

6 Logan Street
NARRABUNDAH ACT 2604
Wednesday 15 March 2000

Redistribution Committee for Western Australia
PO Box 781
VICTORIA PARK WA 6100

Distribution of Western Australia into electoral divisions
Suggestion: Divisional name

As the number of Federal electoral divisions in Western Australia is to be increased from fourteen to fifteen, at least one additional divisional name will be required (more than one if any of the existing names are dropped).

The new name I would like to suggest is: *Mahon*.

This name would commemorate Hugh Mahon, the only member of the Commonwealth Parliament ever to be expelled from it.

This unique event, in my opinion, was a significant but discreditable one in Australian Parliamentary history: reflecting discredit, that is, not on Mahon but on the Parliament which expelled him. I believe this view is also supported by historians.

A proper historical memory needs to encompass both the good and the bad. If Mahon's expulsion was discreditable, that discredit is something which Australian history needs to acknowledge and accept. The commemoration of Mahon's name by an electoral division would be a suitable way of doing this. In other respects, Mahon's political career was not so distinguished as to make him an inevitable claimant for recognition of this kind, but at any rate at least as distinguished as some other politicians who have had divisions named after them.

I have appended some details of Mahon's career to provide a fuller background to this suggestion.

Yours faithfully



John Daniel Encel

HUGH MAHON: SOME DETAILS OF HIS POLITICAL CAREER

In the first elections to the Federal House of Representatives in 1901, Hugh Mahon successfully contested the Western Australian electoral division of Coolgardie as the Labor candidate. Coolgardie included the greater part of the area of the State, but the population was concentrated on the goldfields. Mahon was re-elected in 1903 and served as a member of the first Labor Cabinet in 1904, holding the position of Postmaster-General. In 1906, following a redistribution of electoral boundaries, Mahon was re-elected for a division of Coolgardie with only slightly altered boundaries, and he again served as a member of the Cabinet when Labor held office for the second time in 1908–1909, holding the position of Minister for Home Affairs. After Labor's victory in the elections of 1910, however, he narrowly failed to be chosen as a member of Cabinet, while the member for the neighbouring Western Australian goldfields seat of Kalgoorlie, Charles Frazer, narrowly succeeded. Mahon was not helped by his icy personality, which had not won friends among his colleagues.

In 1913 another redistribution of electoral boundaries took effect. Major changes resulted from the decline in the population of the Western Australian goldfields. Much of the goldfields portion of the former division of Coolgardie was transferred to an enlarged Kalgoorlie. The greater part of Coolgardie (in population) was combined with a still larger population previously included in the division of Swan to form a division which was given the name of Dampier. On the new boundaries, while Kalgoorlie still appeared a safe Labor seat, Dampier was one in which Labor had little or no chance of victory. Mahon had some hopes of being selected as the Labor candidate in Kalgoorlie for the 1913 election, but Frazer was preferred. Mahon was endorsed as the Labor candidate for Dampier, but was beaten by a large margin.

Later in 1913, however, Frazer unexpectedly (and prematurely) died. Mahon was endorsed as the Labor candidate for the consequent by-election in Kalgoorlie, and was returned as a Member of Parliament before the end of the year. When Labor won the general election in 1914, Mahon also returned to the Cabinet, initially as an Assistant Minister. When Jack Arthur, the Minister for External Affairs, also died prematurely later that year, Mahon succeeded him in that position.

In 1916, when the Australian Labor Party (ALP) split over the issue of conscription for service in the First World War, and Prime Minister Hughes formed a Cabinet of his own pro-conscription supporters, calling themselves the National Labor Party, Mahon remained with the official (anti-conscription) ALP and ceased to be a Minister. In the general elections the next year, he was again the ALP candidate for Kalgoorlie, but this time lost the seat in a national landslide defeat for his party, which failed to hold any seats in Western Australia.

At the next general elections in 1919, Mahon narrowly succeeded in winning back Kalgoorlie for the ALP. In 1920, however, Mahon's political career came to an end. For the only time in its history, the House of Representatives used its power to expel a member (namely Mahon) and declare his seat vacant. A by-election was then held, which Mahon contested as the endorsed ALP candidate, but unsuccessfully. (At the next general elections in 1922, Kalgoorlie was again won by the ALP, which then held the seat continuously for the next thirty-six years.)

The stated justification for this unique use of the power to expel was founded on remarks made by Mahon when addressing a public meeting called following the death of the Lord Mayor of Cork (Ireland), which had resulted from a hunger strike undertaken in protest at the policies of the British Government in Ireland. Mahon had referred to British rule in Ireland as a 'bloody and accursed despotism', and his participation in the meeting (which carried a resolution in favour of the establishment of an Australian republic) was condemned as seditious.

In the House of Representatives debate on the motion to expel Mahon, his ALP colleagues alleged that there had already been a 'caucus' decision by Hughes's

Nationalist Party to carry the motion. Some Nationalist members took the trouble to deny that they had been party to any such decision and to insist that their decisions to support the motion had been arrived at on the merits of the case, independently of the ulterior motives imputed by the ALP Opposition. As noted above, Mahon's personality had never endeared him to his fellows, and there was a legacy of hostility between him and Hughes since their time as Cabinet colleagues. Attention was also drawn to the contrast between Mahon's case and that of his ALP colleague Mick Considine, the member for the seat of Barrier (New South Wales). Considine's public utterances ('Bugger the King, he is a bloody German bastard') had been arguably more seditious than anything Mahon had said, and he had actually been prosecuted, convicted, and imprisoned. If Mahon had committed sedition, it was asked rhetorically, was it not the appropriate course to prosecute him likewise? Yet this was not done. On the other hand, no attempt was made to expel Considine from the House of Representatives. It was argued, and very plausibly, that Barrier was certain to be held by the ALP in any by-election, while the Nationalists had a good chance to win Kalgoorlie, especially in the context of the expulsion of the sitting ALP member for (alleged) sedition; this, it was alleged, was the true motive of Hughes and his Nationalist supporters. The by-election victory was certainly opportune for Hughes personally, as his own personal parliamentary support base was not fully reliable and one additional seat was potentially crucial.

Incidentally, this by-election was also noteworthy as the only occasion in Commonwealth electoral history so far that the Government has won a seat from the Opposition at a by-election. This is a further illustration of the special impact of Mahon's expulsion.