

The Empire's Patriotic Fund

Abstract Sir Malcolm McEacharn launched the Empire's Patriotic Fund in January 1900 to provide support for the dependants of the men at war in South Africa, and men invalided home because of wounds or illness, across the empire. Its genesis, however, lay not with the male civic leaders of Melbourne society but with an anonymous writer to the *Age* newspaper who signed herself as "An Australian Woman" and Lady Janet Clarke. It raised over £65,000. Local government bodies acted as local branches of the fund and, controversially, donated to the fund from municipal coffers.

Keywords Empire's Patriotic Fund established · Gender and the fund
Local government donations

Sir Malcolm McEacharn, the Mayor of Melbourne, received a hero's welcome when he arrived in Rutherglen on 6 February 1900. The Miners' Band struck up "Rule Britannia" as he was greeted by the town's local dignitaries. A crowd of over 2000 people had turned up to hear him speak. In a speech frequently interrupted by cheers and applause, McEacharn defended Britain's right to rule South Africa, but his primary purpose was to remind his fellow Victorians that it was time for the people at home to show the same loyalty to the Empire as the men who had volunteered. They could do that by subscribing to a patriotic fund set up to provide for the dependants of the men at the front, the widows and

orphans of the men killed, and the wounded, sick and disabled soldiers. The motion that subscription lists be opened was passed by acclamation.¹

McEacharn was in Rutherglen as the chair (and public face) of the EPF, a cause that had gripped the imagination of Victorians since its establishment in January. The crowd could have been forgiven for thinking that he had single-handedly created the fund. Its genesis, however, lay neither with him, nor any of Victoria's male civic leaders: it lay with an anonymous woman who had written a letter to the editor of the Melbourne *Age* two months ago.

"AN AUSTRALIAN WOMAN"

In its issue of 19 December 1899, the *Age* published a letter from "An Australian Woman." The First Victorian Contingent had sailed for South Africa: men would be killed and wounded, it began. New South Wales had already raised £4000 for the benefit of the wounded and the dependants of those killed. Victoria, however, had done "absolutely nothing." Men, she chided, seemed to think that they had done enough by giving the volunteers an enthusiastic send-off. Victoria's women, though, could do better than "cheers and handkerchief waving". She called on the colony's leading philanthropist, Lady Janet Clarke, to take up the cause and organise Victoria's women to raise money and to set up a working league to produce "articles of utility" for Victoria's sick and wounded. If the men wanted to help they would be welcomed.²

A response from Clarke appeared in the next day's issue of the paper (as well as in the *Argus*). She fully supported "An Australian Woman", writing that it was "our bounden and solemn duty" to establish such a fund. In the absence of the mayor, she was happy to convene a meeting of those interested in the cause. She also enclosed a cheque for £15 to start the Victorian Contingent Fund for the soldiers and their dependants.³ They were not, however, alone in their call for such a fund to be established. In the same issue that published the letter from "An Australian Woman", a similar call from a male correspondent was printed. The significance of the women's letters lay in their shaming of Victoria's male elite for failing in their public duty—and it worked. McEacharn announced a public meeting to set up a fund in Melbourne's Town Hall for 8 January 1900.

Both papers endorsed Clarke's proposal and immediately opened subscription lists, as did the regional newspapers. So, too, did the Trades

Hall Council, establishing its "Trades Hall Council Tommy Atkins Contingent Fund" on 22 December with a majority of three at a poorly attended meeting. There was a sense of discomfort within the membership about establishing a fund to assist those fighting in an imperial war. Let the government provide for the men disabled during the war, and their families, some members argued.⁴

The women's timing was apt. Assumptions of an early and easy victory over the Boer republics had been shattered by three major British defeats between 10 and 17 December 1899. Black Week, as it was called, and the call for more contingents from the colonies, saw a wave of jingoism sweep Victoria from December onwards. The issue, then, was not whether McEacharn's fund would be established but rather its focus: should it be Victorian or imperial? McEacharn had no doubts on that score.

London's Lord Mayor had set up the Transvaal War Fund. Established to assist widows and orphans, sick, wounded and disabled soldiers and sailors, and their wives and children, and the dependants of men serving, it was one of several funds established in Britain during the war.⁵ What set it apart from the others was its imperial focus. London would act as the central point for the receipt and distribution of funds across the empire as needed under the direction of the Royal Commission of the Patriotic Fund.⁶ McEacharn wished to establish a Victorian arm of the Transvaal War Fund and incorporate the Victorian funds established in December into the EPF to remove any doubt as to the "destination and administration of the money subscribed".⁷

Although the meeting was not as well attended as had been hoped (it clashed with a patriotic concert being held at the Melbourne Cricket Ground), the hall was well filled. Clarke sat on the stage with McEacharn, Victoria's Premier (Allan McLean), the Lieutenant-Governor (Sir John Madden) and other leading politicians and businessmen. McEacharn thanked Clarke for having "stepped in" to see what could be done for "our troops." The issue of an imperial rather than nativist fund, and that the new fund should incorporate existing funds,⁸ was resolved when Clarke asked that her donation be transferred to the EPF. A committee was appointed consisting of Melbourne's mayor (as chair), the Lieutenant-Governor, the President of the Legislative Council, the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, the presidents of the Melbourne Chamber of Commerce, the Trades Hall Council and the Australian Natives' Association, the chairman

of the Melbourne Stock Exchange (John McWhae), Captain Robert Collins (the Secretary of Defence), David Syme of the *Age*, William Spowers of the *Argus*, the rabbi of the Bourke Street Synagogue, Rev. Dr. Joseph Abrahams, the police magistrate, John Panton, and members of parliament, MLAs John Bruce and William Trenwith and MLCs Sir Frederick Sargood, Nicholas Fitzgerald and Frederick Grimwade: all male, solidly middle class and predominantly businessmen.⁹ Amidst talk of “the holy fire of patriotism” and the “glory of doing our duty”, £2334 was raised in the hall that evening. The only snag in the proceedings was any responsibility the Victorian government had for its men fighting in South Africa. McLean’s response has been described in the Introduction. Sir George Turner, who had his eye on the Premier’s position from the Opposition benches, believed that the government would have to bear some share of the responsibility. Neither man, however, would commit himself to specific measures. That would change one month later (see Chap. 4).¹⁰

McEacharn must have felt pleased at the end of the meeting. He had the support of the mainstream press and money already collected was being transferred to the EPF.¹¹ A letter was going out to all municipal bodies and factories requesting their assistance with fundraising.¹² It was, however, being run concurrently with a competitor for the patriotic penny, the Bushmen. Responding to London’s call for more men, Victoria was raising two more contingents. The Second would be paid for by the imperial and colonial governments, the Third, or Bushmen, by public subscription. The two funds were sometimes confused.

McEacharn’s only disappointment came in February. Hoping to create a national fund based on intercolonial cooperation, he opened negotiations with New South Wales. The response was dismissive. New South Wales had begun fundraising six weeks before and, with £16,000 already to hand, it was too late to “imitate” Victoria’s example. McEacharn’s response was just as snippy: the EPF, within the space of three weeks, had raised over £20,000.¹³

ECHUCA ANSWERS THE CALL

During his speech in the Town Hall, McEacharn had said that the purpose of the meeting was to “touch on something more than sentiment—they came to touch the pocket.”¹⁴ What he had not anticipated was the heady brew created when sentiment, the pocket and jingoism

intersected. It first surfaced in Echuca, three days after the Melbourne meeting.

On 11 January 1900, a special meeting of the Echuca Shire Council was held. A large number of ratepayers also attended. The shire president, Councillor Penrose, opened the proceedings by saying that they had to do “something” to show the motherland their gratitude for protecting Australian interests. The councillors heartily endorsed the sentiment, opened a public subscription list and then unanimously voted £300 from municipal funds for the Bushmen to the applause of the ratepayers. It was a generous donation by any measure. The council then drafted a letter to be sent to every local government body in the colony (just over 200 in all) seeking their “immediate co-operation in forming a joint municipal fund” which would be chaired by McEacharn. It ended with a sweetener, noting that the Minister for Defence had promised to indemnify councils voting funds for patriotic appeals. The fund certainly got off to a good start when Simon Fraser, MLC, donated £1000.¹⁵

Echuca’s meeting, however, flouted procedural protocol governing public appeals. Local government bodies were responsible for opening and maintaining subscription lists, overseeing fundraising activities and acting as collection points for the money raised. Although councillors made contributions as individuals, councils did not. The only exception had been Queen Victoria’s Jubilee in June 1897 when a cash-strapped Victorian government had encouraged local government bodies to donate money from municipal funds to ensure that the Jubilee was appropriately celebrated.

McEacharn had never asked local government bodies to contribute to his fund (or to the Bushmen). His letter to local councils simply invited their “cordial co-operation and assistance” in obtaining contributions for the EPF.¹⁶ The very thought of donating municipal funds to a public appeal was anathema and he had no intention of acting as the chair of a joint municipal fund for the Bushmen. McEacharn, then, was not going to look favourably upon any suggestion that the Melbourne City Council should, or would, contribute to either the EPF or the Bushmen. Yet, at the February council meeting, Councillor Jeffries put the motion that the council vote £500 for the EPF and £500 for the Bushmen from municipal funds. McEacharn’s response was abrupt, saying, “It won’t be carried”. He argued that the council did not have the legal power to vote the money “for occasions of this kind” and he saw the bill then before the House honouring the Minister’s promise to indemnify councils

donating from municipal funds as “extremely dangerous.” The Jubilee may have set a precedent, but he wanted no more of such precedents. The costs involved with the war should be borne by the government, tax payers and individual donors (like himself and his fellow councillors), not local government bodies. No seconder was found. Jeffries, however, refused to withdraw his motion and the matter was held over until the next meeting. As Alderman Ham noted, to reject the motion would have a “very prejudicial effect” because cities like Bendigo had already subscribed £500 from municipal funds to the EPF.¹⁷ When the discussion of Jeffries’ motion was resumed at the council meeting at the end of February there was no debate. According to the *Age*, a secret meeting of the council had been held where the differences between the councillors were “thrashed out.” Jeffries’ motion was passed unanimously.¹⁸

Clearly, McEacharn had seriously underestimated the popular appeal of the fund. An editorial in the *Argus* reflected that by taking him to task. It agreed that the law, in principle, did not allow councils to donate municipal funds for the purposes of war, yet asked who would argue that under no circumstances should municipal funds be spent for “the defence of the city?” Great “national occasions” should not be met by quoting municipal by-laws, it argued, adding that the contribution of a few thousand pounds now might be a more effective contribution than £100,000 in a time of greater crisis because Australia’s security was tied to the empire’s. The editorial’s most telling point, though, was simple: let the council that started the movement be magnanimous enough to follow the other municipalities that had already donated.¹⁹

TO BE DISCONTINUED AT ONCE

McEacharn assumed that fundraising for the EPF would follow the typical course of public appeals, i.e. it would run for a short time and then be closed. Therefore, he nominated 5 March as the fund’s closing date. Some committee members, however, thought it would be unwise to close the fund altogether. McEacharn compromised: 5 March would hold for what he called the “No. 1 Fund”, although the fund would remain active as an interim measure. The press, seeing 5 March as marking the end of fundraising, urged local committees to lose no time in completing their efforts. It also raised an issue that would become more marked in the coming weeks: a concern that other charities would suffer. The dominance of the EPF was already affecting the institutions

administering to the needs of the sick and the poor, it was claimed.²⁰ Moreover, two other major appeals were due to be launched in March, the annual Melbourne Hospital Appeal and the Indian Famine Relief Fund. The failure of the summer monsoons in India in 1899 had produced a drought, crop failure and starvation. For some, the Indian fund was an “incomparably more deserving cause”.²¹

The people of Victoria, however, took no notice. They were busily planning new fundraising projects for dates well after 5 March. At the end of February, the committee instructed the public that no new projects were to be organised. It did agree, however, that those already planned should go ahead: these included Sir Frederick Sargood's illuminated “patriotic demonstration” and the Menzies Hotel's patriotic concert. As 5 March came and went, and new projects were still surfacing, McEacharn began to lose his patience. In mid-March, he insisted that fundraising for the EPF be “discontinued at once” and at the end of the month, he announced that the fund would be “absolutely closed” on 7 April.²² Although some local committees had closed at the end of March, most continued until May and June 1900. Even then, some lingered on: Wangaratta was still collecting in July 1901. The last donation was made in 1902 when the EPF received £650/1/5 from the Deputy Postmaster General, the proceeds from the sale of charity two-penny stamps issued in May 1900 to commemorate the first appearance of Victorian soldiers on the battlefield at Pink Hill.²³

The EPF Committee attributed the fund's longevity to a spontaneous patriotic response to the needs of the dependants of the men at war.²⁴ A more accurate appraisal, though, was given by a local newspaper in March 1900: the fund had been “carefully engineered”, relying heavily on the “false glamour of jingoism”.²⁵ As the *Age* wryly noted, it was easier to stop a cannon ball rolling down a steep hill than to close the EPF.²⁶ McEacharn had certainly tried to stop that cannon ball from February to April, to no avail. In effect, the fund closed itself when, with the fall of the Boer capitals in May and June, a British victory seemed assured.

COUNCILS DELIBERATE

McEacharn's request for “cordial co-operation” in obtaining contributions for the EPF, Echuca's letter regarding the Bushmen and the government's indemnity introduced local councils to new, and sometimes uncomfortable, territory.

At Coburg's January meeting, for example, Councillor Arthur moved that the council donate five guineas to the EPF. Councillor Voice strongly objected: with an overdraft of £3200, the council was not in a position to vote anything. The motion found no seconder.²⁷ Councillors in McIvor and Warragul shires (where "every penny" was required for the roads) raised similar objections. McEacharn's objections to councils donating from municipal funds found supporters in the Richmond and McIvor councils (although his *volte face* undercut their position somewhat).²⁸ Objections, however, were over-ridden, as Coburg's Councillor Voice discovered. At the council's February meeting, a "number of rate-payers" turned up to take their councillors to task. The decision taken the month before, they claimed, was "not in accord with the spirit of the times". The chair of the finance committee moved that £10/10/- be donated to EPF. It was promptly seconded. Voice reiterated his objections but the motion was passed, Voice alone dissenting. The irony remains that the ratepayers had been seeking a donation for the Bushmen, a classic example of public confusion over the two funds. No one, however, objected: the loyal ratepayers of Coburg had ensured that their council had done its bit.²⁹

Braybrook Council simply refused to donate at all at its February meeting. Councillor Mullenger's argument that the council should give something as it would look "very un-British" if they did not was dismissed. Councillor Walsh questioned the legality of donating municipal funds to public appeals, adding that he would like to see the "large land-owners coming forward with their big cheques, for it was in their interests the men were fighting". One councillor stated flatly that he was opposed to voting money towards a war he did not believe in. At its March meeting, however, the council overturned its February decision. It voted £10 to the fund (with an extra £3/1/- thrown in by indignant councillors who felt that £10 was not enough), subscription lists were opened and Braybrook began fundraising.³⁰

For the majority of councils, though, the question of whether to donate was never an issue: as Yea's Councillor Sandilands quipped, a council donation ensured that both loyalists and disloyalists contributed, "whether they liked it or not".³¹ Municipal debt and a smaller rate-payer base, however, meant that few councils could hope to match the largesse of Bendigo or Echuca Shire and many felt obliged to apologise. Moorabbin was one. Its donation of £10/10/- to the EPF reflected the shire's depressed financial condition rather than a lack of loyalty on the

part of its councillors, it claimed.³² The issue that *was* discussed by councils was which of the two funds deserved municipal beneficence.

Some, particularly in regional Victoria, took the middle path and divided their donations equally between the two funds. The Wimmera Shire Council in Horsham, for example, donated £50 to both. A substantial majority of councils across the colony, though, favoured the EPF. Avoca, for example, voted £15 to the EPF and £10 to the Bushmen. Fitzroy Council voted £200 to the EPF, £100 for the Bushmen. Most metropolitan councils donated only to the EPF.³³

Councils had generally agreed to limit their discussions to the letters from Echuca and McEacharn. Wimmera Shire Council showed how divisive the issue of the war itself could be if it was raised. Wimmera's vote of £50 to each of the funds in February 1900 had been rancorously debated. The shire president, Councillor Gross, opposed the donation. It was not a just war, he argued and two Christian nations fighting each other set a poor example for the "heathens" of South Africa. Councillor Dahlenburg, however, supported the motion as "a native of Australia, living under the British flag, under which he hoped to die", as did Councillor Cunningham, who described himself as "true blue". Councillor McQuillan deplored the fact that the councillors were departing from what had been agreed to in committee (viz. that the merits of the war would not be discussed) as well as the threats of ostracism of those in Horsham who held different opinions to the majority regarding the war. A public meeting censured Gross, condemning him as a "German" and a "confessed disloyalist" who had no right to hold his office when the empire was in "such dire straits".³⁴ Considering the public mood in February, the result was hardly surprising. What remains intriguing about the meeting, though, is its early public expression of suspicions about the loyalty of German Australians and evidence of divisions within the German Australian community. Dahlenburg's loyalty lay with Britain.

There is no doubt as to which of the two appeals was the more successful. In August 1900, the Treasurer tabled his report to the House. The Bushmen's appeal had raised £26,541 (about a third of the cost needed for the contingent),³⁵ the Melbourne Hospital Appeal £17,500, the Indian Famine Relief Fund a mere £2961. The EPF, however, had raised £58,508 thus far.³⁶ No matter how people felt about the war itself, few could question a fund for widows and orphans, the dependants of men at the front and the sick or wounded soldier. Even the *Tocsin*, which

relished its description as “the most rabid pro-Boer paper in Australia” and which had described McEacharn as an “inflated lick-spittle” and the men volunteering as “Larrikins of the Queen”, never attacked the fund or its purpose, even if it did feel that the state should provide for the “fools” (and their families) who had left Australia to fight the “Battles of Booodle” in “Fatman’s war” in South Africa.³⁷

NOTES

1. *Rutherglen Sun* 6 February 1900, 3.
2. *Age* 19 December 1899, 5.
3. *Age* 20 December 1899, 7. The alacrity with which Clarke responded suggests that the two women knew each other.
4. Trades Hall Council Minute Book, 22 December 1899, 303.
5. Andrew Thompson identified seven of them: The Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Families Association, the British Red Cross Society, the Patriotic (or Transvaal War) Fund, Lloyd’s Patriotic Fund, the *Daily Telegraph* Shilling Fund, the *Daily Mail* Kipling Poem Fund (the Tommy Atkins Fund) and the *Times* Transvaal War Fund. See Andrew S. Thompson, “Publicity, Philanthropy and Commemoration: British Society and the War” in *Impact of the South African War*, ed. D. Omissi and Andrew S. Thomson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001) 108.
6. National Archives of Australia (NAA) A6443, 333, Claims of widows and dependants of Victorian Contingents, General correspondence files relating to the Australian Contingents in the South African (Boer) War.
7. *Age* 8 January 1900, 5.
8. The *Age* and the *Argus* had opened the General War Relief Fund and the Victorian Patriotic Fund respectively. Both metropolitan papers, however, continued to list donations made through their offices as an addendum to the EPF’s donation lists. Some regional centres, Ballarat being one, had opened funds to assist local men (*Argus* 23 November 1899, 5).
9. Setting aside the Lieutenant-Governor and Collins, who were ex-officio members, and Abrahams, of the remaining fifteen members of the committee, ten were businessmen and pastoralists: McEacharn, Sir William Zeal (President of the Legislative Council), Robert Reid (president of the Melbourne Chamber of Commerce), McWhae, Syme, Panton, Bruce, Sargood, Fitzgerald and Grimwade. Trenwith, who had begun his political life as a union organiser and radical, had begun to move away from organised labour by 1900. The Speaker, Francis Mason, had been a teacher and public servant. (*Australian Dictionary of Biography*: Online Edition, <http://adbonline.anu.edu/adbonline.htm>.)

10. *Age* 9 January 1900, 5, *Argus* 9 January 1900, 5, *Table Talk* 8 January 1900, 6.
11. See, for example, *Geelong Advertiser* 11 January 1900, 2, *Australasian* 3 February 1901, 24.
12. This practice was also evident in the other colonies (see Oppenheimer, *All Work No Pay*, 16). See also Trades Hall Council Minute Book, 2 February 1900, 314.
13. *Age* 2 February, 6, 10 February 1900, 9.
14. *Age* 9 January 1900, 3.
15. *Riverine Herald* 12 January 1900, 2, 16 January 1900, 2, 19 January 1900, 3, 16 February 1900, 2.
16. *Geelong Advertiser* 31 January 1900, 4, *Age* 14 February 1900, 7.
17. *Age* 10 February 1900, 10, *Bendigo Advertiser* 3 February 1900, 5.
18. *Age* 10 February 1900, 10, 27 February 1900, 5, *Argus* 10 February 1900, 14, 13 February 1900, 4.
19. *Argus* 13 February 1900, 4.
20. *Age* 2 February 1900, 6, *Argus* 2 February 1900, 4, 10 February, 14 1900, *Australasian* 3 March 1900, 21.
21. *Sunbury News* 24 March 1900, 2.
22. *Age* 24 February 1900, 9, 2 March 1900, 4, 6 March 1900, 6, 14 March 1900, 8, *Argus* 2 April 1900, 5, *Geelong Advertiser* 9 April 1900, 2.
23. Initially, proceeds from the sale of the stamps were to be devoted to "some charity". Public Record Office Victoria (PROV) VPRS1163 Premier's Department, Solicitor General to the Premier 28 April 1902, inward correspondence files, *Age* 30 March 1900, 6, 22 August 1900, 5, 1 October 1902, 4, *Ovens and Murray Advertiser* 6 July 1901, 2.
24. *Age* 21 May 1901, 9.
25. *Sunbury News* 24 March 1900, 2.
26. *Age* 9 April 1900, 6.
27. *Coburg Leader* 20 January 1900, 1, 17 February 1900, 4.
28. *Age* 2 February 1900, 6, *West Gippsland Gazette* 13 February 1900, 2, *McIvor Times and Rodney Advertiser* 15 February 1900, 2.
29. *Coburg Leader* 17 February 1900, 4.
30. *Independent* 10 February 1900, 3, 10 March 1900, 3.
31. *Yea Chronicle* 1 February 1900, 2.
32. *Brighton Southern Cross* 10 February 1900, 2.
33. *Bendigo Independent* 2 February 1900, 2, *Horsham Times* 13 February 1900, 3, *West Gippsland Gazette* 13 February 1900, 2, *McIvor Times and Rodney Advertiser* 15 February 1900, 2, *Avoca Mail* 16 February 1900, 2, *Mercury and Weekly Courier* 2 February 1900, 3, *North Melbourne Gazette* 16 February 1900, 4-5, *Coburg Leader* 7 April 1900, 1, *Brighton Southern Cross* 10 February 1900, 2. (For other examples, see *Evelyn*

- Observer and South and East Bourke Record* 9 February, 2, 16 February 1900, 2, *Age* 16 February 1900, 6).
34. *Horsham Times* 13 February 1900, 3, 20 February 1900, 2, 2 March 1900, 2, 6 March 1900, 2, *Age* 6 March 1900, 6.
 35. PROV VPRS1163 Premier's Department, Commonwealth Defence to the Premier of Victoria 24 February 1902, inward correspondence files.
 36. *Victorian Parliamentary Debates* (VPD), vol. 94, 804.
 37. *Tocsin* 1 February 1900, 1, 15 February 1900, 4, 12 April 1900, 4.

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