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'David Headon, Joseph Cook – The Chameleon: Australia's Sixth Prime Minister'

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David Headon, *Joseph Cook – The Chameleon: Australia's sixth Prime Minister* (Australian Parliamentary Library, 2025), 134pp. Paperback. A\$29. ISBN: 978-1-9226-5615-5.

This fascinating book is the sixth in a wonderful series on Australia's first eight prime ministers by renowned Australian historian David Headon. In just over 130 pages Headon surveys the life of Sir Joseph Cook, Australia's sixth prime minister. And 'surveys' should be emphasised as this is not a comprehensive biography of Cook, and nor does it claim to be. Instead the book highlights significant points in Joseph Cook's life, including his early life working in the coal mines of Staffordshire, his and his young family's move to Australia from the United Kingdom (UK), entering state politics in New South Wales, entering federal politics, becoming prime minister (June 1913-September 1914), and being appointed Australian High Commissioner to the UK in 1921.

Headon draws on the work of Cook's official biographer, John Murdoch throughout his book. The book also contains excerpts from speeches by Cook as well as editorial commentary on him by his supporters and foes alike. Some lovely images are also found throughout the book, which truly bring his story to life. One of the most consistent themes in Headon's book and it also helps explain its title is Joseph Cook's well-deserved reputation for shifting positions on various subjects throughout his life, i.e. why he was described as a chameleon, or less charitably 'oily Joe'. One of the best illustrations of this is the fact that Cook, considering his life in the UK as a miner and Trade Unionist began his political career in the early Labor political movement in Australia, before jumping ship to what eventually became the Liberal (conservative) Party.

One of the reasons why Cook had such a long and relatively successful political career was due to his reputation as an aggressive orator, especially in the various parliaments that he found himself being a representative in. This well-honed skill owed much to his strong Methodist beliefs, being a lay preacher. His Methodist beliefs were one of the few things that he was consistent about during his life. But a major failing that Headon identifies in Cook is his poor judgement at crucial points in his political career, namely the decision to hold elections at certain times and the very negative nature of many of those campaigns, when the electorate was looking for positive changes to their lives.

However, a notable example of Cook's humility that Headon highlights was his willingness to act as Prime Minister Billy Hughes' deputy during the First World War after the post-conscription Australian Labor Party split, despite not having a very positive view of Hughes or his ability. He took on various ministerial portfolios during the Nationalist governments of Hughes despite being a former prime minister, even if briefly. Furthermore, he was also content to let Hughes take the limelight during the Imperial War conferences and the subsequent Paris peace conferences after the Armistice in November 1918. But his quiet but thoughtful demeanour, certainly in comparison to Hughes' loud and volatile nature, caught the attention and appreciation of British Prime Minister David Lloyd George.

Sir Joseph Cook's life came full circle when he returned to the UK as Australian High Commissioner in 1921. His tenure there until 1927 was a busy one where he did his best to promote Australia. He was popular in high social circles in the UK, with both

him and his wife Mary (and Headon also does an excellent job of illustrating her important contribution to not only Cook's personal but also professional life) being frequent attendees at various social functions. However, he was less well-liked by his staff at Australia House (the Australian High Commission) in the Strand in London, UK due to his micromanaging nature. On his arrival in Australia in 1927 although he could have considered a return to active politics, he instead decided to retire and accepted various invitations to speak at gatherings until he died in 1947. His devoted wife Mary also passed away a few years later.

I really enjoyed reading this book. Despite its relatively short length it succeeds in giving the reader a real glimpse into the man that was Sir Joseph Cook, Australia's sixth prime minister. Headon quite rightly laments the lack of knowledge most Australians have about their first eight prime ministers (hence the creation of the series of which this book is a part of). So, his book and the series will go some way to rectifying this, and I thoroughly recommend the book to both general and specialist readers alike, although it will probably appeal more to the former.

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