



BILLY HUGHES AND HIS RADICAL SON

STEPHEN HOLT EXAMINES THE LIFE OF A PRIME MINISTER'S SON, FOR WHOM WAR AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION WERE A TEST OF LOYALTY

ABOVE
Home Once More
(Sydney: *The Sydney Mail*, 1919)
negative; 12.5 x 9.9 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3080075

Bill Hughes (far right) with his father, stepmother Mary, half-sister Helen and dog at the family home in Kew, Melbourne.

BELOW
George Dancy
The Crime of Those Who Vote 'No!
(Melbourne: *Melbourne Punch*, 1916)
b&w poster; 75 x 50 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an14107651

THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA'S collection of the private papers of William 'Billy' Morris Hughes, Australia's Prime Minister from 1915 to 1923, documents a fiery career. Despite having been a dynamic figure in the Australian Labor Party (ALP) during its formative years, Hughes split with the party in 1916 over the issue of military conscription (he was for it) and threw in his lot with the anti-Labor forces.

Active in politics until his death at the age of 90, Billy Hughes never reconciled with his old party but, as his papers indicate, a member of his family did. From family correspondence we can piece together the contrasting political evolution of his son, Ernest Morris Hughes (always known as 'Bill'), who supported his

father on the conscription issue before returning, buffeted by economic hardship, to the Labor camp that his father had abandoned.

Bill was aged 18 when, in 1916, he volunteered to serve in the Great War. He never sought promotion. It was newsworthy indeed for a son of Australia's extraordinary Prime Minister to be serving as a private in the ranks on the Western Front. Wartime press reports readily identified Bill as the 'eldest son of Mr W.M. Hughes' or as 'his eldest boy'. No shirker,

he received a Military Medal for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty in an attack on enemy lines.

The young soldier stuck by his father during the conscription controversy. In a letter written to his father in the lead-up to the second conscription referendum in December 1917, Bill declared himself to be 'very much in favour' of conscription. His only regret was that he was too young to be able to vote 'yes' in the referendum.

Bill's safe return to Australia after the war was covered in the newspapers. In the spring of 1919, *The Sydney Mail* featured a photograph of Bill being welcomed home by his father, along with his stepmother, Mary, and half-sister, Helen, (his father remarried after Bill's mother, Elizabeth, died in 1906). The future seemed so promising.

Peace, though, was a letdown. The original intention was for Bill, having studied at Hawkesbury Agricultural College, to make his living in rural Victoria before the war. But he was not a successful farmer and, by 1924, he was residing in the Melbourne suburb of St Kilda, his failure as a farmer a disappointment to his father.

Bill joined the workforce which paved and mended postwar Melbourne's roads, although it seems he worked in a supervisory capacity rather than as a labourer. His father wanted him to stay in the country and the two had little, if any, contact after Bill left farming. Over the next few years, the young man married (his wife's given name was Hersee) and became the father of two children (Beryl May and William Morris) without his father (now a disgruntled backbencher) having any knowledge of these developments.





In the winter of 1927, mounting financial pressure caused Bill to turn to his father for material assistance. In two surviving letters written over the space of nine days, he indicated his escalating domestic responsibilities and requested a loan of £200 so that he could tender for a contract for road work being advertised by the local council.

Bill also told his father that he would be 'greatly relieved to get employment of any kind no matter where it was'. He went on to mention the possibility that, on the strength of a dairy certificate that he had acquired as well as his experience in road construction, he might be able to pick up work in Australia's brand-new bush capital, Canberra.

Billy Hughes had no intention of unconditionally lending his son the stipulated sum of £200. He was prepared, though, to subsidise his son, provided he could keep a direct eye on him. He seized on Bill's stated willingness to join him in the move to Canberra. To advance this scheme, the former Prime Minister approached Sir John Butters, the Federal Capital Commissioner, and told him that Bill was keen to work as a supervisor of roadworks in Canberra.

This approach to the Federal Capital Commissioner notwithstanding, Bill did not receive special treatment when, having accepted the Canberra option, he came to the national capital in the spring of 1927. His first place of residence was at the Capital Hill Camp, near the recently constructed Parliament House. Here he dwelt alongside carpenters, linesmen, kitchen staff and other pioneering Canberra workers as he settled down to find permanent employment.

By the winter of 1928, Bill was living with his family in a rented house in the suburb of Kingston. He was able to tell his father that he was getting by 'quite satisfactorily' on work tendered by the Federal Capital Commission, with his father lending him the money (with interest) to cover the security and deposit for each tender. The hope was that he would soon be self-sufficient, financing new bids for construction contracts from the profits of his previous work.

Bill regularly bade for contracts from the commission but there were long periods between jobs. A flurry of recorded activity occurred in the autumn of 1929, when he successfully tendered for three contracts. He continued to rely on his father for the money to cover each bid and Billy Hughes consistently urged him to 'wade in and make a success of the jobs'.

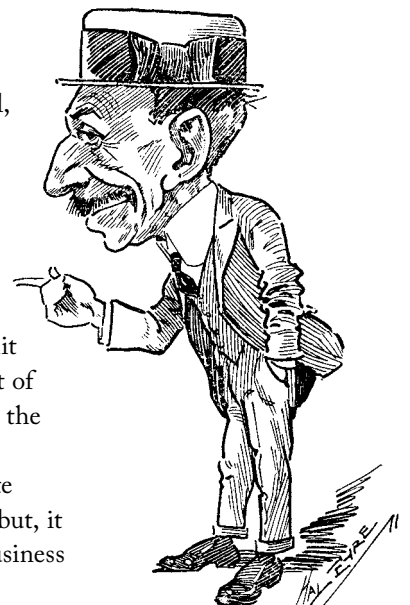
In the fatal economic month of October 1929, Bill asked his father to fund a bid for a 'big job in my line'. Prosperity, however, remained elusive. The Great Depression was soon underway and Bill, like numerous other Australians at the time, became a victim. On Australia Day 1930, he reminded his father that things were 'very bad here', although under the circumstances he was still getting by 'comparatively well'. By the following April, though, he had to admit that Canberra had 'gone flat'. The threat of impending dismissals cast a gloom over the infant capital.

In short, Bill never thrived as a private contractor. He had a strong work ethic but, it is fair to say, he was not cut out for a business

ABOVE FROM LEFT
The Arrival of the Rt. Hon. W.M. Hughes to Attend the Imperial War Conference, He was Welcomed at Euston by Mrs Hughes, His Soldier Son and Little Daughter 1918
sepia-toned print
24.2 x 29.3 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3065078

Portrait of William Morris Hughes Being Carried by Soldiers along a Crowded Street, 1918 1919
sepia-toned print
19.5 x 24.4 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an23150756

BELOW
Hal Eyre (b. 1875) A Hard Case for Labor (detail) 1912
pen and ink drawing; 8.3 x 4.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3308188





ABOVE
 Gerald Spencer Pryse
 (artist, 1882–1956)
Labor Stands for All Who Work!
Vote Labor
 (Sydney: Australian Labor
 Party, NSW Branch, 1928)
 colour poster; 76.1 x 101.6 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-an8263661

career, especially in the 1930s when things were so tough. By 1934 he was involved in road maintenance work that was much more arduous than the construction work he was used to in Melbourne. He was, when he was not without work at all, a labourer.

Adversity caused Bill to turn to the Labor movement in Canberra. Press reports in the mid-1930s indicate that he joined the Australian Workers' Union and helped to organise rallies outside Parliament House to protest against the government's stringent employment policies. He was also an active member of the ALP, becoming secretary of the Canberra branch in 1938. At the time, he was employed by the Department of the Interior as a gardener.

Bill's decision to return to the Labor fold contrasted strongly with his father's status as a renegade. Even so, the family connection survived these political differences. In letters to his father, Bill affirmed his pride in, and loyalty to, the extended Hughes family, including his half-sister Helen, whose tragic death in 1937 affected him deeply. 'My heart,' he told his grief-stricken father and stepmother, 'goes out to you in our tragic bereavement.'

In 1942, Bill moved to wartime Sydney in response to John Curtin's call for Australians to 'fight or work'. Keen to do his bit for the war effort, Bill would have preferred to enlist

again in the army but was considered too old. Instead, he became a worker in a Sydney munitions factory.

As soon as the war ended, Bill looked to his paternal connection to help him get back to Canberra. After Japan surrendered, he immediately contacted his father to see if he would approach the appropriate officer in the Department of the Interior to support his application, despatched two days earlier, to return to his prewar occupation as a gardener.

Billy Hughes, a prominent Opposition member since 1941 (he was the leader of the

United Australia Party in the 1943 federal election), was ready to lobby a Labor minister on his son's behalf and, more importantly, the Labor minister concerned (H.V. Johnson, Minister for the Interior) was most helpful. Hughes made a written representation to Johnson. Bill was 'keenly appreciative' when, in his formal response, the minister told his father that 'employment will be available to your son in the Parks and Gardens Section of the Department'.

Bill's wife Hersee died in 1949, aged only 43. Bill remarried and continued to live in Canberra. He was one of the pallbearers at his father's funeral in 1952. His retirement was spent in rural New South Wales.

Bill Hughes, matching his father's longevity, lived until 1986. His life story, key moments of which are documented in his father's papers in the Library, provides yet more testimony to the decisive importance of the Great Depression and two world wars in shaping the lives and loyalties of millions of Australian men and women in the twentieth century.

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 STEPHEN HOLT is a Canberra-based writer

IN A PREVIOUS ISSUE
The Parliamentary Pettifers
 Stephen Holt investigates
 the papers of a family
 that served the nation's
 parliament for more than
 80 uninterrupted years.
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