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*The First Fateful Shot:
Port Phillip Bay, August 1914*

One Day Conference
9.30 am - 4.30 pm 2 August 2014
Queenscliff, Victoria

THE FIRST FATEFUL SHOT: PORT PHILLIP BAY, AUGUST 1914



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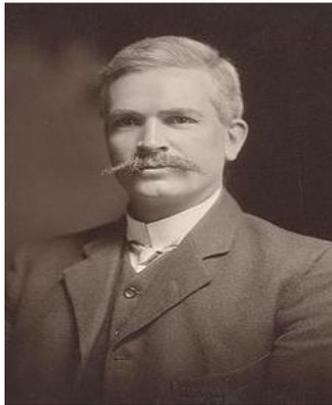
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Taking Australia to war ‘to our last man and our last shilling’

Dr David Day

Australians are familiar with Gallipoli and they’re increasingly familiar with some of the battles on the Western Front. But few are familiar with the circumstances of the war’s outbreak. If they know anything at all, they might know about the promise made by Labor leader Andrew Fisher to support Britain ‘to our last man and our last shilling’. But few will know when he made the promise and in what context. In fact, it was made not too far from here [Queenscliff], in a hall at Colac on 31 July, nearly a week before the war was declared.



Andrew Fisher

Why did Fisher, who had opposed the Boer War, promise to support Britain ‘to our last man and last shilling’? After all, it was a commitment that was open-ended and unlimited, and it was made at a time when people took their personal honour and national honour much more seriously than they do today. When such a commitment was made, and it was done by leaders of both political parties, many Australians felt that it committed them personally to the war. And some acted accordingly by joining up in the first rush of enthusiasm in late 1914.

The rush of enthusiasm for war had been building for several years. Ever since the Anglo-German naval scare of 1909, which sparked a fierce naval race between the two empires, there had been a growing expectation that they would one day be at war. As it happened, Fisher had been prime minister of a minority Labor government during that crisis, and he made the same unlimited expression of support for Britain as he would make in 1914.

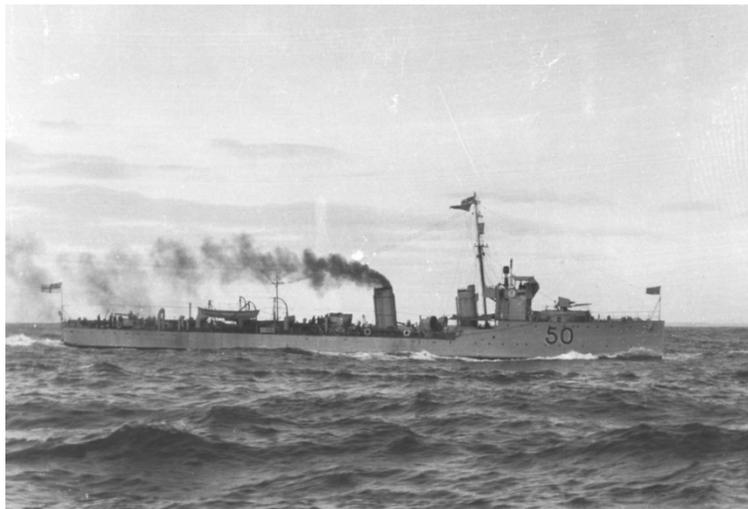
Although he supported the war against Germany, Fisher didn’t intend to be as open-ended and as absolute as the statement in 1914 made him appear to be. There was a very definite limit to his commitment on behalf of a future Labor government, because he was, and remained, a staunch opponent of conscription. What he would have liked to have said in July 1914 was that a government led by him would support Britain *to our last volunteer and to those shillings that we could afford to contribute*. But there was an election campaign in progress and Fisher’s campaign would suffer if he allowed himself to be accused of being stinting in his support for Britain’s cause.

With war in the offing, patriotism was paramount. Not that Fisher, or the Labor Party, was lacking in that respect. However, Labor’s patriotism was focussed more on the nation rather than on the empire of which it was a relatively minor and far-flung part. After leading a short-

lived minority government in 1908-09, he had led Labor to an historic election victory in 1910, which gave Australia its first majority government since federation and made Fisher the first leader of an avowedly socialist government in the world. The defence of the Australian continent was one of his government's principal objectives, and there was a sharp distinction between the defence policies of Fisher and his political opponents.

Whereas Labor's opponents wanted to rely on the might of the Royal Navy to defend Australia, and to meld Australia's defence efforts with those of the empire, Fisher favoured a more independent defence posture. Despite having a huge continent to defend with only a small population, Fisher and his colleagues believed that Australia could become relatively impregnable to invasion by arming and training its menfolk and by creating an Australian navy and air force that was designed for the local defence of Australian ports and coastline.

The Anglo-German naval crisis of 1909 brought those competing arguments to a head, with Australian imperialists calling for Fisher to contribute the cost of a dreadnought to Britain's navy, so that Britain could confront any German challenge in the North Sea. But that was unlikely to help defend Australia against a feared Japanese invasion. For that, argued Fisher, Australia was better served by building a small fleet of fast torpedo destroyers capable of attacking an invasion fleet. Indeed, Japan had proved the efficacy of such vessels when it had successfully deployed them against a powerful Russian fleet in 1905.



A River Class Destroyer - HMAS Huon

In Fisher's view, the best contribution that Australia could make to imperial defence was to relieve Britain of responsibility for the defence of Australia. And he believed that an Australian navy, and a million or more Australian men who had been trained to shoot, would provide a strong deterrent against invasion. Having established Labor's defence credentials, Fisher was not going to squander them when war threatened in Europe, an election was imminent in Australia and any doubt about Labor's patriotism could decide the outcome of the poll.

The day before Fisher's 'last man and last shilling' commitment, Liberal Prime Minister Joseph Cook had told a meeting in Ballarat that, in the event of war, Australia would not 'blink our obligations'. That was hardly the stuff of headlines, and was vague about how much Australia would contribute to a war in Europe. Once Fisher had made his speech in Colac, Cook was forced to respond.

Cook tried to go one better when he turned up in Colac himself on 1 August. With the outbreak of war just three days away, and presumably after reading Fisher's Colac statement in the morning newspaper, Cook now promised to go to war if Britain did. He was confident that 'we shall see a response as spontaneous and complete as at any time in our history'. Again, it fell short of Fisher's commitment, which had left no doubt at all about the extent of the Australian response to a European war. It was what most Australians wanted to hear.

While Fisher wanted to make a memorable statement that would leave voters in no doubt about the Labor party's attachment to empire, that was not the only motive for making such a statement. Fisher also wanted to ensure that he was not out-manoeuvred by the even more bellicose Labor MP, Billy Hughes, who lusted after the prime ministership and wanted to go even further than Fisher. He thought Australia should put aside its peacetime concerns and concentrate only on the coming war. He even urged that the election should be postponed, which was not something that Fisher was prepared to support.

Apart from these political considerations, Fisher also believed there was a strategic need to support Britain in the confident expectation that Britain would respond in kind in the event of Australia being attacked. For all his vision of a nation able to defend itself with a well-armed and well-trained militia and a suitably equipped navy, Australia was far from fulfilling that vision. Most importantly, its forces were not sufficiently strong to repel an invasion from Japan, the country that Fisher feared much more than Germany. As a result, Australia needed to keep the bonds of empire tight.

There were also other, deeper considerations that helped to shape the attitude of Fisher, and of most Australians, towards the coming war. Following the lamentable performance of the British army in the Boer War and the rise of Germany, there was a widespread feeling that the British race was in a state of decline and was being superseded by the rising races of Germany and Japan. As part of the British race, Australians were believed to be declining from the people who had occupied and physically transformed the face of the continent and were now becoming urbanised. Instead of being farmers and miners and road builders, they were becoming clerks and tellers and storemen.

These concerns about their masculinity saw some Australians embrace the teachings and methods of the Prussian body-builder, Eugene Sandow, whose Institutes of Physical Culture were established in Britain and spread to Australia. In 1911, the Antarctic explorer Douglas Mawson recruited one of the proponents of Sandow's methods to keep his men fit during the months that they would be confined to their hut at Commonwealth Bay. The prospect of war was welcomed as a chance for Australians to prove their masculinity on the battlefield. As Billy Hughes would later exult, the war saved Australia 'from physical and moral degeneracy and decay'.

The war also fulfilled a deeper, national need. Over the previous century and a quarter, Australians had progressively conquered and occupied the entire continent, taking the place from its indigenous peoples in a prolonged series of small-scale skirmishes and massacres. But there had been no climactic war, or even a large-scale battle, to confirm that conquest or to confirm Australia's subsequent, part-completed separation from Britain.

In the minds of many, this made for an unconvincing foundation story for a people who wanted to assert their incontestable right to the continent and who wanted to screen their convict origins from sight. It was believed that a proper foundation story required Australia to

fight a war in its own defence, so that the blood of its people could be mixed with the soil of the continent and thereby make it more securely theirs. In the absence of such a war, Australians would have to settle for a far-off conflict and make do with distant battlefields.

Those battles could be deployed as the first chapter in the story of the new Australian nation, which was little more than a decade old. It was common to talk of Australia as a child in Britain's imperial family, with Britain being the mother country. In the context of such terminology, war was seen as allowing a coming of age for the young dominion. Mawson had sought to do this with his Australasian Antarctic Expedition, showing the world what Australians could do. War was even better. Australia could prove its maturity fighting alongside, or against, the old nations of Europe. As Fisher would tell a meeting in November 1914, their contribution to the war was about making 'Australia's name in the world what it ought to be'.

For all of Fisher's apparent enthusiasm for the war, as expressed in his 'last man and last shilling' speech, and for all the wider public enthusiasm, it is important to remember that the public reaction spanned the gamut of emotions from enthusiastic support for the war all the way through to indifference and outright opposition. While Fisher sought to speak on behalf of Labor, there were a considerable number of party members who did not share his view of the war. Indeed, a widespread anti-war movement had gathered considerable support in the years immediately prior to the war.

One of its leaders was the young John Curtin, who would become prime minister during the Second World War. In 1914, he was secretary of the Timber Workers' Union in Victoria and a member of both the Labor Party and the more left-wing and internationally-minded Victorian Socialist Party. He also edited and largely wrote the union's newspaper, *The Timber Worker*, which was defiantly anti-war. When the British socialist Tom Mann was gaoled for publishing an article that called on soldiers to mutiny rather than fire on striking workers, Curtin re-printed the offending article in *The Timber Worker* in March 1914.

And he wanted workers in turn to refuse to fight in the forthcoming war. Along with many other trade union leaders, Curtin had signed up to the so-called Hardie-Vaillant resolution of the international socialist organisation, which called on the workers of the world to strike in the event of war being declared. In June 1914, Curtin convinced the Trades Hall Council in Melbourne to sign up to the resolution, declaring that it was 'the most effective way in preventing war between nations'.

The passing of the resolution just a few weeks before war was declared indicated the extent of anti-war feeling within the labour movement. An examination of the movement's main journals in the years immediately prior to the war reveals many anti-war articles and advertisements for anti-war meetings. They could see it coming, and they could rail against it, but they could not stop it. Yet Curtin and future Victorian premier, Jack Cain, were not swept up by the enthusiasm for war and continued to speak out on street corners to anyone who would listen. In fact, Cain was arrested three times during August 1914 for speaking against the war to crowds on street corners in Port Melbourne.

Many others were intimidated into silence, as the force of pro-war feeling made it a dangerous thing to express public opposition. Not only did they face the threat of arrest by police, but there was also the threat of violence and intimidation by newly-enlisted soldiers and other supporters of the war. The Labor Party certainly didn't want to be associated with

the anti-war movement for fear that it would destroy the party's chance of being elected to government. So it ensured that the door of the Trades Hall in Melbourne stayed firmly shut throughout the election campaign, which meant that no anti-war resolutions could be debated.

Daily newspapers in Melbourne also made it difficult by refusing to carry anti-war advertisements in their pages, while the newspapers and journals of the labour movement were subjected to military censorship. The sorts of fierce anti-war articles that had been commonly published in the pages of left-wing newspapers prior to the war were no longer permitted. These publications sometimes carried blank spaces amongst their columns, where expressions of opposition to the war might otherwise have appeared.

Any expressions of opposition were likely to be less than the pre-war strength of the anti-war movement might have suggested. The fact is that many members of the labour movement, who had formerly opposed war in theory, changed their minds once a war had actually been declared. Some were caught up by the war hysteria, or believed that the survival of Britain was worth any sacrifice that might be entailed. Even the Victorian Socialist Party organised functions to farewell members who had enlisted in the army.

As the radical Labor MP Maurice Blackburn later explained, most Labor supporters believed 'an Allied victory to be necessary' and regarded the war as 'a war against Imperialism, a war to bring liberation to the subject nationalities and to the working class of the German and Austrian Empires, a war to avenge the rape of Belgium'. Although Curtin was very much in the minority in 1914, when he continued to denounce war as 'the assassin's trade' and to blame the conflict on the 'mad fever for armaments', he would find an increasing number of Australians begin to share his opinions as the awful cost of the war became clear to them. By then, Fisher had resigned as prime minister and become High Commissioner in London, where he could see at first hand what his commitment of 'our last man and our last shilling' meant in practice.

When the gun at Queenscliff shot across the bows of the German freighter, the Pfaltz, in August 1914, it marked the first hostile shot of the war fired by the forces of the British Empire. It might have caused jubilation when the news reached Melbourne, but it would be just one of millions of shots fired in the coming conflagration. The cost would be much greater than Andrew Fisher ever imagined, as Australia tried to implement his open-ended commitment to support Britain. It is important to remember among the hoopla of war, and the current celebrations a century later, that there were already mixed feelings among Australians about the war when Fisher made that statement. Those feelings would harden and come to the surface in the great conscription battles of 1916-17.

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David Day is an Honorary Associate at La Trobe University. For further reading, see David Day, *Claiming a Continent*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 1996; David Day, *John Curtin*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 1999; David Day, *Andrew Fisher*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 2008; David Day, *Flaws in the Ice: In search of Douglas Mawson*, Scribe, Melbourne, 2013.