

# Alexander Poynton — the caretaker

John Hawkins<sup>1</sup>

Alexander Poynton served briefly as Treasurer in Billy Hughes' National Labor government. He is the only Treasurer from South Australia. While he was not Treasurer long enough to bring down his own budget, he did present the 1919 Budget to parliament on behalf of the then Treasurer, William Watt.



Source: National Archives of Australia, A8120, 5.

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<sup>1</sup> The author was formerly in the Domestic Economy Division, the Australian Treasury. Thanks to Allan Seymour for archival assistance. The views in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Australian Treasury.

## Introduction

Alexander Poynton OBE was not quite the shortest-serving Treasurer, but is the most obscure.<sup>2</sup> Poynton was regarded by Earle Page as 'a capable administrator' but made little lasting impact.<sup>3</sup> He was described as stocky, red-faced and fiery.<sup>4</sup> Yet a contemporary journalist called him 'a favourite with all parties in the House'.<sup>5</sup> The only Treasurer from South Australia, he was remembered for his brief time as Treasurer, knowledge of rural matters and having one brother who was Lord Mayor of Perth and another Lord Mayor of Melbourne.<sup>6</sup>

## Poynton's life before politics

Alexander Poynton was born in Castlemaine, Victoria, on 8 August 1853, the son of an English miner and farmer and his Irish wife. Alexander left school at 14 when his father died and worked as a miner, shearer and station-hand. Poynton's father had taken part in the Eureka rebellion, and Ballarat was also an important place for Alexander Junior, for it was here that in 1880 he married 17-year-old Harriet Brown, with whom he was to have eight children.

## Early political career

Poynton became involved in trade unionism, and in 1888 moved to Port Augusta in South Australia as a union organiser.<sup>7</sup> In 1890 he stood unsuccessfully for the SA House of Assembly seat of Newcastle but in 1893 won the adjoining seat of Flinders. As an independent Labour member he attended Labour caucus meetings but was not bound by its decisions.<sup>8</sup> While an early supporter of Premier Kingston, in 1899 he crossed the floor to bring down the Kingston Government, citing Kingston's tardiness in implementing land reform, an act for which he was expelled from the Australian Workers' Union. Poynton then served as commissioner for crown lands in the Solomon Government, which lasted only eight days. He maintained his interests in pastoral matters and from 1903 was a partner in the stock and station agency Poynton & Claxton.

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2 Bob Hawke was Treasurer for a day and Gough Whitlam for two weeks.

3 Page (1963, p 59).

4 Van den Hoorn (1988).

5 Columnist, *Punch* (Melbourne), 11 August 1910, p 192.

6 Obituary in *Adelaide Advertiser*, 10 January 1935.

7 He variously served as president of the Amalgamated Miners' Association at Creswick, foundation Treasurer of the Amalgamated Shearers' Union and Treasurer of the Australian Workers' Union.

8 Labor has been the standard spelling since 1912 (see footnote 2 of Hawkins, 2007a).

In 1901 Poynton was elected to the first federal parliament as a South Australian MP, gaining support from both free traders and parts of the labour movement.<sup>9</sup> This broad support led to his being elected unopposed for the huge electorate of Grey in 1903, 1906 and 1910. According to the ALP's caucus minutes, he did not formally join the Labour Party until June 1904.<sup>10</sup> During the Fisher Government of 1910-1913 Poynton was Chairman of Committees. In 1911 he travelled on a fact-finding tour of Canada, the United States and the British Isles, which he wrote up as Poynton (1912). He referred to the trip as also being 'for the benefit of my health' and it enabled him to attend the coronation of George V with his colleagues Batchelor, Fisher and Pearce. He was impressed by the model factories he saw in England which he contrasted with those run by 'sweaters'.

Poynton strongly supported Hughes' stance on conscription, because of or despite the death of one son in the Boer War and another in World War I. It was therefore no surprise when he followed Hughes out of the Labor Party when it split in 1916.

## Treasurer and afterwards

When Hughes formed his minority National Labor Government on 14 November 1916, Poynton was appointed Treasurer. Contemporary newspapers report on the progress of the war and negotiations to form a coalition or national government, with Poynton and economic matters barely rating a mention.

Poynton's main focus while Treasurer seems to have been on the raising of war loans. He was concerned in the days before the fourth issue that 'it is becoming increasingly difficult to find large sums' and approached the banks for their assistance.<sup>11</sup> Publicly, he launched the fourth issue with an appeal to patriotism, declaring: 'it is every man's duty to subscribe, if he can, so that you and your children may the sooner be the citizens of a nation victorious and at peace'.<sup>12</sup> Behind the scenes he had some discussions with the Commonwealth Bank about the terms for these loans.<sup>13</sup>

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9 At the first federal election, South Australia was not divided into electorates.

10 Weller (ed) (1975). Van der Hoorn (1988), and a columnist in *Punch* 11 August 1910, state he became a pledged Labor member in 1902.

11 Letter from Poynton to banks, 22 December 1916, *Reserve Bank of Australia Archives*, S-19-12.

12 Circular for distribution among employees, 22 December 1916, RBA Archives, S-17-2.

13 Letter from Miller to Poynton, 21 December 1916, RBA Archives, SMB-20-3.

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Once the National Labor and Liberal parties merged in February 1917, the Treasurer's job reverted to the veteran Sir John Forrest, notwithstanding Hughes' low opinion of him.<sup>14</sup> In January 1918, when Hughes fulfilled a promise to resign after his second conscription referendum was rejected, Poynton was among the members sounded out as a possible prime minister, but nothing came of it and Hughes was reappointed.<sup>15</sup> Poynton later served in a variety of junior ministerial posts.<sup>16</sup>

While he was not Treasurer long enough to bring down his own budget, he did present the 1919 Budget to parliament on behalf of the then Treasurer, William Watt, who 'had been feeling the strain of administering the Commonwealth for so long'.<sup>17</sup>

Poynton was defeated at the 1922 election and largely retired from public life. He passed away in Adelaide on 9 January 1935.

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14 Hawkins (2007). Poynton's departure seems to have aroused little opposition. The local press said he 'was shaping exceedingly well in the important office of Treasurer' but seemed assuaged by the appointment of fellow South Australian Glynn to the cabinet; *Advertiser*, 19 February 1917, p 6.

15 Souter (1988, p 157).

16 Honorary Minister from March 1918 to February 1920, Minister for Home and Territories from February 1920 to December 1921, and Postmaster-General from December 1921 to February 1923. He also served as an Acting Minister for the Navy from April 1918 to August 1919 and Assistant Minister for Repatriation from January to September 1919.

17 Smith (1935, p 221).

## References

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