

Patriotism above all else: Littleton Groom at War, 1914-1918

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Littleton Groom was typical of many prominent Australian politicians in his attitudes towards the First World War. A non-Labor member of the Commonwealth House of Representatives throughout the conflict and for part of that time a minister, he constantly stressed the moral righteousness of the British Empire's cause, with which he equated that of Australian nationalism. His career between 1914 and 1918 is, nevertheless, worthy of special attention for several reasons. He was the only wartime minister who had also occupied ministerial office in Alfred Deakin's Liberal Protectionist governments of 1905 to 1908 when he was a leading spokesman for the 'new liberal' ideology in Australia. He was one of the few ministers in power at the outbreak of war in 1914 who also held a portfolio when the war ended in 1918. He was one of the very few Queenslanders who played an active role in the federal parliament throughout the war and was always a leading figure in supporting the Allied cause in his own state. He was involved in most of the major war time controversies as well as significant changes in non-Labor political organization. He was typical of other politicians. His activities and views during the war provide a useful case study which assists a wider understanding of significant political and social developments.

Born in Toowoomba, Queensland, in 1867, Littleton Ernest Groom was educated there and at the University of Melbourne. After practising as a lawyer in Queensland for several years, he was elected to the House of Representatives for the Darling Downs constituency in 1901. He quickly became noticed as a forceful politician on the radical wing of the protectionist party. Between 1905 and 1908, first as Minister for Home Affairs, and then as Attorney General, he tried to foster 'federal sentiment' through the expansion of Commonwealth powers. The 1909 fusion of non-Labor parties

presented him with a dilemma but he supported it on the grounds that otherwise his party and its principles faced extinction. As Minister of External Affairs until April 1910, however, he had greater difficulties with many of his new colleagues than with the Labor opposition. Yet he still attacked Andrew Fisher's subsequent Labor administration as class-biased and irresponsible. Minister for Trade and Customs in Joseph Cook's short-lived Liberal government of 1913-1914, he largely devoted himself to reversing Labor policies but was still occasionally able to exhibit his old disregard for parochial state interests.¹

In August 1914 Groom received the first rumours of the impending War while on pre-election speaking tour in Queensland. Arriving at his home in Toowoomba, a series of telegrams from the Prime Minister advised him of the rapid course of events. On the ninth Cook asked Groom to return to Melbourne at once.² Although Groom publicly hoped that the 'terrible calamity of war may be averted', he maintained that 'we all must recognise that the fate of the Empire involves the fate of Australia'.³

Once in Melbourne he was very soon involved in the government's preparations to meet the new circumstances. Despite the Commonwealth's undisputed right to assume responsibility for Australia's conduct in the War, Cook decided it was desirable to cooperate with the states and summoned a conference of state premiers and federal ministers. It met on 11 August and sat for four days, Groom being among those who attended. Relevant to Groom's portfolio were the moves announced to control trade by and with enemy subjects and the possible 'cornering' of foodstuffs.⁴

THE 1914 ELECTION

Groom's time as Minister for Trade and Customs was near an end. The election was fixed for 5 September and during the next couple of weeks he was in his constituency. Despite Labor pleas for a postponement of the poll and an all-party government, Groom and his colleagues believed the election should go ahead as planned. He faced a difficult contest because of the concentration of Germans and those of German descent in his electorate,⁵ one of whom was Paul Bauers, his Labor opponent.⁶ Groom was thus careful in his statements on the war. The conflict, he said on 25 August, was all the more painful because it was 'between two nations who had so much in common and had done so much to advance the arts, sciences and industries of modern civilisation'. Germans in Australia, he stated, should continue to receive the respect of their fellow citizens, 'so that when God in his mercy sent peace, no trace of bitterness could exist between them.'⁷ In a final message to his electors on 5 September he devoted relatively little attention to the war other than



Littleton Groom

arguing that 'at this critical juncturè in our national affairs' it was vital the Liberals be returned. Otherwise, he repeated his party's policies as Cook first enunciated them and spoke disparagingly of 'the theories of the socialistic leaders'.⁸

Despite his efforts, his personal majority was reduced and Labor won a decisive majority in both houses. He received 15,148 votes to Bauers' 11,495 and saw the two major centres of Toowoomba and Warwick show a preference for Labor.⁹ Both were once his strongholds. Overall, Labor achieved a clear-cut mandate with forty two House of Representative seats compared to thirty two for the Liberals and one independent, and thirty one Senate seats compared to five for the Liberals.¹⁰

Although the result disappointed Groom, the loss of the election enabled him to espouse openly his views on the war. He quickly identified himself as an imperial patriot who rejected as outright disloyalty suggestions that Australia was any less involved in the war than Britain, France or Belgium and who conceived of no meaningful distinction between the interests of Australia and those of the British Empire. He argued that the war was nothing less than a fight for the Empire's preservation. Should it go down, and Germany become the dominant nation, he warned, 'then God help the members of this great country.'¹¹

WINNING THE WAR

His identification of God with the British cause was probably strongly influenced by his faith in the principles of the Church of England. Most of that body's laity still saw Britain as the 'old country' and for all the leading members of its hierarchy it was the land of birth, education and training and the preserver of cultural and spiritual values. While the imperialism of church members received only sporadic attention before 1914, the war brought it to new prominence. The contents of wartime Church of England periodicals and sermons gave the impression that the propagation of patriotism took precedence over all other tasks. Many articulate Anglicans like Groom subordinated everything to the winning of the war.¹²

At the same time he saw no conflict between his imperialism and Australian nationalism. In May 1916 he wrote to the ailing (Alfred) Deakin that 'the policy of the Deakin Government is the policy for today'. 'Australian defence—including the Australian navy, a self-contained Australia, a self-contained Empire effected by commercial preferential treaties: and a closer organic union between the mother country and the Dominions', were all, he argued, the outcome of measures Deakin's governments had initiated.¹³ He often stressed, furthermore, that a strong sense of Australian nationhood was a necessary and compatible part of the overall nationalist feeling needed to win the war. On the first anniversary of the Australian landing at Gallipoli, he told a Toowoomba audience that just as the pages of British and French history 'glowed with historic glories ... Australia could well be pardoned that on this day of days she sought to mark it with fitting ceremony in the hope that Anzac Day might be perpetuated.' 'On the day', he went on, 'that men of all classes fell side by side to sacrifice their lives that the nation might live, there arose before their eyes the fact that the nation was the real and vital principle to all of them.'¹⁴ He was partly responsible for having the remains of Major-General Sir William Bridges, the first commander of the First Australian division who was killed at Gallipoli, interred on a hill close to the heart of the proposed new capital city at Canberra.¹⁵

His many contacts with friends, relatives and constituents physically involved in the war must have fostered the expression of such feelings. Of special impact here was the death in action of no less than four of his nephews. Two of his more frequent correspondents, Alfred Moon and Will Grant, served overseas, were decorated and respectively reached the ranks of Lieutenant-Colonel and Brigadier-General, while one of his contemporaries at Toowoomba Graham School, Harry Chauvel, ended the war as a

Lieutenant-General, a knight and one of Australia's most celebrated commanders. He was sent many letters which spoke of the need for Australia to make a greater effort in support of its men so many thousands of miles away.¹⁶

He did what he could to meet such requests. Much of his time from 1914 until the end of the war was devoted to the promotion of recruiting throughout Australia. Typical of his efforts was a tour he made in Victoria in July 1915, during which he addressed meetings in Melbourne and rural centres. He spoke to a gathering in Mildura which he later estimated as 1,500 out of the town's total population of 6,000. In Melbourne he lectured crowds in the streets and even spoke at football matches.¹⁷ Later in the year when a recruiting march, the 'Dungarees', reached Toowoomba, Groom made sure he accompanied it in a prominent position as it made its way into the town. He then called on Toowoomba's eligible young men to join the column.¹⁸ In August of the next year, when unveiling one of the many honour boards throughout his electorate, he urged every man who could possibly do so to join the forces at once. 'Our ranks', he stated, 'would be depleted by the wastage of war, and a call came from our brothers in the front line to fill the vacant places in the ranks.'¹⁹ In parliament he argued in favour of a great national recruiting drive. He predicted in July 1915 that the war would continue at least beyond the next winter and declared that a systematic scheme of recruiting was needed to secure a steady stream of troops for the front.²⁰

His attitude to the Labor governments of Fisher and Hughes was ambivalent. While he had opposed the concept of a political truce before the 1914 elections, he completely reversed his stance after them. One cynical explanation was that he desired to return to ministerial power as soon as possible. He maintained he did not want a combined Liberal-Labour cabinet but only a setting aside of questions of a 'party ideological character' so that the energies of the whole parliament could be combined in the direction of the war,²¹ yet he sternly criticized the government whenever it put forward policies not to his own liking. In December 1914, for instance, he condemned an increase in the land tax, even though it was intended to cover naval and military expenditure.²² In November 1915 he criticized the ministry for its lack of consistent development policy in the Northern Territory.²³ He characterized its tariff as ill-considered,²⁴ opposed its move to increase the powers of the arbitration court²⁵ and accused it of discrimination against rural interests.²⁶ Outside parliament he actively, though unsuccessfully, campaigned against Labor in the 1915 Queensland state election.²⁷ Later in the year he was more effective when he took a leading part in his party's effort to capture the Wide Bay electorate after Fisher's

retirement as its representative. The Liberal candidate carried the seat with a great swing against the government and Groom, one party worker wrote, had a 'large share in our important victory'.²⁸ Though he said he attacked Labor only to assist it frame measures which 'will help make Australia more efficient in this great contest',²⁹ he was not nearly as free from prejudice as he cared to admit.

ADVOCATE FOR CONSCRIPTION

One very important issue where Groom completely agreed with Hughes and some other Labor men was that of conscription for overseas military service. The figures showed, he said in May 1916, 'there has been a shortage, and in spite of all we can do by means of recruiting meetings and sergeants, that shortage has not been made up.' He continued that, 'After doing recruiting work during the past six or seven months in Queensland, I cannot help feeling that the system of voluntary service is not leading to equality of sacrifice throughout the Commonwealth.'³⁰ The question Australians had to ask themselves, he said when speaking of the Military Service Referendum Bill of 1916, was, 'Can the Empire, of which we form a part, afford to lose the war?' It seemed logical to him that when the Empire's existence was at stake the Commonwealth should have power to direct the services of its citizens. The surrender of some part of individual liberty, he said, was the price a man paid for the privileges of the society in which he lived.³¹

He repeated these views in the bitter referendum campaign which followed. Hughes declared that he was going into the campaign 'as if it were the only thing for which I have lived'³² and Groom shared this sentiment. Early in October 1916 he told a Toowoomba audience that while it was only intended to extend the existing system for home defence to service outside Australia, those who had boasted at election time they had established the system of compulsory service in Australia, later raised objections to the whole principle of compulsion.³³ In towns and settlements dotted all over south Queensland Groom called for an affirmative vote and attacked the measure's opponents with a bitterness which reflected the tone of the national debate. In opening the 'yes' campaign in Brisbane he expressed his belief that 'the heart of Australia would ring true, and that on October 28 the Empire would know—as it knew at the beginning of the war—that Australia was in it to the end.' Conscription, he went on, had positive social benefits as well. Under it 'men would forget that they belonged to a class or section' and 'the son of the wealthiest man would fight side by side with the son of the poorest.'³⁴ On the other hand, he later claimed, 'the anti-conscriptionists appealed to all the weaker senses of human nature, the party passions and selfishness, and even the timidity of the people.'³⁵

There were good grounds for Groom's optimism. All the major newspapers urged a 'yes' vote as did five out of the six state governments. Only regret that the leader of the campaign was in the wrong party dampened enthusiasm among the Liberals. Protestant churchmen provided almost unanimous support, with one Methodist minister concluding that Jesus would have voted 'yes'.³⁶

The proposal was narrowly defeated. In Queensland only three out of the ten federal electorates gave 'yes' a majority and the proposal was beaten in the state by 158,051 votes to 144,200.³⁷ A later survey of the broad patterns of voting in the referendum concluded that a anti-conscription confederation was composed of a majority of farmers and pastoralists, a large majority of urban and rural unionists, a minority of the middle class vote and a large minority of the soldiers' vote.³⁸

In the Darling Downs the figures were 14,561 in favour and 14,286 against. In common with many other rural areas, a number of normally non-Labor farmers, probably affected by the early high enlistment of country men and the consequent labour shortage, voted 'no'. Although some historians have questioned the national importance of the 'farmers' vote' in the referendum, its influence was certainly shown in the Darling Downs figures. Usually safe non-Labor subdivisions such as Clifton, Jondaryan, Killarney and Westbrook decisively rejected conscription while Toowoomba and Warwick, which favoured Labor in 1914, came out in support of it.³⁹

The immediate consequence of the defeat was yet another realignment of Australian political parties. Hughes and his pro-conscription followers left the Labor caucus and formed a minority 'National Labor' administration.⁴⁰ The first step towards realignment came when the Victorian Referendum Council suggested the formation of a 'win the war' party, a combination of the Liberals and National Labor men. Groom was present at a meeting which resolved to take steps for 'the creation of a new national organization to convene Australian war and national interests'.⁴¹ Right until the actual formation of the National party and government on 18 February 1917 many Liberal parliamentarians remained suspicious of any sort of alliance.⁴²

Groom did not receive a portfolio but was included in the cabinet as Assistant Minister for Defence. It was also announced he would act as Attorney-General, a post Hughes retained, if the latter went to the forthcoming Imperial Conference in London.⁴³ Although he had suffered a downgrading in ministerial status since last in office, he was lucky to be included in the administration at all when so many former ministers were not. He was, he telegraphed his wife, 'quite satisfied'.⁴⁴

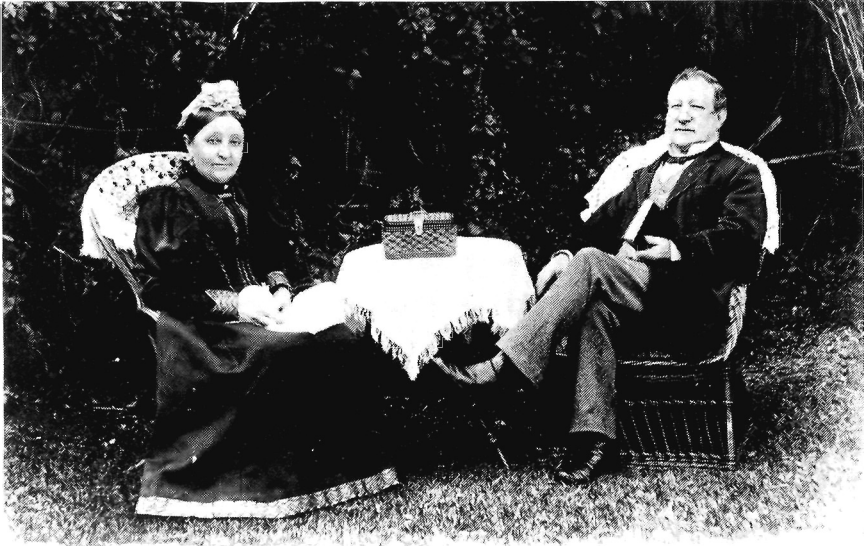
Yet the political scene was still far from placid. A federal election, which the government unsuccessfully attempted to postpone, was fixed for 5 May and the campaign was fought with great emotional fervour. Hughes pointed to his record as wartime Prime Minister and called on those who wanted a 'win the war' policy to give him their votes. At the same time he declared that his government would make no further attempt to introduce conscription unless the military situation made another appeal to the people imperative.⁴⁵ Tudor, the new Labor leader, claimed that while he would conduct the war effort 'with vigour and determination', his party remained committed to voluntary recruitment.⁴⁶

IN CONFLICT WITH RYAN

Groom's own re-election was by no means the certainty it had been in previous contests. While almost all German-born Australian citizens were disenfranchised, their Australian-born descendants and relatives were not. In view of his ideas on the war it was hardly surprising that most of this group were against him. No less than ninety per cent of local Germans, one of his correspondents warned, were for Labor and a lot of farmers were still angry with the government over its conscription proposals.⁴⁷ The Queensland labor government under T.J. Ryan, moreover, was popular and no major split developed within its ranks over conscription. Groom's Labor opponent, John Wilson, previously divisional returning officer for the Darling Downs, had, it was generally agreed, a good chance of being elected. A confident Brisbane Worker reported on 19 April that Wilson 'is winning support everywhre he goes' and 'should have a decisive victory over his opponent'.⁴⁸

In response to the threat Groom made numerous speeches throughout his own and nearby electorates. He opened his campaign at Toowoomba with the assertion that Labor preferred sectional aims to the national safety and its organization shackled it to such an extent that the principle of responsible government was at stake. He appealed to all shades of opinion 'to realise that serious position of the Empire' and urged them to 'lay aside party feelings, and rally to the support of the National War Government'.⁴⁹ In the next few weeks he repeated his message in support of his own and the government's re-election.

Some idea of the reception he received can be gained from the report of the *Brisbane Courier* on a speech he made in Brisbane on 18 April. From the outset, it recorded, he was 'assailed by a chorus of catcalls, hoots and cries that blended into an amorphous unrecognisable clamour'. Two people had to be removed from the hall and a woman, 'amid a storm of execration, offered a knitted sock to two or three of the Caucus brigade who were making a



Mr and Mrs W.H. Groom, parents of Littleton Groom

considerable noise.' For nearly one and a half hours Groom shouted back at the chorus. Taking up some of the interjections, he said he was the minister who drafted the old age pensions legislation, the Barton government passed the one man one vote principle, White Australia was a principle in Queensland before Labor was in politics, and that the Deakin government sent the cable which initiated the Australian navy. To each of his points came the shout of 'liar' from the audience. He concluded what was described as 'one of the greatest fighting speeches delivered in the hall for many years' with some 'biting sarcasm about the lovers of freedom of speech that he had found in the Caucus party in Brisbane.'⁵⁰

Groom won handsomely, his vote being 17,815 against Wilson's 13,937;⁵¹ some felt he did well to win at all. 'Down here', the editor of a Melbourne magazine wrote, 'it was quite expected you would have a very close fight, and might not even have polled as many votes as your opponent.'⁵² 'In my opinion', wrote a Nationalist member of the Queensland Legislative Assembly, 'you turned, what appeared to almost certain defeat, into victory, by your wonderful energy, ability and plucky fight.'⁵³ In the rest of the country the government's victory far exceeded any expectations, the Nationalists won fifty three seats to Labor's twenty two, including two gains in Queensland, and all eighteen Senate vacancies.⁵⁴ The verdict clearly demonstrated to Groom 'that the spirit of Nationalism was strong within the people'⁵⁵ and that the latter had positively endorsed the government's request that 'party programmes and sectional aims might yield place to national and Imperial purposes.'⁵⁶

After the election Groom was at last able to give some attention to his ministerial duties. As Assistant Minister for Defence until the end of the year he shared the administrative duties of his department, answered questions relating to it in the House of Representatives and steered a number of legislative measures through that chamber. From 16 November 1917 he was also Vice-President of the Executive Council which involved his chairmanship of Executive Council meetings in the Governor-General's absence.

The re-emergence of the conscription issue soon disrupted his stable pattern of ministerial life. As it had in 1916, the Western Front exploded and the Australian forces lost some 55,000 men killed and wounded in the battles at Messines, Bullecourt and Ypres. Despite the use of a variety of inducements, the monthly number of new recruits continued to decline. Hughes once more decided to go to the people on the conscription question, the polling date being 20 December.⁵⁷

Groom was closely involved in an episode which revealed how much he and his associates had espoused authoritarian attitudes. It began when on 18 November Ryan, the Queensland Premier, questioned the federal ministry's estimates of the numbers needed for the AIF's reinforcement and claimed, on the basis of official statements, that 109,000 men were readily available.⁵⁸ Whether because of the obvious danger of the calculation or in order to hobble the anti-conscription cause, Hughes added a regulation to the War Precautions Act on 19 November just as Ryan was to address a major rally in Brisbane. It provided that a person who made any false statement of fact likely to affect the judgement of the electors, would be required to appear in court within forty eight hours of the service of the summons.⁵⁹ Ryan was not deterred and used his figure of 109,000 to emphasize how the federal government had misled the people.⁶⁰

Next day Groom replied to the Premier's accusations yet did not deny the accuracy of the assessment of the number of men available for reinforcements.⁶¹ In a letter to the Brisbane *Daily Mail* on the day after the report of his speech he asserted there were at least 100,000 men available but emphasized that many of these were in training and that if reinforcements were not sent and casualties continued there would be no reserves in eighteen months. His estimation of the time during which the 100,000 mentioned would be available was, in fact, more generous than Ryan's original figure prophecy of twelve to sixteen months.⁶²

Groom's efforts seemed unnecessary as the censorship authorities cut the important figures out of the newspaper reports on Ryan's address. His reported speech now suggested not opposition to, but support for conscription. On learning of the censor's actions Ryan

issued a press statement indicating that his speech had been censored in the interests of the conscriptionists. He further pointed out that Groom was allowed to reply to his analysis of the numbers available even though these were not to be published. The censors refused to allow this statement to be printed in the press, whereupon he decided to repeat the significant parts of his speech in the Legislative Assembly.⁶³ On 26 November Hughes personally directed that the Premier's remarks be deleted from the state's printed parliamentary debates and then also ordered the censorship of a special issue of the *Queensland Government Gazette* which also contained them.⁶⁴ On 30 November it was announced that a summons would be served on Ryan for making a false statement likely to affect the judgement of the electors and for conspiring to distribute in the state Hansard a matter not first submitted to and approved by the censor.⁶⁵ The trial opened on 3 December. In many respects the case concluded when Ryan's counsel, N.W. Macrossan, cross-examined the first witness, Captain C. Wood, the censor who made the original cuts in the report of Ryan's speech. Wood argued that Ryan's arithmetic was correct. Laughter rippled through the court when he also concurred that Groom should be prosecuted as well. He felt, in fact, Groom's claim that reinforcements would last for eighteen months was more extravagant than Ryan's twelve to sixteen months. After such an argument it was not unexpected that the magistrate rejected the Commonwealth's case.⁶⁶

Despite the embarrassment the incident should have caused him, Groom's zeal in campaigning for a 'yes' vote was undampened. There were, he told a Brisbane meeting, only two real choices—to be for or against the German military classes.⁶⁷ The proposition for all those who loved their country and were loyal to the Empire, he said a day later, was whether 'our nation is going to exist, or is it going to pass under foreign domination?'⁶⁸

The rowdiness with which anti-conscriptionists often received Groom and other pro-conscription speakers exacerbated the emotional tone of such statements. A number of meetings in the Darling Downs were disrupted and on 29 November, in a now almost legendary incident, hostile demonstrators met Hughes at Warwick railway station, where he was jostled and hit by a flying egg.⁶⁹ Five days later Groom could scarcely make himself heard at nearby Pittsworth above the booing and shouting audience. 'To all intents and purposes', it was reported, 'mob rule prevailed, and the meeting was the worst yet held in the town.'⁷⁰

The government's hopes of carrying the referendum were not realized. In Queensland all Groom's efforts were nullified when only one electorate supported his call. In the Darling Downs the 1916

narrow verdict in favour of conscription was reversed to a 'no' majority of six hundred and seventeen votes.⁷¹

Though the result did not, as some hoped, destroy the federal ministry, it ended whatever remained of a common national desire to win the war.

AN INFLUENCE ON HUGHES

During the next year even Groom, in his role as Vice-President of the Executive Council, found the Prime Minister's impetuosity unacceptable. Always sticklers for legal forms, Groom and the Governor-General, Sir Ronald Munro-Ferguson, for whom he acted, resisted what they saw as the incorrect manner in which Hughes conducted Executive Council meetings. For some time irregularities in this connection had annoyed Munro-Ferguson and he finally drew up a memo, which the cabinet accepted, setting out the correct procedure.⁷² The change was successful, he conceded in a private letter, because of Groom's determination 'that business which has not been before Cabinet shall not go up to the Executive—a precaution which seems to be required but has not hitherto been observed.'⁷³ When, on 27 March 1918, Hughes made Groom Minister for Works and Railways in a cabinet reconstruction, Munro-Ferguson was clearly unhappy. He took occasion, he informed the Colonial Secretary in London, 'to express to the Prime Minister my appreciation of Mr Groom's qualifications for the Vice-Presidency and my regret that he has been transferred from the position without the matter being brought to my knowledge.' Hughes in reply, 'while recognising how advantageous it would be to retain Mr Groom as Vice-President, declared that he was the only man available to succeed Mr Watt and expatiated on his difficulties in reconstituting his cabinet.'⁷⁴ At much the same time the Governor-General directed his official secretary to approach Groom while on a train journey to Melbourne and convey to him Munro-Ferguson's anxiety as 'to the maintenance of the conditions which were recently laid down under which meetings of the Executive Council should be held during Your Excellency's absence from the Seat of Government.' In the discussion which ensued Groom promised he would fully discuss the matter with Senator E.J. Russell, the new Vice-President, would call upon the Governor-General privately to explain what he had done.⁷⁵

On most other matters Groom wholeheartedly supported Hughes. The two men had been on relatively friendly terms since the days of the 1904 Liberal-Labor alliance and Hughes later claimed to have always had a high regard for Groom.⁷⁶ Because of the distrust between Hughes and many other former Liberals, Groom quickly became one of his close advisers. Hughes not only appointed him to

the important Works and Railways portfolio but made him acting Attorney-General during his own long absence overseas during much of 1918 and 1919. Groom, in turn, fully supported his leader's ideas on the prosecution of the war and tried to emulate him in this sphere.

He was particularly pleased with Hughes' acceptance of his long held dream of a Commonwealth agricultural research organization. Despite the war's generally disastrous effect on progressive innovations, it had clearly revealed the necessity for planned action in primary industry. In 1916 conferences of state agriculture ministers, scientists and leading businessmen resulted in a proposal for an Institute of Science and Industry to co-ordinate research work on primary industries and tackle their problems on a national scale.⁷⁷ At the May 1918 premiers' conference where Groom and Watt, the acting Prime Minister, represented the Commonwealth, the state leaders argued this was a Commonwealth intrusion into their domain. It took forceful speeches from Groom and Watt showing its main benefits to persuade the Premiers reluctantly to agree with them.⁷⁸ After much preliminary investigation, a Director of the Institute was appointed later in the year. In late 1918 Groom had the satisfaction of moving the second reading of the bill which definitely established the Institute,⁷⁹ and of defending in parliament the proposal in the 1918 estimates for the provision of laboratories and research equipment.⁸⁰

As acting Attorney-General he was also responsible for the maintenance of a considerable number of special wartime laws and regulations which invaded almost every sphere of national life. While his task was largely routine, it again provided evidence of authoritarian views. One of the more striking instances occurred in May 1918 when he responded to a complaint made by Tudor to Watt about the various restrictions then in force.⁸¹ Groom, who drafted Watt's reply, wrote that while the government appreciated the value of free discussion, the right of public meetings, and freedom of the press, in time of war rights recognized in peace were 'necessarily subject to certain limitations in the national interest'. Not only, he continued, did he support those limitations already in force, but also further restrictions in the area of the prohibition of material prejudicial to recruiting.⁸²

While in the war's closing months it was increasingly evident that Germany's chances of victory were slight and the British Empire had little to fear, Groom continued to argue that the national war effort must dominate all else in Australia. Although, he said in August 1918, the tide was turning in the Allies' favour, there were 'greater reasons now than in 1914 for wanting to carry [the war], to a victorious issue'. He claimed the United States were fighting because they knew that if the Allies did not win the future of democracy in

the civilized world would be threatened, 'We must say to the Germans', he said, '. . . "Get back to Germany, and then we will talk peace with you". The home defence of the United States', he went on, 'was on the fields of Flanders and France and so is the home defence of Australia.'⁸³

Groom and most other politicians all too clearly realized a deep division had been revealed in Australian life since 1914. Only half of those eligible had joined the AIF during the war, so that by 1918, willingly or not, a considerable proportion of Australians stood apart from the remainder. Before the war Groom had shared some common ideological ground with those radical nationalists who led the drive for a social paradise in Australia. But, as Bill Gammage has forcefully argued, by the 1916 conscription referendum the cohesion and confidence which gave impetus to the pre-war social welfare ideals were gone, and political leaders like Groom were caught between the increasingly discordant claims of the nation as they conceived it and the Empire. The non-Labour forces, which between 1910 and 1914 had exerted a tenuous influence on Australian national politics, were united and given purpose by the war because victory and the Empire were causes to which they could dedicate themselves without reservation. The National Party thus expressed not only the ideals of the conservatives but those of people who before 1914 were radical in their aspirations. While the war split society in one sense, in another it allowed politicians like Groom to take firm possession of the spirit of Australian nationhood and maintain an influence for a long period into the future.⁸⁴

ENDNOTES

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