Chapter 2: Railways as Political Nursery

Representing the Railways

From the time the government took control of the railways and tramways in New South Wales, after the initial efforts by the Sydney Railway Company failed, there has been an uneasy relationship between political patronage, undue interference, contested arena between private and public, and expectations of political leaders who had their start in the railways.

There has been constant accusation from one side of political patronage and influence, of extravagances due to the same, through to often hostile animosity between the labour movement and its political leadership. The flow of political aspirants from the railways to parliament (especially in the first hundred years of the railways) is unparalleled in any other industry. Lucy Taksa points out that more than 25 parliamentarians came out of the Eveleigh workshops alone. Among these were the first Labor Premier, JST McGowan, and Premiers McKell and Cahill.

While this steady flow from the railway workplace to the parliament may have slowed in recent times, the railways are not without their patrons in contemporary parliaments. At the time of printing, some of the present day politicians sharing this legacy include; Premier Bob Carr, whose father was a railwayman, former Minister for Transport Services and currently Minister for Roads, Michael Costa, whose father was a guard on the railways, and he himself was a trainee engineman and AFULE official, Marie Andrews, who by all accounts administratively and in so many ways held the NSW Branch office of the Australian Railway Union (ARU) together for many years, is now Member for Peats.

Railway communities further strengthened the relationship of interdependence between workers and their political representatives. Whether it was areas like Redfern, with large numbers of its inhabitants working for the large workshops at Eveleigh and Clyde, or the stations around the area, or major railway junction towns such as Bathurst, Werris Creek, Junee and Albury, work on the railways was central to the life of the towns. Politicians would need the support of the railways workforce for electoral success, and in return these communities had an expectation that their patronage be reciprocated.

Rail workers and their unions quickly came to terms with organised politics, both because their collective bargaining involved them in lobbying, but also as Markey points out because of the concentrations of railway employees in particular electorates ‘became an important consideration in the formation of governments and the maintenance of parliamentary support in the 1880s’ This lead to individual workers and union officials pursuing legislative improvements to working conditions by entering parliament.

1Lucy Taksa, Workplace, Community, Mobilisation and Labour politics at the Eveleigh Railway Workshops, in Ray Markey (ed) Labour and Community: Historical Essays, University of Wollongong Press, 2001, p.55
The Town and Country Journal in 1902 made reference to the concerns relating to the ‘political patronage’ on the railways. “The railways are supposed to be under non-political management but, though it is true that political patronage has been abolished, there is a continual interference by the State in the management.”

In 1914, the Bulletin was bemoaning the corruption in the public service, and in particular, the railways: “In the wicked, muddled old days that decent citizens hoped were dead, but which are perhaps less dead than they should be, every branch of the public service in every State was a hunting ground for politicians. No man got a job in that stirring period unless some politician recommended him ……………….When at last a member had to shove over 1000 of his supporters into the railway service to make his seat reasonably secure?”

Half a century later, in 1952 – the Bulletin had the following criticism: “The transport systems …… have been run by the unions and for the sole benefit of the unions for long enough. The NSW State transport services and those in other states also are a close-up picture of the peril described by the Traffic Board as threatening all employment in Australia – that of an artificially high costs structure in industry artificially maintained.”

As Lucy Taksa argues, political lobbying and concepts of reciprocity are not something new on the railways. “On the contrary, it was associated with the advent of the railways in NSW and it established a tradition that was to shape the relationship between railway workers, the labour movement, railway administrators and various NSW governments.”

These expectations were often realistic, as parliamentarians and Labor governments endeavoured to meet the needs of the railway communities. As Hearn states, “unionists looked to parliamentarians to assume the burden of redirecting society, or at least of trying to solve a few pressing problems……..In the 1920s the Storey and Lang Labor governments did what they could, not always successfully, to help the ARU in the wake of the 1917 strike. In the 1940s both the Lang and McKell governments encouraged compulsory unionism on the railways, which boosted ARU membership.”

The relationship pre-dates even these interventions, and importantly began after the major industrial unrest of 1890, by the first ARTSA Secretary (who had joined the railways in the 1870s after emigrating from England, and worked through the labouring and shunting ranks, and was a Porter at Parramatta in 1886 when he helped form the ARTSA) being elected to the colonial parliament in 1891. This trend was given a significant boost with the first labor government under McGowan, who came out of Eveleigh, in fulfilling electoral promises to increase public employment and improve working conditions.

“In 1915, a Political Labor League deputation to the Railway Minister requested an amendment to the Railway Act to provide for a universal 8 hour day and a minimum wage of ten shillings per day for all employees over 21. A year later the Government passed the Eight Hours Act, which compelled the NSW Industrial Court to enforce a standard of 8 hours per day or 48 hours per week.”

After suffering at the hands of a conservative government during the 1917 strike, railworkers and their unions relied even more heavily on parliamentary support for social and industrial reform. Premier Storey responded to demands to reinstate the de-registered unions by passing the Trade Unions Registration Act, and pledged to undertake the electrification of the city underground and complete the underground railways. The re-instatement of the de-registered unions was pursued by the Lang government in 1925, who went further and attempted to outlaw the loyalist unions. In 1932, as Premier and Minister for Railways, Jack Lang also protected the industrial awards of railway workers.

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1 Cited in Gunn, Along Parallel Lines, op cit., p.244
2 Bulletin, 30 April 1914
3 Gunn, op.cit. p.411
4 Taksa, Workplace, Community, Mobilisation and Labour Politics at the Eveleigh Railway Workshops, op cit., p.53
6 Hearn, op.cit., p18
7 Taksa, Workplace, Community, Mobilisation and Labour Politics at the Eveleigh Railway Workshops, op cit., p.65
employees that had been under threat by the previous conservative government. He also abolished the card system introduced during and implemented after the 1917 strike.\footnote{Ibid., p.69; see also Patmore, The Origins of the National Union of Railwaymen, Labour History, No 43 1982, p44}

The relationship between rail workers, their unions and parliamentary representation remains complex, but is fascinating for its sheer volume, if nothing else. Commentators often explain the phenomenon as the result of large numbers of workers concentrated in industrial locations such as the main railway workshops. Somehow, the relationship seems more substantial than just weight of numbers. Other major industries (such as steel, mining, and waterfront) that also employed large numbers in concentration didn’t produce the same stream of representatives into parliament. This may be in part due to differences in political ideologies, with some of these industries pursuing a more ‘revolutionary’ politics of overthrowing the system that exploited their members, while the more conservative ranks of the railways favoured a parliamentary ‘socialism’ that could improve the welfare and well-being of their members.

It may also be explained in part by the spread and depth of the rail industry, with significant presence in many, rather than a few locations, and spread across metropolitan and rural areas, and in turn representing a broader cross-section of the general community. There may have been a legacy of caution from major industrial defeats such as those in 1890 and again in 1917, seeing parliament as another powerful string to the industrial and social reform bow, especially since it was the power of the parliament that brought about these defeats.

There were certainly famous examples of unionists who went through the 1917 strike, and later victimised for their involvement, moving to the parliament as a direct consequence. Engine driver and later Prime Minister, Ben Chifley claims that but for the strike he wouldn’t be in parliament. Another ‘lilywhite’ striker and union organiser at the Eveleigh workshops, was Joe Cahill, later to become Premier of NSW.

However, while some of these events may have stimulated individuals to pursue a parliamentary career, the extent of the political propagation in the railways can probably best be explained by the fact the railways have been for much of their history a near perfect microcosm of the broader community. The fact that the railways were present in all major metropolitan and regional areas, and most country towns, providing a full compliment of occupations and callings, was by no means insignificant. The additional fact that the railway system introduced during and implemented after the 1917 strike was inextricably a part of the social and economic fabric of these towns, and that these very centres of population were essential to electoral success, rendered the railways a magnet for political aspirants.

If we trace the population patterns, economic growth and state demographics, we see reflected in the railways (and often precipitated by the railways) the main social and economic trends of the state. The urbanisation, then suburbanisation around major cities was enabled by the extension of the rail network, with whole suburbs and communities also being populated by the workforce and families of those required to service this ‘new’ industry. The relationship with major rural communities, transport junctions and population centres also evolved around the railways and its relationships with other industries, economic developments and social services.

If we scrutinise major defining events in the history of NSW, whether it be wars, or industrial growth and related economic developments, the railways seem to have a major role to play. From the provision of Infrastructure, to transport of high volumes of goods or people, to munitions, and servicing armed services personnel, and employment across the state.

The railways provided the solid backbone of stable employment for large numbers of urban and rural workers, including indigenous, British-Australians, and the various waves of major influxes of immigrants from Europe and other parts of the world. It provided career opportunities and options for a range of women workers and youth seeking any variety of vocation. When we look at the NSW railways at any given point in its history, we see a very clear picture of the larger NSW community.

The railways workforce, from a union and broader political perspective, also had the distinct advantage over many other major industries in that it was by definition ‘mobile’ and able to readily access members and populations all over the state. Therefore, communications, organising and political propaganda could be transported with relative ease over the rail network. The role of the railways as a political nursery and in turn, an essential electoral constituency, is rooted in the place and influence of the railways in the community of 19th and 20th century New South Wales.

The counterside to these relationships and expectations of reciprocity are the deep disappointments and sense of betrayal when Labor politicians or governments are not...
perceived as ‘doing the right thing’ by railworkers. There seems to be always a sense of greater hurt and shock if a labor government does not deliver. The two sides to this relationship are a continuous tension that exist to the present between workers, their unions and the Labor movement. The relationship remains confused and ambiguous today, as workers face attacks on their working conditions by ‘friendly governments’ or fail to achieve a desired outcome through enterprise agreement negotiations. There is often not a sense of sharing the fortunes, restrictions and fate of Labor Governments in this notion of reciprocity.

This confusion manifests itself among some workers inexperienced in union or Labor party activity, and is often expressed in a genuine confusion between the role and status of the union in relation to government, some stating that they believe the union to be a government department, while others expect that the union has such a close and influential relationship with the Labor government that it should be able to simply ‘seek and receive’.

Anecdotally, I have had this discussion with a number of groups of railworkers through training programs and workshops, with similar responses. One such discussion occurred immediately after the union secured an agreement in relation to the 2000 Olympics, for wage increases and a special allowance during the Olympics. Most members of the group initially stated that the arrangement wasn’t good enough, and that somehow they had been let down by the union and the government, and should have received more. There will always be an expectation that workers should receive more, and more again from Labor governments, which doesn’t always reflect the true circumstances or current relationships between the union and Labor movements.

Regardless of how we might understand the origins and evolution of the political relationship between the railways, its continuation to the present day can be demonstrated through close co-operation and the dispensing of minor differences, whenever the relationship is called into play. One clear example of this in recent times, which is examined more closely later in this book, is that of the 2000 Olympics. The efforts made by railworkers to ensure that the transport platform, which was key to the event’s success, worked to the highest standard, is testimony of the ongoing commitment and loyalty to community, to the government, to the railway service and to professional pride. Despite political and industrial grievances prior to and since, the railways significantly dug deep and delivered for the government.

These sentiments are certainly echoed by the Premier, Bob Carr, who proudly recounts one worker approaching him and the Transport Minister on a tour to thank railworkers for the Olympic efforts, and exclaiming ‘We did it because we are labor!’

Premier Bob Carr, also provides some insight into the significance of the railways to the government and the state, in a broader sense, reminding us of the statement commonly used by former Premier Jack Lang, ‘As goes the rail revenues, there goes the State Budget’ to summarise the economic reality of the relationship. The Premier insists, that despite some of the negative press on the railways in the past few years, there remains a healthy reciprocity between the current Labor Government, the rail workforce and the unions.

“They know that things would be very different under a coalition government. They’ve got a Labor Government that isn’t going to treat them or their members rough the way a coalition government will ... we look after them, a coalition government would really rough them up, ... they act in their interests as a unionised workforce, they’re not running guerilla campaigns, they have cooperated with many reforms and improvements to the rail system.”

11Interview with Premier Bob Carr, April 2005
12Ibid
The political figures from the railways have left their mark for achievements and reforms at some of the most difficult times in the state and country’s history. Some of the most significant social reforms and infrastructure programs of the past century, have been delivered by engine drivers, boilermakers, machinists, fitters and the like. Apart from universal benefits such as housing, education and workers compensation, the legacies include such visionary contributions to the state’s wealth and identity through icons such as the Snowy Mountains Scheme, the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the delivery by the boilermaker Joe Cahill of the Sydney Opera House.

Regardless of other affiliations, support or criticism for particular political figures, it is undeniable that these people provided leadership and development to the state when it was most required. The correlation between such major initiatives and governance does not always sit comfortably with general perceptions of rail workers of these times. On the one hand, they can be described in the derogatory industrial and social language of ‘unskilled’ or ‘semi-skilled’ workers, and on one interpretation, simply the hand maidens of the industry that gave them their start and seats in parliament. On the other hand, they far exceeded these common perceptions, turning them on their head as they instigated social reforms which were not restricted to or primarily focused on the railways. In many ways they provided the ‘light on the hill’ that was promised and expected of them.

This raises an entirely new set of questions and inquiry. How did these people with minimal schooling, usually from impoverished backgrounds, and trained on the job in the workshop, the station or the line, acquire the necessary skills to not only gain entrance to the parliament, but to lead it and the state in the ways that they did? This is a phenomenon that we can’t adequately investigate here, but rather leave to others to ponder more deeply. What we can postulate in passing is that they shared a number of common characteristics. The lack of formal schooling and the failure of the education system to value genuine intelligence, was reflected in many of these political leaders seeking out their own self-educational opportunities, through evening studies, private reading, technical training, the railways institutes and workers education association, and some through university training.

They knew the plight of struggling working people first-hand. They came from the poor families, working class suburbs and the industrial workplace. They experienced the realities of the working poor, of sub-standard working conditions. They saw their workmates on the railways injured or killed on the job. To initiate housing programs, infrastructure programs, welfare schemes, industrial relations legislation and similar reforms were not cynical electoral exercises for many of these people, nor did they need to be lobbied on some of these issues – this is why they entered parliament. Their political belief was that working people could achieve economic and social improvements through such reforms. This was early Labor’s socialism.

A part answer to our question, then, is some of it didn’t need to be learned, it came as part and parcel of the lived experiences of the parliamentary representatives. As to how the political skills and savvy evolved, can also be partly answered by the structures, practices and cultures of the railway workplaces. These people were by and large unionists and activists in their workplaces, and honed their skills through branch meetings, union meetings, negotiations and conflicts on the shop floor and later, through the electoral processes themselves. These humble locations were the sites of learning and inspiration for many of the political leaders who graduated from the railways.
The early waves of industrial unrest in 1890, saw the beginning of parliamentary representation of railway workers, the first being William Schey, the former Parramatta Porter unionist and ARTSA Secretary. The railway workers would have their voice in first the colonial, then the State and Federal Parliaments. The first New South Wales Labor Premier, JST McGowan would also come out of the Eveleigh workshops, as would some two dozen other politicians.

**J.S.T. McGowan – Boilermaker and First Labor Premier**

JST McGowan was a Boilermaker and union activist at the Eveleigh Railway Workshops between 1875 – 1891. He helped to gain a closed shop for boilermakers, was on the Labour Council Executive, and President of 8 hour day committee. He became the only official Labor Electoral League (ALP) candidate for the seat of Redfern, which he won in 1891. In 1910 he became the first Labor Premier of New South Wales. McGowan continued to try to improve conditions on the railways as Premier.

By the time the first Labor Government won election in 1910, there were all manner of concerns about the progress and development of the railways and their management. In 1911 the Sydney Morning Herald ran an editorial on how the railways in NSW were lagging behind the rest of the world in terms of rate of progress. That progress of new lines was piecemeal and ad hoc. "We threaten to be found wanting in railway facilities when our great new irrigation area along the Murrumbidgee is ready for its owners. The middle-west is only touched at the circumference. The north-west is hardly any better served. The railway policy of the Government will be really the touchstone of whether Ministers are men of large and statesmanlike view, or whether they are like their predecessors .... mere plodders, content to add a few miles here and a few miles there to placate their supporters." 1

This was the taunt and the challenge being thrown down to the first NSW Labor Government. The claims by the Sydney Morning Herald were supported (and probably fuelled) by the report of the Royal Commission on decentralisation of railway transport in May, 1911. Many centres complained of the lack of facilities servicing their areas, and the difficulties in moving goods to markets.

There were of course significant population, geographical and financial resources differences between the European and American situations that were being compared. Despite the limitations and the criticisms, the railways at this time were returning excellent financial results and even after debt repayments, were operating at a healthy surplus. 2

The other significant development occurring was discussion of war and defence roles of the railways. The Chief Commissioner, Tom Johnson was coming under attack in Parliament and in the press for his ‘autocratic’ management of the railways. When McGowan spoke to the House on March 6, 1912, on a proposal to put the tramways under a separate commissioner, he stated that he would never agree to give any officer the power which the Chief Commissioner for Railways possessed, effectively making that officer a “Czar”, an autocrat over the Parliament and the Government. 3

New legislation introduced by the McGowan Government moved to take over certain powers and establish a Board consisting of two Ministers and the Chief Commissioner. There were also tensions between McGowan and the Chief Commissioner on the question of importing locomotives, rather than building them locally. The time spent at Eveleigh as boilermaker made the Premier determined that local workshops should build the locos.

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1 Sydney Morning Herald, 5/6/1911
2 See Gunn, op.cit., p 266
3 Daily Telegraph, 6 March, 1912
The Government also took a more direct interest in the wages, conditions and management of workers, to the outcry of ‘political interference’ by the media and Commissioner. The Daily Telegraph claimed that government ‘has so increased the working costs that not only have surpluses disappeared, but the trains in a boom season are now running at a loss, with freight piled up at the country stations which they are unable to carry.’

The figures, however, show that despite the increased working expenses of the railways, capital expenditure had justified itself. In the three years to 30 June 1913 capital had risen by 8 per cent while gross earnings had increased by 23 per cent, passenger traffic by 32 per cent and freight by 19 per cent.

The government was keen to increase the role of local workshops in building and supplying the locomotives for the railways, and rely less on overseas suppliers. “Eveleigh’s role as a builder, alongside that of the Clyde Company seemed to be assured. Government enterprise on one hand, private enterprise on the other – a pattern that was to recur in Australian commerce and industry. ….. Eveleigh had been expanded in 1907 when the first engine orders were received. By 1912 the workshops covered 26 hectares and employed 3270 people. In the first seven years the works completed 87 locomotives and aimed at a production of two per month.”

McGowan was affectionately referred to as ‘Honest’ Jim, and was described as having a ‘rock-like lack of brilliance’ as a politician, while compared with his deputy WA Holman who was apparently more wily and quick witted. Nonetheless, McGowan’s brief tenure saw an increase in public works, expansion of railway work, and improvements in railway workers conditions and wages. Whereas the more ‘politically astute’ Holman was to later abandon the Labor Party and oversee the 1917 strike on the railways.

The McGowan government also made early progress on state enterprises, housing for workers, and reforms in arbitration and income tax law. There was unrest and instability within the McGowan government, which didn’t make the job any easier. Holman was also becoming impatient to take over the Labor leadership, which McGowan had held for 18 years. Holman was exploring his options as either Labor leader or a post in London, or alternatively setting up a ‘centrist’ party with Bebeby until McGowan resigned the Premiership in 1913, and was succeeded by Holman.

There had also been tensions between state and federal Labor leaders around referenda to increase federal powers in trade, commerce labour and employment. In NSW McGowan and Holman opposed the referenda proposed by Fisher and Hughes at the national level, creating bitter debates and animosity.

McGowan followed Holman down the conscription debate path and was expelled from the Party, but was not prepared to support his enthusiasm. He and some of his previous Labor colleagues (Griffith and Meagher) stood as Independent Labor candidates in the 1917 elections. They all lost. McGowan, with one son killed in Gallipoli and two in the AIF, spent the election campaign in hospital with a broken leg.

His successor as member for Redfern (and also to become Premier), was a 25 year old boilermaker and popular boxer and footballer, Billy McKell. “McGowan had taught McKell at Sunday School and closely supervised his political development; their mutual admiration was unscarred by the Redfern contest, which lacked the vilification that was a feature of the election elsewhere.”

*Daily Telegraph, May 1913
*NSW Parliamentary Documents, September 1913
*David Burke, Man of Steam, Iron Horse Press, Sydney 1986, p 46
*McMullin, Light on the Hill, op.cit., p112

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William Holman – Labor Rat

Holman’s relationship with the railways was significant in two respects. First he presided as the ARTSA Secretary after William Schey stood down in 1892 until 1895. Second, and more significantly, as NSW Premier under his newly formed Nationalist Government (after defecting from the Labor Party) he oversaw the brutal defeat of the 1917 strike of rail and tramway workers, one of the country’s most bitter industrial disputes.

ARTSA was among the unions in the Industrial Section of the Labor Party that later moved to have Holman removed from the Party. So, Holman served as Labor Premier of NSW, from 1913 – 1916, then as United Australia Party from 1916 –1920.

William Holman had been born in England in 1871, arriving in Melbourne with his parents as a young cabinet-maker in 1888. After moving to Sydney he became very active in political affairs, joining the Single Tax League, the Australian Socialist League and the newly-formed Labor Electoral League (the young Labor Party) while still a teenager. He was also active in a number of trade unions, including the Australian Workers’ Union and the ARTSA. During the 1890s he became a proprietor of a number of Labor-friendly newspapers, and spent two months in jail on a trumped up charge of conspiracy to defraud. He also read for the Bar and served on the Central Executive of the party before being elected as MP for the seat of Grenfell in 1898.

Holman, who had been the driving force in the NSW Labor Party, bringing it to the election victory in 1910, took over from the more conciliatory McGowan in June 1913, when McGowan became sick and tired of the struggles of party politics and Government administration. Holman had been the outstanding debater in the Labor Party for many years, and his contribution to the party’s electoral success was fundamental.

If McGown was the heart of the parliamentary party, Holman was the brains, although he had a number of colleagues who contributed well in both those organic ways. In fact, the Ministerial teams of the McGown and Holman Governments were among the more talented such groups in 20th Century NSW politics – where the norm seemed to have been that talent in Cabinet was usually outweighed by mediocrity. Because Holman always insisted that he knew what needed to be done, and because the party needed a strong leader at the time to deal with the union movement, he also became somewhat of an autocrat in Caucus. Where McGown would conciliate, Holman confronted. Even when he became leader of the Nationalists his authoritarian style tended to alienate many on his own side, and he experienced splits in the Nationalist movement as well.
Holman was Premier in another divisive moment in the history of the ALP. The 1916 conference saw Holman at odds with many in the movement and the party, but on side with the Prime Minister, Billy Hughes, another key figure in organizing the ALP in the 1890s, and both now to become the most famous rats.

Holman was already deeply unpopular with many workers for failure to control prices and profiteering during the war, his attitude to pay and conditions of public servants, and his refusal to move to abolish the Legislative Council, as called for by ALP policy. The industrial wing was keen to censure the Premier, but this was avoided by various manoeuvres. However a key motion was passed at the conference that was to have huge ramifications. Arthur Rae's motion was:

“That this Conference solemnly pledges itself to oppose, by all lawful means, conscription of human life for military service abroad, and directs all Leagues and affiliated unions to take immediate steps to oppose all Labor members who vote for or otherwise support conscription, so as to make this matter the issue between the forces of democracy and despotism.”

In 1916 the Labor Executive withdrew its endorsement of Holman and other prominent conscriptionists. The issue was particularly bitter and divisive as many people had mixed feelings about the war, and many labor supporters had husbands and sons in the trenches. By their respective supporters, conscriptionists were viewed as murderers, and anti-conscriptionists as traitors.

Prime Minister Billy Hughes and his conscriptionist allies (such as Holman) used the vitriolic language, previously reserved for the enemies of the labour movement, against their own, including many of the unions. However, the anti-conscriptionists had a narrow victory at the referendum polls.

William Somerville, a respected Labor activist put it in these terms:

“You and your leader are responsible for blowing the Labor Party to shreds, you are the men who have destroyed the results of a quarter of a century of laborious building .... I tell you it is a cowardly, mean thing to attempt to associate men, who have worked with you in the past, and whose sense of honour is as keen as yours, with criminals and incendiaries simply because they dare to differ with you on an important question of public policy”.

Hughes formed a ‘National Labor Party’ Government following the referendum.

The NSW Labor Govt followed suit. Immediately the referendum results were known, Holman entered into negotiations with his anti-Labor foes with a view to forming a coalition government and postponing the next election. Holman remained Premier under this rag tag coalition and a Nationalist Government was sworn in and remained in office until 1920.

The pent up frustrations of the labour movement were unleashed in a ‘general strike’ in NSW, involving a dispute within the tramways and railways, and spreading to road transport miners and maritime workers.

The strategies employed by the NSW and federal Nationalist governments to smash the strike – recruitment of strikebreaking labour, arrest of strike leaders on charges of conspiracy – resembled the strategies adopted in the legendary Labor defeats of 1890 – 1891. Afterwards a legacy of bitterness when many strikers were refused re-employment, striking unions were de-registered and replaced with ‘bosses’ or tame unions. One of these was a Bathurst engine driver who was propelled into politics by ‘this harsh and oppressive treatment’.

After Holman lost his seat at the 1920 NSW election he became a senior figure in the background of conservative politics, returning briefly to parliamentary life as the United Australia Party Federal MP for Martin between 1931 and his death in 1934. The text of his memoirs was serialised after his death in The Bulletin (November 1934 to May 1935), under the title of “My Political Life”, although its content was restricted to discussion of the first NSW Labor Government of 1910-16. In many ways it is a frustrating document, passing over important political events such as the conscription crisis with an abbreviated treatment, while giving space to more trivial matters. It was written nearly twenty years after the period under discussion, and there is an element of self justification, as must be expected in any political memoir.
Ben Chifley – Train driver, Unionist, Prime Minister

Probably the most famous and best known public figure to come out of the New South Wales Railways was Joseph Benedict Chifley. Born in Bathurst in 1885, he was the son of a blacksmith. He held various jobs, mostly in the railways, working his way through the ranks before becoming an engine driver in 1914. In this essay, the focus is on Chifley’s activities primarily as they relate to the railways, the union and Labor movement. Thus, in some respects it doesn’t pay adequate tribute to the major reforms and initiatives of the Chifley government. To this extent, it is a distorted and discounted view of these major achievements, which have been well documented elsewhere.

Chifley in many ways personified the engine driver of his time, an arrogant imposing man interested in ‘betering himself’. He was an interesting mix of his background, his job and position, his sporting, religious and community interests and his union and political involvements. His public image has been well documented, from his times as a shop boy to engine driver to politician. His personal life has been protected to a large extent by the unspoken creed in Australian politics that doesn’t often approve of prying into the personal or private lives of public figures, especially politicians. Thus, we know about the public Ben Chifley, and are left wondering about some of the more personal aspects of the famous engine driver from Bathurst.

He also personalised the Catholic / Protestant divide and tensions that would dominate the ALP for many decades. On reaching the respectable and well-paid status of engine driver in 1914, Chifley (raised in a devout catholic family) defied a papal decree forbidding Catholics to marry outside the church, by marrying his wife Lizzie in a Presbyterian church, after she refused to convert to catholicism. This ‘mixed marriage’ carried its tensions politically and personally, with Chifley’s choice ‘frowned upon’ as he continued to attend catholic mass at St Philomena’s while his wife went to the local St Stephens Presbyterian Church.

The derision and scorn that the marriage caused in some quarters, appears to have kept Chifley defensively in it, even though Lizzie was mostly in very poor health, and their marriage was childless, and by some accounts ‘without usual marital intimacy’. ¹ There was one female companion, his secretary Phyllis Donnelly, sister of his childhood sweetheart and mistress, that seems to have remained loyal and close to Chifley from the 1920s, and was with him when he died in 1951. There was considerable gossip and rumour about Chifley’s relationship with both the Donnelly sisters.

Chifley did not go to high school. He had shown little academic promise, and his parents ‘who did not set much store by education’ were not prepared to make the financial sacrifices to provide him with more educational opportunity. As with many who had left school at an early age, Chifley sought to improve his formal education while on the railways and through private study. He was reportedly a keen reader, and attended classes “up to four nights a week run by the Workers Educational Association and by the Bathurst Technical School,” and later at the Railway Institute.² In his first year on the railways he attended a course and passed examinations that made him a member of the railways Ambulance Corps. Chifley later claimed that he attended “such classes for four nights a week for some 15 years, in the process ‘foregoing a great deal of ordinary life’” ³ in order to make good his educational deficiencies, and to assist in his promotion in the railways.

²Day, ibid, p.65
³Crisp, Ben Chifley, op.cit, p.6
Railwayman and Unionist

Chifley joined the railways in 1903 as a shop boy in the steam shed at the Bathurst rail yards and as some commentators describe, ‘quickly’ made his way through the very rigid hierarchy of the day. He rose through the ranks of cleaner, acting fireman, fireman, acting driver and was finally promoted to driver in 1914. The eleven years of cleaning, and as fireman may not have seemed ‘quick’ to Chifley.

From 1907, Chifley began to be actively involved in the union. Although ARTSA aspired to cover all railway workers, Chifley chose to join the sectional union that just covered the running staff – the NSW branch of the Federated Engine Drivers and Firemans Association of Australasia (FEDFAA, later the AFULE). Engine drivers were arrogant and elitist – the ‘aristocracy of the working class’.

Chifley and his colleagues held themselves aloof from the general unions such as the ARTSA, believing that their interests as enginemen were best served by a union specific to their calling. Working for the railways was not just a job, it was in ‘the service’ and different to other workers. “In nineteenth century Britain, engine drivers regarded themselves as the ‘silk-hatted aristocracy’ of the working class. …. In Australia, the local station master in a country town had a status equivalent to that of a bank manager”.

So, to have reached the rank of engine driver at the age of 27 placed Chifley in the well regarded citizens category around Bathurst, with a certain respectability and status. As a driver, Chifley would have been issued with a railway watch and chain to signify his status. He would have received instructions to treasure his railway watch, and to wear it proudly and avoid damaging it. “There was even a stipulation about how it should be worn “in the top vest pocket, the chain being passed through the arm hole, and carried under the vest to one of the button holes.”

“The relatively high pay of engine drivers had established them as the aristocrats of the working class. But they were more than that. With the rigid rules of the railway service, its strict hierarchy and its ban on drinking and smoking at work, there was no place in their ranks for hard-drinking, independent types. Railway workers were even expected to present an image of sobriety when they were off-duty. They represented the respectability of a working-class elite that aspired to emulate and even join the middle class.”

Years later, Chifley recalled his feelings of pride and power on the footplate, “at night with fourteen carriages behind me. There was always something fascinating about the eyes of 14 carriages looking at you round the bends. Sometimes I still have my hand on the throttle, I hear the blow of the steam and the hiss of the Westinghouse…..when you’re driving an engine you’ve got a lot of power. They may question your decision afterwards, but while you’re in charge of that engine, nobody can”.

The drivers didn’t want to get caught up in a range of industrial disputes, but to focus on pursuing their own interests. They avoided and rebuffed attempts at amalgamation, and on occasions there were hostilities for their lack of support for other rail workers struggles.

For example, in 1908 the FEDFAA refused to come out in support of the tramway workers who had gone on strike in the expectation of support from the engine drivers. “When the support did not eventuate, and the government cracked down hard on the strikers and brought in ‘volunteers’ to keep the trams running, the strike quickly collapsed” Secretary, Robert Hollis publicly boasted of their role in the strike, and that the drivers union was proud of the fact that it had never been on strike.

At a union branch meeting at the Masonic Hall in Bathurst in 1909, with the Liberal MLA for Bathurst, John Miller, and the railways minister in attendance, Hollis told the meeting that ‘the days of strikes were over’ and that they could reap greater benefits from arbitration.

General Strike of 1917

By 1917, there was growing discontent among working people of the burdens they were being asked to shoulder as the war continued. Wages were falling, prices on basic items such as food were increasing with high inflation, workloads had increased substantially as
workforce numbers decreased. In 1916, the coal miners gained wage increases and shorter hours, after a two month lock-out.

Railway workers in New South Wales had a growing list of grievances relating to their working conditions. Although they had an agreement with the railway commissioners not to strike during the war in return for their conditions being maintained, the commissioners under the newly appointed James Fraser had failed to keep their part of the bargain. Approximately 7,500 railway and tramway employees had enlisted in the army, most were not replaced. Workloads were continually increasing, as were the numbers of salaried staff and supervisors.11

To add a spark to an already volatile atmosphere, Commissioner Fraser introduced new measures to improve efficiency and cut costs, using Frederick Taylor’s ‘scientific management’ methods. The ignition for one of the most bitter disputes to occur on the railways, came with the introduction of a card system in the railway and tramway workshops at Eveleigh and Randwick. Within a week, Chifley and 300 of his colleagues in Bathurst had joined the strike, as had railway and tramway workers across the state.

As one Labor MP, and former member of the International Workers of the World (IWW), told a meeting of tramway workers in Sydney, the dispute was not about the card system, but a larger battle, that it was "a fight between Capital and labor, between the National Government and the Labor Party. The National Government was out to smash Unionism, but Unionism was causing the National Government great anxiety, and would probably smash the National Government".12

The Bathurst strikers were disciplined and well organised, and in an effort to maintain community support and to deflect propaganda and criticism that the strike was unpatriotic and would play into the hands of our ‘enemies’, they would assemble with picks and shovels and march to the sound of the district band, as they went off to work on the construction of Memory Drive. The strikers were provided with refreshments from local bakers, brewers and pubs as they went off and voluntarily worked on the road in memory of those who had been killed in the war.13

As the strike deepened, the government and the railway commissioners increased their threats to punish striking workers through loss of status, entitlements and even retaining their jobs. Despite these threats, the strikers stood firm and were joined by workers on the waterfront and the coalmines. Strikers were sacked, and increasing numbers of scabs were brought in to perform the work of the strikers.

Chifley was a prominent unionist in Bathurst, and at the centre of the strike organising in Bathurst. The government stepped up the pressure on the strikers by arresting some of the union leaders for sedition, the rail unions had been deregistered and replaced with ‘tame’ unions, and the strikers had been sacked and forced to re-apply for their jobs. Six weeks later the strike had been defeated.

After Chifley and the Bathurst strikers finally agreed to the humiliating conditions and apply for re-employment, only four were offered immediate work. Chifley and others appealed against their dismissals and were eventually re-employed at lower grades.

"Chifley’s secure world of work had been blown apart. His years of loyalty to the service, which had seen him promoted steadily through the ranks, did not protect him from now being reduced to the level of fireman. He would shovel coal for drivers who had helped to break the strike by crossing the union picket line. He would be fireman to younger men who had learnt their skills in his classes at the Railway Institute."14

The malice and vindictiveness showed towards the strikers continued for several years, with the ‘lilywhites’ being the first to be downgraded with any downturn or change in business. Chifley experienced this form of humiliation on a number of occasions, having his driver status and wage restored, only to be downgraded to the reduced status and wage of firemen on several occasions in the years after the strike.

11see Turner op. cit.; see also Day op. sit. Chapter 8, pp 124 ff
12National Advocate, 8 August 1917
13Day op. sit. p133
14Ibid p144
Chifley remained loyal to his now de-registered union, and remained active in Bathurst, as well as a delegate to Branch Council and Federal Council, maintaining that they would survive and again be a strong union representing enginemen.

Chifley and the other victimised ‘Lilywhites’ were fully reinstated to their previous positions and conditions in 1925 by the Lang Labor government (there was a touch of irony, particularly in relation to Chifley, because a bitter rivalry and ‘hatred’ had developed and persisted between the two in their ALP power jousts over the years)

“I should not be a member of this parliament today if some tolerance had been extended to the men who took part in the strike of 1917. All that that harsh and oppressive treatment did as far as I was concerned was to transform me, with the assistance of my colleagues, from an ordinary engine driver into the Prime Minister of this country”.15

After Chifley was elected to parliament in 1928, the records show that he continued to attend his AFULE monthly branch meetings in Bathurst on a regular basis between 1929 and 1931. He also continued to act as the branch auditor and to represent it on the NSW general committee and federal conferences. He also continued to give evidence for the union at award hearings.16

This continued commitment to his union, and work in his local branch, was not enough to prevent the NSW branch of the AFULE expelling Chifley in 1931 for not doing more to protect workers wage cuts and reductions to pensions, and not supporting the Lang proposals relating to foreign debt and the depression. At a time of economic depression, increased union radicalism, and bitter conflict between NSW Labor under Lang and the Federal Labor Party, many working people and Labor supporters were becoming disenchanted with their political leaders. Chifley was not prepared to readily give up his association with the AFULE, and unsuccessfully appealed the expulsion to the federal executive of the union.

A Higher Goal

Chifley stood for Macquarie five times between 1925 and 1934 and five more times between 1940 and 1951. He won in 1928 and 1929 and from 1940 onwards.

When he sought and narrowly gained pre-selection for what was considered by many as the ‘safe Labor’ seat of Macquarie in 1925, the real politics of this new arena came to visit him in Bathurst. Prime Minister Bruce launched the Nationalist campaign in Bathurst, with a stirring speech that concentrated on the issues of industrial strife and the need to control militant unionists. The propaganda of the campaign was more blunt, with electoral material asking voters which flag they wanted to vote for: “The Australian Flag or the Red Flag”? Thus, the Labor Party, and certainly the likes of Chifley, who had been publicly associated with the 1917 strike, were linked with industrial unrest, communism and anti-Australian behaviour.

In his first foray into electoral politics, Chifley found himself on the back-foot defending against the sorts of allegations such as those made by Bruce. He was forced to demonstrate his loyalty to his country and countrymen, and to law and order. Chifley addressed a largely mining audience in Lithgow during the election campaign, and received only a warm reception when he bombarded them with ‘hard facts’ and emphasised his commitment to law and order: “I stand entirely for the principles of arbitration. I stand for the application of common sense and sanity in all the problems of the day. I say frankly, that the policy of revolution, other than the revolution of thought, makes absolutely no appeal to me.”17 By all accounts his oratory lacked style or passion, it was mostly without emotion, and drawn not so much from the more flamboyant speakers of the Labor movement, but more from the ‘classroom of the Railway Institute where the audience was interested above all in the processes of engine-driving.”18

Chifley learned quickly from his unsuccessful attempt and electoral defeat in 1925. His approach was as a ‘facts and figures’ man, point out what the government was doing wrong through quoting the statistics. While his arguments were usually well researched and forcefully presented, it was the more emotive issues that would ultimately win the day, and his seat in parliament.

‘Protecting White Australia’

In the three years since his first attempt to win the seat of Macquarie, through his campaigning, union activities, Labor Party work, Chifley had fine-tuned his political skills. For all his experience, intelligence and political savvy, Chifley wore the badge of his contemporaries in

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15Crisp, Ben Chifley, op cit, p. 6
16Day, Chifley, op cit, p.257
17Bathurst Times, 17 October 1925, and National Advocate, 3 November 1925
relation to migrants proudly, and was not slow in tapping the more intolerant emotions of his constituents.

At several public meetings leading into the 1928 elections, having been unsuccessful in his 1925 attempt – he found the most enthusiastic applause coming not for all his fastidious facts and figures on what the government was doing, but their immigration policy. He used the racism amongst many working communities to his advantage.

He promised in a Bathurst meeting to stop the ‘stream of foreign workers’ who he claimed were being used ‘to break down the wages and conditions of Australian workmen’.19

The following day at Rockley, he further blantly appealed to and preyed on popular insecurity and racism to win the crowd, denouncing the ‘Czecho Slavs’. On 10 November the National Advocate called for people to vote for Chifley to protect white Australia. Criticising the Government on their policies towards returned soldiers, he stated that the policy was to give ‘preference to Dagoes – not heroes’. Referring to fights in Melbourne between ‘dagoes’ and Australians, as the forerunner of ‘what was likely to happen in the future unless the stream of these most undesirable immigrants was stemmed’. These were not one-offs for the future Prime Minister, but desperate and deliberate attempts to gain the popular support needed at the ballot box. His arguments were not limited to some economic point about unemployment and preserving jobs, they were aimed at a strong racist sentiment. At another meeting he argued that ‘Australia was supposed to be a white man’s country [sic], but Mr Bruce and his Government were fast making it hybrid...’20

Chifley wrapped up his campaign on the Friday night meeting on King’s Parade (Bathurst’s equivalent to the Domain for speeches and soapboxes), where he addressed a large crowd for two hours. Most of the ‘facts and figures’ he used on the audience were about the numbers of southern Europeans being allowed into the country, and how this was ‘diluting the British race’. There were ‘hundreds of Italians, Jugo-Slavians and Czecho-Slovakians working the Melbourne waterfronts while Australian men were left to walk the streets looking for work and ‘their wives and families are starving’.

His campaign strategy was successful this time, winning the seat of Macquarie by a comfortable majority. When Chifley entered the Federal Parliament, some of the main concerns were around industrial arbitration and restricting the benefits of federated unions such as the AFULE. Throughout the twenties there had been a series of bitter industrial disputes on the waterfront, coalmines and timber industry.

David Day, in his biography of Chifley, reflects on the irony of Chifley’s maiden speech to parliament being in defence of the coalminers, who twenty years later, would have the troops used against them by Prime Minister Chifley. “After a millionaire coal mine owner, John Brown, suggested that miners ‘will have to go back to the conditions of 1914’, Chifley declared that the miners were ‘more than justified in expressing violent resentment’ and refusing to discuss proposals that would have that effect. When the mine owners then proceeded to lock the miners out, Chifley pressed the government to use the provisions of the Crimes Act against the owners, and accusing the government of having ‘one law for the mine owners and a different law for miners.’ “21

**Time in the Wilderness**

The same discontent and disunity within Labor and the union movement that saw Chifley expelled from the AFULE, flowed over to his political standing in his electorate. Tony Lucchetti, former campaign manager for Chifley, was contesting the seat in 1931 as a Lang candidate.

The depression, disunity and splits in the Labor Party, was to take its toll at the polling booth. The Scullin labor government was soundly defeated at the polls, and while Chifley beat off his rival in Lucchetti, he was defeated by the conservative candidate in Macquarie, John Lawson.

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19National Advocate, 27 October, 1928
20Day, Chifley, op cit., p.231
When the Scullin Government fell in 1931, Lyons invited Chifley to leave the ALP and join the UAP (United Australia Party), offering him the Treasury portfolio. Chifley refused. He was to regain the seat of Macquarie for the Labor Party in 1940.

Between 1931 and 1940, Chifley was not a member of parliament, but rather concentrated on his political and community involvements, including his long-running battle with Jack Lang and his supporters in the NSW branch of the Labor Party. He was left without a job at the height of the depression and mass unemployment. He didn’t have a parliamentary pension, but did have his railways superannuation, his directorship on the National Advocate newspaper, and the administration of his father-in-laws’ considerable estate.

He was elected vice-president of the Bathurst federal branch of the party, and put his efforts towards ousting Lang. Finally, the Governor, Sir Phillip Game took the previously unprecedented step of sacking the Premier and installed a conservative caretaker government. For the next few years, Chifley’s time was spent mostly in Bathurst, with occasional trips to Sydney for federal Labor party matters. During this time he also became a councillor on Abercrombie Shire Council.

**Light on the Hill**

Chifley regained the seat of Macquarie in 1940. He was the Treasurer under John Curtin in 1941, and became Prime Minister of a caretaker government in 1945 after Curtin’s death. He was re-elected as Prime Minister in 1946. Curtin’s seat of Fremantle was taken up by a 27 year old school teacher, Kim Beazley, father of the current Member for Brand and Leader of the Opposition.

Chifley’s famous description of the goal of the labour movement as the “light on the hill” was made in a speech to the NSW state ALP conference in 1949, when he said: “We have a great objective – the light on the hill – which we aim to reach by working for the betterment of mankind not only here but anywhere we may give a helping hand”.

His contributions as a railways unionist and then in Parliament and as Prime Minister from 1945 –1949 certainly lived up to these ideals in many significant ways, and despite some failings, distinguish this railwayman as possibly the best and most popular Prime Minister in this country’s history.

**Major Achievements in Government**

Chifley pursued ‘the light on the hill’ through a series of significant reforms to essential services such as health, pensions and other social services, and housing. There were also several attempts to extend the powers of the Commonwealth in these areas, and in relation to corporations and banking.

His government supported a policy of full employment, increased social services, encouraged large scale immigration (despite his early election speeches on the matter), established the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme and Trans Australia Airlines, nationalised QANTAS, introduced the independent ABC news service. It also introduced Commonwealth and State Housing, Education and Hospital Agreements to provide funding support between Federal and State, and controversially (and seen by many of his supporters as the major blot on an otherwise impressive copy book) the use of troops in the Coal Strikes of 1949.

As former Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, said in an address in Bathurst in 1991, auspiced by the University of Western Sydney: “Chifley was the great innovator of his generation. He brought Australia up to date and laid the foundations for its future. We should regularly recall his domestic and international achievements and consistently build on them.”

He was frustrated in his attempts to nationalise banks, secure indigenous voting legislation, and standardised rail gauges – all major reforms that were left to later generations to implement. Some still haven’t been achieved.

In 1946 Chifley put a number of major constitutional changes to referendum. One of the three proposed changes, those relating to increased social services powers was successful. The Social Services powers – allowing the provision of maternity allowances, widow’s pensions, child endowment, unemployment, pharmaceutical, sickness and hospital benefits, medical and dental services, benefits to students and family allowances. Consequently, expenditure on social services had quadrupled since the Curtin government came to office in 1941.

The Commonwealth Bank was established as the central bank and prodded it to compete with the private banks.

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22 Day, Chifley, op cit., Pp 280 ff
23 Gough Whitlam, The Light on the Hill: Address to Seventh Annual Chifley Memorial Dinner, Bathurst, 7 September 1991, University of Western Sydney
Chifley was an active supporter of the United Nations, and his government ratified and became a signatory to a list of major conventions and agreements. The following quote by Sir Robert Jackson, head of the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration praises Chifley on his immigration and refugee efforts. “By May 1945 we had about eight and a half million displaced persons in Europe to look after. Of these, it was possible to return about six million to their home countries fairly quickly. However, no country in the world would accept any of the remaining two and a half millions. Finally, in desperation, I went to Australia and approached the Prime Minister, who was a very remarkable man, Ben Chifley. Thanks to his outstanding leadership, the Australain Government immediately accepted one hundred thousand of the displaced persons ….. Mr Chifley’s decisive action achieved three things – it gave new hope to hundreds of thousands of men, women and children; it provided Australia with great numbers of talented workers who have also made a unique contribution to the country’s culture, and set in place a chain reaction in other countries which broke the back of the problem”.25

**Railways**

As a railwayman, Chifley was frustrated on the implementation of standard rail gauges and other rail reforms that his government attempted. Uniformity of railway gauges was defeated at the referendum in 1944. In 1946 it was put to the State premiers, all except Queensland and Western Australia signed a draft agreement. In 1946 the Federal Parliament passed the Railway Standardization Agreement Act. Changes in State Governments paralysed the reforms, and in 1950 the Menzies Government repealed the Standardization act. It was left to the Whitlam Government 1972 –1975 to carry out the Standardization. Melbourne and South Australia remained the only capitals not linked by a standard gauge railway.

Whitlam says : “ No member or supporter of the Labor or Liberal parties can be proud of the performance of Labor and Liberal State Governments and Liberal and Labor Federal Governments with respect to the railways in the 1980s. A man of Chifley’s calibre as a railwayman and Treasurer would not have tolerated this last lost decade. His curiosity would have been aroused by an increase in railway losses…… He would have ascertained that between those financial years the NSW losses rose from $415.8 million to 1144.1 million….I take the liberty to doubt whether Chifley as Prime Minister would have supported a half measure like the National Rail Corporation. I make bold to believe that he would have offered to take over the Victorian and NSW non-metropolitan railway systems.”26

**Trade Unions and the Coal Strike of 1949**

The war years had seen both wage and price controls imposed by the Commonwealth government. Following the war, the increased costs of imports and a world increase in the price of essential items such as food, led to domestic price increases. This in turn, caused increasing unrest in the union movement that started to seek wage increases to compensate for rises in prices. The Chifley government opposed such wage claims; “given that the unions had a genuine grievance, this aroused widespread hostility amongst the trade union movement, and open defiance of the Labor Government by sections of the trade union movement.”27

There had also been a steady trend within the union movement in the late 1930s, towards left-wing and communist leadership. In the post-war years there was a surge of industrial activity, and the communist-led unions through their militancy had secured many advances in wages and conditions for their members. The communist-led unions were also prominent in organising strikes and were openly defiant of the Labor governments. These developments also heightened tensions within the labour movement itself. “Right wing groups became more openly anti-communist, and in many cases anti-leftist”28

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26Whitlam, ibid.,
28Ibid., p.97
Chifley's government was increasingly under industrial relations pressure from 1946/47 onwards. Regardless of the prevailing conspiracy theories and rhetoric of the time from within Labor, and the small but active group of anti-communist Catholics formed around B.A Santamaria (later to become known as the 'Movement') and from the likes of conservatives such as Menzies, the vast majority of trade unions remained under the control of conservative Labor men, with little or no sympathy to the communist-led unions.

Commentators often point to the introduction of compulsory unionism as a plank in Labor policy as a radical or even 'communist inspired' approach. Compulsory unionism in the NSW railways was introduced between the wars by the Lang Labor government. The push for compulsory unionism, however, was not only aimed at increasing union membership (and patronage of the ALP), but act as a block to apathy and enabling unions to be taken over and controlled by communists. Thus, compulsory unionism was used as an anti-communist strategy by state and federal Labor governments.

Since Chifley assumed office, a number of key unions had become communist-controlled and strike action was being used freely as an industrial weapon. Chifley believed that communist union leadership would have to be overthrown by organised union members themselves. In 1946, he stated that "As I see it, the appropriate course of action for those workers who are opposed to Communism is to accept responsibility in their unions and ensure that the will of the real unionists prevails."

Earlier in his political career, he had often denounced communism, and restated his loyalty to Labor and 'law and order'. During his battles with the NSW Lang faction of Labor, he was reported as stating that communism was 'one of the most evil forces that had ever crept into the life of Australia', and that it 'preached nothing but materialism and completely neglected the spiritual side of our nation's existence'.

The tensions between the union movement and the Labor movement reached a peak in 1949 with the outbreak of the general coal strike in June 1949. The dispute was ignited by the miner's claims for a three week annual leave grant, and for a thirty five hour week in the mining industry.

The dispute was under arbitration in NSW when the strike action was taken. This level of militancy and defiance of the 'rule of law' offended Chifley’s long-held approach to industrial arbitration as the most effective means of achieving a fair outcome. Chifley, and McKell’s government in New South Wales had enacted complementary legislation that established a Coal Industry Tribunal and Joint Coal Board, which they thought would regulate and supervise the industry, and constructively resolve any grievances or disputes. Hence, they believed that the coal strike was unnecessary and communist-inspired mischief-making.

In an address to the nation on 3 July 1949, Prime Minister Chifley put his case. "This matter can be settled only by the proper arbitral tribunal – that is, the Coal Industry Tribunal – and not in any other way. ... It has been suggested that this stoppage has been planned by a Communist section of the miners' officials for some months. I hesitate to believe that any citizen could be so callous as to plan deliberately for the holding up of the life of the community and the imposition of the intolerable hardships and deprivation of amenities that this stoppage creates".

The effect of the strike was enormous, in 1949 all the railways and most the electricity generation depended on coal. Being mid-winter, the discomforts were felt by all. Chifley introduced a series of emergency measures to end the strike, freezing the mining union's funds, legislation making donations to union strike funds illegal, and arresting the union leaders. Lance Sharkey, the Communist Party Secretary had been tried and jailed for sedition. The Ross brothers (Edgar and his former ARU Secretary brother) were publicly on opposite sides of the propaganda spin in this debate. Edgar Ross was committed to the Communist party and the strike, while Loyd Ross, who had since left the ARU and the Communist Party and become an adviser to the Curtin and Chifley governments, put the government position on the strike.

One newspaper report of the time, gives a flavour of the mood on both sides. Reporting on a meeting in the Sydney Domain, addressed by Minister for Immigration Arthur Calwell, reported that the police estimated the rally at about 20,000. The language of the Minister sets the tone. Calwell is reported as stating, while beseeching
the miners to leave the Miners Federation and join the Australian Workers Union (AWU), that the interjectors in the crowd should be in a concentration camp. ‘If it is left to me, in a concentration camp they will go.’ He went on to claim that ‘never before have so few caused so much misery in such a short time’... ‘we will use all the resources of the country against them [striking miners]. We will use the army on them, the navy on them and the air force on them’ He continued, ‘they don’t believe in democracy. They don’t even believe in industrial democracy. They don’t pay attention or any allegiance to the Labor Council or the ACTU. They take no notice of anybody, but the nitwits at Marx House, even the nitwits who are not yet in gaol but who soon will be.’

Calwell presented the full government argument to the boos and jeers of the crowd. He didn’t hold back, and was clear that this was being seen as much more than an industrial dispute, but rather a political battle that the ‘government must win’. ‘It is a Communist conspiracy. It is the greatest act of political skullduggery that has ever been perpetrated on the people of Australia.....finally describing the Miners Federation as ‘industrial outlaws and political lepers’.

Finally, Chifley sent troops in to move stocks of coal and also to mine some open cut mines, and effectively breaking the seven week strike. This sort of action was previously unprecedented in any government action against a strike, least of all a Labor government.

This final, major action by the Chifley government alienated left and right alike, with many within the union movement shocked that a Labor government would take such action. Other support was lost to the conservatives, who continued to claim that this sort of industrial action can only be effectively curbed by an anti-labor government. Chifley was also coming under attack from sections of the Labor, including personal attacks from J.T Lang in NSW. Chifley lost to Robert Menzies and his Liberal – Coalition in December of 1949. From 1949 he continued to lead his party in Opposition until his death.

Conclusion

Chifley was a man of his times and place. He was the consummate engine driver in so many regards – proud and aloof, loyal to the union movement and Labor, conservative and yet in other ways radical. The trademark pipe and the prominence of it in publicity and official promotional portraits, portrays Chifley as ever the ‘homely’ type, an image appealing to a broad section of the community. He experienced first hand some of the harshest and most bitter battles in industrial relations and within his own political party. He wrestled with local, national and international issues, and attempted to address them within his ‘Light on the Hill’ framework, gaining him great admiration as well as derision from those who claimed to share a similar vision and politics.

Despite his political achievements and shortcomings, Chifley in many ways remained a humble servant to his working class roots. During his tenure as Prime Minister he did not ever take up residence in the Lodge, preferring to stay at the Kurrajong Hotel. Apparently he never owned a dinner suit, and avoided events that required him to wear one. At a gathering in Canberra on June 13 1951, to celebrate Fred Daly’s 38th birthday, Daly asked him if he was going to attend the grand ball that evening to mark the jubilee of the inauguration of parliament. “Oh no” he told Daly, ‘you can go and trip the bloody light fantastic, I’m going home to read a couple of westerns”

He died that night of a heart attack in his room at the Kurrajong.

His death was felt deeply by politicians from both sides of the parliament, civic and union leaders and many ordinary people around the country, such was the affection for this man. A State funeral was held for Chifley in his beloved Bathurst on 17 June 1951, with thousands of mourners attending and seemingly all of Bathurst stopping to watch the procession.

33The Age, 1 August, 1949
34McMullin, Light on The Hill, op.cit., p.262
William McKell (1891–1985) was the Premier of NSW from 1941 to 1947 and Governor-General of Australia from 1947 to 1953. Known as the founder of the Kosciusko National Park, the McKell Medal for excellence and achievement in natural resource management is a permanent reminder of his lifelong commitment to soil and water conservation.

William John McKell was born in Pambula, a village on the South Coast of NSW on 26 September 1891, and spent his early childhood in Candelo in the Bega Valley, before the family was forced to move to Sydney in search of work. He was the son of a rural butcher put out of business by the 1890’s drought. His father later deserted the family in a search for work. McKell left school at 13 to take up an apprenticeship as a boilermaker, eventually becoming the Assistant Secretary of the Boilermakers Union. He joined the Labor party when he was about 15 years old., and in 1917 at age 25 was elected to the NSW Legislative Assembly as the Member for Redfern.

On 7 January 1920, McKell married Minnie May Pye, a 26-year old tailoress from the Sydney suburb of Annandale, in St Aidan’s Anglican Church, Annandale. They were to have three children – Betty born in 1920, Patricia born in 1927 and William born in 1928.1

**Early Days**

William McKell was born at a time of social and political unrest. The industrial disputes of the early 1890s, prolonged drought and depression, all had a major impact on the lives of people in the city and the country. His father’s successful butcher business was forced to close in 1898, and the family travelled by steamer to Sydney to start afresh.2

By this time, working men had the vote, and had been represented in Parliament since the year of Billy’s birth. This was also the decade that was debating and deciding on forming a federation of the colonies.

William McKell lived in the poorer areas of Sydney, with his mother and her four children moving to Redfern, after his father deserted the family in the early 1900s.

“The effect upon the boy of his father’s desertion was far-reaching, particularly as he, his mother and his brother and his two sisters were now to experience serious poverty. Billy was forced into the role of surrogate father.”3 Redfern was where McKell was to spend a significant part of his life, and was to go on and represent the seat in State parliament. Redfern was an overcrowded, working class industrial suburb on the fringe of the city. It was accessible to most parts of the city by public transport in the form of buses, trams and trains. The station serving the area was called Eveleigh (until renamed Redfern), and was bounded by the Eveleigh railway workshops. Redfern was a railway suburb, with much of its population made up of railway workers.

**Boxer, Footballer and Sports Fan**

The McKell’s were a boxing family, with four of Billy’s uncles being prominent prize-fighters. His uncle Herb, a coach painter by trade, became lightweight champion of Australia, and toured overseas. Young McKell followed his uncle’s fortunes, was a keen spectator, and boxed locally as an amateur himself. Cunneen, throughout his biography, illustrates that McKell had a lifelong passion for sport, “with a light but solid athletic build, McKell was an above average athlete. He played cricket at Bourke Street and was captain both of his school Rugby Union team and that of St Saviour’s.”4
McKell apparently used to sneak into the Sydney Cricket Ground and the Randwick racecourse as a boy to watch the spectacles on offer. Both of these interests were sustained during his life. He was a keen racegoer, and a regular at the Randwick Racecourse, and later owned his own trotters.5

He pursued his passion for cricket as an active member of the Sydney Cricket Ground Trust since his appointment in 1931. In 1938 McKell was elected chairman of the Cricket Ground Trust. As Cunneen points out, at the time, ‘cricket was a game that transcended politics in Sydney’, and this involvement was one element in the depth of his connection with ordinary citizens, 'McKell was one with the people in a way that none of his rivals in the parliamentary party, and certainly not Lang, approached even remotely’.6

**Boilermaker and Unionist**

In 1904, aged 13, Billy McKell left school. Although, by all accounts a bright student, this choice both saved his mother paying school fees and would provide a much needed additional income for the family. His first job was as a messenger boy with the city druggist Elliott Brothers, earning 5 shillings per week. He worked there for two years without a pay rise, before seeking out an apprenticeship.

McKell explained later that he “*couldn’t get one of the better trades – engineering, pattern-making and that sort of thing. Those were all reserved, and [for] most of those [you] had to pay premiums. Boilermaking was tough – hard, you know – not very congenial and therefore not hard to break into*”. So, for the next six years he commuted to the Mort’s Dock & Engineering Company at Balmain, a typical city commuter, “he would walk or travel by tram from Redfern to the city in the early hours of the morning, and board a ferry at Erskine Street in east Darling Harbour. A short journey westwards around the industrial centre of Pyrmont, took him to the marine engineering works on the peninsula of Balmain”.

McKell described this choice of work as ‘the hardest, dirtiest, and the most dangerous trade of all’. His recollections describe a bleak image: “you would see many boilermakers with only one eye; you found boilermakers everyone of them deaf, and I developed a bit of that myself while I was there. It was very, very dangerous; very, very hard work.”, and the concept of an apprentice being more than cheap labour, seemed to be lost on his early employer, “they started you off by heating rivets …. In many instances apprentices were only used for the purpose of making additional money. The thought wasn’t to teach the boy the trade. For example, as a boilermaker’s apprentice in those days they would keep us on heating rivets for about eighteen months …... just standing there heating rivets, not doing anything in the trade at all”.

In 1911 he made application for a permit to leave and finish his time at the Department of Railways Permanent Way workshops, in Alexandria, adjacent to Eveleigh. His union, the Boilermakers Society refused the application. After completing his apprenticeship, he worked as a journeyman boilermaker at locations including the Hoskins Iron Works at Ultimo and the Australian Gas Light Company at Mortlake, before joining the highly unionised Eveleigh railway workshops in 1913.

As a boilermaker on the government payroll he was earning 11 shillings and fourpence per day. He described this as an ‘excellent job, with the promise of permanent employment’. Here he was elected a union shop delegate for his union.

In an interview with the then journalist [and later himself Premier of NSW] Bob Carr, McKell reflected on his political career and the life influences that shaped his political awareness. His poverty growing up in Redfern, his early work experiences, his sense of injustice- “*it was all these things ….That helped to form my resolve that the whole social system was unfair. It was wrong*”.

He was unable to join his union during his apprenticeship, as with so many craft unions it had strict rules that restricted membership to qualified tradesmen aged 21 or over. Despite this he still attended meetings and was closely associated with the union, and joining at about 21 years of age. He became active in the union and on Labor Council. In 1914 he was elected assistant secretary of his union as a full-time paid position and he resigned from Eveleigh.

He was on the Labor Council committee which set up the Workers Education Association, at which he attended classes for union officials in industrial law. In 1916 he was appointed as the boilermaker’s representative on the wages board, representing boilermakers in the Government Railways.

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1Ibid., Pp 15-19
2Ibid., Pp 112-113
3McKell interview with Bob Carr, 1980, cited in Cunneen, p.23
4Ibid., p. 23
5McKell interview, cited in Cunneen, p.24

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Chapter 2 - Railways as Political Nursery
It is almost facile to say that McKell’s early experiences with poverty, as a boy working under harsh conditions and poor wages, and living in the heart of working class Sydney, had a lasting and guiding impact on William McKell. He was fully immersed in this culture, with its contributions from neighbourhood, kinship, religion, sport and the camaraderie of work and union, combining to shape a keen sense of injustice and a desire to redress the situation through political means. William McKell knew where he came from, and what values were most important to him, and as with many early labor leaders, he well understood the reciprocal nature of this relationship. The working class railway suburb of Redfern had not only shaped his personal character and world views, he was one of theirs in the Parliament, and was expected to represent and better their situation in return for continued support and loyalty. A relationship that neither failed.

**Member for Redfern**

McKell’s political career was also shaped by conflicts and major internal rifts within the Labor Party, both with his initial election in the seat of Redfern after the 1917 strike, replacing McGowan (The first Labor Premier) and railwayman, and later in leadership battles with Premier Jack Lang.

After the first NSW Labor Premier, McGowan was expelled from the Labor Party over the conscription issue, and unsuccessfully stood in the 1917 election as an Independent Labor candidate, his successor as member for Redfern, was a 25 year old boilermaker and popular boxer and footballer, Billy McKell. So, the seat was passed on to another railway man, boilermaker and unionist who was later to go on to be Premier and Governor-General.

As a Member of Parliament from 1917, McKell favoured a cautious approach and when he became Premier in 1941 he sought stability. This was because he was Leader at a time of great instability, having beaten Jack Lang for the leadership in 1939 and with the Party involved in splits. As a result, his government was never revolutionary but rather characterised by moderate, gradual reform. William McKell was described by former Premier Neville Wran as ‘perhaps the most significant political figure in the history of NSW’. This sentiment is shared by the current Premier Bob Carr.

**[Footnotes]**

- Interview with Bob Carr, Bulletin ?, 1980
- R.G.Preston, The Eveleigh Locomotive Workshops Story, Australian Railway Historical Society, NSW Division, Redfern, 1997, p.4

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**Chapter 2 - Railways as Political Nursery**

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While in Opposition McKell strongly supported the NSW Soil Conservation Act, passed in October 1938. This Act led to the establishment of the first Soil Conservation Service in Australia, with Sam Clayton as its Director.

The Premier

During particularly difficult times within the Labor Party, McKell won the leadership of the parliamentary party from Jack Lang in 1939, at the age of 48. Two days before he was elected leader, World War II had been declared. The internal tensions continued, and posed problems for McKell’s leadership. The party leadership was divided amongst its loyalties, and within the executive there were a number of members who were also members of the Communist Party, who were seen as infiltrators attempting to use labor to establish their own power base. “Lloyd Ross was one such whiteant who would later reveal his role and renounce his former allegiance to communism.”14 He also had disaffected leadership aspirants in the like of Heffron and Lang and his strong group of supporters working for his return as leader, in his leadership group. The debates that also raged in the party over support for the war, fuelled these divisions and provided Lang with a stage to attack McKell, ultimately leading to Lang defecting and forming the breakaway Australian Labor Party (Non-Communist), before rejoining the party and government under a loyalty pledge. 15

As Leader of the Opposition, McKell led Labor to victory in the 1941 election, becoming Premier of New South Wales. He went to the polls with a simple message that reform and social justice were at the heart of labor’s approach, “above all, the policy for which the Labor Party is asking the support of the electors is a direct and open challenge to the Mair-Bruxner attitude, so often expressed in word and action, that social reform and progress have no place in a war-time economy.”16 In his 1941 election campaign he identified water conservation as the key to Labor’s rural policies. As Premier, McKell established expert committees to advise him on soil conservation, rural reconstruction, and the diversion of the waters of the Snowy River to the arid interior of NSW. The election of the McKell Labor Government heralded a new era of Labor history, which was to maintain continuous power in the parliament for the next quarter century.

The consensus seems to be that McKell was not a dynamic or charismatic leader, ‘with little of the great gifts of advocacy of a Holman, or the ruthless domination of a Lang, McKell nevertheless possessed shrewdness, human understanding and a skill in political management that allowed him to keep difficult people working together.’17 The intelligence of McKell as a politician was displayed by his rural strategy. Unlike many of his colleagues, he believed a strong rural campaign was essential to winning the 1941 and 1944 elections. He made country policy speeches and extensively toured rural areas. His method was proved correct because Labor was able to form government with the benefit of key rural seats from 1941.

Conservation was also an issue that McKell found important and again, Bob Carr picked up on this point as Environment Minister in 1985 in saying “McKell was the first significant environmentalist in politics”. His great achievements included seizing land in the Snowy Mountains to create the huge Kosciusko National Park, working with Prime Ministers Curtin and Chifley towards the Snowy Mountains scheme, combating soil erosion and protecting natural forests.

The creation of Kosciusko National Park was one of McKell’s great legacies. In January 1942 McKell toured Australia’s high country for ten days. After seeing the erosion being caused by grazing in the Snowy Mountains firsthand his government banned grazing over an area of 1.38 million acres and established Kosciusko National Park in 1944.

Among his government’s reforms, McKell had earlier also helped create the Workers’ Compensation system and the Government Insurance office (GIO). As Premier, he sought to undo the damage done to the Workers’ Compensation scheme in the 1930s including extending coverage for dust diseases, to streamline the arbitration system and to enable the GIO to compete for all types of insurance. These were important measures for a government seeking stability, especially through a good relationship with the union movement.

McKell managed other reforms that are still relevant today. The policies he took to the 1941 elections included revitalising NSW without jeopardising the war effort, establishing a Housing Commission, stabilising the price of food and revitalising the State’s health and education systems. McKell’s government delivered on
each of these policies while being fiscally responsible.

McKell has been recognised in later years as a quiet achiever who set Labor up for many years in government. He may not have been the most progressive or charismatic leader, but he certainly showed he was able to steadily achieve reform while sticking to Labor principles. He was a visionary leader, as Bob Carr has noted, in that he improved workers' rights, social justice and environmental policy that proved beneficial for many decades. The challenge for Labor today is to stick to that example we gave ourselves.

These are some of the achievements of McKell's first government he took to the 1944 elections:

- Re-established shipbuilding as a great State enterprise now employing 1200 men, supplying warships for Australian and Allied fighting forces.
- Given widows additional allowances, ranging up to 35/- weekly, in addition to federal widows pensions; spent 165,000 pounds in special allowances for destitute children; huge sums on kindergartens, day nurseries, free milk, baby health centres, child welfare generally.
- Set aside 100,000 pounds for a special cancer institute, and brought to Australia Dr. Ralston Paterson, world authority on checking this scourge.
- Greatly extended the coverage of the Industrial Arbitration Act to the benefit-scope of Workers' Compensation.
- Established improved working conditions in factories, including greater facilities for the health and safety of workers. 18

Previous governments established the Soil Conservation Service of NSW, but the McKell government expanded it considerably. He arranged a comprehensive survey of the extent and nature of erosion throughout NSW and set up a number of soil erosion research stations. In 1944, McKell took the results of the survey of soil erosion in NSW to the Premiers Conference, where he pushed unsuccessfully for the establishment of a National Soil Conservation strategy.

McKell played an important part in the Snowy Mountains hydro-electricity scheme. In 1941, whilst Opposition leader, he campaigned for a twenty-year program of construction to transfer westwards the water that flowed to the sea from the Great Dividing Range, including diversion of the Snowy River. As Premier, McKell established an expert committee, which recommended the waters of the Snowy be diverted to the Murrumbidgee River, mainly for irrigation. It was during this period that the seeds were sown for one of Australia’s largest peace-time engineering projects, the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electricity Authority. In 1949, as Governor-General, McKell formally launched construction of the scheme at Adaminaby.

In the period following the end of World War II, McKell’s Darling River Water Act provided for construction of 30 low-level weirs on the Barwon and Darling rivers, work resumed on Keepit Dam on the Namoi River and McKell turned the first sod on the Glenbawn Dam on the Hunter River, and the Burrendong Dam near Mudgee.

Sir William McKell – Governor-General

McKell surprised many of his colleagues when he announced his intention to retire before the next election. He had been in the Assembly for almost three decades, five as Premier, and while only in his mid-fifties he had become tired of politics. He resigned as Premier in 1947 at the age of 55, and after 29 years in the NSW parliament, and shortly afterwards Prime Minister Ben Chifley appointed him Governor-General of Australia.

McKell was at first reluctant to take up the position, following the return to England of the Duke of Gloucester, the first and only direct royal family (brother to the King) representative to hold the post. Chifley appealed to McKell’s national pride and ego in wooing him for the position. “You are too young to retire and I want an Australian Governor-General who understands Australia’s problems, who is imbued with its aspirations and ideals.....I want a man of the people, and you are the man I want, Bill.” 19

“The Labour movement warmly approved the appointment, but conservatives were apoplectic about the prospect of an ex-boilermaker and Labor premier being installed as the King’s vice-regal representative. When the appointment was officially confirmed Menzies described it as ‘shocking and humiliating’.”20 Later, as Prime Minister, Menzies was to extend McKell’s term of office. The press went to town, criticizing and ridiculing the appointment as simply a political sham.

This new role, of Crown representative, required McKell...
to distance himself from his past affiliations, including his union of which he had remained a member, the Labor Party and even the Sydney Cricket Ground. The ‘non-partisan representative of the Crown was required to be above sectional, political or even regional sporting loyalty. He was to be both the agent of the British monarch and the representative of all the Australian people’.21

He was Australia’s twelfth Governor-General, and only the second Australian citizen to be appointed to this position, Sir Isaac Isaacs being the first, and despite a political furare at the time, all sides of politics eventually respected the way he undertook the position. The editorials on his relinquishment of office following the expiration of his term as Governor-General in May 1953 were universally complimentary. As Governor-General McKell retained an interest in farming and spent most of his weekends at the farm near Goulburn.

Apart from his range of official duties, McKell had the opportunity to indulge in some of his favourite pastimes in the post, including attending race meetings such as the Melbourne Cup at Flemington, and sporting fixtures such as cricket test matches. In 1948, he apparently took ‘great pleasure’ in presenting the Melbourne Cup to the owner of the winning horse, Rimfire.22 The position also allowed him to remain closely involved with the development of the Snowy Mountains hydro-electric scheme, which he officially launched in 1949.

In 1951, McKell officiated over the jubilee of Federation, which included the celebration of the jubilee of the opening of the first federal parliament. His patriotism was overflowing at the official banquet, when sharing the speaking honours with Menzies, Chifley and Billy Hughes, when he proposed a toast to the Commonwealth, ‘to Australia, my own! Australia, my native land! Australia, the land of sunshine; Australia, the land of abundance! Australia, the land of opportunity!’.”23 In November 1951, whilst in London, McKell was summoned to be invested personally by the King at Buckingham Palace as Knight Grand Cross of the Order of St Michael and St George (GCMG). McKell relinquished his post as Governor-General in 1953. In retirement, McKell enjoyed life as a practical farmer near Goulburn with his family. Soon after he left the properties to his son Bill to manage, and he and Lady McKell moved to an apartment in Double Bay in Sydney. His retirement was briefly interrupted in 1956 when prime Minister Menzies nominated McKell as the Australian member of the British-led commission to draft a new federal constitution for Malaysia.

McKell’s contributions to political life continue to receive recognition through a number of public gestures. In 1978, in recognition of his instigation of the Kosciusko National Park, and conservation efforts, the McKell Prize for the Environment was inaugurated. The New South Wales Labor Party commenced the McKell lectures in 1982 to commemorate one of its most significant leaders. In 1984, the NSW Minister for Agriculture and Forestry, Jack Hallam instigated a commemorative award in honour of the contribution that Sir William McKell had made to the development of a soil and water conservation ethic within Australia.

Politician, statesman, and committed conservationist, Sir William McKell died in 1985 aged 93. The memorial service in St Andrew’s Anglican Cathedral in Sydney was attended by political and civic leaders, and ordinary Australians, confirmation that Sir William’s career had touched people from all walks of life. At the time of his death, there was a Federal Labor Government, under Prime Minister Bob Hawke, and in NSW a Labor Government, led by Premier Neville Wran, symbolic of his role in securing labor in government.

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20McMullen, Light on the Hill, op.cit., p.244
21Cunneen, op.cit., p.199
22Cunneen, op.cit., p.204
23Official record of the Jubilee Celebrations, cited in Cunneen p 209

Chapter 2 - Railways as Political Nursery
Joe Cahill worked at the railway workshops at Eveleigh until the general strike of 1917. As one the organisers of the strike his papers were marked ‘not to be re-employed’. He finally returned to the industry at the Randwick tram workshops. Cahill unsuccessfully stood as the ALP candidate for the seat of Dulwich Hill in 1917.

Cahill was born of Irish immigrant parents in Redfern in 1891 where he also went to school at the Patrician Brothers College. He was apprenticed as a fitter at Eveleigh in 1906 at the age of 15, and soon became branch officer of the Amalgamated Society of engineers and a delegate at union conferences.

He was Minister for Public Works in McKell’s government during WWII, then Minister for Public Works and Local Government under the McGirr government, before himself becoming Premier of NSW in 1952 and holding the office for three terms or seven and a half years.

In 1956 Cahill opened the part elevated, part underground rail link between Wynyard, Circular Quay and St James. The first regular services on the Central-St James- Wynyard loop two days later. The train used for the opening ceremony was the first in the suburban system equipped with power operated doors.

His government undertook to engage the firm of railway consultants from U.S (Ebasco) to advise on the railway system for the next decade. This was at a time when the media was once more raising all manner of issue with the running of the railways. There had been cost-cutting and severe wage cuts under the control of Commissioner Reg Winsor, a one-time President of the Railways Salaried Officers’ Association in the 1930s, then Assistant Commissioner for railways in the 1940s. This was also a time when competition for freight and private transport were increasing due to motor vehicle use and airline and trucking. The Herald claimed that the railways and tram services, due to wage increases, over employment and strikes were ‘bleeding the State white.’

It was also a time of massive expenditure on replacing rolling stock, Winsor had requested the purchase of at least 300 diesel-electric locomotives at the rate of 30 per year, plus an expansion of electric trains. There were electrification projects and replacement of deteriorating infrastructure, with many timber bridges being replaced with steel structures.

In addition to the rationalisation measures undertaken, the Cahill government set the cat among the pigeons by introducing major fare increases (up to one third of the price) for train and bus passenger services, as well as increases to freight charges. The same media that complained about the railways deficits, now took up the criticism of ‘severe and harsh’ fare increases imposed.

Joe Cahill died in 1959 from the combined effects of coronary occlusions and a burst ulcer. As the Bulletin stated, he died from ‘strain, worry and overwork’.

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1Lucy Taksa, Labour Politics at the Eveleigh Railway Workshops, in Markey (ed), Labour and Community: Historical Essays, University of Wollongong Press, 2001, p 64
2Sydney Morning Herald, 20 March 1956
3Cited in Gunn, op.cit., p 436
“No Premier was ever a harder worker, none was ever called on to bear fools more gladly ... A sound family man, in his private moments he was a friendly soul, even when sorely tried. His one real, bred-in-the-bones hate: daily newspapers.”

The name and legacy of Joe Cahill is enshrined in the controversial Cahill Expressway. The position of the Cahill Expressway was determined in 1945 when the Department of Main Roads prepared a concept report on an expressway system for Sydney. When the design of the railway and associated roadway at the Quay became public in 1948, the protests started. The design was described as ‘ridiculous’, ‘ugly’, ‘unsightly’ and a ‘monstrosity’. The public formed the Quay Planning Protest Committee to fight the proposal, but without success. The Cahill Expressway (1958 and 1962) was jointly funded by the State and the Council and built in two stages with Council labour. The expressway represented the vision for modern Sydney. The Premier J. J. Cahill described it at the opening on 24 March 1958 as ‘a striking symbol of Sydney’s growth and maturity and a monument to the skill and industry of the people’.

In addition to other measures of the Cahill government, and some of the less flattering legacies, without doubt his greatest public works project, and one that generations will remember him fondly for, was the vision and will to build the Sydney Opera House, an international icon of contemporary public architecture.

Public pressure to build a suitable concert facility in Sydney intensified in the 1940s. In 1955 Premier J.J. Cahill announced an international competition for the design of ‘an opera house’. Danish architect Jørn Utzon’s entry was selected as the winning design. His design was for a complex with two theatres side by side on a large podium. This was covered by interlocking concrete shells, which acted as both wall and roof. A third smaller shell set apart from the others was to cover the restaurant.

Another link to the rail and tram industry is the site chosen for the new Opera House. The Sydney Opera House is built on Bennelong Point. The site was initially occupied by Fort Macquarie which was designed by Francis Greenway in 1817. Later, it was the site of the Bennelong Point Tram Depot. This in turn was demolished to make way for the Opera House.

While he oversaw the contracting, design and construction of the first stage of the Opera House he didn’t get to see the finished dream, dying almost a quarter of a century before it was completed and before the Opera House was opened in 1973.

The construction of the Opera House was at times difficult and controversial. Construction began in early 1959 and proceeded in three stages: Stage 1 (the podium, 1959-1963), Stage 2 (the roof and exteriors, 1963-1967) and Stage 3 (the interiors, promenade and approaches, 1967-1973), with Jørn Utzon resigning from the project in 1966. The Opera House was officially opened by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on 20 October 1973.

This contribution alone is a fitting legacy for the last in the long legacy of Premiers and political leaders who had their beginnings in the railways. It would seem that it is not such a large leap of imagination, capability or culture between being a fitter in the workshops and envisioning future performing arts requirements, and grasping radical architectural concepts.

*Sydney Morning Herald, 25 march, 1958*
A Fading Legacy

The role of the railways as a breeding ground for politicians is diminishing, along with its share of the labour market, its concentration of numbers in key workplaces, and its overall ability to influence government decision-making. The railways is no longer the ‘king maker’ it was in the first half of the last century, but remnants of the legacies remain, and the current government is not without its railways links. That relationship, however, has changed from one of close interdependence to a more distant and formal one. Current politicians rely on a perception of detachment from major interest groups, an objectivity and neutrality that distinguishes them as strong and decisive leaders. That is, until it is time for re-election and old acquaintances and friendships are rekindled.

Similarly, it is misleading to bemoan or rely on a reduction in railways employment numbers, and in turn, the numbers of seats the railways contribute to the parliament to understand the contemporary significance of the railways in New South Wales political life. The railways continue to hold a special and significant place in the public and in determining the strength of pulse in the political heart beat. The significance of the rail transport system to the effective functioning of this state has been spectacularly highlighted in recent times through the planning and running of major events such as the 2000 Olympics, and the extent of public debate and concern generated around major rail accidents, and the media attention given to the general state of the rail system and its community and business impact.

150 years after that initial trip to Parramatta, the debate on how to best manage the railways, appropriate mixes of public and private investment, regulation of operations and working, is as lively today as it has ever been. The political fortunes of the current government may not depend on the numbers of parliamentarians drawn directly from the rail industry, or on the total votes of communities of rail workers and their families, but the rail industry remains a hot ticket item contributing to electoral success or failure. It is a mix of the previous culture of patronage and reciprocity, and the continued vital role of the railways socially and economically, that sustains an expectation by rail workers that their parliamentary representatives will continue to show special favour or consideration to their plight.

The current parliament is headed by a Premier whose father and grandfather were train drivers. The father of the former Minister for Transport Services (currently Minister for Roads) was a guard on the railways for more than 40 years of his working life, and Mr Costa himself worked as a trainee engineman at Enfield before becoming AFULE President. Marie Andrews, Member for Peats, worked for many years in the ARU head office in Sydney, before her parliamentary career. These are examples of the continuing influence of the industry on our parliament, and the continued presence of representatives who owe a large part of their parliamentary success to the industry that sustained them.

Former Labour Council Secretary

Michael Costa is currently Minister for Roads, and Hunter Valley. Prior to this, he was Minister for Transport Services, Secretary of the Labor Council of NSW, and in the late 1980s AFULE State President.

He was affected and influenced by the railways from childhood by his Greek Cypriot train guard father. As with so many post-war migrants, Mr Costa senior sought safe and secure employment on the NSW Government Railways to provide the new start for his family that was being sought. He remained in the service for more than 40 years, first at Broadmeadow, then moving to Sydney with a promotion. Michael Costa also worked at Darling Harbour Yards and at Sydney Parcels Office in the early 1970s as a schoolboy casual during the summer vacations.
I knew Michael Costa in his days at Wollongong University, both of us running in the same socialist pack at the time. He made a career out of it, I am writing about him. He was the angry, young firebrand establishing himself in the political apprenticeship of student unionism and activism, who was later to become a trainee engineman at Enfield, under the tutelage of former union official (and then driver trainer ) Bob Plain. For someone who makes the curious claim to have ‘dropped out’ of politics, he was never far from it, either as AFULE official, later Labor Council Secretary or Government Minister.

Costa seems to be able to simultaneously generate animosity and affection from future bosses. It was Michael Easson (at the insistence of then Young Labor comrade, Peter Costello) who originally had him expelled from the Labor Party for his Socialist Workers Party affiliations, who later employed him at Labor Council. Similarly Premier Bob Carr had called for his sacking from Labor Council and expulsion from the ALP over a discussion paper critical of the ACTU and Labor’s electoral prospects, co-authored by Costa and Mark Duffy, was leaked to the media. Carr later put the novice parliamentarian on his front bench.

He gained a seat in the Upper House in 2002. Obviously, catching the interest and winning the respect of the Premier, he was quickly promoted to the Ministry, in the controversial portfolio of Police, seeking ‘popular’ support from radio jock Alan Jones, and police whistle blowers, and seeing off the imported English Commissioner Peter Ryan.

He demonstrated from the outset that he was not prepared to sit back and ‘learn the job’ but rather to get on and do it ‘his way’. If they didn’t know his name previously, Michael Costa became household words in NSW early in his parliamentary career. He used the media and the public stage to challenge and explain what he thought was wrong, and how it needed to be fixed.

As Police Minister, he described his role in the following terms:

“I took legal advice early in the piece about what the role of the Minister was.... I am a representative of the taxpayer and if things are not operating managerially effectively I have an absolute authority to ask questions and see that changes are made.” This is the same position he has taken in subsequent portfolios.

A year or so into the Police portfolio, he was given the Ministry for Transport Services. He took the same controversial enthusiasm to the task, generating some hysterical media headlines, shaking up the management, and not winning too many friends with his old Labor Council running mate, Nick Lewocki, Secretary of the RTBU or his members. Rather than bringing to the role a set of fond memories from the rail industry, he referenced his actions against a poor industry culture in need of urgent redress.

Michael Costa ‘makes no apology’ for his approach to the tasks he saw as necessary in his time as Minister for Transport Services. He acknowledges that he was generally perceived as the ‘bad guy’ and as a former colleague and labour movement leader that was kicking the rail workers. ‘It was hardline, but it is what had to be done’. He describes a situation where the government was faced with responding to the Waterfall accident, a seriously lacking management culture, where there had been ‘nine CEOs in about as many years’, there were problems that needed to be addressed on a range of indicators.

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The Minister cites many of his first hand experiences on the job, first as a casual schoolboy, then as a trainee engineman, to support his claims that much of the worst aspects of railway culture (in terms of poor and unsafe work practices, poor productivity in some areas) had survived the two decades from his time in the industry in the 1980s to his time as Minister. His task, therefore, was twofold. Firstly to sort out management structures and roles, and in so doing remove what he viewed as these ‘negative’ aspects of railway culture.

“There had been a failure of management – management was hopeless - someone had to fill the vacuum, and the vacuum was filled by unions in the past – keeping the place ticking over – but this was not a good substitute for putting in place good management systems, and getting the roles right.”

He believes that his time as Minister provided the shake up needed, and that many objectives and improvements were achieved through that period. He points to changes such as cleaning out the management and replacing it with people with rail backgrounds, implementing a range of responses to the Waterfall accident, sorting out timetabling and on-time running issues, introducing a new training regime, and putting in place arrangements with Australian Rail and Track Corporation (ARTC) for

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1See Marilyn Dodkin, Bob Carr: The Reluctant Leader, UNSW Press, Sydney 2003, p 38. Also, Brothers in Arms
2Ibid, p 228
3Interview with Michael Costa, June 2005
interstate rail operations. Costa believes that they did the work of fixing existing problems, not the big ‘visionary stuff’ - because ‘often a politician’s vision can become other people’s nightmare – usually the taxpayer’s nightmare.’ Rather they looked to avoiding the ‘Mickey Mouse’ stuff, taking people to the airport, inappropriate investments, and went to the core business of getting people to and from work, and putting in place basic sustainable strategies.

“People will look back at this period, I am sure of this, as a time when we readjusted and put in place the right framework – there were tensions in IR – internal divisions within the drivers union – I was impatient, wanted to get things done.

The union had lost its authority in this area – and the challenge was to put in place responses to Waterfall – no apologies – also focused on management with rail background – it was a watershed period for changes. It was difficult – hard line – but railways need a periodic clean-out and that’s what we did.”

We achieved the objectives of laying the basic strategies –...got some serious investments and capital in the right places. We’ve just announced an 8 billion dollar rail project that makes sense. “

While Costa won no popularity stakes among rail workers as his time as Minister, he insists that the main source of the problem was management and not rail workers, and the focus was on sorting out the past failure of management.

“Those cultures are not the fault of the workers, it is a management issue. The problem with the railways is a failure of management. The future of the rail industry is good, so long as the railways focus on their specific tasks they can provide a magnificent service. It is when they try to do things that they are not technologically or logistically equipped to do – rail can’t compete with airlines or discount airfares on long distance travel – or moving parcels around the city – won’t work.

 Bulk freight and mass passenger movement is what they are best at – most Countrylink services currently are for social not economic purposes.”

It is not clear how his contemporaries view his role – this ‘new kid’ in the Parliament, shaking up the status quo, the loose cannon using the media often to run and facilitate major policy controversies. Most rail workers are reasonably clear in their assessment, and would vigorously maintain, in terms of reciprocity, that Costa owes the rail industry considerably more than the industry owes him.

It is doubtful that he achieved many of the reforms that he was given or makes claim to – he unsettled some sleeping giants, and certainly elevated public debate on policing and railways, and more recently on roads transport issues. To use his own argument, serious and substantive cultural change takes a concerted effort over time, not a quick fix. Costa has not remained in a portfolio long enough to see through substantive reforms and their implementation, and if his own career predictions are to be believed, he doesn’t plan to be in the parliament long enough to give the parliamentary historians too much material.

It may be that Costa has been used as a ‘pinch hitter’, the ‘spanish fighting fish’ put in the tank to stir it up and keep the others on their guard. This much, the former trainee train driver has unquestionably achieved. He will probably be remembered among many rail workers and unionists, as the former rail union official, and Labor Council Secretary who failed to meet his obligations of reciprocity to his former colleagues and constituents.

The Premier

As Premier Bob Carr has stated, his government inherited the tradition and foundations laid by the earlier Labor Governments, especially the stability woven from turmoil by the McKell government. That stability and legacy has Premier Carr enjoying his third term, and record for the longest tenure in the job.

The Premier carries with him an image and set of memories that he maintains ‘keep him loyal to his working class background and in particular, the railway work that provided him with good food, modest shelter, and a grounding in politics’. The Premier is the son of

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1Ibid
2Interview with Michael Costa, June 2005
an engine driver, Ted Carr, who was himself the son of an engine driver. He was raised in a fibro house in Maroubra, ‘teaming with children and their friends’ and with a factory backdrop as the constant landscape.

Premier Carr’s political apprenticeship and influences were those around the legends and ‘nation-building mythology of Lang, Joe Cahill, John Curtin and Ben Chifley. He joined the ALP at 15 and had sought out and read a number of biographies of these labor leaders. He saw that he had no option but to become a labor politician.6

The Premier hails the Sydney Olympics as perhaps his proudest moment in office, and has been effusive in his praise of rail and transport workers for their contribution to its success. This is the Premier who visited stations and other rail workplaces, jubilant and appreciative. He seems to like it when the traditional relationship of ‘reciprocity’ is revived in favour of his government, but perhaps less enthusiastic when it takes the form of ‘critical friend’.

The government was nervous about anything going wrong during the Olympics, and in particular whether the rail network could meet the task without any major incidents. “Rail workers spearheaded the campaign for an Olympic allowance – we agreed and settled on it. It was all done fairly amicably. They [the RTBU] said it would have the practical effect of eliminating absenteeism and it did.”7

Contrasted alongside the celebratory scenes of the Olympics, in many workers memories, are the now ‘infamous’ images of the Premier who ‘crossed’ the union picket line (via a carpark entrance) over the workers compensation demonstrations in front of Parliament House, and the taunt from the balcony of Parliament with a victory sign to the protesters, after he had ordered his caucus to enter the parliament. From the vantage point of the union protestors, the ‘V’ sign may have been misinterpreted as a closely related gesture – either way, the message was clearly much the same.

While the new Secretary-elect of the then Labor Council of NSW, John Robertson, maintained that the protest and picket line were a legitimate means for unions and others to protest the changes to Workers Compensation, the Premier took a very different view. He maintained that such a protest was not a ‘picket line’ but rather a ‘blockade of parliament’, obstructing the parliament from carrying out its work, was an affront to the democratic process, akin to the sacking of the Whitlam government in 1975.

Carr’s private diaries indicate that he enjoyed the ‘Boys Own’ adventure of the moment and the conflict.

“Egan and I enter parliament around 11 am [19 July] via a connection with the State Library – secret passage, basement entrance into the parliament’s car park. In a darkened building without staff, there we are: Carr, Egan, Della and a handful of MPs who stayed overnight to avoid ‘the picket’….I ram the workers comp package through – emotional debate, I speak, lash them into sense. … All in all I enjoyed the crisis.”8

The Premier concedes that the focus on the workings of railways in the past few years has been a constant issue for his government, but in some ways is not new. He claims that he was raising concerns about these issues in the 1980s as a journalist.

The rail workers and their union were not as sympathetic, and were publicly angered by what they perceived as betrayal by ‘their’ government on major rail issues. The RTBU ran a postcard campaign in 2004 with the theme – ‘Don’t Blame Rail Workers’ for late trains and systems problems on the railways, distributing postcards to be sent to the Premier. This, and related campaigns, laid the blame for poor management of the railways squarely at the feet of the government. The union viewed the media attacks and blame campaign

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7Interview with Bob Carr, May 2005
8Extracts from Carr’s personal diaries, cited in Dodkin, Pp215-216

Chapter 2 - Railways as Political Nursery
against railworkers as a low point in relations with the government trying to distract attention from the parlous state of the rail network. Rail workers were genuinely offended by a labor government stooping to these tactics. 9

It remains to be seen what lasting effect these tensions have on the relationship between rail workers, their union and the parliamentary labor party. The Premier indicates that he is confident of the strength of the relationship, and as mentioned previously, that railworkers ‘know that they are better off under labor, and will be looked after better than under a coalition government’. The gamble in this calm approach, electorally, is that the anger and disappointment felt by rail workers does not follow a logical political formula and is unpredictable at the polls, as is the response of the travelling public. The political acumen of the Premier should not be under-estimated, and the absence of a vigorous or credible opposition, certainly boosts the governments’ immediate electoral prospects. Whether or not the Premier can appease the electorate on public transport, can regain the confidence of rail workers and rail communities, and the long-term effects of recent tensions is yet to be tested at the polls.

As with so many rail traditions and legacies, the once strong bond of reciprocity between rail workers and their parliamentary representatives seems to have faded to a level where it is no longer recognisable as the cornerstone of labor politics in this state. The mounting industrial relations attacks emanating from the Federal Coalition government, may provide the stimulus to rekindle these old bonds and expectations, and to seek out and rebuild stronger alliances with the State Labor Government, or serve to dissipate them once and for all.
The following excerpts about life around the railways in Bathurst from David Day’s biography - *Chifley, Harper Collins, Sydney, 2001*

Bathurst had been the first inland ‘capital’, the centre of the initial gold rush and the short-lived rail head for the central west.

From further west came trains hauling produce from as far as Bourke, Cobar and Condobolin, undercutting the river boats that plied the meandering rivers of the Murray-Darling system and which had previously dominated the transport of wool from the distant interior and diverted much of the trade of New South Wales to Victoria and South Australia. The railway workshops at Bathurst repaired the locomotives and carriages, the goods wagons and guards’ vans that made up this modern transport system. (p58)

In July 1903 [when Chifley joined the railways as a shop boy], the New South Wales government agreed to enlarge the railway works at Bathurst [across the road from Chifley’s home].

Working for the railways was not just a job. It was akin to joining the services, with its strict hierarchy of different ranks, its own disciplinary code and its requirement to remain on duty each day until being stood down. In 19th century Britain, engine drivers regarded themselves as the ‘silk-hatted aristocracy’ of the working class………..In Australia, the local station master had a status equivalent to a bank manager. As government employees, railway workers also were deemed to be public servants and thereby different from other workers. ……….Engine drivers being amongst the highest paid workers in the state. (p60)

Young Ben would have witnessed the constant coming and going of the locomotive traffic, the shunting of carriages and goods wagons in the expansive yard as trains were coupled together for their onward journey, the filling of tenders with water and the shovelling in of the coal, the clearing out of the ashes, the oiling of the axle bearings and the constant cleaning of the engines and the polishing of their brass parts…….. As a shop boy he was at the bottom rung of this noisy activity, detailed to do the most menial tasks around the shed. According to the 1914 book of instructions for running staff, shed labourers were ‘responsible for keeping the Shed floor, traps, and gutters in a thoroughly clean condition’ (p62)

The shed itself was about one hundred metres long, its walls covered with corrugated iron and interspersed with arched windows to provide a measure of light within. It was probably the largest industrial structure in Bathurst, with the wages of its workers underpinning the wealth of the city. It was wide enough to allow four straight through-roads, along with three dead-end roads for the repair section. At points in the shed there were pits to allow easy inspection and work on the underside of the engines while at either end of the shed there were water columns from which to fill the tenders. A coal stage and de-ashing sidings completed the industrious picture. (p63)

In the strict hierarchy of the running staff, there were three major rungs that Chifley would have to ascend if he aspired one day to drive a train. First, he would have to be promoted to cleaner……….an employee who cleaned the engines and consequently had to have a knowledge of how they worked. A cleaner might also work as an acting fireman, if required and join the driver on the footplate. They might also drive a train themselves in order to shift it within the confines of the yard. Similarly, the press of business could see firemen work as acting drivers and take charge of slow goods trains. Fast goods trains and express passenger trains on the main line were reserved for experienced drivers and firemen. As such, there were many years of study and steady work before the young shop-boy could hope to be riding the footplate of the double-headed trains that pulled out of Bathurst station on their way west. (p 62).

On top of Chifley’s immediate hierarchy were the various foremen and the inspector who had charge of the several hundred workers in the Bathurst steam shed.

Each year, Chifley’s wage as a shop-boy increased automatically until it had doubled to five shillings a day by September 1905. (p 64) On promotion to labourer in January 1907, he was paid the relatively princely sum of six shillings a day.
Chapter 2 - Railways as Political Nursery
In July 1949 the Chifley Federal Labor Government, and NSW McGirr Labor Government decided to move 36,000 tons of coal already mined. The miners had declared the coal ‘black’ and to move it would label the railworkers scabs.

The Labor Council Transport Group (ARU, AFULE, ATMOEA, Storemen and Packers and the TWU) supported the movement of the coal. The AFULE policy on the Coal Strike and the use of the military to mine coal was that of the Labor Council, in support of the Government. The journal reported this support in affirming the resolution taken by the transport group of the Labor Council, the following terms:

“That this Land Transport Group of the Labor Council of NSW, representing approximately 70,000 workers in the transport industry, upon receipt of information disclosing the parlous position that confronts the gas and electricity undertakings and industry generally, and, keeping in mind that this is not a strike for legitimate industrial gains, but a political conspiracy, reaffirms its determination to support the Government’s endeavours to obtain, and as a consequence, we approve the principle of transporting coal produced at open cuts under the Government’s directions.

Recognising the necessity for a determined stand by the Government against this deliberate and completely unjustifiable attack on the people of Australia, we direct the attention of all trade unionists to this decision, and state unequivocally that attempts by Communists to sabotage this plan will be resisted.”

*The Locomotive Journal, September 8, 1949, p. 4*

The State Council of the ARU, torn between supporting the miners and ‘destroying the Chifley Government, voted in support of the resolution. As then Councillor, Joe Poole (who opposed the motion), stated, ‘he never thought a Council of the ARU would condone scabbery’. (Hearn p.100)

The NSW view was not shared by the ARU national Council, when it met in an attempt to overturn the NSW decision. After heated debate the NSW delegates left the meeting, and The ARU Australian Council voted in support of the miners. NSW defied this decision, and under police protection moved the ‘black’ coal. Guard Alf Taylor recalls: “I was up in Lithgow and I saw a policeman on the coaltrucks with the guard sitting alongside of him – I couldn’t bloody well take that. Against my principles.’ (Hearn p 101) Taylor was suspended for refusing to take a coal train out of Enfield.

In defending the role of the union in the miner’s dispute, officials such as ARU Secretary Jack Ferguson are quoted as claiming to the ARU State Conference in October 1949, that ‘ they called me a scab and I liked it’. (Hearn p 102)

After the strike, the ACTU Executive carried a resolution, which was overwhelmingly endorsed by the NSW Trades and Labor Council, justifying the support of the Government over the miners, which said in part:

“We warn workers of this country to be ever watchful of any attempt in the future to embroil them in industrial disputes which are designed for purely political motives…..

We draw the attention of the workers of Australia to the fact that the coal dispute, due to having a political and not legitimate industrial basis, caused the acceptance by the Trade Union Movement of measures most repugnant to it, such as the Freezing of Funds legislation, imprisonment of the Union officials, and the use of the armed forces to win coal.” (minutes, NSW Trades and Labor Council, 25 August, 1949 cited in Deery, Labour in Conflict, p.99)