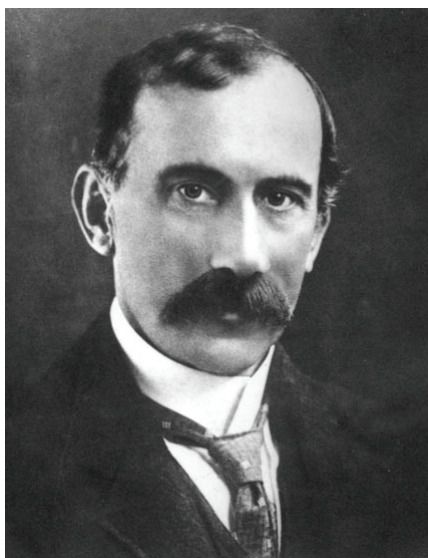


William Higgs: senator and treasurer

John Hawkins¹

A printer who rose to publish and edit newspapers, William Higgs served in the Queensland parliament and the Senate before taking a seat in the House of Representatives and becoming Treasurer in Billy Hughes' wartime Labor government. Higgs was arguably the most radical politician to hold the post, but Hughes' singular focus on the war limited Higgs' scope to make broad social reforms. He was an early advocate of the independence of the Commonwealth Bank.



Source: National Archives of Australia: A8120, 4.

1 The author was formerly in the Domestic Economy Division of the Australian Treasury. Scott Bennett assisted with the box. The views in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Australian Treasury.

Introduction

William Guy Higgs had a mind described as 'disciplined rather than vivid and original'² and his voice was like 'distilled sorrow'.³ He was 'not eloquent but a logical, clear, incisive speaker' which made him a persuasive agitator and a 'clever questioner' in select committees.⁴

A contemporary recalls him as 'tall ... with black hair and swarthy skin ... [like] an Italian conspirator of the middle ages'.⁵ He generally dressed in black, and had a drooping moustache, which along with his serious mien, earned him the nickname 'the undertaker'. A fellow senator recalled him as 'a tall, sedate man with a very serious cast of countenance which quite belied his fiery disposition'.⁶ A contemporary journalist said 'his chief possession is a bitter tongue and a stock of moral courage'.⁷ But he also had a sense of humour.⁸ This extended to some controversial practical jokes such as hiding the parliamentary mace.⁹

Higgs' life before politics

Higgs was born in Wingham, NSW, on the Manning River, on 18 January 1862, the eldest son of a Cornish storekeeper and his Irish wife. The family moved to Parramatta and then Orange, where at 13 Higgs left school and was apprenticed with the *Western Advocate*. Like a number of Labor figures, most notably Chris Watson, Higgs worked as a compositor. He continued this trade when he moved to Sydney, until in 1886 he became the full-time secretary of the NSW Typographical Association.

A renowned radical, Higgs was said to have coined the expression 'socialism in our time'.¹⁰ Appearing before a royal commission on strikes, he advocated 'the state should be the sole employer of labour ... and provide everything, all the necessities of life and all the comforts'.¹¹ Higgs was not just mouthing slogans: he provided the commission

2 Anonymous columnist in *Punch* (Melbourne), 6 April 1905, p 436.

3 Gibbney (1983, p 291).

4 Campbell-Jones (1935, p 409); *Punch*, 6 April 1905, p 436.

5 Campbell-Jones (1935, p 409).

6 George Pearce (1951, p 129).

7 *Punch* (Melbourne), 4 June 1914, p 956. The columnist went on to admire his tactical abilities; 'he is an underground engineer of a high order, and takes care always to explode his mine at the most inopportune time for the other side'.

8 Pearce (1951, p 129) tells the story of how during a tariff debate with Senator Pulsford, who referred to him as 'Senator 'Iggs', Higgs said he had no objection to Pulsford trying to cut duties by 20 per cent, but 'is he in order by continually reducing my name by 20 per cent?'

9 Souter (1988, p 134).

10 Gibbney (1983, p 291).

11 Cited by Walsh (2000, p 96).

with an informed analysis of Marxism and a history of the English Poor Laws and Factory Acts. He not only championed the interests of working men but also women and the aged. Initially opposed to Federation, by 1899 he enthusiastically supported it.

In 1889 he resigned as union secretary and with a fellow unionist formed the printing firm Higgs & Townsend. They published a labour weekly newspaper, the *Trades and Labor Advocate*, and supported the establishment of a Labor party. On 18 April 1889 he married Mary Ann Knight and they were to have three children.

Senator

Higgs was selected as Labor candidate for the NSW Legislative Assembly seat of South Sydney in 1891 but was defeated at the election. In 1893 he moved to Brisbane as editor of the *Worker* and its circulation flourished under Higgs' leadership.¹² He began a rapid political ascent. He was elected to the Brisbane City Council in February 1899 and later that year, on his second attempt, won the Queensland Legislative Assembly seat of Fortitude Valley. His exposure of an attempt to bribe him to support a government bill won him favourable publicity.¹³

In March 1901 he was elected as a senator to the first federal parliament, topping the poll in his state. Higgs successfully served as chairman of committees¹⁴ and was a member of the royal commission on the tariff. Long 'a fanatical believer in protection,'¹⁵ he was an early supporter of 'new protectionism'.¹⁶

At Labour's 1902 conference Higgs moved to establish a 'Commonwealth Bank of deposit and issue'. In 1904 Higgs suggested Watson form an alliance with Deakin. He was also an advocate of dividing Queensland to form new states from the central and northern regions.

Higgs was defeated in 1906. He supported himself as an auctioneer in Sydney and later director of the Sydney branch of the Queensland Intelligence and Tourist Bureau.

12 The previous editor had been the well-known radical writer William Lane who had headed off to found the socialist 'New Australia' settlement in Paraguay. Under Higgs, *The Worker* campaigned hard on the 'sinister interest' of the Queensland National Bank and its dubious links with the conservative government, in time being vindicated by an official investigation; Dalton (1961, pp 34-8).

13 Dalton (1961, pp 21-2).

14 According to a contemporary columnist, he 'won golden opinions from both sides and was spoken of as a future president of the Senate'; *Punch*, 4 June 1914, p 956.

15 Pearce (1951, p 129).

16 Hansard, 23 May 1901, p 252.

Treasurer

Higgs won the seat of Capricornia in the Labor landslide in April 1910. His status within the party was shown by his selection as part of the parliamentary delegation to the coronation of George V in 1911. After Labor was defeated in 1913, Higgs challenged Fisher for the leadership, representing the more radical wing of the Party, but was defeated 42-18.¹⁷ He then topped the first ballot for the executive positions.¹⁸

When Andrew Fisher retired as treasurer and prime minister in October 1915, the new prime minister Hughes attempted a restructure to keep Treasury, Attorney-Generals and External Affairs under the prime minister, but his ministers would not stand for it. Hughes then appointed Higgs as treasurer.

Higgs did not present the 1915-16 Budget until 9 May 1916. In his speech he estimated national private wealth at £1 billion and national income at £0.2 billion, based on the war census. He advised the people to save more given the likely fall in employment at the end of the war.

Higgs was a long-term advocate of an independent Commonwealth Bank. While Treasurer he opposed the suggestion that the Bank and government ministers or departments be in the same building; 'the nearer the Bank gets to the government, the greater the danger of the exercise of political influence in the management of the Bank'.¹⁹ Higgs urged that O'Malley's contribution to the establishment of the Commonwealth Bank be acknowledged by the inscription of his name at the head office.²⁰

After being treasurer

Higgs resigned as Treasurer in October 1916 as Labor split over conscription. This was a wrench for him. As he later put it, 'in resigning the Commonwealth Treasurership I sacrificed a position which I regarded as a great privilege and a distinguished honour. I loved the work.'²¹ The position was left unfilled for two weeks (box).

17 Higgs was still a radical at this time, arguing in Higgs (1914) for 'collective ownership'.

18 This was not reported by the contemporary press but appears in the caucus minutes; Weller (1975a, pp 322-6). Higgs was described as a 'certainty for selection to any new federal Labour ministry' and a possible future leader; *Punch*, 4 June 1914, p 956.

19 Letter to King O'Malley 17 August 1916, O'Malley Papers, National Library of Australia MS 460/3899. Over twenty years later, in Higgs (1938) he called for its board to be comprised of a high court judge, professor of economics, and three former bank managers, only able to be removed by a vote of both houses of parliament.

20 Gollan (1968, p 99).

21 Higgs (1938, p 7).

Box: The mystery of the missing Treasurer

When Higgs resigned as Treasurer on 27 October 1916, Hughes was too preoccupied with trying to hold onto power to appoint a replacement, but did not assume the post himself either.

Smith (1933, p 178) remarks 'the government remained without a treasurer for several days' after Higgs resigned. This is supported by a contemporary story in *The Age* (6 November 1916) complaining that 'the Federal Treasury is without a political head at this most critical period, when millions of pounds are being spent with the speed and facility with which thousands were expended in the pre-war period.'

Treasury (2001) is incorrect in assuming that Alexander Poynton had taken over immediately. Poynton was not appointed until 14 November. The 18-day interregnum has been the only time since Federation the position of treasurer has been unfilled.

In July 1917 Higgs became chairman of the Labor caucus' treasury and finance committee and in June 1918 served as Labor's acting deputy leader.²² Higgs was seen by some as a likely leader, given he was the most experienced Labor minister, after an ailing Tudor lost his second election in 1919 but the party preferred to stay with Tudor.²³ By now Higgs' radical ardour had cooled and many of his friends had left the party. In 1919 he supported Hughes' referendum to expand federal government powers over industry and commerce in defiance of the Labor Party's stance, criticised some party officials and urged coalition with the Country Party. In January 1920 he was expelled from the Labor Party and after sitting as an independent for some months in September joined the Nationalists. His parliamentary career ended when he was defeated as a Nationalist candidate at the 1922 election by Labor's future short-term prime minister Frank Forde. His last political involvement was chairing a royal commission into the effect of Federation on the finances of Western Australia in 1929.

22 Weller (1975b, pp 33 and p 68).

23 Murphy (1975).

William Higgs: senator and treasurer

Higgs retired to Kew and became a Christian Science practitioner. By now the former radical was often expressing very conservative views.²⁴ But there were still some progressive causes which moved him. He became an active president of the Society for the Welfare of Mental Patients and in Higgs (1930) wrote feelingly of their plight.

He passed away at Kew on 11 June 1951, a day before he had hoped to attend the 50th anniversary of parliament dinner, and the day before Ben Chifley's death.²⁵

24 In Higgs (1941) he advocates religious education to prevent adultery on the grounds that 'in these days of modern flats and labour-saving devices, foolish young wives with time on their hands can easily fall victim to young and old men' and opposes the teaching of evolution.

25 By the time of Higgs' death, Billy Hughes, King O'Malley and George Pearce were the only other survivors from the first federal parliament.

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