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MR. CHIFLEY'S VISIT

How a Precedent Was Established

Written for "The Listener"
by TOM L. MILLS

IT is nearly 47 years since Australia became a Federation, but not many Prime Ministers of Australia have become acquainted with New Zealand. The Right Hon. J. B. Chifley, who at the time of writing was expected to reach Auckland on December 15, with Mrs. Chifley, makes the third, not counting the Rt. Hon. R. G. Menzies, who passed through Auckland during the last war. I'm told that "Billy" Hughes, otherwise the Rt. Hon. W. M. Hughes, paid a flying visit to Wellington to see a son and daughter, but I can't confirm this. And one's memory may be faulty.

A point that interested me particularly in the first announcement of Mr. Chifley's visit was this, that "it was influenced by long-standing invitation from Mr. Fraser" for there was a time when such invitations were not given, and I have a personal experience that bears on this.

In November, 1912, I was in Melbourne at a Press conference. One afternoon I was the guest at tea of the Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher, and his Ministers, for in the days when I was working on the mechanical side of the newspaper trade, I was hon. secretary of the Wellington Typographical Union, its delegate on the Trades and Labour Council, and New Zealand special correspondent of the *Queensland Worker*. Two of the *Worker's* directors were Andrew Fisher and Joseph Cook. The latter left the Labour Party and became a Liberal, and was eventually Prime Minister of Australia. In those days of the nineties the editor of Brisbane's *Worker* was William Lane, who founded the New Australia Socialist settlement in Paraguay.

Our tea-party was given in Victoria's Parliament Buildings, for Canberra wasn't nearly ready for Federal occupation. I was under fire from a bombardment of questions all round the table: What was the real position and condition of affairs over in New Zealand? Why did the electors depart from the Ballance-Seddon Liberal-Labour policy and programme? Why did Sir Joseph Ward cut the hyphen out of the Coalition that had given Richard Seddon the Premiership for 13 years and kept him in power until his death? Was it really true that Prohibition was taken seriously?

The First Invitation

At the end of this private session, which lasted just under a couple of hours, I said to the company generally and to Mr. Fisher especially: "You gentlemen seem to be greatly interested in our little country across the water. I myself, as an interviewer, have met members of Cabinets from South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales, but no Federal Cabinet Minister has yet touched our shores! Why not? Why don't you come across, Mr. Fisher? You would get a very hearty welcome."

Andrew Fisher, the most gentlemanly and quietest of a long procession of statesmen and politicians within my own

contacts, smilingly replied: "The answer is easy, Tom. You see, we have never been asked!"

That one shocked me into replying: "Well, that can easily be remedied!"

It was. On my return to Wellington, before going on home to Feilding, I called on Mr. Massey, the Prime Minister, and told him of the episode. In my presence, Mr. Massey immediately dictated an invitation to Mr. Fisher to visit the Dominion as the guest of the Government.

Not many weeks later I received a telegram from Auckland signed "Andrew Fisher": "Will be on the Limited for Wellington to-morrow. Meet me at Marton so that we can have a yarn till you get off at Feilding."

When I joined the train, I was introduced to Keith Murdoch, who was travelling as private secretary to the Prime Minister, and at the same time reporting the tour for the Melbourne *Argus*. By the way, during my city career I found that Australian Cabinet Ministers didn't follow the New Zealand custom of taking their political secretaries on tour, but invited a member of a leading newspaper to enjoy the trip—and thus got good publicity. To-day Sir Keith Murdoch is one of the most prominent newspaper proprietors in the Commonwealth.

There was also John Christian Watson, first Federal Labour leader and Commonwealth Prime Minister, who was serving his time as a compositor on the Oamaru *Mail* when I was an apprentice on the Timaru *Herald*. When he became a journeyman John Watson migrated to Sydney and became a leader in the typographical and other unions, and climbed to the top in politics. During a tour of New Zealand 45 years ago Mr. and Mrs. Watson spent a day with my family in Wellington, and when I was in Sydney in 1912 John took me from his office to see a deep excavation being made for the foundations of a big building which was to house what was hoped to be Australia's first daily Labour newspaper. He was then treasurer and trustee of the fund.

Not Gregarious

By the time this appears Mr. and Mrs. Chifley will be here, but I may pass on this tip to officialdom in those New Zealand centres which he is likely to visit: "Ben Chifley detests stiff-shirted receptions and all formality. He is very human but not socially gregarious. Don't civic-reception him as New Zealanders love to do to visiting personages." He is a persistent pipe-smoker. At times he is so dourly silent as to seem to be inarticulate. He and his wife infinitely prefer their cottage life to the Canberra restrictions and formalities. For recreation, an occasional race meeting, a novel of the thriller class—he enjoys an Australian author with an action theme—and his nose-warming pipe. For serious reading, books on economics, to which he is addicted, doing his own thinking and deduction. Mr. and Mrs. Chifley will hugely enjoy seeing New Zealand and New Zealanders if it can be done without what the Chifleys call "fuss, flummery and formality."