Australia in the League of Nations: a centenary view

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The League and global politics beyond the Empire-Commonwealth

With the formation of the Australian Commonwealth, the new nation adopted a constitution that imparted to the federal government the power to manage ‘external affairs’ (Sections 51, xxix), and one of the original departments of state had that name and something of that function. However, Australia was far from being the practitioner of anything approaching an ‘independent’ foreign policy, a notion that was explicitly rejected by the early prime ministers of the federation. Australian political leaders were confident that the nation’s prosperity, security, and even cultural identity were best protected and promoted through membership of the British Empire. Nevertheless, they did chafe at instances of British neglect or indifference, especially in the Pacific. In colonial times the activities of France and Germany in New Caledonia and New Guinea, respectively, had been regarded with apprehension. In 1907, at the Colonial Conference held in London, Alfred Deakin complained that British interests had not been properly asserted in the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu), the joint protectorate being established with France in 1906 without adequately consulting Australian opinion.¹

The experience of the Great War transformed Australia’s place in the world. On the one hand, within the Empire it was agreed (on the initiative of the Canadian prime minister, later to be vociferously supported by Prime Minister Billy Hughes) that the self-governing components would have more of a voice in the formation of common policy, and soon the expression ‘Empire-Commonwealth’ emerged as a descriptor of the trans-national British world. On the other, Australian representatives participated in the most significant act of global diplomacy to that date.²

Initially as part of the British Empire delegation, Hughes and his staff assembled with delegates of all 27 ‘allied and associated powers’ to negotiate the terms of the post-war order at the Paris Peace Conference. The proceedings involved many meetings and debates, but were effectively dominated by the three major powers, the United States, France and the United Kingdom. Though its principal business was to rearrange the map of Europe to give legitimacy to the nationality principle, on the insistence of American President Woodrow Wilson it also laid the grounds for the first potentially global institution devoted to promoting peace and security, the League of Nations. The conference concluded with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, on 28 June 1919. As a signatory, Australia became a national member of the League of Nations. Though Britain was the most important power within the new organisation (and its largest financial contributor) after the United States decided not to join, Australia nevertheless assumed through its new role a position in the wider international society beyond the Empire-Commonwealth. In time this membership would impose new tasks and responsibilities, requiring Australian Governments to consider as never before the nation’s interests beyond those customarily served by attachment to London.³ In short, the League became a school for international citizenship. This paper explores important aspects of this experience, which was initiated 100 years ago and continues today through Australia’s membership of the United Nations.

The requirements of membership

When the United Nations was formed in 1945, it was proclaimed as a new international organisation. However in its institutions as well as in the agenda it addressed, it copied many of the forms and practices of the League of Nations. Both were a response to a war that threatened to ruin civilisation, both sought to manage security issues and promote arms control as well as to pursue an extensive economic and social agenda, and both were structured to be controlled by an executive (or ‘Council’) dominated by the major powers which functioned alongside an assembly in which all member states were represented. The UN was the legatee of the League in more than one sense. Not only did the UN inherit the property of the League—including its Geneva headquarters—but some League agencies (including the International Labour Organization and UNESCO) transitioned to become elements of the UN system. The fiction of a new start was maintained to ensure that the United States and the Soviet Union were UN members from the beginning, in light of the fact that neither were foundation members of the League.

The structure of the League was prescribed in a Covenant of 26 Articles (as compared to the 111 Articles of the UN Charter). As a member of the League, the most immediate consequence for Australia was participation in the annual gatherings of the representatives of the member nations. Generally in September, for a period of two or three weeks, the Assembly met at the seat of the League in Geneva. Each nation had a single vote in plenary sessions, being permitted to send up to three delegates (as well as a further number of alternates). Initially the Commonwealth drafted officials or members of parliament who happened to be in Europe; later the choice of delegates became more considered, with the question going before Cabinet. Consistent with the principle adopted by the League—progressive for the time—that no position in the League would be closed to women, the decision was taken in 1922 that the Australian party dispatched to Geneva should contain at least one woman (this at a time when the Australian parliament consisted entirely of men).

The Assembly could debate a wide range of matters, from economic and social affairs to questions of security and disarmament. The practice developed that delegates from the Empire-Commonwealth (the British Empire Delegation—BED) met in preliminary sessions to discuss issues that might arise in order to avoid major differences between them being aired in public. In general Australian delegates were happy to follow the imperial lead but the record shows that they were willing to defend their national prerogatives when the occasion required.

The League recruited a permanent secretariat, under the supervision of the secretary-general (a position first held by the veteran British diplomat Sir Eric Drummond). Australians were among the early appointees, and the secretariat consistently included three or four Australians among its number.

The pre-eminent League body was the Council which consisted of representatives of the great powers, along with representatives regularly elected from the other nations (originally four, rising to eleven in 1936). Although initially content to follow the British lead, Canada became the first British dominion to take a national seat on the Council in 1927. In 1933 Australia joined the Council, a position it held until 1936.

The larger League machinery included the International Labour Organization (in Geneva) and the Permanent Court of International Justice (in The Hague). No Australians sat on the bench of the latter, but Australian delegations attended the regular ILO assemblies.

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Finally, the League initiated a number of international conferences and deliberations, from gatherings devoted to such social questions as the control of drugs of addiction, to problems entailed by the codification of international laws, to issues of economic cooperation and of disarmament. In each case the League acted as facilitator and custodian, the treaties or agreements that resulted being between the nations concerned. Australia sent delegates to many of these meetings, and though cooperation with the Empire-Commonwealth was usually the norm, there were occasions when specific Australian interests required a concrete response.

Through the many linkages these memberships and presences forged, Australia was required to contribute a national perspective to fora beyond the familiar Empire-Commonwealth circle, as some of the examples considered below illustrate.

**The Australian experience as a League mandatory**

At the negotiations in Paris that issued in the Versailles Treaty, Australia’s claims were given a strident voice by Prime Minister Hughes.\(^5\) Australian forces having occupied German New Guinea and Nauru in 1914, Hughes was determined to retain control of a region he considered strategically vital. British inaction in 1884 (despite agitation by the Queensland and Victorian colonial governments) had seen Germany annex New Guinea and there must be no repetition. Hughes had become strongly apprehensive regarding the rise of Japanese power in the region, and sought New Guinea as a defensive ‘rampart.’ British sympathies were tempered by the requirements of the Anglo-Japanese alliance, in existence from 1902.

The decision was taken by the great powers, however, that the colonial territories of the former enemy powers should become international ‘mandates’, governed by states charged by the League with the duty to protect the health and well-being of their populations while developing their natural resources in the interests of those populations. Even within the constraints of these principles, Hughes pressed hard for untrammelled control of New Guinea. On the grounds that conditions within those territories varied widely, the mandates came to be framed accordingly. In light of its low level of development and lack of national sentiment, New Guinea became a class ‘C’ mandate, governed in effect as an integral part of the mandatory. Committee work in which J G Latham—on Hughes’ staff in Paris—was an important actor, ensured that Australia achieved virtual annexation. Unlike more developed territories, in the case of ‘C’ mandates the mandatory had no obligation to accept trade or migration from other countries. It could not, however, fortify the territory or recruit the inhabitants for military service. While Hughes still achieved his main objective which was strategic denial, Australia’s responsibilities nevertheless led to a continuing engagement with the League in which Australia was required to account for its conduct before international opinion.\(^6\)

The accountability of mandatory powers was given substance when, in February 1921, the League formed the Permanent Mandates Commission (PMC). Though this panel of experts was drawn, in many cases, from personnel of the imperial powers, its chief role was to scrutinise the record of the mandatories, and especially assess the funding and effectiveness of their programs of moral and material improvement. The PMC sent the Australian Government a highly detailed questionnaire on its administration in New Guinea and also in Nauru, and the practice became that each year a report was assembled and printed for submission to the PMC. The PMC conducted hearings annually, and Australian officials were sent to Geneva to be questioned on

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these reports and on any other matters thought relevant. As a recent study has demonstrated, over time the remit of the PMC tended to expand, and some nations became subject to critical and publicised PMC strictures, notably South Africa for its administration of Southwest Africa (now Namibia), and Britain for its programs in the Palestine mandate. Australia did not entirely escape from such criticism.

Concerning Nauru, administered by Australia under a mandate held by the ‘British Empire’, the PMC sought assurance when it appeared that the administration was more focused upon the exploitation of the island’s phosphate reserves than the well-being of its inhabitants. The three nation agreement (with Great Britain and New Zealand) on the latter was very specific as to modalities but made no mention of the indigenous inhabitants. Dispatched to Geneva, the High Commissioner in London, Sir Joseph Cook, complained of the ‘very rough passage’ he had experienced before the PMC in 1922. In response the Australian Government duly clarified the powers and responsibilities of the Administrator. Nauru’s remoteness and tiny population thereafter led to few difficulties, though Australian spokespersons later had to defend the extent of the mining royalties paid to the inhabitants, the nature of the education system, and the labour recruitment practices that brought Chinese miners to the island, amongst other issues.

The administration of New Guinea, which imposed far greater difficulties, led to some searching questioning at the hearings convened by the PMC. Under the military administration that preceded the mandate properties owned by German citizens had been expropriated, and their disposition was an issue repeatedly reviewed.

In 1923 the statement supplied by the Australian Government of the accounts of the territory revealed that the trading agency established to serve the needs of the territory had made a tidy £12,000 in profit which was returned to the Commonwealth. The members of the PMC wanted to know why these monies were not retained to further the good governance of New Guinea, and Cook, who had again travelled to Geneva, had to improvise with some inventive explanations. Learning from this experience, for the 1926 meeting the Australian Government dispatched Joseph Carrodus, who was able to draw upon first-hand experience in the territory, to assist Cook. The statement by Carrodus before the PMC of the aims and methods of the Australian administration was the most complete exposition, to that time, of the Government’s strategies and objectives.

Beyond the larger structures of the administration’s role, the PMC inquired on a host of detailed matters, from the question of whether any compulsion was used in the recruitment of native labour—such practices were prohibited under the terms of the League Covenant—to such issues as the provision of medical services and the education of women and girls.

When the role of expositor of Australian policy fell to Sir Granville Ryrie as High Commissioner, he found the experience a trial. The 15th meeting of the PMC occurred shortly after an incident that came to be known as ‘the Rabaul Revolt’, when, in January 1929, many local workers had undertaken a concerted labour strike in pursuit of improved pay and conditions. The administration responded with harsh measures against the organisers, and despite the assistance of O C W Fuhrman who had travelled to Geneva from the London High Commission, the members of the PMC were far from satisfied with what they learned. In an act of unprecedented censure, in

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8 Cook to Hughes, 8 August 1922; National Archives of Australia [NAA]: A518, C849/1/2.
11 For extensive documentation, NAA: A518, AA840/1/4 PT 2.
1929 the PMC withheld its annual assessment of the Australian record until it had received more information and reassurances on matters of concern. In order to deal more effectively with PMC inquiries, in 1930 the Government included in its delegation to Geneva, E P Chinnery, Cambridge-trained and since 1924, the New Guinea administration’s anthropologist. He evidently impressed the members of the PMC and was able to offer a positive account of the administration’s program based upon his own detailed knowledge.

What was termed the ‘opening’—the exploration, pacification and development—of the territory generated for the Australian Government and its administrators by far the greatest controversy, no more so than in 1937. In travels between April 1930 and October 1934, some in the company of J L Taylor, an Assistant District Officer with the New Guinea administration, Michael Leahy and his brothers had traversed extensive and well populated highland regions previously unseen by Europeans.

After a dispute regarding his discoveries Leahy delivered an illustrated talk on his activities at the Royal Geographical Society in London in November 1935, with a detailed account being subsequently published in 1936 in the Society’s *Journal*. There he admitted that his parties were armed and described the killing in various incidents of some 30 natives, though he claimed that each incident occurred during an attack of some kind.

In 1937 Leahy’s activities were the subject of a petition to the PMC from the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society. This petition was passed on to the Australian Government for comment, and discussed at the 31st session of the PMC in June 1937. The PMC had also sought comment from Lord Hailey, a veteran imperial administrator then preparing his *African Survey*. Hailey suggested that the cited circumstances were, to a degree, extenuating, though he recommended that the mandatory authorities further constrain activities in the uncontrolled areas.

At Geneva that year, Australia’s spokespersons were O C W Fuhrman, serving with New Guinea police official Lt Col John Walstab. They faced close questioning from the PMC, especially on the question of the management of access to what were officially categorised as ‘uncontrolled’ areas.

While from the contemporary perspective the role of the PMC as a check on Australian colonial practices might be considered slight, in New Guinea a controlling power was required to explain the details of policies that might have been replicated in a normal colony—such as Papua—without attracting any external comment or scrutiny. With the formation of the United Nations, the role of colonial powers and increasingly the rationale for colonialism itself moved to the main agenda of global politics, in many ways building upon the experience of the League. And in the case of New Guinea, it remained an Australian mandate though now under the ultimate authority of the United Nations.

**Peace, disarmament, collective security**

The formation of the League would never have come about without the tragedy and disruption of the Great War. Even though the largest proportion of the League’s budget became devoted to social and economic questions, the organisation’s pre-eminent commitment was to further peace,
security, and the reduction of armaments, as Article 8 of the Covenant proclaimed. Accordingly, much of the work of the League was directed to these latter ends.

In the 1920s, in addition to dealing with a number of bilateral disputes in Europe and Latin America, the League expended considerable energy to entrenching its credibility as the pre-eminent global provider of collective security. Early efforts to build upon the framework provided by the League Covenant were found wanting. The 1924 ‘Treaty of Mutual Guarantee’, which specified both what member nations should be prepared to contribute to collective security as well as what protections they could expect, was unsatisfactory not least because the treaty restricted its remit to the ‘continent’ of each state. Prime Minister Stanley Bruce had to point out that Australia, alone, occupied a whole continent.16

Although the Covenant was clear on the duty to avoid war and to act in concert against aggression, if a state had submitted a dispute to the Council for resolution and its members had been unable to agree on a solution (a real prospect given the requirement that Council decisions required unanimity), following a grace period of three months the state in question could resort to war without fear of mandatory penalties. In 1924 the recently elected MacDonald Labour government in Britain, working in concert with France, argued in Geneva for a range of measures that, in effect, would require for every dispute between states the obligation for the parties to proceed to arbitration. States that refused to do so would automatically become aggressors and would then face mandatory financial and other penalties on the part of member states. The most important measure proposed was ‘the Protocol for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes’, often referred to as ‘the Geneva Protocol.’

MacDonald proposed to move quickly and the Australian representatives, at the preliminary meeting of the BED in London, were apprehensive that insufficient time had been given to deliberate on the full consequences. MacDonald with his French counterpart, Édouard Herriot, came to Geneva to advance this agenda personally. The chief Australian delegate was Sir Littleton Groom, Commonwealth Attorney-General, who was under instructions from Prime Minister Bruce to ensure that Australia’s domestic policies—and especially the ‘White Australia Policy’—would not become subject to the envisaged arbitration procedures. Although other delegations in the BED had expressed apprehensions, the British persuaded them to support the measure. Groom, despite his instructions to abstain, further underlined by cable from Melbourne, nevertheless signalled his assent when the Assembly voted on the protocol.17 Although this episode might have generated significant intra-imperial tensions, MacDonald’s Government was displaced within months, and the incoming administration led by Stanley Baldwin repudiated the protocol.

In 1929 MacDonald, newly returned to government, made further endeavours to extend the scope of international arbitration and dispute settlement. He sought to orchestrate a common Empire policy that would accept the determination of the Permanent Court of International Justice (under what was termed ‘the optional clause’) in a wide range of disputes. This measure had been favoured for some time by Canada and the Irish Republic. C W C Marr, minister without portfolio and leader of the Australian delegation to Geneva, was instructed to delay a final decision pending further consultations. Once again, Australian leaders were concerned to preserve domestic policy autonomy. After a busy round of negotiations Australian fears were all but assuaged and Marr directed to indicate his assent to the measure, when the fall of the Government—ironically precipitated by a decision by Littleton Groom, now Speaker, not to vote to support the Government—aborted the process. However, after extensive consultations, and in light of British

16 Bruce to Drummond, 4 July 1924, Geneva, League of Nations, 1924.C.394.M.145.1924.IX.
enthusiasm for the measure, though in caretaker mode the Government decided to instruct the High Commissioner to register assent for the Commonwealth.\textsuperscript{18}

If the 1920s was the decade of entrenching a collective security system, the 1930s was the period in which that system was undermined and then collapsed. The seizure by Japan of China’s north-eastern provinces—‘Manchuria’—in 1931 elicited a hesitant response from the League. Japan was by far the most important Asian member of the League (and as a great power, a permanent member of the Council), Japan’s existing rights in Manchuria (including the right to station troops in certain locations) were substantial but obscure, and the region was far from those European forces that would have to be mobilised if conciliation failed and force was then contemplated. Even when a League commission of inquiry broadly condemned Japan’s actions and China appealed to the League for redress, the Australian Government view was not only that there should be no resort to war but that Australia should avoid participating in any regime of sanctions employed against Japan.\textsuperscript{19} In the event, Japan withdrew from the League, a strategy subsequently copied by Germany and then Italy.

As these events were unfolding, the League was attempting to bring to fruition the effort of a decade to agree and implement comprehensive measures of disarmament. There had been some progress in this direction. In 1925, for example, a protocol on the prohibition of poisonous gas and biological agents in warfare had been formulated, a measure Australia adopted in January 1930.

After many preliminary meetings, which achieved some agreement regarding certain classes of weapons, in February 1932 a full-scale disarmament conference convened in Geneva, notably including delegations from the United States and the Soviet Union, both then outside the League. The Australian delegates were J G Latham—Attorney-General and Minister for External Affairs—and the High Commissioner, Sir Granville Ryrie. With the level of Australian armaments spending at a historic low due to the impact of the global depression, there was little Australia could contribute, though it was undoubtedly useful to add an Australian voice to the many intra-imperial discussions that took place. In his speech to the conference, Ryrie, drawing upon his experiences of Gallipoli to illustrate the ruin of war, created a strong impression.\textsuperscript{20} Unfortunately the withdrawal of Germany, now under Hitler’s leadership, from the conference condemned it to futility, though it continued in lesser form until 1937.

In 1935, the League was faced with an incident similar in character to the Manchuria crisis. On this occasion, however, the aggressor power was Italy—a major European power and permanent member of the Council—and the victim was Ethiopia, the territory of which abutted British and French colonial possessions (and whose boundaries were the product of intra-colonial bargains). Ethiopia was a member of the League and its government appealed to the Council in Geneva. After much prevarication and delay, including British and French attempts to arrange a settlement essentially favourable to Italy, the full-scale invasion of the country by Italian forces triggered the requirement (under the League Covenant) that member states adopt economic sanctions to deter the aggressor. Britain decided to do so—though excluding trade in some vital commodities—and the Lyons Government in Australia reluctantly followed suit. It was a widely held view, including in Australia, that such sanctions risked precipitating war; it was also a British objective not to alienate Italy in the hope that its power would help deter an increasingly militant Germany. Yet failure to act against Italy undermined the League’s role as a provider of collective security.

\textsuperscript{18} For the many diplomatic cables of this period, NAA: A981, PCU 23 PART 3.

\textsuperscript{19} Latham to Bruce, 3 February 1933, NAA: A981, CHIN 125 PART 2.

Australia’s delegate at the League, former prime minister Stanley Bruce, summarised the dilemma the members faced. War was a last resort and the sanctions prescribed by the League should be maintained, but if Italy did not change course, the whole rationale of the League’s security role would be at issue. In April 1936, speaking at the Council (of which he was also then president), Bruce stated the problem as follows:

> it is now imperative that there should be a re-examination of the whole of the collective system that has been built up. These weaknesses are very great; they are creating doubts in the minds of all nations and all peoples, and it is no use our ignoring them. If we truly believe in this system, we should face these weaknesses and try and find a solution for all those which have been disclosed, and I believe that men’s minds in all countries are moving to the point of demanding that re-examination, which, I trust, will lead to a reassurance with regard to the whole collective system, and I suggest that to allow nations to be lulled into a false belief of security where, in fact, there is no security and to allow them to rely upon assistance which will not be forthcoming, is not a contribution to the peace of the world but is a menace to it.21

Following the Italian conquest of Ethiopia, hope in the League as a provider of security waned, and as Hitler’s Germany pushed forward with its program of annexations and threats, Geneva was effectively sidelined.

Bruce, however, was responsible for some significant advances in other spheres at this time. Under League auspices he chaired a conference of the interested powers at Montreux in 1936 at which maritime transit to and from the Black Sea by way of the Bosporus and the Dardanelles was discussed. The convention that was agreed between the Black Sea powers (including the Soviet Union), Britain, France and Greece remains in force to this day.

Cognisant that the League’s security role had been severely compromised, Bruce used his influence at Geneva to argue in the later 1930s for a refocus on the potential of its social and economic role. In particular, he campaigned for reducing the barriers to agricultural trade while also furthering scientific studies of improved nutrition. If the nations could have access to cheaper foodstuffs and their populations were better fed, security would be enhanced by taking a more practical route. He was successful in attracting the support of other member states that were major agricultural exporters, in what might be seen now as a striking anticipation of the ‘Cairns Group’. Armed with these ideas, Bruce chaired a committee devoted to considering a broad reorganisation of the League which issued a comprehensive report in August 1939, *The Development of Economic Cooperation in Economic and Social Affairs*.22 Though the Bruce Report, as it became known, was shelved as a result of the outbreak of war, the innovations it suggested were taken up in the organisation of the new United Nations, which provided enhanced scope for social and economic issues, to be coordinated by the Economic and Social Council. They also inspired the establishment by the United Nations of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 1945. Prominent in the new organisation was Frank L McDougall, who had advised Bruce in London and Geneva over many years and upon whose research he had increasingly relied.23

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The League and the management of international trade and economic policy

Though the Covenant of the League said little regarding economic matters, the Great War left the global system of trade and commerce highly disrupted; the devastation experienced by some central European countries was however directly acknowledged in the Covenant. Lest these conditions give rise to new conflict, the League developed an active economic agenda through its Economic and Financial Section. Over time, some of the measures later to be associated with such organisations as the OECD—including the collection of consistent statistical series, and the gathering and publication of customs regulations—became League functions. The League also convened conferences to discuss the harmonisation of customs procedures and the simplification of commercial and financial arrangements in order to encourage world trade and promote a return to prosperity.

Australian agencies and delegates played a role in this League activity which progressively extended the transparency of global trading rules.

In May 1927 the League convened the World Economic Conference where a major matter of debate was the growth of trade protectionism. While receptive to some possible reforms, Australia’s chief delegate, South Australian parliamentarian David Gordon, defended Australia’s right to regulate tariffs, which were seen as a means to build industrial capacity and population.

In June–July 1933 the League convened the World Economic Conference, held in London as Geneva was crowded with delegates wrestling with the issue of disarmament. The representatives of 65 nations (including a number of non-members of the League) attended, the major issue being to attempt to craft a program of economic cooperation—including monetary stabilisation—in order to deal with the baleful effects of the global depression. Little was achieved, however, chiefly as a result of Anglo-American differences on handling the vexed issue of currency values. The Australian delegation was led by Stanley Bruce, then minister without portfolio in London. His speech at the closing stages of the conference painted a stark, and strikingly prescient, picture of a world in which, without the lowering of barriers to economic exchange, ‘intensely nationalist policies’ would obstruct the attainment of greater prosperity that science and industry could offer.

An area of policy where the League Covenant was quite specific was in relation to industrial relations and conditions of labour. The International Labour Organization (ILO) was established in 1919; it moved to Geneva in 1920 and functioned as part of the League system but under its own director. The ILO established a schedule of annual conferences devoted to the agenda of improving conditions of labour, protecting vulnerable workers (including women and children), and extending programs of insurance and compensation to improve the lot of workers. In an interesting innovation, the national delegations to the conferences were chosen on the basis of a ‘tripartite’ formula, being composed of employers, workers and government officials. The Australian Government supported the conference, including budgeting for the travel and living expenses of the worker delegate who was required to make the long journey to Geneva (and who faced the possibility of an uncertain position on return). ILO delegations were discussed and approved in Cabinet, and in 1924 the worker delegate chosen was John Curtin, then president of the Australian Journalists’ Association in Western Australia. The future prime minister undertook his first trip abroad (and later journeyed at his own expense to Britain to meet the leadership of

the British Labour Party). On his return he presented a very full account to the Government of his experiences which was published, as became the practice, as a part of a parliamentary paper. In this report, while he emphasised the usefulness of this conference, he noted Australia’s tardiness in ratifying some of the ILO conventions that had already been adopted, and also lamented his inability, as a single individual, to attend to the many committees that were convened for the business of which some nations sent multiple delegates and advisers. Between 1934 and 1939 Walter Crocker, later to serve as Australian ambassador to India and also Indonesia, was an official in the International Labour Organization. The ILO became the first specialised agency of the new United Nations in 1946.

In the post-World War II world, the global management of trade and economic affairs has become a commonplace, as has the notion of lowering transaction costs through transparency in customs and regulatory regimes. In retrospect, the League’s attempts to address these issues can be seen as highly innovatory, the experience of which was formative for Australian policymakers.

**The League’s social agenda**

The League pursued an active social agenda, sometimes taking on issues that were already the subject of international agreements. In adopting in 1921 the International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children, the League was expanding the remit of earlier attempts to suppress what was then known as ‘the white slave trade’. Policing and improving the 1921 convention became one of the matters discussed in the Fifth Committee of the League Assembly. Dr Roberta Jull, an alternate member of the Australian delegation to the Assembly in 1929, presented at Geneva a widely praised commentary on the convention.

The International Opium Convention of 1925, which built upon an earlier agreement negotiated at The Hague in 1912, generated an extensive network of advisory and expert bodies. It led to the establishment of a remarkably comprehensive transparency regime in which member states were required to report upon the production, processing, transfer and use of opiates. The Social Questions and Opium Traffic Section was an active component of the League machinery, with one of its senior members from 1927 being the Australian scholar H Duncan Hall. The 1931 Geneva Narcotics Manufacturing and Distribution Limitation Convention owed a good deal to his research and drafting skills. Hall visited Australia in 1931, giving a number of public lectures on the drug suppression and health work of the League, and later worked in the League’s Information Section.

Health was also a major focus of the League, with Geneva taking on many of the tasks of the International Health Office originally established in Paris in 1908. One of the major concerns of the League’s Health Section was epidemiology; in 1925 the decision was taken to establish a Far Eastern Bureau in Singapore to conduct research and provide current reportage on health conditions. Australian health officials were among its advisory committee. From 1932 until the outbreak of the Pacific War, its director was Australian Dr Charles L Park.

The League also experimented with expedients to achieve greater intellectual cooperation across the nations. In 1922 the League appointed an advisory committee of distinguished scholars, the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation, to propose and review projects for cultural,

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artistic and scientific exchange. Among its members were Henri Bergson and Albert Einstein. From 1928, Australian-born Professor Gilbert Murray served as its president. With assistance from the French Government, the League established an International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation (IIIC), based in Paris, which provided planning and funding for such exchanges. Sir George Knibbs (1925–26) and then Kenneth Binns (from 1930) were designated by the Commonwealth Government to act in lieu of a national committee to deal with contacts with the IIIC. An initiative of these bodies was the International Studies Conference, the annual gatherings of which were attended by Australian scholars (including Dr Margot Hentze and Dr John Burton).

These activities in the social sphere have been maintained and broadened in components of the current United Nations system, including the World Health Organization and UNESCO.

**Geneva as a school for international affairs for some prominent Australians**

As has been shown, though Australian diplomacy was still in its formative phase, Australian figures, including those already mentioned, played a part in the Geneva experiment. The most prominent of all was Stanley Bruce, who had transferred to London, first as resident minister and then, in 1934, as high commissioner. He took a close interest in League affairs and was given a remarkably free hand by the Lyons Government to conduct Australian policy in that theatre. He headed the Australian delegation to the League on every occasion from 1932 to 1938, sat on the Council (including chairing some of its sessions) in the period 1933–36, and performed other specialised tasks for Australia and for the League. His first appearance at the League, in 1921, was a matter of happenstance. On a golfing holiday in France, and at that stage of his career, a backbencher in parliament, he was urgently summoned by Prime Minister Hughes to attend the Assembly to fill the position. On that occasion, drawing upon his personal experiences at Gallipoli, he impressed the other members with his sincere abhorrence of war. In his later role he was often assisted by officials on the staff of Australia House, especially O C W Fuhrman and F L McDougall. One of his predecessors and another former prime minister, Sir Joseph Cook, was also a frequent visitor to Geneva, at that time supported by the external affairs officer in London (later External Affairs Minister and eventually Governor-General), R G Casey.

The annual parties of Australian delegates, alternate delegates and officials making the journey to the Assembly in Geneva (the last usually from the London high commission) introduced a generation of Australians to contemporary international society. In addition to the politicians who were generally the delegation leaders (an issue considered further below), also included were prominent business figures, Sir Mark Sheldon, Herbert Brookes, Clive Baillieu and George Swinburne. For the officials, the broadening experience of Geneva was invaluable, and the files of External Affairs demonstrate that developments at the League were carefully followed and assessed.

Under Article 7 of the Covenant, as has been noted, all positions in the League were open to women, and many international women’s movements engaged with the League in seeking to advance the position of women as well as bring a feminist perspective to such pressing issues as peace and disarmament. It is in this context that a number of progressive Australian women took part in the activities of the League.31 After the decision was taken—following intense lobbying by various women’s groups—to include at least one woman amongst the delegates to the Assembly, this practice was adopted. Successive prime ministers regularly received advice on suitable women candidates and were also reminded that the Australian Government was remiss in only making the nominee an alternate rather than a full delegate. Nevertheless, the first president of the Australian

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Federation of Women’s Societies, Bessie Rischbieth (who had persuaded Prime Minister Hughes to send women to Geneva), historian Jessie Webb, and Dr Ethel Osborne, physician and hygienist, all made the journey to Geneva.

Women’s groups also lobbied the Government energetically on specific policies under review by the League. In the later 1920s, preparations were made for a major conference on international law to be held at The Hague. One of the issues to be discussed was the nationality of married women, the rule in many countries then (including Australia) being that upon marriage a woman took her husband’s nationality and usually lost her own. Though, following this conference, Australia adopted some partial reforms in line with new British legislation, the cause of gender equality was not fully achieved. In the 1930s, as the global security situation deteriorated, women’s groups were prominent in pressuring the Government to bend its efforts to preserving world peace. Some members of the Australian women’s movement also raised the question of Indigenous rights.32

Juliet Mitchell was a leading figure in the New South Wales League of Nations Union (LNU) with a career as an educationist, novelist and writer. Already a seasoned international traveller, she spent time in Geneva, again as a temporary collaborator, at the League in 1935. Having had prior experience living in Manchuria, upon her return to Australia she was in much demand as a broadcaster and commentator, particularly upon League affairs.33

The League also had an impact upon Australians at various stages of their careers. In 1932, Fred Alexander was appointed an alternate delegate to the League Assembly. He also obtained an attachment at Geneva as a ‘temporary collaborator’ which gave him the opportunity to study the League system. Since his appointment to the University of Western Australia in 1924, Alexander had done more than any other individual to stimulate the discussion of international affairs in Perth, on campus and off. He was also a leading light in the Australian LNU.34

Alexander was an academic mentor to Paul Hasluck, later External Affairs Minister and ultimately Governor-General. Hasluck had attended a summer school in international affairs in Geneva in 1932, and returning to Perth on the same vessel as Alexander, was persuaded to complete his degree and take a greater interest in international studies. He later taught Alexander’s course while the latter was on study leave, and Alexander was one of the individuals (John Curtin was another) who influenced his decision to enter the diplomatic service.

**The Australian League of Nations Union**

While the Great War was in progress there was much debate in Europe and America about the possible shape of a post-conflict world. In Britain, a League of Nations Society had lobbied for a world organisation to pursue peace and disarmament, and in October 1918 it amalgamated with other groups and formed the League of Nations Union. In its heyday the LNU was a major lobby group that had a considerable impact on government policy; its membership exceeded 400,000 at the peak of its influence; its chairman during 1923–38 was Professor Gilbert Murray. In 1921, branches of an Australian LNU were formed in the Australian states, in imitation of the British original. Soon enjoying prime ministerial patronage, the organisation strove to broaden Australian understanding not only of the League, but also of the whole field of international relations. Its earliest publication was the text of a presentation that had been given by Latham in Melbourne in October 1919. Recently returned from Europe, he spoke expansively on the new tasks that would

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face Australia with League membership, and called for the appointment of officials to serve abroad to develop the expertise required. From that time the LNU acted as a lobby group, by way of lectures, broadcasts, meetings and publications, devoted to encouraging the Government to attend to its responsibilities to the League, including supporting a just recognition of the role of women. The LNU made particular efforts to persuade the Government to accede to the statute of the Permanent Court of International Justice that enlarged its role as a global agency of arbitration. Along with the Institutes of International Affairs in Melbourne and Sydney—amalgamated as the AIIA in 1933—with which the LNU often cooperated, public knowledge of international affairs was both augmented and transformed.

The Australian LNU paid particular attention to promoting League ideals in education. The Victorian branch of the LNU published a detailed model curriculum for peace studies, which included suggested reading drawn from a notable body of progressive authors. In New South Wales, due in part to sympathetic state authorities, many schools instituted a ‘League Corner’, and the LNU was permitted to conduct (in imitation of the British parent body) a ‘peace ballot’ among secondary school pupils, of whom 155,164 chose peaceful methods of dispute resolution (with a recorded 181 against). The national LNU persuaded Prime Minister Joseph Lyons to deliver a public broadcast in August 1932 to encourage Australians to take a constructive view of the League. The LNU also provided delegates for Geneva. Raymond Watt, LNU National Secretary and a prolific publisher and broadcaster for the League cause, served as an alternate delegate to the Assembly in 1931 and a full delegate in 1936 (when he also attended the Brussels World Peace conference).

**The League idea in Australia**

Even while the notion of forming a new kind of organisation as a means of preventing a repeat of the Great War was still a mere proposal, this prospect was a matter of debate in Australia.

After 1919, League membership and its obligations had a significant impact on the ideas of some prominent Australians. In a public address delivered in 1924, Sir Henry Braddon, who had been the Australian Commissioner in New York, maintained that with the establishment of the League the world could now at last claim ‘a disinterested international agency’. The alternative, ‘too horrible to contemplate’, was a return to ‘the balance of power’ and the inevitability of further bloodletting.

Engineer, businessman and parliamentarian, George Swinburne, who had been an Assembly delegate in 1925, returned from Geneva acclaiming the League as ‘the hope of the world’. Offering an implicit critique of the somewhat narrow approach to the League on the part of Australians preoccupied with such matters as ‘White Australia’ and tariffs, he was sufficiently far-sighted to glimpse in the League new and more expansive possibilities:

> Do not forget that, with all that wonderful variety [of humanity at the League], it is the first time in the history of mankind that the nations of the earth have come together to publicly discuss the international problems which confront them. Remember also, that humanity is all the richer for its wide variations, and we have seen enough to realise that it is quite possible to have a fundamental unity of spirit

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35 J G Latham, *The Significance of the Peace Conference from an Australian Point of View* (Melbourne: Melville & Mullen, 1920).
underlying these differences. If we are to advance it is not through nationalism alone, or the cultivation of racial feeling. It is by making men who are proud of their race more perfect in their qualities in which that race is pre-eminent, to serve their fellows and uplift the world.  

One of the most influential international thinkers in Australia in these years was Sir William Harrison Moore, professor of law at Melbourne University and an adviser to Prime Minister Bruce. In his university days, Harrison Moore had been the first to offer a university course in international relations. He served as an alternate delegate (1927) and a full delegate (1928, 1929) to the League Assembly, and also represented Australia on the League committee devoted to the codification of international law. From 1925 until 1934, he was the president of the Victorian branch of the LNU and later (from 1930 to 1934) of the reorganised national LNU.

In December 1930 Harrison Moore delivered a lecture entitled ‘Australia’s Place in the League of Nations’. The novelty and importance of the League consisted in its principal objective, which was to prevent war or—to see its work in terms of the fundamentals of the international system—to reconcile the interest of the nations. And Harrison Moore was convinced that ‘save through the League, there seemed no escape from the experience of the past—the clash of interests and policies sooner or later leading to war’. The organisation was thus to be understood as an attempt to achieve nothing less than a fundamental transformation of the international system. As Harrison Moore described that system, international law had been based traditionally upon the notion of equality of the formal rights of states, ‘But the dynamics of international relations were substantially in the hands of the Great Powers: the smaller nations accepted results, or sought to affect them by attaching themselves as clients to a Great Power or to a group’. In short, the international system was shaped by power, not by law. By giving ‘a place and a voice in its counsels to every state member, great and small, and that of right and not of sufferance’, the League sought to realise something of the real equality of states.

A factor that facilitated the recognition of the importance of the League was the idea that developed in the 1920s that there was essentially a similarity of form between it and the more familiar Empire-Commonwealth. This was not simply a matter of the League’s original architecture being the product of a joint Anglo-American project at institutional design, using the materials at hand. It also derived from the notion that the longer term objectives of the two organisations were, if not identical, then at least aligned.

As P D Phillips, a member of the AIIA delegation to the first unofficial International conference of Commonwealth institutes in Toronto in 1933 (and a student of Harrison Moore) observed:

> The starting-point of any consideration of the relations of these two entities is a realization of the surprising identity in form and principle of the Empire and the system established at Geneva. Since the War it has year by year become clearer that the essence of the imperial relationship is to be found in the free association of its nation members co-operating together because of an agreement upon general principles ... Britishers should realize that they have a particularly close concern with the success of the League, because it represents the application of their own great political discoveries to the world of states.

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Discussion of the League in the parliament and the debate on foreign affairs

The annual delegation to Geneva was usually led by a serving politician, in most cases of the front rank—E D Millen, Sir Neville Howse, Sir Littleton Groom, J G Latham, Sir George Pearce, Matthew Charlton, Frank Brennan and W M Hughes all served as delegates. The only sitting prime minister to address the League was James Scullin, who spoke to the Assembly on 20 September 1930 in favour of disarmament. His visit was very brief as the imperial conference was due to convene in London. While such figures often had other opportunities for international exposure, under the conditions of the time, such experience was important and often framed subsequent opinions.

When Senator Millen returned to Australia having led the delegation to the first League Assembly, he submitted a full account to the prime minister on his experiences. The practice developed that returning delegations drafted a report on the matters discussed at Geneva. These reports were presented to parliament where they were discussed and then published as parliamentary papers. In this period foreign affairs accounted for a modest share of parliamentary time; debates in connection with the imperial conferences of prime ministers in London (convened in 1921, 1923, 1926, 1930, and 1937) were occasions for extended commentary on world affairs; after these the debates on the League were of considerable significance. Reports of League conferences were also noted by the parliament, and sometimes led to parliamentary questions.

In parliamentary debates in these years, League commentary on Australia’s responsibilities as a mandatory power received some attention. The most consequential issue was the preservation of Australian freedom of action in immigration and tariff policy, and the threat—real or imagined—that engagement with the League would undermine that freedom. With the Labor Party committed until the late 1930s to the cause of disarmament, the League was often invoked in reviews of this issue. In the late 1930s, after the denouement of the Ethiopia crisis, the parliament began to hear commentary on the failure in practice of the League as a provider of security. However, the League ideal continued to have its champions until the outbreak of war. Even after 1939 there were some references to the need, once peace was finally achieved, of a revived and improved international organisation dedicated to the same ends. Some illustrative examples of these parliamentary exchanges follow.

In the early 1920s the parliamentary assessment of the League from both sides of the chamber was generally positive. Though Hughes was privately sceptical of the larger prospects of the Geneva experiment, in presenting the Versailles Treaty to the parliament he gave the organisation his endorsement, qualified, however, by the observation that it would achieve its great potential provided that the nations permitted it to function. As he said in one of his more orotund passages, ‘If the whole of the nations of the earth are really desirous to co-operate in this great work, then the League of Nations is truly a charter of liberty—a charter of civilization—of not less value to the world than was Magna Charta to the men of our race ...’ Sir Joseph Cook was more positive, predicting that the League would become ‘a mighty instrument for peace and progress’.

Even at this early stage there were parliamentary questions regarding the size of Australia’s contribution to the organisation’s budget, which in 1921 was around £26,000 per half year, a sum later reduced. Thereafter, parliamentarians often expressed concern at what were seen as the inflated salaries paid in Geneva, and more than one Australian delegation was urged to press the organisation for economies.

45 Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, HoR, 13 Apr 1921, p.7388.
In his very full accounting of the League session for 1921, Bruce informed the parliament that though originally he had been sceptical of the value of the organisation, he found it to be most seriously engaged with many of the nations fielding high-level delegations by comparison with which the Australian presence (the only other delegate being Malcolm Shepherd from the high commission) was decidedly modest. He foresaw that League membership would entail much detailed work, and therefore recommended that the Government provide the necessary record-keeping and bureaucratic support.  

The 1924 controversy regarding the Geneva Protocol, discussed above, generated considerable parliamentary interest. As soon as news arrived in Australia that Littleton Groom had signalled Australia’s approval, Bruce faced parliamentary questions. From the backbench W M Hughes interjected that Australia’s rights had changed ‘fundamentally’ as a result. Bruce was in the difficult position of being uncertain what exactly had transpired and made the point that he was awaiting a report from the Australian delegates. In the meantime, while he defended the intention of the Protocol, and also reminded the parliament that it would have the final determination on whether Australia would be a party, he was forthright in his defence of the national prerogatives: ‘Australia cannot allow action regarding a question of domestic jurisdiction to be dictated to her by the League of Nations, or by any other outside authority’.  

In the following year, Littleton Groom was able to present his own account of the proceedings in Geneva. In an interesting act of bipartisanship—which was not repeated—the Bruce Government had also sent the Leader of the Opposition, Matthew Charlton, to accompany Groom. Charlton also made a statement to the parliament. Both dwelt on the issue of whether the Protocol might result in Australia being compelled to accept League arbitration concerning such issues as the White Australia Policy, and were emphatic that it would not. By this time, however, the Baldwin Government had withdrawn from the Protocol, with Australia following suit, rendering the debate academic. Charlton also complained that the Protocol would be discussed again at Assembly, but delegates for the current year had already departed for the Assembly, so they could not learn the reason for the Australian Government’s policy towards the protocol since only now were the events of 1924 being debated. Charlton further emphasised that in order to convene the full disarmament conference, which would be the essential means to achieve real arms reductions, the Protocol was the necessary preliminary. It was in that spirit that he had supported it.  

Subsequent reportage to the parliament of the proceedings at Geneva during the remainder of the Bruce administration, always contained a cautionary statement on the Government’s determination to preserve national prerogatives in policy making. Thus, in 1928, Bruce himself was led to assert:  

While we enthusiastically subscribe to the ideals of the League of Nations, we are not prepared to surrender any of our rights as a sovereign nation on such matters of domestic jurisdiction as the fiscal policy we think fit to pursue, or the migration to our shores of the nationals of other countries.  

Lest it be thought that the issue of the League only elicited defensive remarks, it should be noted that the prime minister’s sentiments elicited a remarkable rebuttal from E A Mann, then member

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49 Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, HoR, 26 April 1928: Latham’s speech on the League Eighth Assembly 1927 quotes delegation leader Pearce on Australia’s need to ‘safeguard her national and economic life’, p.4412.

50 Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, HoR, 8 February 1929, p.141.
for Perth and later the ABC commentator ‘the Watchman.’ Mann complained that the League was a somewhat neglected topic in the parliament, and that when it was considered, the insistence upon protecting at all costs tariff autonomy, was too narrow an approach. He welcomed the League’s economic role, perceiving it to be in the direction of what would now be termed economic openness, and suggested that Australia was denying itself advantages by resisting this trend:

It is unwise for us ... to dissociate ourselves from the obvious movement in European countries towards a better commercial relationship. It would be a pity if we persisted in our present attitude. We shall be judged, not by our professions in regard to League matters, but by our attitude towards specific questions.51

In the 1930s, debate on the League took on a different aspect. Expectations diminished. When Latham presented his interim report to the parliament on the 1932 disarmament conference at which he had been a chief Australian delegate, he was forced to concede that very little had been achieved, generally as the result of the presence of ‘an uncompromising attitude of national sovereignty’.52 Thereafter, with a few notable exceptions, caution became the watchword on both sides of the political divide.

Thus, after an exhaustive study for the League, the Lytton Commission reported that Japan’s occupation of Manchuria was unwarranted and should be brought to an end; the Minister of External Affairs, J G Latham, was asked whether the Government would issue a statement on what was a momentous issue for the world. Latham replied that while Australia was working closely with the United Kingdom, the Government would be making no pronouncement.53 Meanwhile, rebuffed in Geneva, Japan withdrew from the League.

When Prime Minister Lyons made his statement to the parliament on the imposition of economic sanctions on Italy, reluctantly adopted in solidarity with the United Kingdom’s policy at the League, J A Beasley (then aligned with Lang Labor but soon to rejoin the Federal Labor Party) moved that Australia adopt a position of strict neutrality in the dispute and declare that no forces would be offered under the requirements of the League Covenant, Article 16 (which provided for the Council to recommend the use of armed force to repel action by states deemed aggressors).54

In the midst of the debate that then ensued on the sanctions imposed on Italy over the invasion of Ethiopia, W M Hughes, then in government as Minister for Health and Repatriation, published his Australia and War Today.55 In it he suggested that the League’s economic sanctions were in fact either an empty gesture or a way station to war. This was a position at variance with that of the Government, Prime Minister Lyons having assured the parliament that Australia was not taking a path that led to conflict. After some pointed parliamentary scrutiny, Hughes was required to resign his portfolio in early November 1935.

Thereafter, parliamentary remarks on the League were more in sorrow than anger. In 1937, Prime Minister Lyons, while discussing the outcome of the recently concluded imperial conference, regretted ‘the failure of the League to guarantee security against aggression’.56 It was at this time, accordingly, that there was some discussion of League ‘reform’ that would set aside the

51 Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, HoR, 8 February 1929, p.145.
52 Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, HoR, 30 September 1932, pp.1073-4.
55 W M Hughes, Australia and War Today: the price of peace (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1935).
organisation’s security responsibilities. The parliament discussed these possibilities, though the issue was overtaken by war.

**Conclusions: Australia in the League**

Australia’s membership of and relations with the League of Nations had a significant impact on the Australian view of the world, not least because they prepared the way for the enthusiastic embrace of the United Nations in 1945. Australians were long accustomed to adopting a transnational perspective because of their place within the Empire-Commonwealth. The League, particularly through the popular propagation of the obligations membership generated, introduced the idea of a potentially global and specifically non-imperial transnationalism. Political leaders, officials and citizens were all compelled, to some degree, to come to terms with the role of international regimes, international scrutiny and international norms in global affairs. In short, Australian membership of the League encouraged and sometimes required thinking beyond the Empire-Commonwealth. It thus constituted a major step to full international citizenship.

**Note on the author**

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