

Chapter 30

The Politics of Elections

The Wall Street Crash of October 1929 had initially attracted little attention in Australia. At the time, economic ties to America were not strong and the flow-on effects of a stock market collapse were not fully understood; with so many things to worry about at home, not much consideration was given to what was going on abroad.

Yet it wasn't long before the ripple effects of the global economic crisis were felt. During 1930 the government was met with plummeting export incomes, mounting unemployment and a worsening budgetary deficit. The Communist Party of Australia – considered to be Australia's greatest menace – had also been making big gains through the trade unions and the struggles of the working class.

As the problems grew, Prime Minister Scullin went to attend an Imperial conference in London. James Fenton, now the Minister for Trade and Customs, acted in his place and, together with Joseph Lyons, the acting treasurer, called urgent parliamentary sittings to deal with the crisis. Both men held very conservative views that Australia was living beyond its means, and to trade out of the Depression significant cuts to government spending, wages and pensions were needed, along with an increase in taxation. These views contrasted sharply with inflationary policies proposed by others to encourage more spending and promote jobs. Amidst conflicting advice and opposing agendas, fierce debates arose in caucus

that spilled into the public arena, causing unrest. The banks were blamed, called out as greedy financiers whose sole intentions were to line their own pockets by impoverishing the working class. Other huge sums had been borrowed, it was claimed, from money-lending Jews. This led to renewed antisemitism, prompting Issy to write a letter to the paper.

Sir. – I shall be glad if you will grant me a little space in answer to the repudiation talk by Mr Hogan, The Premier of Victoria, at the Hotel Windsor. My strong objection being the remarks made by the Premier that it was believed by some that the Government had borrowed huge sums of money from money-lending Jews. As a peaceful citizen of Victoria and a Jew, I take strong objection to these remarks as, I am sure there is no need for me to inform him, that there are just as large a money-lending people of other religious bodies – Yours etc.,

Izzy [*sic*] Smith

Melbourne, March 19¹

When Scullin returned in early 1931 and replaced Lyons with a politician in favour of the more radical direction proposed to deal with the crisis, Lyons and Fenton promptly resigned. Fenton joined the newly formed United Australia Party led by Lyons and on 28 November of that year helped bring down the government through a no confidence motion. In one of the fastest campaigns in Commonwealth history, nominations closed on 5 December and a general election was called for 19 December.

The election was always going to be stormy. It wasn't just the political climate that was strained; many of the working class understood the implications and were disillusioned and angry. Employment opportunities, investments and savings had been drying up since the crash, and long dole queues were the norm. For the destitute there was little relief other than a government issue of surplus army clothing and tired old boots which made the wearers highly conspicuous. The cuts to pensions seemed particularly

heartless and further burdened families battling to stay afloat. The mood was dark.

On the opening night of his local election campaign, Fenton knew there would be tension – his electorate in Maribyrnong covered the main industrial districts where many had been laid off. Perhaps in the hope of obtaining a fresh perspective, he asked Enid Lyons, wife of Joseph Lyons, if she would accompany him and speak. Also joining them was Issy, who had decided to try his hand at politics and was contesting the Melbourne seat against the longstanding Dr William Maloney. Issy's decision, said *The Herald*, was made because he believed that 'the present is the time when people who have principles should be prepared to stand by them.' The papers had previously highlighted the lack of ex-servicemen in politics and perhaps Issy had taken heed, although he listed himself modestly just as 'I. Smith, Manager, Moonee Ponds', without his military credentials.²

'I have not been associated with any political party,' Issy told the paper.

I believe that Australia's greatest need is to return to Parliament men who can be trusted and whose very presence will restore confidence both in Australia and overseas. I am irrevocably opposed to Communists and I would have their organisation declared illegal, with penalties providing either deportation or gaol. What Australia now wants is a policy of sound finance, a sound protectionist policy, a sound defence policy, and a properly conceived scheme of Empire trade.³

It was going to take a good deal of work to get these principles heard. Enid recalled the emotion-charged evening in her memoirs:

An angry crowd is always a disturbing sight, but under some circumstance and in some surroundings it can be a terrifying one. No one can tell the moment when the last barrier of civilised restraint will break. Only once have I seen such a sight, and if I were asked to name the most dramatic incident of my life I think I should choose the one

that occurred that night, when Sergeant Issy Smith stood and faced the crowd.

– *So We Take Comfort* (1965)

That evening, a dreadful noise could be heard coming from the Moonee Ponds Town Hall as the Fenton party pulled up. Supporters, pacing and anxious, quickly warned that it had been building since 6 pm. The hall was now full, mostly of men who had come straight from the factories to vent their grievances. Tired, hungry and dirty, nearly 2000 had forced the doors open and stood for two hours waiting for Fenton, the ‘object of their wrath’ to appear. Another 500 who could not gain admittance gathered outside.

As the party walked on stage there was an uproar. Insults, jeers, catcalls, heckles and boos filled the room for the entire time, except for just three remarkable minutes at the very end.

At first the chairman stood and attempted to make his opening speech, but after five minutes he abandoned and sat down. Enid, sitting next to him, hadn’t heard a word amid the din. Fenton tried next, shouting against the wave of anger; but the commotion only worsened, broken at times by the cries of ‘Traitor!’, ‘Rat!’ and ‘Mongrel!’ He persisted for nearly half an hour without losing his patience, possibly encouraged by the occasional cheers heard in amid the roar, but his unruffled demeanour annoyed the hecklers more, and eventually another committee member took his place. It wasn’t long before he too gave in.

Fenton, strained and pale, leaned across to Enid. ‘You don’t know how I hate to expose you to this,’ he said, ‘but they might listen to a lady. Would you try?’

Enid nodded. Rising nervously to her feet, she surveyed a sea of fury. ‘Be sports,’ she attempted. For a moment the racket appeared to lessen and then it rebounded with umpire’s whistles, bells and voices that shouted in unison.

‘Get back to your kids!’

The shouting did not let up. ‘Get back to your kids! Go back to Tasmania!’ they cried. After five minutes Enid, too, sat down

defeated. The chairman took over and tried again. The only two police constables on duty stepped in and removed a few of the most persistent interjectors, but they were immediately replaced by women who stood on chairs to hurl their abuse.

While the crowd howled at their speaker, Issy sat down beside Enid. 'Lord this is awful,' he said. 'This fellow doesn't know how to handle them. I know the idiom here. I live in these parts. I'll have a go. They'll listen to me!'

Enid was relieved. Issy was not only a respected VC winner but also a well-known member of the community. Perhaps they would hear him out.

Signalling to the chairman, he indicated that he was prepared to speak. The chairman made room and Issy stepped forward.

For the briefest of moments, the racket seemed to lessen. The audience knew him – he was one of them, a popular figure, and both a local and national hero since the war. He managed perhaps a dozen words against the clamour before the hoots and jeers returned and the mob shouted him down. 'You will count for very little on December 19,' he exclaimed at last. 'Mr Theodore will ruin the Labour party.'

Then, in the centre of the hall, a lone man raised his hand. For five minutes he stood, his arm outstretched, until it occurred to the crowd that he had a question. The noise fell to a dull rumble, then to a murmur, then to silence. At last, when everyone including the party on the stage was listening, he spoke.

With his face mottled with anger, his voice impassioned with hatred and each and every word crystal clear, he asked, 'Who killed Christ?'

A gasp rippled through the hall and the room fell deathly quiet. Issy stood on the platform, motionless for perhaps half a minute. Then, in the stony silence, in a voice fervent with feeling that could be heard in the farthest corners of the room, he said, 'Well, if you're a fair specimen of a Christian, thank God I am a Jew.'

Not another word was spoken and the audience dispersed. Years

later, in an article to the press, Enid noted that Issy, the most dignified person in the hall at that moment, spoke with 'eloquence and vigour' – to no avail. The hall was full of hostile voters. Ultimately hatred and prejudice – which she considered passed for current public opinion – beat reason.⁴



The meeting might have ended, but the hostilities did not. As Issy stood on the steps of the Soldiers Memorial in North Melbourne a few days later, an unruly crowd interrupted his first official address. Roughly 1000 people were gathered and initially they accepted the opening speaker Mr Dillon, the candidate for Essendon, until he began to talk about a sugar embargo. Suddenly the mood shifted.

'Where's Issy?' they shouted. As Issy stepped forward, smiling and waving, the hooting gathered momentum. 'You've as much chance of shifting Dr. Maloney as I have of shifting the Shrine of Remembrance,' an injector yelled, to which there were cheers and laughter.

Issy maintained his smile. 'Come on, boys, be sports and –' he started. The crowd surged forward and an inner circle of approximately 200 young men refused to let him speak. Each time he tried, an uproar began. Issy patiently persisted, but when an insulting remark about his war honour was shouted his smile disappeared – right then, an egg meant for him flew past and smashed against the pillar of the memorial. The crowd became more oppugnant, with some shouting to 'knock him down and put the boot in'. As his supporters gathered around him to hold off the advance, a young man in a cap yelled cynically, 'Don't be afraid, Issy: we'll see you're not hurt.'

Issy calmly brushed aside his stalwarts and said to the young man in the cap, 'I haven't lost my courage yet.' This inspired a brawny interjector to lob an offensive remark about returned soldiers to which some of the crowd applauded. But one man defended Issy. 'I was at the same place with him. Give him a go,' he called. A group

surrounded the man and warned him to keep quiet.

The wall of insults continued in the face of Issy's attempts to speak. When he said that he favoured the cancellation of all war debts, some of the crowd pushed clenched fists in his face and told him 'to cut out the fucking war'. Issy appealed for moderation, proclaiming that surely they did not wish to drag in the war at the 1931 election.

A protester shouted, 'Are you in favour of absolute preference to all unionists?'

'No,' Issy replied, and a tremendous calamity followed.

Issy descended the steps and the crowd lurched, hooting, calling names and reviling his religion. When the noise began to lull, Issy ascended again and a handful of people cheered. But this was quickly drowned by more hooting and howling as the mob rushed the memorial steps. Issy was crushed against the base and had to fight his way out. As he pushed towards his car, he was derided for not having enough money to hire a hall. Some people came forward and offered to subscribe money but Issy, tired and hoarse, shook his head.

At the car, a woman called out, 'Think yourself lucky you ain't goin' 'ome in an ambulance', to which there was much laughter.

When the car moved off, a momentous roar rose up behind him. 'IZZY WAS HOOTED AS HE FLED' a newspaper splashed in headlines, only to acknowledge in the story that 'they howled him down, hooted and counted him out, and finally threatened to remove him from the steps of the memorial by force. Smith then left.'⁵

Dr Maloney, at his own meeting at the Kensington Town Hall later that evening, heard of the incident. A seasoned campaigner at 74 years of age, and not one to hold back or allow party politics to surpass his chivalry, he addressed the large audience, prefacing his speech with the need for respect for such an honour as the Victoria Cross and calling for fairness.⁶

Many wrote to the papers the next day, denouncing the crowd's disgraceful behaviour. *The Herald* reported that Dr Maloney also

telephoned the paper personally to say how much he regretted the tactics being followed to prevent his opponent from speaking.

‘At North Melbourne last night, Sergeant Smith was interrupted so much he was not able to get a fair hearing. I believe in absolute freedom of speech,’ Dr Maloney said. ‘After all, my opponent has won the greatest honour that can be won and Australians should see that he gets fair play.’⁷

Others agreed, and many sent letters of complaint.

‘This is the type of man that Melbourne has the opportunity to elect to Parliament,’ a Mr Clarke wrote to the papers. ‘A man who risks his life for his fellows, not once, but many times, would not lack courage when it came to a fight on behalf of the people. The unemployed have a gallant friend in Sergeant Issy Smith VC.’⁸

One paper attempted to defend the behaviour. ‘It was more from sentimental support for Dr W. Maloney M.H.R., than from political reasons that Sergeant Izzy Smith, V.C. was howled down ...’ the article claimed.⁹ ‘A section of ‘the little doctor’s’ followers always gives his opponents for Melbourne seat a very bad time. Dr Maloney has held this seat for over 25 years, often uncontested, and many of his followers consider it audacious for a candidate to oppose him.’¹⁰

But despite the press, the campaign animosity persisted.

Speaking at Royal Park Grammar School, Issy was continually interrupted, especially by a Mr William Gullett, whose shouts and abuse meant it was impossible for Issy to be heard. Gullett marched to the platform, threatening to knock him off it. The police removed him from the hall but he scaled a wall and attempted to climb back in through a window. ‘Lie down, you mongrel! If I get up on the platform, I will go you,’ he hollered, before being removed from the window and escorted outside again.

A few days later he appeared in Carlton Court and was charged with behaving in an offensive manner. He was fined £5 with one month’s imprisonment in default imposed.¹¹

At the next meeting in Kensington Town Hall on 14 December more police attended. When the UAP senator James Guthrie referred

to Issy's war record, a man yelled, 'Cut with the sob stuff. Give us some politics.'

Issy then rose to address the crowd. 'I notice in the audience some of my friends from North Melbourne,' he said.

'Where do you come from, Jerusalem?' a voice called out.

'I am not ashamed to say that I am from the ancient Jewish race,' he replied, to which there was some applause. 'I think some of you are being paid to follow me around – I hope you are receiving union rates.'¹²

On 17 December, just two days before election day, an advertisement appeared in *The Herald* from CW Joyce, State Secretary of RSSILA, who made an open admission that it was he who wrote the accusing article on Issy regarding the Anzac Day observance some eight months earlier. 'I therefore regret the statement that he had been in Australia for four or five years only. I have not and never have had any desire to reflect upon Mr Smith personally. His long and distinguished career with the Manchester Regiment is well known to me, as is the act of gallantry whereby, on 26th April, 1915, he won the Victoria Cross [...] I have not desired to suggest in any way that in this controversy he has expressed views which are contrary to his genuine convictions, nor do I suggest that he would, under any circumstances, express views contrary to his convictions.'¹³

If this was an effort to help Issy's political bid, it came too late. In less than three weeks, the whirlwind campaign was over, with Dr Maloney retaining his seat. The heavy vote for the non-Labor forces were startling and Issy's was a case in point, with the papers reporting that it was amazing the fight he put up and how many votes he had received (over 13,000, resulting in a 38 per cent swing). Maloney had represented Melbourne for 27 years, and his hold on the seat was such that 'many thought Sergeant Smith was wasting his time in contesting it.' Issy accepted defeat gracefully. In a brief speech, he said that he was satisfied the best man had won. A photo was printed in *The Herald* of the two men shaking hands.¹⁴

But not surprisingly, there was more to come.

The Argus reported that the posters for Issy Smith had been deliberately altered. The posters advised electors to vote '1' for Issy but under cover of night, the number had been carefully altered to '2' for Maloney. Care had been taken to see that the new number fitted exactly into the square – the printing was identical. The voting was rigged.¹⁵

Nothing was done about this scandal. Interestingly, when Maloney had stood for the seat of Melbourne in 1903 (after being soundly beaten in his first attempt in 1901), he had protested the narrow defeat. Appearing before the Court of Disputed Elections he argued that hundreds of ballot papers had been signed by ineligible persons and that postal submissions had been recorded on phoney ballot papers. The Chief Justice ruled in his favour and in 1904 a by-election was held, which he subsequently won.¹⁶

Issy did not challenge the 1931 result. Despite managing a huge swing in his favour, even with all the hurdles thrown in his path, he took no further part and withdrew from federal politics. Perhaps he thought the remaining margin to win the seat was too great. Or maybe he decided that the political arena, and everything that went with it, was a mug's game.¹⁷