

DOUGLAS NEWTON

‘We have sprung at a bound’: Australia’s leap into the Great War, July–August 1914

‘We have sprung at a bound against barbarism and despotism.’¹ Thus did Joseph Cook, Australia’s Liberal prime minister during the international crisis of July–August 1914, describe Australia’s leap into the Great War in his private diary early in 1915. Looking back, Cook took pride in his government’s record of rapid decision-making in 1914. This quickly became the received view, for which Charles Bean and Ernest Scott had laid the foundations. They suggested in the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918* that Australians, infused with ‘the general sense of a democracy’, had put steel into the British wobblers in 1914 by reacting to the threat of war with swiftness and determination. It was democratic audacity in action.² Similarly, a century after the outbreak of World War I, many Australians still think of their nation’s dash into that war as a chest-swelling moment.

Indeed, it is increasingly clear that, over the next four years, a kind of jingoistic euphoria may take hold in Australia as the centenary moments of World War I roll by. In some political circles, Australia’s history must always be presented as a ‘see how great we are’ story. Patriotically correct history must be written in the spirit of the ‘greatest, pluckiest, little country in the whole world’, so that we may all feel taller. Our 1914 story must be yet another chapter in a long feel-good narrative. The Australian commemorative ceremonies for the Great War that have been organised so far have been more



triumphal than elegiac in tone. For example, on the 100th anniversary of the departure of Australia's expeditionary force from Albany on 1 November 2014, Prime Minister Tony Abbott cited a contemporary who described the vision of the convoy departing as 'the most wonderful sight that an Australian ever saw' and another who looked upon it as 'one of the most stirring sights in the whole history of the war'.³ The central truth offered to wide-eyed children is, apparently, that military endeavour is the way to the stars. It seems that the story of 1914 is to be marketed as uncomplicated and uplifting: Britain made the key decisions; Australia stepped up when Britain called; and the leaders of both nations were wholly in the right in rushing to the assistance of Belgium and France against German aggression. Australia and Britain, so we are told, stood up for democracy against barbarism and despotism. They leapt into war – heroically.

This article challenges that flattering nationalist consensus. It seeks to reconsider Australia's decision-making during the crisis of 1914, and to interleave the British and the Australian stories – which, in practice, means the stories of events as they unfolded in London and Melbourne, the key cities of decision-making power. 'Marvellous Melbourne' was at that time the home of the federal parliament and of the Governor-General and, therefore, was the de facto political capital of Australia. This article argues that the story of Australia's 1914 is neither straightforward nor uplifting. Australian politicians made decisions that were reckless, hurtling ahead of British requests for assistance. The idea that Australia merely followed in Britain's wake is misleading – for Australia moved ahead of Britain's decision for war. Moreover, democracy had little to do with decision-making, in either London or Melbourne.

This article puts the case for five propositions. First, in the years before 1914, Australia's military leaders and politicians authorised preparations for war well beyond the mere defence of Australia. Second, Britain's choice for war on 4 August 1914 was a close-run thing, with significant political forces at work, even inside the British Cabinet, seeking a negotiated end to the crisis. Third, in the course of the crisis, Australia jumped the gun, rushing forward to military decisions that pre-empted Britain's decisions. Fourth, Australia's jumping the gun had an unfortunate political impact in Britain, adding to the momentum of a political movement seeking to orchestrate British intervention as a matter of fidelity to the entente powers, Russia and France. Fifth, Australia's decisions in the crisis were driven by domestic political considerations arising from a federal election campaign that was in full swing when the international crisis blew up in July 1914.

I

Australia's leap into war was no kneejerk response. Well before the outbreak of war in August 1914, Australia planned to make a contribution to the defence of the British Empire – and that meant preparing for military action beyond the nation's borders. For more than a decade before the outbreak of war there were powerful advocates of the primacy of imperial defence among Australia's military planners, and they spruiked the indispensability of imperial expeditions.⁴ They preached the doctrine of the offensive, including expeditionary warfare and colonial seizures. Apprehended dangers to Australia from Asia, especially Japan's victory over Russia in 1904–05, loomed largest in the 'defence schemes' that were created, and this emotion underpinned loyalty to Britain.⁵ Those who created Australia's defence plans also explicitly opposed the voluntary clauses of Australia's first *Defence Act* (1903) as an obstacle to a commitment to wider imperial warfare. Australia's politicians slowly acquiesced before those insisting on the need for such offensive planning. In this way, a sense of obligation took hold, making it probable that Australia would make a military contribution to Britain's cause, in the widest sense, and under virtually any circumstances.

This took some time. In the decade following the end of the Boer War, Labor politicians at first suggested the possibility of Australia standing aloof from a British war and only slowly crab-walked away from this position.⁶ This created some tension between Labor political figures and Major-General Edward Hutton, the British officer serving as the first General Officer Commanding the new Australian forces from 1902 to 1904.⁷ Hutton produced the first significant defence scheme for Australia, drawn up in 1904. It set enduring themes. It anticipated racial perils facing Australia from Asia, and clearly the White Ensign of the Royal Navy was presented as the ultimate guarantee of White Australia. Hutton's scheme also preached imperial duty, specifically the need for an 'Imperial Australian Force' to undertake 'the larger defence of Australian interests elsewhere than in Australia'.⁸ While asserting the need for more autonomy in Australia's defence after 1907, Australian politicians in fact made key concessions to Britain. At the Imperial Defence Conference of July 1909, Australian representatives committed Australia to the transfer of its own naval fleet to the British Admiralty in wartime, and crucially agreed also that Australia must 'take its share in the general defence of the Empire'.⁹

In the years that followed, visiting British military experts shored up the commitment. The legendary British military commander Lord Kitchener of

Khartoum was invited to Australia in early 1910 and he supplied a famous 'Memorandum on the defence of Australia'. This endorsed more military spending, and advocated plans for Australia's military forces to prepare for 'taking the offensive' through 'a mobile striking force' – which Kitchener suggested would most likely operate within remote Australia.¹⁰ By that year, the politicians from both major parties, the Commonwealth Liberal Party and the federal Labor Party, had accepted the essentials of a common program: a scheme to establish compulsory military training for young men, the enlargement of a separate Australian fleet (the Royal Australian Navy, or RAN, as it was named in 1911), and the virtual certainty of an Australian military contribution to any British war.

Most importantly, between 1910 and 1914 politicians from both sides endorsed explicit planning for expeditionary warfare. The Labor government led by Prime Minister Andrew Fisher, which held office from 1910 to 1913, did not resist this trend of events. Fisher and George Pearce, Labor's Defence Minister, attended the imperial conference in London in the summer of 1911. There they gained symbols of a supposed greater autonomy in Australia's defence – such as the right to fly the Australian flag from the jackstaffs of Australian naval ships. But, on matters of substance, Fisher and Pearce were willing to compromise. They renewed the promise of a smooth transfer of Australian warships to London's control in wartime. Anything else was 'inconceivable', declared Pearce, promising that 'you can always count the fleets in'. Shy of publicity, however, Pearce also pleaded that it would be 'far wiser to leave it unwritten'. Striking a similar note, Fisher assured all: 'Do not depreciate us. We shall do things, and not talk about them.'¹¹ At a series of War Office meetings during the conference, Pearce offered even more. He agreed that Australian military officers should 'work out a scheme so that, if the Government of Australia so desires, they will have preparations made for mobilising a certain proportion of their force to proceed to certain ports for oversea [*sic*] action'.¹² The actual planning for this began at a conference on 'mutual assistance' with New Zealand in November 1912. Australia was slated to supply 12,000 men.¹³

Australia's next 'General scheme of defence' (1913) incorporated these plans. The scheme, endorsed by the British Committee of Imperial Defence, scorned mere 'local defence' and urged 'active offence'. The scheme's mobilisation schedules for an 'Expeditionary Force' included plans for its despatch 'against foreign possessions' near Australia (that is, German, Dutch, French and Portuguese colonies), followed by its deployment further afield in 'Imperial military operations'.¹⁴ British war orders for Australia's navy assumed



The parade of the Australian Expeditionary Force: lunch time at Royal Park, Melbourne, 1914. State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection H86.98/218

British Admiralty control, giving Australia a role in plans for economic warfare against Germany, 'swabbing up the seas of enemy merchantmen'.¹⁵ In this sense, plans for military operations in faraway places were all in the works *before* August 1914.

Does this matter? Were not Australians bound to contribute anyway to Britain's war? Certainly Australia had no power to choose neutrality in 1914. Australians were constitutionally and politically incapable of standing aloof. Believing themselves transplanted Britons, most were emotionally committed to assisting the motherland. But it is not at all clear that they were overwhelmingly in favour of a commitment, in advance, to an expeditionary force to serve Britain anywhere. None other than General Sir Ian Hamilton, British inspector-general of overseas forces, who visited Australia in early 1914,

explained to British Prime Minister H.H. Asquith that this was a sensitive matter in Australia. ‘The whole vital force of the country,’ he estimated, ‘i.e. the rank and file of its people, are standing firm together against any such proposition’.¹⁶

II

Before examining Australia’s actions in July–August 1914, it is important to challenge a common misconception: that the case for Britain entering the war was so clear that it was irresistible. Some historians present a narrative suggesting that the British Government and people were almost unanimous in support of war, apart from a tiny group of ineffectual cranks.¹⁷ One historian notes that the decision for war was opposed by only ‘a few dissenting voices’ who ‘found themselves isolated and largely without influence beyond the confines of their sects’.¹⁸ This is scarcely borne out by the evidence from within the British Cabinet. Britain’s final decision for war in 1914 was in fact a close-run thing. It is mostly forgotten now that the British Cabinet decided as late as Saturday 1 August that Britain would *not* send its own expeditionary force into the jaws of war on the Continent. Moreover, Britain’s actions during the crisis were controversial – especially inside the governing Liberal Party. Many Liberal dissidents were appalled at the haste and manipulation of their own government. Because of the strong resistance to war, the ultimate decision hung in the balance in Britain until the last moments, deep in the evening of Tuesday 4 August. Why?

There was a strong faction of neutralists inside Prime Minister Asquith’s factionalised Cabinet of 19 men. Lewis Harcourt, the colonial secretary, was the leader of that faction. Harcourt’s Cabinet journal, which has only recently become available, reveals that on Monday 27 July, at the beginning of the crisis, there were 11 ministers whom Harcourt identified as pledged disciples in the ‘Peace party which if necessary shall break up the Cabinet in the interest of our abstention [from war]’.¹⁹ The neutralists had the numbers, and they were absolutely determined that Britain should stick with neutral diplomacy, resist any provocative moves, and do all she could to restrain Russia and France. Harcourt’s journal exposes the passion. On Wednesday 29 July he wrote: ‘I am determined not to remain in the Cabinet if they decide to join in a war – but they cannot so decide as I am certain now that I can take at least 9 colleagues out with me on resignation.’²⁰ Harcourt ended his private journal for Thursday 30 July with the fighting words: ‘War situation I fear much worse tonight. Pray God I can still smash our Cabinet before they can commit the crime.’²¹ Nine resignations would have sunk the government.

As the crisis unfolded, Radical critics were seething. They asserted that the leading ministers were doing too little to avert war. Worse, they engineered three provocative moves early in negotiations that compromised Britain's own efforts to mediate. At the beginning of the crisis, on Sunday 26 July, Harcourt warned Asquith that 'he ought to order Churchill to move no ship anywhere without instructions from the Cabinet. I have a profound distrust of Winston's judgment and loyalty'.²² His suspicions were well founded. Winston Churchill, first lord of the admiralty, was behind decisions that frog-marched events. First, Churchill ordered the First Fleet *not* to disperse after a test mobilisation (on Sunday 26 July), so that Britain's navy was kept in a state very near to full mobilisation. He also publicised this initiative in the press. Second, Churchill decided to order the First Fleet to move to its 'war stations' (on Tuesday 28 July). These two initiatives encouraged the Russian and French advocates of 'firmness'.²³ Both decisions were made behind the back of the Cabinet and came at an early stage in the crisis, even before a Balkan war was known in London to have been declared. Third, the Liberal Imperialists secured a Cabinet decision to despatch the official 'warning telegram' across the Empire (Wednesday 29 July).²⁴ This launched the 'precautionary stage' in war preparations, and incited the emotionalism of war across the Empire. Germany did not issue her comparable 'danger of threatening war' proclamation (*Kriegsgefahrzustand*) until Friday 31 July.²⁵ General Henry Wilson, the director of military operations, wrote of the warning telegram in his diary: 'I don't know why we are doing it, because there is nothing moving in Germany'.²⁶ Thus, even Wilson acknowledged that Britain was forcing the pace.

It is vital also to grasp the powerful movement of resistance to Britain embarking upon this war. There were Cabinet revolts in the autumn of 1911 and again in 1912 against the presumption of British intervention in war at the behest of France and Russia.²⁷ The same Radical neutralist ministers who had revolted against this presumption in 1911 and 1912 also revolted against it during the July crisis. Inside the Cabinet, and the Liberal Party, the call for neutrality undoubtedly had the support of the majority. Asquith himself, in a letter to his lover Venetia Stanley, estimated that 'three quarters' of Liberal MPs opposed intervention.²⁸ Beyond the ranks of Liberals, a commitment to neutrality over intervention was strong among a wide circle of internationalists, socialists, radicals, intellectuals, feminists, suffragists, peace activists, and internationally minded Christians. At short notice, rallies were organised in many cities on the last weekend of peace. Up to 20,000 people filled Trafalgar Square to advocate peace and neutrality for Britain on Sunday 2 August.²⁹

So serious were divisions in Asquith's Cabinet over these early steps toward war that it nearly collapsed on the very eve of the war. Four Cabinet ministers (John Burns, John Simon, Lord Beauchamp and Lord Morley) and one junior minister (Charles Trevelyan) resigned on Sunday 2 and Monday 3 August. They complained, as Morley put it, that 'the Cabinet was being rather artfully drawn on step by step to war for the benefit of France and Russia'.³⁰ The dissenters' resignation letters protested against the government's servility to the entente. In particular, the rebels denounced the Cabinet's decision, by a slender margin, to offer a guarantee of British naval support to France on Sunday 2 August.³¹ Beauchamp wrote a private memorandum on the crisis, ending with a heartfelt cry: 'I cannot but feel that our promise to France is a *casus belli* to Germany. Alas for this country.'³² This British Cabinet crisis was truly singular and it had no parallel in other nations. Nowhere else in Europe did ministers resign with the hot breath of war on their faces; only in London. This in itself points to the deep dissatisfaction inside the British Cabinet at the handling of events by Asquith, Sir Edward Grey, the foreign secretary, and Winston Churchill.

As is well known, two of the four resigning Cabinet ministers (John Simon and Lord Beauchamp) did return to the Cabinet on Tuesday 4 August – reacting to Asquith's pleas to put national unity first. But none of the original four withdrew their criticisms of the British policies that they alleged had contributed to the disaster. John Burns, for example, filled his diary with bitter denunciations of those who had chosen war. On 2 August 1915 he recorded: 'A year ago today since I resigned. After a year's waste of blood and treasure I rejoice that I had the wisdom, courage and knowledge of what would happen to register by my resignation my objection to this gratuitous and wanton war.' He attacked those who had allowed the entente with France to blossom into an alliance: 'This alliance was entered upon by a secret coterie behind the back of the Cabinet, without the knowledge of Parliament and to the surprise of the country.'³³ His complaint was echoed by dozens of other Radicals.³⁴

London's final decision for war was an intensely political decision. The leading Liberal Imperialists in the Cabinet, Prime Minister Asquith, Sir Edward Grey and Winston Churchill, intimidated the majority by threatening to resign if the neutralists persisted in opposing a commitment to France during the last days of peace.³⁵ In light of these threats, the Radicals faced the collapse of their government, and their careers, if they provoked the Liberal Imperialists into walking away from the Cabinet. For this reason, Herbert Samuel, a leading minister, told his wife on 2 August that, in the last analysis, the result of rebellion within the Cabinet 'would have been either a Coalition

Government or a Unionist Government either of which would certainly have been a war ministry'.³⁶ In the end, enough Radicals surrendered for the interventionists to prevail. As the winning argument went – better a Liberal-led war, if war it had to be. But it was a near thing.

The Radical critics were also infuriated at their leaders' scant respect for 'democracy' in deciding for war. The parliament was told little about Britain's policy with respect to the crisis during the week beginning Monday 27 July. In his diary, Alexander MacCallum Scott, a Radical MP, exploded: 'Why should we not know the policy?'³⁷ Similarly, parliament was in the dark about Russia's early military steps until Thursday 30 July, and was told absolutely nothing about the British Government's rejection of German diplomatic approaches on that day and again on Saturday 1 August.³⁸ When Grey addressed the House of Commons for the first time at any length on British policy, on Monday 3 August, he put the case for instant intervention on behalf of France and Belgium in any war. Showing no democratic instinct, Asquith immediately attempted to close down all debate. Only a last-minute suggestion by the Speaker secured an adjournment debate for MPs.³⁹ In the House of Lords the Liberal and Tory leaders colluded to prevent any debate.⁴⁰ When the Commons turned to debate Grey's statement that evening, 17 MPs spoke against Britain's intervention. Only three speakers favoured it.⁴¹ Scandalously, the Asquith government had sought to commit the British nation to a war, soon to be described as a great crusade for democracy – while simultaneously seeking to shut the mouths of all parliamentarians.

The 'democratic deficit' was plain. During the week of crisis, the Cabinet was frequently sidelined. The ministers were 'bounced' by a string of faits accomplis: Winston Churchill's decisions to keep the First Fleet concentrated and then to send it to its war stations (Sunday 26 July and Tuesday 28 July); Grey and Asquith's decisions to reject out of hand German efforts to begin negotiations over Britain's neutrality (Thursday 30 July); Grey's ham-fisted telegrams to Paris and Berlin, insincerely seeking promises to respect Belgian neutrality (Friday 31 July), with no even-handed negotiation in return, such as William Gladstone had achieved in 1870; Grey's notification to the French Embassy of the pledge of naval assistance that he hoped to extract from the Cabinet (Saturday 1 August); Churchill's completion of naval mobilisation, in defiance of the Cabinet's decision (overnight Saturday 1 and Sunday 2 August); and Asquith's decision to mobilise the British army (overnight Sunday 2 and Monday 3 August). All these landed in the laps of the ministers as done deeds.⁴²

A handful of ministers made the key decisions. On Sunday 2 August, Lord Beauchamp and John Simon complained that the Cabinet majority had been

'jockeyed' into a pledge of naval support for France by the Cabinet's leaders.⁴³ Churchill conceded in his memoirs that *all* the 'supreme decisions' – to send an ultimatum, to declare war on Germany, and to send the expeditionary force to the Continent – 'were never taken at any Cabinet'. These decisions 'were compelled by the force of events, and rest on the authority of the Prime Minister'.⁴⁴ George Trevelyan, Grey's biographer, was correct when he observed, 'Apparently there never was a formal decision taken in the Cabinet to go to war or to send an ultimatum to Germany'.⁴⁵

The final decisions were the work of Asquith's closest satellites. It is not clear even that the final Cabinet meeting before the war, on the morning of Tuesday 4 August, approved in advance a declaration of war by Britain at midnight. Prime Minister Asquith did not use the word 'ultimatum' when he spoke to the House of Commons later on that day, nor did he read the text of the vital second telegram to Berlin.⁴⁶ Only a fraction of the Cabinet gathered at 10 Downing Street on the night of Tuesday 4 August: Asquith, Grey and Richard Haldane, joined later by Lloyd George and Reginald McKenna. This small assembly made the final choice for war. Thus, as the contemporary historian Keith Wilson concludes, 'the Cabinet, as such, never did make a decision for war'.⁴⁷

The actual declaration of war was achieved by resorting to the royal prerogative. A meeting of the Privy Council was engineered by Asquith late in the evening of Tuesday 4 August. Seated with King George V were three men, Lord Beauchamp (who had only just returned to the Cabinet), Lord Allendale and Earl Granard. This tiny Privy Council, at 15 minutes' notice, met at Buckingham Palace at 10.35 pm, and approved the documents.⁴⁸ Faithfully reflecting the pre-democratic order, the King, one peer and minister, and two court officials, formally launched Britain's war. None was elected. The defeat of the neutralists in 1914 testifies not to the hopelessness of their cause but to the rapidity of the crisis.

III

When the political struggle in London in July–August 1914 is brought into focus, Australian actions take on a new complexion. In an important sense, Australia can be seen to have jumped the gun – pre-empting the British Government's requests for military assistance and the final decision for war.

How did Australia react to the developing European crisis? On Tuesday 28 July, Australian naval officers read press reports of the first British naval initiative, namely, the decision to keep the First Fleet concentrated – Winston Churchill's decision that was so controversial inside the British Cabinet.

Admiral William Creswell, the commander of the Royal Australian Navy, urged the Navy Board in Melbourne to put the men and ships of the Royal Australian Navy on six hours notice, to prepare stores, and to take preliminary steps to impose censorship. In addition, he urged the Naval Board to ask Rear-Admiral Sir George Patey, the British officer in command of the Australian squadron, to suggest a list of essential naval preparations, because 'it may soon be desirable that vessels should be moved to their war stations'.⁴⁹ Edward Millen, the defence minister, approved these measures the next day. These developments were set in train before news reached Australia of the outbreak of war in the Balkans following the Austrian declaration of war upon Serbia on Tuesday 28 July.

Two days later came a much more serious step. On Thursday 30 July, the official British 'warning telegram' of Wednesday 29 July arrived in Sydney. It invited the Australian Government to begin the simple precautions outlined as first steps in the latest defence scheme – in essence these were measures to guard port facilities. Instead, the receipt of the telegram prompted Australia's newly appointed Governor-General, Ronald Munro Ferguson, a British Liberal Imperialist eager to show his mettle, to go much further. Munro Ferguson, undertaking his first visit to Sydney at that time, asked Edward Millen for a promise that the Royal Australian Navy would be transferred instantly to the control of the British Admiralty. Millen conceded. Munro Ferguson cabled London with the good news: 'I understood from Minister of Defence unofficially that Australian ships would be placed at Admiralty's disposal at once.'⁵⁰ Later that night, Millen agreed also to Rear-Admiral Patey's request that the Australian fleet, cruising off the Queensland coast, should be ordered to return to Sydney and take on stores and ammunition in preparation for a move to war stations.⁵¹

Unbeknown to Munro Ferguson, at the Colonial Office in London during these same hours, Lewis Harcourt had been mulling over Winston Churchill's request that he cable to Australia seeking the immediate transfer of the Australian warships to the Admiralty's control. Harcourt confided to his private journal that, filled with his own worries, he had delayed sending the cable. Churchill, he wrote, 'has gone mad', and was 'getting prematurely in the war stage'.⁵² The transfer of the Australian fleet, wrote Harcourt, was 'premature, unnecessary'. Then, to Harcourt's astonishment, before sending the Admiralty request, he received the cable from Munro Ferguson, 'with [an] unofficial offer of their fleet for our purposes'.⁵³ Later on the same day, Thursday 30 July, Harcourt received a second note from Churchill at the Admiralty, pressing him to send another urgent cable to Australia, this time

requesting the instant movement of Australia's warships to their prearranged war stations.⁵⁴ Harcourt sent this cable promptly. But he confided to his journal that he 'did so with regret', believing it was 'premature'.⁵⁵ Once again the cable sent in reply from Australia surprised Harcourt. Replying in the afternoon of Friday 31 July, Munro Ferguson proudly reported that the warships were *already* on their way.⁵⁶ Later, Munro Ferguson would boast to the King that the movement of Australia's naval ships in preparation for deployment to their war stations had begun 'before the "warning message" reached us'.⁵⁷ Australia had indeed moved ahead of Britain's requests.

The most spectacular instance of Australia jumping the gun came at an emergency Cabinet meeting presided over by Prime Minister Cook in Melbourne on Monday 3 August. The Governor-General had prompted this meeting by cabling to Cook from Sydney on Friday 31 July with a plea that he recall his ministers from their election schedules across Australia. All were busily engaged in electioneering for the coming federal poll due on 5 September. 'Would it not be well', Munro Ferguson cabled, 'in view of latest news from Europe, that Ministers should meet in order that [the] Imperial Government may know what support to expect from Australia?'⁵⁸ Munro Ferguson backed this up with a personal letter to Cook, highlighting the fact that 'according to one report Canada has acted already'.⁵⁹ Indeed, Colonel Sam Hughes, Canada's indiscreet defence minister, had been talking excitedly to journalists for some days about Ottawa's plans to offer 30,000 troops to Britain.⁶⁰ Clearly Munro Ferguson was playing upon the anxieties of Australian ministers that they might be seen to be falling behind in the race between the dominions to demonstrate loyalty. He offered to come to Melbourne overnight on Sunday 2 August in order to endorse any decisions made by Cook's emergency Cabinet. He also offered to bring to Melbourne with him on his overnight express train the two Cabinet ministers electioneering in Sydney over the weekend, Edward Millen and Sir William Irvine, attorney-general. Cook complied. He returned to Melbourne from his round of election meetings in the Victorian countryside on Saturday 1 August and called an emergency meeting of his Cabinet in Melbourne for Monday 3 August.

Munro Ferguson's overnight dash to Melbourne underlined his own belief that some dramatic gesture should be made that would signal Australia's absolute loyalty to Britain. Cook greeted the train carrying Munro Ferguson and his two Cabinet ministers at Spencer Street Station, Melbourne, on Monday morning 3 August. Munro Ferguson then withdrew to the grand Government House in the King's Domain near the Royal Botanic Gardens, at that time his official residence as Governor-General of Australia.



Prime Minister Sir Joseph Cook, Governor-General Sir Ronald Munro Ferguson, Lady Helen Munro Ferguson and Lady Mary Cook, Melbourne, 18 May 1914.
State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection H2007.129/5

Meanwhile, the Cook Cabinet assembled at the ‘Commonwealth Offices’ at 4 Treasury Place in Melbourne, facing the Treasury Gardens. It was a new building, proudly bearing in large letters the name of the new nation, ‘Commonwealth of Australia’. The Commonwealth Coat of Arms graced its entrance, in contrast to the oversized Royal Coat of Arms over the doorway of the grand state government Treasury Building at 2 Treasury Place, so typical of the colonial-era buildings along Melbourne’s look-alike Whitehall. Would the Cook Cabinet reflect the new national spirit or the old colonial instinct? In fact, only four of Cook’s ten ministers were present – Cook, Irvine, Millen, and James McColl.⁶¹ Distance and short notice accounted for the absence of most. The majority was still scattered, immersed in the election campaign. Nonetheless, the rump of the Cabinet did not choose to exercise any caution on account of the small attendance. The four ministers deliberated, and then Cook summoned the Governor-General, commander-in-chief of all Australia’s military forces, to preside immediately at a federal executive council meeting. Here he endorsed the key decision. The chief military adviser to the Cabinet, Major Cyril Brudenell White, prepared the text of a cable to be despatched immediately to Lewis Harcourt’s Colonial Office in London.⁶² It read:

In the event of war Commonwealth of Australia [is] prepared to place vessels of Australian Navy under control of British Admiralty when desired. Further prepared to despatch expeditionary force [of] 20,000 men of any suggested composition to any destination desired by the Home Government. Force to be at complete disposal of the Home Government. Cost of despatch and maintenance would be borne by this Government. Australian press notified accordingly.⁶³

Through this extraordinary Cabinet decision, a small knot of politicians announced to the world Australia's decision to offer her forces to the 'Home Government', both her warships and an expeditionary force, virtually without qualification – save the outbreak of war. The ships and troops, in any combination, were for combat anywhere, under British direction, for any objective, with Australians footing the entire bill. The colonial instinct had triumphed.

The timing of the Australian offer is significant. The cable left Melbourne at about 6 pm (AEST) on Monday 3 August. This was 8 am (GMT) Monday in London. So, Australia despatched its offer some seven hours *before* Sir Edward Grey stood in the House of Commons that afternoon to outline to the nation and the Empire, for the first time, the position of the Asquith government on the European crisis. Australia despatched its offer some 40 hours *before* the British Government itself issued the announcement of the declaration of war at the Foreign Office, soon after midnight on Tuesday 4 August (the announcement backdated the declaration to 11 pm).⁶⁴ In no sense was Australia's offer of troops a reaction to a British request. Nor was it a requirement demanded of Australia under her imperial defence plans. It was not a response to the outbreak of war in Western Europe, for Germany did not declare war on France until the early evening of Monday 3 August, and did not invade Belgium until the next day. The rump of the Cook Cabinet had simply rushed forward with a sweeping military offer. Harcourt's formal reply to Australia's offer, while expressing gratitude on behalf of the British Government, made this plain: 'there seems to be no immediate necessity for any request on our part for an expeditionary force from Australia.'⁶⁵

Were Australian politicians aware that London was still debating whether to make war at all? Certainly they were. On Monday 3 August they knew that London was still in two minds about intervention. Australia's leading newspapers did not hide the fact. They reported correctly that the issues of war or peace were dividing the political class in London. Summaries of editorial opinion from the British press highlighted this.⁶⁶ The Melbourne

Age noted on the morning of Monday 3 August that 'a strong Liberal party movement is on foot in England to keep the British Empire neutral, and that the Asquith Cabinet has already felt its pressure'.⁶⁷ On Monday 3 August many Australian newspapers also correctly reported the Liberal-aligned London *Daily Chronicle's* stunning account of the British Cabinet decision of Saturday 1 August – *against* sending Britain's own expeditionary force to the Continent.⁶⁸ Australia's offer of troops and ships had been made in the full knowledge that Britain's decision was still pending. It cannot be said that the Australian politicians made this offer because they knew war was just around the corner. They did not.

IV

It is a difficult thing to assess precisely, but there can be little doubt that Australia's hasty offer had a political impact in Britain in the countdown to war. Together with the offers coming from New Zealand and Canada, it intensified the pressure on London's Liberal politicians.

Australia was not alone in rushing forward with an offer of an expeditionary force. On receipt of London's 'warning telegram' of Wednesday 29 July, the three leading dominions moved to show something of their readiness to help the 'mother country'. On the evening of Friday 31 July New Zealand time, William Massey, prime minister of New Zealand and leader of the conservative Reform Party, made a public offer in the Wellington parliament of support to Britain. Massey announced that, in the event of war, he would indeed ask the parliament and people 'to do their duty by offering the services of an expeditionary force to the Imperial government'.⁶⁹ Canada's offer was sent on Sunday 2 August. The Duke of Connaught, the Canadian Governor-General, cabled the Colonial Office to explain that the ministers of Robert Borden's Conservative government wanted to help Britain and were 'anxiously considering the most effective means of rendering every possible aid'. He added that the Canadian Government was 'confident that a considerable force would be available for service abroad'. The Canadians planned to cover 'all necessary financial provision for their pay, maintenance, and equipment'.⁷⁰ Thus, Australia's offer was third in line. Three dominions were evidently puppy-keen and tugging at the leash.

British Tory newspapers and politicians, in mutual embrace, lauded the dominions' initial generalised declarations of loyalty. When these were backed up with offers of expeditionary forces, the British pro-interventionist newspapers were jubilant. Their purpose was plain: they trumpeted the dominions' apparent eagerness to send military aid in order to increase pressure

on the Liberals for intervention. In this way they contributed to the self-styled ‘pogrom’ orchestrated by certain partisan military officers, diplomats, and press barons in London, all aiming to whip up support for war.⁷¹ Australia’s impetuosity bolstered this ‘pogrom’.

On the last weekend of peace, all the leading Tory newspapers publicised the dominions’ extravagant declarations of fidelity to the Empire.⁷² *The Times* drew attention to the Australian politicians’ promises of unstinting support in a special Sunday edition published on 2 August. Assurances that ‘Australia will fight for the Empire to the last’ were paraded, along with the details of New Zealand and Canada’s offers of expeditionary forces.⁷³ *The Times* argued in the punch line of its special leader, ‘Britain’s part in the crisis’, that the dominions were showing Britain the way, and that the Asquith government ‘cannot afford at this hour of peril to be less clear sighted, less resolute, than our brethren overseas’.⁷⁴ *The Observer* and the *Scotsman* promoted this same lesson, highlighting the speeches of Australian politicians.⁷⁵ On Monday 3 August, *The Times* was effusive in its main editorial: ‘These kinsmen [of the dominions] have swept away the phrases of weakness and indifference and ranged their manhood at our side.’⁷⁶ When news of the Australian offer of 20,000 men reached London on the morning of Tuesday 4 August, again the interventionist press extolled the offer, putting the dazzle of noughts into their headlines.⁷⁷

The dominions’ offers of expeditionary forces also gained special mention in the British parliament. Andrew Bonar Law, the Conservative Party leader, praised the loyalty of the dominions in his speech to the House of Commons following Sir Edward Grey’s foreign policy statement on the afternoon of Monday 3 August. He assured the Liberal government of Conservative support for ‘whatever action it is necessary to take’. But he did not fail to mention the dominions. He doted on them. Their readiness to assist Britain was a ‘bright spot’ in the crisis. The vows of loyalty and the pledges of expeditionary forces demonstrated that ‘every one of His Majesty’s Dominions beyond the Seas will be behind us in whatever action it is necessary to take’.⁷⁸

Similarly, immediately after the declaration of war, the Tory leaders and other interventionists in the House of Lords were still booming the dominions’ offers, in particular Australia’s offer, and pleading for the Liberal government to accept them, in order that Britain could wage a war of imperial dimensions.⁷⁹ ‘These offers have moved our people greatly’, argued Lord Lansdowne, Tory leader in the Lords. ‘They are a proof that the British Empire is not a paper Empire, but a great reality, and that from all parts of the Empire we may depend upon that cooperation to which we certainly look from the

people of these islands.' He was 'content' to hear, he said, that the government 'will not hesitate' to take up the dominions' offers of military aid 'at the proper moment'.⁸⁰ Prominent Tory politicians would long remember the dominions' apparent readiness to rush into combat as one significant factor, among many, that lubricated Britain's slide to war.⁸¹

Did Australia push Britain's finger nearer the trigger as the crisis reached its climax on Tuesday 4 August? A more cautious conclusion is necessary. The most that can be said is that Australia's offer of an expeditionary force on Monday 3 August assisted a noisy political campaign that can only have shaken the resolve of men of principle who were struggling to save the Empire from a premature plunge into war. It must be remembered that the man in London who received all Governor-General Munro Ferguson's cables from Australia – offering military assistance ahead of any British request, and even boasting that Australia was gripped by 'indescribable enthusiasm and entire unanimity'⁸² – was Lewis Harcourt, leader of the neutralist ministers. These cables must have rocked his confidence. At various points in the crisis he described to the Cabinet the pressure he was under from the dominions. For example, Australia's offer of an expeditionary force arrived at the Colonial Office while Harcourt was in a Cabinet meeting on the evening of Monday 3 August. In his private journal recording events at that meeting, Harcourt wrote that he had raised there the New Zealanders' offer. He told the Cabinet that he was replying with the comment that there was 'no condition yet which renders this necessary'. He was careful to note that he was doing so, 'With PM's concurrence'.⁸³ At the Cabinet meeting on the following morning, Tuesday 4 August, Harcourt sought to restrain his colleagues when it was proposed they should begin discussions on the 'seizure of German colonies' at the commencement of a war. Harcourt resisted this, and told the ministers that he was 'holding back [the] Dominion Exped[itionary] forces for the present'.⁸⁴ Indeed, later that day he replied not only to Australia but also to Canada and New Zealand that there was 'no immediate necessity' for their offers of expeditionary forces.⁸⁵ In Harcourt's private journal, as noted previously, he described these as 'unnecessary' and 'premature'. But in truth they were worse than this – they were politically damaging to the neutralist cause.

V

To comprehend Australia's offers to Britain one must place them in the immediate Australian political moment. The international crisis coincided with an unprecedented federal election campaign in Australia, following the nation's first double dissolution. This arose from Liberal Prime Minister

Cook's political difficulties following the close election of May 1913, which had left the Liberals with only a slender majority in the House of Representatives, while facing a Senate still controlled by federal Labor. At the outset, familiar domestic issues dominated the campaign. The Liberals vowed to abolish preference for trade unionists in federal government employment. Labor looked to the extension of pensions to widows and orphans. Both sides promised to build up Australia's defences, but Labor was reluctant to borrow in order to do so.

As chance would have it, the events of the international crisis and key moments in Australia's election process were closely aligned. The Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated on 28 June; the federal parliament in Melbourne was prorogued the following day. By mid July both Cook for the Liberals and Andrew Fisher for Labor had delivered their policy speeches. The leading politicians were in the thick of electioneering when Austria delivered its ultimatum to Serbia on Thursday 23 July. The crisis suddenly took on a more serious aspect on Tuesday 28 July when Austria declared war on Serbia and the next day shelled Belgrade. This was reported in Australia on Thursday 30 July, the same day the federal parliament was formally dissolved and voters had their last chance to enrol. The serious possibility of the Balkan war igniting a wider European war was glimpsed in London late on Friday 31 July, when Prime Minister Asquith suddenly announced at the end of the proceedings of parliament that he had received news of Russia's general mobilisation – a fatal step not known about in Australia until Saturday 1 August. Over those same two days, the pace of the election campaign in Australia was heating up, with the leading Australian politicians addressing election meetings daily.

Indeed, from this point, political speeches in small Victorian country towns and political decisions in Melbourne took centre stage in the story of Australia's descent into war. On Friday 31 July both Fisher and Cook were campaigning in rural Victoria. Suddenly, both party leaders turned to the European crisis in their election addresses. On the evening of Friday 31 July, Fisher spoke to a crowd at the Victoria Hall in Colac, a town of about 3500 people serving the dairy industry some 150 kilometres south-west of Melbourne. Only at the end of his address did the opposition leader refer to the danger of war. Fisher spoke in tones of regret. But he famously promised that 'should the worst happen after everything has been done that honour will permit, Australians will stand behind our own to help and defend her to our last man and our last shilling'.⁸⁶ Transparently, it was a calculated tactic to repel the familiar smears directed at Labor by the 'Union Jackals', as the *Bulletin* dubbed the imperial enthusiasts, that Labor was lukewarm on Empire,

reluctant to spend on defence, and riddled with Catholics – whom the dog-whistlers could always infer were the traitors within Australia's gates, especially in light of the extraordinary tensions over Home Rule in 1914. Fisher had been twice wounded before on such issues. In 1909, he resisted a populist campaign that Australia should donate a dreadnought battleship to Britain. Next, in 1911, he had been controversially reported as saying that, if Australia judged a British war to be unjust, she might 'haul down the Union Jack' and strike out on her own.⁸⁷ By adopting at Colac the ultra-patriots' hyperbole familiar from the days of the Boer War – 'last man, last shilling' – Fisher attempted to find safety for Labor if the election campaign began to degenerate into a debate on love of Empire.

There was certainly a danger of that. A prominent Queensland Liberal Senate candidate, Thomas Chataway, advised Cook on Friday 31 July that 'the European situation affords Liberals in Australia excellent material for a good war-cry during the current campaign'. Chataway told his leader that Liberals should not be frightened of the accusation that 'we are trying to have a Kahki [*sic*] election', because 'the war question is swamping all political questions'.⁸⁸ The opportunity was too good to miss: Labor should be depicted as soft on Australian and imperial defence. Other Liberal politicians were already signalling their readiness to milk the moment for political advantage. Edward Millen, speaking at Mosman in Sydney on Friday 31 July, accused Labor of showing 'open hostility' on defence because Fisher's party opposed further borrowing for defence purposes. In the context of the swirling international crisis, Millen argued, Labor was too big a risk for the voters to contemplate.⁸⁹ The whiff of a khaki election was in the air.

On the hustings in country Victoria, Cook spoke with the scent of looming combat in his nostrils. At Horsham, a rural town of about 3500 people in Victoria's Wimmera region, on the evening of Friday 31 July, he expressed his hopes that negotiations would avert war in Europe. 'But if it is to be war, if the Armageddon is to come, you and I shall be in it', he told his applauding audience in the town hall. 'It is no use to blink our obligations. If the Old Country is at war, so are we', he continued, sparking more loud applause.⁹⁰ Then he referred to the 'grave' matter of defence. He would not 'palter' over defence spending, he promised. He appeared to gloat over the fact that Russian, Austrian and Serbian socialists were already at each other's throats, overwhelmed by 'the feeling of nationhood'. Similarly, he warned, Socialism could not save Australia from war.⁹¹

The next day, Saturday 1 August, Cook spoke at the Victoria Hall in Colac, not 24 hours after Fisher. This time he placed the issue of Australia's defence

front and centre. Labor, which was ‘clamouring just now for the defence scheme to be less expensive’, would place Australia in jeopardy, warned Cook. A Liberal government, by contrast, ‘would not starve the effective preparations for defence’. Cook repeated his unconditional commitment to Britain: ‘If it was to be war they would all be in it.’ Australia’s ‘obligations’ would be ‘placed at the disposal of the responsible authorities’, Cook promised. He contrasted his own readiness for ‘action’ on defence with the trepidation and confusion that he claimed afflicted Labor.⁹²

Cook’s colleagues adopted the same tactics. Senator James McColl, a leading member of the Cook Cabinet, talked up the defence issue when he addressed electors at Casterton in rural south-west Victoria on Friday 31 July. McColl made a trenchant attack on Fisher for refusing to contemplate loans to build up the nation’s defences. Instead, he lamented, Labor proposed more spending on pensions for widows and orphans.⁹³ The message was plain enough: Labor was going to leave Australia dawdling in a fool’s paradise of socialist pension schemes when a militarist moloch was on the loose. Similarly, in Sydney, other frontbench Liberals were flag-waving in the face of war. At a rally in North Sydney on Saturday 1 August, Irvine scolded William Holman, the New South Wales Labor premier, for suggesting that Australia could not be pitchforked into war ‘at the bidding of some irresponsible ruler’. ‘What I say,’ Irvine declared, ‘is that when England is at war we are at war. (Applause.)’ The Cook government would back the statesmen of Britain, Irvine promised, ‘*whatever* [author’s italics] course they may adopt’.⁹⁴ The cheque was blank. Colonel Granville Ryrie, the local federal MP, weighed in at the same meeting, accusing Holman of treachery because he had ‘desired that the British should be defeated in the unfortunate war in South Africa’. He bawled back at interjectors, accusing them of being trade unionists who ‘would as soon be ruled by Germans’. Labor cared nothing for loyalty to Empire, he claimed. ‘At such a time as this, we as a nation need men at the head of affairs who have some sentiments of Imperialism. (Cheers).’⁹⁵

This was the bruising political contest that backlit the Cook Cabinet’s emergency session in Melbourne on Monday afternoon 3 August. All four politicians present, Cook, Edward Millen, Sir William Irvine and James McColl, had over the preceding three days been shouting at public meetings about their eagerness to spend on defence and to rush military aid to Britain. In this sense, the astonishing offer of an expeditionary force of 20,000 men – before Britain had made any request for such assistance – must be seen as a low political device. It was meant to trump Fisher’s vaguely preposterous ‘last man and last shilling’. Cook’s offer, aided and abetted by an activist

Governor-General, was real, precise and officially endorsed. It got Cook 20,000 points on the political scoreboard.

But Cook's decision to offer troops was scarcely a democratic decision. Democracy was entirely sidestepped – although the actions were taken in a constitutionally correct manner. There was no requirement that parliament be consulted and, with parliament dissolved, there was no opportunity. Moreover, the government was confident that the Governor-General, as the guardian of the Crown's reserve powers, had the power to endorse any military decisions taken by the government. Cook was in a rush. As he had warned at Colac on Saturday 1 August, he might have to act hastily in this crisis. 'The consent of Parliament is, of course, a very proper thing to have when the time is opportune, and, if parliament is sitting.' But it was not. Meanwhile, the government controlled the army and navy and might have to act 'at once if the necessity arises'.⁹⁶ In short, whether an election was impending or not, the inner executive had the power. It would use it if need be. And it did.

But to no avail, politically speaking. Labor offered a virtual political truce on defence issues on Sunday 2 August, and thereafter matched the Liberals' promises to assist Britain. Most importantly, Labor did not challenge Cook's offer of an expeditionary force on Monday 3 August.⁹⁷ That fait accompli stood. Small wonder that Governor-General Munro Ferguson could assure the King in early August, 'It would matter little to Your Majesty's Service which party was in power in this Commonwealth'.⁹⁸ Indeed, successfully repelling the Liberals' ultra-patriotic challenge, Labor enjoyed a great victory at the polls on 5 September and thereafter threw itself into the business of war.

The bitter truth about Australia in 1914 is that, in the middle of an election campaign, Australia's political leaders fell over themselves in an emphatic rush to offer proof of their devotion to the British Empire. Before diplomacy was exhausted, and before Britain indicated her own stance, Australia's Liberal leaders, facing a looming federal election, went beyond the defence plans made jointly with Britain, and beyond the British request for mere defensive precautions at an early stage. They offered an expeditionary force to anywhere, before a declaration of war. They offered men, ships and money, without qualification, in a transparent effort to eclipse their political rivals. The politicians and the press naively gloried in the offer, openly promoting it as proof of Australia's determination to match the pace of New Zealand and Canada, as if Australia were locked in a frantic footrace to win an imperial challenge cup. The unfortunate effect in London of Australia's huff-and-puff was to add to the tailwind in support of war. As the world swooped toward disaster, Australia exercised no brake whatsoever.