The 1938 Dalfram Pig-Iron Dispute and Wharfies Leader, Ted Roach

Greg Mallory
PhD student, Department of History, University of Queensland and Honorary Official of the Queensland Teachers' Union

1. Port Kembla 1937–38

In Port Kembla during the 1920s and 1930s the physical and social conditions of wharfies were peculiar to the emerging heavy industries of the Illawarra region. The ‘bull’ system prevailed and general safety conditions were poor. According to Griffith, the union and the stevedoring companies were controlled by four families and the union was seen as being ineffectual.

As the effects of the Depression lessened and work became available, Port Kembla began to attract workers who were transferred from other ports. A number of these were militants who had not only built up experience in the trade union movement, but who had been involved with ‘political’ organisations of the left. One such worker was Ted Roach, who came from Newcastle. Roach was a former district secretary of both the Unemployed Workers’ Union (UWM) and the Militant Minority Movement (MMM) and his politics were learnt as an itinerant labourer travelling throughout Queensland and New South Wales between 1928 and 1931, looking for work. He became an active member of the Communist Party in 1931 in Mackay where he was also secretary of the UWM. When Roach arrived in Port Kembla, he immediately agitated for better working conditions. Initially this was no easy task, as the ‘bull’ system operated and Roach and fellow militants were often denied work. They were often left idle at the pick-up.

Roach's first demands was the implementation of a roster system where the work was evenly shared. Roach promoted discussion on an alternative system at branch meetings and on 15 March, 1937 the following motion moved by Ted Roach was passed:

In the advent of a transfer of labour being required, the Secretary or COM member in conjunction with the employer, transfer such labour from ship or batch finishing first.

Roach was elected Secretary of the WWF South Coast Branch in January 1938. He immediately began to organise industrial campaigns agitating for a roster system as well as other campaigns that involved other union struggles. The branch began to develop a reputation as being militant. Roach stated:

other workers in cafes and pubs – if there was a problem, they would come to us and we would take it through the Labour Council. And we would put a dispute on if necessary.

In November 1937, the stevedoring company agreed to employ WWF members placing the port under complete union control. The union roster system gave the men the freedom to agitate as the fear of victimisation was removed. A strict code of discipline operated within the union. Fines were imposed on men who did not follow the rules governing the roster or who acted irresponsibly on the job. This became known as “fronting the red beards”. The industrial struggle was organised around a “programme for immediate demands” which meant that whenever one particular gain was made then immediately another campaign would take place for the next demand. For example, according to Roach, when the branch won the roster the leadership immediately started on a campaign for “rotation of hatches”.

The Port Kembla wharfies were also involved in community work, for example helping fight bushfires, digging air-mid shelters, as well as being involved in political campaigns through their Communist Party. One such activity was organizing money in the main street on a Friday night to send sheepskins to Russia. Roach and his fellow militants’ blend of industrial and political militancy led to a dispute that was, up to that stage, unique in Australian trade union history.

2. War Materials to Japan and the Federal Committee of Management

As Japan’s undeclared invasion of China in 1937 became more apparent to the Australian people, the WWF nationwide began to take more militant action in response to this aggression. Then in September 1939, Fremantle wharfies refused to load supplies on a Japanese whaler. Roach believed the WWF had become too focused on purely industrial conflicts and had not engaged in political activity.

Roach was in Melbourne when he learned that scrap iron was on board and destined for Japan. He decided to refuse to load scrap iron on to a German ship in May 1938. Roach believed the FCOM generally discouraged branches from staying out over this issue and in fact ordered them back to work. Roach and his fellow militants’ blend of industrial and political militancy led to a dispute that was, up to that stage, unique in Australian trade union history.

Roach believed the FCOM generally discouraged branches from staying out over this issue and in fact ordered them back to work in this case:

Because each time they (the Federation) made a move – the Dog Collar Act would hunt ‘em [sic] back to work directed by Jim Healy and the Federal Committee of Management, directed back to work each time, there was Townsville, Fremantle, Adelaide.

This statement from Roach indicates his hostility towards the FCOM for not staying out on strike. Roach handled the political situation from a local perspective and was not prepared to be dictated to by an ‘outside’ body. This was Roach’s boldness and the Port Kembla branch’s militancy and places their actions in a
unique context as it stressed local action through local decision making. Between January and May the ban held but the invocation of the Transport Workers Act was threatened.22

The FCOM meeting at the end of May sought a resolution that would not invoke the Transport Workers Act (TWA).23 On 24 May, a phone message was received by the FCOM from G. Mullins, the Sydney Branch Secretary. A mass meeting of the Sydney Branch condemned the Federal Government for forcing its members to load war materials to Japan but agreed to load the cargo under duress and finished off by stating that

"...we, therefore stand as an organized body feeling confident that our action in this matter was correct. We accept, however, the government’s ultimatum and agree to work all cargoes from the date specified by the Prime Minister (J. Lyons)."24

The Sydney Branch’s decision to go back to work shows the enormous amount of pressure placed on the union by the TWA. The Sydney Branch was not prepared to challenge the penalties of this Act. The banning of pig-iron to Japan was unable to be implemented by the Sydney Branch. The events at Port Kembla towards the end of 1938 produced a far different result.

3. The Pig-Iron Dispute

The South Coast Branch showed their concern over the exporting of pig-iron in correspondence from Ted Roach to Jim Healy on 20 May 1938. He pointed out that the Branch had sent the following motion to Prime Minister Lyons, the Labor Party, the Sydney Labor Council, and the Sydney Branch of the WWF. It read:

"We the members of the South Coast Branch of the Waterside Workers Federation of Australia, desire to lodge an emphatic protest against the savage threat of your government to introduce the Transport Workers’ Act to the Port of Sydney and force the application of the penalty provisions of the Act in the ports, where the Act already applies, unless the policy of our members is changed from one of supporting the policy of the League of Nations – to which your Government has pledged support – to one of assisting a country in an aggressive and murderous war against another member of the League."

On 15 November 1938, the British tramp steamer Dalfram berthed at No. 4 jetty in Port Kembla. Mitsui, the controlling company for Japanese Steel Works Ltd had chartered the vessel to take pig-iron from Port Kembla to Kobe, Japan. It was part of a contract to provide the Japanese steel mills with 300,000 tons of pig-iron. Japanese Steel Works was producing military materials for the undeclared war in China. Lockwood describes this event as “the Japanese Army’s rape of China”.25 When the ship docked in Melbourne, Charlie Young, a militant Melbourne wharfie, advised Jim Healy, General Secretary of the Federation, and Ted Roach, South Coast Secretary, that the ship was bound for Port Kembla. The South Coast Branch had already made clear its attitude on this matter. When the ship arrived in Port Kembla the wharfies were called together by Ted Roach. He stated:

"The Dalfram came in, I called the boys together in the lane, ..... and that morning I jumped a stump26 and said to the boys there was a ship coming in, and there was pig-iron for Japan, and our policy is clear, what do you think we should do about it? ..... and of course I moved a resolution that we don’t load it – but then cautioned that we accept work, we go back to work and commence work normally, to allow us to authenticate this information by moving amongst the crew and so on. You see – we didn’t want to make any mistakes ...

And the boys started loading this pig-iron and they were getting “boyo” about it and by the time I had finished, about a quarter past eleven – I had been down with the lascars.28 You see the native crews – I finished up convinced that they were going to Kobe, so I just walked up on deck and I said “Right-o boys, it’s going to Kobe” – to a man, everything stopped, and now they marched straight off the bloody ship – hey – we had no idea we were making history.29

The employer’s response was to individually harass the men as they walked off the ship.30 But this action was unsuccessful as the men remained firm in their commitment. The next day, when the men went to the ‘pick-up’, the Dalfram was first on the roster. When no labour was forthcoming for the Dalfram, they refused to call labour for any new ships.31 Roach claimed that this was a ‘lock-out’.32

4. The FCOM Response

The FCOM meeting in Melbourne received news of the “walk-out” in the afternoon of 15 November and requested that they submit a report on this action.33 On the 16 November, Ted Roach phoned the FCOM and told them that they had reaffirmed their action and had received support from the crew of the Dalfram and the Metal Workers.34 The FCOM “decided to leave the matter in abeyance pending further reports”.35 The actions of the Port Kembla men politicised the situation by upholding the principle and insisted on local decision-making about the end product of their labour.

Pressure was beginning to be applied to the FCOM to convince the Port Kembla WWF members to go back to work. Attorney-General Menzies phoned on Friday 18 November and asked the FCOM to order the men back to work and said that any discussion on the repeal of the TWA would be in jeopardy.36 At the conclusion of this meeting the General-Secretary was instructed to keep in touch with Wollongong and contact the FCOM if the occasion warranted it.37 On 27 November the South Coast branch reaffirmed their stand on the Dalfram and decided to call a public meeting on the threat of licences being applied under the TWA.38 General-Secretary Jim Healy conveyed this news to the FCOM on Thursday, 29 November and they issued a public statement:40 This statement attacked the Lyons government’s policies on exporting materials to Japan and reaffirmed their opposition to the TWA.41 Healy reported on 1 December that there was growing support for the South Coast Branch’s actions and that a meeting of all unions was called for the coming Sunday morning.42 On 2 December Healy was instructed by the FCOM to attend this meeting.43

Roach has argued that the FCOM wanted the men to go back to work but when confronted with a determined local branch they were forced to support them.44 He was of the opinion that a different situation existed to that of other ports. Roach has contended:

"...the Committee of Management wanted to order us back, but of course Healy knew he was not dealing with the people he always dealt with and he said to the Committee of Management, you’ve got to come down and order them back yourselves – well then, I was the first cab off the rank to the meeting and by the time I went down I had ‘em guaranteeing, I got ‘em into a guarantee of 3000 ( ) worth of food – it was only a guarantee, but it was a political victory for us down there over the bloody right-wing Committee of Management.45

This statement of Roach, made some fifty years after the event, indicates that the leadership of the Port Kembla branch saw the political situation differently to their Sydney counterparts and shows a resentful attitude towards the FCOM. The Port Kembla branch broke new ground by implementing decisions made at the local level thereby and setting the agenda for the FCOM.

5. The Transport Workers’ Act

The employers continued to put the Dalfram first on the roster when no labour was forthcoming. Support for the Port Kembla
wharfies was immediately forthcoming from unions, political parties and other organisations.46
The Federal Government threatened to use the TWA on 6 December to break the strike. On 4 December a meeting held at the Wollongong Miners Hall and attended by ACTU officials resolved to support the men.47
Menzies wired the Federation on 29 November and advised them to take notice that the TWA would be applied to Port Kembla by 6 December if the pig-iron was not loaded.48 The Federal Government accused the WWF of dictating foreign policy. It argued that as the elected government that it had the sole right to decide what relationships were to be established with foreign powers and threatened to declare Port Kembla a Transport Workers Act port.49
Healy, accompanied by Roach, met with Menzies on 7 December but Menzies still threatened them with the provisions of the TWA.50 The FCOM on 5 December sent a lettergram to Federal Labor Party loading seeking support.51 However, according to Roach, Curtin in reply talked to them as if they were a bunch of ‘naughty boys’ and said, “if we were the government, you would still have to load pig-iron”.52
Another meeting of the branch on 7 December 1938, with General-Secretary Jim Healy in attendance, reaffirmed its previous position of refusing to load pig-iron and passed the following motion: … that requests be sent to Curtin asking that pressure be brought to bear on Lyons to force a referendum on the question of the export of war materials to aggressive nations and the repeal of the Transport Workers’ Act.53
A FCOM telegram was received on 7 December asking the South Coast Executive if it was prepared to allow the FCOM to take over the dispute and involve other branches.54 Both Lockwood49 and Roach51 have stated that conservative elements within the FCOM were frightened of a confrontation with the government and wanted a return to work. Healy urged the FCOM on 8 December to pass a resolution of support for the men.55 It did so by passing the following motion:
That the COM, although having no say in the creation of the present situation as existing at Wollongong, find themselves faced with the situation that an attempt is being made to enforce the provisions of the Transport Workers’ Act on the Wollongong branch, and the issue now becomes a question of a fight against the Transport Workers’ Act. The Committee therefore supports the principle for which the men are fighting.56
This motion mentions nothing about the principles over which the men were fighting and indicates a lukewarm support of the FCOM. The TWA was applied at Port Kembla on 7 December, 1938.55 Only one licence was taken out. Ted Roach convinced that member to hand over his licence so that it could be burned publicly in front of the Customs House.49 Immediate support came from other unions and the wharves were declared black.49 As a consequence, the TWA was seen to be ineffectual, and this was proved to be one of the great victories in the dispute.
6. The Sydney Branch and Pig-iron
On 12 December, a report was received from Mr Mullins, Secretary of the Sydney Branch, advising the FCOM that WWF members had refused to accept work on the S.S. *Nellar* as they believed that its cargo was connected with the pig-iron dispute at Port Kembla.42 Mullins had contacted the shipping companies who had advised him that the pig-iron was not destined for Japan but in fact was to be discharged in Shanghai.49 He requested the FCOM to order the men back to work and stated that the ‘trouble’ had been caused by outside people.44 The FCOM felt that it was inadvisable to shop loading the cargo but decided to discuss the matter with the ACTU before making a decision. Mullins rang the FCOM on 13 December ‘complaining’ that the men were still refusing to load the cargo and had refused to load another ship, the *Taiping*. He requested a directive from the FCOM ordering them to work.46 After discussing the matter with the ACTU, the FCOM sent the Sydney Secretary the following motion:

**FCOM**

**7. The FCOM go to Wollongong**

On 16 December 1938, a joint meeting of the Federal FCOM and the South Coast branch was held.49 The Branch Executive gave a report on the situation and made it clear to the FCOM that the members had passed two motions not to load pig-iron to any ship destined for Japan and would abide by that decision. They reported that there was wide public support for their actions which included local union support. The FCOM decided to fully support the Port Kembla WWF members.51 On the following day the FCOM heard a report on the Combined Union Committee’s meeting at Wollongong. The FCOM appointed A. Finlay as their delegate on this committee and passed a resolution calling on the ACTU to rally the Australian trade union movement behind the actions of the Port Kembla men.51 At the meeting in Sydney, on 19 December, the Federal COM placed a levy of 1 shilling on all members in order to finance the Port Kembla dispute.57
8. The Search for a Solution

BHP laid off 4000 men on 17 December as they claimed the Dalfram dispute was responsible for bringing everything to a standstill. The WWF claimed it was a ‘lock-out’ and an attempt to sway public opinion against the wharfies. The situation of having over 4000 men out of work over the Christmas period placed enormous strains on the local community. Relief schemes were set up and donations were received from all over Australia. As outlined earlier, the Port Kembla wharfies had won wide support by participating in community activities such as fighting bushfires, digging air-raid shelters and helping farmers in times of difficulty.

After the Christmas period, Menzies made an attempt to settle the dispute by calling a meeting with the Combined Union Committee at Wollongong on 11 January, 1939. The Committee organised a large demonstration. The entire township was mobilised for Menzies’ arrival. Roach described the preparations:

Well there were two roads at the top of the pass, you know, the new road and the old road – and they were stuffing us about – weren’t giving us all the information, moving the times, so as to interrupt us – the miners had a holiday, and all the school-kids had a holiday this day for Menzies coming down – and the place was full of people and we got Stan Speedly on his fast motor-bike up the top near the Panorama Hotel, to let us know, as soon as he has come, Stan was going to whip down and let us know – and there were little demonstrations all along the coastline in little miners’ villages.

When Menzies arrived in Wollongong, he was met by an angry demonstration of over 1000 people. Roach recalled wharfies directing traffic and taking over point duty. Menzies visited the Wollongong Hotel, where he was to have lunch with the Mayor and other local dignitaries. The demonstrators held banners outside the hotel which read ‘No Pig-iron for Japan’ and ‘No Dog Collar’. It was here that Menzies acquired the name ‘Pig-Iron Bob’ apparently first used by wharfie, Stan Moran. In an article in the Sydney Morning Herald in 1993, Ted Roach claimed that it was first used by Mrs Gwendoline Croft, a member of the women’s relief committee, who helped the poor. It was later picked up by the Rev Bill Hobbin, a former Methodist minister, and Stan Moran, the well-known wharfie and communist Domain orator.

After Menzies had finished lunch, he was to meet with the WWF Committee across the road in the Town Hall. The demonstrators grew rowdy and the police were concerned for Menzies’ safety. Inspector Roser, who was in charge of the police, approached Ted Roach and asked him if he could guarantee Menzies’ safety. Roach said that he would arrange a path through the crowd. He organised some wharfies, who incidentally were Communist Party members, to clear a path. Roach ironically remembered this incident fifty years later:

The irony of this! Menzies, number one Red-baiter, had to be protected by a communist.

As Menzies walked across the road, he was abused by everyone, including women and children. At the meeting with the union officials, he stressed that the government decided foreign policy and not the Waterside Workers’ Federation. Nevertheless, he did hint that if this shipment of pig-iron was loaded, then the government would review its policy and also the implementation of the Transport Workers Act at the port. At the conclusion of the meeting, Menzies was escorted back to the hotel by Communist Party members.

9. The Settlement

A formula for solution to the dispute was sought. Menzies had intimated at the Wollongong meeting that the government would review its policy and withdraw licences from Port Kembla. A formula was negotiated and at a special meeting of the South Coast Branch on 17 January, Ted Roach proposed the following motion:

That we recommend the acceptance of the proposals and furthermore that in the event of a future attempt being made to ship any further contracts that we emphatically refuse to handle it.

This was lost 100 to 54. However, with the increasing hardships experienced by the workers at BHP due to the shutdown, the wharfies loaded the pig-iron on 21 January 1939, under protest. The accord stipulated that the licences were to be withdrawn from the port and there would be discussions with Menzies about future shipments. On 24 January, Jim Healy met with government representatives and received an unofficial assurance that no more pig-iron would be shipped to Japan. There is some contention as to whether any more pig-iron was sent to Japan. Roach claims that a ban was placed on the remaining 277,000 tons. However both Beasley and Sutherwood-Claridge claim that more shipments of ore were sent to Japan. Beasley states that in April 1939 the Townsville branch loaded metal concentrates for Japan under the threat of the TWA. Sutherwood-Claridge claims that BHP sent 70,000 tons of scrap metal and pig-iron to Japan between 1939 and 1940.

10. Implications

The political and industrial lessons learnt from the pig-iron dispute could be classified in a number of areas. Firstly, the WWF South Coast Branch showed that the Transport Workers Act was ineffectual when workers collectively stood up against it. As Ted Roach said when the Branch was first threatened with the Act:

I said to the boys, let us not worry, we have this situation well in hand here – penal legislation is only as dangerous as the resistance to it is weak – we have the trade union position lined up so strongly here.

The main reason for such strong support was that the industrial and political work that had gone on previously had galvanised an active political membership. This action set an example to other branches. As Maritime Worker stated:

It will also indicate to the members of the Federation generally that the threat of the Transport Workers’ Act does not necessarily preclude the right of our members to use their industrial organisation for the purpose of maintaining their democratic rights and privileges.

The second area was the ‘exporting of militancy’. For Roach, victory in the roster struggle and the pig-iron dispute had implications for the rest of the Federation. Roach has contended that when Port Kembla wharfies were transferred to other ports, they brought this kind of militancy to their new workplace. Some of these men became delegates and subsequently agitated against the ‘bull’ system and for a roster system. Thus this militancy was exported to other ports, and the Federation grew in strength. Roach has promoted this position by stating:

I could give you a dozen examples – and they took the message out and all the building of the rosters – that was the most single thing [sic] in strengthening the Federation – the implementation of rosters everywhere – it took it out of the bosses hand, the ability to victimize and coerce members – it gave them a new lease of life as independents, and strength developed in that independence, the boss couldn’t sack them, and the Union grew with this.

Wharfies who had taken part in the pig-iron dispute and other associated struggles, first hand, later went on to become Federation officials at other ports. The lessons learnt at Port
Kembla were transferred to their official activities at other branches. They drew on their experience at Port Kembla in their everyday work and this situation led to the Federation becoming a more militant organisation nationally and locally. As Tony Hawkins has observed when discussing the effects this had on the Federation in the 1950s and the 1960s:

There was this hangover from the period of the Dalfran dispute and the banning of pig-iron which gave the wharfies a feeling that they had played a major role in developing militant policies in Australia and had proved themselves right in the face of what had occurred following that – and this affected the union and the members of the Union itself, to the point where they felt that they were playing an important role in Australia's history, and they were playing a leading role in educating working people to the concept that you needed to do other things than just fight for increases in wages and conditions.\(^{108}\)

The pig-iron dispute led the WWF into taking a more militant role in political actions. After the Second World War the union became involved in industrial actions throughout Australia in support of Indonesian independence. These actions tied up Dutch ships at Australian ports for a significant length of time.\(^{109}\) In 1948 it took industrial action in support of the railway workers in Queensland,\(^{109}\) and in 1949 Jim Healy and Ted Roach were gaol for supporting the Coal Strike.\(^{106}\) The year 1950 saw the WWF supported by the CPA in its fight against attacks from the Menzies Government which was attempting to ban it.\(^{107}\) Roach was also gaol in 1951 for publishing a cartoon in *Maritime Worker* critical of a Federal Industrial Court Judge's ruling.\(^{107}\) All of these actions enhanced the reputation of the WWF as being a militant union both industrially and politically and in 1954 the Federal Government moved to curb its power by changing the method of recruitment to the industry.

The relationship between the officials of the South Coast Branch and the FCOM is of particular importance. Oral evidence has suggested that the officials and the members of the South Coast Branch were prepared to continue on the struggle against the TWA. Roach was more concerned about the local situation and making decisions about the use of workers labour at the local level. Roach and the South Coast Branch 'broke new ground by going it alone'. It was obviously necessary to work with the FCOM in order to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion. It may be argued that Roach showed that when local action was initiated then through spirited negotiation the FCOM were forced by circumstances to follow the local initiative.

A crucial point is the contrast between the officials of the Sydney Branch and the Port Kembla Branch. Sydney Branch Secretary Mullins requested the FCOM to order the men to load pig-iron whereas Roach, as Secretary of the South Coast Branch, was determined to 'hold out' as long as possible. The rank and file were still very determined to continue the dispute, given the vote at the 16 January meeting (100 to stay out). Roach maintained that the pig-iron dispute was a total political victory when he said in 1993:

In a different era, and in changed circumstances, we met the reactionary government and the monopolies head on and, in the process, we struck heavy blows for democracy and destroyed a strike breaking, union destroying system of licensing. We concluded the battle with no physical casualties and emerged as a much stronger organisation. We won a political victory of enormous national and international importance.\(^{108}\)

**Appendices**

**A. Ted Roach – the Militant**

Appendix A is an obituary published in *The Hummer*\(^{108}\) and shows that Ted Roach continued on his militant activity for the rest of his life.

**B. FCOM telegram to South Coast Branch**

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Stan Moran Interview, Mt Drum NSW, June 1991.

Ted Roach Interview, Revesby NSW, September 1990.

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*Maritime Worker*, Journal of the Waterside Workers' Federation, December 1938.


**Books**


**Endnotes**

1 Ted Roach interview, Revesby, NSW, September 1990. Also documented in Gary Griffith, 'The Growing Militancy of the South Coast Branch of the Waterside Workers Federation: 1930–
There is some disagreement as to when Healy became involved. Lockwood claims that Young telephoned Healy directly, however both Roach and Griffith claim that Young telephoned Roach first. “jumped a stump” — expression for addressing the men.

Common name for Asian seamen, however in this case they were mainly Arabs and Indians. See Lockwood, *War on the Waterfront*, p.214.

Ted Roach Interview, September 1990.

Ibid.

Roach Interview, September 1990 and Gary Griffith, 'The Growing Militancy of the South Coast Branch of the Watersiders Workers' Federation', p.81.

Ibid. September 1990.

Ibid., WWF Federal Office file, T62/2/3, Committee of Management (COM) minutes, 15 November 1938.

Ibid., 16 November 1938.

Ibid., 18 November 1938.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid., WWF Federal Office file, T62/2/3, COM minutes, 1 December 1938.

Ibid., 2 November 1938.


Roach Interview, September 1990.

Griffith, 'The Growing Militancy of the South Coast Branch of the Watersiders Workers' Federation', p.79, and *Maritime Worker, Journal of the Watersiders Workers Federation*, December 1938. Expressions of support came from the Illawarra Trades and Labour Council, the Federated Ironworkers Association, the Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association, and the Australian Workers' Union as well as many sections of Australian society including the Labor Party and Communist Party branches, the Council of Civil Liberties and various religious organisations and individuals such as the Bishop of Gippsland. Sir Isaac Isaacs, former Governor-General or Australia, also spoke out in support.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

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Ibid.

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