised to him that the High Commissionership was a non-political office, and it was in this spirit that he accepted it. In London, he had to co-operate with Agents-General whose primary concern was to assert the separate identity of the States (section ii). The Imperial government, and the Colonial Office in particular, remained determined to control imperial policy and the conduct of official relations (section iii). But despite the election of a Labor administration in 1910, Reid played a diplomatic role in Anglo-Australian relations, especially with respect to issues of naval co-operation. He performed a similar function under the short-lived conservative Cook government in 1913-14 (section iv), consulting with it closely during a visit to Australia. With the outbreak of war (section v), the High Commissioners began to be liberated from the control of the Colonial

Office, Reid dealing with several government Departments, sometimes at a ministerial level. Yet the political sensitivity of these negotiations highlighted a latent mistrust of Reid and a lack of experience on the part of both the High Commissioner and the government, as well as the value to the States of retaining independent Agents-General. Reid's achievement, however, had been to establish a non-political High Commissionership, and it is in this context that we should place his disappointment when the Labor government refused to extend his term for more a year (section vi).

One of the reasons Reid was not offered a longer extension was the desire of some Labor leaders to appoint a High Commissioner who had been politically associated with the government (Chapter Three, section i). The Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher, also wished to become High Commissioner, largely because of the breakdown of his health and his inability to cope with the strains of war time leadership. The experiment with a 'political' representative failed because of the further collapse of his health and his estrangement from Hughes, his successor, after the latter broke with Labor (section ii). Hughes himself found it necessary to rely on an unofficial figure, Keith Murdoch, to act as a personal emissary. But, like Reid, Fisher struggled to serve the national interest. As High Commissioner (1916-21), he supported Hughes's policies concerning imperial consultation, finance and economic development, sought to secure the welfare of the AIF, and persuaded three of the States to re-locate their Agencies-General to Australia House (section iii). But, in the critical post-war period, his incapacity created a vacuum in Australia's representation (section iv), bringing the High Commissionership into considerable disrepute and leading to the administrative neglect of Australia House.

The failure to appoint Fisher's successor for almost a year was of a piece with this neglect (Chapter Four, section i), the more conspicuous because his identity was already well-known. The selection of Sir Joseph Cook (1921-27) is the most unambiguous exercise in patronage during the period. Yet Cook was also a former Prime Minister and considered acceptable in England. In the year preceding his taking

office (section ii), the post-war pattern of Australian activity in London, with its particular emphases on immigration and loan-raising, began to take shape; but the interregnum emphasised the necessity of a senior representative. In his first year as High Commissioner (section iii), Cook dealt with issues of domestic economic interest, but also questions of international relations, especially in his capacity as the leader of the Australian delegation at the League of Nations. Yet in this regard he was out of his depth, and the Chanak crisis in particular demonstrated that, in foreign policy, the Prime Minister would take direct charge to the exclusion of the High Commissioner. But the crisis was also significant because ^{it was} the first occasion when an Australian High Commissioner found himself closely involved in a major question of foreign policy, and, potentially at least, in a position to influence the government's response. In certain respects, this presaged the High Commissioner's role during the 1930s.

With the replacement of Hughes by Bruce (section iv), access to information came to be seen as the key to the problem of imperial consultation. But Bruce did not consider Cook appropriate to address it and appointed R.G. Casey as Liaison Officer with the British government. Casey, like Murdoch, came to act as the personal emissary of the Prime Minister. Similarly, F.L. McDougall watched over Australia's economic interests. Cook, however, concentrated on the management of Australia's heavy capital-raising programme - the importance of his contribution being evident in his pivotal role in the 1925 flotation of the Commonwealth's first loan in New York.

By 1926, Bruce made it clear that he wished to reform the High Commissionership (Chapter Five, section i). He regarded the calibre of the holder as the most important consideration, yet had considerable difficulty in finding a suitable individual. His original choice was rejected and eventual appointment of Sir Granville Ryrie (1927-31) met with a lukewarm response. While Bruce did intend that he should have greater contact with the British government and the Liaison Officer than Cook, Ryrie was overstretched in his new post and failed to make a significant impact (section ii). The election of a Labor government at the end of 1929, and the onset of

the Depression, began a period of acute stress in Anglo-Australian relations and raised the question of how a conservative-appointed High Commissioner would behave during a period of profound political crisis (section iii). Ryrie, however, maintained a working relationship with the Scullin government and loyally served its interests. Nevertheless Casey and the Financial Adviser, James Collins (who had been appointed in 1926), carried the main workload. The conservative government which came to office in 1932 (section iv) did not have a warmer relationship with Ryrie; but irrespective of this, the High Commissioner's official responsibilities, particularly at the Committee of Imperial Defence and in Geneva, increasingly meant that during an international crisis like that over Manchuria, he would still represent the government at the highest level.

The failure of Fisher's term and anonymity of Ryrie's performance undermined the reputation of the High Commissionership and led to demands for its reform (Chapter Six, section i). Throughout the period 1916-32, the appointment of a Resident Minister in London was rejected as prejudicial to the political authority of Cabinet, while the selection of High Commissioners on the basis of their political sympathy with the government was opposed for the same reasons as in 1909. Australian governments chose to retain a non-political High Commissionership, but from the mid-1920s the High Commissioner's access to official information and participation in consultations with the British government was steadily increased. At the secondary level, with a Liaison Officer, Economic Adviser, Financial Adviser, Official Secretary and other senior public servants in London, although lacking the clear co-ordinating authority of the High Commissioner, there had also developed considerable sophistication in Australia's representation.

With the Commonwealth acquiring responsibility for the overseas organisation of immigration and borrowing (section ii), the Agents-General, while remaining of value to the States, declined in importance. The only potential counterweights to the High Commissioner in dealing with financial issues were the Commonwealth Bank and the Bank of England, but up to the Depression his

independent authority was maintained. In the field of inter-imperial relations (section iii), the rise in autonomy and status of Dominions was reflected in the greater formal privileges permitted to their representatives. Moreover, depending on the extent to which the Dominions wished to participate in imperial consultation, the High Commissioners were also given access to all official communications between the Dominions and Britain, as well as British documents on foreign policy, attended meetings of the CID, and met regularly with the Dominions Secretary. Ultimately, only the Dominion Prime Ministers were competent to deal with many issues in imperial relations, but by 1932 the High Commissioners' position in the system of imperial consultation had been firmly established.

In many respects, then, S.M. Bruce (1933-45) realised potentialities which already existed in the High Commissionership. He was originally sent to London as Minister without Portfolio (1932-33) to deal with issues of acute domestic political importance to the government (Chapter Seven, section i), but opposed any long continuation of the post because of its incompatibility with the collective responsibility of Cabinet. He became High Commissioner in 1933 (section ii) largely because he saw no political future for himself in Australia; certainly he no longer had any ambitions to be Prime Minister. His approach to the High Commissionership had to a great extent been anticipated during his period as Minister without Portfolio. Over issues like trade (section iii), where the government was particularly vulnerable to domestic pressure, he found it virtually impossible to shift the general line of policy, despite his strenuous efforts to do so in 1934. Over issues of foreign policy (section iv), where his views were fundamentally the same as the government's, he was allowed wide discretion and had considerable freedom to formulate Australia's official response to specific questions. Bruce's success was based on his personal competence and on the institutional maturity of the High Commissionership during a period when the need for inter-governmental consultation was great. But his influence also rested on the fact that he never represented a political threat to the Prime Minister or his potential successors (section v). Yet, while promoting the recognition of the

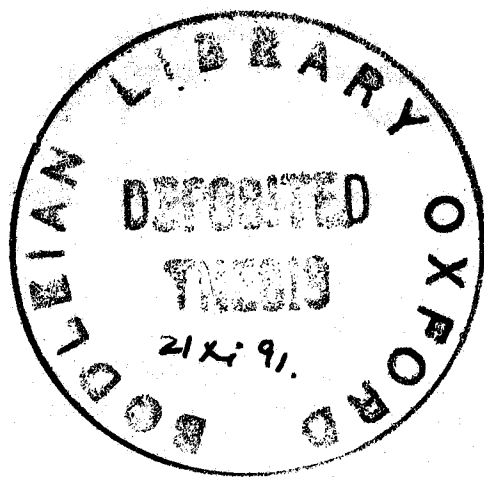
High Commissionership as a non-political diplomatic post, he was the most political of High Commissioners; in an age of stress, striving always to minimise embarrassment to the government or any questioning of the value of the imperial relationship.

The interaction of four factors was critical to the nature and history of the Australian High Commissionership: the original control of imperial policy by the British government, and the institutional importance of the Colonial Office and the Governor-General; the existence and powers of the Agents-General; the limited group from which a High Commissioner could be chosen; the aspiration that the High Commissionership should be a non-political office. During the period the High Commissioner's authority to deal with all official matters of Australian concern was established. More generally, the Dominion High Commissioners were incorporated into a system of imperial consultation. Depending on his competence and relationship with the government, there was always room, in any case, for the High Commissioner to play a diplomatic role within Anglo-Australian relations. For these reasons, the conventional view that until Bruce's appointment the High Commissionership was ceremonial and did not concern itself with major issues of policy is inadequate. Moreover, the assumption that the selection of the High Commissioner was invariably an exercise in patronage convenient to the government also requires modification. Yet the appointment of senior politicians as High Commissioner - in the case of the first three, partly as a political reward, but also because they appeared the most obvious representatives - often meant that they were not competent to deal with many questions. The notion of a non-political High Commissionership had an abiding, often restrictive, influence on the office. By the 1930s, however, it could be seen as fitting appropriately into the increasingly ambassadorial character of the post.

The Australian High Commissioner's Office

Politics and Anglo-Australian Relations

1901 - 1939



A thesis submitted for the degree of
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when about to leave for England Australians say, "We are going home"; and when they are leaving England for Australia they still say, "We are going home". The colonising genius and the loyalty of our race are revealed in that double-barrelled feeling of affection for the land from which their fathers came and for the land of their birth. It represents that union of affection which alone makes the British Empire possible and may make it immortal.
Sir George Reid, My Reminiscences, p. 305

I remember Sir Samuel Hordern, when he visited London, once said to me that in Australia he felt of some importance but in London he did not count for more than an ant or silkworm. It is so vast that no one bothers about you at all or cares what you do as long as you don't make a noise about it.
AA: CRS A1632, Memoirs of M.L. Shepherd, p. 316.

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It would have been impossible to complete this thesis without the assistance of all these people; the responsibility for its contents is naturally mine.

ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Australian Archives Office, ACT
<u>ADB</u>	<u>Australian Dictionary of Biography</u>
<u>AEHR</u>	<u>Australian Economic History Review</u>
<u>AJPH</u>	<u>Australian Journal of Politics and History</u>
AWM	Australian War Memorial
BE	Bank of England Archive
BUL	Birmingham University Library
<u>CHBE</u>	<u>Cambridge History of the British Empire</u>
CID	Committee of Imperial Defence
<u>CPD</u>	<u>Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates</u>
<u>CPP</u>	<u>Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers</u>
CUL	Cambridge University Library
<u>DAFP</u>	<u>Documents on Australian Foreign Policy</u>
DUL	Durham University Library
<u>HS</u>	<u>Historical Studies of Australia and New Zealand</u>
ICS	Institute of Commonwealth Studies
<u>JICH</u>	<u>Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History</u>
<u>Jnr of World Conference</u>	League of Nations, <u>Journal of the World Monetary and Economic Conference</u>
<u>My Dear P.M.</u>	W.J. Hudson and Jane North (eds), <u>My Dear P.M.</u> (Canberra, 1980)
NLA	National Library of Australia
<u>NSWPP</u>	<u>New South Wales Parliamentary Papers</u>
<u>PP</u>	Great Britain, <u>Parliamentary Papers</u>
PRO	Public Record Office, Kew
<u>OPP</u>	<u>Queensland Parliamentary Papers</u>
<u>RAHSJ</u>	<u>Royal Australian Historical Society Journal</u>
<u>'Secret Service Agent'</u>	W.J. Hudson and Wendy Way (eds), <u>Letters from a 'Secret Service Agent'</u> (Canberra, 1986)
<u>SMH</u>	<u>Sydney Morning Herald</u>
<u>TJPP</u>	<u>Tasmania, Journals and Printed Papers</u>
WRO	Wiltshire Record Office

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis is to undertake a study of the office of Australian High Commissioner in London from its establishment in 1909 to the death of Prime Minister Joseph Lyons on the eve of the Second World War. In broadest terms, it seeks to combine the objects of two previous studies of Australian representation: to examine the origin and development, scope and effectiveness of the High Commissionership, and, furthermore, to show how Australian representation in London was shaped by historical circumstances, constitutional arrangements, political culture and the close ties between Australia and Britain.¹

The Australian High Commissionership is of interest because of its uniqueness in the period as an office in Australian public life,² but more especially because of the nature of Australia's relations with Britain. In 1901, when the six Australian colonies federated, the international identity of the Commonwealth was subsumed within that of the British Empire, in whose defence it fought and whose foreign policy it increasingly sought to influence. Whether measured empirically, in statistics of trade, immigration and investment; politically, in the records of Colonial and Imperial Conferences and ministerial visits to London; constitutionally, in written statutes and the norms of custom and convention; or culturally, in the language of 'blood, sympathy and ideas', Australia's connection with Britain and the Empire was part of the background and substance of daily life.³ Certainly, it was a relationship

¹ Barbara R. Atkins, 'The Problem of Representation of Australia in England. The Origins and Development of the Australian Agencies-General During the Nineteenth Century' (Melbourne University, MA Thesis, 1959), p. v; J.R. Thompson, 'The Australian High Commission in London: Its Origins and Early History 1901-1916' (Australian National University, MA Thesis, 1972), p. v.

² In 1918, W.M. Hughes created the post of Trade Commissioner in New York. Invariably, it was offered to businessmen, who occupied it for short periods. During the 1930s, a trade commissioner service was established on a more formal basis. The status and functions of these offices were not comparable to those of the High Commissionership. In March 1939, Joseph Lyons told the British government that Australia had decided to open legations in Washington and Tokyo, M. Ruth Megaw, 'Undiplomatic Channels: Australian Representation in the United States 1918-1939', Historical Studies xv (1973), 610-30; P.G. Edwards, Prime Ministers and Diplomats (Melbourne, 1983), p. 119.

³ G. Blainey, The Tyranny of Distance (Rev. ed., Melbourne, 1982), p. 314; F.K. Crowley, '1901-1914', in Crowley (ed.), A New History of Australia (Richmond, 1974), pp. 261-64; Russel Ward, A

constrained by a sharp sense of separate interests and national goals.⁴ Nevertheless, throughout the period of this study, Australia remained securely anchored in a British world.

The position of Australia's official representative in Britain, therefore, was one of considerable prestige. Potentially, it was also a post of enormous importance - such importance, in fact, that four of the first five High Commissioners were former Prime Ministers. But, despite this, among constitutional commentators and historians of Australia's foreign affairs a conventional view of the High Commissionership has developed which regards the office as marginal to the conduct of Anglo-Australian relations. According to this view, the High Commissioners were invariably former Ministers who deserved well of their parties, who had outlived their usefulness or who had become an embarrassment or threat if left idle on the backbenches. In other words, the appointment was an exercise in political patronage in the sense used by Lyall: 'one where the effective appointing authority is the government or an individual minister and where the choice is assumed to have been dictated by personal, factional, or party political purposes'.⁵

It flowed from this that, until the appointment of Stanley Melbourne Bruce, the High Commissioners took little part in representing Australia's vital interests or pressing their consideration upon the Imperial government. Moreover, they were quite satisfied with the appearance of power, content to preside as figureheads over Australia House and at social and ceremonial functions. Thus the office was stunted in its development and of little diplomatic significance. Such a view can be found in

Nation for a Continent (rev. ed., Richmond, 1985), pp. 4-5, 24-25; for the language of 'blood, sympathy and ideas', Professor Goldwin Smith quoted in D.M.L. Farr, The Colonial Office and Canada, 1867-1887 (Toronto, 1955). p. 12.

⁴ C. Grimshaw, 'Australian Nationalism and the Imperial Connection 1900-1914', AJPH, iii (1958), pp. 161-82; Neville Meaney, The Search for Security in the Pacific 1901-14 (Sydney, 1976), pp. vii-x, 1-7.

⁵ E.A. Lyall, 'Australia's Overseas Representation and Government Patronage', Australian Outlook, xxiii (1969), p. 121.

the introduction to the collection of R.G. Casey's correspondence edited by Hudson and North:

The Australian High Commissioner was always... a former Minister offered consolation. He represented Australia at functions and on occasion was called in by the British Government. He provided services for Australians in Britain and he administered an office... which provided a roof for officials engaged in a variety of tasks. He might be called on at times to represent Australia at political conferences, notably at League of Nations meetings in Geneva, but he was not seen as a professional career diplomat.⁶

Edwards, commenting on the appointment of the first High Commissioner, has written: 'The die was cast. The High Commission henceforth would be used to rest, reward or remove ministers, often Prime Ministers, allowing them to end their careers with dignity and honour but with little power or influence'.⁷

But the conventional view allows 'one highly significant exception'.⁸ In 1932, Stanley Melbourne Bruce was appointed acting High Commissioner. A younger man than his predecessors, extraordinarily well-qualified for the office, and occupying it in a period of unprecedented economic and political instability, Bruce transformed its possibilities, redefining them to enable him to occupy a position of unique privilege and influence in the conduct of Australia's external affairs.

This thesis will question the validity of this conventional view of the history of the High Commissionership. It will attempt to redress the balance between Bruce and his predecessors, to ask how such an orthodoxy came about, and, finally, to arrive at a more complex appraisal of the contribution of the High Commissioners to the conduct of Anglo-Australian relations.

⁶ My Dear P.M., W.J. Hudson and Jane North (eds) (Canberra, 1980), p. xvii. Also see, Meaney, Security, pp. 119, 191; Lyall, pp. 124-25; A.B. Keith, Imperial Unity and the Dominions (Oxford, 1916), pp. 536-47; Keith, Responsible Government in the Dominions (Oxford, 1928), i, pp. 281-87.

⁷ Edwards, Prime Ministers, p. 21.

⁸ Ibid. This view is presented most cogently in, P.G. Edwards, 'The Rise and Fall of the High Commissioner: S.M. Bruce in London, 1933-45', in A.F. Madden and W.H. Morris-Jones (eds), Australia and Britain (London, 1980), pp. 39-56.

The thesis, therefore, is a study of the role and functions of the High Commissioner rather than an administrative history of Australia House, although some discussion of the latter will be found in section two of Chapter Six. I have attempted to interpret the history of the High Commissionership in terms of the location of power and authority in the conduct of Anglo-Australian relations, which I have analysed with respect to three relationships: the relationship of the High Commissioner with the Australian government; with the Imperial government and its bureaucracy; and with the Agents-General of the State governments. Such an analysis will show where the balance of authority and power actually lay, and how it shifted during the period under consideration.

The thesis has been divided into three parts, each corresponding to a distinct phase in the history of the High Commissionership. Its development is broadly chronological. Each of the five High Commissioners who occupied the office before 1939 is treated in a separate chapter. Chapter One deals with the origins of the Australian High Commissionership. Chapter Six gives an overview of its development between 1916 and 1932. Throughout, I have proceeded on the assumption of Farr in The Colonial Office and Canada, 1867-1887 that: 'the working of the imperial connection, at any point, can only be discussed in terms of the specific issues which go to make up its content',⁹ and have dealt with the term of each of the first High Commissioners as a "case study" in the working of their office. Thus I have attempted to discuss each with particular reference to the sets of issues 'which seemed both significant and representative of the general course of events' during their terms.¹⁰ Section three of Chapter Two, for example, examines Sir George Reid's relations with the Fisher Labor government with special reference to the issue of Anglo-Australian naval co-operation. As the conventional view of the High

⁹ Farr, pp. vii-viii.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. viii.

Commissionership regards it as bound up with the exercise of patronage, the appointment of each High Commissioner forms a separate case study.

The ease with which a relatively uncomplicated verdict took root may partly be attributed to the absence of sources. The disorganisation and poverty of official documents for the early history of Australia's external relations are notorious, and this may fairly be said to extend to official records generally prior to 1927, when the Federal capital was moved to Canberra, if not later.¹¹ The records of the High Commissioner's Office for the period of this study have been repatriated to Australia, but the wholesale destruction of files in Australia House as late as 1959 has severely reduced their value and created enormous holes in the record, particularly for the period before 1930. The difficulty is exacerbated by the paucity of private papers concerning Reid, Cook and Ryrie. Some illumination is afforded by the completeness of the records of the British government, while after 1930 the problem of official sources in Australia becomes less acute and is eased by the early volumes of the Documents on Australian Foreign Policy and by the relative plenitude of the papers of Bruce and his contemporaries. This flood of light on the activities of the High Commissioner during the 1930s may explain the concentration on Bruce, but it is of little assistance in dispelling the shadows surrounding his predecessors.

I am indebted to two previous histories of Australian representation in London. Atkins' early study of the Australian Agencies-General during the nineteenth century is based primarily on printed sources and provides a detailed account of the activities of the Agents-General in their heyday.¹² Thompson's influential and lucid study of the origins and early history of the High Commissioner's Office from 1901 to 1916 is based on the private papers of the politicians of the day and a small selection of material then available at the Australian Archives.¹³ Thompson focuses upon the

¹¹ Edwards, Prime Ministers, p. viii; Meaney, Security, p. xi.

¹² See note 1.

¹³ See note 2.

attempts to establish the High Commissionership during the first decade of the century and regards the office's single most important task as the advertising and promotion of Australia. With access to only a limited amount of archival material, he considerably underestimates the extent of Reid's official role as an intermediary with the Imperial government; in his view: 'Almost inevitably Reid became a figure-head High Commissioner'.¹⁴ Finally, like Atkins, he interprets his subject within the framework of a developing Australian nationalism, contending: 'the High Commissioner legislation, rather than being of merely practical necessity, was also a product of this first rich period of nation building when the Commonwealth was young and its needs for self-expression were keenly felt'.¹⁵

The sub-title of the present study is 'Politics and Anglo-Australian Relations'. Apart from the author's good fortune in having access to a wider range of primary sources, it signifies the main departure from previous work. Politics had a profound impact on the character and development of the Australian High Commissionership. The desire to establish a non-political office deeply influenced the type of institution that was eventually created and gave rise to problems which were never adequately resolved. The fact that politicians were nevertheless appointed to the post also caused complications as soon as the government changed hands, even if this did not necessarily lead to the elimination of the High Commissioner from the conduct of Anglo-Australian relations. Finally, the extent of Australia's dependence on Britain was such that a particular aspect (for example, its dependence on Britain for security) or crisis could have a political significance which, according to the High Commissioner's competence or relations with the government, profoundly affected the extent to which the authorities were prepared to employ him. Where mutual trust existed, the High Commissioner might be at the centre of policy-making; where none at all, he was ignored. Hence, while primarily a study of the High Commissionership,

¹⁴ Thompson, Thesis, p. 273.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 73; Atkins, pp. iv-v.

this thesis also hopes to contribute to the understanding of Australian politics and of its inter-play with Anglo-Australian relations.

PART ONE

THE EARLY COMMONWEALTH

1901 - 1915

If there are Strathconas about Collins Street, let us have the best amongst them, but, as a matter of fact, we in Australia are a work-a-day people, and the margin between those who have to depend on their daily toil and those who have not is a small one. Australia, in her practical mood, does not require a representative to be a mere social pivot in the Old Country.

H.W. Wilks, Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, li, p. 3063, 7 September 1909.

it is in the last degree essential that the man who represents Australia in London shall represent Australian opinion today, and shall not be politically a fossil of the post-pliocene epoch.

W.M. Hughes, Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, li, p. 3058, 7 September 1909.

CHAPTER ONE

THE MARKETPLACE OF EMPIRE

COLONIAL REPRESENTATION IN LONDON,

1858-1909

(i) Agents-General

Since the late 1850s, the imperial capital had known some form of representation from the Empire's colonies of settlement. It had been an aspect of the granting of local self-government and of the beginning of the first long cycle of economic development which, wedding men, money and markets, dominated the second half of the nineteenth century and set the pattern for much of the twentieth.

Starting with a South Australian in 1858, the Agents-General established themselves in London (almost invariably in Victoria Street) and laboured long in the service of their colonies.¹ The momentum of economic development increased phenomenally the amount of business they transacted. Competition amongst all the colonies mounted for the markets, capital and immigrants necessary to sustain this growth and inspired the original despatch of colonial representatives to England. Not accidentally, the first officials sent by South Australia, New Zealand, New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania were emigration agents. Emigration promotion

¹ South Australia established the first permanent agency in 1858, although several of the colonies experimented beforehand. The Agent-General of Victoria arrived in 1868, Queensland in 1869, New South Wales in 1871, Tasmania in 1885, and Western Australia in 1892. A New Zealand Agent-General was appointed in 1870 as part of a campaign to revive white settlement in the islands. The first white South African representatives also appeared during the nineteenth century. An Agent-General from the Cape Colony arrived in 1882; another from Natal in 1893. Finally, representatives from Transvaal and the Orange River Colony took their places in 1906 and 1908. For Canada see section two below. Atkins, pp. 39-141; R.M. Dalziel, The Origins of New Zealand Diplomacy (Wellington, 1975), pp. 25-28; Roy McNab, The Story of South Africa House (Johannesburg, 1983), pp. 64, 68.

continued to figure prominently amongst the duties of the Agents-General. To these were soon added the placing and shipment of government orders (above all the heavy capital goods required for railway construction), the floating of loans, the negotiation of postal and telegraphic services, and the general oversight of colonial interests.²

With federation, the Australian Agents-General represented States rather than colonies, but their duties had altered little when, in 1905, the Prime Minister, Alfred Deakin, asked them to prepare a report on the functions of a High Commissioner.³ They in fact produced a memorandum on their own activities, dividing them into four branches, but emphasising nevertheless that 'in practice, these distinct branches do not exist, for even where they are ostensibly maintained, there is considerable overlapping'. The work of the first three branches was obvious from their titles: 'commercial and immigration', 'purchase and inspection of material', and 'inscription of Stock and payment of interest on Stock and debentures'.⁴ The fourth, 'general', branch was, in effect, the province of the Agent-General himself, and the description of its activities revealed the broad sweep of Australian interests in the United Kingdom:

this agency [i.e. branch] is the channel employed by the State Governments in communication with the Colonial Office, it makes purchases on behalf of the State, negotiates loans, attends to banking business and payments made in London, gives information concerning the State to businessmen or intending immigrants, facilitates the business of Australian visitors in London, and attends to the hundred-and-one other matters which arise from time to time in connexion with the State.⁵

Of all these functions, the Agents-General regarded loan raising as preeminent. The acquisition of these duties in the 1870s had added prestige to their positions.⁶ In

² The best accounts of the nineteenth century Agents-General are Atkins and Dalziel.

³ Thompson, Thesis, pp. 90-91.

⁴ CPP (1905), ii, 'Memorandum by the Agents-General on the Question of the Office of High Commissioner in London...' (henceforth 'Memorandum'), pp. 1309-11.

⁵ Ibid., p. 1309.

⁶ D.S. MacMillan, 'The Australians in London, 1857-1880', RAHSJ, 44 (1958), p. 171.

1905, they believed: 'no duty that could be given to the [High] Commissioner could be compared in importance with the work of negotiating a large loan or the carrying out of an important financial operation'.⁷

Yet despite the importance of their financial duties, the role the Agents-General had described was largely managerial. They owed their existence to the breadth of colonial business which had necessitated the establishment in London of what were in effect branch offices of the colonial civil services. But while the Agents-General had been quick to assert State prerogatives against possible encroachments by the new Commonwealth government, they omitted to refer to the quasi-diplomatic duties which they had occasionally discharged in an earlier epoch, but which, since federation, had become redundant. Yet during the late-nineteenth century, these had had some significance. According to Atkins, as late-Victorian fervour for Empire waxed, the colonial representatives were increasingly called upon to represent their governments at functions where the 'imperial sentiment' was celebrated.⁸ Moreover, with the colonies beginning to develop political ambitions which brought them into conflict with the imperial authorities, the Agents-General acquired 'an ill-defined but important duty... to develop [their]... diplomatic role'.⁹

Following his arrival in 1868, the first Victorian Agent-General, George Verdon, soon found himself negotiating with the Colonial Office on matters ranging from military defence to postal and telegraphic communications.¹⁰ In 1871, John Douglas, the Queensland Agent-General, told his government: 'Her Majesty's Secretary of State for the Colonies has encouraged the gentlemen holding this position [of Agent-General] to accept a diplomatic and confidential position as regards himself, on the grounds that there are some matters of business, and even of

⁷ 'Memorandum', p. 1313.

⁸ Atkins, p. 145.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 79.

sentiment, affecting the relations of the mother country with the Australasian communities, which can be best transacted through such a medium'.¹¹

These were anticipations of more important developments a decade later. The Australasian colonies had long taken an interest in the expansion of the Empire into New Guinea and the Western Pacific. In the 1880s, with German and French designs in the region becoming apparent, they pressed their views with greater vigour. As the men in London, the Agents-General were the obvious people through whom to approach the Imperial government.¹² Thus, in February 1883, the Queensland Premier instructed his Agent-General to urge the Colonial Secretary to annex the eastern half of New Guinea. Later that year, all the Australasian Agents-General (with the exception of the South Australian) submitted a memorandum seeking the extension of the Empire into New Guinea and along the entire Melanesian chain as far as the New Hebrides. Their advocacy of Australasian regional ambitions persisted throughout the decade, further enhancing their status.¹³ Thus, in January 1883, Lord Derby received them shortly after replacing Lord Hartington as Colonial Secretary, and, in 1885, Sir Frederic Rogers, the Permanent Under Secretary in the Colonial Office, wrote:

[The] actual position [of the Agent-General] is one which, originally viewed with some jealousy in Downing Street, has been of late cordially accepted and studiously raised in dignity and influence. Everything seems to be done and to be doing by the Imperial Government to give Agents-General, relatively to the Colonial Minister, a status analogous to that which is held by the representative

¹¹ Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland, Memorandum, 8 September 1871, quoted in Dalziel, p. 75.

¹² Ibid., chapter six, especially pp. 91-112. See also Atkins, pp. 250, 261-63 and Roger C. Thompson, Australian Imperialism in the Pacific (Carlton, 1980), p. 6. As early as 1871, the New South Wales Agent-General took up the annexation of Fiji with the Colonial Secretary. The Victorian Agent-General was also actively promoting schemes for the administration of these islands; Thompson, Australian Imperialism, p. 30.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 51-52, 72-73; Dalziel, pp. 96-111.

of foreign States of equal importance in relation to the Minister for Foreign Affairs.¹⁴

Their rise culminated in 1887 when they attended the first Colonial Conference as their governments' delegates.¹⁵

Yet it is possible to exaggerate the importance of the Agents-General. The success of the federation movement in the 1890s, and with it the likelihood in the near future of the appointment of an Australian High Commissioner, soon threatened their prestige, authority and, indeed, very existence. The signs of the times were already clear in 1890, when Deakin predicted at the first federal conference that, one day, a single Agent-General would deal with all Australian affairs.¹⁶ The Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, a keen supporter of federation, who may have already wished to quash the pretensions of the future Australian States, refused to accept the Agents-General as delegates to the 1897 Colonial Conference.¹⁷ Later, the Colonial Office rejected the broad interpretation of the functions of colonial representatives which had been current in the 1880s. As the century drew to its close, the colonies also became preoccupied with domestic affairs, and the Agents-General reverted to an earlier incarnation as entrepreneurs. Advertising began to figure prominently amongst their functions, while technological advance nurtured new export industries and stimulated them into greater activity in marketing colonial products.¹⁸ But the advances of the earlier period could not be set aside. The right of access of the Agents-General to the Colonial Secretary had been recognised, while the Colonial Office found it convenient to transact routine business directly with them. Finally, a

¹⁴ quoted in Farr, p. 254; Atkins, p. 263. The Agents-General also began to be likened to ambassadors; see Atkins, pp. 70, 81, 102, 118, 142.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 228; also Dalziel, pp. 121-28.

¹⁶ Thompson, Thesis, p. 14.

¹⁷ Dalziel, p. 128.

¹⁸ Atkins, p. 216; Dalziel, pp. 144-48.

second channel of communication now existed alongside the traditional one through the Governor.¹⁹

The new century did not open happily for the Agents-General. They were divided amongst themselves, apprehensive about the appointment of a High Commissioner and alert to the slightest suggestion of a snub. Sir Horace Tozer of Queensland complained that the Colonial Office did not adequately recognise their work. John Taverner of Victoria feared they had 'not been made enough of'.²⁰ Walter James, a former Premier of Western Australia, now that State's Agent-General, explained to Deakin in May 1905:

I am hopeful that we may restore that friendly feeling which I fear the late Mr. Copland and poor old Grainger helped to destroy. It is a thousand pities that following upon Federation when the Colonial Office had an excuse for that policy of ignoring the States which naturally commended itself to Red Tape - though I believe it to be woefully shortsighted from the broader view of Imperialism - the States' Agents should have been split up by internal differences and numbered men as Copland, personally unfit; Grainger, cantankerous and loud; Lefroy, well-intentioned but useless; Dobson, hopelessly afraid of forming or expressing an opinion; and Victoria a blank. This condition of affairs gave the Colonial Office the excuse it desired and now the States are not recognised and even our Annual functions fail to draw official patronage. It was this condition of affairs too which left Australia without a man to speak for it; each Agent thinking only of his own State and not doing that very vigorously. Copland no doubt made himself heard but did not rub people down the right way; whilst Tozer always lectured Australia and Australians. This picture may perhaps be overdrawn but it represents what I have heard from many sources but can only accept to the extent of 50 per cent.²¹

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They were, however, beginning to pull themselves together, in 1905 forming a committee under the chairmanship of the new Agent-General for New South Wales,

¹⁹ Atkins, pp. 250, 254-56; Dalziel, pp. 133-37.

²⁰ Standard, 7 December 1904, cutting in PRO: Colonial Office; CO 418, Australia, Original Correspondence, 1889-1922; vol 35, f. 41974; CUL: Crewe Papers, S/1/8, 'Notes for interviews with Agents-General', unsigned, but ms. of Sir Charles Lucas.

²¹ NLA: MS 1540 (Alfred Deakin Papers); series 1, ff. 1156-61, Walter James to Deakin, 26 May 1905. Copland was the Agent-General of New South Wales; Grainger of South Australia; Lefroy was James's predecessor; Dobson was Agent-General of Tasmania.

the distinguished statistician Timothy Coghlan, to handle jointly matters of general Australian interest.²² From time to time, they also acted on behalf of the new Commonwealth government, placing orders, paying accounts, representing Australia at conferences and replying to criticism in the press.²³ Moreover, the Colonial Office was not as ill-disposed to them as they imagined. Himself disappointed in ambition, Coghlan was the most difficult of the Agents-General; otherwise, Sir Charles Lucas, the head of the Dominions Department, found them 'friendly and cordial to the Colonial Office', describing Alfred Dobson of Tasmania as 'the most courteous and kindly of all the Agents-General'.²⁴

But despite their efforts to rise to the challenges of the new century, amongst federal politicians, dissatisfaction with the Commonwealth's dependence on the States became widespread, many considering that the Agents-General worked at cross-purposes, sacrificing national good for local interest, and failing altogether to represent a united Australia.²⁵ In 1909, Andrew Fisher, the leader of the Labor Party, complained that 'the whole Commonwealth was scandalized' by some recent remarks of the Queensland Agent-General: 'it would have been well if we had then had in London a High Commissioner to voice the opinions and sentiments of the people of Australia'.²⁶ Long before, Walter James confided to Deakin: 'I question whether the mistakes made can be rectified in the absence of a High Commissioner or of some person chosen as the London Agent of the Commonwealth'.²⁷

²² Thompson, Thesis, p. 33.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 31; D. I Wright, *Shadow of Dispute* (Canberra, 1970), pp. 92-93.

²⁴ CUL: Crewe Papers, S/1/8, 'Notes for interviews with Agents-General'. For Coghlan see *ADB*, viii, pp. 79-80.

²⁵ eg. George Fairbairn in *CPD*, li, pp. 3074-75; Foster, p. 3083; Tilley Brown, p. 3553; also, Thompson, Thesis, p. 19.

²⁶ *CPD*, li, p. 3021.

²⁷ NLA: Deakin Papers, 1/1155-61, James to Deakin, 26 May 1909.

To those who wished to see Australia represented in London by its own High Commissioner, the colonial Agents-General were significant for three reasons. They provided a functioning model of Australian representation which might be used as a guide to the activities of a future Commonwealth Office. Yet while the States retained powers which still required their representation in London, the Agents-General would also compete with any office the Commonwealth created and exercise powers which otherwise might be discharged by the High Commissioner. Finally, the Agents-General constituted a tradition of appointments which provided a background of precedent and convention to the appointment of future High Commissioners.

The duties of the nineteenth-century Agents-General, and their brief flourishing as part time diplomats has already been described. Their experience, when juxtaposed with that of later High Commissioners, testifies to the continuity of the colonial era with what historians have asserted about the post-federation period: 'Australian governments, on an ordinary daily basis, have not been preoccupied by questions of peace and war, of grand defence strategies, of political relationships. In fact their ordinary daily concerns have been with loan raising, with finding markets for Australian exports, with attracting investment, with immigration'.²⁸ With the inauguration of the Commonwealth in January 1901, however, it was widely assumed that their powers would soon be transferred to the jurisdiction of the Federal government and, finally, that they would simply wither away. Quick and Garran wrote in their commentary on the constitution:

The [Agents-General]... would be denuded of their prestige and most of their duties, and there would be no necessity or justification for the continuance of the old system. The Agent-General's office for each State, if not quite abolished, could be converted into that of a 'General Agent' - a term so repugnant to the sensibilities of some of its past occupants.²⁹

²⁸ W.J. Hudson and Wendy Way (eds), Letters from a 'Secret Service Agent' (Canberra, 1986), p. x.

²⁹ Sir J. Quick and Sir R.R. Garran, The Annotated Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth (Sydney, 1901), p. 633.

The Federal government soon established its exclusive right to act on behalf of Australia in all matters affecting external relations.³⁰ In 1904, Henry Just, an Assistant Under-Secretary in the Colonial Office, observed: 'The Agents-General are not entrusted by the Colonial Governments with any powers to negotiate on any matters. They are in fact business agents & not political agents'.³¹ In Australia, Senator E.D. Millen, the Vice-President of the Executive Council, assured the Senate in 1909: 'It is quite clear... that... the diplomatic functions of the Agents-General have already to a great extent disappeared. They have been cut down by the very creation of the Commonwealth itself'.³²

Otherwise, the Agents-General were not so easily hustled off the stage. As Quick and Garran and many federal politicians recognised, while the States existed as sovereign governments, there would always remain a nub of business, like the placing and supervision of government orders, which would require their separate representation in London.³³ More importantly, neither the Commonwealth nor the Colonial Office could deprive the States of their powers over Crown land, water supplies, railways, immigration (shared with the Commonwealth) and finance which enabled them to pursue separate policies of economic development necessitating the stationing of Agents-General in London. This was obvious enough to the Agents-General themselves, who wrote in their 1905 memorandum: 'In any circumstances, while the States retain in their hands so many and so important functions, it is doubtful if they can do without direct representation of some sort'.³⁴

³⁰ Edwards, Prime Ministers, pp. 4-6.

³¹ PRO: CO 418/35/41974, minute, H.W. J[ust], 8 December 1904.

³² CPD, lii, p. 3920.

³³ eg. Littleton Groom in CPD, li, pp. 3559; Bruce Smith, p. 3086; Senator St. Ledger, CPD, lii, p. 4032.

³⁴ 'Memorandum', p. 1313.

From the outset, federal politicians called for the abolition of the Agencies-General as they had previously existed,³⁵ but this could not happen without the consent and co-operation of the States themselves. Following federation, South Australia and Victoria reduced the status and functions of their representatives, but South Australia soon reconsidered when none of the other States followed suit.³⁶ At a conference in 1903, the Premiers insisted that the appointment of a High Commissioner would 'not obviate the necessity of the independent representation in London of the various States'. A year later, some of them even suggested that the appointment of a Commonwealth representative would be premature.³⁷ But apart from their official duties, the Premiers were also finding that the Agents-General could be useful in their conflicts with the Commonwealth over State rights. As early as 1901, when the Governor of South Australia jibbed at the Colonial Office's instruction to send copies of his despatches to the Governor-General, Lord Hopetoun, he told the latter that, rather than submit to such a procedure, his Premier would use the Agent-General as the channel of communication.³⁸

But cooperation between the Commonwealth and the States in areas of common interest like loan-raising and immigration was equally elusive. The Commonwealth's power over immigration was largely interpreted as a policing function, allowing it to impose restrictions on entry and to regulate health and safety standards.³⁹ As long as the States controlled the key elements in any settlement programme, the Commonwealth was unable to initiate any national immigration policy. In 1908, the Premiers agreed to cooperate in the establishment of a

³⁵ eg. Fairbairn, *CPD*, li, p. 3074; Maloney, p. 3077; Foster, p. 3082.

³⁶ Thompson, Thesis, pp. 19-20; for the restoration of the South Australian Agent-General see Senator Guthrie, *CPD*, lii, p. 4223.

³⁷ *CPD*, i, p. 2302; cf. Thompson, Thesis, pp. 66-67.

³⁸ Wright, *Shadow*, p. 3.

³⁹ F.K. Crowley, 'British Migration to Australia, 1860-1914' (Oxford University, D.Phil., 1951), pp. 138, 149.

Commonwealth publicity branch. In 1912, they expressed their willingness to adopt a more coordinated policy. But the actual organisation and management of immigration remained in their hands.⁴⁰ Similarly, although the Commonwealth was empowered to acquire responsibility for the States' massive public debts in London, this could only happen with their consent. The States retained, besides, the power to raise fresh loans overseas. During the 1890s, pro-federationists had argued that federation would improve Australia's credit in London, but the Premiers procrastinated over the transfer of their debts and did not even contemplate surrendering their borrowing power, that part of their duties which the Agents-General prized most highly.⁴¹

The legislators who debated the High Commissioner Bill in 1909 clearly recognised that while the States controlled immigration and raised their own loans, two of the principal facets of Anglo-Australian relations were out of bounds to the High Commissioner. Some even asserted that Australia's need for representation was already being adequately met by the Agents-General.⁴² But a greater number insisted that at least some accommodation would have to be reached with the States before the appointment of a High Commissioner could be justified. In 1904, the Reid-McLean coalition refused to proceed with legislation for these reasons.⁴³ Those Ministers responsible for steering the Bill through Parliament maintained that it indeed was an invitation to the States to do just that, but a deep scepticism remained.⁴⁴ Again, the Agents-General themselves had got to the nub of the matter in 1905: 'Shorn of the State business, the High Commissioner's Office, though one of great dignity, would

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 149-58.

⁴¹ Grimshaw, pp. 174-75; D.I. Wright, 'The Politics of Federal Finance, The First Decade', *HS*, xiii (1969), pp. 464-66, 470-72.

⁴² See Senators Findley and Guthrie in *CPD*, lii, pp. 4221, 4223.

⁴³ W.G. McMinn, *George Reid* (Carlton, 1989), pp. 250-51. For the 1909 debate see, eg, McWilliams in *CPD*, li, pp. 3067-68; Tilley Brown, pp. 3069-70; Webster, p. 3089; Hutchinson, p. 3181.

⁴⁴ Groom, *CPD*, li, p. 3558; Millen, lii, p. 4226. For the sceptics see, Bamford, i, p. 2302; Mathews, li, p. 3178.

not be important from a business point of view'. After listing the High Commissioner's possible functions, they concluded:

if all things be considered, the work of a High Commissioner would not be essentially greater than, even if so great, as that of the Agents-General of an important State, for no duty that could be given to the Commissioner (*sic*) could be compared in importance with the work of negotiating a large loan or the carrying out of an important financial operation.⁴⁵

In 1909, the Labor member Josiah Thomas referred to the fact that many appointments to the Agent-Generalship had been political.⁴⁶ The practice of appointing politicians, frequently Premiers or senior Ministers, was the third aspect of colonial representation in London which was relevant to Commonwealth legislators. It was a storehouse of precedents, a guide to the way in which federal ministries might themselves act or a tradition which could be rejected altogether.

Between 1900 and 1910, no fewer than five of the eighteen individuals who served as Australian Agents-General had previously been a State Premier. Four others had been politicians, two subsequently reentering state politics, one becoming the Premier of Western Australia. This continued the pattern of the nineteenth century, when the Agent-Generalship was frequently used as a reward for political services, most obviously when the Premier himself was appointed to the post.⁴⁷ Atkins suggests that the idea that colonial governments invariably awarded it to 'an aged or embarrassed Premier, a loyal political supporter, or an embarrassing colleague or opponent, is not borne out by the facts'.⁴⁸ But at best, the legacy of political appointments was an ambiguous inheritance. The nature of the Agents-General's duties were such that it was appropriate that a colony should be represented in the

⁴⁵ 'Memorandum', p. 1313.

⁴⁶ CPD, li, p. 3632.

⁴⁷ Atkins, p.166.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 171.

imperial metropolis by a senior politician with some experience of public life.⁴⁹ According to one historian, in the 1870s, the succession of one New South Wales Premier by another confirmed 'the office of Agent-General... as an employment worthy of the talents of colonial politicians of the rank of Premier'.⁵⁰ Equally, however, the tradition of political appointments created both the expectation that the office would be dispensed as patronage, and a deep mistrust of the motives of any ministry making the appointment. This is an issue to which we shall return again when we consider the influence of the Canadian High Commissionership on the creation of the Australian office.⁵¹

(ii) High Commissioners

The expectation in 1901 that Australia would be represented by a High Commissioner owed as much to its sister Dominion in North America as to the Agents-General's long sojourn in London. Canada's desire in 1879 to send a Resident Minister to Britain and the place its High Commissioners subsequently earned for themselves in English public life largely made it a matter of course that, after federation, Australia would ^{be} similarly represented. With the Canadian office firmly established, the High Commissionership came to be regarded as a necessary corollary to the advanced status of self-governing communities like Australia, New Zealand and the Union of South Africa. It was largely with this in mind that Quick and Garran interpreted the external affairs power in the Commonwealth constitution as enabling the Federal Parliament 'to create a new department similar to that of the High

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 167.

⁵⁰ MacMillan, p. 171.

⁵¹ See, for example, Hughes's attempt to amend the High Commissioner Bill so as to have the name of the appointee inserted, CPD, lii, p. 3059; for the debate of the amendment, pp. 3179-96.

Commissioner for Canada'.⁵² It was also, evidently, the assumption of both New Zealand and South Africa when they legislated to appoint their own High Commissioners in 1904 and 1911 respectively.⁵³ Yet whilst there were obvious similarities between the offices created by Canada and Australia, these were not inevitable. Canada provided an obvious model, but it was not one which was imitated unreservedly.⁵⁴

The circumstances which brought the first Canadian High Commissioner, Sir Alexander Galt, to London in 1880, immediately distinguished the Canadian experience from that of Australia. Like that of the Agents-General, Galt's arrival was preceded by a period of experiment and improvisation, and closely linked to the gathering pace of economic and political development in the Dominion. Throughout the late nineteenth century, the Canadian office was involved in the same broad mix of financial, commercial and immigration matters which so occupied the Australian colonies and, later, the Commonwealth.⁵⁵ But the inspiration for Galt's appointment differed from that of the Australian representatives. In 1879, the Canadian Premier, Sir John MacDonald, proposed to send someone of ministerial rank to London because he believed that the existing system of consultation with the Imperial government was inadequate, and that the despatch of a Minister, invested with quasi-diplomatic powers, was the only appropriate solution. Thus, in contrast to the vague hopes which eventually sped the first Australian High Commissioner on his way, the Canadian Premier had a specific object in mind.

MacDonald's handling of Canadian representation during his first premiership (1867-73) largely anticipated his proposals in 1879. In 1868, Sir John Rose, a former

⁵² Quick and Garrahan, p. 633

⁵³ Dalziel, pp. 167-68; McNab, p. 70.

⁵⁴ The origins and early history of Canadian representation in England are described in Farr and H. Gordon Skilling, Canadian Representation Abroad (Toronto, 1945), upon which the following account is largely based.

⁵⁵ Skilling, pp. 85-89.

finance Minister and close political associate, moved to England to take up a partnership in a banking firm and, unofficially, soon began to supervise Canadian interests, floating loans and promoting emigration and commerce. While remaining personally close to MacDonald, he also cultivated relations with English politicians of all parties and, in 1⁸69, was 'accredited to Her Majesty's Government as a gentleman possessing the confidence of the Canadian Government with whom Her Majesty's Government may communicate on Canadian affairs'. During the mid-1870s, he acted^{as} the 'Financial Commissioner for the Dominion of Canada'.⁵⁶ Moreover, he mediated between Ottawa and the Colonial Office over issues like the Red River rebellion, and even between the Imperial and United States government in connection with the Washington Conference.⁵⁷

Rose's success convinced MacDonald of the value of having a representative in London closely connected with, and possessing the confidence of, the Canadian government. With these criteria in mind, he decided to put such representation on a permanent basis, and using similar criteria, Canadian ministries selected the first three High Commissioners: Galt (1880-83), Sir Charles Tupper (1883-96) and Sir Donald Smith (1896-1914), later Lord Strathcona. In 1879, MacDonald submitted a memorandum to the Colonial Office proposing the appointment of a Canadian 'Resident Minister' in London. He pointed to the inadequacy of the existing system of communication and indicated several matters of mutual concern - including the Pacific railway, the negotiation of commercial treaties with France and Spain, and the defence of Canada - which would shortly require consultation in London. He envisaged that the Minister would be responsible for all matters of general concern to the Dominion and, moreover, accredited to foreign courts for the purpose of conducting commercial negotiations. In other words, the Resident Minister would be an active intermediary, dealing with substantive matters, between the Canadian,

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 86-87; Farr, pp. 256-57.

⁵⁷ Skilling, pp. 86-87.

imperial, and even foreign governments. MacDonald concluded with the hope that the Imperial government would 'see no insuperable difficulty in giving the Canadian representative a quasi-diplomatic position at the Court of St James, with the social advantages of such rank and position'.⁵⁸

In principle, both the Colonial and the Foreign Offices welcomed MacDonald's proposals, but as far as the former was concerned, the 'rank and position' of the Canadian representative created difficulties. The granting of diplomatic status would undermine the diplomatic unity of the Empire, fragmenting the control of foreign policy among its members. Equally, a constitutionally anomalous position would occur, for with diplomatic status a colonial Minister would simultaneously represent and be accredited to one and the same head of state, the British monarch.⁵⁹ Similar problems were raised by the title of the new officer, MacDonald wishing that it should reflect the prestige of the Dominion, the Colonial Office concerned to establish that the functionary was not strictly a diplomat.⁶⁰ MacDonald first suggested the title 'Resident Minister', but this was unacceptable. Eventually, the Colonial Office yielded to the subsequent suggestion of 'High Commissioner of Canada in London'. But the arguments over status soon became otiose. According to Farr, within a decade, 'the Canadian High Commissioner had achieved, whatever his constitutional position, a *de facto* diplomatic status'.⁶¹

Apart from the growing importance of the Dominion itself, much of this was due to the calibre of the individuals who held the office and to the close political links between them and the government in Canada. The first three High Commissioners

⁵⁸ Farr, p. 258. For the memorandum see Skilling, pp. 89-92.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 254, 258-60; Skilling, p. 84.

⁶⁰ For the argument over the title see Farr, pp. 258-64.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 269. Since the eighteenth century, the Crown had been represented at the annual General Assembly of the Church of Scotland by a Lord High Commissioner. British High Commissioners in Southern Africa and the Western Pacific also exercised 'a restraining and mediatory influence over all that lay adjacent to the colonial borders', *CHBE*, viii (Cambridge, 1963), pp. 344-45, 764; W.P. Morrell, *Britain in the Pacific Islands* (Oxford, 1960), pp. 180-85; *Oxford English Dictionary* (1893).

were men of substantial wealth, experience and prestige. Galt and Strathcona were both businessmen and politicians. Tupper had been Premier of Nova Scotia and a leader of the confederation movement. During the 1870s, he was one of MacDonald's right-hand men, holding several portfolios. Nor did his influence wane when he replaced Galt in 1883. For much of his High Commissionership, he remained a member of the government, actually rejoining the Cabinet in 1886-87 as Minister for Finance, and campaigning for the conservatives in the 1891 election. In 1896, he resigned in order to become Prime Minister, and himself appointed Sir Donald Smith - railway magnate, Commissioner of the Hudson Bay Company and politician, soon to be created Lord Strathcona of Mount Royal⁶² - to succeed him. Tupper in particular was acknowledged as having occupied a unique position. For much of his term he was a de facto Resident Minister. According to Farr, his 'experience and dominant personality entitled him to speak of right as the recognized leader and doyen of the colonial Agents-General in England. Thus in almost every discussion between the self-governing colonies and Great Britain in the years between 1883 and 1896 it was possible to discover the commanding figure of Sir Charles Tupper'.⁶³ His success was probably largely responsible for the subsequent popularity of colonial Resident Ministers as a solution to the problem of imperial consultation.

With the election of the Liberals under Wilfred Laurier in 1896, the close political ties between the High Commissioner and the Canadian government were temporarily severed. Laurier left Smith in office, but both agreed that his position would be strictly non-political. Moreover, Strathcona concentrated on the purely diplomatic and social aspects of his role.⁶⁴ He nevertheless remained a figure of considerable authority, enjoying the honours heaped upon him in the long evening of his life - elevation to the peerage, the Governorship of the Hudson Bay Company, the

⁶² For biographical details see Norah Story, The Oxford Companion to Canadian History and Literature (Toronto, 1967); Farr, passim; Skilling, pp. 98-99, 103-104.

⁶³ Farr, p. 269.

⁶⁴ Skilling, p. 104.

Chancellorship of the University of Aberdeen and, finally in 1908, membership of the Privy Council. Clearly, it was with him in mind that the Agents-General described the High Commissioner as: 'an officer, with considerable private means, who will be able to entertain largely and attend to such diplomatic work... as may arise from time to time'. As a later historian commented, 'his prestige in ruling circles and the general public was great'.⁶⁵ On his death in 1914, however, the practice of appointing representatives closely connected to the government was reestablished when the conservatives sent Sir George Perley to London as Minister without Portfolio.⁶⁶

The Canadian High Commissioner enjoyed two advantages not shared by his Australian colleague. The first was geographical. In contrast with the isolation of the southern hemisphere, Canada was relatively close to the United Kingdom. By 1910, five submarine cables linked Australia to Britain, but the journey via the Suez canal required a month, that from Canada less than a week. A Canadian could thus represent his government in London without isolating himself from political life at home. For these reasons, it was also possible, as in the cases of Tupper and Perley, to send a Resident Minister to London. For an Australian High Commissioner, however, isolation and the difficulty of retaining influence with the government were potentially considerable handicaps. Moreover, the delegation by the government of executive powers to a representative in London raised political and constitutional difficulties.⁶⁷ In 1912, Robert Collins, the Official Secretary at the Com^monwealth Office, urged the government to send a Minister to attend the Committee of Imperial Defence. But to George Pearce, the Minister for Defence, the objections were obvious: 'You know well the difficulties that confront an Australian Government in sending Ministers frequently to Great Britain; it is a practical difficulty, and one to

⁶⁵ 'Memorandum', p. 1312; Skilling, p. 104.

⁶⁶ Skilling, pp. 110-12.

⁶⁷ For communications see Commonwealth Year Book, iv (Melbourne, 1911), pp. 767-68, 787-88; G.S. Graham, 'Imperial Finance, Trade, and Communications, 1895-1914', CHBE, iii (Cambridge, 1959), pp. 473-74. More generally on the problem of distance, Blainey, p. x and Chapter 14.

which no solution at present presents itself.⁶⁸ Atlee Hunt, the Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, was more explicit:

the idea of Cabinet solidarity, that unanimity which results from close intimate personal intercourse would have to go. The Minister would get out of touch with his colleagues just as frequently as it is said officials there [in London] do with Departments here.⁶⁹

The second Canadian advantage was constitutional. The government in Ottawa was not hampered by provincial governments which each exercised wide powers and implemented separate policies respecting immigration and finance. The British North America Act conferred all essential powers affecting external relations, including jurisdiction over trade, commerce and banking, to the Parliament in Ottawa.⁷⁰ This did not prevent the provinces from sending their own emigration agents to England, soon styled Agents-General, but they were overshadowed by the central government's own network of emigration officers under the authority of the High Commissioner.⁷¹ Initially, they obtained some recognition from the High Commissioner and the imperial authorities, but by the turn of the century their privilege of direct access to the Colonial Office was withdrawn. Whitehall, moreover, refused to transact Canadian business with them and Strathcona himself asserted the primacy of his office.⁷² Although they remained in London, within a short time, Keith could safely write that it was: 'the invariable rule that relations between Canada and the Imperial Government are conducted through the Dominion Government and the High Commissioner'.⁷³ Nevertheless, unfailingly, the Australian Agents-General

⁶⁸ Australian War Memorial (henceforth AWM): 3DRL 2222 (George Pearce Papers); bundle 7, item 106, Pearce to R.M. Collins, 3 December 1912.

⁶⁹ NLA: MS 52 (Atlee Hunt Papers); item 854, Hunt to R.M. Collins, 17 December 1912.

⁷⁰ Kenneth McNaught, The Pelican History of Canada (Harmondsworth, 1982), pp. 134-35.

⁷¹ Skilling, pp. 4-10. The Agency-General of Nova Scotia was established in 1185; New Brunswick, 1887; British Columbia, 1901; Prince Edward Island, 1902; Ontario, Quebec, 1908; Skilling, p. 107.

⁷² Ibid., pp. 107-9.

⁷³ Keith, Responsible Government, p. 283.

cited the representatives of the Canadian provinces as demonstrating the necessity of their own survival.⁷⁴

Few direct references were made to the Canadian High Commissionership during the debate of the 1909 Bill, but Australians were conscious of the Canadian example in three ways. As we have seen, the High Commissionership had become established as one symbol at the heart of the Empire of the prestige, dignity and aspirations of the newly created British Dominions. Furthermore, during the years preceding the first world war, the powerful, well-organised Canadian office appeared to give the Canadians a distinct edge in the competition for immigrants and markets. Finally, the Canadian High Commissionership - like the Australian Agencies-General - embodied wider attitudes to the use and distribution of public office which might be imitated or rejected as the Commonwealth legislators saw fit.

The statements of Australians themselves revealed the extent to which the High Commissionership had come to be regarded as a corollary of Dominion status. Groom, the Minister of External Affairs, introducing the High Commissioner Bill in 1909, declared: 'The office of High Commissioner, which will^{be} created by this Bill, is but a logical sequence of the bringing into being of the Federal constitution'.⁷⁵ Deakin commented in 1911: 'From the very establishment of the Commonwealth it was always recognised as one of the essentials that we should be represented in London on a fitting scale. This was due first to the dignity of the Commonwealth...'.⁷⁶

We have already seen that the Agents-General regarded Strathcona as the model High Commissioner, but some doubted whether he was an appropriate example for Australia's circumstances, the conservative, Henry Wilkes, declaring in 1909: 'If

⁷⁴ 'Memorandum', p. 1313; New South Wales Parliamentary Papers (1919), iv, 'Agent-General for New South Wales in London (Report by Sir Charles Wade KC...)', p. 692.

⁷⁵ CPD, I, p. 2301.

⁷⁶ He continued: 'and secondly it presented opportunities of which we were always anxious to avail ourselves of assisting the isolated efforts of the State Governments in different fields', CPD, lxiii, p. 4124.

there are Strathconas about Collins Street, let us have the best amongst them, but, as a matter of fact, we in Australia are a work-a-day people, and the margin between those who have to depend on their daily toil and those who have not is a small one'.⁷⁷ Many acknowledged, however, that the social demands on a High Commissioner would be great and that the Australian should not be placed at a financial disadvantage. The position should also not become the privilege of the wealthy.⁷⁸ Some even argued that the High Commissioner should be paid more than the £3,000 specified in the Bill, but an amendment to this effect failed.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the conviction of the importance and prestige of the office remained strong, inspiring some extravagant hyperbole. Llewelyn Atkinson, a freetrader from Tasmania, called it 'the blue riband of Australian official life'.⁸⁰ Other conservatives ranked it with the Governor-Generalship and appointments to the High Court.⁸¹ Even E.L. Batchelor, a future Labor Minister of External Affairs, felt that the High Commissioner would be no less than 'the representative of Australia at the hub of the universe'.⁸²

A consciousness of the competitive advantage conferred upon Canada by its High Commissionership was as acute as that of the prestige of the office itself. Senator Rae complained in 1911: 'We get Canada quoted at us morning, noon, and night... when a question crops up as to what Australia is doing, or proposing to do'.⁸³ But others were not reluctant to draw the obvious moral that, while Australians procrastinated, Canada stole a march in the struggle for immigrants and markets. Thus, for example, in 1911, Deakin referred to 'the extraordinary success of the

⁷⁷ CPD, li, p. 3063.

⁷⁸ eg. Bruce Smith, CPD, li, pp. 3087-88; Batchelor, li, p. 3066.

⁷⁹ For the debate of the amendment see, CPD, li, pp. 3562-71.

⁸⁰ CPD, li, p. 3186.

⁸¹ Willis, CPD, li, p. 3071; Wilks, CPD, li, p. 3062.

⁸² CPD, li, p. 3065.

⁸³ CPD, lxiii, p. 4119.

efforts which have been put forward by the great Dominion of Canada during all the years that we have been idle'.⁸⁴

Finally, the North American example was significant to Australian legislators in a more diffuse and general sense, although here the experience of the Agents-General may have been equally important. Strathcona may have been the model of the High Commissioner as elder statesman detached from party politics, but the success of the Canadian office during the nineteenth century had been due in large measure to the close political ties which had existed between the government and its representative in London. This had been based upon sound practical thinking, but reflected equally the practice of only appointing to official positions those who had been active supporters of the party in power. According to Gordon T. Stewart, by the late nineteenth century, the manipulation of patronage for party political ends had become a norm of Canadian political culture.⁸⁵ John A. MacDonald justified himself in constitutional terms, stating in 1871 that 'in the distribution of government patronage we carry out the true constitutional principle [that] whenever an office is vacant it belongs to the party supporting the government'.⁸⁶ Moreover, whether in the form practised by MacDonald, or the 'spoils system' in the United States,⁸⁷ Stewart argues that the systematic deployment of patronage to cement party loyalty and cultivate local constituencies was a feature of North American political life which differentiated it from that of British communities, among which he included the Australasian colonies.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ CPD, lxiii, p. 4126; also see Sen. McGregor, pp. 4115, 4121 and Thompson, Thesis, p. 60.

⁸⁵ Gordon T. Stewart, The Origins of Canadian Politics (Vancouver, 1986), p. 71; for a full discussion see pp. 67-90. This had also been the practice respecting appointments in the British Civil Service which the reforms issuing from the Northcote-Trevelyan report only gradually displaced, H.J. Hanham (ed.), The Nineteenth Century Constitution (Cambridge, 1969), p. 315 and doc. 239.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 67.

⁸⁷ Described and defined in Hugh Brogan, The Pelican History of the United States of America (Harmondsworth, 1986), pp. 272, 274-76, 410-11, 419-20.

⁸⁸ For the argument applied to Canada see Stewart, pp. 88-89.

In Britain, the line of development, seeking to disengage the civil service from the influence of old-style political patronage, had been in precisely the opposite direction. Furthermore, the ideal of a neutral civil service founded upon merit and immune from political interference was transplanted to the Australian colonies when they established their own infant bureaucracies.⁸⁹ In 1895, the Reid government in New South Wales created an independent board to regulate all aspects of the Public Service and protect it from the depredations of politicians.⁹⁰ In 1902, the Commonwealth Public Service Commissioner and his Inspectors were appointed to the same end.⁹¹ By 1910, therefore, the rejection of the wholesale use of patronage for political purposes, and the clear separation of policy-making from administration, were ideals of Australian public life.⁹² And if at times these principles were more honoured in the breach than the observance, they might still be ranked among the hallmarks of the 'Britishness' of Australian political culture.

To be sure, much to the chagrin of the Public Service Commissioner, the Commonwealth Public Service Act of 1902 had reserved the senior Administrative Division of the Service, which included all permanent heads and chief officers, like the Justices of the High Court, from his control. Appointments to this Division, in which the High Commissioner would also be included, were made by Cabinet.⁹³ Moreover, during the debate of the High Commissioner Bill itself, no explicit reference to the North American system of political patronage was made. Nevertheless, in the discussions of the office during the preceding decade the

⁸⁹ Arthur McMartin, 'Patronage, merit and morality', in J.J. Eddy and J.R. Nethercote (eds), From Colony to Coloniser: Studies in Australian Administrative History (Sydney, 1987), pp. 57, 60; Hanham, pp. 314-20.

⁹⁰ McMinn, p. 118; also, p. 96.

⁹¹ Gerard Caiden, Career Service (Carlton, 1965), pp. 63-69.

⁹² cf. Barbara Page, 'Public service management and political control: the 1917-1918 Mason Allard inquiry and the Public Service Board of New South Wales', in Eddy and Nethercote (eds), pp. 163-64.

⁹³ Caiden, pp. 64, 73.

rejection of this kind of patronage had been sufficiently strong to allow us to regard it as a powerful influence upon attitudes to the post.

Prior to 1909, this rejection had been most obviously evident in the attempts of some members of Parliament to take the appointment out of the hands of the executive and place it within the control of the legislature, a move of some significance while no party was able to command a clear majority. In 1905, for example, the Senate approved a motion that the selection of the High Commissioner should be made by secret ballot of both Houses. But Deakin, the Prime Minister, refused to proceed with any Bill, maintaining that the motion breached the conventions of responsible government.⁹⁴ During the debate of the Bill itself, an amendment moved by Hughes that the High Commissioner should be named in the legislation, attracted further support for the idea that Parliament should be allowed to make the appointment.⁹⁵ The motion was defeated, but the notion that the 'appointment... should not be decided by the past record or party claims of the person who is sent' was expressed by members of all parties,⁹⁶ the freetrader William Wilks, for example, deprecating that the High Commissionership might become 'a sinecure for a political friend of the Government', and hoping 'that an appointment will be made quite irrespective of party considerations'.⁹⁷

Perhaps even more illustrative of these aspirations, and certainly of greater long term significance, was the provision in clause three of the Bill of a fixed renewable term for the High Commissioner of five years. The origins of the clause probably lay in the statutory three-year terms established for their Agents-General by the colonies of Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia in the 1870s and 1880s, in order to provide them with security of tenure during a period of frequent changes of

⁹⁴ John La Nauze, Alfred Deakin (Carlton, 1965), ii, p. 594; G. Sawyer, Australian Federal Politics and Law, 1901-1929 (Carlton, 1956), p. 53 and note 108.

⁹⁵ CPD, li, pp. 3059, 3179-96.

⁹⁶ On this occasion the freetrader William Kelly, CPD, li, p. 3181

⁹⁷ CPD, li, p. 3062.

government.⁹⁸ The first decade of Federal government had also been marked by political instability, ministries following each other in rapid succession. Thus the necessity to avoid frequent changes of High Commissioner was an obvious consideration. But the Commonwealth legislation departed from its colonial precedents and the New Zealand High Commissioner Act of 1904 (upon which it was based), by specifying a yet longer term than three years,⁹⁹ ensuring that any Australian High Commissioner would outlive the government which appointed him, even if it ran the maximum three years allowed by the constitution. It would thus be impossible for any incoming government to dismiss an incumbent High Commissioner. Yet, as in the case of the Agents-General, with no other discouragement to a ministry to use the patronage at its disposal when the opportunity arose, the five-year term introduced a rigidity into the legislation which handicapped the Australian High Commissionership throughout its early history. The fact that it passed almost unnoticed may have indicated both the consensus in favour of a non-political office, and the reality that there were no other practical alternatives which would ensure its creation. Those who did trouble to comment had a different evil in mind, agreeing that the fixed term meant that a High Commissioner would not hold office long enough to lose touch with Australia.¹⁰⁰

Only Andrew Fisher, the Labor leader, objected to the term and the near impossibility of removing a High Commissioner:

The High Commissioner is not in the position of an ordinary Commissioner of Railways. He should be there at the direction of the Ministry to carry out the policy of the Ministry for the time being. We do not want a man appointed for a number of years, and so entrenched in his position... as to be able to give vent to opinions that are contrary to the wishes of the Parliament and Government of the day.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Atkins, p.155.

⁹⁹ Statutes of New Zealand, xxxii, no. 47 of 1904. The New Zealand High Commissioner was also eligible for reappointment.

¹⁰⁰ Wilks, CPD, li, p. 3062; Russell, lii, p. 4145.

¹⁰¹ CPD, li, p. 3558, 16 September 1909; Fisher also urged that the government should have the power to recall the High Commissioner, p. 3589.

Similarly, Senator Pearce suggested that there might be some benefit in a political appointment. He acknowledged 'that this will be a party appointment', and would 'not object to it as such'.¹⁰² He also had 'absolutely no sympathy' with the view of some members of his party that politicians should be disqualified from holding the High Commissionership: 'I think, on the contrary, that a politician should be appointed, because he would be more likely to be in touch and sympathy with the political sentiment of the country'. But both Fisher and Pearce were exceptions, standing out against the tide of opinion flowing in the opposite direction, not only amongst conservatives, but also within the Labor party.

The opposition to a North American style of politics was equally strong outside Parliament. In 1909, the Sydney Daily Telegraph congratulated Deakin on the appointment of an erstwhile opponent as High Commissioner, for: 'If a Prime Minister was entitled to consult his own fiscal or other political principles in filling the highest or the humblest public office we would have the beginnings of the American system, under which the Government offices are regarded as the spoil of the victorious party'.¹⁰³ When, in 1915, Fisher indicated Labor would appoint a High Commissioner following the principles he had expressed in 1909, his critics immediately drew parallels with the same spoils system and accused him of Americanizing politics. According to the Sydney Sun: 'The transaction is an example of the degradation of national affairs to party uses'.¹⁰⁴ Certainly, Fisher's opponents could themselves be accused of playing politics, but they appealed to the same element in Australian political culture which had been expressed in 1909, and would resurface again on the occasion of subsequent appointments. According to this view, the Australian High Commissioner must occupy a position in which, in the words of a

¹⁰² CPD, li, p. 3953.

¹⁰³ Sydney Daily Telegraph, 15 December 1909.

¹⁰⁴ Sun, 20 August 1915; Bulletin, 14 October 1915.

later Prime Minister: 'he knows no political party, but represents the whole of the Australian people'.¹⁰⁵

Throughout the period covered by this study, Australian politicians and opinion-makers rarely seemed to discern the benefits which might accrue from the existence of a political friendship between the High Commissioner and the government, and almost uniformly regarded such friendships as corrupt, the Bulletin declaring typically in 1915: 'If it is necessary that he [i.e. the High Commissioner] should be a political partisan, then it is equally necessary that the holders of a thousand other offices in the State should be partisans, and that would introduce a system of corruption and a mass of turmoil which even Andrew Fisher might not care to be responsible for'.¹⁰⁶ As we shall see in Chapter 6, if it was necessary for the government to be represented by a politician in London, it was thought preferable to send a Resident Minister. By contrast, the fixed five-year term conferred upon the High Commissionership the verisimilitude of a non-political office. But while discouraging the ambitious from making a long interruption to their careers, there were no other incentives to a cabinet to behave virtuously. Thus the door remained open to other forms of patronage without the advantages to be gained from the appointment of an active politician. Finally, the rigidity of the Act also meant that, for a time at least, any government would be bound to accept its predecessor's appointee. In these circumstances, the office of High Commissioner might easily become nugatory.

¹⁰⁵ S.M. Bruce in CPD, cxvi, p. 209.

¹⁰⁶ Bulletin, 14 October 1915.

(iii) The Colonial Office, the Governor-General and Imperial Consultation

When the first Australian High Commissioner arrived in London he not only found a long-established tradition of colonial representation, which already defined his functions and - in the case of the Australian Agents-General - limited his sphere of operation, but also a bureaucracy, in the form of the Colonial Office and its Governors-General, which was already responsible for the official conduct of Anglo-Dominion relations and which, by the first decade of the century, was markedly reluctant to concede any role to colonial representatives in the conduct of imperial affairs.

When the Commonwealth of Australia came into existence it was part of an Empire formally governed from the United Kingdom, subordinate to the Imperial government in all matters affecting its external relations. Within this relationship, the Colonial Office was the channel of communication between the Imperial government and the Dominions. Inside Whitehall, it was the coordinating department for all matters affecting the Dominions. In most general terms, it aspired 'to ensure the consistent application of imperial policy in every field concerning the Empire'.¹⁰⁷ In 1907, the Dominions' special needs and status were nevertheless recognised by the creation of a department within the Office devoted exclusively to Dominion affairs.¹⁰⁸

In Australia, the Colonial Office was represented, as in all the Dominions, by a Governor-General appointed by the Crown. The constitutional expert and sometime Colonial Office official, A.B. Keith, wrote of this officer: 'his duty is to represent the King as head of the local Government, and to serve as the channel of formal

¹⁰⁷ J.A. Cross, Whitehall and the Commonwealth (London, 1967), pp. 6, 8-9.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., pp. 17-19.

communications between the local and the central Governments'.¹⁰⁹ But there was more to him than that. While still an official in the Colonial Office, Keith minuted in 1912: 'the Governor-General of the Commonwealth... is the constitutional means of enforcing by personal rep[resen]t[ation]s the opinions of the Secretary of State for the Colonies on... constitutional quest[ion]s'.¹¹⁰ Earlier, in 1911, his colleague Henry Lambert had asserted more explicitly: 'At present the Governor is appointed by His Majesty's Government and is in constant touch with Ministers... The Governor is our own man and for the purpose of getting at the people with whom we want to deal with is in every way a better instrument [than the High Commissioner]'.¹¹¹

Thus the Governor-General had three functions. He was the representative of the Crown as the head of the Commonwealth government. He was an imperial functionary, the agent of the Colonial Office, responsible for guarding imperial interests. Finally, he was the formal channel of communication, linking the Colonial Secretary and the Australian government. Clearly, the different aspects of his role might not be compatible. His functions in one capacity gave him a particularly privileged position when acting in another, a situation which it was obviously in the interests of the Colonial Office both to prolong and obscure. Successive Commonwealth governments, quite naturally, placed greatest emphasis on the Governor-General's constitutional role. But according to Cunneen, the Governor-General's chief function during the Commonwealth's early history was imperial rather than constitutional.¹¹²

Apart from seeking to strengthen the authority of the Federal government in external affairs vis-à-vis the States, the Colonial Office avoided interfering in

¹⁰⁹ Keith, Imperial Unity, p. 544. In each of the Australian States, the Colonial Office was similarly represented by a Governor.

¹¹⁰ PRO: CO 418/106/26651, minute, A.B. K[eith], 27 August 1912.

¹¹¹ PRO: Colonial Office; CO 532, Dominions, Original Correspondence, 1907-1925; vol. 18, f. 36512, minute, H. L[ambert], 2 December 1911.

¹¹² Christopher Cunneen, Kings' Men (Sydney, 1983), p. ix.

domestic affairs, even when they might affect wider imperial interests.¹¹³ Invariably, however, it upheld the authority of the British government as the maker of imperial policy. Thus, it did not intervene over issues like the tariff and the White Australia policy, despite the offence they caused to foreign powers like Japan,¹¹⁴ but where questions of foreign policy were concerned, it did not keep the Dominions adequately informed, nor ask for their views, even if their interests were directly affected. Australia's ignorance in 1906 of the existence of an Anglo-French commission to discuss the future of the New Hebrides was the greatest example of this during the Commonwealth's first decade.¹¹⁵

If consultation did take place, it occurred through the Governor-General or at colonial (subsequently imperial) conferences in London, at which Dominion Ministers met directly with the Colonial Secretary and, in 1911, the British Prime Minister. During the century's first decade, these were held in 1902 and 1907. In 1909, a defence conference - a harbinger of change - also met. The subjects discussed ranged over issues like local defence, tariff preferences, imperial organisation and physical communications, but conscious of nationalist opinion at home and wary of being lured into unwanted commitments, the colonial Premiers insisted that their discussions could not be binding; consequently: 'time was spent on unimportant subjects or on vague motions so phrased to command the maximum of acceptance.'¹¹⁶ Until 1911, the Imperial government also avoided the discussion of

¹¹³ For the Commonwealth, the States and the Colonial Office see Edwards, Prime Ministers, pp. 4-6.

¹¹⁴ The right of the self-governing colonies to fix their own tariffs had been recognised since 1873, see H.L. Hall, Australia and England (1934), pp. 196-97. For the immigration issue see Cunneen, pp. 25-28; for the Colonial Office's general attitude to domestic issues in the Dominions, Ronald Hyam, 'The Colonial Office Mind 1900-1914', JICH (1979), viii, pp. 42-43.

¹¹⁵ The New Hebrides issue is dealt with in Meaney, Search for Security, pp. 94-107. For the influence of Australian attitudes to Japan upon the Anglo-Japanese Treaty of 1902 see I.H. Nish, 'Australia and the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, 1901-1911', AJPH, ix (1963), 201-12.

¹¹⁶ R. M. Dawson (ed.), The Development of Dominion Status 1900-1936 (London, 1937), p. 8. For the evolution of the colonial and imperial conferences see J.E. Kendle, The Colonial and Imperial Conferences 1887-1911 (London, 1967), and their influence on imperial policy, Edwards, Prime Ministers, pp. 8-11.

foreign policy. Finally, despite Deakin's efforts in 1907, the conferences resisted any attempt to establish a permanent secretariat staffed by Dominion representatives.

The Colonial Office itself was careful that proposals like Deakin's in 1907 and, later, those of the New Zealand Prime Minister, Joseph Ward, at the 1911 Imperial Conference, did not undermine its position or the authority of the Governors-General.¹¹⁷ More importantly for our purposes here, it resisted any attempt to widen the functions of the High Commissioners and thus displace its own officials from the conduct of Anglo-Dominion relations.¹¹⁸

The first decade of the century had in fact produced a plethora of proposals - involving the establishment in some form of imperial councils, permanent advisory committees, and new channels of communication - with the object of strengthening the machinery of imperial consultation, which reflected both a growing sense of imperial vulnerability and the aspirations of Dominions like Australia for a greater say in imperial policy-making. Most of these proposals envisaged some role for the Dominion representatives in London. A committee chaired by the jurist Sir Frederick Pollock concluded in 1907 that the High Commissioners might be used to provide continuity between imperial conferences.¹¹⁹ At the Colonial Conference of that year, Deakin suggested that the Agents-General might act as the channels of communication between the Dominions and the secretariat which would serve the Imperial Council, whose establishment he also advocated.¹²⁰

But in the face of such proposals, the Colonial Office asserted the importance of its own role and insisted that colonials were entirely unsuited to the niceties of imperial diplomacy. Ward's proposals in 1911 met with similar resistance. Ward

¹¹⁷ eg the differences in 1902-1903 between Barton, Deakin and Lord Tennyson over the functions and appointment of the Governor-General's Official Secretary, see Cunneen, pp. 40-42. For the Governor-General generally see Cunneen, *passim* and Edwards, *Prime Ministers*, pp. 21-24.

¹¹⁸ Kendle, pp. 66, 111-13, 155-58, 184.

¹¹⁹ Kendle, p. 80. The Agents-General had figured in the schemes of the imperial federationists since the 1880s, Dalziel, p. 90.

¹²⁰ *PP*, (1907), lv, Cd. 3523, Minutes of Proceedings of the Colonial Conference, p. 141.

suggested that the High Commissioners might be invited to attend meetings of the Committee of Imperial Defence when matters of Dominion interest were being discussed; that the High Commissioners be permitted to communicate with the Foreign Office; and that they replace the Governors-General as the channel of communication.¹²¹ To the Colonial Office, these resolutions were no less than a formula for its own abolition, at least where Dominion affairs were concerned. Henry Just, an Assistant Under Secretary, commented with reference to the proposal to put the High Commissioners in touch with the Foreign Office:

a system which eliminated the functions of the Colonial Office and of Governors and Governors-General would not be in the best interests of relations between His Majesty's Government and the Dominion Governments

The duty of the Colonial Office is to press the view of the Dominions upon the Foreign Office and to reinforce that view, while the Foreign Office is primarily concerned with the interests of His Majesty's Government, as affected by the contention of the foreign Government; friction is more easily avoided and a result more advantageous to the Dominions more certainly reached through the intervention of the agency of the Colonial Office. Nor could His Majesty's Government dispense with the assistance of the Governor or the Governor-General - his information derived from discussion with his Ministers, and his agency as a means of conveying to Ministers confidentially the views of His Majesty's Government on important occasions.¹²²

Furthermore, Henry Lambert, a Principal Clerk, observed, under Ward's scheme: 'we should be absolutely at the mercy of the Dominion Gov[ernmen]t in regard to the man with whom we deal'.¹²³ The Colonial Office was convinced, however, that the bulk of colonial representatives were unsuitable for the duties it was now proposed they take up. Lambert continued:

¹²¹ PRO: CO 532/18/36486, Governor of New Zealand to Colonial Secretary, 29 November 1910.

¹²² PRO: Colonial Office; CO 886, Dominions, Confidential Print, 1907-1925; vol. 4, no. 32, 'Imperial Conference 1911: Reorganisation of the Colonial Office and Position of the High Commissioners, New Zealand Resolution 3', January 1911, H.W. J[ust], p. 4.

¹²³ PRO: CO 532/18/36512, minute, H. L[ambert], 2 December 1910. Also see Hyam, 'The Colonial Office Mind', pp. 40-41.

They [the Dominion governments] may send us a man of the type of Sir R. Solomon [the South African High Commissioner], or a man of the type of some of the Agents-General one has known - although the system might be workable with an educated and conciliatory man like Sir R. Solomon, to bring the other type into contact with the F.O. would certainly not grease the wheels. Perhaps the C.O. has too great a belief in its own capacity for managing things, but we do at least spend our lives at the job and are not put into it because we are inconvenient supporters of the Gov[ernmen]t or are past our work and require a rest.¹²⁴

Frequently, the High Commissioner was 'but a little trusted official (more particularly if there is a change of Gov[ernmen]t in the Colony after he has taken up office)'. His colleague, Johnson, agreed: 'as often as not, those officials are out of touch with the political views of their Governments'.¹²⁵

For their part, British politicians were equally determined that the Dominion representatives should not acquire ambassadorial status, and that they themselves remained firmly in command of the machinery of imperial consultation. The High Commissioners had no institutional place in this machinery; their position was tenuous and ill-defined. The Canadian Premier, Laurier, acknowledged this in 1911, telling the Imperial Conference: 'Their status is one which is somewhat delicate, because the whole of the constitution is something new, which has never existed in the world before, for which we have no precedent, and which we have to create ourselves'.¹²⁶ On the larger question of the actual conduct of policy, the Imperial government was no less determined to maintain its grip. On this, Herbert Asquith, the Liberal Prime Minister, was quite explicit, telling the 1911 Imperial Conference with reference to Ward's proposal for the creation of an Imperial Council:

For what does Sir Joseph Ward's proposal come to ? ... It would impair if not altogether destroy the authority of the Government of the United Kingdom in such grave matters as the conduct of foreign policy, the conclusion of treaties, the declaration and maintenance of peace, or the declaration of war and, indeed, all those relations with Foreign Powers, necessarily of the most delicate character, which are now in the hands

¹²⁴ PRO: CO 532/18/36512, minute, H. L[ambert], 2 December 1910.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, and minute, H.W. J[ohnson], 2 December 1910.

¹²⁶ *PP.* (1911), liv, Cd. 5745, Imperial Conference - Minutes of Proceedings, p. 188.

of the Imperial Government, subject to its responsibility to the Imperial Parliament. That authority cannot be shared...¹²⁷

The Australian Constitution had, in fact, already conferred upon the Commonwealth the power 'to make laws for the peace, order, and good government of the Commonwealth' with respect to external affairs (s.51 xxix). Since the Durham Report of 1839, however, the control of foreign relations had been explicitly reserved to itself by the Imperial government, and Joseph Chamberlain, when introducing the Constitution Bill into the British Parliament in 1900, made it absolutely clear that it had no intention of surrendering it.¹²⁸ The exact origin of the external affairs power is not clear. Amongst constitutional experts, it gave rise to considerable confusion. Quick and Garran agreed that it allowed the appointment of 'accredited agents' similar to the Canadian High Commissioner; 'the conduct of the business and promotion of the interests of the Commonwealth in outside countries', largely with respect to commercial relations; and the extradition of criminals.¹²⁹ But the Commonwealth could have no diplomatic representation, nor any treaty-making power. In effect, as far as foreign powers were concerned, its existence and interests were subsumed within those of Britain and the Empire. The first Prime Minister, Edmund Barton, put the position succinctly in February 1901: 'There could be no foreign policy of the Commonwealth. The foreign policy belonged to the Empire... [Australians] could not affect that policy except by such representations as they could make to the Imperial Government'.¹³⁰

Edwards suggests that during the 1909 debate of the High Commissioner Bill: 'Little interest was demonstrated in the significance of the post [of High Commissioner] for Australia's imperial and foreign relations'.¹³¹ We have already

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 71.

¹²⁸ Keith, The Sovereignty of the British Dominions (London, 1929), pp. 34, 277-78; Edwards, Prime Ministers, pp. 1-4; Meaney, Search for Security, p. 38.

¹²⁹ Quick and Garran, pp. 631-32; Meaney, Search for Security, (1911), liv, p. 33.

¹³⁰ quoted in Edwards, Prime Ministers, p. 1.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 18.

seen that Australian politicians acknowledged the Imperial government's suzerainty in foreign policy. Yet, as the opening decade of the century progressed, some - most notably Deakin - came to resent the subordination of Australian interests which this implied and the Colonial Office's apparent dilatoriness and obstructionism where they were concerned. In 1907, Deakin proposed to the Colonial Conference that year the establishment of a permanent Imperial Conference or Council served by its own permanent secretariat and bypassing the Colonial Office altogether.¹³² Importantly, he also envisaged a role for a future Australian High Commissioner in the machinery of imperial consultation. He commented with reference to the permanent secretariat:

Our idea was that the Prime Ministers at the head of the various Governments would act through their Agents-General in making such representations as they chose through such a secretariat. If it had been a joint department, and a joint secretariat... to which we all contributed, and in regard to which we had some voice as to the selection of officers, the Agents-General would have the utmost freedom, the fullest right and title to enter the office to communicate with it and use it when representing their Prime Ministers.¹³³

In 1909, he described the High Commissioner as 'a representative... who will be able to enter into relations with the leading public men of the Mother Country. He will be clothed with full power and authority to speak, subject to the direction of this Parliament and the Government, on any question of interest to Australia'.¹³⁴

In 1909, the High Commissioner Bill passed through Parliament against the background of an Imperial Defence Conference in London which, in September, sanctioned the construction of an Australian fleet unit to form part of the Eastern Fleet of the Empire.¹³⁵ Introducing the Bill, Groom, the Minister of External Affairs, declared that the High Commissioner's 'most important duties would be of a

¹³² Kendle, pp. 90-106 ; La Nauze, ii, Chapter 21.

¹³³ PP (1907), lv, cd. 3523, p. 141.

¹³⁴ CPD, li, p. 3022.

¹³⁵ Meaney, Search for Security, p. 181-86.

diplomatic nature. He would have a good deal to do in connexion with negotiations between the Government and the Colonial Office in matters which do not ordinarily pass through the Governor-General'.¹³⁶ Edwards suggests that Groom meant 'principally the protection of Australian interests in proposed legislation at Westminster and the clarification and interpretation of acts of the Commonwealth Parliament',¹³⁷ but in October 1909, with precisely the recent naval agreement in mind, the conservative, Senator James McColl, placed the legislation squarely in its imperial context:

We are on the verge of a great world-wide movement... for widening the base of Empire... the British people are coming together as they have never done before. For that reason alone it is necessary that we should have in London a man who could speak for United Australia in tones of authority. We are not content now simply to share the benefits of Empire, but we are making up our mind also to share the burdens of Empire; and so we desire a voice in regard to Imperial matters.¹³⁸

In a climate of growing cooperation and equality, the High Commissioner would become: 'a confidential medium of communication... between the Defence authorities here and the Admiralty and the War Office in the Old Land'.¹³⁹

The small Department of External Affairs - created in 1901 for the purpose of superintending the Commonwealth's relations with the Imperial government, the States and the Pacific islands, and of administering immigration and the Australian territories - was inspired by a similar Deakinite vision. In 1915, when faced with the prospect of losing control of the High Commissioner's Office (which had been placed in its charge in 1909), F.J. Minlan, the Acting-Secretary, responded:

It is thought that the functions of this Department should be, and were always intended to be - as far as circumstances warranted - akin to those of the British Foreign Office. The Minister for External Affairs

¹³⁶ CPD, I, p. 2304.

¹³⁷ Edwards, Prime Ministers, p. 18.

¹³⁸ CPD, lii, pp. 4023-24, 1 October 1909.

¹³⁹ CPD, lii, p. 4027; cf. Batchelor in li, p. 3065.

should be regarded as the Minister to deal with all matters concerning Australia's external relations...

The High Commissioner's Office, as an external adjunct of Australia, was properly placed under the control of this Department on its establishment, and there appears to be no justification for any action at this juncture which would remove it from the control of the Minister for External Affairs.

Outside the government, other organs of Australian opinion were prepared to take an equally broad view, the leader writer of the Sydney Morning Herald maintaining with specific reference to 'the islands of the Western Pacific' in January 1910:

On the more diplomatic side... the work that is to be done is great and growing. Every day the Commonwealth is touching the world at more points, and any adjustments which require to be made must be made through London. The importance of having a competent representative in London to press the Australian view on critical occasions can best be measured by the loss occasioned through the absence of such representation in years gone by.¹⁴¹

For some Australians, then, the High Commissioner would not simply reproduce the work of the Agents-General on a grander scale or merely be a symbol of the Commonwealth's status as a Dominion, he would have an active part to play in the inter-imperial diplomacy arising from a new era of consultation and cooperation, of which the 1909 Defence Conference was a harbinger. The germ of the idea was present from the outset and never completely absent from Australian thinking about the High Commissionership.

Yet we must be wary of exaggerating this. Virtually all the Commonwealth's initiatives in imperial foreign policy during the first decade of the century belonged to Deakin alone, and despite the heat occasionally generated by issues like the New

¹⁴⁰ AA: Prime Minister's Department; CRS A461, Correspondence series 1934-1950; file A348/1/5, memorandum, Department of External Affairs, F.J. Minlan, 18 October 1915. Atlee Hunt, the Department's Secretary, accompanied the Australian delegation to the 1907 Colonial Conference and the 1911 Imperial Conference. Edwards, while arguing that the Department 'was of little diplomatic significance', also suggests that, as early as 1904, Hunt was conducting 'some elementary diplomacy' with the Japanese Consul-General in Sydney. Moreover, by around 1910: 'it was becoming increasingly possible to describe Hunt as an external affairs adviser to the Prime Minister of the day'. These aspirations, however, were stifled in large measure by the creation of a separate Prime Minister's Department which took responsibility for the Prime Minister's correspondence with other governments, Prime Ministers, pp. 13-16.

¹⁴¹ Sydney Morning Herald (henceforth SMH), 15 January 1910.

Hebrides and the rise of Japan, habits of deference to imperial authority and prestige were deeply ingrained.¹⁴² The majority of Australians took little interest in foreign policy or imperial organisation; even Deakin's resolutions for the 1907 Colonial Conference 'received only cursory consideration in Parliament'.¹⁴³ Moreover, while the element of diplomacy cannot be discounted from the Deakinite-Liberal conception of the High Commissioner's duties, Edwards is right in emphasising that few legislators took an interest in this aspect of his role. During the 1909 debate, several referred in vague terms to the 'diplomatic' nature of the High Commissionership, but none echoed Senator McColl's views about its potential importance in imperial consultation.¹⁴⁴ Some, like Senator E.D. Millen, the Vice-President of the Executive Council, who steered the Bill through the Senate, wondered whether it was correct even to use the adjective 'diplomatic', 'to describe communications from a country like Australia'.¹⁴⁵ He reminded senators that, when he referred to the Commonwealth's external affairs, he only meant 'the development of trade relations and matters which might arise in connexion with shipping'.¹⁴⁶ According to W.J. McWilliams: 'Our representative will have no ambassadorial functions to perform'.¹⁴⁷

Set in such a context of conservative attitudes to imperial and external relations, both in Australia and Britain, it is perhaps not that surprising 'that the Dominion High Commissioners did not play a bigger part in imperial policy-making'.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴² eg. Deakin's invitation to the American fleet to visit Australia in 1908, and his tentative suggestion to the Foreign Office in 1909 of some form of Pacific pact, Meaney, Search for Security, pp. 163-64, 191-94.

¹⁴³ Edwards, Prime Ministers, p. 24-275; Sawyer, 1901-1929, p. 78.

¹⁴⁴ eg. CPD, li, p. 3072, Spence; p. 3084, Bruce Smith.

¹⁴⁵ CPD, lii, p. 3917.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 3916.

¹⁴⁷ CPD, li, p. 3567.

¹⁴⁸ Edwards, Prime Ministers, p. 19.

(iv) Commonwealth Representation in London, 1901-1909

Even before he had arrived in London, the position of an Australian High Commissioner was heavily circumscribed. The Colonial Office and Governors-General controlled the channel of communication; the Imperial government grasped firmly the reins of foreign policy; the Agents-General clung grimly to office and supervised much of Australia's economic relations with the mother country. It was debatable whether Australia even needed a High Commissioner. W.J. McWilliams, the conservative member for Franklin, asserted in 1909: 'there has been a failure... to show what the High Commissioner is to do'; it was 'obvious that there will practically be no work for him, except attending public and official banquets, and speaking on behalf of Australia at various functions'.¹⁴⁹ Others insisted that the High Commissioner Bill should not be proceeded with until an agreement had been reached with the States to transfer most of the powers of the Agents-General to the Commonwealth representative.¹⁵⁰ Yet, despite the determination of both the Colonial Office and the Agents-General to preserve the status quo, the momentum for the appointment of a High Commissioner steadily grew.

At the level of imperial relations, the White Australia policy, tariffs, the New Hebrides, naval defence, and Anglo-Japanese relations were all issues concerning which an Australian High Commissioner might have interpreted Australian policy both to the Imperial government and the British public. As we have seen, Deakin envisaged that he would mediate between the government and the Colonial Office, or whatever official department supplanted it. The majority of Australian politicians, however, appeared more concerned with British opinion. According to Groom, the

¹⁴⁹ CPD, li, p. 3067.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 3067; also see Tilley Brown, p. 3069; Matthews, p. 3178; Dobson, lii, pp. 3945-47; Neild, pp. 4218-19.

High Commissioner would: 'put before the British people the intentions and aims of Australian legislation. Had this office been created earlier, several measures which were passed by this Parliament in the interests of Australia would undoubtedly have been better understood'.¹⁵¹ In particular, he referred to the tariff, the Commerce Act (1905) and the Immigration Act (1901).¹⁵² Speaking in more general terms, Batchelor of the Labor Party felt: 'The High Commissioner should be in sympathy with, and prepared to defend, the White Australia policy, the formation of an Australian Navy, and other national aspirations'.¹⁵³ Quite apart then from any role he might have in the machinery of imperial consultation, the virtue of an Australian High Commissioner would lie in his being able to explain Australian aspirations to the British public at large.

Yet, however important the political and imperial issues, the majority of legislators also clearly felt that the substance of Anglo-Australian relations was more mundane and could be measured in the statistics of trade, immigration and investment. Here too, despite the Agents-General, the aspirations of the Federal government pointed it towards the appointment of a High Commissioner.

As we have noted, the economic development of the Australasian colonies had depended upon the inflow of British migrants and capital, and the export of wool to the British market. The depression of the 1890s and subsequent drought broke the continuity of development, but recovery occurred in 1902-1904 and by 1910 Australia was riding the crest of a boom. New exports - wheat, meat, cheese, butter, fruit and minerals - had appeared. Efforts were being made to diversify markets, and greater recourse was had to the domestic capital market, but Australia's fundamental economic dependence on Britain persisted. In 1910, 51 per cent of Australian exports went to the United Kingdom. £192 million of State public debt, over 74 per cent, was

¹⁵¹ CPD, i, p. 2301.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 2304; see also Batchelor, li, p. 3065; Bruce Smith, p. 3084; E.D. Millen, lii, p. 3916.

¹⁵³ CPD, li, p. 3185.

held in London. 38,200 immigrants, virtually all those who travelled to Australia, came from Britain. In 1911, emigration from the United Kingdom rose to 68,913.¹⁵⁴

As we have seen, the constitutional powers retained by the States enabled them to pursue separate borrowing and immigration policies, while at the same time competing with each other for markets and suitable immigrants. But the Federal government was not discouraged from seeking to create a coordinated immigration policy or to improve Australia's credit by taking over responsibility for the States' debts.¹⁵⁵ The appointment of a High Commissioner was an essential element in the realisation of these aspirations.¹⁵⁶ The majority of speakers in 1909 placed immigration and the State debts first among a High Commissioner's concerns.¹⁵⁷ Equally important, federal politicians felt that the Agents-General, with their parochial interests and provincial rivalries, were working at cross-purposes, incapable of either properly representing a single nation or advertising its resources. Groom emphasised in 1909: 'I can see great advantage in the Commonwealth, through the High Commissioner, undertaking the advertising of the resources of the country. In the first place, it is better that our resources should be advertised as a whole, and not those of individual States.'¹⁵⁸ And he explained:

¹⁵⁴ For investment see Commonwealth Year Book, no. 4, 1911, p. 855; for immigration, F.K. Crowley, 'The British Contribution to Australian Population 1860-1919', Appendix 1, in University Studies in History and Economics, ii (1954), p. 84; for trade, Meaney, Search for Security, appendix v, p. 282.. For the economy generally see Crowley, '1901-14' in Crowley (ed.), A New History of Australia, *passim*; Grimshaw, pp. 168-76.

¹⁵⁵ For the Commonwealth's efforts to secure the States' cooperation in a coordinated immigration policy see Crowley, Thesis, pp. 153-58. For the State debts, Wright, 'Politics', pp. 464, 466, 470-72; Grimshaw, p. 174-76.

¹⁵⁶ In 1904, the Reid-McLean government refused to formulate a national scheme for immigration until a High Commissioner had been appointed, PRO: Colonial Office; CO 644, Australia and New Zealand, Register of Correspondence, 1901-1908; vol. 2, Governor-General to Colonial Secretary, 4 October 1904.

¹⁵⁷ eg. McWilliams, CPD, li, p. 3067-68; Fairbairn, p. 3074; Atkinson, p. 3080; Foster, 3083; Bruce Smith, p. 3084.

¹⁵⁸ CPD, i, p. 2305.

I see not the slightest reason for any conflict between the Commonwealth and the States. If the resources of the States are good, those resources are a Commonwealth possession, whether they consist of rich fertile lands in Queensland or Victoria, or good fruit country in Western Australia. Such resources are an Australian asset, and we should have no other object than to place before the British public, in the fairest and best light, the advantages of Australia as a whole.

Hughes agreed: 'It is almost impossible to set down in terms what Australia loses through not speaking with one voice at the head-quarters of the Empire'.¹⁵⁹

Thus, if between the Colonial Office and the Agents-General there appeared to be little room for a High Commissioner, legislators asserted that, apart from considerations of prestige, the want of such a representative had harmed Australia's political, imperial and economic interests. But the absence of a Commonwealth official in London was felt most keenly at the routine, administrative level. Above all, the necessity for efficiently and economically transacting government business finally led the Commonwealth to open an office in London.

As we have seen, in the absence of a High Commissioner, the Agents-General had undertaken a certain amount of business on the Commonwealth's behalf. In February 1903, the Governor-General notified the Colonial Office that, pending the High Commissioner's appointment, orders for the Defence Department would be channelled through the State representatives.¹⁶⁰ The Agents-General were also occasionally asked to represent the Commonwealth at international conferences.¹⁶¹ Neither of these arrangements was satisfactory. Occasionally, they caused embarrassment. In 1904, after the death of the New South Wales Agent-General, the Colonial Office noted that the Commonwealth had not nominated the Queensland representative to attend a forthcoming conference on the Pacific Cable in his place, 'presumably because of the divergence between the views of Queensland... and those of the Commonwealth on the question of the agreements with the Eastern Extension

¹⁵⁹ CPD, li, p. 3057.

¹⁶⁰ PRO: CO 644/2, Governor-General to Colonial Secretary, 26 February 1903.

¹⁶¹ Wright, Shadow, pp. 92-93.

Telegraph Company'.¹⁶² Moreover, the Defence Department soon became impatient with the inefficiency and inconvenience of relying on the States.¹⁶³

By February 1906, the Department had resolved to take direct control of its affairs. Senator Thomas Playford, the Protectionist Minister, recommended that the head of his department, Captain Robert Muirhead Collins, be seconded to organise and take charge of an office in London, with the objects of: '(a) Concentrating all the orders of War Materiel now distributed to the offices of the several Agents-General, and thus have a more effective supervision and control, as well as a better system of obtaining information on Defence matters. (b) Concentrating the receipt and expenditure of Commonwealth monies in London'.¹⁶⁴ In particular, Playford stressed the importance of, and the economies which would accrue from, taking 'direct control of our own business' and having 'command of our own monies without delay'.

The proposal had probably been mooted beforehand, informally or in cabinet. Collins, himself originally an officer in the Royal Navy, had been wanting some kind of appointment in London since 1901.¹⁶⁵ In any case, Playford's suggestion was immediately accepted, possibly because it avoided the necessity of legislation. Within a fortnight, Deakin wrote to the Governor-General, informing him of the government's decision, 'as a temporary measure', to send Collins to London. He asked that it be pointed out to the Colonial Secretary:

that it is desirable that Captain Collins should be given every facility for carrying out his duties in supervising all stores ordered through the War Office, and for acquiring all necessary information connected with such stores or with other matters with respect to which he may receive instructions from this Government; and will ask that official

¹⁶² PRO: CO 418/34/23943, minute, G.W. Johnson, 7 July 1904.

¹⁶³ 'Memorandum on the work of Captain Collins', Department of Defence, 1906, quoted by Senator E.D. Millen in CPD, lii, pp. 3920-21.

¹⁶⁴ AA: High Commissioner's Office, London; CRS A2911, General Correspondence Series, 1909-1916; file 2441/11, 'Recommendations', T. Playford, 7 February 1906; for Collins see ADB, viii, pp. 79-80; Thompson, Thesis, pp. 44-47.

¹⁶⁵ ADB, viii, p. 79.

recognition may be given to all communications which he may find it necessary to address in such matters.¹⁶⁶

In early May, Collins notified the Colonial Office that he had taken up residence amidst the throng of High Commissioners and Agents-General at 72 Victoria Street. One official had already observed dryly: 'A rather curious beginning of a Commonwealth agency in London'.¹⁶⁷

Though the labourer arrived late, he was worthy of his hire. In 1908, the Colonial Office noted: 'the Com[monweal]th Office is extremely obliging in sending us in[formatio]n and papers of all sorts'.¹⁶⁸ Shortly after, Lucas, the Head of the Dominions Department, told Lord Crewe of Collins: 'He is a capable, friendly and rather pushing man, quite useful and cordial'.¹⁶⁹ In Australia, George Pearce, Collins's Minister for a time in 1908-1909, subsequently paid a glowing tribute: 'I found that he was not only an enthusiastic, but a painstaking and remarkably capable man in his position'.¹⁷⁰ Although Collins was principally concerned with defence orders and always remained under the direction of the Defence Department, Deakin made it clear enough to the Governor-General that he would serve a more general purpose. His formal title of Official Representative of the Commonwealth in London does not seem to have been settled until 1909, but the Colonial Office immediately treated him as such.¹⁷¹

With a separate Commonwealth Office finally established, a wide range of demands were soon placed on it. Before 1906 was out, Collins was handling routine

¹⁶⁶ PRO: CO 418/44/10242, Prime Minister to Governor-General, 20 February 1906.

¹⁶⁷ PRO: CO 644/3, Collins to Permanent Under-Secretary, 3 May 1906; CO 418/44/10242, minute, G.W. J[ohnson], 27 March [1906].

¹⁶⁸ PRO: CO 418/65/4145, minute, G.W. J[ohnson], 6 February 1908.

¹⁶⁹ CUL: Crewe Paper, S/1/8, minute, 'Notes for interviews with Agents-General'.

¹⁷⁰ CPD, lii, p. 3951.

¹⁷¹ PRO: Colonial Office; CO 706, Australia, Commonwealth, Register of Correspondence, 1909-1922; vol. 1, Agents 2355, 'Official Designation of Captain Collins', 20 January 1909; also see CUL: Crewe Papers, S/1/8, minute, 'Notes for interviews'.

correspondence with the Colonial Office. Work was being passed on from the Postmaster-General's Department.¹⁷² A trickle of semi-official information also began to flow through the office. In October, Collins supplied the Colonial Office with information about Deakin's tariff proposals. In 1907, he sent it details of the new tariff as they arrived.¹⁷³ Above all, whilst boom conditions prevailed, the office functioned as a general bureau for advertising Australia's resources. In 1909, Groom told Parliament:

Information... is supplied to persons making inquiries respecting Australian trade, investments and commercial matters generally, while Australian visitors to England avail themselves of the information which is always readily supplied. Thus the office is appreciated by the British public and the Australian abroad, and serves this Government in various ways.¹⁷⁴

Importantly, apart from being an administrator, Collins also began to play an informal diplomatic role, which partly reflected his own pretensions, but also stemmed from the need of British officials to stay abreast of Australian policy. We have already seen that Collins notified the Colonial Office of Deakin's tariff proposals. With debate occurring in Australia about the most suitable form of naval defence, the Admiralty also wished to be informed of the government's views, Collins writing to Pearce in 1909: 'As the Admiralty so constantly asks me to assist them in interpreting the wishes of the Commonwealth Government in naval matters, I would be glad if you would always keep me fully informed either officially or unofficially of your wishes and proposals'.¹⁷⁵ At the same time, he wrote to Fisher, the Prime Minister, explaining the opinion of the First Lord regarding the establishment of an Australian navy.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² 'Memorandum on Captain Collins', in CPD, lii, pp. 3920-21.

¹⁷³ PRO: CO 418/51/37719, Collins to G.W. Johnson, 12 October 1906; CO 644/4, Agents, passim.

¹⁷⁴ CPD, i, pp. 2303-4.

¹⁷⁵ AWM: Pearce Papers, 7/79, Collins to Pearce, 23 April 1909.

¹⁷⁶ NLA: MS 2919 (Andrew Fisher Papers); series 6, ff. 6-8, Collins to Fisher, 2 April 1909.

Thus, while the appointment of a High Commissioner remained in abeyance, the Commonwealth's necessities had brought it to open an office in London. The Commonwealth representative had even started to behave like a diplomatic officer. By the end of 1909, he supervised a staff of eleven, including a chief clerk, supply officer and a paying officer.¹⁷⁷ But his position was ill-defined, his resources slight, and his initiative limited. As time passed, dissatisfaction with the arrangement grew.¹⁷⁸ In 1908, Joseph Cook, the leader of the Free Trade conservatives, used the annual vote for the office as an opportunity to raise Collins's position. A year later, Fisher described it as 'anomalous': Collins 'could not be expected to represent the Commonwealth as effectively as could a High Commissioner'.¹⁷⁹ Pearce observed that his duties had been departmental rather than representative.¹⁸⁰

Collins's lack of status and the provisional nature of his position also created difficulties in London. Not surprisingly, his arrival ruffled some feathers in Victoria Street. Lucas noted in 1908: 'The position is a difficult one. The Agents-General resent his representing Australia, and the fact that he is not High Commissioner makes the feeling stronger; but privately and personally I think they are good enough friends'.¹⁸¹ Collins himself was touchy about his own dignity. In June 1908, he complained to the editor of the Daily Telegraph that the report of a dinner organised by himself and the Agents-General, had failed to mention his attendance.¹⁸² Finally, in 1909, Groom closed this particular chapter in the history of Australian representation: 'Captain Collins has been zealous and industrious, and deserves great

¹⁷⁷ CPD, I, pp. 2303-4.

¹⁷⁸ ADB, viii, p. 79; Thompson, Thesis, p. 101.

¹⁷⁹ CPD, li, pp. 3021-22; Thompson, Thesis, pp. 101-3.

¹⁸⁰ CPD, lii, p. 3951.

¹⁸¹ CUL: Crewe Papers, S/1/8, 'Notes for interviews'.

¹⁸² AA: A2911, 1A/1909, Collins to Editor, Daily Telegraph, 30 June 1908; also see Thompson, Thesis, p. viii.

praise for the work done and the tact shown. A High Commissioner, however, could better voice Australian feeling'.¹⁸³

Both the inspiration for, and the utility of, Collins's office had shown that there was a nub of business which the Commonwealth would need to supervise in London. For many federal legislators, prestige required that Australia be represented at the same level as the other Dominions. By the beginning of 1909, it also seemed that important duties might be attached to the High Commissioner's office. The Dominions had been summoned to London to discuss imperial naval defence.¹⁸⁴ Moreover, a Premiers' conference was due to meet in August to arrange a new system of financing the States and to consider the transfer of their debts to the Commonwealth.¹⁸⁵ At the year's end, the South Australian Register placed the High Commissioner's appointment against this background, as well as that of the formation of the Fusion government:

The past year... has witnessed a great psychological change in political conditions. We have seen the advent of a Federal constitutional Government, the adoption of a scheme for the settlement of the financial problem, and the acceptance of an Imperial co-operation plan of Australian defence. The Commonwealth has developed national consciousness, accepted a policy of expansion and assumed Empire obligations. A High Commissioner has consequently become an imperative necessity.¹⁸⁶

The Minister of External Affairs also felt that the need for a High Commissioner had become urgent. He told Parliament in August 1909: 'The office has not been created before, but the constant trend of events shows the necessity for its creation without any long delay'.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³ CPD, 1, p. 2304.

¹⁸⁴ Meaney, Search for Security, p. 181.

¹⁸⁵ Wright, 'Politics', pp. 470-74.

¹⁸⁶ Register, 16 December 1909; also see SMH, 8 September 1909.

¹⁸⁷ CPD, 1, p. 2301.

(v) The High Commissioner Act

Even before federation, it had been widely assumed that the appointment of a High Commissioner would be among the Commonwealth's first legislative acts. In 1909, Hughes recalled: 'When Honourable members entered the first Federal Parliament, they almost expected, in the innocence of their hearts, to find the shadow of the High Commissioner rising behind the Speaker's Chair, and assuming form and substance during the first session'.¹⁸⁸ But the chronic instability of the first three Parliaments and the heavy legislative burden associated with laying the legal, fiscal and administrative foundations of the Commonwealth frustrated this hope. The insistence that federation be cheap, the States' refusal to consider closing their London offices, conflict between the executive and the legislature over which branch of government should make the appointment, and a dearth of obvious candidates were further obstacles to the swift establishment of the office.

The High Commissioner Bill was hardly unique in this fate. Several measures projected long before federation, like the transfer of control of the Northern Territory to the Commonwealth and the creation of an inter-State Commission, had to await a more stable era in federal politics.¹⁸⁹ Few sessions passed without the government promising to bring legislation forward, whilst enquiries were made amongst the States, the Agents-General and even the Canadians about the most appropriate office to establish.¹⁹⁰ Australia's representation was again debated in 1908, but when the Fisher Labor government, having promised legislation, was defeated in May 1909, the Commonwealth was no nearer to an appointment.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ CPD, li, p. 3059; cf. Thompson, Thesis, p. 53.

¹⁸⁹ Sawyer, 1901-1929, pp. 73, 92.

¹⁹⁰ For the history of legislative attempts to establish the office see, Thompson, Thesis, especially Chapter two; La Nauze, ii, pp. 594-95.

¹⁹¹ CPD, xlix, p. 7.

As we have seen, however, by 1909 the pressure for the appointment of a High Commissioner had considerably mounted. At the beginning of the year, Deakin 'was exchanging views on the matter with Fisher'.¹⁹² In June, after the merger of the conservative parties under Deakin's leadership resulted in Labor's ejection from office, the new ministry promised to proceed with its own legislation, and, on 11 August, Groom introduced the second reading of the High Commissioner Bill. His speech caught the mood of optimism and expansion which settled on the Commonwealth during the final years of prosperity, calm and stability before the war. He acknowledged the previous attempts to establish the office and commended the work of Collins and the Agents-General, but expressed the hope and belief that a High Commissioner would 'be able to voice the aspirations, ideals, and sentiments of the Australian people in the way that they should be voiced'.¹⁹³

The High Commissioner, he suggested, would have five functions. The first and 'most important', 'duties of a diplomatic nature', has already been described in section three of this Chapter. The High Commissioner would also have financial duties, which: 'If the debts of the States are transferred to the Commonwealth... will be exceedingly important'.¹⁹⁴ He would have 'mercantile' duties, inherited from Collins's office - the supervision of purchases for defence, telegraphs and other services.¹⁹⁵ He would take charge of 'an intelligence department for the whole of Australia', which would aim 'to prevent duplication [with the Agents-General], and to disseminate the latest information in the widest possible fashion'; it would promote trade and attract investment, tourism and immigration.¹⁹⁶ Finally, the High

¹⁹² La Nauze, ii, p. 594.

¹⁹³ CPD, i, p. 2301; for his speech see pp. 2301-7.

¹⁹⁴ CPD, i, p. 2304. Groom's description of the High Commissioner's functions was based upon a 1901 report by a member of the Supreme Court of Victoria on the work of the Canadian High Commissioner and the Australian Agents-General, Thompson, Thesis, pp. 56-57.

¹⁹⁵ CPD, i, p. 2304.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 2301, 2304-5.

Commissioner would have 'social duties'; in this capacity, he would 'speak on public occasions regarding the progress and advancement of the Commonwealth, when his views will get a wide circulation'.¹⁹⁷

The Bill, thus introduced, began a three and a half month progress through Parliament. Following Groom's speech, debate was adjourned until 7 September, when, according to Joseph Cook, the government wished to have the second reading passed. Fisher had already, on 3 September, promised that the Bill would 'go through as soon as it is brought forward',¹⁹⁸ but some Labor members already suspected that the ministry was more interested in delaying its passage. After a debate of moderate length, cutting across party lines, the government took the unprecedented step of accelerating its progress by twice applying the closure.¹⁹⁹ But the Labor front bench still voted for the Bill. It was in committee until 16 September. Labor amendments, that the appointee be named in the Act and that his salary be higher, were defeated. The third reading, on 17 September, was unopposed.

On 30 September, Millen, the Vice-President of the Executive Council, introduced the Bill into the Senate. Pearce, leading Labor, described it as 'a belated Bill, which should have been passed years ago' and pledged his 'cordial support'.²⁰⁰ By mid-October, it had passed the Senate with one minor amendment; thereafter, it stalled. The Senate's amendment was not considered by the lower house until 26 November. Labor protested that the Fusion was dragging its feet so as to avoid making an appointment whilst Parliament was still sitting, but in vain Fisher belaboured it: 'The action of the Government is a mere device to palter with a great question. It is being shuffled about by a Government who seem to have a greater wish to delay the measure'.²⁰¹ On 1 December, the Bill was returned to the upper house

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2304.

¹⁹⁸ *CPD*, li, p. 3021.

¹⁹⁹ i.e. the 'gag'; see, Sawyer, *1901-1929*, p. 12.

²⁰⁰ *CPD*, lii, p. 3950.

²⁰¹ *CPD*, liv, p. 6485.

and, on the following day, was finally passed. The timing had indeed been fortuitous. Cabinet had insufficient time to choose a High Commissioner before Parliament was prorogued on 8 December. On 13 December, the Governor-General gave his assent.²⁰² After a weary journey, appropriately putting an end to almost a decade's spasmodic and inconsequential effort, the High Commissioner Act (number 22 of 1909) had finally been placed on the statute book.

The Act, based on similar New Zealand legislation of 1904, was a brief instrument of ten clauses.²⁰³ It empowered the Governor-General to appoint a High Commissioner for a period of five years, after which he might be reappointed. His salary would be £3,000 per annum, with an annual allowance for an official residence not exceeding £2,000, and provision for travelling expenses. Clause four specified that he would 'act as representative and resident agent of the Commonwealth in the United Kingdom, and in that capacity exercise such powers and perform such duties as are conferred upon and assigned to him by the Governor-General'. He would also: 'carry out such instructions as he receives from the Minister respecting the commercial, financial and general interests of the Commonwealth and the States in the United Kingdom and elsewhere'. As we have seen, the reference to the States was intended as an invitation to the Premiers to transfer some of powers of the Agents-General to the High Commissioner. Clause five elaborated, providing that, at the Governor-General's direction: 'The High Commissioner, for the purpose of more economically and effectively advancing the material interests and welfare of every part of Australia, shall also... perform for the States functions and duties... similar to those now discharged by the Agents-General of the States'. Clause three specified that he could be removed from office 'for misbehaviour or incapacity, or upon a joint address of both Houses of Parliament'.

²⁰² PRO: CO 418/78/4982, Administrator to Colonial Secretary, 14 January 1910.

²⁰³ Commonwealth Acts, viii, No. 22 (1909); CPD, li, p. 3548; Statutes of New Zealand, xxxii, No. 47 (1904).

According to Senator Needham, the Bill was 'received with paens of praise - practically with a continuous song of triumph'.²⁰⁴ Much of the ground covered by the debate has already been traversed and so can be briefly summarised here. Fisher declared at an early stage that Parliament was 'dealing with a matter of the greatest importance - a matter that is not a party question at all',²⁰⁵ and the only controversy was caused by the government's use of the 'gag'. Otherwise, it soon emerged that the two principal issues were the future of the Agents-General and the manner of appointing the High Commissioner. Behind the latter lay concerns about the scope of Ministerial patronage and the possibility that the government might already have someone in mind for the job. The High Commissioner, it was agreed, must be 'thoroughly representative of Australian sentiment'.²⁰⁶

Few demurred at Groom's description of his duties, although little real interest was expressed in what might be called his diplomatic or imperial role. The majority felt that his most important tasks would lie in the management of the public debt, the promotion of trade and immigration, and the correction of misrepresentations about Australia. All agreed that some modus vivendi would have to be reached with the Agents-General. Some, like the Labor veteran, William Spence, wanted him to be all things to all men: a glorified Agent-General, a diplomat, a sound administrator, and in addition to all this, a person with 'experience and knowledge of Australian politics'.²⁰⁷

Spence also asserted that he would have to have 'a great capacity for big dinners'.²⁰⁸ Duties of this kind, perhaps because they were the most public and therefore received the greatest coverage in the press, attracted considerable comment.

²⁰⁴ CPD, lii, p. 4214.

²⁰⁵ CPD, li, p. 3100.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 3073.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 3072-74; also see, Wilks, p. 3062; Bruce Smith, p. 3084.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 3072.

The social duties of a Dominion High Commissioners had indeed become heavy. One commentator remarked in 1913 that he had 'heard it suggested that colonial representatives at an Imperial Conference... should be sent over in pairs, one delegate to attend the meetings, and the other, a statesman of proved endurance, to go out to dinner'.²⁰⁹ In 1909, the conservative, Bruce Smith, trembled 'for the digestion and the nerves of the man who accepts this post',²¹⁰ but he and others acknowledged the importance of the representative aspect of the High Commissioner's functions.²¹¹ Yet some were deeply suspicious of the London social world. Wilks, a conservative, thought that it might be difficult 'to find a representative who will remain an Australian after he has coquetted with the club life of London'.²¹² On the Labor side of the house, Dr Maloney did not believe it was the Commonwealth's duty 'to spend a large amount of money in entertaining court officials with ridiculous titles'.²¹³

According to Sir Josiah Symon, one of the Constitution's founding fathers, the appointment of a High Commissioner was the 'carrying out [of] one of the necessities of the initiation of our national existence'.²¹⁴ Referring to the 'Nation building' of Deakin's second government, one historian has even suggested 'that the High Commissioner legislation, rather than being merely of practical necessity, was also a product of this first rich period of nation building when the Commonwealth was young and its needs for self-expression were keenly felt'.²¹⁵ Indeed, the legislation was introduced against the background of the Imperial Defence Conference which sanctioned the construction of an Australian fleet, and was among several measures,

²⁰⁹ Sidney Low, 'The Problem of an Imperial Executive', The Nineteenth Century and After (August, 1913), p. 427.

²¹⁰ CPD, li, p. 3088.

²¹¹ eg. Hughes, ibid., p. 3058.

²¹² Ibid., p. 3546.

²¹³ Ibid., p. 3077.

²¹⁴ CPD, lii, p. 4155.

²¹⁵ Thompson, Thesis, p. 73.

like the Seat of Government Acceptance Act and the Coinage Act, passed in the same session of Parliament.²¹⁶

During the debate itself, little attempt had been made to consider the nature of the relations between the High Commissioner and the government, and none apart from Fisher perceived the Act's rigidity. When it was finally passed in December, no agreement with the States over immigration or the public debt, which many had deemed essential, had materialised. Thus, few of the hopes about the kind of person to be appointed High Commissioner and the nature of the duties he would perform had been translated into anything concrete. The absence of a clear set of duties, combined with the possibility that a High Commissioner might be lured into making an injudicious statement or commitment in London, inspired a cynicism quite different from the idealism of Groom's introductory speech. Catts of the Labor Party expressed the obverse of this idealism when he commented in September 1909: 'I have heard honourable members in the lobbies suggest that the main duty of the High Commissioner will be to keep his mouth shut and gorge and guzzle as much as possible'.²¹⁷

By 1909, the Australian colonies had been represented in London for over half a century. But because of distance, the instability of the first Federal governments, and the values embedded in Australian political culture, Australians had shunned the creation of a political office similar to that of the Canadian High Commissionership in the nineteenth century. These same factors had delayed the appointment of an Australian High Commissioner, despite the consummation of federation in 1901. The Federal government's practical needs had nevertheless compelled it to open an administrative office in London in 1906. By 1909, notwithstanding the continued existence of the Agents-General and the retention by the States of powers over immigration and external borrowing, the widening domestic horizons of the Federal government and the promise of closer Anglo-Dominion cooperation indicated that the

²¹⁶ Ward, pp. 69-70.

²¹⁷ CPD, li, p. 3550.

time for the appointment of a High Commissioner was propitious. Moreover, the fusion of the conservative parties, effectively creating two-party politics, established the conditions for such an appointment. With the passing of the High Commissioner Act, the legal basis for the appointment had been laid. But whether the High Commissionership would be truly non-political, or the Commonwealth's aspirations realised with respect to the acquisition of State powers and the increase of inter-imperial consultation, could only be seen in practice when the first Australian High Commissioner had finally been despatched to London.

CHAPTER TWO

SIR GEORGE REID, 1910-1915

(i) Sir George Reid's Appointment

'The whole question, after all, really is', Billy Hughes announced in September 1909, 'Who is the man?'.¹ Since Federation, politicians and the public alike had been exercised by the question of who would have the distinction of being Australia's first High Commissioner. The ambitions of some had long been well-known. Bernhard Ringrose Wise, Rugby and Oxford educated, a prominent New South Wales politician and federalist of the 1890s, and a Deakinite in federal politics, was one of the first and most persistent in putting himself forward.² Sir John Forrest, George Reid, even Sir Timothy Coghlan in London, were also known to desire the post.³

Any government charged with making an appointment was immediately faced with the dilemma of reconciling propriety with expediency. The High Commissioner would have to be a figure of sufficient standing in the Commonwealth's public life to be immediately acceptable as a national representative both in Australia and Britain. He would have to be capable of discharging the various, if ill-defined, duties of the post. And finally, however non-political his conduct in London, he would have to be acceptable to the government of the day and the majority of its supporters.

In 1907, Sir John Anderson, the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office, told Edmund Barton, now a Judge of the High Court, that it was of the 'highest importance that there should be a man in London who could speak for Australia and speak with weight'.⁴ Not only should he be a well-known Australian, but also capable

¹ CPD, li, p. 3058.

² Thompson, Thesis, pp. 52-53.

³ Ibid., pp. 78, 97-99; NLA: Deakin Papers, 1/1155-61, Walter James to Deakin, 26 May 1905.

⁴ quoted in Thompson, Thesis, p. 23.

of commanding respect and attention in England; thinking possibly of some of the Agents-General, he confided: 'I hope you will send a really good man, not merely someone you want to shelve'. Deakin was also reluctant to send a retired politician to London and conscious of the difficulty in finding a qualified individual. Richard Jebb, the imperial publicist and propagandist, raised the subject during a visit to Australia in 1906:

I urged the importance of appointing a High Commissioner soon. D[eakin] says the trouble is to find a man efficient and acceptable. A man may do for London but won't be acceptable here. [The] L[abor] P[arty] want to have him selected by ballot of Parliament ! E.g. Wise, and others, have a 'past' here, which, though nothing vile, would be raked up against them. He himself would be acceptable to all parties, but he won't take it, being wedded to Australia. G.H. Reid wants it, but is impossible for London. Wise is unbusinesslike, but good at a banquet. Forrest no good in London, and not pan-Australian enough. Lord Jersey not representative of Australia; yet very important to have a man for whom all doors are open. Has a v[ery] poor opinion of 'unscrupulous' Reid.⁵

But apart from a British peer and former Governor of New South Wales, even Deakin does not appear to have regarded the field for candidates as extending beyond Parliament. Probably, by 1909, his range of choice was already restricted by the pressure from Cabinet to select a politician. Yet, as Wilks noted during the High Commissioner debate, Australia lacked businessmen of the stature of Strathcona. Nor, for obvious reasons, did it possess a diplomatic service. The very existence of such a service, however, would have presupposed a very different relationship to that which existed ^ubetween Australia and Britain in 1909 and, as Sir John Anderson had reminded Barton, demanded special qualities in the Commonwealth's representative. One parallel might have been found in the post of British Ambassador in the United States, which often during the twentieth century would be held by someone other than a career diplomat. Since 1907, the Ambassador had been the Liberal statesman and

⁵ ICS: Richard Jebb Papers, B3, Journal, 29 January 1906. A.W. Jose, Builders and Pioneers of Australia (London, 1928), p. 121. In 1904, Jersey, a former Governor of New South Wales, represented the Commonwealth at a conference on the Pacific cable. PRO: CO 418/31/23312, Governor-General to Colonial Secretary, 1 July 1904; previously, he had stood-in for the New South Wales Agent-General, ADB, ix, p. 485.

Privy Councillor, James Bryce. As men experienced in public affairs and known nationally, senior politicians, whether retired from politics, like Barton and the other Judges of the High Court, or still active, like Forrest and Reid, were, virtually by default, the most appropriate High Commissioners-in-waiting. Even Anderson had to admit that all the suitable candidates were occupied. Wilks was not wide of the mark when he commented in 1909: 'the truth is that Australia is lamentably short of such men'.⁶

As it came to the end of 1909, then, the government was faced with a particularly delicate task. During the Bill's debate, Deakin, Groom and Millen had each refused to be drawn by Labor's persistent invitation to name their candidate. Ministers maintained that Cabinet had simply not considered the matter. Deakin undertook only that it would be dealt with as soon as the legislation was passed, but he seemed more concerned to avoid the issue.⁷ On 6 December, four days after the Bill had been enacted, he reported that Cabinet had still not considered the appointment. On 8 December, as both Houses prepared to rise, he confessed that it had finally touched upon the issue, 'but no decision was arrived at'.⁸ On the afternoon of 15 December, free at last of Parliament's scrutiny, he informed the Australian public that he had offered the High Commissionership to Sir George Houston Reid, the late leader of the now defunct free trade, anti-socialist party.⁹ To later generations, it was clear that the Deakin-Cook ministry had failed the first, and most crucial, test; as Dr Peter Edwards has put it: 'The die was cast'.¹⁰

It is now a virtual commonplace that Reid's appointment was largely a reward for standing down from the leadership of his party in 1908 in order to allow the Fusion of the non-Labor groups to take place. It was also a convenient means of

⁶ CPD, li, p. 3063; Thompson, Thesis, p. 23.

⁷ CPD, liv, pp. 6640-41.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 7066, 7235.

⁹ SMH, 16 December 1909.

¹⁰ Edwards, Prime Ministers, p. 21.

translating him from the mis en scene, following the precedent of appointments to the Agencies-General.¹¹ From the outset, it showed the attitude Commonwealth ministries would take to the London post, and illustrated the principles which would govern the selection of later High Commissioners.

The idea that Reid's appointment was part of a bargain between the Fusion leaders had, in fact, been suggested by the Western Australian Labor Senator, Hugh De Largie, during the debate of the Bill itself and subsequently stuck.¹² In 1914, William Higgs maintained that: 'This particular High Commissioner was appointed by an old rival, as a reward for fixing up the Fusion'.¹³ In 1916, Round Table repeated what was now becoming conventional wisdom: 'Sir George Reid's original appointment was a party appointment. It was one of the terms of the fusion of 1909 between his own Free Trade party and the Protectionists under Mr Deakin'.¹⁴ But by then Reid's position in London had become the subject of controversy. There is no evidence at the time that the appointment had been agreed in advance. Groom and Millen both denied that the High Commissioner Bill was 'intended to make a position for any particular man',¹⁵ and few, even in his own party, seemed to share De Largie's view. Indeed, on both sides of the House the issue remained in doubt. Sir John Forrest and Reid were both regarded as the clear favourites, but several others were also named as possible candidates: Senator Josiah Symon, a founding father and leading freetrader; Sir Robert Best, the Minister for Trade and Customs - who, as a

¹¹ See, for example, ibid, p. 19 and Ward, p. 70. Meaney is more circumspect; in his account: 'Reid's translation to London could be seen as a reward for his acquiescence in the fusion...' (Search for Security, p. 191). D.C. Gordon, unaware that, until the end of 1909, Federal governments lacked the legal means to appoint a High Commissioner, not only assumes that Reid's appointment was part of the Fusion agreement, but finds it noteworthy that he 'did not actually take up his post until 1910', see The Dominion Partnership in Imperial Defence, 1870-1914 (Baltimore, 1965), note 46, p. 232. Writers closer to the subject doubt the existence of an agreement and emphasis Reid's qualifications for the post, see La Nauze, Deakin, ii, p. 595 and Thompson, Thesis, pp. 116-19. McMinn does not refer to the suggestion that Reid's appointment was part of the Fusion agreement, and sidesteps the issue of whether it was a reward, see Reid, pp. 251-53.

¹² CPD, lii, p. 4211.

¹³ CPD, lxxv, p. 1174, 27 November 1914.

¹⁴ Round Table, vi (1915-16), 22, p. 338.

¹⁵ CPD, li, p. 3068, p. 3305; see the account of the fusion negotiations in La Nauze, ii, pp. 535-64.

Deakin-supporter, had had a hand in negotiating the Fusion; Sir Malcolm MacEachern, a business and shipping magnate, and one-time Lord Mayor of Melbourne; even Coghlan, the New South Wales Agent-General.¹⁶ Forrest, the Treasurer and leader of the tariff reformers who had formed the third part of the Fusion, certainly did not behave as if the High Commissionership had been reserved for Reid. According to Deakin's private secretary, Malcolm Shepherd, he 'had fought hard for the appointment and looked forward to obtaining it'.¹⁷ Dudley, the Governor-General, believed that 'the Government could hardly have withheld it, if he had been anxious for the honour'.¹⁸

In Parliament, Labor referred to Reid and Forrest, but criticised any likely appointee in terms broad enough to embrace both. Ernest Batchelor feared 'that there is a possibility of an anti-Australian, or, at least, a man who cannot be considered to represent Australia in any real sense on the great policy which the Commonwealth has embarked, being placed in this high position'.¹⁹ But, contrary to another commonplace, some Labor members supported Reid's appointment, reserving their explicit opposition for Forrest.²⁰ On 13 August, the member for Werriwa, referring to comments that Forrest was best-suited to the post, considered that 'it would be a culminating act of shame on the part of this Ministry if they send a man so unfitted for the position of High Commissioner'.²¹ The future Speaker, Charles MacDonald, had already in April noted that Reid had been suggested as a possible High Commissioner, adding: 'while I do not agree with him politically, I must admit that his qualifications are a long way ahead of those of any other person whose name has

¹⁶ CPD, lii, pp. 4147, 4212; liv, p. 6697.

¹⁷ AA: CRS A1632, Memoirs of M.L. Shepherd [henceforth Shepherd, Memoir], pp. 66-67.

¹⁸ PRO: CO 418/78/8273, Governor-General to Colonial Secretary, 1 February 1910.

¹⁹ CPD, li, p. 3185.

²⁰ According to Ward: 'Labor members vigorously opposed the passage of the High Commissioner Bill precisely because they suspected the job was to be Reid's', (p. 70); also see Sawyer, 1901-1929, p. 72 and McMinn, p. 252.

²¹ CPD, li, p. 2503.

been mentioned'.²² During the debate itself, Thomas Brown, the member for Calare, said that he wouldn't object to Reid's appointment; William Russell stated that he preferred Reid or Symon to all the others who had been mentioned.²³

On the other side of the House, the uneasiness of the recent Fusion was evident amongst the government's supporters. Free trader and Protectionist alike joined Labor in deprecating the appointment of a wealthy man or 'a political friend of the government' and demanded that the selection be made whilst Parliament was still sitting.²⁴ Reid's former supporters seemed to have little confidence in the chances of his success.²⁵ On 8 September, William Wilks told the House: 'The opposition to the Bill is not based on the terms of the Bill itself, but on the probability of a certain appointment being made'.²⁶ Shortly after, Senator Clemons required an assurance 'that no member of the present Federal Ministry will be appointed High Commissioner'.²⁷ If, then, the field had finally narrowed to two, it was clear that Reid was the favourite.

As early as August, Deakin had apparently sounded Reid out, but on 1 December the Prime Minister told Parliament: 'We ruled out any reference to any person. No name was mentioned in Cabinet or out of it during the consideration of the Bill'.²⁸ A first, inconclusive, discussion took place on 7 December, but the numbers may have already begun to tell against Forrest.²⁹ If there was any pressure to offer Reid a consolation prize, it was felt now. Of the ten Cabinet members, five were free traders and only two, including Forrest himself, from the tariff reformer group.

²² CPD, xlix, p. 299.

²³ CPD, li, p. 3552; lii, p. 4147.

²⁴ Wilks, CPD, li, pp. 3061-63; also see Willis, p. 3071; Kelly, pp. 3181, 3190; Storrer, p. 3189; lii, McColl, p. 4324; Clemons, p. 4322.

²⁵ see Wilks, Willis, Kelly and Clemons in note 24 above.

²⁶ CPD, li, p. 3197.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 3202.

²⁸ CPD, liv, p. 6641; McMinn, p. 251.

²⁹ For an account of the Cabinet discussions see Thompson, Thesis, pp. 113-16.

But it was also clear that the weight of opinion was already on Reid's side. One commentator in England even thought that, if Forrest had been appointed in September, the High Commissioner Bill would have never got through the Senate.³⁰ On 8 December, the Treasurer withdrew his candidature. Dudley believed that Forrest did not yet want to retire from politics, but he was more likely making a dignified exit.³¹ Shepherd saw that he felt ill-used.³² But even this failed to settle the issue. Not until the following day was it agreed that Cook should offer Reid the High Commissionership. Forrest grumbled: 'What has Reid ever done for Deakin that he should get the appointment ?'³³ On 13 December, Cook wrote to Deakin from Sydney that Reid was 'most willing to accept the position. In all the circumstances therefore would it not be well to clinch the matter at once, & so settle the question as to enable an announcement to be made'.³⁴ As we have seen, the news was broken two days later.

According to the Sydney Morning Herald, the only serious alternative had not been Forrest, but Deakin himself.³⁵ As early as 1906, Walter James, the Western Australian Agent-General, had encouraged him to take the job, but it did not appeal to him.³⁶ Nevertheless, if he was unwilling to put himself forward, it is also unlikely that, but for the Fusion, he would have chosen Reid, whom he regarded as coarse and unscrupulous. Afterwards, he felt degraded by having given the High Commissionership to a politician.³⁷ Thus, while the appointment had not been originally part of the terms of the Fusion bargain, the merger of the conservative

³⁰ PRO: CO 418/78/8273, minute, A.B. K[eith], 23/3/[1910].

³¹ Ibid., Governor-General to Colonial Secretary, 1 February 1910.

³² Shepherd, *Memoir*, p. 66.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ NLA: Deakin Papers, 15/2470, Cook to Deakin, 13 December 1909.

³⁵ SMH, leader, 16 December 1909.

³⁶ NLA: Deakin Papers, 1/1399-1407, Walter James to Deakin, 4 May 1906; Deakin to James, 4 June 1906, quoted in La Nauze, ii, p. 594.

³⁷ ICS: Jebb Papers, B3, Journal, 29 January 1906; Jose, p. 121.

parties had made it possible. Moreover, with a majority of Reid's freetrade followers in the new party, it also conveniently cemented the alliance and consolidated Deakin's support.

Thus, regarded both as a reward for Reid and as a means of strengthening the party, the appointment of the High Commissioner had been an exercise of political patronage which conformed to the Canadian pattern described in Chapter One. Deakin's antipathy for Reid, however, should not hide the fact that by 1909 Reid possessed the quality that Deakin regarded as most necessary in a High Commissioner: he was acceptable to all parties.³⁸ In other words, Deakin's personal feelings alone could not be regarded, then or now, as sufficient grounds for regarding Reid as an inappropriate High Commissioner, or as a reason for considering his appointment as purely a reward. Deakin himself, though unenthusiastic, was prepared to acknowledge some of Reid's strengths, writing apologetically to Jebb in December: 'I fear you will not like our first High Comm[issione]r but his ability is very great & his eloquence remarkable. He is the sum of his own works and will make them Imperial now he is given a golden opportunity'.³⁹

Apart from Reid's acceptability to all parties, the appointment differed from the Canadian precedents in another, more important sense. Although the choice of High Commissioner had been influenced by political factors, Deakin shared the common assumption that the High Commissionership should not be a political office. He believed this as a matter of principle, but other more obvious considerations were also involved. In the Federal Parliament, Reid had been the standard bearer of free trade, Deakin its foremost opponent. Thus, one of the objects of Cook's mission to Sydney had been to emphasise to Reid that the High Commissioner must be neutral on the fiscal, as well as all other political issues. But Cook reported to Deakin:

During our conversation I was glad to hear him enunciate voluntarily and correctly and fully the ambassadorial side of his mission. He quite

³⁸ This may be one of the reasons why he was sounding him out in August, well before Parliament had considered the Bill or Cabinet the appointment.

³⁹ Deakin to Richard Jebb, 14 December 1909, quoted in McMinn, p. 253.

recognises that the High Commissioner should be the servant of the Gov[ernmen]t and this w[oul]d mean a new role altogether for him, but one at the same time perfectly agreeable and satisfactory.⁴⁰

He added by way of conclusion: 'that the expression of the point of view regarding the High Commissioner was made without any leading on my part'. Reid himself emphasised to the press shortly after:

From today I throw behind me forever all recollections of party strife or political difference. I become the representative of the Government of Australia and the people of Australia in London. My first duty will be to interpret loyally the policy of the Government of the day. In many respects, the position is really that of an ambassador.⁴¹

The die had indeed been cast, but in a rather different sense to that suggested by Edwards. The Sydney Daily Telegraph, while preening itself on the selection of a New South Welshman, drew the appropriate moral: 'The offer [of the High Commissionership]... to Sir George Reid... may presumably be taken to indicate Mr Deakin's acceptance of the principle that its occupant should have nothing to do with party affairs. If so... one of the most satisfactory things in connection with his appointment... will be that in selecting the first High Commissioner this salutary precedent has been firmly established'.⁴² Yet however good either Reid's or the government's intentions - and the government's motives were mixed - the fact that Reid had been a politician meant that his impartiality would always be suspect in the eyes of his opponents.

Nevertheless, both experience and personality fitted him for the High Commissionership and contributed to his broad appeal. Gregarious by nature, he had been a liberal and a pragmatist in politics, as well as a speaker of considerable ability. He was also a public figure with a national reputation, well-versed in the constitution (which he had had a hand in framing) and the Australian Parliamentary system. Despite appearing indolent, he had a capacity for hard work. One colleague recalled

⁴⁰ NLA: Deakin Papers, 15/2470, Cook to Deakin, 13 December 1909.

⁴¹ SMH, 16 December 1909.

⁴² Sydney Daily Telegraph, 15 December 1909.

in valediction: 'He was a man of clear vision and somewhat cynical commonsense... sound of judgement and, if expediency permitted, in action'.⁴³ For all his exaggerated qualities, he was a man 'of wisdom and understanding'.⁴⁴

The equanimity with which Reid shed the role of politician reflected both his temperament and the point at which his career had arrived.⁴⁵ Born in Johnstone in Renfrewshire on 25 February 1845, the son of a Presbyterian minister, his family emigrated to Australia in 1853 and eventually settled in Sydney. There, a staunch advocate of free trade, he rose through the colonial Treasury, was called to the bar and, in 1880, entered New South Wales politics as a liberal. He was Premier of the colony between 1894 and 1899, successfully trading reform for the votes of the Labor Members of Parliament. In 1897, he attended the Diamond Jubilee and the Colonial Conference, becoming a Privy Councillor. During the same decade, he also played a leading, if ambivalent part, in the federation movement, which earned him the lasting enmity of figures like Deakin and Barton and condemned him to the role of leader of the opposition for much of his later career in federal politics. He was Prime Minister for a short time in 1904-5. Subsequently, he attempted to make anti-socialism the basis for a coalition of all the non-Labor parties. But the hostility to him personally of Deakin and Forrest was the greatest obstacle to such a union and, in November 1908, he stepped aside with good grace, handing his party to his protégé Joseph Cook. The Fusion, as it became known, was soon consummated, but he declined a ministry in the new government. In 1909, he was knighted, being appointed a KCMG.

His acceptability as High Commissioner was evident in the acclaim which met his appointment. According to the Sydney Morning Herald, 'it is an offer that is made not merely by Mr Deakin, but by the consent of Australia at large'.⁴⁶ Dudley, the

⁴³ P.M. Glynn, *Diaries*, 14 September 1918, quoted in McMinn, p. 277.

⁴⁴ C.M.H. Clark, A History of Australia, v (Carlton, 1981), facing p. 113.

⁴⁵ For Reid's biography see McMinn, *op. cit.*, and McMinn, 'George Houston Reid', ADB, xi, pp. 347-54; L.F. Crisp, George Houston Reid. Federation Father. Federation Failure? (Canberra, 1979).

⁴⁶ SMH, 16 December 1909; also see Brisbane Mail, 20 October 1909; South Australian Register, 16 December 1909.

Governor-General, cribbing from the Argus, reported to the Colonial Office: 'No Act of the Ministry has been received with more general public approval than that of Sir George Reid's appointment. He is generally recognised as being, in a high sense, a representative Australian, well fitted to speak at the centre of the Empire for the land in which he has spent all the strenuous years of his conspicuous life'. Dudley also suggested that, had it been put to the vote, 'an overwhelming majority of the Members [of Parliament] would have approved the action of the Ministers'.⁴⁷ Only the Age, hostile to the Fusion and all its works, dissented.⁴⁸ In London, Collins felt that Reid 'ought to make an excellent High Commissioner'.⁴⁹ Fisher, the Leader of the Opposition, also gave his endorsement: 'the appointment of Sir George Reid to the High Commissionership was a good one for the Commonwealth. It was well that a man of some capacity and political standing should receive the appointment. He would do well for the country in the position'.⁵⁰

Finally, several influences had borne upon Reid's appointment. If the desire to reward him and to reconcile the old free trade party had been two factors, so had his acceptability and qualifications for the post. Each contributed to the final decision.

(ii) The Agents-General and the High Commissioner

Reid's five-year appointment took effect on 22 January 1910, the date of his departure from Sydney.⁵¹ His instructions, confirmed by the Executive Council five days earlier, were: 'to represent the Commonwealth in the United Kingdom, to make

⁴⁷ PRO: CO 418/78/8273, Governor-General to Colonial Secretary, 1 February 1910; c.f. Argus, 16 December 1909.

⁴⁸ Age, 21 December 1909.

⁴⁹ NLA: Hunt Papers, 800, Collins to Hunt, 21 January 1910.

⁵⁰ SMH, 17 December 1909.

⁵¹ CPP (1911), ii, 'First Annual Report of the High Commissioner', p. 965; Commonwealth Gazette, 22 January 1910, p. 48.

such representations to the Imperial Government and others as he may be instructed or as circumstances may require, and to enter into such contracts as he shall have been authorized by the Minister to make'.⁵² He was also to 'observe the course of public affairs, and take such action as may appear to him necessary to preserve or promote Australian interests', and to report 'all matters coming to his knowledge likely to be of advantage to the Government'. These were the only formal instructions given to an Australian High Commissioner during the period of this study. The general terms in which they were expressed might be thought to have allowed him some scope for discretion, yet on this they were quite explicit, concluding that he was to: 'Consult with the Minister before taking action to bind the Commonwealth in all matters of more than ordinary interest or importance'.

The new High Commissioner arrived in England on 28 February 1910. He was met at Dover by Collins, and welcomed at Victoria by Sir Charles Lucas, representing the Colonial Office, the Agents-General and 'a large number of public and private friends'. On the following day, he called on the Colonial Secretary, the Marquess of Crewe.⁵³ Among his first tasks, he began to organise a general expansion of the Commonwealth Office.

In 1908, Collins had recommended that, with the High Commissioner's appointment, the office's staff would have to be doubled, and had been hopeful that it 'might be organised and arranged in a manner far ahead of anything as yet done in London in the Offices of the Agents-General and even an improvement on the Canadian Offices'.⁵⁴ Reid first established the Publicity branch, dealing with press information, advertising and immigration inquiries, Groom had foreshadowed when introducing the High Commissioner Bill.⁵⁵ In 1911, a Bureau of Information and

⁵² AA: A2911, 1/1909, 'Minute Paper, Executive Council', 17 January 1910.

⁵³ Times, 1, 2 March 1910; for the extensive press coverage of Reid's arrival see the collection of cuttings in AA: External Affairs I; CRS A59, Hansard Cuttings and Press Cuttings relating to the High Commissioner, London, 1909-1910.

⁵⁴ AA: A2911, 2441/11, Collins to Atlee Hunt, 10 April 1908; telegramme, Collins to Hunt, 13 November 1910.

⁵⁵ George Reid, My Reminiscences (London, 1917), pp. 271-72; 'First Annual Report', pp. 976, 979-81; AA: A2911, 8/1911, 'Report by Mr H. Smart', 12 May 1910; 'Report by Mr H.S. Gullett', n.d.

Intelligence was added.⁵⁶ Government orders remained an important part of the offices' activities. The supervision of the construction of the Australian fleet unit, and liaison with both the Admiralty and the War Office on technical and administrative questions also grew in importance. In April 1910, a military adviser was appointed: 'To expedite the execution of orders, and to generally assist in keeping the Department of Defence informed of all military changes'.⁵⁷ In December 1911, Captain Francis Haworth-Booth, a retired Royal Navy officer, was appointed naval adviser.⁵⁸ By then, a Customs officer had been sent out from Australia.⁵⁹ Finally, in 1913, a Medical Bureau was created to implement the system of examination required by the new Immigration Act.⁶⁰

Such was the shape of the High Commissioner's Office on the eve of the Great War. It has been described as 'a congeries of specialist sections, each acting on instructions from its parent department', over which Reid presided 'as something of a figurehead'.⁶¹ But there is little to suggest that individual departments existed virtually independently of each other or that the High Commissioner was content to play the role of figurehead. Collins was appointed Official Secretary and remained in charge of the daily running of the office, but still thought that Reid did too much administrative work.⁶² The office's two largest and most active branches - Publicity and Intelligence - were closely associated with the promotion of trade and immigration with which Reid was intimately involved. He also participated in discussions with the Admiralty regarding the status of the Australian fleet and the

⁵⁶ CPP (1912), iii, 'Second Annual Report of the High Commissioner', p. 10.

⁵⁷ 'First Annual Report', p. 976.

⁵⁸ 'Second Annual Report', p. 16. For the papers relating to Haworth-Booth's appointment see PRO: Admiralty; ADM 1, Papers 1660-1943; item 8257; for supervision of the construction of the fleet unit, AA: Office of Governor-General; CRS A6661, Correspondence; item 955.

⁵⁹ 'First Annual Report', p. 976.

⁶⁰ CPP (1914-17), v, 'Fifth Annual Report of the High Commissioner', pp. 253-54.

⁶¹ Edwards, Prime Ministers, pp. 18, 19. Edwards' remarks are based on Thompson, Thesis, p. 273.

⁶² ICS: Jebb Papers, Collins to Jebb, 7 February 1912.

selection of naval personnel.⁶³ Finally, the office itself was not so large that he could easily lose touch with its activities. By June 1914, the staff had grown to thirty four. Although Forrest suggested that this might be excessive, there were few complaints regarding its size. Indeed, the government's critics more often worried that the High Commissioner was being inadequately supported.⁶⁴

The Agents-General were among the first to welcome Reid to London. On 10 March, they held a banquet at the Trocadero at which: 'Practically the whole of the London houses interested in Australian financial, merchantile and shipping business... [were] represented by their principals'.⁶⁵ The gathering epitomised the broadly economic dimension of Anglo-Australian relations which, since Federation, the Agents-General had made their principal field of activity and now offered the greatest scope for co-operation with the Commonwealth. But despite the optimism of some federal politicians, the State governments had not transferred to the High Commissioner any of the functions of their Agents-General, who remained in effective administrative charge, particularly with respect to finance and immigration. Reid wrote to Atlee Hunt after the Trocadero dinner:

I don't think that the State Governments are very favourably inclined to this office in London after all. I have good reason to believe that their instructions to their A[gents]-G[eneral] are not very gushing. However the A[gents]-G[eneral] themselves are good friends & I am sure we will get on well together. The Australian dinner (which they managed) was a brilliant success.⁶⁶

The Premiers had indeed swiftly reminded the Agents-General that Reid 'was not their supervisor and had no authority over them'.⁶⁷ The Agents-General themselves

⁶³ See 'First Annual Report', 'Second Annual Report' and CPP (1913), ii, 'The Annual Report of the High Commissioner' (henceforth 'Annual Report, 1912') passim.

⁶⁴ CPD, lxiii, p. 4132, 12 December 1911. Forrest himself suggested that the High Commissioner was a figurehead and that the staff included twenty to thirty clerks, 'who are engaged chiefly in issuing certificates to enable exporters to secure Customs rebates in Australia'. For suggestions that the High Commissioner was inadequately supported see CPD, lviii, pp. 5470, 5534; lxxi, p. 3792.

⁶⁵ Times, 5 March, 11 March 1910.

⁶⁶ NLA: Hunt Papers, item 2221, Reid to Hunt, 11 March [1910].

⁶⁷ Wright, Shadow of Dispute, pp. 92-93.

were not likely to tolerate any undermining of their social position. In 1906, Walter James, who looked forward to the High Commissioner's appointment, had nevertheless told Deakin:

I do hope... whoever is appointed will come with a determination to secure co-operation with the various Agents-General so that we may have a chorus of voices to his solo. If he comes with the idea of snubbing them out of existence he will make a great mistake and will find six notes of dissent almost as strong as his own voice. I can promise a most loyal... co-operation but I need hardly say that I should not take a 'snubbing' without a mild attempt to square things up.⁶⁸

The Agents-General also repudiated any suggestion that their offices should be abolished or their functions curtailed. Abolition, the Tasmanian, McCall, told his government in January 1911, 'would be a serious mistake... fatal to the best interests of Tasmania'; in practice, 'no one man can represent all the State Governments... It should be quite clear that State functions and development require special representation'.⁶⁹ Even if some financial business was eventually taken over by the Commonwealth, the State governments would still need to place orders; as it 'would have no authority over Commonwealth Officers...', it is plain that it would be most unbusiness-like to lose such control'. He believed that the State should conduct its own immigration business, and, in 1914, also objected to 'handing over the control of our loans to another Government'.⁷⁰

Yet the Agents-General, who had virtually all been politicians of the 1890s, were concerned with more than administrative efficiency. Until 1901, the States had each enjoyed limited sovereignty as self-governing communities within the Empire. Parochialism and self-interest apart, the Agents-General feared that, within almost ten years of Federation, the identity and standing of the States in London would be swallowed up by the new Federal government. The Commonwealth's advertising

⁶⁸ NLA: Deakin Papers, 1/1125-30, James to Deakin, 31 March 1905.

⁶⁹ Journals and Printed Papers of... Tasmania (henceforth TJPP) (1910), lxiii, paper no. 4, 'The Agent-General in London... Report, 1 May 1909 to 31 December 1909', p. 12; also see the speech of the retiring Agent-General of Victoria, Sir John Taverner, reported in Times, 20 February 1913.

⁷⁰ TJPP (1910), lxiii, no. 4, p.2; (1914-15), lxxi, no. 11, 'Agent-General... Half-Yearly Report ending 30 June 1914', p. 2.

policy was an early cause for concern, McCall writing to his Premier at the beginning of 1910:

the unification of the advertising has led to Tasmania being practically left out, and so far as the share of her money is concerned it is almost all wasted. A general advertisement appears in the newspapers here calling attention to Australia, but no mention is made of Tasmania, and as probably there is not one person in ten thousand in this country who knows that Tasmania is in the Commonwealth, the advertising is valueless to our State, except in so far as Tasmania benefits from the growth of Australia proper.⁷¹

Four years later, despite Reid having agreed to name each State individually in all Commonwealth advertising, the Agent-General was still complaining that the State would not obtain any benefit.⁷²

The States' fears for their separate identities was just as evident when the Federal government attempted to bring all the London offices together under a single roof. Even before Collins' arrival, the Commonwealth had taken steps to obtain appropriate office accommodation in the capital, and Reid was soon instructed to resume the search.⁷³ On his recommendation, the Commonwealth decided to acquire a block, known as the Strand-Aldwych site, on the north side of the Strand. In December 1911, Parliament approved its purchase at a cost of £364,000 and, in the new year, the London County Council agreed to sell the freehold.⁷⁴ Denman, the Governor-General, informed the Colonial Secretary: 'the credit for this very satisfactory decision is largely due to Sir George Reid'.⁷⁵

In September 1910, Fisher - now Prime Minister - said that the policy of the new Labor government was 'to have one place in London at which all information

⁷¹ TJPP (1910), lxiii, no. 4, pp. 1-2.

⁷² TJPP (1914-15), lxxi, no. 1, 'Agent-General... Report... 1 July to 31 December 1913', p. 5.

⁷³ Thompson, Thesis, pp. 195-99; cf. also 'First Annual Report', 975.

⁷⁴ For Reid's instructions see CPD, lxiii, p. 3682; Reid's recommendation: 'Second Annual Report', p. 4; the motion to purchase the site: CPD, lxiii, p. 3682; p. 4141, 28 December 1911; the negotiations: Times, 29, 31 January 1912.

⁷⁵ PRO: CO 418/89/3528, Governor-General to Colonial Secretary, 30 December 1911.

relative to Australia can be procured first hand',⁷⁶ and the architects were instructed to provide sufficient space in the Commonwealth building to accommodate the Agents-General.⁷⁷ Even before deciding to purchase the Strand-Aldwych site, Fisher asked the State governments for their views regarding his plans. Only Queensland, which had just taken a thirty-year lease on another Strand property, positively declined to be involved.⁷⁸ In January 1912, Fisher officially notified the Premiers of the decision to purchase the Strand-Aldwych site, and forwarded details of the building the Commonwealth proposed to erect, adding: 'As it is proposed to make provision for the accommodation of the Agents-General, I will be glad if you will kindly furnish me with information as to the extent and class of rooms that you will require. The Government will be pleased to consider any suggestions that you may offer in connection with the matter'.⁷⁹

As Victoria had already leased a portion of the site, its inclusion in the scheme was a foregone conclusion.⁸⁰ Queensland confirmed that it was satisfied with its present arrangements.⁸¹ Otherwise, Fisher met with prevarication and delay. The Tasmanian Agent-General raised the subject with Reid shortly after his arrival, but with little apparent enthusiasm.⁸² By October 1913, he was still 'unable to state definitely' whether or not his government would take space.⁸³ He also thought the rent was too high and could not see why the offices were not offered free.⁸⁴ The New South Wales Agent-General was also unable to make a commitment, but, according to

⁷⁶ CPD, lvi, p. 2685; cf lxi, p. 1911.

⁷⁷ AA: Prime Minister's Department; CRS A2, Correspondence Series 1902-1923; file 85/86/113, 'Australia House... August 3, 1918' [programme for opening ceremony].

⁷⁸ CPD, lvi, p. 2685.

⁷⁹ AA: A2, 1919/3514, Prime Minister to Premiers of all States, 17 January 1912.

⁸⁰ AA: A461, C348/1/10, part 1, Accommodation for Victoria - Old Papers, 1919.

⁸¹ AA: A2, 1919/3829, Chief Secretary's Office (Queensland) to Prime Minister, 30 May 1912.

⁸² TJPP (1910), lxiii, no. 23, 'Agent-General, Report for Half-Year ended June 30 1910', p. 1.

⁸³ AA: A2, 1919/3514, 'Memorandum by Mr Rutter'.

⁸⁴ TJPP (1912), lxvii, no. 4, 'Agent-General, Report, 1 January to 30 June 1911', p. 1.

the letting agent, was 'quite unwilling to discuss the matter except as a remote possibility'.⁸⁵ The South Australians waited almost two years before declining Fisher's initial offer, which was renewed after Labor's re-election in 1914. But again the State government delayed almost two years before finally refusing.⁸⁶ In November 1915, Hugh Mahon, the Minister of External Affairs, reported that Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania were not taking space. Positive responses from New South Wales and South Australia were also doubtful.⁸⁷ An exasperated Reid observed in his final report: 'It seems to me that this is provincialism run mad'.⁸⁸

The responsibility for the fiasco lay as much with the Agents-General as the governments in Australia. In some cases, it is unlikely that they had negotiated in good faith. In September 1915, while his government was yet to make a decision, B.R. Wise, the Agent-General for New South Wales, notified his Premier that South Australia had just obtained an 'excellent site in the Strand next [to] Western Australia, close [to] Queensland and New Zealand, which would afford splendid and ample accommodation for our State and South Australia, permitting each to retain its separate identity'.⁸⁹ Both Agents-General were set against taking space in the Commonwealth building. According to Wise, it was 'unsuitable, being without separate entrances would destroy [the] distinctive identity of the States. Rooms are also dark and inconvenient and site too far East and on [the] wrong side of [the] Strand'. Like his Tasmanian colleague, he also felt that the State could obtain cheaper accommodation elsewhere.

The episode had, at least, underlined the fact that the State governments had not the slightest intention of doing away with their London agencies. Reid thus soon

⁸⁵ AA: A2, 1919/3514, 'Memorandum by Mr Rutter'.

⁸⁶ The correspondence between the Commonwealth and South Australia is in AA: A2, 1919/3514.

⁸⁷ CPD, lxxix, p. 7474, 11 November 1915.

⁸⁸ CPP (1914-17), v, 'Sixth Annual Report of the High Commissioner', p. 297.

⁸⁹ AA: A2, 1919/3514, Agent-General (New South Wales) to Premier, 30 September 1915.

found himself expending considerable diplomatic energy in appeasing the State representatives. He immediately made it clear that he had no wish to supersede them and, as we have seen, readily adopted a suggestion that each State be named separately in all Commonwealth advertising.⁹⁰ 'In this and many other ways', McCall reported, 'the High Commissioner has evinced a desire to work with the States' representatives'.⁹¹ Reid also arranged to meet them monthly, commenting in his first annual report: 'These gatherings have been at all times most useful and harmonious; and I cannot too fully acknowledge the help which my colleagues have afforded me since my arrival in London'.⁹² But the position remained awkward. He told his Minister in May 1910 that 'a desire for smooth working, and close co-operation, seems common to all', but was 'bound to add that simply means making the best of a most difficult situation'.⁹³ Indeed, initially he had had considerable difficulty in getting any of the States to agree to participate in joint exhibitions at the annual agricultural fairs. The Agents-General even objected to 'the unusual and complicated' system of medical examination arising from the 1913 Commonwealth Immigration Act, the Queensland representative maintaining to the end: 'It seems very questionable whether anything in the experience of the other States has made necessary any such regulations as those proposed'.⁹⁴ In 1912, Henry Smart, the head of the Publicity Branch in the Commonwealth Office, confided to Hunt:

As I wrote to you some months ago, we succeeded in getting all the States to combine in one show at the agricultural shows. This combination was brought about only after I had taken a severe training in the ways of angels. Well, these combined shows have been running for some months, and I am almost fit for a lunatic asylum. They are all impossible. Each man of course is fighting for his own job, from the

⁹⁰ Times, 11 March 1910.

⁹¹ TJPP (1910), lxiii, no. 23, p. 2.

⁹² 'First Annual Report', p. 968; TJPP, (1910), lxiii, no. 23, p. 2.

⁹³ AA: A2911, 8/1911, 'Report, Advertising and Attracting Immigrants', Sir George Reid to Minister of External Affairs, 13 May 1910, p. 3.

⁹⁴ Queensland Parliamentary Papers (OPP) (1914), 'Agent-General, Report, 1913', p. 289; for the difficulties over joint exhibitions at agricultural fairs see AA: A2911, 8/1911 and Thompson, Thesis, pp. 167-68.

Agents-General down, and the general chorus is --- Australia ! I am now quite convinced if we are to do effective business-like work, we must do all the work, whether large or small, as Australia, and not as six States. I am sure sooner or later it will be necessary to take up this attitude at this end on all matters.⁹⁵

But for the moment the Commonwealth was in no position to coordinate the borrowing, immigration or advertising programmes of the six States. It therefore launched an intensive publicity campaign to complement their efforts.⁹⁶ Advertising thus became one of the most prominent of the London office's activities before the war. Its principal features, drawn from the Canadian example, have already been described by Thompson. Briefly, 'the chief benefits that could be derived from a vigorous policy', Reid told Batchelor in May 1910, were:

- (1) A more satisfactory stream of desirable emigration to Australia.
- (2) A wider knowledge of and a better sale for the exportable products of the Commonwealth.
- (3) Increased attention to Australia as a field for enterprise.
- (4) A fuller recognition of the value of our public securities.⁹⁷

He assured him: 'The change would be from a curiously dense state of ignorance into a widespread knowledge of the great resources of our country, and an intelligent sympathy with the course of our progress from year to year'. In addition to the advertising campaign masterminded by Henry Smart, he personally applied himself to the task.⁹⁸ Throughout the United Kingdom, in industrial and commercial centres, at Chambers of Commerce and trade associations, at society dinners and public meetings, on the Continent and in North America, his themes were invariable: immigration, finance and trade; Australian prosperity; the Commonwealth's development and stability; the eagerness of its people to share the burdens of Empire; the good sense of their leaders. Although the Commonwealth still eschewed a loan

⁹⁵ NLA: Hunt Papers, item 892, H.C. Smart to Hunt, 21 June 1912.

⁹⁶ For a detailed account of the publicity campaign see Thompson, Thesis, ch. 3, 'Publicity-Publicity-Publicity'.

⁹⁷ AA: A2911, 8/1911, 'Report, Advertising and Attracting Immigrants'.

⁹⁸ Reid's speeches were frequently reported in the press; also see his pamphlet, 'The Only British Continent - Australia' (London, 1911), reprinted from the Financial Review of Reviews.

policy of its own, State borrowing in London had resurged dramatically. To allay the anxiety of British financiers, merchants and investors that 'in politics, Australia... [was] travelling at a dangerous rate', he drew their attention to the nation's resources and financial strength. From the outset, in a gesture which was to become characteristic of Australian High Commissioners, he assured them that 'Their money has been absolutely safe'.⁹⁹

Frustrated by his exclusion from any role in the organisation of immigration, he nevertheless regarded it as a subject of national importance, staying in touch with the shipping companies concerned and making several recommendations to the government. He also displayed considerable prescience. Despite the record immigration of 1912, he warned that the pace could not be sustained. Even after a year in London, he advised that Australia should consider accepting immigrants from France, Germany, Switzerland and Italy.¹⁰⁰

The boom in Australian trade provided him with greater scope for endeavour. Apart from paying careful attention to trade with the United Kingdom, he immediately took up a campaign started by Collins to sell Australian meat in Europe, the United States and India, seeking the assistance of the Colonial and Foreign Offices in having prohibitive health and tariff regulations altered, and obtaining sample shipments for Continental buyers.¹⁰¹ Off his own bat, he soon recommended that commercial agencies be established in two or three leading cities in the United Kingdom, and in Paris, Berlin and New York, the Labor government officially instructing him to go into the matter in 1912.¹⁰² The results now do not appear impressive, reflecting perhaps economy, caution and lack of resources, as well as reluctance to stray too far from the imperial fold. By the beginning of 1914, Australia

⁹⁹ Times, 1 March 1910; 'First Annual Report', p. 969,

¹⁰⁰ 'First Annual Report', p. 968; 'Annual Report 1912', pp. 1187-88; 'Fifth Annual Report', p. 257.

¹⁰¹ 'Second Annual Report', pp. 10-14; 'Annual Report, 1912', pp. 1180-83. See also the record of correspondence with the Colonial and Foreign Offices in CO 706/1-3.

¹⁰² 'First Annual Report', p. 969; AA: A2, 1918/1471, Secretary, External Affairs, to Official Secretary, 4 March 1912.

was represented on the Continent by an assortment of honorary 'trade commissioners', consisting of: an Australian citizen resident in Switzerland, who had previously done some work for Collins; an 'Australian section' in the British Chamber of Commerce in Paris; a British consul in Austro-Hungary; and two Germans in Berlin, one also representing South Australia who was credited with having started the Australian frozen meat trade with Germany.¹⁰³ But Smart assured Hunt: 'There is perhaps no need to say that the men selected by Sir George to represent us on the Continent are all first class men'.¹⁰⁴ Reid also urged the appointment of trade and immigration representatives in the United States and Canada, but no action was taken before the outbreak of war.¹⁰⁵

Reid himself travelled widely in the pursuit of markets, touring the industrial centres of Great Britain, twice visiting North America and frequently crossing the Channel, a remarkable achievement for an Australian public figure during the Commonwealth's first years. In May 1912, he met the Kaiser and addressed the Reichstag on the subject of trade. Later that year, he made a first visit to Canada and the United States, representing Australia at a meeting of the International Chamber of Commerce in Boston and subsequently looking into the possibility of trade representation. In early 1913, he visited Paris, Berlin and Vienna, where he was received by the Austrian Emperor. Smart recorded in January 1913: 'Sir George seems to get on particularly well with the kings. His visit to these royal personages of course was nothing more or less than a publicity stunt'.¹⁰⁶

Despite the fact that the responsibilities of the Agents-General had been virtually unaffected by Reid's appointment, the argument that a Commonwealth High

¹⁰³ PRO: CO 418/128/24178, Official Secretary to Under-Secretary, Colonial Office, 3 July 1914; *TJPP*, (1913), lxvii, no. 4, p. 5. For Dr Ernst Carroll's association with Collins see AA: A2911, 10/1909, 'Dr Ernst Carroll - Trade Commissioner in Switzerland'.

¹⁰⁴ NLA: Hunt Papers, item 919, Smart to Hunt, 24 January 1913.

¹⁰⁵ AA: A2, 1918/1471, Reid to Arthur Thomas, 2 August 1912; 19/447, High Commissioner to Minister of External Affairs, 25 October 1912,

¹⁰⁶ NLA: Hunt Papers, item 919, Smart to Hunt, 24 January 1913. Reid's various journeys were reported in the *Times*; also see Reid, *Reminiscences*, *passim*.

Commissioner would be superfluous had proven unfounded. Reid had raised the Commonwealth's profile in the United Kingdom, Europe and North America, Smart considering 'always... that Sir George's photograph in a newspaper is better than a pageful of advertisement'.¹⁰⁷ Equally, Reid had presided over the expansion of the Commonwealth Office, acquired the site for a new headquarters, established a working relationship with the Agents-General, created a network of trade representatives, taken steps to safeguard the welfare of immigrants, and sought openings for Australian products on the Continent. These were substantial achievements, quite apart from the relationship he struck up with the Imperial government and a succession of Australian ministries. To the latter subject, we will now turn.

(iii) The Labor Government and the Colonial Office, 1910-1913

Since losing the Premiership of New South Wales in 1898, Reid had been repeatedly outmaneuvered by events. While he was still en route to London, elections were called in Australia and on 13 April Labor became the first party to win an outright majority in the Federal Parliament. Thereafter, except for an interval of just over a year between July 1913 and August 1914, Labor remained in government for the rest of the period he held office. The rigidity of the High Commissioner Act was immediately exposed. As Fisher had predicted, with virtually his full term to run, the High Commissioner could not be replaced. Yet there is no evidence that Fisher contemplated removing him, or that Reid himself considered resignation. Both actions would have conflicted with the aspiration to make of the High Commissionership a non-political office, and with the spirit in which it had been offered to, and accepted by, Reid. But despite this, the election result immediately raised the question of how in practice a High Commissioner and a political party who had recently opposed each

¹⁰⁷ NLA: Hunt Papers, item 909, Smart to Hunt, 9 August 1912.

other actually managed the conduct of Anglo-Australian relations when one found itself represented by the other in London.

Historians have suggested that Reid's appointment and Labor's election soon after meant that, from the outset, the High Commissioner would have no part in representing or advising the government when matters of policy were concerned. Edwards writes that, as High Commissioner, Reid's interests were 'primarily social and commercial rather than political'. Furthermore: 'A Labor Prime Minister was naturally reluctant to give discretionary authority to that hunter of socialist tigers'.¹⁰⁸ According to Meaney:

Reid was out of step with the new Australia. For the same reason... his role in England was greatly circumscribed. Because of his past differences with Deakin and even more because of his hostility to Labor Reid did not have the confidence of the Australian government for most of the period in which he held office.¹⁰⁹

Certainly some in the Labor party were not prepared to trust him. No sooner had Parliament met, than he was taken to task by Senator Needham of Western Australia for telling the London press that Labor was 'moving toward unification'. According to Needham, this showed 'that if the High Commissioner has not actually dabbled in Party politics, he has trespassed perilously close to the border'.¹¹⁰ In November, Ernest Roberts launched a virulent attack, prompting one opposition member to remind him 'that reflections should not be cast upon public servants during a debate'; indeed: 'It was not to be expected that we should allow an absent man, whose mouth was closed by his position as well as by distance, to be maligned'.¹¹¹ But this kind of criticism soon subsided. Labor had broadly welcomed Reid's appointment; his acceptability had been a point in his favour. The incoming Minister

¹⁰⁸ Edwards, Prime Ministers, pp. 19, 20.

¹⁰⁹ Meaney, Search for Security, p. 191.

¹¹⁰ Needham also took umbrage at Reid employing an Englishman as his private secretary; he subsequently employed his son, CPD, lv, pp. 142-43; Times, 1 March 1910.

¹¹¹ CPD, lix, pp. 6654-55.

of External Affairs felt that: 'Sir George [was] starting out particularly well'.¹¹² Towards the end of 1912, his successor, Josiah Thomas, observed that he enjoyed 'the most cordial relations' with the High Commissioner. His appointment had been 'a very good one'.¹¹³

Reid himself had worried about the election, writing to Groom on 2 April 1910:

In a few days the great ordeal will be over. I am waiting with intense interest for the result. At this distance & with the scant news we get I don't know how the tide is running. Officially I am a disinterested spectator. Naturally I hope the result will be that which is, in my private judgement, the best for the Commonwealth.¹¹⁴

But following the election, and despite his loudly-trumpeted 'anti-socialism' of the 1900s, there was no reason why he personally should be unable to strike up a working relationship with the new government. In the 1890s, he had distinguished himself by co-existing with the Labor members of the New South Wales Parliament upon whose votes his survival as Premier had depended. In 1909 and after, he embraced the non-partisan character of the High Commissionership. On arriving in London, he reaffirmed: 'It will be my duty to interpret the sentiments and desires of the Australian people as they are interpreted by the Government of the day. It is well-known that I have taken in my own country a very strong line in reference to fiscal and other questions... but I have done with all these disputations'.¹¹⁵ In November 1911, he told Deakin, now the Leader of the Opposition:

No one knows better than you do, that such an office [as High Commissioner] carries with it the obligation of perfect loyalty to the Government of the day who are, to him, the only authoritative source of the desires of the Australian Commonwealth. I have therefore done my best to represent the late Government. I am doing my best to

¹¹² Ernest Batchelor to Deakin, 20 May 1910, quoted in McMinn, p. 257.

¹¹³ CPD, lxviii, p. 5426.

¹¹⁴ Reid to Littleton Groom, 2 April 1910, quoted into McMinn, p. 257.

¹¹⁵ Times, 1 March 1910.

represent the present Government, and when the tide turns, will not find any difficulty serving under you once more.¹¹⁶

Ultimately, Reid's relations with Labor can only be judged in practice. Nevertheless, it is enough to suggest here that the original grounds for antagonism between the High Commissioner and the government have been overestimated.

With respect to imperial relations, Edwards and Meaney have rightly pointed out that the Australian High Commissioner neither performed the same functions, nor filled the same role in policy-making, as a modern diplomat. But their view^{of} the office verges on being anachronistic. Within the context of the times, it artificially compartmentalises a Dominion representative's social, commercial and political functions, underestimates the sometimes perfunctory way in which Australian politicians made policy, and overlooks the obstacles to both Dominion governments and their High Commissioners if they wished to influence the Imperial government.

Some of these factors were described in Chapter One. Yet despite these, even the Fisher Labor government was prepared to employ its High Commissioner at its discretion when the occasion demanded. In turn, it welcomed informal consultation through his office. In the years 1910-13, the test of Reid's relations with Labor and of his role in London is the extent to which, within the constraints of the imperial relationship we have described, he acted on the government's behalf across the range of its concerns in Britain. Following the 1909 Defence Conference, naval co-operation became the most important issue in Anglo-Australian relations. The attitude of the Commonwealth and Imperial governments to the High Commissioners, and Reid's own view of his position will thus be illustrated here with particular reference to this issue, as well as to the wider discussions about imperial co-operation during the period. But first it will be necessary to say a few words about the general status of the High Commissioners and their relations with the Crown.

On 3 March 1910, Reid was received by Edward VII and granted 'the privilege of Entree' to the Court.¹¹⁷ Keith later noted: 'Sir G. Reid's arrival marked a definite

¹¹⁶ NLA: Deakin Papers, 16/732, Reid to Deakin, 24 November, 1911.

¹¹⁷ AA: A2911, 1/109, C.P. Lucas to Official Secretary, 4 March 1910; Times, 4 March 1910.

demand for higher status [for the High Commissioners], which received recognition by order of the King'.¹¹⁸ In fact, the Crown was becoming more conscious of itself as a unifying element within the Empire and of the importance of the inclusion of the High Commissioners in the ceremony of State as a visible expression of the link between itself and the Dominions. After George V's accession in May 1910, the High Commissioners were given an increasingly conspicuous part on State occasions. The new monarch instructed that they be accorded special recognition at his father's funeral, after which they were received by Queen Alexandra.¹¹⁹

The king also welcomed the Colonial Secretary's suggestion in February 1911 that the High Commissioners' status and precedence be considered by a committee chaired by the Permanent Under-Secretary of his Department.¹²⁰ The High Commissioners had, in fact, been pressing for some time for privileges similar to those of foreign ambassadors, particularly better places at the State opening of Parliament and similar rights of entry during sittings. The Colonial Office 'played the card that they [i.e. the High Commissioners] are at home and not foreigners', but agreed that their claims were 'well-founded'.¹²¹ In the event, they were given special places at the opening of Parliament, but otherwise little progress was made until after the First War.¹²² On 3 August 1914, Reid and his guest, Justice H.B. Higgins, the President of the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration, were unable to gain entry to the crowded galleries of the House of Commons to hear a statement by Sir Edward Grey. The official representative of the Commonwealth, which would be bound by any imperial declaration, 'had to be satisfied with the relayed news that Britain would go to war if Germany invaded Belgium'.¹²³

¹¹⁸ Keith, Responsible Government, i, p. 282.

¹¹⁹ Reid, Reminiscences, p. 281; NLA: Hunt Papers, item 804, Collins to Hunt, 27 May 1910.

¹²⁰ Bodleian Library: Lewis Harcourt Papers, 462/59, Sir Anthony Bigge to Harcourt, 6 February 1911.

¹²¹ CUL: Crewe Papers, S/2/5, minute, Sir Charles Lucas, [15 March 1910].

¹²² Reid, Reminiscences, p. 285.

¹²³ John Rickard, H.B. Higgins (Sydney, 1984), p. 212, citing Higgins's diary.

At the political level, while still determined to retain their grip on policy, and opposed to the transformation of the High Commissioners into ambassadors, British Ministers responded to the necessity of maintaining imperial unity in the face of a threatening international environment by seeking to bind the Dominions closer to Britain through making concessions to their requests for greater consultation.¹²⁴ In February 1911, possibly influenced by a Colonial Office suggestion that more use be made of the High Commissioners 'in matters that do not involve high policy',¹²⁵ Asquith proposed to invite Reid and Strathcona to a meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence to discuss a scheme for the defence of Prince Rupert Island.¹²⁶ Subsequently, at the Imperial Conference in May, Lewis Harcourt, the Colonial Secretary, countered New Zealand's proposals regarding the High Commissioners, which we discussed in Chapter One, by offering to create a Standing Committee of the Conference, comprising himself, representatives of the Colonial Office, and the High Commissioners, 'or any representative in their place whom the Dominions liked to appoint for that purpose'.¹²⁷ This Committee, he emphasised, 'would be...

¹²⁴ Kendle, p. 167; Meaney, Search for Security, pp. 213-14.

¹²⁵ PRO: CO 532/18/36512, minute, G.W. J[ohnson], 2 December 1910.

¹²⁶ PRO: CO 532/25/7488, Colonial Secretary to Governors-General, Canada, Australia, 27 February 1911. The 1907 Colonial Conference had already resolved that Dominions wishing to attend the CID might have representatives summoned to meetings when matters concerning the Dominions were being discussed, Kendle, pp. 189-90.

¹²⁷ PP (1911), liv, cd. 5745, 'Imperial Conference - Minutes of Proceedings', pp. 180-81; Kendle, pp. 169-70, 178-79. Edwards, Prime Ministers (pp. 19-20), misinterprets Harcourt's proposals. He overlooks Kendle's point that their object was to restrict the High Commissioners' role, rather than, as Ward's resolution envisaged, provide them with a significant part in Anglo-Dominion consultation. Indeed, the proposals were probably made with the certainty that the Canadian, Laurier, would object. Moreover, it is difficult to understand how Harcourt 'clearly expected that the Dominions would be represented by their High Commissioners' (Prime Ministers, p. 19), when Harcourt emphasised that he was not assuming this at all. He told the premiers: 'Of course, it would be perhaps necessary for you... to define a little more clearly what is the status which you wish your High Commissioners to occupy here, because it is possible you might wish to have a special representative on this Committee and not always to be represented by your High Commissioners' (PP [1911], liv, p. 182). Similarly, when the question of Dominion representation was taken up at the CID, Asquith remarked: 'I can conceive that they [the Dominions] might think that the High Commissioner was not always the person best suited for the purpose... the Dominions might think it well to send one of their own Ministers or some responsible representative ad hoc whom they would think better qualified for this particular function' (PRO: Cabinet Office; CAB 2, Minutes of the Committee of Imperial Defence; vol. 2, minutes of 113th meeting). Edward's conclusion that: 'Fisher thus helped to block the opportunity for the High Commissioner to play a significant role in Australian and imperial policy-making' (Prime Ministers, p. 20), with the now inevitable corollary that: 'A Labor Prime Minister was naturally reluctant to give discretionary authority to that hunter of socialist tigers', would seem inappropriate.

advisory, of course, of the Secretary of State and informative of all members of the Conference or rather of all Dominions constituting the Conference'. While they were in England, the Dominion Prime Ministers also attended three sessions of the CID and agreed that their representatives might join later meetings, although specific references to the High Commissioners in the final resolutions were avoided.¹²⁸ In December 1912, having earlier impressed Robert Borden, the conservative Canadian Prime Minister, with the benefits of attending the Committee (and, incidentally, pledged him to provide three dreadnoughts for the imperial fleet), the British government promptly issued invitations to the other Dominions to send Resident Ministers to represent them on the Committee.¹²⁹

The Commonwealth government submitted its own resolutions to the 1911 Conference calling for greater consultation, but its policy was neither consistent nor clearly defined.¹³⁰ In practice, it was chary of involving Ministers and High Commissioners in policy discussions far from home. Fisher replied to Asquith's invitation to send Reid to the CID in February 1911, by suggesting that the discussion stand over until the Minister of Defence was in London in May.¹³¹ At the Conference, he finally supported Harcourt's proposal of a Standing Committee, but only on the basis of it being purely advisory. While acknowledging that Australia might be represented on such a body by the High Commissioner, he also did not want the official mentioned in the final resolution.¹³² Similarly, at the CID, he agreed that the Commonwealth might be represented, yet insisted that its representatives could be consulted 'only as a servants of the Government, and not as having authority themselves to act or say anything on their own behalf, but only that they should

¹²⁸ PRO: CAB 2/2, CID, minutes of 113th meeting, 30 May 1911.

¹²⁹ PP (1912-13), lx, cd. 6560, 'Dominions no. 13, Despatches from the Secretary of State... as to the representation of the... Dominions on the CID'; Kendle, pp. 198-214; Meaney, Search for Security, pp. 231-32.

¹³⁰ Meaney, Search for Security, pp. 212, 217-18.

¹³¹ PRO: CO 532/25/7488, Governor-General to Colonial Secretary, 4 March 1911.

¹³² PP (1911), liv, cd. 5745, pp. 193-95, 280.

communicate to their own executive authority'.¹³³ Although Reid was the Commonwealth's 'chief representative', Fisher felt that a Minister was a more appropriate representative. But, when in 1912, the government was officially invited to send a Resident Minister to attend the CID, he declined and suggested an imperial conference to take place in Australia instead.¹³⁴

Keith and, more recently, Edwards have regarded the failure of the Dominions to seize each opportunity to enlarge the responsibilities of their representatives as 'striking confirmation of the view that these Governments do not trust their High Commissioners'.¹³⁵ But their attitude was consistent with their rejection of anything which might be construed domestically as a form of imperial federation through the backdoor or as undermining Dominion sovereignty. Nor were the High Commissioners - government officials, not elected Ministers - necessarily the most suitable representatives to send to the bodies suggested by the British. Collins already lamented that Reid was 'not a big enough man for the political situation as he is a subordinate of a Minister & under orders'.¹³⁶ Keith himself recognised that Reid and Strathcona lacked the expertise to serve on the CID.¹³⁷ Fisher felt that a Minister would be a more appropriate representative, but we have already noted in Chapter One the political and constitutional objections to sending someone abroad for any length of time.¹³⁸ Besides, the government simply did not regard the CID as an appropriate organ to deal with their grievances. Pearce explained to Collins in January 1913:

¹³³ PRO: CAB 2/2, CID, minutes of 113th meeting.

¹³⁴ PP (1914), lx, cd. 7347, 'Correspondence relating to the representation of the Dominions on the CID...', p. 642, Governor-General to Colonial Secretary, 19 December 1912.

¹³⁵ Keith, Imperial Unity, p. 543; Edwards, Prime Ministers, pp. 19-20. While Harcourt's invitation referred only to 'a member or members of... [Dominion] Cabinets' (PP [1912-13], lx, cd. 6560, p. 515), Keith assumes that the reluctance of all but Canada to accept implied distrust of the High Commissioners.

¹³⁶ ICS: Jebb Papers, Collins to Jebb, 7 February 1912.

¹³⁷ PRO: CO 532/25/7488, minute, A.B. K[eith], 7 March 1911.

¹³⁸ PRO: CAB 2/2, CID, minutes of 113th meeting.

Then, again, the question arises as to what a Minister could do on the Defence Committee (sic). As I understand it, this Committee is more or less technical and deals with technical questions. What is wanted is a strong and well-defined Policy of Naval Co-operation with the Dominions. This was decided on in 1909, but with the exception of Australia, has not been acted upon. It is therefore necessary that there should be a Conference in order to try again and see if we can come to some agreement, as far as Canada and New Zealand are concerned. Hence the necessity for a subsidiary Conference rather than representation on the Defence Committee.

The Defence Committee might be a convenient vehicle to carry out a Policy already adopted, so that it seems to me it is putting the cart before the horse, in sending representatives to the Defence Committee, before a policy has been agreed upon.¹³⁹

Indeed, Fisher had already invited Churchill, then the First Lord of the Admiralty, to 'come to Australia to confer... on questions of Imperial Defence'.¹⁴⁰

The Dominions' response to the Imperial government's proposals in 1911 showed, in fact, that rather than institutionalise the functions of their High Commissioners, they preferred to employ them at their own discretion. When Asquith asked the Prime Ministers for their views regarding the position they wished these representatives to occupy, Fisher replied: 'The Government of the Commonwealth view the functions of the High Commissioners in the broadest sense, and I think, perhaps, they will be the most useful channel through which we can communicate our views in detail, and inform the Government of the United Kingdom, who have the care of all parts of the Empire, what we really have in our minds'.¹⁴¹ The Commonwealth would favour any proposal 'to... give the High Commissioners or other persons... some definite and distinct authoritative power to enter into these negotiations [affecting Australian interests] and to discuss them as an officer of his Dominion... with His Majesty's Minister for Foreign Affairs, say, or the Prime Minister'.¹⁴² Referring to the most recent issue to prompt Australian calls for greater consultation, he suggested that the Dominions might be consulted through their High

¹³⁹ AWM: Pearce Papers, 7/107, Pearce to Collins, 21 January 1913.

¹⁴⁰ PRO: CO 418/100/3531, Denman to Harcourt, 8 November 1912.

¹⁴¹ PP (1911), liv, cd. 5745, p. 191.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 192.

Commissioners when treaties like the Declaration of London were being considered.¹⁴³ Importantly, Fisher's statement was far more than a pious hope or conference rhetoric. It defined in simple terms the relation Reid had borne to the government since Labor had taken office a year before.

Almost immediately after the 1910 election, Labor instructed Reid to invite Admiral Jacky Fisher, the recently retired First Sea Lord, to visit Australia in order to advise the government about the establishment of the navy. Subsequently, although the Colonial Office's good offices were sought, all the arrangements for the visit of Admiral Reginald Henderson, whom Fisher suggested might go instead, were conducted through the High Commissioner's office.¹⁴⁴ In June, Labor asked Reid to take up an initiative of the previous government, which, perhaps wishing to mollify the Admiralty after the American fleet's tour in 1908, had suggested that the battleship HMS Commonwealth be sent to Australia on a goodwill visit. The Admiralty had demurred and, on 10 June, Reid contacted Crewe, urging it to reconsider. He added shrewdly: 'It does seem to me that after the visit of the American fleet in 1908, the presence of the great ship of the Imperial navy bearing our name would be welcomed with peculiar enthusiasm'.¹⁴⁵ In August, he was instructed to raise the issue of the 'all-red' cable route between Australia and the United Kingdom with the Pacific Cable Board, on which the Commonwealth, Britain, Canada and New Zealand were represented.¹⁴⁶ Throughout 1910 and 1911, he also sent both conservative and Labor

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 194. Both the Fusion and Labor governments had been upset by the Imperial government's failure to invite Australia's views during the negotiation of the Declaration of London, Meaney, Search for Security, p. 203.

¹⁴⁴ AWM: Pearce Papers, 5/26, minute to Cabinet, 16 May 1910; Reid to Pearce, 26 May 1910, 1 July 1910; J.A. Fisher, Fear God and Dread Nought, ii, A.J. Marder (ed.) (London, 1956), p. 327, Fisher to Esher, 27 May 1910; PRO: CO 706/1, High Commissioner to Colonial Secretary, 10 June 1910.

¹⁴⁵ PRO: CO 418/78/12118, Governor-General to Colonial Secretary, 15 March 1910; CO 418/84/17961, Reid to Crewe, 10 June 1910. These representations were to no avail.

¹⁴⁶ PRO: CO 418/84/26143, Official Secretary to Under-Secretary, 23 August 1910. Parallel representations were made through the Governor-General, CO 418/79/26837, Governor-General to Colonial Secretary, 25 July 1910. Reid and Coghlan were the Australian representatives on the Pacific Cable Board.

governments press reports, official publications and legal opinions regarding the Declaration of London affecting the status of seaborne trade in wartime.¹⁴⁷

More important than each of these issues, he was involved in a conference with the Admiralty concerning the international status of the Australian fleet and the conditions of its employment on imperial service in both peace and war. In June 1910, an inter-departmental committee in Whitehall reported on these questions, the issue having been given added relevance by the fact that the Commonwealth, through Reid, was pressing the Admiralty for a decision regarding the flag to be flown by two Australian destroyers which were nearing completion in Britain and about to make their maiden voyages.¹⁴⁸ Apart from the practicalities of relations between the Australian and imperial navies, complex legal issues were involved.¹⁴⁹ As far as the Admiralty was concerned, everything turned upon the code of discipline governing the colonial fleet, and in August a memorandum was sent to the Commonwealth recommending that the Imperial Naval Discipline Act be extended to cover the Australian navy.¹⁵⁰ Without this restraint:

it would be within the power of the Dominion Governments to order or permit their ships to take action in relation to foreign Powers for which the Imperial Government would be responsible, but which they would not be able to prevent or control. In such an event the Imperial Government might be seriously hampered in the control of the foreign policy of the Empire and might be committed to a policy, or even to a war, of which they did not approve.¹⁵¹

The issues raised were thus of some importance and the Admiralty suggested that, apart from its memorandum being sent to Australia, it also should be discussed with

¹⁴⁷ eg. AA: A2911, 7/1911, Reid to Deakin, 25 November 1910; cable from External Affairs, 1 February 1911.

¹⁴⁸ PRO: Admiralty; ADM 116, Secretariat, cases, 1855-1951; item 1100c, W. Graham-Greene to R. McKenna, 31 December 1909; 'Report of Inter-departmental Conference', June 1910; AA: A2911, 237/11, telegrams from Defence Department, 12 March 1910, 7 July 1910.

¹⁴⁹ PRO: ADM 116/1100c, 'Report of Inter-departmental Conference', June 1910; minute, Graham-Greene, 13 July 1910.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Crewe to Dudley, 15 August 1910; 'Memorandum on Status of Dominion Ships of War', August 1910.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 'Report of Inter-departmental Conference', June 1910.

the High Commissioner in London. These discussions would not be binding upon either government, but preliminary to a final agreement between Ministers.¹⁵²

On 29 August, Reid was asked to confer with the Admiralty. Although the substantive questions were the relations between the two fleets and the code of discipline, his only instructions were that he was to: 'Endeavour to obtain recognition of [the] Australian flag for [the] Naval Unit'.¹⁵³ Without any inkling of government policy on the main issues, he turned for guidance to the correspondence of the previous Labor government which had been printed in a British Parliamentary Paper, and to the parliamentary speeches of the Minister of Defence.¹⁵⁴ On 7 September, he informed Ernest Batchelor, the Minister of External Affairs, that 'discussion shows that many serious difficulties, both Imperial and International, arise out of [the] flag question. I wish to proceed further... on [the] basis of [the] White ensign at [the] ensign staff, and, in place of [the] Union Jack carried by [the] British Navy at [the] jack staff, the Australian flag'.¹⁵⁵ The government had already intimated that it would accept the White ensign, which indicated that the commanding officer held the King's commission and thus came under imperial naval discipline. But, instead of explaining this, Reid continued, ignoring the possible offence he might give to a nationalist government: 'This would give our ships... [the] war flag of the British Navy with its glorious traditions and the new flag of our own country, and ensure [the] highest status everywhere for our fleet'.¹⁵⁶ Batchelor replied simply: 'Government desire the Australian flag to be agreed to, unable to accept [your] suggestions'.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵² Ibid., Graham-Greene to Under-Secretary, Colonial Office, 9 August 1910; Crewe to Dudley, 15 August 1910.

¹⁵³ AA: A2911, 237/11, Batchelor to Reid, 29 August 1910.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., Reid to Batchelor, 10 February 1911.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., Reid to Batchelor, 7 September 1910.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., cable from Department of Defence, 7 July 1910; Reid to Batchelor, 7 September 1910.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., Batchelor to Reid, 12 September 1910.

But the flag was largely a symbolic issue. The Admiralty's principal concerns lay with naval discipline and its own jurisdiction over the Australian fleet when it was outside its home station, about which the Commonwealth apparently had nothing to say. In January 1911, Reid signed a report, which he sent to Australia, broadly conforming to the Admiralty's views.¹⁵⁸ But the discussion had not been straightforward. Reid 'at the outset took up a position almost as irreconcilable as' that of the Canadian government, which had wanted unlimited discretion to send its ships wherever it wished.¹⁵⁹ Despite the fact that, as he reported to Batchelor, 'the Admiralty has a very strong wish with reference to the Flag', he had 'fully acquainted [it]... with the desires of the Australian Government in this respect' and finally the question had been allowed to stand over.¹⁶⁰ The report also affirmed the principle that, in the event of war, the fleet would only pass under Admiralty control at the Commonwealth's discretion.¹⁶¹

A final agreement on the report's recommendations, and a decision about the flag, now awaited the Imperial Conference in the middle of the year, when Pearce, the Minister of Defence, approved the results of the Reid-Admiralty discussions with only minor amendment. Finally, as regarded the flag, Pearce gave way, telling the CID: 'we do not feel strongly on the point'. In his memoirs, he claimed the credit for a final agreement which largely belonged to Reid.¹⁶²

In fact, the naval discussions of 1910 had revealed inexperience and inaptitude on the part of both the government and the High Commissioner - the government in poorly instructing Reid; Reid in not reporting adequately - which would be evident again on later occasions. But the discussions, and the other

¹⁵⁸ PRO: ADM 116/1100c, 'Organisation of Australian Naval Force', 31 January 1911; AA: A2911, 237/11, Reid to Batchelor, 10 February 1911.

¹⁵⁹ PRO: ADM 116/1100c, Graham-Greene to Hartmann Just, 30 March 1911.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 'Organisation of Australian Naval Force'; AA: A2911, 237/11, Reid to Batchelor, 10 February 1911.

¹⁶¹ PRO: ADM 116/1100c, 'Organisation of Australian Naval Force'.

¹⁶² PRO: CAB 2/2, minutes of CID, 29, 30 May 1911; ADM 116/1100c, Notes of Meeting at the Admiralty, 20 June, 29 June 1911; G.F. Pearce, Carpenter to Cabinet (London, 1951), pp. 83-85.

examples cited, nevertheless showed that by mid-1911 Reid was being used by the Labor government in precisely the way described by Fisher, as 'the most useful channel through which we can communicate our views in detail, and inform the Government... what we really have in our minds'.¹⁶³ Certainly, poor communication and past political differences created the conditions for misunderstanding, but the main obstacle to the High Commissioner's fuller participation in imperial diplomacy was not any supposed tension between himself and Labor, but the actual limits placed on him by the imperial government.

At first glance, these obstacles may have appeared to be crumbling. In 1911, the Imperial Conference passed a resolution affirming the British government's readiness to invite greater consultation from the Dominions prior to the negotiation of international agreements.¹⁶⁴ Harcourt, who had become Colonial Secretary in November 1910, was already meeting monthly with each of the High Commissioners.¹⁶⁵ But neither development signified any fundamental change. During the crisis over Germany's despatch of a warship to the Moroccan port of Agadir, which occurred immediately after the Conference, no attempt was made to keep the Dominions informed of developments. The High Commissioners had been left equally in the dark. Collins told Hunt in November 1911: 'We were very near War. I wonder if any secret warning was sent to Australia?'¹⁶⁶ The Colonial Office was equally determined to protect the Governors-General as the channel of communication and, as a corollary, to exclude the High Commissioners from any such function.

Since the late-nineteenth century, the Governors in virtually all the self-governing colonies had complained that the Agents-General were displacing them as

¹⁶³ PP (1911), liv, cd. 5745, p. 191.

¹⁶⁴ Meaney, Search for Security, p. 220; I.H. Hancock, 'The 1911 Imperial Conference', HS, xii (1966), p. 367.

¹⁶⁵ PP (1911), liv, cd. 5745, p. 183.

¹⁶⁶ Meaney, Search for Security, p. 226; NLA: Hunt Papers, item 808, Collins to Hunt, 24 November 1911.

the channel of communication.¹⁶⁷ The establishment by the Dominions of large London offices further encouraged the trend to bypass both the Governors and the Colonial Office when they wished to communicate with other parts of the Imperial bureaucracy. In Australia's case in particular, the establishment of the navy routinely put the High Commissioner's Office into contact with the Admiralty. Quite apart from the threat this represented to the Colonial Office's influence, such disregard for established procedures could cause confusion and duplication. In March 1911, Harcourt wrote to the seven departments which were the worst offenders², insisting: 'the Colonial Office should be the sole medium for communications with the Dominions to the Imperial Government and vica versa. The only exception to the rule should be in cases of mere routine or in any case in which I agree that for special reasons direct communication will be useful'.¹⁶⁸ He elaborated:

In the former case it is not possible to draw a hard and fast line between what is a routine matter and what is not, but generally speaking I would say that the Colonial Office should be informed of any matter in which a question of policy affecting His Majesty's Government and one of the Dominion Governments arises. In cases of doubt it is better to send us too much rather than too little.

But the matter did not rest there. One official had already noted: 'The Adm[iralt]y are rather bad offenders'³.¹⁶⁹

Even before Reid's arrival in London, Dudley, irritated at discovering that Collins had been in touch with the Admiralty, asserted his authority. He took particular exception to Collins using the phrase 'my Government'.¹⁷⁰ In June 1910, he again complained that he had been overlooked when Admiral Henderson was

¹⁶⁷ Farr, pp. 253, 267-68; Dalziel, pp. 133-37; Atkins, pp. 250-56.

¹⁶⁸ PRO: Colonial Office; CO 209, New Zealand, Original Correspondence, 1830-1922; vol. 274, f. 8300, draft, to Buxton, Burns, Samuel, Haldane, Mckenna, Runciman, Churchill from Harcourt, 30 March 1911; minute, A.B. K[eith], 17 March 1911; CO 418/117/41838, minute, A.B. K[eith], 10 December 1913. The departments concerned were the Board of Trade, Local Government Board, Post Office, War Office, Admiralty, Board of Education and Home Office.

¹⁶⁹ PRO: CO 209/274/8300, minute, R.V. V[ernon], 20 March 1911.

¹⁷⁰ AA: External Affairs I; CRS A1, Correspondence, 1903-1938; file 15/16430, Private Secretary, Governor-General to Prime Minister, 11 June 1909.

invited to Australia. According to his successor, he 'was quite unaware of this appointment until it appeared in the Australian press', and could only surmise that the negotiations had been conducted through Reid's office.¹⁷¹ On 19 June, he wrote to Fisher: 'I feel bound to ask, out of consideration for the position of the office I hold, that a serious attempt should be made to define my relationship with the High Commissioner, and to inform me how far it is intended that this new channel of communication should be used for direct dealings with the Imperial authorities'.¹⁷² He was aware of 'the great advantages and conveniences accruing to the Commonwealth Government from the presence of the High Commissioner in London', but asserted that if he was superseded a 'vital blow' would be struck to the importance of his position.

The Colonial Office had not been perturbed by Reid's involvement in the invitation of Henderson, but the arrival of New Zealand's resolutions for the Imperial Conference stirred it into action. As we have seen, in March 1911, Harcourt insisted that the positions of both the Colonial Office and the Governor-Generals be respected. Later, he circulated guidelines regarding communications with the Dominions, which Reid considered 'wise as far as we are concerned'.¹⁷³

But incidents involving the Commonwealth Office continued. In September 1912, the Colonial Office became particularly alarmed that the Admiralty might have sent Reid copies of confidential Opinions of the Law officers, 'which we have never dreamt of communicating to the Commonwealth Government'.¹⁷⁴ Keith minuted:

In my opinion the policy of letting the Admiralty deal direct with the High Commissioner is a totally wrong one and one which the Secretary

¹⁷¹ AA: CO 532/39/33999, Governor-General to Colonial Secretary, 17 September 1912; Shepherd, Memoir, p. 44, Governor-General to Prime Minister, 19 June 1910. It is an indication of the care with which official documents were treated that the only record of this letter appears to be the transcribed copy in the 'Memoir' of M.L. Shepherd.

¹⁷² Shepherd, Memoir, p. 44, Governor-General to Prime Minister, 19 June 1910.

¹⁷³ PRO: CO 532/32/31379, Colonial-Secretary to Governors and Governors-General... 6 October 1911; AA: A1, 15/16430, minute, G. R[eid], 21 November 1911 on memorandum, Collins to High Commissioner, 16 June 1911.

¹⁷⁴ PRO: CO 418/106/26651, minute, A.B. K[eith], 27 August 1912.

of State should take the opp[ortunit]y of this neglect of his position to terminate once and for all. The result is that the Governor-General of the Commonwealth becomes more and more a figure-head when he does not even have an opportunity of seeing matters. It must be remembered that everything sent though the High Commissioner escapes altogether the notice of the Governor-General and nothing in reason is to be gained for the Admiralty or Secretary of State in eliminating the constitutional questions of im[portanc]e from the Secretary of State for the Colonies, who is the authority on the constitutional relations between the Dominions and the mother country, and the Governor-General of the Commonwealth, who is the constitutional means of enforcing by personal re[resen]t[ation]s the opinions of the Secretary of State for the Colonies on these constitutional quest[ion]s.¹⁷⁵

Harcourt protested to Churchill, the First Lord, who agreed that: 'where questions of policy which lie in the sphere of what I may call Colonial diplomacy are concerned, it is of course essential that the Colonial Office should be our ambassador and act for the Admiralty'.¹⁷⁶ He suggested that 'a small Inter-Departmental Conference or Commit[t]ee' might settle their differences. But even before the Committee had an opportunity to meet, a despatch arrived from Denman, Dudley's successor, complaining that he had himself found it necessary to raise the matter with Fisher. Referring to Dudley's difficulties, he told Harcourt: 'There can be no doubt that the establishment of the High Commissioner of the Commonwealth in London has created a distinct tendency in the direction of setting aside, more especially in naval matters, the proper means by which the Commonwealth Government should communicate with His Majesty's Government'.¹⁷⁷ Fisher had, in fact, already raised the matter in Cabinet and told Ministers to follow the procedures laid down by Harcourt in 1911.¹⁷⁸ But this was not sufficient to forestall the almost immediate occurrence of the most serious incident so far.

In October 1912, war broke out in the Balkans. The Turkish armies swiftly collapsed and, by early November, the investment of Constantinople and the Straits

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., Harcourt to Churchill, 31 August 1912; Churchill to Harcourt, 9 September 1912.

¹⁷⁷ PRO: CO 532/39/33999, Governor-General to Colonial Secretary, 17 September 1912. A general account of the channel of communication debate is given in Cunneen, pp. 86-87, 94-96.

¹⁷⁸ AA: A1, 15/16430, Fisher to Minister of External Affairs, 19 August 1912.

was imminent. In anticipation of possible intervention, the European powers began to concentrate their naval forces in the Aegean. By 9 November, upwards of twenty British battleships and cruisers had gathered in what Churchill called 'those classic waters'.¹⁷⁹ In order to maintain its superiority in the North Sea, the Admiralty immediately accelerated work on all vessels under construction and nearing completion. As the the Australian cruiser Melbourne was itself near to completion, on 11 November, Sir William Graham-Greene, the Secretary to the Admiralty, wrote to Collins:

I am directed by the Lords Commissioner of the Admiralty to acquaint you for the information of the High Commissioner and for communication by telegram to the Government of the Commonwealth of Australia that in view of the present critical state of affairs in the Near East it has been considered desirable to press on with the work on all ships under construction and nearing their completion in order that they may be commissioned in an emergency if required.

My Lords are anxious that His Majesty's Australian Ship Melbourne should be one of the vessels to be accelerated in this manner if the Commonwealth Government concur in this course.¹⁸⁰

Reid immediately conveyed the message to Australia, omitting only the words 'Near East' and himself adding in conclusion: 'Very urgent. The Government of the Australian Commonwealth may deem this a fitting opportunity of showing their desire to co-operate in [an] imperial emergency'.¹⁸¹

Denman, when shown a copy, was aghast. His dismay was greater because he thought that Reid's addition was part of the original Admiralty message. He cabled a transcript to Harcourt, concluding: 'Would you be so good as to inform me if this is correct and if so I would suggest that the usual channel of communication should be employed by the Admiralty'.¹⁸² Harcourt thought the matter serious enough to raise it with the Prime Minister.¹⁸³ He also demanded an explanation from Churchill.

¹⁷⁹ R.C.K. Ensor, England 1870-1914 (Oxford, 1936), pp. 463-67; Times, 11 November 1912.

¹⁸⁰ PRO: CO 418/100/35907, Graham-Greene to Collins, n.d. but 11 November 1912.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., a transcript is in, telegram, Denman to Harcourt, 13 November 1912.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Bodleian: Harcourt Papers, 462/243-44, Harcourt to Churchill, 16 November 1912.

According to Graham-Greene, rather disingenuously, the action with regard to the Melbourne had been part of 'a general order and the effect of it was a slight disturbance of contract conditions'. Communication with the High Commissioner, who was the financial agent of the Commonwealth, was therefore 'not considered to be outside the agreed procedure'.¹⁸⁴ Churchill later told Harcourt that the Admiralty had approached Reid because of the need to maintain secrecy, but agreed that Reid's additional recommendation was 'unsuited to our Admiralty communication unless sent through the C[olonial] O[ffice]'.¹⁸⁵ After further mutual recrimination, Harcourt finally wrote to Churchill on 16 November:

so far as I am personally concerned, the incident is now closed, though I think it very desirable that precautions be taken against its recurrence. The fact that the High Commissioner, in sending his telegram, omitted some of the Admiralty words and interpellated an expression of his own opinion in such way as to give the impression that they originated from the Admiralty only served to show the danger of this irregular mode of communication on serious questions. You spoke to me of the necessity of secrecy in this matter but I cannot think that secrecy is better obtained by communicating through Sir George Reid to Mr. Fisher than would be by the transmission of a message from me to the Governor-General of the Commonwealth. I make, of course, no complaint of the action of Sir George Reid as he, no doubt, was under the impression that the Admiralty made their request with my knowledge and sanction.¹⁸⁶

He observed to his own officials: 'If this had been done through the Admiral in Australia¹⁸⁷ the offence w[oul]d not have been so great: it was the interposition of Sir G. Reid which was intolerable'.¹⁸⁸

Clearly, Harcourt's principal concern was that the Admiralty's message affected policy and that Reid's additional recommendation had appeared to be part of the original. Yet even after the affair had been thoroughly aired, no one for a moment

¹⁸⁴ PRO: CO 418/100/35907, minute, Graham-Greene, 13 November 1912.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., Churchill to Harcourt, 13 November 1912; Bodleian: Harcourt Papers, 462/243-44, Harcourt to Churchill, 16 November 1912.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ i.e. the commander of the Australian station.

¹⁸⁸ PRO: CO 532/40/30452, minute, Harcourt, 20 November 1912.

suggested that Reid had deliberately attempted to mislead the government. He could more fairly be accused of the same carelessness which had marked his communications with Australia during the 1910 negotiations with the Admiralty. According to the Commonwealth naval representative, Captain Haworth Booth, he had 'thought it would be a popular thing for the Australian Government to offer the use of the ship'.¹⁸⁹ In the event, although Denman reported that Fisher had been 'strongly of the opinion' that the Admiralty's message should have been sent through the Governor-General, the government did not hesitate to offer the Melbourne.¹⁹⁰ In 1916, after Fisher himself had become High Commissioner, Denman recalled: 'during one of Germany's periodic bursts of "sabre-rattling" in the autumn of 1912... Mr Fisher and Senator Pearce made through him a spontaneous offer from the Australian Government to the Admiralty of Australian warships then being completed in this country'.¹⁹¹ Once again, if any credit was due, it rightly belonged to Reid.

In March 1913, Harcourt wrote to Denman finally laying the incident to rest: 'I do not think there will be any further reason for complaint as to direct communication from the Admiralty and Sir Geo. Reid about matters of policy. I was quite as much annoyed as you were and have put my foot down rather heavily'.¹⁹² Yet both the 1910 negotiations over the status of Dominion warships and the Melbourne episode had shown the extent to which the High Commissioners might be drawn onto politically sensitive ground. It remains to examine the attitude Reid himself took to this aspect of his role.

In January 1911, in advance of that year's Ministerial visit to London, Hunt wrote to him: 'I wish you will give careful consideration to the matter of the relationship of the High Commissioners of the Dominions to the Imperial Conference'. Hunt himself was thinking in terms of 'some definite plan of

¹⁸⁹ PRO: CO 418/100/35907, minute, Graham-Greene, 13 November 1912.

¹⁹⁰ Bodleian: Harcourt Papers, 478/86-87, Denman to Harcourt, 19 December [1912]; PRO: CO 532/40/36123, telegram, Denman to Harcourt, 15 November 1912.

¹⁹¹ Times, 2 March 1916.

¹⁹² Bodleian: Harcourt Papers, 478/92-93, Harcourt to Denman, 3 March 1913.

perpetuating it by means of a council of High Commissioners'.¹⁹³ Reid's reply, if any, has not survived, but he would probably have opposed the establishment of any permanent body in London. At the 1896 Colonial Conference, he had not favoured the creation of an 'Imperial council'. He told Reuters in 1912 that he was opposed to an imperial Parliament, for 'closer bonds might lead to greater friction'.¹⁹⁴ Yet, whilst there is no evidence of his deep involvement in imperial policy, he still regarded such issues as falling within his purview. In 1910, he proposed to Hunt: 'a solution of the very difficult question of the relations between the Australian Navy and the Royal Navy'.¹⁹⁵ In 1912, his recommendation regarding the Melbourne had been made in the context of the Admiralty's continuing anxiety about the availability of the Australian fleet in wartime.¹⁹⁶ The offer of the cruiser would be a gesture of goodwill. But as the Admiralty retreated from the policy laid down in 1909, he rejected its alternative strategies, telling Reuters in 1913 with respect to Churchill's scheme for an imperial flying squadron: 'I do not regard an Imperial Squadron stationed at Gibraltar as in itself sufficient for the purpose of guarding our world-wide Empire in time of danger. The prospect of an Imperial Squadron and that of Dominion fleets do not seem to me to be antagonistic proposals'.¹⁹⁷ Earlier, Collins credited Reid and himself with originating the proposal of an imperial conference to meet in Vancouver to resolve the naval issue, which was being considered in official circles in early 1913.¹⁹⁸

Besides these forays into inter-imperial politics, Reid established contacts with the diplomatic community and placed importance upon the ambassadorial aspects of

¹⁹³ NLA: Hunt Papers, item 2242, Hunt to Reid, 17 January 1911.

¹⁹⁴ McMinn, p. 136; Times, 30 July 1912.

¹⁹⁵ NLA: Hunt Papers, item 2242, 17 January 1911, replying to Reid's letter of 16 December 1910, which is not in Hunt's papers.

¹⁹⁶ Meaney, Search for Security, p. 235.

¹⁹⁷ Times, 28 March 1913; cf. 27 May 1910 and 28 January 1913.

¹⁹⁸ AWM: Pearce Papers, 7/113, Collins to Pearce, 17 January 1913; Meaney, Search for Security, pp. 238-39.

his role. Although Australia's external interests were primarily commercial rather than political, he set out to win the goodwill of the international community. His ²⁴⁶journies overseas and contacts with foreign heads of state have already been noted.¹⁹⁹ As one of his first duties, he called upon the heads of foreign missions in London. During the Imperial Conference, he gave a reception for the Australian Ministers at which the diplomatic corp was well-represented.²⁰⁰ Finally, he kept up a steady diplomacy towards China and Japan, rarely losing an opportunity to compliment the latter as 'the leading nation of the Eastern hemisphere'. At the annual dinner of the Japan Society in 1912, he expressed his conviction that: 'The alliance between Great Britain and Japan marked one of the brightest departures of British statesmanship from the narrow and insular traditions of the past'.²⁰¹

Thus, both Reid and the Labor government took a more permissive view of the High Commissioner's role than the conventional accounts have allowed. In 1916, Keith, in Imperial Unity and the Dominions, gave one of the earliest versions of the received wisdom: 'Sir George Reid was an able politician... but it was absurd to expect that the Labor Party in the Commonwealth, with which he had been at variance all his political life, on finding him in office as a legacy from their predecessors, should trust him with political information'.²⁰² Professor Ernest Scott, the official historian of the home front during the 1914-18 war, quoting this passage, replied: 'There was no question of lack of trust'.²⁰³ What Scott wrote of wartime can equally be applied to the period before. This did not mean, as he well understood, that Reid was 'in close personal touch and sympathy with the Ministry',²⁰⁴ nor that the government was prepared to vest him, or any other representative, with wide

¹⁹⁹ also see McMinn, pp. 259-60.

²⁰⁰ Reid. Reminiscences, pp. 274, 290; 'First Annual Report', p. 965.

²⁰¹ Ibid, p. 274; Times, 25 May, 24 June 1912.

²⁰² Keith was trying to account for why Australia would not be represented permanently on the CID, Imperial Unity, p. 540.

²⁰³ Ernest Scott, Australia During the War (Sydney, 1936), p. 300, note 28; the emphasis is Scott's.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

discretionary powers, nor even that misunderstandings would not occur. But it did mean that, under Labor, Reid still discharged what may be described as the diplomatic function within the imperial relationship, representing the government as necessary and advising it when required. The constraints upon him did not stem primarily from the nature of his relations with Labor, but were to be found within the terms of the imperial relationship itself. Fisher declared in 1913: 'whatever the different political views held by the people of Australia, he was sure that they were united in feeling that no better man could be appointed to the position of High Commissioner than Sir George Reid'.²⁰⁵

(iv) The Liberal Government, 1913-14

In June 1913, the Fusion, now re-christened the Liberal party and under the leadership of Reid's former deputy, Joseph Cook, began a fifteen-month term in office. According to Meaney: 'Even during Cook's brief administration there is no evidence that he [Reid] had an important role in the conduct of Anglo-Australian relations'.²⁰⁶ But our conclusions regarding the scope of the High Commissioner's role in London, even under Labor, and the limits placed upon it by the Colonial Office are equally valid here. What we can ask more appropriately is whether under the Liberals Reid's duties changed in any significant way and, just as importantly, whether his relations with the government became any closer.

In fact, prior to the outbreak of war, Reid was in London for only five months of the ministry's life, for much of which Cook was handicapped by a one-seat majority and trying to engineer a double dissolution. Between September 1913 and April 1914, Reid was visiting Australia. As early as July 1913, however, he was discussing loan raising with the Bank of England.²⁰⁷ In 1909, Deakin had intended

²⁰⁵ SMH, 21 October 1913.

²⁰⁶ Meaney, Search for Security, p. 191.

²⁰⁷ Bank of England Archive (henceforth BE): OV 13, Representative Country Files, Australia; item 32, Reid to Governor, n.d. but c. 20 July 1913.

that he should raise a £3.5 million loan to fund the construction of the fleet. Before his departure, Reid conferred with Deakin and the banks about both the loan and, more ambitiously, 'a scheme of borrowing control' following the transfer of the State debts to the Commonwealth.²⁰⁸ Labor repudiated the naval loan, but the conservatives were still contemplating entering the London market. In August 1913, Reid was instructed to make enquiries about how to approach the conversion of the State debts. The Treasurer, Forrest, was also in touch with A.C. Cole, a former Governor of the Bank, who concluded his reply: 'As Sir George has gone to Australia no doubt you will have conferred personally with him'.²⁰⁹ Earlier, the New South Wales government had raised again the question of commercial representation in the United States. Patrick Glynn, the Minister of External Affairs, preferred to defer consideration of the issue until Reid's return to Australia.²¹⁰

As early as 1912, Reid had asked Labor for permission to visit Australia.²¹¹ But the trip was postponed until after the election and he arrived on 15 October 1913. His stated object was to bring himself back into touch with the country, and he immediately embarked on a tour which embraced all six States. Describing himself as 'the living link in London between this Commonwealth and the mother country',²¹² he also felt it incumbent on himself to convey an imperial perspective, telling Harcourt during his return voyage: 'I have been trying to impress on the public mind of the Commonwealth a more powerful impression of the greatness of the Empire, and of other nations, and a more avid sense of all that they owe out there to the power and protection and the generous spirit of Imperial statesmanship'.²¹³ But he also emphasised the practical, as against the purely rhetorical, benefits of the imperial

²⁰⁸ PRO: CO 418/78/8273, Governor-General to Colonial Secretary, 1 February 1910.

²⁰⁹ BE: OV 13/32, Reid to Governor, 7 August [1913]; A.C. Cole to Forrest, 25 September 1913.

²¹⁰ AA: A2, 1919/447, Atlee Hunt to Joseph Cook, 1 August 1913.

²¹¹ McMinn. p. 261.

²¹² SMH, 23 October 1913.

²¹³ Bodleian: Harcourt Papers, 452/345-46, Reid to Harcourt, 25 March [1914].

connection and admonished Australians to look for security to other powers apart from the Empire. Referring to his recent visit to the United States, he told an audience at the Sydney Town Hall: 'One great statesman in New York told me that they looked to Australia to assist them in guarding and protecting the Pacific. The highest motives of policy call upon Australian statesmen to develop the most friendly relations with the great people on the other side of the Pacific'.²¹⁴

The tour could 'only be described as triumphal',²¹⁵ reflecting the persistence of Reid's popularity and his authority as the Australian public figure in closest touch with the Imperial government. But he was also in Australia to consult with the government 'upon many important questions'.²¹⁶ We already know what some of these were. They included the management of the State debts, the issue of Commonwealth stock in London, and the advisability of opening some form of trade representation in the United States. Bearing in mind the disagreements over the 1909 naval agreement and Reid's close contact with the Admiralty, it is also likely that the naval issue was discussed.²¹⁷ Finally, the deteriorating situation in Ireland also appears to have been referred to. Reid immediately raised the subject on his return to England in April 1914, telling the press at Plymouth:

Australians, themselves prepared to risk their lives in the defence of the Empire, do seem to have a right, in common with the rest of His Majesty's subjects abroad, to offer a respectable but very solemn remonstrance, and to demand that British statesmen do something better than allow this disastrous explosion to occur.²¹⁸

More importantly, he also wrote privately to Harcourt, urging the necessity of compromise with the Unionists:

²¹⁴ SMH, 15 November 1913.

²¹⁵ London Daily Telegraph, 2 April 1914.

²¹⁶ SMH, 21 October 1913.

²¹⁷ The timing of the Cook government's correspondence with the Admiralty over the agreement also provides circumstantial evidence of this, Meaney, Search for Security, p. 242-57.

²¹⁸ London Daily Telegraph, 13 April 1914.

I am sure that the Ministry are taking into serious consideration whether it is, or is not, their duty to the whole Nation, to do that which they have proposed as a matter of arrangement with the opposition... The responsibilities are so immensely greater in the case of Ministers than in the case of their opponents. I don't know about the strategy of the thing, but as to the wisdom of providing no present excuse for disorder the matter seems to present many advantages in the direction of perseverance and forbearance - qualities of supreme importance in the present crisis.

This is not a letter to be answered or even acknowledged.²¹⁹

We cannot be certain whether Reid was acting on his own initiative or with the tacit approval of the Ministry. But it is clear enough that during his 1913-14 visit to Australia, he had discussed issues of substance with the government. In England, he was soon back in harness, Glynn asking him in June 1914 to ascertain the Imperial government's latest intentions towards the Anglo-French condominium in the New Hebrides.²²⁰

Thus Reid represented the Liberal government, like its Labor predecessor, across the broad range of its concerns. By visiting Australia in 1913-14, however, he was also able to advise it personally about several aspects of policy. It is reasonable to assume that his previous personal and political links with the ministry facilitated this contact. In this respect, therefore, his relationship with the Cook government was closer than with Labor.

But, by the middle of 1913, Reid had been absent from Australia for well over three years and so established the non-partisan character of the High Commissionership that a change of government may have made only a subtle difference to his activities. Whether Labor or the Liberals governed in Australia, he had also made his office the premier colonial department in London, causing Sir Charles Tupper to complain from his retirement that Reid had 'usurped completely the leadership of the Dominions in this country'.²²¹ The Sydney Morning Herald,

²¹⁹ Bodleian: Harcourt Papers, 452/347-48, Reid to Harcourt, 14 April [1914].

²²⁰ AA: A2911, 1017/14, Glynn to Reid, 4 June 1914.

²²¹ Sir Charles Hibbert Tupper (ed.), Supplement to the Life and Letters of... Sir Charles Tupper (Toronto, 1926), p. 112.

recalling his instrumentality in obtaining the site for a new office, commented in October 1913:

But not even a building so well-chosen and well-designed counts for anything like as much as the individuality of our representative. That it is which has to make itself felt in all the hurry and turmoil of the centre of Empire; and that Sir George Reid has accomplished this is a monument to his talent more enduring than brick and stone.²²²

(v) The Business of War, 1914-1915

The outbreak of war in Europe in August 1914 commenced a new phase in Reid's career. He wrote self-effacingly in his Reminiscences: 'I was present at many confidential conferences in connection with war business - financial, naval, military, and commercial... but, of course, we High Commissioners were never really behind the scenes'.²²³ Some have interpreted this as an admission of his own lack of importance, although it is unlikely that in 1914-15 even the Australian government was 'behind the scenes' in the sense he intended.²²⁴ Equally relevant is E.A. Walker's comment in his biography of Shreiner, the South African representative: 'the war served as a forcing-house for Government Departments, and not least for those of the Dominion High Commissioners'.²²⁵ I have suggested in the previous two sections of this Chapter the ways in which Reid filled a diplomatic function within the imperial relationship. The war led to both an intensification of activity in this regard and a considerable widening of the High Commissioner's responsibilities. From August 1914, Reid was in touch with several departments in Whitehall, not least the War Office, acting as a personal representative of the Commonwealth government when direct contact or negotiation were required. Furthermore, with the general widening of

²²² SMH, 24 October 1913.

²²³ Reid, Reminiscences, p. 357.

²²⁴ Edwards, Prime Ministers, p. 21.

²²⁵ E.A. Walker, W.P. Shreiner (Oxford, 1937), p. 365.

the High Commissioner's sphere of operations, the Colonial Office's strict supervision of Dominion affairs was undermined and the High Commissioners' status commensurately increased.

It is not possible here to describe all Reid's activities.²²⁶ As far as the Commonwealth Office was concerned, he was instructed to retrench in some departments, most extensively in the publicity branch, and to create others - a Transport and Shipping branch, for example, in January 1915 - to meet new needs. In 1915, he also oversaw the establishment in England of a military administration and depots to serve the Australian Imperial Force (AIF).²²⁷ Personally, he was directly concerned in the welfare of the AIF and with economic and financial issues, alerting the Commonwealth to infringements of its interests and making representations on the behalf of the government, businessmen and private individuals. With respect to trade and commerce, for example, he intervened on behalf of Australia's wool and base metal producers, became involved in the marketing of the Australian wheat crop, and made numerous requests for the allocation of more shipping to the Australian route.²²⁸ He was also involved in protracted three-cornered negotiations with the Imperial and South African governments over three German steamers, which had been en route with raw materials to Australia and impounded at the Cape when war broke out.²²⁹

The range of Reid's activities strained established procedures. In October 1914, a secret telegram from the Colonial Office, asking the Commonwealth to loan rifles to the South African government, was duplicated by a similar requisition sent through Reid and originating with the South African High Commissioner. Sir Ronald

²²⁶ McMinn, pp. 264-69; Thompson, Thesis, pp. 217-224, 275-78.

²²⁷ CPP (1914-17), v, 'Sixth Annual Report of the High Commissioner', pp. 285-89, 291; C.E.W. Bean, The AIF in France, 1916 (Sydney, 1929), pp. 158-59.

²²⁸ PRO: CO 616/9/50249, telegram, Munro-Ferguson to Harcourt, 16 December 1914; CO 616/11/37112, Reid to Harcourt, 28 September 1914; Times, 7 October, 8 November 1914; 'Sixth Annual Report', p. 294.

²²⁹ For the relevant documents see, PRO: CO 616/11; CO 616/35; CO 418/133/39490; AA: A2911, 1307/14A, part 1.

Munro-Ferguson, the new Governor-General, told Harcourt: 'Mr Fisher considers that the prospects of secrecy are not enhanced by this procedure. Apart from this I feel there is risk of irritation between the High Commissioner and his Government if he transmits secret messages which normally come through the Colonial Office'.²³⁰ Yet, with many decisions affecting the Dominions now being made outside the Colonial Office, the latter itself was not being kept fully informed about the activities of other Departments. In February, the Colonial Office was not notified of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's proposals for financing the public works of the Australian States. When in March the Chancellor sanctioned a second war loan for the Commonwealth government, neither the Colonial Office nor the Governor-General were told until well after the event.²³¹

There is no evidence that Fisher wanted to substitute Reid as the channel of communication, but the opportunities open to him to play a more direct role, bypassing the Colonial Office altogether, are clear enough from his activities with respect to the AIF. In the opening week of the war, he was transmitting confidential, if hardly momentous, messages from the War Office. On 8 August, he conveyed its hope 'to hear shortly of Australian activity dealing with German possessions [in the] Pacific'. On the same day, he sent Kitchener's 'grateful and special thanks for the splendid help promised by Australia'.²³² In November, Kitchener asked him to communicate his fateful recommendation 'that [the] Military Forces of the Commonwealth nearing Egypt be landed there to be trained instead of [in] England'.²³³ Although Kitchener made this decision without reference to him, Reid had quite independently become concerned about conditions on Salisbury Plain where

²³⁰ Bodleian: Harcourt Papers, 479/169-74, Munro-Ferguson to Harcourt, 26 October 1914. Labor had returned to government in September.

²³¹ PRO: CO 418/132/9155, minute, G.J. H[owell], 24 February [1915]; CO 418/133/44807, Munro-Ferguson to Bonar Law, 18 August 1915; minute, H.S., 2 October 1915.

²³² For both cables see, AA: Prime Minister's Department; CP 317/6, Bundles of cables, 1914-1917; bundle 1, cables, from High Commissioner, 8 August 1914.

²³³ AWM: Australian High Commission (London) Files; AWM No. 48, 1313/27/14, Reid to J.A. Arthur, 17 November 1914.

the AIF would be encamped, and subsequently was summoned by Kitchener to discuss the change of plan. He told his Minister:

From independent evidence I strongly support Kitchener's view. Before I saw him Buckley, Chauvel and Dr Norris visited Salisbury Plain and strongly deprecated our forces camping there. Extremely doubtful whether even canvass huts can be ready. Dr Norris says to house Australian troops in tents in midwinter on this windswept area, after long voyage in troopships passing through tropics and sub-tropics, would be criminal.²³⁴

At the end of December, alarmed at the scarcity of equipment for the Australian forces and the diversion to the western front of supplies intended for the AIF, he visited Egypt with his military adviser and Thomas Mackenzie, the New Zealand High Commissioner, to confer with Generals Maxwell and Birdwood, the officers in charge. He reported in January, commenting with reference to the shortage of equipment: 'As our Force could not reach the front for some time, I felt that I should not faithfully interpret the wishes of the Government if I made a grievance of that. The needs of the men in the trenches and behind the guns, who are fighting the German armies, must come first, until our own men are about to join them'.²³⁵ He added, however: 'But the extent to which these deviations are to happen - the time at which they should stop - the ability of the War Office to replace our supplies when we must demand them, all these problems have added to our anxieties. Indeed, it is clear that we must make efforts in all directions to meet our requirements'.

Reid's contacts with the War Office and efforts on behalf of the AIF illustrate the extent and significance of his role as the Commonwealth's personal representative. But the early months of the war had also thrown up issues, particularly relating to finance, which both touched on sensitive areas of government policy and required negotiation with Ministers in London. As High Commissioner, Reid was inevitably involved in these negotiations. But, like the pre-war discussions about the status of the

²³⁴ *Ibid.*; C.E.W. Bean, *The Story of Anzac I*, (St. Lucia, 1921/1981), pp. 110-12. Buckley was the military adviser in the High Commissioner's Office; Norris was medical officer and Chauvel the Australian representative on the Imperial General Staff.

²³⁵ AWM: AWM/48, 1313/27/14, High Commissioner to Minister of External Affairs, 20 January 1915.

navy, the 1914-15 talks regarding finance revealed a maladroitness on the part of both Reid and the government, and a potential for misunderstanding and mistrust. Equally important, the financial issue also soon became conflated with a dispute about State rights, and with the outcome hinging upon decisions made in London, the value of the Agents-General in providing the States with independent representation was underlined.

Despite the war, the States still looked to London for the money to fund their extensive programmes of public works. But, with the closure of the Stock Exchange and the suspension of capital issues, they feared that they would be locked out of the market for the duration of the conflict. In September 1914, Reid told the government that Britain was prepared to fund the Dominions' war expenditure.²³⁶ Fisher, however, was determined that Australia's requirements should be met from domestic sources. He nevertheless soon realised that the only way to assist the States was by raising in London a loan for public works.²³⁷ On 16 October, he submitted a memorandum to Harcourt via the Governor-General informing him that the Commonwealth was approaching the Imperial government on behalf of the States, who wished to raise £20 million for expenditure on public works over the next twelve months. The Commonwealth was prepared to guarantee a loan and sought the Imperial government's 'advice and assistance'.²³⁸

Fisher also transmitted a copy of his memorandum to Reid, but did not attach any instructions.²³⁹ On 22 October, the High Commissioner discussed the request with Harcourt and Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but found that little could be done. He reported that he had pressed the proposal 'most urgently knowing its great importance', but 'Secret and confidential reasons' had been

²³⁶ AA: A2, 1915/3503, part v, High Commissioner to Minister of External Affairs, 4 September, 23 September 1914.

²³⁷ For an account of Australian borrowing during the war see, Bernard Attard, 'Politics, Finance and Anglo-Australian Relations: Australian Borrowing in London, 1914-20', *AJPH*, xxxv (1989), pp. 142-63.

²³⁸ PRO: CO 418/123/40101, Munro-Ferguson to Harcourt, 16 October 1914.

²³⁹ AA: A2, 1915/3503, part v, cable... to the High Commissioner, 16 October 1914.

advanced why the Chancellor was unable to provide assistance, including the possibility of the war continuing for some time with a consequent strain on British finance. He concluded: 'Ministers urge you not to press suggestion and rely upon absolute secrecy as to reasons'. The Exchequer's offer to cover Australia's war expenditure nevertheless remained open.²⁴⁰

But Fisher would not be dissuaded and remonstrated that the Commonwealth's position was 'purely to arrange for and guarantee for first time [a] joint loan for five States and for their purposes only'.²⁴¹ He also feared that he had been misunderstood and, according to Munro-Ferguson, 'that New South Wales is not running straight with the Federal Government on this undertaking; that Sir G. Reid and Sir T. Coghlan are in touch; and that they are influencing the money market and the Colonial Office against the scheme'.²⁴² Quite how Fisher in distant Melbourne had come to suspect Reid is not clear. Munro-Ferguson had felt: 'Personally, knowing Sir George, I should say that he was the last person whose sphere of action should be unduly restricted'. Indeed, on 24 October, Reid contacted Harcourt, noting 'how anxious the Government has been', and wondering whether 'there is no indirect means of doing what they want?'.²⁴³ But the Exchequer stood firm against any advances for non-war expenditure and, on 27 October, Fisher had no alternative but to ask for £18,000,000 'for war purposes only'.²⁴⁴ Harcourt immediately saw what he was up to. The Exchequer's conditions had been met, but only as a matter of convenience. Fisher had asked for a sum identical to that he was prepared to advance to the States; without it, he acknowledged, the loans would have been made, 'but we could not have paid our war expenditure here.' In London, the proceeds of the Exchequer loan were used to

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, cable from the High Commissioner, 22 October 1914.

²⁴¹ PRO: CO 418/123/41118, Munro-Ferguson to Harcourt, 23 October 1914.

²⁴² Bodleian: Harcourt Papers, 479/169-74, Munro-Ferguson to Harcourt, 26 October 1914.

²⁴³ PRO: CO 418/123/41118, Reid to Harcourt, n.d. but 24 October 1914.

²⁴⁴ PRO: CO 418/123/41556, Munro-Ferguson to Harcourt, 27 October 1914.

cover the States' expenditure.²⁴⁵ Possibly Reid's good offices had succeeded in persuading the Treasury to turn a blind eye.

During 1915, the Dominion High Commissioners and Australian Agents-General were called together by the Chancellor on three occasions to discuss their borrowing requirements. It was agreed they would only be permitted to raise fresh loans to fund existing public works. In Australia, Fisher decided that, rather than the States approaching the market separately, the Commonwealth should continue to borrow in London on behalf of all the Australia governments. Thereafter, the issue became entangled irretrievably in a quarrel over State rights.²⁴⁶

Reid attended each of the meetings called by the Chancellor and was given precedence as the senior Dominion representative. Yet partly because the Commonwealth's policy was still undecided, and partly because the Chancellor's reasons for calling the the meetings were often never clear, he was not adequately instructed.²⁴⁷ The first meeting took place on 26 January, immediately after his return from Egypt. He instantly cabled for directions, but these failed to appear. He therefore told Lloyd George: 'We are more in the position of listeners here today than of suggesters, because I think we would all wish to consult our Governments - I know I would like to consult the Commonwealth Government before I could say anything'.²⁴⁸ Lacking clear instructions and adequate information about its policy, he was unable to advise the government. Even so, his communications were brief and uninformative. After a meeting on 8 March, he reported that the Chancellor had ruled out loans for new public works, but failed to clarify the conditions on which other

²⁴⁵ PRO: T1/11877/30900, minute, Sir J. Bradbury, 28 October 1914; CPD, lxxv, p. 1010, 25 November 1914; Attard, 'Politics, Finance', p. 145.

²⁴⁶ Attard, 'Politics, Finance', pp. 146-47.

²⁴⁷ Fisher was also a sick man. He was absent in New Zealand during the early part of 1915; L.F. Fitzhardinge, William Morris Hughes, A Political Biography, ii (Sydney, 1979), pp. 38-39.

²⁴⁸ AA: A2, 1915/3503, part iii, Reid to Minister of External Affairs, 23 January 1915; PRO: Treasury; T172, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Miscellaneous Papers, 1792-1925; item 215, 'Conference between the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the High Commissioners...', 26 January 1915.

loans for non-war expenditure could be floated.²⁴⁹ At a meeting on 9 August, the new Chancellor, Reginald Mackenna, appeared to open the door to direct loans from the Exchequer as an alternative to approaching the open market, but, possibly not taking Mckenna seriously, or believing that the details would be sent through the Governor-General, Reid did not report this. He assured the government: 'The new Chancellor did not seek to depart from the lines laid down by Mr Lloyd George'.²⁵⁰ But the States began to frame their policies on precisely the possibility of such a departure. Lacking adequate information, the Commonwealth expressed increasing alarm and dismay at the turn of events.²⁵¹ In sum, while further illustrating Reid's widening role in the conduct of inter-imperial diplomacy, the financial negotiations of 1914-15 were equally an object lesson in the mutual frustrations of a government acting through a distant, out of touch representative, and of a High Commissioner who was never fully aware of its policy.

In August 1915, Munro-Ferguson commented that the 'chief preoccupation' of the Agents-General was 'to get money for their Governments to spend'.²⁵² In fact, some were already making important contributions to the war effort. Robinson of Queensland was advising the Imperial government about the supply of Australian meat; Coghlan of New South Wales was deputed to ensure that meat, butter and other foodstuffs were not attracted to the United States by higher prices; Newton of Western Australia had taken charge of the Australian military depots in Britain.²⁵³ By affording access to British Ministers, however, the Agents-General also provided the States with an independent voice, particularly, during 1915, when Fisher began to press them to suspend their borrowing powers.

²⁴⁹ AA: A2, 1915/3503, part iii, High Commissioner to acting Prime Minister, 8 March 1915.

²⁵⁰ AA: A2, 1915/4009, Reid to Hugh Mahon, 26 August 1915; for his earlier cabled report see 'cable, High Commissioner', 20 August 1915.

²⁵¹ PRO: CO 418/133/39490, Munro-Ferguson to Bonar Law, 25 August 1915; CO 418/133/40182, Munro-Ferguson to Bonar Law, 31 August 1915.

²⁵² PRO: CO 418/143/49110, Munro-Ferguson to Bonar Law, 24 August 1915.

²⁵³ Scott, pp. 518-19, 523; 'Sixth Annual Report', pp. 288-89; Bean, AIF in France, 1916, p. 160.

As early as October 1914, some of the States made enquiries through their Agents-General about the likelihood of obtaining direct financial assistance from the Exchequer.²⁵⁴ During 1915, the Agents-General continued to appeal for help and were stout defenders of State rights. In January, Coghlan pointedly reminded the other Dominion representatives that New South Wales was 'twice as large and populous' as New Zealand, and objected to the suggestion that it should submit its loan proposals to a capital issues committee:

I would not like to, and I do not think it would be proper, that a Self-Governing Colony should have to go to any Committee in London to ask for permission to borrow money for its necessities. You set up a Committee but I feel that it is not right that New South Wales, the Government of which is a sovereign Government, should go to a Committee and ask for liberty to do this.²⁵⁵

In September, the Premiers made one final attempt to outflank the Commonwealth, asking the Agents-General to approach the Chancellor with their overseas borrowing requirement for 1916 of £16 million. But by now the British Ministers were supporting the Commonwealth's policy and avoided any meeting. In the end, the Agents-General were overtaken by events. In November the new Prime Minister, Hughes, reached an agreement with the States which allowed the Commonwealth to borrow overseas on their behalf for the duration of the war.²⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the episode had shown that, apart from having administrative and symbolic value, the Agents-General remained politically useful to the State governments.

²⁵⁴ PRO: CO 418/128/38672, McBride (Agent-General, Victoria) to Premier, 7 October 1914.

²⁵⁵ PRO: T172/215, Transcript... 26 January 1915; eg. also, T1/12005/34221 [24341], B.R. Wise to Sir J. Bradbury, 11 November 1915.

²⁵⁶ Attard, 'Politics, Finance', pp. 148-50.

(vi) The End of Reid's Term

The outbreak of war had immediately increased the responsibilities of the High Commissioners and, despite its tragic consequences, possibly for Reid began the most satisfying period of his term. By September 1914, however, he had almost completed the final year of his appointment, and the concluding months of his High Commissionership were to be overshadowed by a dispute between himself and Labor over his request for a re-appointment. The issue raised questions once again about the nature of the High Commissioner's position and his relationship with the government.

According to Scott, the principal reason for Reid's visit to Australia in 1913-14 was to seek a second term from the Cook government.²⁵⁷ In fact, he had originally asked Fisher for leave in October 1912, well before the 1913 election, chiefly to attend his daughter's wedding, but persisting when her engagement was broken off. He was determined, however, to avoid any hint of political involvement, emphasising to Deakin that the tour would be 'clear of the general election of course'.²⁵⁸ Finding Cook in office, he took the opportunity to broach the subject of his reappointment. Probably, had Labor still been in government, he would have done the same. Having painstakingly assumed the role of a disinterested public servant and widely advertised his political detachment, he very likely assumed that, like Strathcona, he would be left undisturbed.²⁵⁹ He told Fisher in a memorandum in September 1914: 'When the position [of High Commissioner] was offered to me it was looked upon as an official post, and not an uncertain political post'. As long as he performed his duties satisfactorily, he was entitled to expect re-appointment.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁷ Scott, p. 301.

²⁵⁸ NLA: Deakin Papers, 1/3092, Reid to Deakin, 11 December 1912; McMinn, p. 261.

²⁵⁹ Skilling writes of Strathcona (p. 104): 'The permanent character of his appointment, unaffected by changes of government at home, served to emphasise the non-political character of the London post and put an end for the time being to the combination of High Commissionership and resident Cabinet Ministership which had evolved during Tupper's regime'.

²⁶⁰ CPP (1914-17), v, 'Correspondence Respecting Extension of term... of... Sir George Reid', p. 327, Memorandum by Sir George Reid, 25 September 1914.

Reid first raised the subject with Patrick Glynn, the Minister of External Affairs, at the beginning of 1914, and was assured in February that his term would certainly be extended, the only question being whether it would be for three or five years. In July, Glynn told him that the government had not yet dealt with the matter, but added: 'you may at least act on the assurance that your term will continue for an additional twelve months'.²⁶¹ By then, however, elections had already been called and, either because of pressure of work following the outbreak of war, negligence or reluctance to make an appointment until the election, no decision had been made when Labor returned to office in September.

Reid immediately sent Fisher a memorandum, explaining the commitments he believed the previous government had made to him.²⁶² But the new Cabinet declined to extend his term for more than twelve months and, despite Reid's protests, refused to admit any evidence that Glynn had promised an extension of at least three years, Hugh Mahon, the Minister, arguing somewhat irrelevantly: 'It can hardly be expected that a new Administration should accept without question the post-mortem evidence left by a defunct Government whose policy and administration has just been decisively condemned by the people of Australia'.²⁶³ The situation was compounded by misunderstanding and poor communication. In August, Mahon offered Reid three months leave, but the latter preferred to remain at his post. In September, Reid himself offered 'the Government without intrusion or offence my services in London till the end of [the] war without salary'. The offer, however, was leaked to the press and Fisher promptly turned it down.²⁶⁴ Scott maintains: 'It is not easy to see how the

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ibid.; Scott, p. 301-302.

²⁶³ CPP (1914-17), v, p. 332, Mahon to Reid, 20 April 1915; also see, p. 328, Reid to Arthur, 25 October 1914; p. 327, cable, Minister of External Affairs, 14 November 1914; p. 330, memorandum, Reid to Minister of External Affairs, 23 December 1914; cable, Minister of External Affairs to High Commissioner, 13 April 1915.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 338, Minister of External Affairs to High Commissioner, 16 August 1915; Reid to Minister of External Affairs, 18 August 1915; Reid to Prime Minister, 16 September 1915; Prime Minister to Reid, 19 September 1915; Minister of External Affairs to Reid, 11 October 1915.

previous Government... could, even morally, bind its successor'.²⁶⁵ Fisher himself wanted a High Commissioner politically sympathetic to the government. He may also have felt that Reid had been in London long enough. Munro-Ferguson confided to the Colonial Secretary, 'though fond of his High Commissioner, he thinks him lazy and getting old'.²⁶⁶

It had nevertheless been a shabby affair. Unable to oppose Labor's overtly political conception of his role, Reid felt 'a just sense of grievance'.²⁶⁷ Fisher may already himself have coveted the High Commissionership, while radicals like Mahon may have been glad of an opportunity finally to be rid of him. But Labor had not been unanimous. In May 1915, Watson, the previous party leader, wrote to Fisher from London, suggesting that if, as he still asserted, he really did not want the post: 'I should leave Sir George where he is. At this end the opinion is that he does his work well, and I can back that up so far as my observation goes'.²⁶⁸ According to Scott, Hughes also urged Fisher to renew Reid's appointment. Indeed, Hughes reminded him in 1920 that, although Reid had offered to continue without salary: 'You strongly opposed the extension'.²⁶⁹

Reid ceased to be High Commissioner on 21 January 1916 and, soon after, entered the House of Commons after a by-election for one of the seats for St George's Hanover Square. He died after suffering a stroke on 12 September 1918. As High Commissioner, he had not lacked detractors, one writing to Deakin in 1912: 'Reid is as lazy as ever and remains true to the only political principle that I have discovered he held - Free Trade'.²⁷⁰ But his achievements lend greater weight to the more

²⁶⁵ Scott, p. 302; cf. McMinn, p. 268.

²⁶⁶ Bodleian: Harcourt Papers, 479/325-29, Munro-Ferguson to Harcourt, 13 May 1915.

²⁶⁷ CPP (1914-17), v, p. 328, Reid to Arthur, 25 October 1914.

²⁶⁸ NLA: Fisher Papers, 1/107, J.C. Watson to Fisher, 11 May 1915.

²⁶⁹ AA: Prime Minister's Department; CP 317/8, Cables to and from the High Commissioner and others; bundle 1, Hughes to Fisher, 24 November 1920; Scott, p. 299. Scott does not give a source, but as the official historian had access to politicians concerned.

²⁷⁰ NLA: Deakin Papers: 1/3067, H. Campbell Jones to Deakin, 1 November 1912. The charge of 'laziness' was frequently levelled by Reid's enemies and dated from his political days.

favourable judgements of other contemporaries. In 1916, Round Table commented: 'No fault was found in Sir George Reid's discharge of his duties. On the contrary, he is universally acknowledged to have done more than well'.²⁷¹ According to Scott: 'Sir George Reid had been, by general admission, a popular and efficient High Commissioner'.²⁷²

As we have seen, he had presided over an orderly expansion of the Commonwealth's activities in the United Kingdom, established himself above the Agents-General as the authoritative spokesman for Australia in Britain, and outshone all the other Dominion representatives. But his work had gone beyond public relations. Commonwealth governments, both Labor and Liberal, had used him in a diplomatic role, as an intermediary with the Imperial government and institutions like the Pacific Cable Board and the Bank of England. Thus issues of policy had come within his scope. He had shown little aptitude for the detail of imperial diplomacy, but, more importantly, prior to 1914, his role had, as a matter of policy, been restricted by the Colonial Office. With the outbreak of war, however, the Colonial Office's control over the activities of the High Commissioners was weakened.

Similarly, throughout Reid's term there had been little real diminution in the powers of the Agents-General. But even here, the wartime borrowing agreement between the Commonwealth and the States presaged the transfer of State powers to the Commonwealth which, during the inter-war period, led to many of the Agents-General's functions being handed to the High Commissioner.

I argued in Chapter One that, during the first decade of the Commonwealth's existence, arguments about the character of the Australian High Commissionership, whether it should be a political or a non-partisan office, were not merely political rhetoric or vague sentiment but, within the Australian political community, expressed underlying attitudes to, and assumptions about, the nature of public office, particularly in the public service. Sir George Reid had accepted the High

²⁷¹ Round Table, vi (1915-16), 22, p. 338.

²⁷² Scott, p. 300.

Commissionership in accordance with these attitudes and assumptions, and endeavoured to establish its non-partisan character. As early as 1909, however, Labor leaders like Fisher and Pearce had suggested an alternative view about the relationship between the High Commissioner and the government. With the conclusion of Reid's term, they finally had an opportunity to forge a closer political link between the governing party and its representative in London.

PART TWO

THREE FORGOTTEN MEN

1916-1932

Even more successful was the King's Christmas pudding, in which all the Dominions were represented.

Sir Joseph Cook, CPP (1926-28), v, 'Report for the Year... 1926', p. 983.

Armistice Service in the morning. We adjourned for hot soup to the Cabinet Room afterwards. I suggested to the PM he might ask in the High Commissioners but he doubted whether there was enough soup suggesting that I should remind him about it for next year.

L.S. Amery, The Leo Amery Diaries, i (London, 1980), p. 571, Diary, 11 November 1928.

CHAPTER THREE

ANDREW FISHER, 1916-1921

Andrew Fisher's resignation as Prime Minister on 26 October 1915 closed the era of the early Commonwealth with its virtual hegemony of Liberal-Protectionist and Labor governments and commenced a sea change in Australian politics during which existing forces realigned themselves and, between 1917 and 1929 the federal scene was dominated by the Nationalist and Nationalist-Country Party governments of W.M. Hughes and S.M. Bruce. The period was framed by two great crises in Australian domestic history, the conscription referenda of 1916-17 and the Depression of the early thirties. In imperial terms, the period also spanned the 1917 Imperial Conference and the Statute of Westminster (1931) and produced lasting change to the status of the Dominions and their relationship with Britain.

There are sound historical reasons then for grouping together the High Commissionerships of Fisher (1916-21) and his two successors, Sir Joseph Cook (1922-27) and Sir Granville Ryrie (1927-1932). There are also sound institutional reasons, for between 1916 and 1932 the convention that the High Commissionership was largely ceremonial and marginal to the real business of Anglo-Australian relations took deep root. Subsequently, the terms of Fisher, Cook and Ryrie have largely been forgotten.

This development is paradoxical in two senses. After 1916, Australian dependence on Britain became greater, potentially creating more scope for a High Commissioner to act as an intermediary at a time when the Agents-General were diminishing in importance. Simultaneously, wider developments in inter-Imperial relations, often without active encouragement from Australia, propelled the Dominion High Commissioners into a larger role, particularly with respect to foreign affairs.

The paradox may be more apparent than real. As we have seen in Reid's case, a change of government did not necessarily disqualify the High Commissioner from an active role in Anglo-Australian relations. But the rigidity of the High Commissioner Act, with its provision for a fixed five-year term, and political instability in Australia at the times when it was most acutely dependent upon assistance from Britain, most notably during the Depression, created situations in which the High Commissioner and the Commonwealth were potentially at odds. It would have mattered less if Australia's dependence on Britain had not been so great, if the inter-play between this dependence and domestic politics was not so significant, or if there had not been profound disagreement between political parties over major questions of national policy, but a combination of these factors was characteristic of Australia's political crises of the period and affected relations between the High Commissioner and the Commonwealth.

The period was inaugurated and ended in crisis. The intervening decade, however, was one of stability and, with the post-war drive for 'men, money and markets', considerable growth and diversification in Australia's official relations with Britain. As Prime Ministers, both Hughes and Bruce closely supervised imperial relations and tended to concentrate their management in their hands. The High Commissioners' scope nevertheless grew and they found ample opportunities to make substantial contributions to the conduct of government business in Britain.

(i) Andrew Fisher's Appointment

On 27 October 1915, Hughes reported to Parliament that on the day before Andrew Fisher had resigned the Prime Ministership and been appointed High Commissioner. Fisher himself met the Labor Party Caucus on 30 October and belatedly informed it that he intended 'to be an applicant for a position in the public

service, namely the position of High Commissioner'. His five-year appointment took effect on 22 January 1916.¹

As early as August 1915, the Sydney Sun had accused Labor of feeling 'no shame in making the [High] Commissionership a job for one of its own members'; Reid's removal was 'an example of the degradation of national affairs to party uses'.² But despite the opposition of the conservative press and the Leader of the Opposition's allegation that the government was 'Americanizing' politics,³ the appointment was consistent with the view of Labor's leaders that the High Commissioner might legitimately be chosen from the governing party, 'there at the direction of the Ministry to carry out the policy of the Ministry'.⁴ This had been their position throughout the row over Reid's reappointment. Fisher himself was known to lay 'great stress upon the necessity of the High Commissioner being in the closest possible touch with the Commonwealth Cabinet' and had even suggested 'that the High Commissioner might resign if his Ministry goes out of power'.⁵ He was simply being candid when he told the press on 5 October: 'There is a Labor Government in power, and we consider it right that a member of the ruling party should hold the position. It is right that things should be thus'.⁶

In the event, Fisher's appointment was generally acceptable. Although one opposition member felt it unjustifiable 'For the Prime Minister to desert his office', there was little comment in Parliament and, according to one non-Labor member in

¹ CPD, lxxix, p. 6945; P. Weller (ed.), Federal Parliamentary Labor Party, Caucus Minutes (Carlton, 1975), i, pp. 426-27; AA: A2, 16/159, minute paper for Executive Council, 26 October 1915.

² Sydney Sun, 20 August 1915. Clippings of the newspaper reports referred to here can be found in AA: Prime Minister's Department; CRS A6252, Unregistered papers related to the High Commissioner's Office, 1915-33; item 1.

³ The press: Adelaide Register, 14 October 1915; Bulletin, 14 October 1915; the Leader of the Opposition: Argus, 7 October 1915.

⁴ Fisher in CPD, li, p. 3558.

⁵ Round Table, vi (1915-16), p. 340.

⁶ Age, 6 October 1915.

1918, 'the House was almost unanimous that he would render good service to the Commonwealth'.⁷ In some quarters, the decision was even regarded as a positive development. Round Table considered that 'the appointment of Mr Fisher is one to be welcomed very heartily', explaining:

Fortunately he is in the confidence of the Government which has appointed him. He will thus be in a position to convey from and to them confidential information on matters of importance. If he does this the status and usefulness of the office of High Commissioner might be greatly raised. When the Commonwealth Constitution was being discussed the position of High Commissioner was frequently described as a kind of high diplomatic office of peculiar importance in our loosely knit Empire. There is a chance that under Mr Fisher the office may be given a character which it has not previously possessed and one more like this pre-federation idea.⁸

Even Keith conceded that: 'The appointment of a Labour Minister... will for a time keep the Government and the High Commissioner in unity of thought'.⁹

Fisher therefore was far from retiring to a position that was generally perceived as merely administrative and ceremonial. He and others in the Labor Party had a clear view of the functions and importance of the High Commissioner, which had been frequently expressed and was well-known. But while acting consistently with party policy, Fisher also had personal motives for wishing to take up duties which, despite their importance, were still considerably less arduous than those of Party Leader and Prime Minister. He told Caucus that the reason for his retirement was the decline of his health over the past two years, but Senator Pearce later recorded: 'the increasing differences in the party was the general cause of Mr Fisher's retirement'.¹⁰ Whichever of these was uppermost is now difficult to tell. Certainly, Fisher confided to a former colleague in 1919: 'The bare fact is that I was more run

⁷ CPD, lxxix, p. 7088, 3 November 1915; lxxxvii, p. 9566.

⁸ Round Table, vi (1915-16), pp. 338, 340.

⁹ A.B. Keith, Imperial Unity and the Dominions (Oxford, 1916), pp. 546-57.

¹⁰ Weller, pp. 426-27; Pearce, p. 127.

down in health when I left the Commonwealth than my friends knew'.¹¹ But whatever his motives, with a large young family and no alternative income or special privileges as a former Prime Minister, Fisher was still dependent on public office for his livelihood.

If his motives were mixed, no one doubted his 'manifest integrity'.¹² Born on 29 August 1862, at Crosshouse, near Kilmaurs, Ayrshire, he was the second son in a presbyterian, working-class family, his father a coal miner, active in the local Labour movement. At the age of ten, Fisher himself went down the pit. In 1879, he was Secretary of the district branch of the Ayrshire Miners' Union. But with little chance of advance in Crosshouse, he and a brother emigrated to Australia, arriving in Queensland in 1885. There he easily found work, became active in the Labour movement and, in 1893, entered the Queensland Legislative Assembly. In 1901, he was elected to the first Commonwealth Parliament as the Labor member for Wide Bay. In August 1904, after earlier that year serving as Minister for Trade and Customs in Chris Watson's short-lived Labor government, he became Deputy Leader of the Party and, when Watson retired in 1907, was 'automatically elected leader'.¹³ By November 1908, he was Prime Minister and, in April 1910, giving 'the appearance of trust, competence and stability',¹⁴ led Labor to an electoral victory in which it became the first federal party to win an outright majority. That year, he represented the Commonwealth at the inauguration of the Union of South Africa and, in 1911, attended the Imperial Conference and the coronation of George V, and was made a Privy Councillor. He narrowly lost the 1913 election, but returned to the Premiership in September 1914 with another substantial majority.

¹¹ NLA: Fisher Papers, 1/507, Fisher to W. Higgs, 5 September 1919.

¹² L.F. Fitzhardinge, William Morris Hughes: A Political Biography, i (Sydney, 1964), p. 162. For Fisher's biography see Fitzhardinge, i and ii; ADB, viii, pp. 502-7; R.A. Broinowski, 'The First Five Prime Ministers of Australia', RAHSJ, xxxv (1949), pp. 81-116; John Malkin, Andrew Fisher (Darvell, 1980).

¹³ Fitzhardinge, i, p. 170.

¹⁴ ADB, viii, p. 505.

Unlike his contemporaries Hughes and Holman, Fisher was not gifted with great intellect or rhetorical skill and consequently has been patronised by some historians.¹⁵ But as a party leader, he overshadowed both Hughes and Holman, inspiring the confidence of the entire Labour movement and keeping it united. Although on the party's left, he was a cautious, moderate Prime Minister. In November 1915, Munro-Ferguson, while noting that 'he may not rival the retiring High Commissioner in the art of brilliant and persuasive oratory', commended 'his native shrewdness, untiring industry, and homely and effective speech'.¹⁶ In December he added:

Mr Fisher played with all his cards on the table and according to his own fixed rules. He was absorbed in his own opinions which are unchangeable. Nevertheless, such is his honesty and public spirit that it is always a pleasure to confer with him as a friend and as a Minister it was often useful to do so.¹⁷

Others praised his personal qualities. Charles Bean, the official war correspondent and historian, considered him 'a loyal friend and a straight good man - a rock in the midst of an oily muddy sea of politicians'.¹⁸ General Birdwood, the Commander of the AIF, felt 'he is such a real straight and good man in every way'.¹⁹

As early as 1913, the strain of leading an often fractious Party had begun to tell. Ill-health and pressure of work had already forced the retirement of Watson, the first leader, and such was the general stress of Australian political life that as Munro-Ferguson observed: 'several Labor Ministers obtained relief from it by death'.²⁰ The

¹⁵ eg. Scott, pp. 38-39; H.V. Evatt, Australian Labour Leader (Sydney, 1940/1979), refers to the Fisher-Hughes government.

¹⁶ PRO: CO 418/134/299, Munro-Ferguson to Colonial Secretary, 18 November 1915.

¹⁷ PRO: CO 418/134/5695, Munro-Ferguson to Colonial Secretary, 28 December 1915.

¹⁸ AWM: 3 DRL 606 (C.E.W Bean Papers), item 59, Diary, 11 September 1916.

¹⁹ NLA: MS 2823 (Sir Keith Murdoch Papers), series 21, W. Birdwood to Murdoch, 13 February 1918.

²⁰ PRO: CO 418/144/20563, Munro-Ferguson to Colonial Secretary, 17 March 1916. Amongst those who had served in Fisher's ministries, J.A. Arthur, E.L. Batchelor and J. Hutchison had found such 'relief'.

anxieties of wartime leadership, and the difficulty of maintaining unity amongst the State governments and within his own Party, brought further 'physical and mental overwork and worry'.²¹ According to Malcolm Shepherd, the Secretary of the Prime Minister's Department, 'after a few months he developed that tired feeling'.²² An official visit to New Zealand failed to restore him and increasingly he left day-to-day leadership to Hughes. During 1915, tension grew within the Party over financing the war and declining standards of living. The complete co-operation of the State governments remained elusive. The Federal government was also criticised for failing to stimulate recruitment. A Universal Service League demanded conscription for service overseas. But as far as the latter was concerned, Fisher told a trade union deputation that he was 'irrevocably opposed to conscription and was sure he could say his colleagues were [also]'.²³ The breaking point came on 2 September. At the behest of 'a strong section of the party',²⁴ he reneged on an agreement with the opposition to adjourn Parliament in order to introduce an amendment to the Arbitration Act. But as Fitzhardinge suggests, the drift of events had probably already convinced him that a time was approaching when he would no longer be able to maintain consensus in his Party.²⁵ According to one biographer, 'seeing the danger of splitting the Party over the issue' of conscription, he 'felt constrained to give up the leadership in favour of his deputy, William Morris Hughes, thinking that the Party would unite behind him and his support for conscription for armed service abroad'.²⁶

²¹ R. Garran, Prosper the Commonwealth (Sydney, 1958), p. 221. During Fisher's term, Garran was the Secretary of the Attorney-General's Department.

²² Shepherd, *Memoir*, p. 289. Shepherd was Fisher's private secretary and, afterwards, the Secretary of the Prime Minister's Department.

²³ Argus, 25 September 1915, quoted in Scott, p. 298.

²⁴ Pearce, p. 127.

²⁵ Fitzhardinge, ii, p. 40.

²⁶ Malkin, p. 15. No reference is given, but Malkin may have had access to family information.

Having made up his mind, he appeared to move as effortlessly to the High Commissionership as he had to the Party leadership, 'by a kind of right'²⁷ and with virtually no discussion within the Party. Donald Horne, however, asserts that he was pushed, on or soon after 2 September, after a quarrel with Hughes over the introduction of the Arbitration Amendment Bill:

resentment of years of Hughes's unreliable pushiness overwhelms him. His forthrightness breaks through his reticence and he threatens Hughes: he will never work with him again. The high commissionership in London is vacant: Hughes can resign, go to London and become high commissioner... Hughes says he won't go, and his bluff wins. Fisher gives in, and sends himself to London, leaving behind the story that he is tired and in ill-health.²⁸

In fact, little evidence remains to show how Fisher actually became High Commissioner, but without resort to elaborate conspiracy theories, Horne's version of events conflicts with the few facts that are known. The possibility remains, however, that Fisher's replacement by a more vigorous war leader was encouraged by some members of his Cabinet.

The question of Reid's successor had first come to the fore in December 1914, when Labor refused to reappoint him for more than twelve months. According to Shepherd, within 'a few months' of winning the September election, Fisher 'had visions of the High Commissionership'.²⁹ But Munro-Ferguson told Harcourt on Christmas Eve:

It is rumoured that Mr Fisher is not advanced enough for his Caucus, which would prefer Mr Hughes's leadership, and that Mr F[isher] would be High Commissioner. I do not believe that the P[rime] M[inister] has any desire to move, but he thinks that Mr H[ughes] is bound some day to be P[rime] M[inister] so may find a retreat in London expedient'.³⁰

²⁷ Scott, p. 43.

²⁸ Donald Horne, In Search of Billy Hughes (South Melbourne, 1979), p. 63.

²⁹ Shepherd, *Memoir*, p. 289.

³⁰ Bodleian: Harcourt Papers, 479/217-19, Munro-Ferguson to Harcourt, 24 December 1914.

Nevertheless, reports that Fisher might succeed Reid began to circulate, causing him to show 'signs of irritation'. He assured the Governor-General in April 1915 'that this was a pure fabrication'.³¹ Munro-Ferguson believed, however, that the reports 'may have received encouragement in Ministerial quarters'.

The subject was now being openly discussed in the press. The Sydney Sun thought that Hughes, Fisher and Hugh Mahon, the Minister of External Affairs, were the likely candidates, but was unimpressed with the latter two: 'To replace Sir George Reid with Mr Fisher would be humourous; while the appointment of Mr Mahon would overwhelm with importance a negligible politician'.³² Watson was soon also added to the list.³³ The Adelaide Register believed that, apart from Fisher, two other Ministers 'would not be averse to accepting the High Commissionership'.³⁴ But by August, the Melbourne Herald was in no doubt that Fisher would get the job and Munro-Ferguson, noting that 'Mr Fisher suffers from overstrain', commented: 'This may of itself relegate him to the Post of High Commissioner, but this has not yet been decided by the Caucus'.³⁵

The issue remained in doubt. Hughes told Parliament on 9 September that an announcement would be made in October.³⁶ On the same day, the Argus declared that 'despite persistent whispers', Caucus was still uncertain. The Sydney Daily Telegraph reported in October that there was opposition to Fisher becoming High Commissioner.³⁷ But Hugh Mahon insisted that nothing had been decided.³⁸ Cabinet

³¹ Ibid, 479/312-14, Munro-Ferguson to Harcourt, 13 April 1915; cf. 479/325-29, Munro-Ferguson to Harcourt, 13 May 1915.

³² Sydney Sun, 20 August 1915.

³³ Labor Call, 7 October 1915.

³⁴ Adelaide Advertiser, 4 October 1915.

³⁵ Melbourne Herald, 20 August 1915; PRO: CO 418/133/49110, Munro-Ferguson to Colonial Secretary, 24 August 1915.

³⁶ CPD, lxxviii, p. 6797, 9 September 1915.

³⁷ Argus, 9 September 1915; Sydney Daily Telegraph, 5 October 1915.

³⁸ Argus, 16 October 1915.

finally turned to the subject on 20 October. Even then, some Ministers were thought to oppose a reshuffle because they wanted Fisher to stay, but the appointment was at last agreed.³⁹ Munro-Ferguson finally reported to Whitehall in November: 'That Mr Fisher would retire from the position of Prime Minister to accept that of High Commissioner for Australia has been for many months a secret *de policinelle*. All attempts to make a mystery of it... failed to shake the conviction of those who had their information from the best sources that Mr Fisher's transference to another sphere of public duty was virtually cut and dried'.⁴⁰

What one actually makes of all this is far from clear. Fisher may, as Shepherd believed, have set his sights on London early and simply waited an appropriate moment. Munro-Ferguson, however, had great faith in his Prime Minister's candour⁴¹ and, until May, Fisher firmly contradicted all reports that he would become High Commissioner. Possibly a Hughesite faction, wishing a more vigorous war policy, encouraged rumours that Fisher was going to London. Equally possible, the left, fearing Hughes, resisted any change. George Lochran, a member of Fisher's Gympie branch, congratulated him even before the Cabinet had made its decision, but confided with some prescience: 'For my own part I would rather that you stay here as I am afraid the party will bust up'.⁴² Yet Hughes was the heir apparent and, as Fisher's health declined, a transfer to the High Commissionership must have become appealing. Whatever the pressure from a faction within the Party, it is unlikely that he needed to be pushed. This charge seems to have first been made in the feverish atmosphere after Hughes had split the Party. Ferricks, a Queensland Labor Senator, asserted on 9 February 1917 that Fisher had been 'jockeyed out by the present Prime

³⁹ *Age*, 21 October 1915; *Argus*, 22 and 23 October 1915.

⁴⁰ PRO: CO 418/134/299, Munro-Ferguson to Colonial Secretary, 18 November 1915.

⁴¹ Bodleian: Harcourt Papers, 479/169-74, Munro-Ferguson to Harcourt, 26 October 1914.

⁴² NLA: Fisher Papers, 1/180, G. Lochran to Fisher, 18 October 1915.

Minister',⁴³ but the pro-conscriptionist, Thomas Givens, who had moved the vote of thanks for Fisher's services in Caucus, told him in May: 'Now of course you know that is not true and is entirely undeserved'.⁴⁴

(ii) Fisher and Hughes

Fisher's translation to London was evidence of the powerful forces slowly rending the Australian Labor Party and breaking up the pre-war consensus about national goals and aspirations which had carried Labor to government federally in 1910 and, by 1915, in every State but Victoria. But Fisher's High Commissionership fell victim to the same sea change in Australian politics and society. More immediately, Fisher suffered at the hands of Hughes's idiosyncratic leadership, from his personal unease in London, and from the inexorable decline of his health. His term is notable then for both its impact upon the High Commissionership and for what it signified in the wider history of the Commonwealth.

Hughes had been the outstanding member of Fisher's Cabinet. Between October 1915 and the election of 1922 he dominated public life and played a particularly active role in external relations. His position was strengthened, especially after the break with Labour, by the apparent docility of his Cabinets, by an 'inability to delegate work or responsibility to others' (which, according to his biographer became 'morbid'),⁴⁵ and by his tendency to rely on individuals whose loyalties were to him personally rather than to the government. He was also a fervent imperialist. Almost as soon as he assumed the Prime Ministership, he accepted an invitation to visit Britain and, between March and June 1916, made a triumphant tour, consulting

⁴³ CPD, lxxxi, p. 10387, 9 February 1917.

⁴⁴ NLA: Fisher Papers, 1/347-49, Thomas Givens to Fisher, 30 May 1917.

⁴⁵ Fitzhardinge, ii, p. 268.

with the Imperial government on matters as diverse as the conduct of the war, the use of Australian troops, the German colonies in the Pacific, and trade and finance. He also barnstormed through the country, advocating a chauvinistic policy of post-war imperial economic development.

Despite the Labour movement's growing opposition, he also became convinced of the necessity of introducing conscription in Australia. Returning in August, he persuaded Caucus to hold a referendum on the subject. The campaign was bitter. By the eve of the poll, four Ministers had resigned. In September, Hughes himself was expelled from the New South Wales branch of the Party. He retaliated by portraying his opponents as anarcho-syndicalists, pro-Germans and Sinn-Feiners. One pro-conscription advertisement, purported to be a declaration from the Kaiser that he had decided to 'award the Iron Cross to all my ever faithful supporters who will vote "No"'.⁴⁶ But on 28 October conscription was narrowly rejected, and on 14 November Hughes and twenty-four others walked out of the Labor Party, forming a minority government supported by the opposition. Against this background, Fisher passed his first year as High Commissioner.

Munro-Ferguson had immediately seen that in England Hughes would overshadow Fisher. On 25 November 1915, he told Lord Stamfordham, the King's Private Secretary:

It is no doubt hard on Mr Fisher, the new High Commissioner, that his successor should follow so hard on his heels to London. Yet - much as I like and admire Mr Fisher as a courageous, honourable man - I cannot regret this, since Mr Fisher is too full set in his opinions and too restricted in his views to meet present emergencies with sufficient elasticity. In Mr Hughes there are the makings of a great War Minister.⁴⁷

In fact, Hughes's relations with Fisher had never been particularly close.⁴⁸ Holman, the New South Wales Premier (who was expelled from the Labor Party at

⁴⁶ Quoted in Evatt, p. 311.

⁴⁷ NLA: MS 696 (Novar Papers), ff. 192-93, Munro-Ferguson to Stamfordham, 25 November 1915.

⁴⁸ Clark, v, p. 283.

the same time as Hughes), wrote of Fisher during his second term: he 'had already begun to be, what he always remained, a conscientious puppet in the hands of abler men than himself'.⁴⁹ Fitzhardinge, while considering that Holman exaggerated, suggests that Hughes came 'to entertain [for Fisher], in private, a kind of amused tolerance, only occasionally tinged with irritation'.⁵⁰

In England, Hughes 'chose to bypass Fisher almost completely, except for official functions'⁵¹ and did not involve him in his dealings with the British authorities. Already he may have sensed a rift over their attitudes to Australia's contribution to the war. But they agreed about the importance of Dominion participation in imperial policy-making and Fisher appears to have been reconciled to a secondary role, at least for the duration of Hughes's visit. Characteristically, he told Pearce that he thought Hughes's policy regarding German holdings in British companies might be 'qualified', but otherwise there are no signs of tension between the two.⁵²

While in England, Hughes had also depended for publicity and introductions on Keith Murdoch, an Australian journalist who ran the cable service for a group of Australian newspapers. According to Fitzhardinge, he was 'Patriotic, ambitious and with energy to match Hughes's own'.⁵³ He had visited Gallipoli and achieved prominence by writing to Fisher, while the latter was still Prime Minister, violently criticising the conduct of the campaign. The letter eventually came to the attention of the British government and gained him entree to political circles in England. After Hughes returned to Australia, he organised the pro-conscription campaign amongst

⁴⁹ Quoted in Fitzhardinge, i, p. 252.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 252-53.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, ii, p. 74.

⁵² AWM: Pearce Papers, 7/91, Fisher to Pearce, 9 March 1916. Cf. also 3/91, Fisher to Pearce, 3 June 1916. For Fisher on consultation see section three below.

⁵³ Fitzhardinge, ii, p. 75.

the soldiers ^{and} acted as the Prime Minister's go-between with Lloyd George.⁵⁴ In September 1917, Hughes assured him: 'you are doing public work - great public work - you know that when I want a thing done I cable you about it'.⁵⁵ A Colonial Office official later commented dryly: 'Mr Murdoch is we have always understood Mr Hughes's alter ego... the mouthpiece of the Prime Minister of the C[ommon]w[ealth]'.⁵⁶ As Bean noted: 'Many of the matters referred by Hughes to Murdoch, or vica^q versa, were really in the province of the High Commissioner',⁵⁷ but much of Murdoch's value lay in his partisanship and independence of the official bureaucracy. Nevertheless, his intrigues eventually came to be resented.⁵⁸

Bean also commented upon 'the sad gradual collapse of Andrew Fisher's mental powers'.⁵⁹ The illness has never been properly identified, although possibly it was Alzheimer's disease. Murdoch described it as 'a sort of nervous tiredness, rather serious and necessitating rest'.⁶⁰ But Fisher was also palpably out of place in London. With little formal education and socially rooted to the Scottish working class, in 1911 he was the first Labor Prime Minister seen in England, an object of curiosity and the despair of Reid, who vainly attempted to persuade him to wear full court dress at the coronation.⁶¹ Between him and Harcourt there had been complete incomprehension, requiring Shepherd 'on many occasions... to smooth things out'.⁶²

⁵⁴ C.E.W. Bean, The AIF in France 1918, part 1 (Sydney, 1937), pp. 6-8.

⁵⁵ NLA: Murdoch Papers, item 33, Hughes to Murdoch, 3 September 1917.

⁵⁶ PRO: CO 532/111/45113, minute, H. L[ambert], 10 September 1918.

⁵⁷ Bean, The AIF in France 1918, part 1, pp. 7.

⁵⁸ eg. Wiltshire Record Office (WRO): MS 947 (Walter Long Papers); folder 534, Birdwood to H. Batterbee, 10 June 1918. Cf. also ADB, x, p. 623.

⁵⁹ Bean, AIF in France 1918, part 1, p. 7.

⁶⁰ NLA: Ms 1538 (W.M. Hughes Papers); series 16, ff. 1906-9, Murdoch to Hughes, 18 January 1918. The suggestion of Alzheimer's disease is based on private information.

⁶¹ Bodleian: Harcourt Papers, 465/65-66, Reid to Harcourt, 'Monday, 27th 1911'; 465/69-70, Reid to Fisher, 19 April 1911.

⁶² Shepherd, Memoir, p. 223.

He was even less at ease in an imperial capital braced for total war. The Times later doubted whether 'he was ever really happy at Australia House'⁶³ and Munro-Ferguson soon heard 'some criticism of the High Commissioner', but explained to Stamfordham: 'it is his self-consciousness that sometimes causes a queer twist to his speech and action. The King has in him a loyal if pernicky subject'.⁶⁴ Fisher himself told Pearce: 'I have had a skirmish here and there since I took up duty. The old boys are unchanged by war conditions. Some of them are unchangeable'.⁶⁵ In August 1916, he complained of the 'craddled and cruddled' English politicians.⁶⁶ But his personal limitations also impaired his usefulness. Hughes complained in September 1917: 'Fisher doesn't seem to have the entree anywhere & his influence is negligible, at least I fear so'.⁶⁷ But by this time, Fisher had been isolated by events in Australia. Murdoch replied:

You are rather severe on Fisher. He has not been a shining success as High Commissioner because he has no social qualities, and does not understand what social qualities are. But he is a straight-going and honest Australian, and expresses Australian sentiment better than Reid did. He has a certain following here with the public... I am quite sure he has his old belief in you but he is afraid, and feels rather out of his depth.⁶⁸

The breakdown of relations between Fisher and Hughes did not occur through any single event but rather the steady accumulation of personal and political tensions since Fisher had become High Commissioner. His acceptance, in September 1916, of a place on the committee appointed to investigate the Dardanelles campaign without first obtaining the consent of the government, was an initial false step.⁶⁹ The

⁶³ Times, 23 October 1928.

⁶⁴ NLA: Novar Papers, ff. 207-9, Munro-Ferguson to Stamfordham, 25 April 1916.

⁶⁵ AWM: Pearce Papers, 7/43, Fisher to Pearce, 24 February 1916.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 3/50, Fisher to Pearce, 11 August 1916.

⁶⁷ NLA: Murdoch Papers, folder 33, Hughes to Murdoch, 3 September 1917.

⁶⁸ NLA: Hughes Papers, 20/343-45, Murdoch to Hughes, 22 November 1917.

⁶⁹ Age, 31 July 1916.

Commonwealth had not been properly consulted about the committee's establishment and officially dissociated itself.⁷⁰ Fisher's acceptance was therefore an embarrassment and placed Fisher personally in an anomalous position. In the event, the government permitted his participation, but only 'on [the] distinct understanding [that]... you cannot be regarded as representative of the Commonwealth on [the] Commission'.⁷¹ This was also 'not to be regarded as involving [the] Commonwealth [as being] in any way responsible [for] the Commission'.⁷² Henceforth, Fisher was punctilious in referring matters back to Melbourne.⁷³

The conscription referendum was also of itself not the occasion for an open and dramatic break. During the 1914 election campaign, Fisher had made a pledge to 'stand beside our own... to our last man and our last shilling',⁷⁴ which long afterwards rang in his ears. According to Fitzhardinge: 'There was no question that Fisher willed the end: whether he would also will the means, if this meant falling out with old and trusted colleagues, was less certain'.⁷⁵ But his reluctance as Prime Minister to promote a vigorous recruiting campaign may also have masked an ambivalence about the lengths to which Australia could reasonably be expected to go. 'I am almost unhappy,' he told Pearce in August 1916, about criticism of 'what Australia has done and will be willing to do. It has done its bit in its own way. It has done that well'.⁷⁶ To conscription he remained resolutely opposed, telling the press in Paris: 'There has

⁷⁰ NLA: Fisher Papers, 1/216-17, Pearce to Fisher, 26 July 1916.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 7/3, Pearce to Fisher, 24 July 1916.

⁷² PRO: Colonial Office; CO 616, Dominions, War of 1914-18, Original Correspondence 1914-19, vol. 55, ff. 36049, Governor-General to Colonial Secretary, 30 July 1916.

⁷³ Melbourne *Herald*, 20 October 1920. For an example of Fisher's punctiliousness, see the question of leasing space to the British Government in Australia House, AA: High Commissioner's Office; AA1973/362, Miscellaneous Correspondence 1912-53; 405/16/4, 'Australia House - Office of Works - Inland Revenue'.

⁷⁴ Neville Meaney (ed), *Australia and the World* (Melbourne, 1983), doc. 108.

⁷⁵ Fitzhardinge, ii, p. 40.

⁷⁶ AWM: Pearce Papers, 3/50, Fisher to Pearce, 11 August 1916.

never been any question of conscription',⁷⁷ His views had not changed when in September 1916 he crossed the Channel to organise the vote amongst the AIF. Bean recorded in his diary:

Curiously he is entirely opposed to conscription in Australia. He told me that the thought of it some times took away his nights rest. He thought it would lead to bloodshed in Queensland.⁷⁸

Of its probable effect upon Labour, he also could not have any doubt. One of his correspondents was 'sure it will throw the party back five or perhaps ten years'.⁷⁹ William Higgs, the new Treasurer, felt that: 'If unhappily the question is forced on the Parliament, our Labor Party will go into opposition for many years'.⁸⁰

Yet, like many Labour moderates, Fisher's opposition to conscription was quite distinct from his attitude to the war. He told Australian reporters in London that his object as High Commissioner was 'to do everything in Australia's interests to help in the war, and to explain to Britain that we are backing her up to the utmost'⁸¹ and assured George V 'that Australians had only one thought and that was to co-operate with him in this great struggle to a successful issue'.⁸² Even in 1918, after two years of political tumult had left the Labour movement prostrate, he told Walter Long, the Colonial Secretary: 'There is and can be no doubt of the united desire to serve our respective countries in the most terrible crisis of its history'.⁸³

Importantly, he could also shelter behind the convention of non-partisanship established by Reid. This was perfectly legitimate even if he had accepted office on

⁷⁷ Bean, AIF in France 1916, p. 9.

⁷⁸ AWM: Bean Papers, item 60, Diary, 29 September 1916.

⁷⁹ NLA: Fisher Papers, 1/195, George Gardiner to Fisher, 14 February 1916.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 1/203, William Higgs to Fisher, 11 May 1916.

⁸¹ Argus, 2 February 1916.

⁸² AA: A2, 16/159, telegram to Minister of External Affairs, n. d.

⁸³ PRO: Colonial Office; CO 687, Dominions (War of 1914-18): Trade, Original Correspondence, 1916-19; vol. 47, f. 24539, Fisher to Walter Long, 10 June 1918.

the basis of his political sympathy with Labor. The government had then possessed a clear electoral mandate; collaboration with it was quite different from interfering in a question being put to a popular vote. Conventions of impartiality also cut both ways. On 14 November 1916, the day the ministry broke up, the Minister of External Affairs commented with respect to the provision of news to the men at the front: 'Of course, one cannot expect the office to do as a private organisation would and give expression to views about Party matters. Perhaps it is as well that we should keep our internal matters for home consumption as far as possible'.⁸⁴

As High Commissioner, Fisher was responsible for arranging the vote amongst the troops.⁸⁵ In early October, he assured Hughes that he would 'do all that is possible to carry out your wishes' and asked to be kept 'fully advised'.⁸⁶ On 4 October, he received a message signed by Hughes, but inspired by the editor of the Sydney Sun: 'Barton, Watson, Cook, Deakin, myself agreed sign appeal [to the] Australian people [to] support national government proposals [in] this unprecedented crisis also urge you [to] sign and make appeal from all prime ministers'.⁸⁷ Fisher had already been taken to task once for trespassing 'on ground forbidden to a High Commissioner' by telling The Times that he was in favour of greater federal power, the Argus declaring: 'he is not entitled to speak in support of the Australian Labor Conference's programme'.⁸⁸ Now he returned a brief but simple reply: 'Cable received with best wishes, am unable to sign, position forbids'.⁸⁹ Hughes probably did not even expect an affirmative response and it is unlikely that the episode, as the

⁸⁴ AA: A461, N348/1/2, Minister of External Affairs to Fisher, 14 November 1916.

⁸⁵ NLA: Fisher Papers, 1/236-37, Hughes to Fisher, 2 September 1916; 1/243, Fisher to Lord Derby, 8 September 1916.

⁸⁶ NLA: Hughes Papers, 20/68, Fisher to Hughes, 6 October 1916.

⁸⁷ NLA: Fisher Papers, 1/238, Hughes to Fisher, 4 October 1916. For the origins of the cable see NLA: Hughes Papers, 20/260.

⁸⁸ Argus, 1 February 1916; Times, 31 January 1916.

⁸⁹ NLA: Hughes Papers, 20/75, Fisher to Hughes, 4 October 1916.

Australian Dictionary of Biography suggests, led him to transfer his confidence to Murdoch.⁹⁰ Apart from his remarks to Bean, Fisher avoided making any public statement about his views. In August, he told Pearce: 'I find it difficult to divest my mind of political ideas and many times I have with difficulty been able to restrain a strong impulse to say something'.⁹¹ The pro-conscriptionist, Senator Givens, commented in November: 'I note you say you must not talk politics now on account of your official position'.⁹²

Fisher's official neutrality contrasted sharply with the activities of Murdoch and the Agents-General. In September, Holman instructed Sir Timothy Coghlan to urge Bonar Law, Lloyd George and John Redmond to make concessions in Ireland in order to appease the Irish vote in Australia, which, since the Easter Rising, was believed to be disaffected and anti-conscriptionist.⁹³ When Hughes decided to hold a second referendum on 20 December 1917, Murdoch contacted Frederick Young, the South Australian Agent-General:

Another conscription campaign is on us at once. It is to be a lightning stroke, and we require efforts of all stalwarts over here. Do you think you could come to a meeting, confidential and select, at Mr Robinson's office... when we hope to arrange for a campaign amongst the soldiers?⁹⁴

Fisher was aloof from such cabals. From the relative detachment of London, he also hoped that conscription would not permanently divide Labour, and when it accomplished just that, failed to manifest the same bitterness as those who remained within the Party. On 11 August 1916, before Hughes had shown his hand, he told

⁹⁰ ADB, viii, p. 507.

⁹¹ AWM: Pearce Papers, 3/50, Fisher to Pearce, 11 August 1916.

⁹² NLA: Fisher Papers, 1/269-71, T. Givens to Fisher, 22 November 1916.

⁹³ NLA: MS 6335 (Sir Timothy Coghlan Papers), folder 10, Holman to Coghlan, 19 and 28 September 1916.

⁹⁴ NLA: Murdoch Papers, series 33, Murdoch to F. Young, 8 November 1917. Robinson was the Queensland Agent-General.

Pearce: 'Here the news we get of Australia is suggesting of discontent and division in the ranks of the Labor Party... If there is division I hope it is not deeper than a difference of opinion. The motto for the times is "Steady Boys Steady" '.⁹⁵ In October, he expressed his 'wholehearted wish that the friends of many fights for right may not be driven apart for the rest of their lives'⁹⁶ and told Givens that conscription was 'merely an ephemeral and passing issue'.⁹⁷ Even after the referendum, and later, the collapse of the government, he sought to place the national interest above party loyalty, writing to Pearce on 7 November:

I cannot express my feelings of regret at the turn affairs have taken in Australia. My hope was when the friends of the people for the second time fell upon each other and went into the political wilderness for a long time that I should never see another trouble of this kind... I write in hopes that the safety and progress of the Com[monwea]ll[th] will not suffer on account of strong party feeling... Our men have earned an honourable name by their valour in the field. I ask no more of those who stay behind, whatever their difference of opinion on political matters than this that the national interests of the Commonwealth may have first and final consideration in this great world crisis.⁹⁸

In the New Year, he added sadly, but with no obvious rancour: 'Bad as the conditions are they might have been worse. The danger signal has been passed with the blinds down rather daringly but the worst that happened seems to be a severe shaking, "a 'througher" as the Scots say: which in plain English meaning that they will never be the same to each other again'.⁹⁹ The anxiety caused by events in Australia took further toll on his health. He told Pearce: 'I rather think the situation in Australia disturbed me worse than it did those in the thick of the strife', adding: 'I have not been idle nor unduly happy, but some progress has been made'.¹⁰⁰ Word soon filtered

⁹⁵ AWM: Pearce Papers, 3/50, Fisher to Pearce, 11 August 1916.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 7/92, Fisher to Pearce, 9 October 1916.

⁹⁷ NLA: Fisher Papers, 1/269-71, Givens to Fisher, 22 November 1916.

⁹⁸ AWM: Pearce Papers, 7/93, Fisher to Pearce, 7 November 1916.

⁹⁹ Ibid., Fisher to Pearce, 8 January 1917.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

through to Birdwood that the High Commissioner was 'looking tired and overworked'. With unconscious irony, he invited him to 'come over and see us again, and have a bit of a rest here'.¹⁰¹

Given his hope of November 1916 that 'the national interests of the Commonwealth may have first and final consideration', the attempt to introduce conscription and formation of a 'National Labour' government probably did not do irreparable damage to Fisher's relations with the Ministry. The unfolding of events in 1917 and Hughes's increasingly cavalier treatment of him and the London office, however, finally seems to have caused a permanent rupture.

On 17 February 1917, after a month of fitful negotiations, the 'national Labour' MPs merged with the Liberal opposition to form a composite Nationalist Ministry. On 5 May, the new party won a landslide electoral victory. But this triumph failed to check the rising tide of industrial unrest, which in August 1917 turned in New South Wales into a 'general' strike which soon affected the entire country. At the beginning of November, Hughes announced that he would put a reworded conscription proposal to the people. He also said that without conscription he would be unable to carry on the government. But when on 20 December the proposal was again rejected, he first procrastinated and then resigned only for the Governor-General to recommission him in January 1918. The previous year had been one of unprecedented political and industrial turmoil. In each conflict, Hughes and his supporters had depicted their opponents as revolutionaries and criminal extremists, disloyal both to Australia and the Empire. During the August strikes the New South Wales government had even gone to the lengths of issuing a proclamation which declared: 'A great conspiracy has been fomenting (*sic.*) for the past two years to prevent Australia rendering further assistance to Great Britain and her Allies. Every striker is playing a game for Disloyalists'.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ NLA: Fisher Papers, 1/298, Birdwood to Fisher, 2 February 1917.

¹⁰² Evatt, p. 334.

Fisher's discomfort was almost complete. In January 1918, he told Bean sadly: 'Things are going all wrong out there'.¹⁰³ Although he had expected that there would be a small majority in favour of conscription in the second referendum,¹⁰⁴ he did not believe that compulsion was enforceable and thought that there would have been 'terrible trouble if the bill had been passed'.¹⁰⁵ He was also hostile to coalitions of any sort, insisting in January 1918 that they were 'not straight'.¹⁰⁶ But he was conscious of a deeper change in Australia. Bean recorded:

It is a very big worry to him I can see; and to Mrs Fisher, too, he says. He can see that the Australian Govt instead of getting the anti-conscriptionists on the right side (as it would do by putting them in power) is making them (almost forcing them to become) more and more hostile to the war and the old country.¹⁰⁷

He had already begun to seek political news, but Josiah Thomas, who had chosen to follow Hughes, wrote patronisingly: 'I want to give you a bit of advice... and that is do not worry about the political situation here. All your worry cannot alter what is here just now [sic.]. But just [attend] (as I know you will) to your duties as H[igh] C[ommissioner]'.¹⁰⁸ The tone of those who had remained in the Party was altogether different. D.C. McGrath wrote from AIF Headquarters in London, referring to the coming election: 'Andrew it makes my heart ache to think about it'.¹⁰⁹ Others believed that things would have been different had Fisher stayed in Australia. W.H. Demain wrote on Christmas day 1916: 'If Andy Fisher had still been prime minister this ordeal would not have had to be faced. We would never have had this attempt to

¹⁰³ AWM: Bean Papers, item 96, Diary, 24 January 1918.

¹⁰⁴ NLA: Murdoch Papers, series 21, Murdoch to Birdwood, 27 December 1917.

¹⁰⁵ AWM: Bean Papers, item 96, Diary, 24 January 1918.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ NLA: Fisher Papers, 1/292-94, J. Thomas to Fisher, 2 January 1917.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 1/307-8, D.C. McGrath to Fisher, 8 March 1917.

force conscription on a free people. And I believe them and the one regret is that your health should have failed at such a critical moment'.¹¹⁰ Others wanted him to come home. William Maloney, the Member for Melbourne, wrote on 12 November 1917: 'No man is wished for and prayed for his return equal to yourself'.¹¹¹

Hughes himself showed no rancour towards his High Commissioner. On the eve of the first referendum, he wrote, giving an account of the campaign and confiding that he was not hopeful of success: 'I think of you often in the great world remote from this dear Australia of ours & envy you'.¹¹² But feelings cooled, particularly on Fisher's side. In London, he had become a Shakespearian ghost, a reproach to Hughes for splitting the Labor Party. In September 1917, the latter complained to Murdoch: 'Fisher is evidently hostile to me personally. He has not sent me a line even officially since I left England'.¹¹³ Official relations also deteriorated. As early as December 1916, it was evident to the Imperial authorities that there was little confidence between the High Commissioner and the government. When the Treasury contemplated telling the Commonwealth that it would have to borrow any further money it required for public works in the United States, Bonar Law did 'not think that any useful purpose would be served by a discussion with Mr Fisher; any communication should be sent to Mr Hughes'.¹¹⁴ The Governor-General wrote to Walter Long on 14 May 1917: 'I have kept off the subject of Mr Fisher, but I imagine that he was not considered much in sympathy with the Government in the recent crisis, and he is supposed to be somewhat in favour with the Labor Caucus Party'.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1/286-90, W.H. Demain to Fisher, 25 December 1916.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1/384-86, W. Maloney to Fisher, 12 November 1917. Also see 1/359, Finlayson to Fisher, 29 June 1917 and 1/373-373a, F. Tudor to Fisher, 15 August 1917.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 1/251, Hughes to Fisher, 26 October 1916.

¹¹³ NLA: Murdoch Papers, series 33, Hughes to Murdoch, 3 September 1917.

¹¹⁴ PRO: T1/12051/17373 [2299], minute, Davison to Chalmers and Bradbury, 12 December [1916].

¹¹⁵ WRO: Long Papers, folder 624, Munro-Ferguson to Long, 14 May 1917.

The growing rift between the High Commissioner and the government became obvious at the beginning of 1917 when Hughes realised that he would be unable to attend the Imperial Conference summoned by Lloyd George soon after he became Prime Minister. Labor and Liberal Senators suggested that Fisher might attend in his place. Even Murdoch felt that the 'High Commissioner would carry more weight than an ordinary Minister'.¹¹⁶ But the government rejected the idea, Munro-Ferguson explaining to Long:

I doubt whether he [Hughes] gave it much consideration. What is certain is that Mr Fisher, despite his excellent character and varied experience, is not well-qualified by mental capacity or freedom from prejudice to act on an Imperial Conference. He sees through blinkers, is governed by catchwords and bound by the rules of Trades Unions and the fiats of Political Labour Leagues.¹¹⁷

During 1918, the estrangement deepened. When Hughes arrived to attend the Imperial War Cabinet, he was reported to have: 'instantly demanded that all cables to Mr Fisher should be submitted directly to him'.¹¹⁸ Fisher himself saw little of Hughes and his contribution to the visit mainly consisted in assisting his wife.¹¹⁹ But he also kept aloof and was deeply suspicious.¹²⁰ In June, The Times reported that Hughes was planning to transfer Fisher to the new post of Australian Commissioner in the United States. Hughes actually intended appointing a businessman, but Fisher believed the story, telling his wife: 'There is much evidence of a game being played to get me to go to America at an early date as High C[ommissioner] in the United

¹¹⁶ CPD, lxxxi, Ferricks, O'Keefe and McDougall for Labor (pp. 10387, 10684, 10785); Bakhap and Keating for the Liberals 9pp. 10930, 10965); NLA: Hughes papers, 16/2578, Murdoch to Hughes, n.d.

¹¹⁷ WRO: Long Papers, folder 624, Munro-Ferguson to Long, 14 May 1917; Times, 8 March 1917.

¹¹⁸ Sydney Sun, 24 October 1920; see also, D.C. McGrath in CPD, lxxxvii, p. 9607, 17 December 1918.

¹¹⁹ NLA: Fisher Papers, Add. material, box 2, Fisher to Margaret Fisher, 18 June 1918; 1/451, Fisher to Birdwood, 24 July 1918.

¹²⁰ AA: CP 317/8, bundle 1, Hughes to Fisher, 24 November 1920.

States'.¹²¹ The transformation of perceptions of the former Prime Minister was now complete. In June, Munro-Ferguson counted him 'amongst [the] Labour fanatics'.¹²²

(iii) Fisher as High Commissioner

Despite his alienation from the government, Fisher did not lose sight of the larger issues or neglect his duties as High Commissioner. On the question of imperial consultation, he had stood firmly in the Deakinite tradition of Prime Ministers who wanted Australia's views taken into account when the Imperial government considered matters affecting its interests. In this respect, he was far closer to Hughes than many of the conservatives who reluctantly followed him after 1916. In November 1918, Hughes scarified the British government for failing to consult the Dominions about the armistice terms. He cabled to Australia that the Imperial War Cabinet was 'a farce and sham'.¹²³ Fisher himself commented to his wife:

The failure to include a Dominion Representative at the Council which prescribed the terms of surrender (or rather the conditions of armistice) is very regrettable and cannot be repaired by subsequent concessions. The great point missed was the place of the growing Dominions in future Empire difficulties. The world war was a rare opportunity to introduce them either collectively by one Representative - settled by themselves, or one Representative from each Dominion [at the Allied Council].¹²⁴

Later, he welcomed the attendance of the Australians at Versailles: 'For the first time in the history of the Empire the Dominions have been recognised, in their relationship to foreign powers as, at any rate, of equal political status with the United

¹²¹ Times, 11 June 1918; NLA: Fisher Papers, 1/447, Fisher to Margaret Fisher, 11 June 1918.

¹²² WRO: Long Papers, folder 625, Munro-Ferguson to Long, 18 June 1918.

¹²³ Fitzhardinge, ii, p. 357.

¹²⁴ NLA: Fisher Papers, 1/482, Fisher to Margaret Fisher, 7 November 1918. For Fisher on Imperial consultation generally see Round Table, vi (1915-16), p. 339.

Kingdom'.¹²⁵ About the importance of immigration and trade in the post-war development of Australia he also agreed with Hughes.¹²⁶

As High Commissioner, he was guided by the same principles which had inspired him as a trade unionist and Labor politician. His functions and responsibilities were essentially the same as those of his predecessor, relating to finance, trade, shipping and the welfare of Australians abroad, including munitions workers, prisoners of war and, of course, the armed services. To this was added attendance at a plethora of committees and imperial bodies. Apart from the Dardanelles Committee, he sat on the Pacific Cable Board, the Empire Cotton Committee, the Committee on Wool Production, the Imperial War Graves Commission, the Committee on Flax Production, the Imperial Institute, the Imperial College of Science and Technology, the Australian Wheat Committee and, from February 1917, the Empire Settlement Committee, which was eventually to prepare a scheme for post-war immigration within the Empire.¹²⁷ Such was the burden that, in April 1917, he excused himself from membership of a sub-committee of the Settlement Committee, telling Lord Tennyson, the Chairman: 'the truth is that the number of committees with which I am officially connected at the present time is such that when the almost daily requirements of the Dardanelles Committee are superimposed, it leaves me little time for my other pressing duties'.¹²⁸ Later that year, Murdoch observed that Fisher was 'always at his desk'.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ AA: Prime Minister's Department; CRS A458, correspondence series, 1923-34; F108/8, part 5, High Commissioner's Annual Report, 1918, pp. 3-4.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, F108/8, part 3, Annual Report 1916, p. 10; part 5, Annual Report 1917, p. 57; *Argus*, 2 February 1916.

¹²⁷ AA: A458, F108/8, part 5, Annual Report 1917, p. 4; PRO: CO 532/91/6463, Governor-General to Colonial Secretary, 3 February 1917.

¹²⁸ AA: High Commissioner's Office; A2910, Correspondence Series, 1918-1960; file 417/4/4, part 1, Fisher to Tennyson, 17 April 1917.

¹²⁹ NLA: Hughes Papers, 20/343-45, Murdoch to Hughes, 22 November 1917.

Like Reid, his primary concern was the welfare of the AIF. He told Australian reporters when he arrived in England: 'After my official calls my first business will be to visit, with my wife, the Australians in the various hospitals, depots, and camps'.¹³⁰ In June 1916, he toured the front with Hughes and established a warm relationship with Birdwood, with whom he stayed in touch. Birdwood, for his part, regularly sent a representative to consult with him.¹³¹ In 1916, an arrangement was reached whereby the War Office would deal directly with the officer commanding AIF Headquarters in London rather than the High Commissioner, but the latter continued to take a personal interest in AIF affairs, the activities of the Red Cross and the welfare of Australian prisoners of war.¹³² In 1917, he visited Berne, where Australian prisoners released from Germany had been interned, and had their camp moved to a lower altitude.¹³³ His most important intervention, however, was in April 1916, when he insisted that, with the redeployment of the AIF to France, the main Australian base should be transferred to England. In September, he told Mahon that the British plan to transport the Australian wounded to Egypt via Marsailles:

seemed to me so entirely opposed both to the safety and welfare of our soldiers and to my conception of the views of the Com[munonwea]l[th] Government that I immediately denounced it as an unexpected outrage and asked for a place in the home of their fathers where they would have reasonable comfort and a fair chance of recovery. After great pressure Salisbury Plains or nothing was the offer. I accepted the former and you know the result.¹³⁴

But he assured Pearce, the Minister for Defence, that he had no wish to meddle:

¹³⁰ Argus, 2 February 1916.

¹³¹ NLA: Fisher Papers, 1/234-35, Birdwood to Fisher, 1 September 1916, and correspondence in series 1, passim. I have been unable to locate any of Fisher's correspondence in the Birdwood Papers at the AWM.

¹³² AWM: Pearce Papers, 3/50, Fisher to Pearce, 11 August 1916; AA: A461, N348/1/2, Fisher to Minister of External Affairs, 8 September 1916; PRO: Colonial Office; CO 693, Dominions (War of 1914-18); Prisoners, Original Correspondence, 1916-19; vol. 8, f. 12851, Fisher to Long, 12 March 1918, about Australian prisoners in Turkey; Bean, AIF in France 1916, p. 155.

¹³³ AA: A458, F108/8, part 4, Annual Report 1917, pp. 4-5.

¹³⁴ AA: A461, N348/1/2, Fisher to Mahon, 8 September 1916; Bean, AIF in France 1916, pp. 152-55.

Everywhere and at all times I maintain that there is no authority above you in directing our military forces other than in action or in movements that precede or follow them. I mention this so that you may put me right on the matter. I do not intervene when I can avoid doing so. But there are times when it would be nothing short of cowardice to stand by and see injury done and... our own soldiers placed at a disadvantage or put in a false position.¹³⁵

Yet despite these assurances, and probably influenced by Murdoch, he did sometimes interfere. In early 1917, he and Murdoch told General Brudenell White that the men on leave were complaining that the AIF was being expected to do too much fighting.¹³⁶ In July, at the same time as Murdoch, he urged Hughes to bring pressure on the British government to form the Australian divisions into a single army officered by Australians.¹³⁷ In 1918, he became involved in Murdoch's intrigue to remove Birdwood from the general command and replace him with White. During a meeting with Birdwood, he became 'enraged and spoke contemptuously of [General] Monash'.¹³⁸ This, however, was the extent of his interference.

With respect to government borrowing, he continued to seek Exchequer support for the policies he had advocated as Prime Minister. The Commonwealth eventually floated four loans in London for State public works under the terms of Hughes's 1915 agreement with the States. The actual negotiation and flotation of the loans were carried out by the Commonwealth Bank and the stockbrokers, R. Nivison and Co., but it was Fisher's responsibility to obtain the Exchequer's consent. This was far from automatic. In July 1916, he induced the Treasury to re-draft a letter which authorised the flotation of a loan for a smaller sum than that originally requested, 'his view being that his Government would resent a request to avoid further borrowing in

¹³⁵ AWM: Pearce Papers, 3/50, Fisher to Pearce, 11 August 1916.

¹³⁶ Bean, The AIF in France 1917 (Sydney, 1933), pp. 42-43.

¹³⁷ Geoffrey Serle, John Monash: A Biography (Carlton, 1982), p. 299.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 325. Serle's source is the note of a conversation between Monash and Birdwood dated 24 June 1918 in the Monash Papers at the AWM.

this year altogether much less than an attempt to cut down their demands'.¹³⁹ Sir John Bradbury, the Joint Permanent Secretary, explained to his opposite number in the Colonial Office: 'I am sorry to have put you to this inconvenience but Fisher was so insistent as to the probably bad sentimental effects of the original... that we felt we had to let him have his way'.¹⁴⁰ Like Hughes, Fisher also asserted that the Commonwealth should have priority over New South Wales, which remained outside the financial agreement. When both governments were given permission simultaneously to go to the market, he told the Chancellor: 'I am not free from apprehension about the idea of States claims being put in front of the Com[monwea]l[th] in loan matters while the latter bears the whole burden of War expenditure'.¹⁴¹

Finally, similar continuities of policy and outlook can be traced in his administration of the Commonwealth Office. He immediately decided that the existing accommodation in Victoria Street 'could not be more unsuitable to the work of the Commonwealth' and attempted to have the construction of Australia House accelerated so that at least part of the building could be occupied by the end of the year.¹⁴² The move to the incomplete building finally began on Christmas day and was accomplished by 1 January 1917, 'After three days and nights hampered by dense fog'. On 3 August 1918, with Hughes and a large Australian party attending, Fisher presided at the official opening by the King.¹⁴³ In 1919, he partly realised a long-standing ambition, despite the obstructionism of at least one Agent-General and the unhelpful attitude of the Prime Minister's Department, by successfully negotiating with the Agents-General of New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania for

¹³⁹ PRO: CO 418/154/36933, Bradbury to Fiddes, 4 August 1916.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ PRO: T1/12051/17373 [8851], Fisher to Bonar Law, 15 March 1917.

¹⁴² AA: A461, N348/1/2, Fisher to Mahon, 8 September 1916.

¹⁴³ AA: A458, F108/8, part 3, Annual Report 1916, p. 3; part 5, Annual Report 1918, pp. 5-7; A6252, 7/2, Coleman Report, Appendix O, 'Statement... by the Controller'.

them to move to Australia House.¹⁴⁴ The arrangement was satisfactory, the Tasmanian Agent-General reporting in 1921:

I am very satisfied that the decision to make this removal was a correct one. There is no doubt that the business of the office is much facilitated by its proximity to all the other Australian Offices, as well as the Commonwealth offices. The offices secured are in a very good position, and the accommodation first class in every direction.¹⁴⁵

Fisher also kept an eye on working conditions in Australia House. He successfully recommended that there should be a regular interchange of officers with Departments in Australia, telling Mahon in September 1916: 'my view has long been that a constant stream of young Australians to this office and their return to Australia in the Government Service would be of great value to Ministers in the Administration of its affairs'.¹⁴⁶ In 1919, he made strong representations on behalf of the staff, whose salaries had been severely hit by the post-war inflation.¹⁴⁷

(iv) The End of Fisher's Term

By 1919, however, Fisher's health had almost completely failed. According to one writer the High Commissioner was no longer capable of any sustained effort. He himself felt that such was his condition 'it would be folly to try to tour Australia for some years to come'.¹⁴⁸ His decline continued to such a point that Hughes remarked

¹⁴⁴ TJPP (1917), lxxvii, no. 4, 'Agent-General... Half-Yearly Report... 31 December 1916', p. 3; AA: A2, 19/3514, passim; A461, B348/1/10, passim; TJPP (1920-21), lxxxiii, no. 2, 'Acting Agent-General... Report', p. 4.

¹⁴⁵ TJPP (1921-22), lxxxv, no. 38, 'Agent-General... Report... for the Period 1 July 1920 to 30 June 1921', p. 7.

¹⁴⁶ AA: A461, N348/1/2, Fisher to Mahon, 8 September 1916; AA: A458, F108/8, part 3, Annual Report 1916, pp. 15-16; part 5, Annual Report 1918, p. 2.

¹⁴⁷ AA: A2, 1919/607, Fisher to Prime Minister's Department, 28 May and 4 October 1919.

¹⁴⁸ P. Heydon, Quiet Decision (Carlton, 1965), p. 105; NLA: Fisher Papers, 1/507, Fisher to Higgs, 5 September 1919.

to Shepherd in 1923: 'He seemed when I was in London in 21 & after his return to Australia to be quite unbalanced. He was never strong mentally - never capable of great strain'.¹⁴⁹ But, his deterioration also meant he was unable to give Australia House firm management at a time when it was universally decried in Australia for waste and inefficiency, and created a vacuum in Australia's representation at a difficult period in Anglo-Australian relations. Over 150,000 members of the AIF in France, the United Kingdom and the Middle East awaited repatriation. The government itself was lurching into a prolonged financial crisis as it struggled to find the money to meet its immediate obligations and to fund its enormous war debt to Britain. Apart from the presence in England of Hughes and Cook in 1918-19, the magnitude of these problems necessitated a long visit by Pearce in 1919 and a financial mission by the Treasurer, William Watt, in 1920. When Watt resigned en route, Senator Edward Millen was despatched in his place.¹⁵⁰

The frequency of these visits attracted widespread criticism in Australia. In January 1919, the Secretary of the Queensland Branch of the Returned Soldiers and Sailors League wrote with reference to Pearce's mission: 'We consider this a reflection on the High Commissioner, who is representing the Commonwealth, and on the various Officers of the AIF in England, in whom we have every confidence'.¹⁵¹

But there was no reason why a ministerial visit should have necessarily undermined the High Commissioner's authority. The unbroken procession of ministerial delegations to London during the 1930s did not prevent Bruce from acquiring a position of exceptional prestige and influence. The government's critics also failed to distinguish between the executive powers of a Minister and those of an official like a High Commissioner who would be required to refer any important

¹⁴⁹ Hughes to Shepherd, 28 March 1923, quoted in Shepherd, Memoir.

¹⁵⁰ For repatriation see Scott, p. 825. The financial crisis of 1919-20 has passed virtually unnoticed.

¹⁵¹ eg. CPD, lxxxvii, p. 9519; lxxxviii, p. 11059; xci, p. 257; Sydney Sun, 24 October 1920; Argus, 9 September 1919; AA: Prime Minister's Department; CRS A3934, correspondence 'secret and confidential' series 1918-26; SC32 [3], H.A. Fisher to W. Watt, 3 January 1919. See also, Hon. Secretary Mosman Anti-German League to Prime Minister, 22 January 1919.

decision back to the government. In October 1918, Pearce made precisely this distinction when he explained to Cabinet the reasons for his own mission. The repatriation of the AIF would need: 'a strong Administration in London, under a responsible Minister, by a Board of Civilians as well as Military Officers'. If it was managed by a Board alone, it would be 'impossible for a Minister in Australia to control and be responsible for the operations of a Board at such a distance both in time and in space, and to refer questions to Australia for decision by cable would be both expensive and inadequate'.¹⁵² The negotiation of the War Debt Funding Agreement in 1921 and representation at the Imperial Cabinet would also require somebody of ministerial rank.

It was the High Commissioner's inactivity rather than the frequent dispatch of a Minister which lay at the root of the problem. By referring even small matters back to Melbourne he had already, as the Herald later observed, 'seemed voluntarily to reduce the High Commissionership to narrow limits'.¹⁵³ Now, more than anything else, Fisher's conspicuous failure, either because of incapacity or disaffection, to provide support for visiting Ministers brought his office into disrepute. In July 1920, even the Chancellor of the Exchequer was compelled to emphasise the 'urgent need for discussion in London with a fully authorised representative of the Commonwealth Government'.¹⁵⁴ During 1919, the proximity to London of so many Australian Ministers simply caused confusion. Pearce and Fisher worked at cross-purposes over the organization of the Anzac Day commemoration and, in August, Fisher's office was criticised for providing misleading information about the Commonwealth's financial requirements which had 'confused [the] issue with [the] Chancellor'. Fisher

¹⁵² Ibid., Secret, extract from Sen. Pearce's memorandum on demobilisation and organisation in London, 28 October 1918.

¹⁵³ Melbourne Herald, 20 October 1920.

¹⁵⁴ AA: A3934, SC17 [5], Colonial Secretary to Governor-General, 1 July 1920.

was told brusquely: 'Please do not give any further figures... unless so instructed by [the] Prime Minister'.¹⁵⁵

The absence of any coherent organisation or clear authority in Australia House had been painfully exposed earlier that year when Hughes appointed two Australian businessmen, Henry Braddon and Walter Leitch, to act as a trade board to investigate the commercial aspects of Australian representation and to liaise with the Agents-General.¹⁵⁶ They were frustrated when the Agents-General refused to deal with them unless they had been authorised by the High Commissioner, but the damage had already been done and, according to the *Sydney Sun*, the staff of Australia House had begun to regard Fisher as 'an amiable cypher'.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, each incident aggravated the growing tension between the London office and the Prime Minister's Department. The latter's hostile response to Fisher's pleas for the extension of the staff's war bonuses was one symptom; Hughes's displeasure when Fisher went ahead and signed leases with New South Wales and South Australia without first obtaining his consent was another.¹⁵⁸

By 1919, the criticism of both Fisher's ineffectualness and the inefficiency of Australia House had become endemic. In December 1918, one Nationalist speculated wryly: 'The High Commissioner in London, if not dead, must be asleep'.¹⁵⁹ In July 1920, William McWilliams, then leading the recently formed Country Party, announced his intention of testing 'the feeling of the House upon the question whether or not the High Commissionership is to be retained as at present'. He declared:

¹⁵⁵ AWM: Pearce Papers, 6/10, Thornton to Fisher, 3 April 1919; Hughes to Pearce, 7 April 1919; AA: CP 317/8, bundle 1, telegram from Acting Prime Minister, 18 August 1919.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Pearce to Acting Prime Minister, 18 July 1919. Hughes appears to have set up the Trade Board on his own initiative.

¹⁵⁷ *Sydney Sun*, 24 October 1920; *Argus*, 8 September and 1 November 1919; *NSWPP* (1919), iv, p. 691.

¹⁵⁸ for the bonuses, AA: A2, 19/607, Fisher to Prime Minister's Department, 28 May 1919 and *passim*; for the leases, A461, B348/1/10, indenture, 16 January 1920; N348/1/2, statement, attached to Hughes to E.D. Millen, 3 November 1920.

¹⁵⁹ Falkiner in *CPD*, lxxxvii, p. 9607.

I think the time has come when there should be a thorough overhaul of the position in connexion with the office of High Commissioner. Matters are unsatisfactory today, not only to the gentleman holding that office, but to the Government and the people of Australia. We are getting virtually no return for the money laid out. There are continual complaints in Australia that the High Commissioner is doing practically nothing.¹⁶⁰

Others suggested that the post should either be abolished or reformed, the High Commissioner possibly being replaced by a Resident Minister.¹⁶¹ In September 1919, Holman tabled in the New South Wales Parliament a telegram from his Agent-General reporting the activities of Braddon and the trade board, and commented: 'To avoid the danger of confusion arising out of the multiplicity of authorities, the Agents-General have informed Mr Braddon that the negotiations must be with the High Commissioner, unless Mr Braddon has been officially appointed to supercede him'.¹⁶²

The press also started to use the London office as a stick with which to beat the government. On 24 October 1919, the Sydney Sun reported: 'The whole of Australia House is in the shackles imposed by Melbourne, with the screws constantly becoming tighter'. Shortly after, the Melbourne Herald noted 'the evident absence of co-operation between the Government and the High Commissioner, and the inadequate use made of the London staff', and asked rhetorically: 'Events have so shaped themselves that the question may be asked "Why have a High Commissioner at all?"'.¹⁶³ Hughes was driven to issue a statement asserting that there was 'no foundation for the statement that the High Commissioner's powers have been curtailed, and his decisions overridden', and criticising Fisher for ignoring the advice of the Prime Minister's Department regarding the leases in Australia House. He also

¹⁶⁰ CPD, xcii, p. 3171. See also O'Loughlin, lxxxix, p. 12483, 18 September 1919; Thomas, p. 12462.

¹⁶¹ eg. Needham, lxxxvii, p. 8471; Foll, lxxxviii, p. 11059; McGrath, xcii, pp. 3171-72.

¹⁶² Argus, 8 September 1919.

¹⁶³ Sydney Sun, 24 October 1920; Melbourne Herald, 26 October 1920.

claimed misleadingly 'that not one constructive suggestion has emanated from the High Commissioner's Office for the last six months, except to increase the war bonus to the staff'.¹⁶⁴ Munro-Ferguson was therefore expressing a widely held view when he told Lord Milner in June 1920: 'It is very desirable that Australia should appoint a competent High Commissioner in London'.¹⁶⁵

In May 1920, Fisher added a postscript to a letter to Pearce: 'The world has not yet settled down to quiet work though most people are doing their bit cheerfully. Personally I await the dropping of the curtain with serene feelings. My memories of office here will always fall short of love's sweet dreams'.¹⁶⁶ By now the conventional wisdom about the High Commissionership had become firmly established; it was - in the Melbourne Herald's formulation - a position 'reserved for distinguished politicians who have outlived their usefulness in Australia, and may be adroitly consigned to dignified ease, at the nation's expense, by other ambitious men in the political arena'.¹⁶⁷ But this had not been the view in October 1915 when Reid had been judged a success and Fisher's appointment welcomed as raising the post's status. Yet whatever his general ambitions for the office had been, Fisher had ultimately become High Commissioner because the breakdown of his health and the tensions caused by the war prevented him from continuing as Prime Minister, and had disappointed expectation. At any time after the formation of the National government in February 1917, he had ample political grounds for resignation, but he had hung on, possibly because he believed the general crisis of war precluded such a dramatic gesture. Yet politics aside, the collapse of his health was also sufficient reason. Finally, self-interest had prevailed. As for the government, the High Commissioner Act permitted

¹⁶⁴ AA: A461, N348/1/2 for the statement to the press attached to Hughes to Millen, 3 November 1920, and printed in the Melbourne Herald, 29 October 1920 and Age, 30 October 1920.

¹⁶⁵ Bodleian: MS English History, Add. Milner, c. 706/205-8, Munro-Ferguson to Milner, 29 June 1920.

¹⁶⁶ AWM: Pearce Papers, 7/126, Fisher to Pearce, 17 May 1920.

¹⁶⁷ Melbourne Herald, 26 October 1920.

Hughes little discretion. Section 3 (ii) provided that the Governor-General could remove the High Commissioner 'for misbehaviour or incapacity', but only McWilliams remotely suggested this.¹⁶⁸ Had it even occurred to Hughes, he would probably have judged it more trouble than it was worth. He could also have had little appetite for depriving Fisher of his livelihood. In the end, despite the considerable damage done to the office, Hughes chose simply to side-step him. Reid, it was said, 'would never have tolerated what Mr Fisher has had to put up with'.¹⁶⁹

Among Fisher's final acts was a hint of future things. In August 1920, he travelled to Slesvig, then to Sévres, to sign the final treaties and conventions arising from the Peace Conference.¹⁷⁰ But this was only a prevision of the European shuttlings of future High Commissioners. On 29 January 1921, his term extended by three months to allow for paid leave, he slipped quietly from England. On 18 March, he told Groom that it was 'great to see Australia once again', but he stayed only long enough to wind up his affairs before, bowing to family pressure, he returned to England.¹⁷¹ Some thought he might re-enter politics, either contesting Hughes's seat or standing for the Senate, but as early as September 1919, although 'not conscious of any change of views on the main questions of social organisation of the State for and on behalf of the people', he signified his intention of finally abandoning public life: 'The call will reach the younger men soon or the great sacrifices of the last few years will bring few gifts to downtrodden mankind'.¹⁷² His last years were spent

¹⁶⁸ CPD, lxxxxvii, p. 9484, 17 December 1918.

¹⁶⁹ Melbourne Herald, 26 October 1920.

¹⁷⁰ AA: CP 317/8, bundle 1, Hughes to Fisher, 3 and 10 August 1920.

¹⁷¹ NLA: MS 236 (Littleton Ernest Groom Papers); series 1, f. 1857, Fisher to Littleton Groom, 18 March 1921; Age, 26 January 1921; Broinowski, p. 115.

¹⁷² Age, 1, 7 and 26 January 1921; NLA: Fisher Papers, 1/507, Fisher to Higgs, 5 September 1919.

quietly in Hampstead, where he died on 22 October 1928. Breaking precedent, the King was represented at his funeral.¹⁷³

¹⁷³ PRO: Dominions Office; DO 35, Correspondence, 1926-46; vol. 56, f. 11009, minute, Batterbee, 22 October 1928; Sir Clive Wigram to J.A. Edgcumbe, 23 October 1928; Broinowski, p. 115. See also Scott's eloquent epiteth, pp. 303-4.

CHAPTER FOUR

SIR JOSEPH COOK, 1921-1927

(i) Sir Joseph Cook's Appointment

Fisher's term formally expired on 21 April 1921, but that date passed and the government did not name a new High Commissioner. His identity, however, was already well-known. In March 1920, T.J. Ryan, the former Queensland Premier who had recently entered the Federal Parliament, suggested that he would be Sir Joseph Cook, the Minister for the Navy, who then ranked third in the Ministry.¹ In June, a correspondent assured Fisher: 'Sir Joseph Cook is marked and labelled for London this year'; even the Prince of Wales whilst in Australia was overheard asking 'when his old friend Joe Cook is coming over to be High Commissioner?'² With Fisher's departure from England in early 1921, the Melbourne press confidently predicted a decision at the first Cabinet following the summer vacation.³ In fact, largely because of Hughes's political difficulties, it was delayed for almost a year. Since late 1920, although putting off an announcement, the Prime Minister had known he would have to attend an Imperial Conference in the coming year and, with a shortage of competent deputies, required Cook to lead the government in his absence.⁴

None of this was apparent in January 1921, when the press quoted sources close to the government that Cook's appointment was imminent.⁵ The Age disclosed

¹ CPD, xci, p. 214.

² NLA: Fisher Papers, 1/523, Alan McDougall to Fisher, 30 June 1920; CPD, xcv, p. 9046.

³ Age, 17 January 1921; Argus, 18 January 1921.

⁴ Fitzhardinge, ii, pp. 435-36, 463; NLA: MS 213 (Sir George Foster Pearce Papers); folder 12, minutes of the meetings of the Nationalist Party, 5 April 1921.

⁵ Age, 17 and 28 January 1921; Argus, 28 and 29 January 1921.

that 'among Ministers there was a mutual agreement that when a formal offer is made to Sir Joseph Cook no exception would be taken',⁶ but on 24 January, Cabinet allowed the matter to 'stand over', and Ministers began to be impatient with Hughes's 'stolid silence'.⁷ Characteristically, the Prime Minister did not take anyone into his confidence, causing speculation that like his predecessor he might himself be about to take the post. The Argus reported that, according to one unidentified source: 'Mr Hughes does not appear able to decide whether he will take the High Commissionership or not. Until he settles that question, he is not likely to offer it to anybody else'.⁸ Such was the uncertainty that, in early March, Percy Hunter, the Director of Emigration, cabled from London that a story was circulating that Hughes might resign 'due to ill-health and unpopularity'.⁹ But on 5 April Hughes told a party meeting that 'he had no intention of becoming High Commissioner in London',¹⁰ and virtually confirmed that Cook would be awarded the post, proposing that Cook lead the government while he was at the Imperial Conference: 'the appointment of a High Commissioner could be deferred until his return'.¹¹

He returned in early October and soon suggested that Cook's translation was imminent. On 6 October, he told Nationalist MPs that Pearce rather than Cook should attend the Washington Naval Conference in November: 'it was not possible for Sir Joseph Cook to attend even if he were appointed High Commissioner. His place would be in London at the earliest possible moment'.¹² But the government's majority

⁶ Age, 28 January 1921.

⁷ AA: Cabinet Secretariat; CRS A2717/XM, Hughes Ministry, folders of Cabinet agenda and decisions, 1919-22; vol. 3, folder 13, rough notes and drafts of Cabinet decisions, 24 January 1921; Age, 28 January 1921.

⁸ Argus, 27 January 1921; cf. 28 January 1921.

⁹ AA: CP317/8, bundle 1, Percy Hunter to Prime Minister, 9 March 1921.

¹⁰ NLA: Pearce Papers, 213/12, minutes of Nationalist Party, 5 April 1921.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 6 October 1921.

had again become unreliable and only in November, after Cook had presented his second budget and Hughes agreed terms with the Country Party, was the Treasurer able to be spared.¹³ Pearce remarked in his memoir: 'At that time the appointment of Sir Joseph had been decided upon, but the Cabinet decision was being kept secret', but this was not quite accurate, for only on 10 November did Cabinet finally decide to offer the High Commissionership to Cook.¹⁴ Hughes told the Party later that day, and informed the House on the next.¹⁵ The announcement was greeted with applause. One journalist remarked: 'The new High Commissioner will go to London, illustrating in his own person the Dick Wittington things that may happen to a man in Australia'.¹⁶

Cook is chiefly remembered as a slow-thinking, cautious man, lacking imagination or constructive ideas, better suited to opposition and deputy-leadership. Professor F. Alexander described him as 'a dull, heavy plodder';¹⁷ Scott linked his career with that of Fisher: 'They were... a pair of respectable, experienced politicians who in the lottery of party play had drawn winning tickets'.¹⁸ But Earle Page, the Leader of the Country Party, who knew him both as a parliamentarian and High Commissioner, was more generous: 'he had become steeped in political affairs, accumulated an enviable store of knowledge and experience, and enjoyed the reputation of being a past-master in the manipulation of the forms of the House to secure ministerial ends. He never received due credit for his constructive mind'.¹⁹

¹³ Fitzhardinge, ii, p. 497-98.

¹⁴ Pearce, From Carpenter to Cabinet, p. 155; Fitzhardinge, ii, p. 498, citing Cabinet notes in the Hughes Papers.

¹⁵ NLA: Pearce Papers, 213/12, minutes of the Nationalist Party, 10 November 1921; CPD, xcvi, p. 12695.

¹⁶ Sydney Daily Telegraph, 12 November 1921.

¹⁷ Quoted in Ward, Nation for a Continent, p. 91.

¹⁸ Scott, p. 39.

¹⁹ E.C.G. Page, Truant Surgeon, A. Mozley (ed.) (Sydney, 1963), p. 58.

Cook's career had in fact been a testament to the virtues of self-help. He was born on 7 December 1860 at Silverdale, Staffordshire and, like Fisher, started work in the pits at an early age, also becoming active in the local labour movement.²⁰ His formal education was rudimentary and he was largely self-taught. A devout primitive methodist, he was hard-working, morally correct and ambitious. In 1885, he married and, at the end of the year, emigrated to New South Wales, where he settled in the mining town of Lithgow and resumed activity in the labour movement. In 1891, he was elected to the Colony's Legislative Assembly and soon after became Leader of the New South Wales parliamentary Labour Party. But in 1894 he became the first in a succession of leaders to defect, rejecting a conference decision that MPs should be bound by decisions of the Labor Caucus. Soon after, he accepted a post in Reid's government. After successfully contesting the seat of Paramatta in the first federal election, he joined Reid in the free trade opposition. In 1905, he became Deputy-Leader, and in 1908 succeeded Reid. By now, his political convictions were thoroughly conservative. It fell to him to negotiate the Fusion with Deakin and Forrest in 1908-9; afterwards he became Minister of Defence in Deakin's last government. In 1913, he was chosen Leader of the Liberal Party and, after the June election, became Prime Minister with a majority of a single seat. His only real achievement was to secure the first double dissolution of a Federal Parliament, but he lost the subsequent election and during the first eighteen months of the war was limited to giving unenthusiastic support to the Labour government. Hughes's own defection opened fresh vistas. In early 1917, he negotiated a coalition with the Prime Minister, becoming Deputy-Leader, Minister for the Navy and government Leader in the House. In 1918, he accompanied Hughes to England, and later the Peace Conference at Versailles, where he was the senior British delegate on the commission which drew up the boundaries of Czechoslovakia. While Prime Minister, he had been made a Privy Counsellor; in 1918, he was appointed GCMC - the announcement timed to

²⁰ For biographical details see, J.R.M. Murdoch, 'Joseph Cook: A Political Biography' (Ph.D., University of New South Wales, 1969) and F.K. Crowley, 'Sir Joseph Cook', *ADB*, viii, pp. 96-99.

coincide with the opening of Australia House. Finally, on Watt's resignation in July 1920, he became Treasurer.

But by now he was ageing, impatient with Hughes's erratic leadership and ambitious for the High Commissionership.²¹ In many respects, the manner in which he obtained the appointment was similar to the way in which Fisher had secured his. In effect, he nominated himself and, once Hughes's attitude became known, his seniority in the government ensured his success. The fact that he was an ex-Prime Minister (the previous appointees having also held that post) was a powerful factor in his favour. As far as Hughes was concerned, like Deakin's choice of Reid, Cook's appointment would be a fillip to party morale, shoring up his support amongst the superior conservative element in the Nationalist Party which, as the Liberals, had passed under his leadership in 1917.

The decision having been an open secret for almost a year, Hughes's announcement hardly came as a surprise. For many editors, the occasion was another opportunity to express dissatisfaction with the London office and the men who had occupied it. Their response also illustrated the extent to which perceptions of the office had altered since 1916. The Age pronounced that the High Commissionership was 'still being used as if it were a means of pensioning off the political veterans'. Reid, it declared erroneously, 'was appointed by the Fisher Labor Government when Australian politics had left him behind and he was in danger of lagging superfluous'; he had 'sought to magnify his department as a species of Imperial social centre'. Fisher's selection 'gave additional scope for the ambitions of Mr Hughes, and improved the chances of younger and more aggressive members'. It concluded: 'The history of the High Commissioner's department shows, therefore, that it exists not so much for the sake of Australia as for the benefit of politicians and officials who are favoured by specially generous patronage'.²² The Brisbane Courier was no less

²¹ Murdoch, p. 378.

²² Age, 12 November 1921.

acerbic: 'the office of High Commissioner becomes very largely an expensive sinecure to be filled by an elderly and trusted politician, according to the party making the selection, as a reward for services rendered and, possibly, to make room in the Cabinet for some advancing and ambitious member of the Party'.²³ The Sydney Daily Telegraph, gratified by the selection of another New South Welshman, was more subdued, but also murmured darkly: 'If Sir Joseph Cook does not redeem its reputation he is likely to be the last of the High Commissioners'.²⁴ But none of the newspapers could come up with a better suggestion about who should be sent to London.

In 1920-21 Hughes had encountered the same difficulty in finding a High Commissioner of sufficient standing and ability as Deakin in 1909 and, later, Bruce in 1926-27. Apart from Hughes himself, no alternative to Cook was nominated, and no other candidate came forward. The consensus in the Nationalist Party appears to have been that Cook, as the next most senior figure (and an ex-Prime Minister), was entitled to the job. Possibly Hughes was happy to part company with Cook. In any event, as we shall see, he still believed that the most important questions of imperial policy would have to be dealt with by the Prime Minister.

Cook at least possessed some of the necessary qualifications. Despite a reputation for humourlessness and irascibility, he was a competent public speaker, self-confident and socially at ease. Above all, although John Latham, his personal adviser in London and at the Peace Conference, complained about his 'mediocrity, self-satisfaction, idleness & discourtesy',²⁵ he had been an unexpected success with the English politicians. In March 1918, Munro-Ferguson commended him to Stamfordham as 'worth some attention. He is not a good administrator but he is a leader of experience, able and capable of giving a sound opinion on Australian affairs.

²³ Brisbane Courier, 15 November 1921. The 'advancing and ambitious member' was probably Bruce.

²⁴ Sydney Daily Telegraph, 12 November 1921.

²⁵ Quoted in Edwards, Prime Ministers, p. 44.

He is a Methodist from the Midlands, of the type of your Northumberland and Durham Miner leader, less strong in character but without that Quaker like attitude to the war'.²⁶ In August, Walter Long reported that Cook 'has impressed everybody most favourably and is not only much liked but is very highly thought of'.²⁷ In December, he wrote at greater length:

I am very glad you approved of Sir Joseph Cook's GCMG. I must say the more I see of him the more I like him personally, and the more I admire his unquestioned gifts. He takes broad and statesmanlike views on questions: he is very moderate in the expression of his opinions and is a charming man to work with. But I well understand that he does not reach the necessary standard of popularity to be a leader of men; and of course as to his administration, I am not able to express an opinion.²⁸

But Cook's relations with Hughes had not always been happy. In 1917, he had been unenthusiastic about joining him in government, and subsequently resented his dictatorial methods, particularly during the visit to England. Yet he had remained 'doggedly loyal'²⁹ and admired Hughes's relentless energy and gift for leadership. Nevertheless, the High Commissionership, was an attractive escape route: he confided to Latham in November 1921: 'How I wish you were going with me There will really be more scope this time'.³⁰ For his part, Hughes had been impatient with Cook's caution and referred to him privately as 'Bible bashing Bill'.³¹ But he respected his political skills and generously praised his 'manly qualities, his loyalty and industry'.³²

²⁶ NLA: Novar Papers, ff. 305-8, Munro-Ferguson to Stamfordham, 11 March 1918; also see, WRO: Long Papers, folder 624, Munro-Ferguson to Long, 14 February 1917.

²⁷ WRO: Long Papers, folder 625, Long to Munro-Ferguson, 17 August 1918.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Long to Munro-Ferguson, 13 December 1918.

²⁹ Fitzhardinge, ii, p. 422.

³⁰ Murdoch, 'Cook', p. 378; NLA: MS 1009 (Sir John Latham Papers); series 1, f. 948, Cook to Latham, 15 November 1921.

³¹ WRO: Long Papers, folder 624, Munro-Ferguson to Long, 14 February 1917.

³² NLA: Pearce Papers, 213/12, minutes of the Nationalist Party, 10 November 1921.

His regard for his High Commissioner, however, had clear limits. He wrote to Shepherd, admittedly soothing words to a captious official, in 1923:

I know the gentleman very well. He has most excellent qualities. But he is not an efficient administrator. He knows nothing at all about business. It is really a very great pity. But there it is and must remain for another four years at least.³³

(ii) A Brief Interregnum, 1921

Cook arrived in England on 13 January 1922 and had an audience with the King on 13 February.³⁴ During 1921, Australia House had been briefly administered by Hughes during his visit for the Imperial Conference. In August, Malcolm Shepherd - the Secretary of the Prime Minister's Department, who in March was appointed Official Secretary in London - became acting High Commissioner.³⁵ Shepherd was soon involved in controversy when Hughes also chose him to lead the Australian delegation to the second League of Nations Assembly in Geneva. Finally, after considerable protest in Parliament, he was instructed to act as deputy to S.M. Bruce, who happened to be on holiday in Europe and, although still a back-bencher, was regarded as a more acceptable representative.³⁶

In London, the conduct of Australia's essential business continued and the pattern of activity began to assume its peacetime character. Shortly before Shepherd's arrival, Senator Millen, the Minister for Repatriation, opened the Migration Branch in Australia House.³⁷ Shepherd himself started the reorganisation of the London

³³ Shepherd, *Memoir*, p. 357, Hughes to Shepherd, 3 September 1923. Cook is not named, but the reference to 'another four years at least' indicates it is he who is meant.

³⁴ *Times*, 14 January and 14 February 1922.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 30 August 1921.

³⁶ Fitzhardinge, ii, pp. 498-99.

³⁷ *CPP* (1922), ii, 'Report of the Acting High Commissioner... for the Year 1921', p. 1606.

administration and supervised the clearance of wartime stocks of meat and butter.³⁸ With the stockbrokers, R. Nivison and Co. (the head of the firm being Robert Nivison, created Lord Glendyne in 1922),³⁹ he floated the first two post-war Commonwealth loans in London, occupied the Australian seats on the Pacific Cable Board and the Imperial War Graves Commission and performed the social and ceremonial duties incumbent on a Dominion representative in Britain. With respect to the latter, Cook's arrival came as a relief. After attending one State Ball in July, Shepherd recalled: 'hoping for the early appointment of a High Commissioner to take over the social part of the job' - he 'found it too strenuous to work at the office all day and attend social functions until midnight almost every night'.⁴⁰

In other respects, Cook's arrival was less welcome. During the 1890s, Shepherd had worked under him unhappily in the New South Wales Postmaster General's Department, and Cook's fussy, over-meticulous methods did not suit his own inclination to draw Australia House 'into his official clutches'.⁴¹ He wrote to Hughes while attending a League-sponsored conference in January 1921:

[I] Wish they had selected the H[igh] C[ommissioner] [to attend the conference] for he gets very upset every time I am picked out for these jobs. [He] seems to take it as a personal matter and gets very nasty. Am afraid it is really jealousy for he hates to think that a mere worm of a public servant should be even considered for anything. Why, oh Why did you pick him, and he has another 2 years to run, unless he cracks up in the meantime - a not unlikely possibility for I fear he is aging rapidly. In many ways he is following Fisher - loss of memory, irritability etc. Am always getting into trouble because "he is never shown anything". Even his own initials on a paper is not evidence, and [he] raves like a lunatic at times.⁴²

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1601, 1609.

³⁹ R.S. Gilbert, 'London Financial Interests and Australian Overseas Borrowing, 1900-29', *AEHR*, xi, (1971), pp. 39-47. This article does not discuss the relations between Nivison & Co and the High Commissioner, nor the role of the Bank of England.

⁴⁰ Shepherd, *Memoir*, pp. 387f., 401. Also see, 'Report of the Acting High Commissioner, 1921', pp. 1601-12.

⁴¹ *My Dear P.M.*, no. 1, R.G. Casey to S.M. Bruce, 27 November 1924; Murdoch, 'Cook', p. 96.

⁴² Shepherd, *Memoir*, p. 370, Shepherd to Hughes, 22 January 1925.

But Shepherd's argument was with the man chosen, not the necessity of a High Commissioner. Indeed, the interregnum, like Collins's period as Official Representative in 1906-9, underlined the necessity of some form of senior Australian representation, however the relationship with the government or the duties of the representative were defined. The representative, social and ceremonial functions alone - as Shepherd had discovered - called for such a figure. More importantly, more substantial duties, like the oversight of the borrowing programme or the leadership of the annual delegation to Geneva, required an individual of the highest possible rank.

(iii) Cook and Hughes, 1922

Following Cook's appointment, Hughes enjoyed only one further year in office. During that period, his relations with Cook were cordial and in marked contrast with the tension which characterised Fisher's final years. In January 1922, he asked Churchill, the Colonial Secretary, to 'arrange for Sir Joseph to be furnished with copies of all official cables henceforth exchanged between [the] Commonwealth and [the] Colonial Office other than personal cables between your Prime Minister and myself'.⁴³ But the Colonial Office was reluctant to do so, reserving private and personal telegrams generally, as well as those relating to honours. It also felt that 'there might be a case now and then in which there might be a doubt whether the telegram should be sent to Sir Joseph'. All telegrams would therefore be vetted 'before they are passed on to Sir J. Cook in order that any doubtful cases may be considered'.⁴⁴

⁴³ AA: Prime Minister's Department; CP 268/1, Staff files; 'Joseph Cook', Governor-General to Colonial Secretary, 13 January 1922.

⁴⁴ PRO: CO 418/218/2081, minute, C.P. Davis to Sir J. Masterton Smith, 16 January 1922; minute, J.M. Green, 13 January 1922.

Personally, Cook experienced little coolness in his reception to London. On 9 March, he told Hughes:

Suffice to say that I have been living more or less in a whirl since my arrival here.

I have been made most welcome & am beginning to settle into a steady swing. I find the work interesting & also find plenty of it to do every day. I am treating the office as I did every other office I have ever had to administer. I have people here in shoals anxious to know things about Australia.⁴⁵

His co-operation with the Prime Minister clearly reflected their recent association together in Cabinet. He was content, moreover, to stay within the limits of his office, neither challenging the established channels of communication nor acting independently of Hughes.

He immediately took up the problem of the remaining wartime stocks of meat, suggesting to the Treasury and the Colonial Office in February that part of a forthcoming £2.5 million loan to Austria might be provided in the form of Australian meat. He proposed to Hughes that he 'immediately cable Lloyd George strongly on [the] matter, pointing out [the] seriousness of [the] position. Feel sure [this] would have good effect'. Hughes acted accordingly.⁴⁶ With the New Zealand High Commissioner, Sir James Allen, and the commercial firms involved in the import trade, Cook devised a further scheme for disposing of the meat and urged Hughes to contact the New Zealand Prime Minister. Hughes told the latter: 'I think that suggestion [a] good one and likely to be warmly approved by [the] procurers'.⁴⁷ The meat was finally cleared by July. Hughes also soon advised Cook of the position regarding a proposed 'Metals Extraction Company', which he had discussed with the Treasury in 1921, and told him that he had 'no objection to your taking action your end if you deem [it] advisable'.⁴⁸ Finally, Cook discussed every aspect of

⁴⁵ NLA: Hughes Papers, 16/2286, Cook to Hughes, 9 March 1922.

⁴⁶ AA: CP 317/8, bundle 1, Cook to Hughes, 7 February 1922; Hughes to Cook, 9 February 1922.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Cook to Hughes, 22 February 1922; Hughes to Massey, 24 February 1922.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Hughes to Cook, 13 March 1922.

Commonwealth finance with Nivison & Co., and, in April, presided over the flotation of a £5 million loan.⁴⁹

Clearly, London was the focus of Cook's activities. But as a consequence of the war and the Versailles settlement, the Dominions were also being drawn into the wider life of the international community. The general implications for their representatives abroad will be considered in Chapter Six. The most immediate was their regular attendance at the annual Assembly of the League of Nations. The Australian High Commissioner was *ex officio* neither the leader nor an automatic member of the Australian delegation, but during Cook's term, half of Ryrie's, and preeminently Bruce's, this was, in effect, the case. In many respects, Cook's duties at Geneva, like his annual appearance before the Permanent Mandates Commission, were quite distinct from those as High Commissioner. Nevertheless, throughout the inter-war period Australia chose to participate in an imperial foreign policy, and whilst international crises like those over Chanak, Manchuria and Abyssinia were played out in both London and Geneva, the overlap between the High Commissioner's functions as the Commonwealth's representative in both places was great. His performance in Geneva, moreover, might affect his standing in London. Bruce's membership of the League Council in 1933-36 is the most notable example of this, but the circumstances in which a gifted individual might make an impression existed as much in the early twenties as in the mid-thirties.⁵⁰

Cook's approach to the wider questions of imperial relations was a combination of conservatism and self-assertion. He commented with respect to an Irish proposal in 1924 that the High Commissioners should become the channel of communication that: 'the continuous and responsible representation of... [the] views and needs' of the Dominions was 'already a right through [the] G[overnor]-

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Cook to Hughes, 20 January 1922 and *passim*.

⁵⁰ For the general background see, W.J. Hudson, *Australia and the League of Nations* (Sydney, 1980).

G[enerals]'.⁵¹ Yet he was also aware of international issues. In England at the end of the war, he took a close interest in the fate of the German colonies in the Pacific, and a month before his appointment as High Commissioner, confided to Latham: 'I wish I could get people to see as I do that the great question of the future is disarmament & that this question is about the most important economic problem we have to face'.⁵² As High Commissioner, he soon rubbed up against issues bearing upon Australia's foreign relations, but declined to act independently of the government. When in May 1923 the Presbyterian Moderator in Melbourne asked him to urge the Imperial government to end the Anglo-French condominium in the New Hebrides and take complete British control, he replied: 'suggest you place matter before Prime Minister. Cannot act without his instructions'.⁵³

He nevertheless soon found himself cast onto the international stage. In April 1922, he represented the Commonwealth at the International Economic Conference at Genoa. Instructed by Hughes to 'give all support to Lloyd George' in opposing French 'rattling of the sabre', he also resisted any measure which might have limited Australia's right to impose tariffs or duties.⁵⁴ Yet he was ill-adapted, by temperament, training and experience, for the subtleties of international diplomacy. At Versailles, Harold Nicolson, his British colleague on the Czechoslovakian Commission, found him 'a nice sensible man and an angel of obedience', but the chief American delegate judged him 'blissfully ignorant of everything European'.⁵⁵ At the League, Hudson has described his 'tendency to blunder in the Geneva tea shop'.⁵⁶ As

⁵¹ AA: High Commissioner's Office; CRS A2908, Correspondence Files, Classified Single Number Series; file P7, marginal notes in Cook's ms. on memorandum, 'The Status of the High Commissioners' [July, 1924].

⁵² The Leo Amery Diaries, John Barnes and David Nicholson (eds), i (London, 1980), p. 229, 25 July 1918; NLA: Latham Papers, 1/937, Cook to Latham, 12 October 1921.

⁵³ AA: A2911, 1017/14, Sir J. Cook to Burns, Moderator, Melbourne, 30 May 1923.

⁵⁴ AA: CP 317/8, bundle 1, Hughes to Cook, 28 April 1922; Cook to Hughes, 27 and 28 April 1922.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Murdoch, 'Cook', pp. 374-75.

⁵⁶ Hudson, League of Nations, p. 156.

early as August 1922, he made an ill-judged attempt to have William Ormsby-Gore removed from the Permanent Mandates Commission, when the British representative had joined in a particularly robust cross-examination of his report.⁵⁷ The Chanak crisis in September that year further revealed his shortcomings as a diplomat. But the episode was significant in other ways. It was the first occasion on which the roles of High Commissioner in London and Australian representative in Geneva converged. At the same time, it showed the extent to which Hughes would continue to deal direct with the British government, to the exclusion of his High Commissioner.

The crisis broke while Cook was leading the Australian delegation to the 1922 League Assembly. Hughes's response to Churchill's invitation to send military assistance, and harangue of Lloyd George for his failure to consult the Dominions have already received considerable attention.⁵⁸ But Hughes also demanded to know what the League was doing and told Lloyd George: 'In order to make it clear to the world where Australia stands in this grave matter, her representatives at the Assembly now sitting at Geneva have been requested to urge the League to take immediate action'.⁵⁹ In Geneva, Balfour - who was leading the British delegation - consulted the Dominion representatives and, on 20 September, reported that Cook had 'said... that although his government had agreed [to support Britain] they felt they were entitled to [a] fuller explanation than had been hitherto given to them of all [the] elements in [the] situation'.⁶⁰ In the Political Commission, on 21 September, Cook supported the motion of the Norwegian delegate, Dr Nansen, that the League should intervene. The Foreign Office observer reported: 'Some delegates, notably Lord Robert Cecil, Dr. Nansen, and Sir Joseph Cook acting on direct instructions from Mr. Hughes held the view that it was the duty of the Council to take in hand direct negotiations with the

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 157-65.

⁵⁸ See, P.M. Sales, 'W.M. Hughes and the Chanak Crisis of 1922', *AJPH*, xvii (1971); Fitzhardinge, ii, pp. 485-96.

⁵⁹ Meaney, *Australia and the World*, no. 177, Hughes to Lloyd George, 20 September 1922.

⁶⁰ PRO: CO 532/213/47041, telegram no. 40, H.M. Consul in Geneva, 20 September 1922.

Turks'.⁶¹ But the majority felt that it would be wrong for the League to interfere while Britain and France were themselves attempting to arrange a conference, and tried to devise an alternative resolution:

Sir Joseph Cook, after privately accepting Mr. Fisher's first [British] resolution, proceeded to show himself more Cecilian than Cecil in his demand for intervention by the League. He appeared to have no notion that Australia should adapt her utterances on foreign policy to a form which should at least not embarrass the Foreign Office of the British Empire. Nor did he seem capable of discussing and reasoning in private a common line of British policy.⁶²

But Cook was not completely oblivious to the underlying realities of the situation. On the same day, 21 September, he transmitted a message from Balfour to Hughes explaining that it was impossible for the League to intervene.⁶³ He also conveyed the views of Lord Robert Cecil and the Indian delegation that action by the League was out of the question, and concluded: 'Have impressed Balfour with strength of feeling in Australia and he asks me to tell you he is doing his best in [a] very difficult situation'.⁶⁴

The day before, the Colonial Office had started to cable summaries of the situation in the Near East to the Dominions.⁶⁵ Coincidentally, the delegations in Geneva began to complain that they were 'not being kept sufficiently informed'.⁶⁶ The Colonial Office therefore sought the Dominion Prime Ministers' views: 'as regards communication to representatives of your Government now at Geneva of the

⁶¹ PRO: Foreign Office; FO 371, General Correspondence, Political 1906- ; vol. 8335, f. 8634, Fisher, 'NOTES on the work of the SIXTH (Political) COMMISSION at the THIRD ASSEMBLY of the League of Nations, 1922'.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ NLA: Hughes Papers, 16/2391, Cook to Hughes, 21 September 1921.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 16/2392, Cook to Hughes, 21 September 1921.

⁶⁵ PRO: CO 532/213/47257, Colonial Secretary to Governors-General, 20 September 1922.

⁶⁶ PRO: FO 371/7891, E9697/27, telegram, no. 44, H.M. Consul in Geneva, 21 September 1922.

recent and subsequent telegrams exchanged between us (including messages to and from yourself and the Prime Minister here).⁶⁷ Edward Harding noted:

The reason is that all the High Commissioners are at Geneva, and they usually - in fact almost always - do not receive messages between Prime Ministers.

On the other hand - it may be desirable in this particular case to let the Dominion representatives have the full text - in any case the High Commissioners have a direct interest in anything which concerns the movement of troops, in view of the question of supplies.⁶⁸

Hughes replied: 'As the number of these telegrams will be very great, some being very lengthy as may be my replies thereto and all highly confidential, I leave the question of keeping [the] High Commissioner informed to your discretion'.⁶⁹ The Colonial Office, which was generally reluctant to share confidential information with Dominion representatives, immediately took its cue, the Permanent Under Secretary advising Churchill: 'Mr Hughes in his telegram... leaves it "to your discretion" but the wording of his telegram leaves the impression that he would prefer you not to show the actual text to Sir J. Cook'.⁷⁰ As far as general information was concerned, Churchill told Balfour: the 'Best method will be for us to keep you fully informed each day, and for you to make this information available to the Dominion delegations'. But on no account was he to communicate 'the actual text of messages passing between their Prime Minister and the British Prime Minister'.⁷¹ Finally, on 3 October, Churchill cabled Hughes:

Now that the High Commissioner has returned to London I am arranging to send him periodic summaries of confidential information as to the Near East crisis similar to those which were sent to Geneva for [the] British Empire Delegation. I am not however furnishing him

⁶⁷ NLA: Hughes Papers, 16/2375, Colonial Secretary to Governor-General, 21 September 1922.

⁶⁸ PRO: CO 532/213/47262, minute, E. Harding to Marsh, 21 September 1922.

⁶⁹ PRO: CO 532/210/47268, Governor-General to Colonial Secretary, 22 September 1922; cf. the more positive responses from Canada, South Africa and New Zealand in PRO: CO 532/210, passim.

⁷⁰ PRO: CO 532/210/47268, minute, J. M[asterton] S[mith] to Churchill, 25 September 1922.

⁷¹ PRO: FO 371/7893, E9870/27, telegram, no. 56, to H.M. Consul in Geneva, 22 September 1922.

with copies of my messages to you in view of their personal and intimate character.⁷²

Throughout, the Colonial Office had assumed that Hughes was himself in touch with Cook.⁷³ Yet, while Hughes certainly had been instructing his High Commissioner at Geneva, none of these communications appear to have survived and it is impossible to know the extent to which Cook was being taken into his confidence. The sudden projection of the High Commissioners into the centre of a diplomatic crisis, however, had been an unexpected and novel event, and Hughes had reacted cautiously. Significantly, Cook did not figure in the subsequent controversy over Dominion attendance at the Lausanne conference in 1923 which finally brought the dispute to an end.⁷⁴ Yet, even under a strong Prime Minister, there was no reason why, with the right man and better access to information, a High Commissioner could not have taken the initiative and played a constructive role by providing his government with a more detailed appreciation of British policy and of events at Geneva, and by conveying Australia's views with greater effect and subtlety.

(iv) Cook and Bruce, 1923-27

Cook's first year as High Commissioner had been varied and eventful. He commented with satisfaction in his first report: 'My official and public life for more than 30 years has been well-known to the public of Australia, and I can honestly say that the last year has been the hardest of all'.⁷⁵ His relations with Hughes had been happy, the latter employing him in a wide range of tasks. In the Federal election on 16 December 1922, however, the Nationalists failed to obtain an outright majority, and

⁷² NLA: Hughes Papers, 16/2466, Colonial Secretary to Governor-General, 3 October 1922.

⁷³ PRO: CO 532/210/47268, Colonial Secretary to Governor-General, 25 September 1922.

⁷⁴ PRO: CO 532/215, passim, and Fitzhardinge, ii, pp. 492-96.

⁷⁵ CPP (1923-24), ii, 'Report of the High Commissioner... for the Year 1922', p. 569.

thereafter the Country Party refused to join a government which included Hughes. On 9 February 1923, Hughes resigned and Stanley Melbourne Bruce, who had succeeded Cook as Treasurer, formed a coalition with the Country Party.

Unlike his predecessors, Cook had not been caught out by a sudden change of government. Nevertheless, he belonged to the same political generation as Hughes and had worked closely with him in government. By contrast, Bruce, who had only entered Parliament in 1919, came from an altogether different background, and was of a quite different cast of mind. He inherited Cook from Hughes but did not enjoy the same mutual confidence with him as that which had existed even between the two older men. In November 1921, while still a back-bencher, he told Parliament: 'in my opinion, there is only one factor that counts in the least, and that is the personality of the High Commissioner'.⁷⁶ What he had in mind was someone who would be acceptable in Whitehall and Westminster, particularly if his office was to develop into something akin to an ambassadorship. Unfortunately, Cook did not appear to have the necessary qualities. In May 1925, Bruce confided to Leo Amery, the Colonial Secretary, his difficulty in finding someone fit to consult closely with the Imperial government: 'Pending the finding of the right man, the High Commissioner can be used to a certain point, but, writing confidentially to you, I do not think that Sir Joseph Cook - notwithstanding the fact that he has many excellent qualities - is quite the suitable person for the position which I have in mind'.⁷⁷

Like Hughes, Bruce's solution was to rely upon particular trusted individuals to act as his personal representatives. One of his first aims as Prime Minister was to ensure that the Commonwealth would never again be taken unawares by the outbreak of a crisis similar to that which had occurred over Chanak. In October 1924, he

⁷⁶ CPD, xcvi, p. 13246, 24 November 1921.

⁷⁷ AA: Stanley Melbourne Bruce; AA1970/555, Further papers covering 1918-29, Bruce to L.S. Amery, 6 May 1925; cf. CRS A1420, Correspondence with the External Affairs Liaison Office, London, 1924-29; file 3, Bruce to R.G. Casey, 16 January 1926.

appointed Richard Gardiner Casey to the new position of Australian Liaison Officer with the Foreign Office. He explained to Cook:

In his capacity as liaison officer between the Prime Minister's Department and the Foreign Office, he will supervise and accelerate the flow of information between the latter office and the Commonwealth Government, and, it is hoped, will be the means of keeping the Commonwealth in closer touch with the information which is normally available, but the importance of which a British officer might not appreciate.⁷⁸

Casey was eventually allowed a desk in the Cabinet Office and supervised by the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Maurice Hankey. With the latter's compliance, he also soon ranged far beyond the Foreign Office, gradually extending his duties to include 'liaison with the Dominions Office, with the decisions of the Cabinet, with the activities of the Committee of Imperial Defence, and with the various organisations charged with keeping touch with Communist activities both in and outside Britain'.⁷⁹ What Bruce had not told Cook, however, was that he also wished Casey 'to be considered as his mouthpiece and representative on all matters of foreign policy',⁸⁰ and that he intended to use him as a confidential intermediary in matters which often had nothing to do with foreign affairs. Within a month of his arrival, Bruce asked him to interview secretly the shipping magnate, Lord Kylsant, about the possible purchase of the Commonwealth Shipping Line.⁸¹ In effect, Casey was soon acting as Bruce's private representative to the British government.⁸² Moreover, the nature of his

⁷⁸ R.G. Casey Papers, by courtesy of Dr. W.J. Hudson, now in AA (Melbourne); Bruce to Cook, 14 October 1924. For the origins of the Liaison Office see, W.J. Hudson, *Casey* (Melbourne, 1986), pp. 54-62.

⁷⁹ AA: Department of External Affairs II; CRS A981, Correspondence files, alphabetical series, 1927-42; Imperial Relations 54, Casey to F. Koppel, 9 November 1925.

⁸⁰ Casey Papers, A. Leeper, 'Report on my service with the Commonwealth Government', November 1924.

⁸¹ AA: Bruce Papers, A1420/1, Bruce to Casey, 27 December 1924.

⁸² See eg. *My Dear P.M.*, no. 30, Casey to Bruce, 20 August 1925.

position as Liaison Officer was such, it was necessary that both he and his records should remain completely independent of Australia House. Bruce told Cook:

He is to be regarded for all practical purposes as an officer of the Prime Minister's Department, and though the information from the Foreign Office will still come through the usual British channels, Mr. Casey's own communications with Melbourne will be transmitted direct. He will, however, have direct access to yourself, and will keep you advised as fully as possible of his official correspondence.⁸³

In some respects, Casey's position resembled that of Keith Murdoch during the war. Like Murdoch, he served the Prime Minister's need for a personal intermediary as distinct from an official representative. The two were similar in other ways. Both were relatively young men (Casey was thirty-four when he took up his post in London) and, unlike the High Commissioners, had - at that stage at least - no obvious political past. Their relationships with Hughes and Bruce have been described as 'almost filial'.⁸⁴ But there the resemblance ended. Casey was a product of the Melbourne establishment - wealthy, well-educated, and a war veteran - and possessed many of the qualities Bruce judged essential if the Liaison Officer was to be acceptable in London. In May 1925, he told Hankey: 'I appreciated at the time when we decided on making an appointment that the usefulness of anyone appointed would entirely depend upon his personality. I am quite sure that in Casey we had the right man, and I am indeed glad to have your confirmation'.⁸⁵

Many years later, Casey recalled that Cook had been "'highly indignant" at having an Australian official in London directly responsible to Melbourne'.⁸⁶ At the time, he told Bruce: 'Sir J[oseph] C[ook] has been most helpful from the start - and is making the way easy as far as he can... Once Sir J[oseph] C[ook] became seized of your intentions with regard to direct communication with me - he set about having the

⁸³ Casey Papers, Bruce to Cook, 14 October 1924.

⁸⁴ Fitzhardinge, ii, p. 75; *My Dear P.M.*, p. viii.

⁸⁵ Casey Papers, Bruce to Hankey, 1 May 1925.

⁸⁶ Hudson, *Casey*, p. 59, quoting Casey to Stephen Roskill, 6 February 1968.

matter put down in black & white'.⁸⁷ In fact, Cook asked Casey to draft a telegram to Bruce, defining the Liaison Officer's relationship to Australia House, so that it would be 'cut & dried - and clear cut' as far as Shepherd, then absent in Geneva, was concerned.⁸⁸ Cook himself explained to Bruce:

My object in so cabling was to make quite definite and clear cut to me your intentions in the matter and to leave no room for doubt as to Casey's relations with this Office, and the conditions under which he should work.

Having regard to the secret and confidential nature of the work on which he will be engaged, I was from the beginning in no doubt as to the necessity for the conditions you mentioned, as I realise from my knowledge of the Foreign Office and other public departments that such an appointment was unlikely to be acceptable under any other conditions. However, it was my duty to have the position clearly defined, which our interchange of cables has satisfactorily effected.⁸⁹

Thereafter, Cook and Casey worked independently of each other. But, as far as one can tell, their relations were cordial, and there is no evidence of the underlying tension implied by Edwards' statement that, as far as the League of Nations were concerned, 'the High Commissioner and the Liaison Officer were compelled to collaborate'.⁹⁰

Inevitably, as Bruce himself acknowledged in January 1926, Casey became 'the connecting link between the Prime Minister and both the [Foreign and Dominion] offices... and Sir Joseph Cook has not appeared in the picture to any extent'.⁹¹ Yet Cook was not entirely removed from contact with the imperial departments of state. Amery, as Colonial and Dominions Secretary, sought to involve all the Dominion High Commissioners in various forms of consultation, holding weekly meetings and, after the 1926 Imperial Conference, arranging for them to receive copies of Foreign

⁸⁷ My Dear P.M., no. 1, Casey to Bruce, 27 November 1924.

⁸⁸ Ibid.; Casey Papers, Casey to Cook, 19 November 1924; cf. Hudson, Casey, p. 59.

⁸⁹ Casey Papers, Cook to Bruce, 29 November 1924.

⁹⁰ Edwards, Prime Ministers, p. 75; the emphasis is mine.

⁹¹ AA: Bruce Papers, A1420/1, Bruce to Casey, 16 January 1926.

Office confidential print and the telegrams on foreign affairs sent to the Dominion capitals.⁹² Cook himself occasionally communicated with Australia about issues arising from his meetings with Amery, including, for example, in March 1925, the creation of a separate Dominions Office, and, in February 1926, the date and agenda of the forthcoming Imperial Conference.⁹³ He also continued to lead the delegation to Geneva and represent the Commonwealth at various international conferences: in 1924, the London conference on the Dawes report; in 1926, the Special League Assembly that discussed the admission of Germany to the Council; in 1927, the three-power naval disarmament conference in Geneva.

After a poor start, he also seemed to acquire some sense of the diplomatic proprieties. The faux pas of which Hudson makes so much took place during the first year of his term. When, at a session of the International Labour Conference in June 1926, J.A. Beasley, the President of the Trades and Labor Council of New South Wales, offended the Italian delegation by suggesting that the fascists were hostile to the working class, Cook privately apologised to the Italians and dissociated the Commonwealth from Beasley's remarks. He reported to Bruce: 'I have had to correct him in committee several times. He "cuts little ice" and is not in harmony even with his own group'.⁹⁴

But, during the twenties, foreign affairs were only one part, and not necessarily the most important, of a Dominion High Commissioner's duties and preoccupations. In 1921, Hughes had embarked upon large-scale programmes of borrowing and immigration. According to Fitzhardinge, 'Bruce's basic policies on immigration, closer settlement and organized marketing, and even on Imperial relations, were variations, transposed into another key, of those of Hughes'.⁹⁵

⁹² See Chapter Six, section two.

⁹³ Amery, Diaries, i, p. 401, 18 March 1925; AA: CP 317/8, bundle 2, Cook to Bruce, 2 February 1926.

⁹⁴ Ibid., Cook to Bruce, 3 June 1926.

⁹⁵ Fitzhardinge, ii, p. 533.

Moreover, Hudson and North remind us: 'Probably it would be true to say that, when Bruce thought of London, he thought first not of the Foreign Office, but of a couple of key firms in the City and of [the] Bank of England'.⁹⁶ This then was the context in which Cook served his term. According to one biographer he had been attracted to the High Commissionership by his interest in the post-war economic development of the Empire. He arrived in England describing Australia as 'the Land of the Better Chance' and shortly after 'emphasized Australia's need of British emigrants and British capital'.⁹⁷ In July 1922 Reginald Burchell, the government Whip, who had just returned from England, reported a discussion with him about recent criticism of Australia House:

I have repeatedly discussed the position with Sir Joseph Cook, and I know that his one aim is to re-establish Australian prestige in London and the United Kingdom generally. There is no gainsaying the fact that at present the High Commissioner is doing his utmost to place at the disposal of the commercial world the facilities which Australia House undoubtedly possesses. He is aiming at creating a distinct commercial atmosphere at Australia House.⁹⁸

Throughout his term, Cook assiduously promoted trade and immigration.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, as in the case of foreign affairs, in economic matters Bruce largely depended on another individual, Frank Lidgett McDougall, virtually unconnected with Australia House, to advise him and to cultivate contacts with British businessmen.¹⁰⁰ In 1923, McDougall, who was then representing the Australian Dried Fruits Association in London, had advised Bruce during the Imperial Economic Conference held that year. During 1923, he also lobbied British politicians and

⁹⁶ My Dear P.M., p. xvii.

⁹⁷ Murdoch, 'Cook', pp. 378-79; Times, 14 and 27 January 1922.

⁹⁸ Melbourne Herald, 24 July 1922.

⁹⁹ Murdoch, 'Cook', pp. 378-79. Also see, eg. Annual Report, 1922, pp. 582-84; CPP (1923-24), ii, 'Report of the High Commissioner... for the Year 1923', pp. 597-98.

¹⁰⁰ See ADB, x, pp. 258-59; W.J. Hudson and Wendy Way (eds), Letters from a 'Secret Service Agent' (Canberra, 1986), pp. xi-xvii.

businessmen to provide preference for Dominion products in the United Kingdom market, and was later appointed by Bruce to represent the Commonwealth on the Imperial Economic Committee and the Empire Marketing Board. Following the reorganisation of Australia House in 1930, he was given the title of Economic Adviser to the High Commissioner.

Though McDougall and Cook were not close, the two often co-operated, McDougall drafting Cook's letters to the press on trade matters and keeping him in touch with his activities on the Imperial Economic Committee.¹⁰¹ In February 1926, they both urged Bruce to persuade Baldwin to implement the recommendations of the Committee's first report.¹⁰² Later, they advised him to consolidate the plethora of Boards and Agencies which were involved in the marketing of Australian products in London.¹⁰³ But of the two, Bruce preferred McDougall as his personal emissary, asking him in February 1927 to impress Amery with the importance of soon sending a British business mission to Australia. The request embarrassed McDougall, who normally communicated with Canberra through Australia House and was 'naturally anxious to maintain the friendliest possible relations with the High Commissioner and to obviate anything that might disturb this'.¹⁰⁴ Afterwards, he arranged to have personal messages transmitted through Casey, but the incident occurred late in Cook's term and one can assume it was an infrequent event - at least, while Cook was in London.

The High Commissioner finally came into his own as the supervisor of Australia's loan-raising operations in the City. He took office at a time when the

¹⁰¹ eg. 'Secret Service Agent', no. 97, McDougall to Bruce, 9 March 1927; no. 113, McDougall to Bruce, 16 June 1927; AA: CP 317/8, bundle 2, Cook to Bruce, 3 March 1926.

¹⁰² AA: CP 317/8, bundle 2, McDougall to Bruce, 9 February 1926; Cook to Bruce, 10 February 1926. Cf. Amery, Diaries, i, 26 January to 13 February 1926, passim.

¹⁰³ 'Secret Service Agent', no. 62, McDougall to Bruce, 8 April 1926; CPP (1926-28), v, 'Report of the High Commissioner... for the Year 1925', pp. 927-29. Cook's recommendations were embodied in a memorandum submitted to the assistant Minister, Sir Neville Howse, during the 1926 Imperial Conference, ibid., 'Report of the High Commissioner... for the Year 1926', p. 971.

¹⁰⁴ 'Secret Service Agent', no. 92, McDougall to Bruce, 10 February 1927.

market was settling after the war and just as the Commonwealth and the States embarked on programmes of land settlement and economic development which depended upon large amounts of borrowed capital. The Commonwealth Bank continued to issue all Commonwealth, and most State, loans, but the High Commissioner was responsible for negotiating their terms with Nivison & Co. and recommending them to the government - eventually to the complete exclusion of the Commonwealth Bank.¹⁰⁵ With the authorities in London nervousness about the amount of money leaving the country, particularly after the return to the gold standard; mounting criticism of the volume and practice of Australian borrowing; the setting up in 1923 of the National Debt Commission, which controlled the Sinking Fund; and the establishment of the Loan Council on a voluntary basis in 1924, the management of Australia's financial affairs in London became steadily more complex and politically sensitive.¹⁰⁶ Thus, after the creation of the Loan Council, Cook was instructed to co-operate with the Agents-General in negotiating State issues. But after New South Wales left the Council, he also had to ensure that the other States did not receive less favourable treatment from the market.¹⁰⁷ The task, however, was eventually beyond him alone, particularly as Shepherd, the Official Secretary, lacked expertise. In April 1926, James Collins, the Secretary to the Treasury and one of the most distinguished officers in the Commonwealth Public Service, was sent to London as Financial Adviser to the High Commissioner and a member of the Commonwealth Bank's London Board of Advice.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ See Chapter Six, section two.

¹⁰⁶ For a general survey see C.B. Schedvin, Australia and the Great Depression (Sydney, 1970), Chapter 5.

¹⁰⁷ Bank of England Archive (henceforth BE): G1, Governor's Files; item 286, 'Memorandum of interview', M. N[orman], 11 December 1925.

¹⁰⁸ AA: Prime Minister's Department; CRS A1606, Correspondence 'Secret and Confidential' series 1926-39; item C17/1, part 4, Bruce to Cook, 9 April 1926; Department of the Treasury; CRS A571, Letters, inward, 1901-75; item 28/3756, 'Advice to J.R. Collins, 1926-31'; Prime Minister's Department; CP 268/3, Staff Files, Dependent Agencies 1920-1954; item I/280, 'J.R. Collins'; ADB, viii, 'James Richard Collins', pp. 77-78; CPD, cxix, p. 7031.

Yet even though Cook eventually required assistance, his role in the City was evidence of the accuracy of Garran's view that: 'Mr Bruce was better at team-work, and whilst not avoiding responsibility... placed more confidence than Hughes in his colleagues and official advisers'.¹⁰⁹ As early as May 1923, Cook was warning of London's alarm at the amount that Australia was borrowing.¹¹⁰ In January 1926, he reminded the Prime Minister:

It all comes back to what I have already told you. We are on the market all the while and are the only Dominion in that position. Our tally is six loans in six months with a bank rate at 5 per cent with [the] inevitable result lower prices than other Dominions which have borrowed nothing during the time with the exception of South Africa's £2,500,000 new money after [a] period of 15 months.¹¹¹

In May 1924, the difficulty of timing loans so as to coincide with the most favourable periods in the market prompted him to ask Bruce for 'a definite loan programme laid down six or twelve months ahead', and for greater discretion when choosing to go to the market.¹¹² He also criticised the system of running up large overdrafts with the Westminster and Commonwealth Banks, which had disastrous consequences during the Depression.¹¹³ Page, the Treasurer, was cool towards such recommendations, but Bruce subsequently followed Cook's advice on the timing of particular issues.¹¹⁴ By early 1927, Cook was receiving the minutes of the Loan Council. He and Nivisons had also persuaded Bruce to include specific information in prospectuses about the amount of the Sinking Fund which would be employed in England.¹¹⁵ But the

¹⁰⁹ Garran, p. 281.

¹¹⁰ AA: A1606, C17/1, part 1, Cook to Bruce, 10 May 1923.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, part 4, Cook to Bruce, 7 January 1926.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, part 2, Cook to Bruce, 22 May 1924.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*; cf Schedvin, pp. 5, 104-5.

¹¹⁴ AA: A1606, C17/1, part 2, Page to Bruce, 24 December 1924; CP 317/8, bundle 2, Cook to Bruce, 12 January 1926; Bruce to Cook, 16 January 1926.

¹¹⁵ AA: A1606, C17/1, part 4, Cook to Bruce, 22 February and 15 March 1927; Bruce to Cook, 16 March 1927.

clearest illustration of the scope of Cook's role in the City and of his relations with the other institutions and individuals interested in Australian finance is to be found in his contribution to the negotiation in mid-1925 of the Commonwealth's first loan in the United States.

As we have seen, with the return to the gold standard in May 1925, the Bank of England and its Governor, Montagu Norman, were particularly anxious about the level of overseas borrowing in London. From April, Norman sought to restrict, and at times to impose a complete embargo upon, the flow of imperial and foreign issues.¹¹⁶ He was also concerned about the general level of Dominion borrowing and in June communicated with Bruce via the Commonwealth Bank, asking him to reduce the amounts required by Australia.¹¹⁷ At more or less the same time, Casey discovered that the British Cabinet was about to discuss the matter and on 14 June informed Bruce of the contents of a cable which would be sent to all the Dominions on the following day (and which Amery passed on to Cook on 16 June), urging them to curb their borrowing.¹¹⁸ Despite this, on 17 June, the Loan Council decided that it would require £40 million from overseas sources, preferably London, in the coming year.¹¹⁹ But the unlikelihood of being able to get this from the City had already inspired Bruce to consider alternatives. On 10 June, he instructed Cook to obtain from the London Manager of the Commonwealth Bank a recent telegram from Head Office which suggested that American bankers might be willing to arrange a loan. He also

¹¹⁶ R.S. Sayers, The Bank of England, 1891-1944 (Cambridge, 1976), p. 148; PRO: CO 886/11/95, no. 354, Dominions Secretary to Governors-General and Governors, 3 November 1925.

¹¹⁷ PRO: Treasury; T160, Finance, 1920-42; ref. 67, file F2217/2, minute, Niemeyer to Chancellor, 13 March 1925; CO 532/317/25692, minute, Sir H. Lambert, 26 May 1925; Montagu Norman to Lambert, 29 May 1925. As a matter of policy, the Bank of England avoided communicating directly with Governments, preferring to deal with a country's central bank, Sayers, pp. 159-60.

¹¹⁸ AA: Bruce Papers, A1420/2, Casey to Bruce, 14 June 1925; PRO: CO 532/332/26576, Colonial Secretary to Governor-General, 15 June 1925; minute, Edgcumbe, 15 June 1925; W.C. Hankinson to Cook, 16 June 1925.

¹¹⁹ AA: A1606, C17/1, part 3, Bruce to Cook, 17 June 1925.

asked him to consult Norman, 'and in other ways make your own independent inquiries regarding the matter'.¹²⁰

During the second half of June, Cook immersed himself in discussions with Norman and Nivisons. He also spoke to Amery, a representative of the National City Bank of New York, the General Manager and a Director of Lloyds Bank, and a broker, Robinson, who seems to have represented a syndicate associated with Lloyds. On 12 June, he reported that, while money was cheaper in the United States, caution was advisable in any decision to seek alternatives to the City: 'The only way in which the change could safely be made would be a joint arrangement between leading London and American Financiers and including all Dominion London borrowers'.¹²¹ Accordingly, on 17 June, the Loan Council decided that the Commonwealth should act 'as [a] single authority borrowing for all', and asked the High Commissioner to 'make discreet enquiries and cable any information you can obtain as to the prospects of co-operation between London and New York interests for the issue of joint loans'.¹²² Bruce also contacted Baldwin and asked him whether 'steps are contemplated for the issue of Anglo-American loans by co-operation between London and New York groups'.¹²³ He also wanted any Commonwealth borrowing in either market underwritten by the two brokers with whom Cook was in contact, their American associates, and the 'big five' English clearing banks. But both Norman and the Chancellor of the Exchequer opposed such a broad combination; in any case, Robinson was principally interested in poaching Nivison's business, Cook reporting on 25 June: 'Except for Nivison's side of things I have definitely got to the bottom of the other'. On 27 June, he endorsed Norman's recommendation of a combination of Nivison & Co. and the American House, J.P. Morgan & Co. to make simultaneous

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, Bruce to Cook, 10 June 1925.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, Cook to Bruce, 12 June 1925. This is what Norman advised Cook on 30 June, over a fortnight later, BE: OV13/32, Norman to Cook, 30 June 1925.

¹²² AA: A1606, C17/1, part 3, Bruce to Cook, 17 June 1926.

¹²³ PRO: CO 532/306/27758, Governor-General to Colonial Office, 18 June 1925.

issues in London and New York.¹²⁴ Earlier, he had asked Bruce to define his position vis-a-vis the Commonwealth Bank. An answer came on 26 June:

Have cabled Secretary of State [for Colonies] today in reply to cable from him asking him to see you and discuss whole position. Position appears to be clarifying as [a] result [of] your negotiations. Please continue and keep us fully advised. Have today instructed the Commonwealth Bank that you are controlling the whole of the negotiations with regard to our loan requirements and they must instruct their London Manager to open no negotiations save after consultation with you.¹²⁵

As early as 15 June, Casey had reported that Amery did not object to the Commonwealth borrowing in New York as long as it did not signify a permanent break with London.¹²⁶ On 14 July, Bruce gave Cook authorisation for simultaneous issues of \$75 million (approximately £15 million) and £5 million in New York and London, the New York portion to be issued (and entirely taken up) by Morgans. Nivisons were the sole stockbroker in London. It remained only for Cook to make \$50 million of the New York loan available to the Exchequer (which required dollars for a war debt payment) in exchange for sterling offered at a discount, and to transfer the balance at a favourable rate, thereby earning the commendation of the Loan Council.¹²⁷

On 29 July, he reviewed the entire negotiations: 'They were both difficult and delicate and there seemed so many who were interested directly or indirectly that there were few one could consult with the certainty of receiving disinterested advice'; Norman, however, had given 'valued advice' and shown 'unfailing and helpful courtesy'.¹²⁸ Importantly in view of the tendency to magnify his role,¹²⁹ Casey had

¹²⁴ AA; A1606, C17/1, part 3, Cook to Bruce, 25 and 27 June 1925.

¹²⁵ Ibid., Bruce to Cook, 26 June 1925.

¹²⁶ AA: Bruce Papers, A1420/2, Casey to Bruce, 15 June 1925.

¹²⁷ AA: A1606, C17/1, part 3, Bruce to Cook, 14 and 27 July 1925; Annual Report, 1925, p. 940.

¹²⁸ AA: A1606, C17/1, part 3, Cook to Bruce, 29 July 1925.

¹²⁹ Edwards, Prime Ministers, p. 74.

played his customary part as an informal channel of communication, but had no involvement in the actual negotiations. Both Nivisons and the Commonwealth Bank had also provided useful information, but ultimately Cook had been the pivot of the operation. He had enjoyed Bruce's confidence, and finally brought the affair to a successful conclusion.

Besides the supervision of the loan programme, the promotion of trade and immigration, the contacts with the Colonial Office, and his regular excursions to Geneva, there were other aspects of his duties which Cook did not neglect. He superintended the administration of Australia House,¹³⁰ took his place on the Pacific Cable Board and the Imperial War Graves Commission, and enthusiastically represented Australia on the Executive Council and Management Committee of the 1924-25 British Empire Exhibition, chairing the sub-committee charged with ensuring that only empire foodstuffs and construction material were used.¹³¹ Finally, he happily took to the social duties which Shepherd had found so onerous, emphasising in his 1925 report:

It is not generally appreciated in Australia that this exchange of social courtesies has often an incidental but very important business side... I have considered it not the least important part of my duty as High Commissioner, and in the advancement of Australian interests, to attend many of the official functions to which I have been invited, and I am convinced that much advantage to the Commonwealth has resulted therefrom.¹³²

He meticulously listed these engagements in quarterly reports which also covered the entire administration of Australia House. In March 1925, for example, he attended eighteen official functions, luncheons and dinners, including two levees at the Court of St. James at which he presented Australian visitors, and a private dinner given by the Colonial Secretary. He also attended the annual general meeting of the British

¹³⁰ eg. Annual Report, 1922, p. 573.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 578-580; CPP(1923-24), ii, 'Annual Report, 1923', p. 619; *Times*, 31 July 1947.

¹³² Annual Report, 1925, p. 921.

Empire Exhibition Executive and visited Liverpool to meet Page, the Commonwealth Treasurer, who was en route to Australia from the United States.¹³³

Under Cook the Australian High Commissionership reverted to the traditions established by Reid, his mentor and patron. He had benefited from a period of political stability in Australia not enjoyed by his two predecessors, and his duties had grown as the Commonwealth's functions themselves expanded after the war. There may have been gall and wormwood in the thought of Casey enjoying Bruce's confidences and ranging freely in Whitehall's corridors, but probably he had little time for such brooding; his biographer's suggestion that he had been a figurehead, a kind of elevated administrative official, is wide of the mark.¹³⁴ According to Shepherd, who returned to Australia shortly after him: 'Sir Joseph had a wonderful time in office'.¹³⁵ At the time of their departure: 'Australia's stock stood higher than that of any other Dominion'; Australia House 'had become one of the busiest spots in London'.¹³⁶ The Times paid Cook the compliment of a personal tribute: his High Commissionership had been 'a notable one' - 'the six years that have passed since he came to London have been years of steady work for the increase of our Imperial estate'.¹³⁷ His successor observed in his first report: 'I cannot open... without expressing admiration for the tireless efforts he made to uphold the prestige of Australia and to represent her interests in London. Of the value of his organisation and of his personal energies in the directions indicated, I have had repeated evidence since I took control of this office'.¹³⁸

¹³³ AA: A458, E108/8, High Commissioner to Bruce, 20 April 1925. For Cook's quarterly reports see: A458, E108/8/33 (March 1924 to March 1925); E108/8 (June 1925 to September 1926) and A461, A348/1/6 (April to June 1927); the series is incomplete.

¹³⁴ Murdoch, 'Cook', pp. 397-98.

¹³⁵ Shepherd, Memoir, p. 412.

¹³⁶ Ibid., pp. 412, 413.

¹³⁷ Times, leader, 20 August 1927.

¹³⁸ CPP (1926-28), v, 'Report of the High Commissioner... for the Year 1927', p. 1009.

Cook's term was due to expire on 10 November 1926. In early August, Bruce offered him an extension of six months which he found 'quite acceptable'.¹³⁹ The Prime Minister told the press that it was 'most desirable that Sir Joseph Cook should be available for consultation during the course of the Imperial Conference',¹⁴⁰ but he was also having difficulty in finding a successor and wanted to see what the conference would turn up. In mid-1927, Cook represented the Commonwealth at the three-power naval conference in Geneva and, on 20 August, sailed for home.¹⁴¹ He was the first High Commissioner to retire in Australia. In 1928-29, he chaired a Royal Commission which investigated the finances of the South Australian State government, and then settled in the exclusive Sydney suburb of Bellevue Hill, where he died on 30 July 1947.

¹³⁹ AA: Stanley Melbourne Bruce; AA1970/559, miscellaneous papers; bundle 1, Cook to Bruce, 8 August 1926.

¹⁴⁰ AA: CP 268/1, 'Statement for Press', S.M. B[ruce], 30 August 1926.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., Cook to Bruce, 2 and 11 June 1927; Times, 20 August 1927.

CHAPTER FIVE

SIR GRANVILLE RYRIE, 1927-1932

(i) Sir Granville Ryrie's Appointment

Although, in August 1926, Bruce extended Cook's term by six months, he had been thinking about the question of his successor for some time. His choice was complicated by the likelihood that the next Imperial Conference would be discussing important constitutional issues and his own intuition that a further instalment of reform was due in the London office. Amery was also nudging him in this direction. He assured him in March 1925 that Casey had been a success as Liaison Officer, but that 'information' was 'not quite the same thing as personal communication or consultation'. 'It always seems to me', he continued, 'to come back in the long run to the necessity of having someone of really high standing whom you can trust to give authoritative expression to your views and instructions'.¹ Bruce replied in May:

I recognise that it is imperative that some method should be devised for the fullest possible personal consultation, if the Empire is not to be brought down on this difficult and intricate question of foreign policy. I have held the view for some time that the only way in which the trouble can be got over is by the Australian Prime Minister having in London somebody, enjoying his fullest confidence, of such a calibre that he would equally enjoy the confidence of British Ministers. His position would actually be that of an informal Ambassador. It does not matter whether he is High Commissioner or not... It is... not what he is called that is the difficulty, it is in finding the individual. So far, I have not been successful, but I can assure you that I have the matter in my mind, and I would not hesitate to act if I could see the right person.²

¹ AA: Bruce Papers, AA1970/555, Amery to Bruce, 16 March 1925; cf. Amery to Bruce, 30 July, 8 October and 24 November 1925.

² Ibid., Bruce to Amery, 6 May 1925.

He was still thinking about reform in early 1926, when he turned to the actual choice of Cook's successor, confiding to Casey on 16 January:

At the moment I have no clear views on this subject, as far as the individual is concerned, but I feel very strongly that the position of High Commissioner is one of such importance that the occupant of it should be a man of outstanding ability. Could one find the ideal occupant of the position it would unquestionably mean that his relations to the Foreign Office, and to the Dominions Office would be very much closer than those of Sir Joseph Cook have been.³

As he had indicated in 1921, the calibre of the High Commissioner was his first consideration. He explained to Casey: 'My own idea is to try and go a little outside of the type of man who has been sent in the past, and to appoint as High Commissioner a man of outstanding ability, and of such a character as would ensure his being acceptable to the British Government'.⁴

That the Prime Minister was contemplating some change was reported by the press in March, making the identity of the next London representative a subject of unprecedented speculation.⁵ As early as November 1925, Casey had written that Pearce, Sir Neville Howse and Sir Mark Sheldon, a Sydney businessman who had been the Commissioner in the United States, were all being talked about in London as potential High Commissioners.⁶ Eventually, Sir Victor Wilson, Earle Page, Sir John Monash, Sir James Elder, Sir George Fairbairn, Sir Brudenell White, Hughes, William Watt, even Bruce himself, were also added to the list.⁷ In March 1926, the Argus confidently predicted that Howse would be appointed after the Easter recess, but this was soon contradicted.⁸ In August, the Victorian Agent-General, Sir George

³ AA: Bruce Papers, A1420/3, Bruce to Casey, 16 January 1926.

⁴ Ibid.; CPD, xcvi, p. 13246, 24 November 1921.

⁵ Argus, 8 March 1926.

⁶ My Dear P.M., no. 40, Casey to Bruce, 19 November 1925.

⁷ Argus, 8 March, 20 and 28 August, 3 February 1927.

⁸ Ibid., 8 March, 26 June, 31 August 1926.

Fairbairn, was believed to be destined for the post, but the State Premier felt 'such a thing [was]... most unlikely to happen'.⁹ Finally, the Argus reported: 'Well-informed people... forecast that the Prime Minister himself, after the opening of Parliament at Canberra, will probably accept the position'.¹⁰

Of all these individuals, apart from Bruce himself, only Hughes had precedent on his side. He had, in fact, 'often hinted privately that he expected to be appointed High Commissioner in London, as had former Prime Ministers',¹¹ and undoubtedly his claims were credible. In March 1927, the South Australian Register asserted: 'The ex-Prime Minister... would have been eminently qualified both to undertake the re-organisation which... is required at Australia House, and to speak with distinction in behalf of (sic) the Commonwealth at the Imperial and international council tables'.¹² Had Bruce regarded the High Commissionership as the refuge of elder statesmen who had become troublesome, Hughes was an obvious choice. But, as we have seen, Bruce believed the High Commissionership to be important in its own terms and was determined to break with precedent. According to one biographer: 'Bruce denied that any promise had been made to Hughes, who, he believed, would have been most unsuitable for the job'.¹³

Quite apart from his 'great difficulty in finding a new High Commissioner',¹⁴ his approach was tempered by caution and a desire to see what the Imperial Conference (due to meet on 9 October), would turn up.¹⁵ In August, Cabinet considered the positions of both High Commissioner and Liaison Officer with respect

⁹ Ibid., 20 and 24 August 1926.

¹⁰ Ibid., 28 August 1926.

¹¹ Cecil Edwards, Bruce of Melbourne (London, 1965), p. 75.

¹² South Australian Register, 24 March 1927.

¹³ Edwards, Bruce, p. 75. Hughes was still unacceptable when the post came up again in 1932, see NLA: MS 4581 (J.A. Lyons Papers); box 1, file 9, J.W. Fowler to J.A. Lyons, 6 January 1932.

¹⁴ Argus, 31 August 1926.

¹⁵ AA: Bruce Papers, A1420/3, Bruce to Casey, 16 January 1926.

to possible discussions at the conference,¹⁶ and it was in connection with the conference that, in October, Lord Salisbury, then leading a delegation of the Empire Parliamentary Association, discussed Bruce's attitude to 'the "improved High Commissioner question" ' with Pearce. Salisbury reported to Amery:

Bruce is quite satisfied that the policy which he had adopted should be further developed and that, if possible, the appointment should be made of a man of Cabinet rank. He appreciates the fact that such [a] development may, owing to possible Canadian reluctance, be premature, [but] he would be prepared to go a long way subject to His Majesty's Government showing itself agreeable to such a course.¹⁷

At the conference itself, Bruce suggested that the High Commissioner 'should be the unofficial channel' between the Foreign Office and the Commonwealth Government. Amery himself obtained the Prime Ministers' consent to circulate copies of Foreign Office confidential print among the High Commissioners; Baldwin, inspired by Hankey, suggested that they might also attend meetings of the CID.¹⁸ It is also likely that Amery discussed Cook's successor with Bruce. On 13 December, three weeks after the Conference's conclusion, Bruce cabled to Page, the acting Prime Minister, suggesting that Sir Brudenell White, the former Chief-of-Staff of the AIF and at that time the Chairman of the Commonwealth Public Service Board, be appointed, probably for a reduced term of three years.¹⁹

The nomination confirmed the genuineness of Bruce's desire to break with precedent. Before the war, White had excelled at the British Staff College at Camberley. He had planned the successful evacuation of the Gallipoli peninsular in

¹⁶ AA: Cabinet Secretariat; CRS A2718/XM, Bruce-Page Ministry, volumes of Cabinet minutes, minutes and submissions, 1923-29; vol. 2, Cabinet minutes, 3 August 1926.

¹⁷ CUL: Stanley Baldwin Papers, vol. 96, f. 197, Salisbury to Amery, 12 October 1926.

¹⁸ PRO: Cabinet Office; CAB 32, Imperial Conferences to 1939; vol. 56, Imperial Conference 1926 - Inter-Imperial Relations Committee... 8 November 1926; Amery, *Diaries*, i, p. 478, 8 November 1926; *My Dear P.M.*, no. 153, Casey to Bruce, 20 September 1928; AA: A981, Defence 289, Dominions Secretary to Prime Minister, 24 April 1928.

¹⁹ I have been unable to locate this cable, but its contents can be inferred from Page's reply in AA: Bruce Papers, AA1970/559, bundle 1, Page to Bruce, 15 December 1926, and what appears to be an accurate report in the *Argus*, 3 February 1927.

1915, and by the war's end was a Major-General and the Chief-of-Staff of the British Fifth Army. In 1923, he became Chairman of the Public Service Board, but was due to retire in 1928.²⁰ He had sufficient prestige to be acceptable to most Australians, administrative ability and experience, and, perhaps most important of all, the credentials to give him entree in Whitehall and Westminster. But Cabinet was diffident, Page wiring on 15 December:

Assume that you have good reason for your suggestion regarding White but Cabinet feels considerable hesitancy about his political sense, otherwise qualifications admirable. In circumstances feel that matter of appointment even for shorter term had better remain in abeyance until your return which still would leave three months before Cook's term expires.²¹

Cabinet may have genuinely doubted White's suitability, or simply balked at the appointment of a non-politician. But Bruce may not have immediately discarded the idea, reports of the probability of White's appointment appearing after the Prime Minister's return to Australia in February 1927.²² He also did not change his views about the importance of the High Commissioner. He told the press in Sydney that 'the scope of his work has yet to be discussed by the Cabinet', but added in Melbourne shortly after: 'After the Imperial Conference it had been recognized that it was desirable to have some less official method of clearing up points... As far as Australia was concerned, the High Commissioner could do, and was doing, the work without any alteration of status'.²³

In the end, unable to convince Cabinet, or simply changing his mind, Bruce turned to somebody who had escaped public notice altogether. On 21 March 1927, Cabinet unanimously agreed to his suggestion that Brigadier-General Sir Granville de Laune Rylie, the member for the New South Wales seat of Warringah, be invited to

²⁰ Dictionary of Australian Biography, ii, pp. 483-85.

²¹ AA: Bruce Papers, AA1970/559, bundle 1, Page to Bruce, 15 December 1926.

²² Argus, 2 and 3 February 1927.

²³ Times, 4 and 7 February 1927.

accept the High Commissionership.²⁴ Ryrie consented and, on the evening of 22 March, Bruce announced the decision in the House. The appointment took Parliament, the press and, not least, Ryrie himself by complete surprise. The *South Australian Register* observed wryly: 'A darker horse has never won an important official event'.²⁵

Ryrie was the first native-born Australian to be appointed High Commissioner. His background and up-bringing also contrasted markedly with the working-class origins of his immediate predecessors. Born on 1 July 1865 at Michelago station in the high country south of modern Canberra, he was the son of a pastoralist and sometime member of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly. He was educated at Mittagong and the King's School, Parramatta, before starting work on the land and soon taking over the management of Michelago. He was a skilled bushman and had earned distinction in the South African war. In 1906, he won the by-election as a Liberal for the State seat of Queanbeyan and in 1911 entered the Federal Parliament through another by-election, winning the blue-ribbon seat of North Sydney. In 1914, he returned to the colours, eventually serving in Gallipoli, the Sinai and Palestine. By the end of the war he was a Brigadier-General, commanding all Australian forces in Egypt. He was appointed KCMG in 1919 and became assistant Minister for Defence in Hughes's last government. But, after the 1922 election, he was dropped from the Ministry to make more room for the Country Party. From January 1926 until his resignation, he was a member of the Joint Committee of Public Accounts, becoming Chairman in July. Since February, he had also been temporary Chairman of Committees. In other words, although a distinguished soldier and a member of the pastoral establishment, he had been a journey-man politician, with few obvious debts to call in to warrant his appointment as High Commissioner. Serle portrays him in the *Dictionary of Australian Biography* as: 'Bluff in speech, and full

²⁴ AA: A2718/XM, vol. 2, Cabinet minutes, 21 March 1927.

²⁵ CPD, cxv, p. 883, 22 March 1927; *South Australian Register*, 24 March 1927; cf. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 March 1927 and *Age*, 23 March 1927.

of humour, courage and common sense... In politics he was sound, honest and efficient with a scorn of finesse and intrigue'.²⁶ He also had a reputation for the use of 'expressive and lurid' Australian vocabulary.²⁷ The Sydney Daily Telegraph commented in March 1927: 'He is an exceedingly unostentatious man personally, though in Parliament he has been known to grow exceedingly boistrous, and almost brutally candid'.²⁸

Ryrie had not been Bruce's first choice as High Commissioner, neither had he been an obvious candidate for the position. He nevertheless satisfied some of Bruce's criteria. Like White, he had enjoyed a distinguished military career; as a pastoralist he would be able to speak authoritatively about Australia's export industries and developmental needs. Up to a point, his appointment had also been a break with precedent, a fact acknowledged by one later commentator.²⁹ In May 1927, Stonehaven, the Governor-General, explained to Salisbury:

Ryrie is quite a different type from previous High Commissioners: a typical Australian country gentleman, the 3rd generation of a family of squatters. He has been a Member of the Lower House of the Federal Parliament for many years, & has held office as Assistant Minister for Defence. But in choosing him Bruce was not influenced, I fancy, by his Parliamentary record, so much as by his personal qualifications. He wanted to have a man representing Australia in London who could possibly become persona grata not only in official circles but in others not much frequented by High Commissioners hitherto, possibly through lack of opportunity or inclination.³⁰

But the fact remained that the High Commissioner had been chosen from the governing party and in this respect the appointment remained an exercise in political patronage. Unlike his three predecessors, however, Ryrie had not aspired to the job

²⁶ Dictionary of Australian Biography, ii, p. 302; for Ryrie's biography see pp. 301-2 and ADB, xi, pp. 502-504.

²⁷ Pearce, Carpenter to Cabinet, p. 181.

²⁸ Sydney Daily Telegraph, 23 March 1927.

²⁹ Lyall, p. 125.

³⁰ Hatfield House Library: MSS 4M/121/95, Stonehaven to Salisbury, 30 May 1927; quoted by permission of the Marquess of Salisbury.

and, if he was being rewarded, it was for services out of the public eye. It can safely be assumed that he was acceptable to the Country Party - in the 1910 New South Wales election he had run against Holman, the Premier, in an attempt to attract the farmers' vote.³¹ He may also have been influential in the Nationalist organisation. In the reshuffle after Cook's retirement, he was believed to have demanded a rise in salary in lieu of promotion, and following the 1922 election, had, with Bruce, attempted to discover Hughes's intentions when the Country Party refused to join a Hughes-led government.³² Indeed, before the election, he had moved to the new electorate of Warringah to enable Hughes to contest the safe seat of North Sydney. In 1927, a senior party organiser, Robert Archdale Parkhill replaced him in Warringah.³³ But these are straws in the wind. In the end, his appointment was probably political primarily in the sense that Cabinet would only trust a party loyalist in London.

Whether by choosing Ryrie, Bruce had also abandoned the idea of reforming the High Commissionership is not clear. The South Australian Register and Sydney Daily Telegraph certainly assumed as much, but neither was entirely correct.³⁴ Bruce had already consented to his High Commissioner receiving copies of Foreign Office confidential print, and been consulted about the High Commissioners' attendance at the CID.³⁵ As he told Amery in 1925, he also intended bringing the Liaison Officer into closer contact with the High Commissioner, instructing him to meet Ryrie on a weekly basis, showing him the reports he sent to Australia. Amery told Hertzog, the South African Prime Minister, in September 1927:

³¹ Evatt, Holman, p. 155.

³² Fitzhardinge, ii, pp. 502, 515.

³³ Ibid., p. 508. In 1927, Parkhill was the Secretary and Treasurer of the New South Wales Nationalist Association, and Secretary of the Consultative Council, Commonwealth of Australia, Biographical Handbook (1930).

³⁴ Sydney Daily Telegraph, 24 March 1927; South Australian Register, 24 March 1927.

³⁵ See note 18 above and Chapter Six, section three.

Originally Mr Bruce had treated Casey as his personal liaison, acting to a considerable extent independent of the High Commissioner... He had... now decided to make the High Commissioner his chief representative, the junior being attached to him as his staff officer to go about and get him information and brief him with it for purposes of discussion.³⁶

Ryrie would also receive copies of official communications between the Commonwealth and the Dominion Office, with no reservations as to particular classes of material.³⁷

But whether Ryrie was capable of bearing these new responsibilities was an open question. Hughes considered that the government was 'sending a man to represent Australia in London... who with all his excellent qualities as a soldier, is quite unfit for the job'.³⁸ The press was equally sceptical. The Brisbane Courier felt 'that Sir Granville Ryrie is not the man that the vast majority of Australians would choose for this important office'. The South Australian Register remarked: 'if some disappointment be mingled with the surprise occasioned by his appointment... it will arise from the belief that the qualities which served him so well at the head of his brigade and in the rough-and-tumble of politics are not exactly those needed in a High Commissioner'.³⁹

Bruce's reasons for choosing Ryrie remain partly obscure. His own nominee had been rejected and finally he had compromised. Ryrie might be competent at the CID and reveal qualities not obvious during his political career. Failing this, he could fall back upon the role of figurehead, leaving Casey, McDougall and Collins to get on with the actual business of representing the Commonwealth in London.

³⁶ AA: Department of Foreign Affairs; A3299, Cumpston Collection, Bruce to Ryrie, 13 June 1927, by courtesy of Dr P. Edwards; PRO: Foreign Office; FO 372, Treaty, General Correspondence from 1906; vol. 2322 - f. T7554, file 213, minute, 'Relations between Australian Liaison Officer and High Commissioner', 15 June 1927; DO 35/29/9394, 'Extract from Notes of Discussion Between Mr Amery and General Hertzog', 7 September 1927.

³⁷ AA: A3299, Bruce to Ryrie, 13 June 1927.

³⁸ Shepherd, Memoir, p. 377, Hughes to Shepherd, 24 September 1927.

³⁹ Brisbane Courier, 24 March 1927; South Australian Register, 24 March 1927.

(ii) Ryrie in London, 1927-29

Ryrie arrived in London on 13 July 1927 and was soon received by the King.⁴⁰ Until October 1929, he served the same conservative coalition which had appointed him. Bearing in mind Bruce's preoccupation with the calibre of the High Commissioner and his desire to employ him as an 'unofficial' intermediary with the Foreign Office, the most important questions we can ask of the first half of Ryrie's term are whether there had been any significant change, either in the High Commissioner's duties, or in his relations with the Commonwealth and British governments.

As far as the High Commissioner's public duties were concerned, continuity was more evident than change. In his first statement to the press, Ryrie emphasised that he was a pastoralist whose 'practical experience may be of service to the producer in Australia, to the consumer here, and to the migrant' He looked upon 'migration as of the greatest importance not only to Australia, but to the whole Empire', and declared with respect to Anglo-Australian trade: 'We want your goods; we have shown that clearly'.⁴¹ Like his predecessor, he stressed: 'that valuable work is accomplished, and benefit to Australia obtained by attendance at functions and hospitality by the High Commissioner'. He too called for: 'a closer correlation of the efforts' of the produce control boards, and noted his contacts with 'many of the prominent businessmen with whom it will be my pleasure to collaborate in the interest of Australian trade and commerce during the coming year'.⁴²

⁴⁰ Times, 14 and 23 July 1927.

⁴¹ Times, 14 July 1927.

⁴² Annual Report, 1927, pp. 1009-10.

His emphasis upon the themes of 'men, money and markets' accurately reflected where the true centre of gravity in Anglo-Australian relations now lay. By the end of Cook's term, the wave of post-war immigration and public borrowing from the United Kingdom had reached its peak. Exports to the United Kingdom accounted for a third of all Australian exports, while imports from that country represented over forty per cent of the nation's total. During Ryrie's first year, immigration, borrowing and trade continued at these levels or increased.⁴³

In meeting the challenge of his new position, Ryrie could rely upon the support of the three accomplished individuals who had each taken their places in London during his predecessor's term. Until the Coleman reforms of 1930 (when he became 'Economic Adviser'), McDougall probably had the loosest official relationship with Australia House. Nevertheless, he noted following Ryrie's arrival: 'Trumble [the new Official Secretary] is anxious to arrange for a weekly meeting between the High Commissioner and myself. Sir Granville is going to give me an early opportunity to discuss several points'.⁴⁴ In December 1927, he attended a small lunch at Australia House at which Ryrie entertained the Parliamentary Secretary of the Department of Overseas Trade, and the Civil Service heads of both that Department and the Board of Trade. He felt that it had been 'very useful', and hoped that the lunches would continue on a fortnightly basis.⁴⁵ In the event, he was disappointed. At the time of writing to Bruce in April 1928, it had been 'the first and last' such occasion - at least, to which he had been invited.⁴⁶ Indeed, Ryrie noted in his first annual report that he had started a series of luncheons 'at which I am gradually becoming closely acquainted with members of His Majesty's Government,

⁴³ For the relevant statistics on trade, immigration and public borrowing see Year Book, 1928, no. 21, pp. 205, 207, 389, 926, 928-29.

⁴⁴ 'Secret Service Agent', no. 118, McDougall to Bruce, 20 July 1927.

⁴⁵ Ibid., no. 138, McDougall to Bruce, 14 December 1927.

⁴⁶ Ibid., no. 160, McDougall to Bruce, 17 April 1928.

departmental chiefs, and heads of banking, shipping and similar institutions'.⁴⁷ Otherwise, McDougall stayed in touch with Ryrie, advising him on economic issues, particularly tariffs and marketing.⁴⁸

Collins, as Financial Adviser and the most senior public servant in Australia House, was the official in closest touch with Ryrie. By sending him to London, Bruce had possibly anticipated the appointment of a High Commissioner who lacked financial expertise.⁴⁹ Typically, his relation to Ryrie was never adequately defined. Later, he told Prime Minister Joseph Lyons:

Though there were no Government instructions showing where the financial duties and responsibilities, as between the High Commissioner and the Financial Adviser, began and ended, no practical difficulty arose, for the personal relations were satisfactory and business was carried on in mutual confidence and understanding.⁵⁰

More particularly:

I interviewed the Governor of the Bank of England and other leading bankers in London, and... terms for long loans, short loans and Treasury Bills were negotiated by me with underwriters and bankers. The High Commissioner, Sir Granville Ryrie, sometimes took part in work of that kind but invariably much weight and responsibility fell upon me.

Even before the Depression, then, Collins had assumed much of the responsibility for the daily management of Australia's financial transactions in London. But the borrowing programme was too important - politically and economically - to be overseen by him alone, and Ryrie, while deferring to Collins's experience and judgement, was far from being a cypher. He participated in the discussions with Nivisons and in the less frequent meetings at the Bank of England. He advised the

⁴⁷ Annual Report, 1927, p. 1010.

⁴⁸ eg. 'Secret Service Agent', no. 163, McDougall to Bruce, 9 May 1928.

⁴⁹ AA: See Chapter Six, section two.

⁵⁰ AA: CP 268/3, I/280, J.R. Collins to J.A. Lyons, 30 January 1934.

government, jointly with Collins, but sometimes making separate observations. In February 1928, for example, he and Collins discussed the prospects for the current loan programme with Montagu Norman, enquiring whether Australia should again borrow in New York. Afterwards, Ryrie was active as a principal in the negotiation of a \$m50 loan.⁵¹ In October 1928, he was reporting to Bruce on the effects of the Waterside Workers' strike on Australian stock. He and Collins agreed with Nivisons 'that conditions are still unfavourable for [a] new Commonwealth loan'; Ryrie himself concluded: 'both Nivisons and I will keep [the] possibility for [a] further Commonwealth loan under daily consideration'.⁵² Yet, apart from advice on specific questions, there is no evidence that either he or Collins attempted to advise about the general lines of the borrowing programme or how Australia's reputation in the City might be improved.

Finally, the Liaison Officer was the third senior official whose support the new High Commissioner could rely on. Here, as we have seen, Bruce did introduce some measure of change, bringing him into closer touch with Ryrie and instructing him to show Ryrie his communications with Australia. He was, however, to remain under Hankey's supervision in the Cabinet Office, quite independent of Australia House. Casey was in Australia for much of 1927, but returned to London in December and soon felt that he would have 'no difficulty in working harmoniously with Australia House'.⁵³ But the international scene was quiescent and he was soon disappointed, writing to Bruce in March 1928:

Since I have been back in London I have, by arrangement, seen the High Commissioner each week at a stated time, and have kept him verbally and briefly informed. I am on good terms with him and with them all at Australia House. My weekly period with him, however, is only about a quarter of an hour. He does not want anything except

⁵¹ AA: A1606, C17/1, part 5, Bruce to Ryrie, 27 January 1928; BE: G1/286, 'Record of Interview', E.M. H[arvey], 1 February 1928. For the negotiation of the dollar loan see AA: A1606, C17/1, parts 5 and 6.

⁵² AA: A1606, C17/1, part 6, Ryrie to Bruce, 18 October 1928 and subsequent telegrams.

⁵³ My Dear P.M., no. 76, Casey to Bruce, 14 December 1927.

headlines, and it has rather come down to an understanding that I do not fail to inform him of anything of outstanding importance to Australia.⁵⁴

Clearly, either because of lack of time or inclination, or because foreign affairs were low in his priorities, Ryrie did not take great interest in international relations. Nor did he share Casey's fondness for the minutiae of imperial co-operation. Casey nevertheless attempted to keep him abreast of the developments likely to affect him, noting in August 1928, for example:

I have kept the High Commissioner fully informed of the Antarctic negotiations, by word of mouth and by submitting a complete file of correspondence to Trumble at regular intervals. They seem quite content to leave it to me. In fact I very much doubt if they have read the material I have bombarded them with.⁵⁵

Apart from the closer relationship (at least, in theory) between the Liaison Officer and the High Commissioner, the most important innovation of the first part of Ryrie's term was the High Commissioners' attendance at meetings of the CID, the first such meeting taking place on 22 May 1928. These, as well as the circulation of papers beforehand and the weekly round of Foreign Office confidential print, brought the Dominion representatives routinely in touch with issues of imperial defence and foreign policy. But for the reasons which will be explained in Chapter Six, they never became closely involved in policy discussions, and were soon summoned to the Committee only when sufficient items of 'Dominion' interest had accumulated to justify a separate agenda.⁵⁶ Ryrie nevertheless attended five of the Committee's seven meetings during 1929.

Though aware of the British government's reservations regarding the High Commissioners, Bruce still regarded the Committee as an appropriate forum in which to voice Australia's concern about British policies, Ryrie thus becoming on these

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 109, Casey to Bruce, 1 March 1928.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 150, Casey to Bruce, 30 August 1928.

⁵⁶ See Chapter Six, section three.

occasions the spokesman of the Commonwealth government concerning major questions of policy. When in July 1929 the MacDonald Labour government notified the Dominions that a Cabinet committee had been appointed to review naval expenditure, Bruce urged: 'that if any changes of consequence in Imperial Defence policy are contemplated such proposals should be made subject to inquiry and discussion at a meeting of the Council (sic) of Imperial Defence at which the Australian High Commissioner and his technical advisers should be present'.⁵⁷ In the event, he was unable to forestall the decision to slow work on the Singapore base and suspend part of the naval construction programme, but a meeting of the Committee nevertheless took place on 25 July. Ryrie had only returned from Geneva the evening before, and Casey did his best to brief him about 'the situation as regards Singapore, Naval limitation and Egypt'.⁵⁸ At the meeting itself, he repeated more or less verbatim the terms of a telegram referring to the contribution Australia had already made to the Singapore strategy, which Bruce had earlier sent to MacDonald. He asked 'whether it was intended actually to implement any policy regarding Singapore before receiving the views of the Dominion Prime Ministers',⁵⁹ and responded bluntly to MacDonald's assurance:

speaking on behalf of Australia, though not under actual instructions from Mr Bruce, he was very pleased to hear the definite statement made by the Prime Minister, especially after various rumours he had heard that there was a possibility of the Singapore Base being abandoned.

The episode well illustrated both the difficulties during the 1920s, and the shortcomings, of an aging High Commissioner. Frequently compelled to turn from one unrelated issue to another - the borrowing programme, trade, Geneva, imperial defence - he was required to be a jack of all trades but was master of none. The limits

⁵⁷ AA: Bruce Papers, A1420/8, draft of cable from Prime Minister to Secretary of State, 14 July 1929.

⁵⁸ My Dear P.M., no. 208, Casey to Bruce, 25 July 1929.

⁵⁹ PRO: CAB 2/5, CID, minutes, 25 July 1929.

to 'consultation' were also exposed. In effect, Bruce had been handed a fait accompli and there was nothing either he or Ryrie could do about it. The proposed treaty with Egypt had also been on the agenda, but as Casey explained: 'the High Commissioner did not have an opportunity to put his views, as the Prime Minister did not, apparently, wish to have a discussion on the matter'.⁶⁰

In March 1928, Bruce told Casey that he was satisfied with his High Commissioner: 'As far as I can make out from letters I have received from Britain, Ryrie has done extraordinarily well, and he has been very acceptable to everyone in London'.⁶¹ Yet Casey and McDougall had both been disappointed, and Amery, expecting to be able to count on Dominion support for strong imperial defence, was not impressed when Ryrie told the CID on 5 July 1928 that Australia accepted the assumption that there would be no war within the next ten years, adding with reference to Singapore:

He did not consider Japan was really a potential enemy at the present time, and it was, therefore, a most inopportune time to start the construction of coast defences, which might well be obsolete before the danger from Japan justified their construction. In view of the large amount of money that America had invested in Australia, it was hardly likely that the United States would countenance an aggressive policy on the part of Japan against Australia.⁶²

This, Amery felt, was 'a very silly little speech'.⁶³

Ryrie's performance at the League was also criticised. In July 1929, the Manchester Guardian created 'a slight storm at Geneva' when it commented that the High Commissioner appeared to know less about New Guinea than the Permanent Mandates Commission to which he was reporting. Casey informed the Prime Minister: 'This came about by reason of there having been a lot of questions put to Sir

⁶⁰ My Dear P.M., no. 209, Casey to Bruce, 1 August 1929.

⁶¹ AA: Bruce Papers, A1420/5, Bruce to Casey, 20 March 1928.

⁶² PRO: CAB 2/5, minutes, 5 July 1928.

⁶³ Amery, Diaries, i, p. 554, 5 July 1928.

Granville to which he could not reply and on which he asked for Fuhrman [the League of Nations Officer] to reply for him - which arises out of the fact that he won't read the papers with which he is supplied'.⁶⁴

Finally, the bluntness of some of Ryrie's public statements also gave offence. On 27 March 1929, the Bulletin observed: ' "The Old Brig" bears the reputation in London of being the Empire's champion brick-dropper'.⁶⁵ But he was not asked to change the tone of his speeches. Characteristically, he told the guests at a dinner to welcome the returning members of the 1928 British Economic Mission: 'He hoped that [their report] might stop some of the carping criticism from pessimists who wanted to give [Australians]... a bad name and say that they were practically insolvent. Such talk was rubbish'.⁶⁶

In many respects, during the first half of his term, Ryrie had shown little aptitude for the High Commissionership. If we are to believe Casey, he was reluctant to get involved in detail - although this was not wholly true where the borrowing programme was concerned. Bruce's failure to make separate appointments to cover the commercial and financial aspects of his duties (as had been widely anticipated in 1926-27),⁶⁷ also meant that he was overstretched, particularly when his frequent visits to Geneva are taken into account. According to Casey, these were becoming 'much beyond the power of the High Commissioner to cope with them'; on average, he was spending four months of each year abroad.⁶⁸ In 1929, for example, he toured war graves in the Middle East with Rudyard Kipling, and attended the International

⁶⁴ My Dear P.M., no. 207, Casey to Bruce, 18 July 1929; Hudson, League of Nations, p. 155.

⁶⁵ Bulletin, 27 March 1929. For the complaints about Ryrie's speeches see AA: A461, D348/1/5, 'Statements by the High Commissioner, 1928-37'.

⁶⁶ Times, 12 April 1929.

⁶⁷ See Chapter Six, section one.

⁶⁸ AA: Bruce Papers, A1420/8, Casey to Bruce, 28 November 1929.

Labour Conference (two sessions), the Permanent Mandates Commission, the League Assembly and the Diplomatic Conference on the Treatment of Foreigners.⁶⁹

Yet even when these kinds of demands are taken into account, apart from a greater access to British Ministers and official information, Ryrie's appointment had brought little change to either the quality of the High Commissioner, the nature of his duties, or the depth of his relations with the Commonwealth and the British governments; indeed, Ryrie lacked Cook's energy and evident zest for the job. Whether, as Bruce had hoped, he moved in circles different to those frequented by his predecessors, the evidence does ^{not} ~~to~~ permit us to say.

(iii) The Scullin Government and the Depression, 1930-31

Towards the end of 1929, two events deeply affected Ryrie's position in London. On 12 October, the election of the Labor Party in Australia once again created a situation in which a conservative-appointed High Commissioner might find himself at odds with a Labor government. At the same time, the onset of the Great Depression gave rise to tensions in Anglo-Australian relations which completely overshadowed the final half of Ryrie's term.

The Federal Labor government formed by James Scullin in late 1929 was the first such since the disintegration of Hughes's ministry in November 1916. It immediately responded to the fall in export earnings and related fiscal crisis by making the first of several upward revisions of the tariff and by taking steps to terminate the assisted immigration programme. Both policies were deeply resented in Britain.⁷⁰ As sterling receipts declined and the City lost confidence in Australian stock, the problem of funding the floating debt in London (which principally took the

⁶⁹ AA: A458, F108/8 [15], Report of the High Commissioner for 1929, pp. 64-67; Times, 14 February 1929.

⁷⁰ PRO: T160/807/F11935/1, minute, R.V.N. H[opkins] to Grigg, 3 February 1930.

form of overdrafts with the Westminster and the Commonwealth Banks, and £m10 six-month Treasury Bills) and servicing the £m524 long term debt, became acute. Scullin's biographer comments: 'The short-term debt was an ever present menace, and Scullin was rarely free from anxiety over the threat of Australia's "bankruptcy"'.⁷¹ Professor Schedvin adds: 'the struggle to avoid default on public interest obligations abroad underpins the entire history of the depression'.⁷²

Politically, the government was also poorly placed. Since the conscription crises of the last war, Labor had frequently been charged with disloyalty to Australia, Britain and the Empire: 'Through socialists, it was associated with Bolshevik revolution, through the Irish, with rebellion'.⁷³ Scullin's measures to deal with the economic crisis made it vulnerable to such charges once again. This would have mattered less if Labor had been firmly in control of the government, but the 1929 election had only been for the Lower House, and the conservatives still retained an overwhelming majority in the Senate. As one lobby reporter noted, although Labor was in office, it commanded little real power.⁷⁴

It was thus from a position of weakness that Labor attempted to counter the effects of the Depression. But its methods and its resistance to orthodox deflationary policies failed to obtain general support and served to deepen political divisions. Schedvin writes: 'Rational examination of... alternatives was... buried beneath a dense layer of prejudice, personal conflict, doctrinal rigidity and antediluvian economics. Choice between the alternatives was thus determined by the strategic strength of the respective parties and the institutional support at their command'.⁷⁵ This conflict, moreover, was not confined to Australia. The government's dependence upon

⁷¹ John Robertson, J.S. Scullin (Nedlands, 1974), p. 392.

⁷² Schedvin, p. 3. For general accounts of the Scullin government see Schedvin, especially Chapters 1 to 11, and John Robertson, '1930-1939' in Crowley (ed.), New History of Australia, pp. 415-57.

⁷³ Heather Radi, '1920-29', in Crowley (ed.), New History of Australia, p. 368.

⁷⁴ Warren Denning, Caucus Crisis (Sydney, 1982), pp. 21-22.

⁷⁵ Schedvin, p. 9.

assistance, support and sympathy from London meant that whatever influence could be mobilised in that quarter would have a decisive impact upon the direction of economic policy in Australia and, ultimately, upon the outcome of the political struggle itself. The conflict over policy, therefore, was conducted as much in London as in Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne. Thus, the Depression can also be seen as a test of the character and behaviour of Australia's representation in London during a prolonged political crisis. The most important questions one can therefore ask of the second half of Ryrie's High Commissionership are: with what success did Ryrie assume the role of a politically disinterested public servant; did he at any time attempt to undermine the government, either through active opposition or passive resistance?

Without doubt, sections of the Labor Party had always regarded Ryrie with suspicion. Soon after he took office, the then opposition had accused him of making 'biassed comments on questions of a highly controversial and party political character'.⁷⁶ But charges of this kind had been *de rigueur* since Reid's day. Equally, a future Labor Minister, Albert Green, would 'say nothing derogatory of Sir Granville Ryrie... he is, I believe, animated by true Australian sentiments. On that account I approve of his appointment'.⁷⁷ As far as the legislature was concerned, Ryrie was probably simply unknown to most Labor members, the majority of whom had entered Parliament after his retirement from politics.

In some respects, Ryrie's position was similar to that of Reid following the Labor victory in 1910. Like Reid, he had opposed Labor politically. But his predecessor's achievement had been to establish a non-political office, rather than to create a precedent of resignation when the government changed. But in other respects, Ryrie's position was quite distinct from Reid's. As we have seen, by 1929 Labor's loyalty to the Empire had been questioned to an extent it had not in 1910. The pre-war consensus over issues like protection, the construction of the navy, and the general

⁷⁶ James Fenton in *CPD*, cxvi, p. 209, 5 October 1927; cf Sen. Needham, *ibid.*, p. 257; *Argus*, leader, 3 October 1927.

⁷⁷ *CPD*, cxix, p. 7043.

tenor of Anglo-Australian relations, which had smoothed Reid's path, no longer existed. Finally, while the Fisher government had been stable, Scullin's soon showed every sign of falling apart. Ironically, then, Ryrie's position soon began to resemble Fisher's after 1916 as much as Reid's in 1910.

Like Fisher, he also had no desire to be removed from office. In November 1929, Casey observed to Bruce:

Sir Granville is not feeling very disturbed about the change of Government in Australia - as far as his personal position is concerned. His contract gives him something over two years still to run, and he has told me that he will not allow himself to be displaced unless they are willing to pay him his salary for the unexpired portion of his appointment - which I imagine they will find it very difficult in the present financial state of things in Australia.⁷⁸

But there is little evidence that Scullin contemplated removing him. Apart from the difficulties Ryrie would have created and the problem of amending the High Commissioner Act (a controversial measure which may have been blocked in the Senate), the replacement of the High Commissioner with a Labor nominee would have undermined London's confidence at the worst possible moment. In fact, during the early months of 1930, Scullin treated Ryrie as no less than a senior public servant, staying in close touch with him over the financial crisis and instructing his department to send Australia House regular bulletins on events in Australia.⁷⁹

For Ryrie's part, there was no reason why a conservative pastoralist should be any less a patriot than someone in the Labor movement. Once assured of the security of his position in London, he was probably as much influenced by a sense of national duty as political loyalty to his former associates. There were certainly few signs of tension in March 1930 when he commented to Scullin about reports that Labor sympathisers were being protected from the effects of retrenchment in the London

⁷⁸ AA: Bruce Papers, A1420/8, Casey to Bruce, 21 November 1929.

⁷⁹ AA: A461, B348/1/6, 'Report of the High Commissioner for 1930', pp. 37-38. For a later example of the bulletins from the Prime Minister's Department, see NLA: Latham Papers, 52/69-73, Prime Minister to High Commissioner, no. 14, 13 April 1932. For the financial crisis see AA: A1606, C17/1, part 7.

office: 'Such a suggestion, as you say, is absurd, and I can only think that this is another example of the tendency of the Press to make "copy" at the expense of Australia House'.⁸⁰

As the markets turned against Australia, the nature of Ryrie's relations with the new government was clearly visible in the cables which passed daily between Canberra and London. With the crisis deepening, he and Collins suggested remedial action. On 5 December 1929, he informed Scullin that a 'serious position has been reached in Australian loan experience', and advised: 'it is necessary further and substantially to reduce [the borrowing] programme for this year'. On 23 January 1930, he and Collins proposed the 'issue of Treasury Bills for £5,000,000 to be issued at [a] time and for [a] period and at [a] price to be approved by [a] Committee consisting of [the] High Commissioner and Agents-General'. Shortly after, at an Australia Day dinner, he declared: 'Australia would not default, and he staked his life on that statement. In Australia they were loyal to the King, the flag, and the Empire, and would be solid as a rock with regard to their financial position'. On 30 January, after meeting the Agents-General, he suggested that Scullin make a similar statement, which, in the event, reassured the stock market for a time.⁸¹

Nevertheless, the capacity of the government and its London advisers to influence events was limited. As we have seen, Ryrie himself lacked financial expertise or any real flair for the High Commissionership, and, however cordial his relations with Scullin, this was no substitute for the complete confidence of the ministry. Moreover, while Ministers and officials struggled to find solutions to Australia's problems, various unofficial and semi-official groups also competed for

⁸⁰ AA: A461, N348/1/8, part 2, Ryrie to Scullin, 6 March 1930.

⁸¹ AA: A1606, C17/1, part 7, Ryrie to Scullin, 5 December 1929, 23 and 30 January 1930; *Times*, 28 January 1930; Robertson, *Scullin*, p. 228.

influence in London. All these aspects of Ryrie's position were evident in the spring of 1930 in the discussions preceding the mission of Sir Otto Niemeyer to Australia.⁸²

As early as January 1930, James Fenton, the Minister for Trade and Customs, who was attending the London Naval Conference, may have sought some form of financial assistance, either from the City or the Exchequer. But apart from losing its credit, Australia had also exhausted much of its goodwill, first by the previous government's persistent refusal to heed the advice of the Bank of England to curb its borrowing, then by Labor's measures to remedy the economic situation. Snowden, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, did not wish publicly to oppose Fenton, but advised Montagu Norman to adopt: "passive resistance" to [the] fin[ancial] needs of [the] Com[mon]wealth'.⁸³

Against this background, the question of financial accommodation was again raised in March. With a half-yearly payment on the war debt due to the British government at the end of the month, Sir Robert Gibson, the Chairman of the Commonwealth Bank, advised Scullin to seek a deferment.⁸⁴ Accordingly, on 11 March, Collins interviewed Sir Richard Hopkins, the Controller of Finance at the Treasury, explaining that the Commonwealth Bank had refused to provide money for the payment. As an alternative to a deferment, he asked 'whether... the British Government would be prepared to use their good offices with the Bank of England to secure the necessary advance to the Australian Government for such period of time as might be necessary while they are rehabilitating their Exchange'.⁸⁵ On 12 March, Norman contacted Collins and a meeting took place that evening at which Collins was asked to prepare a statement of Australia's obligations in London over the next twelve

⁸² For an account of the origins of the Niemeyer mission see, Bernard Attard, 'The Bank of England and the Origins of the Niemeyer Mission, 1921-30', Working Papers in Australian Studies, no. 50 (1989).

⁸³ BE: G1/286, Norman's ms note on Sir Arthur Balfour to Norman, 15 January 1930.

⁸⁴ Schedvin, p. 132.

⁸⁵ PRO: T160/396, F11935/02, R.V.N. H[opkins], 11 March 1930.

months. J.S. Scott, the London Manager of the Commonwealth Bank, was also present.⁸⁶ On 14 March, Scullin authorised Ryrie to discuss with the Bank of England 'all questions relating to [the] means of financing our London obligations', and a further meeting took place between Collins, Scott and Sir Ernest Harvey, the Deputy-Governor.⁸⁷ By now, Fenton was also talking with the Chancellor about 'large financial accommodation in the City'; in mid-April, he discussed a two-year plan with the Bank.⁸⁸ Otherwise, he took no part in the negotiations.

After the meeting of 14 March, there was a pause while the Bank analysed the figures provided by Collins, then on 28 March a full-dress meeting took place between Norman, Harvey, Ryrie, Collins and Scott. As a result, Ryrie transmitted to Scullin fourteen detailed questions covering Australia's financial position and the government's future policy.⁸⁹ While awaiting a reply, Norman attempted to widen the circle of those involved in the discussions. He approached Sir Ernest Clark, who had led the 1928 Economic Mission to Australia.⁹⁰ On 1 April, he had lunch with Bruce, the former Prime Minister, who was in London on private business, and then passed him over to Sir Otto Niemeyer, his Adviser with special responsibility for international questions.⁹¹ On 3 April, Ryrie conveyed to Scullin Norman's request to bring Sir Ernest Clark and 'any other person who in his opinion might be able to assist' into the discussions, adding however: 'Self and Collins feel it is [a] very delicate matter to advise upon but we suggest you consider whether it would be wise

⁸⁶ BE: G1/291, Norman to Collins, 12 March 1930; Pencil note in Norman ms, 12 March; AA: A1606, C17/1, part 8, Ryrie to Scullin, 13 March 1930.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, Scullin to Ryrie, 14 March 1930; BE: G1/291, 'Analysis of Mr Scullin's statement of 14 March', R.M. K[ershaw], 14 March 1930.

⁸⁸ PRO: T160, 807/F11935/1, minutes, R.V.N. H[opkins] to Phillips, 19 March 1930; R.V.N. H[opkins] to Fergusson, 13 June 1930; BE: ADM 20, Montagu Norman Diaries; vol. 19, 15 April 1930.

⁸⁹ AA: A1606, C17/1, part 8, Ryrie to Scullin, 28 and 29 March 1930.

⁹⁰ BE: G1/291, Harvey to Sir Ernest Clark, 31 March 1930.

⁹¹ BE: ADM 20/19, Norman Diary, 1 April 1930.

to lay our whole position before any non-official person'. Accordingly, Scullin rejected the proposal.⁹² Finally, the reply to the Bank's questions arrived on 8 April and Collins again met Harvey. But the Deputy-Governor felt: 'There was still difficulty in obtaining reliable information as to the position in Australia'.⁹³

The situation had ceased to be urgent when, possibly with the Bank of England's assistance, the Commonwealth Bank found the money for the war debt payment to the British government. On 7 April, Harvey contacted Gibson, suggesting that 'some person or persons fully informed regarding all aspects of the matter, banking, economic and financial, could come here as soon as possible to consider with us [the] best method of dealing with the situation'.⁹⁴ On 7 May, while Collins was absent with Fenton exploring the possibility of a loan in New York, Harvey again got in touch with Gibson, proposing three alternatives: the Bank 'could stand aside altogether and await developments'; it could 'confer with a special intermediary sent here privately by [the] Commonwealth Government'; or, finally, it could 'ourselves send privately an intermediary to Australia if invited to do so and if he would be taken into full confidence'.⁹⁵ The Bank also approached Casey, who informed Scullin of its desire 'to send privately to Australia some person in their confidence who could act as a liaison confidentially with you'.⁹⁶

On 16 May, Gibson replied, urging the Bank to send a mission to Australia. He was convinced that deflation was the only possible economic policy in the circumstances, and that: 'The political Party in power during such [a] process must have great determination or must be forced through inability to borrow to carry the

⁹² AA: A1606, C17/1, part 8, Ryrie to Scullin, 3 April 1930; BE: G14, Committee of Treasury; item 89, Australia etc., minutes, 9 April 1930.

⁹³ AA: A1606, C17/1, part 8, Scullin to Ryrie, 8 April 1930; BE: G14/89, Committee of Treasury, 16 April 1930.

⁹⁴ BE: OV13/47, Harvey to Gibson, 7 April 1930.

⁹⁵ BE: G1/291, Harvey to Gibson, 7 May 1930.

⁹⁶ BE: OV13/47, 'Confidential for Prime Minister from Mr Casey', no date, but c. 6 May 1930.

process through'.⁹⁷ It only remained for Harvey to stall the negotiations with Collins. This he accomplished on 28 May.⁹⁸ On 30 May, Gibson agreed that Niemeyer would be the best person to lead the mission and advised that the Commonwealth be approached through the High Commissioner.⁹⁹ Harvey immediately saw Collins, suggesting the terms of a message. On 5 June, 'The consensus of Cabinet was that the proposed visit of N[iemeyer] be welcomed'. On the following day, Collins communicated Scullins' reply that the 'Commonwealth Government... would cordially welcome [a] representative of the Bank visiting Australia'.¹⁰⁰

Clearly, Ryrie had taken little part in the negotiations; these had mainly been conducted at a lower level of seniority, between his Financial Adviser, the Deputy-Governor and Sir Otto Niemeyer. The Governor, moreover, had not felt the same need to consult him as he had Bruce and Sir Ernest Clark. Apart from these two, the politician, Fenton, and, more importantly, Sir Robert Gibson, the Chairman of the Commonwealth Bank, had also been involved. Finally, when, around 6 May, the Bank had wanted to send a private message to Scullin, it had turned to Casey.

Ryrie had largely been passive, but it cannot be inferred from this that he had abdicated all responsibility or that, like Bruce and Gibson, he welcomed the idea of the Bank sending someone to Australia.¹⁰¹ As early as 1928, as we shall see in Chapter Six, the Bank's disinterestedness as far as Australian matters were concerned had been prejudiced in the eyes of the London officials.¹⁰² In 1930, while Ryrie had left Collins to bear the brunt of the negotiations, he had attended, as on 28 March, when required. Finally, when it had been necessary to advise Scullin, for example

⁹⁷ BE: G1/291, Gibson to Harvey, 16 May 1930.

⁹⁸ AA: A1606, C17/1, part 9, Ryrie to Scullin, 28 May 1930.

⁹⁹ BE: G1/291, Gibson to Harvey, 30 May 1930.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, Harvey to Gibson, 31 May 1930; Collins to Harvey, 6 June 1930; AA: Cabinet Secretariat; CRS A3624/XM, Scullin Ministry... copies of Cabinet Minutes', 5 June 1930.

¹⁰¹ For Bruce see, NLA: Latham Papers, 1/1979-83, Bruce to Latham, 15 July 1930.

¹⁰² See Chapter Six, section two.

over the question of involving Sir Ernest Clark, he had had the government's interests at heart.

Further light upon Ryrie's role, and upon his relations with the Scullin government, is shed by the crisis precipitated in March 1931 by the decision of New South Wales to default on its interest obligations in London. The case is particularly significant because the government in Canberra had already begun to collapse. In January 1931, Fenton and Joseph Lyons resigned from the ministry when Scullin reinstated Edward Theodore (who himself had resigned in 1930 over a scandal connected with his premiership of Queensland) as Treasurer. In February, a faction allied to the New South Wales Premier, Jack Lang, also withdrew their support. According to Schedvin, the government 'was a lifeless shell awaiting inevitable extinction'.¹⁰³ Ryrie was thus in an extraordinary position, the servant not only of a government with which he disagreed politically, but one now which was also disintegrating.

The New South Wales default was the climax to a series of events which had further sapped confidence in London. On 9 February 1931, during a Premiers' conference called to formulate a plan for national recovery, Lang unveiled a scheme involving as one of its elements the suspension of interest payments on the overseas debt. Subsequently, the so-called 'Lang Plan' became the principal issue in a by-election on 7 March for the usually safe Labor seat of East Sydney, which was won by the Lang candidate. On 9 March, Ryrie attempted to reassure investors. He told an audience in Birmingham: 'they were loyal people in Australia, and he would stake his existence that those who had done so much for the Empire were not going to let the Empire down by repudiating a farthing of their obligations'.¹⁰⁴ He had already, on 3 March, written privately to Lord Stanley of Alderley, a former Governor of Victoria: 'I think that it is absolutely certain that should Mr Lang endeavour to bring about

¹⁰³ Schedvin, p. 232.

¹⁰⁴ Times, 10 March 1931.

repudiation of interest, either at home or abroad, he would not be allowed to do so. The Commonwealth would in that instance take some action'.¹⁰⁵

Nevertheless, on 24 March, with interest payments by the State due at the beginning of April, the General Manager of the Westminster Bank (which had issued some of the New South Wales stock), twice called on Ryrie to impress him that no money would be paid unless the Bank was assured that it would be reimbursed. On 25 March, however, Scullin informed Ryrie that Lang had in fact decided to default.¹⁰⁶ The news broke on the following day, but the market was relatively calm. Glendyne telephoned Australia House to explain that: 'The prices of Commonwealth stocks had not gone lower because the Stock Exchange and the City do not believe for a moment that the Commonwealth Government could repudiate its liability to see that the bondholder receives his due interest in accordance with the Finance Agreement no matter whether the interest is Commonwealth or State'.¹⁰⁷ At the very least, then, Ryrie's attempts to reassure investors had not been ignored; at most, he had helped steady the market.

The action now moved behind the scenes. On 25 March, Scullin had also informed Ryrie that the Commonwealth was 'considering its position' under the terms of the 1927 Financial Agreement with the States.¹⁰⁸ The role of Australia House was therefore to hold the position until the government had clarified whether it had the legal power to act. On 26 March, the Westminster Bank sent a delegation to the Dominions Secretary, insisting that the Commonwealth was liable to pay the interest owed by Lang, and complaining that 'no assurance can be obtained from the High Commissioner... that funds will be provided by the Commonwealth'.¹⁰⁹ Casey, who

¹⁰⁵ AA: A2910/T22, box 738, 418/6/50, part 7, Ryrie to Stanley of Alderley, 3 March 1931.

¹⁰⁶ AA: A1606, C17/1, part 9, Ryrie to Scullin, 24 March 1931; Scullin to Ryrie, 25 March 1931.

¹⁰⁷ AA: A2910/T22, box 738, 418/6/55, 'Telephoned by Lord Glendyne', 26 March 1931.

¹⁰⁸ AA: A1606, C17/1, part 9, Scullin to Ryrie, 25 March 1931.

¹⁰⁹ PRO: DO 35/220, 8438/33, 'Memorandum for His Majesty's Secretary of State for the Dominions', 26 March 1931.

had assisted Whitehall in January when the Colonial Office had contemplated withdrawing from Australia the funds of the two Western Pacific administrations,¹¹⁰ was no longer in London, and the Dominions Office had no recourse but to contact Ryrie, summarily requesting him to get in touch with Scullin and to furnish a reply 'first thing tomorrow morning'.¹¹¹ Without even a British Governor-General in Canberra following the appointment of Isaac Isaacs, the Dominions Office also asked the British Migration Representative in Melbourne and the Governor of New South Wales to send their own appreciations.¹¹² On 27 March, a Friday, Ryrie sent the Dominions Office copies of the most recent cables from Australia, informing it that the legal position was still being explored.¹¹³ But Harding, the Permanent Secretary, 'thought it would be desirable, if possible, to stimulate the High Commissioner to further action', and Thomas, the Secretary of State, indiscreetly let slip in the Commons that further information would be available on the following Monday. In fact, Ryrie had given no such undertaking and (according to Harding) 'called the bluff'.¹¹⁴ He wrote to Thomas on the Saturday:

I really do not understand why you appear to think that further information may be received from Canberra on Monday, for it seems that Mr Scullin's reply, included in my letter to you of 27th March, is not likely to be extended until the consideration which is being given to the subject has been advanced to a further stage. I have no doubt that Mr Scullin will keep me advised as to all developments, and as soon as any further news comes, I shall communicate it to you.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8438/19, Casey to Sir H. Batterbee, 14 January 1931; statement, 'Australian Financial Situation', 15 January 1931.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8438/33, Thomas to Ryrie, 26 March 1931.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, Under Secretary to British Migration Representative, 26 March 1931; J. Thomas to Sir Philip Game, 27 March 1931.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, Ryrie to Thomas, 27 March 1931.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8438/34, minute, Harding to Secretary of State, 28 March 1931; Ryrie to Thomas, 28 March 1931.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Ryrie to Thomas, 28 March 1931.

In the event, on 30 March (the Monday), Scullin notified Ryrie that the Commonwealth had been advised that it could pay the New South Wales interest and was making arrangements accordingly. Ryrie immediately sent the news to Thomas, who made a statement in the Commons, and was himself authorised to issue a statement on the following day.¹¹⁶

While the High Commissioner dealt with the Dominions Office, Collins kept in contact with the banks, sending the Westminster Bank and the Bank of England (which had also issued New South Wales stock) copies of the cables from Australia and, eventually, notifying them on 30 March that the Commonwealth would be paying the interest.¹¹⁷ On the same day, Ryrie was instructed to seek an advance from the Bank of England 'sufficient to cover [the] interest in question'. Harvey told Collins, however, that the Bank did 'not see their way to depart from their established policy of not making advances to Dominion Governments'.¹¹⁸

But the spectacle of Australia tottering on the brink of default concentrated the mind wonderfully. Harvey had suggested that, if help were given, 'any assistance... would be to [the] Commonwealth Bank', and soon after the latter was able to make funds available (whether or not with the Bank's help is not actually clear).¹¹⁹ Moreover, in response to direct appeals from Scullin, the Treasury offered to postpone four half-yearly payments to the sinking fund of the war debt, the first of which was due on 31 March.¹²⁰ Yet nothing would induce the Treasury or the Bank to go any further. To no avail Theodore sought the good offices with the Bank of

¹¹⁶ AA: A461, N344/1/7, telegram to High Commissioner, 30 March 1931; PRO: DO 35/220, 8438/36, Ryrie to Thomas, 30 March 1931; AA: A1606, C17/1, part 9, telegram to High Commissioner, 31 March 1931.

¹¹⁷ AA: A2910/T22, box 738, , 418/6/50, part 7, Collins to J.H. Greenhill, 27 and 30 March 1931; Collins to Sir E. Harvey, 27 and 30 March 1931.

¹¹⁸ AA: A1606, C17/1, part 9, telegram to High Commissioner, 30 March 1931; BE: G1/286, Harvey to Collins, 1 April 1931.

¹¹⁹ AA: A1606, C17/1, part 9, Ryrie to Scullin, 31 March 1931.

¹²⁰ PRO: DO 35/266/9216/7, telegram, no. 46, Dominions Secretary to Prime Minister, 30 March 1931.

W.S. Robinson, a businessman who was well-connected in London.¹²¹ The conservative opposition in Australia was also determined that the government should receive no further assistance, the Migration Representative reporting to the Dominions Office in early April: 'Financial authorities, and Opposition Political leaders as well, maintain that until Governments take remedial steps... financial assistance from England in the form of funding [the] floating debt should not be given'.¹²²

Thus, as they had during the negotiations preceding the Niemeyer mission, several groups apart from the officials in Australia House competed for influence in London in a climate unsympathetic to Australia. Lacking either Casey's standing in Whitehall or Robinson's in the business and financial community, Ryrie was again of limited value to the government. But as the close contact between his office and Canberra showed, the official relationship between the High Commissioner and the Scullin government remained healthy. Within the limits of his ability and position, Ryrie had striven to calm the City's fears and protect the Commonwealth's interests.

Even so, Ryrie's efforts to salvage something of Australia's credit could be reconciled with a sense of national interest which submerged political loyalty within a deeper patriotism. Scullin's determination in 1930 to appoint an Australian as Governor-General, however, could not so easily be reconciled, for, to conservative eyes, it appeared to aim a blow at the imperial connection no less damaging than Lang's default. This then is the final test of Ryrie's relations with the Labor government. It is essentially a negative one because there is virtually no evidence of Ryrie's actions or opinions during the ensuing controversy.

In fact, his actual involvement was negligible. When, on 28 March 1930 (a day he and Collins were occupied at the Bank), Scullin first indicated his desire to appoint the High Court Judge Isaac Isaacs as Governor-General, he communicated with the

¹²¹ BE: G1/286, Theodore to W.S. Robinson, 30 March 1931; exchange of letters, Robinson and Harvey, 7 and 8 April 1931; W.S. Robinson, If I Remember Rightly (Melbourne, 1967), pp. 147-48.

¹²² PRO: DO 35/220, 8438/40, British Migration Representative to Under Secretary, 2 April 1931.

Dominions Office directly, and when in April reports of his plans appeared in the press, the Dominions Office did not consult the High Commissioner but wondered 'whether it would be advisable to bring Major Casey into the matter'.¹²³ In the event, the question was held over until Scullin arrived in London in September to attend the Imperial Conference. Only after a series of meetings with the Prime Minister, the King's Private Secretary and finally the King himself did Scullin succeed in obtaining the Monarch's consent. During these protracted negotiations, whenever the Palace had felt a need for an Australian intermediary, it had recourse to Casey rather than the High Commissioner.¹²⁴ Indeed, according to one of Stonehaven's correspondents, when the rumours of Isaacs' appointment began to circulate, Australia House was 'quite in the dark, and splashed about with explanations which were promptly contradicted by Press reports'.¹²⁵

This was hardly surprising in view of the secrecy of the negotiations. Ryrie himself probably knew personally what was going on, either through Casey or the Dominions Office, and apparently was summoned to the Palace several times to discuss the issue.¹²⁶ But there is no record of what was said. Stamfordham, the King's Private Secretary, denied to Scullin that the Australian people approved of Isaacs' appointment on the grounds that the Palace's 'information leads us to believe the very opposite'.¹²⁷ On the same day, Ramsay MacDonald concluded a report to Stamfordham 'hoping that those who are in daily personal touch with the King will be

¹²³ PRO: Dominions Office; DO 121, Dominions and Commonwealth Office, Private Office Papers, 1924-56; item 42, minute, E.J. H[arding], 23 April 1930. For an account of the appointment see Cunneen, *King's Men*, pp. 173-81.

¹²⁴ NLA: MS 356 (J.H. Scullin Papers), Casey to Scullin, 21 November 1930.

¹²⁵ NLA: MS 2127 (Stonehaven Papers); series 1, ff. 425-29, to Stonehaven, 14 May 1930.

¹²⁶ J.A.G. Ryrie to the author, 3 February 1986. The Royal Archives, Windsor, have no record of Sir Granville Ryrie being summoned to Buckingham Palace in connection with the nomination of Isaac Isaacs for the Governor-Generalship.

¹²⁷ Meaney, *Australia and the World*, doc. 195, aide-memoire of a meeting between Scullin and Stamfordham on 30 October 1930.

very careful as to the ideas that they put into his head'.¹²⁸ Yet this is barely circumstantial evidence, and there is nothing to connect Ryrie with either remark. If he opposed Isaacs' appointment, he did not venture beyond the expression of his private opinion. But while not actually obstructing the government, neither was he likely to advocate its views with conviction or credibility.

Even as a channel of communication, his position can be contrasted with that of Casey, whose involvement in both Isaacs' appointment and the invitation to send Niemeyer to Australia showed the extent to which the British government still regarded him as the representative of the Australian Prime Minister. During Ryrie's term, far from becoming more subordinate to the High Commissioner, his special role in Anglo-Australian relations developed even further. With the election of the Scullin government, he consciously assumed the manner of a diplomatic officer. Bruce himself believed that it was important that Labor keep Casey in London, telling him in November 1929: 'I spent the best part of an hour endeavouring to convince my successor that in his own interests it was imperative he should retain your services if you were willing to continue'.¹²⁹ Scullin accepted the advice, telling Stonehaven in June 1930 with respect to the forthcoming Imperial Conference that he 'was very much relying upon Casey'. Stonehaven in turn reported to the Dominions Secretary: 'Mr Scullin is clearly anxious not to go behind Casey in any way, so if anything is done in this matter, Casey ought to be in your confidence from the start'.¹³⁰ Moreover, despite Casey's resignation at the end of 1930, Scullin did not accept the recommendation of the Coleman Report to abolish the Liaison Office for reasons of economy.¹³¹

¹²⁸ PRO: PRO 30/69 (J.Ramsay MacDonald Papers), folder 557, J.Ramsay MacDonald to Stamfordham, 30 October 1930.

¹²⁹ My Dear P.M., p. 561, Bruce to Casey, 18 November 1929.

¹³⁰ NLA: Stonehaven Papers, Stonehaven to J. Thomas, 30 June 1930.

¹³¹ CPP (1929-31), ii, 'Report upon the Organization of the High Commissioner's Office, London', p. 1408; AA: A461, L348/1/2, Collins to Scullin, 11 December 1930, enclosing a memorandum summarising Scullin's decisions. For more on the Coleman Report, see Chapter Six, section two.

But Ryrie was not completely detached from the official conduct of Anglo-Australian relations, although appropriately his contribution appears to have largely concerned defence matters. With Casey's assistance, he continued to represent Australia on the CID.¹³² He discussed the introduction of economies in the Royal Australian Navy (involving both British personnel and Australian submarines) with the First Lord of the Admiralty, and publicly opposed the suspension of work on the Singapore base.¹³³ One can also assume that Casey continued to report to him, while Scullin was careful to avoid giving the impression that he ever went behind his back.¹³⁴

Thus the High Commissioner maintained a working relationship with the Scullin government. But it would be misleading to suggest that a close confidence grew up between the two, or that tensions did not arise. As early as February 1930, Ryrie was suspected of dragging his feet over redundancies in the Migration Branch.¹³⁵ He kept his distance when Percy Coleman, the Chairman of the Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee, investigated the organisation of Australia House in mid-1930. Coleman, who did not bother to show him his report or inform him of its recommendations beforehand, later told Parliament: 'He did not evidence any desire to make any suggestions'.¹³⁶ Scullin himself came to regard Collins as the effective administrator of Australia House,¹³⁷ and was embarrassed by some typically candid observations in Ryrie's 1930 Report concerning the depressing effect that an Australian wheat quota plan would have on international prices, and the

¹³² For Ryrie's reports on these meetings, see AA: A981, Defence 290.

¹³³ PRO: CAB 2/5, minutes of the CID, 28 November 1930; AA: A981, Defence 290, Ryrie to Scullin, 28 November 1930; A1606, N15/1, Ryrie to Scullin, 9 July 1931; Times, 22 October 1930; J. McCarthy, Australia and the Imperial Defence (St. Lucia, 1976), p. 17.

¹³⁴ AA: A3299, Scullin to Ryrie, 18 May 1931.

¹³⁵ AA: A461, N348/1/8, part 2, memorandum, Sen. Daly, 18 February 1930.

¹³⁶ CPD, cxxviii, p. 1001, 17 April 1931; AA: A461, L348/1/2, Coleman to Fenton, 14 August 1930.

¹³⁷ CPD, cxxxv, p. 450, 14 September 1932.

explicitly retaliatory nature of some French tariffs affecting Australian goods; these, the Prime Minister's Department felt, 'may possibly give rise to misunderstanding' if tabled in Parliament.¹³⁸

Inevitably, Scullin came under pressure to remove him. When a new government recalled the Canadian High Commissioner in order to replace him with its own nominee, one Labor backbencher asked in March 1931: 'Does the Australian High Commissioner... reflect the policy of the Government? Does the Prime Minister propose to adopt the Canadian position of regarding the High Commissioner... almost as a member of the Government?'.¹³⁹ But Scullin would not be drawn. Later, while taking a cure at Bagnolles, Ryrie himself found it necessary to issue a statement that he had 'no intention of vacating office before his term expired'.¹⁴⁰ As he entered his final year, speculation started about who would replace him. Scullin, Theodore Brennan (the Attorney-General) and Parker Maloney (the Minister for Markets) were all regarded as possibilities, but events overtook Labor before the time for a decision came.¹⁴¹

Australia House had been one of several institutions inherited by Labor which it had little power to change. Despite this, Scullin had been remarkably well-served by his officials in London, particularly Casey and Collins. Moreover, there had been no breakdown in relations between Ryrie and the government comparable to that between Fisher and Hughes during 1916-21. Within the limits of a situation in which no great mutual confidence could exist, Ryrie placed himself in the tradition of non-political High Commissioners established by Reid. The Times later recalled that for two years he had served a Labor government, but observed: 'His strong sense of duty... enabled Sir Granville Ryrie to maintain harmonious relations with the new

¹³⁸ AA: A461, B348/1/6, Prime Minister's Department to High Commissioner, 20 July 1931.

¹³⁹ CPD, cxxviii, p. 296, 17 March 1931.

¹⁴⁰ SMH, 5 August 1931.

¹⁴¹ CPD, cxxxii, p. 1651; SMH, 9 November 1931.

Government at home'.¹⁴² In certain respects, during a period of acute crisis, the occupancy of Australia House by an aloof, politically neutral High Commissioner, amounted to another failure in Australia's representation in London. But bearing in mind Scullin's own inability to achieve much beyond Isaacs' appointment during his own visit to England in 1930, it is difficult to imagine that Labor would have been better served had it been able to choose its own High Commissioner.

(iv) Denouement, 1932

The Scullin government finally lost office on 19 December 1931, the new United Australia Party (UAP) forming a Ministry early in the following year. According to Ryrie, the change was received in England with a 'sigh of relief'.¹⁴³ But despite this, he did not enjoy a closer relationship with the UAP than with Labor.

There may have been several reasons for this. Apart from Lang's second default in January 1932, Anglo-Australian relations had now entered a more ^rtanquil phase. Sir John Latham, who was effectively the deputy Prime Minister, was himself in London during the first half of 1932. Ryrie's term was also drawing to a close. Lyons did not know the High Commissioner, and possibly associated him with previous discredited regimes, conservative and Labor. Finally, both the government and the bureaucracy appear to have had a poor opinion of his abilities. Until Latham could arrive, he was put in charge of the Australian delegation to the 1932 Disarmament Conference and instructed to 'represent [the] Commonwealth at [the] formal opening of [the] Conference and... make any announcement of general policy which may be decided upon'. But he was also told: 'Thereafter you will please leave Duffy [the Liaison Officer] to represent [the] Commonwealth'.¹⁴⁴ Lyons may also

¹⁴² Obituary, Times, 4 October 1937.

¹⁴³ SMH, 13 September 1932.

¹⁴⁴ AA: A2908, C17, part 1, cable from the Prime Minister's Department, 8 January 1932.

have been influenced by remarks like those of the former politician, J.M Fowler, who wrote in January 1932:

Those acquainted with General Ryrie were astounded when he was appointed High Commissioner. Uncouth and uncultured, he was totally unfitted for the position, and in London he has only excited amusement and contempt. If you regard these observations as too severe they can be verified by Senator Elliott who, attending a public dinner where Ryrie was expected to make an important announcement, had to suffer the humiliation of seeing and hearing Australia's official representative make an ass of himself.

But whatever the opinion of Ryrie's ability in Australia, by the early 1930s the High Commissionership had developed to such an extent that a sudden international crisis or shift in imperial policy created situations in which a Dominion representative was required to act for his government at the highest possible level. This had been the case during the Chanak crisis and, more recently, when the second Labour government had decided to cut naval expenditure. It was the case again in September 1931 when Japan invaded Manchuria, triggering the last major episode in Ryrie's career as High Commissioner.

Ryrie was actually attending the Disarmament Conference when Latham, the Minister of External Affairs, became worried that the issue might be raised in Geneva. He told Ryrie on 22 February: the 'Commonwealth Government [is] very concerned that [the] Empire should not become involved in war. At [the] same time [the] Government recognises [the] necessity of protecting British lives and property'. If it was necessary to make a statement, he was to 'express [the] urgent hope that [a] Pacific settlement will be attained'.¹⁴⁶ On 12 February, the dispute was referred to the League Assembly and a special session was summoned to meet on 6 March. But by now Ryrie had returned to London. The Department of External Affairs, despite feeling that there was 'practically nothing that our delegate could do which will not be

¹⁴⁵ NLA: Lyons Papers, 1/9, J.M. Fowler to J.A. Lyons, 6 January 1932.

¹⁴⁶ AA: A981, China 114, part 3, file 9, telegram, no. 10, to Duffy, 8 February 1932.

done by the delegates of the United Kingdom', nevertheless recommended that: 'The presence of an Australian delegate is probably desirable on account of our position as one of the few Pacific Members of the League'.¹⁴⁷

While attending the Disarmament Conference, Ryrie had taken a close interest in the crisis, attending the meetings of the League Council and staying in touch with the British delegation. On 22 February, he asked Lyons whether he should attend the special Assembly, and was instructed to do so.¹⁴⁸ In Geneva again, he continued to co-operate with the British Foreign Secretary, Sir John Simon, and the other Dominion representatives, and kept Lyons informed of the proceedings, assuring him that he would 'not, of course, intervene in the discussions without reference to Simon and you'.¹⁴⁹ With the Canadian and New Zealand delegations, he also deprecated the stridently anti-Japanese stances of the South African and Irish representatives.¹⁵⁰ His conduct was thus consistent with his behaviour throughout his High Commissionership. He had been conscious of the significance of the crisis to Australia and a conscientious observer in Geneva. But, as on previous occasions, he had naturally inclined to a passive role, and made little attempt either to influence British policy or discover its mainspring.

In March 1932, his term was extended by four months to allow Bruce, who had been appointed Resident Minister in London, to represent Australia at the Imperial Economic Conference in Ottawa. He had a final audience with the King on 20 July and departed England at the end of the month.¹⁵¹ Although for a time he contemplated re-entering politics, age or the lack of opportunity barred him. Finally,

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, file 13, minute, the Minister, 22 February 1932.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Ryrie to Lyons, 22 February 1932; Latham to High Commissioner, 23 February 1932.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, file 14, telegrams, 4, 7 and 10 March 1932.

¹⁵⁰ PRO: DO 35, 178/6, G.R. Price to Batterbee, 9 March 1932.

¹⁵¹ *Times*, 15 March and 21 July 1932.

he returned with obvious relief to Michelago, where he eventually died on 2 October 1937.¹⁵²

Whatever Bruce's hopes may have been in 1927, as High Commissioner Ryrie had found himself out of his depth and heavily dependent upon his subordinates. Yet, despite these shortcomings, the events of his term and the continued development of a system of imperial consultation - however imperfect - had repeatedly thrust him into situations in which he had come into close contact with the British government and was bound to represent the Commonwealth's views. Indeed, there was no reason why in the future such a position could not be exploited by a High Commissioner of greater resource and imagination.

¹⁵² SMH, 13 September 1932; Argus, 27 September 1932; NLA: Latham Papers, 1/3016, Ryrie to Latham, 6 January 1933; obituary, Times, 4 October 1937.

CHAPTER SIX

AUSTRALIAN REPRESENTATION IN

LONDON, 1916 - 1932

(i) Reforming the High Commissionership

On 14 September 1932, the Country Party member, Victor Thompson, complained in Parliament about: 'the ghastly failure of the High Commissionership during the last fifteen years'.¹ In the early thirties, criticism of the office did not rise to the same pitch as during the last years of Fisher's term, but a sense of dissatisfaction was no less prevalent. On 6 January 1930, with Labor now in government, the Age declared:

The High Commissionership is the greatest gift at the disposal of the Commonwealth Government, and it has seldom been disposed wisely. Possibly the choice of past Commissioners (sic.) has been as good as the restricted area of selection has allowed. But is there any reason why the restriction should exist at all? The post is now a political plum. Ministries never look beyond the Parliamentary sphere. Nor do they always select the most suitable man there. The High Commissionership has been reduced to the level of a reward for the faithful party hack. Alternatively, the offer of the Commissionership is the means of getting rid of some political foe, or even nominal friend, who has malice enough to be a nuisance or ability enough to be dangerous. It is all grossly unfair to the people of Australia. The citizens of London and Britain reasonably assume that we choose the best men in our midst as High Commissioner. They are entitled to consider him the apex of our social structure, the flower of our intellectual culture. If we persist in our present practice, need we wonder if the British people form impressions of Australians under which we may writhe, but which, logically, we have no right to resent.²

¹ CPD, cxxxv, p. 473.

² Age, 6 January 1930.

The Age expressed the same dissatisfaction with the motives of ministries when making appointments, and with the size, expense and apparent inefficiency of Australia House of much previous criticism, yet reflected also the expectation that the High Commissioner could be all things to all men.³ Finally, it recommended: 'The Government should employ the first opportunity to review the functions of the High Commissioner, and the usefulness of Australia House'.

But the frequency with which the High Commissionership had been criticised in the past had already inspired much consideration of its reform. Three main alternatives had presented themselves: the replacement of the High Commissioner altogether with a Resident Minister in London; the appointment of a High Commissioner who would be directly connected with the party in government and would be obliged to resign when his party lost office; and, finally, the retention of a non-political office, but one whose powers and status were raised to an ambassadorial level. Ultimately, the first alternative was rejected for the same political and constitutional reasons it had not been adopted earlier in the century, while the second proved alien to the political values which had shaped the original character of the High Commissionership.

Between 1918 and 1920, several MPs, critical of the number of Ministers being sent abroad and of Hughes's refusal to entrust Fisher with any serious responsibility, called for the abolition of the High Commissionership and its replacement by a Minister who would be permanently resident in London.⁴ As we have seen, the concept of Resident Ministers had its origins in pre-war debates about imperial consultation. Canada had, in fact, taken up the British government's invitation to the Dominions to be represented at the CID, sending Sir George Perley as a Resident Minister in 1914, and later replacing him with Sir Edward Kemp, who

³ For earlier examples see, Melbourne Herald, 26 October 1920; Sydney Daily Telegraph, 23 March 1927.

⁴ CPD, lxxxvii, p. 8471, Needham, 28 November 1918; lxxxix, p. 12464, Foll, 18 September 1919; xcii, pp. 3171-72, McGrath, 30 July 1920.

remained in London until 1919.⁵ In July 1918, the Dominion Prime Ministers agreed to allow other members of their governments, whether or not Resident Ministers, to represent them at the Imperial War Cabinet.⁶ In 1919, Pearce was a Resident Minister in all but name.⁷ In 1921, the Dominion Premiers once again affirmed their prerogative: 'to nominate Cabinet Ministers to represent them in consultation with the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom'.⁸ In July 1923, in the aftermath of the Chanak crisis, Bruce told Parliament: 'the Government believe that, although not an ideal solution, something material would be achieved if we had a Resident Minister in Britain, provided that the Minister's term of office was a very limited one'.⁹

But in March 1924, after returning from an Imperial conference and initiating an investigation of the existing machinery for the conduct of Australia's external affairs, Bruce announced that the difficulties associated with the appointment of a Resident Minister 'were at present insurmountable'.¹⁰ Neither he nor Hughes had been enthusiastic about the idea.¹¹ Hughes felt that a Resident Minister would soon lose touch with Australia; Bruce doubted whether the government could spare 'a Minister of the calibre needed to represent worthily Australian opinion'.¹² More fundamentally, it was impossible to reconcile the position of a Resident Minister, who would attend the Imperial Cabinet and the CID, with the collective responsibility of

⁵ Skilling, pp. 110-12.

⁶ Fitzhardinge, ii, p. 328.

⁷ cf. NLA: Murdoch Papers, folder 41, Pearce to Murdoch, 9 April 1918: 'The question of sending an Assistant Minister to London has received careful consideration and Messrs Hughes and Cook will look into this question on their arrival in England. I regret very much that it is impossible for me to go to England just now for reasons that are largely political, but I think, under the circumstances that my right place is here'.

⁸ PP (1921), xiv, cmd. 1474, 'Conference of Prime Ministers and Representatives of the United Kingdom, the Dominions and India... 1921. Summary of Proceedings', resolution xiv, pp. 9-10.

⁹ CPD, civ, p. 1482.

¹⁰ CPD, cvi, pp. 42-43; printed in Meaney, Australia and the World, no. 178.

¹¹ PRO: CAB 32/2, Imperial Meetings 1921; notes, 12 July 1921; Age, 26 July 1923.

¹² PRO: CAB 32/2, Imperial meetings 1921, 12 July 1921; CPD, cvi, p. 43.

the Australian Cabinet and the sovereign status of the Commonwealth government. Hughes felt that a Minister could not be allowed wide discretion, because: 'he could decide nothing, he could not speak as I could speak as the Head of a Government... He could speak only as a member of a Cabinet afar off, whose circumstances he does not know, and with whose ideas he is losing touch every day'.¹³ The sight of a Resident Minister regularly consulting with the British government might also be interpreted as automatic consent to British policies. This was the fear of Nationalist Party politicians when they discussed the possibility of appointing a Minister in July 1923, and again Bruce in 1924: 'the departure [by such an appointment] would bind Australia to a participation in an unsought for degree in foreign affairs, with results that might prove very embarrassing and troublesome, to say the least'.¹⁴

Much of the debate about Resident Ministers took place within the context of wider discussions about the best means of preserving and building upon the system of imperial consultation which had sprung up during the war. Yet the fundamental objection, as Hughes insisted in 1921, was that only a Prime Minister had sufficient authority to bind his government abroad. This remained true throughout the 1920s, for as Stonehaven told Baldwin in 1926: 'The real work must and only can be done by the Prime Minister, for he alone is in a position to take responsibility for decisions which must be endorsed by the Parliament of which he is the Leader'.¹⁵ Casey had also swiftly grasped this fact, writing to Bruce a year before:

Nothing... can alter the fact that the real machinery for decision on any point, or at any crisis, is the Prime Minister and the Parliament of the Dominion at the seat of Government of the Dominion.

With this premise, an Australian Minister, permanently or quasi-permanently resident in London... would not be able to do more than transmit to the British Government the views of the Australian Cabinet, and in nine cases out of ten, he would speak officially only on

¹³ PRO: CAB 32/2, Imperial Meetings 1921, 12 July 1921.

¹⁴ Age, 26 July 1923; also Bruce in CPD, cvi, p. 43.

¹⁵ CUL: Baldwin Papers, 96/174-77, Stonehaven to Baldwin, 8 March 1926.

definite instruction from Australia. This function your Liaison Officer, or your High Commissioner, could do equally well.¹⁶

If the High Commissioner was not to be replaced by a Resident Minister, it might yet be possible to make him a more effective representative by requiring that he be appointed by the government of the day and retire when it lost office. In November 1921, Earle Page identified the essential weakness of the High Commissionership when he told Parliament:

no matter how exalted the political career of the High Commissioner might have been, he became, upon his appointment, merely an official selected to hold office for a definite period of time. One Government may make the appointment, but another Government may take office while he holds the position, and no matter how friendly disposed they may be towards a High Commissioner appointed by their predecessors, it is not human nature to expect the fullest trust to be reposed by them in a perhaps lifelong political opponent. High Commissioners are really like officials; they are not like ambassadors, who have a lifelong diplomatic career before them; they have not the official mind, they are not completely in the confidence of the Government of the day. An unsatisfactory ambassador can be removed, but our High Commissioner, being appointed for a definite period of five years, cannot be removed if he proves unsatisfactory as a means of communication.¹⁷

Page preferred that the High Commissioner should virtually be a member of the ministry, with Cabinet rank and 'in active touch with the Cabinet'; if this were not possible, his term should either be for the life of the Parliament or for three years.¹⁸

Part of the problem, as Page implied, lay in the rigidity of the High Commissioner Act, with its provision of a fixed five-year term, which prevented an incoming ministry from replacing an incumbent High Commissioner with someone more sympathetic to its views. But Page was not the only person to comment on this. Fisher had objected to the length of the term in 1909. In 1925, Amery, hoping that Bruce would allow Cook's successor access to the same information as Casey, told him: 'clearly in that case the High Commissioner could no longer be [appointed] for a

¹⁶ My Dear P.M., no. 8, Casey to Bruce, 20 January 1925.

¹⁷ CPD, xcvi, p. 12700.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.12701.

fixed term, but would be normally, though not necessarily, changed with the change of Government'.¹⁹ When in 1932 the High Commissioner Act was amended to permit the High Commissioner's duties to be discharged by a Resident Minister, the Minister was only authorised to exercise these functions at the pleasure of the Governor-General; as Latham pointed out: 'The object of that provision is to put it beyond doubt that any appointment under this legislation will not be even remotely binding on any subsequent administration'.²⁰

But, ultimately, the key to the problem did not lie in a statute, which could be amended, but in the same underlying set of attitudes which had influenced legislators in 1909 and not only deterred a government from introducing change, but made it unlikely that it would even consider it. Thus Hughes was not merely scoring debating points when he replied to Page:

This High Commissioner of his is to be a sort of creature of circumstances, a marionette of a party... What could such an official be but the obedient puppet of a party? This system is, of course, in accordance with American ideas which, I must admit, have many virtues, but which, at the same time, possess marked defects. The High Commissioner, if he is to be of service to the Commonwealth, must have security of tenure; he must be able to familiarize himself with Britain... Above all, the High Commissioner must be the servant, not of a party, but of the nation. When a High Commissioner has been appointed he becomes independent of all others and all else... This vital fact constitutes the radical difference between our system and the American system, and I am bound to say that, in my opinion, the advantage lies with us.²¹

Like those who had discussed the issue in 1909, Hughes asserted that national and party interests were incompatible, that the national interest would be best served by someone independent of party, and that a political appointee would only pursue sectional interests. The idea that an individual who enjoyed the government's confidence might also be a more effective High Commissioner, and therefore better

¹⁹ AA: Bruce Papers, AA1970/555, Amery to Bruce, 30 July 1925.

²⁰ CPD, cxxxv, p. 453.

²¹ CPD, xcvi, p. 12704.

serve the national interest, was a question that neither Hughes nor many other politicians and leader writers attempted to address. Fisher's appointment had been, in part, an attempt to bring the High Commissioner closer to the ministry, but Labor was accused of 'Americanizing' Australian politics. In the event, Fisher's collapse and the swift demise of the Labor government brought the experiment to an abrupt end. Page's proposals in 1921 failed to evoke any support. Bruce, it seemed, was affirming a fundamental principle when he told Parliament in 1927: 'The High Commissioner occupies an office in which he knows no political party, but represents the whole of the Australian people'.²²

If the High Commissioner was to be neither a Resident Minister nor a political ally of the government of the day, the only remaining alternative was to raise the calibre of the men appointed and to increase their powers so that they might resemble more closely those of an ambassador. In fact, as far as the High Commissioner's duties were concerned, this is what actually occurred, although in such a piecemeal fashion that it was largely unobserved. The difficulty in finding a suitably qualified individual, however, meant that during the 1920s the office never adequately realised its potential.

As we have seen, as early as 1922, Hughes instructed that, apart from his messages to the British Prime Minister, Cook should be shown all official correspondence between Australia and the Colonial Office. As the decade progressed, as we shall see in sections two and three of this Chapter, the growth of the Federal government's powers vis-a-vis the States, and Australia's increasing participation in imperial and international affairs, widened the scope of the High Commissioner's activities and interests, especially with respect to the negotiation of loans, attendance at international conferences, and access to official information about British foreign policy. With Cook's retirement, Bruce raised expectations that he was about to reform the office; in particular, it was believed that he would separate the commercial from

²² CPD, cxvi, p. 209.

the social and diplomatic aspects of Australia's representation - thus making the High Commissionership a more purely ambassadorial post - and bring the High Commissioner into closer contact with the British government.²³ In the event, while his actual choice of High Commissioner appeared uninspired to some, many of these expectations were met.

Bruce had made it clear as early as 1923 that access to information was one of the most important issues in Anglo-Australian relations.²⁴ The creation of the Liaison Office in Whitehall was intended to address precisely this problem; but, at the 1926 Imperial Conference, Bruce cautioned that, while: 'The appointment of a liaison officer has resulted in much better contact with the British Government... there was a danger that this system might undermine the position of the High Commissioner'.²⁵ He emphasised that: 'He only thought it necessary that the Prime Ministers should be allowed to appoint someone who should have access to confidential documents';²⁶ with such access, the High Commissioner would be in a position to communicate to his government both 'unofficial information' and 'his impressions of the atmosphere on all matters of foreign policy'.²⁷ He proposed therefore:

that the High Commissioners should be the unofficial channel [with Great Britain] and should (1) be entitled to see confidential communications; (2) should be entitled to have access to Ministers; and (3) should be used by the Dominion Governments to give the unofficial views of their Governments... He thought that these duties could be carried out by the High Commissioners, as liaison officers must necessarily be juniors.²⁸

²³ Argus, 17 December 1926; 3 February 1927.

²⁴ CPD, civ, pp. 1482-83.

²⁵ PRO: CAB 32/56, Imperial Conference 1926 - Inter-Imperial Relations Committee; 8th meeting... 8 November 1926, p. 3.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁸ Ibid.

The Dominion Prime Ministers agreed that the High Commissioners could 'see the confidential papers', which they themselves had been receiving since 1921.²⁹ In 1927, Bruce decided that Ryrie could see all Casey's communication with the Department of External Affairs, as well as the telegrams on foreign affairs which had been sent to the Dominions since the Chanak crisis. He also concurred with Amery's proposals regarding the attendance of the High Commissioners at the CID, which will be discussed shortly. All this occurred with little fanfare and passed virtually unnoticed in Australia.

Yet, apart from the High Commissioner's actual duties, there had been considerable debate about the type of person who should represent Australia. In 1921, the Australian Natives Association called for 'a man of wide experience in politics, business and commercial matters'; in 1927, the Sydney Daily Telegraph asserted: 'We have no use for a Cavour or a Richelieu in London just yet'.³⁰ But as we have seen, even before the office's creation, Prime Ministers had had difficulty in finding a suitable occupant. In 1924, Bruce's lack of confidence in Cook's ability to handle issues of foreign policy - 'difficulties (largely of a personal nature)' as one observer put it - prevented him from going further than the establishment of the Liaison Office.³¹ In 1926, he told the Imperial Conference: 'it would depend on the sort of person they sent as High Commissioners whether the Dominion Governments would get the necessary information as to the trend of affairs'.³² By the time Bruce had an opportunity to choose his own High Commissioner, he was determined to break the precedent of retiring a senior politician to London, but largely failed. Possibly he was

²⁹ Amery, *Diary*, i, p. 478, 8 November 1926; Edwards, Prime Ministers, p. 56.

³⁰ AA: A461, F348/1/5, S.H. Watson to Prime Minister, 22 April 1921; Sydney Daily Telegraph, 24 March 1927.

³¹ Casey Papers, A.W.A. Leeper, 'Report on my service with the Commonwealth Government'; Leeper was seconded by the Foreign Office in 1924 to investigate the organisation of the External Affairs branch of the Prime Minister's Department, and to suggest how it might be more closely linked to the Foreign Office, see Edwards, Prime Ministers, pp. 70-71,

³² PRO: CAB 32/56, Imperial Conference 1926... Inter-Imperial Relations Committee, 8 November 1926, p. 3.

thwarted by a Cabinet which did not wish to limit its powers of patronage; possibly he was hampered by the absence of obvious alternatives. Indeed, the factors which had limited the range of choice in 1909 were virtually unchanged. There was still no diplomatic service; the fixed term and non-political character of the office discouraged active politicians from seeking it; businessmen were regarded as lacking appropriate experience.³³ In such circumstances, Bruce was driven back to the appointment of an elderly politician.

Moreover, because Cook and Ryrie lacked suitable qualifications to become the 'unofficial channel' between Australia and Britain, he compensated by relying on Casey and McDougall to act as his personal representatives. This he did not regard as satisfactory, but it did mean that by the end of his premiership - when Thomas Trumble, the Official Secretary (formerly the Secretary of the Department of Defence), Collins, the financial adviser, and Colonel Manning, the Director of Migration, are also taken into account - there was considerable specialisation at a secondary level in Australia's representation in Britain. Furthermore, these officials stayed in touch and co-operated with each other.³⁴ What was lacking was the co-ordinating authority of the High Commissioner at the top. But even with respect to the High Commissioner, Bruce had been able to achieve some of his aims. Despite the strictures of later critics like the Age, as far as he was concerned, further reform of the High Commissionership was no longer necessary. On returning to Australia after the 1926 Imperial Conference, he told the press, with reference to the need for an informal means of communicating with the British government: 'As far as Australia was concerned, the High Commissioner could do, and was doing, the work without any alteration of status. He did not think special training was necessary. It needed only an intelligent person, capable of doing a sensible job sensibly'.³⁵

³³ eg. South Australian Register, 24 March 1927.

³⁴ 'Secret Service Agent', no. 196, McDougall to Bruce, 29 November 1928; My Dear P.M., no. 193, Casey to Bruce, 25 April 1929.

³⁵ Times, 8 February 1927.

(ii) The Decline of the Agents-General
and the Consolidation of Commonwealth Powers

The decade separating the war from the Great Depression saw a considerable expansion in the Commonwealth's functions, particularly in areas like immigration, previously controlled by the States, and its involvement in other activities, like capital-raising overseas, which it had not undertaken hitherto. These activities primarily concerned domestic policy but often required a delegation of administrative responsibility which resulted in the consolidation of the authority of the High Commissioner and Australia House at the expense of the Agents-General. As early as 1921, Sir Henry Lambert advised Churchill at the Colonial Office: 'The fact is that very little matters to us anyway in the States, and nearly the whole of our important Australian business is done with the Commonwealth.'³⁶

At the heart of Hughes's scheme of post-war Australian development was a programme of large-scale assisted emigration from the United Kingdom and the settlement of these immigrants on the land. With the replacement of Hughes by Bruce, this programme was simply system^{at}ised into one part of the triad of 'men, money and markets'.³⁷ At a Premiers' Conference in May 1920, the States agreed to hand responsibility for the overseas organisation of immigration and the transport of immigrants to the Commonwealth government, and on 1 March 1921 Senator Edward Millen, the Minister for Repatriation, opened the Migration Branch in Australia House, with Percy Hunter as its first Director.³⁸ Not surprisingly, the Agents-General expressed 'mixed feelings' about the centralisation of Australia's immigration

³⁶ PRO: CO 418/116/27797, minute, Sir Henry Lambert, 20 May 1921.

³⁷ PP (1924), xviii, Cmd. 2009, Imperial Economic Conference... 1923, Record of Proceedings, p. 58.

³⁸ Annual Report, 1921, p. 1606; AA: A461, N348/1/8, part 1, Hughes to Hunter, 30 September 1920; Fitzhardinge, ii, p. 441.

organisation in Australia House, but Hughes was careful to ensure that the Branch employed representatives of each State who were in touch with the Agents-General.³⁹

The Branch soon became the largest department in Australia House, in June 1925 employing 89 individuals,⁴⁰ but was virtually autonomous and under the direct control of the Prime Minister. Its Directors, Hunter (1920-27) and Colonel C.H.E. Manning (1927-30), were also independent of the High Commissioner. Hughes instructed Hunter to 'keep in close touch' with him, and the special status of the Director continued after Bruce took office.⁴¹ But with the cutting back of immigration from early 1928, the Branch entered decline. The termination of assisted immigration in 1930 led to heavy redundancies, and with Manning's retirement, the post of Director lapsed and the remaining staff were absorbed into the High Commissioner's office.⁴²

The formation of the Loan Council on a voluntary basis in 1923 further undermined the position of the Agents-General. In July 1925, with a moratorium in effect on loans in the London market, the Loan Council agreed that the High Commissioner and the Agents-General should co-operate in implementing the borrowing programme, but Cook was sceptical, replying: 'You will realise [the] difficulty of keeping [the] matter secret with seven of us taking a hand'.⁴³ In November, however, he was instructed to assist the Tasmanian Agent-General in negotiating a State loan.⁴⁴ Shortly after, George Fairbairn, the Victorian

³⁹ *TJPP* (1921-22), lxxxv, no. 38, p. 3; AA: A461, N348/1/8, part 1, Hughes to Millen, 4 January 1921.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Memorandum... to Prime Minister's Department, 4 June 1925.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Hughes to Hunter, 30 September 1920; J344/1/1, part 1, memorandum by the Prime Minister, 25 January 1924.

⁴² For the history of the branch see AA: A461, N348/1/8, parts 1 and 2.

⁴³ AA: A1606, C17/1, part 3, cable to High Commissioner, 6 July 1925; Cook to Bruce, 8 July 1925.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Prime Minister to High Commissioner, 13 November 1925.

representative, suggested that the Agents-General and the High Commissioner might form a branch of the Loan Council in London, but this, and Ryrie's later similar suggestion in January 1930, came to nothing.⁴⁵ By the onset of the Depression, the responsibility of the Agents-General for the State debts had become negligible, and apart from possibly spoiling the negotiations, they played no part in the large conversions carried out by Bruce in 1932-33.⁴⁶

Clearly aware of their marginalisation in many areas of Anglo-Australian relations, they made overtures to Bruce (then Resident Minister) in 1933 about the possibility of greater co-operation with the Commonwealth, finally proposing that together they form a trade council to deal with questions of trade and publicity.⁴⁷ Bruce was 'totally opposed' to such a body, 'as all questions of external trade were the responsibility of the Commonwealth Government'. Certain issues also 'might involve serious differences of opinion between the Commonwealth Government and some of the Governments which they [i.e. the Agents-General] individually represented'.⁴⁸ Instead, he suggested that they constitute an 'informally recognized consultative body', the first monthly meeting of which took place on 5 October 1934.⁴⁹

Yet despite the narrowing of their activities and the inevitable calls in the Commonwealth Parliament for their complete abolition, the Agents-General remained in London. Only three concrete proposals for their removal emerged from the States themselves, on each occasion for reasons of economy. In 1919, William McPherson, the Victorian Treasurer, told Pearce in London that he was going to recommend his

⁴⁵ NLA: MS 1633 (E.C.G. Page Papers), folder 2525, Fairbairn to Page, 24 November 1925; AA: A1606, C17/1, part 7, Ryrie to Prime Minister, 23 January 1930.

⁴⁶ AA: Bruce Papers; M110, Binders of Debt Conversion Notes, Cables and Correspondence 1932-33; item 1, note, 5 May 1933, regarding the interference of the South Australian Agent-General.

⁴⁷ AA: A2910/T21, box 660, 401/1/19, part 1, Agent-General of South Australia to Bruce, 10 June 1933; H. Colebatch (Agent-General, Western Australia) to Bruce, 3 August 1933; A461, I348/1/10, High Commissioner to Prime Minister, 30 January 1934.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Notes of meetings and further documents are in AA: A2910/T21, box 660, 401/1/19, parts 1 and 2; also see, A461, I348/1/10, 'Co-operation Commonwealth [and] States'.

government to transfer the work of the Agent-General to the Commonwealth. He would also take the issue up with the other States. In August 1923 and July 1932, the Premiers of Tasmania and New South Wales respectively made similar proposals.⁵⁰ But nothing came of these plans. McPherson's suggestions sank without a trace. The Tasmanian plan was part of a wider scheme of retrenchment which was dropped as soon as the government changed.⁵¹ New South Wales lost heart when it realised that none of the other States were following suit.⁵²

For its part, particularly at Premiers' conferences in 1930-32, the Commonwealth urged the States to merge their offices with Australia House, but the Premiers' anxieties about the loss of prestige and autonomy which this would entail (particularly on the part of the small, outlying States) invariably outweighed the attractions of the savings which would result.⁵³ So great were State fears about the loss of their identity that by 1935 New South Wales and South Australia had terminated their leases in Australia House.⁵⁴

But there were also practical reasons for retaining the Agents-General. Two New South Wales reports on the advisability of retaining the office, one by the Agent-General in 1919 and the other by the State Premier in 1923, both concluded that there was an irreducible core of business which would continue to require separate representation by the State.⁵⁵ The gathering under a single roof of officials reporting to seven different governments would also create the potential for an unwieldy,

⁵⁰ AA: A461, C348/1/10, part 1, Pearce to Prime Minister, 21 July 1919; G348/1/10, W. Lee to Prime Minister, 25 August 1923; B348/1/10, B.S.B. Stevens to Prime Minister, 14 July 1932.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, G348/1/10, Lyons to Prime Minister, 27 May 1924; also, *ADB*, x, p. 53.

⁵² AA: A461, H348/1/10, Stevens to Lyons, 8 February 1934.

⁵³ *CPP* (1929-31), ii, 'Conference of Commonwealth and State Minister', February 1930, pp. 73-75; 'Conference', February 1931, pp. 147-49; (1932-34), iv, 'Conference', January-February 1932, p. 521, and subsequent correspondence in AA: A461, A348/1/10.

⁵⁴ AA: A461, B348/1/10, Stevens to Prime Minister, 20 December 1932; E348/1/10, Richard Butler to Prime Minister, 20 May 1935.

⁵⁵ *NSWPP* (1919), iv, 'Agent-General for New South Wales in London', pp. 691-95; (1923), iii, 'Agent-General for New South Wales... Report of the Premier'.

internally divided bureaucracy. Considerations of administrative efficiency apart, issues still arose which entailed direct discussion between the States and Whitehall, including the appointments of Governors and Legislative Councillors, Exchequer grants for land settlement programmes, and occasional constitutional crises, such as the attempt of the New South Wales Governor, Sir Gerald Strickland, to dismiss the Holman Government in 1916, and the Western Australia secession movement of 1930-33.⁵⁶ As long as States like New South Wales continued to find themselves in conflict with the Commonwealth, the Agents-General also ensured that their views would be heard in London.⁵⁷ Finally, the Agent-Generalship had always been a useful form of patronage, one with which State politicians may have been reluctant to part.⁵⁸

With the decline of the Agents-General, the only other potential counterweights to the High Commissioner's authority over issues affecting domestic policy were the Commonwealth Bank (which had opened a London branch in 1913) and, behind it, the Bank of England.⁵⁹ As we have seen, as early as 1913, Reid had discussed loan raising with Governor Cunliffe, but only in 1921 did the Federal government embark upon an ambitious borrowing programme and the High Commissioner assume responsibility for negotiating with the brokers and advising the government. Much to Montagu Norman's chagrin, he also was the channel of

⁵⁶ For the role of Agents-General with respect to appointments of State Governors and Legislative Councillors, PRO: PRO/69, J. Ramsay MacDonald Papers, item 577, J. Thomas to MacDonald, 12 August 1930 and Bede Nairn, *The 'Big Fella'* (Carlton, 1986), p. 245; land settlement, Amery, *Diary*, i, p. 392, 18 November 1924; Governor Strickland, PRO: CO 418/163/3366, T.A. Coghlan to Under Secretary, Colonial Office, 17 January 1917; W.A. Holman to Coghlan, 14 November 1916; and Western Australian secession, PRO: Dominions Office; DO 115, Confidential Print, Australia, 1928-36; vol. 2, no. 33, Sir Hal Colebatch to Sir E.J. Harding, 4 December 1933.

⁵⁷ eg. over the question of State borrowing in London during the First World War, PRO: T1/12005/34221 [24341], B.R. Wise to Sir J. Bradbury, 11 November 1915; and Lang's conflict with the Commonwealth in 1931-32, AA: A1606, D20/1, 'New South Wales Agent-General in London'; Nairn, p. 254.

⁵⁸ eg. during the negotiations preceding the New South Wales National Party in 1916, Sir Charles Wade, the Liberal leader, was promised the Agent-Generalship and, eventually, a seat on the State Supreme Court, Evatt, p. 318.

⁵⁹ For relations between the two banks see Sayers, pp. 205-7.

communication between the Bank of England and the Commonwealth.⁶⁰ These responsibilities grew to such a point that Ryrie observed in his 1931 report: 'Perhaps the most important work done for the Commonwealth in London relates to finance'.⁶¹ Collins, the Secretary to the Treasury between 1916 and 1928, later told Lyons: 'work in finance had been regarded in departmental circles as the most important function of the High Commissioner himself'.⁶² The Bank of England's concern about the volume of Australian borrowing and desire to see loan raising managed entirely by the Commonwealth Bank, gave particular importance to independence of the High Commissioner. This, however, was soon challenged by the banks.

In November 1925, the Commonwealth Bank questioned the High Commissioner's right to negotiate State loans. The Governor complained to the Treasury about 'inspired statements' to the press and referred to 'futile representations by the High Commissioner'. He asserted on 20 November: 'Further the participation in State loan negotiations by the High Commissioner merely opens another door for the leakage of valuable information and is incapable of any good'.⁶³ Collins replied on 24 November:

I have shown the correspondence to the Treasurer, who desires me to say that the Government is quite satisfied with the services of the High Commissioner in connection with the flotation of loans in London, and that it is the intention of the Government to continue the present practice in London.

I am to add that there is unimpeachable evidence that, in the necessary negotiations, the services of the High Commissioner are invaluable, and that there is no justification at all for the suggestion either that the High Commissioner has made futile representations or that there has been any leakage of information through him.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ eg. in 1925, Norman attempted to browbeat Cook into obtaining assurances regarding appointments to the Commonwealth Bank in Australia, BE: OV 13/32, Norman to Cook, 22 and 26 October 1925.

⁶¹ AA: A461, C348/1/10, 'Report of the High Commissioner for 1931', p. 1.

⁶² AA: CP 268/3, I/280, Collins to Lyons, 30 January 1934.

⁶³ AA: A571, 25/20056, J.R. Kell to Collins, 16 and 20 November 1925.

⁶⁴ Ibid., Collins to Kell, 27 November 1925.

If not directly inspired by Norman, the bank was probably influenced by his antipathy to the involvement of politicians in the conduct of financial operations, which he regarded as more the province of a central bank. We have already seen that during the twenties the High Commissioner occasionally consulted with the Bank of England about various aspects of the borrowing programme. In 1927, Ernest Harvey, then Comptroller General, visited Australia and believed that he had obtained a commitment from the government to consult with the Bank prior to the flotation of any London loan.⁶⁵ But Collins, now the Financial Adviser in London, feared that the connections of the Bank's Court of Directors with the rest of the City would lead to leaks, and refused to divulge anything without the Prime Minister's authority.⁶⁶ He even excluded the London manager of the Commonwealth Bank from the negotiation of issues until the High Commissioner had been able to recommend their terms to Canberra.⁶⁷ Thus the autonomy of the Commonwealth's representatives was asserted. But Norman did not relent from seeking to influence Australian borrowing, in January 1929 summoning first John Nivison, then Casey, to remonstrate about the terms of a particular issue.⁶⁸

Apart from the decline of the Agents-General and the assertion of the High Commissioner's control over the management of the loan programme, the consolidation of Commonwealth powers was further reflected in the growth of Australia House as an administrative centre. By July 1930, the staff (excluding the High Commissioner and the Migration Branch) had expanded from the 60 employed in August 1914 to 226. Apart from the High Commissioner's own staff, Australia House also accommodated officers from the three armed services, the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, the Development and Migration Commission, the

⁶⁵ BE: G1/286, Harvey to Gibson, 24 November 1927.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, cable from the London Office [of the Commonwealth Bank], 17 February 1928.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, Ernest Riddle to Sir Cecil Lubbock, 28 August 1928.

⁶⁸ AA: A1606, C17/1, part 7, Ryrie to Bruce, 11 January 1929; *My Dear P.M.*, no. 167, Casey to Bruce, 17 January 1929.

Departments of Trade and Customs, Markets, and Health and Repatriation, the External Affairs Branch, the Auditor-General, the Public Trustee, the semi-independent Australian Trade Publicity Office, and, of course, the Migration Branch.⁶⁹ In other words, the office was a microcosm of the Commonwealth Public Service abroad. Ryrie observed in his 1927 report: 'Australia House, as an organ of administration, is surely unique. Gathered under one roof and owing allegiance to the High Commissioner are a number of officers representing statutory bodies in Australia, which are not only separately housed but are independently controlled'.⁷⁰ But the administrative problems were also unique:

Officers in charge of these offices, in the sense that they represent their respective Departments in Australia, desire authority from, and must observe, the rulings of those Departments, but in another and larger sense their offices are simply integral parts of a single Commonwealth representation in London and as such they are guided by the High Commissioner on matters of policy and principle. In the nature of the case this peculiar condition of affairs seems unalterable, but it makes the problem of administering Australia House a much more complicated one than that of administering a Department in Australia.⁷¹

The administration of the Commonwealth Office does not appear to have been an issue when, at the end of 1916, Hughes abolished the original Department of External Affairs and transferred control of the London Office to the Prime Minister's Department.⁷² But in January 1924, Bruce told Cook that, with regard to the 'purely administrative duties of the office':

the analogy to be kept in mind is the relation of a Cabinet Minister to his Department, with such modifications as are necessitated by the distance from the seat of Government, and the peculiar character of some of the duties to be performed. The fundamental things to be

⁶⁹ AA: A2911, 2441/11, 'Schedule of information for the Secretary of the High Commissioner of South Africa'; figures for July 1930 from CPP (1929-31), ii, 'Coleman Report'; A6252, item 7, part 2, Coleman Report, appendix F.

⁷⁰ Annual Report 1927, p. 1009.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Edwards, Prime Ministers, p. 34.

aimed at are, unity of control, with definitely allocated responsibility, and the cordial co-operation of the staff.⁷³

Decisions affecting administration, staff and appointments were to be submitted to the High Commissioner, who was ultimately responsible for 'the control and discipline of Australia House'. Apart from the Director of Migration, who had special privileges, the High Commissioner was also the channel of communication with all departments in Australia.

Inevitably, much responsibility fell upon the Official Secretary, who was, as Major-General Ramaciotti observed in his report to the Economies Royal Commission in June 1920:

not only a permanent Under-Secretary, but from the financial and trade point of view may be compared with the general manager of a large banking institution or business concern...

He is effectually a Deputy High Commissioner, and is required to deal with issues, the magnitude of which is not realized in Australia outside Ministerial circles.⁷⁴

But the administrative control of both the High Commissioner and the Official Secretary remained incomplete, particularly where other public service departments were concerned. In April 1931, Coleman commented: 'Under existing conditions the office of High Commissioner in London does not carry that measure of direct responsibility in executive control that it would do if the original terms of the High Commissioner Act were given effect'.⁷⁵

Almost from its creation, the London office was attacked for waste and inefficiency. In 1916, Round Table noted of its business methods: 'in the past they have been the subject of a great deal of criticism'.⁷⁶ In 1923, the Age described

⁷³ AA: A461, J334/1/1, part 1, Memorandum by the Prime Minister, 25 January 1925.

⁷⁴ CPP (1920-21), iv, 'Final Report of the Royal Commission... upon Public Expenditure', Appendix C, 'Report... by Major-General Ramaciotti', p. 1409.

⁷⁵ CPD, cxxviii, p. 1001.

⁷⁶ Round Table, vi (1915-16), p. 338.

Australia House as an 'Augean stable of sloth'.⁷⁷ According to Premier Collier of Western Australia in February 1930: 'It has been an absolute incubus. It is a by-word in London'.⁷⁸ Some senior officials in Australia, themselves subject to complaints about the mediocre standards in the Commonwealth Public Service, were outright in their hostility. In late 1919, H.C. Brown, the accountant in the Prime Minister's Department, commented with respect to Henry Braddon's investigation of the trade and commercial branches:

if most of the matters referred to are not already being done it would be interesting to know what is left for the existing large staff at Australia House to do.

If the other sections of the High Comm[ission]er's Office are not doing better work than the Accounts section the result cannot be anything but unsatisfactory.

As far as can be judged here the High Commissioner's staff seem to think they are employed to spend all the Government's funds they can get hold of and then ask for more.⁷⁹

Historians have taken most of this criticism at face value,⁸⁰ but while a certain amount is justified, particularly during the period 1919-20, much stemmed from factors outside the London office's control. Its shortcomings at the end of Fisher's term, for example, were largely due to its rapid expansion during the war, the circumstances of the move to an incomplete Australia House at the end of 1916, Hughes's failure for over a year to appoint a successor to Edward Box who resigned as Official Secretary in October 1919, and the absence at that time of any government policy on immigration or trade.⁸¹ Moreover, several investigations of the office failed to uncover the gross waste and inefficiency which were frequently alleged. In December 1911, Josiah Thomas, the Minister of External Affairs, who had recently

⁷⁷ Age, 20 October 1923.

⁷⁸ CPP (1929-31), ii, Conference, p. 74.

⁷⁹ AA: A461, N348/1/2, note, H.C. B[rown], n.d.; also see, A2, 1919/607, memorandum, H.C. Brown to Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, 6 November 1919; Caiden, Career Service, pp. 125-41.

⁸⁰ Murdoch, Thesis, p. 400; Edwards, Prime Ministers, p. 87.

⁸¹ CPP (1920-21), iv, Ramaciotti Report, p. 1408.

attended the coronation, observed: 'the staff of the High Commissioner in London is well-organized, and does excellent work'.⁸² In 1920, Ramaciotti found the staff generally efficient and concluded: 'The organization is capable of being placed upon a sound footing, giving efficient economical working, once the policy which is to guide its activities has been clearly defined'.⁸³ During the 1923 Imperial Conference, Senator R.V. Wilson inspected the office; according to the Melbourne Herald: 'the efficiency of the sub-branches redounds to the credit of the officers in control'.⁸⁴ Even Coleman's recommendations in 1930 were inspired by the urgent necessity for economy rather than the discovery of maladministration in the office. Trumble, the Official Secretary, told Scullin: 'He is silent on the subject of public complaint against Australia House. It is therefore interesting to note that he recommends no change in the Commercial, Intelligence or Customs offices which see the bulk of people who come on business'.⁸⁵

But the frequency with which Australia House was criticised made it an easy target whenever the government was forced to cut its budget, and the subject of several inspections and reorganisations. Braddon took up the question, abortively, in 1919. Ramaciotti acted for the Economies Commission in 1920. That year, Watt was instructed to reorganise the office, but when he resigned, Millen was given the job; he, in turn, passed it on to Shepherd, who finally carried it out.⁸⁶ During the 1921 Imperial Conference, Hughes inspected the office early one morning before the staff arrived for work. Senator Wilson made a similar inspection in 1923.⁸⁷ Finally, in

⁸² CPD, lxiii, p. 3682, 5 December 1911.

⁸³ CPP (1920-21), iv, Ramaciotti Report, p. 1408.

⁸⁴ Melbourne Herald, 27 November 1923.

⁸⁵ AA: A461, L348/1/2, Trumble to Prime Minister, 12 November 1930.

⁸⁶ AA: Prime Minister's Department; CP 4/11, Watt Mission to London; bundle 1, Mr Watt's Mission to Great Britain, 'Statement', 14 June 1921; A461, A348/1/7, part 1, Memorandum to Public Service Inspector for Victoria from Secretary Prime Minister's Department, 15 October 1920; Age, 8 January 1921; Report by Acting High Commissioner 1921, pp. 1601-3.

⁸⁷ Melbourne Herald, 27 November 1923.

1930, Coleman conducted an investigation for the Labor government. But no amount of retrenchment or reorganisation satisfied the critics. As late as November 1938, one Minister complained: 'Australia House never seems to function as effectively as it should'.⁸⁸ With considerable justification, Trumble lamented to Scullin in 1930:

Australia House has ever been an object of recurring attacks. Under every Government and under every London regime it has sooner or later been assailed and has many times been searchingly investigated. A period of lull has then followed but after a while the complaints have broken out again.⁸⁹

(iii) The Conduct of Imperial Relations

The expansion of the Commonwealth's overseas activities to include capital raising and the organisation of trade and immigration was paralleled, during and after the war, by the Dominions' involvement in a system of imperial consultation, the fuller recognition of their sovereign status, and their increasing participation in the life of the international community. Each of these developments had consequences for the High Commissioners. Nationalist governments in Canada and the Irish Free State sought the recognition of their status through the elevation of that of their High Commissioners. As regards the conduct of policy, British politicians like Amery involved the High Commissioners in their schemes to consolidate and extend^d the advances in imperial consultation which had occurred during the war. Thus, in contrast with the pre-war period, by 1932, the position of the High Commissioners in the conduct of imperial relations had become firmly established.

As we have just noted, the question of the High Commissioner's formal status was raised most vigorously by Canada and the Irish Free State. In July 1924, a memorandum by McNeill, the Irish representative, suggesting that the High

⁸⁸ Thomas White in CPD, clviii, p. 2177; also see, AA: A461, I348/1/2, part 1, Bruce to Lyons, 25 January 1934.

⁸⁹ AA: A461, L348/1/2, Trumble to Prime Minister, 12 November 1930.

Commissioners be granted: 'the same political courtesies as the accredited representatives of foreign States enjoy',⁹⁰ revealed the underlying motivation. McNeill, rejecting the idea that the High Commissioners might attend some meetings of the British Cabinet, or 'be formally organised as a consultative body', simply desired that - apart from becoming the channel of communication - they be allowed the same place in the order of precedence and the same exemptions from rates and taxation as foreign ambassadors. Rather than wishing to extend their powers in such a way as to bind the Dominions more closely to imperial policy, he sought: 'The express and unqualified recognition of the equal statehood of the several countries' of the Empire.

With one important exception, the Imperial government had no qualms about yielding to such requests. In March 1923, Batterbee advised: 'my own feeling is strongly in favour of meeting the High Commissioners in every way possible in questions of this kind', concluding: 'a concession given at once gives much satisfaction and often has a good effect in improving relations out of all proportion to the intrinsic importance of the privilege concerned'.⁹¹ But Whitehall resisted giving the High Commissioners identical privileges, particularly in the matter of precedence, to those of foreign ambassadors. Constitutionally, it was impossible, as they did not represent a head of state (in their case, the king), but their governments. Politically, it was equally impossible, as it would have involved the tacit recognition that the Dominions were now foreign states. In March 1930, an inter-departmental committee preparing for the Imperial Conference later that year: 'generally agreed that it was necessary at all costs to prevent anything in the nature of diplomatic status being accorded to the Dominion High Commissioners, and the placing of High Commissioners in front of foreign Envoys was out of the question'.⁹²

⁹⁰ AA: A2908, [P7], Memorandum, 'The status of Dominion High Commissioners; the Canadian High Commissioner, Mackenzie King, raised the question at the 1923 Imperial Conference; PRO: 32/9, Imperial Conference, 1923... Notes of the Fourteenth Meeting, pp. 20-21.

⁹¹ PRO: CO 532/241/10124, minute, Batterbee, 9 March 1923.

⁹² PRO: DO 35/112/3, Inter-imperial relations committee, 4 March 1930.

By 1932, the position was this: seats were reserved for the High Commissioners in both Houses of Parliament;⁹³ the High Commissioners were entitled to the same exemption from taxation, and the same privileges at Court, as foreign ambassadors and ministers;⁹⁴ finally, at ceremonial occasions, other than when a Minister from the respective Dominion was present, they ranked immediately behind a Secretary of State of the Imperial government.⁹⁵ Of purely domestic interest, the Australian High Commissioner was ranked ahead of a State Premier.⁹⁶ Furthermore, one of Ryrie's conditions when accepting office was that he be provided with an official residence; accordingly, the Commonwealth obtained a 21-year lease on a property at 18 Ennismore Gardens, Kensington.⁹⁷

Some of these privileges, such as reserved seats in the House of Commons, where a debate might affect a Dominion's interests, were of practical benefit; others were largely symbolic, but no less important, signifying - particularly at public events - both the outward unity and cohesion of the British Commonwealth, and the Dominions' standing as, in Balfour's famous words, 'autonomous communities... equal in status... united by a common allegiance to the Crown'.⁹⁸ Stonehaven got to the heart of the matter when he told Baldwin in March 1926: 'The status of the [High] Commissioners is by no means unimportant, and the higher it is the easier will be the treatment of matters between the Prime Ministers because the legitimate pride of the Dominions in the Imperial partnership will have been legitimately recognized'.⁹⁹

⁹³ PRO: CO 532/241/10124, memorandum, Lt.Col. Verney, 23 April 1923; CO 532/243/34713, memorandum, 'Accommodation in the House of Commons...', July 1923.

⁹⁴ PRO: CO 532/283/59853, Colonial Secretary to Governor-General, 20 December 1924; AA: A1606, Q42/1, Lord Chamberlain to High Commissioner for Australia, 7 November 1929.

⁹⁵ AA: A1606, Q42/1, Dominions Secretary to Prime Minister, 22 January 1931.

⁹⁶ PRO: DO 35/28/4650, minute, W.C. Hankinson to Harding, 4 May 1927.

⁹⁷ 1927 Report, p. 1009; CPD, cxxviii, p. 1017.

⁹⁸ PP, (1926), xi, Cmd 2768, Imperial Conference... 1926, Summary of Proceedings, p. 14.

⁹⁹ CUL: Baldwin Papers, 96/174-77, Stonehaven to Baldwin, 8 March 1926.

In 1919, the Prime Minister's Department in Melbourne observed 'that the number of official and social functions at which the High Commissioner has been expected to attend has greatly increased'.¹⁰⁰ It also forecast that the High Commissioner's duties would soon include diplomacy:

The diplomatic functions have hitherto been small, but with the advent of a permanent League of Nations, in which the Australian Government will be directly represented, the diplomatic duties will increase and possibly become continuous. In receiving mandates for the administration of the Pacific Islands assigned to Australia, matters affecting the neighbouring powers such as Japan and Holland will increase, and necessitate action through or in consultation with the British Government.

During the following decade, the High Commissioners' involvement in the discussion of imperial foreign policy was but one aspect of the wider development of inter-imperial relations and cannot be divorced from that context.

Throughout the twenties, the Dominions, particularly Australia and New Zealand, found themselves the natural allies of figures like Amery and Hankey who wished to keep Britain free of commitments on the European mainland and to maintain her position as a global imperial power. Their sponsorship of closer consultation, therefore, can be regarded in narrowly political terms, the Dominions only mattering so far as they provided additional support for their predetermined views on British policy.¹⁰¹ But in a wider sense what occurred was a convergence of interests of mutual advantage to imperialist and outlying Dominion alike. In other words, the imperialists subscribed to a view of Britain's power and international responsibilities which fitted neatly with the particular Dominion's own sense of its place in the world. Of course, this did not prevent Amery from being almost precipitate in attempting to involve the Dominions in foreign policy, nor from being

¹⁰⁰ AA: A461, N348/1/2, memorandum, 'Functions and duties of the High Commissioner', supplied by Secretary of the Prime Minister's Department, 9 October 1919.

¹⁰¹ See R. Holland, 'The Commonwealth in the British Political Mind: A Study in Anglo-Dominion Relations 1925-37' (Oxford, D.Phil Thesis, 1977), p. 37 with respect to Amery's reasons for establishing the Dominions Office; for a later period see E.M. Andrews, The Writing on the Wall (Sydney, 1987), pp. 75, 101-2.

disappointed (and consequently losing enthusiasm) when they failed to support his views. But it also meant that posts like the Australian Liaison Office in Whitehall were created which were of long-term benefit to Australia.

The problem of devising a form of consultation which did not infringe Dominion autonomy - quite apart from the question of how far, at the end of the day, either Britain wished to consult, or the Dominions to participate - was also a conundrum which would ultimately prove insoluble. Moreover, the answer varied from one Dominion to another. The fear of imperial federation by default may have receded, but as we have seen with respect to the Australian High Commissionership, the Dominions remained no less opposed to delegating wide discretionary powers to High Commissioners and Cabinet Ministers. As early as February 1920, Hughes doubted whether the establishment of a consultative body to formulate an imperial policy at the annual League assembly was 'compatible with those rights of self-government which the Dominions possess and that status under the League of Nations which is accorded them by the Treaty [of Versailles]'.¹⁰² As we will see in the case of Canada, even the mere exchange of views and information might be interpreted as prejudicing the freedom of Prime Minister and Parliament to decide policy. None of these factors prevented the Dominions from seeking information about, or even in the case of Australia, wishing to participate in, imperial foreign policy; but they did limit the extent to which they were prepared to use their High Commissioners to achieve these ends.

Throughout the war, the Colonial Office had continued to regard the High Commissioners as 'just officials' and to restrict their access both to information and to British Ministers.¹⁰³ Yet by the early twenties, with their responsibilities vastly increased and the Dominions expecting to be better informed about foreign affairs,

¹⁰² PRO: CO 886/9/76, no. 30, Hughes to Colonial Secretary, 21 February 1920; copy in AA: A3934, SC 28 [2].

¹⁰³ PRO: CO 687/47/24539, minute, H.L[ambert] to Sir G. Fiddes, 25 May 1918; CO 532/113/16355, minutes on E.A. Box to Under Secretary, 28 March 1918.

this attitude could no longer be maintained. In October 1923, Sir Eyre Crowe, the Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign Office, declared: 'Full information respecting foreign affairs being communicated to them [i.e. the Dominions], the Home Government are ready at any time to meet representatives of the Dominions for the purpose of consultation, of offering explanations, of exchanging views and, if necessary, inviting support or co-operation'; whether these representatives should be Ministers, special delegations or High Commissioners was for the Dominions to decide.¹⁰⁴ This openness paved the way for the establishment of the Liaison Office in 1924. At the end of that year, Sir Austen Chamberlain, the new Foreign Secretary, noted the facilities being offered to 'Mr Bruce's confidential representative', and expressed his willingness 'if desired, [to] make it part of my business to receive any such accredited representative myself on any occasion when he is instructed by his Prime Minister to seek a personal interview with me either to give or to gain information'.¹⁰⁵ He later told Casey 'that he hoped one day to see the High Commissioners accredited to the Foreign Secretary and authorised by their Governments to maintain touch on Foreign Relations'.¹⁰⁶

As far as Chamberlain was concerned, the key to greater consultation was the appointment by the Dominions of representatives 'whom they are ready to trust'.¹⁰⁷ Throughout the twenties, British statesmen and officials remained critical of the calibre of the High Commissioners and sceptical of the extent to which they had the confidence of their governments. Following the 1926 Imperial Conference, Chamberlain told Amery, after the latter had arranged for the Australian and New Zealand representatives to receive Foreign Office confidential prints, that he had got

¹⁰⁴ PRO: FO 371/9412, W9288/7756/350, memorandum, 'Notes on the question of closer co-operation...', Sir Eyre Crowe, 1 October 1923.

¹⁰⁵ PRO: FO 371/10565, W11200/4972/50, memorandum, A.C[hamberlain], 20 December [1924]; emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁶ My Dear P.M., no. 37, Casey to Bruce, 5 November 1925.

¹⁰⁷ PRO: FO 371/10565, W11200/4972/50, memorandum, A.C[hamberlain], 20 December [1924].

from the Dominion Prime Ministers 'a very definite impression that not one of these three Prime Ministers [of Australia, New Zealand and Canada] desired it; that not one had chosen his High Commissioner with a view to the discharge of such a function and that not one thought his present High Commissioner suited for the work'.¹⁰⁸ More often than not, Whitehall attributed this lack of confidence to the personal inadequacies or political pasts of the Dominion representatives.¹⁰⁹ Occasionally, it acknowledged that the problem might be political; that, whatever their abilities, the Dominions did not wish their High Commissioners to 'act as plenipotentiaries binding their Governments';¹¹⁰ and that, as we have seen, many questions could only be finally decided by a Prime Minister. Thus, in February 1929, Batterbee commented with respect to the problem of obtaining the Dominions' adherence to the Optional Clause of the Statute of the Permanent Court of International Justice:

personally, I do not think that we shall advance the matter much by bringing in the High Commissioners in a matter so complicated and important. There might be some advantage in eg. Mr Smiddy growing familiar with the difficulties of the problem, but I doubt whether the High Commissioners would be able to contribute much towards the solution of them, or indeed would be allowed by their Governments to do so. A via media would be to ask the Dominion Governments to send over legal experts to join in our discussion, but political issues are so tangled up with the legal issues that I doubt whether anyone short of the Dominion Prime Ministers is really capable to deal with them.¹¹¹

Yet, despite the personal and political difficulties which often limited the usefulness of the High Commissioners, the Prime Minister's Department had been correct in forecasting that their role as Dominion representatives at the annual League Assembly and at meetings like the 1924 conference in London on the Dawes

¹⁰⁸ PRO: FO 372/2198, T16240/5885/384, Chamberlain to Amery, 21 December 1926; for the attitude of Amery and Cecil see: DO 35/29/9394, 'Notes of discussion between Mr Amery and General Hertzog', 7 September 1927; My Dear P.M., no. 136, Casey to Bruce, 7 June 1928.

¹⁰⁹ PRO: FO 371/10564, W4972/4972/50, minute, G.M. Villiers, 19 June 1924; FO 372/2197, T5885/5885/384, Memorandum on consultation and communication of information to the British Dominions on Foreign Policy', Percy Koppel, 16 January 1926.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Minute, Sir H. Batterbee, 1 February 1929, quoted in Holland, Thesis, p. 133-34.

report,¹¹² would bring them into contact with international affairs and the discussion of imperial policy. As we have seen, during the crises over Chanak and Manchuria, they also provided the Dominions with the opportunity for personal consultation with the Imperial government. Yet there were clear limits to this. Cook was denied full access to his own government's communications with London, and after Chanak, no longer received even abbreviated versions of the foreign affairs telegrams which thereafter were regularly sent to the Dominions.¹¹³

During the second half of the decade, however, Amery (who from January 1925 concurrently held the positions of Colonial and Dominions Secretary) made the most systematic attempt to involve the High Commissioners in imperial consultation. In March 1925, he confided to Bruce:

I am sure that it would make a great deal of difference to the real control by the Dominions over foreign policy and to the real understanding of the Dominion point of view here, if it were possible to have someone here to whom the Foreign Minister or myself could talk about the situation as it developed and who could communicate to you in their own language and get your views.¹¹⁴

In November, he elaborated:

The most immediate need... it always seems to me, is that the Dominion Governments have someone here, be it the High Commissioner or someone else, authorised not only to have full information and transmit it but to consult on the instructions of their Governments with the Government here; such authorised representatives could not only attend the League Assembly, as the High Commissioners in fact do, but also such regular and frequent meetings of the Imperial Conference as might be fixed upon.¹¹⁵

¹¹² For Cook's involvement in the conference on the Dawes report see, PRO: CO 886/11, no. 93, pp. 34-71; Cabinet Office; CAB 29, International Conferences to 1929; vol. 105; CO 532/281-82.

¹¹³ PRO: CO 532/243/44934, 'Foreign policy and relations of the empire', 10 September 1923; CO 532/271/54369, E.J. H[arding] to Green, 10 February 1925.

¹¹⁴ AA: Bruce Papers, AA1970/555, Amery to Bruce, 16 March 1925.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Amery to Bruce, 24 November 1925.

In November 1924, on becoming Colonial Secretary in a new Conservative government, he saw each of the High Commissioners individually, and then arranged a meeting between all of them, Baldwin and Chamberlain at Downing Street on 18 November, at which the Foreign Secretary could 'informally tell them something about the general foreign situation'.¹¹⁶ The 'first collective meeting was an unqualified success';¹¹⁷ Amery recording in his diary:

High Commissioners' Tea Party at No. 10. Austen gave a short survey of the world situation, laying special stress on Egypt... The High Commissioners were all very pleased and no doubt communicated very fully with their Governments. In this matter we went as far as we could without forcing the hands of the Dominion Governments by treating the Dominion High Commissioners as their diplomatic representatives.¹¹⁸

For his part, Sir Joseph Cook took the opportunity to explain Bruce's plans regarding Casey and the Liaison Office.¹¹⁹

In 1925, Amery broadened the scope of these meeting. On 12 March, he had a lengthy discussion with the High Commissioners about the problems of Dominion representation and the creation of a separate Dominions Office.¹²⁰ On 23 March, shortly after Cabinet had authorised the Foreign Secretary to negotiate a European security pact, Baldwin and Chamberlain met them to explain their policy; they also promised to keep them 'informed of developments' and supplied with the relevant communications with the Dominions.¹²¹ The resulting Locarno pact, Cook recorded in his annual report, was the most important political event of the year, 'and it will be

¹¹⁶ Amery, Diary, i, p. 391, 14 November 1924.

¹¹⁷ PRO: FO 371/10565, W10461/4972/50, Amery to Chamberlain, 24 November 1924.

¹¹⁸ Amery, Diary, i, p. 392, 18 November 1924.

¹¹⁹ Casey Papers, Cook to Bruce, 29 November 1924.

¹²⁰ Amery, Diary, i, pp. 400, 401, 12 and 18 March 1925.

¹²¹ PRO: CO 532/317/15593, minute, Davis to Harding, 7 April 1925; W.S. Hankinson to Lt.Col. Sir Ronald Waterhouse, 8 April 1925; Keith Middlemas and John Barnes, Baldwin (London, 1970), pp. 356-57.

noted that the discussions which have taken place upon it have incidentally brought to the front once again the question of the status of the Dominion High Commissioners'.¹²² Finally, in July, Amery started to meet the High Commissioners on a weekly basis; on 20 October, for example, discussing Locarno once again.¹²³ According to Amery, the idea of these meetings - which would 'discuss matters of current interest which otherwise get indefinitely postponed' - came from Peter Larkin, the Canadian High Commissioner;¹²⁴ but he hardly needed encouragement. Ironically, the objections of the Canadian premier, Mackenzie King, led to their being discontinued. According to the Casey, Mackenzie King 'thought that they amounted to an assumption that the High Commissioners were the channel of communication with their Dominion'.¹²⁵ After the 1926 Imperial Conference, an embarrassed Larkin absented himself, telling Amery: 'that Mackenzie King was afraid of these meetings being misinterpreted in Canada and so... he had thought he had better not come'.¹²⁶ The last recorded meeting with the other High Commissioners took place on 3 May 1927.¹²⁷

At the 1926 Conference, Amery obtained the Dominion Prime Ministers' consent to supply the High Commissioners with the same Foreign Office confidential prints which were sent to members of the British Cabinet, Cook starting to receive these in March 1927.¹²⁸ In July 1927, Amery embarked on a tour of the Empire, one

¹²² Report for the Year 1925, p. 921.

¹²³ AA: A458, E108/8, 'High Commissioner's Engagements, quarter ended 30 September 1925'; Amery, Diary, i, p. 423, 20 October 1925.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 413, 8 June 1925.

¹²⁵ My Dear P.M., no. 105, Casey to Bruce, 23 February 1928.

¹²⁶ Amery, Diary, i, p. 485, 7 December 1926.

¹²⁷ AA: A461, A348/1/6, High Commissioner's engagements during the quarter 1 April 1927 - 30 June 1927; but Cook did not record all his meetings with Amery.

¹²⁸ PRO: DO 35/34/1865, E.J. Harding to Sir Joseph Cook, 24 February 1927; AA: A981, Imperial Relations 53, Memorandum of procedure for communication of papers on foreign affairs to Dominion High Commissioners.

of the objects of which was 'to tie up the loose ends and really settle with each Prime Minister individually what authority he is prepared to entrust to his High Commissioner here'.¹²⁹ In Pretoria and Canberra, he took up the possibility of the High Commissioners attending the CID, a subject that Baldwin - under Hankey's inspiration - had raised at the recent Imperial Conference.¹³⁰ In January 1928, Bruce formally proposed 'that on every occasion notice be given to the High Commissioner of the Agenda of the main Committee of Imperial Defence, so that he may ask to be allowed to attend when he thought a matter affecting Australia is listed for discussion',¹³¹ and on 22 May Ryrie attended his first meeting.

With the arrival of the High Commissioners at the CID, Amery and Hankey had reached the limit of how far they were prepared to consult them. They did not, for instance, desire their presence at the CID when matters of particular secrecy, or which had not yet been considered by the Cabinet, were being discussed. On 28 July 1928, Hankey arranged for them to withdraw when the final items on the agenda, concerning anti-aircraft guns for the fleet and the distribution and strength of the army, were reached - this, however, occurred with the knowledge and consent of the High Commissioners.¹³² In April 1929, at Chamberlain's instigation, consideration of the report of a Cabinet committee on belligerent rights was dropped so that it could first be discussed in Cabinet.¹³³ Indeed, Ryrie's failure in July 1928 to support Amery over Singapore seems to have brought the value of actually having the High Commissioners at the CID into question. Hankey told Casey:

¹²⁹ CUL: Baldwin Papers, 96/111-15, Amery to Baldwin, 1 March 1927.

¹³⁰ PRO: DO 35/29/9394, Extract from notes of discussion between Mr Amery and General Hertzog, 7 September 1927; AA: A981, Defence 289, T.W. Glasgow to Bruce, 7 January 1928; Dominions Secretary to Prime Minister, 24 April 1928; My Dear P.M., no. 153, Casey to Bruce, 20 September 1928.

¹³¹ AA: A981, Defence 289, Sir Neville Howse to Dominions Secretary, 17 January 1928; arrival of despatch timed to coincide with Amery's return to England.

¹³² PRO: Cabinet Office; CAB 21, Registered Files; item 470, Hankey to P.J. Grigg, 3 July 1928.

¹³³ Ibid., Chamberlain to Hankey, 16 April 1929.

from what he had seen of the scheme in practice, he did not feel confident that anything very constructive would result and he did not propose to endanger the principle by putting it very freely into practice. In pursuance of this, he proposed in future to advise the Prime Minister to hold an occasional C.I.D. meeting, the agenda for which would be selected with an eye to the attendance of High Commissioners. In other words, he would keep the principle alive for possible use in the future by holding an occasional High Commissioners' C.I.D. meeting, and would not jeopardise it by discussing subjects in their presence about which they were but ill-informed and about which, by their intervention, they would retard the progress of the discussion.¹³⁴

The High Commissioners nevertheless continued to attend the majority of the CID's meetings.

The way in which the Dominions responded to these opportunities for greater consultation largely depended on circumstances in each country. Mackenzie King, mainly concerned to assert Canada's autonomy, pressed for the appointment of a British High Commissioner in Ottawa and refused to have anything to do with the CID.¹³⁵ South Africa, however, embraced the sovereign status defined in the Balfour declaration by soon creating its High Commissioner: 'Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary' and accrediting him to the Foreign Office, and by sending similar Ministers to the Hague, Washington and Rome.¹³⁶ Australia welcomed Amery's changes, but did not rush to imitate South Africa. Ryrie attended the CID, but until 1931, Casey remained the informal link between the Commonwealth and the British Government.

The changes in imperial relations flowing from the 1926 Imperial Conference, however, did not automatically strengthen the High Commissioners' hands. Since 1918, when Lloyd George admitted the right of the Dominion Prime Ministers to

¹³⁴ My Dear P.M., no. 153, Casey to Bruce, 20 September 1928.

¹³⁵ Amery, Diary, i, p. 475, 28 October 1926; PRO: CAB 21/470, Hankey to Harding, 17 October 1928; minute, Sir M. Hankey, 22 May 1929.

¹³⁶ PRO: Dominions Office; DO 114, Confidential Print, Dominions, 1925-1945; vol. 15, no. 52, Chamberlain to Amery, 28 April 1927; no. 53, Extracts of notes of discussion between Mr Amery and General Hertzog on 7 September 1927; DO 114/22, no. 390, J.B.M. Hertzog to Dominions Secretary, 22 March 1929; no. 391, Hertzog to Amery, 22 March 1929; T.R.H. Davenport, South Africa: A Modern History (Basingstoke, 1987), p. 290.

communicate directly with him, the importance of the Governors-General rapidly declined.¹³⁷ In January 1926, the Foreign Office summarised the position:

In theory, the Governor-General is not only the representative of His Majesty in the Dominions, but also the link between His Majesty's Government and the Dominion Government. In practice, his influence on matters of imperial or international policy has gradually been diminishing. He has to a large extent been chosen latterly from those having no political experience, and is expected to act constitutionally not politically.¹³⁸

But the High Commissioners had acquired few of the Governor-Generals' functions: 'While, therefore, the utility of the Governors-General for the purpose of consultation may be said to have decreased, that of the High Commissioners has not increased'. After 1926, with the exception of New Zealand, the Governors-General ceased, even theoretically, to represent the British government and to act as the channel of communication. But rather than the High Commissioners becoming the formal link between Britain and the Dominions, the privilege of direct communication, granted in 1918, was extended to cover all official communications between the Dominions and the Dominions Office. Direct communication with the Canadian and South African governments commenced in July 1927. The system was extended to Australia on 1 January 1928.¹³⁹

Yet however uneven the development of their role, by the early 1930s, no real obstacle remained to the High Commissioners acting as the authoritative representatives of their governments in London. How a Dominion actually chose to employ its High Commissioner largely depended upon the quality of his relationship with the government, and the relations with Britain and international aspirations of the particular Dominion. During the 1920s, the confidence of Australian Prime

¹³⁷ Cunneen, pp. 144-48.

¹³⁸ PRO: FO 372/2197, T5885/5885/384, 'Memorandum on consultation with and communication of information to the British Dominions on foreign policy', Percy Koppel, 16 January 1926, p. 4.

¹³⁹ PRO: DO 35/29/6685, memorandum, 'Action taken to give effect to the recommendations of the inter-imperial relations committee', P. Liesching, 28 June 1927; DO 35/22/12270, Stonehaven to Dominions Secretary, 21 December 1927.

Ministers in their High Commissioners was limited, but it would be wrong to say that they did not trust them in anything. Moreover, Bruce's agreement to the extension of the High Commissioners' powers and privileges was an insurance against the day when the government's confidence in its representatives would be greater. Amery expressed the position accurately when, towards the end of 1928, he told Smit, the South African High Commissioner: 'The house is wired and the lights are in. All General Hertzog need do is to turn the switch'.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ PRO: DO 114/22, no. 383, Under Secretary (Dominions Office) to Imperial Secretary, South Africa, 12 November 1928.

PART THREE

THE STATESMAN AS EXILE

1932 - 1939

I am a Minister of the British Crown, but not a Minister of Great Britain. I am a Minister of one of His Majesty's young Dominions beyond the seas.

I speak with less authority but more freedom.

I also am not an Englishman. This frees me from all the prejudice and suspicion which we have to recognise is felt in the minds of some of your people towards all Englishmen.

At the same time I can claim to express British views because today they are no longer the views only of the people of Great Britain, but are those of the British Empire, an association of free people scattered to all the corners of the earth.

AA: Bruce Papers, M104/2, S.M. Bruce, Notes for speech... at the Thanksgiving Day Dinner of the American Society in London, 24 November 1932.

I feel I would be just as great an embarrassment if I was in Australia, even if I remained out of politics, as I would be in Parliament as a private member. With me out of Australia and definitely not available, things would settle down and you would have a chance of getting stability with the personnel available. If I am in Australia, I create an atmosphere of uncertainty and attempts would undoubtedly be made to use me by those who would desire to prevent either you or Menzies becoming firmly established as the recognized leader.

S.M. Bruce to Richard Casey, 9 November 1935, in Cecil Edwards, Bruce of Melbourne, p. 246.

CHAPTER SEVEN

S. M. BRUCE, 1932 - 1939

(i) Minister without portfolio, 1932-33

In 1930 and after, the Depression created a number of crises in Anglo-Australian relations which preoccupied the Scullin government and required the constant attention of its London representatives. The High Commissioner, Sir Granville Ryrie, had played a largely passive role, but even he had been thrust into prominence as the occasion demanded. The deadweight of interest payments to Britain and the policy of deflation associated with Sir Otto Niemeyer also meant that the imperial relationship had entered political controversy to an extent unparalleled since the war. But, in December 1931, Joseph Lyons advised the Australian electorate to 'tune-in with Britain', and to place their trust in 'sound, honest finance and government'.¹ From the moment of its election, therefore, apart from immediately having to grapple with the concrete issues of debt, trade, defence and external relations, the success of his government depended in large measure upon the actual benefits to be derived from the imperial connection. Thus, for both practical and political reasons, in February 1932 the government announced that, after leading the Australian delegation to the Imperial Economic Conference at Ottawa, S. M. Bruce (now an Assistant Minister) would be proceeding to London for a period of twelve months.²

As we have seen, before 1932 the appointment of a Resident Minister had been consistently rejected on political and constitutional grounds. But in the

¹ SMH, 3 December 1931

² Times, 11 February 1932.

immediate aftermath of Lang's second default in January 1932, and in view of several pressing matters in London (including the maturity of a New South Wales loan towards the end of the year), the Cabinet felt that there was an 'urgent need for a Cabinet Minister in London as a pledge of Australia's full realization of her financial responsibilities and as a corrective to the unfavourable impression created by Mr Lang's default'.³ By the middle of 1932, it had also decided to take advantage of the cheap money policy in Britain to renegotiate the terms of much of its high interest bearing stock.⁴ In June, Casey (now a conservative MP) told Sir Harry Batterbee that Bruce's mission was 'more important in the near view at least than Ottawa. His real mission... is to get by hook or by crook (the latter not in the Lang sense) a reduction in our overseas interest burden'.⁵ Thus a Minister, as opposed to an official, was being sent to London because of the political importance to a new government, frightened by the contagion of Langism, of obtaining some relief on the burden of interest payments, and because of the necessity to reassure the British investing public and restore Australia's prestige in the City. As Latham explained in Parliament, a Resident Minister would 'have an authority abroad which no other appointee could have'.⁶ But the government was reluctant to make it a permanent arrangement, Latham insisting that: 'It could not be adopted as a general principle'. The appointment was 'only an experiment to meet special circumstances'.⁷ Officially, Bruce would be designated 'Minister without portfolio'.⁸

³ Ibid.

⁴ The option to convert existed on £84 million of Australian stock. For an account of the conversions which is not sympathetic to Bruce see Neville Cain and Sean Glynn, 'Imperial Relations Under Strain: The British-Australian Debt Contretemps of 1933', AEHR, xxv (1985), pp. 39-58.

⁵ Churchill College: Hankey Papers, HNKY 5/7, Casey to Batterbee, 10 June 1932.

⁶ CPD, cxxxv, p. 453, 14 September 1932.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Times, 16 June 1932.

In London, he would also discharge the duties of High Commissioner, and in September 1932 the government amended the High Commissioner Act to allow, according to Lyons: 'a Commonwealth Minister, in certain circumstances, to exercise the powers and to perform the duties vested in the High Commissioner'.⁹ For the only time before 1945 (when the Labor Minister Jack Beasley occupied a similar position), Australia would be represented in Britain by a Resident Minister. It is appropriate here to ask two questions: first, whether in fact there was any real advantage in this arrangement; and second, whether there had been any validity in previous objections to the appointment.

As Casey told Batterbee, the most important object of Bruce's mission was to negotiate a substantial reduction of the interest on £84 million of Australian debt. To a government which had declared itself the party of 'sound, honest finance' and asserted that: 'Default would inevitably have been attended by financial collapse and national ruin', a reduction of interest payments was of such importance that in July 1933 (when Bruce's negotiations seemed to have stalled), Cabinet felt that even a Minister's authority might be insufficient, and contemplated sending the Prime Minister himself to London.¹⁰ In the event, Lyons stayed at home. But even as a Minister, Bruce did not have unfettered discretion. He remained in close touch with his Cabinet colleagues and strove throughout to keep in step with Australian public opinion.

Bruce arrived in London on 7 September 1932. He had to deal first with a maturing New South Wales ^{loan} which the government wished to roll over.¹¹ The maturity is noteworthy here because the negotiations set the tone for the more important series of conversions in 1933-34. The maturity would also be the first

⁹ Commonwealth Statutes, xxx, no. 34 (1932); CPD, cxxxv, p. 448 and passim.; Times, 11 February 1932. The debate was brief, Labor rejecting government 'partly from London', questioning Bruce's personal fitness, and raising the familiar objections to posting a Minister abroad.

¹⁰ PRO: T160/516, f11935/05, Representative... of H.M. Government to Dominion Secretary, 6 July 1933; SMH, 3 December 1931.

¹¹ Schedvin, pp. 354-57.

major Australian operation in the London capital market for over two years. For these reasons, Bruce advised Lyons that it was 'essential that the operation should be an outstanding success', and recommended terms certain to be popular with the market.¹² But Lyons wanted the cheapest credit possible, telling him:

We do not think it is too much to say that unless the London money market meets Australia in a reasonable manner, which on [a] far sighted view is wise in Britain's own interests, it may lead to a complete overthrow of all that has been accomplished towards the rehabilitation of the country and Australia's efforts to keep faith with its overseas creditors.¹³

From the outset, then, the impact upon opinion in Australia would be the main criterion in judging the acceptability of terms offered in London; or, as Bruce put it: 'whether the effect on Australian public opinion would be so serious as to imperil the whole position by strengthening the forces of repudiation and provoke such an outcry... as to undermine the creditable position we are steadily building up here'.¹⁴ For Bruce, the object of the subsequent conversions would to strike a balance between the demands of opinion in Australia and what was actually possible in London.

He opened the negotiations in October 1932, but did not fully report their progress to Lyons until late January. Glendyne and the Bank of England wished to deal with the £84 million stock on which there was an option to convert progressively, in tranches of no greater than £24 million. But Bruce insisted that no less than £43 million would be acceptable as an opening operation. He nevertheless saw the sense in dealing with smaller sums. He told Latham on the phone in December 1932 that an initial conversion of more than £11 million 'would be extremely difficult', and asked him to consult Lyons and other Ministers 'as to what the reaction of public opinion in Australia would be to a transaction of this size and whether they thought we could hold the situation on the basis of the progressive elimination of the high interest

¹² AA: A461, G344/1/7, Bruce to Lyons, 14 September 1932.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Lyons to Bruce, 26 September 1932.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Bruce to Lyons, 23 September 1932.

bearing stocks'.¹⁵ But Lyons told him in February 1933 'that public opinion was becoming increasingly impatient with [the] existing position and that a comprehensive scheme to secure relief was a national and political necessity'. The Loan Council now wished to proceed with a single conversion of all £220 million Australian stock bearing interest of greater than four per cent, whether an option to convert existed or not.¹⁶ In March, Lyons asked him to go for a single operation of £84 million, even though Bruce had already told him that this was 'too large under any circumstances to contemplate dealing with in one transaction'.¹⁷

Bruce nevertheless now acted on these instructions, but returned to his original plan of doing a £43 million operation at the first hint of compromise by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. In April, Latham (who was considerably less alarmist than Lyons) told him that the government 'could handle the thing from a political point of view' if he could manage £43 million, but that anything less would cause trouble.¹⁸ By May, the negotiations had reached 'complete deadlock';¹⁹ despite the opposition of the Bank and the Treasury, Bruce reluctantly began to prepare for a £43 million operation. Two events forestalled him. The Chancellor threatened not to lift an embargo imposed in 1932 on all optional conversions of trustee stock, while the news that Britain might default on its war debt to the United States created a crisis in the market. On 13 May, Bruce phoned Lyons to ask whether a £43 million operation was still 'absolutely necessary', and seized on the suggestion that he might be able to do 'something less'.²⁰ He had already begun to prepare a climbdown, and on 27 May

¹⁵ AA: Bruce Papers; M104, Correspondence 1926-1964; item 1, Telephone conversation with Latham, 19 December 1932.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, M110/2, Lyons to Bruce, 9 and 10 February 1933.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Bruce to Lyons, 27 January 1933; Lyons to Bruce, 11 March 1933.

¹⁸ AA: Department of the Treasury; CP 197/1, Correspondence between Treasurer and High Commissioner re Conversions, October 1932 to May 1933; Telephone conversation between Latham and Bruce, 5 April 1933; AA 1970/559, box 2, bundle 1, Telephone conversation with Latham, 5 April 1933.

¹⁹ AA: Bruce Papers, M110/1, Interview with the Governor of the Bank of England, 3 May 1933.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, M110/2, Telephone conversation with the Prime Minister and Latham, 13 May 1933.

obtained the Loan Council's approval for an initial conversion of £11 million, which was successfully carried out in June. Thereafter, despite continuing anxiety about the state of public opinion, the persistence of unsettled conditions in London (now associated with the failure of the World Economic Conference) meant that only small operations remained possible, the final one being completed in February 1934. In October that year, with another group of loans coming up for conversion, Bruce began to look forward to the next round.²¹

The negotiations of 1932-33 illustrated some important aspects of Bruce's position as a Minister. He had stayed in close touch with his Cabinet colleagues, discussing progress at length by cable, but also taking advantage of the wireless telephone link which had been opened between Britain and Australia in 1930.²² He had also kept himself fully informed of the state of public opinion. But his position remained distinct from that of an official. He was not bound by a rigid set of instructions, neither was he a mere channel of communication. He shared collectively in the government's decisions and, within certain limits, was permitted to use his discretion. He soon decided that an initial £43 million conversion was the most that he could get away with, and stuck to this until compelled to yield by force majeure.²³ His main criterion nevertheless remained what the government regarded as politically acceptable in Australia.

But the conversions were primarily of domestic concern. With regard to questions of imperial foreign policy, where Britain was the main Commonwealth protagonist and the issues appeared remote to most Australians, Bruce acted rather differently. He immediately took charge of the Australian delegation at the Geneva

²¹ AA: A1606, AY 17/1, Bruce to Lyons, 16 October 1934.

²² J.R. Robertson, '1930-39', in Crowley (ed.), p. 444.

²³ This, nevertheless, was a welcome let off; there is no basis for Radi's assertion that: 'Blocked by a government embargo on the raising of new capital (*sic*), Bruce used his old City contacts to breakthrough' *ADB*, vii, p. 458; as early as January 1933, 'the City' (viz Montagu Norman) threatened not to lift the embargo on conversions, BE: G1/292, Norman to Bruce, 12 January 1933.

Disarmament Conference, and in November 1932 informed the Foreign Secretary, Sir John Simon, of his views regarding the latter's most recent statement concerning the conference. In February 1933, he sent him a twenty-three page memorandum on a recent French plan and offered his advice about how best to deal with it.²⁴ In Geneva, in March, Anthony Eden outlined to him over dinner his own draft convention, Bruce immediately suggesting a strategy for how Britain might seize the initiative at the Conference. Eden 'entirely agreed', and promised to communicate the plan to MacDonald, the Prime Minister. Bruce felt that his dinner with Eden was 'well worthwhile and in some respects the most interesting evening I had ever spent'.²⁵

Eden later acknowledged of Bruce: 'His counsel was invaluable to me then and later, in rougher weather'.²⁶ But the point here is not that Bruce suddenly became an important adviser either to Eden or Simon; rather that he immediately assumed the right to behave in such a manner. In part, this stemmed from a personal attraction to the large questions of policy. More importantly, it was a consequence of his support for an imperial foreign policy. That Australia's interests lay in participating in such a policy was an article of faith; it therefore followed that Australia, by right, should be consulted and informed. Here he stood in the tradition of Deakin, Fisher and Hughes, but unlike any politician of his generation he had the talent and opportunity to participate in such a policy. Moreover, Australia's interests could be construed in the widest possible sense, and Bruce assumed the right to speak, both as Australia's representative and as an imperial statesman in his own right, on most issues of foreign policy.

In marked contrast with the conversion programme, he also frequently acted with little explicit direction from Australia. Possibly, as Edwards suggests, he wanted to play 'an independent part in the United Kingdom political process' apart from his

²⁴ PRO: Foreign Office; FO 800, Private Collections, Ministers and Officials; vol. 291, ff. 114-16, Bruce to Simon, 14 November 1932; FO 371/17351, W1944/40/98, Bruce to Simon, 9 February 1933.

²⁵ AA: Bruce Papers, M104/2, Geneva, Notes of Conversation with Eden at dinner, 12 March 1933.

²⁶ Anthony Eden, Facing the Dictators (London, 1962), p. 30.

official role.²⁷ Yet for reasons which will be discussed in section four of this Chapter, it is equally likely that the government was satisfied to give a general indication of its policy and leave the rest to Bruce. Bruce's conversation with Eden in Geneva in March 1933, for example, was preceded by a cable from Latham informing him that the government felt 'that a really determined effort should be made to obtain immediate results [at the Disarmament Conference]. What appears to be wanted is a really strong lead and an appeal with some force and fire...' ²⁸ Whatever action Bruce took, however, was left up to him. The contrast between his limited discretion in matters of domestic political concern and far greater freedom in foreign policy is one which would emerge again during his High Commissionership.

Clearly, Bruce's powers and authority as a Minister were far greater than those of previous High Commissioners. Nevertheless, he soon became preoccupied with the disadvantages of his position. He was unhappy about having little influence over Cabinet decisions, telling Casey in January 1933 that any government interference in the exchange rate would 'be more than I can bear', and threatening to resign when Latham gave a legal opinion that the Federal government had no responsibility for the State debts.²⁹ He confided to Casey after ceasing to be a Minister in September 1933: 'I felt... that that had gone on as long as it should. I was beginning to feel a little restive at being in a position where I was a member of the Government and responsible for the Government's actions, but could not really take part in the deliberations of the Cabinet'.³⁰ He had probably advised Lyons in similar terms, when the latter asked him in November 1932 about 'the desirability of maintaining a Minister in London'.³¹ In February 1933, he told the London branch of the Canadian

²⁷ P. Edwards, 'The Rise and fall of the High Commissioner', p. 49

²⁸ AA: A981, Disarmament 16, item 15, file 49, Latham to Bruce, 8 March 1933.

²⁹ AA: Bruce Papers; A1421, Minister without Portfolio... correspondence with R.G. Casey, 1933-1938; folder 1, Bruce to Casey, 19 January 1933; Edwards, Bruce, p. 229.

³⁰ Ibid., Bruce to Casey, 13 September 1933.

³¹ NLA: Lyons Papers, 1/4, Lyons to Bruce, 2 November 1932.

Chamber of Commerce: 'that he could not believe that the system of maintaining a Cabinet Minister in London would be extended by Australia or followed by other Dominions'.³² In September, after accepting Lyons's offer of the High Commissionership, he urged him 'to make very clear... why we are abandoning the system of my carrying on as a Minister', and suggested the statement: 'that if it were continued indefinitely it would involve a departure from the doctrine of the collective responsibility of Ministers, a principle to which the Government collectively and Mr Bruce individually attach great constitutional importance'.³³ The appointment of a Resident Minister had been unpopular with some sections of the press;³⁴ now the post was abandoned for the same constitutional reasons that Bruce and others had rejected it in the early 1920s.

(ii) High Commissioner

On 28 February 1933, Lyons offered Bruce the High Commissionership.³⁵ According to some historians, having got Bruce out of the country, Lyons had decided that it would be best to keep him abroad. In Radi's account:

Lyons never allowed Bruce the opportunity to threaten his position... Well before he could make any moves to return [to Australia], Lyons offered him the high commissionership in London and when Bruce endeavoured to defer his decision, still contemplating a return to politics and expecting Lyons's health would not hold up. Lyons forced the issue in September 1933.³⁶

³² Times, 23 February 1933.

³³ NLA: Lyons Papers, 2/11, Bruce to Lyons, 9 September 1933.

³⁴ Argus, 12 September 1933; Canberra Times, 13 September 1933.

³⁵ NLA: Lyons Papers, 2/11, Bruce to Lyons, 11 April 1933.

³⁶ ADB, vii, p. 458.

Radi assumes several things: that Lyons felt threatened by Bruce and was able to remove him from politics; that Bruce wanted to return to the Prime Ministership, and, in any case, that he still wished to stay in politics; that when offered the High Commissionership, he had no choice but to accept it; and that the views of other Ministers did not matter. It would be wrong to discount altogether the influence of politics and self-interest in Bruce's appointment. Yet it is also clear that Bruce was under little compulsion when he accepted the High Commissionership, and that Lyons was being far from Machiavellian when he offered it to him. If the door to Bruce's return to politics had closed, it had shut in October 1929 and not when he boarded the liner for Ottawa in June 1932.

Lyons was possibly already thinking about making Bruce High Commissioner when he had asked him in November 1932 about the desirability of keeping a Minister in London, but did not tell anybody until February 1933, when he tried the idea out on Keith Murdoch.³⁷ He also discussed it with Latham and Casey. Latham agreed that Bruce might find the post attractive. Lyons, however, did not approach him until his unfavourable comments about retaining a Minister in London were published in Australia.³⁸ When he did write to him at the end of February, he appears to have given him the alternatives of the High Commissionership or remaining in the Ministry as Treasurer. He had offered him the High Commissionership, however, because he wanted someone who was 'respected and would be able to pull his weight'.³⁹ On 29 March, Latham assured him that Lyons was not trying to get rid of him. Bruce replied in May:

It never entered my head for a second that the Prime Minister's suggestion with regard to the HC was inspired by a desire to get me

³⁷ AA: Bruce Papers, A1421/1, Casey to Bruce, 20 February 1933.

³⁸ NLA: Latham Papers, 1/3377-80, Bruce to Latham, 11 May 1933; AA: Bruce Papers, A1421/1, Casey to Bruce, 5 March 1933; Argus, 23 February 1933.

³⁹ Lyons's letter to Bruce of 28 February is not extant, but see Bruce's reply in NLA: Lyons Papers, 2/11, Bruce to Lyons, 11 April 1933. Lyons told Casey that Bruce would become Treasurer if he chose to return to Australia, see AA: Bruce Papers, A1421/1, Casey to Bruce, 5 March 1933.

out of the Government. Even if it had, I have known and worked with you too long to have believed for a second that you would be a party to any such action. I recognised the proposal for what it was namely a generous desire on your part and that of the PM to give me the opportunity of accepting the HC if I so desired. You can rest assured that your apprehensions were quite groundless but at the same time it was good of you to write.⁴⁰

Bruce had originally anticipated that he would be in London for a short time, starting the conversions off and then returning to Australia, possibly becoming Prime Minister for a short time if Lyons' health broke down and Latham was appointed to the High Court.⁴¹ But before receiving Lyons' offer, he had decided that the conversions would require him in London much longer. After their completion, he would resign and carry out a reconstruction of the family importing business, Paterson, Laing & Bruce, which had been hit badly by the Depression, and then return to public life in Australia. His acceptance of the High Commissionership in February 1933 would entail his resignation as Chairman of the family firm. But the necessity of having an official position while carrying out the conversions also made him reluctant to resign his portfolio, even if this would have made a place for Casey in the Ministry, and then accept the High Commissionership after he had reconstructed Paterson, Laing & Bruce. He therefore told Lyons in April that he would be able to give him an answer in two or three months; by then: 'If my private affairs permit I would be prepared to take the position of High Commissioner for a time'.⁴² In early August, Lyons phoned for an answer. Bruce was now thinking in terms of completing the conversions as a Minister and starting as High Commissioner in the new year, an arrangement which would also allow him to deal with Paterson, Laing & Bruce. But Lyons and Latham, possibly thinking ahead to their reconstruction of the Ministry in October, pressed him for an immediate decision. Bruce asked for another month in

⁴⁰ NLA: Latham Papers, 1/3377-80, Bruce to Latham, 11 May 1933.

⁴¹ AA: Bruce Papers, A1421/1, Casey to Bruce, 19 January 1933; Bruce to Casey, 9 November 1935, in Edwards, Bruce, p. 244 (original in AA [Melbourne], Casey Papers); for the date of this letter see, Hudson, Casey, pp. 95-96.

⁴² NLA: Lyons Papers, 2/11, Bruce to Lyons, 11 April 1933.

order to satisfy himself that the family firm would not be disadvantaged by his absence from the Board, and in early September accepted the High Commissionership over the phone. But now it was Lyons's turn to delay so as to defer the by-election for Bruce's seat until after he had presented the budget. Finally, Bruce's appointment was announced on 6 October.⁴³

The experience of being a Resident Minister had confirmed Bruce in his opposition to such posts. His duty to Paterson, Laing & Bruce and responsibility for the conversions, rather than resistance to Lyons, had prevented his immediate acceptance of the High Commissionership. He told Latham in May 1933 that he was convinced of Lyons' good faith. There was thus no stratagem to remove him from political life. In a deeper sense, however, politics had led to his departure from Australia.

As Prime Minister, in 1929, Bruce had pressed ahead with legislation which would have virtually divested the Federal government of its powers over industrial arbitration, without first consulting the Nationalist Party Council, despite the pleas of its Secretary. The electoral defeat to which he soon led the party alienated its powerful backers; in 1933, he referred to 'the gentlemen, who some three years ago exhausted their vocabulary in finding terms abusive enough for me'.⁴⁴ But the loss of his own seat was also a personal humiliation which exaggerated his natural diffidence towards politics. By the early 1930s, the Nationalists were a discredited force.⁴⁵ Bruce, however, although aware of his unpopularity, was prepared to re-enter politics, writing to Pearce from England in May 1930: 'if, in our collective wisdom we decide it would be a good thing for me to go into the ring there again, I will do so. If, on the

⁴³ AA: Bruce Papers, A1421/1, Bruce to Casey, 13 September 1933; Geoffrey Sawer, Australian Federal Politics and Law, 1929-1949 (Carlton, 1963), p. 44. Cabinet formally took a decision to appoint Bruce on 21 September (AA: Cabinet Secretariat; CRS A2695, Lyons-Page Ministries... Minutes and Submissions, 1932-39; item 10, Cabinet Minutes, 21 September 1933), although the press already took it for granted; Argus, 12 September 1933; Canberra Times, 13 September 1933.

⁴⁴ AA: Bruce Papers, A1421/1, Bruce to Casey, 19 January 1933; Alfred Stirling, Lord Bruce: The London Years (Melbourne, 1974), p. 4.

⁴⁵ Churchill College: Hankey Papers, HNKY 5/7, Casey to J.H. Thomas, 26 March 1931.

other hand, we decide that I have run my course in Australia and would be a liability to the party, then I will probably come back here again'.⁴⁶ In October, he told Baldwin: 'what my future actions will be depends on whether the Australian public show any desire to have my services or not'.⁴⁷ He nevertheless offered himself for re-selection as the candidate for his former seat.

With the election of the UAP in November 1931, the problem of his position in the government immediately arose. His ability and experience meant that he could not be excluded from the Ministry, but it was impossible for him to play too prominent a role. Sydney Snow, the Vice-President of the New South Wales Retailers Association and a senior figure in the UAP, felt that he was an obvious choice as Treasurer.⁴⁸ Bruce, wishing to play Baldwin to Lyons's MacDonald, wanted to be Vice-President of the Executive Council.⁴⁹ But Lyons chose the Treasury for himself, and probably yielding to the need to have all the States represented in Cabinet, gave the Vice-Presidency to a South Australian. Lyons made Bruce an Assistant Minister, but following his advice, gave him special responsibility for the Treasury. Because of his 'experience and high qualifications', he was ranked third in the Ministry behind Lyons and Latham. The entire position, as Lyons himself admitted, was 'rather anomalous'.⁵⁰

The problem of Bruce's acceptability to public opinion and the UAP's backers, rather than, as Radi maintains, the accident of being in England when the election was called, was the reason for his incongruous place in the Ministry. Lyons required him in the government but was unable to give him too prominent a position. Similar factors prevailed during Bruce's remaining months in Australia. Together, he and

⁴⁶ AA: Bruce Papers, M104/2, Bruce to Pearce, 27 May 1930.

⁴⁷ CUL: Baldwin Papers, 165/44, Bruce to Baldwin, 10 October 1930,

⁴⁸ NLA: Lyons Papers, 1/9, Sydney Snow to Lyons, 23 December 1931.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, cable, Bruce to Lyons, 23 [December] 1931.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*; *Times*, 6 January 1932; AA: Bruce Papers, A1421/1, Casey to Bruce, 5 March 1933.

Latham were 'the strong men in the Cabinet'; but as a party leader, the British representative reported: 'Lyons carries off the honours and is a more popular figure in the country'.⁵¹ In the aftermath of Lang's second default, Bruce was the obvious person to re-negotiate the debt in London, particularly as he had been active in the City during the crisis of 1930. Lyons had contemplated leading the delegation to Ottawa himself, but with Latham also shortly to depart for London and Geneva, it was thought unwise to have so many senior Ministers absent at one time.⁵² Bruce, therefore, was also given the Ottawa job. The conference was viewed with little enthusiasm in Australia, an additional reason perhaps for Bruce going instead of Lyons: Bruce felt that the mission was a 'suicidal job'; according to Casey, any agreement to reduce tariffs would mean that the leader of the delegation was 'liable to lose his reputation in Australia'.⁵³

Reputation mattered all the less to Bruce because he no longer had any ambition to be Prime Minister, even if the post should fall into his lap through the breakdown of Lyons's health. Latham departed for the Disarmament Conference in early March 1932, but Bruce was already concerned about Lyons's health and wanted Latham to return as soon as possible, writing on 22 March: 'I could carry on till you got back, but it is desirable if possible, to avoid my being drawn into the forefront of the picture. The reasons for this you know full well'.⁵⁴ Bruce was also concerned that Lyons would be without the support of either for over a month, and had contemplated asking Latham himself to go to Ottawa and afterwards deal with the conversions. This he did not pursue because Latham would have to takeover as Prime Minister if Lyons collapsed. Latham, however, soon made his own ambitions for the High Court sufficiently clear to leave Bruce as the only credible successor. But Bruce told Casey

⁵¹ PRO: DO 35/410/11648/27, Hankinson to Batterbee, 21 June 1932.

⁵² Times, 11 February 1932.

⁵³ NLA: Latham Papers, 1/2368-71, Bruce to Latham, 24 June 1932; Churchill College: Hankey Papers, 5/7, Casey to Batterbee, 10 June 1932.

⁵⁴ AA: Bruce Papers, M104/1, Bruce to Latham, 22 March 1932.

in January 1933: 'I still have a very real feeling that my return to the job of Prime Minister would probably be a bad mistake'. His popularity with the party's supporters in the business community had risen, but he feared that this was only temporary:

I am afraid... after a very short period with me as Prime Minister again they would revert to their previous attitude of mind. That I hold this view and that my one desire is to dodge being Prime Minister again, would not, however, influence me if it was obvious to me that my job of work was to take it on again. If such an unpleasant situation arose it seems to me that what we should be aiming at is that my occupancy of the position should be a very limited one.⁵⁵

A waning enthusiasm for political life and the sense that he was a liability to his party characterised Bruce's final months in Australian politics. This, as much as his apparently lowly place in the Ministry, prompted his reply to Earle Page's congratulations on his re-election in January 1932: 'I have been caught for a job of work but I am afraid my enthusiasm at being back in office is somewhat restrained'.⁵⁶ His strong sense of duty, however, combined with his interest in public policy and attraction to power and influence, led him to accept the High Commissionership. In April 1933, he told Lyons, his private affairs permitting:

I would be prepared to take the position of High Commissioner for a time and probably I would render the best service here because I have great difficulty seeing myself playing a really useful part in Australian politics again. I have my grave doubts of my value as an asset either to the Government or the party if actively engaged in politics in Australia. Here I might be of some service.⁵⁷

In a sense, with Bruce's appointment, the Australian government had reverted to the previous practice of selecting as High Commissioner former Prime Ministers

⁵⁵ AA: Bruce Papers, A1421/1, Bruce to Casey, 19 January 1933.

⁵⁶ NLA: Page Papers, 1694, Bruce to Page, 13 January 1932. In November 1935, Bruce told Casey with respect to politics: 'The battle itself leaves me cold - although when in it one fights to the best of one's ability - because of the futility of it all and the feeling of tragedy at how little is being done and can be done where there is so much to do', Bruce to Casey, 9 November 1935 in Edwards, *Bruce*, p. 243.

⁵⁷ NLA: Lyons Papers, 2/11, Bruce to Lyons, 11 April 1933; cf. AA: Bruce Papers, A1421/1, Bruce to Casey, 13 September 1933; NLA: Latham Papers, 1/3377-80, Bruce to Latham, 11 May 1933.

who looked to the party for their reward. According to Casey, however, Lyons's motives were remarkably similar to Bruce's when ^{he} had scoured the country for a representative in 1926-27: 'He was determined to break the previous precedent of pensioning off an old politician who deserved well of the party. He wanted to send someone to London who would be respected and who would be able to pull his weight in the many conversion operations that the next few years would see'.⁵⁸

Without doubt, Bruce was remarkably well-qualified for the post.⁵⁹ He had become Prime Minister shortly before his fortieth birthday in February 1923, and for six and a half years had striven to establish Australia as an independent nation within the British Commonwealth. His interests had ranged over every aspect of imperial relations: trade, finance, foreign policy, defence, consultation and co-operation. He was at ease in British political society and respected within it. In part, this stemmed from his Cambridge degree, early professional career at the Bar, and wartime service with a British regiment; in part from the authority and prestige gained from attendance at three Imperial Conferences; finally, it rested on sheer ability. At the 1923 Imperial Conference, one of his Ministers was told that the response to his 'men, money and markets' speech was: 'by far the best that has been received by any Dominion Prime Minister since the stirring days of the war'.⁶⁰ As the decade unfolded, he continued to impress. Stonehaven, the Governor-General, an experienced Conservative Party organiser, felt that there was: 'no man in public life... in the Dominion possessing anything approaching his character and ability and integrity'. Amery reported during his imperial tour: 'He is to-day the one big asset Australia has got'.⁶¹

⁵⁸ AA: Bruce Papers, A1421/1, Casey to Bruce, 5 March 1933.

⁵⁹ For Bruce's biography see, I.M. Cumpston, Lord Bruce of Melbourne (Melbourne, 1989); Edwards, Bruce; H. Radi, ADB, vii, pp. 453-61; Stirling.

⁶⁰ NLA: Page Papers, 1694, Sen. Wilson to Page, 10 October 1923.

⁶¹ CUL: Baldwin Papers, 96/186-88, Stonehaven to Baldwin, 12 November 1926; 96/137-44, Amery to Baldwin, 19 November 1927.

Finally, Bruce's interests had drawn him to high policy rather than high politics. As Prime Minister, he had concentrated on the 'big issues',⁶² and it was the big issues in imperial and Anglo-Australian relations that attracted him to London. As he explained to Lyons in September 1933: 'For some little time to come there are going to be very many difficult questions to be handled here and it is because I feel that I can be of greater service to Australia at the present juncture by continuing my work here than by returning to a ministerial post, that I have accepted the position of High Commissioner'.⁶³

Unlike his predecessors, Bruce also had both the capacity and the opportunities to think in terms of, and to devise, policy. In a letter to Casey at the onset of his High Commissionership, he set out an agenda for himself which revealed his characteristic concentration on the 'big issues'. First, came the conversion of Australia's debt; then the British government's agricultural policy and recent tendency to support international programmes for the restriction of agricultural production. He told Casey: 'We have got to be very alert to prevent them committing Britain to arrangements which are against the interests of the rest of the Empire and if necessary we have got to stir the other Dominions up to supporting us'. He concluded:

Finally and possibly more important than anything else is the necessity of keeping a watchful eye on the Prime Minister and his disarmament adventures. With the contacts one has established here it is possible to do a good deal in this direction. The present Government's foreign policy is also fairly alarming.⁶⁴

It was a remarkable anticipation of his activities during the coming years and the clearest indication possible that, while relinquishing his ministerial portfolio, he intended continuing as he had begun.

⁶² Heydon, pp. 91, 93.

⁶³ NLA: Lyons Papers, 2/11, Bruce to Lyons, 9 September 1933.

⁶⁴ AA: Bruce Papers, A1421/1, Bruce to Casey, 13 September 1933.

(iii) The Limits of Influence: Trade Policy

Following the Ottawa Conference, trade became one of the principal issues in Anglo-Australian relations. Bruce's contribution to the creation and implementation^{of} Australian trade policy, therefore, is a crucial test of his importance and influence during the early years of his High Commissionership. It is doubly relevant because, recently, the widest possible claims have been made for the influence of both Bruce and F.L. McDougall, who remained his Economic Adviser. According to O'Brien, the pair were the eminence gris² of Australian trade policy and largely responsible for its character between the wars. O'Brien argues of Bruce:

As Honorary Minister (sic) assisting the Treasurer in Lyons' (sic) Cabinet in 1932, he was responsible for the preparation and execution of government policy at Ottawa; as Resident Minister and later as High Commissioner in London, he not only saw to the implementation of those policies, but in a remarkable way he played a major role in their formulation...⁶⁵

The policy devised 'was essentially sterile from 1933 onwards'; nevertheless: 'In certain respects he was the link... which held the Coalition together after Earle Page's Country Party decided to join with Lyons' United Australia Party... in 1934'.⁶⁶ McDougall's influence, exercised through Bruce, was even more pervasive: 'The genesis of Australian imperial sentiment and its manifestation in the 1920s and 1930s can be traced' back to him; so can the conversion during the 1920s of 'British politicians of all parties to the merits of tariffs as [a] means of augmenting Empire trade'.⁶⁷ Together: 'During the 1930s, Bruce and McDougall had all the semblances of a government in exile - the only difference being that they were far more effective

⁶⁵ John O'Brien, 'Empire v. National Interests in Australian-British Relations During the 1930s', Historical Studies, xxii (1987), p. 573.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 573, 581.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 571.

because of their standing with the government in Australia'. 'It was indeed a remarkable performance...'⁶⁸

In general terms, O'Brien overlooks two important facts. First, empire preference had been a feature of the Commonwealth government's commercial policy since the customs tariff of 1908, and an issue in British politics since Chamberlain's tariff reform campaign of the same decade.⁶⁹ Second, as we noted in Chapter Four, the economic policies of the Bruce-Page government were largely developments of those of the Hughes government, and before it, of the governments of the early Commonwealth. Richmond writes: 'Of course neither the grand imperial vision nor the development and migration strategy was original to Bruce; indeed they were policies for which in the post-war period there was almost a national consensus'.⁷⁰ This is not to suggest that neither Bruce nor McDougall were influential policy-makers or lobbyists, but only that both should be placed in a wider context in which notions of empire preference and imperial development were already pervasive and deeply rooted in the Australian community. If, therefore, we note during the 1930s the persistence of a basic orientation towards the British market and the formulation of policies within this framework, it is not necessary to detect invariably the hand of either Bruce or McDougall.

The best test of O'Brien's argument, however, is to examine Bruce's influence on Australian policy in the years after the Ottawa Conference. As far as Britain was concerned, the most important achievement at Ottawa was not simply a preferential tariff for its manufactured goods imported into Australia, but the concession in article 10 of the Agreement with Australia of 'domestic competitor' status, which provided that: 'the tariff shall be based on the principle that protective duties shall not exceed

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 575, 581.

⁶⁹ Sawyer, *1901-1929*, p. 68; Richard Shannon, *The Crisis of Imperialism* (London, 1974), pp. 349-67; Nicholas Mansergh, *The Commonwealth Experience*, i (London, 1982), pp. 159-61.

⁷⁰ W.H. Richmond, 'S.M. Bruce and Australian Economic Policy, 1923-29', *AEHR*, xxiii (1983), pp. 240-41.

such a level as will give United Kingdom producers full opportunity of reasonable competition on the basis of the relative cost of economical and efficient production'.⁷¹ By this, the British delegation understood that Australia had 'agreed by progressive reductions of duties to put the British manufacturer in the position of a domestic competitor'.⁷² But if, in fact, this was what Bruce had promised, the British soon discovered that it was far more than he could deliver.⁷³

After the Conference, Bruce himself did not return to Australia. In January 1933, Sir Henry Gullett, the Minister for Trade and Customs, who had assisted him at Ottawa, resigned because of ill-health. Thus there was no one in Cabinet either to explain article 10 or to oppose its referral to the Tariff Board, which reported in October 1933 that it still allowed the Australian producer a 'margin advantage' over British imports.⁷⁴ The British government immediately protested and raised the issue with Bruce in London. Bruce had already in August been handed an aide-memoire by the President of the Board of Trade listing the points on which the British government felt Australia was not meeting its Ottawa obligations. The same points were raised at a meeting with Bruce in October, the Board of Trade's officials noting: 'Mr Bruce was privately in agreement with us as to the Tariff Board position [regarding article 10], but did not wish to send our aide-memoire to the Commonwealth Government... as he thought representations in that precise form would not be the most effective'.⁷⁵

Protests through Ernest Crutchley, the Official British Representative in Canberra, were also to no avail. Crutchley recognised that the same opposition to

⁷¹ I.M. Drummond, British Economic Policy and the Empire 1919-1939 (London, 1972), document 28.

⁷² BUL: Neville Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/795, Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 21 August 1932.

⁷³ PRO: Board of Trade; BT 11, Commercial Department; item 221, E.T. Crutchley to E.G. Machtig, 18 December 1933.

⁷⁴ I.H. Drummond, Imperial Economic Policy 1917-1939 (London, 1974), p. 393

⁷⁵ PRO: DO 114/51, no. 91, Board of Trade Note of Interview with Mr Bruce, 23 October 1933. For the aide-memoire itself see no. 75.

tariff reduction which had caused Bruce to describe Ottawa as a 'suicide job' were a powerful constraint upon the government. In June 1933, before the Tariff Board had reported, he observed:

There is no disguising the fact that the United Australia Party set out with the very best intentions, which may be expressed briefly as: a general reduction of the protective duties. The intense opposition of the manufacturers, followed by the formidable opposition of the Labour Party and Press, particularly the Melbourne "Age", have caused them to retreat farther and farther from their original position and as a result we have had the difficulties which you know of in connection with matters arising out of the Agreement.⁷⁶

Crutchley also believed that similar factors accounted for Bruce's reluctance to send the Board of Trade's aide-memoire to Australia. In December, he told Eric Machtig, an Assistant Secretary in the Dominions Office, with respect to the problems over Article 10:

I have no doubt he was quite genuine in saying he agreed with your complaint; he was at Ottawa and I have good reason to believe he actually did contemplate that British industries should share the Australian market on more or less equal terms with the native industry. He has the reputation, as you probably know, of being somewhat aloof from his fellow men - therefore inclined to be academic in matters of this sort. He knows now, I feel sure, that it would be quite impossible for the Government to permit any such inroad without imperilling its existence; to this realisation at least partly, is attributable Bruce's desire that the protest should be made through me instead of handling the matter himself in London where in his opinion (he has told me so himself) all matters requiring personal conference should be dealt with.⁷⁷

As far as Australia was concerned, the most important concessions at Ottawa were: the continued free entry of its agricultural products into the United Kingdom, originally granted under the Import Duties Act of 1932; a specific margin of preference over foreign imports; and, with regard to meat in particular, 'an expanding share of imports into the United Kingdom'. These, however, were subject to certain qualifications. In 1933, British imports of Australian frozen mutton and lamb would

⁷⁶ PRO: DO 35/280/9279A/148, Crutchley to Whiskard, 14 June 1933.

⁷⁷ PRO: BT 11/221, Crutchley to Machtig, 18 December 1933 (Crutchley's emphasis).

be limited to the amount imported in the year ending 30 June 1932, and from 30 June 1934 Britain would regain the right to restrict imports of all kinds of Australian meat. As far as eggs, poultry, butter, cheese and other dairy products were concerned, from July 1935, Britain would be free to impose a preferential duty, 'or in consultation with the... [Dominion] Government to bring such produce within any system which may be put into operation for the quantitative regulation of supplies from all sources in the United Kingdom market'.⁷⁸

Virtually all these provisions arose from the adoption in Britain of a policy of protecting domestic agriculture by first raising commodity prices through the imposition of quotas on imported products, and, secondly, encouraging the restriction of output in primary-producing countries.⁷⁹ In the two to three years immediately after the Ottawa Conference, the British government could at best only hope for voluntary co-operation from the Dominions. In Australia, however, its policies were completely unacceptable. In April 1933, the Commonwealth rejected a plan to tackle the glut of imported butter by limiting supplies from all sources. Later that year, Lyons, citing his many political and industrial difficulties, told Bruce: 'In this atmosphere the proposed curtailment of Ottawa restrictions is creating [an] impossible situation and we feel [that the] time has arrived for plain speaking'.⁸⁰

Both in his negotiations with British Ministers, and at the World Economic and Monetary Conference in London in mid-1933, Bruce made clear Australia's opposition to restriction. On 21 July, he told the Conference's Economic Commission: 'Australia very much regrets that there should have been in this Conference such a concentration upon the question of the limitation of production. We do not believe that the real object of this Conference... can be achieved by means of restriction of

⁷⁸ Drummond, British Economic Policy, doc. 28.

⁷⁹ Drummond, Imperial Economic Policy, p. 301.

⁸⁰ AA: A2908, I15, Lyons to Bruce, 17 August 1933; Drummond, Imperial Economic Policy, p. 322.

production'.⁸¹ His personal position, however, was less rigid. In February 1933, he recommended to Lyons that, as long as the Dominions were still allowed an expanding share of the British market, Australia should co-operate with the United Kingdom.⁸² In May, despite the government's refusal to limit its butter exports, he told the British Minister for Agriculture that, while regulation 'was not the policy of Australia... they were open to conviction if it could be shown it was in their interests to co-operate'.⁸³ He took a similar line at the World Conference, declaring on 20 June that, although it seemed 'an attitude of intolerable pessimism to believe that the world's economic difficulties can only be remedied by restriction of production':

It is to be recognised... that in the present critical state of world trade there may be some commodities in respect of which the necessity, as a temporary remedy, has to be faced of some form of control of production and restriction of marketing. The Australian delegation is prepared to consider on its merits any individual commodity and not be obsessed by the general principles that govern Australian policy.⁸⁴

Bruce's flexibility may have stemmed from personal conviction⁸⁵ and the anxiety that Australia might find itself isolated, but probably above all from the awareness that, from mid-1934, Britain would begin to regain the power to impose quotas, regardless of Australian opposition. Immediately after the Conference, he reported a: 'Difficult situation has arisen in connection with Dominions' imports of agricultural products into Great Britain' because of Britain's agricultural policy and public support for the reduction of Dominion imports. Britain was aware that at

⁸¹ League of Nations, Journal of the World Monetary and Economic Conference (Jr of World Conference), no. 37, 25 July 1933, p. 221; for discussions with British Minister see: PRO: DO 35/317/9513/2, 'The Produce Market Situation, Meeting with the Dominion High Commissioners', 15 May 1933.

⁸² NLA: Lyons Papers, 2/11, Bruce to Lyons, 14 February 1933.

⁸³ PRO: DO 35/317/9513/2, 'The Produce Marketing Situation...', 15 May 1933.

⁸⁴ Jr of World Conference, corrigenda, 20 December 1933, p. 3.

⁸⁵ At Ottawa, on 3 August, Chamberlain noted in his diary that Bruce: 'welcomed very warmly the idea of restriction of production as applied to mutton and lamb and thought it should also be applied to butter', BUL: Chamberlain Papers, NC 3/17, Diary of Ottawa Conference.

present it could only seek voluntary agreement, but bearing in mind the possibility of future compulsory restrictions, he had: 'felt it necessary, without commitment, to ascertain what restriction on Dominion imports their policy requires in the immediate future'.⁸⁶ That this was a pragmatic response was clear enough from his remarks to Casey in September that: 'A new danger has arisen in connection with Britain's policy of the restriction of imports and the general atmosphere that developed at the World Conference for the regulation of agricultural and primary production to demand'. He warned: 'With the present tendency of the British Government towards international arrangements for the regulation of supply we have got to be very alert to prevent them committing Britain to arrangements which are against the interests of the rest of the Empire'.⁸⁷ But his advocacy of flexibility made little impression on the Australian government. Thus, during 1933, far from implementing a policy which he and McDougall had enshrined in the Ottawa Agreement, Bruce found himself running ahead of the government, not daring to raise his own interpretation of Article 10 and failing to persuade Lyons to consider regulating some of Australia's exports. But the limits to his influence became even clearer when he toured Australia in 1934.

When he accepted the High Commissionership in September 1933, Bruce suggested that he might visit Australia 'as soon as a suitable opportunity presents itself' in order to stay in touch with Australian affairs and public opinion.⁸⁸ Possibly, he already envisaged raising Australia's commercial policy with the government. He arrived at Perth on 20 March 1934, and by the time he departed Sydney on 2 May, he had visited each State, held discussions with the Federal and State governments, and addressed numerous producer and commercial organisations. Most importantly, he

⁸⁶ AA: A2908, I15, Bruce to Lyons, 1/2 August 1933.

⁸⁷ AA: Bruce Papers, A1421/1, Bruce to Casey, 13 September 1933.

⁸⁸ NLA: Lyons Papers, 2/11, Bruce to Lyons, 9 September 1933.

had persuaded Lyons to hold a conference with the States on 20 April to consider the nation's marketing policies.⁸⁹

In Perth, he confined himself to generalities, declaring that, following the failure of the World Economic Conference, Australia's only market remained in Britain. It was imperative now that the countries of the Empire act together, and he announced that: 'the main object of my visit to Australia is to discuss with the Federal and State Governments how best this co-operation can be assured'. But at a civic reception later that day, he hinted: 'The restoration of the Empire's trade must be on the basis of group agreements by individual Governments', and asked: 'Are we going to have the sanity to plan our existence over the next few years on these lines?'⁹⁰ On 5 April, in Sydney, at a conference with representatives of the dairy industry and, afterwards, a private meeting with the Dairy Produce Export Board, he broached the subject of restriction: 'He emphasised... that he had been one of the most outspoken critics for proposals of restriction of production when these had been made at the World Economic Conference, but that it was necessary for Australian dairymen to consider all the facts of the marketing position and decide upon the policy that they considered in the best interests of the nation as a whole'.⁹¹ That month, at the conference with State Ministers in Canberra, he urged them to continue participating in the International Wheat Agreement and suggested that as far as mutton and lamb, butter and eggs were concerned the alternatives lay between accepting voluntary regulation now or having restrictions imposed on them later. As far as butter, the commodity for which the demand for action was most pressing, was concerned, he proposed that an agreement with Britain might take the form 'of a "standstill" character over a period of one or two years'.⁹² The desirability of such standstill

⁸⁹ SMH, 28 March 1934; AA: A1606, BG 17/1, telegramme addressed to Premiers of all States, 28 March 1934.

⁹⁰ SMH, 21 March 1934.

⁹¹ SMH, 6 April 1934.

⁹² SMH, 21 April 1934.

agreements, covering several products, now became one of his principal themes.⁹³ Richard Dalton, the senior British Trade Commissioner, reported after a long conversation with him:

He thinks that Australia (by negotiation now) can get away with a 'stand still' agreement allowing her to maintain her export trade to the United Kingdom at the peak already reached so long as she agrees not to exceed it. His 'line' therefore is to advocate such an arrangement as preferable to waiting until the expiry of agreements gives the United Kingdom the right to fix such restrictions as she thinks necessary - which may be greater than might be negotiated for now.⁹⁴

On the eve of his departure, Bruce 'emphasised... that he had not come to Australia to advocate any particular policy. His task had merely been to set out... the facts of the immediate marketing position abroad, so that those who might be called upon... to make decisions... should have full information'.⁹⁵ There were few doubts, however, about which policy he felt it lay in Australia's interests to pursue. But he made little progress in obtaining support for his views. He had some initial success with Lyons, who indicated at the April conference with State Ministers that 'the Commonwealth Government recognised that control of exports, and possibly of production, might in the present difficulties be necessary as a temporary remedy',⁹⁶ but the matter was referred to a meeting of State Ministers of Agriculture, which after 'some plain speaking' only avoided breakdown by diverting it into an elaborate consultation process.⁹⁷ The Country Party had already rejected Bruce's proposals, Earle Page declaring on 27 April that: 'he would fight strenuously against any restriction on exports, especially governmental restrictions'.⁹⁸ The co-operation of the

⁹³ eg. at the Hotel Australia in Sydney on 24 April and in Brisbane on 27 April, SMH, 25 and 28 April 1934.

⁹⁴ PRO: DO 35/281/9279A/287, R.W. Dalton to Sir Edward Crowe, 26 April 1934.

⁹⁵ SMH, 2 May 1934.

⁹⁶ SMH, 21 April 1934.

⁹⁷ SMH, 24 April 1934.

⁹⁸ SMH, 28 April 1934; also, 16 April 1934.

States was essential in any scheme for the control of output, but after listening to a speech at the Hotel Australia in which Bruce again raised the possibility of 'standstill' agreements, Bertram Stevens, the New South Wales Premier, sought a meeting with the senior British Trade Commissioner. According to Dalton:

Stevens... displayed grave anxiety about Bruce's attitude. The question of restriction affects the States more than the Commonwealth because the States will have to accept the first and probably the major odium. Stevens is very much perturbed. He says (1) that there is no leader here in Federal politics at least capable of shouldering the burden of carrying the idea through (2) that he himself is afraid of what may happen at the next State election if he has to father the idea in New South Wales, and (3) that it is very regrettable that Bruce did not at the outset advance his 'stand still' idea instead of breathing the word 'restriction'.⁹⁹

By the end of April, the governments of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Queensland had indicated that they opposed restriction, both of exports and production.¹⁰⁰ Even Lyons had retreated from the lead he had given in Canberra, saying at Hurstville, New South Wales, on 30 April, that the regulation of exports would not be imposed until it was 'absolutely necessary', and that 'when the time comes for the consideration of quotas, the initiative about quantities will actually rest with Britain'.¹⁰¹ According to Malcolm MacDonald, who toured Australia later that year, Bruce had won over Robert Menzies, then Deputy Premier of Victoria, 'and the number of converts which he quickly made is an indication of the way in which strong leadership could bring Dominion producers into line; but immediately after he had left Australia his colleagues grew frightened at the approach of a General Election and let him down completely'.¹⁰² Bruce drew his own conclusions, in a letter to Casey, in November 1935: his efforts to educate Australian public opinion

⁹⁹ PRO: DO 35/281/9279A/287, Dalton to Crowe, 26 April 1934; for Bruce's speech at the Hotel Australia, SMH, 25 April 1934.

¹⁰⁰ SMH, 7, 24 and 25 April 1934.

¹⁰¹ SMH, 1 May 1934.

¹⁰² CUL: Baldwin Papers, 98/295-314, [memorandum], M. M[acdonald], January 1935.

'were not very successful, and the position was complicated by... a considerable lack of guts shown by the Government and its present bedfellows the Country Party to face up to the problems and recognize the issues involved'.¹⁰³

His attempt to induce the government to modify its interpretation of Article 10 met with even less success. He raised the issue at ^a meeting with Cabinet, but T.W. White, the Minister for Trade and Customs, opposed him and he failed to convince the government. On 30 May, after a conversation with Edwin Abbott, the Comptroller-General of Customs, Crutchley noted: 'He was somewhat circumstantial in giving me his opinion that Bruce had more or less returned [to England] empty... Little White apparently treats Bruce and his opinions with complete scorn and has been crowing lustily over having routed him in debate on Tariff matters'. Bruce's parting words to Abbott in Sydney had been ones of resignation: ' "Well the responsibility lies with our masters" '.¹⁰⁴

His failure to make much of an impression during his tour was equally obvious in its sequel. Following an election in September 1934, Lyons was compelled to bring the Country Party into the government, Page becoming Minister of Commerce. In July, Britain had regained the right to regulate the Dominions' meat imports and begun to allocate quarterly quotas. The coalition with the Country Party finally sunk any hopes Bruce might have had of Australia's participation in any scheme of voluntary regulation, and in December the government rejected the frozen beef quota it been allocated for the next quarter.¹⁰⁵ Bruce found it necessary to issue a statement denying that he had threatened to resign.¹⁰⁶ But his sense of isolation was clear enough from his comments to Casey that month: 'If I had had close contacts with Members of the Government I should probably have been writing this story as it

¹⁰³ Bruce to Casey, 9 November 1935, in Edwards, Bruce, p. 244.

¹⁰⁴ PRO: BT 11/221, extract, Crutchley to Whiskard, 30 May 1934; also, DO 35/182/6, Crutchley to Under-Secretary, Dominions Office, 30 May 1934.

¹⁰⁵ Drummond, Imperial Economic Policy, pp. 314-16.

¹⁰⁶ Times, 24 December 1934.

developed and it would have been in a number of Ministers' heads so that when a discussion came up on the question they would have had an informed view about it'.¹⁰⁷ No doubt, it was because of his fear of isolation that he had already warmly welcomed Gullett's return to the Ministry and urged him that it was 'essential that we should work together and there should be complete understanding between us'.¹⁰⁸ Gullett's reply that 'we are at variance with a good deal of expressed government policy', hardly inspired confidence;¹⁰⁹ nor did his place in the Ministry as Assistant Minister with responsibility for Trade Treaties, behind Page (Minister of Commerce) and White (Trade and Customs) indicate, as O'Brien implies, that he was in a position to wield much influence.¹¹⁰ These three Ministers were soon pulling in entirely different directions. In December 1934, White tabled a new tariff and was immediately assailed by the Australian Chamber of Manufactures. Crutchley reported:

The fact is that, as a member of the triumvirate of Ministers which now deals with trade treaties, he has had a very thin time. His uneasiness has only been relieved during the past few days by Dr Earle Page's somewhat threatening speech on United Kingdom import restrictions... This speech, by arousing the hostility of Sir Henry Gullett, has created a diversion and at the moment the committee of three is about as distracted and as mutually distrustful as a committee well could be.

Sir Henry Gullett's position would seem to be an impossible one.¹¹¹

There is, therefore, nothing to suggest in the allocation of the key portfolios in September 1934 that Bruce would be able to exercise greater influence over trade policy than during his visit to Australia earlier that year. Indeed, it was this failure rather than any imagined success in implementing an agreed policy which cemented

¹⁰⁷ AA: Bruce Papers, A1421/1, Bruce to Casey, 18 December 1934.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, M104/2, Bruce to Gullett, 12 October 1934.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, Gullett to Bruce, 29 October 1934.

¹¹⁰ cf. O'Brien, pp. 573-74.

¹¹¹ PRO: DO 35/278/9279/68, Crutchley to Under-Secretary, Dominions Office, 12 December 1934.

the coalition between the Country Party and the UAP. Page was at variance with Bruce over export quotas; White opposed him over tariff policy; Gullett was at odds with Page, White and 'a good deal of expressed government policy'. Indeed, reviewing the two and a half years after the Ottawa Conference, there is scant evidence for O'Brien's assertion that together Bruce and McDougall were responsible, almost single-handed, for formulating and implementing Australian trade policy. Bruce had put his weight behind influencing the government over two specific issues and failed. If he and McDougall really did possess 'the semblances of a government in exile', this surely must have been within his grasp.¹¹² In 1934, he had urged Australians 'to look the facts in the face', to recognise that Britain's primary concern 'was the question of how to restore her agriculture', and not to deceive 'themselves that they could get a free run on the British market for lamb, butter, and other products by additional [tariff] concessions'.¹¹³ Later, his mind turned to international co-operation as the best approach to solving the world's economic and political problems. It is misleading, therefore, to accuse him of either being the architect of 'an Empire policy that was essentially sterile from 1933 onwards' or being largely responsible of encouraging 'exaggerated expectations created by the Ottawa bonanza'.¹¹⁴

Setting aside assertions of this kind, however, it is possible to arrive at a more realistic, if qualified, estimate of Bruce's influence, according to which it is still significant, but exercised over particular issues at particular times. Indeed, in the context of the history of the High Commissionership, what is striking is not the limit to his influence, but the nature of his activities. As High Commissioner he dealt with every major political issue in Anglo-Australian relations: trade, finance, defence and foreign policy. He was thus more actively involved in government policy than any

¹¹² O'Brien, p. 575.

¹¹³ SMH, 24 April 1934.

¹¹⁴ O'Brien, pp. 578, 581.

previous High Commissioner, with perhaps the possible exception of Reid during the brief term of the Cook government in 1913-14, under an altogether different dispensation in Anglo-Australian relations. But Bruce aspired beyond this to influence the general tenor of the government's policy, and here he had failed because he had been opposed by an array of interests at the Federal and State level which it was not within the power of any individual to change.

He remained, however, a respected adviser and skilful negotiator. In 1938, Page noted during the abortive attempt to re-negotiate the Ottawa Agreement: 'Bruce has been a tremendous tower of strength and wisdom'.¹¹⁵ Menzies recalled: 'he was an unsurpassed High Commissioner... whose skill in close negotiation I have never seen excelled, or, for that matter, equalled'.¹¹⁶ But by 1935, Bruce had become reconciled to the limitations inherent in his position. He urged Menzies, who had recently entered the government, to lead the forthcoming meat negotiations in London, because as a Minister he was far better placed to obtain approval for the results.¹¹⁷ His desire to enlarge the market for Australia's primary products combined with his interest in international economic co-operation was also leading him to accept answers to the problems of international relations which were quite different to the traditional preoccupations of Australian policy. At the same time as Gullett was fathering trade diversion in Australia, he wrote to the economist L.F. Giblin: 'that the solution of Australia's problem of increased exports cannot be found in the British market... but must be based on an improvement in world trade and the finding of means to bring about increased consumption'. He did not believe that Britain was able to accept all Australia's products; neither did he think that it should exclude all non-empire products: 'I am certain we shall gain nothing for ourselves by a policy of

¹¹⁵ NLA: Page Papers, 1598/42, Page to Casey, 16 July 1938.

¹¹⁶ R.G. Menzies, *Afternoon Light* (London, 1967), p. 117.

¹¹⁷ NLA: MS 4936 (Sir Robert Menzies Papers), series 1, Bruce to Menzies, 7 March 1935.

Imperial nationalism and would probably only cause financial and economic ruin, and political repercussions of a disastrous kind'.¹¹⁸

(iv) The Search for Influence: Foreign Policy

Bruce's 'extraordinary position' and 'unique importance' in the conduct of Australia's external relations during the 1930s has already been described.¹¹⁹ Edwards suggests that Bruce 'was simultaneously filling three essentially separate and discrete roles':¹²⁰ he was the Australia's official representative in London, he was the initiator and formulator of Australian policy, and, finally, he played 'an independent part in the United Kingdom political process'.¹²¹ As we shall see with respect to the Abyssinian crisis, there is little to add here to Edward's conclusions about Bruce's influence. Edwards and other historians, however, tend to write about foreign policy as if it were the only significant political issue with which the Dominion High Commissioners had to deal, and that only with the coincidence of Bruce's appointment and the succession of international crises of the 1930s did the Australian High Commissionership assume importance in the conduct of Anglo-Australian relations. Thus Hudson suggests: 'Bruce was to show that the High Commissionership... could be much more than ornamental, but that was not yet apparent in 1935'.¹²² According to Edwards, no one could have predicted in 1933 that Bruce's term as High Commissioner would be any more significant than that of

¹¹⁸ AA: Bruce Papers, M104/4, Bruce to L.F. Giblin, 11 July 1936.

¹¹⁹ Edwards, 'The Rise and Fall of the High Commissioner'; Prime Ministers, pp. 109-16; quote from 'Rise and Fall', p. 40.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 40.

¹²¹ Ibid., pp. 40, 45-46, 49.

¹²² Hudson, Casey, p. 95.

his predecessors, 'as he had given few obvious signs of interest or ability in international politics'.¹²³

We have already seen, however, that, as political issues, trade and finance figured in Anglo-Australian relations as much as, if not more than, defence and foreign policy, and that, from the outset, the High Commissionership had never been purely ornamental. During the 1920s, there had been a deliberate effort to include the High Commissioners in imperial consultation; during the 1930s, the High Commissioners' scope widened yet again. With the onset of the Depression, and following the Ottawa Conference in particular, inter-imperial trade entered directly into the sphere of public policy in Britain and the Dominions, and cast new duties of negotiation, mediation and consultation upon the High Commissioners. Vincent Massey, the Canadian High Commissioner from 1935, recorded: 'Commercial policy and trade occupied a good deal of my attention'.¹²⁴ With the deterioration of the international situation, the necessity for consultation on foreign policy became urgent. Thus, the High Commissioners' preoccupations shifted with those of their governments. But there was no fundamental change in the High Commissionership itself. Edwards suggests that new forms of consultation, like the meetings of the High Commissioners with the Dominions Secretary and the attendance of the High Commissioners at the CID, only came into existence around 1936.¹²⁵ Yet, as we have seen, the precedents had already been created, or the procedures actually established, during the 1920s. Britain's concern with consultation was thus not new. What occurred around the mid-1930s was that, with the rapid succession of international crises, the machinery came to be operated with increasing frequency.

Bruce's interest in international politics could also hardly be described as unpredictable.¹²⁶ Edwards and Hudson have themselves shown that, as Prime

¹²³ Edwards, *Prime Ministers*, p. 110.

¹²⁴ Vincent Massey, *What's Past is Prologue* (Toronto, 1963), p. 243.

¹²⁵ Edwards, 'Rise and Fall', pp. 41, 42-43.

¹²⁶ Edwards, *Prime Ministers*, p. 110.

Minister, Bruce took an intelligent interest in international affairs and tried to improve Australia's capacity to understand and respond to them. During the Depression and after, he placed Australia's recovery in a global, as well as imperial, context and, in 1932-33, he was active in both London and Geneva in connection with disarmament and the Manchurian crisis.¹²⁷ On becoming High Commissioner, as we have already seen, he placed the foreign policy of the MacDonald government high amongst his priorities and, by December 1933, had become concerned about the new threat posed by Germany.¹²⁸

The question nevertheless remains how it was possible for Bruce to exert such a powerful influence over Australia's attitude to imperial foreign policy when he was unable to exercise a similar influence over trade. The answer is to be found in the different forces bearing upon these different areas of government activity, in his agreement with senior Ministers about Australia's place in the world, and above all in the fact that, in foreign policy, he was not going against the grain. Trade policy was largely driven by domestic forces and responded to circumstances which changed slowly, if at all. Its repercussions were felt, either through tariff policy or the success with which markets were opened, by large sections of the population and hence was the subject of representations to government and political parties by Chambers of Commerce, associations of manufacturers, producer organisations, financial institutions and trade unions. It concerned back-benchers as well as Ministers, State politics as well as federal; it was the product of self-interest and compromise, and the capacity of any one individual to influence any significant aspect was limited. By contrast, international events of the kind that might one day involve the Commonwealth in another war, unfolded far from Australia's shores. The underlying assumptions affecting the country's policy may, as in commercial matters, have been few and relatively invariable, but the domestic pressures bearing upon the government

¹²⁷ *Times*, 3 December 1931; Andrews, *Writing on the Wall*, pp. 84-99.

¹²⁸ Stirling, p. 16.

were limited, and the number of Ministers actually involved was few. More often than not they deferred to British judgement and prestige.¹²⁹ Australia had committed itself to participate in an imperial foreign policy whose focal point was London.¹³⁰ Crises occurred suddenly and ran unpredictable courses, creating situations which changed from day to day and required rapid responses. The conditions affecting foreign policy were thus quite different to those affecting trade.

In London, Bruce was the man on the spot, the man with the greatest information and, unlike his predecessors, the chief intermediary with the British government. His rising star as a diplomat of international repute, culminating in 1936 with his chairmanship of the League Council during the Rhineland crisis and his presidency of the Montreux conference, enhanced his prestige and authority. He was respected by Lyons, Page and Menzies, and personally close to Casey, the Ministers most actively concerned in foreign policy, and actually directly in touch with several of them for two or three months each year, during his own visits to Australia in 1934 and 1939 and the annual ministerial missions to London of 1935-38. Above all, he shared with them a common view of Australia's place in a British world and, particularly after Chamberlain became Prime Minister, a common endorsement of the objects of British foreign policy. This unanimity was the key to his apparent freedom in London.

¹²⁹ E.M. Andrews, Isolation and Appeasement in Australia (Canberra, 1970), pp. x, 5, 16-17, 22; Edwards, Prime Ministers, p. 24. The issue of Australian deference to British judgement is debated by Australian historians. My position here is substantially that of W.J. Hudson in an unpublished paper 'Australia and the Suez Crisis of 1956' given at the conference, 'From Munich to Vietnam: Australia's Diplomatic and Defence Relations with Britain and the United States', at the Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies on 13 January 1989. Hudson's paper is incorporated in Blind Loyalty (Carlton, 1989).

¹³⁰ For two of the major statements of Australian defence policy between the wars, setting the country firmly within a system of imperial defence, and thus identifying its external interests and security with that of Britain and the Empire, see Bruce's statement to Parliament on 27 March 1924 (Meaney, Australia and the World, doc. 181), and the speech of Pearce, the Minister of Defence, to the Millions Club in Sydney on 25 September 1933 (SMH, 26 September 1933). Defence policy was one of the principal issues of the 1937 election, and the government's stance was apparently endorsed with the re-election of the UAP (G. Fairbanks, 'Isolation vs Imperialism: The 1937 Elections', Politics, ii (1967), pp. 245-55). For a general treatment see Paul Hasluck, The Government and the People, 1939-41 (Canberra, 1952), pp. 47-55, 72-73.

As early as 1935, Menzies wrote to Chamberlain after attending the meetings of Commonwealth Ministers, expressing: 'what a privilege it has been to meet you and to have the opportunity of discussing matters with you. My wife and I leave England with nothing but admiration for your pre-eminent public services'.¹³¹ After the 1937 Imperial Conference, Whiskard, the British High Commissioner in Australia, reported of Lyons:

he is more than ever profoundly impressed with the quality of United Kingdom leadership during these critical times. He is, of course, conscious that it is difficult to disentangle a clear line of policy which has been inflexibly held to, but he is equally conscious of the fact that crisis after crisis has been met as it arose, that the imminent danger of each has been avoided, largely, if not entirely, in his opinion, by the action of the United Kingdom Government, and that the situation now is certainly not worse and almost certainly better than it was, say, a year ago. He was obviously greatly impressed with Mr Eden, and even more so with the Prime Minister.¹³²

In November 1938, Page wrote to Halifax after a recent mission to England:

We in Australia have noted with great pride and appreciation the magnificent work that Mr Chamberlain and yourself have been doing to try and maintain peace in Europe, and bring about better political and economic conditions throughout the world. We are behind you 100 per cent... and I would very much like to express to Mr Chamberlain my own personal appreciation of his efforts and success.¹³³

As Hudson and North observe, Bruce himself was not easily impressed 'by many of the big men of Westminster and Whitehall'.¹³⁴ In 1933, he told Latham that neither Simon, the Foreign Secretary, nor 'the British Government as a whole' had a 'consistent policy on any question of foreign affairs'.¹³⁵ But his support for Chamberlain was unqualified. In February 1938, he congratulated him on his

¹³¹ BUL: Chamberlain Papers, NC7/11/28/37, Menzies to Chamberlain, 25 July 1935.

¹³² PRO: Foreign Office; FO 954, Photocopies of Papers of Anthony Eden; item 4, ff. 267-68, Whiskard to Harding, 4 August 1937.

¹³³ PRO: FO 800/310/26-27, Page to Halifax, 1 November 1938.

¹³⁴ My Dear 'PM', p. xiv.

¹³⁵ NLA: Latham Papers, 52/334-36a, 9 March 1933.

leadership, and commended to Lyons his policy for 'a general appeasement in the International situation'.¹³⁶ Referring to the drift in British foreign policy 'for many years past', told Lyons: 'Had that drift continued I believe war was inevitable. Now there is hope that with a realistic and definite policy some solution may eventually be found'.

It is in this context of shared convictions, personal contact and mutual respect that Bruce's influence upon Australia's attitude to virtually every question of imperial policy can be placed. In large measure, it accounts for the deftness of his intervention during the abdication crisis in November 1936 and for his prominence throughout the period in formulating Australia's responses to a succession of international crises.¹³⁷ Abyssinia was the first such crisis. It will serve here as an example - with respect to foreign policy generally during the 1930s - of Bruce's modus operandi and standing, of the approach of the Australian government, and of the role of the High Commissioners.¹³⁸

With the emergence of the Italo-Abyssinian conflict in December 1934, the machinery for keeping the Dominions informed about foreign affairs, which had not stopped ticking over since the Chanak crisis, shifted into a higher gear. The Dominions Office sent a continuous stream of telegrams to the Dominion capitals, briefing them about the British appreciation of the situation, recent decisions and future moves.¹³⁹ As far as Australia was concerned, the Liaison Office^r now known as the External Affairs Officer and joined by an assistant in early 1936, also kept up a

¹³⁶ BUL: Chamberlain Papers: NC 7/11/31/40, Bruce to Chamberlain, 25 February 1938; copy in AA: Bruce Papers, M104/6/1; AA: Bruce Papers, M104/6/1, Bruce to Lyons, 23 February 1938.

¹³⁷ For the abdication crisis see, Middlemas and Barnes, pp. 990-92; Edwards, Bruce, pp. 249-55; for documents in the Bruce Papers see AA: M104/4, 'Conversations with the Prime Minister', 15 November 1936; Bruce to Baldwin, 16 November 1936; AA1970/559, box 2, bundle 1, cable, personal secret himself, Bruce to Baldwin, n.d.; the relevant files in the AA are: A461, V396/1/1; A3522, item 1, and CP 4/10, items 1-5; most of the material in these files is closed for 100 years.

¹³⁸ For an account of the crisis see, Frank Hardie, The Abyssinian Crisis (London, 1974).

¹³⁹ Found most conveniently in AA: A2908, I18, parts 1 and 2; J18, parts 1 and 2.

constant commentary on events.¹⁴⁰ Later, as he became increasingly occupied with foreign policy, Bruce himself spent much of his time working in the External Affairs Officers' small office in Whitehall Gardens.¹⁴¹ Finally, Bruce sent his own reports and appreciations, particularly of proceedings in Geneva, supplementing these with personal messages to Lyons.¹⁴²

In July 1935, the plenary meetings between the High Commissioners and British Ministers, which had not taken place since the Manchurian crisis, and not as a regular event since the late 1920s, were resumed.¹⁴³ Charles te Water, the South African representative, had proposed in March:

[regular] conversations at which the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs could convey the background and atmosphere of the problem and the Dominion High Commissioners could explain the probable reactions of their Governments to the line which the United Kingdom Government proposed to adopt. What was required was a system by which conversations of this kind could take place while the policy of the Government here was in the making.¹⁴⁴

There was no suggestion that the Dominion High Commissioners should participate in collective decision-making with the British Cabinet, but Mackenzie King, who returned to office in October 1935, again instructed Massey, the Canadian High Commissioner, not to participate. Malcolm MacDonald explained in vain to the Canadian Prime Minister in May 1936 that the meetings:

are intended to furnish information supplementary to that which is conveyed through official despatches and telegrams, and to afford an opportunity for the High Commissioners to obtain what I may call the "atmosphere" of a situation which it is difficult to give satisfactorily in official communications... The meetings are completely informal. There is no attempt to reach or record conclusions. The conversations are meant to be purely informative, and there is no question, nor could

¹⁴⁰ see eg. AA: A981, Abyssinia 24, part 1; Abyssinia 35 'Old'; Abyssinia 43 'Old'.

¹⁴¹ Stirling, p. 41.

¹⁴² eg. AA: A981, Abyssinia 43 'Old'.

¹⁴³ The minutes of these meetings are in, PRO: DO 114/66 and 68.

¹⁴⁴ PRO: CAB 21/493, minute, H.F. Batterbee, 25 March 1935.

there be, of any Dominion Government being committed to any line of policy by what takes place.¹⁴⁵

It would be wrong, therefore, to expect that the British Cabinet should necessarily have given much weight to the High Commissioners. When, after his first meeting with them, Samuel Hoare, the Foreign Secretary, told Thomas: 'All of them... seemed completely in accord with our line of policy and if they differed in any way from me, it was because they seemed to wish to go further and faster in support of the League than I myself', Harding in the Dominions Office cautioned:

Whatever views may have been expressed by the High Commissioners at the meeting - and the record does not suggest that any of them made any definite declarations of policy on behalf of their Governments - experience shows that it would not be wise to regard statements made at a meeting of this kind as necessarily expressing the considered view of the Dominion Governments.¹⁴⁶

These meetings were also not the only occasions on which the High Commissioners were consulted; Bruce in particular was reluctant to commit himself when a record was being kept.¹⁴⁷ Nevertheless, as Hoare's remarks suggest, the High Commissioner meetings did provide one sounding board for British Ministers throughout the crisis, even if they were most impressed when the High Commissioners confirmed their own views.

The Dominions themselves were largely passive, particularly during the early months of the dispute. On 21 August 1935, as the British Cabinet met in an atmosphere of crisis, Harding noted: 'So far we have heard very little officially but it is pretty clear that all of them are in full sympathy with the policy of upholding the League Covenant'.¹⁴⁸ For its part, the Australian government was happy to leave the issue to Britain, even if it did not fully understand its policy. At the meetings of

¹⁴⁵ PRO: DO 114/68, no. 2, MacDonald to Mackenzie King, 22 May 1936; cf. Massey, pp. 231-39

¹⁴⁶ PRO: DO 35/155/6, Hoare to Thomas, 17 August 1935; Harding to Secretary of State, 19 August 1935.

¹⁴⁷ See Bruce's comments at a meeting on 6 May 1936 in PRO: DO 114/68, no. 7.

¹⁴⁸ PRO: DO 35/155/6, minute, Harding to Secretary of State, 21 August 1935.

Commonwealth Prime Ministers in London in May 1935, Lyons confessed: 'he was not happy at the situation which had arisen as between Italy and Abyssinia, but here again he was content to leave matters in the hands of the Government of this country'.¹⁴⁹ In October, he told the American Consul-General in Canberra: 'As to the Italo-Abyssinian dispute... his government would definitely follow Great Britain'.¹⁵⁰ Finally, in June 1936, the new British High Commissioner reported:

I am pretty sure that the predominant feeling on the part of Ministers here is to Thank God they can leave decisions to the United Kingdom. The extent to which they were prepared to back the judgement of the United Kingdom was noticeable when first I came out here (it was, I think, strengthened rather than weakened by the fate of the Hoare-Laval proposals which made them feel that they could count on public feeling at home to act as long-stop if the Cabinet should by chance let a fast one on the leg-side slip past them) and I can detect no signs that recent events have altered their views.¹⁵¹

During the crisis itself, Australian Ministers showed little interest or alarm. The day after Italy invaded Abyssinia, Lyons called a special Cabinet, but Pearce, the Minister of External Affairs, and two other Ministers 'went off for the weekend as if nothing was happening'.¹⁵² After the publication of the Hoare-Laval proposals in December, the British representative reported apologetically that the Cabinet had dispersed for the summer vacation, 'and no Minister [is] now left in Canberra. Consequently I have been unable to gain any impression of their general attitude'.¹⁵³

But, as on many later occasions, while deferring to Britain's overall handling of foreign policy, when any detailed statement of its position was required, the Australian government was guided by its High Commissioner. And if the line that

¹⁴⁹ Meaney, Australia and the World, doc. 203.

¹⁵⁰ The Moffat Papers, Selections from the Diplomatic Journals of J.P. Moffat, 1919-43, Nancy Harrison Hooker (ed.), (Cambridge Mass, 1956), p. 128, 2 October 1935.

¹⁵¹ Durham University: Malcolm MacDonald Papers, 7/6/74-80, Whiskard to MacDonald, 18 June 1936.

¹⁵² Moffat diary, 4 October 1935, quoted in Edwards, Prime Ministers, p. 99.

¹⁵³ PRO: DO 114/67, no. 152, telegram, from the Representative in the Commonwealth, 16 December 1935.

Bruce took was at variance with that of the British government, no serious difficulty arose, because Australia was committed to supporting Britain in any event, and because Bruce himself convinced his government that sanctions would never be allowed to involve the Empire in war.

Bruce had been concerned with the dispute since January 1935, when it had first been considered by the League Council (of which Australia had become a member in September 1933). In May, he probably briefed Lyons while the Prime Minister was attending George V's silver jubilee. By July his own views were clearly defined. He did not believe that the League Covenant had envisaged that, in the event of one nation being declared an aggressor, 'some other nations, not concerned in the original quarrel, should, by the enforcement of economic or physical sanctions, expand or endanger the expansion of the area of the conflict'. But, this was the likely outcome should sanctions be imposed. Britain and France were the only great powers still in the League, and there appeared: 'to be no doubt but that Mussolini [was]... so far committed to his Abyssinian adventure that it would be impossible for him to pull back'. The League, therefore, should make 'a definite statement [that]... in view of the non-universality of the League, the provisions for sanctions have become inoperative', and limit itself to moral condemnation of Italy without taking any action. At the same time, Britain should reaffirm its adherence to the League and the rule of law in international affairs, and embark on a programme of rearmament, including the floating of a £200 million defence loan.¹⁵⁴

He used these arguments at meetings between Hoare and the High Commissioners on 29 July and, with the crisis deepening, on 21 August.¹⁵⁵ On 22 August, he communicated his views to Lyons and asked for instructions for the next meeting of the League Council on 4 September. He feared that, if economic sanctions were applied or the Suez canal was closed, Mussolini might attack Malta or France,

¹⁵⁴ AA: Bruce Papers, M104/3, undated memorandum, c. 20 August 1935.

¹⁵⁵ PRO: DO 114/66, nos 1 and 3.

and Germany then 'might... see fit to take a hand and the whole of Europe be put into a blaze'. He therefore advised: 'sanctions against Italy are impracticable and increase [the] danger'.¹⁵⁶ Lyons replied on 30 August:

it has been decided that the policy of the Commonwealth Government shall be one of close co-operation with the United Kingdom Government for continued efforts to settle the dispute by peaceful means, and for the maintenance of the principles of the League. You may make a declaration to this effect at Geneva. You may also inform the United Kingdom Government that [the] Commonwealth Government as at present informed considers [the] imposition of sanctions impracticable and possibly leading to general war... You can assure the British Government of our desire to co-operate with them and the other Dominions in any actions that will conduce to upholding the principles of the League, but most of all we desire to ensure the unity and safety of the Empire.¹⁵⁷

On 2 September, the External Affairs Officer passed a copy of these instructions on to the Foreign Office, which had no doubt about their inspiration: 'Mr Bruce has presumably made his own opinion prevail in the Commonwealth Cabinet (he regards the question from the businessman's point of view) - but if sanctions are found to be practical politics in any shape or form, there is no reason to anticipate difficulties from Australia'.¹⁵⁸

On 21 September, after Hoare's speech at the League, apparently pledging Britain's unequivocal support for the Covenant, Bruce told Lyons that, if Italy invaded Abyssinia and there was unanimous support for sanctions, Australia would have 'to come into line'. But he doubted that there would be unanimity. Nevertheless, as with all imperial issues, the overriding aim of Australian policy was to keep in step with Britain; it was, he emphasised: 'most essential that no suggestion should be conveyed by or [be] readable into any statement made in Australia of lack of co-operation or unity of view within [the] British Empire'. He suggested that Lyons should limit any

¹⁵⁶ AA: A981, Abyssinia 24, part 1, Bruce to Lyons, 22 August 1935.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Lyons to Bruce, 30 August 1935.

¹⁵⁸ PRO: FO 371/19130, J4358/1/1, minute, I.P. Garran, 5 September 1935; also memorandum, K. O[fficer], 2 September 1935.

statement in Parliament 'to reaffirmation of Australia's belief in the Covenant and [the] collective system and her determination to co-operate with Britain to find a solution of the present trouble and to maintain the principles of the League of Nations'.¹⁵⁹ The Prime Minister thus made a statement in Parliament on 23 September, largely reviewing the history of the dispute. His only indication of the government's attitude was to say that Bruce had been instructed: 'that the policy of the Commonwealth Government was one of close co-operation with the Government of the United Kingdom in continued efforts to settle the dispute by peaceful means and to maintain the principles of the League'. Otherwise, Lyons pointed out that no breach of the Covenant had yet taken place and therefore refused 'to announce in advance the course of action to be followed by the Commonwealth Government in contingencies the nature and the circumstances of which cannot at present be foreseen'. He concluded by echoing Bruce's speech at the Assembly on 11 September: 'While fully recognizing the gravity of the present situation, the Government holds very strongly that it ought not, either by word or by action, to embarrass those who are earnestly striving to effect a peaceful settlement'.¹⁶⁰

On 3 October, Italy invaded Abyssinia. Five days later, Bruce advised Lyons to give Parliament another 'historical review and [to] explain in some detail the story of the past month'. But he thought it 'imperative' that any statement 'should be limited to something down the following lines - Australia stands by her obligations under the Covenant and will co-operate in any collective and co-ordinated action for the maintenance of the principles of the Covenant and the restoration of peace'.¹⁶¹ Accordingly, on 9 October, Page reviewed the course of the crisis and declared that the government's policy was 'whole-hearted support of the British government in its

¹⁵⁹ AA: A981 Abyssinia 24, part 1, Bruce to Lyons, 21 September 1935.

¹⁶⁰ CPD, cxlvii, pp. 34-35. In Geneva, Bruce had declined to speak at length about the dispute, telling the Assembly that, as it had been referred to a Committee for consideration: 'words spoken here might add to the difficulties of those who are working unremittingly to find a solution', League of Nations, Official Journal, special supplement, no. 138, pp. 51-52.

¹⁶¹ AA: A2908, I18, part 1, Bruce to Lyons, 8 October 1935.

continued efforts to secure peace, and to maintain the principles of the League of Nations. There could be no clearer indication of policy than is given by those last words, because they have behind them the full knowledge and responsibility of the obligations underlying the Covenant of the League'.¹⁶² Earlier, Bruce had advised Lyons that, as Australia had pledged to support Britain in maintaining the Covenant, '[it] would appear our best course must be to continue that policy of recognising that in the event of any practical scheme for collective action being evolved Australia must co-operate'.¹⁶³ Page did not make any commitment to this effect, but Cabinet followed the progress of the crisis and, on 14 November, formed a sub-committee to deal with the application of sanctions.¹⁶⁴

In May 1936, Abyssinia's resistance crumbled. The question immediately arose whether sanctions should be continued. At meetings with British Ministers on 7 April and 8 May, Bruce became quite heated, insisting that sanctions should not be used as bargaining tokens to extract concessions from Italy. Page and Menzies, who were in London on a trade mission, also attended the meetings, but Bruce took the lead, telling Malcolm MacDonald, the Dominions Secretary, on 6 May:

He hated the thought of going to Geneva with any idea of continuing sanctions. He did not know the attitude of his Government but, with all deference to Dr Earle Page, he could not advise them to keep sanctions on. In his view it was better to say that sanctions had failed and try to reform the League for the future.¹⁶⁵

Page agreed, but Menzies supported the British line of persisting with sanctions. On 8 May, however, Page phoned Lyons, who 'had taken the view that the best thing to be done was to end sanctions as soon as possible'. Cabinet also considered a cable on the subject from Bruce and decided to seek further advice about 'the removal or

¹⁶² CPD, cxlvii, p. 548, 9 October 1935.

¹⁶³ AA: A981 Abyssinia 24, part 1, Bruce to Lyons, 8 October 1935.

¹⁶⁴ Cabinet considered the question on 16, 17, 22 and 25 October, AA: A2694/XM, vol. 14, part 3.

¹⁶⁵ PRO: DO 114/68, no. 7.

continuance of sanctions' from ^{him} and the British government.¹⁶⁶ On the following day, Bruce replied: 'My own view is that the removal of sanctions is the only practical course'.¹⁶⁷ This was sufficient. On 23 May, Cabinet: 'resolved to inform Messrs Page and Menzies, in order that they may inform Mr Bruce - that the Cabinet considers that no good purpose can be served by the continuation of sanctions against Italy'.¹⁶⁸

Whoever had been High Commissioner, the underlying principles of government policy - a common front with Britain and avoidance of war - would have been the same, and, if one substitutes the Rhineland, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland for Abyssinia, remained so throughout the decade.¹⁶⁹ At each point during the crisis, however, whenever the government had needed guidance, it had relied on Bruce.

Two further questions - concerning the extent to which Bruce was adequately informed about British policy, and the effectiveness of his representations to the British government - also arise with respect his role during the crisis. According to Hudson: 'In the period to the imposition of sanctions on Italy, the Australian government was as deceived about Britain's real intentions as the home [i.e. British] electorate... Canberra was not privy to Machiavellian ministerial thinking in London'.¹⁷⁰ Carlton concludes: 'at no point in the Abyssinian crisis was the opinion of the Dominions of decisive significance in determining British policy'.¹⁷¹ Both

¹⁶⁶ AA: A2694/XM, vol. 15, part 2, Cabinet minutes, 8 May 1936; PRO: DO 114/68, no. 8, Note of a meeting at the Foreign Office on 8 May 1936; AA: A981, Abyssinia 36, cable, via External Affairs Officer, 8 May 1936.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, Bruce to Lyons, 9 May 1936.

¹⁶⁸ AA: A2694/XM, vol. 15, part 2, Cabinet minutes, 23 May 1936.

¹⁶⁹ Although potentially conflicting, the first principle always took precedence. With respect to the Sudetenland, Lyons asserted simultaneously that: 'The Czechoslovakian problem is not a question on which war for the British Empire can justifiably be contemplated' and 'that a war involving Great Britain will, in fact, see the Commonwealth committed to active participation', *DAFP*, i, no. 242, Liesching to Dominions Secretary, 31 August 1938.

¹⁷⁰ Hudson, *League of Nations*, p. 80.

¹⁷¹ D. Carlton, 'The Dominions and British Foreign Policy in the Abyssinia Crisis', *JICH*, i (1972), p. 75.

assume a degree of forethought and coherence in British policy which did not exist. Hudson, in particular, appears to be wrong about the information available to Bruce and flowing to Canberra. As Australia's representative on the League Council, assuming the Presidency at its ninetieth session in January 1936, Bruce co-operated with the British over tactics at Geneva and was close to Eden throughout. On 21 August, the Dominions Office noted: 'Mr Bruce, as a member of the League Council is studying the situation closely, and is in constant touch with Mr Samuel Hoare and Mr Eden'.¹⁷²

But he was under no illusions about how well-informed the Dominions had been in the past. On 20 August, the day before Hoare's meeting with the High Commissioners, he was one of several senior figures who called at the Foreign Office, telling Eden:

that while we, the Dominions, were supposed to be consulted on all major issues of foreign policy, that rule was more often broken than observed. What happened in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred was that the UK Cabinet reached a conclusion, and the unfortunate Dominions had to accept it and be dragged at the heels of the decision, however fundamentally unwise they might consider it.¹⁷³

On 22 August, he reported to Lyons that Cabinet was divided and uncertain about its policy.¹⁷⁴ On 28 August, he saw Hoare and appears to have been fully apprised of the line Cabinet had finally decided to take. He assured the Prime Minister that Britain's aim at Geneva would be to have the question of sanctions referred to a committee 'whose findings would be against any attempt to impose sanctions unless previous conversations had disclosed that co-operation in applying sanctions would be so universal as to make them effective'. Hoare had been 'most anxious that you should appreciate that under no circumstances would Britain contemplate any isolated

¹⁷² PRO: DO 35/155/6, minute, Harding to Secretary of State, 21 August 1935.

¹⁷³ Edwards, Bruce, pp. 232-33; Times, 22 August 1935. The others to visit the Foreign Office on 20 and 21 August were George Lansbury, Austen Chamberlain, Lloyd George, Sir Herbert Samuel and Churchill, M. Cowling, The Impact of Hitler (Chicago, 1975/1977), p. 87.

¹⁷⁴ AA: A981, Abyssinia 24 part 1, Bruce to Lyons, 22 August 1935.

action against Italy'.¹⁷⁵ On 21 September, after Hoare's strong speech to the Assembly, he emphasised to Lyons that the Foreign Secretary had only committed the United Kingdom to 'participation in sanctions... if there is unanimity for such action and made it equally clear that such unanimity was essential'.¹⁷⁶ In the light of all this, it is difficult to agree with Hudson's comment that: 'In effect, Hoare was playing his government's electoral trick on the dominions'.¹⁷⁷

Together, these communications had the desired effect of reassuring the Australian government through all the unexpected twists and turns of British policy. On 2 October, the United States Consul-General noted of Lyons:

Despite all the telegrams [going] back and forth he did not know the ultimate plans of the British Government, but he did not expect that it would push matters to extremes or run the risk of general hostilities. I asked about the possibility of trying to close the Suez Canal, but he seemed reasonably satisfied that there was no probability of any sanction of such severity.¹⁷⁸

Shortly after, Page told Parliament: 'It can be regarded as definite... that nothing will be proposed which does not have the full support of the League members, or which may be likely to extend the area of hostilities or the number of participants'.¹⁷⁹

But if the importance of Bruce's advice and reports to the Australian government is clear, the High Commissioner's influence with the British government is more difficult to gauge. The harsh pragmatism of his approach to the crisis was unpalatable to Hoare, if only for political reasons, but his insistence that sanctions should not be permitted to widen the conflict and that the decision to apply them should be unanimous accorded with that of the Cabinet and was well-known to Hoare and Eden. In Geneva, he told Eden that, Hoare having taken the initiative, Britain

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, Bruce to Lyons, 28 August 1935; cf. Hardie, pp. 135-36.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, Bruce to Lyons, 21 September 1935.

¹⁷⁷ Hudson, *League of Nations*, p. 81.

¹⁷⁸ *Moffat Papers*, p. 128, diary, 2 October 1935.

¹⁷⁹ *CPD*, cxlvii, p. 550, 9 October 1935.

should not stall decisions about which sanctions to impose, but insist that League members should reaffirm their commitment to all their obligations under the Covenant, the point being: 'that Britain would have maintained her position consistently, and at the same time would not have committed herself to any action unless the decision of France [regarding sanctions]... was a satisfactory one to the British Government'. Eden was: 'very impressed that this was the only line to take' and cabled London 'at once asking them to authorise his adopting it'.¹⁸⁰ In December, at a meeting with the High Commissioners, Hoare specifically asked Bruce of all those present about his views regarding the desirability of postponing the imposition of oil sanctions while British discussions with France (which ultimately ended in the Hoare-Laval pact) still held out the possibility of peace terms being offered to Mussolini. Bruce agreed that: 'if there was a chance of peace being reached he would be in favour of postponing fixing a date for the application of the embargo'.¹⁸¹ Finally, although in May 1936, he failed to persuade Eden to drop sanctions immediately, the new Foreign Secretary admitted that his arguments 'were very strong',¹⁸² and soon changed his mind when others like Chamberlain took them up.

It would be inappropriate to expect that the only way a Dominion High Commissioner like Bruce could be said to have exercised any influence is by his having an immediate, personal and decisive impact upon a major question of British policy, or that this should be explicitly acknowledged in the sparse minutes of Cabinet discussions. As Baldwin's biographers suggest: 'Like all prolonged political decisions, those of British foreign policy during the Abyssinian episode depended not on a single individual nor on one moment in time, but on months of changing attitudes,

¹⁸⁰ AA: Bruce Papers, M104/3, Note of conversation with Eden, 17 October 1935; cf. FO 800/295/247-49, Eden to Hoare, 25 September 1935.

¹⁸¹ PRO: DO 114/66, no. 14, Note of a meeting at the Foreign Office, 5 December 1935. Following the Hoare-Laval pact, Bruce felt that Baldwin rather than Hoare, whom he 'regarded... as a good Foreign Secretary', should have resigned, Stirling, p. 46.

¹⁸² PRO: DO 114/68, no. 8, Note of a meeting at the Foreign Office, 8 May 1936.

pressures and the relative importance of Abyssinia in the whole spectrum of external relationships'.¹⁸³ To the extent that Bruce co-operated closely with the British Ministers concerned, that his assessment of the developing situation and the lines of action he proposed were ultimately the same as theirs, that he was aware of the underlying motivation of British policy (such as it was), and that his views were solicited, it is possible to say that he had some influence with the British government. Moreover, this was just as true of later episodes in British foreign policy - the acceleration of the air defence programme in 1938, Chamberlain's statement on foreign policy in March 1938, and the Czechoslovakian crisis.¹⁸⁴ It was reflected, despite Hankey's later impression to the contrary, in the access he had to Chamberlain and his close adviser, Sir Horace Wilson, and in Chamberlain's offer to him of the Chairmanship of the BBC in December 1937.¹⁸⁵ Finally, it was also reflected in the respect of the diplomatic community. In November 1937, during the Brussels conference on the Sino-Japanese war, The Times foreign correspondent Thomas Cadet confided to him his fears about the unsatisfactory progress of British rearmament and told him that he 'was the only person who had the necessary influence and power to make the British Government face up to the position'.¹⁸⁶ In November 1938, the Dutch Ambassador expressed his concern that Britain was allowing the initiative to pass to Germany and, as Bruce recorded: 'urged me very strongly to do everything I could to persuade them of the necessity for action'.¹⁸⁷

In the mid-1930s, Bruce's advocacy in Britain and at the League of the policy of economic appeasement may have had some bearing on Chamberlain's proposed

¹⁸³ Middlemas and Barnes, p. 898

¹⁸⁴ These are documented in AA: Bruce Papers, M104/5/1 and M104/6/1; DAFP, i; Stirling, Chapters 2 to 4.

¹⁸⁵ See n. 184 above; for Chamberlain's offer of the BBC, AA: Bruce Papers, M104/5/1, Conversation with Mr Chamberlain, 16 December 1937.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., Talk with Mr Cadet, n.d.

¹⁸⁷ AA: Bruce Papers, M104/6/1, Count John de Limburg-Stirum, 4 November 1938.

demarche of March 1938, involving a readjustment of colonial possessions in tropical Africa.¹⁸⁸ But his persistence, despite the deterioration of relations with Germany, damaged his reputation. On the eve of the war, Hankey suggested that Bruce might be brought into the Cabinet. Chamberlain confided, however, that the High Commissioner's views over the guarantee to Poland: 'had much reduced his confidence in Bruce - never, I gather, very high'.¹⁸⁹ It is a striking testimony to Bruce's role in the late 1930s, nevertheless, that Hankey had proposed him at all.

(v) Bruce and Australian Politics, 1932-1939

Bruce's standing in London was based in large measure on the considerable influence he retained with the government in Australia, which itself stemmed from a relationship with Lyons and his senior Ministers founded upon mutual regard and a shared view of Australia's place in the world. Bruce belonged to the same elite as these politicians, one in which the conventional distinction between Minister and civil servant broke down and its members were 'more concerned with policy-making and the exercise of power than with the possession of power in constitutional terms'.¹⁹⁰ During his term, Bruce subscribed to the ideal of a non-partisan High Commissionership, but his relationship with Australian politics during the 1930s was always ambivalent. He was concerned to establish that his post was ambassadorial,

¹⁸⁸ For Bruce, Chamberlain and economic appeasement see eg, PRO: FO 371/19933, C4757/99/18, Record of conversation with Mr Bruce, Gladwyn Jebb, 10 June 1936; 'Origins of the Hall Memorandum', Gladwyn Jebb, 25 June 1936; FO 371/21215, W6363/5/50, minute, Gladwyn Jebb, 17 March 1937; BUL: Chamberlain Papers, NC 7/11/31/40, Bruce to Chamberlain, 25 February 1938; NC 7/11/31/46, minute, H. W[ilson], 21 March 1938; NC 7/11/31/44, minutes, H. W[ilson], N. C[hamberlain], 12 March 1938; AA: Bruce Papers, M104/5/1; Keith Middlemas, The Diplomacy of Illusion (London, 1972), pp. 141-42.

¹⁸⁹ Stephen Roskill, Hankey: Man of Secrets, iii (London, 1974), p. 414, quoting, Hankey, Diary, 23 August 1939.

¹⁹⁰ Middlemas, p. 67. This became more obvious in 1940, when Casey and Latham were appointed the first Australian Ministers in Washington and Tokyo, Edwards, Prime Ministers, pp. 127-28, 130.

that appointments should be based on merit, and that the High Commissioner should be capable of serving both conservative and Labor governments. Yet he also furthered the political interests of the Lyons government and, in more subtle ways, minimised the potential for friction in Anglo-Australian relations so as to discourage any controversy about the value of the imperial connection. To these issues, we will finally turn.

Edwards suggests that Bruce's influence in London may have been based in part on the fact that he was regarded there as 'the "once and future Prime Minister" of Australia'.¹⁹¹ In fact, while never far from the calculations of would-be king-makers at home, Bruce maintained his position largely by abjuring active politics and thus representing no threat either to Lyons or Menzies, his most ambitious Minister.

Page, the leader of the Country Party, was the most persistent in seeking to bring about his return to Australian politics. Even after Bruce had resigned from Parliament in 1933, Page - possibly hoping that he might want to make a comeback after completing the conversions - tried to keep his seat open for him. In March 1934, a week after Bruce's arrival in Perth, he told the Country Party that he was prepared to resign his own seat in order to get Bruce back into Parliament.¹⁹² Undoubtedly, he was motivated by a respect for his ability dating from the coalition of the 1920s. More importantly, however, the Country Party was outside the government and Page feared that the UAP's tariff policy would jeopardise the Ottawa concessions for Australian products in the British market; it was imperative: 'that Britain, Australia's greatest market for agricultural products, should be fully and freely open to us'.¹⁹³ Bruce, he hoped, would make the government take a stricter view of its Ottawa obligations. He told his party in March 1934:

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 114-15.

¹⁹² AA: Bruce Papers, M104/2, Page to Bruce, 28 November 1933; NLA: Page Papers, 2577, undated memorandum by the Member for Cowper; Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 227.

¹⁹³ NLA: Page Papers, 2577, undated memorandum.

I am satisfied, (as I was when I urged Mr Bruce not to resign Flinders) that whether Mr Bruce remains an ordinary member on the floor of the House or joins the Government, he could, under the special circumstances with which Australia is faced, and with his special knowledge, so arouse public opinion as to force any government along the right road of action.¹⁹⁴

But the Country Party did not accept his offer, and Bruce's campaign for voluntary standstill agreements probably caused Page rapidly to change his mind. Nevertheless, in very different circumstances, after Lyons's death in April 1939, he again urged Bruce to return to the Prime Ministership.¹⁹⁵ Page genuinely believed - like Casey, Lyons himself, and some members of the UAP organisation - that Bruce was the best leader for the country; but this was largely inspired by the conviction that Menzies, who had resigned from the Ministry in March, certainly was not. Hasluck's conclusions are persuasive: 'Read in its political context', Page's actions 'appear less like a search for a national leader than an attempt by Page first to nominate the leader of the United Australia Party and, after that attempt failed, a move by Page to displace the leader which that party did elect'.¹⁹⁶

But Bruce was as adamant in 1939 as he had been in 1932, and was again in 1935, that he had no desire to be Prime Minister again.¹⁹⁷ Apart from Page, suggestions that he should return to politics - most persistently by Casey, Murdoch and Snow; most dramatically by the National Union in 1938 - continued throughout the decade.¹⁹⁸ Much of the interest in his future plans stemmed from his own uncertainty about how long he would continue as High Commissioner, which did not end until he accepted Lyons's offer of a second term in December 1937. But well

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ AA: Bruce Papers, M104/7/1, Page to Bruce, 12 April 1939. For extracts from this and related correspondence see, Page, Truant Surgeon, pp. 271-78, which should be compared with the Bruce Papers, M104/7/1.

¹⁹⁶ Hasluck, p. 113.

¹⁹⁷ For Bruce's views in 1935 see, Bruce to Casey, 9 November 1935 in Edwards, Bruce, pp. 242-44.

¹⁹⁸ eg. SMH, leader, 22 March 1934; Casey to Bruce, 12 October 1935, in Edwards, Bruce, pp. 241-42; AA: Bruce Papers, AA1970/559, box 2, bundle 1, conversation with Keith Murdoch, 11 August 1936; conversation with Sydney Snow, 4 September 1936; Edwards, Bruce, pp. 261-62.

before then, he told Casey that even if he retired from public life and settled in Australia, the pressure for him to return to politics would make him a disruptive element. He had therefore decided to remain in London, possibly taking a job in the City.¹⁹⁹ More positively, he unambiguously passed the mantle of leadership of Australian conservatism to Casey and Menzies. He told Casey in November 1935 that if Lyons continued as Prime Minister for the next two or three years: 'you and Menzies will have served a quite sufficient apprenticeship to take over the job when he lays it down'; theirs was 'the desirable succession'.²⁰⁰ He was even more candid with Menzies, writing to him in 1934, on the eve of his departure from Australia:

there is much I would have liked to have talked over with you and some angles of thought which one could have put in conversation but cannot write. However it is impossible so I can only send you this hurried line to wish you the best of luck and to tell you how greatly my journeyings to and fro have convinced me that there is a great part for you with your personality and ability to play in Australia.²⁰¹

In London, Bruce referred to Menzies as the next Prime Minister, and those in the know had few doubts that Menzies rather than Bruce would succeed Lyons.²⁰²

By 1935, then, Bruce had clearly made way for Menzies. But his withdrawal^a from active politics did not mean that he ceased to act politically. In 1934, he advised Cabinet about the most desirable date for that year's election, probably with a view to avoiding its embarrassment over Britain's agricultural policy.²⁰³ In 1937, he suggested to Lyons the general lines along which he should approach the next election.²⁰⁴ But his actions were political at a deeper level. With the Labor party in

¹⁹⁹ Bruce to Casey, 9 November 1935, in Edwards, Bruce, pp. 246-48; AA: Bruce Papers, M104/5/1, conversation with Andrew Williamson, 26 July 1937.

²⁰⁰ Bruce to Casey, 9 November 1935, in Edwards, Bruce, pp. 245-46.

²⁰¹ NLA: Menzies Papers, series 1, Bruce to Menzies, 1 May 1934.

²⁰² C.M.H. Clark, A History of Australia, vi (Carlton, 1987), p. 486, quoting Menzies Diary on 29 May 1935; PRO: CAB 21/386, Hankey to Sir A. Montgomery Massingberd, 31 January 1935; CUL: Baldwin Papers, 98/295-314, memorandum, M. M[acDonald], January 1935.

²⁰³ PRO: DO 35/182/6, Crutchley to Under-Secretary, Dominions Office, 30 May 1934.

²⁰⁴ AA: Bruce Papers, M104/5/1, Bruce to Lyons, 30 June and 9 July 1937.

Australia deeply critical of many aspects of the imperial connection, and apparently gaining strength year by year, one of his principal objects as High Commissioner was to minimise the possibility of friction over the two most important issues in Anglo-Australian relations, trade and imperial defence, and, in a threatening international climate, to avoid any questioning of the value of the imperial tie. He soon advocated the appointment of a member of the royal family as the next Governor-General, in succession to Isaac Isaacs,²⁰⁵ and more generally conducted himself with a constant eye to the political repercussions of the issues with which he dealt. His behaviour was political, therefore, in the sense that it was motivated by a conservative conception of Anglo-Australian relations which was directly opposed to the isolationism of Labor.

With respect to trade, given the general climate of protectionism, he maintained that (as he told Gullett in October 1934): '[the] British market is, and will continue to be, [the] vital one for all our exports and [the] only one for many of them'.²⁰⁶ During the life of the first Lyons government, with the UAP unable to command an outright majority in Parliament and Labor hostile to the tariff provisions of the Ottawa agreement, trade remained a particularly sensitive issue. Bruce's open advocacy of accommodation of Britain's agricultural policy, while probably condoned by Lyons, was thus a descent into the public arena unprecedented in any previous High Commissioner, and there was considerable truth in the accusation of the Labor Senator, J.V. MacDonald, in November 1936:

The present High Commissioner has conducted unsuccessful propaganda at various times in regard to the marketing of Australian products, and he has visited this country for that purpose. A public servant should not be permitted to direct a political campaign, as was done by Mr Bruce a couple of years ago, which is not to the best advantage of the people of Australia.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ NLA: Lyons Papers, 2/11, Bruce to Lyons, 27 April 1933.

²⁰⁶ AA: Bruce Papers, M104/2, Bruce to Gullett, 12 October 1934.

²⁰⁷ CPD, clii, p. 2362, 26 November 1936.

Bruce's activity in London was open to a similar charge. As we have seen, on 1 August 1933, the British government handed Bruce an aide memoire detailing the points on which it believed Australia was in breach of its Ottawa obligations. He undertook to provide his observations at the end of the summer.²⁰⁸ But later that month, Lyons cabled that Britain's restriction schemes were creating a politically impossible situation for him. Bruce, judging that the aide memoire would only make matters worse, decided not to inform him about it until after the October budget (in which some revenue duties were abolished) had been delivered.²⁰⁹ On 31 October, he again undertook to communicate with his government, but in November Crutchley reported that there was no evidence that he had done so.²¹⁰ In February 1934, he told Runciman, the President of the Board of Trade, that he would discuss the aide memoire during his visit to Australia, but, in May, Dalton, the Senior Trade Commissioner, complained:

the result has been completely nil. I have said before that Bruce is not to be relied on to pass on representations either correctly or even at all. Nor is his pleasant reception of views to be taken seriously. The present instance is a case in point, for as you will see, the man who really matters in it, viz. Abbott [the Comptroller of Customs], is of the opinion that in a sharp encounter Bruce not only gave nothing, but had an overwhelming victory; ergo no need to bother any more about it all.²¹¹

The motives for Bruce's behaviour are not obvious. He did, in fact, discuss the tariff during his visit to Australia, and even had he refused outright to pass on the United Kingdom's complaints, they would eventually have been communicated through the British representative in Canberra. Probably he had decided that delay

²⁰⁸ PRO: DO 114/51, no. 75, Aide-Memoire; no. 76, Harding to Crutchley, 3 August 1933.

²⁰⁹ AA: A2908, I15, Lyons to Bruce, 17 August 1933; PRO: DO 114/50, no. 88, Bruce to Thomas, 6 October 1933; Sawyer, 1929-1949, p. 59.

²¹⁰ PRO: DO 114/50, no. 98, note of meeting at the Board of Trade, 31 October 1933; no. 100, Representative of His Majesty's Government to Under-Secretary, Dominions Office, 8 November 1933.

²¹¹ PRO: DO 35/281/9279A/287, Dalton to Crowe, 5 May 1934; DO 35/313/9469c/7, minute, Walter Runciman, 15 February 1934.

was the best tactic, and that if Britain did protest, it should not be through him. During 1933, he did not wish to compound Lyons's political difficulties, explaining to Thomas, the Dominions Secretary: 'I refrained from taking up the points in the aide-memoire with the Government in Australia pending the presentation of the Budget statement... I felt it better to let questions be considered free from an atmosphere of criticism from here of Australia's efforts in implementing the Ottawa Agreements'.²¹² Later, Crutchley suggested that Britain's protests had been ignored because: 'whatever promises may have been made, or understandings conveyed, it is politically quite impossible for the Government to check the progress of secondary industries, much less to permit inroads upon them'.²¹³ Finally, Bruce may have also decided that the aide-memoire would not have helped his own efforts to induce Australia to co-operate with Britain's agricultural policy.

His approach to imperial defence was equally ambivalent. Throughout the decade, he remained convinced that Australia had no alternative but to look to Britain for its security. As late as November 1938, describing the possibility of war 'as a real and present one', he told Lyons: 'that whether Australia spent £20 million or £50 million she would not merely by her own efforts ensure her safety', and that it was unwise to plan on the basis that the United States was bound to enter a war. He told Casey that Australia 'will have to be dependent on Britain in any circumstances'.²¹⁴ From 1932, he did not conceal the weaknesses of Britain's defences in the Far East from the inner members of the government, but, with the Australian service chiefs disagreed about how best to allocate defence expenditure and the Labor Party asserting that Britain was either unwilling or unable to defend Australia, he was reluctant to raise officially the more fundamental question whether, even when

²¹² PRO: DO 114/50, no. 88, Bruce to Thomas, 6 October 1933.

²¹³ PRO: BT 11/221, Crutchley to Machtig, 18 December 1933.

²¹⁴ AA: Bruce Papers, M104/6/1, conversation with Prime Minister, Street and Casey, 24 November 1938.

rearmament had taken place, Britain would be prepared to send a battle fleet to the Far East.²¹⁵

The weaknesses of Britain's defences were clear to him from the outset of his High Commissionership. In 1933, he attended the meeting of the CID which considered the review of imperial defence by the Chiefs of Staff which exposed the precariousness of the situation, and added his own voice to the call for rearmament.²¹⁶ In 1935, he urged Britain to announce that it was embarking on a rearmament programme, which would include the flotation of a £200 million defence loan, as the corollary to any declaration that the League was unable to impose sanctions.²¹⁷ Thereafter, the pace and adequacy of Britain's rearmament, the counterpart to any pursuit of appeasement, became one of his constant preoccupations.²¹⁸

He was also clear about the implications of Britain's weaknesses, particularly the failure to make any real progress on the Singapore base, for Australia's security. He even doubted whether, with the base complete, Britain would be able to send a fleet to the region. He told the CID on 9 November 1933: 'It was difficult to see what could prevent Japan obtaining a complete mastery of the Pacific if she chose to go to war between now and that time that Singapore was completed. At the present moment he felt we were powerless in the Far East'.²¹⁹ Earlier, at a conference at the Admiralty to consider the replacement of the cruiser HMAS Brisbane, he had been more candid about his fears, observing:

²¹⁵ For the debate among the service chiefs see, McCarthy, pp. 58-62; for the ALP, Hasluck, pp. 20-30, 73-91.

²¹⁶ PRO: CAB 2/6, CID, 9 November 1933; also, CAB 2/5, CID, 6 April 1933.

²¹⁷ AA: Bruce Papers, M104/3, Undated Memorandum, c. 20 August 1935.

²¹⁸ eg. DAFP, i, no. 123, Bruce to Lyons, 16 December 1937; enclosure, note by Bruce of conversation with Chamberlain, 14 December 1937; Stirling, pp. 57-60.

²¹⁹ PRO: CAB 2/6, CID, 9 November 1933.

at present no British naval force could be sent to the Pacific. He also repeated that Australia might well have doubts whether even with Singapore completed such a force would certainly be sent in an emergency threatening the Commonwealth: there might be a popular cry in England against denuding our own coasts of naval defence, or a new Government might be unwilling to take such a step.²²⁰

But the 1936 British defence White Paper and the assurances given at the 1937 Imperial Conference appear to have allayed his fears, and he told Chamberlain in December 1937 that, as far as imperial defence was concerned 'the Navy was probably in as strong a position as it had ever been'.²²¹ But this proved to be but a temporary remission. Following the severe deterioration of the international situation in 1938, he again doubted Britain's capacity to defend Australia. During his visit to Australia in 1939, he told Cabinet: 'that in his opinion Great Britain will be unable to send capital ship forces to Singapore in [the] event of war with [the] Japanese while at war in Europe'.²²²

Yet Bruce had not been behindhand in communicating the facts of Australia's strategic position to the government. In 1933, he reported to Lyons his comments at the CID regarding Britain's powerlessness and 'the possibility of Germany and Japan coming together'.²²³ He refused, however, to send an Admiralty memorandum - asserting that the Australian plan for replacing the Brisbane would decrease the number of cruisers under direct Admiralty control - because it would create controversy about the value of imperial defence and raise the question whether, in the event of war, Britain 'would actually send a Naval force into the Pacific'; therefore: 'He suggested that if the Australian proposal had to be rejected, it should be rejected on technical grounds, and not on grounds of higher policy'.²²⁴ Yet he probably feared

²²⁰ PRO: CAB 21/397, note of a conference held at the Admiralty on 19 September 1933 (emphasis in original).

²²¹ DAFP, i, no. 123, enclosure, note by Bruce, 14 December 1937; for the 1937 Imperial Conference see nos 32, 35, 43 and 47.

²²² DAFP, ii, no. 37, Admiral Sir Ragnar Colvin to Admiral Sir Roger Backhouse, 14 March 1939; see also, no. 112, Record of Meeting held in United Kingdom Prime Minister's room, 28 June 1939.

²²³ AA: A981, Defence 290, Bruce to Lyons, 16 November 1933.

²²⁴ PRO: CAB 21/397, note of a conference at the Admiralty on 19 September 1933.

less a re-evaluation of Australia's defence policy than the support the Admiralty would inadvertently supply to those who wanted the country to pursue a more isolationist path. When Eyres-Monsell, the First Lord, asked him 'whether many people in Australia wished to give up the maintenance of a Navy', he 'replied in the negative, but said that partisans of the Australian Army and Air Force would be glad to see such a step taken'.²²⁵ The desire to avoid further controversy about the adequacy of imperial defence may have also inspired his advice to Lyons to avoid putting too much stress on defence during the 1937 election.²²⁶

Even without Bruce, the government had sufficient knowledge to draw its own conclusions. In 1935, Menzies attended the meeting of Dominion Prime Ministers at which Chamberlain declared that: 'it was... clear that this country [i.e. the United Kingdom] was not in a position to carry on war against Germany and Japan at the same time', and was present again in March 1936 when, referring to the Abyssinian crisis, the First Sea Lord told a meeting: 'that in the present circumstances it would not be possible for the Fleet to be sent to Singapore and to reach there in forty-two days, but present circumstances were quite exceptional, and we must assume that the conditions would improve'.²²⁷ Bruce himself emphasised Britain's weakness to try to get the Australian government to increase its own defence expenditure.²²⁸

Bruce, then, did not set out to mislead the Lyons government about the weakness of Britain's defences; yet, believing that Australia would have to rely on Britain in any event, he discouraged any discussion of the issue outside an inner circle of Ministers. Even amongst them, for much of the decade he did not raise the question

²²⁵ *Ibid.* On 25 September, Pearce, the Minister of Defence, made a speech affirming that Australian defence policy 'must... dovetail into the Imperial defence policy', *SMH*, 26 September 1933.

²²⁶ AA: Bruce Papers, M104/5/1, Bruce to Lyons, 9 July 1937.

²²⁷ PRO: CAB 32/125, Meetings of Commonwealth Prime Ministers, second meeting, 7 May 1935; Cabinet Office; CAB 53, Chiefs of Staff Committee; item 5, COS Sub-Committee, 31 March 1936.

²²⁸ eg. PRO: CAB 2/6, CID, 9 November 1933; AA: A981, Defence 290, Bruce to Lyons, 16 November 1933; Bruce Papers, A1421/4, Bruce to Casey, Bruce to Casey, 1 December 1937.

in such an acute form as to make them revise their policy. But the reasons for this were more than political. Hudson writes that Bruce and other conservative politicians avoided a breach with Britain: 'mainly because still they hankered for imperial unity in the belief... that its achievement promised most for a weak, isolated Australia'.²²⁹ The consequences of any admission that Britain was unable to defend Australia were also unacceptable. In a similar way to British politicians when confronted by the rise of Hitler: 'Hard-pressed men, faced with an intractable problem and the unthinkable risk of war, preferred to accept what suited their hopes'.²³⁰

* * * *

In December 1937, Bruce accepted the government's offer of a second five-year term to take effect in October 1938. Throughout his first term he had been uncertain about how long to continue as High Commissioner, originally envisaging that he would retire after completing the conversions. But conditions in the middle of the decade - 'the generally unsatisfactory International situation and the number of economic and financial questions of major importance to Australia which will have to be dealt with in the immediate future' - his diplomatic successes in 1936, and his financial position deterred him from resigning.²³¹ Yet, by July 1937, he had finally decided to retire 'as soon as practicable' and go to the City.²³² The sharply deteriorating international climate following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war,

²²⁹ Hudson, League of Nations, p. 111.

²³⁰ Middlemas, p. 95; cf. Robertson, '1930-39', p. 454. For the political motives behind the reluctance of conservative politicians to face facts see, McCarthy, p. 129.

²³¹ Bruce to Casey, 9 November 1935, in Edwards, Bruce, pp. 244-45; AA: Bruce Papers, M104/4, Bruce to Ormsby-Gore, 15 June 1936; AA: 1970/559, 2/1, conversation with Clive Baillieu, 31 July 1936.

²³² AA: Bruce Papers, M104/5/1, record of conversation with Andrew Williamson, 26 July 1937; also, record of conversation with Montagu Norman, 6 July 1937.

however, may have persuaded him to change his mind. Stirling, the External Affairs Officer, recalled:

I had never seen him looking so serious as now, in the first week of December 1937. He was, even more since the Brussels Conference [to discuss the Sino-Japanese war], deeply and increasingly concerned that the British Empire was now gravely confronted, in Europe, by Germany, and Italy, together, and soon might have Japan confronting it as well.²³³

In 1937, Bruce had also felt it necessary to stress that the High Commissionership was primarily a diplomatic post. He told Andrew Williamson, the Chairman of the English, Scottish and Australian Bank, with reference to the next Australian election and his own retirement:

if the Gov[ernmen]t was defeated I would be more awkwardly placed as I sh[ould] feel it my duty to point out to the new [Labor] Government that it would be desirable in the interests of Australia that I sh[ould] remain for a time so as to [remove] the impression that the H[igh] C[ommissionership] is a political and not a diplomatic appoint[ment] and also to save my successor from the impossible task of handling the next conversion. I also explained I sh[ould] feel obliged to press them not to change immediately as I would be better able to fight the attitude that the City of London would take up that they would have nothing to do with Australia because of the change of Gov[ernmen]t. This would amount to an attempt at financial dictatorship and would be extraordinarily dangerous.²³⁴

In certain respects, his attitude was inconsistent with role he had already played in Anglo-Australian relations. More importantly, however, he was concerned to obtain permanent recognition of the High Commissioner as a central figure in the conduct of Anglo-Australian relations, and to establish that the individual appointed should be both competent to fill this role and capable of retaining the confidence of any government, whether conservative or Labor.

By the end of the decade, the functions of the High Commissioners had indeed become clearly diplomatic. The incorporation of the Dominion representatives into

²³³ Stirling, pp. 57-58.

²³⁴ AA: Bruce Papers, M104/5/1, record of conversation with Andrew Williamson, 26 July 1937.

the machinery of imperial consultaion, started in the 1920s, was taken as far as it could politically go. In Australia's case, Bruce had become the principal channel of communication in Britain between the Commonwealth and the United Kingdom, a development paral^{le}led by the appointment in 1931 of an Official British Representative in Canberra, followed by a British High Commissioner in 1935.²³⁵

At a secondary level, Australia's representation had achieved a coherence and maturity which had been lacking in 1932. The Official Secretary (a position combined with that of Financial Adviser in 1930-33) began to take on duties, like the annual appearances before the Permanent Mandates Commission, previously undertaken by the High Commissioner. In 1936, the Official Secretaries of all the Dominion offices began to meet regularly and agreed that: 'each... would speak to [his] High Commissioner with a view to [the] High Commissioner seeking [for them the] same status and privileges as far as practicable as a Counsellor in a Foreign Embassy'. In 1942, the new position of Deputy High Commissioner was created.²³⁶ Bruce himself came to regard the two External Affairs Officers 'as his counsellor and first secretary respectively', and continued to work closely with McDougall, who remained his Economic Adviser.²³⁷

Stanley Melbourne Bruce remained High Commissioner until his retirement in August 1945, the longest-serving of all Australia's representatives in London. In 1947, he was raised to the peereage as Viscount Bruce of Melbourne. During the war, he worked closely with Menzies and, later, the Labor Prime Minister, John Curtin, from whom he accepted re-appointments in 1943 and 1944.²³⁸ From 1942, he

²³⁵ Cunneen, p. 184.

²³⁶ CPP (1932-34), iv, 'Report of the High Commissioner for the Year 1933', p. 913; 1934, p. 206; AA: A2910/T21, box 679, 412/5/55, notes of meeting of Official Secretaries, 23 November 1936; DAFP, ii, p. 507. The Official Secretaries during the 1930s were: J.R. Collins (Official Secretary and Financial Adviser, 1931-33); (Sir) John McLaren (1933-36), Stuart McFarlane (1936-38) and John Duncan (1938-42).

²³⁷ Stirling, p. 57.

²³⁸ AA: A461, A348/1/5, Bruce to Prime Minister, 29 September 1943, 29 August 1944.

represented Australia in the British War Cabinet and was the first Australian Minister to the Netherlands.²³⁹ According to Edwards, however, his influence waned, partly because of the different personalities with whom he dealt, partly because of his identification with the discredited policy of appeasement.²⁴⁰

But wider events in the history of Australia's external relations had altered the political and institutional context in which Australia House operated. In particular, the decision in 1939 to open the first Australian diplomatic missions outside the United Kingdom meant that the High Commissioner in London was no longer the principal official link between Australia and the outside world.²⁴¹ For all the limitations of imperial consultation, the 1930s had represented high points in Bruce's own career and in the history of the High Commissionership which were never regained.

²³⁹ Ibid., Press statement, March 1942; ADB, vii, p. 460.

²⁴⁰ Edwards, 'Rise and Fall', pp. 54-56.

²⁴¹ Keith Officer became the Australian Counsellor in the British embassy in Washington in May 1937; separate legations were established in the United States and Japan in 1940, Edwards, Prime Ministers, pp. 118-21, 124.

CONCLUSION

Despite a long delay, the Commonwealth government appointed a High Commissioner in London in 1909 because, following the example of Canada and New Zealand, such representation was regarded as appropriate to the needs and status of a Dominion. The appointment was linked to the expectation that greater consultation would soon be necessary in London as Australia played an increasing part in imperial defence, particularly through the establishment of its navy. Finally, a senior representative was also required to take charge of the administrative office which had been opened in 1906, and which it was hoped would soon acquire greater responsibilities through the transfer to the Commonwealth of State powers over immigration and borrowing.

Yet even before the establishment of the Australian High Commissionership, several factors existed which, through their interaction, would have a profound effect on its character and history. The first group were constitutional and institutional, and during the first twenty-years of the High Commissionership's existence subject to the greatest change. Most obviously, the High Commissioner could not be an ambassador in the literal sense. The Commonwealth of Australia was part of the British Empire and, as Skilling observed of a later period: 'the High Commissioner was, and is, not the representative of the head of the state, but merely of the... Government and is sent, not to a "foreign country", but to another part of the Commonwealth, under the same sovereign'.¹ Yet, in 1909, this also reflected the underlying political reality that the Imperial government controlled the foreign policy of the Empire, in which the Dominions were neither expected nor permitted to have any part. Furthermore, as Edwards has argued, the system of imperial consultation - based on the imperial conferences and the Governors-General - which did exist, and the tendency for issues

¹ Skilling, p. 84.

to require decision at the highest political level, gave a particularly prominent role to the Dominion Prime Ministers.²

The High Commissioner was thus sent to London not to play a part in an 'Australian' or even an imperial foreign policy, but to superintend those matters of specific Anglo-Australian interest, most obviously issues like trade, immigration and borrowing, but also including official business requiring contact with the Imperial government and, occasionally, direct representations on the Commonwealth's behalf. But even here his position was limited. The Colonial Office and the Governors-General were already responsible for the official conduct of Anglo-Australian relations and acted as the formal channel of communication. Moreover, the Australian High Commissioner had been preceded by the Agents-General of the six Australian colonies who, by virtue of the powers retained by the State governments, exercised wide administrative responsibilities, particularly with respect to immigration and borrowing. From the outset, the Commonwealth government was aware of the difficulties posed by the Agents-General. The absence of any clear role for the High Commissioner in the system of imperial consultation, however, was never defined as a separate issue, probably because it was secondary to the larger problem of obtaining consideration for Australian views with which Deakin and Hughes in particular grappled.

Yet despite these constraints, from Reid's inaugural term there was always scope for an Australian High Commissioner to play a diplomatic role within the imperial relationship. Much depended on his competence and relationship with the government, but it had been true of the Canadian High Commissioners, and was true again of Reid and his successors under both conservative and Labor administrations. The extent and significance of this role becomes clearer when one recognises that issues of trade and finance, rather than foreign relations, were the major external preoccupations of Australian governments and often had a serious bearing upon their

² Edwards, Prime Ministers, pp. 189-90.

political position at home. During the 1920s, the States also handed many of their powers over external economic affairs to the Federal government, bringing them firmly within the ambit of the High Commissioner. These were the issues which dominated the terms of Cook and Ryrie, and the first period of Bruce's High Commissionership. The value of the High Commissioner lay in his being attuned to the balance of domestic forces bearing on them, and in his independence both of the British government and of institutions like the Bank of England which sought to influence Australian policy.

But even as a vehicle for the conduct of inter-imperial relations, the High Commissionership underwent a constant evolution, reflecting in large measure the emergence and development of the British Commonwealth itself. With the outbreak of the First World War, the High Commissioners started to be emancipated from the control of the Colonial Office. During the 1920s, as far as the British government was concerned, with the Dominions beginning to play a more active part in international affairs, figures like Amery seeking to involve the Commonwealth in the formulation of foreign policy, and the re-ordering of institutional arrangements following the Balfour Declaration, the position of the High Commissioners in the system of imperial consultation became secure.

Yet even as this new dispensation took shape, Prime Ministers Hughes and Bruce remained central protagonists in the conduct of Anglo-Australian relations, while the Departments in Australia concerned with external policy, particularly the Department of External Affairs, were small and undeveloped.³ Nevertheless, by virtue of their attendance as leaders of Australian delegations at the Assemblies of the League of Nations in Geneva, and the efforts of individuals like Amery to involve them in consultation through the CID and occasional ministerial meetings, both of the Australian High Commissioners during the 1920s - Sir Joseph Cook and Sir Granville Ryrie - were placed in situations where, irrespective of their abilities, they both acted

³ cf. Cameron Hazlehurst, review of Edwards, *Prime Ministers*, in *HS*, xxii (1986), pp. 301-303.

ex officio as their government's spokesmen at the highest level and, potentially at least, were in a position to exercise some influence over Australian policy.

During the 1920s, through individuals like Casey, the Liaison Officer; McDougall, dealing with economic affairs; and J.R. Collins, the Financial Adviser, there also developed a remarkable degree of specialisation at the secondary level in Australia's London representation which reflected the multifaceted nature of Anglo-Australian relations and provided Bruce, as Prime Minister, with an extraordinary range of contacts through which to garner information and to deal with the British government, the City and the business world. But this secondary tier of representation had grown up in a piecemeal, unco-ordinated fashion. Casey and McDougall, in particular, were not originally principally intended to be support staff for the High Commissioner, but rather personal liaisons for the Prime Minister, and, while serving the High Commissioner to varying degrees, operated virtually independently of him. By the 1930s, however, with the opportunities available to the Dominions to consult with the British government, the relative sophistication of the Commonwealth government's representation, and the decline of the Agents-General, the Australian High Commissionership was an office whose time had come.

Bruce was an outstanding High Commissioner because of his personal competence, because he enjoyed the confidence of a stable government in Australia, and because of the opportunities open to the High Commissioners during the decade to make their mark. It is with this period that we also associate other gifted High Commissioners: Charles te Water of South Africa, Vincent Massey of Canada. In particular, the series of crises which overshadowed the 1930s necessitated frequent recourse to the High Commissioners by the British government for the purpose of exchanging views and information. Yet in many respects Bruce was realising the potential which had existed in his office since the Chanak crisis in 1922 and which, as Prime Minister, he had played a considerable part in enhancing. But it is also important to recognise the limits to his influence. It was greatest over questions of foreign policy, where he and the government agreed about Australia's fundamental

approach; weakest over issues like trade, where he came into conflict with powerful interests which the government also had to take into account. This was even truer of what influence he had with the British government. He was listened to with respect as a man who carried considerable weight in Australia and as a highly experienced diplomat, his ideas were occasionally taken up, but he was unable to affect the general line of its policy.

The Australian High Commissionership, therefore, had never primarily been a social and ceremonial office, and although its preoccupations had indeed at times been predominantly financial and commercial, it was because these had been the main concerns of the government.⁴ The office had had a clear institutional development, becoming a recognised part of the system of imperial consultation. Moreover, the High Commissioner had always been available to the Commonwealth government for the purpose of making representations to, or negotiating with, the imperial authorities. The extent to which the High Commissioner was used, however, depended above all on his competence and the quality of his relationship with the government, and this related to the second group of factors which had a bearing on the character of the Australian High Commissionership.

Before 1909, considerable interest had focussed on the particular individual who would become High Commissioner, and on whether Cabinet or Parliament should have the final say over the appointment. The government nevertheless faced a genuine difficulty in finding a suitable representative. It lacked a body of trained and experienced officials, whether diplomats or civil servants. Yet the nature of the High Commissionership was such that it could not be held by someone other than an individual of considerable personal standing. But Australia also did not have a tradition of public service outside the ranks of career politicians and civil servants. Senior politicians were thus the most obvious candidates for the office. The problem

⁴ cf. Edwards in DAFP, i, p. 546.

of finding an appropriately qualified High Commissioner, however, was one to which each Prime Minister seemed to return afresh.

The issue was complicated by the fact that the legislators of 1909, in accord with underlying assumptions in Australian political culture, refused to create a 'political' High Commissionership with the holder closely affiliated to the governing party, asserting that it imported alien values into Australian public life, undermined the stability of the office, and sacrificed national interest for the sake of partisan advantage. The appointment of a Resident Minister who would be based in London, while experimented with in 1932-33, was also ultimately rejected because of the political objections to delegating wide executive powers to a distant Minister and its incompatibility with the collective responsibility of Cabinet.

Australia would thus be represented by a High Commissioner, who, despite the likelihood that he had previously been a politician, would be expected to conduct himself in an entirely non-partisan manner. But this aspiration immediately conflicted with the pressure on Prime Ministers to make patronage appointments, or ones which, in any event, would be acceptable to their Cabinets. The result could be the worst of every world - High Commissioners who were unfitted by experience and out of their depth in London, and lacked the complete confidence of their political masters. As a consequence, Prime Ministers relied on individuals like Keith Murdoch, Casey and MacDougall to protect Australian interests and to act as personal emissaries. During 1919-21 and the Depression, however, vacuums occurred in Australia's representation which harmed the country's interests. In particular, the failure of Fisher's term and the neglect of Australia House at the end of the First World War did long term damage to the High Commissionership's reputation. Yet, as its architects had hoped, the office was a stable one and only under Fisher did a serious breakdown in relations with the government occur. Moreover, as we have seen, despite the shortcomings of its holders, the High Commissionership played an increasingly significant part in the conduct of Anglo-Australian relations.

As regards the first five High Commissioners, there is considerable truth in the conventional view that their appointments were exercises in political patronage. By its very nature, the High Commissionership was a position suitable for elder statesmen who wished to retire or saw no future for themselves in Australian politics. Yet even where the received wisdom is most apposite, some qualifications need to be added, while in the cases of Ryrie and Bruce other considerations were equally prominent.

The choices of Reid, Fisher and Cook, were exercises in patronage in three respects. These politicians were elder statesman who deserved well of their parties; their appointments were popular, serving to maintain party morale and loyalty; and, finally, it may have been convenient to some for them retire from politics. Probably not too much weight should be given to the last factor. Fisher, for example, could have easily deflected pressure upon himself to retire by extending Reid's term for more than a year. Two further points are relevant: the first three High Commissioners had actively sought the London job and each served as Prime Minister, thus bringing to their position a prestige and experience in public life which were regarded as appropriate. With Fisher's appointment, the decision to give the High Commissionership to a senior Labor Minister was also partly inspired by an alternative, albeit minority, view of the office which held that it was desirable that there should be a political link between the High Commissioner and the government. Fisher's personal motives in wanting to become High Commissioner, however, were uppermost and the experiment failed with the further deterioration of his health and the collapse of the Labor government.

Superficially, Ryrie's appointment could also be said to have been inspired by similar motives to those of his predecessors.⁵ Certainly, Ryrie had not been Bruce's first choice. His selection, nevertheless, represented a departure from previous appointments. He had served neither as Prime Minister nor even as a senior Minister; nor does he appear to have harboured any ambitions for the post. Finally, Bruce

⁵ ADB, xi, pp. 502-4

himself had clearly indicated his desire to break with tradition, and actually implemented, or consented to, changes in the High Commissioner's duties which, potentially at least, enormously increased their importance. Ryrie can thus be regarded as a transitional figure, although precisely what he was a transition to, and whether this would signify any permanent change, remained to be seen.

Finally, Bruce's appointment also fitted into the established pattern, being both the due reward of a former Prime Minister and a convenient means of removing a potential threat to the party leadership. In a sense, there was an obvious truth in this, but again the reality was more complex. There was probably a place for Bruce in Lyons's Cabinet had he wanted it. He also did not believe that Lyons was trying to get rid of him. Finally, at the beginning of the 1930s, there were several outstanding issues in Anglo-Australian relations, vitally affecting the government's interests, with which Bruce was peculiarly well-qualified to deal. As Dr A.C.D. Rivett, the Chief Executive of the CSIR told McDougall in November 1933: 'Probably most of us feel that the two or three sound fellows in Cabinet can carry the rest here for some time yet - while no one else can do the London work as well as S.M.B'.⁶

Yet politics did play a large part in Bruce's acceptance of the High Commissionership. In Australia, he was unpopular with the electorate and a possible focus for dissatisfaction with the existing leadership. In London, by distancing himself from party politics and posing no threat to Lyons and his heirs, he laid the foundations for his own influence as High Commissioner, which also rested on his continuing membership of the political elite which governed Australia throughout the decade and blurred the distinction between Minister and public servant. By striving to minimise friction in Anglo-Australian relations and to avoid any open questioning of the value of the imperial connection in Australia, Bruce was also the most 'political' of the High Commissioners. But he also abjured active politics, continuing the tradition

⁶ Quoted in Cumpston, p. 106.

of non-partisanship established by Reid, which culminated in his service under the Curtin Labor government during the war.

In conclusion, this thesis suggests further research in three areas. First, it is an obviously truncated study. Ideally, it would have also covered the second half of Bruce's term and the High Commissionership of his successor, the Labor Minister, Jack Beasley, who died in office in 1949. By so doing, it would have been possible to examine Bruce's relations with the wartime Labor government and to assess his long term impact on the High Commissionership. It would also have been possible to analyse the effects of the war on Anglo-Australian and Anglo-Dominion relations.

Secondly, the present study has shown that the history of the Australian High Commissionership reflected both the peculiarities of Australian political culture and the distinctive characteristics of Anglo-Australian relations. In a sense, the High Commissionership was what each Dominion chose to make of it. Further comparative study of these offices will throw light on the variability of Anglo-Dominion relations.

Finally, I have argued that the High Commissionership created in 1909 was an expression of certain values in Australian political culture which, put crudely, reflected a tension between British and North American assumptions about public office and profoundly affected its development. Nevertheless, the emphasis here has been on the nature of the High Commissioner's role and on his relations with the Australian government and the various authorities and institutions which were concerned in the conduct of Anglo-Australian relations. Yet, the study of the influence of political culture on the public offices and institutions created by the early Commonwealth still beckons and may afford further insight into the development of modern Australia.

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