Conservative Protest or Conservative Radicalism? The New Zealand Legion in a Comparative Context, 1930-1935

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> If the Legion is to do anything worthwhile, it must do so because it has touched the imagination, the hearts of men. It must be a spiritual movement, drawing to itself men of goodwill, whom it will lead on a new crusade. That is the problem – to call up a crusading spirit, to sound a rallying cry, not to elaborate details of policy. Details divide, we need to unite. Give us a common basis on which we can agree – first principles, fundamentals.
>
> In short, give us a creed, a confession of faith, high in its ideals, daring in its demands.
>
> Will Lawson, 'Wanted: A Creed'[1]

Introduction

Robert Campbell Begg was not a skilled orator. He was described by those who saw him speak as 'placid' and 'undemonstrative', despite having served as an officer during the Great War.[2] Nevertheless, after being approached to lead a new non-party movement named the New Zealand Legion in February 1933, Begg threw himself into a whirlwind speaking tour of the country.[3] The object of the Legion was simple – 'to secure a Government . . . freed from the trammels of sectional pressure and actuated solely by the motive of patriotic effort'.[4] The Great Depression had caused a national crisis, claimed Begg, and only the combined efforts of a self-sacrificing citizenry could bring it back from the brink. In this, the 'undemonstrative' Begg proved wildly successful – by the end of the year, his idealist appeals to national unity and moral regeneration had enticed 20,000 members into the Legion's fold.[5] Less than a year later, however, the Legion was all but defunct.

This paper argues that the Legion's meteoric rise and subsequent fall into obscurity is best explained by viewing it within an international context. That it arose during the Great Depression was no coincidence, nor was its divergence from the conservative mainstream that gave birth to it. Its policies were reminiscent of the fascist and far-right movements that were taking hold

in Europe at the time. However, to categorize the Legion as fascist would both oversimplify the movement and genericize the term 'fascist'. Instead, this paper compares the Legion to several similar movements in Australia during the 1930s. It suggests that the Legion was merely one manifestation of a broader phenomenon of 'conservative radicalism' – a phenomenon that should be considered the antipodean reflection of what was occurring elsewhere in the world.

What little historical attention has been devoted to the New Zealand Legion does not stress this radical element. Michael C. Pugh's impressive Masters thesis, by far the most authoritative work on the Legion, categorizes it as a form of 'conservative protest'. The Legion, he contends, was simply one manifestation of an ongoing crisis within New Zealand conservatism. The increasingly interventionist policies of the Reform Party in the 1920s and the Coalition government in the 1930s produced a steady stream of discontented conservatives favouring traditional laissez-faire methods.[6] It is this continuity which leads Pugh to dismiss any attempt to compare the Legion with European fascist movements. Whilst the Legion shared many ideological premises with fascism – moral regeneration, nationalism, anti-socialism and anti-party sentiment chief amongst them – its focus on individualism, the minimization of the state apparatus and the maximization of democracy render Pugh's decision to contextualize it within the 'crisis of conservatism' very apt.[7] Yet Pugh has placed too much focus on the laissez-faire elements of Legion policy. An in-depth perusal of the public and private material produced by the Legion reveals a greater emphasis on the idealist elements espoused by Begg than Pugh allows for.[8] It also demonstrates the unorthodox nature of many Legion policies that contradict traditional conservative beliefs on economics and the role of government.

Gerard Campbell's Honours paper on the Legion in Otago provides several tentative conclusions as to why some Legion material veered towards the radical. He asserts, much as Pugh does, that the ambiguity of the Legion's initial aims was one of its major weaknesses, as was its highly decentralized organizational structure. The Legion's constitutional requirement to have national policy vetted by all divisions and centres, combined with Begg's desire to avoid the trappings of definitive policy 'not essential to the fundamental aim', resulted in criticisms of vagueness from both its opponents and its own membership.[9] Campbell contends that it was this criticism, coupled with the desire to expand its support base, which brought about the formalization and radicalization of Legion policy. This policy, however, 'ran against the Laissez-Faire principles of existing members', and served only to hasten the decline of the movement.[10] Campbell's argument, however, fails to explain why, in the face of dissent, the Legion turned to such alienating

policies and not to more traditional fare.[11] Furthermore, the Legion was circulating material suggesting a planned economy and proto-corporatism well before complaints of ideological vagueness came to the fore.

Adam Allington's recent Honours paper is the only work asserting that the Legion was radical in nature. Like Pugh, he concludes that it was not a fascist movement; however, he also highlights several areas in which it lay to the right of mainstream conservatism.[12] Specifically, Allington points to the Legion's desire to abolish the party system and its strong patriotic sentiment.[13] More contentiously, he claims that the Legion sought to establish a centralized and authoritarian government, valuing 'efficiency in government over basic democratic principles' such as representative government and the balance of power.[14] However, the Legion's core belief in the decentralization of power, coupled with its strong focus on individualism, render this claim suspect. Allington also does not make use of Begg's more idealistic policies around moral rejuvenation and national unity in his argument. Ultimately, whilst Allington correctly identifies the Legion as radical, he has not fully demonstrated why it was so.

A broader contextualization of the New Zealand Legion is essential to demonstrate its radical nature. Both Allington and Pugh have made tentative steps in this direction. Allington compares the Legion to British movements of the 1920s such as the 'Diehards' and 'Britons'.[15] However, Allington risks over-extending terms like 'conservative', 'right-wing' and 'radical' by contextualizing the Legion within the European arena.[16] Closer to home, Pugh tantalizingly hints at several similarities between the Legion and a contemporary Australian group named the All for Australia League.[17] This paper picks up where Pugh left off, making use of the plethora of works that have been produced on Australian interwar conservative movements since Pugh's thesis was written. It will analyse the origins, ideology and decline of the New Zealand Legion in a comparative context, highlighting its similarities with the Australian movements. Placing the Legion within this context, rather than limiting it to the context of New Zealand conservatism, demonstrates its radical nature in comparison to the mainstream conservatism of the time.

But what exactly does 'radical' mean? Apart from being a popular pejorative for one's political opponents, it is typically reserved for those whose actions and policies are seen as deviating significantly from the norm. A more sophisticated definition is required for this paper. 'Radical' is defined as 'of or going to the root or origin' or 'favouring drastic political, economic, or social reforms'.[18] This definition, whilst useful, does not provide a conservative 'benchmark' against which more radical ideas can be measured. An expansion upon it is provided by Hayden White's *Metahistory*,

which defines radicalism in contrast to other broad ideological categories. Radicals 'believe in the necessity of structural transformations . . . in the interest of reconstituting society on new bases'. In contrast, conservatives 'tend to view social change through the analogy of plantlike gradualizations'. Conservatives 'imagine historical evolution as a progressive elaboration of the institutional structure that *currently* prevails, which structure they regard as a "utopia"'. Radicals, on the other hand, are 'inclined to view the utopian condition as *imminent*, which inspires their concern with the provision of the revolutionary means to bring this utopia to pass *now*'.[19] This contrast between the desire for fundamental change versus a preservation of the status quo will serve as the definition of 'radical' used by this paper.

The citizens' movements

The majority of scholarly attention on Australian right-wing movements has focused on a group named the New Guard. The brainchild of one Eric Campbell, the New Guard was a fiery anti-communist movement active in New South Wales in the early thirties that planned to kidnap the bombastic Labor Premier Jack Lang and imprison him in the disused gaol at Berrima.[20] Similarly militaristic movements existed in the other Australian states – although unlike the New Guard, these movements tended to maintain a policy of strict secrecy.[21] However, there was a separate strand of citizens' movements during the same period that mobilized behind appeals to national unity, moral rejuvenation, and political reform. These movements united large numbers of disaffected conservatives concerned with the political and economic upheaval of the time. In a relatively short period, they amassed large memberships and established vast organizational structures. They sought, for the most part, to abolish party politics and promote independent candidates whom they perceived as representing national, rather than sectional, interests. This section will analyse these movements and highlight which of their characteristics should be kept in mind when contrasted with the New Zealand Legion.

The two movements that this paper will focus on are the All for Australia League and the Citizens' League of South Australia.[22] The All for Australia League was born in New South Wales in the months after Lang's electoral victory in October 1930. The initial discussions that gave birth to it were held by 'panic-stricken' business leaders and Rotarians who were concerned with the 'socialistic' policies of Premier Lang and the inaction of the Federal Labor government under Prime Minister James Scullin.[23] A similar movement, the Australian Citizens' League, arose in Victoria around the same time under a pledge to 'restore Australia's political integrity and stability' against the financial excesses of the Federal government.[24] This

group merged into the All for Australia League in March 1931, one month after its inauguration, and would also adopt its name[25].

The policy of the All for Australia League was deliberately vague from the outset, amounting to 'a set of moral injunctions [rather] than a blueprint for economic action'. The League aspired to 'set aside conflicting sectional interests for the sake of unity of purpose'.[26] It saw itself as an educational body designed to inculcate citizens with their democratic duties as citizens of Australia.[27] Eric Campbell attended the inaugural meeting of the League in February 1931 and applauded the speakers for 'denounc[ing] the failure of party government to handle the depression'. The League intended to 'put Australia first and political parties last'; from such a position it could 'select and then elect the type of men who would restore integrity and leadership to parliamentary government'.[28] It sought to dissociate itself from what it perceived as the petty, parochial interests that had brought about the depression and 'create a healthy atmosphere remote from party politics' where a sense of national unity could flourish.[29]

The League believed that the class conflict prevalent in depression politics was a result of the party system. Sectional interests had been cultivated by self-serving politicians intent on bolstering their own support bases. This belief was partly one of convenience – the League chose 'machine politics' as its main target in order to differentiate itself from the Nationalists, the main conservative party of the time.[30] Nevertheless, this criticism was not solely limited to Labor – the League levelled many fierce attacks against the 'money power' of the Nationalists as well.[31] Despite its adherence to the conservative line on fiscal responsibility and minimalist government, the League adopted several other radical policies. It called for the creation of an economic advisory council that would provide 'scientific' recommendations on finance, arbitration and tariffs. An industrial bureau – possibly even an industrial parliament – would incorporate the opinions of both employer and employee in the interests of cooperation and economic planning.[32] It was hoped that this form of planning would 'conjoin the interests of Country and City' and align 'producing and consuming interests'.[33] Along with its idealist calls for moral rejuvenation and national unity, the League's proto-corporatist economic policies were distinct from mainstream conservatism.

The decline of the All for Australia League was tied closely to its own inherent radicalism. Whilst practical concerns such as the increasing debt of the movement and its falling membership were contributing factors, it is worth considering the cause of these factors.[34] The League represented a sudden swing to the right in conservative thought, boosted to success by a weakening of the National and Country parties and the general apprehension caused by the depression. The conservative resurgence under

Joseph Lyons and the new United Australia Party brought many dissident conservatives back into the fold, undercutting support for the radical policies of the League.[35] Ironically, the League itself contributed to this process by promoting the former Laborite Lyons as the obvious candidate to lead a new government of national unity.[36] The League ultimately united with its former enemy, the Nationalists, and was subsumed into Lyons's new party.

The Citizens' League of South Australia was born under similar circumstances as the All for Australia League. It was created by Edward Alexander Bagot, a former officer in the Great War and a mildly successful businessman, out of protest against the 'criminal procrastination of the Federal Government'. The Citizens' League believed that the depression had created, or exacerbated, three main crises – public indebtedness, party factionalism and social divisiveness. Its solutions to these crises were simple – economic orthodoxy, non-party government and a revived spirit of citizenship.[37] The principles of the Citizens' League were summarized in what Bagot termed the 'big hand of service' – a picture of an open palm, with each digit corresponding to one of the movement's maxims. These were the 'cultivation of a national sentiment; equality of sacrifice and service as a civic duty; legislation for the nation and not for party only; encouragement of primary production; rigid economy in all public undertakings'.[38] The Citizens' League utilized conservative discontent to promote a vague and idealist platform of national unity and moral rejuvenation.

The Citizens' League in particular demonstrates the divergence between mainstream conservatism and the new citizens' movements. Bagot had initially created the movement out of dissatisfaction with the 'gradualism' of the Constitutional Club, the group that instigated its creation.[39] Whilst he believed that laissez-faire policies would provide the long-term solution to the depression, he proposed many radical short-term policies that clashed with conservative mores. He devised a 'Back to the Land' program of public spending to provide farming land, stock and equipment to the unemployed.[40] These policies were met with alarm by the conservative elite in South Australia, who feared the challenge that the Citizens' League posed to the party system and its potential to split the conservative vote at the next Federal election.[41] A second movement, the Emergency Committee of South Australia, was formed under the aegis of Archibald Grenfell Price, a history professor and staunch supporter of the status quo. The Emergency Committee sought to contain the extremism of the Citizens' League whilst promoting conservative party politics and policies.[42] This would ultimately contribute to the fall of the League – its opposition to the party system denied it the chance to actually enact any of its policies. Its decision to enter the political

fray as the 'Citizens' Party' in 1933 did little except alienate its already dwindling membership.[43]

The citizens' movements in Australia provided an outlet for conservative discontent during the Great Depression. Vague and idealistic policies such as those promoted by the All for Australia League and the Citizens' League of South Australia would have no doubt struck an emotional chord with many concerned conservatives. Despite their vagueness, however, the radicalism of these movements is unmistakeable. By opposing the party system and advocating economic solutions that went against traditional principles, the citizens' movements were viewed with anxiety by mainstream conservatives. Their willingness to criticize the 'machine politics' of both the left and the right raised fears that the conservative vote might be split, further highlighting the divergent path that these movements had taken from the mainstream. It is this combination of conservative populism with radical policy alternatives that should be kept in mind when comparing the Australian movements with the New Zealand Legion.

The New Zealand Legion

Conservative discontent took a slightly different form in New Zealand during the Depression. Whilst the country was not as severely affected by the depression as Australia, it did experience a dramatic drop in export prices and average incomes. Unemployment peaked at 12% in 1933, one year after unemployed workers had rioted in Dunedin, Auckland and Wellington.[44] The reins of power remained firmly in conservative hands throughout the depression, with the coalition of the United and Reform Parties winning election in 1931. Nevertheless, several policies of the coalition government provoked widespread opposition amongst conservatives. The first was the publishing of the national budget for 1933 which predicted a deficit of £8.3 million. The second was the decision to raise the exchange rate in January 1933 from £UK100 = £NZ110 to £UK100 = £NZ125, spearheaded largely by Finance Minister Gordon Coates. The exchange rate rise was designed to increase export earnings for primary producers; however, it would also have the reverse effect on businessmen and manufacturers who were reliant on British imports. The unorthodox nature of this move, coupled with the negative effect it had on import prices, turned conservatives against their own government in droves.[45]

The New Zealand Legion was formed in February 1933, less than three weeks after the increase in the exchange rate. Begg himself claimed that it was the budget deficit that prompted the formation of the Legion; however, it is likely that Pugh is correct in focusing on the exchange rate. Whilst the Legion's predecessor movement, the New Zealand National Movement, was

formed after the release of the budget deficit in April 1932, it met with little success until the exchange rate rise in January 1933. After renaming itself and co-opting Begg as its new leader, the Legion experienced a dramatic rise in visibility and membership.[46] It was a rupture in conservative unity that brought about the Legion and fostered the conditions for its growth.

The Legion's ideology can be categorized under several main themes. At its core it was an idealist movement, opposing party politics and promoting moral rejuvenation and national unity. This idealist core formed the central focus of the Legion – solid policy was seen as secondary and potentially divisive. Nevertheless, the Legion also promoted several strategies for concrete change. The main objective from the Legion's inception was governmental reform at a local and central level. It also experimented with a number of economic theories, culminating in its proposition of an economic advisory board to assist parliament on financial matters. This combination of populist idealism with radical policy suggestions bore many similarities with the Australian citizens' movements.

The desire to abolish party politics was central to the Legion's platform. It claimed that the existing political system was dominated by partisan groups that had placed the party line above national needs. In his first public address, Begg stated that the Legion would 'unit[e] all the resources of the country and obliterat[e] all sectional interests'.[47] *Light on the Legion*, the movement's first informational booklet, claimed that it would 'help the public to see through the shallowness of superficial, plausible bluffers whose platforms are mainly pretence, and . . . demonstrate the importance of putting into power men who will give national service, free from sway by sectionalism'.[48] Its constitution exhorted its members to 'set aside selfish and parochial interests' and 'accept their full responsibility as units of democratic Government'.[49] The first issue of *National Opinion*, the movement's fortnightly journal, stated that '[t]he present system of government has led to the substance of the State being poured out as a bloody sacrifice to the Moloch of party'. The party system had become the 'abrogation of democracy', and needed to be eliminated if national unity was to be achieved.[50]

The Legion admitted that not all politicians were at fault for adhering to 'machine politics'. Those who truly wished to serve the national interest, however, were ultimately forced to adhere to the party line under the current system. The Legion's first press release in April claimed that '[t]here is no organisation in the Dominion . . . [where] ideas may be carefully considered, apart altogether from sectional or political interests'.[51] '[E]very party candidate', stated *National Opinion*, 'goes to the House with an obligation to the machine that put him there. Blind adherence to his party is the best guarantee for eventual selection to the Cabinet, and ready acquiescence to

the ideas of the leader the best surety for staying there'.[52] As such, 'a man who is not put up by a party machine has very little chance of election'. The Legion hoped to achieve 'the freedom of Parliament' by removing the 'trammels which fetter every member' through abolishing political parties. This would allow parliament to 'legislate always in the national interests'.[53] According to the Legion, if honest politicians had the freedom to act without the confines of party ties, the nation would be better off.

The Legion sought to encourage moral rejuvenation through appeals to national unity and selflessness. It cast itself as a 'spiritual movement, drawing to itself men of goodwill, whom it will lead on a new crusade'.[54] Through this crusade, 'hypocrisy, selfishness, and superficial thought' would be replaced by 'frankness, altruism and insight . . . idealism and high public spirit'.[55] The Legion considered the first duty of every citizen to be 'to consider the welfare of the country before immediate individual interests', and it counselled its members to 'make any necessary personal sacrifice for the sake of the Country'.[56] Hearkening back to the recent experience of the Great War, the Legion reminded its members of 'the 16,000 New Zealanders who gave their lives for the nation'. It was only through the 'same spirit of service' and 'mutually helpful fellowship' that New Zealand would emerge from the depression.[57]

The Legion's strategy for moral rejuvenation also extended to the traditional realm of conservative economics. It is here that the laissez-faire element of the Legion's ideology was most apparent.[58] Several decades of reckless government borrowing and 'State paternalism' had fostered a sense of entitlement that was seen as corrosive to the human spirit. '[W]e have been content to depend on [the nation] as the almost exclusive source of our economic existence', Begg wrote. 'Here and there we have given, but for the most part we have been content to take . . . [h]as the spirit of loyalty not too often passed over into that of blind dependence?'.[59] Politicians had created a 'demand for extravagance', encouraging individuals to view the government as a 'cheery benefactor, always willing to do a good turn for the people with their own money'.[60] The nation needed to be 'lifted from dependence on the unsubstantial things in which it had placed its trust'.[61] If New Zealand were to save itself from economic disaster, its citizens would need to reject reckless state spending and practice personal economic thrift.

A strong current of nationalism underlay much of the Legion's idealism. New Zealand was portrayed as a nation in the process of being born amidst the turmoil of the depression. '[T]he world is upon the threshold of a new political and economic era', it was claimed in a set of Legion principles, in which 'the people will think nationally and realise that they

are part of a larger unit than themselves'.[62] *National Opinion* wrote that 'all [governmental] policies . . . must mould themselves to the concept of the new nation . . . [t]he nation of New Zealand must be built by all and for all'.[63] Begg's own words were far heavier with patriotic fervour:

> When the people of New Zealand break through the miasma, when they glimpse the vision of their destiny, when taking heart of grace they find the courage to follow the vision unafraid, and the National spirit at last awakes – then and not till then, will we throw off this slough of misery, hopelessness, pettiness and fear – and stand at last on the threshold of nationhood.[64]

Nationalism provided a powerful rhetorical device within which the calls for moral rejuvenation and the abolishment of sectional interests could be comfortably couched.

When it came to the question of New Zealand's relationship with Britain, the Legion's nationalist message was mixed. Begg believed that New Zealand should be a 'partner' and 'a nation in a commonwealth of nations' rather than 'a colony or dependency'.[65] *National Opinion* agreed that 'New Zealand is destined to become something greater in the British Commonwealth of Nations than a mere appendage of Great Britain, entirely reliant on her financiers'.[66] This spectre of the foreign financier was a powerful one, evinced most clearly during the introduction of the Reserve Bank of New Zealand bill upon the recommendation of Otto Niemeyer, the British economist. '[T]o-day the sovereign rights of a people are sought to be made the playthings of the international financiers', the Legion claimed. A Reserve Bank, it was claimed, would '[part] with much of the power of self-government' and '[sell] the nation into economic servitude'.[67]

Other Legion material spoke very favourably of the British motherland. 'The New Zealand Legion is sturdily loyal to the Crown and Constitution', *Light on the Legion* stated, and '[t]here is more liberty, equality and fraternity under the British Crown than under any republican flag'.[68] Begg himself even remarked, in his first speech to the Provisional National Council in April 1933, that the Legion was '[l]oyal to King and country'.[69] In November 1933, *National Opinion* published an article advocating the retention of strong ties with Britain. 'New Zealand is no longer the suckling child always at liberty to ask for protection and sustenance,' wrote the author. 'It is time we became the grown-up son and did something to assist and support the Mother Country'.[70] This rhetoric combined pro-British sentiment with a call for greater national self-reliance – albeit as a service to the motherland.

The Legion's contradictory statements around Britain's role in national identity can be explained in several ways. Begg's desire for New Zealand to 'stand on its own two feet' may have been an extension of the Legion's faith

in individualism and self-reliance.[71] The Legion believed that 'the people as a whole must think of themselves as being part of a national unit before the country . . . can think and act as part of an international or world unit'.[72] The fact that it complemented this belief with patriotic references to the motherland may be an example of James Belich's re-colonization thesis, which argues that ties with the imperial centre grow stronger during times of economic crisis.[73] The Legion's criticism of money power was a manifestation of a broader trend of conspiratorial thought within New Zealand at the time. A secretive cabal of 'international financiers' provided a convenient target for radicalized conservatives seeking to criticize Britain without compromising their sense of imperial patriotism.[74] More pragmatically, it may simply have been part of a deliberate strategy of ideological vagueness – by publishing both positive and negative material on Britain, the Legion avoided causing any fractures within the movement.

The question of governmental reform was on the Legion agenda from its inception. Its constitution began by stating that 'the existing forms and methods of Government require drastic revision to deal adequately with the present difficulties and future problems of New Zealand'.[75] Begg told the press after the movement's inception that its 'sole aim' was 'a more efficient Government, centrally and locally'.[76] *Light on the Legion* stated that the Legion aimed to achieve 'far-reaching reformation of the system of government, general and local – a system which is antiquated, slow to operate, too costly and too centralised'.[77] The need to urgently pursue this objective was reinforced amongst the Legion's leadership by the complaints it received from both the public and its own membership regarding its lack of concrete policy.[78] '[I]f the Legion is to make any further progress,' resolved the first National Council in July 1933, 'this Council should arrive at conclusions in regard to definite constructive measures of reform and publish them as the considered views of the Legion'.[79] Whilst the desire for governmental reform was not in itself unusual, the shape that the Legion's suggested reforms took held radical undertones.

The Legion sought to reform local and central government in line with its anti-party stance. It advocated the division of New Zealand into a series of autonomous provinces based along lines of 'communities of interest' and 'convenience of communication'. These local units, it was suggested, should be as independent as possible, thus removing electorate concerns from members of Parliament and allowing them to focus solely on national issues. It was also believed that dividing New Zealand into a series of provinces would reduce the number and cost of local government bodies.[80] At a national level, the Legion promoted an elective cabinet, a proportional voting system, a reduction in the number of MPs, and the introduction of

the powers of referendum, initiative and recall. These measures were aimed at avoiding the dominance of either Parliament or cabinet by a single party. By separating central government from local concerns and introducing additional democratic measures to parliament, the Legion hoped to render partisan politics obsolete.[81]

The Legion adopted its most radical concrete policies in the field of economic reform. Despite the fact that its membership was almost unanimously conservative, the Legion produced and distributed a significant amount of material criticizing laissez-faire economics. Evan Parry, Chairman of the Legion's economic research committee, took the lead in promoting alternative theories. Parry promoted the benefits of a planned economy, going so far as to produce a detailed report for the first National Council in July on the subject. It is worth noting, however, that Parry's ideas did not gather the unanimous support of the Council at this time.[82] Nevertheless, Parry's full report appeared in the first issue of *National Opinion* the following month, with the addendum that 'the Legion is convinced that a planned economic system is necessary for the purpose of co-ordinating consumption and production'.[83] Parry's ideas grew more radical – he proposed protectionist and autarchic economic policies and supported Roosevelt's New Deal.[84] He circulated articles praising Mussolini's Italy as 'sane planning or State collectivism, as against thoughtless laisser-faire [sic]'.[85] Parry genuinely believed in the necessity of such measures, claiming that the existing economic system could only survive under 'strict and intelligent control'.[86]

But how widely accepted were Parry's beliefs? Whilst his articles praising the New Deal were countered by others condemning it as 'marching on the borders of socialism', his criticisms of laissez-faire economics were well received by some members of the Legion.[87] E.W. Nicolaus, Parry's associate on the economic research committee in Wellington, published a proposal advocating state control of money, credit and land. Whilst the National Executive was quick to reassure its membership that the proposal was not official Legion policy, they did not condemn it.[88] Following the lead from Wellington, the economic study group in the Hawkes Bay division considered that 'some form of rationalisation, regulative control, or planned economy is essential to recovery', as opposed to 'the suicidal policy of laissez-faire'.[89] Begg himself claimed that one of the aims of the Legion was 'to rouse the people to the necessity of themselves throwing off, and for the leaders to throw off, the laissez faire of the past and deal boldly with the reconstruction of New Zealand on sound lines for the future'.[90] *National Opinion* advocated that the government should put unemployed workers to work on the land, suggesting that the additional consumption facilitated by their wages would have a multiplier effect on the domestic economy.[91] The Legion's policies

on local government reform suggested occupational franchise as a potential means for constituting provincial parliaments.[92] These suggestions culminated with the Legion's campaign for an economic advisory board to provide central government with 'expert consideration of economic affairs'.[93] This mixture of experimental economic policies suggests at least some resonance of Parry's ideas within elements of the Legion's membership.

The Legion was aware of the paramilitary movements in Australia, and sought to distinguish itself from them. *Light on the Legion* stressed that the movement was 'not a New Guard nor an Old Guard', nor was it 'a Fascist body'.[94] This equation of the New Guard with fascism was regularly drawn. '[We are] neither a new guard nor a fascist movement,' argued the National Executive in a circular distributed to its divisions in March 1933, adding that '[The Legion] believes that any unconstitutional movement would be disruptive and disastrous to the country'.[95] In a letter dated 19 April 1933, the Secretary of the Gisborne centre informed his leader in Hastings that the main criticism he had received during his recruitment campaigns was that the Legion was a 'New Guard' or 'Fascist' group.[96] Yet the links between the Legion and the New Guard extended no further than the fact that one of its leaders, H.M. Campbell, was the uncle of Eric Campbell.[97] The presence of a conservative government ensured that no 'socialistic' left-wing administration would incite a paramilitary response from the right.[98]

By the beginning of 1934 the Legion was fading from the New Zealand political landscape. A combination of factors had brought about its demise. As depression conditions eased and export prices rose, the fears that had made the policies of the Legion seem attractive to so many lost their appeal.[99] Additionally, the introduction of concrete policy proved to be a divisive factor, alienating many members and raising concerns that the National Executive was becoming more authoritarian.[100] Finally, the Legion's decision to launch itself as a political party at the 1935 elections raised the obvious question of hypocrisy. Apprehensive of a Labour victory, many conservatives feared the 'vote-splitting bogey' of new parties on the right.[101] The Legion had represented a rightward swing of conservative opinion in a time of crisis – without the crisis, it was doomed to failure.

The Legion was a New Zealand manifestation of the citizens' movement phenomenon. It opposed party politics and sectional interests, promoting instead the need for greater national consciousness and stronger moral fibre in order to deal with the crisis of the depression. According to the Legion, political parties had strangled the democratic system, and only their abolition would allow the freedom necessary for candidates to legislate according to the national interest. It also proposed several radical policies for governmental and economic reform, eschewing the traditional conservative

position of supporting laissez-faire. These policies sought to go to the root of the problems that had caused the depression and enact 'drastic political, economic, [and] social reforms'. The Legion's desire to abolish political parties was a 'structural transformation' aimed at 'reconstituting society on new bases'. The contrast to the conservative desire to maintain the status quo is clear; whilst the Legion staunchly supported democracy and individualism, its policies were undeniably to the right of mainstream conservatism.

Conclusion

The life and death of the citizens' movements in Australia and New Zealand followed the same pattern. They were children of the Great Depression, born out of popular frustration with government and the fractured nature of contemporary conservatism. All of them were held together by vague ideals and platitudes, but the nature of these platitudes was unmistakeably radical. The movements also toyed with extreme policies around economic planning and governmental reform as a means of recovering from the depression. It was the combination of social, political and economic upheaval that pushed the range of conservative opinion rightwards, allowing the growth of mass movements around ideas that held little traction during less trying times. Economic recovery and the decision to enter party politics typically spelled the end for these movements. With the bulk of conservative opinion swinging back towards the centre, their demise became a foregone conclusion.

The similarities between the ideals and policies of the citizens' movements are striking. The call for moral and national renewal and an anti-party mentality were the major factors shared by the movements. Along with a shared penchant for moral platitudes, some of their concrete policies were also remarkably alike. Both the All for Australia League and the New Zealand Legion, for example, advocated an 'economic advisory board' – and both used the same phrase – to consider all financial decisions and provide recommendations to parliament. Nevertheless, the extent to which the Legion was aware of its Australian counterparts is uncertain; neither the All for Australia League nor the Citizens' League of South Australia are explicitly mentioned in any Legion material.

A comparative assessment of the New Zealand Legion alongside the Australian citizens' movements better enables us to appreciate its radical nature. By demonstrating both the radicalism of the Australian movements and their similarities to the Legion, it can be plausibly claimed that the Legion was also radical. There are limits to this argument, of course – a more thorough analysis of New Zealand mainstream conservatism and its relation to the alternative policies of the Legion would provide it with additional credence. It could also be argued that it was the radicalism of

mainstream conservatism that gave birth to the Legion – Coates's decision to raise the exchange rate was far from laissez-faire. Additionally, this paper has not taken into account the growth of various Australian rural movements and the subsequent rise of the Country Party of Australia as another alternate model of conservatism. Whilst New Zealand experienced a similar phenomenon with the Auckland Province Farmers Union, it did not exist on the same scale as in Australia. That the Legion arose from the animosity between rural and urban interests stirred by Coates's decision to raise the exchange rate warrants more attention.

Nevertheless, this paper has demonstrated that there was a broad phenomenon of alternative conservatism in the antipodes during the Great Depression that defied categorization under the right-wing mainstream. Labelling this as 'conservative protest', as does Pugh, conflates its conservative membership with its radical policies. Nor were its radical policies simply a response to its declining membership, as both Pugh and Campbell claim – the Legion was experimenting with the idea of planned economics and proto-corporatism well before it came under fire for being too vague. The ideology of the Legion and its Australian counterparts can be better defined as 'conservative radicalism' – an outlandish set of ideas considered by associations of conservatives who, under different circumstances, might not have given them a second thought. This may seem like little more than an exercise in semantics – however, this would underestimate the importance of the citizens' movement phenomenon as the closest antipodean analogue to the right wing populist movements that swept across Europe during the same period.

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1 *National Opinion* (NO), 1, 3 (7 September 1933), p.3.

2 Michael C. Pugh, 'The New Zealand Legion and Conservative Protest in the Great Depression', MA thesis, University of Auckland, 1969, pp.74-75.

3 New Zealand Legion, Hawke's Bay Division, Papers, MSS & Archives A-38, Special Collections, University of Auckland Library, Auckland (hereafter referred to as 'NZL Papers'). 'Itinerary in Forming the NZ Legion', file 1, folder 1. Altogether Begg travelled 5276 miles by rail, car, air and ferry.

4 *Hawkes Bay Herald* (HBH), 23 February 1933; *The New Zealand Herald* (NZH), 13 March 1933; R. Campbell Begg, speech given at the first meeting of the Provisional National Council, reprinted in 'The Common Goal', NO, 1, 4 (21 September 1933), p.12.

5 'Hastings Centre to Members', NZL Papers, file 1, folder 3.

6 Pugh, 'The New Zealand Legion and Conservative Protest in the Great Depression', pp.11-42, 144-83, 184-9. This ongoing discontent was demonstrated with the formation of the United Party in the 1920s and the Democrat Party in the 1930s. Pugh espouses

the same views in the article based on his thesis; see Pugh, 'The New Zealand Legion, 1932-1935', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 5, 1 (April 1971), pp.49, 68-69.

7 Pugh, 'The New Zealand Legion and Conservative Protest in the Great Depression', pp.190-3.

8 Pugh asserts that anti-party sentiment, for example, is merely an underlying current in New Zealand's history that surfaces periodically in times of crisis. Whilst this is certainly true, it does not typically assume the central role that it did with the Legion. It will be shown here that opposition to party politics, along with other idealist elements such as moral rejuvenation and national unity, formed the core of the Legion's message. See Pugh, 'The New Zealand Legion 1932-1935', pp.68-69.

9 Gerard P. Campbell, 'The New Zealand Legion in Otago, 1933-1935', BA (Hons) thesis, University of Otago, 1987, pp.52-60; Pugh, 'The New Zealand Legion, 1932-1935', pp.62-67; R. Campbell Begg, 'The Common Goal', NO, 1, 4 (21 September 1933), p.12.

10 Gerard P. Campbell, pp.60-67, 72.

11 Pugh suggests that this was at least partially an attempt to court left-wing supporters of Labour and the Social Credit movement. See Pugh, 'The New Zealand Legion, 1932-1935', pp.63-64.

12 Adam Allington, 'Gold-Shirts in God's Own? The Extreme Right in New Zealand During the 1930s Depression', BA (Hons) thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2009, pp.20-27, 37-39.

13 Ibid., pp.5, 37-39, 54-55.

14 Ibid., pp.32-33, 37-39, 54.

15 Allington, pp.22-23, 54. These groups preceded the fascist movements of Oswald Mosley and Arnold Leese in the 1930s.

16 Pugh correctly identifies this trap in his thesis; see Pugh, 'The New Zealand Legion and Conservative Protest in the Great Depression', pp.191-2. Placing the Legion within this international context oversimplifies the specificities of right-wing radicalism in the antipodes.

17 Ibid., pp.190-1.

18 *Dictionary.com*; available from www.dictionary.com, accessed 27 February 2010.

19 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore, 1973, pp.22-25. He draws these categories, along with 'liberalism' and 'anarchism', from Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia,* New York, 1946.

20 Keith Amos, *The New Guard Movement 1931-1935,* Melbourne, 1976, pp.55-76; Andrew Moore, *The Secret Army and the Premier: Conservative Paramilitary Organisations in New South Wales, 1930-32*, Kensington, 1989, pp.177-87. Whilst the New Guard never even came close to achieving this objective, one of its members is renowned for slashing the ribbon at the opening ceremony of the Sydney Harbour Bridge before Lang could manage to do so.

21 These included the Old Guard (NSW), the League of National Security (VIC), the Queensland Loyalty League (QLD), and the Khaki Legion (WA). See Moore, *The Secret Army and the Premier*; Michael Cathcart, *Defending the National Tuckshop: Australia's Secret Army Intrigue of 1931*, Fitzroy, 1988.

22 Other less prominent groups included the Tasmanian Producers Advisory Council, the Sane Democracy League, the Western Australian Citizens' Federation, the South

Australian Proportional Representation Group, the Who's for Australia League, and the Soldiers and Citizens Party. There were also several country movements in New South Wales, such as those in the Riverina and New England, that advocated for secession from state government so that they could manage their own affairs.

23 Trevor Matthews, 'The All for Australia League', *Labour History*, 17 (1970), p.138; Geoffrey Robinson, 'The All For Australia League in New South Wales: A Study in Political Entrepreneurship and Hegemony', *Australian Historical Studies*, 39, 1 (March 2008), p.39.

24 Cathcart, p.156; Matthews, pp.139-40.

25 Matthews, p.140.

26 Ibid., pp.139-40.

27 Robinson, pp.40-41.

28 Eric Campbell, *The Rallying Point: My Story of the New Guard*, Melbourne, 1965, p.42.

29 Amos, p.32.

30 Robinson, pp.41-42.

31 Matthews, p.145.

32 Robinson, p.40.

33 Matthews, pp.139-40.

34 These are the causes identified by Matthews – see ibid., p.145.

35 Robinson, pp.51-52.

36 Cathcart, pp.156-7.

37 Stephen A. James, 'God, Mammon and Mussolini: The Ideology and Policy of the Citizens' League of South Australia, 1930-1934', *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, 37, 1 (1991), p.39. This article was based on his earlier Honours thesis, which is by far the most thorough work on the Citizens League. See Stephen A. James, 'The Big Hand Of Service: The Citizens' League Of South Australia 1930-34', BA (Hons) thesis, University of Melbourne, 1982.

38 James, 'God, Mammon and Mussolini', p.43.

39 Ibid., p.39.

40 James, 'The Big Hand Of Service', pp.45-49. Bagot saw this as hearkening back to the 'pioneering spirit' of the first settlers of South Australia.

41 Archibald Grenfell Price, 'The Emergency Committee of South Australia and the origin of the Premiers' Plan, 1931-2', *South Australiana*, 17,1 (March 1978), pp.10-13.

42 John Lonie, 'Conservatism And Class In South Australia During The Depression Years 1929-1934', MA thesis, University of Adelaide, 1973, pp. 240-2.

43 James, 'The Big Hand Of Service', pp.87-92.

44 According to G.R. Hawke, export prices fell 37% between 1929 and 1931, whilst incomes fell by as much as twenty percent. See Hawke, *The Making of New Zealand: An Economic History*, Cambridge, 1985, pp.123-27.

45 Pugh, 'The New Zealand Legion, 1932-1935', pp.50-51.

46 The *Dominion*, 11 March 1933; Pugh, 'The New Zealand Legion and Conservative Protest in the Great Depression', pp.53-76.

47 HBH, 23 February 1933.

48 *Light on the Legion*, Wellington, 1933, p.10.

49 'Constitution of the New Zealand Legion', NZL Papers, file 1, folder 1.

50 'The People's Executive – Destroyer of Party Oligarchy', NO, 1, 1 (10 August 1933), p.10.

51 'Minutes of Meeting of the Provisional National Council, 4th/5th April 1933', NZL Papers, file 1, folder 1.

52 'The People's Executive – Destroyer of Party Oligarchy', NO, 1, 1 (10 August 1933), p.10.

53 *Light on the Legion*, Wellington, 1933, pp.5, 10; 'Circular No. N.Z.L. 3, 11 March 1933 – Answers to Criticisms', NZL Papers, file 1, folder 2.

54 Will Lawson, 'Wanted: A Creed', NO, 1, 3 (7 September 1933), p.3.

55 'The Legion's Creed', NO, 1, 4 (21 September 1933), p.3

56 'Circular Ref. 6/2/34 – 6th June 1933', NZL Papers, file 1, folder 2; 'Constitution of the New Zealand Legion', NZL Papers, file 1, folder 1.

57 *Light on the Legion*, Wellington, 1933, pp.5-6, 13.

58 Pugh emphasizes this laissez-faire sentiment over the other elements of Legion ideology. See Pugh, 'The New Zealand Legion, 1932-1935', pp.67-68.

59 R. Campbell Begg, 'The parting of the ways: Parish or Nation – the Hour of Destiny', NO, 1, 1 (10 August 1933), p.1.

60 *Light on the Legion*, Wellington, 1933, p.6.

61 'Minutes of Meeting of the Provisional National Council, 4th/5th April 1933', NZL Papers, file 1, folder 1.

62 'Circular Ref. 6/2/34 – 6th June 1933', NZL Papers, file 1, folder 2.

63 'The Legion's Creed', NO, 1, 4 (21 September 1933), p.3

64 R. Campbell Begg, 'The parting of the ways: Parish or Nation – the Hour of Destiny', NO, 1, 1 (10 August 1933), p.1.

65 Ibid.

66 'Why we publish 'National Opinion'', NO, 1, 5 (5 October 1933), p.2.

67 C.R.C. Robieson, 'Niemeyer – Empire Dictator; Central Reserve Bank Bill', NO, 1, 3 (7 September 1933), p.2.

68 *Light on the Legion*, Wellington, 1933, p.13.

69 R. Campbell Begg, 'The Common Goal', NO, 1, 4 (21 September 1933), p.12.

70 'The Britain we Love', NO, 1, 7 (2 November 1933), p.3.

71 Pugh, 'The New Zealand Legion, 1932-1935', p.56.

72 'Circular Ref. 6/2/34 – 6th June 1933', NZL Papers, file 1, folder 2.

73 James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000*, Honolulu, 2001.

74 Marinus La Rooij, 'Political Antisemitism in New Zealand during the Great Depression: A Case Study in the Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy', MA thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 1998, pp.159-63. La Rooij highlights the key role of renowned anti-Semite Arthur Nelson Field in popularizing conspiratorial material in New Zealand during the Great Depression. This material was eagerly adopted by many radicalized

conservatives seeking a straightforward explanation of the economic crisis. La Rooij briefly mentions the Legion, terming it 'an inclusive and broad-based movement of the political mainstream'. In fact, he claims that the Legion 'created for discontented conservatives a political diversion that prevented the establishment of more radical protest organisations'. See La Rooij, pp.61-63, 83-86.

75 'Constitution of the New Zealand Legion', NZL Papers, file 1, folder 1. It was also written in the Legion's earlier provisional constitution – see 'New Zealand Legion: Constitution and Rules (Provisional, 17 Feb 1933)', NZL Papers, file 1, folder 1.

76 HBH, 23 February 1933.

77 *Light on the Legion*, Wellington, 1933, p.1.

78 'Circular No. N.Z.L. 3, 11 March 1933 – Answers to Criticisms', NZL Papers, file 1, folder 2.

79 'Minutes of Meeting of National Council of the New Zealand Legion, 19-21 July 1933', NZL Papers, file 1, folder 1.

80 'A Legion Forum', NO, 1, 4 (21 September 1933), pp.8-10.

81 'Circular Ref. 6/2/76 – 19th October 1933', NZL Papers, file 1, folder 2.

82 'Minutes of Meeting of National Council of the New Zealand Legion, 19-21 July 1933', NZL Papers, file 1, folder 1. Parry told the National Council that '[t]he Main difficulty they [the economic research committee] had encountered was that of overcoming the various lines of conflicting thought and opinion and moulding them into a common plan'. The Council agreed to support Parry's conclusions whilst 'making clear the fact that such scheme has not been officially adopted by the National Council'.

83 Evan Parry, 'Economic Question', NO, 1, 1 (10 August 1933), p.5.

84 Evan Parry, 'In Search of New Markets', NO, 1, 4 (21 September 1933), p.5.

85 'Circular Ref. 6/2/32 – 5th June 1933', NZL Papers, file 1, folder 2.

86 Evan Parry, 'Internal Reorganisation and External Trade', NO, 1, 5 (5 October 1933), p.5.

87 'What the World is Doing: America's Experiment', NO, 1, 4 (21 September 1933), p.11.

88 Pugh, 'The New Zealand Legion, 1932-1935', p.64.

89 'Circular Ref. 6/12/19 – 15 May 1933', NZL Papers, file 1, folder 2. These comments come from handwritten notes on the back of the printed circular from the head office.

90 'Circular Ref. 6/2/75 – 16th October 1933', NZL Papers, file 1, folder 2.

91 W. Macbeth, 'Surplus Dairy Produce', NO, 1, 2 (24 August 1933), p.4.

92 'Government Reform – Summary for Divisions', NO, 1, 7 (2 November 1933), p.8. The exact wording was 'election by preferential voting of a Regional Council composed of one representative of each of the following interests: Agriculture, Manufacturing, Commerce, Transport, Medical, Finance (Banking, Insurance or Accountancy), Engineering, Women'.

93 'The Legion's Aims', NO, 2, 27 (1 October 1934), p.23.

94 *Light on the Legion*, Wellington, 1933, p.1.

95 'No. N.Z.L. 6, 11 March 1933 – "Answers to Misrepresentations"', NZL Papers, file 1, folder 2.

96 'Letter dated 19 April 1933, from Gisborne to A.S. Tonkin, Secretary of Hastings Centre', NZL Papers, file 2, folder 3.

97 Pugh, 'The New Zealand Legion and Conservative Protest in the Great Depression', p.54. It appears that J.M. Campbell contacted his nephew for advice on organizing the New Zealand National Movement in 1932.

98 Ibid., p.50.

99 Ibid., pp.184-7.

100 Ibid., p.188; Gerard P. Campbell, pp.72-73.

101 Gerard P. Campbell, pp.60-67.