

# NEW [acquisitions]



photo: Dragi Markovic

## Million pound banknote

Ever been handed one million pounds? The Museum has recently acquired a Country-National election flyer from the 1931 federal election in the form of a 'one million pound banknote', generously donated by Paul Hills.

The 1931 election, the first during the Great Depression, was contested over the management of the Australian economy. This million pound note played on differing political responses to Australia's crippling national debt. Labor Treasurer Edward 'Red Ted' Theodore and Prime Minister James Scullin proposed an inflationary policy based on printing money to fund social welfare programs. Some in the Labor Party, most notably New South Wales Labor demagogue Jack Lang, wanted to repudiate foreign loans altogether. However others, including 'Honest' Joe Lyons and the conservative parties, were for re-establishing overseas-lenders' confidence in Australia by repaying the loans in full. Joseph Lyons and his political allies eventually won the day.

Money was a central concern of governments and individuals during the Great Depression. Lack of money encouraged ideas of 'thrift' and

'making do' amongst those on the breadline, whilst the prospect of inflation endangered the savings of the middle classes. The 'one million pound banknote' reminded Australians of the German hyperinflation of 1923, as well as the role played by credit in creating the Australian depression of the 1890s. However, notions of financial decency and national honour also motivated Australians at this time. Both inside and outside of the Australian Labor Party, Lyons argued against repudiating Australia's loans. To rebuild investor confidence in Australia, Lyons launched the 'All for Australia' campaign in 1930. Many small businesses, organisations and individuals pledged a day's profits to repay the loan. At the end of the campaign, the twenty-eight million pound loan was over-subscribed by two million pounds. It was from this campaign that the United Australia Party was formed, a forerunner of today's Liberal Party.

The note is a reminder that a 'one million pound note' in your pocket is not something to aspire to but rather to fear; fears that the conservative parties exploited to their advantage in 1931.

## Ballot box

The National Museum of Australia has recently acquired a ballot box, donated by Mr Alick Myers of Tumut, NSW. This wooden ballot box was originally held by returning officer, JM Koth, who owned property at Gobarralong, NSW between 1958 and 1979. However, the production of wooden boxes ceased around 1930, although it is estimated that the box itself dates from between 1910 and 1920.

In the more fluid political and social conditions of colonial Australia, electoral innovation was often achieved ahead of longer-established societies. White male suffrage was achieved in the Australian colonies before a similar franchise was granted in Great Britain and in the eastern and southern regions of the United States.

Innovation also extended to the *method* of voting. The secret ballot was first instigated in Australia. By the end of the 1850s, most Australian colonies used the secret ballot for their elections. In contrast, the secret ballot was finally introduced in Great Britain in 1872 and was only the norm in most US states by 1896. In the United States,

the precedent set by the adoption of the secret ballot in Australia was recognised in some of the names given to the secret ballot in the various different states in which it was proposed: 'the Australian ballot', 'the Victorian ballot', 'kangaroo voting' and 'the penal colony reform'.

Australia is also the only English-speaking country to employ 'compulsory voting'. Compulsory enrolment in Commonwealth elections was introduced in 1911 and voting was made mandatory for non-Indigenous Australians in 1924. This measure was introduced to address low voter turnout. In the 1903 election, turnout had been only 46.8 per cent. Saturday voting was also an Australian innovation, similarly designed to combat low turnout and voter apathy.

One of the first acts of the Commonwealth Parliament was the *Commonwealth Franchise Act* of 1902. This Act represented a moment of enfranchisement and disenfranchisement; the legal enfranchisement of women in federal elections (South Australia became the

first state in which women could vote in 1893; Victoria the last in 1909) and the effective disenfranchisement of Indigenous people.

A restrictive reading of the Act meant that only Aboriginal people on electoral rolls in 1902 qualified for voting in federal elections, and in time these individuals died off. Eventually, in 1961, a select committee recommended extending the Commonwealth franchise to Indigenous people Australia-wide and legislation was passed to this effect in 1962. However, enrolment for Indigenous people was to be voluntary in the first instance and enrolment only became compulsory in 1983.

The ballot box symbolises the central importance of voting in Australian political culture and history. Voting practices today are the product of successful campaigns for white male suffrage, white female suffrage and, somewhat later, Indigenous suffrage. The boundaries of inclusion and exclusion associated with voting allude to the development of contemporary attitudes to citizenship and democratic rights.

The Alick Myers ballot box is currently on display in the Nation gallery's Moments exhibit.

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