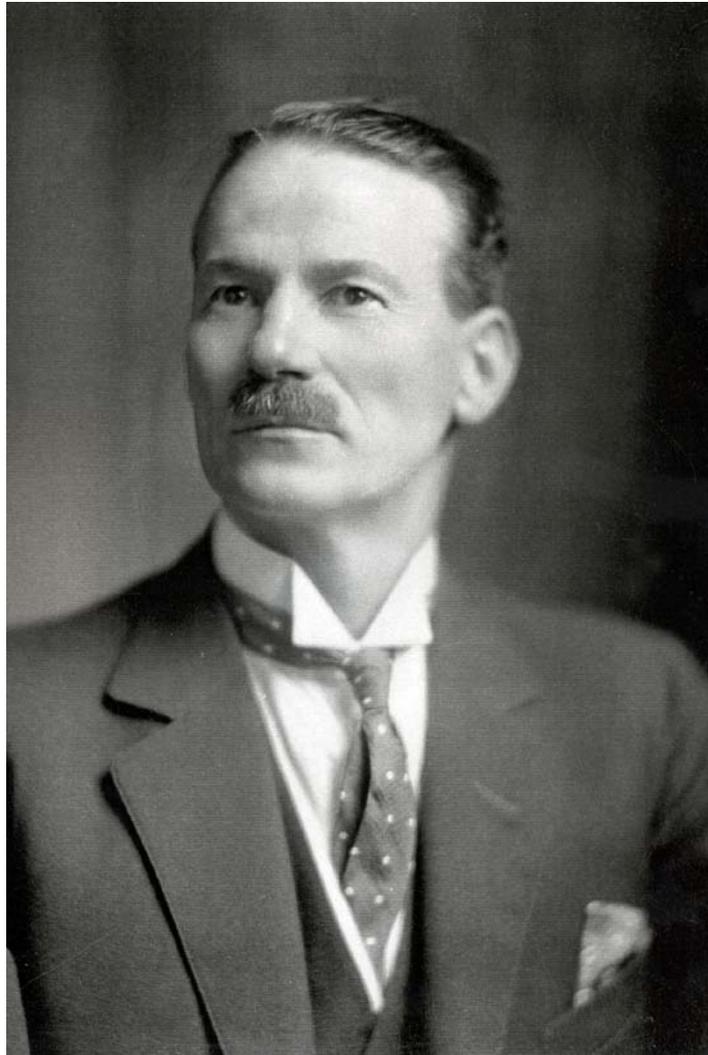


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From Coal Pit to Leather Pit:

Life Stories of Robert Semple



A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of a PhD in History at
Massey University

Carina Hickey

2010

Abstract

In the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* Len Richardson described Robert Semple as one of the most colourful leaders of the New Zealand labour movement in the first half of the twentieth century. Semple was a national figure in his time and, although historians had outlined some aspects of his public career, there has been no full-length biography written on him. In New Zealand history his characterisation is dominated by two public personas. Firstly, he is remembered as the radical organiser for the New Zealand Federation of Labour (colloquially known as the Red Feds), during 1910-1913. Semple's second image is as the flamboyant Minister of Public Works in the first New Zealand Labour government from 1935-49.

This thesis is not organised in a chronological structure as may be expected of a biography but is centred on a series of themes which have appeared most prominently and which reflect the patterns most prevalent in Semple's life. The themes were based on activities which were of perceived value to Semple. Thus, the thematic selection was a complex interaction between an author's role shaping and forming Semple's life and perceived real patterns visible in the sources. Chapter one explores Semple as an Australian New Zealander whose relationship with his homeland was a complex one, continually affected by issues such as time, place and political expediency. Chapter two considers Semple in the identity which was arguably the most radical in New Zealand historiography – the Socialist. Several facets of Semple's socialism will be examined including militant socialism, from which his radical persona was formed, state socialism and practical socialism. To improve the lives of working people was Semple's aim in life, so the third thematic chapter examines Semple's role as a union organiser – this was a vehicle through which he pursued this aim. It was from this image that Semple's public career was founded and then sustained. In the fourth chapter Semple, the Labour politician will be examined. Here his ultimate aim was to improve conditions for all New Zealanders and the several arenas in which Semple pursued this end included party activities, municipal politics and ministerial office. In these two chapters changes in Semple's political perspectives can be seen as labour concerns became subservient to national concerns when he became part of the Labour government. Chapter five examines Semple as an anti-militarist which was the image where the greatest change in political perspective was evidenced. Semple, the anti-conscriptionist of one world war, drew the marble for the first conscription ballot in the next. These themes are not the only ones in Semple's life but appear most consistently during his lifetime.

Contents

Abstract ii

Acknowledgements iv

List of Abbreviations and Illustrations vi

The Chronological Life ix

Introduction p.1

Chapter 1 “His tap root was stronger and more tenacious than that of most of us”: The Australian New Zealander p.28

Chapter 2 “I still claim, from the housetops, that I am a Socialist”: The Socialist p.75

Chapter 3 “I would never under any circumstance turn the working class down”: The Union Organiser p.140

Chapter 4 “I have done my best to improve the lot of the working people”: The Labour Politician p.180

Chapter 5 “Bombs and bullets will never settle the world’s troubles”: The Anti-Militarist p. 240

Conclusion p. 289

Bibliography p.299

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I am indebted to the Knight family, a branch of Semple's Australian relatives. My contact in the Knight family was Dale Liepins in Canberra. Dale presides over a vast collection of Knight/Semple family history which includes Birth/Death/Marriage Certificates, newspaper cuttings, photographs and other memorabilia. The family history has been accumulated over time by Dale and other family members including her mother, Thelma Montgomery and her uncle, Doug Knight. For the purposes of this thesis these are acknowledged as the Knight Family History Collection (KFHC). Dale provided a steady stream of valuable information by email, telephone, compact disc and photocopied a large amount of material which she forwarded to me. Any questions I asked were always answered promptly and without hesitancy and Dale was always very helpful and enthusiastic about the project. One of the highlights of this research was personally meeting Dale in Canberra while I was researching Semple in Australia.

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University Library, Wellington City Council Archives, Wellington Regional Council Archives. Also Australian institutions: The Bathurst District Historical Society, The Noel Butlin Archives in Canberra, The State Library and the Public Record Office in Melbourne, The New South Wales State Library and the State Record Office in Sydney. The funding of this thesis has been made possible by a Doctoral scholarship and the Bailey Bursary granted by Massey University, for which I am most grateful. Finally, I want to thank Robert Semple for without his courage and strength of conviction there would be no stories to tell.

Carina Hickey, January 2010.

Front Cover Acknowledgements

The Leather Pit in the title of this thesis refers to the leather seats in Parliament. In Maurice Gee's novel *Plumb* the central character George Plumb describes visiting Parliament and seated in the public gallery he refers to Semple, Fraser, Nash and Parry "and there they were, in their rimu-panelled, padded-leather pit".¹

Front-page cover shows Robert Semple after he was elected to Parliament, 1929, F-18790-1/1, Alexander Turnbull Library (WTU).

¹ Maurice Gee, *Plumb*, Auckland: Penguin, 1991, p. 148.

Abbreviations and Illustrations

Abbreviations used in text

| | |
|------|---|
| AJHR | Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives. |
| AOL | Alliance of Labour. |
| CMT | Compulsory Military Training. |
| CP | Communist Party of New Zealand. |
| FOL | Federation of Labour. |
| KFHC | Knight Family History Collection, Canberra. |
| NA | National Archives, Wellington. |
| NZLP | New Zealand Labour Party. |
| NZPD | New Zealand Parliamentary Debates. |
| RHSC | Robert H. Semple Collection, Perth. |
| SDP | Social Democratic Party. |
| UFL | United Federation of Labour. |
| ULP | United Labour Party. |
| VCMA | Victorian Coal Miners' Association. |
| WCCA | Wellington City Council Archives, Wellington. |
| WLRC | Wellington Labour Representation Committee. |
| WTU | Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. |

Illustrations

- Figure 1. 'Any more with axes to grind?', *Evening Post* cartoon, 3 March 1947, p.1.
- Figure 2. John Semple c 1880, KFHC, p. 31.
- Figure 3. Map showing the area where Robert Semple was born, KFHC, p. 33.
- Figure 4. George and MaryAnn Knight, KFHC, p. 38.
- Figure 5. Lithgow Valley Colliery employee group c 1885, Lithgow District Historical Society, p. 41.
- Figure 6. Korumburra c 1897, H8376, State Library, Victoria, p. 45.
- Figure 7. Outtrim Miners Association Lodge c 1898, Peter Gardner, p. 47.

- Figure 8. Station Street, Outtrim 1904, E165/56/51, Noel Butlin Archives, Australia National University, Canberra, p. 55.
- Figure 9. Hamilton Knight and Robert Semple, KFHC, p. 68.
- Figure 10. *Barrier Daily Truth* diagram, 7 March 1914, p. 107.
- Figure 11. Seddon Memorial Library, Runanga, G-196-1/2, WTU, p. 119.
- Figure 12. Miners' Hall, Runanga, F-9395-1/4, WTU, p. 120.
- Figure 13. Tunnel co-operative Work Party, Wellington Regional Council, p. 123
- Figure 14. Labour group at Orongorongo Tunnel, F-140138-1/2, WTU, p. 125.
- Figure 15. Semple and the wheelbarrows, RHSC, p. 127.
- Figure 16. Semple as Transport Minister, C-28279-1/2, WTU, p. 137.
- Figure 17. The Semple Family, RHSC, p. 153.
- Figure 18. Poem in *Maoriland Worker*, 3 May 1916, p. 159.
- Figure 19. Semple and his son, Robert Francis, RHSC, p. 171.
- Figure 20. Semple family photograph, Mill Road, Otaki, RHSC, p. 192.
- Figure 21. Semple and Harry Holland at Petone, C-277991-1/2, WTU, p. 204.
- Figure 22. Eileen Semple and her three daughters, Pat Dickinson collection, p. 208.
- Figure 23. 'Dumped', *New Zealand Herald* cartoon, 20 March 1940, p. 213.
- Figure 24. Semple moving furniture into first State house, *Dominion Post*, p. 217.
- Figure 25. 'Telling the World', *New Zealand Herald* cartoon, 27 January 1937, p. 225.
- Figure 26. Semple in 1943, B. 060737, Spencer Digby Collection, Te Papa, p. 223.
- Figure 27. 'Ad Infinitum', *New Zealand Herald* cartoon, 22 April 1949, p. 228.
- Figure 28. 'Protest March', *New Zealand Herald* cartoon, 5 June 1951, p. 234.
- Figure 29. Robert Semple and Robert McKeen, *Dominion Post*, p. 238.
- Figure 30. Semple Duck shooting with friends, RHSC Collection, p. 248.
- Figure 31. Card for Semple's official welcome, Christchurch 1917, RHSC, p. 259.
- Figure 32. Poster 'Ghastly Horrors of War', Eph-C-PEACE-1934-01, WTU, p. 269.

Figure 33. 'Mein Kampf', *New Zealand Herald* cartoon, 20 May 1938, p. 277.

Figure 34. Semple with his two sons, Vic and John, RHSC, p. 285.

Figure 35. Semple leaving Parliament in 1954, *Dominion Post*, p. 289.

Figure 36. Semple's funeral cortege, 1955, EP/1955/0234, WTU, p. 290.

Figure 37. Memorial to Peter Fraser, Karori cemetery, author's photograph, p. 292.

Figure 38. Semple House, Oriental Bay, Wellington, author's photograph, p. 293.

The Chronological Life

- 1873** Robert Semple born near Sofala, New South Wales, Australia.
- 1878 – 1883** Attended Sofala Public School.
- 1883** Started work in the coalmines at Lithgow.
- 1883/1890s** Worked in various mining occupations in the Greater Lithgow area, then in Newcastle district of New South Wales.
- 1887** Mother MaryAnn Semple died.
- 1893** Father John Semple died.
- 1890s** Moved to South Gippsland, Victoria.
- 1898** Married Margaret McNair. Resident in Outtrim. Member of the Outtrim Miners' Association Lodge and Miners' Union Federation, the militant Victoria Coal Miners Association.
- 1899** Son Robert Francis Semple born in Outtrim.
- 1900** Moved to coal mining town of Collie, Western Australia.
- 1901** Brother John Semple killed fighting in Boer War, South Africa. Worked mining in WA towns of Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie.
- 1902** Moved back to South Gippsland, resident in Korumburra.
- 1903** Daughter Agnes Vida Semple born in Korumburra. Becomes President of Coal Creek Miners' Union in Korumburra. Also President of Political Labour League in district.
- 1903/04** Great Victorian Coal strike. Semple represented miners in both negotiations with employers and in interstate travel soliciting funds for striking miners.
- 1904** Blacklisted during dispute Semple moves to New Zealand. Arrives Runanga, West Coast ca June 1904. Secured work at State Mine and became first President of Coal Creek Miners Union established ca September 1904.
- 1905/06** Employed by the Public Works department on the Staircase Gully viaduct and other work on the Midland Railway Line in the South Island.

- 1906** Back in Runanga. Son John Hector Ronald Semple born.
- 1907** Daughter Ella May Semple born in Runanga.
- 1907** President of the State Miners Union. Integral in the formation of branches of the New Zealand Socialist Party on the West Coast.
- 1908** Integral in the establishment of the New Zealand Federation of Miners.
- 1909** Miners' Federation becomes the New Zealand Federation of Labour (FOL).
- 1910 – 1913** Became official Organiser for the FOL.
- 1911** Son Leonard Victor Semple born in Runanga.
- 1912** Travelled to Australia aiming to strengthen ties of industrial unionism with Australian unions. Actively involved in Waihi Miners' strike.
- 1913** Moves to Wellington. As a result of Unity Conference appointed organiser for United Federation of Labour (UFL). Involved in Great Waterfront strike, briefly imprisoned.
- 1914** Travels to Australia early in year to solicit organising funds for labour organisations. Resigns in October as organiser of UFL.
- 1915 – 1919** National Miners' Federation rebuilt. Semple appointed workman's inspector and agent.
- 1916** Visits Australia campaigning against conscription. Imprisoned December 1916 for opposition to conscription in New Zealand. Served nine months in Lyttleton Gaol.
- 1918** Elected MP for Wellington South in by-election. Lost seat a year later in general election of 1919.
- 1920 – 1924** Leader of co-operative labour party that built the Orongorongo tunnel which supplied water to Wellington City.
- 1924 - 1926** National Organiser for New Zealand Freezing Workers' Federation.
- 1926 – 1928** President of the New Zealand Labour Party.
- 1925 – 1935** Labour representative on Wellington City Council.
- 1927 – 1929** Secretary of the Wellington General Labourers' Union.

- 1928** Elected MP for Wellington East representing seat until 1946, then MP for Miramar 1946-1954.
- 1930** Eldest son Robert Francis Semple killed in car accident
- 1935** When Labour government elected Semple became Minister of Public Works and Transport.
- 1937** Suffered physical and mental breakdown. Trip to Australia for recuperation.
- 1940** Became Minister of National Service. Draws first marble in conscription ballot.
- 1941** Visits Australia in search of steel and war supplies for New Zealand
- 1941/42** In further Cabinet reshuffles relinquishes Transport and National Service portfolios, and is allocated Railways, Rehabilitation and Marine. Becomes Minister of Works when Public Works absorbed into Works.
- 1948** Publication *Why I Fight Communism* and nationwide tour denouncing Communism. Last visit to Australia, again in quest for steel supplies for New Zealand.
- 1949** Publicly supported peace-time conscription. End of Ministerial career when Labour government defeated in 1949.
- 1951** Waterfront strike. Views aligned with FOL rather than Labour Party. Holds seat in 1951 general election. Moved to Otaki.
- 1954** Dogged by ill-health for past two years retired prior to 1954 general election. Moved to New Plymouth to live with son.
- 1955** Died 31 January at New Plymouth.

Introduction.

In the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* Len Richardson described Robert Semple as one of the most colourful leaders of the New Zealand labour movement in the first half of the twentieth century.¹ This thesis confirms this image. Historians have generally focussed on a radical image of Semple to the extent that it has dominated his categorisation in New Zealand historiography. For example, during the early industrial ferment in New Zealand Barry Gustafson said Semple was “for a time the most prominent radical in New Zealand”.² My initial interest in Semple was sparked by a 1947 newspaper cartoon which featured both Semple and a Labour colleague, William Jordan, being burned at the stake by Wellington watersiders.



Figure 1: *Evening Post*, 3 March 1947.

Both men had voiced their disapproval at waterfront strikes and the unionists had objected to their comments. Jordan was from the so-called ‘moderate’ wing of the early labour movement. He did not have a trade union background and was never

¹ Len Richardson, ‘Robert Semple 1873-1955’. *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, updated 22 June 2007 URL: <http://www.dnzb.govt.nz/>

² Barry Gustafson, *Labour’s Path to Political Independence: The Origins and Establishment of the New Zealand Labour Party, 1900-1919*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1980, p.26.

involved in industrial militancy.³ In contrast, Semple was from the ‘militant’ wing of the movement – so much so that historian P.J O’Farrell had labelled him as “industrial unionism personified” prior to 1913.⁴ However, in 1947 the two men were caricatured standing side by side, having expressed similar opinions against strike action. The cartoon raised questions about the dominance of a radical image of Semple in New Zealand history.

Initial research revealed that even contemporaries presented two Semples, which suggested he was a complex man. Following the 1919 general election campaign, wherein Semple stood as a candidate in the Wellington South Electorate, he took action against the newspaper, the *Hutt Valley Independent* for defamation of character.⁵ In his evidence Semple denied making the statement alleged by the newspaper but when he was cross-examined by defence counsel the lawyer suggested by reading some of his more fiery speeches that Semple, in the heat of his passion, said many things which he might regret afterwards and which might not be correct. The defence claimed there were two Semples:

Mr Robert Semple, the litigant in Court, amiable, courteous, calm and dispassionate. Then there was the other Mr Semple – Bob Semple, the demagogue, the orator to the mob in the mood with an audience with him, who gave no rein to his tongue, who had no words too strong to vilify and slander his political opponents.⁶

An enticing factor was to investigate the multiple Semples. Initial conceptual questions in the research were how and why did Semple present himself to the world. The selection of the thematic chapters in this study is loosely based on the various answers that were found to those questions.

Historian Ludmilla Jordanova suggested that there are two prerequisites for a viable biography: “its subject must command more than specialist interest and there must be

³ Carina Hickey, “‘Man in his time plays many parts’: Life stories of William Jordan’, Massey University, MA thesis, 2003.

⁴ P.J. O’Farrell, ‘Politics and Coal: the Socialist Vanguard, 1904-08’ in Philip Ross May (ed.), *Miners and Militants: Politics in Westland 1865-1918*, Christchurch: Whitcoulls, 1975, p. 104.

⁵ *Evening Post*, 11 February 1920.

⁶ *Evening Post*, 10 March 1920.

sufficient material available”.⁷ Semple certainly fulfils the first requirement, while the second will be discussed further in this chapter. Richardson argues that Semple was not only colourful, but that his achievements helped to determine New Zealand’s social and economic pattern for two generations.⁸ He was an early labour militant who helped form the Miners’ Federation in 1908 and the New Zealand Federation of Labour a year later. He was imprisoned for his opposition to conscription in 1916 but later became a member of the first Labour government in 1935. He was a dynamic, florid and earthy speaker with a powerful personality who was renowned for his picturesque language. Semple’s lengthy contribution to the New Zealand labour movement combined with his unique personality denoted him as a compelling historical individual.

The selection of Semple as a research subject was also enhanced by his humorous linguistic ability. A biographer must be interested in the subject and it would be rare for any author to consider a subject that bores them, as Jordanova argued, “A few biographies are written out of dislike, disapproval or hatred, but they are relatively rare”.⁹ Historians have remarked on Semple’s sense of humour and picturesque language. When Rosslyn Noonan was compiling her history of New Zealand’s public works she said, “the present day researcher must feel grateful to Semple for his injection of life and often unintentional humour into many otherwise dull Parliamentary debates”.¹⁰

In his study on the nature of biography John Garraty argued that subject choice can result from a period of intense historical study which “results in the discovery of an obscure and significant individual leading the scholar to bring the new figure before the eyes of the world through a biography”.¹¹ While acknowledging that Semple was not obscure, this was indeed how this thesis evolved. Previous research on William Jordan revealed Semple as a contemporary who although significant in New Zealand

⁷ Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice*, 2nd ed., London: Hodder Arnold, 2006, p. 45.

⁸ Richardson, ‘Robert Semple’.

⁹ Jordanova, p. 142.

¹⁰ Rosslyn Noonan, *By Design: A Brief History of the Public Works Department, Ministry of Works, 1870-1970*, Wellington: Govt Print, 1975, p. 199.

¹¹ John Garraty, *The Nature of Biography*, Oxford: Alden Press, 1958, p. 136. This study of biography, although a number of years old, is one of the most comprehensive analysis of the genre and all its aspects.

labour history, had received no in-depth analysis.¹² Although there were other figures of the same period who were also men of remarkable ability, Semple stood out in two respects: firstly, for the sheer longevity of his contribution to the labour movement which surpassed nearly all of his colleagues and, secondly, for his ability as a natural orator which was unrivalled amongst his contemporaries.

Semple in Historical Literature

Semple was a national figure in his time and, although historians had outlined some aspects of his public life, there had been no full-length biography written on him. In New Zealand history his characterisation is dominated by two public personas. Firstly, he is remembered as the radical organiser for the New Zealand Federation of Labour (colloquially known as the Red Feds), during 1910-1913. Erik Olssen had featured Semple significantly in his history of the Red Feds.¹³ Semple's second image is as the flamboyant Minister of Public Works in the first New Zealand Labour government from 1935-49. Rosslyn Noonan outlined Semple's role as Minister in two chapters of her study on New Zealand's Public Works.¹⁴ Although these two public identities feature significantly in the historical record there were large undocumented gaps in both Semple's public and private life. Early research revealed there were other less emphasised images of Semple which needed to be addressed, as well as the question of why two images in particular have dominated his historical characterisation to the detriment of others.

New Zealand labour history has focussed significant attention on militant trade union activity and when Semple is recorded in the secondary literature it often focuses on this specific period of his life. In *The Red Feds* Olssen identifies Semple as organiser and one of the key protagonists with very radical views.¹⁵ He suggested perhaps harshly that Semple "may have been facile on ideological issues but he never erred in

¹² Hickey, 'Man in his time plays many parts'.

¹³ Erik Olssen, *The Red Feds: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism and the New Zealand Federation of Labour 1908-1913*, Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1988.

¹⁴ Noonan, Chapter 7 and 8.

¹⁵ Olssen, *The Red Feds*.

identifying a hunger for power, self-esteem and recognition”.¹⁶ In his *Red Fed Memoirs* Pat Hickey outlines Semple’s instigation and commitment to the early Federation of Labour’s radical unionism, “In his organising and propaganda work, Mr Semple was very frequently unsparing of his criticism of the craft union and its official”.¹⁷ Stanley Roche’s *The Red And The Gold* and Harry Holland & R.S. Ross’s *The Tragic Story of the Waihi Strike* give detailed versions of the miners’ strike of 1912 and both trace Semple’s involvement. Semple’s charisma as a speaker is noted by Holland and Ross, “Crowds flocked everywhere like steel filings to a magnet to hear Semple, the organiser...”.¹⁸ Similarly, Roche reflects on the role that Semple’s ability as a speaker had on the crowds during the strike, “...wild-tongued Bob Semple, beloved of the crowds, has spoken to an audience overflowing the hall and has worked them up”.¹⁹ While this literature provides valuable insights into specific events during the early part of Semple’s life, subsequent periods have not received the same depth of analysis.

General New Zealand history features Semple but he is again often categorised by his early part in radical unionism. In the *Oxford History of New Zealand* Len Richardson refers to the Blackball Strike of 1908 saying, “...P.C.Webb and Robert Semple led an assault on the Arbitration system”.²⁰ Michael King categorises Semple by his early Red Fed involvement and also his later use of colourful language as an MP, “In Parliament, he frequently had MPs almost collapsing with laughter at his pungent epithets”.²¹ Similarly, R.M. Burdon notes Semple’s imprisonment for seditious utterances in 1916 and his later turn of phrase, “When Peter Fraser and Robert Semple took the oath [when Labour became the government in 1935] with hands placed simultaneously on the same Bible Semple remarked ‘This is better than having your fingerprints taken’”.²² Here can be seen the two most dominant ways Semple is

¹⁶ Erik Olssen, ‘Some reflections about the origins of the ‘Red’ Federation of Labour, 1909-13’ in Eric Fry (ed.), *Common Cause: Essays in Australian and New Zealand Labour History*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986, p. 36.

¹⁷ Pat Hickey, *Red Fed Memoirs*, Wellington, New Zealand Worker, 1925, p. 34.

¹⁸ Harry Holland & R.S.Ross, *The Tragic Story of the Waihi Strike*, Wellington: The Worker Printery, 1913, p. 41

¹⁹ Stanley Roche, *The Red And The Gold: An Informal Account of the Waihi Strike, 1912*, Christchurch: Whitcoulls, 1982, p. 145.

²⁰ Len Richardson, ‘Parties and Political Change’, in Geoffrey Rice (ed.), *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, 2nd ed., Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 212.

²¹ Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, Auckland: Penguin, 2003, p. 357.

²² R.M. Burdon, *The New Dominion*, Wellington: A.H. & A.W.Reed, 1965, p. 213.

characterised in New Zealand history - primarily, by his early association with the Red Feds and then as a colourful Minister of the Crown.

Why has the radical image dominated the characterisation of Semple, while other phases of his life have remained undocumented? It may be, as stated previously, that militant trade union activity has received more attention from historians than the moderate sector within the labour movement. Jack Vowles has argued that different political and ideological contexts of Labour Party development have not been adequately appreciated by historians, which may account for some lack of early analysis of moderates in the secondary literature.²³ As a highly visible militant leader the spotlight fell naturally on Semple, so the radical image has received a large amount of exposure. But with no corresponding analysis of the moderate sector to provide some balance there has been no counter suggestion that he may have also been 'moderate' during periods of his life.

Semple's radical image was also fuelled by his own colourful language coupled with his extrovert personality. Although suggesting that Semple was possibly the best natural orator New Zealand politics had produced, historian and press gallery writer Leslie Hobbs argued Semple's flamboyance and "his own exaggerations about other people reaped for him a harvest of unsupported and wholly untrue stories about himself".²⁴ Semple's extravagant personality allowed stories to be created about him, often radical, which may have been far from the truth but which a reader could believe possible. As such, the very essence of the man which allowed him to stamp his mark in history also, at times, lead to a blurred distinction between myth and reality. For example, in one recent history the author enhanced Semple's radical image although it is factually incorrect. In a 2005 publication historian Melanie Nolan linked Semple with the legendary 1908 Blackball strike saying, "The mine manager went down the shaft, clocked a group including Pat Hickey, Bob Semple and Paddy Webb, and sacked them when they would not go back to work. The union went on

²³ Jack Vowles, 'From Syndicalism to Guild Socialism: Some Neglected Aspects of the Ideology of the Labour Movement, 1914-1923' in John E. Martin and Kerry Taylor (eds.) *Culture and the Labour Movement: Essays in New Zealand Labour History*, Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1991, p. 283. The moderate/militant term has been widely used amongst historians. See Brown, p. 8 and Gustafson, *Labour's Path to Political Independence*, p. 24.

²⁴ Leslie Hobbs, *The Thirty-Years Wonders*, Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1967, p. 75.

strike until the men were reinstated”.²⁵ But Semple, although whole-heartedly supporting the strike, never worked at the Blackball mine. Nolan does not cite a source and although it may have been an inadvertent embellishment, it supports Semple’s later claim that many industrial disputes were attributed to him even when he was not involved. In a 1937 newspaper interview Semple said of the pre-War labour agitation, “I got the blame for every strike in those years”.²⁶

Literature examining coalmining and its place in New Zealand’s industrial radicalism is another area of labour history in which Semple is frequently mentioned. In Len Richardson’s *Coal, Class & Community* Semple’s advocacy as a Mines Inspector is detailed. For example, when miners argued for increased control of their workplace in 1915 Richardson said, “Semple...proposed that the Miners’ Federation’s prime objective should be to ‘make men the masters of their jobs’”.²⁷ Semple’s specific role in coal mining politics during 1904-1908 in the coal communities on the West Coast is discussed by P.J. O’Farrell who says, “he [Semple] was to stand out in the Grey district as industrial radicalism personified, the core of worker protest and action, the giver and receiver of vitriolic abuse, the figure who most captured the public eye”.²⁸ Semple’s role within miners’ unionism cements the radical image.

James Bennett’s *Rats and Revolutionaries* and *Common Cause: Essays in Australian and New Zealand Labour History* edited by Eric Fry discuss and analyse the labour movements on both sides of the Tasman and the reciprocity between them.²⁹ Bennett suggests developments in Australia gave a sharper edge to the revolutionary industrial consciousness of New Zealand socialists and cites Semple as an example: “Bob Semple, whose role as organiser for the Federation of Labour saw him campaign tirelessly on both sides of the Tasman”.³⁰ Olssen in *Common Cause* discussed the Red Feds and suggests that “wherever Semple went crowds of men gathered to hear him

²⁵ Melanie Nolan, ‘1913 in retrospect: a laboratory or a battleground of democracy?’ in Melanie Nolan (ed.), *Revolution: The 1913 Great Strike in New Zealand*, Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2002, pp. 21-40.

²⁶ John Mowbray, ‘The Real Bob Semple’, *New Zealand Observer*, 22 July 1937.

²⁷ Len Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community: The United Mineworkers of New Zealand 1880-1960*, Auckland, Auckland University Press, 1995, p. 164.

²⁸ O’Farrell, ‘Politics and Coal’, p. 104.

²⁹ James Bennett, *Rats and Revolutionaries: The Labour Movement in Australia and New Zealand 1890-1940*, Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2004 and Fry (ed.), *Common Cause*.

³⁰ Bennett, p. 67.

proclaim the new evangel of liberation. Events beyond New Zealand encouraged the ferment further”.³¹ Rollo Arnold, a commentator with far less time for militant unionism, discusses New Zealand’s yeoman rural Arcadia myth in the early twentieth century and notes, “the Red Fed serpent, which had plotted against this vision by offering an alternative socialist myth, had too often spoken in an Australian accent”. Semple is named as one of these undesirable types.³² This indication that radicalism was external is also a facet of the secondary literature.

New Zealand Labour Party history frequently mentions Semple and although there are biographies of other prominent Labour men, there is no detailed account of Semple’s life story. J.T. Paul’s retrospect of the New Zealand Labour Party up to 1946 touches on Semple’s radicalism in early years and Paul was critical of it, “The anti-Labour propagandists plumbed the depths of righteous indignation when Mr Semple stressed the fact that Labour men were being denounced in all seasons as Bolsheviks, stating incidentally that if he were in Russia he would be a Bolshevik”.³³ Barry Gustafson’s *Labour’s Path to Political Independence* and Bruce Brown’s *The Rise of New Zealand Labour* both provide an analysis of the history of the Labour Party in New Zealand for their specific periods.³⁴ Gustafson charts Semple’s activity in the Labour Party up to 1919. He makes the following generalisation in his summary of Semple: “Radical in the early part of his career he became increasingly conservative in later years”.³⁵ There has been no attempt to explain why Semple became more conservative or what is meant specifically by the term. Brown, whose history stops at 1940, identifies Semple within the nucleus of the Labour Party but has suggested to the writer that during the 1920s Semple lost touch with the core leadership of the Party – this suggestion will be disputed in the thesis.³⁶ Although Semple is included in these Labour Party histories, understandably the authors’ aim was to provide a history of the Party itself and not an analysis of the individuals who make up the Party. Brown does, however, identify Holland, Savage, Fraser and Nash as standing out

³¹ Olssen, ‘Some Reflections about the origins of the Red Federation of Labour, 1909-13’, p.41.

³² Rollo Arnold, ‘The Australasian Peoples, 1888-1915’ in Keith Sinclair (ed.), *Tasman Relations: New Zealand and Australia, 1788-1988*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1987, p. 67.

³³ J.T.Paul, *Humanism in Politics*, Wellington: New Zealand Worker, 1946, p. 46.

³⁴ Gustafson, *Labour’s Path to Political Independence*: Bruce Brown, *The Rise of New Zealand Labour: A History of the New Zealand Labour Party from 1916 to 1940*, Wellington: Price Milburn, 1962.

³⁵ Gustafson, *Labour’s Path to Political Independence*, p. 167.

³⁶ Interview with Bruce Brown, 23 February 2005.

above the rest which perhaps unintentionally, relegates Semple to a supportive role within the Party. However, Brown's focus appears to be on policymaking and the leadership contribution of these men, the latter three being Prime Ministers. But other members of the Labour Party made significant contributions without holding leadership roles. This thesis will argue Semple's contribution as a publicist and propagandist was of significant importance to the Party but that it has been undervalued in subsequent histories. As Leslie Hobbs said of Semple, "Few men served the Labour Party more faithfully and no one ever brought it better publicity when it was most needed".³⁷

Semple's role in national politics is briefly mentioned in the biographies of several leading Labour politicians who were his contemporaries. In Barry Gustafson's biography of Michael Joseph Savage he is noted for his "vigorous and picturesque utterances and as...a great mimic and entertainer".³⁸ In Keith Sinclair's, *Walter Nash*, he is described as one of the few people who could get his own way with Nash by using bad language, which Nash disliked.³⁹ P.J. O'Farrell, in his biography of Harry Holland, remarked on Semple's relationship with the early leader of the Labour Party, "Semple disliked Holland and Holland found Semple's exhibitionism objectionable".⁴⁰ The three separate biographies of Peter Fraser written by James Thorn, Margaret Clark, and most recently by Michael King and Michael Bassett all mention Semple.⁴¹ Bassett and King describe the relationship between Fraser and Semple after an alleged dispute between them in 1937, "Relations between the two were never the same again, although Fraser held the upper hand".⁴² In Erik Olssen's *John A Lee* Semple is described as sharing Lee's passion for publicity: "Like Semple, Lee was news, and he enjoyed the fact".⁴³ John A. Lee himself also devotes a small section to Semple in *Rhetoric at the Red Dawn* which details some interesting political anecdotes and draws attention to Semple's characteristic energy, "What a

³⁷ Hobbs, p. 81.

³⁸ Barry Gustafson, *From the Cradle to the Grave: A Biography of Michael Joseph Savage*, Auckland: Reed Methuen, 1986, p. 286.

³⁹ Keith Sinclair, *Walter Nash*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1976, p. 260.

⁴⁰ P.J. O'Farrell, *Harry Holland: Militant Socialist*, Canberra: Australian National University, 1964, p.121.

⁴¹ James Thorn, *Peter Fraser*, London: Odhams Press, 1952; Margaret Clark (ed.), *Peter Fraser: Master Politician*, Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1998; Michael Bassett & Michael King, *Tomorrow Comes The Song: A Life of Peter Fraser*, Auckland: Penguin, 2000.

⁴² Bassett & King, p. 165

⁴³ Erik Olssen, *John A Lee*, Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1977, p. 43.

physical dynamo Semple was...”.⁴⁴ Political anecdotes featuring Semple can also be found in *The Thirty Years Wonders* as author Leslie Hobbs recalled various personalities in the first Labour government. He emphasised Semple’s ability with language, “A colourful expression he used many times was: ‘People were so broke during the depression that they used the slack from their stomachs to wipe the tears from their eyes’”.⁴⁵ Not unexpectedly the biographies of his colleagues and the light-hearted personal reflections of some who worked with them contain no in-depth analysis of Semple. But there are interesting issues implied, such as Semple’s ability to bully Walter Nash and frequent reference to characteristics such as his language and his energy, both of which will be explored in this thesis.

Due to the length of his political career Semple is also mentioned in the biographies of Labour and National politicians who entered politics when Semple was in the twilight of his career. These biographical studies are testament to Semple’s longevity in Parliament and bear witness to some of his later attitudes. Although they do not provide a sense of continuity, they do indicate a pattern of combativeness and some sense of admiration either despite or because of this attitude. In *Man to Man* Tom Skinner fondly recalled getting his real political education from Semple and noted Semple’s colourful flow of language as, “he related the most outrageous stories about himself and about the early days of industrial and political struggle”.⁴⁶ In Warren Freer’s memoirs Semple is described as occasionally intolerant of some junior members’ attitudes. In caucus in 1949 Semple drowned Freer’s comments with, “Mr Chairman, how long do we have to listen to this bloody politician in napkins!”.⁴⁷ In Ross Doughty’s, *The Holyoake Years*, Semple is mentioned as having an acrimonious conflict in the 1930s with Holyoake, then a young MP, at a time when complaints about Semple’s attitude to the workers began to filter into the Labour movement.⁴⁸

On a wider level, Semple as a political figure features very briefly in the memoirs and biographies of people who were on the periphery of Labour Party politics - they provide a contrast from the radical Semple to the more conservative, ministerial

⁴⁴ John A Lee, *Rhetoric at the Red Dawn*, Auckland: Collins, 1965, Chapter 20.

⁴⁵ Hobbs, *The Thirty-Years Wonders*, Chapter on Semple entitled ‘The Human Bulldozer’.

⁴⁶ Tom Skinner, *Man to Man*, Christchurch: Whitcoulls, 1980, p. 69.

⁴⁷ Warren Freer, *A Lifetime in Politics: The Memoirs of Warren Freer*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2004, p. 42.

⁴⁸ Ross Doughty, *The Holyoake Years*, Feilding: Ross A. Doughty, 1977, p. 63-65.

Semple of later years. The opinions put forward in these biographies often reflect the political perspectives of the subjects and although they suggest changes in Semple's political principles, again the literature does not provide an explanation for his apparent shift in position. In *Black Prince: The Biography of Fintan Patrick Walsh* Graeme Hunt likens Walsh's opposition to Communism with that of Semple, suggesting both were former labour radicals who then became cold war warriors.⁴⁹ The memoirs of union waterfront leader, Jock Barnes, are scathingly critical of Fraser and Semple, whom Barnes saw as betraying Labour Party principles when both war and peacetime conscription were supported. Barnes found this particularly galling, as Fraser and Semple had been jailed for their opposition to conscription during WWI. In the case of peacetime conscription he remarked, "This gross betrayal of labour principles made their defeat at the next general election a certainty".⁵⁰ The reminiscences of Alex Galbraith, a member of the New Zealand Communist Party, remark on Semple's apparent change in political attitudes, "from class against class to servile bootlicker of bourgeoisie".⁵¹ An early research objective was to examine and provide an explanation for Semple's suggested change of political principles.

Historical accounts and personal reminiscences of Public Works construction when Semple was Minister in charge of the Department tend to feature Semple in amusing anecdotes. In *Men of the Milford Road* by Harold Anderson Semple's passion for shooting is recollected, "Bob had a habit of potting off rabbits, hares, hawks and other game from the fast-moving ministerial car on his trips around the country".⁵² In the Hutt County Council Centenary publication Semple is noted for his role in the completion of the Coast Road from Paremata to Paekakariki. It was completed in record time though, "A typical Bob Semple comment was that people had forecast that the Government would empty the Treasury into the Tasman before it was finished".⁵³ Although mainly focused on the construction itself the literature reiterated

⁴⁹ Graeme Hunt, *Black Prince: The Biography of Fintan Patrick Walsh*, Auckland: Penguin, 2004, p. 126.

⁵⁰ Tom Bramble (ed.), *Never a White Flag: The Memoirs of Jock Barnes*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1998, p. 108.

⁵¹ Ray Nunes (ed.), *The Making of a New Zealand Revolutionary: Reminiscences of Alex Galbraith*, Wellington: Workers' Party of New Zealand, 1994, p. 121.

⁵² Harold J. Anderson, *Men of the Milford Road*, Wellington: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1975, p. 169.

⁵³ James M. Daley, *Hutt County Council Centenary 1877-1977*, Wainuiomata: Hutt County Council, 1978, p. 70.

the reference to Semple's energy and language and reinforced their exploration in the thesis.

Rosslyn Noonan's *By Design* is an historical examination of the Public Works Department. It features two chapters wherein Noonan discusses the changes and direction of the Ministry under Semple during 1935-49.⁵⁴ It also includes an outline of the work completed by the Department during Semple's Ministry and some comment on his relationship with his staff. Although Semple was also Minister of Transport from 1935-1942 there is no in-depth investigation of his time as head of this Ministry, despite the introduction under his leadership of a raft of important legislation including the still current Warrant of Fitness scheme. Two important histories of transport fail to even mention Semple. James Watson's *Links: A History of Transport and New Zealand Society* provides only a broad overview of the history of all transport in New Zealand and does not mention Semple.⁵⁵ *Golden Milestone: 50 Years of the AA* provides a general overview of some of the changes in the motor industry, but Semple is not referred to. This may be an example where the focus and consequent dominance of Semple's image in the public works ministry has detracted from his significance in other areas. Analysis of the Ministry of Transport under Semple and the long lasting effects of the regulations implemented is long overdue and deserves its own study.

The Structure of Biography

In many ways, integral to history is the structure or way it is written. Arguably history and the genre of biography are inexplicably linked, as biography can be rich in historical insights. In a single individual's life we see many factors at play – the political, social and economic conditions, education, kinship and friendship bonds, leisure activities and work. In this way Jordanova suggested, “reconstructing a life can be a form of *histoire totale* on a limited scale”.⁵⁶ Like many others, I was interested in people and the fortunes of the individual and believe history is generally about unique human experience. There were no rules or formulas applied to achieve a correct

⁵⁴ Noonan, Chapter 7 and 8.

⁵⁵ James Watson, *Links: A History of Transport and New Zealand Society*, Wellington: Government Print, 1996.

⁵⁶ Jordanova, p. 46.

answer – each individual could experience their surroundings or moment in time in a different way, although I do acknowledge Garraty’s point when he argued, “The individual makes history; so does chance; so do social forces”.⁵⁷ And, while mindful of the value of historical theory, I came to view history with a similar perspective to historian E.P. Thompson who believed human experience and agency in history should not be ignored. History was and is, in part, the product of humanity’s own efforts. Historical knowledge could not be deduced from theory alone but is the product of concepts and evidence (historical theory and historical past). Therefore, there must be “humanism” in history.⁵⁸ And I concur with biographer Stephen Oates who said, “biography humanises history”.⁵⁹ The selection of the biographical genre, which features individual agency, was apt as it illuminates Semple’s specific human experience within history.

Biography has always had an enduring popularity and this is largely because people are interested primarily in people. However, some historians have different perspectives on the merits of biography in history.⁶⁰ Keith Sinclair, who ironically wrote two political biographies, argued that biography is not history, since “the life and times is a bastard form of literature”. He suggests that a biography of a politician is not principally political history but the history of a person.⁶¹ But Richard Broome argued that it is just as important to have a history of individuals, as it is to have the history of social forces and structures to understand the past. Broome suggests that all historians deal in biography as they populate their histories with individuals even though it may be with small fragments, and they use people to support and colour their generalisations.⁶² Garraty said biography is the record of a life: “It is thus a branch of history, each life a small segment in a vast mosaic, just as the story of the development of a town, a state, or a nation may be thought of as an element in a larger

⁵⁷ Garraty, p. 21.

⁵⁸ Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984, p. 212.

⁵⁹ Stephen Oates (ed.), *Biography as High Adventure: Life Writers Speak on their Art*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986.

⁶⁰ Broome cited in Mark Hearn & Harry Knowles, ‘Struggling for Recognition: Reading the Individual in Labour History’, *Labour History*, Number 87, (2004), p. 9.

⁶¹ Keith Sinclair, ‘Political Biography in New Zealand’ in Jock Phillips (ed.), *Biography in New Zealand*, Wellington: Allen & Unwin: Port Nicholson Press: Stout Research Centre, 1985, pp. 30-36. Sinclair makes this point as he said that some reviewers think that “a biography of Nash should also be a history of the Labour Party...my message is that biography is not history”.

⁶² Broome cited in Mark Hearn & Harry Knowles, ‘Struggling for Recognition: Reading the Individual in Labour History’, *Labour History*, Number 87, (2004), p. 9.

whole”. He argued that the simplest accurate definition of biography should be, “The History of a Human Life”. It is, in fact, history in microcosm and you cannot remove an individual from his/her surroundings and study them. The subject interacts with other subjects and is influenced by social, cultural and economic forces in their environment, “To tell the story of any man, one must say something about the stage on which he acts out the drama of his life”.⁶³ While acknowledging Garraty’s comments regarding the subject and his surroundings, similarly to Sinclair, this thesis aimed to construct a biography of politician Robert Semple, not principally a political history, but the history of Semple the man.

Nonetheless, Gustafson has suggested that it is difficult for a biographer to determine the extent to which one discusses the private person in a biography of a politician as it is mainly the political person you are interested in.⁶⁴ This thesis has paid only passing attention to Semple’s wife and family. This is largely due to the research revealing that Margaret Semple made a substantial contribution to the Labour movement in her own right. She should not be regarded as merely a ‘supporting player’ in Semple’s life story – she deserves an individual investigative study.

The humanity in biography makes it a popular and, usually, accessible genre which is aided by its presentation in a bewildering variety of form and theory. Yet there is no one way to write a biography and biographers have used a variety of ways to tell a life story. In Greek times Plutarch, who was known as the father of biography, wrote moralistic and anecdotal lives. Plutarch asked the singular question, “What sort of man was he?”.⁶⁵ As people live their lives from birth to death many biographers have conformed to chronology in tracing the lives of men and women. Nonetheless there has been diversity of approach. Another method is group biography which is characterised by a series of themes or actions that link various individuals. In group biography, one becomes defined in part by the many. For example, in *Kin: A Collective Biography of a New Zealand Working-Class Family* Melanie Nolan

⁶³ Garraty, p. 19.

⁶⁴ Barry Gustafson, *His Way: A Biography of Robert Muldoon*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2000, p. 15.

⁶⁵ Nadel, p. 16.

examined the life, culture and identity of Jack McCullough and his four siblings.⁶⁶ The book considered the issue of typicality in biography, identifies the variability of working class experience and argues that the collective biography allows for multi-vocality. Other successful writers have sometimes begun in the middle of a life and have made effective use of flashbacks. Bruce Nadel, in his study of the structure and evolution of biography asked, “Is there a theory of biography, a systemised set of principles regarding the form and composition of the genre?”. But he concluded that given the multiplicity of lives and variety of styles of biographical expression this appeared impossible.⁶⁷

Over many years biographers have displayed an awareness of narrative strategies and plot structures to enhance the meaning of the life to the reader. Writing in the 1950s Nadel suggested the traditional chronological approach was inadequate to deal with the complexity of individual lives, “Today, new demands are placed on biography from psychology, anthropology and history; as a literary enterprise, biography must respond by registering in its form and content new means of expressing human experience”. In 2004 Hearn and Knowles said “In recent decades the rich diversification of biographical and historical methodology offer new ways of uncovering the experience and context of working lives”.⁶⁸ And authors are continuing to revise and reinterpret lives: there are, for example, over 57 biographies of Charles Dickens. There are numerous versions of a life not because the facts differ but each author has a different conception of what narrative is best suited to the facts. It is the configuration of the life that alters, not the facts (although facts can alter if new material is discovered). The ways of telling a life-story are not limited. Nadel’s suggestion over fifty years ago that the form or way biography is written is just as important as the content is as relevant today as it was previously. He suggested emphasis on causality rather than chronology, configuration instead of detail and significance instead of information to concentrate on the nature of the subject in the attempt to articulate the inner life⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Melanie Nolan, *Kin: A Collective Biography of a New Zealand Working-Class Family*, Christchurch, Canterbury University Press, 2005.

⁶⁷ Nadel, p 151.

⁶⁸ Mark Hearn & Harry Knowles, ‘Struggling for Recognition: Reading the Individual in Labour History’, *Labour History*, Number 87, (2004), pp. 1-10.

⁶⁹ Nadel, p. 102-105.

The amount of evidence of a subject's life has demanded that biographers analyse lives with new methodology to yield as much from it as they can. Hearn and Knowles suggest that in recent decades gender, race and class were biographical and historical categories which offered new ways of reading a life to authors whose subjects evidence has been limited.⁷⁰ These categories offer multiple ways of exploring a life as well as multiple avenues through which evidence can be gathered instead of the narrow focus of one interpretation. Discussing gender analysis feminist Liz Stanley argued, as an alternative methodology, that biography should be seen as a kaleidoscope and not a microscope, "Each time you look you see something rather different, composed certainly of the same elements, but in a new configuration."⁷¹ Susan Grogan has pointed out that, "lives do not have the neat trajectory, the logic and wholeness, which the biographer generally aspires to achieve, but personalities, 'selves' are fragmented and shifting rather than unitary and coherent, defying any biographical aspiration to identify the real person".⁷² In her study of Flora Tristan, Grogan highlighted a variety of ways in which her subject represented herself to the world by presenting her life as a series of themes. Semple had multiple personas, as we all do, but initial research suggested that his radical image had dominated historiography. Therefore, a thematic structure did appear preferable in the analysis of Semple's life rather than a chronological approach so that other images could be identified and explored. In addition, Gustafson said in his biography of Muldoon that although he agreed with Keith Sinclair who said political biography should not be a history of the government or political party, the environment in which the subject interacted could not be ignored and, "only by examining many episodes, many layers, many relationships, many incidents, many aspects of a person's life, some better documented than others, can one approach the essential core of one's subject and see patterns emerge".⁷³ The thematic structure can offer new interpretations and questions about a life, which is an historian's general objective.

Notwithstanding the above, the issue of multiple identity is well-established across a range of disciplines. Post-modern theory suggests the self can never have a stable core

⁷⁰ Hearn & Knowles, 'Struggling for Recognition'.

⁷¹ Liz Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992, p. 158.

⁷² Susan Grogan, *Flora Tristan: Life Stories*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 10.

⁷³ Gustafson, *His Way: A Biography of Robert Muldoon*, p. 12.

as no true or essential identity exists but only opportunities to play a number of roles with each requiring a slightly different identity. Similarly, Sinclair argued biography was like peeling an onion; the author removes layer after layer only to find that there is no kernel.⁷⁴ In contemporary social psychology, social psychologists Worchel, Iuzzini, Coutant and Ivaldi put forward a multi-dimensional model of identity and argue, “the quest for identity takes place on several stages, each varying independently along a salience or prominence dimension”.⁷⁵ Craig Colhoun suggested that identities “can and to some extent...always do change”.⁷⁶ Semple can be seen as an example of a multi-dimensional identity (through a thematic structure) his changing self-representations reflecting his own changing perspectives as his quest for identity took place on various levels.

Semple’s life structured as a series of themes also allows the exploration of change and continuity, fundamental to all history, over several categories of identity. And what had been signalled early in the research was that Semple appeared to have altered his political perspective later in his life. The thematic structure offered many possibilities for interpretation and expression of Semple’s life and many possibilities to examine change and continuity as his experience and values changed within the context of time and place.

In addition, the fact that Semple was a politician with both a private and public face was influential in the decision to examine his life in a thematic framework. In his commentary on political biography Erik Olssen suggested that politicians have a public persona, which is constantly shifting, and his/her success depends upon the skill with which that public persona is projected. Olssen argued the politicians underlying character takes on new forms, even quite late in life.⁷⁷ The fact that this study is a political biography with a subject whose image was constantly changing in response to the political environment is significant.

⁷⁴ Sinclair, ‘Political Biography in New Zealand’, p. 30.

⁷⁵ Stephen Worchel, Jonathan Iuzzini, Dawna Coutant and Manuela Ivaldi, ‘A Multidimensional Model of Identity: Relating Individual and Group Identities to Intergroup Behaviour’ in Dora Capozza and Rupert Brown (eds.), *Social Identity Processes*, London, Sage Publications, 2000, pp. 15-32.

⁷⁶ Craig Colhoun, ‘Social Theory and the Politics of Identity’ in Craig Colhoun (ed.), *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, pp. 9-36.

⁷⁷ Erik Olssen, ‘Political Biography: A Commentary’ in Jock Phillips (ed.), *Biography in New Zealand*, Wellington: Allen & Unwin: Port Nicholson Press: Stout Research Centre, 1985, pp. 39-41.

This thesis is not organised in a chronological structure as may be expected of a biography but is centred on a series of themes which have appeared most prominently and which reflect the patterns most prevalent in Semple's life. In addition, the themes were based on activities which were of perceived value to Semple. Thus, the thematic selection was a complex interaction between an author's role shaping and forming Semple's life and perceived real patterns visible in the sources. Chapter one explores Semple as an Australian New Zealander whose relationship with his homeland was a complex one, continually affected by issues such as time, place and political expediency. Chapter two considers Semple in the identity which was arguably the most radical in New Zealand historiography – the Socialist. Several facets of Semple's socialism will be examined including militant socialism, from which his radical persona was formed, state socialism and practical socialism. To improve the lives of working people was Semple's aim in life, so the third thematic chapter examines Semple's role as a union organiser – this was a vehicle through which he pursued this aim. It was from this image that Semple's public career was founded and then sustained. In the fourth chapter Semple, the Labour politician will be examined. Here his ultimate aim was to improve conditions for all New Zealanders and the several arenas in which Semple pursued this end included party activities, municipal politics and ministerial office. In these two chapters changes in Semple's political perspectives can be seen as labour concerns became subservient to national concerns when he became part of the Labour government. Chapter five examines Semple as an anti-militarist which was the image where the greatest change in political perspective was evidenced. Semple, the anti-conscriptionist of one world war, drew the marble for the first conscription ballot in the next. These themes are not the only ones in Semple's life but appear most consistently during his lifetime.

The thematic chapters have allowed changes in Semple's perspectives and his political outlook to be explored. The chapters in this study are multi-chronological, tracing a series of life experiences which overlap and interlock with each other. Each chapter is an interpretation of how Semple represented himself to the world, but all are from a different angle. They often trace the same event or experience but each time with a different focus. The chapters provide a layered approach to his life, offering a multi-dimensional image of their subject. The aim of this research is to

uncover what Teresa Illes describes as “all sides of the subject”,⁷⁸ or at least some of them, and to emphasise the multiple dimensions of Robert Semple’s life story.

Notwithstanding this approach, one problem facing the biographical author is that the real or essential subject will never be recreated. Biographers have also frequently commented on this issue over the years. Garraty suggested, “Perfection is beyond the biographer’s reach...Man’s essence is such that no description of him is self-evidently true to every observer”. And even the significance of a man’s deeds changes as time goes by.⁷⁹ Nadel also argued that because of historical, social and ultimately stylistic restrictions and interferences, no biography can duplicate the life of its subject, “Despite all claims to authenticity and objectivity, we read a personal view of the subject, not a documentary history”.⁸⁰ C. Behan McCullagh said “it is, of course, quite impossible to describe an entire life as it occurred for that includes more thoughts and actions than anyone could, or would, record”.⁸¹ However, Garraty also suggested that as cold impartiality is impossible the author’s approach must be sympathetic, “this does not mean apology or eulogy, it means that the chief goal has been understanding. The sympathetic biographer does not hide the hero’s faults, he does not pass over discreditable episodes or stifle the comments of unfriendly witnesses...”.⁸² With an awareness that the real Bob Semple will never be found, this thesis is a quest for reasonable accuracy in the presentation of the essential person (or persons) which make up Semple’s life.

An author’s influence is another issue problematic for biographers as they can influence the life of the subject by the ways they interpret evidence. Evidence is the main ingredient in biography but biographers have to provide the final human ingredient of translation and as they do this they must be on guard against external conditions that may distort their work. Carl Rollyson suggested biographers have enormous power, “selecting those aspects of a life to emphasise, those parts to leave

⁷⁸ The title of a book by Teresa Illes, *All Sides of the Story: Women and Biography*, New York: Teachers College Press, 1992.

⁷⁹ Garraty, p. 208.

⁸⁰ Nadel, p. 177.

⁸¹ C. Behan McCullagh, *The Truth of History*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 97.

⁸² Garraty, p. 139.

out”.⁸³ In extreme cases it may be possible for biographers to give evidence a meaning exactly opposite to their obvious one in order to create a particular impression. Proximity to, or collaboration with, family members may generate material but it may also result in emotional bonds and a consequent tempering of criticism.

At the same time, historians have advocated varying degrees of closeness with their subject. Vandiver suggested that the biographer must live with the subject until he or she becomes real, until the writer shares the life: “Empathy is biography’s quintessential quality – without it lives are mere chronicles”,⁸⁴ although Keith Jenkins argued that empathy is unachievable in history.⁸⁵ Watelet suggested both sympathy and distance in historical research or ‘investigative subjectivity’,⁸⁶ and Jordanova argued “to write a convincing biography the author needs a certain measure of sympathy with their subject”.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, any measure of empathy or sympathy can lead to the problem of over identification with the subject. An author must be conscious of familiarity creeping in, a feeling that one knows one’s subject so well that one can predict reactions and feelings. However, nothing must be assumed, including the subject’s thoughts or beliefs.

Sources

Furthermore, the availability of materials is problematic. Nadel argued, “Biographers...are in danger of suffocating from the collected mass of material, becoming lost in minor details, adhering too strictly to chronology and failing to separate what is the important from the trivia”.⁸⁸ While Semple left no collection of either personal or public papers some primary source material was gleaned from his family. Oral history also played a significant part in the research. Nevertheless, this

⁸³ Carl Rollyson, *A Higher Form of Cannibalism?: Adventures in the Art and Politics of Biography*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2005, p. 19.

⁸⁴ Vandiver cited in Oates, *Biography as High Adventure: Life Writers Speak on their Art*, p. 52-62.

⁸⁵ Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, London: Routledge, 1991, p. 39-40. Jenkins argues empathy is unachievable for historians for several reasons including, “to all past events historians bring their own mind-set programmed in the present”.

⁸⁶ Hubert Watelet, ‘Illusions About and Underestimation of the Role of Sentiment’, in *History Under Debate: International Reflections on the Discipline* Carlos Barros & Lawrence J. McCrank (eds.), New York: Haworth Press, 2004, pp. 213-238.

⁸⁷ Jordanova, p. 142.

⁸⁸ Nadel, p. 7.

thesis has had to rely heavily on public information. Many of these sources have been written or edited for the public record and posterity (such as the Parliamentary debates). What is written in newspapers sometimes reflects the author's own political perspectives (editorials are an example). In this thesis much of the evidence had to be scrutinised for its value as simple unmediated 'fact'.

Jordanova's second pre-requisite for a viable biography, that there must be sufficient material available, was one of the greatest challenges in this research. While considering Semple's life story as a research topic early investigations revealed he had left no collection of either personal or public papers in any public repository on either side of the Tasman. Initially I could not find any document written in Semple's own hand and none of a personal nature and he did not appear to have voluminous manuscript papers guarded over by remote descendants. It was of concern that there would not be enough personal papers for Semple's own voice to be heard in the thesis. However, as Joanne Drayton remarked in her biography of New Zealand artist Rhona Haszard, "a life is always much more than one voice; it is the voice and perception of many".⁸⁹ I had to work very hard trying to find sources of information and had wondered whether the silence and lack of evidence was, in fact, a purposeful act by Semple. It is extremely unfortunate not only for the thesis but also for New Zealand labour history that so much of Semple's private voice is missing.

The lack of personal papers meant that a careful piecing together of scraps of information from a huge variety of sources was needed. Initial family information was provided from Semple's Australian relatives, the Knight family. Information from Semple's family in New Zealand was gathered largely through oral history. His closest relatives were grandchildren and the net was cast far and wide in an effort to make contact with them. At the time of his death Semple had eight grandchildren. When I started my research two were deceased but I interviewed the remaining six. I travelled almost the length of New Zealand, from Queenstown to Auckland and to Perth, Australia to complete the series of interviews. One granddaughter lived in Canada but I interviewed her when she made a return visit to New Zealand. All the

⁸⁹ Joanne Drayton, *Rhona Haszard: An Experimental Expatriate New Zealand Artist*, Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2002, p. 17.

grandchildren provided particular recollections and insights about their grandfather which included family stories, comical anecdotes and personal information. They gave an intimate perspective which was unobtainable elsewhere. However, I was mindful that due to their close family connection many of their recollections may be weighted in Semple's favour. I had conversations, emails and correspondence prior and subsequent to the interviews with several of them which often clarified and added to earlier information. All the grandchildren were helpful and enthusiastic about the project.

In addition, several grandchildren provided additional primary source material. Rob Semple in Perth had a collection of photographs and some official papers. He also had in his possession a series of hand-written letters by Semple which were sent to family members when Semple was in prison during 1917. These letters remain the only correspondence I have seen in Semple's own hand and his only private thoughts on paper. I was given unlimited access to Rob Semple's collection. Both Jackie Smith and Kay Jones had photographs and newspaper cuttings and both gave valuable avenues and sources of information which were helpful.

As Semple spent the first thirty years of his life in Australia, significant research was done in that country trying to trace his movements and activities. Details of Semple's Australian heritage are not well-known in New Zealand since historians, while acknowledging Semple's Australian roots, have focussed primarily on his union background as a platform for this activism in New Zealand. A focus of the Australian research was to provide a more comprehensive account of Semple's early life aside from his union activism. I visited Semple's birthplace in Sofala, New South Wales and the Sofala Public School where he attended in early childhood. Although the original records of the school were destroyed in a fire I received some background material during Semple's time from the current principal. Further information on the school was gained from the State Records Office in Sydney. I also visited the Bathurst District Historical Society which provided some secondary literature on the convict population. They also had Census records and the local paper of the time, *The Bathurst Times*. The Lithgow District Historical Society had information on the mines in the district when Semple worked there as a youth, Electoral Rolls and the

newspaper, *The Lithgow Mercury*. These newspapers of the district were also examined when Semple made return visits in later years.

The New South Wales office of the Births, Deaths & Marriage provided the Marriage Certificates and Death Certificates for Semple's parents and his own Birth Certificate. The Melbourne office provided his Marriage certificate to Margaret McNair and the Birth Certificates of his two eldest children. The Mitchell Library in Sydney held newspapers including *The Lithgow Mercury*, *Newcastle Morning Herald & Miners' Advocate*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *International Socialist*. These newspapers were examined during the six times Semple later returned to Australia.

In Melbourne the Public Record Office held shipping emigration lists which were accessed to try to pinpoint Semple's departure. There were also records of the Coal Creek Miners' Union which were examined for evidence of Semple's membership. Early Electoral Rolls for Victoria were viewed at the State Library of Victoria. The Library was a valuable source of information as it held the local newspapers of Gippsland where Semple was living at the turn of the century. *The Korumburra Times*, *Outtrim News* and *Great Southern Advocate* all provided evidence of Semple's residence and union membership. Also viewed were the Melbourne newspapers, *The Age* and *The Herald*. The small circulation socialist paper, *Tocsin*, was examined for comments on union activities. The *1906 Royal Commission on Coal Mining* was held at the State Library. This provided contextual material as it analysed local mining conditions during Semple's residency in the district.

The Noel Butlin Archives Centre at the Australian National University in Canberra held the records of the Australian Coal and Shale Employees Federation, Central Council and districts. In these records Semple's visit to the union and request for funds was seen in 1912. There was also a large collection of photographs of early miners and their activities which were relevant to some of the districts where Semple worked. The Archive also had the H. Scott Bennett and Harry Holland papers. Both men had contact with Semple later in New Zealand. As Semple claimed to have some union membership in Western Australia a paid researcher examined the union records of the Coal Miners' Industrial Union from Collie at the J.S. Battye Library in Perth, Western Australia. However, minutes of the Delegates Board and Accounts books did

not mention Semple. The Collie District Historical Society provided information on the mine where Semple worked and the J.S. Battye Library provided photographs of the district and the mine itself. The newspaper, *The Collie Miner* was interloaned for any evidence of Semple's mining activities and it confirmed his brother's enlistment for service in the Boer War and his subsequent death.

In New Zealand, national public archival material was researched. In Archives New Zealand in Wellington the shipping lists from Australia to New Zealand were searched for any confirmation of Semple's immigration. Early Labour Department files confirmed Semple's first New Zealand union connections in 1904. The Police Department files during 1913-1916 provided personal information such as the nature of his tattoos and information on his arrests and time spent in prison. Also accessed were the government files of the Public Works and Transport Departments. These were invaluable to examine Semple's time as Minister of these portfolios during the Labour government. The External Affairs Department provided some reports from Semple about his visits to Australia on government business in the 1930s and 1940s. The Walter Nash papers provided several letters mentioning Semple, and one from Semple himself (typed) to Peter Fraser. And the Archives held the Wills of both Robert and Margaret Semple as well as the Coroner's Inquest Report on the death of their eldest son.

The Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington holds the papers of several of Semple's labour and Labour Party contemporaries. The Harry Holland papers were examined for any early comments on Semple, as were Pat Hickey's papers. Also examined were the papers of Labour supporter P.J. O'Regan who, in his diaries, made comments about Semple's initial election to Parliament and who also gave insightful remarks about Semple's son. Peter Butler's papers gave specific information on Semple's time as organiser for the Wellington General Labourers' Union.

Other material at the Alexander Turnbull Library included the Federation of Labour papers and the Labour Party collection which included Conference Reports and Semple's comments on particular motions and nominations/elections within the Party. The New Zealand National Party Papers held many newspaper clippings on election campaigns, Semple's speeches, cartoons and other topical issues that Semple

commented on, including unions. The papers of historian Bert Roth provided biographical information on Labour Party identities including Semple. The Roth papers also had information on individual unions that Semple was involved with. The P.J. O'Farrell papers provided information on early Labour Party activity and the Fraser King papers, which provided information used for the biography of Peter Fraser, yielded some reminiscences regarding Semple from interviewees.

The Oral History Centre at the Alexander Turnbull Library had two recordings of Semple's speeches at pre-election meetings. These were invaluable to hear Semple's emphasis and tone of his voice and also for the content of the speeches themselves. There was also an Electricity Centenary Oral History project which contained several interviews from men who had worked with Semple in the Public Works Department when he was Minister. Several recounted humorous anecdotes which would not be obtained anywhere else. There was also an interview in the Kilburnie-Lyall Bay Community Centre Oral History project with a woman who had been an early Labour Party member and she discussed Semple several times in the interview remarking on his ability to draw crowds and votes for the Party.

The Radio New Zealand Sound Archives in Christchurch had a recorded talk from Semple about road safety when he was Minister of Transport. Also recorded was a radio appeal by Semple to striking railway workers in 1942 asking them to return to work. A labour colleague, H.R.G. Mason recalled Semple as an impersonator and Semple's address to an anti-communist meeting in Christchurch in 1948 was also recorded.

The Victoria University Library in Wellington holds the papers of Labour identity Jim Roberts. These papers included minute books, correspondence and election of officers of the Miners' Federation during 1915-1919 during which time Semple was National Miners' agent and organiser. Also included amidst the papers were reports from Semple who during 1925/6 was an organiser for the New Zealand Alliance of Labour of which Jim Roberts was President. Several editions of the labour newspaper, the *Maoriland Worker* not held in the National library were viewed to complete coverage of that particular paper. Also in the Roberts papers were Minute Books of the

Wellington Labour Social Club during the 1920s and this sketched the involvement of Semple and other members of his family.

At the University of Canterbury in Christchurch the Macmillan Brown Library held the records of the Canterbury Freezing Workers Union. These included records of the National Union and had minutes and correspondence during 1924-26 (when Semple was organiser). Also at the Library were the early minutes of the Canterbury Trades and Labour Council. The Canterbury Museum in Christchurch held the papers of labour identity J.A. McCullough which shed light on McCullough's personal opinion of Semple.

On a local body level the Wellington City Council Archives held the Minute Books for the Wellington City Council from 1925-1935 which covered the entire period that Semple was a City Councillor. They provided details of Semple's individual vote on many crucial matters and recorded his opinion and, in many cases, his vocal opposition. There were also the Town Clerk's files which had several inquiries and Notices of Motion from Semple. Also included were the City Engineer's Department Files which had the Contract for the Orongorongo Tunnel which was built by a co-operative labour work party headed by Semple.

The Wellington Regional Council Archive had more detailed information on the Orongorongo Tunnel Contract which occupied four years of Semple's life and could be numbered amongst his greatest achievements. They had a large amount of background material on Wellington's water supply and numerous photographs of various stages of the tunnels progress plus greater detail of the costs and payments provided to Semple.

Notwithstanding the above, one of my main sources of material on Semple was public information. Newspapers included the *Grey Evening Star* and *Grey River Argus* were consulted as Semple lived on the West Coast prior to 1913. Following his move to Wellington the *Evening Post* and the *Dominion* contained the most local reference from 1913 to his death. The *New Zealand Herald* from Auckland and the *Auckland Weekly News* provided additional coverage throughout his life, as did the *Christchurch Press* and the *Otago Daily Times*. *The Maoriland Worker* and *The*

Standard, which were official organs of the Labour Party were also used to assess Labour Party opinion. Miscellaneous newspapers also examined for particular reference to Semple included the *New Zealand Free Lance*, *New Zealand Observer*, *Voice of Labour* and as Semple criss-crossed the country many times over any small town where he had a union or election meeting, which was covered by the local paper, was often accessed. These are too numerous to recount individually. I also researched Government Publications such as the *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates*, *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives* and *New Zealand Electoral Rolls* for personal living information and occupations.

The recreation of a life is like dropping pebbles (in this case the primary materials) into still water. Here the circles in the water are the multiple dimensions of Robert Semple's life story, overlapping each other in a continuous fashion. The first circle of water to reverberate throughout Semple's life is the image of an Australian New Zealander.

Chapter One

“His tap root was stronger and more tenacious than that of most of us”: The Australian New Zealander.¹

Robert Semple is remembered as a leading New Zealand politician and a dominant figure in the labour movement, but he was an Australian by birth and always remained firmly attached to that country in a complex relationship – he was very much an Australian New Zealander. The secondary literature has often noted Semple’s nationality. Historian Michael King said when miners’ unions from all over the country met to form a national federation, “Australian immigrant Bob Semple...was president”.² Len Richardson described the formation of the first miners’ union in Runanga “led by the charismatic Australian Bob Semple...”.³ But the Australian New Zealander was a persona that Semple himself did not actively promote in New Zealand. This identity could be described as relatively passive when compared to Semple’s other representations of himself, such as a Socialist, which he projected more vigorously. In this image a sense of discretion can be detected which is less evident in Semple’s other representations of himself. This was largely due to the persona being, in some ways, a personal Achilles heel - throughout his life it was often used to belittle and disparage him. For example, during the 1951 general election campaign, when Semple had been in the country for over forty-five years, his opponent in the Miramar electorate, C.H. Taylor said, “if Mr Semple lives to be as old as Father Time he will never do a greater service for his country, Australia, than he did when he left it”.⁴ When called upon Semple did defend the image but the criticism was hard to counter as he could not refute his birthplace.

Nonetheless, Semple often deployed the Australian link in various ways according to time, circumstance and political considerations. Over the course of his public career Semple blurred his Australian roots, later in life deliberately reconstructing his father’s convict past by treating it as a more conventional immigration story. His account of his decision to come to New Zealand was also later shaped by the

¹ *New Zealand Listener*, 11 February 1955.

² King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, p. 310.

³ Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community*, p. 103.

⁴ *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 21 August 1951.

requirement of gaining and holding political power. He underplayed the radical context of his move to New Zealand. But Semple's origins were undeniably important to him. Whenever his health failed him he returned to Australia to rejuvenate himself. And it was "Waltzing Matilda", described as Semple's theme song, that was played at a farewell function when he retired from Parliament.⁵ It was no surprise that when he died the *New Zealand Listener* wrote, "His taproot was stronger and more tenacious than that of most of us".⁶ The prevalence and complexity of the nationality issue throughout Semple's life warrants its inclusion as one of the themes in this study of his life.

Although Semple spent the first thirty years of his life in Australia, the details of his Australian heritage are not well known. Where New Zealand historians have acknowledged Semple's Australian roots they have focussed primarily on his union background to provide a platform for his activism in New Zealand. This chapter examines first his family background in Sofala and then his Australian union experiences. While union experience certainly defined Semple, he did not arrive in New Zealand with immediate militant intent as suggested by some New Zealand historians. The chapter will also discuss how Australia featured in his stories of his life including how, over time, the increasing primacy of electoral politics in Semple's life resulted in him barely acknowledging his earlier union activism in Australia or New Zealand. Accounts of his early life were subtly reshaped accordingly. However, Semple always remained attached to Australia and his frequent return visits to his homeland bear witness to this attachment. The contentious issue of Semple's Australian nationality in New Zealand, whereby this was often used to question his loyalty and make disparaging remarks about him, will also be examined.

Early Days

Robert Semple was born on 21 October 1873, near Sofala, a gold-mining town 45 kilometres from Bathurst in New South Wales.⁷ His father, John Semple, was not a

⁵ *Evening Post*, 12 July 1954.

⁶ *New Zealand Listener*, 11 February 1955.

⁷ Gold was first discovered on the banks of the Turon River in May 1851 and later that year the town of Sofala was established. At the height of the gold rush the population may have been as high as twelve thousand inhabitants. But as the rush diminished the population declined. By the 1871 Census, the township of Sofala had a population of 644 with the surrounding goldfields accounting for 2,177

miner or an early settler but a transported convict who had been born in Paisley, Scotland in 1816. He was the eldest son of John Semple senior, a collector of customs, and Margaret Campbell. John junior had two brothers, William born in 1821 and James born in 1824. In June 1837 John junior, a silk weaver, was tried in the Glasgow Court of Judiciary on a charge of stealing a watch. Although he had no previous convictions, he was found guilty and was sentenced to seven years transportation. He arrived in New South Wales on the *Lord Lyndoch* on 8 August 1838, as Prisoner Number 38/1433. A Presbyterian, he was described as having a dark, ruddy and freckled complexion, black hair, dark brown eyes and 5ft 7inches in height.⁸ Semple would have been assigned to a master and put to work.

As Robert Hughes suggested in his history of convict life in Australia, “The convicts were not slaves under the law, but British citizens whose enforced task, in Australia, was to work their way back to freedom through expiation”.⁹ John Semple shared many characteristics with his fellow prisoners. For example, his sentence of seven years was shared by 51per cent of other convicts; he was in the male age group of 20-24years which was the highest age percentage of convicts; and he was transported during the years 1830-9, which saw the highest percentage of convicts arriving in Australia. Historian Lloyd Robson suggested that the percentage of convicts transported from Scotland was less than 5per cent, and that transportation was not a sentence that was passed lightly or for the first offence, unless it was a serious one.¹⁰ Therefore, John Semple from Scotland may have considered himself unlucky to be transported to Australia.

people making the total population for the district 2,821. Robert G.V.Baker, *Historic Sofala: A Goldfield That Changed a Nation 1851-1943*, Centrepak Research, NSW, 1985, p. 36.

⁸ Convict Research Service, Archives NSW, KFHC.

⁹ Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia, 1787-1868*, London: Collins Harvill, 1987, p. 302.

¹⁰ L.L.Robson, *The Convict Settlers of Australia*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1965, Appendix 4: Basic tables and comments, pp. 176-188.

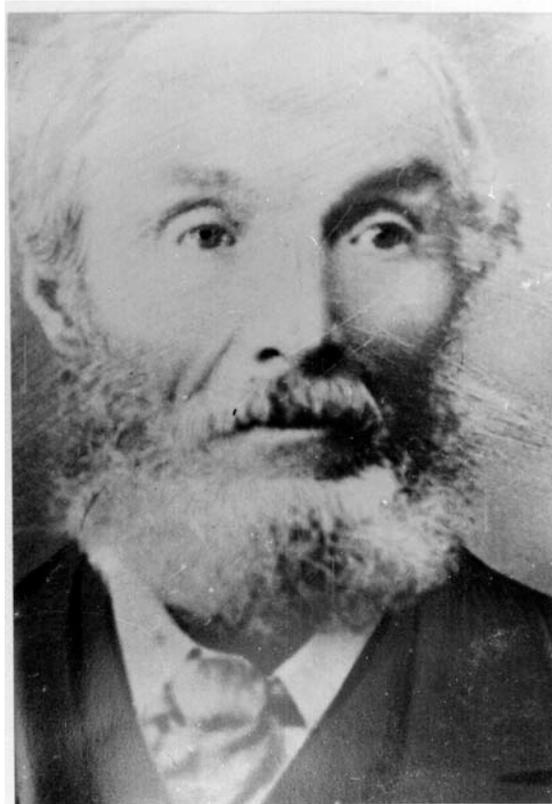


Figure 2: John Semple c 1880, KFHC.

Almost nothing is known of John Semple during his early life as a convict although he may have worked for James Blackman of Bathurst, as it was this man who recommended Semple for a Ticket of Leave.¹¹ James Blackman was a local landowner and in the NSW Census of 1828 he had eleven convicts assigned to him.¹² The convict labour provided by the assignment system was hugely beneficial to land owners, as Hughes notes, “Where else in the world could settlers of responsibility and Capital assure themselves a free supply of labour?”¹³ Semple received a Ticket of Leave, a form of parole, on 14 November 1842 and was ordered to remain in the Bathurst District.¹⁴ He did so and worked as a shepherd, an occupation probably learnt while working on Blackman’s landholdings. When a convict obtained a Ticket of Leave he no longer had to work as an assigned man for a master. He could spend the rest of his sentence working for himself, wherever he pleased, as long as he stayed within the colony.¹⁵ The ticket only lasted a year and had to be renewed and the

¹¹ Photocopy of Ticket of Leave, KFHC.

¹² Information on James Blackman supplied by the Bathurst District Historical Society. 1828 NSW Census, Bathurst District Historical Society.

¹³ Hughes, p. 286.

¹⁴ Ticket of Leave, KFHC.

¹⁵ Hughes, p. 307.

convicts were still required to attend a muster once a week on Sunday.¹⁶ John Semple served his seven-year sentence in the Bathurst region and was granted a Certificate of Freedom on 2 March 1844.

On 4 January 1859 John Semple married a widow, Mary Miller. They were both working on a property at Bogi Mountain, near Pyramul. Their occupations were recorded as shepherd and housekeeper respectively.¹⁷ Shortly after their marriage they left Bogi and wheeled their possessions in a wheelbarrow across country. When they reached the junction of Crudine Creek and the Turon River, they built a house nearby. When Mary died of pneumonia in 1862 John continued to live and work in the area. There were no children from the marriage.¹⁸

Robert Semple could trace both his maternal and paternal origins to the convict transportation system and the local communities that sprang up around the New South Wales goldfields. On 13 June 1865 John Semple married Mary Ann Ryan at the District Registrar's office in Sofala. Semple's age was recorded as forty-three, and his wife was twenty-two. Their usual places of residence were Crudine Creek and Tamboroora respectively. Tamboroora was 5km to the north of Hill End, another goldfields town in the Bathurst district. Mary Ann was born in Sydney around 1842.¹⁹ Her father was Andrew Ryan, also a transported convict, originally from Dublin in Ireland. Andrew Ryan, recorded as being aged 18 years, with no former convictions, Catholic, single, whose occupation was a blacksmith, was convicted of highway robbery at Dublin on 29 August 1829 and sentenced to transportation for life. He arrived in Sydney on 26 April 1830 on the ship *Forth I* and was assigned to the Department of Public Works.²⁰ He received a Ticket of Leave in 1842 and married Mary Keane in 1843.²¹ When another daughter, Bridget, was born in 1847 the Ryans were living in Harrington Street, Sydney. Andrew received a conditional pardon on 30

¹⁶ Information supplied by the Bathurst District Historical Society

¹⁷ Certified Copy of Marriage Certificate dated 27th July 1987, KFHC.

¹⁸ 'John Semple', *Australian Biographical and Genealogical Records, Volume 3 1842-1899*, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

¹⁹ Certified Copy of Marriage Certificate dated 13 January 2005, KFHC.

²⁰ Archives Office, Convicts Indents, NSW, KFHC.

²¹ Certified Copy of Marriage Certificate, Ticket of Leave Number 2854, KFHC.

September 1847.²² It is possible that when gold was discovered in the Turon River in 1851 the Ryans travelled to the area.

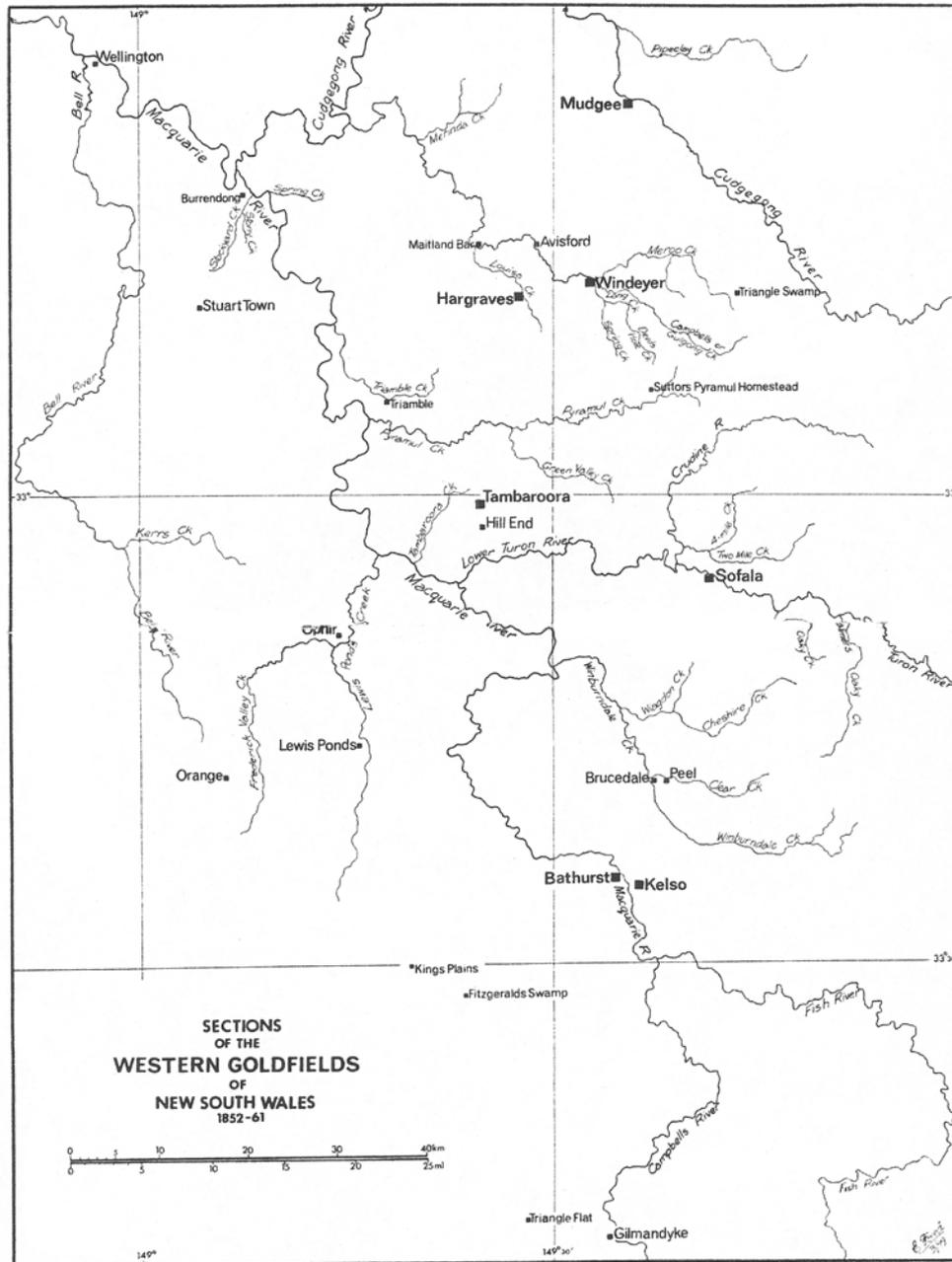


Figure 3: This goldfields map shows the towns of Sofala, Hill End, Tambaroora and Bathurst. Also shown is the area of Pyramul where John Semple was working when first married, KFHC.

²² A conditional pardon gave the transported person citizenship within the colony but no right of return to England, Hughes, p. 307.

Robert Semple did not publicly disclose the convict aspect of his family heritage. In a 1937 newspaper interview, he reconstructed his father's past by treating it as a more conventional immigration story. He said, "his father who had left Scotland about ninety years ago, trying his luck first at Dunedin and then going over to Victoria about the time of the Eureka stockade affair, was a shepherd".²³ Again, during the 1938 election campaign, he said his father came to New Zealand eighty-five or eighty-seven years ago, but later went to Australia.²⁴ Possibly trying to find a New Zealand connection, Semple seems to have borrowed this story from his wife's family history. Margaret Semple's parents were Thomas and Agnes McNair from Larnarkshire in Scotland. Thomas was a miner who immigrated to New Zealand with his family in 1875. After arriving in Bluff the McNairs settled in Matarua where Margaret was born. Following the death of Agnes in 1887 Thomas took his family to Melbourne in 1888 and settled in Victoria.²⁵

Self-protection, pride and a desire for respect were likely reasons for the construction of an identity which Semple perceived as more publicly and politically acceptable. Historian Graeme Dunstall has argued that in estimating social status in an historical context, how a man sees himself – the self-conscious label – is our most important evidence.²⁶ When Labour won office in 1935 Semple, then a consummate politician, became a government minister. The accompanying rise in Semple's social status was probably entwined with a desire for respect that could not accommodate his father's convict connections. The effort to hide the convict legacy was occasionally extreme. Semple's granddaughter Jackie Smith recalled that during his time as a Minister Semple inherited some money from his father's family in Scotland. However, he had to return to Scotland to claim the inheritance. Fearing that his father's past would be revealed to the New Zealand public if he returned Semple did not go to Scotland and the inheritance was forfeited.²⁷ There was nothing to be gained during the 1930s or 1940s by revealing his father's past and it could have been used by his political foes

²³ Mowbray, 'The Real Bob Semple'.

²⁴ *Christchurch Star-Sun*, 27 September 1938.

²⁵ The McNairs' immigrated to New Zealand in 1875 on the ship *Christian McAusland* that sailed from Clyde on 29 May 1875 and reached Bluff in New Zealand on 30 August 1875. Passenger Shipping Lists 1875, Roll 11, Palmerston North Public Library.

²⁶ Commentary by G. Dunstall on Miles Fairburn, 'Social Mobility and Opportunity in Nineteenth Century New Zealand', *New Zealand Journal of History*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1979, pp. 61-62.

²⁷ Interview with Jackie Smith, 8 December 2004.

to damage his hard won reputation. Semple preferred his father's particular Australian past to remain secret to protect himself from both political opponents and any supposed dishonour which could be used to cast aspersions on his own character. Convict ancestry is now more acceptable, even fashionable, and in the twenty-first century Semple could have used the story to address the issue of injustice and oppression. In his own time he chose not to.

Semple was prepared, however, to focus on some aspects of his early life when it could be used to emphasise his own working class background. He suggested in the 1937 profile that his early life and that of his family was a struggle for existence.²⁸ John and Mary Ann Semple had eight children, seven of whom survived childhood. When he was born in 1873 Robert Semple had three elder sisters; Mary Ann born in 1864, Janet born in 1867 and Margaret born in 1871. His two younger sisters, Jessie and Clara, were born in 1876 and 1881 and Robert's only brother John was born in 1879.²⁹ Semple recalled that he was born in a house built of slabs with a stringy bark roof and an earth floor and that the family's life on their small patch of land was hardly more than a minimal existence. Semple represented this time in his life as one of poverty and hardship. He remarked that his parents were "victims of a cruel system".³⁰ It is unclear whether he was referring to the convict transportation system or the apparent anomalies in the economic system whereby some wages provided only a bare subsistence for some families while other large landowning families were extremely wealthy. Through his own family's circumstances Semple identified and understood the needs of the working class. In 1937, as a member of the Labour government, Semple used these circumstances to show he had not forgotten his working class roots.

Semple received his only formal education at the Sofala Public School. The school was established in 1878 and, being of school age, Robert Semple was probably an early pupil.³¹ Enrolment numbers between the years 1878 to 1884 range from the low of forty-two pupils in 1884 to a high of seventy pupils in 1880. Financial difficulty

²⁸ Mowbray, 'The Real Bob Semple'.

²⁹ Certified Copies of Birth Certificates of Robert Semple's siblings, KFHC.

³⁰ Mowbray, 'The Real Bob Semple'.

³¹ Sofala Public School 1878-2003 125th Anniversary Booklet supplied to author by Helen Dwyer, Sofala School Principal. Semple's school attendance cannot be verified as the original school was burned down in the 1950s and all records were destroyed.

was one factor that affected pupil attendance as parents had to pay for their children's education. A scale of fees sanctioned in 1878 for Sofala School was as follows,

| | |
|--|---------------------------|
| For 1 child | 1/- per week |
| Two children from same family | 9d each per week |
| Three children from same family | 8d each per week |
| Four children from same family | 7 1/2 d each per week |
| Each additional child from same family | 6d per week ³² |

Some families in the area struggled financially to send their children to school. In 1880 the Teacher-in-charge, Edwin Page, wrote to the department of Public Instruction for permission to place certain children as free pupils,

Their parents are poor and unable to pay for them. William Pollet, father unknown, mother destitute; Thomas Jones, mother of doubtful character... A second class of parents are those who pay one shilling each child in eight or ten weeks, but at the present time are unable to pay more for no rain is falling and gold cannot be got... This class object to being retained as defaulters and sometimes detain their children from attendance at School.³³

Semple attended school for only a few years, later noting, "I went to work in mines when I was ten".³⁴ With several children his parents would have found school education a financial burden. Also, the school in the township was a considerable distance from where the Semples lived, a one-way walk of well over five miles. Semple's education is briefly mentioned in *Ghosts of the Goldfields*, a local history where Henry Neary recounted the achievements of some well-known men who were born in the area, "In the early days he [Semple] used to tramp a long distance, barefooted, to obtain his education from the school at Sofala...".³⁵ Notwithstanding the distance, the financial concern may have been a consideration for Semple to begin working life as he said in 1937 "work had to be found and the only openings were in the mines".³⁶

³² Memo Scale of fees for Proposed Public School at Sofala, 14 November 1878, Sofala School Pre 1939 Administrative File [Sofala 5/17643. 1A], Index to Schools and Related Records, State Records, NSW.

³³ Edwin Page to Department of Public Instruction 14 December 1880, [Sofala 5/17643. 1A], State Records, NSW. It is not known if Semple was a free pupil. His name does not appear in any teacher's requests.

³⁴ *New Zealand Free Lance*, 7 March 1951, Kay Jones Collection.

³⁵ Henry H. Neary, *Ghosts of the Goldfields: Pioneer Diggers & Settlers on the Turon*, Bathurst: Mitchell Printery, 1983, p. 48.

³⁶ Mowbray, 'The Real Bob Semple'.

Robert Semple was fourteen years old when his mother died and a month from his twentieth birthday when his father died of dropsy on 1 September 1893.³⁷ On 6 December 1887 Mary Ann Semple, 45 years old, died of complications from premature childbirth brought on, her death certificate notes, by sunstroke.³⁸ Mary was buried in one of the three cemeteries in Sofala.³⁹ A correspondent from Sofala recorded John Semple's death in benign terms in the *Bathurst Times*,

It is with feelings of deep regret I have to record the death of Mr John Semple, an old resident...of this district. Deceased had resided on the Crudine for many years past, and leaves behind a wide circle of friends, whose memory will long cherish kindly feelings of the old gentleman. Death was a happy release, as deceased had long been a sufferer, and he had borne his agony with unflinching fortitude.⁴⁰

In contrast, Herb Knight said his grandfather had been “a cranky, cruel bugger of a man”.⁴¹ John Semple was buried in the Church of England cemetery in Sofala. His death appeared to have had an immediate affect on his daughter Jessie, who entered the Good Samaritan Refuge at Arncliffe less than two months after his death on 12 October 1893. The home was originally established in Sydney to give a shelter to women who were homeless or in distress. The residents earned their keep by helping in the laundry or the kitchen. There was no date recorded for Jessie's discharge but she was readmitted on 15 May 1899 at the age of twenty-three and died of consumption and paralysis on 16 July 1906.⁴²

Semple's eldest sister Mary Ann married George Knight, a miner, in 1882.⁴³ George Knight had arrived in Australia from England as a child of two and went with his parents, who were prospecting for gold, to Sofala. He worked both mining and

³⁷ Certified Copy of Death Certificate dated 12 January 2005. Dropsy is described as a condition characterised by an accumulation of watery fluid in the tissues or in a body cavity.

³⁸ Certified Copy of Death Certificate dated 12 January 2005.

³⁹ The Roman Catholic, Church of England and the General cemetery were three cemeteries in Sofala. On her death certificate Mary's place of burial is recorded as 'Government cemetery Sofala'. Reg McDonell to Carina Hickey 22 January 2005, “The term Government Cemetery probably indicates that Mary Ann was buried as a pauper in the portion set aside in the cemetery for government use. Such burials were entirely basic and no monument of any kind was provided”.

⁴⁰ *Bathurst Times*, 2 September 1893, Bathurst District Historical Society.

⁴¹ Thelma Montgomery, 'My Aunty Thelma's Story', KFHC. Thelma was the 12th child of George and Mary Ann Knight (nee Semple).

⁴² Information supplied by the Archivist, Good Samaritan Offices, NSW, KFHC.

⁴³ Certified Copy of Marriage Certificate dated 6 August 1982, KFHC.

shepherding the few sheep that his parents ran on the banks of Crudine Creek.⁴⁴ It is probable that the Knight and Semple families (George and Mary Ann’s parents) lived in close proximity to each other. George and Mary Ann had a large family of twelve children and also lived along the Crudine, close to the Semples. Thelma Jessop, nee Knight, remembered hearing “The Semples are home, there is smoke coming out of their chimney”.⁴⁵ When Mary Ann Semple died Mary Ann Knight became a substitute mother for the Semple family, “Most of them called her Mum”.⁴⁶ Memorabilia in the Knight Family History Collection such as early family photographs also suggest that the relationship between Robert Semple and the Knight family was a close one and it was to remain so even into Semple’s years as a politician.



Figure 4: George and MaryAnn Knight, date and place unknown, KFHC.

John Semple followed his brother Robert into the mines, Jackie Smith remembered her grandfather talked of himself and his brother working together in the mines.⁴⁷ Mary Ann Knight remained in the Sofala area with her family for a number of years.

⁴⁴ ‘George Knight’, *Australian Biographical and Genealogical Records, Volume 3 1842-1899*, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

⁴⁵ Montgomery, ‘My Aunty Thelma’s Story’, KFHC.

⁴⁶ Montgomery, ‘My Aunty Thelma’s Story’, KFHC.

⁴⁷ It is not known at what age this was or in what locality. Interview with Jackie Smith, 8 December 2004.

Little is known of the movements of Janet, Margaret or Clara Semple. All were unmarried at the time of their father's death and with no known alternative means of support they may have had to leave the area in search of work. When Janet and Clara Semple were married their usual places of residence were recorded as Sydney, and Leichhardt (a suburb of Sydney), respectively.⁴⁸ Sydney's inner suburbs could have provided the possibility of employment for them which the goldfields of Sofala did not – when Janet Semple was married her occupation was listed as servant. Semple's phrase of "work had to be found" may well have applied to all members of his family and been reason alone for a move from the goldfields.

From an early age Semple worked as a miner, travelling throughout Australia. During these formative years he encountered unionism, in various degrees of organisation, and participated in several places. Historians have viewed Semple's New Zealand militant unionism as a consequence of his Australian union experiences. O'Farrell suggested that Semple's participation in the protracted Victorian Coal Strike of 1903-04 provided, "an object lesson in the elements of industrial warfare".⁴⁹ Some historians also suggest that early radicalism on New Zealand's West Coast was fuelled by external factors such as the Australian invasion by men such as Semple. Rollo Arnold argued, "The Red Fed serpent which had plotted against this Arcadian vision by offering an alternative socialist myth had too often spoken with an Australian accent".⁵⁰ The unionism that Semple encountered at this time, although encompassing class solidarity, did not have a revolutionary dimension and nor did it promote revolutionary industrial unionism (or workers gaining control of the economy by gaining control of industry through strike action).⁵¹ Unionism, at this time, gave Semple experience in representation, leadership, negotiation and widespread knowledge of strike tactics used by both employers and employees but as

⁴⁸ Janet Semple married Charles Kenny in 1901, Certified Copy of Marriage Certificate dated 17 May 2005. Clara Semple married William Burton in 1914, Certified Copy of Marriage Certificate dated 8 August 1995, Margaret Semple remained unmarried. KFHC.

⁴⁹ O'Farrell, 'Politics and Coal', p. 104

⁵⁰ Rollo Arnold, 'The Australasian Peoples and their World, 1888-1915', p. 67.

⁵¹ Industrial unionism generally aimed to organise industrially into One Big Union and seize power by a general strike. The concept of industrial organisation was that all craft unions and workers would be organised into about eight large unions based, according to one model, on agriculture, mining, transport, distribution, manufacturing, construction, printing, journalism and the Public Sector. Each sector would have a department headquarters and be co-ordinated from a central headquarters.

Olssen suggests, when Semple came to New Zealand, “he had no conception of revolutionary industrial unionism, only of the traditional forms of localism”.⁵²

Semple started work in the Lithgow mines in 1883, aged ten.⁵³ Lithgow is a town situated in a valley 64km from Bathurst. In the later half of the nineteenth century industry, such as coal and shale mining and iron and steel, was flourishing in Lithgow.⁵⁴ On Semple’s return visit to Lithgow in 1914, as organiser for the United Federation of Labour in New Zealand, the *Lithgow Mercury* suggested he had worked as a youth in the Zig Zag mine, opened in 1883, and also at the Vale of Clywdd colliery, opened in 1874⁵⁵ – they were amongst the numerous collieries of the Lithgow Valley and Western District.⁵⁶

The earliest known date for coalmining unionism in the Lithgow Valley is 1875 when the Vale of Clywdd colliery formed a lodge. In his history of the Miners’ Federation of Australia Edgar Ross subsequently said the earliest minute books of the Western District association were dated 1878.⁵⁷ Greg Patmore, who studied labour and localism in Lithgow, also noted the miners’ activism. Demands for an eight-hour day in 1886 led to the formation of the Coal Miners’ Mutual Protection Association of the Western District, which covered four colliery lodges in the Lithgow Valley and the miners held the first eight-hour demonstration in 1887.⁵⁸ The miners were also involved in political organisation in Lithgow. Joseph Cook, the Miners’ secretary, became the first president of the Hartley Labour League (formed after the 1890 Maritime strike) and won the seat in the 1891 elections.⁵⁹ However, Patmore argued that localism led to a fragmented trade union structure, local unions were formed without confidence in the ability of regional or national unions to represent them effectively or understand local issues.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, in this mining district there was

⁵² Olssen, *The Red Feds*, p. 19.

⁵³ *New Zealand Free Lance*, 7 March 1951, Kay Jones Collection.

⁵⁴ Jim W. Brown, *Bent Backs: An Illustrated Social and Technological History of the Western Coal Field*, Lithgow: Industrial Printing Co., 1993, Chapter Six.

⁵⁵ *Lithgow Mercury*, 4 February 1914.

⁵⁶ Brown, *Bent Backs*, pp.109-116.

⁵⁷ Edgar Ross, *A History of the Miners’ Federation of Australia*, Sydney: Macarthur Press, 1984, p. 40.

⁵⁸ Greg Patmore, ‘Localism and Labour: Lithgow 1869-1932’, *Labour History*, No. 78, May 2000, pp. 53-70.

⁵⁹ Patmore, ‘Localism and Labour’.

⁶⁰ Patmore, ‘Localism and Labour’.

an ever-growing consciousness of the need for organisation and unity, which may have been visible to Semple.



Figure 5: Lithgow Valley Colliery employee group c 1885. Semple would have been working with men similar to those in the photo. Many of the miners have an oil-wick lamp on their caps and 'crib time' tins, Lithgow District Historical Society.

Semple's first job in the mines was as a trapper boy.⁶¹ Trappers opened and closed ventilation doors to permit the passage of traffic.⁶² Mines were dark, dirty, dangerous and boring for a child. Semple later recalled the long hours, "I worked ten hours a day six days a week and in the winter only saw the sun on Sundays". Jackie Smith said her grandfather also spoke of the dangers in the mine as a boy, "he said the trucks came down...it was a very small space and he had to hook and unhook the coal trucks, he had to be quick otherwise he might be killed".⁶³ Semple later became a bailer-boy and although this may have implied a certain rise in status, he stated that this was no cushy job. Mines were not equipped with automatic pumps, the bailer had to bail out the water seepage from sumps in the dank subterranean passages, pouring it into huge

⁶¹ Mowbray, 'The Real Bob Semple'.

⁶² Robin Gollan, *The Coalminers of New South Wales: A History of the Union 1860-1960*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1963 p. 21. For a British definition of a trapper see John Benson, *British Coalminers in the Nineteenth Century: A Social History*, London: Gill and Macmillan, 1980, p. 223.

"The (generally young) worker responsible for opening and closing ventilation doors underground so as to allow the movement of men and animals without disturbing the current of air".

⁶³ Interview with Jackie Smith, 8 December 2004.

tanks whence an engine hoisted it to the surface in barrels. Semple recalled this early phase of his life: “I was soaking wet all the time and used to shiver for the whole of the eight hour shift. In winter it was dreadful”.⁶⁴

The burgeoning industrial activity of the greater Lithgow area provided various employment opportunities for Semple. The *Lithgow Mercury* suggested, “From there [Lithgow] he went navying on the Mudgee Line and the Clarence siding deviation works carried out in 1894. He also worked on the Cobar-Nyngan line and various other works in the State...also at the Genowlan [sic] shale mines and Portland cement works”.⁶⁵ When visiting the Newcastle area in 1937, the *Cessnock Eagle’s* reporter noted that the current president of the local Chamber of Commerce, Mr Arthur Biggers, had worked with Semple many years ago. At the civic reception for Semple, Biggers recalled how he worked side by side with “Bob” in a shale mine at Nellie’s Glen, about six miles from Katoomba.⁶⁶ Katoomba is part of the Blue Mountains district just below Lithgow. The small town of Portland, where Semple also worked, had a large cement works.⁶⁷ Brown stated that the cement works was a self-contained operation with a limestone quarry, a shale quarry and a coalmine on company land.⁶⁸ Semple may have worked in the coalmine at the Portland works.

Semple also worked in the silver mines in Sunny Corner, another town in the greater Lithgow area.⁶⁹ Christine Karlsen’s history of the town indicates that from 1880-1910 it was a booming mining town with a number of mines, smelters, hotels, churches, schools, banks and a variety of shops as well as its own newspaper.⁷⁰ Sunny Corner was originally a gold mining township but the discovery of silver and copper at a time when the price for both commodities was very high saw the Sunny Corner “boom” start in earnest around 1885-87.⁷¹ The population appeared flexible. Karlsen cited the Mining Registrar’s Report of 1885 which quoted the official population of the town as 4,000, the largest official figure. The NSW census of 1891 gave the population as

⁶⁴ Mowbray, ‘The Real Bob Semple’.

⁶⁵ *Lithgow Mercury*, 4 February 1914. Semple visited Lithgow representing the United Federation of Labour and Social Democratic Party.

⁶⁶ *Cessnock Eagle*, 6 August 1937.

⁶⁷ Brown, *Bent Backs*, p. 214. The first Australian cement was manufactured at Portland in 1889.

⁶⁸ Brown, *Bent Backs*, p. 215.

⁶⁹ *Evening Post*, 30 June 1930.

⁷⁰ Christine Karlsen, *Return to Sunny Corner*, Bathurst: Mitchell CAE Printery, n.d., p. 1.

⁷¹ Neary, p. 33.

1677 however Karlsen suggested that other sources claimed that the figure could be as high at five thousand more than this. The transitory nature of gold mining towns is reflective of many of the mining townships, both gold and coal, that Semple was working in during the 1880s and 1890s and his own transience probably part of this movement: “People could be there one day and gone the next”.⁷²

From the Lithgow area Semple moved to Newcastle, a city on the coast north of Sydney. Like Lithgow, there were numerous mines in the district and Semple worked at the Stockton mine, which extended two and a half miles under the sea.⁷³ The Newcastle area also had a history of unionism. In 1860 a meeting was held by miners to initiate a campaign for a local miners’ federation to address their grievances and to demand the appointment of Government inspectors of coalmines. Consequently, the Hunter River Coalminers Mutual Protective Association was the first clearly defined association of lodges.⁷⁴ Unionism was ongoing in years up until the 1890s, although it was often tempered by harsh economic conditions, organisational problems and employer antagonism. The 1887 Rulebook of the Amalgamated Miners’ Association of Newcastle declared its motto, “We are ONE – United we Stand, Divided we Fall”. Amongst its objectives were “To obtain these legislative enactments for the more efficient management of Mines, whereby the lives and health of Miners’ may be preserved” and “To provide a weekly allowance for the support of Members who may be locked out, or on strike, and to resist any unjust regulation connected with their employment”.⁷⁵ The motto emphasised a strong bond between the miners although in reality mitigating factors such as localism often inhibited the cause. Coal Mining legislation and levies in support of striking unions were also objectives with which Semple would become more familiar as he became increasingly involved with unionism.

⁷² Karlsen, p. 13.

⁷³ *Evening Post*, 30 June 1930. The mine had been in production since 1884 and was one of several Newcastle collieries that had workings under the South Pacific Ocean. *Korumburra Times*, 27 February 1904.

⁷⁴ Ross, p. 19-20. The men sought better regulation of mines, policing of conditions by inspectors and a maximum working shift of eight hours.

⁷⁵ ‘Rules of the Amalgamated Miners Association of Australasia, No. 2, Colonial District, Newcastle, NSW, E165/27/1, Australian Coal and Shale Employees Federation, Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, Canberra.

Semple did acknowledge the influence of this district's union activity. When he returned to the area in 1912, as organiser for the New Zealand Federation of Labour, he was welcomed at a delegate board meeting of the Colliery Employees Federation in the Trades Hall, Newcastle. Semple referred to his former union associations in the Newcastle district where "he had first received his impressions of unionism which had enabled him to render service to the cause in other places".⁷⁶ When later outlining his work record Semple said at the age of twenty he was made miners' check inspector at Stockton.⁷⁷ A check inspector is a union representative who, in each mine, checks on the air, timber and other aspects of safety, so Semple was a member of the Stockton union at age twenty in 1893.

In January 1894 there was a strike at Stockton, which may have included Semple. The owners wanted to reduce the tonnage rate, the miners would not agree and when a strike started, strikebreakers or non-unionists were introduced to the mine. Miners' demonstrations, deputations by the miners to the manager and a conference between both parties were all abortive. On 5 March the strike was declared off. Alex McLagan, who wrote a history of unionism in the *Newcastle Morning Herald* claimed, "Men had to go to work independently... Nearly the whole of the original miners had to leave Stockton and go elsewhere. They were blacklisted throughout the district".⁷⁸ Semple may have been one of Stockton unionists who were forced to leave the area. The introduction of free labourers, or scabs, to break a strike would become a reoccurring pattern in several of Semple's subsequent union experiences.

Semple then moved to Victoria. The evidence of his marriage on 27 June 1898 in Outtrim, South Gippsland, suggested that he was in the area for a period of time prior to this event.⁷⁹ South Gippsland had vast coal deposits and it is probable that with the development of the district as a coal region in the 1890s Semple found work in the new mines of that area. By 1898 Outtrim, Korumburra and Jumbunna were Gippsland coal towns that had grown with the development of the railway. In May 1898 the

⁷⁶ *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 19 April 1912.

⁷⁷ *Evening Post*, 30 June 1930.

⁷⁸ *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 5 April 1955.

⁷⁹ The South Gippsland region of Victoria stretches southeast of Melbourne from Western Port Bay to the New South Wales border, between the Great Dividing Range and Bass Strait.

population of Outtrim was 2,500, with Korumburra and Jumbunna of similar size. The towns were in close proximity to one another.⁸⁰



Figure 6: Korumburra c 1897, H8376, State Library, Victoria.

With the growth of the townships and the opening of new mines came corresponding union activity. During the early 1890s there were some local miners' organisations in the area (the Coal Creek Miners' Association had been formed in 1893) but it was not until 1896 that a successful regional federation of the local associations took place. Peter Gardner, in his history of the Victorian Coal Miners' Association, suggested that this might have been to try and counter the burgeoning mining development that was taking place in the district.⁸¹ There were three main mining companies. The Outtrim-Howitt Company which operated the mine at Outtrim, the Jumbunna Company that operated the mine at Jumbunna and the Coal Creek Mining Company that operated the mine at Korumburra. The outcome of the unions' federation was a Gippsland union based in Outtrim, Jumbunna and Korumburra: the Victorian Coal Miners Association (VCMA).⁸²

⁸⁰ *Outtrim News*, 7 May 1898, State Library Victoria.

⁸¹ Peter Gardner, *A Gippsland Union: the Victorian Coal Miners Association 1893-1915*, Bairnsdale: Ngarak Press, 2003, p. 41.

⁸² Gardner, p. 10.

The path of the VCMA was, however, a rocky one with periodical splits and schisms largely caused by parochialism between individuals and neighbouring coal towns.⁸³ Many of the men were nonetheless in general agreement over wider issues such as being in favour of some form of legislation or regulation in the coal industry. Despite personality and locality clashes the VCMA did make some gains. For example, after January 1901 coal had to be weighed before the screens and thus miners paid for all the coal they mined – this was a long-fought for gain. By the end of 1901, of about 1000 miners in the field, Gardner claimed that 80-90% of the men were members of the VCMA.⁸⁴

It is probable that Robert Semple, resident in Outtrim, was a member of the Outtrim Miners' Association Lodge. The photograph below shows the Association c1898, Jackie Smith and Kay Jones both identified the man at the back right of the photograph, on horseback, as Robert Semple. Finance was an early problem that dogged the VCMA and the union held many fund-raising activities such as a concert that was held in the Outtrim hall in August 1898.⁸⁵ The local newspaper, the *Outtrim News* records Semple's noteworthy effort on behalf of the union: "Messrs W. Jennings and R. Semple worked untiringly in the sale of tickets...with the result of about fourteen pounds, ten shillings being realised".⁸⁶ Semple's later skills as an energetic and efficient organiser in New Zealand probably developed from these early experiences.

⁸³ Gardner, p. 58.

⁸⁴ Gardner, p. 56.

⁸⁵ *Outtrim News*, 27 August 1898, State Library, Victoria. The entertainment included sword dances, highland flings and recitations and was preformed before a large audience.

⁸⁶ *Outtrim News*, 27 August 1898. The first issue of the *Outtrim News* held by the State Library in Victoria is 4 December 1897 and there are continuous holdings up until the time Semple left the district in 1904.

Figure 7: Outtrim Miners Association Lodge c 1898. The occasion is not known and the majority of members are unidentified. However, Semple is at the back right of the photo, on horseback. VCMA secretary, A.A. Wilson is kneeling front right, photograph courtesy of Peter Gardner.

A feature of the VCMA was regular meetings of all the miners and their families, “the day was structured with speeches and motions by miners and guests followed by various sports”.⁸⁷ Opinions on union issues were often voiced at these public events. At the Miners’ Gala in December 1898, before the sports started, there were several speeches by VCMA members. Two resolutions were carried. Mr J. Duffy’s resolution was that, “We the coal miners of Victoria do hereby pledge ourselves to accept no Coal Mines Bill that has not the NSW and English Coal Mines weighing clauses inserted in it”. The second resolution, moved by Mr A. A. Wilson, called for greater union organisation, “...it is highly desirable that all the workers employed in and about the coal mines in Victoria should band themselves together and federate into one grand union”.⁸⁸ Hence, the VCMA and some of its members did have a concept for One Big Union and may have had some hopes for a national organisation - this was something that Semple embraced further in New Zealand.

⁸⁷ Gardner, p. 49.

⁸⁸ *Outtrim News*, 10 December 1898.

Between August and December 1899 Robert and Margaret Semple moved to Western Australia with their first child, Robert Francis, who had been born in Outtrim on 22 May 1899. In August the Outtrim juvenile brass band gave a concert, and Semple was mentioned in the programme of supplementary local performances.⁸⁹ This was the last entry in the press for Semple during this year. In February 1900 an article entitled ‘Outtrimites in the West’ confirmed Semple’s residence in Collie, Western Australia. The article reported a cricket match between teams representing the Proprietary mine and the Collie cricket club which was played on New Year’s Day. At a smoke social after the match, “Mr Semple proposed the health of our genial host, Mr Crow”.⁹⁰ The reason for Semple’s move west is not known. Possibly the Outtrim mine now held unpleasant memories for him. In April 1899 John Duffy, president of the Outtrim miners’ lodge had been killed in the mine by falling stone. Semple gave evidence at the inquest that he had been working only a few feet from Duffy when he was killed.⁹¹ The mine’s safety could have been an issue as although he returned to the area later, he never worked in the Outtrim mine again. John Semple, Robert’s brother, was in Western Australia around this time and he may have been a reason for the move to this particular district. The brothers had some contact in the district as Jackie Smith said her grandmother spoke about living in a tent in the heat in Western Australia and meeting her brother-in-law who she recalled was a very handsome man and taller than her husband.⁹²

Semple was probably working at the Proprietary mine near Collie. There were three mines operating in the area during 1900/01, the Wallsend mine, the West Collie mine and the Proprietary mine. Both the Wallsend and the Proprietary commenced production in 1898.⁹³ The Proprietary mine was distinguished by its extensive plant, which included the most up-to-date weighing machines.⁹⁴ Although the mine plant was considered progressive the miners, according to a photo of the Proprietary

⁸⁹ *Outtrim News*, 19 August 1899. Listed in the programme of items was, “...a duet, ‘Driven from Home’ Messrs R. Semple and W. Jennings (much amusement was caused over this item, as one gentleman did not put in an appearance at all, while the other one cleared through the back door)”.

⁹⁰ *Outtrim News*, 3 February 1900.

⁹¹ *Outtrim News*, 6 May 1899.

⁹² Interview with Jackie Smith, 8 December 2004. Margaret Semple did not specify a particular town.

⁹³ Catherine Stedman (ed.), *100 Years of Collie Coal*, Bentley, W.A.: Curtin Printing, 1988, p. 30.

⁹⁴ *Twentieth Century Impressions of Western Australia*, 1901, p. 318. Rare Book Collection, J.S. Battye Library, Perth, Western Australia. Photographed copies of an article on the Proprietary mine sent to author by Battye Library.

company camp dated 1898, lived largely in tents near the mine.⁹⁵ Information supplied by the Collie Historical Society suggested that this accommodation was not dissimilar to other mines: “In 1898 had only tents for workers and families on the site of the Government shaft (later the Wallsend Mine)”.⁹⁶ Tented accommodation was part of the rudimentary, although standard, living conditions for Semple and his family in this period.

In New Zealand Semple claimed to have been president of the Collie Miners’ Union, but this is difficult to substantiate.⁹⁷ The *Collie Miner*, which commenced publication in June 1900, contained no reference to Robert Semple in connection with either mining/union activities or recreational events for the remainder of 1900 or 1901. In September 1900 the newspaper recorded the formation, at a combined meeting of the Wallsend, Proprietary and West Collie Miners’ Associations, of a Miners’ Mutual Protection Association.⁹⁸ District officers for the new Collie River Miners’ Association were published periodically throughout 1900-02 but Semple’s name is not recorded. Information supplied by the Collie Historical Society suggested Semple may have been an unnamed official at the Proprietary mine. Pit top meetings were held at each mine and a chairperson was appointed to oversee the meeting. Semple may have been one of the people elected to chair meetings as many of the miners were labourers and an experienced union person, who spoke well, would be listened to. It is probable that Semple would have been regarded as a leader or President of their group.⁹⁹ Therefore, although not an official of the District Association Semple may have been a representative of the men at the Proprietary mine.

From Collie the Semple family moved into the interior of Western Australia - to the goldfields, “he [Semple] was a quartz miner on the Coolgardie goldfields”.¹⁰⁰ The reason for this move is again unknown. Possibly the Semples moved after John Semple left for the Boer War in South Africa or even after news of his death in 1901

⁹⁵ Collie Coal proprietary company camp, 1898 B13084-970B/25. J.S. Battye Library, Perth, WA.

⁹⁶ Jan Wallace (Collie Historical Society) to Carina Hickey, 6 September 2005.

⁹⁷ *Maoriland Worker*, 13 October 1911. Historical Researcher, Loreley Morling accessed the records of the Coal Miners’ Industrial Union. Minutes of Delegates Board 25 Nov 1900-26 Aug 1902 [Accession 1414A/1] and also Account Books 11 Nov 1899-Sep 1902 [Accession 1413A/19] for author. There was no mention in either records of John or Robert Semple. These records are held in the J.S. Battye Library, Perth, WA.

⁹⁸ *Collie Miner*, 15 September 1900.

⁹⁹ Wallace to Hickey 6 September 2005.

¹⁰⁰ *Press*, 1 February 1955.

(this is discussed further in the Anti-militarist chapter). Another reason could have been the economic conditions. A letter to the editor published in the *Outtrim News* in May 1901 outlined the dismal state of employment in the Collie fields, “We have not worked more than half time for some months past”.¹⁰¹ Employment prospects on the goldfields did not appear to have been much better. In June another letter from a former resident of Outtrim written from Coolgardie warned, “At present I would on no account advise you to come over here. Things are very depressed and large numbers of men are out of work”.¹⁰² A search of the goldfields newspapers, the *Coolgardie Miner* and the *Kalgoorlie Miner* for the three years including 1900, 1901, 1902 contain no reference to Semple.

Another interstate move saw the Semples return to South Gippsland by July 1902.¹⁰³ The *Maoriland Worker* later suggested that the reason for this move was because of Margaret Semple’s ill health but did not elaborate.¹⁰⁴ At Korumburra, in early 1902, the Coal Creek Company was opening up a new coal seam found in its MacKay shaft, and it was noted “more men will be put on so as to hasten the opening up of these workings”.¹⁰⁵ Semple may have found work in this development as the couple settled in Korumburra with Semple finding employment at Coal Creek.

Semple was soon involved in union activities. In November 1902 the district had been stunned by the news that the federal government had accepted no Victorian tenders for the railway coal supply. The coal contracts were the lifeblood of the community and, if lost, would result in drastic job losses.¹⁰⁶ At a meeting in Korumburra the miners and townspeople voiced their protests. Semple, speaking for the miners, said they had carried the following resolution at an earlier meeting,

That in the event of the Minister adhering to the proposal to give all the coal contracts to NSW collieries a deputation be sent from this district to urge upon the Minister the claims

¹⁰¹ *Outtrim News*, 4 May 1901.

¹⁰² *Outtrim News*, 1 June 1901.

¹⁰³ *Outtrim News*, 23 July 1902. Semple is named among supporters at a local football match between teams from Coal Creek and Korumburra.

¹⁰⁴ *Maoriland Worker*, 13 October 1911.

¹⁰⁵ *Outtrim News*, 19 April 1902.

¹⁰⁶ Councillor Mitchell said that if the coal contracts were stopped it would mean fifteen or twenty railwaymen instead of seventy being employed, and only three or four hundred miners instead of over a thousand.

of the district for a fair share of the coal contracts.¹⁰⁷

Semple and the miners were not averse to lobbying ministers and parliamentarians and had some faith that parliamentary representatives in government should respond to the needs of its citizens. They were probably also looking for some continuity of employment with the coal contracts.

Compulsory arbitration was another issue high on the agenda of the VCMA and although Semple's personal views are not recorded, he was among a group of miners who supported its introduction in 1902. In August a deputation of Gippsland coal miners requested the Minister of Railways to introduce into all government coal contracts a clause compelling coal mining companies to submit to arbitration in cases of labour disputes. Previously, the Outtrim miners had asked the Minister of Mines to introduce a Coal Mines Bill as it was felt there was every necessity for legislation in the coal industry. In the meantime the deputation wanted a condition introduced into the coal contracts requiring that disputes between the men and companies should be settled by arbitration. A resolution handed to the Minister passed at a meeting of coal miners representing Outtrim and Coal Creek (approx 1,100 men) asked for a compulsory arbitration clause in all government coal contracts.¹⁰⁸ This suggests that Semple was probably in favour of arbitration before he came to New Zealand.

The Great Strike

The start of 1903 saw an industrial dispute begin in the coal towns that would last seventy weeks: a drawn out battle which, O'Farrell argued, gave Semple, "an object lesson in industrial warfare".¹⁰⁹ Gardner referred to the dispute as the "great strike"- it arose out of a proposal by the companies to reduce the rate for hewing coal.¹¹⁰ A

¹⁰⁷ *Korumburra Times*, 5 November 1902.

¹⁰⁸ *Korumburra Times*, 9 August 1902. In the state of New South Wales the Industrial Arbitration Act 1901 had given legislative recognition to collective bargaining between industrial union of workers and employers as a proper method of determining questions of wages and working conditions. The central feature of the Act was the establishment of a court with extensive powers to hold hearings, make awards and enforce decisions. The Bill, passed in December 1901, was strongly supported by the NSW coalfields members. Many unions had been virtually unable to gain a hearing from the proprietors in industrial disputes and compulsory arbitration seemed at least to provide a means of enforcing negotiation. Compulsory arbitration for the Victorian miners would have also meant at least negotiation with the coal owners – something which had not been freely forthcoming in the past. Gollan, p. 110.

¹⁰⁹ O'Farrell, 'Politics and Coal', p. 104.

¹¹⁰ *Korumburra Times*, 18 May 1904. The rate was to be reduced by 1 shilling per ton.

meeting of the miners (Outtrim and Jumbunna) overwhelmingly rejected the new agreement conditions offered by the companies in early 1903. The companies insisted the terms were not negotiable. Coal Creek, with a separate agreement under discussion, worked on for several months but when the management later combined with the Outtrim/Jumbunna management and enforced a new agreement, the men went out. During the next seventeen months Semple was a part of unsuccessful union activism which fought against poor pay and working conditions, inflexible mining companies and then non union strike-breakers.

By early 1903 Semple was President of the Coal Creek lodge representing miners in discussions regarding their agreements and in deputations to parliamentarians. In January a conference was held at Coal Creek between the mine management, VCMA and miners' representatives, including Semple, to try to settle the dispute. Although the meeting was conciliatory, no agreement was reached. In February Semple was part of a deputation consisting of Coal Creek delegates, VCMA officers, Melbourne Trades Council members and several Parliamentarians who met the Minister of Railways, Mr Bent, regarding the government coal contracts with the local mines. The member for West Gippsland, Mr J Mackay, suggested that the strike at the mines was due to the government not paying an adequate price for coal, therefore the coal companies had to reduce wages. Mr A. Wilson, VCMA secretary, said that a thousand men, with their families, were practically being driven out of the state. He pleaded for a Coal Mines Bill, "embracing the necessary clauses dealing with arbitration to be passed by Parliament as soon as possible". Semple spoke of the difficulties the coal miner had to deal with and stated he did not think that coal miners were overpaid. Other delegates referred to the accidents in the mines and the necessity that existed for legislation to protect the lives of the workmen.¹¹¹ The miners, Semple included, lobbied parliamentarians suggesting they believed the role of government included legislating to address workers' grievances.

In May 1903 the Coal Creek company announced the new agreement would come into force and the men not accepting the conditions were on strike. The company's decision drew a further deputation from the men in which Semple again represented them. At a meeting of the men it was decided that Semple (president) and John

¹¹¹ *Outtrim News*, 4 February 1903.

Flockhart (secretary), along with the district officers should go to Melbourne to interview the directors.¹¹² Although the conference was fruitless, these deputations would have given Semple valuable negotiating experience, and although he was unsuccessful in this instance, many mining disputes later in New Zealand were settled with mutually satisfactory agreements made by Semple.

As the coal strike dragged on all in the district began to suffer, Semple experienced first hand the deprivation that a strike caused. An *Outtrim News* editorial noted, “Business is practically paralysed and much misery exists among the families of the miners”.¹¹³ The unionists were financially supported by levies from NSW coal miners, fundraising entertainments and travelling delegates. In June the Coal Creek miners held a fancy dress parade followed by a football match in aid of the distressed miners’ families. The procession marched through the town to the recreation reserve, “Mr R Semple, with a fuzzyheaded piccaninny tied on his back, made a capital lubra [an Aboriginal woman]: in fact this was one of the best characters in the procession”.¹¹⁴ Semple’s talent for entertaining, featuring in some of the fundraising events at this time, would later be blended into his political career in New Zealand.

Semple’s role in representing the miners led to his victimisation in 1903. All three companies brought outside labourers to the mines from May. Following news of the strike-breakers’ arrival, at Coal Creek a deputation consisting of company employees told the manager that they were prepared to go back to work on the company’s terms. The manager said he was prepared to take men on individually, “but the executive of the branch and those who had taken an active part in the strike would not, under any circumstances, be employed in the mine again”. The press said this management decision was disapproved of by the men who refused work the next day as a protest against their executive being victimised:

Their president, Mr R. Semple, who had got word a day previously that he would not be taken back had generously urged them not to stay out of work on his account, but when it came to a blocking of all their leaders the men ‘got their

¹¹² *Outtrim News*, 6 May 1903.

¹¹³ *Outtrim News*, 20 May 1903.

¹¹⁴ *Korumburra Times*, 6 June 1903.

backs up' and determined not to give way.¹¹⁵

Such personal experiences undoubtedly led Semple to campaign ardently against workers being victimised during strikes in New Zealand.

The VCMA sent delegates around Australia to raise funds. In November Semple and T. Carroll headed to Western Australia, "The purpose of these delegates was to put the union position before the public eye, to check the flow of scabs into the coal districts and to raise funds for the miners' cause".¹¹⁶ Semple and Carroll arrived in the Kalgoorlie goldfields on 14 November and stayed in the district several days, addressing meetings every night in different centres.¹¹⁷ The *Kalgoorlie Miner* reported Semple's open-air meeting,

He [Semple] traced the incidents which led up to the present strike...He also gave a graphic description of the privations which the strikers and their wives and families were undergoing rather than submit to the degrading terms demanded by the directors...A collection was taken up and over seven pounds realised.¹¹⁸

Semple and Carroll toured numerous outback towns then left the goldfields and headed to Perth.¹¹⁹ They gained monetary support at many places; the mill hands at the Wallsend Mine in Collie contributed a half days pay per man, the Bunbury Wharf Lumpers contributed one days pay and at the Fremantle Trades and Labour Council ten pounds was voted at the meeting addressed by Semple and Carroll. They returned to Gippsland in January 1904 and said they had addressed over forty meetings and were very optimistic, "and at every one of these we met with the greatest success, financially, and the actions of the Victorian Coal Miners were upheld and appreciated by every worker whom we came in contact with".¹²⁰ Semple's ability to gather financial support for numerous causes was always a great asset to the various organisations he would be involved with.

¹¹⁵ *Korumburra Times*, 10 June 1903.

¹¹⁶ Gardner, p. 83.

¹¹⁷ *Outtrim News*, 20 January 1904.

¹¹⁸ *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 23 November 1903.

¹¹⁹ *Westralian Worker*, 11 December 1903.

¹²⁰ *Outtrim News*, 20 January 1904.

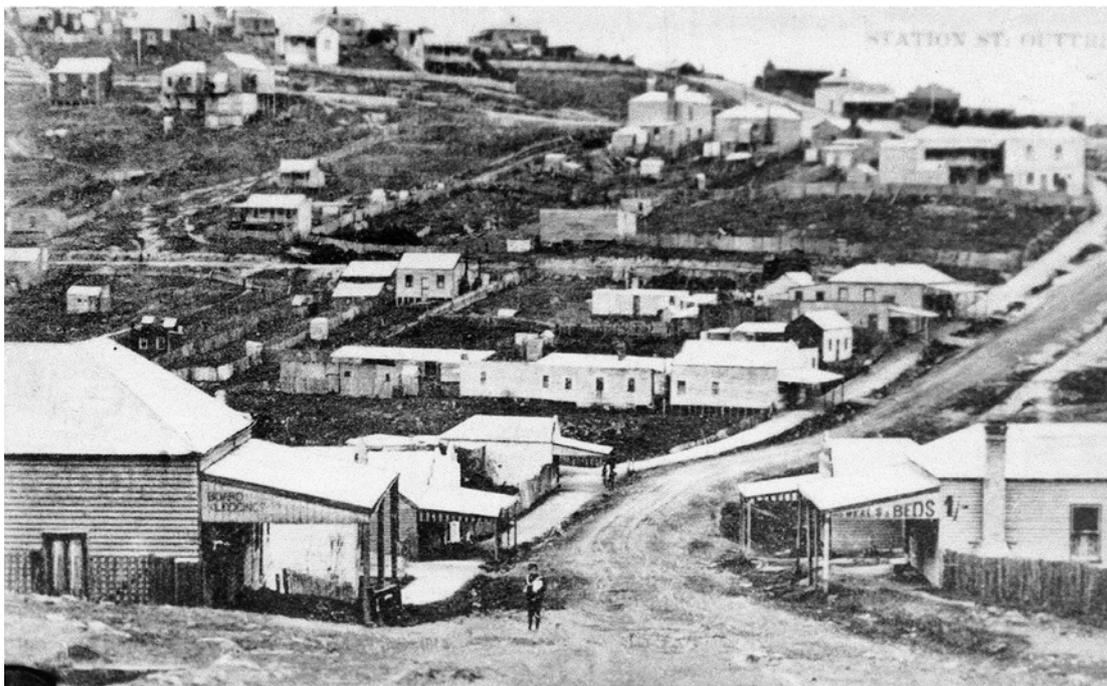


Figure 8: Station Street, Outtrim 1904, E165/56/51, Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, Canberra.

In May, the VCMA received news that signalled the end of the strike and Semple probably left the district, along with many others, soon after. A meeting held on 18 May 1904, is the last known recorded entry of Semple in the Gippsland newspapers.¹²¹ During the long strike the Victorian miners received the bulk of their financial support from the NSW coal miners - from February 1903 to the end of May 1904 the Illawarra miners had sent three thousand three hundred and seventy pounds to the Gippsland miners.¹²² However, due to industrial trouble in NSW itself the unions could no longer continue their support. Therefore, the VCMA could no longer distribute strike pay to their members and many, who could not gain local work because of victimisation, left the area in search of employment, “the refusal of the colliery companies to re-engage any of their former employees has had an immediate effect, many of the unionists having already left the district, and others are preparing to follow”.¹²³

¹²¹ *Outtrim News*, 17 February 1904.

¹²² Cash Book of the Illawarra Colliery Employees’ Federation 1901-1909 T3/18, Australian Coal and Shale Employees Federation, Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, Canberra.

¹²³ *Korumburra Times*, 8 June 1904.

The VCMA was officially dissolved in August and Semple was not amongst those unionists recorded present on 17 August at a valedictory held for Mr A.A. Wilson, union secretary, so may have already left the district. Unionist George Greenslade reflected on the union's defeat, "Unionism in this district was like a tree cut down; the roots were not disturbed, but would sprout up again with great vigour".¹²⁴ Ross argued that the end of the strike dispersed many unionists interstate and they spread their influence wherever they went, "The Victorian mines were in fact a training ground for union activists destined to occupy leading positions in the Labour movement, not only in other Australian coal mining centres but reaching New Zealand".¹²⁵

Semple came to New Zealand in the aftermath of the strike. As previously stated, he was still in the area on 18 May 1904.¹²⁶ His whereabouts between mid-May and September 1904, when he participated in the forming of the State Miners' Union in Runanga, New Zealand, remain unknown. Efforts to trace Semple in the outwards passenger lists from Melbourne and Sydney and lists to New Zealand have proved fruitless. Pat Hickey, in his *Red Fed Memoirs*, said Semple came to New Zealand under an assumed name after being blacklisted.¹²⁷ Semple's grandchildren were asked if they knew his travelling name, but this merely added new uncertainty. Jackie Smith suggested the name of Scott, while Rob Semple suggested the name of Saunders. However, research in both Australia and New Zealand reveal nothing conclusive.

Pat Hickey's account is probably correct, though Semple's grandson, Rob Semple, has suggested another version of his grandfather's departure from Australia. In his account Robert Semple was said to have worked in New South Wales after the Victorian strike. During a strike there strike-breakers on horseback were employed and in a clash Margaret Semple was knocked to the ground. Rob Semple said,

Grandad managed to get the offending fellow off his horse and struck the bloke on the head with a pick handle...the fellow died...the miners hid Grandad and raised enough money to get him out of the country to New Zealand where, once he had

¹²⁴ *Outtrim News*, 17 August 1904.

¹²⁵ Ross, p. 136.

¹²⁶ *Outtrim News*, 25 May 1904.

¹²⁷ Hickey, pp. 9-10.

a job, he sent for my grandmother.

Margaret Semple apparently told this story to Rob after her husband's death. Rob Semple suggested that later the family returned to Australia where Robert Semple handed himself in and faced a trial. Rob's father apparently confirmed that a trial did take place in which Semple successfully defended himself and was acquitted.¹²⁸ My research has discovered no evidence of a trial for Robert Semple and it is likely the incident did not occur. Other grandchildren of Robert Semple and members of his Australian family were not aware of this story.

We have already discussed an example of Semple reconstructing his past so it is possible that other phases of his life were also constructed to obscure events he wanted to remain hidden. Semple may have travelled to New South Wales after being blacklisted in search of employment or to see his sisters, but a search of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Melbourne Argus* and local Gippsland newspapers between May and September 1904 have no reports of a man being killed during any strike action. The most likely story is that Semple left for New Zealand from Melbourne probably in late May or June 1904. He may have arrived in Wellington (the destination of a large majority of the ships from Melbourne) and then travelled to the West Coast. He first appears in the New Zealand historical record in late September 1904 as the first President of the Coal Creek Miners' Union in Runanga.¹²⁹ A May/June arrival would have given Semple time to begin union organisation and be elected to the presidency in September.

Faced with a lack of court record or any other corroborating evidence I can only suggest that Margaret Semple, who was an elderly woman when she told the story, may have misrepresented various events from a past long ago. As acknowledged by oral historian Megan Hutching, 'The strongest criticism that has been levelled at the authenticity of oral evidence is that of the unreliability of memory'.¹³⁰ During his

¹²⁸ Interview with Robert Hamilton Semple, 7 June 2006.

¹²⁹ J. O'Loughlin to Deputy Registrar 26th September 1904, Registration of Industrial Unions – Coal Creek State Mine IUW, L1 Box 112 1904/528, Department of Labour, National Archives. List of officers in Rule Book: President R Semple, Secretary J O'Loughlin, Treasurer L Clelland, Executive Committee, Wm Strongman, R Gregory, Thos Hilton, Wm Robb, Thos O'Loughlin, T Currie.

¹³⁰ Megan Hutching, *Talking History: A Short Guide to Oral History*, Wellington, Bridget Williams

travels around Australia Semple participated in local unions, different places and union activity may have become blurred by Margaret Semple. Events may have been misplaced in time. Addressing a Socialist meeting in Wellington in 1911 Semple gave a ‘vivid description of the Gippsland strike...women were sent to gaol and men bludgeoned’.¹³¹ During the Waihi strike in 1912 in New Zealand miner, Frederick Evans, was killed by a blow on the head from a police baton.¹³² The account of Semple striking a man could have been distorted from a memory of actual events. Hutching also argued that memory is less reliable about exact chronology or events and the story recollected by Margaret Semple does not contain any specific dates or places. It is possible that she merged time and events inadvertently but at the same time with an intention of enlivening or enhancing the identity of her late husband for her grandson.

O’Farrell argued that the birth and development of militant political radicalism in the Grey district of the West Coast was largely due to the example and influence of Australia. More specifically he claimed that when Semple arrived in the district, Australian radicalism began to stimulate local development. He suggested that the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in Australia was a militant body and its theories appealed to the Australian mine workers who had long repudiated arbitration and believed in the principles of direct strike action. Semple, he claimed, was trained in Australian IWW principles.¹³³ However, while Semple may certainly have been influenced by IWW theories later, at this time, it is not possible for Semple to have been exposed to these theories. The Gippsland strike was in 1903/04 and the Victorian miners were in favour of compulsory arbitration, contrary to O’Farrell’s suggestion. Semple was in New Zealand by 1905 when the IWW was formed so he cannot have been trained in Australian IWW principles. O’Farrell is perpetuating the common notion that radicalism was imported rather than locally generated but Semple’s attitude seemed less radical, at this stage, than O’Farrell suggested.

Books, 1993, p. 58.

¹³¹ *Maoriland Worker*, 20 March 1911.

¹³² Olssen, *The Red Feds*, p. 159.

¹³³ O’Farrell, ‘Workers in the Grey District’, pp. 156-158. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was an American organisation, formed in Chicago in June 1905, whose aim was for the workers to organise industrially into one big union and seize power by a general strike.

Valerie Smith's study of West Coast socialism up unto 1908, supports this revision of O'Farrell's view. She suggested that Semple was not radical, citing his desire to register the newly established union in Runanga under the Arbitration Act.¹³⁴ The miners, as state employees, were not covered by the Act. But Semple had come from Victoria – a state where arbitration had not been part of industrial law and although compulsory arbitration was widely desired by the Gippsland miners, especially during the 1903/04 strike, the coal owners had consistently refused it. Therefore, Semple's desire to register the new union under the Arbitration Act was a continuity of his attitude to have a form of adjudication between employees and employers. Although, as Hickey said in his *Red Fed Memoirs*, arbitration was the prevailing view of West Coast unionism, "the miners' union representatives...could not conceive of unionism without arbitration, and in this connection...reflected the outlook of every miners' official on the West Coast at that time".¹³⁵ Registration of the new union under the Arbitration Act may have reflected West Coast belief in arbitration but for Semple it may also have been a continuity of his Australian attitude.

Olssen correctly stated although Semple did have considerable union experience, it was not experience of revolutionary industrial unionism. The Australian influence of Semple, and probably others, was not the significant contributory factor on West Coast radicalism as alleged by O'Farrell. Rather, as Olssen suggested, Semple's view of unionism when he came to New Zealand was a more traditional form of localism. Although the VCMA did appear to have a concept of One Big Union there was no discussion of class war or direct action. Semple's activism in New Zealand was more a response to the new spirit of industrial unrest largely spawned by increasing dissatisfaction with the system of compulsory arbitration. While it is acknowledged that Semple became a leader, as Olssen suggested, "leaders did not create the unrest: rather the unrest created leaders".¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Valerie J. Smith, ' "Gospel of Hope or Gospel of Plunder": Socialism from the mid-1890s up to and including the Blackball Strike of 1908', research essay Massey University, Palmerston North, 1976, p. 62.

¹³⁵ Hickey, p. 7.

¹³⁶ Olssen, *The Red Feds*, p. xiv.

A Complicated Nationality

A by-product of O'Farrell's analysis that union radicalism had an Australian genesis, was criticism of Semple's Australian nationality in New Zealand. His nationality and the nationality of other leaders of the New Zealand labour movement was occasionally used to cast aspersions on their characters and their politics. This was often during periods of industrial turmoil with union leaders such as Semple stigmatised as "foreigners". Bennett argued that during the 1913 Great Strike in New Zealand Prime Minister Massey set up the conflict in simplistic terms by reducing the strike to a dispute between a foreign socialist subversive organisation and the producers and employers of New Zealand. Bennett suggested that one of the reasons behind this was to distance New Zealand, psychologically, from Australia by suggesting New Zealand's yeoman arcadia was threatened by alien contamination. But, interestingly, he noted that Australian conservatives also suggested *their* socialism was a foreign virus.¹³⁷

When several of labour's leaders, including Semple, were arrested as a consequence of the Great Strike in Wellington in 1913, the conservative Wellington newspaper, the *Evening Post*, pointed out that in most cases the leaders arrested were not New Zealand born and suggested that their stake in the country was not very high.¹³⁸ At the same time, in a letter to the editor, 'Worker out of Work' wrote to the *Greymouth Evening Star*,

Re Semple and Co. landed in his majesty's jail. Why should we New Zealanders born, be dictated to by the likes of them. It is time we rose up like a body and did not allow these foreigners to lead and dictate to us.¹³⁹

Although Semple himself did not respond, Pat Hickey an FOL spokesman contended New Zealanders were all foreigners and that foreigners had a perfect right to come to New Zealand and settle in order to earn an honest crust.¹⁴⁰ But attacks on Australians

¹³⁷ Bennett, 72. p. 72.

¹³⁸ *Evening Post*, 12 November 1913. For more discussion on the branding of 'foreigners' see Rollo Arnold, 'The Australasian Peoples and their World, 1888-1915', pp. 52-70.

¹³⁹ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 15 November 1913.

¹⁴⁰ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 24 November 1913.

in New Zealand's union movement were not unique at this time. In February 1907 Petone slaughtermen struck in defiance of their Arbitration Court award. The Minister of Labour, Mr J.A. Millar, told the press that he blamed Australian transient workers for the strike, and the Attorney General, Dr. Finlay, referred to these Australians as "birds of passage" of an undesirable type.¹⁴¹

During the 1919 general election campaign the nationality of Semple, Fraser, and Harry Holland (an Australian born leader of the labour movement in New Zealand), all now Labour MPs, was again used to discredit them.¹⁴² Bolshevism was an additional bogey that was pinned on the three men – with some justification as all had made remarks in support of the Russian revolution. Semple said, "If I were in Ireland I would be a Sinn Feiner; if I were in Germany I would be a Spartacist; if I were in Russia I would be a Bolshevik".¹⁴³ Many objected to Semple's political views and his language – for example, 'Anti-mug' wrote to the *Evening Post* attacking the Labour MPs nationalities. He suggested that if the extremist section of the Labour Party led by Holland, Semple and Fraser were supporters of Home Rule then they should return to their own countries and govern them instead of New Zealand.¹⁴⁴ Trying to defuse the debate, Semple said he had meant that whatever country he was in he would always be on the side of the working class. But the nationality issue re-emerged periodically. In a heated debate in Parliament in 1925, replying to a government MPs charge that the Labour leaders were all immigrants, Fraser responded, "I would rather be born a man in Scotland than a jackass in New Zealand".¹⁴⁵ In 1947 when a *New Zealand Herald* editorial suggested Semple, then Minister of Public Works, should resign over Auckland's power shortage, 'Resigned to it' replied,

Your suggestion that Mr Semple should resign because of his incompetence will meet with widespread approval. To enlarge upon the idea, it would be a very good thing if Messrs Fraser, Nash and Semple all resigned and returned permanently to the countries whence they came leaving the affairs of New Zealand to be managed by New Zealanders.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ Arnold, 'The Australasian Peoples and their World, 1888-1915', p. 67.

¹⁴² Peter Fraser was born in Scotland.

¹⁴³ Semple cited in Brown, *The Rise of New Zealand Labour*, p. 53.

¹⁴⁴ *Evening Post*, 10 June 1919.

¹⁴⁵ *NZPD*, 206 (1925), pp. 402-14.

¹⁴⁶ *New Zealand Herald*, 19 March 1947.

Although Semple's political opponents and the mainstream press focussed solely on his Australian nationality Semple also perceived himself as British at various stages throughout his life. James Belich has argued that Europeans in early "Australasia" also saw themselves as part of a wider "pan-British culture" so Semple's identification with a concurrent British identity is not unique.¹⁴⁷ His Britishness had unusual manifestations. Semple had several tattoos on his body including one of Saint George (patron saint of England) and a dragon on his chest and another of an "Australian coat-of-arms and RULE BRITANNIA on his right forearm".¹⁴⁸ His grandchildren said he obtained the tattoos during his early life in Australia. Semple's brother John volunteered for service in the Boer War and lost his life fighting in defence of the British Empire, so the brothers may have shared an early British patriotism.

In his analysis of New Zealand's national identity Keith Sinclair argued many New Zealanders "felt a loyalty to the British Empire and later British Commonwealth. They were still British subjects as well as citizens of New Zealand".¹⁴⁹ Although the New Zealand nationalistic dynamic was very important to Semple and the Labour government in 1935, seen in Labour's adoption of a degree of independence in foreign affairs, its members worked within an overarching framework which saw them bound in an allegiance to Britain. In the New Zealand Cabinet Semple, Paddy Webb, Minister of Mines, and Michael Joseph Savage, Prime Minister, were Australians. Walter Nash, Minister of Finance was from England, and Peter Fraser, Deputy Prime Minister was born in Scotland. Thus, the outbreak of WWII saw Semple and several of his colleagues in the Labour Party express their strong feelings of British kinship. As New Zealand Prime Minister Michael Savage said, "We range ourselves without fear beside Britain. Where she goes, we go; where she stands, we stand".¹⁵⁰ Similarly, several days after war was announced Semple praised the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, in his attempts to avert war. But he said that now that the step had been taken, "our duty is to make a vow that if England goes

¹⁴⁷ James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000*, Auckland: Penguin, 2001, p. 47.

¹⁴⁸ Return of Prisoners reported as Discharged from gaols during the week ended 24 May 1913, New Zealand Police Gazette 1913, NA.

¹⁴⁹ Keith Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart: New Zealand's Search for National Identity*, Wellington: Allen & Unwin, 1986, p. 107.

¹⁵⁰ Savage cited in Gustafson, *From the Cradle to the Grave*, p. 251.

down we go down with her”.¹⁵¹ Addressing road transport operators in 1940 Semple declared faith in the ability of the Empire to withstand the struggle against Germany and her allies, “We will not hand the British Commonwealth over to Hitler...I would gladly come out of this struggle without a penny and without a roof over my head as long as I know that we had preserved for our children that freedom we now enjoy”.¹⁵² In his 1948 publication of “*Why I Fight Communism*” Semple echoes these sentiments suggesting his reason for fighting Communism was that it endangered the free world, “I love my country and I fear for the freedom and liberty of the peoples privileged to enjoy the British way of life”.¹⁵³

Although still a “foreigner” in the eyes of some during WWII, Semple, as part of the government’s drive against subversion, attacked a wide range of “subversive elements”, including foreigners. Although Semple still used the description of a foreigner in the context of someone who opposed the government (as Massey had done with Australians many years before) he now broadened the foreigner concept to non-British people. In February 1940 he criticised disruptive elements of the community whose efforts, he said, were designed to retard New Zealand’s war effort. He described them as “a conglomeration of political enemies of the State, Communists, pacifists and direct agents of foreign powers”.¹⁵⁴ When Communist pamphlets circulated in the Addington railway workshops allegedly justifying the Russian invasion of Finland, Semple attacked the Communists, “Foreign spies and pimps are propagating a gospel that does not belong to this country and which is foreign to the British mind and spirit”.¹⁵⁵ With “foreigners” there is sometimes a perception of divided loyalties and when Semple’s nationality was used to criticise him it often suggested that his first loyalty was to Australia. Semple himself later used this particularly in his criticism of Communists whose loyalty, he claimed, was to Moscow and not New Zealand.

¹⁵¹ *New Zealand Herald*, 5 September 1939.

¹⁵² *New Zealand Herald*, 26 June 1940.

¹⁵³ Robert Semple, ‘*Why I Fight Communism*’, Wellington: Hutcheson, Bowman and Stewart, 1948.

¹⁵⁴ *New Zealand Herald*, 8 February 1940.

¹⁵⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, 5 March 1940.

An Australian Attachment

Notwithstanding the intricacies of Semple's national identity there were regular return visits and ongoing Australian connections through which Semple remained firmly attached to his native soil. Several times Australia served as a land of sanctuary – when Semple's health periodically failed him he returned to Australia to rejuvenate himself. At the end of 1911, the *Maoriland Worker* said of Semple, “the strenuousness of his work in the north has overtaxed his strength somewhat, and he is in dire need of a complete rest to enable him to recuperate”.¹⁵⁶ In February 1912, accompanied by his wife, Semple returned to Australia. The *Maoriland Worker* said the visit was for a well-earned rest, but also suggested that whilst in Australia Semple had been instructed to solidify ties between New Zealand and Australian coal miners and watersiders.¹⁵⁷ Semple spent a month in the Bathurst region probably visiting his sisters who were still living in the area at that time. When he recommenced his union duties he first lectured in his hometown of Sofala and the coal-mining town of Lithgow where, as a youth, he worked in the mines.¹⁵⁸

In June 1937, when Semple was Minister of Public Works, his health broke down again. He spent a week in a private hospital in Wellington for rest and recuperation. However, only days after leaving hospital Peter Fraser announced that Cabinet had decided that arrangements should be made for Semple to visit Australia for a few weeks with the view to aiding his recovery.¹⁵⁹ Semple left New Zealand in early July and returned at the end of August. Before he left Semple was quoted in the *New Zealand Herald*: “My nervous energy has been used up and reached the point of collapse, and I am advised that the only cure is rest”.¹⁶⁰ After attending several welcoming functions in Sydney Semple again visited the district where he was born. He was given a civic reception in Bathurst, and in Lithgow and he again returned to Sofala where the Turon Shire council gave him an enthusiastic reception. The *New Zealand Herald* noted that he was welcomed back as “one of their own”.¹⁶¹ The trip did appear beneficial to Semple – it was reported that he had put on nearly a stone in

¹⁵⁶ *Maoriland Worker*, 24 November 1911.

¹⁵⁷ *Maoriland Worker*, 23 February 1912.

¹⁵⁸ *Maoriland Worker*, 26 April 1912.

¹⁵⁹ *New Zealand Herald*, 24 June 1937.

¹⁶⁰ *New Zealand Herald*, 6 July 1937.

¹⁶¹ *New Zealand Herald*, 22 July 1937; and 23 July 1937.

weight during his trip.¹⁶² He later used the success of his visit and the embrace of his fellow Australians to rebuff the 1938 opposition taunts that he had been chased out of Australia earlier in his life. He asked defiantly,

whether it was conceivable that a man who had left Australia in disrepute would have been entertained, as I was on my recent visit, by the Federal parliament at Canberra and every State parliament, and no man living ever got a warmer, more loving welcome than I did in the little New South Wales mining town where I was born.¹⁶³

Australia also served as an ally in union solidarity. Prior to the 1920s Semple, believing that industrial unity needed to be applied internationally, campaigned for working class solidarity on both sides of the Tasman. In November 1909 when 12,000 miners struck at Broken Hill Semple cabled his support from New Zealand, “Your fight, our fight”.¹⁶⁴ With the labour movement financially exhausted in New Zealand after the Great Strike in 1913, Semple crossed the Tasman in early 1914 to solicit organising funds. His visit to Australia was viewed as essential by New Zealand labour organisations with a general election looming and the impossibility of taxing their own members who had not yet recovered from their strike efforts. Semple was successful in obtaining a loan of £1,000 from the Australian Workers’ Union (AWU). In thanking the union Semple said he hoped the money would go a long way in helping to politically defeat the government and said the AWU had done a notable thing in assisting to stimulate political activity in working class ranks in New Zealand.¹⁶⁵

Apart from the general ties of unionism it was also significant that Semple was a miner and there was a strong empathy amongst the miners’ unions, which stretched across the Tasman. As James Bennett argued, “In no other occupation group did the bonds of solidarity in the Australasian labour movement rival those of the miners”. The tradition of reciprocal moral and financial support dated back to the 1880s.¹⁶⁶ Semple was not unlike other miners whose solidarity with fellow Australians

¹⁶² *New Zealand Herald*, 28 July 1937.

¹⁶³ *Christchurch Star-Sun*, 27 September 1938.

¹⁶⁴ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 18 November 1909.

¹⁶⁵ *Australian Worker*, 5 February 1914. £1,000 was the amount Semple was instructed to raise.

¹⁶⁶ Bennett, p. 65.

transcended national boundaries. In early 1916 a strike began at Broken Hill, 2,500 miners were affected.¹⁶⁷ At a conscription conference in New Zealand in January 1916 Semple made a powerful appeal for the Broken Hill miners – he moved that the conference express sympathy with the miners and pledge to solicit financial support for them. In February, when two Broken Hill delegates visited New Zealand, Semple accompanied them to meetings throughout New Zealand, delivering stirring speeches of welcome and calling for support.¹⁶⁸ In May 1919 Broken Hill miners were locked out, by March 1920 the miners had been on strike for over ten months and appealed throughout New Zealand and Australia for assistance. The New Zealand Miners' Federation appealed to organised labour and advised that Semple had been requested by the Australasian Miners' Federation to tour New Zealand on behalf of their Australian comrades, "He has agreed to do so and is therefore our accredited representative".¹⁶⁹

Australia also served as a source of ideological ferment and a site of organising for Semple, resulting in a periodic political reinvigoration for him. In late 1916 he crossed the Tasman to fight conscription in Australia. On 30 August 1916 the Australian Prime Minister announced that a conscription referendum would take place on 28 October 1916. The New Zealand Miners' Federation received a request to send delegates to Australia to combat conscription. At their September conference they decided to send one delegate, Semple was selected and was in Australia in early October. After speaking at several anti-conscription meetings in Sydney Semple toured the district where he was born. He spoke at a crowded meeting in Bathurst and his nationality endeared him to the crowd. The local *National Advocate* reported, "An intimation that the speaker was native of Bathurst was responsible for a round of applause".¹⁷⁰ Later back in New Zealand Semple said he was reinvigorated by the Australian no conscription vote. He said his Australian experiences, "had rekindled for him a rebellion in his soul".¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁷ *Evening Post*, 11 January 1916. The miners were demanding a 44hour week and the abolition of the Saturday afternoon shift.

¹⁶⁸ *Maoriland Worker*, 1 March 1916.

¹⁶⁹ *Maoriland Worker*, 24 March 1920.

¹⁷⁰ *National Advocate*, 11 October 1916, Bathurst District Historical Society.

¹⁷¹ *New Zealand Herald*, 4 December 1916.

While Semple's public activity linked him to Australia he also maintained a strong connection to his Australian family. His relationship with his eldest sister, Mary Ann Knight, and her family was particularly strong. This relationship regularly drew Semple back to the district where he was born. On his return from his later Australian trips (1937, 1941 and 1948) his grandchildren recall him talking about his Australian family. They also remember Semple's sisters coming to New Zealand to visit him. Granddaughter Margaret Lange remembered going down to the Wellington wharf and meeting one of his sisters from Australia in the late 1930s.¹⁷²

Probably the closest family connection was with nephew Hamilton Knight with whom Semple developed both a close private and public relationship, their careers followed parallel lines. They both worked as miners and then as union officials and later became parliamentarians. Hamilton entered State Parliament in New South Wales in 1927, and when Labour came into office in 1941 he became a Minister in the State Government.¹⁷³ On one official occasion in Auckland in 1945 Hamilton Knight, Minister of Labour in the New South Wales government, was greeted by Robert Semple, Minister of Works in the New Zealand cabinet.¹⁷⁴ During the 1951 election campaign, again answering questions from the floor about his nationality, Semple said he could have "got into Parliament in Australia – there is no question about that...A nephew of mine is in Parliament over there – its in the blood you see".¹⁷⁵ Hamilton Knight also privately visited the Semples several times. Granddaughter Jackie Smith remembered, as a child, receiving a very special gift of a fountain pen from him.¹⁷⁶ Family photographs and memorabilia in the Knight Family History Collection in Australia are testament to the strong family relationship which continues to this day.

¹⁷² Interview with Margaret Lange and Kay Jones, 30 March 2005.

¹⁷³ Information on Hamilton Knight supplied from the KFHC.

¹⁷⁴ *New Zealand Herald*, 27 August 1945.

¹⁷⁵ *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 17 August 1951.

¹⁷⁶ Interview with Jackie Smith, 8 December 2004.



Figure 9: Hamilton Knight, on left, and Robert Semple. The date and occasion of the photograph is unknown but due to Semple's age it is probably during the 1920s, KFHC.

There is no doubt that Semple's Australian roots were important to him.

Notwithstanding this, Semple and other members of his family, who came to New Zealand and worked in the West Coast mines, were part of a wider Trans-Tasman movement of labour which contained a significant proportion of miners. Philippa Mein Smith and Peter Hempenstall acknowledge miners as particularly visible in the Trans-Tasman labour market.¹⁷⁷ Erik Olssen suggested miners were part of a larger migration, and that "between 1900 and 1913 over 115,000 immigrants entered New Zealand".¹⁷⁸ By 1911 some 50,000 people of Australian birth lived in New Zealand.¹⁷⁸ James Bennett argues that Australians constituted significant proportions of the rank and file in mining communities in New Zealand: "by 1909-10 they represented about 10 per cent in the Buller and Grey areas of the West Coast, over 17 per cent in Waihi and 21 per cent in Inangahua".¹⁷⁹ Two of Semple's nephews, George Henry Knight and Hamilton Knight, came to the West Coast in 1907 and remained there for several years working in the mines around Runanga. Two other Knight brothers, Herbert and

¹⁷⁷ Philippa Mein Smith & Peter Hempenstall, 'Living Together' in Philippa Mein Smith, Peter Hempenstall and Shaun Goldfinch (eds.), *Remaking the Tasman World*, Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2008, pp. 56-80.

¹⁷⁸ Olssen, *The Red Feds*, p. 39.

¹⁷⁹ Bennett, p. 65.

William, also spent time on the Coast. Robert Knight, a cousin from Sofala, also made his home on the West Coast.¹⁸⁰

The movement across the Tasman was however, a two-way process.¹⁸¹ Aside from permanent immigrants there were many sojourners as evidenced by Semple and his nephews, several of whom followed his union and political affiliations. Hamilton Knight became president of the Paparoa Miners' Union and became a member of a New South Wales Labour government after returning permanently to Australia in 1914. George Henry Knight, who was seriously injured in a mining accident in 1912, also returned to Australia.¹⁸² Robert Knight, who married and settled in Runanga, was president of the State Miners' Union in 1917-18 and was later president of the Runanga branch of the Labour Party. He was killed in a mine accident in 1938.¹⁸³ Herbert Knight was a member of the New Zealand police force between September 1911 and November 1912. Enquiries by Knight family members to New Zealand Police National Headquarters conclude Herbert either resigned or was dismissed when called upon to act in the Waihi miners' strike of 1912, as he had been a miner himself and still had sympathy with them.¹⁸⁴ Herbert also returned permanently to Australia. Semple and his family support Bennett's argument that the labour movement was constantly reinvigorated and revitalised by movements of personnel and union ideas back and forth across the Tasman.

For Semple, a further seemingly inescapable connection to Australia was through his language. He was a dynamic speaker with a vast and vivid vocabulary of picturesque words and phrases, he always claimed that practically all his more florid expressions came from his Australian vocabulary.¹⁸⁵ As a natural orator Semple often invented words if there were no dictionary ones to convey exactly what he meant. Some of his more memorable phrases were "snivelling snuffle-busters" for people who

¹⁸⁰ *Grey River Argus*, 12 February 1938.

¹⁸¹ Bennett, p. 65.

¹⁸² MaryAnn and George Knight raised eleven children. Their sons included George Henry, Hamilton, Herbert and William. Details on the movements of the Knight brothers is from information supplied from the KFHC.

¹⁸³ Robert Knight was killed by a fall of stone at Rewanui. He was 51 years old. In an article on his death in the local newspaper, the *Grey River Argus* said Robert Knight was "one of the best-known men in the Labour movement on the West Coast". *Grey River Argus*, 12 February 1938.

¹⁸⁴ Doug Knight to Commissioner of Police, New Zealand 7 January 1987. New Zealand Police National Headquarters to Doug Knight, 15 January 1987, KFHC.

¹⁸⁵ *Evening Post*, 1 February 1955.

complained unduly and impractical critics were “spittoon philosophers”.¹⁸⁶ Certainly some of his language did bear the stamp of his Australian heritage. When describing an unruly mob during the Waihi miners strike in 1912 Semple said, “They got round me like a mob of dingoes”.¹⁸⁷ However, some of his language also had a distinctly New Zealand context. Speaking in Greymouth in 1912 about the Waihi strike Semple said the local press “didn’t have the brains of a whitebait”.¹⁸⁸ For Semple, language was probably more of an unconscious association with Australia. His own unique language may have been more to do with his natural ability to coin phrases on the inspiration of the moment and punctuate his speeches with aphorisms and witticisms rather than an Australian origin although this, no doubt, was an influence at times.

The Trans-Tasman dynamic may well have been especially important for Semple, certainly when compared to another prominent Australian immigrant Michael Joseph Savage. Throughout his life he returned periodically to Australia and the frequency of his visits sustained, perhaps even enhanced his links. Semple spent his impressionable years in Australia, he did not come to New Zealand until aged thirty. This allowed time for bonds of friendship to be formed with fellow Australians and an attachment made to the land. He revisited Australia six times during his lifetime, often to very warm receptions from Australians, as mentioned earlier, which allowed these links to be revitalised. Not enough time elapsed between Semple’s visits for any separation to become permanent, whereas Semple’s colleague Michael Joseph Savage only returned once to his homeland in 1926 after leaving in 1907. For Savage, time did allow the separation to become permanent. As Savage’s biographer Barry Gustafson, remarked he “accepted the permanence of his separation from his family and his native land”.¹⁸⁹ Savage’s isolation from Australia may have been due to personal financial constraints and lack of opportunity but additionally to painful memories of his early life. All Semple’s visits were funded by the organisations he represented (the FOL, Miners’ Federation and the New Zealand government) whereas Savage did not appear to have the same early opportunities as Semple (part of Semple’s duties for the first two federations including organising in Australia) and later, as Prime Minister, not the time. And although Semple also experienced early hardships his memories

¹⁸⁶ *Dominion*, 1 February 1955.

¹⁸⁷ *Maoriland Worker*, 16 November 1912

¹⁸⁸ *Maoriland Worker*, 1 November 1912.

¹⁸⁹ Gustafson, *From the Cradle to the Grave*, p. 131.

may have been intermingled with happier times whereas Savage's were not. Savage simply may not have had the desire to return to Australia whereas Semple did.

Political Influences

Although Semple did have strong ties to Australia the increasing importance of electoral politics later in his life saw him de-emphasise some links which could have been politically damaging to him and construct a new immigration narrative. Over the course of his public career Semple was asked several times the reason why he left Australia. This issue was often raised during election campaigns when his nationality was used to try and discredit him. In 1938 opposition MP H. Kyle alleged Semple was "chased out of Australia". His replies show the explicit construction of politically acceptable family narratives. Semple said his reason for coming to New Zealand was that his wife was a New Zealander, born at Matura and she pined to come back to New Zealand. He said, "It was to please her that I came to New Zealand".¹⁹⁰ During the 1951 campaign, he reiterated this account, "so she is responsible... Don't blame me for not being born in New Zealand – I was not consulted".¹⁹¹ While it is true that Margaret Semple was New Zealand born, the issue of the Victorian strike and the subsequent blacklisting was removed from the equation although it is acknowledged earlier when Semple was closer to radical union politics. In 1911 the labour newspaper, the *Maoriland Worker*, after sketching Semple's participation in the Victorian strike said, "When the strike ended he was forced to leave Australia in order to obtain employment".¹⁹² The blacklisting is also acknowledged in Hickey's 1925 *Red Fed Memoirs*.¹⁹³ By the late 1930s it has disappeared. For example there is no reference in later political electioneering pamphlets such as a 1938 Wellington East campaign publication which simply read, "As a young man, Mr Semple came to New Zealand in 1903".¹⁹⁴ The blacklisting and associated industrial action was replaced by Margaret Semple's birthright which probably did play a part in the original decision, but subsequently became the main focus.

¹⁹⁰ *Christchurch Star-Sun*, 27 September 1938.

¹⁹¹ *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 17 August 1951.

¹⁹² *Maoriland Worker*, 13 October 1911.

¹⁹³ Hickey, pp. 9-10.

¹⁹⁴ 'A Message to the Electors of Wellington East' (Election pamphlet, 1938) KFHC.

By 1938 Semple had also de-emphasised the militant aspect of his Australian and New Zealand unionism and re-formulated it as a more mainstream quest for social justice. In a 1937 newspaper interview Semple said that as a youth he began to ask why men who toiled hard received insufficient wages to feed their families. As a result, “He started to dive into literature to find out, joined a debating society, and thus was led inevitably to trade unionism”.¹⁹⁵ Similarly, during the 1938 general election a pamphlet from his Wellington East campaign included the following,

From the beginnings of his arduous career both underground and on the surface, Mr Semple was an ardent champion of Labour and Humanity in general. ‘If men must toil like this for a living, why can’t the pay and working conditions be better?’ was his plea. And he was never afraid to cry it from the housetops in the face of conservative authority.¹⁹⁶

Semple’s militant rhetoric had been replaced with a language of protection and assurance by 1938. In 1911, during a strike by the Auckland General Labourers, Semple threatened general industrial upheaval in New Zealand in an attempt to coerce the Auckland City Council into compliance with the strikers’ demands.¹⁹⁷ The Auckland Mayor, C.J. Parr, said the city needed protection against the possibility of a few rash men being able to wreck the whole civic organisation.¹⁹⁸ By 1938 Semple projected a personal image of security to the nation’s electors in the general election campaign, his message was “Vote Semple, Vote Security”. In an election pamphlet he said, “All that I am able to do I will do in the best interests of the Dominion...Do not forget that a vote for me is also a vote for the policy and achievements of the Labour government – Progress, prosperity and social security”.¹⁹⁹

Later in life Semple moved away from an association with industrial action as the gaining and holding of political power became paramount for him. By the 1940s he had reversed his stance on strikes, becoming increasingly hostile to union disputes. He even turned his critical attention to Australian militants and in 1947 Semple, the one-time Australian radical unionist, attacked Australian radical unionists. In March 1947

¹⁹⁵ Mowbray, ‘The Real Bob Semple’.

¹⁹⁶ ‘A Message to the Electors of Wellington East’.

¹⁹⁷ *Auckland Weekly News*, 2 November 1911.

¹⁹⁸ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 6 November 1911.

¹⁹⁹ ‘A Message to the Electors of Wellington East’.

he publicly attacked the Federal secretary of the Australian Seamen's union, E. Elliott who had travelled to New Zealand after the Australian vessel the *Wanganella* had run aground in Wellington. The ship had been salvaged but the crew were unhappy and went on strike, refusing to move the vessel. Semple objected to these "wrecking tactics" and criticised Elliott for interfering. The Wellington branch of the Watersiders' union objected to his comments and called for Semple to be removed from office.²⁰⁰ The Australian Seamen's union denounced Semple and said his "anti-working class statements would expose him for what he really was – a reactionary of the first order". Semple retorted that he was a servant of the New Zealand people and "not a tool of a clique in Australia or elsewhere", he was probably referring to Moscow.²⁰¹

However, Semple at this time was not out of step with the views of the Labour leadership. In 1947 the government had amended the IC and A Acts. It now believed that ample machinery for settling disputes was available. Prime Minister Fraser said any section of workers who tried to leap ahead in wages or working conditions would create chaos in industry. Angus McLagan, Minister of Labour, epitomised the Labour leadership's point of view when he said, "Strikes are entirely unnecessary today. There is no need for anybody to strike to get a fair deal or a fair settlement of a legitimate dispute – machinery has been provided".²⁰²

Despite his nationality Semple never individually promoted closer ties with Australia while he was a member of the Labour government. When he returned from Australia in 1937 he did call for a review of trade relations between the two countries, saying it was absurd to have trade barriers between the two Dominions. But he also said he had gathered a good deal of information on irrigation, transport and electric power and on the whole there were few lessons to be learned from Australia, "From what I have seen I am satisfied New Zealand is far ahead of Australia in...public works".²⁰³ He reiterated this in a private letter to Peter Fraser, "I am inclined to think Australia can teach us little...as far as New South Wales is concerned they can teach us nothing

²⁰⁰ *Evening Post*, 5 March 1947.

²⁰¹ *Evening Post*, 8 March 1947.

²⁰² *NZPD*, 277 (1947), p. 794. Also McLagan cited in R. McLennan, 'The Last Years of the First Labour Government, 1945-49', University of Auckland, MA thesis, 1963, p. 231.

²⁰³ *New Zealand Herald*, 2 September 1937.

about the control of transport – we are miles ahead of them in New Zealand...”.²⁰⁴ During his visit in 1941 he did stress closer co-operation between the two countries but this was probably part of a government effort to ensure for New Zealand continuity of supply of war materials from Australia which was the objective of his trip.²⁰⁵ As previously stated, a dual nationality sometimes has the perception of divided loyalties and any individual attempt by Semple to promote Australia itself or closer ties may have opened up a further avenue of criticism. Semple’s sense of discretion and self-preservation plus loyalty to the Labour Party and New Zealand probably combined in this instance.

Semple’s Australian New Zealander persona was a complex identity, even his own representation of the image was sometimes paradoxical - on occasions he highlighted his Australian roots and in other circumstances he downplayed them. As such, perceptions of this image are variable. In New Zealand history he is remembered as a leading figure in the labour movement, but his grandchildren also remember him as an Australian who enjoyed singing *Waltzing Matilda*. Granddaughter Kay Jones said, ‘If I hear *Waltzing Matilda* – I get all choked up thinking of Grandad because he loved that’.²⁰⁶ Granddaughter Jackie Smith also recalled him singing *Waltzing Matilda* with great gusto, especially when Labour won an election.²⁰⁷ Although Semple remained firmly attached to his native soil, his Australian New Zealander identity was a discrete guise and one which he manipulated to construct a publicly acceptable image in a potentially hostile political environment. There is no doubt that Semple became a New Zealander but he just as much remained a product of Australia, although the identification with and deployment of narratives surrounding his Australian roots was tempered by time, place and political expediency. In contrast with the Australian New Zealander which was a discerning guise for Semple another persona by which he identified himself was openly visible and strongly projected by him. The next chapter considers Semple as a Socialist, an image he “claimed from the housetops”.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁴ R. Semple to P. Fraser 26 July 1937, 2318 Nash Papers, NA.

²⁰⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, 25 October 1941. The *Herald* speculated, “It is understood New Zealand’s request is for the automatic allocation of one-sixth of the Australian production of certain specified items”.

²⁰⁶ Interview with Margaret Lange and Kay Jones, 30 March 2005.

²⁰⁷ Interview with Jackie Smith, 8 December 2004.

²⁰⁸ *Western Times*, 16 July 1937.

Chapter Two

“I still claim, from the housetops, that I am a Socialist”: The Socialist.¹

Throughout his life Semple believed socialism held the key to improving the lot of the working class. He vigorously projected his socialist self-image and it consequently features significantly in the historiography and the primary sources. Len Richardson discussed radicalism in the West Coast coal communities prior to 1910 as involving “two young Australian socialists, P.C. Webb and Robert Semple”.² Semple’s name is still synonymous with socialism for many New Zealanders. In 2006 Ashley Bent, in a letter to the editor of the *Sunday Star Times*, argued that dole-bludgers were an insult to socialism, “the architects...such as Peter Fraser, Walter Nash and Bob Semple...I cannot believe any of them would be happy with the present system”.³ Semple helped to form branches of the Socialist Party on the West Coast in 1907. And as a Red Fed his objective was the complete overthrow of the capitalist system by industrial action and its supersession by socialism, the socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange. Thirty years later during a trip to Australia he said, “I still claim, from the housetops, that I am a Socialist”.⁴ But there were occasions when Semple’s view was more circumspect and socialism was framed as the most suitable course of action rather than an ultimate goal. As Transport Minister in 1937, he was accused of trying to socialise all forms of goods transport. He said that a socialist policy was subservient to an efficient transport system, which was the government’s only objective, “The single ownership policy is not being adopted only because it is socialistic but because it is sound business for everyone”.⁵

Socialism is difficult to define. In his study of socialist theories and practices, Anthony Wright emphasised the extraordinary diversity of socialism: “The world is full of socialisms. There is no unitary tradition”.⁶ Semple’s concept of socialism will therefore be explored in this chapter from several perspectives. Examined first will be

¹ *Western Times*, 21 July 1937.

² Richardson, ‘Parties and Political Change’, p. 212.

³ *Sunday Star Times*, 16 July 2006.

⁴ *Western Times*, 21 July 1937.

⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, 7 July 1937.

⁶ Anthony Wright, *Socialisms: Theories and Practices*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 18.

a fundamental aspect of Semple's socialism which was the quest for equality. This was expressed many times in the militant language of class war. Although it was prevalent early in his public life, class war imagery faded significantly when he became part of the Labour government. The tactics employed to achieve socialism, such as militant action, will then be discussed as it was largely within this framework that Semple's radical image was formed and remained a dominant representation of him in New Zealand historiography. However, changes can be seen over time in the examples of Semple's attitude to the Arbitration Court, the strike weapon and to political action when direct action proved a failure. Semple was also a practical socialist. Although he is often remembered for his fiery rhetoric this aspect of his socialism demonstrated his willing, hands-on approach to getting things done. Practical socialism featured the building of public amenities on firstly, a local scale and when in government, on a national level. Finally, another feature of socialism was state ownership of large enterprises such as land and large companies and also state provision of employment. Over his lifetime Semple consistently favoured various forms of public ownership of the means of production.

Why did Semple become a socialist? It is probable Semple heard English socialist, Tom Mann, lecture in Gippsland, Australia, in 1903. Mann was employed as a Labour Party organiser and his aim was to establish Party branches in the country districts in the run-up to the 1903 state elections. Recalling this period in his memoirs Mann said, "Although I was travelling under the auspices of the Labour Party, always and everywhere I advocated Socialism".⁷ In September 1903 Mann held a meeting in Korumburra, the town where Semple was living. The *Korumburra Times* said there was a great crowd "consisting principally of workers". Mann advocated state ownership of land and emphasised equality and co-operation as basic socialist principles.⁸ In a biographical profile of Semple in 1914 the *Maoriland Worker* said Mann had met Semple in Australia, had taken an interest in him, and offered him encouragement in his public speaking.⁹ Although the *Worker* was not specific, there is likely to have been some socialist content in Mann's encouragement of Semple. Semple was receptive to a form of state ownership - while travelling in Western

⁷ Tom Mann, *Tom Mann's Memoirs*, London: The Labour Publishing Co. Ltd, 1923, p. 180.

⁸ *Korumburra Times*, 12 September 1903.

⁹ *Maoriland Worker*, 22 July 1914.

Australia in 1904, as a VCMA delegate, he visited a state hotel. He said he had learned it was the intention of the government of Western Australia not to grant any more public licenses and if any more hotels were necessary they were to be run by the state. Semple said, “This is a step in the right direction”.¹⁰ However, it was only in New Zealand that he developed these ideals and his activism.

In New Zealand, during 1907, Semple and Pat Hickey started to form branches of the Socialist Party on the West Coast – this activity was the combination of both overseas and local influences. Hickey’s influence on Semple was significant - he had returned from America in 1906 and had a “red card” of the American Socialist Party. The two men had met when Hickey gained employment at the State mine where Semple was President of the miners’ union. Hickey said his first meeting with Semple was when they discussed forming a branch of the Socialist Party.¹¹ Historian Peter Clayworth said due to Hickey’s overseas experiences in the militant Western Federation of Miners in America and knowledge of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) he returned to New Zealand with “a determination to stir up class struggle and industrial agitation in New Zealand with the ultimate aim of the destruction of capitalism and the abolition of the wage system”.¹² Semple’s own experience of class conflict, particularly in the Victorian strike, would have made him receptive to Hickey’s activism – he shared the same sense of class injustice apparent in Hickey and many other miners.

Hickey’s American socialism can be seen in the context of a world-wide wave of industrial unrest which Olssen argued “swept the world in the years before the first World War”.¹³ New Zealand was fast becoming part of a global activism of workers whose leaders preached class war, direct action, industrial unionism and One Big Union as the means for achieving a socialist utopia. Clayworth suggested that early in the twentieth century New Zealand was one point of arrival and departure in an imperial and global labour market. As Olssen argued, Semple was sensitive to the new spirit of unrest and began to articulate it.

¹⁰ *Outtrim News*, 20 January 1904.

¹¹ Hickey, p. 10.

¹² Peter Clayworth, ‘Pat Hickey – the Making of a Revolutionary’, Talk delivered at Blackball Cribtime Strike Centenary Celebrations 23 March 2008.

¹³ Olssen, *The Red Feds*, p. xiv.

Rhetoric and the Language of Class War

At the heart of Semple's notion of his socialism was a quest for equality that was articulated in his early career in the militant language of class war. Although colourful language, not confined to militancy, was a notable part of Semple's overall public image and was not limited to professions of socialism. Equality is perhaps the key socialist value. As Wright suggested, "Socialists, from a variety of perspectives, have anchored their commitment to equality in a view of the equal worth of all individuals and have presented their egalitarian proposals as extensions and applications of this basic position".¹⁴ When Semple was asked later in life what set him on his life's path inequality was a significant factor. During a visit to Australia in 1937 Semple answered his own question "Why did I become a Socialist" by saying "I came to the conclusion there was something wrong fundamentally with society when there was such cruel inequality between people".¹⁵ In a newspaper profile in New Zealand in the same year he said as a youth he became aware of social injustices which compelled men to work long hours in the mines for subsistence wages and "What, he asked himself, was the reason for the apparent inequalities".¹⁶

The early socialism of Tom Mann, which Semple was probably exposed to, emphasised equality and co-operation as basic socialist principles. Discussing poverty in the world Mann said in Korumburra in 1903,

The whole trouble arose through wealth being unequally distributed... The socialist believed in equality in every way – equality of opportunity, and he did not wish to push himself ahead by placing his foot on the neck of another. There was no selfishness in socialism – each was working for the good of all.

Mann also said, "Socialism was a state in which people co-operated instead of indulging in cut-throat competition as in the present state of affairs". He argued the modern capitalist and competitive system was essentially a bad system and said many countries were adopting the co-operative system "which was collectivism pure and simple". Although there was reference to class, "one class of the community were

¹⁴ Wright, p. 33.

¹⁵ *Western Times*, 21 July 1937.

¹⁶ Mowbray, 'The Real Bob Semple'.

getting many of the luxuries of the world and the others were getting less than a sufficiency of the necessities of life”, there was no suggestion of a harder notion of class war at this time.¹⁷

In New Zealand Semple’s early statements on socialism included the basic premise of equality. At the second meeting of the Dunollie branch of the Socialist Party in 1907 he suggested, “socialism was a means whereby all persons would be equal and not as in the present day where class predominates. What was wanted was the workers of the country to co-operate...and to have everything worked by and for the good of the people”.¹⁸ During the drive for the miners’ federation in 1908 Semple said, “The workers should pull together and capture political power, as the worker who is the producer was entitled to a fair share of the good things of this earth”.¹⁹

Valerie Smith suggested socialism was, for some, “a cry for social and political recognition”.²⁰ In an Australian context Andrew Metcalf has argued the wage-labour/capital relationship in the coalfields involved a relentless struggle for self-respect, the work process tended to dehumanise the miners.²¹ Semple certainly viewed the issues involved in the 1908 Blackball strike as a challenge to the miners’ humanity and called for social justice. He chaired a public meeting in Dunollie which was addressed by the Blackball strikers. Appealing for support Semple said it was a “disgrace to mankind” the treatment that had been meted out to those men by Mr Leitch (mine manager) and moved a resolution to support the Blackball union which was carried unanimously.²² Following the strike letters appeared in the local press predicting a black future for the labour movement in the form of a general strike. Disagreeing with the strike predictions Semple reiterated the unjust treatment of the Blackball miners saying that the men would never have struck if they had been treated fairly. He predicted the future was bright for the labour movement, emphasising that

¹⁷ *Korumburra Times*, 12 September 1903.

¹⁸ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 19 November 1907.

¹⁹ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 6 August 1908.

²⁰ Smith, p. 82.

²¹ Andrew Metcalf, *For Freedom and Dignity: Historical Agency and Class Structures in the Coalfields of NSW*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988, Chapter 5.

²² *Greymouth Evening Star*, 2 March 1908.

never before had labour manifested such a spirit of solidarity and class-consciousness.²³

Semple occasionally used Christian rhetoric in arguments between socialism and organised religion. During the 1908 Blackball strike, in a letter to the editor of the *Greymouth Evening Star*, Archdeacon York of Greymouth appealed to the strikers to maintain the principles of law and order and return to work. He said that the men should settle their grievance by constitutional methods and referred to the “misguided outside sympathisers”.²⁴ Semple was not impressed by the Archdeacon’s “uncharitable and unchristian” letter and replied that it was the duty of every true trade unionist to assist each other in the time of trouble,

I have seen the innocent children starved to death by the cast iron rule of capitalism and I have never had the pleasure of seeing very many of the Rev gentleman’s profession protesting in the interest of the poor and oppressed...strange to say, as soon as the worker makes an effort to fight for his rights he is denounced left and right.

Semple then offered the Archdeacon some of his own advice saying that, “If he follows in the footsteps of the Child of Nazareth I feel sure he will not be found denouncing or abusing the poorer members of his race”.²⁵ Some members of the community objected to the criticism of Archdeacon York by Semple and other socialists and continued to portray them as anti-religious.²⁶ “Fairplay” said in the *Greymouth Evening Star*, “Why is it that socialists quote scriptures in arguing their cause when three parts of them are out and out pagan...If socialism is to succeed it must be in a better class of men to preach it to try and embrace the sympathy of all, teach us, but don’t shock us”.²⁷

In 1911 Rev. R. Wilson spoke in Runanga on “Wealth, War and Wisdom”. The local press said the lecture had aroused much interest with a clergyman entering into the heart of the Socialist camp at Runanga and giving an address on Christian Socialism as opposed to Agnostic Socialism. After his speech Wilson was questioned and asked

²³ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 3 April 1908.

²⁴ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 28 March 1908.

²⁵ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 31 March 1908.

²⁶ The vice-president of the Blackball union, Mr Fox, had also criticised Archdeacon York in a letter to the editor.

²⁷ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 31 March 1907.

to explain the attitude of bishops and other church dignitaries in upholding slavery, in propagating war, holding shares in breweries and sweating institutions. Wilson replied that many of these things represented a want of Christianity and were not the fault of Christianity. At the end of the meeting Paddy Webb thanked the speaker and said although he could not agree with some of the Reverend's points he appreciated the effort. In agreement, Semple said that if other ministers would only "come out of their coward's castle and face the problem in a similar way much good would be done". He also could not endorse all Mr Wilson's positions, but admired his sincerity. He said "his complaint was not with Christianity, but with Churchianity".²⁸ Semple later said he opposed the hypocrisy of the churches and referred to the Archbishop of Canterbury's wife in christening a warship created for slaughter, while on Sunday evening the Archbishop preached to the people, "Love ye one another".²⁹

Semple's later views on Christianity reflected a similar perspective. During the 1935 mayoral campaign he addressed criticism that he was an atheist. He responded that he had never expressed atheistic beliefs, indeed he had said on countless platforms that if the people of the world followed the philosophy of Jesus there would be no poverty, nor usury, and no war, neither would there be war mongers, "I have and will to the end of the journey believe the teachings of Christ".³⁰ Jackie Smith recalled that her grandfather did not go to Church regularly but had a firm belief in God. Remarking on Semple's Church attendance she said, "He was a birth, death and marriage man".³¹

Semple's language was very often threatening, in this way he created the image of a radical which was so successful that he struggled to shed it later in his public career. In an extreme case Semple's aggressive rhetoric during the 1911 election campaign led to claims he and Australian socialist Harry Scott Bennett were anarchists. Immediately prior to the general election Scott Bennett, who personified militant labour, and Professor Walter Mills, who personified moderate labour, debated their opposing positions in the main centres. Labour elements who supported Mills were bitter antagonists of Scott Bennett and Semple and did their best to disparage them. An article culled from the *'Voice of Labour'*, the official organ of the Auckland

²⁸ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 13 February 1911.

²⁹ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 25 April 1911.

³⁰ *Evening Post*, 4 May 1935.

³¹ Interview with Jackie Smith, 8 December 2004.

NZLP, was used as an advertisement in the local West Coast press. The sub headlines included “Destruction of life, property and machinery openly advocated on street corners”. During a meeting in Wellington Semple was accused of inciting violence with his vehement language “Semple’s speech from beginning to end was a torrent of vituperation and a direct appeal to all the lowest and basest passions of his audience”. Semple denied this and there is no report of violence in the Wellington *Evening Post*.³² The article suggested Semple had verbally attacked Professor Mills’s Unity scheme (Mills was the organiser for the Labour Party and was touring the country with a scheme for a United Labour Party) and in a direct incitement of his audience to use violence against all those connected with Mills, said, “We will deal with these people mentally or physically”.³³ It alleged that some workers who were campaigning for Mills were attacked on the street and said, “We deliberately charge Semple...together with the whole of the Anarchist outfit in New Zealand, the concern that calls itself New Zealand Socialist Party, and that other bluffing concern that calls itself the...Federation of Labour, with being responsible for this wanton outrage”.³⁴ The article said one of the workers attacked was a member of the staff of the *Voice of Labour* and probably the writer of the article therefore the animosity was personal. To this and other criticism Semple replied, “I don’t intend to answer them (his critics) as life is too short and time too valuable. If one stopped to kick at every cur that yelped at him he would never accomplish any task”.³⁵

As militant socialism gained pace Semple’s public position frequently included expressions of class-consciousness.³⁶ When Semple and other socialists in Runanga attacked the English monarchy in 1910 they were accused of disloyalty, both by the local press and by citizens who wrote to the local newspapers. On 9 May 1910 news of King Edward VII’s death reached New Zealand; a press sub-headline declared “People Stupefied with Grief”.³⁷ Several days later there was a mining disaster at

³² *Greymouth Evening Star*, 5 December 1911.

³³ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 2 December 1911.

³⁴ *Voice of Labour*, 3 November 1911.

³⁵ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 3 January 1912.

³⁶ Amongst the plurality of socialist traditions is the incorporation of revolutionary class action, largely drawn from Karl Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*. In Marx’s *Manifesto* there is a class character in his model of social change, Marx’s units are not individuals but classes. Revolution as the method of social change was constant and integral and the revolution would be brought about by class conflict with the exploited class (finally aware of its exploited position) rising up and taking over.

³⁷ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 9 May 1910.

Whitehaven in Cumberland, England. A fire followed an explosion and 137 miners were entombed in a burning mine.³⁸ Labour organisations met to establish a relief fund for victims.³⁹ Semple was among several speakers who objected to the press giving more prominence to the death of the king than to the working class tragedy. The Chairman J. Rollett said, “More real sorrow was experienced by the working class as a result of the death of their comrades in Whitehaven than by the death of a monarch whose life and interests were opposed to theirs”. Semple denied the charge of disloyalty. He said he was loyal to his class and humanity as a whole but “Unlike others he was not going to shed crocodile tears or speak with bated breath of any deceased old gentleman who had reached his allotted time span and departed for glory...It was to the people alone he claimed allegiance...Human love was wanted not for dead Monarchs but for living millions”.⁴⁰

This attitude provoked criticism of the Runanga socialists in the local press. While commending the Whitehaven cause “Loyalty” said, “The report contains a great deal of highly inflammable if not treasonable utterances from these Socialist orators who must have allowed their zeal somewhat to overstep their discretion”.⁴¹ A *Greymouth Evening Star* editorial also voiced its disapproval, “Such uncalled for and unjustifiable outburst...do an immeasurable amount of harm to the labour movement”.⁴² Notwithstanding the controversy the appeal set up for the Whitehaven disaster was met with generous responses. But when the owner of the mine, Lord Lonsdale, had given a donation to the English relief fund of £1,000 the *Greymouth Evening Star* which had been previously critical of the socialists commented,

The gift does not seem to be recklessly extravagant in view of the fact that the dead miners have left about 80 widows and 200 children...It is hardly surprising that many regard the present industrial conditions as altogether out of harmony with the needs of modern civilisation.⁴³

³⁸ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 14 May 1910.

³⁹ The meeting was held under the joint auspices of the State Miners’ Union, General Labourers’, Runanga Socialist Party Branch and the New Zealand Federation of Labour.

⁴⁰ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 25 May 1910.

⁴¹ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 27 May 1910.

⁴² *Greymouth Evening Star*, 28 May 1910.

⁴³ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 9 July 1910.

There was clearly some sympathy in the community with the views of Semple and the other socialists.

To some members of the Runanga community it seemed as if Semple was imposing an authoritarian socialism on them, denying free speech to those with opposing views. Semple was accused of hijacking a 1911 election meeting of Webb's opponent, Arthur Guinness, by putting forward his own views and denouncing others. An interjector, C. Dobson, objected to this and when the audience chastised him he claimed that free speech was being denied, "There are men in Runanga who wish to stifle all thought that does not coincide with their own".⁴⁴ A. Fisker echoed these sentiments:

In Runanga I am not allowed to have an opinion of my own,
I am supposed to think the same as a few so-called revolutionaries.
If anyone thinks different he must think quietly, if he thinks aloud
he is called a scab or a traitor. The so-called Socialist and revolutionaries
of this place are trying to take away from a few of us what our
forefathers fought so nobly for, viz freedom of thought and speech.

Although Semple did not comment at the time, Hickey did later concede that members of the FOL were intolerant: "We were so convinced that our tactic was right that it was inconceivable to us that any intelligent worker could possibly do other than rally to our cause".⁴⁵ This dogmatic manner did lead to further claims of a dictatorial and authoritarian attitude later in Semple's life.⁴⁶

In 1913 Semple's language gave the government grounds for his arrest. In late November Semple along with several other strike leaders, George Bailey, Peter Fraser, Harry Holland and W.T. Young, were arrested and convictions were secured for the men largely on the grounds they had incited others.⁴⁷ Since he was viewed as a dangerous leader, Semple's sureties were amongst the highest required by the courts. He was initially charged with two offences. The first was that on 1 November at Wellington, he incited unknown persons to resist constables stationed in Wellington in execution of their duty. The second charge was that on 1 November he incited

⁴⁴ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 9 December 1911.

⁴⁵ Hickey, p. 30.

⁴⁶ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 15 December 1911.

⁴⁷ Richard S. Hill, 'The police, the state, and 'lawless law'', in Melanie Nolan, *Revolution: The 1913 Great Strike in New Zealand*, Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2005, pp. 79-98.

persons to commit a breach of the peace by using the words, "...I hope that there will be no shooting, but if any is done and Cullen will come out I undertake to shoot him first". George Bailey, not perceived as a leader, was bound over to keep the peace for 12 months in his own recognisance of £200 and two sureties of £200 each. Fraser was bound over for same time with the same sureties.⁴⁸ Semple was bound over to keep the peace for 12 months in his personal bond of £500 and two others of £500 each.⁴⁹

A fresh charge of speaking seditious words was brought against Semple in connection with one of his Auckland speeches. It was alleged the speech made on 30 October included, "If they use violence we also will club them as they club us... These people have batons to club you, and I ask you, for the defence of your characters, of your manhood and of your wives and families to be ready to club them back again". Bail was allowed for this charge of £250 and two sureties of £250 each.⁵⁰ Semple was released on 10 December.⁵¹ Thus, the total sureties and bail amounted to £2,250 which Semple later boasted in Australia in 1914 was a much higher sum than the Australian bushranger Ned Kelly.⁵² In December the sentencing judge said Semple did not advocate aggression but merely resistance to force and that did not justify imprisonment.⁵³ He dismissed the charge of incitement to resist the police constables, but convicted Semple of citing to resist special constables and fined him £20, and £4 18 s costs. Semple paid his fine immediately.⁵⁴

As Miners' agent in 1915 Semple's militant and egalitarian objective had a narrower focus, at this time arguing for better wages for miners. Touring the coalfields at the end of 1915 Semple found miners' economic conditions were worsening. In August the State miners sent a resolution to Prime Minister Massey stating that "many members...are unable to purchase the simple necessities of life".⁵⁵ Speaking on the

⁴⁸ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 29 November 1913.

⁴⁹ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 5 December 1913. John Payne, MP, and Christian Imandt were the sureties for £500 each. Elected in 1911, John Payne was the independent Labour MP for Grey Lynn. He championed the strikes of 1912 and 1913. Although I have searched the Wellington and Auckland electoral rolls for the period it is unclear who Semple's three other sureties were.

⁵⁰ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 6 December 1913. Chas. Johnson and Anton Brogen provided the bail of £250 each.

⁵¹ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 10 December 1913.

⁵² The Australian government had offered a bounty of £1,000 for Ned Kelly.

⁵³ *Evening Post*, 20 December 1913.

⁵⁴ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 22 December 1913.

⁵⁵ *Maoriland Worker*, 25 August 1915.

new Miners' Federation in Otago Semple said the organisation was determined to protect the lives of its members and "to strive for a greater share of life's necessities on the other hand".⁵⁶

Semple was imprisoned for sedition in 1916 and spent nine months in gaol. After his release he wrote a 32-page unpublished booklet entitled 'An Indictment and Challenge to the National Government'. It was among only a handful of booklets produced by Semple during his lifetime indicating he was more comfortable as a speaker rather than a writer. The notion of equality and the call for social justice permeate the booklet. Semple argued a real national policy would include the conscription of wealth, which would then have the effect of "Equal service, equal sacrifice". He condemned the government for allowing an enormous rise in the price of such commodities which prevented the people from obtaining the necessities of life except at "famine prices". He was critical of a tax on tea when other luxuries such as imported cars were untouched and yet the minister of finance had the presumption to characterise the workers' demand for the conscription of wealth as "legalised robbery". Semple asserted that if it was "legalised robbery to conscript the wealth of a nation, then it was legalised murder to conscript human flesh and blood". He protested at the treatment received by the miners "the underground slaves of New Zealand" and defended their patriotism. He dared the government to put patriotism to the test – he challenged MPs to give up their income in excess of £3 per week, the proceeds to go to the soldiers' dependents. Semple claimed his principles were right and just and were destined to free the world from the vices of the capitalist system.⁵⁷ However, he continued to temper the message to particular contexts. His maiden speech in Parliament, delivered in 1919, reflected an awareness of the political environment, militancy and class war were downplayed amidst a call for a more egalitarian New Zealand. During the 1919 parliamentary session the Labour Party was frequently accused of disloyalty, extremism and revolutionary plotting. Although, at times, Semple was happy to accept the revolutionary tag, as an individual the language of class war appeared to be considered more appropriate in an industrial context than in Parliament. He said,

⁵⁶ *Otago Daily Times*, 15 September 1915.

⁵⁷ Robert Semple, 'An Indictment and Challenge to the National Government', Peter Butler Papers 89-119-1/3/2, WTU.

the Labour Party has not come to this House to perpetuate a class war or to create class division...The Labour Party is anxious that a policy should be adopted that will obliterate the class line. There is enough wealth, and plenty to spare for all in this country...there is a place at Nature's table for all if this country is managed on reasonable and democratic lines.⁵⁸

Harry Holland had also entered parliament in a by-election two months before Semple. He told Parliament, "We of the Labour Party have come to lift political fighting to an intellectual plane...Ours is the work of social transformation...to end all class warfare by ending the causes of class warfare".⁵⁹ Semple's comments can also be seen in a similar light, speaking in Wanganui in June 1919 Semple said it was untrue that Labour stood for the policy of force. He said, "Labour did not desire a class war – it was here now and Labour wanted to see it ended. He would like to see a revolution, but of mind and heart. Labour appealed to the higher human faculties to bring about a better order of things, not to brute force".⁶⁰

After completing the Orongorongo tunnel Semple became organiser for the New Zealand Freezing Workers' Federation in 1924.⁶¹ The language of class warfare was toned down while Semple was an MP but when advocating unity in an industrial context 'class-consciousness' appeared as a more appropriate term for him. He continued to preach the gospel of unity and believe in the transformative power of socialist propaganda. Reporting in the *Worker* he stressed to the freezing workers the urgency of healing internal divisions in their organisation and the need to create a greater spirit of comradeship. He also said their job was to build the organisation "upon a class-conscious oasis with a full knowledge of our historic mission ...members must fully understand their economic position to do this therefore more time must be spent in the future in education and propaganda work along these lines". Petty jealousies divided the organisation and he suggested one of the cures was the abolition of the wage-system. At Westfield on 1 April 1924 he emphasised the growing force of modern capitalism and the "octopus-like grip that it possesses". Semple argued it was his duty as organiser to deal with Trade Union issues as well as

⁵⁸ *Maoriland Worker*, 24 September 1919.

⁵⁹ *Maoriland Worker*, 10 December 1919.

⁶⁰ *Evening Post*, 11 June 1919.

⁶¹ He commenced his duties on 31 March 1924.

discuss with the freezing workers the more important questions that were really the economic root cause of all their grievances.⁶²

Not all freezing workers appreciated Semple's socialist message. At the annual meeting of the National Executive in 1925 Semple noted his awareness that his form of propaganda was considered unsatisfactory in some quarters. However, he reiterated his view that the organisation needed men with class-conscious convictions and members needed to be made aware how they were being robbed under the present system. No progress would be made without those teachings. Semple wanted to know if the organisation was not happy with his propaganda, what sort did they want. The issue was discussed in the Federation Executive but no action taken. Later addressing the Canterbury District Union Semple said at the last National Executive meeting there had been an effort to terminate his engagement "Unquestionably, this would have suited the employers who had intimated to officers of the organisation that it was the worst days work the Freezing Workers Federation had done, when they appointed him as organiser". A closed meeting of the union later endorsed the propaganda Semple delivered. Mr. F. Hansen said he had heard that in the North Island some members complained that Semple was introducing too much socialism. But he had heard Semple on several occasions and said he heartily agreed with all that he had uttered.⁶³

During the same period, when Semple spoke as a member of the Labour Party, he tended to emphasise democracy stressing evolutionary rather than revolutionary change. Electoral considerations and appealing to a wide cross section of voters were becoming increasingly important for Semple and the Labour Party. As O'Farrell has written, "In practice, the militant socialist leaders of the NZLP had chosen to seek their social revolutionary ends by constitutional action within the accepted political framework".⁶⁴ Semple had clashed periodically with Communists since the establishment of the party in 1921 and in an effort to distance himself, and the Labour Party, from them highlighted the differences between democratic socialism and revolutionary Communism. Interviewed in 1927 he said, "I believe in socialism and

⁶² *New Zealand Worker*, 30 April 1924.

⁶³ Canterbury Freezing Workers and Related Trades Union MB 9 [1/4] Minutes 1925, Macmillan Brown Library, University of Canterbury.

⁶⁴ O'Farrell, *Harry Holland: Militant Socialist*, p. 108.

the democratic method and it is because these are imperilled by the tactics of deceitfulness and the policy of civil war advocated by the Communists that I oppose them".⁶⁵ He was speaking after Communist actions were blamed for Labour's disappointing 1927 municipal election campaign.⁶⁶ Among the candidates nominated for the City Council by the Wellington Labour Representation Committee (LRC) was Fred Freeman who, despite a pledge of loyalty to the Labour Party, later admitted he was a member of the Communist Party (CP).⁶⁷ Speaking as Labour Party president Semple said Communists sought to disrupt the Labour movement, and to be more effective they were "sneaking" into Labour Party branches and other organisations by disguising their real intentions. He argued that once in trade unions Communists then subordinated the interests of these bodies to the CP. He stressed the Labour movement had nothing in common with the tactics and policy pursued by Communists who stood for violence, force and dictatorship. In contrast the Labour movement he stood for believed in democratic control, both within its own organisation and as a matter of public policy.⁶⁸

Despite his antagonism towards the Communists, Semple upheld democratic principles several months later when he supported Communists holding office in the Wellington General Labourers' union - he had become secretary during 1927. In November 1927 an election of officers was held and two names, Fred Freeman and Mr Robinson, were excluded from committee nominations on the grounds they were Communists. Subsequently, union member Robert Francis Semple, Semple's eldest son, moved to rescind the exclusion motion. He said although he had nothing in common with the tactics or methods adopted by the CP he thought "the embargo placed on these men an unfair handicap". Several members opposed his motion citing the destructive tactics pursued by the Communists. Semple supported his son's motion. He said he detested the methods pursued by the Communists but

he did not believe in handicapping anyone in the Labour movement, sealing their lips or crippling their chances. He

⁶⁵ *Evening Post*, 14 May 1927.

⁶⁶ "The Labour Party's organisation was not good on this occasion, and apathy being met with on all hands, while the trouble among the seamen and Communist trickery created difficulties of an extraordinary character". *New Zealand Worker*, 4 May 1927. Labour lost a seat on the Wellington City Council going from three seats to two.

⁶⁷ *New Zealand Worker*, 27 April 1927.

⁶⁸ *Evening Post*, 14 May 1927.

believed that each member of the union should be free and unfettered from any embargo whatever and that his value should be left entirely to the judgement of his fellow workers.⁶⁹

The motion was passed. Semple's attitude at this time is in stark contrast to his later views, particularly during the 1940s when he harshly criticised Communist union officials and quashed their legitimacy more fundamentally.

Although down playing class war as a Labour MP in 1919, when Semple was elected MP for Wellington East in 1928 the language of class and his condemnation of capitalism underpinned much of his criticism of the government. He believed that government legislation introduced to combat the depression was perpetuating class division. At this time class war was part of his repertoire as an opposition politician, which was what Semple excelled at. In 1933 when the government introduced the Sales Tax Bill Semple said in Parliament, "I submit that never in the history of the Dominion or any other country in the civilised world has a more unjust and savage tax of a class nature been imposed on a suffering people".⁷⁰ Semple's language was similar to his colleagues in opposing the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Amendment Bill in 1932. Peter Fraser said those responsible for the bill were "fostering and encouraging class war of the worst possible description".⁷¹ In 1933 Semple criticised the government during a reading of a Finance Bill for taxing nurses and midwives but not taxing twenty-seven public servants who received between them £152,658 when they retired.⁷² Semple blamed capitalism,

The state of society today is nothing more nor less than one of pure and unadulterated anarchy... The Socialist believes that the natural resources of the earth belong to mankind, that the things that are created by the skill and genius and collective effort of mankind should belong to mankind, that no one should starve in a land of plenty.

He said that the capitalist system permitted the most unscrupulous to survive at the expense of the misery and privation of the rest of the people. He blamed monopolies

⁶⁹ Minute Book Wellington General Labourers' Union, Peter Butler Papers, 2004-204-2/1, WTU.

⁷⁰ *NZPD*, 235 (1933), p. 515.

⁷¹ Fraser cited in Brown, *The Rise of Labour*, p. 153.

⁷² *NZPD*, 235 (1933), pp. 1138-1139.

and trusts both in the monetary and outside world for throttling civilisation “They have a stranglehold on humanity”.⁷³

Semple’s attack on the economic system focussed on large monopolies, banks in particular. From 1919 the Labour Party had advocated the establishment of a state bank but also during the depression the Party believed large banking monopolies had contributed to the economic distress – Semple’s criticism was following Party lines. Debating the Finance Bill in 1931 he said “It can be safely said that one of the difficulties facing the world today is the money trusts which have developed into a titanic monopoly and wields a tremendous power over nations”.⁷⁴ During the Mortgagors and Tenants Relief Bill he argued that the

call for equality of sacrifice should reach the money-lender as well as the farmer, the business man and the worker. If equality of sacrifice means anything, it means that we must each carry the same amount of the load – that every man should shoulder the equivalent of his neighbour’s share.

He said the money-lender had not accepted his share of the sacrifice.⁷⁵ During a finance debate in 1933 Semple again emphasised equality as the key value of socialism,

What is the philosophy of the modern Socialist? It is... that man-power...applied to the raw materials of nature, produces all real wealth. And if that is true, what is wrong with the people who create the wealth having a right to a legitimate share of that wealth? Will anybody suggest for a moment that the natural gifts around us should be solely the property of the few, while the many go without...We want common ownership and control of the wealth created by mankind for mankind. That is the goal that the modern Socialist is striving for; and we will fight on till we get it.⁷⁶

When Labour became the government its leaders pursued an egalitarian ideal. For example, Labour tolerated no racial distinction in the eligibility for pensions. The 1938 Social Security Act saw the growing numbers of older Maori become

⁷³ *NZPD*, 236 (1933), p. 250-251.

⁷⁴ *NZPD* 227 (1931), pp. 314-315.

⁷⁵ *NZPD*, 231 (1932), p. 615.

⁷⁶ *NZPD*, 237, 1933 pp. 337-339.

automatically eligible for the first time since 1901 for the old-age pension.⁷⁷ As Minister of Public Works Semple introduced a new agreement for public works employees which included in the agreement was a pay increase for Maoris from about 7s.6d per day to the same rate as that for Europeans.⁷⁸ Semple abolished relief work and the subsistence rates of pay. He reclassified all Public Works Department job as standard works which meant an immediate pay rise for all employees. Hence, with the belief that they were creating an egalitarian society the language of class disappeared from the vocabulary of many in the Labour government, including Semple.

Militancy vs the Arbitration Court

Also changing over time was Semple's attitude to the Arbitration Court. In 1907 the socialism advocated by both Semple and Hickey was seen as radical partially due to their antagonism to the Arbitration Court and their advocacy of the strike as a weapon of the working class. Their attitude was in stark contrast to the prevailing view of arbitration in West Coast unionism at the time. Hickey said in his *Red Fed Memoirs*, that every miners' official on the West Coast believed that arbitration and unionism went hand in hand.⁷⁹ As previously stated, when Semple came to New Zealand he was not as radical as alleged by O'Farrell. Semple's attitude by 1907 was a change from his earlier perspective.

Why did Semple express dissatisfaction with the Court in 1907 rather than in 1904 when he arrived in New Zealand? Semple answered this question in an interview in the *International Socialist* in 1912. He said that during his first years in New Zealand he made

a special study of the Arbitration Act and the procedure of the Court before attempting to condemn it in any shape or form, and in due time came to the conclusion that in its effect it was both degrading and humiliating in the extreme to the workers, and that as a court of justice it was a mere mockery.⁸⁰

Semple may have been expressing his own disillusionment with the Arbitration Court. When Tom Mann lectured in Korumburra in 1903 he praised New Zealand's

⁷⁷ Bassett, *The State in New Zealand 1840-1984*, p. 212.

⁷⁸ *AJHR*, 1936, D 1A, p. p. 2-3

⁷⁹ Hickey, p. 7.

⁸⁰ *International Socialist*, 9 March 1912.

arbitration system: “Mr Pember Reeves had the courage to make arbitration compulsory...New Zealand was the pioneer country in this direction...In 98% of the cases it was generally admitted that perfect success had been achieved...the colony had never been more prosperous”.⁸¹ The newspaper recorded that Mann’s speech was punctuated with cheers from the audience. Semple may have held high hopes when he came to New Zealand but between 1904-07 found, like many other workers, that the Arbitration Court failed to increase wages with the cost of living. Olssen also argued Semple had an “instinctive sympathy with the victims of injustice”.⁸² Following his experiences in Australia, Semple probably hoped that he might find justice in New Zealand (which for him was greater equality both in wages and living conditions). When he perceived that workers in both countries were not receiving justice, a more radical form of socialism became the vehicle through which he believed this could be acquired.

Inextricably linked to the socialist agitation on the West Coast was the Blackball strike in February 1908. Now working at Blackball, Pat Hickey exceeded the fifteen minutes for lunch or “crib” inserted into the miners’ award by the Court of Arbitration. Ordered by the manager to return to work Hickey refused and along with six other miners, he was sacked. A strike began which became the most serious in New Zealand for many years. After eleven weeks the Blackball Coal Company, despite the support of the Court, capitulated. The settlement was a triumph for the strikers who gained every point for which they fought. As Erik Olssen argued, “Hickey and the Blackball miners had discredited the Court, redeemed strike action, and placed industrial unionism and solidarity high on the political agenda”.⁸³

Although Semple advocated the radical new socialist structure for society he also projected a non-confrontational method of attainment. During the drive for a federation of miners in 1908, and following the Denniston and Blackball miners withdrawing from the Arbitration Court after the Blackball strike, rumours of a coal strike abounded. Semple said it had been circulated that the whole aim of the federation was to cause a huge strike when it was thoroughly organised but this was

⁸¹ *Korumburra Times*, 12 September 1903.

⁸² Olssen, *The Red Feds*, p. 19.

⁸³ Erik Olssen. ‘Patrick Hodgens Hickey 1882-1930’. *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, updated 7 July 2005 URL: <http://www.dnzb.govt.nz/>

not the case as they did not want to settle their industrial disputes by the barbarous methods of strikes. He stressed that the desired change would be done constitutionally.⁸⁴ Speaking at Otira Semple said, “The main object was to steer clear of such things as strikes, and aim at industrial peace”.⁸⁵ In the early days of advocating for a miners’ federation this was a strategy of tactical language employed by Semple to gain the support of those unions who still believed in the Arbitration system which outlawed strikes.

The Miners’ Federation became the Federation of Labour (FOL) and as organiser between 1910-13 Semple and his Red Fed colleagues preferred direct negotiations with employers rather than waiting for the Arbitration Court to improve workers living standards. Unions that joined the FOL often cancelled their registrations under the I.C. & A Act.⁸⁶ Semple and the FOL improved award conditions for many workers - in January 1912 they negotiated a new agreement between the waterside workers and the shipping companies during which they secured major gains for the wharfies with an across-the-board increase in pay of 2d an hour and differential rates for different types of work. The *Greymouth Evening Star* suggested that this success would mean a considerable accession to the ranks of the FOL and a corresponding blow to the Arbitration Court. Richardson suggested the FOL was becoming an acceptable alternative to the arbitration system.⁸⁷ To combat the growing influence of Semple and the FOL some employers then refused to recognise or negotiate with any union not registered within the arbitration system, and encouraged the formation of breakaway arbitrationist unions. Gustafson argued that arbitrationist unions, which were first seen in Auckland, “created a precedent for subsequent action against the Waihi miners in 1912 and the waterside workers in 1913”.⁸⁸ At Waihi the miners’ union had cancelled its registration under the Arbitration Act but a separate union to cover engine-drivers with a minority of members had been formed. Subsequently the majority of miners struck in protest. The future of Arbitration itself was on the line and the Waihi strike was a test case for the FOL.

⁸⁴ *Greymouth Evening star*, 3 April 1908.

⁸⁵ *Greymouth Evening star*, 6 August 1908.

⁸⁶ Noel Woods, *Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration in New Zealand*, Wellington: Govt. Printer, 1963, p. 90.

⁸⁷ Richardson, ‘Robert Semple’.

⁸⁸ Gustafson, *Labour’s Path to Political Independence*, p. 59.

In a meeting with the Minister of Labour, the Hon. G. Laurenson, on the Waihi strike, Semple and representatives from the FOL argued that the Arbitration Act was being used undemocratically.⁸⁹ According to the *Evening Post* Paddy Webb, FOL president, said they wanted to protest against the Arbitration Act which, they understood, was never intended to be compulsory. Semple said, “unions had been insulted and defeated and decided to get away from the Court, they had cancelled their registration, but the minority had formed a new union and dragged the majority back to the Court”. He said the Federation was not out to break the law; all they wanted was that the workers should receive more consideration and get better conditions for themselves and their families. The argument offered to the Minister was that the Act, which permitted a majority of members of a union to cancel registration, also anomalously allowed a minority to again register, and that if an award of the Court was made by pressure of that minority it would apply equally to the reluctant majority. Semple said it was “a case of minority tyranny”. The *Post* editorial suggested Semple had been “in his busy days, a destroyer of the Act” but he and the FOL were now “inspired expounders of it”.⁹⁰ While Semple framed his argument on democratic lines, he foresaw correctly that the formation of the arbitrationist unions was an attempt to diminish the authority and direct bargaining of the FOL and drive unions back to the Arbitration Court.

It was not often that Semple was backed against a wall but when he was, he fought back with aggressive language. When Semple and FOL representatives met with delegates from the Gold Mineowners’ Association (who employed the Waihi men) their chairman, Charles Rhodes, stipulated the condition that the only the binding agreement would be under the Arbitration Act. Semple and the FOL would not accept this. Semple said “the gauntlet had been thrown down...They would make it a bitter fight, and to the end, with the gloves off. They were not as weak as many thought. The gloves were off and it would be a fight with bare knuckles”.⁹¹ It was with remarks of this nature that Semple gained the nickname “Fighting Bob”.⁹² Semple

⁸⁹ The FOL representatives were Semple, Webb FOL president, Bill Parry from the Waihi Union, Mr Canhan from the Auckland Watersiders Workers Union and John Dowgray from Westport.

⁹⁰ *Evening Post*, 7 June 1912.

⁹¹ *Evening Post*, 19 June 1912.

⁹² Richardson, ‘Robert Semple’.

had been a boxer in his youth and the similarity was drawn between Semple's combative instincts in the ring and the industrial arena.

During 1915-1919, when Semple was national agent for a reformed Miners' Federation, the Arbitration Court was heavily criticised by many in the labour movement. Semple contributed to this weight of criticism, his attitude consistent with earlier criticism of the Court. Writing to the *Maoriland Worker* in 1918 Auckland unionist William Parry said that hostility among the workers towards the Court was being expressed from one end of the country to another.⁹³ At a conference of Auckland Trade Unions a resolution was carried calling for unions to sever their connection with the Court.⁹⁴ At the Miners' Federation Annual Conference in July, a telegram was received from the Ohinemuri Engineers' Union dealing with the Arbitration Act. Semple moved, "that we inform the Ohinemuri Engineers that we are of the opinion that the whole machinery of the Arbitration Court is fundamentally rotten and it is against our interests to patch up any such institution or act". This was carried unanimously.⁹⁵

After the completion of the Orongorongo tunnel in 1924 Semple became organiser for the national Freezers' Federation. Semple was still antagonistic to the Arbitration Court at this time. As inflation rose after WWI militant unions again talked of direct action, which led to the formation of the national Alliance of Labour (AOL). Although weakened by the fluctuating economy during 1921-22, in 1924 when the economy rallied, the AOL flexed its muscle with an unsuccessful railway strike in April 1924. Consistent with the AOL perspective in 1924 Semple was again militant in his call for better wages. In a report to the Freezers' Federation secretary, A. McLeod, in October 1924 Semple declared the apathy he found in industrial organisations was appalling, "There is no Socialist propaganda going on whatever, no economic education. They are following in the old orthodox trade union beaten trail, satisfied to appeal to a class judge for a few crumbs from the master's table every

⁹³ William Parry was leader of the Waihi Miners' Union in 1912 and was imprisoned for his participation in the strike. He was a member of the FOL and became MP for Auckland Central in 1919 and was also a Minister in the first Labour government.

⁹⁴ *Maoriland Worker*, 10 July 1918

⁹⁵ A2 Miners' Federation Minute Book 1915-23, Jim Roberts Papers, Beaglehole Room Victoria University.

three years”.⁹⁶ He quoted the recent actions of the Arbitration Court in awarding the railway workers a wage increase of one farthing per hour and said he found it hard to believe that working men could accept the insult without a single protest. In the same report Semple called the Court a “fox and goose organisation”.⁹⁷ In a 1926 report Semple said that the Court “which is created by the oppressors of Labour, controlled by the oppressors of Labour, and whose duty it is to keep the working class on the lowest level of subsistence from the cradle to the grave”.⁹⁸ When the Freezing Workers received a meagre award from the Court in December 1924 Semple said it was just another exhibition of the futility of appealing to that institution and blamed the Court itself for the small increase.⁹⁹

Richardson claimed that in the crisis years of 1912-13 Semple possessed “a hard-headed pragmatism that his wilder utterances sometimes obscured”.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, in the late 1920s, when the economic depression began to hit workers hard, Semple the militant socialist who had previously vehemently criticised the Court, exhibited a more cautious approach. In 1928, while secretary of the Wellington General Labourers’ union, he cautioned the union against any hasty Arbitration Court proceedings. At a union meeting on 30 July delegates voted to prepare a new draft award. Semple suggested it was not wise to rush this as he had discussed the position with Mr Monteith, the workers’ representative on the Arbitration Court. Monteith had advised him that at the moment it would be an inopportune time to approach the Court due to the thousands of unemployed throughout New Zealand. He suggested it would be better to try and solicit the co-operation of other general labourers’ unions and bide their time for a more favourable opportunity. Semple said he endorsed Monteith’s advice and indicated it would be very unwise approaching the Court at the present time but that there was nothing to prevent the Executive from drafting a new award so that they would be ready when a more favourable opportunity presented itself.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ *New Zealand Worker*, 15 October 1924.

⁹⁷ Semple to McLeod 2 October 1924, Canterbury Freezing Workers and Related Trades Union MB 9 [2/6] Correspondence in/out 1924, Macmillan Brown Library, University of Canterbury.

⁹⁸ Semple to Ellis 8 February 1926, Freezing Workers Records, Bert Roth Papers, 94-106-39/02, WTU.

⁹⁹ Semple to McLeod 5 January 1925, Canterbury Freezing Workers and Related Trades Union MB 9 [2/7] Correspondence in/out 1925, Macmillan Brown Library, University of Canterbury.

¹⁰⁰ Richardson, ‘Robert Semple’.

¹⁰¹ 30 July 1928 Minute Book Wellington General Labourers’ Union, Peter Butler Papers, 2004-204-2/1, WTU.

As the depression began to bite Semple began to warm to the protection of the Arbitration Court as employers set about trying to reduce wages. Previously, he had vigorously opposed the pay rates set by the Court and the Court's provision of compulsory arbitration. As late as February 1926 he said it was the Court's duty to keep workers on the lowest level of subsistence over their lifetimes.¹⁰² But as relief wages sunk below the standard rate of pay Semple, in his capacity as a Labour representative on the Wellington City Council from 1925-35, urged the Council to pay the wages set by the Court.

By 1932 Semple, the long time ardent critic of the Arbitration Court, became one of its defenders. When the Arbitration Amendment Bill removed the compulsory provision of the Court Semple, now an MP, said in Parliament that he hoped that the government could see "that it made a tragic blunder in repealing the compulsory provisions of the Arbitration Act".¹⁰³ In the run-up to the Bill he said, "It will be one of the blackest epochs in the political history of New Zealand if this Government is allowed to repeal that law which is protecting thousands of our men and women". Semple acknowledged that he had spoken against the Arbitration Court in the past but said that the Court was born in lean years "when workers were being ruthlessly exploited by a certain section of unscrupulous employers. The very birth of the institution was for the advance and protection of the working people".¹⁰⁴ Semple was not alone in his stance. The Parliamentary Labour Party fought the Bill from its introduction – Peter Fraser and John A. Lee were both suspended from the House during the second reading of the Amendment Bill. Semple later suggested, "the repeal of the compulsory provisions of the Act was one of the most vicious pieces of legislation ever put on the statute-books".¹⁰⁵

In another debate on the I.C & A Act, Opposition MP Sydney Smith suggested that Semple had done a complete somersault regarding the Act, "A few years ago the honourable gentleman was just as emphatic and bitter against the arbitration system". Semple denied this, but Smith quoted some of Semple's correspondence as organiser

¹⁰² Semple to McLeod, 8 February 1926, New Zealand Freezing Works and Related Trades Federation MB 9 [2/8] Correspondence in/out 1926, Macmillan Brown Library, University of Canterbury.

¹⁰³ *NZPD*, 234 (1932), p. 127.

¹⁰⁴ *NZPD*, 231 (1932), p. 50.

¹⁰⁵ *NZPD*, 241 (1935), p. 242.

for the Freezing Workers' Federation in which he was scathing of the Court. Smith said Semple wrote a tirade against maintaining the Arbitration Court legislation on the statute book. Previous criticism of the Act was not unique to Semple, Smith also criticised Harry Holland for writing the pamphlet *Labour Leg-Ironed*, in which he had also condemned the Arbitration Court.¹⁰⁶

It would appear that Semple's support of arbitration was conditioned by the economic circumstances prevailing at any one time. Semple's changing attitude is perhaps summed up in the words of Harry Holland, the leader of the Labour Party: "On a rising market...the employers will want the Court and many of the stronger unions will not want it, but on a falling market, the Court is the only protection the unions have – especially the weaker unions".¹⁰⁷ Semple's attitude was akin to others in the Labour Party at this time, Peter Fraser saying in opposition to the bill that, "the workers are to be left at the untrammelled mercy of the employers".¹⁰⁸ From 1932 the restoration of compulsory arbitration was a core plank in Labour Party policy and it was restored soon after Labour became the government.

The Strike Weapon

Just as Semple's perspective on the Arbitration Court changed over his lifetime, his attitude to the strike as a weapon of the working class also shifted. O'Farrell suggested the essence of the new militant socialism on the West Coast prior to 1913 was the strike.¹⁰⁹ And in contrast to some of Semple's assertions of constitutional change, his vision certainly included the strike as the weapon of the working class. At the inaugural meeting of the Miners' Federation in 1908, in a discussion of whether to register the new federation under the Arbitration Act Semple spoke strongly against such a move:

Unless the worker had reserved his right to strike in the past he would have been crushed under the load of capitalism. No body wished to see more strikes but when liable to be strangled by unjust conditions of employment the worker should not be deprived of his only

¹⁰⁶ *NZPD*, 234 (1932), pp. 128-129. Sydney Smith was MP for New Plymouth.

¹⁰⁷ Holland cited in Brown, *The Rise of Labour*, p. 154.

¹⁰⁸ Fraser cited in Brown, *The Rise of Labour*, p. 153.

¹⁰⁹ O'Farrell, *Harry Holland: Militant Socialist*, p. 48.

weapon.¹¹⁰

Semple believed local disputes could precipitate a national strike. This new tactic was gleaned from the IWW and its slogans which included “an injury to one is an injury to all”. When coal owners tried to enforce a compulsory medical examination for miners in 1908 the Miners’ Federation strongly protested. Semple threatened, “If these conditions are enforced...the New Year will see a very serious industrial conflict throughout the dominion”.¹¹¹ Semple’s threats were successful as the spectre of a nation-wide coal strike led the government to indemnify companies against the risk of added insurance costs. But in contrast, Semple did not advocate strike action when he spoke at Westport where the medical inspection had been enforced by the Westport Coal Company for several years. Semple was the principal speaker at a conference where the Granity, Millerton, Stockton and Denniston unions discussed medical examinations. The *Greymouth Evening Star* reported Semple and other speakers emphasised strongly the necessity for further organisation of labour throughout the country and there was unanimous and strongly expressed opposition to the Westport medical examination “But the speakers were careful to advocate the adoption of constitutional means to achieve an end in view. No encouragement whatever was given to any idea of a strike”.¹¹² Semple’s threats of widespread industrial revolt were part of a strategy of frightening and bullying employers for workers’ gain, although his sometimes contrary comments suggest he may not have had the capacity nor the intention of engaging in a showdown with employers during these early years.¹¹³

As FOL organiser Semple continued his strategy of using threats and intimidation to achieve an objective. In October 1911 he threatened nationwide strike action when there was a strike in Auckland involving the General Labourers’ union.¹¹⁴ After travelling to Auckland, and addressing the men, Semple and Peter Fraser met the

¹¹⁰ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 27 October 1908.

¹¹¹ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 19 December 1908.

¹¹² *Greymouth Evening Star*, 1 February 1909.

¹¹³ Richardson, ‘Robert Semple’.

¹¹⁴ A number of labourers employed on drainage works for the Auckland City Council Drainage Board, stopped work as a protest against one of the contractors sub-letting a small contract to union members. The strike spread and soon 600 labourers had struck. Semple travelled to Auckland and addressed the men. He spoke generally on the organisation of labour, the need for unity and loyalty, the importance of fighting strenuously for the rights and privileges of the working class, and the duty of every unionist to hold out for the principle now at stake. *Greymouth Evening Star*, 27 October 1911.

Mayor of Auckland, C. J. Parr to discuss the dispute.¹¹⁵ Semple said the new order of things in the industrial world was united action and threatened, “We have no desire to dislocate the city, but if need be we will paralyse the whole of New Zealand... We have never done the extreme thing yet. But we have not done one-third of what can be done”.¹¹⁶ Whether Semple would have carried out the threat of a general strike is not certain but they did succeed in ‘persuading’ the Drainage Board to prohibit sub-letting in certain classes of work. In the lead-up to the Great strike in 1913 settlement hopes were permanently dashed when the employers were uncompromising, insisting on arbitration which was rejected by Semple and the UFL delegates. Semple was again defiant threatening to use nationwide strike action - to an audience at Petone he said, “We are going the whole hog this time. We have done something already and we are going to extend it from the North Cape to the Bluff, even if we paralyse New Zealand. We have been driven to do this and by God we’ll do it”.¹¹⁷

Semple said the extension of the Auckland labourers’ strike was in accordance with new methods in modern organisation,

It was not craft division but class unity, carrying into effect the principle of injury to one being the concern of all. That was the method being adopted by the general labourers’ union and by industrialism in all countries in the world.

He said he thoroughly endorsed the action taken and it was no local grievance but a national one.¹¹⁸ Although he had all but threatened a general strike earlier he played down the issue in the press. The *Greymouth Evening Star* reported that he said, “the talk of a general industrial upheaval fostered by the FOL was all empty gossip”.¹¹⁹

For Semple, the pattern of contrasting messages was situational and tactical – his radicalism was sometimes governed by the nature of his audience and he also had conciliatory language in his repertoire. In the early months of the FOL and in an effort to gain support from both conservative and militant unions, Semple told some miners industrial unionism was the only way forward, but he spoke to other audiences about

¹¹⁵ Peter Fraser, who later became New Zealand’s Prime Minister was, at this time, secretary of the Auckland General Labourers’ Union.

¹¹⁶ *Auckland Weekly News*, 2 November 1911.

¹¹⁷ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 13 November 1913.

¹¹⁸ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 30 October 1911.

¹¹⁹ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 1 November 1911: Olssen, p. 122.

joining with the Trades Councils and reform by constitutional means.¹²⁰ Historians have commented on Semple's contrasting messages, Olssen suggests that Semple had an "ability to face both ways".¹²¹ But ultimately at the 1910 FOL Conference Semple discounted the possibility of unity, revealing his militant perspective. He said, uncompromisingly, that amalgamation could only be brought about if the Trade Council executive accepted the constitution of the Federation. He referred to a class of trade union leaders as a mushroom growth "the finished product of the Arbitration Court and the twin brother of capitalism". He denounced sectional strikes and framed their duty to organise as preparing for a battle. He said they needed to strengthen their position so that they, in the future, might be able to effectively defend themselves.¹²²

Remarks such as those confirmed to many conservative newspapers their view of Semple as a revolutionary. When the shearers' union joined the FOL in 1911 the conservative *Evening Post* remarked it was a victory for "the ultra-Socialist Federation of Labour...and for Mr Semple and his colleagues who...have no patience for evolution; their fancy turns to revolution".¹²³ It was the opinion of the *Post* that "Mr Semple is the controlling influence of the Federation...His views are the federation's views".¹²⁴ As organiser, Semple was often the FOL's spokesman and was therefore singled out by the newspaper for criticism. Semple's essential aim was to bring about change through the strike weapon but the newspaper would have considered any deviation from the status quo unacceptable. The *Post's* representation of Semple as a revolutionary who was advocating a transition in control of the means of production from one sector of society to another would be accurate. Semple would certainly acknowledge his desire for change but a revolution of the mind as opposed to violent revolution if that could be avoided.

Semple's attitude to the strike was not dissimilar to the syndicalist thinking which favoured direct industrial action over parliamentary reform. In May 1912 Semple, interviewed by the *Greymouth Evening Star* regarding strikes, said he was not in favour of lengthy confrontations, "If strikes are forced on us by inhuman conditions,

¹²⁰ At Dunedin he spoke about amalgamating with the Trades Councils in May 1910.

¹²¹ Olssen, *The Red Feds*, p. 31.

¹²² Report of proceedings of the Annual Conference New Zealand Federation of Labour 1910, Bert Roth Papers, 94-106-30/01, WTU.

¹²³ *Evening Post*, 13 February 1911.

¹²⁴ *Evening Post*, 3 November 1911.

we shall refuse to wage prolonged struggles but make them united, dreadful and short”.¹²⁵ The Victorian Coal Strike of 1903-04, which lasted 72 weeks, probably contributed to this attitude. But the strike in Waihi during 1912 snowballed into a national issue and did become a prolonged struggle. Semple indicated at a public meeting in Christchurch that the FOL was prepared to accept an honourable settlement, but rather than accept the conditions being offered it was prepared to fight not only for two months but for twelve months if necessary. He claimed he was expressing the opinion of every man, woman and child involved in the dispute and of the members of the FOL generally, when he said that they would never surrender unconditionally. He declared that motions had been carried in every union affiliated with the federation upholding the position. He said, “as far as the men were concerned, the fight had only begun”.¹²⁶ However, Olssen suggested that the FOL’s affiliates responded poorly, with some unions even seceding from the FOL.¹²⁷ Although Semple’s instincts may have been against a lengthy clash, his bravado did not reflect this. As Richardson suggested, Semple’s wilder utterances often obscured his hardheaded pragmatism.¹²⁸

In the aftermath of the Waihi strike, which was a defeat for the labour movement, the FOL called a conference in January 1913. Gustafson claims that, “the obvious intention of the Red Feds was to create a united industrial front which could resist successfully the combined forces of the employers and the state in any future conflict”.¹²⁹ At the second conference in July 1913 when the labour movement formed two new organisations (the United Federation of Labour, UFL, and the Social Democratic Party, SDP,) Semple’s militant reputation was firmly entrenched within labour itself and the conservative press. He was part of the twelve-man committee elected in January 1913 to draft constitutions and rules for the new federation of unions and the political party which would be discussed at the July conference. Gustafson suggested that the Basis of Unity plan “reflected the socialist and syndicalist views of the militant majority as the preamble was taken from the

¹²⁵ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 20 May 1912.

¹²⁶ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 31 July 1912.

¹²⁷ Olssen, *The Red Feds*, p. 149.

¹²⁸ Richardson, ‘Robert Semple’.

¹²⁹ Gustafson, *Labour’s Path to Political Independence*, p. 67.

IWW”.¹³⁰ At the July conference during the first debate on the UFL Semple was among the Red Feds who wanted the IWW preamble included, but the vote was narrowly lost by 175-161.¹³¹ John (Jack) McCullough wrote that this caused much consternation among the Federationists “Poor Bob Semple, Holland and Fraser accused me of being responsible for this defeat and was [sic] very wild because they declared I had introduced the question of Arbitration versus Strike policy”.¹³² There was also division on the strike clause but this was a matter on which Semple and other militant unionists were not prepared to compromise. Moderates wanted the central power of the UFL limited in event of a strike situation developing however the militants wanted the central control of its use and the amendments proposed by the moderates were defeated. The strike clause was adopted by 222 votes to 91.¹³³ The conservative press, and some more moderate unionists, believed the Conference had “fallen into the hands of agitators whose socialism is of a revolutionary complexion”.¹³⁴ However, from Semple’s perspective the strike was still the necessary weapon of the working class.

In late 1913 when two disputes involving Huntly miners and Wellington Watersiders escalated into national significance, Semple supported the strike action. A premise of the IWW was any understanding or agreement between workers and employers was “only an armistice, to be broken, when convenient, by either side”.¹³⁵ Semple’s views could be grouped with the IWW in regard to the Huntly dispute. He had spoken to the miners’ only days after they went on strike and although he assured them they had the support of the Federation, he advised them to settle the strike peaceably if possible.¹³⁶ But the Managing Director of the Taupiri Coal Company, E.W. Alison, accused Semple of influencing the strike – a claim which he denied. Alison also accused him of having eulogised the men for breaking their agreement. Semple also denied this but

¹³⁰ Gustafson, *Labour’s Path to Political Independence*, p. 67. The committee was Messrs Ross, Semple, Hickey, Fraser, Parry, Hunter, Holland, Young, Mills, Webb, Belcher and Tregear.

¹³¹ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 4 July 1913. The proposed preamble declared: that wage earners and employers had nothing in common and the wage system should be abolished.

¹³² McCullough cited in Gustafson, *Labour’s Path to Political Independence*, p. 69. John McCullough was active in the first NZLP. A moderate and member of the Christchurch Trades Council he unsuccessfully tried to reconcile differences between the FOL and the Councils.

¹³³ Gustafson, *Labour’s Path to Political Independence*, p. 70.

¹³⁴ *Southland Times*, 12 July 1913 cited in Olssen, *The Red Feds*, p. 172.

¹³⁵ Frank Hanlon in ‘Aim, Form and Tactics of a Workers’ Union on IWW Lines’ in *Industrial Unionism*, Wellington: Rebel Press, 2007, p. 23.

¹³⁶ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 23 October 1913.

said, “I did commend them for defending their individual liberty against attacks of the company”.¹³⁷ In an editorial, the *Greymouth Evening Star* said that the flagrant disregard exhibited for the inviolability of agreements entered into and signed on behalf of the employers and unions was alarming. But Semple suggested that unjust conditions of employment overrode any law or agreement. He said that the Huntly strike “proved that no matter how harsh or tyrannical an agreement might be, and no matter what the penalty might be for the violation of that agreement, it would not hold the men once their liberty was threatened”.¹³⁸

In 1914 Semple was happy to accept the title of “labour agitator”. This was a change from an earlier perspective in Australia during the Victorian Coal Strike of 1903/04. Addressing a meeting of Korumburra miners Semple had said Reverend R.S. Joyce had dubbed him a paid agitator. He denied he was an agitator “but was trying to do his best to uphold unionism and to secure for himself and others the privileges fought for and won by their forefathers”.¹³⁹ Visiting Australia in 1914 Semple attended the Australian Workers’ Union (AWU) conference. He was welcomed at the conference and said he received a reception that any labour agitator would be proud of.¹⁴⁰ He was in Australia to solicit for organising funds for the financially stricken SDP and UFL – funds were viewed essential with the general election looming. The conference approved the requested amount of £1,000.

Semple then visited Melbourne where the *Melbourne Argus* reported he would address as many unions as possible and lecture on “How and Why I was Gagged in New Zealand”.¹⁴¹ Semple spoke to Socialist Party members where Bob Ross introduced him as “Maoriland’s mob orator”. Semple was again happy to accept the label. He discussed the recent strikes in New Zealand saying, “No true labourite favoured strikes, but at the same time, under certain conditions, they were unavoidable”. Semple believed that if working conditions were unacceptable the worker should have the right to strike although it often meant workers suffering in the short term to achieve a long-term objective. Semple argued the 1913 strike in New

¹³⁷ *Maoriland Worker*, 5 November 1913.

¹³⁸ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 24 October 1913.

¹³⁹ *Korumburra Times*, 9 September 1903.

¹⁴⁰ *Australian Worker*, 5 February 1914.

¹⁴¹ *Melbourne Argus*, 5 February 1914.

Zealand was justified because the conditions the workers were compelled to labour under were absolutely rotten. He expressed the hope that in Australia and the rest of the world those in favour of the cause would organise, and not rest satisfied until the “labouring classes became masters of the universe”.¹⁴²

O’Farrell has argued that after the 1913 strike and the first natural swing towards political action, “the militant socialist champions of industrial action showed great reluctance to relinquish their theories”.¹⁴³ In Australia Semple still advocated strike action and the one big union concept. He was invited by the Barrier Labour Federation to visit Broken Hill to assist in a campaign recently launched to recruit unionists.¹⁴⁴ In his series of lectures Semple indicated that even though he believed in political action this should always be controlled by the industrial movement, “the vitality and life came from the industrial movement, so that the industrial movement, as the parent body, should have control of the child all the time”.¹⁴⁵ But political action was the keynote in several of his lectures, “The only way in which the workers could get control of what they produced was to control the Parliaments of the world and to legislate for that purpose. The strike was a weapon with which they could not part”.¹⁴⁶ In his final address Semple produced a diagram, the “Temple of Labour” which was intended as an example of what complete industrial and political organisation should be (see below). The squares represent the craft unions – the workers are then divided into industries. The pillars of industry bind the craft unions and make each industry a buttress in one FOL. He explained the system would result in the workers getting control of the political machine and eventually of production, distribution and exchange.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴² *Melbourne Argus*, 12 February 1914.

¹⁴³ O’Farrell, *Harry Holland: Militant Socialist*, p. 60.

¹⁴⁴ Semple arrived at Broken Hill on 25 February and spent several days there.

¹⁴⁵ *Barrier Daily Truth*, 27 February 1914.

¹⁴⁶ *Barrier Daily Truth*, 3 March 1914.

¹⁴⁷ *Barrier Daily Truth*, 4 March 1914.

Figure 10: *Barrier Daily Truth*, 7 March 1914. The final sentence in the diagram's caption was, "From that Federation should spring Political organisation, and with that brought to absolute perfection, the structure cannot be captured by any odds". There is no acknowledgement to any original diagram.

Notwithstanding the above, Semple was a pragmatist - although he was loath to relinquish the strike as the working class weapon he consistently discouraged strike action if he perceived it would be ineffectual. While he was national miners' agent and inspector, during 1916 miners threatened to strike if the government introduced conscription. The Miners' Federation officials secretly called for a go-slow in the mines. However, radicals on both the Waikato and the West Coast fields wanted to mount a national coal strike. Blackball miners were impatient with the go-slow strategy and launched a wildcat strike as a unilateral protest against the introduction of conscription.¹⁴⁸ Federation officials denounced the strikers for launching a sectional stoppage which was likely to imperil national strategy. Semple and John Arbuckle representing the Miners' Federation said, "We do not encourage sectional

¹⁴⁸ Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community*, p. 169.

action on the part of any union, as this would not be effective”.¹⁴⁹ Ultimately Semple persuaded the Blackball miners to return to work.

Semple consistently believed in the transformative power of socialist propaganda. Richardson described the 1917 miners’ conference as imbued with a new radicalism, which focussed on industrial unionism as the best means of securing work-place reform. Semple, as miners’ agent for 1917/18, again expressed this militant spirit.¹⁵⁰ A remit was moved at the conference that a vigorous method of propaganda be instituted. Speaking in favour of the motion Semple suggested that because no organisation existed to marshal the widespread dissatisfaction a great responsibility rested on the New Zealand miners,

They must teach their members that profit-taking was the cause of poverty and the wars and the various evils of modern society. Their methods must be to get at root causes and advise drastic remedies. They must organise a fighting minority and revive the militant spirit.¹⁵¹

Although Semple had gained the reputation as a militant labour organiser he did mediate in numerous union disputes which received scant comment in the mainstream press when compared with his perceived radical activities. The mainstream press held very conservative political viewpoints and did not hesitate to portray Semple in what they would have seen as the worst possible light. The conservative Wellington newspaper, the *Evening Post*, did acknowledge Semple’s intermediary role in March 1918. Blackball miners threatened to stop work if Paddy Webb, who had been called up for military service, was not exempted. Millerton miners ceased work due to some of its members refusing to pay a levy on behalf of the victims of an Australian strike.¹⁵² Paparoa and the State mine also stopped work owing to a dispute over the collection of a strike levy.¹⁵³ Semple, as part of a deputation, met with government ministers in an effort to settle the State mine and Paparoa disputes. The strike at Paparoa was finally settled and another big strike at Blackball was narrowly averted. The *Evening Post* acknowledged Semple’s contribution with one line “Mr Semple has

¹⁴⁹ *Evening Post*, 1 December 1916.

¹⁵⁰ *Maoriland Worker*, 25 August 1917.

¹⁵¹ *Maoriland Worker*, 12 December 1917.

¹⁵² *Maoriland Worker*, 6 March 1918.

¹⁵³ *Evening Post*, 22 March 1918.

been in the district a good deal, and the credit of settling both disputes is given to him".¹⁵⁴ The newspaper preferred to perpetuate the image of Semple as a radical, only minimally reporting his more moderate activities.

Within Semple's view of the strike as a weapon of the working class there was an anomaly. Between 1920-24 Semple led a cooperative work party which built the Orongorongo tunnel near Wellington. In a distinct departure from his previous reluctance to relinquish the strike as a working class weapon there was a no-strike clause in the tunnel project's Rules and Regulations which said, "Under no circumstances whatever shall the progress of the work be interrupted in any way through any dispute that may arise with officers of the Corporation or between members of the Party". A fidelity bond of £500 was to be deposited by the miners and forfeited to the Council for a breach of this rule.¹⁵⁵ Semple handpicked the Party - they were all skilled men who he knew well and he was determined to prove that workers alone could be in charge of a project and carry it to a successful fruition. He was so confident in the principle that men would perform well if they received all the profits of their labour that he relinquished the strike weapon. The no-strike clause was also probably an enticement for the Council to award him the job.

Semple was forced to defend the no-strike clause. When the project was announced in 1920 some councillors and ratepayers criticised the price, which was considered high, and the no-strike clause. It was intimated that Semple was becoming a capitalist and was riding on the backs of other men. Semple refuted this, "When I was a member of Parliament I was termed a strike promoter; now I am being criticised freely because I have agreed to forfeit the right to strike...I will work with the rest".¹⁵⁶ In 1921 at a meeting in the Empress theatre, when he delivered a lecture entitled "Industrial Co-operation", he said, "The true object of Socialism was that every man should receive the full product of his labour". Semple openly attacked those in the Labour movement (although he did not specify who they were) who had criticised him regarding his pledge to do the job in record time, without any strikes and without any go-slow. He

¹⁵⁴ *Evening Post*, 22 April 1918.

¹⁵⁵ 'Rules and Regulations to Govern the Co-Operative Party of Men who are to be engaged in the Construction of the Orongorongo Tunnel', City Engineer's Department 00205:5:1079 Tunnel – Wainuiomata, WCCA.

¹⁵⁶ *Evening Post*, 14 September 1920.

defended the no-strike provision, “To me the strike is a nightmare and I want to see the day when the strike in New Zealand is as extinct as the moa. This can be done, by instituting a system which will eliminate the middle-class exploiter...at Wainui we have done this”. Semple said that he would not participate in a strike just “for practice” but he would freely support a real strike for a real cause.¹⁵⁷ Semple was consistent in his attitude. While in Australia in 1914 he discussed the 1912/13 strikes in New Zealand and said, “No true labourite favoured strikes”.¹⁵⁸ One interjector also said unions were against the contract system. Semple said there was a great deal of difference between the competitive contract system and the co-operative contract system. By the latter the workers share and share alike and “It was better than your dirty cast-iron wage system”. Semple’s attitude towards the strike weapon can be attributed to the fact that the men were working for themselves and were now “masters of their jobs” which was what he had advocated while working for the Miners’ Federation from 1915.¹⁵⁹

It was only in the tunnel project that Semple put forward the no-strike clause although, as previously stated, he did not endorse strikes which he perceived would not benefit the workers. While National Miners’ Inspector he criticised the Blackball miners for a series of wildcat stoppages - as Richardson said, “not because they were undesirable but because they were unlikely to be effective”.¹⁶⁰ In February 1934 Semple advised relief workers at Petone not to go on strike because they had nothing to gain from it. He said, “Relief workers only went against themselves when they ceased work, because they did not handle any economic commodity that was necessary to the people, and the Unemployment Board gained by not having to pay out the money”. Semple said if he thought that a strike would better the lot of the relief workers he would go throughout the country organising it, but the best way to win the sympathy of the public was for relief workers to stage big demonstrations and meetings.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ *Evening Post*, 20 June 1921.

¹⁵⁸ *Melbourne Argus*, 12 February 1914.

¹⁵⁹ *Maoriland Worker*, 14 July 1915.

¹⁶⁰ Richardson, ‘Robert Semple’.

¹⁶¹ *Evening Post*, 12 February 1934.

When Semple became a member of the Labour government in 1935 the categorisation of a militant socialist, who promoted the direct action of the strike, disappeared from his public persona. In Semple's Public Works Ministry the new agreement for employees included the introduction of compulsory unionism on all public works projects.¹⁶² All employees were now in one big union yet the objective of this had changed for Semple. In earlier Red Fed days the basic premise was to have more industrial muscle. But the new Public Works agreement made special provision for procedures to be adopted for settling disputes and Semple now firmly believed that all workers' grievances could be resolved effectively and strikes would become irrelevant. He said the one big union would be the only organisation recognised by the government and all grievances would be dealt with through that channel. He said it was his desire that the men should have an organisation that would benefit them, but also the country and the machinery that was provided would do away with the need for stoppages on the job.¹⁶³ There were to be no stop work meetings. The union would protect the men and function in their interests, and also assist the government.¹⁶⁴

For Semple, the Labour government now had procedures in place for settling industrial disputes and although he had been characterised by Harry Holland in 1912 as the "fighting agitator of Maoriland", he and other members of the government, could now not comprehend why strikes still continued.¹⁶⁵ In 1938 he said, "it is time the disgruntled minorities in the trades unions woke up and realised that in fomenting stupid comic opera strikes over trifles they are enemies to themselves, to their unions and to their country". He said he did not want his words interpreted as an attack on trades unionism but short-sighted individuals were destroying their own rights with their attitude. He did acknowledge his own participation in strikes but said when he took part there were big issues at stake,

In those days unionism was outlawed and so were the men who joined the unions. Today conditions have been revolutionised. Unionism has been recognised and has been given its rightful place in society...A government that is friendly to the workers is now in power and it will do its best to improve their standard

¹⁶² The new agreement introduced a 40 hour, 5 day working week and holiday privileges.

¹⁶³ *New Zealand Herald*, 5 February 1936.

¹⁶⁴ *New Zealand Herald*, 6 February 1936.

¹⁶⁵ *International Socialist*, 16 March 1912.

of living but it also wants the workers to play the game.¹⁶⁶

Semple's phrase of playing the game was a request for support from the unions. In the first years of the Labour government there was a perception among many unions that labour organisations should not be antagonistic towards a Labour government. For example, in 1937 the secretary of the New Zealand Waterside Workers' Union Jim Roberts was also President of the Labour Party. His dual role led to conflicting loyalties.¹⁶⁷ Commenting on this issue, Bassett and King said the principles of the trade union movement were bound to conflict with the degree of pragmatism essential in high office. Examining Peter Fraser's style, they said Fraser rode hard on the labour movement "heeding dissident voices but always endeavouring to limit their capacity to damage the greater cause – the continuation of Labour in office".¹⁶⁸ Semple's comments can be viewed in the same light.

Although now critical of strike action, Semple vigorously proclaimed his commitment to socialism when he travelled to Australia in 1937. At Bathurst, in a speech entitled "Why did I become a Socialist", he said "Though that word has suffered wrong interpretations, and has been brought into use as a bogey man by usurers to scare people, I still claim, from the housetops, that I am a Socialist".¹⁶⁹ Back in New Zealand a *Herald* editorial was critical of Semple's speech, especially where he spoke of withstanding the forces of capitalism,

capital makes Mr Semple's public works possible... When he pretends to fight valiantly against the forces of capitalism he is merely shadow-sparring... but his words are provocative... Mr Semple should remember that he is a Minister of the Crown and while abroad that he is a New Zealand representative and not a socialist propagandist.¹⁷⁰

Semple sometimes spoke more sentimentally and romantically in Australia, perhaps more from the heart as he did not have to contend with the hostile battles of electoral

¹⁶⁶ *New Zealand Herald*, 5 December 1938.

¹⁶⁷ Anna Green. 'James Roberts, 1878-1967'. *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, updated 21 May 2002 URL: <http://www.dnzb.govt.nz/>. In 1938 Roberts deliberately delayed proceedings on the new watersiders award until after the general election, fearing that the shipping companies would use the negotiations to embarrass the Labour government.

¹⁶⁸ Bassett & King, p. 157.

¹⁶⁹ *Western Times*, 21 July 1937.

¹⁷⁰ *New Zealand Herald*, 23 July 1937.

politics – it is unlikely at this time he would have declared his devotion to socialism in New Zealand.

Attitudes to Political Action

Another change over time within Semple's notion of socialism was his attitude to electoral and municipal politics. When Semple and Pat Hickey formed branches of the Socialist Party on the West Coast in 1907 the thrust of these branches was to capture political power and to achieve change by evolution not by revolution. Hickey said at the inaugural meeting of the Greymouth branch of the Socialist Party that the cost of living had gone up whilst the wage rate remained the same, "this showed clearly that if the worker hoped to alter this state of affairs he must enter the political arena and by means of legislation entirely change the economic conditions under which we live". Although the content of Semple's speech is not reported the press concluded, "Mr Semple addressed the meeting and in a short pithy speech made a splendid impression".¹⁷¹ In a letter to the editor a few days later Hickey said that by forming a branch of the Socialist Party in Greymouth, "we hope that by so doing to awaken the worker to his interests and accelerate this great social evolution".¹⁷² Although Clayworth argued, "Despite campaigning for the Socialist Party, Hickey, Webb and Semple seem to have regarded it as more of a platform for socialist propaganda than a genuine vehicle for taking parliamentary power".¹⁷³

In late 1908 the New Zealand Federation of Miners' was formed. Semple and Hickey had wanted it named the Federation of Labour (possibly because of its inclusive labour connotations) but the Trades and Labour Council conference (which had just concluded its sitting in Wellington) had previously decided to form a Federation of Labour. The Miners' Federation preamble included, "the objective decided upon is 'The socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange'" and the premise of the IWW one big union, "that immediate steps be taken to bring about a Federation of Workers of the whole Dominion...". But there was also a constitutional objective which was "for the purpose of securing the return of members to Parliament

¹⁷¹ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 28 October 1907.

¹⁷² *Greymouth Evening Star*, 31 October 1907.

¹⁷³ Clayworth, 'Hickey – the Making of a Homegrown Revolutionary'.

pledged to support and carry out the policy of Labour”.¹⁷⁴ Thus, the preamble included both revolutionary and parliamentary goals.

However, once the Miners’ Federation was formed, and subsequently the FOL, Semple rejected political socialism and parliamentarism in favour of self-emancipation via industrial militancy. Hickey said in his memoirs the FOL preached a policy of self-reliance and although many of their members belonged to the Socialist Party they regarded political parties and politicians as spineless organisations and individuals.¹⁷⁵ The forming of the FOL probably gave Semple confidence and as the organisation grew (with more unions such as some watersiders joining) he believed the FOL could force change themselves with direct negotiations with employers and the use of the strike weapon without having to rely on politicians. Semple did not necessarily believe in violent confrontation - change through industrial unionism and strike action was his preferred option over the sole political action of the Trades Councils, which he perceived as ineffectual, or the other extreme of revolution held by some members of the Socialist Party. As historian Bert Roth noted, “The Red Federation put its emphasis, first and foremost, on industrial unionism while the Socialist Party was still dominated by Hogg’s ‘not reform but REVOLUTION’”.¹⁷⁶

But Hickey also argued that the FOL was never anti-Parliamentarian. He said, “there never was an opportunity missed of bringing under ministerial notice the urgent need of this or that reform, all of which we realised could only be achieved by legislative enactment”.¹⁷⁷ At the 1910 FOL Conference Semple said with regard to conference work, that it was futile to pass and forward resolutions to the government, “The work of the future lay, he said, in giving less and less attention to political means of obtaining their rights, but rather to the perfecting of their organisation in the industrial field”.¹⁷⁸ Semple’s perspective was that political action without industrial organisation was pointless. Notwithstanding the above, a deputation, including Semple, presented the resolutions adopted by the FOL to the Premier, and Minister of Labour J.A. Millar. Semple emphasised the need for proper sanitary conditions in all

¹⁷⁴ Hickey, p. 20.

¹⁷⁵ Hickey, p. 31-32.

¹⁷⁶ Bert Roth, ‘The New Zealand Socialist Party’, *Political Science*, Vol. 9, No. 1, March 1957, pp. 51-56.

¹⁷⁷ Hickey, p. 32.

¹⁷⁸ *Evening Post*, 18 August 1910.

mines and suggested the proposed Royal Commission should investigate conditions of labour at the Otira tunnel.¹⁷⁹ As they had done the year before, the deputation pressed for changes to the Workers' Compensation Act. Anyone earning more than £5 per week was debarred from securing compensation. The FOL suggested that the Act be amended so as not to apply so unjustly to shearers and miners who might earn over £5 a week in busy seasons but whose earnings did not exceed, on average, £250 per year. The FOL also wanted the domicile clause amended so that relatives of an injured worker, even if not resident in New Zealand, could receive benefits under the Act. Premier Ward pointed out that there was no reciprocity as to compensation to relatives with other countries except Victoria.¹⁸⁰ This approach did get results as the Royal Commission was set up and changes made to the Workers' Compensation Act although it did take some persistence on the FOL's behalf.¹⁸¹

During the FOL period Semple consistently placed political action secondary to industrial unity although there were exceptions. O'Farrell argued that Labour Party (formed largely by the Trades Councils in 1910) preparations to put forward candidates at the 1911 general election caused the FOL to put aside its previous contempt for political action: "Militant socialist industrialists entered politics lest they

¹⁷⁹ Following the 1909 Miners' Conference Semple led a deputation to the Minister of Mines advocating a number of amendments in the Workers' Compensation Act and other improvements in the law affecting miners. As a result a Royal Commission was to be set up to enquire into the methods of mine ventilation in the hope that such improvements would eradicate the 'miners complaint'. In 1910 the Premier did not agree that the labour conditions at Otira be investigated in the Royal Commission but promised a Public Works official would enquire into the conditions. When the Mining Act Amendment Bill was considered in Committee, MP for Grey, Arthur Guinness, secured an amendment that every owner of a mine shall provide and maintain sanitary arrangements and conveniences, dressing and changing rooms. *Greymouth Evening Star*, 30 November 1910. The Minister of Public Works later replied (re Otira) that the Department's Engineer had reported and it was decided to call upon the contractors to provide such sanitary conveniences within the tunnel as are necessary to comply with the contract specification, the question of ventilation is being enquired into, Sunday work was not excessive and as to housing arrangements there was no real cause for complaint. *Greymouth Evening Star*, 7 November 1910.

¹⁸⁰ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 26 August 1910.

¹⁸¹ Trying to secure inter-colonial reciprocity with regard to the domicile of dependents the FOL later wrote to the Australian Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher. *Greymouth Evening Star*, 6 September 1910. Public meetings were held to protest against the domicile clause and Semple addressed several on the West Coast. Millar later announced that the government would extend the reciprocal provisions of the Workers' Compensation Act to Queensland, Western Australia and Great Britain. The request could not be complied with in its entirety for the reason that all the States of the Commonwealth would not reciprocate with New Zealand. The NSW government had refused. *Greymouth Evening Star*, 11 October 1910. In November 1911 new legislation affecting Workers Compensation was announced, "By an amendment of the Workers Compensation Act all classes of workers, manual or clerical, earning less than 260 pounds per annum and all manual workers, irrespective of earnings will obtain the benefits of compensation for accident. Domestic workers are included if they are engaged for a longer period than seven days. *Greymouth Evening Star*, 4 November 1911.

be outmanoeuvred by not doing so”.¹⁸² In January 1911 Semple said he did not anticipate immediate political action, “but expect to be prepared for political warfare by 1914”.¹⁸³ However, when Paddy Webb was the Socialist Party candidate for the Grey electorate in 1911, Semple spoke in support of him when his campaign was opened in the Runanga Miners’ hall.¹⁸⁴ Semple said “he was pleased to see a new departure in the political world...He was pleased to be there speaking because the first shot in the industrial field in New Zealand had been fired at Runanga and now the first shot in the political arena was also being fired here in Runanga”.¹⁸⁵ In the several months running up to the election Semple accompanied Webb in a supportive role but also addressed meetings on his own championing Webb and the socialist platform.¹⁸⁶

The labour movement suffered a heavy defeat in the 1912 Waihi strike – as a result the balance of industrial action and political action was altering in Semple’s mind. Other militant socialists were also changing their perspective, O’Farrell suggesting that Harry Holland “came to realise that militant socialists must actively pursue political success”.¹⁸⁷ When the UFL and SDP were formed in July 1913 the delegates’ desire for unity was largely based on compromise from both militants and moderates. Semple was no exception. Speaking at the end of the conference he said, “For the future Labour would fight together, shoulder to shoulder, in one great army for the common good”.¹⁸⁸ The *New Zealand Free Lance* viewed Semple’s altered perspective as an, “Amazing marriage”, as prior to the industrial upheaval of 1912 the FOL had not wanted any part of unity schemes. Underpinning Semple’s apparent compromise may have been his belief that industrial unionism would still dominate and instruct political action. Also he may have believed that as newly appointed organiser of the UFL, he could still secure trade union unity.

Gustafson has argued that after the defeat of the 1912 Waihi strike and the Great strike of 1913 the militant leaders of the labour movement were converted to the

¹⁸² O’Farrell, *Harry Holland: Militant Socialist*, p. 49. Webb was nominated for Grey, Hickey for Ohinemuri.

¹⁸³ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 13 January 1911.

¹⁸⁴ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 14 August 1911.

¹⁸⁵ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 16 August 1911.

¹⁸⁶ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 18 September 1911, 29 November 1911.

¹⁸⁷ O’Farrell, *Harry Holland: Militant Socialist*, p. 60.

¹⁸⁸ *Maoriland Worker*, 7 February 1913.

primacy of political action.¹⁸⁹ During this period, for the first but not the last time in his career Semple was accused of being a hypocrite. In December 1913 Semple and SDP organiser W.T. Mills were again together canvassing for the SDP (they had previously campaigned for Webb in the Grey by-election). Semple chaired a meeting in Wellington which was the first of a series of lectures by Mills designed to increase SDP membership and support.¹⁹⁰ An *Evening Post* editorial suggested Semple was a hypocrite and reminded readers of the animosity between himself and Mills the previous year: “Mr Semple said that never in an industrial conflict had the FOL stooped to such low and degraded tactics as Mills had done...He accused Mills of spreading disunity but last night they were side by side”.¹⁹¹ O’Farrell suggested, at this time, Holland and those who thought like him which included Semple “entered politics with reluctance”.¹⁹²

The NZLP was established in 1916 and in November 1918 Semple made his initial foray into electoral politics, standing as Labour’s candidate in a by-election for the seat of Wellington South (A detailed account of Semple’s parliamentary career is in Chapter 4, “The Labour Politician”). He won the seat but was rejected by the voters a year later in the 1919 general election. He then made an unsuccessful bid for the Otaki seat in the 1925 general election, but was elected as a Labour representative on the Wellington City Council in 1925. The attitude of the FOL to municipal politics is not discussed by Hickey in his *Red Fed Memoirs*, where politics is discussed only in terms of parliamentary seats. Although he indicated FOL members did not think highly of political parties and politicians.¹⁹³ Therefore, it is unlikely that Semple was in favour of standing for municipal elections at that time. However this was not the view of an overseas socialist who visited New Zealand in 1912. In a 1912 *Maoriland Worker* interview well-known English Socialist E.R. Hartley was asked if socialists should waste time in capturing municipalities. Hartley replied,

Certainly. Socialists believing that all morals, politics, religion arise out of material conditions must see that every step altering the material conditions for the better is a step forward: socialism and

¹⁸⁹ Gustafson, *Labour’s Path to Political Independence*, p. 76.

¹⁹⁰ *Evening Post*, 27 December 1913. Semple said the SDP was the only political party in New Zealand which stood for the working class.

¹⁹¹ *Evening Post*, 29 December 1913.

¹⁹² O’Farrell, *Harry Holland: Militant Socialist*, p. 62.

¹⁹³ Hickey, p. 32.

municipal management offers endless opportunities of improving material conditions.¹⁹⁴

This perspective grew in significance with the Labour Party which saw that civic politics was a chance to improve material conditions for the worker at a grass roots level and instigate a flow on effect to national politics. When Semple stood in the 1925 municipal elections this represented a change from his earlier outlook. And the change was permanent, for he served on the Council from 1925 – 1935 and in 1928 was elected as a Labour MP, remaining in Parliament until he retired in 1954.

The Practical Socialist

While Semple's attitude to politics changed over time one aspect, which remained generally consistent, was his practical application of socialism. Semple always had a vision of building socialism from a community level up. This was initially manifest on the West Coast and continued throughout his lifetime. O'Farrell argues that up to 1913 local socialism on the West Coast was "more a plan of practical measures to benefit the workers rather than a rigid pursuit of an idea" and although it was exciting to believe in class war, the socialist revolution and the workers possessing the earth "it was more practical to agitate for improved conditions there and then".¹⁹⁵ O'Farrell suggested Semple was behind almost every local movement for bettering the conditions of the worker.¹⁹⁶ And yet this was alongside a global analysis of industrial and revolutionary socialism.

Semple certainly had a significant part in the building of several public amenities in Runanga and had a hands-on, down to earth approach. Although, when he later left the area, he acknowledged in a testimonial the support of the community, saying that anything he had done was not really due to him, it was because he always found behind him, "courageous hearts who were ready to do and dare and suffer".¹⁹⁷ But Semple had an ability to draw together community and labour aspirations and put them into practical forms. When Premier Seddon died in 1906 a public meeting in Dunollie, chaired by Semple, decided that as a Memorial to Seddon, a Public Library

¹⁹⁴ *Maoriland Worker*, 24 May 1912.

¹⁹⁵ O'Farrell, 'The Workers in Grey District Politics', p. 241.

¹⁹⁶ O'Farrell, 'The Workers in Grey District Politics', p. 147.

¹⁹⁷ *Maoriland Worker*, 3 March 1913.

should be built in Runanga. He was elected Chairman of the Memorial Committee, and remained so until the Library opened in December 1907.¹⁹⁸



Figure 11: Front view of the Seddon Memorial Library at Runanga. A wooden building in the style of a large single-storeyed house with a verandah, G-196-1/2, WTU.

Semple was instrumental in the building of the Miners' Hall in Runanga.¹⁹⁹ In the *Greymouth Evening Star* a Runanga correspondent reported, "The want of a public hall has been a long felt want in our midst".²⁰⁰ Semple initially moved that a meeting be called to consider the advisability of building a Hall for the union out of the funds.²⁰¹ Under Semple's chairmanship the miners levied 3d per week towards fund for the Hall which had an estimated cost of £700. When Semple opened the new Hall in December 1908 he said it had always been his aim in life to better the conditions of the worker. He emphasised the practical co-operation in building the hall, which would benefit all the miners. In reporting the opening ceremony the *Greymouth Evening Star* said, "he [Semple] asked them whether it was better for the 400 miners

¹⁹⁸ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 24 December 1907.

¹⁹⁹ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 11 June 1907.

²⁰⁰ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 29 June 1907.

²⁰¹ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 11 June 1907.

to share in the profits to be derived from the hall than that they should go into the pockets of one individual”.²⁰²



Figure 12: The Miners' Hall under construction, Runanga. This was the first miners' hall. It was later burnt down in 1937, and then rebuilt, F-9395-1/4, WTU.

Juxtaposed with practicality was the pragmatic Semple which was demonstrated during the FOL period as industrial unionism was not just a theory for Semple but a feasible, practical method of operating. At the 1912 FOL conference the FOL was under pressure from some in its ranks to make the organisation conform to the scientific form of the IWW. Semple showed signs of caution when he warned that although the constitution required reform “The very moment they became reactionary...or idealistic they would be marching to their Sedan... the delegates had to be careful lest they created machinery that would...fall to pieces”. But only a few days later Semple moved that the FOL alter its constitution by introducing certain machinery clauses that would transform the FOL into a National Industrial Union of Workers, on the lines of the IWW.²⁰³ At this time militancy was tempered by consideration of a workable improvement. He said the new resolution did not give

²⁰² *Greymouth Evening Star*, 5 December 1908. Each member of the State Miners' union was a shareholder in the hall.

²⁰³ Report of proceedings of the Annual Conference of the New Zealand Federation of Labour, 1912, Bert Roth Papers, 94-106-30/01, WTU: *Greymouth Evening Star*, 27 May 1912.

instructions to the Committee to set up an organisation in New Zealand that might suit some other country but simply suggested the organisation should have machinery clauses on the lines of the IWW which, in his opinion, was a very sound system.²⁰⁴

Socialism underpinned by practicality was also combined with employment when Semple and a co-operative work party built the Orongorongo tunnel near Wellington during 1920-1924. Wellington's water supply, or the lack of it, was an ongoing problem for the civic authorities. In March 1920 the City Engineer, W.H. Morton, proposed the piercing of a tunnel from the Wainui valley into the Orongorongo valley. Morton's proposal was reported in the local press.²⁰⁵ Semple took the initiative and at a meeting of the City Council on 15 April 1920 Morton reported that he had discussions with Messrs Semple, Opie, Matthews and Jones (the other men named formed part of the workforce along with Semple) who had expressed their willingness to construct the Orongorongo tunnel under the co-operative labour system. After considerable discussion the Council approved the tunnel construction under the co-operative system.²⁰⁶

For Semple, the tunnel project was socialism in practice. His co-operative labour scheme for the construction of the tunnel was seen as a move away from the orthodox: it was described by the mainstream *Evening Post* in June 1920 as "a considerable novelty".²⁰⁷ When the tunnel was completed in 1924 the *Maoriland Worker* praised the successful "Orongorongo Experiment".²⁰⁸ Semple said the idea of undertaking the Orongorongo tunnel had come to him when considering the excessive delays in the construction of other projects such as the Otira Tunnel and the Lake Coleridge Scheme. Semple said to get the job done quickly and efficiently, he conceived the plan of gathering together a body of practical experts in mining, men he knew and could trust, and of putting definite proposals before the City Engineer.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁴ Report of proceedings of the Annual Conference of the New Zealand Federation of Labour, 1912, Bert Roth Papers, 94-106-30/01, WTU.

²⁰⁵ *Evening Post*, 19 March 1920.

²⁰⁶ Wellington City Council Minute Book, Number 30 27 January 1920-10 February 1921, WCCA. The Corporation was to house the men and supply all power and plant, machinery, explosives and tools and the men would supply the necessary labour.

²⁰⁷ *Evening Post*, 30 June 1920.

²⁰⁸ *Maoriland Worker*, 5 March 1924.

²⁰⁹ *Evening Post*, 30 June 1920.

He described the project as unique saying that he and the other workers were determined to prove the efficiency of the experiment “I have got an idea at the back of my head that the scheme has merit, and I am willing to bury myself in the hills for three years to prove it”.²¹⁰

Social responsibility, which Semple had consistently advocated, was also a feature of his practical socialism. The project’s conditions suggested a principle and obligation to the community “the members are rendering great social service to their fellow citizens, who are urgently in need of an up-to-date water supply which is the very life of a community and that the speedy conclusion of the job will be welcomed by their fellow citizens”.²¹¹ During his 1921 lecture on “Industrial Co-operation” Semple said he honestly believed that the contract was a good thing for the community and for the working-class in general. He argued workers must have some sort of social conscience and upon service rested the health and happiness of the people of the country. Semple suggested the men at Wainui were out to give a social service as quickly as possible and implored the workers to watch the experiment. He said they may wipe out altogether the need for strike or at least would show how this could be done “This is a practical demonstration of the fact that the workers do possess constructive genius, once said to be the monopoly of the private contractor. When opportunity knocks at the door, let the worker get in and show what he can do. Let us...get down to practical methods of making New Zealand a better place for all”. Speaking at the same meeting Paddy Webb said the ultimate aim of all the workers was socialism but they were, as yet, miles away from that objective “But when socialism came they must be prepared for it – prepared to take their share in the great responsibilities that would devolve upon them. They must develop initiative, and the co-operative system would help that”.²¹²

²¹⁰ Mowbray, ‘The Real Bob Semple’.

²¹¹ *Evening Post*, 30 June 1920.

²¹² *Evening Post*, 20 June 1921.

Figure 13: The photograph, taken at the Wainui end of the tunnel, shows some members of the co-operative party in 1922. Robert Semple junior is incorrectly named as Sweeney, Wellington Regional Council.

Co-operation was the key feature in Semple's socialism. Speaking on the success of the tunnel project in September 1923 Semple said with thorough organisation, proper management, and the right spirit behind the movement, any undertaking could be carried to a successful end. He said his objective in adopting the co-operative method was three fold – first, for speed purposes, secondly, to endeavour to carry out such important work with out the use of the strike weapon, and thirdly, to protect the lives of those engaged in such undertakings. He said the experiment had been highly satisfactory with regard to the clean accident record and the speed attained had surpassed anything in the same nature of work known in New Zealand or Australia.²¹³ He said the results were not due to any sweating or speeding-up system, but simply due to organisation,

²¹³ *Evening Post*, 9 October 1923.

Under our co-operative plan each man gets all that he earns, all hands are on an equal footing, have comfortable accommodation, good food, and a splendid bath to turn into at the end of each days work...Ours is the best kind of co-operation or teamwork. We are endeavouring to demonstrate that this is the principle that should be applied to all large undertakings in a young country like New Zealand.²¹⁴

Semple said he hoped the value of his system would be recognised and applied to future works,

The old system has been tried for years and proved a failure and if we are not slaves to traditions and ancient customs surely we will be guided by practical proof. A young country such as New Zealand that has yet to be developed, must get away from old customs that breed industrial antagonism and lead to class conflicts, and get down to the real method of doing things.²¹⁵

When the *Maoriland Worker* staff and friends visited the tunnel site in November 1923 Semple expressed his pleasure at being able to show his comrades a great public work in process of development, for “The motto of their group had always been hospitality and as far as they could in this particular respect they had tried to express the spirit of the great labour and socialist movement”.²¹⁶ Webb suggested the tunnel contract was an experiment which was justifiable from every point of view. He said it was conceived in order to demonstrate that the co-operative labour of workers could perform honest, useful and economic public service without the dictation and supervision of private enterprise, and the enterprise had been a great success, “To have given a practical evidence of this was a substantial contribution to the working out of the socialist ideal”.²¹⁷

²¹⁴ *Evening Post*, 23 September 1922.

²¹⁵ *Evening Post*, 6 September 1923.

²¹⁶ The article said the visit was at the invitation of Semple.

²¹⁷ *Maoriland Worker*, 28 November 1923.



Figure 14: The photograph taken in 1923 shows a Labour group at the tunnel site. It is unclear whether it is the Maoriland Worker group or another Labour organisation such as the Wellington Labour Club, F-140138-1/2, WTU.

But this expression of practical socialism did not persuade everyone. When the Orongorongo tunnel was completed on 23 February 1924 the Mayor and city councillors praised Semple's party.²¹⁸ The labour newspaper, the *Maoriland Worker*, said Semple and his co-operative party deserved the congratulations of the labour movement on the success of their efforts - they had saved the municipality substantial interest charges but also demonstrated the superiority of a non-profiteering system over private contract in the service of the public. It maintained the principle should be applied generally.²¹⁹ The *Evening Post*, while conceding that the project was praiseworthy, was cautious about a wholesale adoption of the co-operative principal. An editorial also concluded that it was not wise to form a general judgement based upon a particular case which might be exceptional,

²¹⁸ Wellington City Council Minute Book Number 33 16 August 1923 – 21 August 1924, WCCA. The tunnel was 10,523 ft in length, just 37ft short of two miles, with a height and width of seven feet. It was 2,000 feet longer than the railway tunnel between Lyttelton and Christchurch and was the longest tunnel in New Zealand with the exception of the Otira tunnel.

²¹⁹ *Maoriland Worker*, 5 March 1924.

Semple's men were picked men, capable of working without supervision. There were no duds. But all men are not equal and some require supervision. For such, co-operation upon a basis of equal sharing presents many difficulties... We readily admit that the Semple party has given a valuable demonstration of the worth of co-operation, but while that demonstration proves much it does not prove everything.²²⁰

Whether it was described as socialism or not, Semple's vision for New Zealand society continued to include tangible benefits which improved the welfare and conditions of the worker. Although both Semple and Paddy Webb continued to trumpet the socialist ideology, they were seldom doctrinaire, and as Leslie Hobbs remarked of Semple, "He was a practical Labour man rather than anyone's ideologist".²²¹

Following Labour's election victory in 1935 Webb, at a reception at Kilbernie for Semple, said the Labour government was still the same advocate of socialism: "It is the times that have changed not Labour's principles... The government represents the new order of society... The people have played their part in a determination to give effect to the new order".²²² For Semple, as Minister of Public Works, the new order meant improved conditions for his public works employees. In announcing the new agreement for employees Semple said the department would improve the social amenities of public works camps. Provision would be made for recreation halls and libraries. He said the whole object of the scheme was to ensure that the men engaged on public works jobs, although they might be isolated from their fellow beings, still felt that they were part of the human family.²²³

For Semple, socialism was progressively modern. During Semple's leadership of the Public Works portfolio Rosslyn Noonan has suggested that the heightened mechanisation of the department was one of the great achievements of the Semple ministry.²²⁴ Semple was certainly committed to the modernisation of equipment for the efficient construction of works and happy for this to be known. Addressing workers at the Mangere aerodrome in February 1936 he said, "The wheelbarrow

²²⁰ *Evening Post*, 25 March 1924.

²²¹ Hobbs, p. 78.

²²² *Evening Post*, 30 January 1936.

²²³ *New Zealand Herald*, 3 March 1936.

²²⁴ Noonan, p. 146.

belongs to the days of Noah's Ark".²²⁵ In April 1936 his department was desperately short of modern plant. He noted anxiously, "All we have left to carry on public works comprises wheelbarrows, double-ended picks and long-handled shovels... We must have modern equipment so that the work done can be done as quickly as possible and at the least cost".²²⁶ Semple advocated the use of modern machinery as a cost saving measure – he wanted the money saved for use in other directions and develop New Zealand as quickly as they could. He also argued for mechanisation on humanitarian grounds, suggesting "They must transfer laborious toil to machinery and make machinery the servant and not the master".²²⁷



Figure 15: The date and occasion of this photograph is unknown however it indicates Semple's disdain for the wheelbarrow, RHSC.

State Action and State Ownership

The state is central to most notions of socialism, Semple was in keeping with this trend. Historian Pat Moloney has examined the discourse of state socialism in New Zealand around 1900 suggesting that the term state socialism, although ambiguous,

²²⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, 5 February 1936.

²²⁶ *New Zealand Herald*, 9 April 1936.

²²⁷ *New Zealand Herald*, 8 February 1937.

“implied the direct involvement of the state in large-scale industrial production”.²²⁸ The state figured prominently in socialist Tom Mann’s lectures in Gippsland and no doubt helped shape Semple’s views. At the Korumburra meeting in September 1903 Mann said, “the state must always be paramount and must be considered before the individual because the whole was greater than the part”.²²⁹ Mann again lectured in Korumburra in December, stating that socialists wished for land nationalisation when it could be achieved “and it would be achieved when the people were sufficiently educated as to the benefits that would accrue from it. Once the state got possession of the land it should retain it and let it on perpetual lease”.²³⁰ Semple’s early recorded views reflect these ideas.

In 1907 Semple supported state ownership of large industry believing workers would accrue greater benefit from this than private ownership. At public meeting at Dunollie held to protest against recent increases in the price of flour, Semple moved “the government be urged to start a State flour mill”.²³¹ While at the Trades and Labour Council in the same year Semple opposed private ownership on a large scale. John Southward, representing the Dunollie miners along with Semple, moved that the “Government be urged to procure steamers to carry coal from the State mines...by doing this they would also be bursting up the greatest monopoly in the Country – viz the Union Company”. The *Greymouth Evening Star* reported that Semple vigorously supported the motion, saying the State mine had been established for the purpose of eradicating the evil of monopoly. He said seeing the State successfully ran railways he did not see why it should not run steamers and thereby benefit the people to a greater extent.²³²

O’Farrell has argued that although the Grey district socialists (including Semple) up until 1913 believed in the class struggle and the imminent socialist revolution, “instead of predicting the withering away of the state, local socialists clamoured for

²²⁸ Pat Moloney, ‘State Socialism and William Pember Reeves: A Reassessment’ in Pat Moloney & Kerry Taylor (eds.), *On the Left: Essays on Socialism in New Zealand*, Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2002, pp. 39-57.

²²⁹ *Korumburra Times*, 12 September 1903.

²³⁰ *Korumburra Times*, 16 December 1903.

²³¹ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 7 June 1907. During May the Flourmillers’ Association increased the price of flour to 10s per ton, the third increase within a fortnight.

²³² *Greymouth Evening Star*, 18 February 1907.

nationalisation, an extension of state powers”.²³³ Semple did advocate more state participation when Prime Minister Joseph Ward visited the State collieries in May 1908. He led a deputation which requested an extension of state ownership and control including state steamers, the advisability of government taking over full control of the township, and an extension of government ownership of coal mines. Semple said he believed Rotorua was a success as a State-owned town.²³⁴

Semple supported nationalising the liquor traffic when he attended the West Coast Trades and Labour Council in 1908, seeing this as the only solution. The Prohibition Party had done practically nothing to check the drinking evil. Referring to his own experience he said, “At Linvia in Western Australia it was a great success. A number of the present hotels were purely drink shops and only the poorest liquor was sold in many cases”.²³⁵ But Semple also supported national prohibition when no-license exponent T.E. Taylor visited the West Coast in 1911.²³⁶ At a Runanga meeting Taylor described liquor as the present curse to the workingman’s welfare and the greatest stumbling block in the way of land and labour reforms. He moved a motion pledging the meeting to do all in its power to carry national prohibition at the end of the year poll. Semple, in seconding the motion, said the liquor trade was a curse to civilisation, for “The workingman too often wasted the product of his industry in liquor”.²³⁷

Following Taylor’s address, Paddy Webb and Semple took part in a debate entitled “State Control versus Prohibition”. Webb took the affirmative while Semple took the negative in opposing state control and advocating the national prohibition of liquor. Semple argued that he did not profess any change of policy in his actions. Perhaps disingenuously he said he had asserted and pleaded for entire prohibition for many years and the only cure to the evil in New Zealand was national prohibition. But previously at the 1908 Trades Council meeting Semple declared state control was the only way to combat the problem.²³⁸

²³³ O’Farrell, ‘Workers in Grey District Politics’, p. 239-241.

²³⁴ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 7 May 1908.

²³⁵ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 11 March 1908.

²³⁶ T.E. Taylor was an Independent Liberal-Labour MP in Christchurch from 1908-1911. He was elected Mayor of Christchurch 1911, but died the same year. He was a free Methodist and leader of the Christchurch prohibitionists.

²³⁷ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 18 April 1911.

²³⁸ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 11 March 1911.

Semple reversed his position again during 1915-19. In an advertisement by the National Council of the Licensed Trade of New Zealand Semple was quoted in the *Worker*, representing the New Zealand Miners' Federation, as supporting Continuance in the liquor trade. He said,

Labour stands for the socialisation of all industries and I personally stand for the placing of the liquor question in the same category. In other words, I am a hardened State controller, believing that this is the only practical solution of the liquor question.²³⁹

But the advertisement in the *Worker* appeared in 1922. While state control may have been Semple's personal view prior to the 1920s, the Labour Party itself thought it unwise to have a direct reference to liquor in its platform after 1919, as the issue was too divisive for supporters. And the liquor question was included in the ballot papers as a referendum in the general elections. However, the National Council of the Licensed Trade of New Zealand used Semple's earlier view to argue for Continuance in 1922. Continuance may have been Semple's personal view although at that time the Labour Party had a more neutral position.

Nonetheless, aware of the danger of workplace accidents, throughout his life Semple was always in favour of abstinence from liquor on the job site. In the Rules and Regulations for the Orongorongo Tunnel party liquor and gambling were banned on site. In 1934 he seconded an amendment to the Gaming Bill presented by Harry Holland. Holland's amendment refused to give the Bill a second reading in the House on the grounds it increased rather than controlled gambling facilities. Semple agreed and said they should be passing legislation to bring a greater measure of security and comfort to people not creating another machine that will tempt people to risk their pittances with a hope of securing a few pounds,

I am not a kill-joy, no one can brand me as a 'wowsers', but I do know something of the evils of gambling. I know that if one wants men to work well, especially on the outskirts of civilisation one must prohibit gambling on the job...if one wants the highest degree of efficiency, two things must be missing, liquor and gambling.²⁴⁰

²³⁹ *Maoriland Worker*, 20 September 1922.

²⁴⁰ *NZPD*, 240 (1934), p. 525-526.

And as Minister of Public Works he supported his officials who worked hard to enforce the rule already in place since the 1890s that alcohol was forbidden in public works camps.

Moloney's article on state socialism argues that in the 1910s Semple and Harry Holland preached "a fiery and revolutionary socialist catechism that scorned the legislation of the Liberal-Labour coalition as mere palliatives". He suggested that both men viewed state institutions like the Arbitration Court as serving only the capitalist class and "state socialism was sham socialism".²⁴¹ But Semple did support the state ownership of industry rather than large-scale private enterprise and also state provision of employment, advocating more state control of mines. Semple's perspective was very similar to Pat Hickey at this time. As Clayworth argued, "Hickey criticised state enterprises as merely another boss to exploit the workers, but believed in a socialised state where industry was organised for the benefit of workers".²⁴²

Throughout the 1910s Semple continued to advocate the social ownership of industry, as an economic and employment solution. As national miners' agent in 1915, protesting at the perceived inadequacy of the Miners' Phthisis Bill, Semple outlined the appalling death toll in the mines and suggested the cause was private ownership of the mines – the placing of dividends before the protection of human life. For Semple the only solution was public ownership and control.²⁴³ When coal supplies began to dwindle during the winter of 1919 many attributed the problem to the shortage of labour and miners. Semple, now a Labour MP, said that nationalisation of the industry was the only remedy as private enterprise was one of the chief factors in the industrial discontent which existed in the mining fields in the world.²⁴⁴ Speaking at Wanganui in June, Semple said the country should own its own steamship line and the coalmines. Under state ownership the coal miners could be given decent conditions and housing, and the coal marketed at less than half the present cost. Semple incorporated the call for nationalisation of the mines into his maiden speech in Parliament. He said politicians should not look at the great economic questions

²⁴¹ Pat Moloney, 'State Socialism and William Pember Reeves: A Reassessment', pp. 41-42.

²⁴² Clayworth, 'Pat Hickey – The Making of a Homegrown Revolutionary'.

²⁴³ *Maoriland Worker*, 6 October 1915.

²⁴⁴ *Maoriland Worker*, 28 May 1919.

through narrow spectacles but try and discover the real cause that produced the evil. Semple said the cause of the coal shortage was that the coal industry was in the hands of a private monopoly. He said the hunt for dividends was raping the mines, not working them.

The nationalisation of the mines was Labour Party policy, and a deputation from the 1919 NZLP Conference, including Semple, put this request before government ministers.²⁴⁵ Leader of the Labour Party Harry Holland said the only solution to the present coal shortage was nationalising the mines. Semple agreed and said the coal-mines were not worked but “butchered” because managers were compelled to work to pay dividends instead of developing the mines according to their own judgement. He argued that private ownership of mines was dangerous and wicked and miners were leaving the mine-fields because the living conditions were not fit for their children “If the mines were reorganised and proper conditions and security of tenure provided he was certain enough men would be found to man them”.²⁴⁶

When Labour became the government in 1935 its enthusiasm for state ownership of mines was more circumspect. Between 1935-1945 there was an ever-increasing coal shortage and rather than nationalise mines, which many unions advocated, the government was wary, believing the unions had political agendas.²⁴⁷ In September 1942 a major confrontation developed in the Waikato coalfields when Pukemiro miners struck because ten men had been paid less than the minimum wage.²⁴⁸ The government responded by agreeing to take over the affected mines and run them for the duration of the war.²⁴⁹ Labour difficulties and coal shortages continued and over the next few years most mines were sold to the government. The government was criticised for engaging in what the National Party claimed in Parliament was “socialism by stealth”, but Minister of Finance Walter Nash countered this with the

²⁴⁵ The speakers in the deputation were Fraser, Holland, Semple, Nash, Parry, Croskery, McKeen and Mrs Beck. The Ministers were Acting PM J. Allen, McDonald – Mines, Herries – Railways and Acting Labour.

²⁴⁶ *Evening Post*, 10 July 1919.

²⁴⁷ There were stoppages at West Coast mines within weeks of Labour coming to power. Stoppages were seen as an effort to increase wages ahead of other industries.

²⁴⁸ The total sum involved was £16.

²⁴⁹ This was done by means of emergency regulations, and after the war these mines were nationalised. Bert Roth & Jenny Hammond, *Toil and Trouble: The Struggle for a Better Life in New Zealand*, Auckland: Methuen, 1981, p. 138.

comment that coal resources were not something “which should be left to the profit-earning motives of private enterprise”.²⁵⁰ The nationalisation of the mines remained government policy however during the war years the reticent attitude can be attributed to deteriorating industrial relations at this time. As Bassett has suggested, “With no apparent enthusiasm, the government passed the Coal Act of 1948. It brought all remaining mines under state control”.²⁵¹

Housing was another area where Semple saw a role for the state. He was, at times, closely involved with the issue. In 1925, as a Labour councillor on the Wellington City Council Semple showed preference for the state assuming responsibility for providing housing for the working class. He was part of a four-man housing committee that was formed shortly after the 1925 election to consider Wellington City’s housing shortage and recommend some solutions. The 1919 influenza epidemic had highlighted the chronic condition of Wellington’s housing and the Labour representatives revived the issue in Council after the election. After visiting some of Wellington’s slum areas, the committee, of which Semple was the only Labour representative, inspected homes built by municipalities in Shannon, Palmerston North, Frankton and Auckland and made loan and site recommendations for approximately sixty new houses to the Council. At first Council could not decide on the location of the houses to be built and then appeared reluctant to raise loan finance itself after representations to the government for help were unsuccessful. But the housing committee did suggest various loan amounts: £100,000, then £50,000 and finally £25,000 in a desperate effort to get the project under way, but to no avail. Semple remarked on his visit north that he had been particularly impressed by the operations carried on at the Railway Department house-building factory at Frankton. The *Post* reported Semple as being “firmly of the opinion that the whole housing problem would be solved if the government would erect more of these factories, say two in each island”.²⁵² Semple said during the months of debate that housing authorities had stressed mass production and concentration and that “The council should endeavour to grapple with the problem on a bold and large scale”.²⁵³ However, they never did. The Housing Committee experience of 1925 and the Council’s continuing inability to

²⁵⁰ *AJHR*, 1947, B-6, p. 21.

²⁵¹ Bassett, *The State in New Zealand 1840-1984*, p. 250.

²⁵² *Evening Post*, 10 July 1925.

²⁵³ *Evening Post*, 10 July 1925.

tackle the problem, may have firmed in Semple's mind the view, that was also shared by others in the Labour Party, that low-cost housing could not be left to municipalities alone – the state had to intervene to provide decent housing for all, and so the State Housing Scheme was instigated shortly after Labour took office.

As a member of the Labour government Semple was consistent in his belief that only the state could adequately supply the country's housing needs. However, he was now more prudent in his advocacy of socialism probably due, in some part, to the socialist objective of Labour Party becoming increasingly remote from policy. The nature and policy of the Party became increasingly determined by electoral success and the ultimate maintenance of power – socialist policy thus became modified to appeal to a wide cross-section of people. And the National Party always constructed socialism as a bogey so rather than present socialism as the ultimate goal Semple framed socialism as a course of action which, from his and the governments perspective, was the right one. In 1943 Semple said,

The demand for houses is so great that it can only be met and satisfied by home building on a mass scale...some critics may call that the socialisation of building. I am not concerned with what they call it so long as the required homes are well, truly and speedily erected.

He said those who condemned government housing schemes and declared that building should be left to private enterprise should explain why so many people had been homeless in the past before state building was undertaken. He said under the state schemes 15,000 houses had been built in New Zealand and another 7,000 financed under the State Advances Corporation.²⁵⁴

Hobbs suggested, "The strongest charge of socialism which could be laid at Labour's door was its nationalisation of so much of the transport industry".²⁵⁵ He cited the example of the buying out of road services, which competed with the government railway. Semple had received a report, when he first gained office, which analysed the current status of transport services. It said

²⁵⁴ *New Zealand Herald*, 19 February 1943

²⁵⁵ Hobbs, p. 184.

long driving hours on trucks and passenger vehicles are a menace to public safety on the roads, and are a root cause of much of the uneconomic competition in the transport field. Britain and many other countries had introduced special legislative measures to deal with the matter.²⁵⁶

But when Semple announced the government's proposal to take over some road freight services under its policy of transport co-ordination, critics decried the move as socialism.²⁵⁷ The executive of the National Party said Semple had made one the most disturbing announcements yet made by any socialist Minister: "The Minister has announced that the whole of the long-distance goods transport system which operates beyond 30 miles on any railway route is to be forcibly taken over and socialised. Such ruthless confiscation cannot on any proper grounds be defended".²⁵⁸ Professor R. Algie, organiser of the Auckland Provincial Freedom Association, said the move was the Labour Party's policy of socialisation camouflaged under the pleasant-sounding name of single ownership. Algie said Semple had reversed his stance of less than two years ago when he said in Parliament,

I know that if I were a licensed carrier engaged on transport work and the government of the day took away my license, threw me on the roadside and confiscated my life's savings, I would regard it as not fit to be a government. And I am certainly not going to do anything of that kind myself.²⁵⁹

Once again Semple was prudent insisting that a socialist policy was subservient to an efficient transport system. He said the fear that the taking over of long-distance freight services by the railway department was a preliminary to taking over all forms of goods transport was unfounded. He argued the government's proposals covered only 197 trucks out of a total of 45,000 in New Zealand:

The single ownership policy is not being adopted only because it is socialistic but because it is sound business for everyone and the best method of providing the most economical transport service on these routes...If socialism is necessary to prevent 200 heavy

²⁵⁶ 'Transport Co-ordination Board Notes for the Hon. Minister' undated, TD1 8/9 Pt 1 Ministers Papers, NA.

²⁵⁷ *New Zealand Herald*, 9 June 1937. Semple outlined the machinery for the taking over of these services. Two purchase officers were appointed and any dispute referred to a tribunal.

²⁵⁸ *New Zealand Herald*, 10 May 1937.

²⁵⁹ *New Zealand Herald*, 12 April 1938.

motor-lorries tearing up and down our roads alongside the railway line, which efficiently deals with 90% of their business, then I say let us have socialism.²⁶⁰

Semple continually scoffed at suggestions his aim was the socialisation of the whole transport system. In 1941 he said,

The only thing we are against is cannibalistic competition on the roads disastrous to all concerned and unfair competition against the railways which is detrimental to public interests...I am not after anybody's business. Private enterprise has a place in society and always will have a place so long as it is governed and controlled as it should be.²⁶¹

However, Sid Holland the Opposition leader said it was amusing to read Semple's declaration that it was not the intention of the government to socialise the transport industry and that socialisation was never contemplated by the government "Mr Semple appears conveniently to have overlooked the objective of the Labour Party, which is socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange".²⁶²

The Opposition still raised the socialist bogey to contradict the benign presentation by Semple and the government.

²⁶⁰ *New Zealand Herald*, 7 July 1937.

²⁶¹ *New Zealand Herald*, 30 January 1941.

²⁶² *New Zealand Herald*, 3 February 1941.



Figure 16: Semple as Minister of Transport broadcasting from 3YA on 'Death on the Highway', 1936, C-28279-1/2, WTU.

As well as state socialism or socialism from the top Semple continued to build socialism up from the community. While Transport Minister Semple said the 1938 road safety campaign was “everybody’s campaign”. He said there were too many people being killed on the roads and it was the duty of every citizen to help save his fellow man and to put into actual operation the words “I am my brother’s keeper”.²⁶³ He stressed road safety was a community effort,

The true spirit of democracy is the cooperation of all the people for the good of all of the people...Every road user must realise his responsibility for his own safety and for that of the traffic in which he moves. Regulation and control may simplify and clarify this responsibility, but cannot move it.²⁶⁴

²⁶³ *New Zealand Herald*, 20 May 1938.

²⁶⁴ *New Zealand Herald*, 5 December 1938.

Although the Labour government did not vigorously pursue the socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange there were some steps taken to further the progress of socialism. The Bank of New Zealand was nationalised in 1945. However, the state already had control of the BNZ with one-third shares and the appointing of four out of six directors. And with control of central banking transferred from private to public ownership by the Reserve Bank Act of 1936, through the Reserve Bank the government had complete control of exchange and loan operations. Roy McLennan, in his study of the last years of the Labour government, suggested that the effect of nationalisation was minimal, the real purpose was to placate monetary radicals on the left of the Labour Party.²⁶⁵ Semple supported the Bill in Parliament when the Opposition attacked it. Mr Walter Broadfoot suggested that people's property would be next and "confiscation without right of appeal is the established Socialist doctrine".²⁶⁶ Semple dismissed this as propaganda designed to scare people, and said the same tactics were used in the general election in England when the people were told of a Socialist Gestapo. Semple quoted Lord Beaverbrook who had said "I want to deprive the Bank of England of its power to regulate money...I want to plant that power, and the responsibility for the use of it, in the hands of the government, Give back to the people the power which has been stripped from them by the financiers". Semple also repeated the words of Abraham Lincoln: "The privilege of creating and issuing money is not only the supreme prerogative of government, but it is the government's greatest creative opportunity. Thus money will cease to be the master and become the servant of humanity. Democracy will rise superior to the money power".²⁶⁷ McLennan argued that many in the Labour Party felt that the take-over of the BNZ would provide stimulus towards the realisation of humanitarian socialism. Semple's comments can be seen in that light although McLennan suggested there was no real change in the nature, purpose, or effect of the BNZ's activities.²⁶⁸ Thus, Semple's socialist rhetoric did not foreshadow any drastic changes in the country's existing banking system.

During his lifetime Semple expressed the belief that socialism was the key to improving the lot of the working class. The absence of a single socialist tradition

²⁶⁵ McLennan, 'The Last Years of the First Labour Government, 1945-1949', pp. 104-118.

²⁶⁶ Walter James Broadfoot was MP for Waitomo.

²⁶⁷ *NZPD*, 271 (1945), p. 426-431.

²⁶⁸ McLennan, 'The Last Years of the First Labour Government, pp. 104-118.

allowed Semple to have an elastic conception of socialism and, like many of his Labour contemporaries, he did not always rigidly adhere to socialist ideologies, or deploy abstract theories, but responded to the conditions he saw around him at any one time. Change could be seen over time as political action became the way of the future in the wake of failed industrial action. Semple's language of class war cemented his early image as a revolutionary and although his rhetoric remained colourful, class warfare itself disappeared over time, especially after he became part of the Labour government. However there were several aspects of continuity in Semple's lifetime of socialism - the basic premises of equality and social justice always underpinned his perspectives. His practical application of socialism remained constant as did his support of state ownership of large enterprises although there were, on occasion, some change in the methods employed by him to achieve an objective as evidenced in his variable attitude to nationalising liquor. But there is no doubt that Semple's lifelong perception and self-representation as a socialist was successful. Historians have acknowledged Semple's pursuit of a socialist vision for New Zealand, as Richardson argued Semple's achievements helped to frame New Zealand's social and economic pattern to this day.²⁶⁹ The socialist persona is but one of a number of identities or layers of Semple. The next chapter considers another image of Semple as a union organiser, an inaugural position which then became overlapped and intertwined with other images.

²⁶⁹ Richardson, 'Robert Semple'.

Chapter Three

“I would never under any circumstances turn the working class down”: The Union Organiser.¹

Multi-dimensional models of identity are now commonplace over a range of disciplines.² While acknowledging that multiple identities co-exist this chapter suggests Semple’s identity as a union organiser was a major part of his sense of life experience. His public career was instigated and largely built by union organising, and so this image provided an umbrella framework from beneath which other personas emerged, operated and overlapped each other. The image features prominently in Semple’s historical characterisation. For example, Michael King’s *Penguin History of New Zealand* highlighted the FOL and then Semple as “the national organiser paid to travel the country calling on unions to de-register from the Arbitration Act”.³ In his biography of Michael Joseph Savage Gustafson introduces Semple as “the Red Feds’ national organiser”.⁴

Semple’s early passion was union affairs and his initial organising was on behalf of coal miners – the community he knew best. Semple also organised for and represented national union organisations such as the Federation of Labour (FOL) and the United Federation of Labour (UFL) in the 1910s. In the 1920s he became organiser for the national Freezing Workers’ union and secretary for the Wellington General Labourers’ union. Believing that unity was the key to workers emancipation Semple constantly advocated worker and union consolidation at both local and national levels and fought hard to improve wages and conditions for those he represented. This chapter explores Semple’s organising on behalf of the specific trade unions and also the national union organisations. The characteristics of his organising such as extensive touring, his language, financial problems and periods of dual representation will also be examined. When Semple became part of the Labour government later in his life his attitude towards unionism was influenced by more general national

¹ Canterbury Freezing Workers and Related Trades Union MB 9 [1/3] Minutes 1924, Macmillan Brown Library, University of Canterbury.

² For example Worchel, Iuzzini, Coutant and Ivaldi, ‘A Multidimensional Model of Identity: Relating Individual and Group Identities to Intergroup Behaviour’.

³ King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, p. 310

⁴ Gustafson, *From the Cradle to the Grave*, p. 76.

considerations. As with his colleagues the nation became Semple's primary organising concern instead of his previous narrower focus of individual unions and then broader union organisations. Some unionists did not reciprocate Semple's new arguments in national terms and accused him of betraying his trade union principles.

Semple's entry into unionism was initiated from his early life experiences. There is a broader context in which he needs to be understood. Richardson suggested that latent within coalmining communities there existed a "powerful sense of injustice".⁵ Semple evoked this when later explaining his motivation for joining unions, suggesting as a youth he became aware of social injustices through which men spent a large part of their lives underground but received insufficient wages to feed their families in many cases. He questioned the reasons for this, read extensively, joined a debating society and "was led inevitably to trade unionism".⁶ Olssen described Semple as having an "instinctive sympathy with the victims of injustice".⁷

While travelling around Australia Semple was generally involved in local unions but when he settled in Victoria he took on the more formalised role of miners' advocate. By the start of 1903 he was President of the Coal Creek Miners' lodge, and during the Great Victorian Strike of 1903/04 he was part of high level discussions over pay and working conditions. He represented the miners at a local and then regional level as a VCMA delegate. He negotiated with the Coal Creek company directors and petitioned parliamentarians on the miners' behalf. These wide-ranging negotiations during the strike would have given Semple valuable experience, and many later mining disputes in New Zealand were settled with mutually satisfactory agreements mediated by Semple.

Organising the Miners

Because of his union background in Australia Semple was willing and able to apply his organising skills when he first arrived in New Zealand, organising men who had

⁵ Len Richardson, 'Billy Banjo: Coalminer, Socialist, Poet and Novelist' in Pat Moloney & Kerry Taylor (eds.), *On the Left: Essays in Socialism in New Zealand*, Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2002, p. 74.

⁶ Mowbray, 'The Real Bob Semple'.

⁷ Olssen, *The Red Feds*, p. 19.

had no previous advocacy. He established a union at the State mine in Runanga and was its first President.⁸ At a farewell function to a State miner in 1909, “Mr Semple said there was no union when he first came to the State mine but with the assistance of Mr J. O’Loughlin a meeting was called and the union formed”.⁹ O’Farrell argued that the union was formed in June or July 1904 and did not accept Semple’s claim that he was the first President. He suggested the union’s first president was L. Cleveland and J. O’Loughlin, its first secretary.¹⁰ However, early union correspondence with the Department of Labour corroborated Semple’s claim. Semple occupied the chair when the decision was taken to form an Industrial Union of Workers at the Dunollie Hotel Clubroom in September and he was listed as President in the first Union Rule book received by the department on 3 October 1904.¹¹

As a local union official for the State miners’ union in Runanga, Semple petitioned government ministers for improved facilities for miners and townspeople. This was a continuation of his Australian unionist experiences when he pursued political avenues as one way to improve life for working people. In 1909 he led a miners’ deputation to the Minister of Public Works and Mines who visited the State Collieries and Runanga. The deputation asked for a review of the cartage charge on coal for the residents of Runanga, and that a bath to be provided for the use of the miners on leaving their shift.¹² The minister agreed to the provision of the bath.¹³ The deputation also asked that transportation be provided for the men from the mine after work, such as was done elsewhere. They suggested that this would tend towards an increase in the men’s earnings and the output of the mine.¹⁴

Semple also pursued industrial organisation as a way of improving conditions for the working class more broadly, believing at this time that working class strength needed

⁸ Mowbray, ‘The Real Bob Semple’.

⁹ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 10 May 1909.

¹⁰ O’Farrell, ‘Workers in Grey District Politics’, p. 146. This information was cited in O’Farrell as verbal information supplied by G. English of Runanga.

¹¹ Smith, p. 62: J O’Loughlin to Deputy Registrar 26th September 1904, Registration of Industrial Unions – Coal Creek State Mine IUW, L1 Box 112 1904/528, Department of Labour, NA. List of officers in Rule Book President R.Semple, Secretary J. O’Loughlin, Treasurer L. Cleavand, Executive Committee, Wm Strongman, R. Gregory, Thos Hilton, Wm Robb, Thos O’Loughlin, T. Currie.

¹² The deputation was referred to the Minister of Railways who visited Runanga in May. The Minister was not keen to interfere with the standard tariff. The deputation also urged a midday train, however, the Minister later advised that passengers numbers did not warrant an extra train.

¹³ The Minister said he was also compelling all private companies to provide baths for miners.

¹⁴ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 10 April 1909.

to be maximised through a regional industrial union. When Semple represented the Dunollie miners at the 1907 West Coast Trades and Labour Council, his thoughts clearly included a wider concept of regional unionism as he recommended the appointment of an organising secretary

with a view of bringing into existence a workers' union in connection with West Coast industries, the whole to form a Federation of Labour for the West Coast...there were plenty of men outside unions. These men should be organised.¹⁵

During 1908, after no subsequent action was taken by the Trades and Labour Council, Semple persisted in arguing for an organiser's position. At the Trades and Labour Council in March he supported the formation of a miners' federation saying that the employers were active in organisation and they were lax not responding with their own federation of labour. He also supported the appointment of an organising secretary whose duties, were to organise all labour in the Westland Industrial district. Semple was one of the three nominations for secretary.¹⁶ He gave an address on federation in 1908 and, exhibiting an early sign of a parliamentary focus, said the time was ripe for an organising secretary whose duties would be "to form unions and get all to combine so that we could vote as one at the general election".¹⁷ Semple said better conditions were required and the workers must co-operate or labour would go back. But by May, with no wholesale support from affiliated unions, much to Semple's disgust, the Trades Council secretary was still not appointed.

Semple and the State miners' union then took the initiative in forming a federation of miners in 1908. As the result of an appeal by Semple a ballot was taken and it was decided by 292 votes to 16 to conduct an active campaign for a federation of coal miners on the West Coast. Semple was appointed State miners' delegate to seek the co-operation of other unions and the Blackball miners appointed Pat Hickey to act with him. The main aim was to try and bring all the workers of New Zealand into one

¹⁵ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 22 February 1907.

¹⁶ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 11 March 1908.

¹⁷ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 18 April 1908.

huge federation that would agitate for legislation towards improving mine management, safeguarding miners' health and improving their economic status.¹⁸

Semple and Hickey toured the unions on the West Coast. Such tours and periods of extensive travel were characteristic of Semple's many organising roles. He was frequently away from his family for long periods of time, Margaret Semple would spend many hours alone and she did more than her share of the children's upbringing. Some years later Margaret Thorn recalled Margaret Semple as a capable woman, "Margaret was often left in a tent when Bob was driven off to the job. Once, Queenie chopped two of her fingers off, and Margaret sewed them on again with number 40 white thread and they worked".¹⁹ But capability may have also been born from necessity, as from a very early stage family life was tempered by Semple's organising duties and then, later, the pursuit of a political cause.

Hickey remarked on Semple's organisational skills in these early years. The two men visited the Buller, Reefton and Grey districts and succeeded in getting a ballot taken on federation at all the meetings. The results were a huge success; 1180 votes for federation, 66 against. He remarked on Semple's wonderful capacity for detail, "In planning a campaign, in outlining policy, the most minute detail was never overlooked".²⁰ Hickey suggested they were a great team with him opening and outlining what they wanted done and Semple then following in elaboration and exhortation.

The Miners' Federation was formed in late 1908, there were eleven unions represented with a total membership of 4,259 miners.²¹ Semple was elected President, testimony to his early prominence amongst the miners. He continued to furiously organise workers. In February 1909 he re-organised the West Coast General

¹⁸ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 8 June 1908. Also, contributions, fines, donations and levies would raise funds for mutual help.

¹⁹ Elsie Locke & Jacquie Matthews (eds.), *Stick Out, Keep Left: An Autobiography by Margaret Thorn*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1997, p. 54-55. Queenie was the nickname for Semple's eldest daughter, Agnes Vida Semple.

²⁰ Hickey, pp. 10-18.

²¹ Hickey, pp. 21-22. The *Evening Post* confirming that "The conference represents 5,000 miners". *Evening Post*, 20 October 1908.

Labourers' union and was elected President pro tem.²² Semple's prominence was coupled with organisational influence as the members voted that the union be registered under the Trade Union Act in preference to the Arbitration Act. Speaking to the union in August Semple gave a "pithy address on the benefits of united action on the part of labour" and, after discussion, the union unanimously decided to join the Miners' Federation.²³ Semple's efforts with this union can be seen as the first move away from a strictly Miners' Federation towards a general federation of labour.

Some employers did not welcome Semple's organising on behalf of the workers. In 1908 he visited the men employed in constructing a railway tunnel at Otira.²⁴ Atrocious weather and poor accommodation contributed to miserable conditions there. The private contracting firm, John McLean and Sons, were criticised by Semple for not providing the minimum standards of living and working conditions.²⁵ John McLean, great-great grandson of John McLean, later published a history of the family's contracting business. When referring to Semple's complaints McLean, in a less than objective view and with animosity that spanned generations, said,

Semple at this time had never lived in one of the huts... On his many trips to Otira to stir up the workers this fat cat union leader always stayed in the comfort of one of the boarding houses or the hotel.²⁶

After another strike in 1909 Semple again travelled to Otira.²⁷ An agreement was reached between the two sides but not before Murdoch McLean claimed, "We believe that the trouble at the Otira end is mainly being caused by a few union men and agitators".²⁸ The McLean business history again blames Semple: "The agreement that was finally reached could have been made as soon as the trouble arose had it not been for outsiders like Semple and Fagan fanning the flames of discontent".²⁹

²² *Greymouth Evening Star*, 16 February 1909. The union had been originally formed in September 1908 but had disintegrated.

²³ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 10 August 1909.

²⁴ The Otira tunnel linked Canterbury and the West Coast.

²⁵ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 6 August 1908.

²⁶ John McLean, *Pioneer Contractors: The Story of John McLean and Sons*, Wellington: John McLean, 2001, p. 94

²⁷ The men struck when the contractors tried to force them to pay a deposit against loss or damage to their lamps. Semple and Mark Fagan from the Inangahua Miners' Union travelled to Otira.

²⁸ McLean, p. 128.

²⁹ McLean, p. 129.

Some unions also resisted Semple's attempts to reshape the movement into a more militant federation and criticised him directly. The Grey Valley Workers' Union said "we think that no person should be allowed to hold office as President of the federation who holds the views that trade unionism has outlived its usefulness as expressed in a public speech recently in Greymouth by the president of the Miners' Federation".³⁰ Hickey replied unapologetically that trade unionism must look to the future and be moulded into a different form of organisation from that of the past. Hickey said Semple was therefore advocating an advanced policy which implied that the hope of the future lay in abandoning the old style of organisation and fashioning their organisations upon the same lines as those adopted by the master class. The basic premise was organisation of workers on the lines of industry as opposed to trade. Although he did concede, "neither the federation President or any other advocate of industrial unionism wish to see the present system of unionism abolished until such time as the workers understand all that is meant by the change and are in a position to adopt it".³¹

The National Organisations

In 1909 the Miners' Federation changed its name to the Federation of Labour – becoming a national organisation to embrace non-miner unions. Semple was appointed organiser and took up his duties in early 1910. Hickey suggested one of Semple's greatest achievements as an organiser was bringing the watersiders into the FOL.³² Semple, who was accompanied by other FOL representatives including Hickey and Webb, persuaded a large majority of the nearly 4,000 or so wharfies to reject the Arbitration Court and affiliate to the FOL, dealing a further blow to the Arbitration system.³³ With substantial control by the FOL of the country's wharfs and mines Semple was establishing a position of power whereby he could threaten a general strike which would indeed "paralyse New Zealand".³⁴ In November 1911, when Semple commenced a nationwide tour to recruit the wharfies, the FOL included

³⁰ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 15 October 1909.

³¹ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 19 October 1909.

³² Hickey, p. 44.

³³ In the 1911 Census the occupation of "Lumpurs-wharfies" was 3,849. *Census* 1911.

³⁴ Semple had used this phrase during a strike by the Auckland General Labourers' Union in October 1911. In negotiations with Auckland mayor C.J. Parr Semple had threatened to paralyse the country.

Lyttelton, Wellington, Timaru, Auckland and Westport watersiders.³⁵ In January 1912 Semple and the leaders of the FOL negotiated a new agreement between the waterside workers and the shipping companies during which they secured major gains with an across-the-board increase in pay of 2d an hour and differential rates for different types of work. The *Greymouth Evening Star* suggested that this success would mean a considerable accession to the ranks of the FOL. Indeed, the new agreement did much for the FOL and Semple's esteem amongst the wharfies. At almost all ports large crowds greeted the agreement with enthusiasm. Olssen noted, "The largest meeting ever held on the Wellington wharves ended with three cheers for the Federation, three cheers for revolutionary socialism, and three more for Webb and Semple".³⁶

As FOL organiser Semple toured extensively, becoming, from 1910, "a roving advocate of industrial unionism, moving around the country...".³⁷ Over his lifetime Semple often pushed himself to the maximum of physical endurance and this periodically affected his health. In February 1912 the *Maoriland Worker* reported that since the inception of the FOL "Semple has worked hard and ably for its success". However, he was to visit Australia for a well-earned rest as "no man, no matter, how strongly constituted could stand the terrific pace Semple set himself".³⁸ During his public career Semple became known for his tremendous energy and enthusiasm and although one result was that he gained a reputation as a man who got things done, at times, this was detrimental to his physical and mental health.

Semple certainly applied himself with great vigour to any task associated with organising – this included gathering financial support for numerous causes, which was always a great asset to the various organisations he would be involved with. At the 1910 FOL conference it was decided to set up a labour newspaper. After the conference Semple lobbied hard for financial contributions and subscriptions.³⁹ But after supporting trial issues of the Shearers' Union newspaper, the *Maoriland Worker*,

³⁵ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 6 November 1911.

³⁶ Olssen, *The Red Feds*, p. 84.

³⁷ Richardson, 'Robert Semple'.

³⁸ *Maoriland Worker*, 23 February 1912.

³⁹ After visits from Semple the State miners loaned the FOL £250, Denniston miners £400 and the Granity miners £300. The State miners agreed to subscriptions for every member as did the Blackball miners union.

the FOL took over the paper in February 1911. Hickey indicated that financial difficulties continually plagued the paper. He recalled on one occasion that the owner of the building the paper was occupying was demanding his rent and there was no money. Ever resourceful, Semple said,

I'll go and buy the building...Bob found the money, a deposit was paid...and we breathed freely...How much the paper really owes to Semple has never been made public. He borrowed money from his personal friends, with no other security than his word of honour; he pleaded with the unions to put additional money into the venture; and, in addition, brought to the office hundreds of pounds' worth of advertisements every year.⁴⁰

When he was appointed organiser of the FOL his salary was £4 a week, second-class railway fares and 8s a day allowance when away from home.⁴¹ Appointed United Federation of Labour (UFL) organiser in 1914 his salary was £5 per week.⁴² Semple could have earned these wages as a miner but the sheer physical exertion would have been a lot greater. When Semple severed his connection with the UFL later in 1914 he was keen to pursue organising work. Jack McCullough recorded in his diary on 12 March 1915 that he had had Semple to tea and

discussed with him his difficulty of getting remunerative work – at least work that he has been used to – he wants a job where his experience as a miner may be utilised and I agree with him in this because in that case it would be more remunerative than the General Labourers work that was offering.⁴³

However, Semple's income from organising was periodically used to criticise him. During a strike at the Reefton mine in 1912 "Shareholder", in a letter to the editor in the *Greymouth Evening Star* complained,

so much irresponsible balderdash about profit chasers, wealthy capitalists and rich mine owners from...Mr Semple and his satellites...Profit-chasers forsooth, methinks it pays better to be a labour agitator than a mining investor.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Hickey, pp. 39-40.

⁴¹ Hickey, p. 27.

⁴² *Maoriland Worker*, 13 July 1914.

⁴³ Diary 5 16 February 1915-10 February 1917, J.A. McCullough Diaries, Canterbury Museum. Jack McCullough was the workers' representative on the Arbitration Court from 1908-1922. James McCombs was SDP MP for Lyttelton. He was first elected in 1913 and was an MP until 1933.

⁴⁴ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 17 June 1912. This correspondent was a shareholder in the Reefton mine.

Similarly, when discussing the FOL levies on its affiliated unions to provide strike pay for the Reefton and Waihi miners, “Jack” queried,

how much (if any) are Messrs Semple and Co sacrificing from their incomes to help the strikers...I am told the organiser of the FOL is paid £300 a year, so that at a time like this he ought to be able to give a substantial contribution to the strike funds; but is he giving anything.⁴⁵

“Tiny” replied saying that Semple and other members of the FOL were levied and pointed out that at the recent FOL conference it was decided that the Executive should not receive any more pay during this strike than that given to any other locked out or striking member.⁴⁶

Criticism also came from unions themselves. After Semple travelled to Australia in 1912 his expenses were closely scrutinised. The Federation’s balance sheet, from 1 September 1911 to May 10 1912, was published at the end of June. During the period Semple received salary and expenses totalling £238 3s, with his trip to Australia costing £110 16s.⁴⁷ When discussing the balance sheet the Waihi strikers took exception to Semple’s Australian expenses but a member of the FOL explained that this figure included Semple’s salary.⁴⁸ Paddy Webb said the press had vilified and misrepresented the Federation’s officers,

The press had never told them that friend Semple was £30 out of pocket as a result of his trip to Australia in the workers’ cause, or that the moment the Waihi men went on strike the Federation officials had foregone their salaries and only asked for three meals a day to fight for the workers.

Semple offered no apology and said, “His hand never shook when he put it out for the little he got from the workers – he earned it”.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 21 June 1912. Semple’s base salary was £4 per week or £208 per year so on those figures the claim of Semple earning £300 per year was incorrect. However, Semple was frequently away from home and could have regularly exceeded his weekly base salary by claiming his away from home allowance of 8s a day.

⁴⁶ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 26 June 1912.

⁴⁷ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 26 June 1912.

⁴⁸ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 22 July 1912. Criticism also came in letters to the editor. ‘Working Man’ queried the strike pay being paid to the Waihi miners, “How can they when the FOL is squandering it off for trips”. *Greymouth Evening Star*, 4 July 1912.

⁴⁹ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 26 June 1912.

When questioned or under attack Semple often represented himself as the victim – at this time suffering for the Federation’s cause. During a Christchurch meeting in late 1912 Semple dwelt on the difficulties of his job as organiser for the Federation saying “that he got much trouble and few thanks”. However, an interjector called out “£10 a week”. Semple called the man a liar. At the end of the meeting Semple offered an explanation. He received £4 a week, he said, and for the first sixteen weeks of the Waihi strike his pay had gone to others. He had not touched it. Out of his pay he paid the 10% levy like the rest of them. He had a wife and five children to keep. For two years before he took up the position of organiser he had averaged an income of more than £5 per week in the tunnel works beyond Springfield. The Federation, he added, would give him more than £4 per week but he was content with that.⁵⁰

This form of criticism was not unique to Semple. John A. Lee suggested financial criticism of labour men was used to cast aspersions on their characters and was common in the days of the early strike troubles,

It is true that the hungrier a strike advocate became, the more the press assured the world that he was in deep clover while his dupes became emaciated. The press would say: ‘Mr Wrecker fills his belly with soup, meat, vegetable and gravy, with sweets and bread and cheese added. His dupes fill their bellies with the husks’.⁵¹

Another characteristic of Semple’s organisational identity and, over time, his wider public image, was his reputation as a man who got things done - Semple was both revered and reviled as a result of this image. He gained this reputation initially on a local level. Prior to 1913 O’Farrell suggested that Runanga public amenities owed much to Semple’s industry during this time.⁵² The image of Semple as a man of action widened to a national level when the press compared him to government leaders in 1910. An *Evening Post* editorial contrasted government inertia with Semple’s ability to get things done, “Parliament sits, and Sir Joseph Ward states and Mr Massey alleges...and while they are stating or alleging men outside are making history”. The editorial also remarked on Semple’s condemnation of deputations to the

⁵⁰ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 20 November 1912.

⁵¹ Lee, *Rhetoric at the Red Dawn*, p. 75.

⁵² O’Farrell, ‘Workers in the Grey District’, p. 147.

government at the 1910 FOL conference, “Mr Semple is a strong man who does not set much store by verbal resolutions, a copy to be sent to the government...He prefers to organise an army of the ultra-Socialists and dictate his own terms to his opponents”.⁵³

As previously noted, juxtaposed with the radical Semple was Semple, the pragmatic organiser of labour who made many agreements with employers. In February 1911 Semple was present when the FOL officials negotiated a compromise at Otira when work had ceased over a dispute regarding wet places.⁵⁴ A disputed agreement at Blackball in March was settled to the miners’ advantage mainly through the efforts of Semple and Webb.⁵⁵ However, Semple continued to expound industrial unionism. At Westport he stressed they must preserve the power to strike if such drastic course became necessary to protect labour and to gain its just ends. What labour required was to abolish the small unions and consolidate itself into one large combination to include all workers. The FOL idea was for the different crafts to meet in a centre and then combine and meet as a Parliament of Labour. Justifying these methods he said there were bad labour conditions in New Zealand, “In many places he had visited, people didn’t live, they just didn’t die”.⁵⁶ As Len Richardson has argued, “He remained for the most part colourful but careful”.⁵⁷ The apparent contradiction can be seen as a fine balance for Semple and the FOL – for the FOL to be seen as an acceptable alternative to the arbitration system while still trying to maintain its revolutionary potential.⁵⁸

Richardson’s characterisation of Semple as colourful certainly applied to his language. Hickey said when Semple was organiser of the FOL he did not hesitate to criticise craft unions and their representatives, “His forceful personality, his fiery eloquence, and his extra-ordinary capacity for illustration, stung many a reactionary official to the quick”.⁵⁹ For many workers Semple’s language had popular appeal. When discussing Semple’s visit to Australia in 1912 the *Maoriland Worker* said,

⁵³ *Evening Post*, 20 August 1910.

⁵⁴ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 4 February 1911.

⁵⁵ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 31 March 1911.

⁵⁶ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 25 March 1911.

⁵⁷ Richardson, ‘Robert Semple’.

⁵⁸ Richardson, ‘Robert Semple’.

⁵⁹ Hickey, p. 34.

“Unskilled in the slimy art of diplomacy, Semple talks to and reaches the New Zealand proletariat in the language they understand”.⁶⁰ Similarly, Isabella Renner, who was a Labour Party supporter from its inception, described Semple as “an uneducated speaker” in comparison to Fraser or Holland. She said,

All the same there was nobody who could hold a crowd like him, both men and women...a very slangy speaker...he had extraordinary ways of describing things...Semple spoke what he thought without thinking about it first but he got the votes and he got the crowds.⁶¹

On a speaking platform the energy and the force of delivery enhanced the impact of Semple’s words. Outlining his speaking ability in 1911 the *Maoriland Worker* indicated that although he had excellent platform qualities Semple was, “Somewhat too apt to indulge in windmill gestures”.⁶² In 1913 a Unity campaign rally was held in Auckland where the speakers, who included Semple, appealed to workers to take interest in the Unity proposals. Tom Bloodworth reported to the *Maoriland Worker*,

Mr Semple criticised...the actions of Massey and Co. He had with him a baton... and also a lash... While Bob was demonstrating to his audience how these things were used, he more than once endangered the face of the writer...Semple is rather long in reach and he gets a bit enthusiastic and demonstrative, and when his face is turned to the audience he is apt to forget the poor inoffensive mortal who sits at his side.

Bloodworth said he felt considerably safer when Semple read extracts from the report of the Employers’ Association.⁶³

Semple’s political viewpoints and his organising as a whole had an ongoing impact on his family. His organising was now nationwide and with numerous conferences being held in Wellington in February 1913 the Semple family eventually left Runanga and moved to Wellington.⁶⁴ As part of the FOL Executive Semple was probably keen to be close to the centre of power to exercise and co-ordinate authority. Also, his involvement and subsequent arrest in the Great Strike in late 1913 placed considerable strain on his family. Pat Hickey accused the special constables of endeavouring to

⁶⁰ *Maoriland Worker*, 23 February 1912.

⁶¹ Interview with Isabella Margaret Renner, OHIInt-0018/1, Oral History Centre, WTU.

⁶² *Maoriland Worker*, 20 March 1911.

⁶³ *Maoriland Worker*, 9 May 1913.

⁶⁴ *Maoriland Worker*, 3 March 1913.

intimidate the wives of the imprisoned leaders and that a number of them had picketed their horses outside the homes of Semple and Holland.⁶⁵ The *Post* said this was a typically wild statement from Hickey and said that enquiries made by a reporter showed that special constables were unaware of where the homes of the imprisoned leaders were. However, in a letter to the editor, Margaret Semple stated the specials were menacingly outside her home and “the children are all afraid to go out for every one of these specials has his baton on view”.⁶⁶



Figure 17: The Semple family, time and place unknown but the age of the children suggests a date between 1913-1916. The children from left to right are Agnes (Queenie), Victor, Robert, Ella and John, KFHC.

Semple’s organising continued to take a toll on a personal level – his health was periodically affected by his work. Labour made renewed efforts at unity in 1913 and before a unity conference in July Semple did a large amount of organising work.⁶⁷ At a Millerton meeting it was suggested he was showing the strain of his efforts, “We could not fail to note that the strenuous work that the FL organiser is doing is making

⁶⁵ *Evening Post*, 14 November 1913.

⁶⁶ *Evening Post*, 15 November 1913.

⁶⁷ Labour’s efforts at unity were following the defeat of the Waihi strike in late 1912. The first unity conference was in January 1913 with the second scheduled for July 1913.

its strain felt on him physically”.⁶⁸ Any health issues never seemed to affect his employment, there was never any suggestion that he could not fully carry out his duties. When the United Federation of Labour (UFL) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) were established at the conference in July 1913 Semple was appointed organiser for the UFL. The unionist position was always close to Semple’s heart so it was no surprise he was elected organiser of the UFL with a salary of £5 per week and 10s per day expenses, plus travelling fares.⁶⁹

Finance was again a concern for Semple as UFL organiser. In 1914 he travelled far and wide to solicit funds, he went to Australia to raise money for the financially stricken UFL and SDP.⁷⁰ He attended the Australian Workers’ Union (AWU) conference in January, at which he confirmed the recent strike had been disastrous financially for the federation which now wanted to organise for the coming general election. The conference unanimously approved the requested amount of £1,000.⁷¹ Semple then continued to hold meetings speaking on the strike and appealing for funds for those who had been victimised.

The ongoing thrust of Semple’s organising was workers’ unity through unionism. While in Australia Semple was invited by the Barrier Labour Federation to visit Broken Hill to assist in a campaign recently launched to recruit unionists. He spent several days there and in a series of lectures promoted unionism saying that “...what the worker had to do today was to...fight as a unit of one solid body...The man who refused to join a union was nothing but a skunk...”.⁷² The *Barrier Daily Truth*, a labour publication, suggested that the progress of the non-unionist campaign had been excellent and was largely due to Semple “It is a singular tribute to the ability and earnestness of our visitor...Mr Semple has a vigorous way of appealing to the intelligence of his hearers, and that good effects to unionism should result from his visit goes without saying”.⁷³

⁶⁸ *Maoriland Worker*, 14 March 1913.

⁶⁹ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 9 July 1913.

⁷⁰ After the 1913 strike the two organisations were left in a precarious financial position. Semple’s visit to Australia for organising funds was viewed essential with the general election looming and the impossibility of taxing their own members who had not yet recovered from their strike efforts.

⁷¹ *Australian Worker*, 5 February 1914. £1,000 was the amount Semple was instructed to raise.

⁷² *Barrier Daily Truth*, 27 February 1914.

⁷³ *Barrier Daily Truth*, 28 February 1914.

Back in New Zealand Semple began an organising tour in May to ensure support, co-operation and solidarity for the up-coming UFL conference in July 1914.⁷⁴ At the conference discussion took place on whether or not an organiser should, in fact, be appointed. Some delegates hesitated due to the finance question. Mr Golder said, “the appointment of an organiser would be a financial obligation and he wished to know who would foot the bill”.⁷⁵ The *Maoriland Worker* reported Semple initially declined nomination. The ongoing financial difficulties of the UFL may have caused him some concern about the organiser’s position, but “on being pressed to accept nomination, Mr Semple made a personal explanation and said he would abide by the wishes of conference”. He was unanimously elected as organiser.⁷⁶ The organiser’s salary was £5 per week and travelling expenses and the appointment was for six months. The *Maoriland Worker* said many delegates got up and expressed their respect for Semple and although some disagreed with his tactics, they all testified to his great qualities as a man. An editorial remarked that Semple had first declined the position and was only persuaded by the wishes of the whole Congress,

The strenuous life, the constant battles he has fought for the workers, and the undaunted sincerity of the man are engraven in his face. Even his enemies must be struck by the sincerity and earnestness of Semple’s personality. He wears the grim determination of ‘Excelsior’ of our schooldays, ‘Higher, very higher’, This is the stuff, as Carlyle says, that heroes are made of’.

After a biographical profile the paper said, “Sprung from the rank and file, Bob Semple is one of the people, and as such beloved by them. He is another Dick Seddon – only better”.⁷⁷ But unlike Seddon, Semple’s popularity was at this time restricted to the working class and he had yet to win support from other sections of the community such as farmers or other politicians.

If Semple did have inner doubts about continuing to work as an organiser (by his initial refusal of the UFL position) it was not outwardly visible during his subsequent tour of the Grey and Buller districts to affiliate the unions.⁷⁸ Although he portrayed union affiliation as successful others in the labour movement had a different view. In

⁷⁴ *Maoriland Worker*, 6 May 1914.

⁷⁵ *Maoriland Worker*, 13 July 1914.

⁷⁶ *Maoriland Worker*, 13 July 1914.

⁷⁷ *Maoriland Worker*, 22 July 1914.

⁷⁸ *Maoriland Worker*, 29 July 1914.

August Semple wired from Runanga to the *Maoriland Worker*, “All unions on West Coast falling into line...” with the UFL.⁷⁹ But by October the SDP was in financial strife and McCarthy, secretary of the ULP, complained to Fraser, “no one knows better than yourself that the unions are not affiliating to any great extent with either the SDP or even the UFL”.⁸⁰ Semple did acknowledge the detrimental effect the start of WWI was having on the labour movement noting that, “...the war is having a somewhat distracting effect with regard to the pushing ahead of the new constitution in the various centres...”.⁸¹ Union affiliation was periodically difficult for Semple and his initial rejection of the organiser position could have been a result of mental fatigue in that area.

Throughout 1914 the UFL and the SDP were on shaky financial ground, and this may have been another significant factor in Semple’s resignation from the UFL only months later in October 1914. By October the SDP was nearly bankrupt. James Thorn and Michael Joseph Savage, who had been named as candidates for Palmerston and Auckland Central, were relieved of their positions as organisers and not replaced. SDP organiser Scott Bennett offered to take a cut in salary if paid regularly, but when even a reduced wage could not be guaranteed he also relinquished his position. It is possible that Semple resigned from the UFL before the same financial chaos befell that organisation and he was also relieved of his position. He may have jumped before he was pushed. The conservative *Evening Post* reported somewhat hopefully that “Mr Semple has resigned his position as organiser, and will probably leave for Australia”.⁸² The parting appeared amicable as in January 1915, via the *Maoriland Worker*, the Executive of the UFL appealed for support for a presentation fund for Semple. The appeal “made on a wide public field” was to give suitable recognition to Semple for his past services to the labour movement. Semple, described by the *Maoriland Worker* as the “good, honest and fearless fighter”, bid farewell to the labour movement as a paid organiser for the time being.⁸³

⁷⁹ *Maoriland Worker*, 26 August 1914.

⁸⁰ McCarthy to Fraser cited in Gustafson, *Labour’s Path to Political Independence*, p. 82. Arthur McCarthy was national secretary of the ULP 1912-1913.

⁸¹ *Maoriland Worker*, 26 August 1914.

⁸² *Evening Post*, 24 October 1914.

⁸³ *Maoriland Worker*, 13 January 1915.

But it was not long before Semple was back organising the community he knew best. He was elected unopposed as workman's inspector and agent in 1915 for a rebuilt national Miners' Federation.⁸⁴ He commenced his duties on 12 July 1915 and in the latter half of that year undertook a nationwide tour of the coalfields enlisting support for the new national body.⁸⁵ The new Federation was the result of the West Coast miners' unions responding to the deteriorating economic plight of their members. However, the blueprint for the new Federation was that it should be a purely mining union and not an umbrella for all classes of labour, an explicit change from the 1908 Federation. Some opposition to the Federation focussed on the fear that the new body might revive the centralist tendencies of the Red Feds and diminish the autonomy of the districts.⁸⁶ Semple probably had a slightly different vision for the Federation as he did call for a complete linking up of the labour forces both industrial and political, which reflected the change in his thinking towards political action and a united labour movement after the industrial defeats of 1912 and 1913.⁸⁷ But the miners' desire for a narrower focus appeared to be supported when the executive, including Semple, met in November 1915 and after discussing the question of affiliating with the UFL and SDP they decided the time was not right to join.⁸⁸

Richardson has suggested that throughout 1915 and 1916 miners concentrated on thrashing out new safety procedures, and this was a feature of Semple's organising. Safety was not a new concern however as the preamble of the 1908 Miners' Federation drew attention to the constant dangers all miners had to contend with.⁸⁹ And during 1910 the FOL had successfully lobbied for a Royal Commission on mining that would include safety in its investigations. In 1916 Semple helped to instigate a new Safety Agreement at Huntly.⁹⁰ He inspected the Huntly mines in February 1916 and launched a stinging attack on the Taupiri Company entitled "Dividends and Death". Semple alleged that the Company had learnt nothing from the 1914 disaster in which 43 miners were killed in an explosion: "they prefer to risk

⁸⁴ Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community*, p. 162.

⁸⁵ A2 Miners' Federation Minute Book 1915-23, Jim Roberts Papers, Beaglehole Room Victoria University.

⁸⁶ Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community*, p. 162

⁸⁷ *Maoriland Worker*, 6 October 1915.

⁸⁸ A2 Miners' Federation Minute Book 1915-1923, Jim Roberts Papers, Beaglehole Room Victoria University.

⁸⁹ Hickey, pp. 21-22.

⁹⁰ Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community*, p. 165.

danger and the lives of their employees, rather than take necessary precautions”.⁹¹ A conference of coalminers’ delegates met in Westport in March. After hearing Semple’s and the local inspector’s report the conference wanted the men withdrawn from the mine until it was safe, “we fully recognise that we would be aiding and abetting the murder of our own members if we allowed them to continue working under such conditions”.⁹²

Semple framed his efforts on behalf of the miners as a strenuous conflict. The miners’ executive demanded the government enforce the proposals made by the Commission of Enquiry on the Extended Mine, Huntly and that the check inspector’s recommendations be complied with immediately to render the mine safe.⁹³ As a result of a conference between the Mines Department, the company, and the miners’ union executive and inspectors a satisfactory agreement was arrived at. Semple reported, “Big victory for our side”.⁹⁴ It was a safety agreement which recognised the special problems of the mine and provided for an inspector chosen by and responsible to the miners, but paid by the company. The miners held a social in honour of Semple and presented him with a leather bag. Acknowledging the gift, he said that when he saw the opportunity to help the worker he always took it: “The fight for Labour was hard, but we must fight, and fighting we must win”.⁹⁵

Many miners placed their faith in Semple’s organisational abilities. Numerous agreements expired in 1916 and Semple’s negotiating skills were greatly valued in smaller areas such as Puponga. A report in the *Maoriland Worker* said Semple’s visit in April was opportune, as the union had just opened discussions with the North Cape Coal Company on a new agreement. Semple attended the conference as Federation representative and a satisfactory agreement arrived at.⁹⁶ Semple spoke to union members with fervour on Labour’s industrial fight and one unionist was moved to verse and sent a poem of appreciation in heroic mode to the *Maoriland Worker*.⁹⁷

⁹¹ *Maoriland Worker*, 13 March 1916.

⁹² *Maoriland Worker*, 22 March 1916.

⁹³ A2 Miners’ Federation Minute Book 1915-1923, Jim Roberts Papers, Beaglehole Room Victoria University.

⁹⁴ *Maoriland Worker*, 5 April 1916.

⁹⁵ *Maoriland Worker*, 19 April 1916.

⁹⁶ *Maoriland Worker*, 10 May 1916.

⁹⁷ *Maoriland Worker*, 3 May 1916.

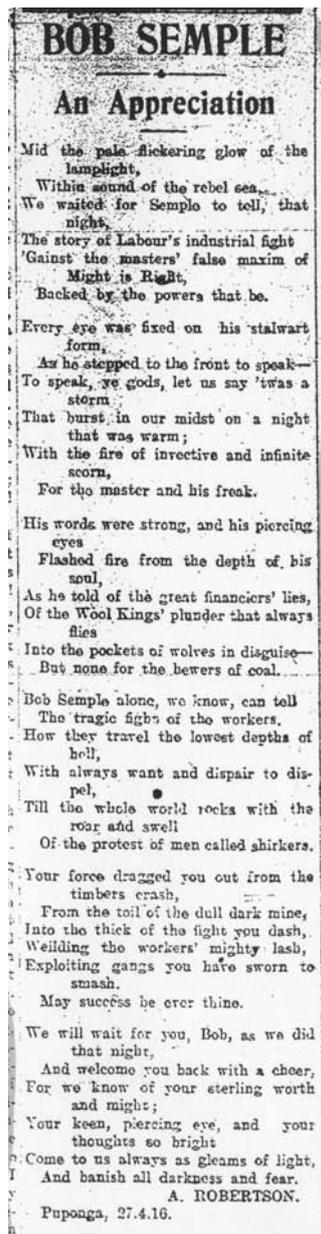


Figure 18: *Maoriland Worker*, 3 May 1916.

The content of the appreciation includes praise for Semple's ability to tell the "tragic fight of the workers" – he probably spoke of the social evolution of the working class. The writer was also impressed with the power of Semple's speech, "To speak, ye gods, let us say 'twas a storm that burst in our midst... With the fire of invective and infinite scorn". He also talks of Semple as dashing into the thick of the fight (possibly alluding to the agreement negotiations) and "wielding the workers' mighty lash" to smash exploiting gangs. Semple is represented as a gleam of light, suggesting the high regard the Puponga miners had for him.

Union organising also had a practical aspect for Semple. He took the campaign to improve conditions for miners to Parliament itself. In December 1918, after several months of preparation, Semple arranged a practical demonstration of the various drilling machines used in the New Zealand quartz mines.⁹⁸ The objective of the demonstration was to prove that the use of the new water lino-boring machine would greatly minimise, if not completely eradicate the dust nuisance, which resulted from boring operations and caused the disease miners' phthisis.⁹⁹ The demonstration took place at the back of Parliament buildings and the old and new machines were worked side by side. The old machines or dust-raisers were compared with the modern driller which, when in operation, produced hardly any dust. Semple used the demonstration to push for the lino borer to be made compulsory. Several members of Parliament who attended the demonstration asserted that they would do all in their power to make the new drills compulsory.¹⁰⁰

Another feature of Semple's union organising was periods of dual representation or working for more than one organisation at a time. In October 1915 he spent several weeks in the Otago coal-mining district speaking on behalf of the Miners' Federation and the Social Democratic Party. Reporting to the *Maoriland Worker* Semple said he first visited Kaitangata where he addressed several meetings, both public and union. He delivered two lectures entitled "What does the Fusion government stand for" which largely condemned the capitalist system. In the second address entitled "How the SDP proposes to solve the Poverty Problems" Semple said that the collective ownership of all the machinery, and means of production was the only constructive policy for any nation.¹⁰¹ This dual representation was probably to target a wider audience, not just miners although the content of his lectures, both union and public, appear very similar – they were advocating socialism as a better social structure than capitalism.

Semple's common task was to elicit publicity and support for the organisations he represented. The UFL decided to convene a conference on 25 January 1916 to discuss

⁹⁸ Semple had first discussed the new lino borer, in operation at the Otira Tunnel, with the Miners' Federation in July 1918. He has suggested a practical demonstration and the conference endorsed the suggestion and gave Semple the necessary go-ahead.

⁹⁹ *Maoriland Worker*, 16 October 1918.

¹⁰⁰ *Evening Post*, 2 December 1918.

¹⁰¹ *Maoriland Worker*, 1 December 1915.

labour's attitude to the introduction of conscription by the government.¹⁰² Reporting on conference attendance the *Maoriland Worker* said the Miners' Federation had decided to give Semple's services "to the UFL from Christmas to the holding of the conference for the purposes of union visitation".¹⁰³ The *Evening Post* said Semple and James Thorn were on a tour of the various centres to awaken interest in the anti-conscription conference.¹⁰⁴ Semple was called on to bolster attendance for the conference – his role testament to the high regard union and labour organisations had for his abilities to rouse and engender enthusiasm for a cause.

Semple believed union organising should be non-discriminatory, encompassing all races and creeds. Speaking at the 1916 May Day celebrations in Wellington Semple said instead of hoarding their funds the trade unions should use the money for organising the unorganised. He said, "Lack of organisation was the curse of the New Zealand movement". Semple acknowledged that cheap coolie labour was becoming an increasing menace but said they should not hound the black man down because he was black but they should organise him into the working class ranks and insist that the coolie and the coloured worker generally received the same wages as the white workers.¹⁰⁵ The immigration of Asian labour into New Zealand was a topical issue in 1916. In September the Wellington Trades and Labour Council protested to the government and said unless the entry of a coloured population into New Zealand was handled firmly, "we may in a very few years have lost the power to say whether New Zealand shall be a colony of Asia or a colony of Europe".¹⁰⁶ Semple's view was that if it was the settled policy of the government to allow the Hindu to come into New Zealand then it was the duty of the labour unions to get these men into their ranks and educate them as to their economic position. Semple criticised the action of the Wellington Watersiders Union in keeping out these workers for, "The Hindu would be a source of danger if left outside the ranks of organised labour".¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² *Evening Post*, 27 December 1915.

¹⁰³ *Maoriland Worker*, 6 January 1916.

¹⁰⁴ *Evening Post*, 8 January 1916.

¹⁰⁵ *Maoriland Worker*, 10 May 1916.

¹⁰⁶ *Evening Post*, 6 September 1916.

¹⁰⁷ *Evening Post*, 11 September 1916. The Waterside Workers did not appreciate Semple's criticism and protested to the Miners' Federation but they replied that as Semple was not speaking under the auspices of the Miners' Federation when he gave his opinion they did not hold themselves responsible for him. The Federation said they would let any person join their union irrespective of colour or creed, but they were opposed to an influx of labour which would create competition among the workers. A2 New Zealand Miners' Federation Minute book, 1915-23.

Semple's organising roles included a Trans-Tasman element; in 1916 he campaigned for Australian miners, soliciting financial support for them. Early in the year a strike began at Broken Hill with 2,500 miners affected.¹⁰⁸ At the New Zealand conscription conference in January 1916 Semple made a powerful appeal for the Broken Hill miners, moving that the conference express sympathy with the miners and pledge to solicit financial support for them. In February, when two Broken Hill delegates visited Auckland they, and other speakers, including Semple, addressed a packed meeting. John Glover reported to the *Maoriland Worker*, "Semple made a splendid appeal".¹⁰⁹ The delegates, A. Carter and E. Wetherell, then travelled to Wellington where they spoke to a mass meeting. Several speakers including Semple delivered stirring speeches of welcome and called for support for the miners:

In a ten minute speech of vigour and eloquence, which lifted the audience to a high pitch of enthusiasm, Mr R Semple appealed for financial support from the meeting, an army of collectors getting to work as soon as Mr Semple resumed his seat...the collection at the doors amounted to over £17, while the indoor effort following Mr Semple's appeal gave over £31.¹¹⁰

Wetherell, who then went to the South Island accompanied by Semple, wrote glowingly of his experiences on the West Coast and especially the assistance he received from Semple.¹¹¹

Imprisonment for his opposition to conscription during 1917 did not diminish Semple's support among the miners. He was re-elected unopposed as miners' agent for 1917/18 and returned to his organising duties at the end of November.¹¹² At the Miners' Federation annual conference in December 1917 Semple received commendation for improving the conditions in the mines. John Arbuckle, the secretary-treasurer, said the best work of the Federation had been to appoint an agent

¹⁰⁸ *Evening Post*, 11 January 1916. The miners were demanding a 44hour week and the abolition of the Saturday afternoon shift.

¹⁰⁹ *Maoriland Worker*, 23 February 1916.

¹¹⁰ *Maoriland Worker*, 1 March 1916. Semple said he had visited the Broken Hill mines two years ago and outlined the treacherous conditions, "They heard a lot about the poisonous gases used by the Germans at the front. The miners of Broken Hill were being poisoned every day by the British shareholders of the mining companies". *Evening Post*, 28 February 1916.

¹¹¹ *Maoriland Worker*, 22 March 1916.

¹¹² *Maoriland Worker*, 25 August 1917.

and workman's inspector who had undoubtedly been responsible for a generally improved condition throughout most of the mines. Semple also received praise for his help in the anti-conscription campaign in Australia,

the result of the assistance rendered by Comrade Semple to the Australian organisations has brought numerous letters of appreciation and thanks from both organisations and individuals and brought both honour and admiration to himself and the Federation. The agent is deserving of the best thanks of this organisation for his work in Australia.¹¹³

Semple relinquished his duties as miners' agent after being elected as an MP in December 1918. He was then involved in completing the Orongorongo tunnel during 1920-24. It was not until 1924 that he returned to union organising. The 1920s were a turbulent time for both the nation's economy and the labour movement. After periods of spasmodic employment during the early and mid 1920s New Zealand began to feel the vice-like grip of the Great Depression in the late 1920s, which lasted until at least 1934. Erik Olssen suggested the unstable economic conditions saw the union movement, "fragmented, unsure of its purpose, incapable of unity".¹¹⁴ An editorial in the *New Zealand Worker* in February 1924 said the rank and file of the industrial organisations should be given a strong and definite lead for, "What is wanted immediately is a propaganda campaign throughout the Unions in favour of a militant policy aimed at the recovery of wage costs...the frank truth is that several of our organisations are in a parlous condition, and it is clear to those who reflect that they can only be placed on a better footing by vigorous and determined leadership".¹¹⁵

Organising in the 1920s

During the early 1920s one confederation of unions that was suffering from internal division was the Freezing Workers' Federation.¹¹⁶ Frank McNulty later argued, "The history of the Freezing Workers' Union has been of a consistent struggle for unity".

¹¹³ *Maoriland Worker*, 12 December 1917.

¹¹⁴ Erik Olssen, 'The New Zealand labour movement, 1920-1940'.

¹¹⁵ *New Zealand Worker*, 20 February 1924.

¹¹⁶ At the New Zealand Alliance of Labour annual meeting in 1924 the secretary said, regarding the Freezing Workers, "This organisation, I regret to report, is in a very bad way through internal dissension". Minutes of Annual meeting held 11-15 January 1924, New Zealand Alliance of Labour, MB 9 [1/3] Minutes 1924, Macmillan Brown Library, University of Canterbury.

He said until 1917, when the first national organisation was formed, there were numerous unions within the freezing industry which contributed to disunity; unions separately covering slaughtermen, labourers, fell-mongery, tanneries, wool-classing and more.¹¹⁷ In 1924 the national organisation had only been in operation for seven years. The Federation had approximately seven thousand members throughout New Zealand. Semple stepped into the midst of the discord when he was appointed Federation organiser in March 1924. He had been chosen to chair the Freezing Workers' National Conference – the *New Zealand Worker* said his selection was to “secure impartiality in the chairmanship”.¹¹⁸ The purpose of the conference was “to smooth our difficulties that have arisen within the Federation”.¹¹⁹ These may have included the acrimonious residue of a nationwide strike in 1922 when the employers applied to the Arbitration Court and were granted a general order reducing wages.¹²⁰ Minutes of the Canterbury Freezing Workers Union record that “...it seems that the trouble arose over the dispute which took place in the SI in July 1922...”.¹²¹ The Christchurch *Press* reported that affiliated freezing workers in Hawkes Bay had returned to work, this was causing considerable discussion in Canterbury, “Several express the opinion that...the Hawkes Bay union is not playing the game”.¹²² As well as task-related divisions within individual unions there was also regional division.

It is not clear why Semple was chosen specifically from other labour identities, but when nominations were called for his was the only name put forward. While Semple had been an organiser for many years and did have a reputation as a man who got things done, it may have been his availability at the time, coupled with his organising experience, which appealed to members of the Freezers' Federation. They looked to him to “smooth out their difficulties”.¹²³

¹¹⁷ Frank McNulty, *There's money in meat: The story of the freezing industry*, Auckland: In Print, 1956, p. 24.

¹¹⁸ *New Zealand Worker*, 26 March 1924. The purpose of the Conference was to restructure both the existing constitution and the administration of the unions.

¹¹⁹ *New Zealand Worker*, 26 March 1924.

¹²⁰ *Press*, 6 July 1922.

¹²¹ Canterbury Freezing Workers and Related Trades Union MB 9 [1/3] Minutes 1924, Macmillan Brown Library, University of Canterbury.

¹²² *Press*, 1 July 1922. Several days later the *Press* reported, “Dissatisfaction with the way in which matters connected with the strike have been managed has led, it is reported, to several men resigning as members of the union”. *Press*, 8 July 1922.

¹²³ *New Zealand Worker*, 26 March 1924.

Sample claimed that a sense of class obligation was a primary factor in his acceptance of the job. The decision itself to appoint an organiser was not unanimous, with some debate over financial concerns.¹²⁴ One delegate, a Mr Osborne, said that “he considered it was money wasted, the workers on the job would not take any more notice of him than they did of the present officials”. However, it was decided that an organiser be appointed on a salary of £8 per week and £1 per day for travelling allowance when away from home. The objective of the appointment was to put organisers in charge of propaganda work while the administrative work could be done from a national office. Sample accepted the nomination but made it clear he had other employment options. He said since the completion of the Orongorongo Tunnel he had been inundated with offers and from a remunerative point of view and he would be able to earn possibly three times as much (from tunnelling work) as the freezing workers were able to offer him, but “He was, however, prepared to forgo remuneration and serve his class”.¹²⁵

Sample implanted his own very forthright opinions into his union organising. When asked to represent the Freezing Workers he said he would not subordinate his own political and industrial views and accepted the job on condition “that he was not bound or fettered in any way as far as his ideas on economic philosophy were concerned, on industrial matters, and on militarism in particular”. He said he was both a socialist and an industrialist “first, last and all the time” and he believed that the present methods of organisation were outdated and had to be replaced with industrial organisation along the lines of industry. Sample’s view remained consistent with his earlier FOL ideas that organisation should be on the lines of industry instead of trade – this was also the perspective of the Alliance of Labour (AOL) at this time.¹²⁶

Sample said the job was going to be an unpleasant one – a man was stepping into a loose federation of units many of which did not understand their own historic mission and it was his task to teach them. He said it was sometimes necessary to be cruel to be kind, and “He did not care if he offended 90% if in the process of doing so he was preaching what he believed to be true”. Sample stated this plainly so all delegates

¹²⁴ *New Zealand Worker*, 9 April 1924. The Freezing Workers Finance report showed there was £400 or £500 available and there was £1,500 due by way of capitation for an organiser to be appointed.

¹²⁵ Canterbury Freezing Workers and Related Trades Union MB 9 [1/3] Minutes 1924, Macmillan Brown Library, University of Canterbury.

¹²⁶ The Alliance of Labour was an industrial organisation formed in 1919. It represented a revival of militant industrial unionism and admitted only unions whose structure was on an industrial basis.

were aware of his views; they accepted his position and he was elected unanimously.¹²⁷

Whether Semple was organising for a national labour organisation, or a specific union, his message was similar - he preached socialism, industrial unionism and workers unity regardless of who he represented. Reporting in the *Worker*, Semple said he stressed to the freezing workers the urgency of healing internal divisions in their organisation and the need to create a greater spirit of comradeship. He said petty jealousies divided the organisation and one of the cures was the abolition of the wage-system. Semple argued it was his duty as organiser to deal with trade union issues as well as discuss with the freezing workers the more important questions that were really the economic root cause of all their grievances.¹²⁸

Extensive travel continued to be a common denominator for Semple's organising. When he was appointed Freezing Workers' organiser he again criss-crossed New Zealand in an effort to reach Federation members. The *Maoriland Worker* reported he commenced his duties on 31 March and was in Auckland only days later. Over the next few months he addressed meetings in Auckland, Taranaki, Gisborne, Masterton, Wellington, Canterbury, Southland and Otago.¹²⁹

Semple continued to favour national agreements for unions and one big union for concerted action. At a meeting of the Freezing Workers National Executive in 1924 delegates suggested a nationwide agreement or award should be sought from employers. Semple agreed saying they should stand unitedly and he condemned the principle of sectional action and craft agreements. The Federation was affiliated to the AOL, but the question of withdrawing from the organisation was debated during the 1925 annual conference.¹³⁰ Semple said he believed in the necessity for closer unity in industrial organisation, the freezing workers should seriously consider remaining in

¹²⁷ Canterbury Freezing Workers and Related Trades Union MB 9 [1/3] Minutes 1924, Macmillan Brown Library, University of Canterbury.

¹²⁸ *New Zealand Worker*, 30 April 1924.

¹²⁹ *New Zealand Worker*, 20 June 1924.

¹³⁰ Under the AOL trade unionism was to be much more than an instrument of collective bargaining. By organisation on a class basis it was to be the means of transforming society through the abolition of the wage system and the establishment of an industrial parliament. Society would be one big union. Brown, *The Rise of Labour*, pp. 46-48.

the AOL and take their part in the building up of an industrial organisation that should go far to emancipate the workers of the country.¹³¹ A prior ballot of sixteen hundred members had voted to withdraw from the AOL. Referring to the ballot Semple said the result could not be taken as a true indication of the general opinion of an organisation representing well over six thousand members. He said, “It is up to us to throw our weight into this movement with a view to making it a success”. A motion resolving that the result of the ballot was not sufficient to bring about disaffiliation was passed.¹³²

Dual roles continued for Semple during the 1920s. While he was organiser for the Freezing Workers’ Federation, Semple also addressed meetings on behalf of the Labour Party. In an undated report (possibly late 1924) to the Labour Party’s National Office Semple said the Freezing Workers’ Federation had agreed he could address meetings on behalf of the NZLP wherever and whenever he could as long as it did not conflict with his work on their behalf.¹³³ During 1924 he spoke at two Auckland meetings on “Is Labour Fit to Rule” and “The Menace of Militarism”.¹³⁴ In the NZLP report Semple said he had addressed twenty-four meetings throughout the country under the auspices of the Labour Party.¹³⁵ In 1925, during the freezing workers’ off-season, Semple also became a paid organiser for the AOL. He and several other organisers were appointed after the AOL conference in April, which proposed amalgamation with the Trades and Labour Councils (with the aim of industrial unity in the labour movement).¹³⁶ Industrial unity continued as an objective close to Semple’s heart so it is not surprising he took on this additional role to promote unity. In June Semple was in Christchurch, along with Jim Roberts, AOL secretary, explaining the unity scheme to a large meeting of trade unionists in the Christchurch Trades Hall. They appealed to all unionists to go into the unity scheme and form one

¹³¹ The freezing workers with about 7,000 members was one of the largest bodies attached to the AOL and with the withdrawal of the railway servants as an outcome of their earlier strike the organization would sustain a heavy blow if the freezing workers withdrew. An AOL delegation appealed to the freezing workers to remain affiliated.

¹³² Canterbury Freezing Workers and Related Trades Union MB 9 [1/4] Minutes 1925, Macmillan Brown Library, University of Canterbury.

¹³³ ‘A Report and Sole Impressions’ Robert Semple to NZLP National Office, Canterbury Freezing Workers and Related Trades Union MB 9 [1/3] Minutes 1924, Macmillan Brown Library, University of Canterbury.

¹³⁴ *New Zealand Worker*, 16 April 1924.

¹³⁵ *New Zealand Worker*, 13 August 1924.

¹³⁶ Pat Hickey was also appointed an AOL organiser.

big union.¹³⁷ It was not until Semple was a cabinet minister that any meaningful unity was achieved.

Why did Semple take on several tasks at once? Was it because he could not say no when asked and was simply dedicated to serve - as he said to the freezing workers?¹³⁸ Semple did firmly believe workers must participate to accomplish change and certainly practiced what he preached in that sense. Semple's dual roles may have also been to boost and build the profile of the organisations he served but also to boost and build his own profile and reputation within the labour movement and then later within the wider community. There was also the issue of financial remuneration – Semple may have taken on additional work to boost his income. It was probably a combination of several of the above issues at any one time that resulted in his dual roles.

Semple continued to receive both praise and criticism for his organising. Several Canterbury branches of the freezing workers had been against appointing an organiser and appointing an individual outside the organisation. However, after a visit from Semple one Borthwicks member said, “He was against any such appointment being made, but he was now satisfied, and congratulated the speaker on the various subjects dealt with”. But at the annual meeting of the National Executive in 1925 Semple said it had come to his knowledge that his form of propaganda was unsatisfactory in some quarters. He said the organisation needed men with class-conscious convictions and they needed to be made aware where and how they were being robbed under the present system. Semple argued no progress would be made without those teachings. He wanted to know if the organisation was not happy with his propaganda, what sort of propaganda did they want.

The issue was discussed in the Federation Executive but no action taken. Later addressing the Canterbury District Union Semple said at the last National Executive meeting there had been an effort to terminate his engagement, “Unquestionably, this would have suited the employers who had intimated to officers of the organisation

¹³⁷ *New Zealand Worker*, 17 June 1925.

¹³⁸ Canterbury Freezing Workers and Related Trades Union MB 9 [1/3] Minutes 1924, Macmillan Brown Library, University of Canterbury.

that it was the worst days work the Freezing Workers Federation had done, when they appointed him as organiser". A closed meeting of the union later endorsed the propaganda that Semple delivered. Mr. F. Hansen said he had heard that in the North Island some members complained that Semple was introducing too much Socialism. But he had heard Semple on several occasions and said he heartily agreed with all that he had uttered.¹³⁹

The implication of dissatisfaction may have contributed to Semple's acrimonious resignation from the Freezing Workers' Federation in February 1926. In his final report to the secretary Semple was candid saying,

My opinion is that our industrial movement lacks knowledge, lacks confidence, courage, co-operation, goodwill and brotherhood. We are divided and subdivided in a thousand different ways. We have a multiplicity of useless craft unions, we have federated in name only but not in character.¹⁴⁰

Semple blamed union officials whose purpose, he alleged, was to keep the organisation divided. He was scathing of unions and officials who accepted the Arbitration Court system, berating the organisation for having no national spirit. He claimed that in the organisation there had been "cowardly intriguing" going on against him personally and he said the employers had participated in that as they had resented his propaganda.¹⁴¹ When Semple accepted the position he said he realised the task of uniting the Federation would be a difficult one, by 1926 he appeared frustrated by his inability to foster a spirit of unity and by a lack of support from union officials. His resignation may have been partially due to personal animosity between the Federation's Chief Executive officer, A. Baker and himself. Semple specifically targeted Baker in his letter of resignation and it is clear there was a great deal of hostility and bitterness between the two men. Semple claimed that in his absence at the Federation's last National Executive meeting Baker referred to him as an

¹³⁹ Canterbury Freezing Workers and Related Trades Union MB 9 [1/4] Minutes 1925, Macmillan Brown Library, University of Canterbury.

¹⁴⁰ Semple to Ellis (secretary, Freezing Workers' Federation) 8 February 1926, Freezing Workers Records Bert Roth Papers 94-106-39/02, WTU.

¹⁴¹ Semple to Ellis 8 February 1926, Bert Roth Papers, 94-106-39/02, WTU.

“imbecile”.¹⁴² In his resignation Semple said Baker was, “positively destitute of intelligent opinion on economics, ethics or morals of the labour movement”.¹⁴³

Semple’s departure from the Freezing Workers’ union was marred by allegations of financial indiscretions. In his final report Semple alleged the Freezers’ Federation was bankrupt, with most of its funds being spent in clerical expenses. In reply Baker accused Semple’s salary and expenses of accounting for nearly one-half of the total capitation and also that Semple received five months salary without working for the Federation during that period. The newly elected President, Mr. J. Hutchinson, and Secretary, Mr F. Ellis, of the Freezing Workers’ Federation issued a public statement suggested both men’s accusations were incorrect. They endorsed Semple’s work, “Mr Semple complied honestly with every instruction given him by the Federation under the terms of his agreement and retains the confidence of the organisation”.¹⁴⁴

There was only a short break between positions, in September 1927 Semple became secretary of the Wellington General Labourers’ union. The previous secretary of the union, Mr Campbell, had died suddenly. Semple’s eldest son, Robert Francis, was a member of the union. Apart from his son’s membership Semple had had no previous known association with the union and it is unclear why he became involved.¹⁴⁵

Gordon Kilpatrick, one time secretary of the Communist Party, was nominated for secretary but the union had previously decided in May that no Communist could hold office in the union. Kilpatrick addressed the meeting and although admitting membership of the Communist Party (CP) he referred to work he had done for the union and claimed consideration. No action was taken. Semple won the nomination for secretary from the only other candidate T. McCarthy.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² Semple to Ellis 5 March 1926, Bert Roth Papers, 94-106-39/02, WTU.

¹⁴³ Semple to Ellis 8 February 1926, Bert Roth Papers 94-106-39/02, WTU.

¹⁴⁴ *Christchurch Sun*, 5 August 1926. John A. Lee targeted Semple’s expenses in this period in his later political reminiscences. Lee said the Freezing Workers’ Federation paid for a season ticket for railway travel and hotel expenses but Semple charged the Auckland Labour Party his full rail fare and hotel accommodation when he talked in Auckland. There is no known record of Lee making these claims in the 1920s and his judgment was probably affected by his resentment at not being in cabinet himself in 1935. John A. Lee, *Political Notebooks*, Wellington: Alister Taylor Publishing Ltd, 1973, p. 22.

¹⁴⁵ At the first annual conference of the New Zealand General Labourers’ union held in Auckland in October 1927 Robert Francis Semple was one of three Wellington delegates who attended. *New Zealand Worker*, 19 October 1927.

¹⁴⁶ The result of the ballot was R. Semple 325 and T. McCarthy 96. 26 September 1927 Minute Book Wellington General Labourers’ Union, Peter Butler Papers, 2004-204-2/1, WTU.



Figure 19: The photograph shows Semple and his son Robert Francis, second from left, cutting timber for bracing in the Orongorongo tunnel c 1922, RHSC.

To the General Labourers Semple continued to advocate unity. He addressed a meeting of Petone/Hutt workmen on, “The imperative need for unity and still more unity” stressing that,

while he (the labourer) was outside of the organisation he would be forced to remain on the lowest level of subsistence, and that he was not only jeopardising his own interest by remaining outside, but he was a menace, if not a danger to organised labour.¹⁴⁷

Semple consistently worked hard to increase membership of any union he was associated with, actively encouraging participation. As Labourers’ union secretary he circularised employers asking for a list of names of their employees who came within the provisions of the Award. At a monthly meeting of the union Semple said a great number of men were outside the union and many were unfinancial and it was his intention to “use every effort possible to strengthen the membership of the union, both

¹⁴⁷ 17 October 1927 Minute Book Wellington General Labourers’ Union, Peter Butler Papers, 2004-204-2/1, WTU.

numerically and financially”.¹⁴⁸ Appealing in the *Worker* Semple tried to impress upon union members their duty to the union,

Your union is your business...Don't stay away from your union meeting, and blame the other fellow for the bad conditions and low wages you are receiving. Attend the meetings, bring along some helpful suggestion. Become a live shareholder in your own business.¹⁴⁹

In January 1928 in a report presented to the Labourers' management committee Semple appealed to members to do more than pay their sixpence. He said it was their duty to be active participants and use every effort to force non-unionists into the union.¹⁵⁰ He did have some success, by March 1928 154 new members had been enrolled.¹⁵¹ In July Semple and the union president, Mr. Hanton, enrolled a further 105 new members, and they claimed most of the jobs in Wellington were manned by union labour.¹⁵²

As a union official Semple sought to affirm the dignity of labour. Regarding the Blackball strike in 1908 Semple said, “Men will not be spoken to like dogs or treated as such”.¹⁵³ The dignity of labour was linked to “the search for respect”. Stevan Eldred-Grigg, in his study of working people, discussed both respectable and the disreputable behaviour amongst the working class in New Zealand between 1890-1990.¹⁵⁴ Bruce Brown argued the early Political Labour League was dominated by union leaders who sought to gain better working conditions and higher wages for the worker through existing constitutional processes, achieving recognition of the dignity of labour and respectability of the worker in the process.¹⁵⁵

This emphasis had not changed in the 1920s. As Labourer's union secretary, Semple sought to put the organisation into a systematic order in keeping with the respect a

¹⁴⁸ 27 October 1927 Minute Book Wellington General Labourers' Union, Peter Butler Papers, 2004-204-2/1, WTU.

¹⁴⁹ *New Zealand Worker*, 23 November 1927.

¹⁵⁰ 30 January 1928 Minute Book Wellington General Labourers' Union, Peter Butler Papers, 2004-204-2/1, WTU.

¹⁵¹ 26 March 1928 Minute Book Wellington General Labourers' Union, Peter Butler Papers, 2004-204-2/1, WTU.

¹⁵² 30 July 1928 Minute Book Wellington General Labourers' Union, Peter Butler Papers, 2004-204-2/1, WTU.

¹⁵³ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 3 April 1908.

¹⁵⁴ Stevan Eldred-Grigg, *New Zealand Working People 1890-1990*, Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1990, pp. 105-109.

¹⁵⁵ Brown, *The Rise of Labour*, p. 9.

workers' organisation should receive. In 1929 he refurnished the union's office in the Trades Hall in Wellington and was congratulated for his efforts. He carried out the refurnishing so it would be a credit to their association, and "the time had past when Labour organisations should be content with an office and outfit that was inadequate and sometimes bordering on a disgrace to the organisation". He suggested the layout of the office reflected the business capacity of those in charge of the union, "What the Labour movement must strive for, is to increase its dignity and prestige and put its organisations on a proper business basis".¹⁵⁶

Semple was certainly valued by the Labourers' Union, particularly for his skill in negotiating award wages. After winning the Wellington East seat in the 1928 general election Semple resigned as union secretary but several members including the President urged him to stay on as, "We have to face the Court and the Council in the New Year for new awards". He agreed to stay on, but stipulated he would not accept any salary.¹⁵⁷ However, at a special meeting of the union held in September 1929 Semple's resignation was read and accepted. The union expressed regret at the resignation and recorded its thanks and appreciation for his services. It also assured him of its "continued confidence in him as a representative of the industrial and political movement of the working class". Semple had carried on as secretary for nine months and at the meeting he was presented with a cheque as a donation in appreciation of his voluntary services.¹⁵⁸

In 1955 the Labourers' Union moved its headquarters from the Trades Hall to a new building in Oriental Parade. As a tribute to Semple and his association with the union the building was named, "Semple House", even though he had been secretary of the union for a relatively short period, 1927-29.¹⁵⁹ He died in January 1955, only a few months prior to the Labourers' acquisition of the building in May 1955, so the timing may have been opportune to keep Semple's name evergreen. Peter Butler, who took

¹⁵⁶ 29 April 1929 Minute Book Wellington General Labourers' Union, Peter Butler Papers, 2004-204-2/1, WTU.

¹⁵⁷ *New Zealand Worker*, 2 January 1929. The Executive had given Semple whatever time off he needed for electioneering.

¹⁵⁸ A resolution had been moved that as Semple refused to accept any wages during this time he be given £100 – this was carried with 3 dissentient voices. 10 September 1929 Minute Book Wellington General Labourers' Union, Peter Butler Papers, 2004-204-2/1, WTU.

¹⁵⁹ *New Zealand Clarion*, May 1955. Copy in possession of author.

over from Semple as Labourers' union secretary, still held the position. They had been close colleagues, Butler had organised Semple's successful 1928 election campaign for the NZLP.¹⁶⁰ A keen Labour man, Butler may have been an influence in naming the building after Semple.

It should be noted that during the depression Semple's work on behalf of unionists was criticised by some. Unemployed workers' movements sprang up, and many desperate people looked to these for quick salvation. Bassett and King argued that the Communist Party had some success establishing these movements, and with the Labour Party lacking the ability to do anything about the declining economy, members of the Labour Party faced hostile audiences. Fraser addressed such a meeting of the Unemployed Workers' Movement in 1932 and "was refused a hearing and was ultimately counted out".¹⁶¹ Similarly, in 1931 at a meeting convened by the Unemployment Committee of the Wellington Trades and Labour Council where all the Wellington Labour MPs were on the platform, interjectors criticised Semple. Several unnamed hecklers said, "You are not a trade unionist, you sold us to the boss" and "Give us a worker to speak for us". Another interjector said Semple no longer had the interests of the workers at heart, as he had in 1913, when he was affectionately known as "Fighting Bob".¹⁶² The criticism of Semple at this time can be seen in the context of the anxieties of the depression and the fight for representation of the unemployed between the Communists and the Labour Party. Semple continued to be elected to the City Council and as MP for Wellington East so these criticisms were a minority voice.

Later Relationships with the Unions

When Semple became a member of the Labour government he was again accused of betraying trade union principles. The new Public Works agreement, introduced by Semple in 1936, made special provision for procedures to be adopted for settling disputes and Semple now firmly believed that all workers' grievances could be

¹⁶⁰ Peter Franks. 'Peter Michael Butler 1901-1995'. *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, updated 22 June 2007 URL: <http://www.dnzb.govt.nz/>

¹⁶¹ Bassett & King, p. 126.

¹⁶² *Evening Post*, 22 January 1931.

resolved effectively and strikes would become irrelevant.¹⁶³ There were to be no stop work meetings. Semple said the one Big Union would protect the men and function in their interests, and also assist the government.¹⁶⁴

But in June 1936 the Motueka branch of the New Zealand Workers' Union condemned the new public works agreement. They were not happy with clauses that dealt with unpaid work in disputes, affiliation to the Labour Party, no guaranteed prices for jobs and organisers.¹⁶⁵ A worker at Motueka said, "Mr Semple, in upholding the rights of the workers in the past, always included the right to hold stop work meetings, but since becoming the Tsar of all the Public Works employees, he goes back on his principles".¹⁶⁶ Semple said he was astonished and described the reaction at Motueka as uncharitable, unreasonable and callous.¹⁶⁷ There was some evidence of Communist agitation amongst the workers which could partially account for Semple's reaction. He said, "I am not going to be embarrassed by a Communistic element, who are nothing more than wreckers".¹⁶⁸ In turn the Communist Party attacked Semple denying there were any Communists employed or resident at Motueka before or after the dispute. They alleged,

There has never been such an attack on trade union rights as was made by Mr Semple at Motueka. He attacked not only the men's FREEDOM OF ACTION (the right to strike is specifically denied in the public works agreement), but even THEIR RIGHT TO CRITICISM WITHIN THEIR OWN UNION CHANNELS).¹⁶⁹

Certainly in his early years Semple had been an ardent supporter of the strike as a weapon of the working class and had always campaigned to retain it. However, he did support a penalty clause against a strike when completing the Orongorongo tunnel project in the 1920s, as we have seen. Defending the no-strike clause in 1921 Semple said, "To me the strike is a nightmare and I want to see the day when the strike in New Zealand is as extinct as the moa. This can be done, by instituting a system which

¹⁶³ *New Zealand Herald*, 5 February 1936.

¹⁶⁴ *New Zealand Herald*, 6 February 1936.

¹⁶⁵ *Evening Post*, 1 July 1936.

¹⁶⁶ Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners Auckland District Branch to David Wilson 5 November 1936, RHSC.

¹⁶⁷ *New Zealand Herald*, 19 June 1936.

¹⁶⁸ *New Zealand Herald*, 24 June 1936.

¹⁶⁹ C. G. Watson, *Mr Semple versus Trade Union Democracy*, Wellington: Unity Press, 1936. This was a pamphlet published by the Communist Party in Wellington.

will eliminate the middle-class exploiter...at Wainui we have done this".¹⁷⁰ For Semple, if the right conditions were in place (this could be construed to mean if he was in charge or the Labour Party) he would relinquish the strike weapon. When he became part of the Labour government he firmly believed the government had put "machinery in place" so that all workers' grievances would be resolved without strikes. As far as he was concerned, the right conditions were again in place (meaning he had stipulated the rules) for the strike weapon to be relinquished. Regarding the public works agreement he said, "I have laid down a set of conditions which I believe to be the best in the world".¹⁷¹

Once Semple became a member of the Labour government his arguments were framed in more general national terms which overrode individual union grievances. On the dispute at Motueka he said, "Members of the Cabinet are not going to be sidestepped, hamstrung or stampeded by any section of the people of this country. We have a responsibility to the country as a whole".¹⁷² And as a Labour government that was friendly to the workers was in power, Semple expected workers to "play the game" and not to strike. He also believed strikes impeded the Public Works programme and he was impatient and intolerant of anyone who he perceived was hindering the work.

Unionists themselves were divided, Semple was perceived as both friend and foe. In May 1938 when relief workers walked off a Governors Bay road job, they said they had grievances about work and payment on wet days and the general conditions on the job. They told local MP Mr T. Combs they had gone through all the constitutional channels, a spokesman said there was nothing left to do but go on strike. Combs said, "Mr Semple does not hold with strikes and will not look favourably on the claims of men who strike". However, a spokesman replied that by striking they were following in Semple's footsteps. Another worker said, "It's all very well for Mr Semple. He is on top now. It was different when he was a worker too".¹⁷³ This was not a unanimous view. In 1938 when the Opposition was criticising roading expenditure, in a letter to the editor, "Shovel" a public works employee, said,

¹⁷⁰ *Evening Post*, 19 June 1921.

¹⁷¹ *New Zealand Herald*, 2 July 1936.

¹⁷² *New Zealand Herald*, 2 July 1936.

¹⁷³ *New Zealand Herald*, 13 May 1938.

The present government has at least found work for some 20,000 men at 16s per day...the money is very much better than what was paid by the last government for work...Whatever Bob Semple has or has not done, he has at least brought a sense of independence to these 20,000 men. They can now afford to buy their clothes and not have to beg for some one's left off boots and clothing.¹⁷⁴

Throughout the 1940s Semple's arguments continued to be framed in national terms, and when striking coalminers threatened the country's supplies during WWII Semple described them as "wreckers". In September 1942 a major confrontation developed in the Waikato coalfields when Pukemiro miners struck because ten men had been paid less than the minimum wage.¹⁷⁵ The executive of Northern Miners Union urged a resumption of work; a ballot of Waikato miners supported the executive, but when the Pukemiro men stood fast, all Waikato miners – 1400 in all, joined the strike. Semple said the men concerned had,

violated every principle of unionism, ignoring the request of their own organisation, the mine workers federation as well as the FOL. By doing this they had placed themselves outside the pale of unionism, played into the hands of the Japanese and treated the governments appeal to reason with contempt and declared civil war on the civilian community.

Semple said he had been associated with industrial organisations all his life but never had he known of anything more dangerous to the best interests of the people of New Zealand and even to trades unionism itself, when the youth of the country was fighting for liberty and life in the battle zones of the world.¹⁷⁶ He expressed his determination to take strong action against the "wreckers". The government prosecuted the Pukemiro men, 182 of whom were sentenced to one month in gaol, but even this failed to break the strike. The dispute was settled late in September when Prime Minister Fraser suspended the gaol sentences and promised to place the Waikato coalmines under state control for the duration of the war.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ *New Zealand Herald*, 28 May 1938.

¹⁷⁵ The total sum involved was £16.

¹⁷⁶ *New Zealand Herald*, 15 September 1942.

¹⁷⁷ This was done by means of emergency regulations, and after the war these mines were nationalised. Roth & Hammond, p. 138.

After WWII Semple continued to perceive almost all unionists who were involved in industrial disputes as enemies who were out to destroy the gains made by the working class. One of the most militant unions during this time was the watersiders and at the Labour Party conference in 1947 Semple denounced the waterside workers and referred to their leader as, “Mr Barnes and his ratbags”. For Semple, striking unionists were “wreckers”, meaning they were wrecking the economy and destroying the gains made by the working class. He said,

Mr Barnes is a wrecker... he constitutes a real threat to the industrial peace and general welfare of the people of this country...there is no room in this country for wreckers and I will fight to ensure that what has been achieved by the working people after a struggle over the years is not lost by the senseless action of unscrupulous industrial racketeers.¹⁷⁸

Semple might well have heard echoes of past criticisms of himself when he labelled Barnes a wrecker and “ambitious for personal power...a real threat to industrial peace and general welfare of the country...with a small coterie he seeks not only to dominate the government but also the country”.¹⁷⁹ However, he was not out of step with the views of the Labour leadership, Prime Minister Fraser said in 1947 that any section of workers who tried to leap ahead – in wage increases or working conditions – would cause chaos in industry.¹⁸⁰

Semple’s union organising was a manifestation of his life’s objective – to improve the lot of the working people. He believed unity was the key to workers’ emancipation and this was a thread of continuity linking all the union and labour organisations he served. Whether he organised for a specific union or a national labour organisation he ascribed to the slogan ‘agitate, educate, organise’. Interwoven amongst his union organising were common characteristics such as extended periods of travel and hard work which sometimes impacted on his health. But when he became a member of the Labour government Semple’s focus was on organising the nation, union organisations had to then be considered as part of the greater whole. Some unionists did not accept Semple’s new arguments and accused him of betraying his trade union principles. Semple believed that the social and economic changes implemented by the government were of benefit to all New Zealanders, including unionists. Early in

¹⁷⁸ *Otago Daily Times*, 17 June 1947.

¹⁷⁹ *New Zealand Herald*, 18 June 1947.

¹⁸⁰ *Auckland Star*, 7 June 1947.

Semple's public career union organising was overlapped by his political activities. The next chapter examines Semple as a Labour politician where the objective was also to improve the lot of the working class.

Chapter Four

“All my life...I have done my best to improve the lot of the working people”: The Labour Politician.¹

Robert Semple was one of the most picturesque figures on the New Zealand political scene for many years. Renowned as an orator, debater and arresting speaker he became one of the Labour Party’s leading parliamentarians – in the first half of the twentieth century there would not have been a voter in the country who did not know who Bob Semple was. Politics was the second avenue through which Semple strove to achieve his lifelong objective – to improve conditions for working people. The image of Semple as a politician features consistently in both the primary sources and the secondary literature. Speaking in Parliament in 1934 Semple said, “All my life...I have done my best to improve the lot of the working people and I will continue to do my best until I leave this planet”.² Discussing the skills of New Zealand politicians in a book of political quotations Desmond Hurley remarks about Semple, “Politicians who stand out as verbally adept are people like Bob Semple...”.³ Semple’s identity as a politician is a feature of his historical characterisation – in the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* the key words beneath his name are “Coalminer, trade unionist, politician”.⁴

This chapter examines Semple’s political career - firstly, some of his Party activities and then his representation of Labour on the Wellington City Council. Also discussed will be his role as a Minister in the Labour government. Included in this analysis are several characteristics that overlap from Semple’s other identities but which are also a large part of his political image - such as periods of extensive travel and consequent health issues, his language and dual representation. Semple’s methods and his political message were reasonably consistent, particularly up until 1935. Some changes did occur when he became part of the Labour government, however this was

¹ *NZPD*, 238 (1934), p. 596.

² *NZPD*, 238 (1934), p. 596. Semple was speaking on the Unemployment Amendment Bill.

³ Desmond Hurley (ed.), *A Dictionary of New Zealand Political Quotations*, Auckland: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 2.

⁴ Richardson, ‘Robert Semple’.

not unique to Semple, his colleagues also grappled with different political challenges as a result of higher office.

Early Attitudes to Politics

During 1903 Semple and the Victorian miners explored both political and industrial organisation as avenues to gain workers' rights. During the Victorian strike the miners sent deputations to state parliamentarians – this was largely to lobby for a Coal Mines Bill which would include a compulsory arbitration clause. Several Labour parliamentarians visited the miners during the strike. Semple chaired a meeting at Korumburra in May 1903 when Mr J. Billson, MLA, addressed a large attendance on, “The Rights of Labour”. Billson said the objects of the Labour Party were to improve the conditions of the people as a whole and endorsed the miners' fight for a system of arbitration.⁵ In July, Semple chaired a meeting addressed by Mr G. Anstey, representative in the State Parliament for East Bourke Boroughs. Anstey said the Labour Party was moving with the object of bettering the present state of affairs and though their progress was slow, they were doing good work. He also endorsed the miners' fight for their rights.⁶ Semple may have chaired these meetings in his capacity as President of the Coal Creek Miners' Lodge in Korumburra. Clearly it shows some belief in the efficiency of parliamentary work at this juncture.

It seems Semple's first direct involvement in a political party was in Korumburra. The formation of a branch of the Political Labour League in the district was part of Labour's initiative to organise the country electorates for the 1903 election.⁷ The Labour party in Victoria did not become a serious contender in State politics until 1902.⁸ Prior to that date Labour in Victoria had been in various stages of disarray – Labour was renamed the ‘Political Labour Council’ at a meeting in February 1901 and was the fourth political Labour Party launched in Victoria in little over a decade.⁹

⁵ *Outtrim News*, 6 May 1903.

⁶ *Korumburra Times*, 8 July 1903.

⁷ A. A. Wilson was the Labour candidate for Flinders (incorporating Korumburra) in the 1903 election. He favoured a White Australia policy, adult franchise, compulsory arbitration and uniform laws to govern the workings of all mines. *Outtrim News*, 4 November 1903. The federal platform included one adult, one vote, a White Australia, old age pensions and protection.

⁸ Stuart Macintyre, *The Labour Experiment*, Melbourne: McPhee Gribble Publishers, 1989, p. 6.

⁹ D.J.Murphy (ed.), *Labor in Politics: The State Labor Parties in Australia 1880-1920*, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1975, p. 307.

A federal election was to take place in December 1903 and the political campaign for this election, involved the formation of Political Labour Council branches in each of the country electorates.

In July 1903 a meeting of the miners formed the Political Labour League branch and Semple was appointed President. VCMA secretary, A.A.Wilson, was a candidate in the election and Semple chaired some of Wilson's meetings in the district.¹⁰ Even the small socialist newspaper, *Tocsin*, declared faith in the political process, noting that "the Federal Parliament is the Victorian workers' political hope".¹¹ The miners, Semple included, were seeking to achieve through political representation what they could not win by strike action. As Gardner suggested, it may have been the aim of the miners "that their own Labour member of the House of Representatives would have helped to bring the conflict to a speedy and positive conclusion".¹²

Adult franchise would operate from the 1903 federal elections and an address by Semple at a social for the Political Labour League specifically targeted women voters and workers' organisation. He said the objective of the gathering was to bring the workers together and try and get them to take a greater interest in their welfare and in politics. He believed women had a right to take part in political matters and that

There were many matters of government in this state that needed alteration in the interest of the workers, and he was sure that if they bonded themselves together and men and women voted solidly these alterations would soon be brought about. The workers were in the majority, and it was their own fault if they allowed themselves to be oppressed by the other side.¹³

Many of the miners did not share Semple's viewpoint as Wilson polled third out of four candidates, receiving little support outside the mining areas. Even within the coal towns his support was far lower than expected.¹⁴

¹⁰ In the Gippsland newspapers the Labour Party branches were entitled the 'Political Labour League'. Also the spelling of Labour at this time included 'u'.

¹¹ *Tocsin* cited in Murphy, p. 310.

¹² Gardner, p. 86.

¹³ *Korumburra Times*, 22 July 1903.

¹⁴ Gardner, p. 86.

Being a member of the Political Labour League probably enhanced Semple's ability as a public speaker, and the Korumburra Branch of the League held regular debates. In August the topic of the debate, in which Semple took part for the affirmative, was "Nationalisation of the Land".¹⁵ In September he chaired a debate entitled, "Is arbitration beneficial to the worker".¹⁶ Semple's specific views on arbitration are not recorded. As noted earlier, Tom Mann also visited the district at this time as a paid organiser for the Labour Party in Victoria.¹⁷ Mann was an outstanding orator and in 1914 the *Maoriland Worker* in New Zealand claimed Mann had fostered Semple's speaking ability: "Mr Semple's platform career began under the auspices of Tom Mann, who expressed a lively interest in him on his first visit to Australia. He advised him to take up public speaking, lent him books, and helped him considerably in numerous ways".¹⁸

During his first years in New Zealand Semple was apparently not a member of any political party. However, during 1907 he and Pat Hickey started to form branches of the Socialist Party on the West Coast. The seed of a political perspective is evidenced when Semple spoke at Dunollie where a branch of the Socialist Party was formed. He said, "What was wanted was...to...send men of our class to represent us in Parliament...".¹⁹

Yet for a time politics took a role beneath industrial unionism. During the FOL period Semple and his Red Fed colleagues believed real change would be achieved by industrial unionism. However, he was a member of the Socialist Party and did support Paddy Webb when he stood as a Socialist candidate for the Grey seat in the 1911 election and then as an SDP candidate in the 1913 by-election for the Grey seat. Olssen has argued that after the defeat of the 1912 Waihi strike most of the Red Fed leaders called for political action, but Semple perhaps struggled to adjust his thinking to the new reality.²⁰ At the January 1913 Unity conference Semple spoke against inviting political parties, "the intention was to have an industrial conference and this

¹⁵ *Korumburra Times*, 2 September 1903.

¹⁶ *Korumburra Times*, 23 September 1903.

¹⁷ Mann, *Tom Mann's Memoirs*, p. 180. Mann does not mention Semple specifically in his memoirs. He does however recall his time as organiser for the Victorian Labor Party in 1902 saying, "Although I was travelling under the auspices of the Labor Party, always and everywhere I advocated Socialism".

¹⁸ *Maoriland Worker*, 22 July 1914.

¹⁹ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 19 November 1907.

²⁰ Olssen, *The Red Feds*, p. 164.

was considered necessary because the power of the trade unions was being undermined". Semple's reluctance can be partially explained by his belief that the ULP did not assist striking workers during the Waihi strike, for, as he stated, "surely they must detest scabbing in time of industrial war, and there were men in the ULP who had absolutely scabbed on their fellow workers".²¹ Yet he denied the FOL was anti-political, declaring he was not a parliamentarian himself but he thought the working class should use their political power when they were organised for industrial solidarity. Ultimately, he did reluctantly agree to some political parties being invited. Subsequent to the defeat of the Great Strike at the end of 1913 Semple was among many labour militants who conceded a changed emphasis in the labour movement from industrial to political activity.²² He campaigned for both the UFL and SDP throughout 1914 but resigned his position as organiser in October 1914.

Gustafson has argued that the militants, including Semple, were "better organisers, orators, and pamphleteers than their moderate rivals". He suggests that this was because Semple and his militant colleagues were on the whole more willing to subordinate their occupations, social life and even families to their political activities and ambitions than the moderates. In 1916 issues such as conscription, inflation and profiteering were high on the political agenda. They were emotional issues and as Gustafson argued, "ideal subjects for men like Holland and Semple to use in building Labour's image and electoral support and simultaneously their own influence within the Party".²³ When the NZLP was formed in July 1916, Semple was a member of the Party's hierarchy. Along with President, vice-president and secretary the new Party elected Semple, Harry Holland, Peter Fraser and William Parry as part of a twelve-strong committee. However, Semple's early Labour Party activities were hampered by his imprisonment in December 1916 for opposing conscription. Although silencing him in the short term his confinement did much to raise his own and the Party profile.

After his release from prison in 1917, and following an immensely popular tour of the coalfields, Semple made a bid for Parliament.²⁴ In November 1918 A. H. Hindmarsh,

²¹ *Maoriland Worker*, 31 January 1913.

²² Gustafson, *Labour's Path to Political Independence*, Chapter 6.

²³ Gustafson, *Labour's Path to Political Independence*, p. 94.

²⁴ Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community*, p. 175.

MP for Wellington South, died from influenza²⁵ and although Semple had said only months before that he had no political ambition, he won the nomination from five other Labour aspirants.²⁶ When Webb resigned his seat in Grey after being drawn in the conscription ballot Semple's name was mentioned as a possible candidate for the Grey seat in April 1918.²⁷ When questioned by the *Evening Post* Semple said that he had received many requests to allow himself to be nominated in the event of a vacancy,

I have decided to have nothing to do with the matter personally otherwise than to help the man selected. I have never had any political ambition; I have never stood for Parliament. I feel that I can do more good by working for Labour outside than in the House. There is tremendous work to be done outside. I prefer to use the plough rather than the harrow at any time.²⁸

Semple offered no explanation for his change of attitude and the apparent contradiction. But his protestations that he preferred to fight for the industrial side of Labour appear to be the excuse Semple used to decline standing in parliamentary seats that were a long way from home. At this time Semple lived in the vacant Wellington South electorate. Labour was gaining some ground in the urban areas (in October Peter Fraser had won the by-election in Wellington Central) and Semple may have been buoyed by Labour's success and seized the opportunity that presented itself.

During the 1918 by-election Semple positioned himself as representing the *people in need* rather than the working class. This may have been an effort to appeal to a wider cross-section of voters. He said,

whether in Parliament or out of it, in prison or out of it, he would be always on the side of people who were trying to get a bit more food into their cupboards and more clothing for their backs. He would fight for the people in need against the other fellow every time.²⁹

²⁵ *Evening Post*, 13 November 1918.

²⁶ The other Labour nominations were T.Brindle, A.L.Monteith, J.Read, M.J.Reardon and W.T.Young. *Maoriland Worker*, 11 December 1918. The *Maoriland Worker* said Semple was selected by ballot, it did not give any figures.

²⁷ Webb refused to comply unless his constituents were willing to release him so to test the feeling of the electorate he immediately resigned his seat and forced a by-election in Grey. No government candidate could be found and Webb was re-elected unopposed.

²⁸ *Evening Post*, 17 April 1918. Harry Holland contested the Grey seat for Labour in the May by-election and won by 2865 votes to 2717. Gustafson, *Labour's Path to Political Independence*, p. 134.

Semple criticised war profiteers, advocated full political rights for women, nationalisation of the coal industry and free education. He also attacked private insurance companies, said he favoured an insurance monopoly for the State and criticised the slum housing conditions in Wellington which had been exposed by the influenza epidemic.³⁰

In a light poll, where over half the electors did not vote, Semple won the seat by over 1,000 votes and became Labour's MP for Wellington South. George Frost, his independent opponent, attributed his defeat to the magnificent effort of the Labour Party.³¹ Bassett and King attributed part of Semple's success to the good work he did during the influenza epidemic, for "He [Semple] lived in the electorate and had become well known as Holland's principle helpmate at the Brooklyn Hospital handling epidemic victims". The *Maoriland Worker* also named several prominent labour personnel who had been helping at Wellington hospitals including Semple.³² However, Bassett and King also argued that with many of Labour's supporters suffering from the flu themselves, "it was as well for Semple there was a well-skilled team of Wellington workers to run his campaign".³³ The *Evening Post* acknowledged the organisational prowess of the Labour Party and criticised both government and electorate apathy.³⁴ How much the success can be attributed to Semple personally is difficult to assess but he had worked hard in the electorate during the influenza epidemic and had solid support from the Labour Party.

Even though he now represented an urban constituency, Semple's political lobbying continued to feature the miners - he defiantly challenged parliamentarians on their behalf. He suggested that one parliamentary opponent should live in the same shacks the miners had to live in. He also suggested that he should try his hand toiling as the miner did. It would be an experience, said Semple that would "trim some of the

²⁹ *Evening Post*, 18 December 1918.

³⁰ *Evening Post*, 18 December 1918.

³¹ Semple's opponents were George Frost and John Castle. Both men were on the Wellington City Council and stood as Independents.

³² *Maoriland Worker*, 11 December 1908.

³³ Bassett & King, p. 87.

³⁴ *Evening Post*, 20 December 1918.

conservative notches off him”.³⁵ When miners were accused of go-slow tactics Semple offered to put on dungarees and hew coal with any MP who wanted to learn about the miners’ working conditions. Another member offered a medal to the MP who produced the most coal. Semple said, “I will enter for the competition then, and I’ll make anybody else go for it. There won’t be any ‘go-slow’”.³⁶

Periods of extensive travel were also a feature of Party work. For Semple and his colleagues this involved spreading the Party’s political message and publicly boosting their own image. In January 1919 Labour decided to launch an extensive organising and educative campaign to increase the strength of the Party. The campaign aimed to cover the majority of New Zealand. NZLP President, J.T Paul said there were serious misconceptions about Labour’s aims and objectives, which the campaign hoped to dispel, “We are out to overtake the misrepresentations of the past”.³⁷

Semple toured the North Island in 1919 as part of Labour’s organising campaign. Reporting on his visit to Dargaville in April an unnamed writer in the *Maoriland Worker* reported how the audience was initially absolutely hostile but “When the speaker appeared on the platform they appeared to be quite non-plussed, as if they had expected to see some gruesome monster”.³⁸ However, the author said Semple soon had his audience won over and they listened intently, “Several people who went in openly expressing their hostility, came out apologising, taking back all they had said”. The report said many of the audience were going to join the Labour Party, “Mr R. Semple has not only made his name good in Northern Wairoa but has also altered the views of a lot of people on the Party, and several ex-hostile prominent figures in the district have expressed the wish to see him in the future”.³⁹

Touring extensively to boost Labour’s image and electoral support was an ongoing pattern for Semple. During 1934 he toured the North Island campaigning on Labour’s

³⁵ Richardson, ‘Robert Semple’.

³⁶ *Evening Post*, 6 September 1919.

³⁷ *Evening Post*, 27 January 1919.

³⁸ *Maoriland Worker*, 14 May 1919. Semple’s 1919 organising campaign covered the length and breadth of New Zealand. During January Semple addressed audiences in Masterton, Taumarunui and Te Kuiti. New Labour Party branches were formed after all his meetings. In February Semple was in the South Island. He spoke at Matarua, Kaitangata, Timaru, Westport, Denniston and Burnetts Face, Rununga and then Christchurch. He was in the Auckland area in March and then in the King Country.

³⁹ *Maoriland Worker*, 14 May 1919.

behalf, he addressed thirty-six public meetings in ten weeks.⁴⁰ After he held a meeting in Karamea a correspondent in the *New Zealand Worker* said,

Those of us who had not seen him before, could picture him... with a disordered shock of long, black hair and protruding teeth – the real wild man from Borneo kind of thing. When we meet him we are almost staggered to find a perfectly normal looking man with Norman physique and manners, together with a powerful but amiably pleasing and attractive personality.

The writer complimented Semple's knowledge of literature and said he looked forward to again hearing one of his illuminating, interesting and educational addresses.⁴¹

Semple's unique language was evident in his political activity. His language was picturesque and direct though he was indiscrete at times. Pat Dickinson said her grandfather was honest and straightforward and always liked other people to be direct with him, "He hated people fudging things".⁴² But in 1919 Semple's portrayal of himself as a Bolshevik showed a lack of judgment. Speaking in Christchurch he remarked

We used to be called 'Red Feds', but now they have a new name for us, they call us now 'Bolsheviks'. I accept the term. I glory in the Russian working man's pluck, and I am sorry that there is not more of it in New Zealand. If I were in Russia I would be with Trotsky and Lenin. If I were in Ireland I would be a Sinn Feiner, and if I were in Germany I would be a Spartacist.

Semple immediately came under fire. Speaking at the Presbyterian General Assembly Reverend W. Scorgie said, "the logical outcome of Bolshevism is that women are to be public property and these men proclaim it here, and they are allowed to draw £300 a year and call themselves members of Parliament".⁴³ The *Evening Post* was also critical: "The glories of Trotsky and Lenin, who betrayed Russian democracy...still appeal to Mr Semple".⁴⁴ W.H. Herries, Minister of Railways, believed Semple's remarks were politically damaging. He wrote to Massey, "As long as he talks like

⁴⁰ *New Zealand Worker*, 6 June 1934.

⁴¹ *New Zealand Worker*, 20 June 1934.

⁴² Interview with Pat Dickinson 1 February 2005.

⁴³ *Evening Post*, 22 February 1919.

⁴⁴ *Evening Post*, 20 February 1919.

that, it is all in our favour”.⁴⁵ Some moderates in the Labour Party agreed. Harry Holland and Peter Fraser had also made some indiscrete remarks on Bolshevism which led the Labour candidate for Invercargill, the Rev. J.K. Archer to say Labour “was not defending such men as Semple, Webb and Holland”.⁴⁶

Semple tried to explain himself. He said he had meant that if he had been born and bred in Russia he would, by the environment, have been forced to be a Bolshevik.⁴⁷ And his speech simply meant that he was on the side of those who were oppressed whatever country it was. He said he honestly considered that no socialist organisation could possibly depart from the principle of a combination of International Workers of the World. The Labour Party must not surrender all socialist and international policy.⁴⁸ William Earnshaw, MLC, was critical of Semple’s explanations suggesting that, “Mr R. Semple proves the triteness of the old saying: Give him enough rope and he will hang himself”. The *Evening Post* was also not convinced, “Does Mr Semple suggest that his original acceptance was really qualified by the same rigmarole about reluctance and environment by which he ruined the rhetoric of the rest of his panegyric?”⁴⁹ But Semple did have some support. A writer in the *Maoriland Worker* said that on the same day the press published both Semple’s speech as well as the cablegram regarding the nationalisation of Russian women under Bolshevism. The writer said it was made to appear that Semple endorsed the polygamous idea but anyone who knew him would know perfectly well that he did not endorse any movement that promoted the degradation of women.⁵⁰

The voters rejected Semple’s bid for re-election in 1919. A contributing factor in his defeat was that the Reform and Liberal parties did not stand a candidate; Semple’s only opponent was Colonel George Mitchell, a war hero, who stood as an Independent.⁵¹ Mitchell also claimed to be a labouring man and in sympathy with workers’ needs which undermined Semple’s ability to be the sole working class representative. Mitchell was born in Balclutha, one of 14 children and went to work at

⁴⁵ Herries to Massey 24 February 1919, PM 9/8 Reform Party Matters, NA.

⁴⁶ *Dominion*, 20 November 1919.

⁴⁷ *Evening Post*, 26 February 1919.

⁴⁸ *Evening Post*, 16 May 1919.

⁴⁹ *Evening Post*, 11 March 1919.

⁵⁰ *Maoriland Worker*, 26 February 1919.

⁵¹ Mitchell had won a DSO in France. Bassett & King, p. 92.

11 years old driving a bakers's cart.⁵² He also advocated policies similar to Labour, such as the nationalisation of the mines and free education from the kindergarten to the university.⁵³ Semple claimed he had done all that was humanly possible for those who had elected him. Throughout the campaign he detailed Labour's work in Parliament, such as the active part taken by Labour in the debate on the Housing Act, and said the Party would not rest until every worker had the chance of securing a home for himself. He claimed that Labour members had done their best to secure for widows a pension that would enable them to devote their lives to their children.⁵⁴ However, the working class had two candidates to claim their allegiance, which may have caused a split in this section of voters.

In the wake of the election the mainstream press questioned Semple's commitment to parliamentary life. Semple said he was not sorry at the result for he could be of more service to the Labour movement outside Parliament than inside: "I have been a thorn in their side for more than twenty years, but I will be a greater thorn in the days to come".⁵⁵ An *Evening Post* editorial described Semple as a chameleon and referred critically to his claim. The newspaper reminded readers that until the Wellington South vacancy Semple had never been interested in a Parliamentary career and had favoured industrial unionism over political action. But with the death of the previous incumbent of the seat, Semple had had a sudden zeal for political democracy. The paper questioned whether Semple would revert to his original antagonism towards political action, "Is the 'greater thorn' to be the Semple of old, the real Semple, whose greatness and thorniness were temporarily diminished by his lapse into Parliamentary respectability? A little while ago we had occasion to refer to 'the Semple that is, the Semple that was, and the Semple that yet may be'". The paper asked whether his words implied that a new stage in Semple's evolution, again threatening to capitalism, was about to follow his ejection from Parliament, where he might have been tamer had the electors been more hospitable "And if Mr Semple does not mean this, what does he mean".⁵⁶

⁵² *Evening Post*, 7 November 1919.

⁵³ *Evening Post*, 5 December 1919.

⁵⁴ *Evening Post*, 12 November 1919.

⁵⁵ *Evening Post*, 18 December 1919.

⁵⁶ *Evening Post*, 23 December 1919.

After his election defeat Bassett and King suggested Semple was rejected by the Party as a parliamentary candidate: “he was personally blamed for the loss and at the next election another candidate won the seat back for Labour”.⁵⁷ While it is true that Robert McKeen stood for Wellington South in 1922, Semple was asked to stand by the Newtown and Brooklyn branches of the Party. But he cited the Orongorongo contract as grounds for rejecting the nomination in December 1921, saying his hands were full at the present time. He said he had pledged himself to the tunnel contract for the City Council and the speedy and successful completion of this urgent public work was more important than a seat in Parliament at the present time. But he did not discount the possibility all together as he said that at some future date, when circumstances would permit, he would be at the disposal of the labour movement of New Zealand.⁵⁸

It was not until 1925, when Semple was given leave of absence during the off-season from his job as Freezing Workers’ organiser, that he contested another Parliamentary seat – this time in Otaki. Although his preference was to be involved in industrial organisations, he did continue to contest parliamentary elections but it was not a policy of desperately seeking to enter Parliament. Semple only contested the Wellington seat where he lived, and now one in close proximity, Otaki. In March, when asked to contest a selection ballot for a Dunedin electorate in the general election Semple said, “There is a great deal to do in the industrial field, and it is my opinion that the workers are losing ground there every year. I recognise the need for political action on the part of the workers, but naturally I would prefer to fight from the industrial side”.⁵⁹

Semple was connected to the Otaki district in a personal capacity which could partly explain his contesting the seat. Nominations for the Wellington seats were given to members who had contested them previously, but there had been no Labour candidate in Otaki in 1922. Semple’s grandchildren recalled many happy memories of the family bach at Manukau beach in the 1930s but were unable to confirm when Semple acquired the property. It is possible that he had acquired the bach by 1925 and spent

⁵⁷ Bassett & King, p. 92.

⁵⁸ *Maoriland Worker*, 7 December 1921; *Evening Post*, 20 December 1921.

⁵⁹ *Evening Post*, 5 March 1925.

weekends and holidays in the area. His grandchildren said he really enjoyed the area and eventually retired to Otaki near the end of his life.



Figure 20: This family photograph was taken during the late 1940s at the Semple home in Mill Road, Otaki. Robert and Margaret Semple are seated on chairs. The group includes grandson, Robert H. Semple, held by his grandfather and granddaughter, Erin Semple, on the right of the photograph, RHSC.

Semple was unsuccessful in the election, losing by a majority of 2,057 votes. W.H. Field, the Reform candidate, polled 4,256 votes, Semple 2,199 votes, with C. Harkness polling 480 votes. Otaki was a rural electorate stretching from Otaki township to Johnsonville with forty-three polling booths. Semple won seven of the booths and they were situated on the perimeter of Wellington city such as Porirua, Paremata, Johnsonville and Ngahauranga suggesting that Semple's support base was mainly urban Wellington.⁶⁰ In a pattern that would reoccur throughout his political career Semple's opponents emphasised his radical image during the election. In 1925 Field criticised Semple's 1919 Bolshevik speech, asking Semple to clarify his meaning.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Votes Recorded for each candidate at each polling-place, *AJHR*, 1926, (V.II), H33A pp. 1-27.

⁶¹ *Evening Post*, 16 October 1925.

Semple's support of striking British seamen may have been detrimental to his election campaign. The *Auckland Star* said amongst the reasons for Reform's overall victory were "the seamen's strike, sympathy shown to the strikers by the Labour leaders, distrust of Labour generally and especially dislike of its land policy".⁶² Peter Butler later recalled meeting Semple for the first time in 1925 during the seamen's strike. He suggested although Semple was a Labour candidate for a rural constituency he did not hesitate to associate himself with the striking seamen. He said that the farmers were very antagonistic to the seamen as the strike affected their dairy exports. Butler recalled, "Semple related how at Levin a couple of farmers and other opponents congregated in his election meeting and every now and again would in unison call out, 'What about our butter', 'what about our butter'". Butler recollected Semple saying "I felt like telling them to rub it on their ... and slide to hell".⁶³

Semple was the victim of both verbal and printed slander in the political environment. Following his defeat in the 1919 general election Semple took a criminal action against the *Hutt Valley Independent* for defamation of character.⁶⁴ The newspaper claimed Semple had said during the campaign, "I am a German and proud of it". Semple vigorously denied this and won the case.⁶⁵ He again invoked court action subsequent to the 1925 election. Arnold Nordmeyer recalled lots of people had a sense of humour like Bob Semple.⁶⁶ But he also said Semple was sensitive when he himself was the butt of jokes, "Bob loved to poke fun at people but let anybody poke fun at him and Bob reacted violently".⁶⁷ Semple was sensitive but often with good reason, both the 1920 and 1925 libel cases went in his favour. In 1925 Semple took legal proceedings against a Mr F.J. Ryder of Otaki for circulating a libel publication in the Otaki electorate during the election campaign.⁶⁸ Later, Ryder publicly apologised to Semple in the *Worker*. Ryder said,

⁶² *Auckland Star* cited in *Evening Post*, 6 November 1925.

⁶³ Peter Butler Draft Autobiography pp. 123-124, Peter Butler Papers 89-119-1/1/1, WTU.

⁶⁴ *Evening Post*, 11 February 1920.

⁶⁵ A fine of £5 plus costs was imposed on the defendant, Angus John McCurdy, the proprietor of the *Hutt Valley Independent*. *Maoriland Worker*, 17 March 1920.

⁶⁶ Arnold Nordmeyer was first elected as Labour MP for Oamaru in 1935.

⁶⁷ Michael King interview with Alister McIntosh and Arnold Nordmeyer 1 August 1978, Bassett & King Papers 2000-094-Box 2, WTU.

⁶⁸ *Evening Post*, 30 October 1925.

This libel was published in the form of a pamphlet and contained statements concerning Mr Semple's conduct in connection with the Orongorongo tunnelling contract with the Wellington City Council which statements I now know to be false and wholly unwarranted.⁶⁹

Ryder said he wanted to withdraw unreservedly the untrue statements.

Municipal Politics

Although rejected in the general election Semple was accepted by the voters on a municipal level. In 1925 he was elected to the Wellington City Council and served for ten years. He did not stand for Council in 1935, instead making an unsuccessful bid for the Wellington mayoralty. Local body candidacy was not uncommon amongst Labour personnel and MPs. In the May 1935 local body elections Dan Sullivan retained the Christchurch mayoralty, which he won in 1931, and Peter Fraser topped the Wellington City Council poll.⁷⁰ The prevalence of Labour in municipal politics can be seen as an attempt to influence national government, starting first from the grass roots civic government to instigate a flow-on effect. Just before the 1935 municipal election an unnamed Labour candidate for the Council said, "on May 8 we will vote solidly for Labour and our only regret will be that it is a Labour council we are returning and not a Labour government, but remember a Labour council is a forerunner of a Labour government".⁷¹ The Wellington Labour Representation Committee issued a policy statement prior to the election which included, "Labour's municipal policy is, in effect, its national social and economic ideals adapted to meet local needs".⁷²

During the ten years Semple was on the Council, Labour never did particularly well in the local body elections compared with cities such as Christchurch. Municipal elections were held every two years up to 1935 and from 1925 to 1933 Labour only had two or three representatives on the Council, at any one time, out of fifteen seats. In 1933 they captured five seats and in a by-election a month later increased their number to six. Their fair showing in civic politics did not, however, parallel national

⁶⁹ *New Zealand Worker*, 9 December 1925.

⁷⁰ Gustafson, *From the Cradle to the Grave*, p. 162.

⁷¹ *Evening Post*, 26 April 1935.

⁷² *Evening Post*, 10 April 1935.

politics – in the 1928 general election Labour won four out of the five Wellington seats. Even in 1935 and in 1938 when Labour was sweeping all before it on a national level, Labour still only had a maximum of six representatives on the Council. Looking at the election results, the maximum of three elected Labour candidates were those who had achieved representation on a national level as MPs. They received a very high percentage of votes whereas the other Labour candidates received a low proportion. This suggests a considerable gap between the well-known candidates and the lesser-known ones, who were often local union representatives and had not yet received significant exposure. Wellington's Labour representation stood in contrast to other centres such as Christchurch where in 1927, for example, there was a Labour majority on Council and a Labour mayor. In 1935 Auckland, although not having a Labour mayor, saw fifteen out of the twenty-one seats on the Council captured by Labour. In Wellington, however, Semple and the two other Labour members struggled as a small minority voice on the Council until 1933 and the opportunities for improving material conditions for the worker were limited.

A notable aspect of Semple's first council election campaign in 1925 and, indeed, in subsequent campaigns was the image him as a practical politician - this was constructed by others but also to a large extent by Semple himself. He capitalised on the proven success of the Orongorongo tunnel contract going into the election, and the contract was often used to enhance his reputation as a practical man who got things done. Jim Roberts, also a Labour Party candidate for the 1925 Council, countered the argument of the opposing Civic League candidates that the city needed businessmen to run its affairs. He said the Labour candidates were workers, "men who had made roads and tunnels, men who had a practical knowledge of the water supply, sewerage and other requirements of the people". What the citizens wanted, he said, were men who could apply that knowledge for the benefit of the citizens.⁷³ During the 1933 municipal campaign Semple said,

Thousands of pounds are being wasted on the relief of unemployment in the city. What was wanted was a council composed of practical men capable of undertaking work of real and lasting value. The Labour ticket contained such men who have been trained in the hard

⁷³ *Evening Post*, 22 April 1925.

school of experience.⁷⁴

Semple epitomised a physical, visual, hands-on practical man in the Party. When the suburb of Miramar was badly hit by flooding in 1929, while other councillors were meeting around the council table, Semple and the assistant engineer were down the main drainage tunnel holding onto a rope to see what was causing the obstruction and consequent flooding. In 1935 Semple stood for Mayor, and in announcing Semple's candidature Peter Fraser said, "His lifelong practical experience in mining and general construction work, as well as his service on the Wellington City Council, the Harbour Board, and in Parliament has fully and efficiently equipped him for the various duties attached to the office".⁷⁵

Health issues still periodically impinged on Semple's activities. He was absent from Wellington in the run up to the 1931 municipal elections. The *Evening Post* reported that under medical advice Semple had left for the Rotorua district for a brief holiday prior to the elections. Semple said he and his wife regretted having no opportunity of addressing the electors "but I am sure the people of Wellington, whom I have served to the best of my ability for a long period of years will understand that that is on account of no desire of our own".⁷⁶ Semple was re-elected to the City Council, his physical absence did not prove to be a disadvantage.

The depression cast a long shadow over much of Semple's period on the Council and he spent a large part of his time insisting on better wages and conditions for relief workers. The first deputation from the unemployed, urging that something should be done in the way of relief works for them, was received in Council in May 1926. The Council did fight hard trying to combat this burgeoning problem by using the profits of some of its own trading departments such as Electricity, public appeals for funds resulting in the Mayoral relief fund, loan finance and subsidies provided by the government. In 1931 it was employing over four thousand men on relief, more than any other city in New Zealand. Semple and his Labour colleague, Robert McKeen, (the only two Labour representatives on Council between 1927-29) persistently advocated trade union rates of pay for relief works, but were regularly outvoted. At a

⁷⁴ *Evening Post*, 2 May 1933.

⁷⁵ *Evening Post*, 15 March 1935.

⁷⁶ *Evening Post*, 29 April 1931.

meeting in January 1929, when the Council was paying relief rates recommended by the government, Semple accused the Council of taking advantage of the men who were unemployed by having work done which normally would have been carried out with standard rates of pay. He again moved that full standard rates should be paid but was defeated.⁷⁷ Semple and his colleagues did have some small successes with regard to improved wages during the depression. After the end of the 1934 financial year the Council had a surplus of £30,000 due to increased rates. With the Labour representation boosted and with the help of others on the council they succeeded in restoring 5% of the 10% cut that had been made in 1931 to Council employees.

The Communist Party was critical of Semple and McKeen as Labour members of the Wellington City Council. However, this can be seen in the context of the ongoing antagonism between the Labour Party and the Communists and the fight for representation of the unemployed, so the criticism was not necessarily personal to Semple. In July 1927 a Communist Party circular on unemployment alleged Semple and McKeen had voted with the Civic League Councillors in the Council in favour of the relief rates being paid on the jobs controlled by the Council. Semple denied this and said although numbering only two on a hostile Council they had done their best in favour of award rates. Semple pointed out the Communists were not attacking the Councillors responsible for the rates, but concentrated their criticism on the Labour Councillors who had fought to make the rate as high as possible.⁷⁸

Although Semple was loyal to his Party's policies on the Council, he did express his own personal opinions on some issues, some of which were in contrast to the views of his Labour colleagues. For example, he consistently opposed new acquisitions for the Zoo. In November 1925 he opposed the purchase of an elephant costing nearly £290. An elephant was obtained for the Zoo free from Madras although the council paid for the transport charge, which was £75. Semple opposed payment of this charge, but his Labour colleagues did not. In September 1926, when a tigress was purchased from Singapore at a cost of £70, Semple also recorded his objection. He protested vigorously in 1927 when the cost of a new bear pit climbed to approximately £2,300. He said men and women were living in housing slums in the city "But we can find

⁷⁷ Wellington City Council Minute Book Number 38 10 May 1928-18 February 1929, WCCA.

⁷⁸ *New Zealand Worker*, 27 July 1927.

£2,366 to build a bear pit - I believe it to be an immoral action on the part of the council to authorise this waste of money for such a purpose".⁷⁹

In June 1932, when the depression was tightening its grip, Semple caused a mild sensation when he gave notice to move that as a measure of economy the Zoo be closed down. The *Evening Post* was flooded with letters both for and against the proposal. Semple said it was ironic that the people who were protesting against the Zoo's closure never protested against the governments attack on pensions and public institutions,

but when it comes to a question of closing a Zoo which is anything but a credit to the city, and of discontinuing the wasting on an average of £3,000 per year public money on torturing dumb animals, there is a protest from individuals who were dumb during the period when human institutions were ruthlessly attacked and hardships imposed.⁸⁰

When Semple put his notice of motion at the Council, for the Zoo's closure, it lapsed through want of a seconder. When his Labour colleague Robert McKeen put forward a motion to abolish the Sunday charges at the Zoo, Semple disagreed saying, "the Zoo was a relic of barbarism and would be better as an open space or laid out in play areas. If people liked the form of amusement presented by enraged confined animals they should pay for it".⁸¹ Although Semple's antagonism to the Zoo was predominately financial, his statements do suggest a relatively modern opposition to the confinement of wild animals.

Labour Party activities continued to take many forms for Semple and occasionally these overlapped, causing him problems on the Council and some conflict of interests. While on the Council he was also a union official for the Freezing Workers' Federation and the Wellington General Labourers' union. He was also a coal-merchant and MP for Wellington East from 1928. In 1931 in the Bylaws Committee recommendations for refunds for heavy traffic fees on account of vehicles taken off the road there was an amount of £7 10s for the firm, Ambury and Semple. The Council minutes record Councillor Semple did not vote on this clause, although he

⁷⁹ *Evening Post*, 13 December 1927.

⁸⁰ *Evening Post*, 27 June 1932.

⁸¹ *Evening Post*, 12 April 1933.

declared he no longer had an interest in the firm. In the run-up to the 1929 municipal elections Semple was criticised by the Civic League for holding dual office, in particular, being secretary of the union of the Councils' union of general labourers and a Councillor representing the employers at the same time. It was a case, said the Civic League, of the plaintiff and juryman in one box.⁸² Semple said that his position as Labourers' secretary made no difference to his attitude on the question of rates and wages and conditions, which in his opinion, should be paid to the non-skilled labourers in the Council's employ. A recurring attack made by the Civic League at election times was Semple's poor attendance at Council meetings which was among the lowest of all the councillors. This criticism was stepped up after 1928 when Semple became an MP but he always countered it by saying much of his time was spent on Council business. He added that he visited every part of the city where there had been complaints from ratepayers and he visited all works regularly and if this was the only criticism the League had to offer then it was a sure signal they were bankrupt for a logical case against him.⁸³

Semple's overlapping political activities had some advantages for his Wellington East constituents. In the lengthy debate in the Wellington City Council he fought hard for access to the eastern suburbs in the form of the Mt. Victoria tunnel when it was in danger of being shelved in favour of western suburbs access. A tender for the tunnel was accepted by the Council in June 1929 and an application made to the Loans Board for the approach work to the tunnel. As no immediate decision was forthcoming, in an effort to speed up the process Semple asked the Prime Minister in Parliament whether he would force the Loans Board to come to a decision as soon as possible so that work might proceed.⁸⁴ Ward replied that the Loans Board had not met. Semple followed this up with criticism of the Loans Board in the press and said the delay in considering the councils application was unacceptable.⁸⁵ Only days later approval was given and the approach work started.⁸⁶ The tunnel took two years to complete and was officially opened by the mayor, Mr T. Hislop in October 1931.

⁸² *Evening Post*, 29 April 1929.

⁸³ *Evening Post*, 30 April 1929.

⁸⁴ *Evening Post*, 11 July 1929.

⁸⁵ *Evening Post*, 16 July 1929.

⁸⁶ *Evening Post*, 18 July 1929.

Amongst other speakers was Semple in his capacity as MP.⁸⁷ Semple characterised the occasion as a historic one and said he always believed that the tunnel would be of the greatest benefit to the city, and particularly to the people living on the eastern side of the hill (including himself and the people of his electorate) and said the great civic value of the tunnel would be driven home in time.⁸⁸

MP in Opposition

In the 1928 general election Semple was Labour's candidate in the Wellington East electorate and won with a majority of 966 votes. Alex Monteith had stood as Labour candidate in the electorate in 1919, had won the seat in 1922 but lost it in the 1925 election.⁸⁹ In 1926 Monteith was appointed workers' representative on the Arbitration Court leaving the way clear for Semple to fill the vacancy. The victory relaunched Semple's parliamentary career, a key factor in his success was the splitting of the Reform vote. The sitting member, T. Forsyth, had a majority of 1,195 votes over Monteith, the only other candidate in 1925. In 1928 the Reform nomination was disputed, a challenger J.J. Clark wanted Forsyth to submit to a selection ballot to contest the nomination as the boundaries of the electorate had been altered. Clark alleged, "There was nothing to indicate that Forsyth held the confidence of a large new section of the constituency".⁹⁰ Forsyth refused to submit to the ballot so Clark stood as Independent Reform, effectively creating a split in the Reform vote. P.J. O'Regan, former FOL legal representative and lawyer in Wellington, recorded Semple's election victory in his diary, "He owes his victory to a tri-angular contest".⁹¹

Two other factors were also significant in Semple's victory. In 1928 Labour produced a much more comprehensive election platform which included the revamped land policy. Semple had been part of the Land Policy Committee which had formulated the new policy. Subdivision, closer settlement, the prevention of aggregation, a State

⁸⁷ *Evening Post*, 12 October 1931.

⁸⁸ *Evening Post*, 13 October 1931.

⁸⁹ Monteith was secretary of the United Storemen's union when he stood for Labour in Wellington East in 1919. He represented the workers in the Arbitration Court from 1926-1947. He was also a Labour member of the WCC from 1923-26 and resigned from the Council when appointed to the Court.

⁹⁰ *Evening Post*, 18 August 1928. Clark had lived in the electorate for many years and was a prominent official of the Reform League.

⁹¹ Diary 1928, P.J.O'Regan 76-165-2/1, WTU. The combination of Forsyth's and Clark's Reform votes of 7209 would have defeated Semple's 5527.

Bank and the extension of State Advances may have appealed to the largely suburban nature of Semple's Wellington East electorate. Changes in electoral boundaries also brought the suburb of Miramar into the electorate. Of the twelve polling stations Semple won eight, including the three booths in Miramar which had formerly been in the Wellington Suburbs electorate.⁹² Although Labour had not won Wellington Suburbs before, the booths in Miramar had previously supported the Labour candidate therefore Semple inherited an area which had been traditionally Labour.

During the election campaign Semple's opponent again constructed an extremist image of him. Forsyth referred to the 1913 strike and alleged that Semple had led and supported the strike, implying that Semple stood for revolutionary principles. As further evidence Forsyth also used Semple's 1919 Bolshevik speech.⁹³ Margaret Young, who stood as an independent Labour candidate in Wellington Central, asserted that the Waihi strike had been engineered by Holland and Semple. Semple replied that the statement was untrue and made "for no other purpose than to damage me personally and the Labour Party generally".⁹⁴ The image constructed by political opponents did not adversely damage Semple as he won the Wellington East seat.

Perhaps because Semple did not return to Parliament until 1928 Len Richardson has suggested that he was on the margin of the Labour Party in the 1920s and "took little part in the modifications of policy that prepared it for power".⁹⁵ Similarly Bruce Brown suggested, "I don't think he was a member of the most influential inner core in the 1920s and 1930s – Peter Fraser and Walter Nash were much more dominant".⁹⁶ However, Semple was on several committees that made fundamental changes to Labour's key policies. Although Labour's percentage of the total vote increased in the 1925 election the result was disappointing as Labour lost five seats. The land policy was subject to a searching review. At the 1926 Conference a special committee on land was formed consisting of Semple, Fraser, Savage, Roberts, Young and Nash. Savage presented the committee's report at the 1927 conference and the new policy dropped the nationalisation of land and basically accepted private small-holder

⁹² *Evening Post*, 15 November 1928.

⁹³ *Evening Post*, 12 November 1928.

⁹⁴ *Evening Post*, 6 November 1928.

⁹⁵ Richardson, 'Robert Semple'.

⁹⁶ Interview with Bruce Brown, 23 February 2005.

ownership.⁹⁷ Semple had also been part of an earlier committee in 1919 that had formulated the existing land policy. The salient points were no further sale of Crown lands, tenure based on occupancy and use, land not to be sold except to and from the state and development by the state of new land for settlement.⁹⁸ In New Zealand, land policy inevitably ranked high in importance with any political party so it is significant that Semple featured in these land policy modifications.

Semple was also on the committee which recommended the Labour Party's pledge which placed limits on Party membership. At the 1925 Conference a special committee was set up to draft a "Declaration of the Principles, Policy and Methods of the Party" and consisted of Holland, Fraser, Semple, W.T. Young and P.H. Hickey. The committee recommended a pledge be introduced which required that Labour Party delegates could not belong to any other Party. The pledge was basically designed to exclude Communists who disagreed with the Labour Party over methods used to achieve their end.⁹⁹ In the 1933 Conference it was moved that a committee be set up to consider unemployment, the reorganisation of industry, planned production, and the control of finance, banking and credit. This was in response to the depression and the Party felt it needed to revamp policy relevant to the current situation. A Policy Committee was established consisting of Semple, Nash (convenor) Savage, Holland, Langstone, Mason and James Roberts. The committee presented a full report, which was adopted by Conference as Labour's policy and was later known as "Labour's Plan".¹⁰⁰ Semple's place on these committees provides evidence to argue against Brown and Richardson's claims.

In addition, Semple was Labour Party President during 1926-27 and 1927-28. In opening the 1927 Party conference Semple said there were two important questions that the Conference had to consider. These were the financial report, which involved the future activities of the organisation, and the report of the Land Committee,

⁹⁷ Report of the Annual Conference of NZLP 1927, NZLP Headquarters, Wellington.

⁹⁸ The 1919 Committee consisted of Nash, Savage, Semple, Holland, Candy and Robertson. Brown, *The Rise of Labour*, p. 63.

⁹⁹ Report of the Annual Conference of NZLP 1925, NZLP Headquarters, Wellington.

¹⁰⁰ Brown, *The Rise of Labour*, p. 162. Report of the Annual Conference of NZLP 1933, NZLP Headquarters, Wellington.

We are called upon by the thousands of men and women we represent, to consider ways and means of perfecting our political organisation so that within the next two years you will have gathered sufficient strength, knowledge and courage to gain political control on behalf of the useful people of this fair land of ours.

He said the Labour Party offered the only constructive programme to solve the many social and economic problems in New Zealand. Labour's objective, he said, aimed at the complete abolition of exploitation or usury of any kind. When reached, this objective meant the economic emancipation of man, woman and child, "We stand unreservedly for equality of access to the natural resources of the earth, which is the gift of God, and should be the heritage of all people". Perhaps referring to the mainstream press he said their task was "to get those principles understood by our people, to remedy false impressions, to create an atmosphere of confidence, trust, goodwill and fraternalism".¹⁰¹

During his 1928 Presidential speech, Semple defined the immediate objective of the Labour Party as "the winning of New Zealand for the useful people and the establishment of a society based upon social justice, conceding to every physically fit man and woman the right to work, and assuring every mother of the nation of a home to shelter her offspring and the fullest and freest education". He suggested the responsibility was on the Party to "banish...the causes that produce inequality, unemployment, penury and want".¹⁰² He condemned the government for not having any national policy of any kind, no administrative capacity and contributing to unemployment through unskilled immigration. And he berated the government for overcrowded schools and unemployed teachers while spending money on the Singapore base and the criminal expenditure of public money on preparation for future wars.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ 1927 NZLP Annual Conference, New Zealand Labour Party, MS-Papers-6270-349, WTU.

¹⁰² *New Zealand Worker*, 18 April 1928.

¹⁰³ Presidential Address, Report of the Annual Conference of NZLP 1928, NZLP Headquarters, Wellington.



Figure 11: Semple, as President of the NZLP, with Harry Holland at Petone. Holland, as leader of the Parliamentary Labour Party, laid the foundation stone for the new Petone Labour Hall in December 1927, C-277991-1/2, WTU.

Semple also made a significant contribution at a local Party level in Wellington. For example, in December 1920 the Wellington LRC inaugurated a series of Sunday night lectures and concerts in the Empress theatre and Semple spoke at the first meeting.¹⁰⁴ He spoke in aid of the Russian Famine Relief Fund in March 1922¹⁰⁵ and made financial contributions to the Fund along with other members of the Orongorongo tunnel party.¹⁰⁶ Throughout 1922 and 1923 he spoke at numerous Labour Party

¹⁰⁴ *Maoriland Worker*, 1 December 1920.

¹⁰⁵ *Maoriland Worker*, 12 April 1922.

¹⁰⁶ *Maoriland Worker*, 19 April 1922.

meetings in Wellington and surrounding districts.¹⁰⁷ In addition, in 1925 the Wellington LRC decided to hold a Labour Carnival “with the object of raising money for the LP’s £25,000 election fund”. Semple was part of a three-person executive elected to consider proposals and attend to details.¹⁰⁸

While there is strong evidence to dispute claims Semple was not influential in Party policy, just as important and of immense value to the Party was his contribution as a publicist and propagandist. By 1922 Semple was again touring nationwide organising on behalf of the National Office prior to the general election. The *Maoriland Worker* spoke glowingly of Semple’s meetings at Levin and Taumarunui. It claimed his Auckland meeting in the Strand theatre was a huge success, saying the building was packed and the enthusiasm was an inspiration. The report said that after leaving Auckland Semple would speak at Ohakune, Raetihi, Taihape and then on to Christchurch. He was also part of Labour’s Wellington campaign, taking part at an election eve Labour party rally at the town hall. Semple said, “Masseyism was dying, and Mr Massey was about to have sentence of political death pronounced upon him”.¹⁰⁹ Remarking on Semple’s national tour, and as evidence of his value to the Party, the *Maoriland Worker* remarked, “the movement could do with more Semples”.¹¹⁰

In the 1931 election Semple cemented his popularity in Wellington East, winning by a clear majority of 688 votes. He did increase his percentage of the total vote from 43.3% in 1928 to 52.1% in 1931. This time his only opponent was T. Forsyth from whom Semple had won the seat in 1928. An *Evening Post* editorial said Semple had strengthened his position, with the Labour gain in votes partly explained by discontent with the economic plight of many.¹¹¹ The *New Zealand Worker* headlined the victory, “Semple’s Great Achievement – Puts Wellington East out of Doubt”. The paper indicated that Wellington East had not been a safe seat for Labour as several areas in

¹⁰⁷ *Evening Post*, 21 September 1922, 20 October 1922, *Maoriland Worker*, 15 November 1922. *Maoriland Worker*, 28 November 1923, *Maoriland Worker*, 5 December 1923.

¹⁰⁸ *New Zealand Worker*. 3 June 1925. The executive was Peter Fraser chairman, James Thorn secretary, and Robert Semple organiser.

¹⁰⁹ *Evening Post*, 7 December 1922. The other speakers included Fraser, Thorn, O’Regan and A.W. Croskery.

¹¹⁰ *Maoriland Worker*, 6 December 1922.

¹¹¹ *Evening Post*, 3 December 1931.

the constituency were supporters of the government. But Semple had worked hard in the area and, as a result, the seat was possessed “for keeps” by him, “Bob’s excellent constituency work however, stood him in good stead and his reasoned speeches won him general approbation...No man better deserved it”.¹¹²

The practical aspect of Semple’s political image was an ongoing feature during the Opposition years. During the depression he consistently protested against the type of work carried out by the unemployed,

We should use the men and the money on work that will benefit the nation, and not continue wasting money on futile work such as rooting up tree-stumps, and tinkering work in the citys, such as throwing sand about at Lyall Bay or digging holes and filling them up again.¹¹³

During a debate in Parliament in 1931 he criticised public works saying public money continued to be spent on work from which the State would get no return, “I want to see the workers of New Zealand employed upon profitable work for which the nation will some day receive a return for the money expended, and in the process of the work that these men are doing they will create something in the way of permanent employment”.¹¹⁴ Semple also emphasised the Labour Party’s own practicality when he campaigned in the general elections. During the 1931 campaign he said,

Friends and foes of the Labour Party generally admit that it contains more practical men than all the other parties in the house put together. The men in the party have worked their way up by industry. They have climbed the ladder of life by merit.¹¹⁵

Speaking at an election meeting for Semple in Wellington in 1935 Michael Joseph Savage said, “We are ordinary men and women claiming to understand the foundation of the economic life of the country. We don’t have to employ any ‘Brains Trust’ to tell us what is wrong; we think we know now”.¹¹⁶ And following the 1935 victory

¹¹² *New Zealand Worker*, 9 December 1931.

¹¹³ *NZPD*, 240 (1934), p. 594.

¹¹⁴ *NZPD*, 227 (1931) p. 92.

¹¹⁵ *Evening Post*, 24 November 1931.

¹¹⁶ *Evening Post*, 27 August 1935.

Semple said, “We will not appoint boards and commissions – we will do the job ourselves”.¹¹⁷

During the 1920s and 1930s Semple’s political identity had become so entrenched, even in the context of family tragedy it could not be separated from his private life. In 1930 Semple’s eldest son, Robert junior, was killed in a car accident. He had been driving a sports car up the Ngahauranga Gorge road towards Porirua late on the evening of 6 October. It was the evidence of witnesses at the Coroner’s inquest that the car was being driven too fast, the driver applied the brakes to round a bend but the car skidded on gravel, overturned and crashed into a fence. Robert junior was admitted to hospital with a fractured skull but died shortly after admission. Semple identified the body of his son at the hospital morgue.¹¹⁸ The *Evening Post* reported the funeral was attended by numerous members of Parliament including the Speaker, the Mayor and city councillors and officers of the Corporation, representatives of labour organisations including the AOL and various trade unions. The pallbearers were not members of the family or friends of Robert juniors but Labour MPs, Robert McKeen, Bill Parry, Walter Nash, Jim O’Brien, Tim Armstrong and Jim Thorn, President of the Labour Party.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ *Evening Post*, 28 November 1935.

¹¹⁸ Coroner’s Inquest Report for Robert Francis Semple, 4 November 1930, No 1339, Micro U 5388-5592, NA.

¹¹⁹ *Evening Post*, 9 October 1930.



Figure 22: Robert junior left behind a widow and three small daughters. From left to right: Erin Francis Semple, Lois Gay Patricia Semple, Eileen Semple, Margaret Jacqueline Semple. The photograph was taken in the mid 1930s. Following the tragedy Eileen Semple resided with her in-laws and eventually remarried in the 1940s. Pat Dickinson collection.

In a reoccurring pattern Semple often polarised people’s opinions - this was both in policy and with his picturesque language. In July 1931 the government introduced a flat rate and wage tax. The Labour Party were highly critical in Parliament, Semple saying, “The Ministry had lost its manhood...in all the history of New Zealand we have never had a harder or crueller gang than the present occupants of the Treasury benches”. An *Evening Post* editorial said Labour should be “more moderate and reasoned in its condemnation”. It suggested the government was making a determined effort to meet the unemployment crisis and Labour was entitled to its opinions but condemned Semple specifically, “Such denunciation of men who are trying, in an unprecedented crisis to alleviate distress, condemns the speaker as himself almost unjust”.¹²⁰

Opinion on Semple’s language was frequently the result of political perspectives – Labour supporters warmed to his speeches, memorable for their energy and humour, and their condemnation of government policy. In 1933 at a Labour Party meeting held

¹²⁰ *Evening Post*, 10 July 1931.

in the Town Hall Semple delivered, “a characteristically vigorous speech, coloured by bright flashes of humour which provoked gusts of laughter”.¹²¹ His speeches were punctuated with memorable phrases. When referring to Opposition attempts to ridicule the Labour Party in 1932 Semple quipped, “When he attempts to wound the Labour Party he put me in mind of a fly attempting to tickle an elephant to death”.¹²² When the NZLP met to protest against the policy of the Coalition government Semple said to the audience, “It’s a pity you people couldn’t come to Parliament and see the people who were given a blank cheque. It is the greatest morgue you could ever imagine...I have never met a more dull, unintelligent gang of political bone-heads in my life”.¹²³

Semple was generally unrepentant about his language. Speaking during the 1935 general election campaign he said, “I am told that I am a little bit vindictive and a bit sarcastic. Mr Forbes said the member for Wellington East had the most vitriolic tongue in the house”. Semple said he had always made it a practice to tell opponents what he was thinking in his own way, “in my own unvarnished language”. He said he had given the Speaker some trouble in Parliament, and tried to penetrate the conscience of the man in charge of the country. He was not contrite, “If you want someone who will flatter them or apologise then don’t vote for me on November 27 because I won’t do that for anybody”.¹²⁴

When Semple stood as Labour’s mayoral candidate in the 1935 municipal elections, he constructed the Labour Party he represented as the ‘progressive’ party,

the difference between the Party I represent and the Citizens party is that we belong to a new school of thought, inspired with vision and hope. We are fighting for a new age, when the fruits of the earth and all man’s wonderful achievements in the world of invention and science shall be the common heritage of every man, woman, and child. Our opponents represent the old orthodox school of thought that has long since outlived its usefulness.¹²⁵

¹²¹ *Evening Post*, 22 February 1933.

¹²² *NZPD*, 232 (1932), p. 42.

¹²³ *Evening Post*, 31 March 1932.

¹²⁴ *Evening Post*, 12 November 1935.

¹²⁵ *Evening Post*, 7 May 1935.

Semple was reasonably consistent in this message, campaigning in Auckland in the run-up to the 1949 election he said, “Our greatest project in the next three years is the drive for more production, with everyone giving of his best, the most modern methods, the best machinery and the most scientific methods we can get”.¹²⁶ Semple lost the mayoral election by 2334 votes polling 19,249 against Hislop’s 21,583 but the *Post* said the votes polled for Semple were easily a record for a Labour candidate for the Wellington Mayoralty. Although not successful in the municipal elections the Wellington public did accept his political candidacy later in 1935.

Semple the Cabinet Minister

1935 was watershed year for Semple. In the general election he won Wellington East by convincing margin of 3182 votes over his nearest rival, the National candidate, Wellington barrister, O. Mazengarb.¹²⁷ Four candidates stood against Semple in Wellington East: O. Mazengarb, W. Gaudin (who was a city councillor), W. Duncan (also a councillor and Democrat candidate) and Miss C.A. Rawcliff of the CPNZ. He increased his percentage of the total vote to 53.1%. Peter Fraser won 69% of the total votes in Wellington Central and in Wellington North C.H. Chapman won the seat with 43.62% in a three-way contest so Semple was near the average for percentages of votes given to Labour in the Wellington seats. Labour won the general election, sweeping all before it on a national level, and several days later Semple was appointed Minister of Public Works and Transport in the first Labour government.¹²⁸

Semple’s practical experience, which had been previously highlighted and used to build his political identity, now appeared sufficient qualification for a Ministerial appointment.¹²⁹ Speculating on the makeup of the Labour Cabinet the *Evening Post* said Public Works would be an important portfolio under the Labour government as the Party had already indicated that it would initiate many works of importance.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ *New Zealand Herald*, 26 October 1949.

¹²⁷ *Evening Post*, 28 November 1935.

¹²⁸ Paul, p. 175 Appendix D Labour Cabinet Ministers.

¹²⁹ When Semple criticised the Northland Tunnel while on the WCC and the Arapuni hydro-electric scheme while in Opposition some opponents said he was not qualified to give an expert opinion.

¹³⁰ Labour gave initial prominence to public works – the Party believed that public works could be a key factor in the restoration of economic stability by providing thousands with jobs and decent rates of pay to swell the spending power of the nation.

The newspaper said Semple and William Parry must be considered, as both were men of practical experience.¹³¹ At a reception given to Semple in January 1936 by his Wellington East constituents, the chairman Mr J. Hutcheson said, “no man was more qualified for the portfolio of Public Works, for no one knew better both the geology and geography of New Zealand”. Paddy Webb, also at the function, said Semple would be a great success in his new role as he was “a practical man whose soul was in his job”.¹³²

Practicality continued as an ongoing theme in many of Semple’s political statements. Speaking at Cessnock in Australia in 1937 he said

My government is not a government of supermen, they are just ordinary men. But we have all had some experience of the world. The battlefield of industry has been our school, the world our university and the hard knocks we have received as we have been tossed about willy nilly on the oceans of life have been our schoolmasters. We feel that, as a result of these experiences, we have learned something which will enable us to give service of a lasting nature to the people whom we serve. We believe that every problem we have to face in this world is of a practical kind and we have the knowledge to meet it.¹³³

Being a Minister did not preclude Semple’s empathy with manual workers and he occasionally chastised other sectors of society who did not earn their living that way. In 1937, addressing public works employees at Cromwell, Semple made some uncomplimentary remarks about bankers,

The man who wears the dungarees is a damned sight more useful to the nation than the banker who sits at his desk and plays pitch and toss with the welfare of society...I would sooner have one navy than ten bankers...if I had my way I would put the dungarees on the banker and give him a spell at that kind of work for a while.¹³⁴

Mr V. Edwards, President of the New Zealand bank officers’ guild protested to Semple against his intemperate references to bankers.¹³⁵ Semple replied he had been quoted out of context, suggesting he had not attacked bankers and their staff but the

¹³¹ *Evening Post*, 3 December 1935.

¹³² *Evening Post*, 30 January 1936.

¹³³ *Maitland Daily Mercury*, 7 August 1937.

¹³⁴ *New Zealand Herald*, 25 February 1937.

¹³⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, 2 March 1937.

group of individuals who manipulate the credit and currency of countries to the advantage of themselves and the disadvantage of the great mass of people.

Not for the first time in his life Semple, as Minister of Public Works in 1940, gave a practical demonstration to prove a point. He had received written complaints of unsatisfactory work by men working on a relief scheme at the Burwood Golf Course. Making an unannounced visit Semple changed into a khaki shirt, flannel trousers and old shoes and used a wheelbarrow and shovel to shift a given quantity of light soil reported to have taken two men a full day to handle. Semple shifted the soil in exactly ten minutes. He said, “I never ask another man to do a job for me if it is sticky and I cannot do it myself”. Semple closed the job down on the spot. A *Herald* editorial said, “By direct and practical methods that are characteristic, Mr Semple satisfied himself that men employed on the Burwood golf course were not giving the country a ‘fair spin’. Everyone else will agree with his verdict and endorse the action he took”.¹³⁶ Semple’s actions were in line with his hard work ethic incorporated into the public works policy, “Efficiency is going to be our slogan and when we provide conditions that will make for that efficiency we will expect it and demand it. There will be no sleeping on the job. Hard work hurts no man if he is compensated for it. I know what a man can do, and I will not ask him to do the impossible. But I will stand no funny business”.¹³⁷ Minhinnick portrayed the incident in the cartoon below.

¹³⁶ *New Zealand Herald*, 20 March 1940.

¹³⁷ *Evening Post*, 6 January 1936. Semple’s actions at Burwood were initiated by allegations that the men had been abusing the system and there was some Communist agitation. When he discharged the men Semple condemned the circulation of Communist literature on relief jobs. James Ramsay who was employed as overseer/timekeeper had written to Semple about conditions on the Burwood job. Ramsay said some men were abusing the method of timekeeping – one man was getting others to clock him on and off the job but was driving a taxi in town, “this way he had been paid on this job as well as taxi fares in town”. He also named several Communists on the job and said, “the foreman and I agree that if those men were dismissed on the job, we would get better results”. James Ramsay to R. Semple 12 March 1940, RHSC.

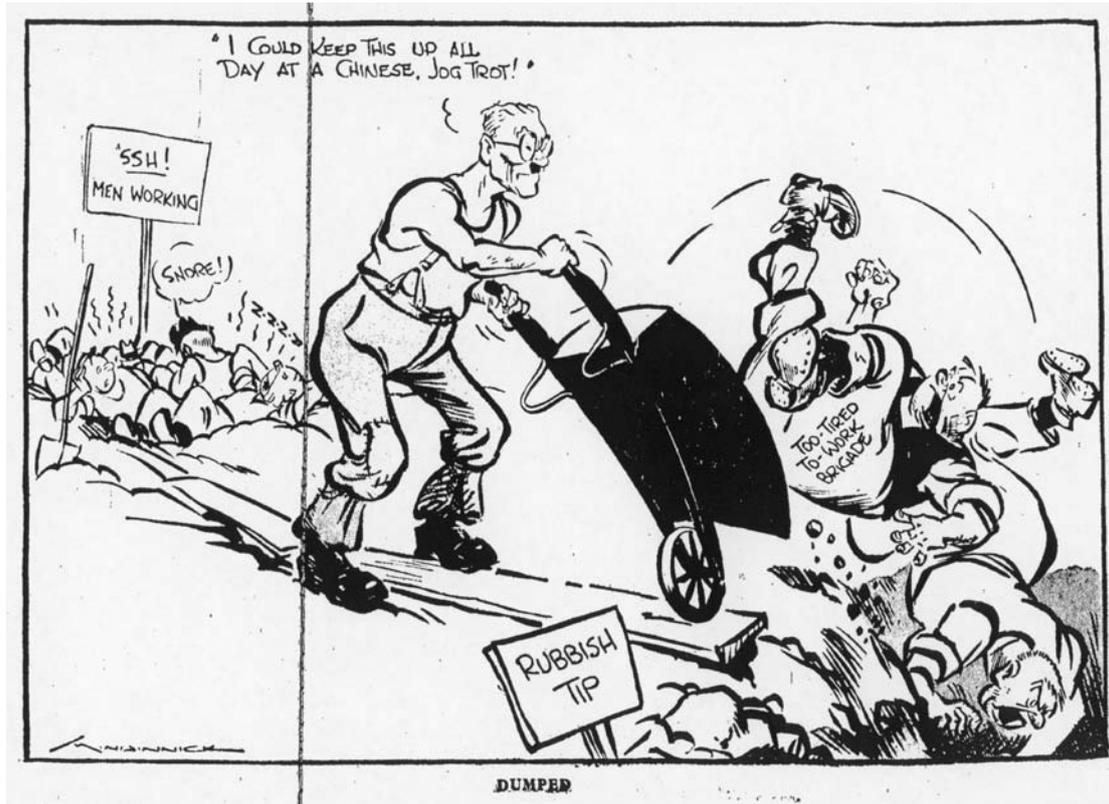


Figure 23: *New Zealand Herald*, 20 March 1940.

Later in his public career Semple's image as a practical man came under scrutiny. Demand for power in New Zealand in the 1940s continued to exceed supply, and following unprecedented power cuts in 1947 Semple was attacked by the mainstream press in Auckland, where the cuts hit hard. The *Herald* was scathing in its criticism, "Ministerial incompetence has suddenly confronted the long-suffering public with another power shortage, probably the worst the north island has known...Such treatment is deplorable".¹³⁸ At the time Semple was in Greymouth delivering his 10-year plan for the West Coast. The *Herald* said Semple should be in Wellington offering some solutions, "The whole North Island could wish he would stop fiddling with the future and cope with the present emergency...Even now he has nothing positive to offer, nothing that is practical, nothing that will avert continuing shortage".¹³⁹ In reply Semple said there was nothing they could do but wait for rain, he could do no good sitting in Wellington and he had other jobs to do.¹⁴⁰ A letter to the editor said, "I seem to remember a meeting in the town hall to discuss the shortage of water.

¹³⁸ *New Zealand Herald*, 15 March 1947

¹³⁹ *New Zealand Herald*, 18 March 1947

¹⁴⁰ *New Zealand Herald*, 19 March 1947

On that occasion Mr Semple vehemently rebuked the City Fathers by stating, “Wise men make provision for the weather”.¹⁴¹ But there was some support. In a letter to the editor ‘Labourite’ said, “It is distressing to read all the moaning and groaning about such petty matters as the power and gas shortages”.¹⁴²

During the 1920s and 1930s Semple argued that practicality and life experience were qualifications for political office. However, during the 1951 election campaign, at a meeting at Palmerston North Semple said, “Parliament should be a collection of intellectual men who know their job. We do not want individuals who open their mouths and let the wind blow their tongues around”.¹⁴³ Semple was no doubt referring to himself and some of his Labour colleagues who had had previous experience prior to the Labour government being defeated in 1949. Practicality was replaced by experience at this time as a political qualification for Semple – this was not surprising in light of Semple’s age – he was seventy-eight years old in 1951.

The pattern of extensive travel and very hard work continued to have an affect on Semple’s health. Within a year of attaining office he began to experience ill health. In November 1936 he set off on a nationwide tour to first visit all the major public works in hand, and then to tour various counties investigating roading needs. The *Herald* remarked, “Mr Semple who is beginning to show signs of fatigue, will take a holiday by the sea at Christmas”.¹⁴⁴ In March 1937 Semple spoke of the strain of his New Zealand tour which had now lasted 10 weeks. But, he said, “I would sooner wear out than rust out”. Travelling night and day, he said he had not worked a 40hr week but from 16-18 hours a day.¹⁴⁵

However, many other Labour men toured extensively and Semple was not unique in being absent from home for long periods of time. Bassett and King suggested Fraser also travelled extensively stepping up his out-of-town activities visiting hospitals as part of his health portfolio.¹⁴⁶ When reflecting on Semple’s relationship with his children, Nancy Semple said that the children were “mentally clever but didn’t see

¹⁴¹ *New Zealand Herald*, 20 March 1947

¹⁴² *New Zealand Herald*, 10 April 1947

¹⁴³ *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 21 August 1951.

¹⁴⁴ *New Zealand Herald*, 19 November 1936.

¹⁴⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, 19 March 1937.

¹⁴⁶ Bassett & King, p. 142.

enough of their parents...they were always holding or going to meetings".¹⁴⁷ Sinclair said Semple's Labour colleague Walter Nash, when describing his home life, remarked, "Rarely at home except to sleep". Consequently, Nash's wife brought up the children.¹⁴⁸ Margaret Semple and Lotty Nash were in some respects, Labour widows.

In June 1937 Semple's health broke down more seriously. In a personal letter to Peter Fraser he described his condition, "I lost all control of myself and my mind was anything but what it should have been".¹⁴⁹ He entered a private hospital in Wellington for a week of rest and recuperation. The *Evening Post* said although Semple's state of health did not give cause for alarm, his doctors had advised him a period of absolute rest was essential.¹⁵⁰ On leaving hospital Semple said his illness had been due to strain and over-work. Seemingly reinvigorated he said, "I am now again fit for the battlefield".¹⁵¹ However, only a few days later Peter Fraser announced it had been decided in cabinet that arrangements were to be made for Semple to visit Australia for a few weeks to aid his recovery. In May, when discussing irrigation in Marlborough, Semple said he hoped to investigate irrigation in Australia so an overseas visit had been previously contemplated and was now incorporated into a rejuvenation trip for him.¹⁵²

Semple's Australian trip was largely due to his health breaking down but some historians have suggested other reasons. Bassett and King said Fraser had reprimanded Semple over alleged financial indiscretions that involved Semple receiving commissions for the supply of some public works machinery.¹⁵³ The historians argued, "Some of the commission was believed to have found its way into Semple's Australian bank account" and pleading overwork Semple then took a holiday in Australia. They also suggested this incident soured the relationship between the two men. But in a private letter to Fraser written from Australia Semple said, "I am very grateful to you and the rest of my colleagues for your consideration

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Nancy Semple, daughter-in-law of Robert Semple, 22 May 2006.

¹⁴⁸ Sinclair, *Walter Nash*, p. 85.

¹⁴⁹ R. Semple to P. Fraser 26 July 1937, 2318 Nash Papers, NA.

¹⁵⁰ *Evening Post*, 15 June 1937

¹⁵¹ *New Zealand Herald*, 22 June 1937.

¹⁵² *New Zealand Herald*, 13 May 1937.

¹⁵³ Bassett & King, p. 165.

and great generosity in giving me leave at a busy time to enable me to restore my health”.¹⁵⁴ The tone of the letter does not suggest any argument or acrimony with Fraser. Alternatively Gustafson claimed it was on Savage’s initiative that Semple went to Australia even though Savage was in England at the time.¹⁵⁵ In his letter to Fraser Semple does not mention Savage.

Semple’s health problems were linked to his tremendous energy and drive, as he often pushed himself to the limit of physical and mental endurance. Charles Turner, after serving in WWII, returned to New Zealand and was an engineer in the Ministry of Works. Turner described Semple, as Minister, as sometimes hard to satisfy, “but his main characteristic was his drive which we all enjoyed”.¹⁵⁶ Remarking on Semple as a Minister John A. Lee said, “He moved over the country like a cyclone”.¹⁵⁷ In July 1936 on a trip north to inspect the uncompleted Dargaville railway line Semple said, “I am an irritable, restless sort of creature. I do not want to rust out, but to wear out, and in doing that I want to be able to do something for the country”.¹⁵⁸ The mainstream press also noted Semple’s energy and drive. In January 1941 following a Cabinet reshuffle, Semple relinquished the Public Works portfolio to Tim Armstrong and took over Railways. The *Herald* said, “The replacement of Mr Semple by Mr Armstrong suggests that the future administration of this department will be less dynamic”.¹⁵⁹ There was no denying Semple’s vast energy which he wholeheartedly applied to any task he undertook.

An ongoing feature of political life was the promotion of Labour’s image, Semple often accomplished this with a deft ability to capture headlines. As Hobbs remarked, “He was worth his weight in gold as a publicity machine for the Labour Party”.¹⁶⁰ The government’s housing programme, which included building state houses for rent and making state loans available for those who wished to build a home of their own, gave Semple opportunities to promote both himself and the Party. During the first half of 1936 land was purchased at Orakei, Roskill, Miramar, Lower Hutt, Christchurch and

¹⁵⁴ R. Semple to P. Fraser 26 July 1937, 2318 Nash Papers, NA.

¹⁵⁵ Gustafson, *From the Cradle to the Grave*, p. 183.

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Charles William Oakley Turner, OHInt-0003/05, Oral History Centre, WTU.

¹⁵⁷ Lee, *Simple on a SoapBox*, p. 57

¹⁵⁸ *New Zealand Herald*, 7 July 1936.

¹⁵⁹ *New Zealand Herald*, 22 January 1941

¹⁶⁰ Hobbs, p. 76.

Dunedin and in December 1936 the first 375 housing contracts were advertised.¹⁶¹ The first of Labour's new houses, in Miramar, (part of Semple's electorate) was handed over to its tenants on 18 September 1937. This is an often-reproduced photo of Savage, Semple and Lee carrying furniture into the new house. It is a great publicity shot, identifying Savage and Semple, who are carrying a dining table as servants of the people, not above manual labour. Semple would go on to open the government's 20,000th state house and the government's 30,000th state house in 1949.



Figure 24: In the photograph is Savage, Semple in the foreground and also John A. Lee, photograph courtesy of the *Dominion Post*.

Semple was also a great publicist for his Public Works department. He organised demonstrations of the new machinery in the department specifically for publicity purposes. There was a range of tractors, bulldozers and trench-digging machines on show at a public demonstration when the Whenuapia aerodrome was being built. The machines demonstrated how quickly hilly land could be transformed into the flat areas essential for the operation of aircraft. The *Herald* reported, "A diversion was caused when Mr Semple, brandishing his walking stick, stopped one of the drivers, and then climbed up beside him to make a bumpy round of the field".¹⁶² Another

¹⁶¹ Gustafson, *From the Cradle to the Grave*, p. 198.

¹⁶² *New Zealand Herald*, 25 March 1939

demonstration of the modern machinery was at the emergency landing ground at Paraparaumu. Semple indicated that while all kinds of things were said about him when he introduced these machines, “The thing that matters most to me, irrespective of what they say, is to see things accomplished in my time”. Semple was not alone in this publicity occasion as several members of Parliament and a large number of the general public rode on the machines while they worked.¹⁶³ Hobbs suggested that many Labour men had long memories of the treatment of Labour by uncompromisingly hostile mainstream newspapers during the Opposition years. They believed that their achievements would never be given adequate publicity therefore they had learned to promote themselves.¹⁶⁴

Semple was certainly sensitive when his political achievements appeared underrated in the mainstream press. Reporting on the Labour Party in May 1943 the *Herald* said Semple had been voted off the five-member committee of the National Executive of the NZLP, finishing sixth.¹⁶⁵ However, Semple corrected the statement several days later saying it was his wife who had been replaced: “I have never been defeated in a selection ballot in the industrial and political movement for the last 40 years. I was not a candidate for the executive position in the Labour Party. I have not been for years, and do not intend to be any more”.¹⁶⁶ Speaking in Auckland in 1948 he said, “I have been in Parliament for 20 years and I have gone back each time with an increased majority...I will stay there until I choose to get out”.¹⁶⁷ But in a letter to the editor Arthur O’Halloran said Semple’s statement that the electors had returned him to Parliament with an ever-increasing majority was incorrect, “At the 1943 election his majority was 2,588. At the 1946 election it was 2,482. In 1943 he received 8369 votes and in 1946 he polled 8064 votes. The clear fact emerges that Mr Semple was definitely losing, not gaining votes at the last election”.¹⁶⁸ In the latter stages of his career Semple appeared to have a heightened sense of self-importance – perhaps blinding him to some of the precise facts. As granddaughters Margaret Lange and Kay Jones remarked, “We knew he was important, and so did he”.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶³ *New Zealand Herald*, 17 July 1939.

¹⁶⁴ Hobbs, p. 142.

¹⁶⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, 4 May 1943

¹⁶⁶ *New Zealand Herald*, 6 May 1943

¹⁶⁷ *New Zealand Herald*, 19 July 1948

¹⁶⁸ *New Zealand Herald*, 21 July 1948

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Margaret Lange and Kay Jones, 30 March 2005.

Semple's colourful way with language did not alter when he became a Minister; he still invented his own words and phrases. Bernard Mair who was a reporter for the *Christchurch Star* said he travelled all over the South Island with Semple in his Ministerial car. He enjoyed being with Semple as he was a character, although "Occasionally when he dreamed up a new phrase he would try it out on me while we were travelling in his car. Then he would bash me in the side with his elbow and ask if I thought it was good. I had many bruises from this".¹⁷⁰ Semple had his own language for people who did not work hard. Speaking to Gisborne railway workers in 1936 Semple said he had two aversions "one is the 'stock exchange gambler' who speculates in the necessities of life, and the other is the 'street-corner spittoon philosopher' who always criticises but never does anything constructive himself."¹⁷¹ Another notable phrase used for people who were going to be dismissed was that they were going to get their "running shoes". When criticised in the mainstream press for his language early in 1936 he replied defiantly, "I want no lessons from anyone about what I shall say...I am going to tell the country my message in my own language and no one is going to pick my words for me. Although I am a Minister of the Crown, I am still the same Bob Semple".¹⁷² Running shoes became synonymous with Semple and for years he appeared in Minhinnick's cartoons wearing running shoes.

There were certainly occasions when Semple's language and indiscrete remarks caused his colleagues concern. In 1919 Semple's remark that he was happy to be called a Bolshevik brought down a hail of criticism on himself and the Labour Party and as we have seen, supplied ongoing ammunition for his detractors. As a member of the Labour government he made several statements that had to be retracted by the Prime Minister. In an address to railway construction workers in 1938 Semple said the menace of war and the necessity of New Zealand providing for its own defence could not be ignored when "Mad dogs like Hitler and Mussolini were running loose". The German Consul-General wrote to Prime Minister Savage protesting at Semple referring to the German Chancellor as a mad dog. Savage apologised saying Semple intimated his own personal regret. The Consul of Italy also verbally protested and

¹⁷⁰ Interview with Bernard Alexander Mair, OHIInt-0135/11, Oral History Centre, WTU.

¹⁷¹ *New Zealand Herald*, 24 November 1936.

¹⁷² *Evening Post*, 10 January 1936.

Savage similarly replied.¹⁷³ Although many New Zealanders probably thought Semple's language was entirely appropriate, it was deemed politically and diplomatically indiscrete by the government.

In Labour's experience nearly all the proprietors and editors of New Zealand's daily newspapers were anti-Labour.¹⁷⁴ This created the desire to develop radio broadcasting as an essential direct link between the politicians and the people. Savage and his colleagues recognised the new medium as a powerful weapon of publicity. Regarding the radio system Gustafson said Savage was longing for the time New Zealand would be able to reach people overseas with its message of world peace through a short-wave broadcasting service.¹⁷⁵ The cartoon below depicted Semple broadcasting to the world, but with the 'Rest of the World' appearing bemused and John citizen embarrassed by his language.

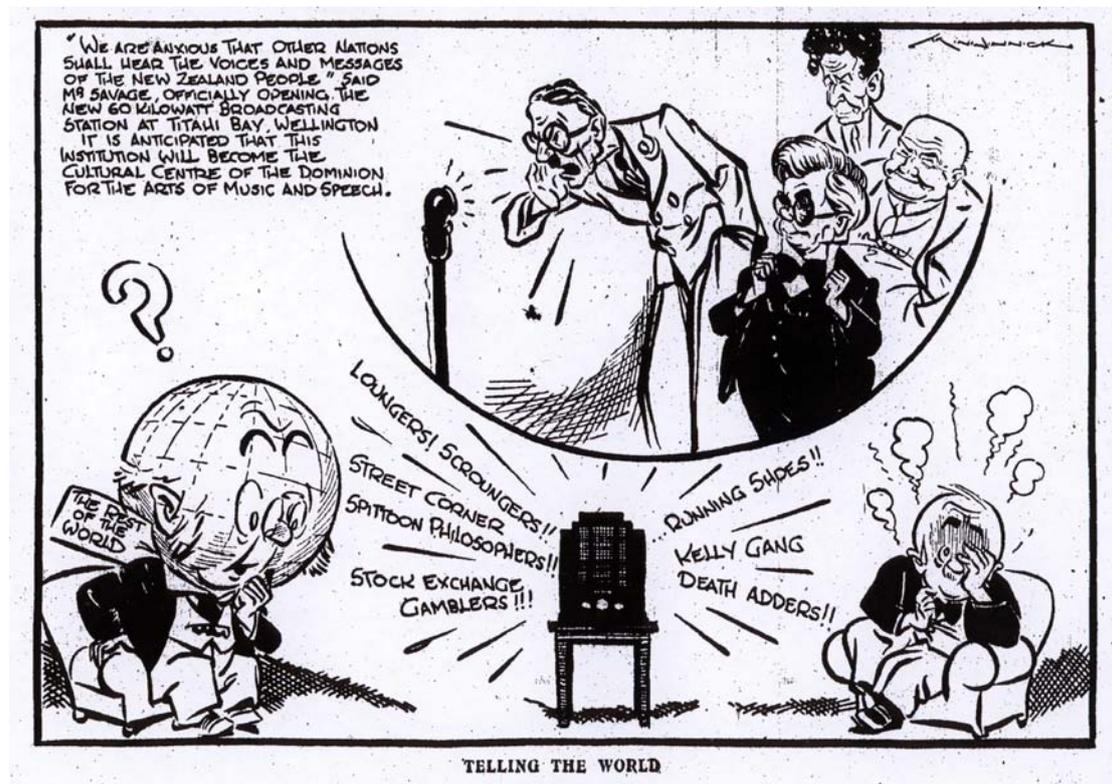


Figure 25: *New Zealand Herald*, 27 January 1937.

Semple continued to make the odd diplomatic gaffe. In 1946 he attacked American President Truman. Speaking on the danger of lifting price controls (which were in

¹⁷³ *New Zealand Herald*, 11 November 1938.

¹⁷⁴ Gustafson, *From the Cradle to the Grave*, p. 169-170.

¹⁷⁵ Gustafson, *From the Cradle to the Grave*, p. 194-195.

place in New Zealand) he said Truman was the “tool of the money gangsters of the United States...and he had taken price control off butter, which was now 6s a pound in America”. But he quickly retracted his statements and said without full information on the subject he had mistakenly assumed that Mr Truman was responsible for or had at least condoned this lifting of control. He said,

I find on going into the matter that Mr Truman was not opposed to price control and...he had desired an extension of the control...I pay full tribute to Mr Truman for his stand and for the great efforts he made in promoting the adoption of a measure of price control which gives grounds for hope that the economic balance and recovery of the world can... be sustained and advanced.

He apologised for anything he said which reflected on Truman in any way. The Opposition raised the question of Semple’s comments in Parliament and asked if Fraser condoned the statement. Fraser said the statement had been based on an erroneous impression and Semple had apologised. He said, “We have nothing but the greatest respect for President Truman and his great country”.¹⁷⁶

Although a Minister with a high public profile and a senior member of Cabinet, Semple was never a serious contender for any leadership role of Caucus. Why was this? It may have been Semple’s language - the impetuous nature of his speech, the cutting phraseology which could be complimentary but also derogatory, and the straightforward manner in which it was delivered that inhibited any leadership contention. Semple was rarely hesitant to express his opinions and sometimes they were given without enough thought. Due to his impulsive manner he could not be relied upon to restrain himself or be discrete when needed, especially at an international level. This may well have been the perception of his colleagues. And it was demonstrated by his remarks on Hitler in 1938 and American President Truman in the 1940s. Semple was an uneducated man, had a language to match and spoke his mind and even though it was these very factors that contributed to his popularity and rise in the Labour movement, they may also have been influential in keeping him aside from any major leadership role.

¹⁷⁶ *New Zealand Herald*, 6 August 1946.

As a Minister Semple did not alter his language but he did seek to alter what he represented in the public eye, as retaining political power became his primary objective. By 1938 Semple had moved a long way from his early radical FOL image and his 1919 acceptance of the Bolshevik term. At this time he projected an image of security in the general election campaign, his slogan was “Vote Semple, Vote Security”. In an election pamphlet he said, “All that I am able to do I will do in the best interests of the Dominion...Do not forget that a vote for me is also a vote for the policy and achievements of the Labour government – Progress, prosperity and social security”.¹⁷⁷ This image was successful as Semple increased his majority over his only opponent, the National candidate W. Barker with a majority of 4448 votes.¹⁷⁸ Security was an ongoing byword in Labour’s election campaigns – in 1951 in a newspaper advertisement for the Labour’s Wellington candidates, including Semple, a sub-headline said “RESTORE...Security, Freedom and Progress”.¹⁷⁹

Semple continued to consciously frame his image as a Labour politician. The photograph below was taken by renowned photographer, Spencer Digby, who also took the well-known picture of Michael Joseph Savage.

¹⁷⁷ ‘A Message To The Electors of Wellington East’.

¹⁷⁸ *New Zealand Herald*, 17 October 1938.

¹⁷⁹ *Evening Post*, 24 August 1951.



Figure 26: Semple in 1943, B. 060737, Spencer Digby Collection, Te Papa.

In a similar vein to Savage, the picture portrays a kindly, eminently respectable and caring politician looking to provide security and dignity to New Zealanders.

The Labour government itself was generally cautious regarding radical change. Bassett suggested although the government wrought huge changes in New Zealand's social structure, for the most part "the Labour government experimented with planning capitalism rather than building socialism".¹⁸⁰ Labour was certainly cautious regarding monetary reform. Gustafson said Michael Joseph Savage criticised those who believed that currency reform was in itself "the short cut to the millennium",

¹⁸⁰ Bassett, *The State In New Zealand 1840-1984*, p. 179.

ignoring the “thousand and one things involved” in creating and distributing wealth.¹⁸¹

Similarly Semple, the one-time radical and critic of the capitalist system, was now cautious in his support of monetary reform. Speaking at the opening of the Strongman Mine Semple said, “Whispering was going on now within the Labour movement that the government was not going fast enough and should do this and that, while a lot of other people were telling the world that its legislation was bringing ruin to the country and disgrace to the British empire”. He said the Labour government had taken steps for monetary reform which had never been taken since the days of the ancient Greeks. He claimed the Greeks had State control of currency for 500 years and no country since had obtained control over currency and credit to reflect the wealth of the people however, this caused the hostility of the money oligarchy of the world,

We are fighting not only the reactionary forces but the boneheads in the Labour movement and the tremendous powers overseas...If those individuals who indulge in cowardly and superficial criticism could only sit like Cabinet grappling with the difficulties, almost insurmountable, in fighting the whole monetary system of the world, they would crawl away and hang their heads in shame.¹⁸²

Remarks such as these led historians to represent Semple as more conservative in his later political career as Gustafson has concluded, “Radical in the early part of his career he became increasingly conservative in later years”.¹⁸³ Discussing Labour’s guaranteed prices for farmers Sinclair said, “...the financially more orthodox, like Semple or Fraser...”.¹⁸⁴ There were some parliamentary labour members such as Lee, Langstone, Mason and others who were convinced that drastic monetary reform was necessary when Labour became the government.¹⁸⁵ They wanted the wholesale socialisation of credit. However as Brown suggested, “The Minister of Finance, and the Prime Minister and the senior leadership of the Party who supported him were reluctant to take such a step”.¹⁸⁶ Not that they (including Semple) were opposed to it on principle but the government was determined to carry out essential reforms first

¹⁸¹ Gustafson, *From the Cradle to the Grave*, p. 244.

¹⁸² *New Zealand Herald*, 3 November 1939.

¹⁸³ Gustafson, *Labour’s Path to Political Independence*, p. 167.

¹⁸⁴ Sinclair, *Walter Nash*, p. 114.

¹⁸⁵ Lee and his colleagues wanted the socialisation of the issue of money – the removal or certainly the limitation, of the powers of the privately owned trading banks to issue credit.

¹⁸⁶ Brown, *The Rise of Labour*, p. 193.

and did not wish to alarm the financial and business community unnecessarily. Semple's comments above can be seen in that regard and could be generalised as conservative by some credit reformers in the labour movement.

Semple consistently advocated sweat and toil to achieve wealth rather than radical monetary reform. This was another long-term theme in his political statements and was in line with Labour's belief in the work ethic. At the 1936 Labour Party annual conference Nash said, "Work must be the title to wealth".¹⁸⁷ In June 1945 Semple stressed New Zealand's only real wealth was created from the country's resources by the hard work of its people. He continually warned of scroungers and malingerers who, he said, were taking advantage of the war conditions and needed to be weeded out. He reiterated that everyone must work together and no one should expect to take from the pool of the nation's wealth more than he puts into it.¹⁸⁸ A *Herald* editorial agreed with Semple saying the only real source of wealth was hard work, "A counter is needed to those of his party and political faith who proclaim that the secret of prosperity lies in a mystical purchasing power to be created by the lavish issue of currency and credit".¹⁸⁹ The hard work ethic was also a personal attribute for Semple. Interviewed in 1951 he said everything he had, had been obtained by the sweat of his own brow and (in his own inimitable words), "Lack of hard work makes a man a chocolate soldier and a namby-pamby bird".¹⁹⁰

Labour won the 1943 general election although its overall majority was reduced. Semple won his seat over four other candidates with a reduced majority of 2,455 votes. At the previous election it was 4,736 votes. However, other successful Labour candidates in the Wellington seats also had reduced majorities. Fraser's majority in Wellington Central was 1,133, at the last election it was 3,837. In Wellington North C. H Chapman's majority was 1,672, it had been 3,278 at the last election and in Wellington South Robert McKeen's majority was 3,835, after previously being 6,415.¹⁹¹ Semple's reduced majority was not unique amongst the Wellington Labour MPs.

¹⁸⁷ *Press*, 14 April 1936.

¹⁸⁸ *New Zealand Herald*, 20 June 1945

¹⁸⁹ *New Zealand Herald*, 20 June 1945.

¹⁹⁰ *New Zealand Free Lance*, 7 March 1951

¹⁹¹ *New Zealand Herald*, 27 September 1943

Later Years in Parliament

By 1946 Semple represented the ‘Old Guard’ in the Party – his age came under increasing scrutiny from government critics and continued to be periodically referred to until he retired from Parliament. With the general election looming at the end of the year, the *Herald* commented that unless sweeping changes were made in ranks of the Labour government it would face electors with an aging team.¹⁹² In October 1946 speaking in Auckland Semple described himself as “the oldest blossom on the tree” and said he had decided to “box on” because he knew the Opposition wanted him out.¹⁹³ When power restrictions were imposed in 1947, a *Herald* editorial said Semple should resign as he was becoming old and feeble. In reply Semple said, “When I start to weaken I will get out but while I can give service to the country I will render it in spite of all the editors that were ever born”.¹⁹⁴ In 1947 in Parliament Opposition MP Mr Sutherland said a separate Minister of Housing should be appointed, “He should be younger than the present Minister who has just about had it”. Semple replied, “The Opposition must be running short of argument when it starts referring to a man’s years. I will go down the Huntly mines with him [Sutherland] for a month after the session and see who digs the more coal”.¹⁹⁵

Criticism also came from within the Labour Party. At the 1946 annual conference it was reported an Auckland faction had made a move to oust the older men of the Labour Party from Parliamentary office because of their age. The National Executive in its annual report gave a reply to the age complaint, saying the future candidature of certain members of Parliament would be taken up with the Prime Minister. But James Roberts, Labour Party President (himself aged 68) drew attention of the conference to Semple’s vigour as an example of the contribution older men could still make to political life. Possibly trying to allay conference fears Semple told the conference about plans to bring forward at the next election some promising some men, particularly soldier candidates.¹⁹⁶ Prime Minister Fraser said, as leader, he had never considered the age of his colleagues,

¹⁹² *New Zealand Herald*, 11 January 1946

¹⁹³ *New Zealand Herald*, 7 October 1946

¹⁹⁴ *New Zealand Herald*, 20 March 1947

¹⁹⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, 11 July 1947. This attack was during the Address-in-Reply debate.

¹⁹⁶ *New Zealand Herald*, 19 June 1946

Mr Semple is more vigorous and youthful today than ever he has been in his life. It would be a scandalous thing, alien to the Labour movement and opposed to its idealism and spirit, if we were to say to some person who has given his whole life to the movement and helped to lay the foundations of its success, that he should be thrown aside solely because of age. I will never be a party to that, never.¹⁹⁷

And Semple's popularity in his own electorate had not diminished. Due to boundary and renaming changes in the Wellington Metropolitan area Semple's Wellington East electorate became Miramar in the 1946 general election. Semple polled 8,064 votes defeating the National candidate, L.T. Jacobsen who polled 5,582 votes. In the official count his majority had increased to 2,482.¹⁹⁸

Prior to the 1949 general election Semple, aged 76 years old, announced he would continue his Labour candidacy for Miramar. He said "My health was never better... I am as vigorous and as strong as I was 20 years ago". He said he had represented the constituency for about twenty years and felt he was physically and mentally capable of standing up to the task. Another reason was the good will shown by his constituency, who had requested unanimously that he stand, and the great friendships he had developed with those he represented.¹⁹⁹ At the 1949 Labour Party conference Semple's age was again discussed. Fraser, in support of Semple, said it had been suggested that Semple might transfer his Railways portfolio to a Cabinet colleague but all the railways organisations had demanded his retention. A remit suggested two separate Ministers should hold the portfolios of Works and Railways (Semple held both portfolios). Many remits, including this one, had multiple movers therefore it is difficult to analyse if there was a particular voice behind the challenge.²⁰⁰ Fraser said that on his energy, initiative and vigour Semple was still one of the youngest of the Ministers. Semple himself said when he could not do the job he would get out, "My race is not run. While I can fight for my fellow worker and the nation at large I will fight. I apologise to no one for my age".²⁰¹ Semple's age was caricatured by Minhinnick in reference to Semple's 10-year plan for Auckland - he said, "the scheme

¹⁹⁷ *New Zealand Herald*, 20 June 1946

¹⁹⁸ Votes Recorded for each candidate at each polling-place, *AJHR*, 1947, (IV), H33A pp. 1-29.

¹⁹⁹ *New Zealand Herald*, 21 April 1949

²⁰⁰ Report of the Annual Conference of NZLP 1949, NZLP Headquarters, Wellington.

²⁰¹ *New Zealand Herald*, 25 May 1949

for Auckland is a not a ten year plan but a hundred year plan”.²⁰² The subsequent cartoon below suggested Semple was aiming for infinite political longevity.

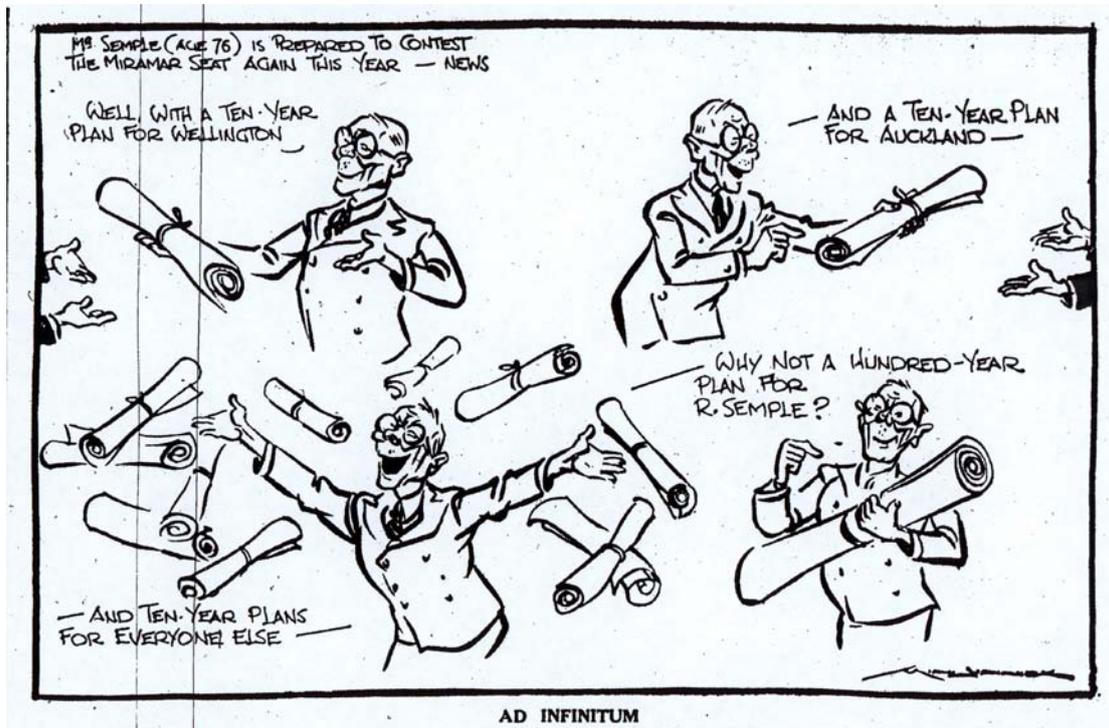


Figure 27: *New Zealand Herald*, 22 April 1949.

At the 1948 Labour Party Conference a remit submitted, again by multiple movers, was that an age limit be adopted for *new* Parliamentary candidates, and that Parliamentary candidates undergo a medical examination prior to each election.²⁰³ This may not have excluded Semple but a remit at the 1950 NZLP conference was more specific “That an age limit be fixed for Members of Parliament”.²⁰⁴ The *New Zealand Herald* speculated that if the remit was carried and the age limit was fixed at around 65 years, the Parliamentary careers of several of the Party’s stalwarts would end abruptly. It named Fraser, Nash, Semple, Parry and C.H. Chapman as being affected.²⁰⁵ However, at this time the remits were all rejected. The age of Labour MPs was a persistent issue but it did not progress to anything past discussion at this time, it was not until 1968 that the Labour Party introduced a compulsory retire-at-70 rule.²⁰⁶

²⁰² *New Zealand Herald*, 17 December 1948.

²⁰³ Report of the Annual Conference of NZLP 1948, NZLP Headquarters, Wellington.

²⁰⁴ Report of Annual Conference of NZLP 1950, NZLP Headquarters, Wellington.

²⁰⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, 30 March 1950.

²⁰⁶ Keith Jackson, *New Zealand Politics of Change*, Wellington: Reed, 1973, p. 144.

Despite questions about Semple's political contribution due to his age, he continued to be very active. Throughout his life he had clashed openly with Communists and during the Cold War era he continued as almost the personification of the government's warning to be on guard against the Communist menace. At Mangakino an industrial crisis developed into what Semple described as "a trial of strength between Communism and the government". The dispute centred on Len Clapham the secretary of the Mangakino branch of the New Zealand Workers Union.²⁰⁷ Clapham, a tunneller at Maraetai, was active in the Communist Party and published a lively little newsheet, *The Spark*. To the engineers in charge of the project he was "a trouble-maker, an agitator and a disturber of workmen".²⁰⁸ They arranged to have him transferred to Auckland, but union members objected, and in March 1948, 900 men went on strike in support of their elected secretary.²⁰⁹

When recalling his Labour colleagues, Arnold Nordmeyer said Semple "came to have the unique distinction of threatening to resign more frequently than any other minister. He found it a useful method of obtaining what he wanted without the painful experience of having his resignation accepted".²¹⁰ Cabinet favoured a tribunal to settle the strike but Semple was against it and in a letter to Fraser he offered his resignation if his view of the Mangakino dispute was not upheld. He said the engineers had told him they would never accept the judgment of a tribunal and it formed a precedent "which makes it impossible for the Commission or myself or any of the engineers to transfer or discharge anyone off the works...it surrenders our power on the job".²¹¹ But Cabinet overrode Semple's objections and the strikers accepted the tribunal offered. Semple probably felt undermined as Cabinet made the decision when he was not present, but was aware of his opinion and annoyed that he had not got his own way. He did not resign and in the press was evasive about his reported threat, "Its just

²⁰⁷ Mangakino was a new township erected to house the workers on the local hydro-electric construction projects.

²⁰⁸ Roth & Hammond, p. 142.

²⁰⁹ *New Zealand Herald*, 10 March 1948. Work on three of the major Waikato power schemes at Maraetai, Whakamaru and Waipapa ceased as a result of a ballot among workers at Mangakino to strike.

²¹⁰ Logan, *Nordy*, p. 46.

²¹¹ R. Semple to P. Fraser 7 April 1948, 2318 Nash Papers, NA.

kite-flying. If I ever decide to resign there will be no need for newspaper conjecture. I will give the public the why and wherefore”.²¹²

In a continuation of a long-term political ploy, when questioned or under attack Semple often portrayed himself as the victim. During the dispute Semple was accused of being a victimiser by rubber-stamping Clapham’s transfer.²¹³ He denied the accusation and alleged he himself had been victimised by the press. In his letter to Fraser Semple claimed the decision to transfer Clapham was a Cabinet one. He said he had not made that fact public, and had taken the blame himself, in view of the possibility of a tribunal being set up and questioning Cabinet’s decision, “In my opinion it would hold Cabinet up to ridicule and contempt in the minds of the general public...that is the reason why I have taken the blame myself to protect the Cabinet”. He also said to Fraser, “I have been 100% loyal to you and there is no man I respect more than you”.²¹⁴ When the tribunal upheld Clapham’s transfer Semple expressed satisfaction, “Any decision other than that reached by the Committee would have made the engineers task impossible. Any other decision would have been accepted by the Communists not only as a victory but as legal license to pursue their evil way”.²¹⁵

The Mangakino dispute appeared the catalyst in Semple’s decision to step up his fight against Communism. In his letter of resignation to Fraser he said, “I am going out to dedicate the rest of my life in fighting these wreckers of the movement and enemies of mankind”.²¹⁶ Communism was an emotional issue and Semple possessed an ability to select these kinds of subjects often to boost his own individual profile and the Party’s popularity as well. At this time he may have felt his influence flagging when the Cabinet virtually ignored his opinion on the tribunal. Only days later he set out on a speaking tour of New Zealand, “to bring home to the people from the public platform the menace of Communism”.²¹⁷ His first public meeting was held in Christchurch where he spoke to a capacity audience. Semple argued the Communists were dupes of a foreign power and were out to wreck democracy and New Zealand’s form of government, “I condemn them as our internal enemies as people who would

²¹² *New Zealand Herald*, 9 April 1948

²¹³ Denying the accusation Semple said the Works department must have the right to transfer its workers.

²¹⁴ R. Semple to P. Fraser 7 April 1948, 2318 Nash Papers, NA.

²¹⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, 15 May 1948

²¹⁶ R. Semple to P. Fraser 7 April 1948, 2318 Nash Papers, NA.

²¹⁷ *New Zealand Herald*, 9 April 1948

first wreck the Labour Party and the government to prepare the way for their glorious dream of a dictatorship”. Semple said the sooner trade unions got rid of Communists the better: “The Communist was public enemy no. 1”.²¹⁸ He also published a booklet in 1948 entitled *Why I Fight Communism*, which reiterated warnings of the Communist menace.

By the time of the 1949 general election Semple was aged seventy-six but still campaigned to the best of his ability. He spent a week in Auckland speaking in various suburbs in the early part of the campaign, emphasising Labour’s past achievements and echoed the sentiment that there was no room for loafing.²¹⁹ But once again Semple’s health impinged on his political activities. After campaigning in the South Island he returned to Wellington at the end of November when ill health forced him to take a rest from electioneering. Margaret Semple advised that Semple was not seriously ill but had just had a strenuous time, having been on the go for several weeks.²²⁰ Semple had the flu which kept him away from several political meetings in his electorate. When he did recover the thrust was again public works. He said works in the Wellington and surrounding districts were estimated to cost over five million pounds in 1949. Semple’s National opponent was Mr C. Taylor, a Crown solicitor, and although Semple won the seat his majority was reduced to 1,197 from 2,482. The *Herald* did acknowledge that his bout of influenza and a speaking tour resulted in Miramar seeing little of Semple.²²¹

When Labour lost the election Semple said he had no regrets and would spend more time with recreational activities, “I shed no tears-there will be no sobbing. All I want is a fishing rod and two good Labrador dogs. I have the best rifle in the world”.²²² Although he put up a stoic public image, in private it was a different Semple that contemplated the 1949 election result. Granddaughter Margaret Lange said he was terribly upset, “He really felt his troops had let him down”.²²³ Granddaughter Pat Dickinson said, “I know he was gutted...I remember him coming home and being pretty upset about it”. However, she said Semple never wasted much time on

²¹⁸ *Press*, 12 April 1948

²¹⁹ *New Zealand Herald*, 26 October 1949

²²⁰ *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 24 November 1949

²²¹ *New Zealand Herald*, 28 November 1949

²²² *New Zealand Herald*, 3 December 1949

²²³ Interview with Margaret Lange and Kay Jones, 30 March 2005.

mourning things, “I think he got on with the next bit then. He always looked forward, he never dwelt on the past”.²²⁴

Throughout his career Semple had been very loyal to Labour Party policy and it was very rare for him to be seen as ‘outside the pale’. However, in 1951 he was perceived by the mainstream press as not ‘stepping to the same drum’ as his leader, Walter Nash. One of the most serious industrial upheavals in New Zealand’s history was the 1951 watersiders’ dispute. Bassett argued the Labour caucus was split within itself and a gulf emerged between most of the Party, which was loyal to Nash, and the FOL.²²⁵ Although never deviating far from the Party line in the past Semple was seen to be closer to the FOL. Bassett argued the Labour Party’s rank and file was much nearer to Nash, Nordmeyer (the Labour Party president) and the other critics of government policy than to Semple and the FOL. The mainstream press also noted that the policy of FOL and Labour Party differed over the dispute, “The Parliamentary Labour Party has favoured a compulsory conference of the employers and workers in the wharf strike, whereas the federation has called on watersiders to resume work at once”.²²⁶

Why did Semple seemingly align himself with the FOL and not the Labour Party in this dispute? Bassett suggested that Baxter, secretary of the FOL, had been in touch with Nash on 2 June requesting that he urge the watersiders to return to work. When Nash failed to do so Bassett said it was likely that the FOL approached Semple.²²⁷ And on 4 June, in the mainstream press, Semple did indeed urge the watersiders to return to work.²²⁸ Semple may have found the different leadership style of Nash difficult to adjust to, possibly being used to the more decisive approach of Fraser which was politically more akin to his own views. The appearance of a softer line taken by Nash towards the watersiders may have led Semple to side with the FOL,²²⁹ no doubt this was enhanced by his personal animosity towards Jock Barnes.

²²⁴ Interview with Pat Dickinson, 2 February 2005.

²²⁵ With a dispute over a wage increase watersiders ceased work in February 1951, the Union was deregistered and a state of emergency declared. The watersiders broke away from the FOL to form the rival Trade Union Congress (TUC).

²²⁶ *New Zealand Herald*, 13 June 1951.

²²⁷ Baxter to Nash, 2235 Nash Papers, NA.

²²⁸ *New Zealand Herald*, 4 June 1951.

²²⁹ In May 1951 when addressing a crowd at the Auckland Domain Nash said, “We are not for the watersiders nor are we against them”. Opponents of Labour condemned his comments – the *Herald* suggested Nash was a ‘fence-sitter’.

In 1947 when the Labour government had problems with the watersiders Bassett has suggested it had been the government's intention to try and isolate the watersiders leaders from the rest of the trade union movement. He characterised Semple at this time as one of the government's "principal hatchet men" who was never reluctant to speak his mind and who had strongly criticised Barnes. In 1951 Semple said,

He [Barnes] has proven his disloyalty to the Labour movement and to the government time and time again, and his unreasoning search for power is shown by such impossible demands he makes for the Government...such preposterous demands make negotiation and co-operation impossible and in the end, do a grave disservice to the men he is supposed to serve.²³⁰

Barnes' hostility towards Semple was equally vehement. In his memoirs, *Never a White Flag*, he discussed what he described as Labour's failure in the dispute. After being critical of Labour's politicians who attacked his union he said, "That was nothing to the vitriolic attack mounted on our union in general and myself in particular by that renegade and repentant sinner Bob Semple".²³¹

Another factor that undoubtedly led Semple to align himself with the FOL was his anti-Communist views. On this issue Semple also had some common ground with the National government – they both viewed the dispute as instigated by Communist agitation, which was contrary to the view of Nash. The FOL also viewed the dispute as an opportunity to eliminate the Communist influences from the union movement. In April 1951 Prime Minister Holland said the watersiders dispute was "just part of a cold war in which a group of wreckers has declared war on the people in an effort to replace orderly, democratic government with anarchy and direct action".²³² However, Nash in 1951 dismissed any suggestion of a Communist inspired plot in connection with the dispute.²³³ Supporting that view was Bruce Brown who, when discussing Nash's position during the dispute, said, "Many right-wing, conservative politicians

²³⁰ *New Zealand Herald*, 4 June 1951.

²³¹ Tom Bramble, *Never a White Flag*, p. 213.

²³² *Evening Post*, 23 April 1951.

²³³ *New Zealand Herald*, 24 May 1951.

and newspaper people exaggerated the Communist menace”.²³⁴ Semple openly expressed a different opinion from Nash’s when he appealed to the watersiders: “I appeal to them [trade unionists] to forsake the wreckers, the Communists and the leaders, so-called who are aiming to lead them into a way of life that is contrary to our own”.²³⁵ Minhinnick caricatured the different views of Semple and Nash in the cartoon illustration below.



Figure 28: *New Zealand Herald*, 5 June 1951.

In 1951 the government announced a snap election over the waterfront issue and there may have been some resistance to Semple’s continued representation in the Miramar seat. Margaret Thorn suggested there was a challenge to his candidature. Although not naming the other candidate she said she fought hard against the second nomination and it was defeated. She said afterwards, “Bob Semple, able, generous, tireless, a splendid Minister to have a so-called intellectual attempt to ditch him... It is difficult for a Minister to keep close to his people, and his life is cluttered up with often quite petty engagements. Members in branches tend to fall away once a task has been

²³⁴ Bruce Brown, ‘The Lockout and Walter Nash’ in David Grant (ed.), *The Big Blue: Snapshots of the 1951 Waterfront Lockout*, Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2004, p. 105.

²³⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, 4 June 1951.

accomplished. One is always in danger of the clique".²³⁶ When the election was announced an *Evening Post* editorial suggested old campaigners like Semple and C.H. Chapman (Wellington Central) "would be as valuable in retaining or increasing Labour's votes as newcomers who would be relatively unfamiliar with the political situation". However, the *Post* also said the Labour Representation Committees might take the opportunity of infusing new blood into the Parliamentary Labour Party "particularly in Miramar which is considered a safe Labour seat".²³⁷ But there was no indication of a challenge to Semple in the *Post* and his candidature was announced with the other Wellington candidates. The *Herald* noted Semple's popularity, "At the age of 78, Mr Semple is certainly Wellington's most popular Labour candidate. The years have in no way dimmed his reputation as a sincere and hard-working stalwart of the old Labour Party".²³⁸ Whether it was by reputation or hard work Semple did retain the Miramar nomination.

Semple held fast to his working class roots in the election. His opponent from 1949, Crown Solicitor C.H. Taylor, again stood against him. When Taylor said Semple had sold his Wellington home and retired to "his garden and mansion in Otaki" Semple refuted the accusation saying "That mansion, as he calls in, is just a plain working man's home".²³⁹ In the election Labour lost more seats to National. Semple won his seat but with a reduced majority of 501 votes.²⁴⁰ Only three of the thirteen Ministers who were members of the 1936 Cabinet now remained in Parliament. There was Semple aged seventy-eight, Nash aged sixty-nine and H.G.R Mason aged sixty-six. Only three others were alive – William Parry retired from Parliament in 1951 and died a year later, Frank Langstone resigned from the NZLP in 1949 over the CMT issue and Fred Jones remained an MP until 1951.

By 1952 Semple's political activity was minimal – his health declined markedly and kept him out of Parliament for a large part of the year. He had an operation for

²³⁶ Margaret Thorn cited in Locke & Matthews, pp. 118-119. Extensive searches in the NZLP Headquarters in Fraser House, Wellington and the Alexander Turnbull Library were unable to find any records from the Miramar Branch of the Labour Party.

²³⁷ *Evening Post*, 12 July 1951.

²³⁸ *New Zealand Herald*,

²³⁹ *Evening Post*, 22 August 1951.

²⁴⁰ Semple's majority in 1949 was 1,315. Other Labour MPs also had their margins reduced. For example, Bob McKeen now of Island Bay was returned with a majority of 1,557. In 1949 it was 2770. *New Zealand Herald*, 3 September 1951.

prostate cancer and spent his 79th birthday in Calvary Hospital, Wellington. Bruce Brown recalled joining Walter Nash's staff in 1952. He said Semple "even in his old age, he was very tall, absolutely erect – no falling or stooping which some people of about 80, as he was, succumb to...but he walked slowly around the corridors almost like a ghost, very pale". But Brown did remember Semple's last speech in 1954 and said it was notable for illuminating the generation gap between him and some of the younger MPs. Brown recalled "A young and bumptious Auckland member Eric Halstead had been attacking the Labour government's policies even though National was now in office saying that the country was 'down at heel'. Auckland hadn't changed since he was a boy and badly needed development". Replying Semple said, "This young man thinks 'down at heel' means hasn't had any new buildings. My definition of 'down at heel' is a man walking down the road, the soles out of his shoes, the seat out of his trousers, wiping the tears out of his eyes with the slack of his stomach".²⁴¹

During his lifetime the numerous public works Semple had presided over were highlighted as the achievements of his political career. Close to Semple's eightieth birthday, in a letter to the *Dominion W. Howard Booth* of Carterton suggested the main highway to Paekakariki be named after Semple and a fitting monument be erected on the seafront to commemorate this great work. In Parliament Reverend Clyde Carr, MP for Timaru, asked the Minister of Works if this could be done in honour of Semple's birthday. However, Stan Goosman replied that it was the policy of the Main Highways Board to name highways according to the routes they traverse or by reference to their terminal points. Goosman said Semple's association with the Centennial Highway was already commemorated on a plaque erected in a boulder cairn on the seafront near the tea-room between Pukerua Bay and Paekakariki.²⁴² In a tribute to Semple on his birthday, the *Evening Post* said "to New Zealand politics he brought a vivid personality that will be long remembered and to the country at large he has given lasting reminders of a revitalised works policy".²⁴³

Semple's language and unique phraseology also defined his career as a politician. When Queen Elizabeth II opened Parliament in 1954, Semple was present and Prime

²⁴¹ Interview with Bruce Brown, 23 February 2005.

²⁴² *NZPD*, 301 (1953), p.2132.

²⁴³ *Evening Post*, 21 October 1953.

Minister Holland paid tribute to him. He said Semple had been sadly missed, in particular his picturesque form of expression “He is without peer in so many respects...we trust that he is now well on the road to recovering his full vigour so that crowded galleries may again hear an eloquence unsurpassed in its style by any other man”. When Semple retired from Parliament later in the year Holland made special reference to him in his absence. He said, “I had hoped that he would be here and would make a speech before we rose. I thought he would give us a reminder of what we used to hear from him when he was an inventor of expressions, some good and some not quite so good...He has been the most picturesque Member of Parliament, in speech, in this century”.²⁴⁴ Nash supported Holland’s statement. He said, “Bob Semple. He is incomparable...He had his own inimitable way of making a speech and putting over word pictures. I do not think I have ever heard anyone else who has a mastery of phraseology like Bob Semple. We all remember his running shoes”.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ *NZPD* 1954, p. 2114.

²⁴⁵ *NZPD* 1954, p. 2118.



Figure 29: Semple and long-time friend and colleague Robert McKeen in October 1954 when they both retired from Parliament. Semple had served the House for twenty-six years and McKeen for thirty-two years, photograph courtesy of the *Dominion Post*.

Robert Semple's fundamental aim in life was to improve the lot of the working people. He strove to achieve this aim with participation in various levels of political activity. Workers responded to Semple's efforts and the longevity of his parliamentary career was testament that many believed he was improving the quality of life for working people. At the same time his career was enhanced as he brought new life and vigour to politics with characteristics that were continuous over time and

included his picturesque language, his energy and hard work and his flair for publicity. When historians James and Margaret Rowe sketched New Zealand's historical development and discussed the first Labour cabinet, they remarked that Semple left a lasting impression on New Zealand: "His great achievement was an immediate one; he opened up large-scale public works to employ men in labour camps and paid them a living wage. An even greater achievement, however, was to banish for ever the notion that men on road works would be used as beasts of burden".²⁴⁶ Semple and his colleagues completely changed New Zealand's economic and social life and established a welfare state which has lasted to this day. Although some political perspectives did change for Semple and his colleagues over time the overall objective did not – this is also significant in the next chapter which considers Semple as an Anti-militarist, where arguably the greatest outward change in his political outlook can be seen.

²⁴⁶ James W. Rowe & Margaret A. Rowe, *New Zealand*, London: Ernest Benn Ltd, 1967, p. 71.

Chapter Five

“Bombs and bullets will never settle the world’s troubles”: The Anti-militarist.¹

Among Semple’s identities is an image of him as an anti-militarist. This identity is significant as it is here that, at face value, the most dramatic change took place in Semple’s political outlook. In 1915 he said, “Conscription is the negation of human liberty...it is the blackest industrial hell”.² And in 1916, along with several other Labour leaders, as a result of his forceful advocacy for the repeal of conscription, he was gaoled for his beliefs. Twenty years later Labour was in power and in his capacity as Minister of National Service, Semple drew the first marble in the inaugural WWII conscription ballot. Prior to WWI he also vehemently opposed Compulsory Military Training (CMT) yet in 1949 he campaigned for the government in the referendum to introduce it. Semple saw no compromise in his principles in either circumstance – altered world conditions such as the rise of fascism and communism now required these responses. But many observers at the time and some historians later noted the anomalies. As Richardson has observed, Semple’s “support for the introduction of compulsory military training in 1949 marked, in the eyes of his left-wing critics, a form of betrayal”.³ Semple’s anti-militarism and his early opposition and then later support for both compulsory military training and conscription, warrant investigation.

Taking a broad view this chapter suggests that an explanation for the disparity in Semple’s views can be found within his overarching objective in life - the general advancement of the working class. Early in his life he believed CMT and conscription were of no benefit to the working class, he perceived them to be pawns in the game of empire and an imperialistic war. This position was later reversed as he saw CMT and conscription as two means of ultimately protecting the working class and defending the gains they had made under the Labour government. As a member of the government, Semple’s arguments became framed in more general national terms, where nation and class became intertwined. So although Semple’s two positions could

¹ *Evening Post*, 12 July 1954.

² *Maoriland Worker*, 17 November 1915.

³ Richardson, ‘Robert Semple’.

be seen as almost polarised, to the Ministerial Semple CMT and conscription served the same purpose – to ultimately protect and defend New Zealand, its people and the government which was implementing social justice for all, during and after WWII. The movement in Semple’s views mirrored that of the Labour Party itself including many of the Party’s early anti-militarists such as Peter Fraser, Paddy Webb and William Parry. Because Semple was often the most vocal exponent of a more general shift within the Party, he has been singled out by historians as its exemplar.

Significant elements of the Labour movement were traditionally opposed to anti-militarism. J.T. Paul said when the Labour Party was born in 1916 it was composed largely of men and women who “had long believed that a victory of peace over all the world would be greater than a victory of war over all the world”.⁴ Included in the Party’s 1916 foundation platform was “a citizen army on a volunteer basis...practical measures for the promotion of peace...repeal of the Military Services Act”.⁵ In 1911 Semple had said, “the sword and the labour movement have nothing in common. One stands for bloodshed, the other stands for freedom and brotherhood”.⁶ Although there were exceptions among labour personnel, the Party was generally opposed to conscription, CMT and war in general, and it maintained that position up until 1935. Then, when Labour became the government it still wanted peace, but not peace at any price. The implementation of social justice for all was worth defending, in New Zealand and overseas. Semple argued in 1941 that he was not a Pacifist in the strict sense of the term, “I have opposed war all my life, but I have never subscribed to the belief that one must bare his chest submissively to the bayonet of an invader who will take his life”.⁷ It could be argued that Semple and his colleagues went to war to enforce peace – the circumstances along that road will be explored in this chapter.

R.L Weitzel argued that in New Zealand’s early anti-militarist movement of the 1910s many militant labour personnel, including Semple, were prominent in opposition to war and often did not differentiate between compulsory military training and

⁴ Paul, p. 104.

⁵ Paul, p. 158.

⁶ *Maoriland Worker*, 9 June 1911.

⁷ *New Zealand Herald*, 8 February 1940.

conscription.⁸ Compulsory military training, the *Maoriland Worker* said, “is conscription...and it means militarism”.⁹ This chapter follows the lead of the early anti-militarist movement and, while acknowledging that conscription and compulsory military training technically have somewhat different meanings, will examine Semple’s attitude to both in a concurrent exploration. A third strand interwoven within the chapter is Semple’s general outlook on war.

Early Views and the Class Perspective

There is no known record of Semple’s attitude to war during his early years in Australia. However, both Robert Semple and his brother John were in Western Australia during 1900-1902. John Semple was caught in the imperialistic fervour of the Boer War. In January 1901 an advertisement in the *Collie Miner* called for volunteers – the call was eagerly responded to with more men turning up for the medical examination than were required. The *Collie Miner* said,

From the coal pits of the south, from the gold mines of the north
...men spring to arms, proud to don the glorious uniform of their
Queen, and to shed their last drop of blood...in defence of the
Empire.¹⁰

John Semple, “occupation miner”, was amongst those selected as members of the Collie unit of the sixth contingent.¹¹ He left Australia on 10 April 1901 and arrived in Durban, South Africa, on 29 April.¹² However, his service was short-lived. On May 15 the sixth contingent was involved in a fight with the Boers at Grobelaar’s Recht, near Carolina. Four men, including John Semple, were killed and many others wounded. The deaths were reported in Collie,

During the week the painful news has come to hand that three
of the young men who left Collie for South Africa have been killed
in action. Messrs F.T.Adams, J. Semple and Nicholas are well
spoken of by those who knew them here, and their untimely
death is much deplored.¹³

⁸ R.L.Weitzel, ‘Pacifists and anti-Militarists in New Zealand, 1900-1914’, *New Zealand Journal of History*, Vol. 7, No 2, 1973, pp. 128-47.

⁹ *Maoriland Worker*, 12 May 1911.

¹⁰ *Collie Miner*, 19 January 1901.

¹¹ *Collie Miner*, 9 March 1901.

¹² Official Records of the Australian Military Contingents to the War in South Africa, KFHC.

¹³ *Collie Miner*, 25 May 1901.

John Semple was buried at Grobelaar's Recht along with the other soldiers who were killed, but was later re-interred in a Garden of Remembrance at Middleburg, a large town in the province of Eastern Transvaal.¹⁴ He made his own personal contribution to the history of Western Australia – a memorial in Perth bears his name today.

Semple recalled his brother's service for his country when he was defending a sedition charge in 1916 in New Zealand. During his trial the prosecution alleged he incited others to be disloyal. Semple disputed this, and said his words were not used with a view of attempting to persuade men not to enlist. Semple said he was not fighting against conscription in an effort to injure the government or the Mother Country: "My only brother perished in the South African War". The purpose of recalling his brother's sacrifice was to emphasise that he had not attempted to dissuade men from war and was, therefore, not disloyal.¹⁵

Semple's first known anti-militarist action in New Zealand was against the Defence Amendment Act which became law in 1910. The Act was largely an attempt by New Zealand to re-organise its defence forces along the lines agreed to at the Imperial Naval and Military Conference held in London in 1909.¹⁶ The Act abolished the volunteer defence force and made military training compulsory, the law requiring all males aged between 14 and 20 years to register for military training. Semple hotly denounced this change. He and several other labour activists travelled around New Zealand in 1911 holding mass meetings against CMT.¹⁷ Several of the meetings in Runanga, Blackball, Huntly and Waihi resulted in the formation of Anti-Militarist Leagues. The *Maoriland Worker* reported that at a Runanga meeting, "Mr Semple was of the firm opinion that if the people of New Zealand were to rise in open protest against this most iniquitous act that the government would back down and refrain from enforcing it".¹⁸

At this time Semple's anti-militarist opposition was inextricably connected to his socialist and class war beliefs. In discussing socialist activity on the West Coast

¹⁴ Official Records of the Australian Military Contingents to the War in South Africa, KFHC.

¹⁵ *Maoriland Worker*, 3 January 1917. Semple advocated conscription of wealth and provision for married men to enlist so there would be no need for a conscription policy.

¹⁶ Weitzel, 'Pacifists and anti-Militarists in New Zealand, 1900-1914'.

¹⁷ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 22 May 1911. William Parry and Charles Smith spoke at meetings.

¹⁸ *Maoriland Worker*, 19 May 1911.

during 1910-1911, O'Farrell argued, "The main socialist grievance of the time was the Compulsory Military Training Act".¹⁹ Semple viewed militarism as a bulwark of the capitalist state. In the *Maoriland Worker* he said, "Socialists declare that the one great evil in society is the private ownership of the means of life. War today is capitalistic and is only one of the effects of this great evil".²⁰ War was a class issue for Semple who believed that the rich declared wars and the poor fought them.²¹ The working class, he said in a *Maoriland Worker* article entitled "Industrialism and Militarism", have for too long paid the blood tax. Many militant labour personnel believed military training was a form of state oppression and a conscript army was a potential weapon of the capitalist class, which could be used against the working class. Semple said,

There is a great danger in allowing these boys to be drilled by the enemies of the working class. When they are wanted to protect their own class against the exploiters we may find them upon the exploiters side, carrying out their orders to shoot the slaves of industry for rebelling against brutal conditions.

Semple urged young men to "boldly refuse" and "defy such an immoral law" saying it was better to suffer than to assist in perpetuating a system which had caused the working class to suffer.²²

Semple supported young men who refused to register for CMT when they were prosecuted and imprisoned by the government, his argument incorporating a gender dimension. A mass meeting was held in Runanga to protest against the imprisonment of a Wellington boy, William Cornish. Among the speakers Semple said he was present to protest as a citizen, and a father, against the liberty of boyhood being interfered with. Using the rhetoric of family he indicated that he was present because he had three boys, and he wanted them under their mother's care. He said war was contrary to human nature and nature never intended one nation to hate another nation,

Workers had no quarrels with nations; their quarrel was with a class...Military uniforms were detestable to him; it meant the ultimate spilling of blood and often legalised murder...He had

¹⁹ O'Farrell, 'The Workers in Grey District Politics', p. 212.

²⁰ *Maoriland Worker*, 9 June 1911.

²¹ Olssen, *The Red Feds*, p. 54.

²² *Maoriland Worker*, 9 June 1911.

protested from Auckland to Wellington...He admired young Cornish and glorified in his stand. He would say to the boys if at any time a law is passed that is immoral or against their freedom to be out against it.²³

Although incorporating women into class solidarity by urging them to instil class-consciousness in their sons, Semple's protest reinforced the woman's stereotype of a mother and nurturer of children. He reiterated his appeal to mothers to teach their sons that they had no quarrel with other sons of toil:

Yes, mothers there is a higher ideal for your sons than to be drilled for the purpose of blowing some other mothers' sons' heads off or spill their own blood for the class who have been the betrayers of mankind.

He urged mothers to tell their sons their place was in the industrial army and not a conscript army.²⁴

The CMT law encroached into Semple's personal life. In 1913 Semple was charged with failing to give the age of his son when requested to do so.²⁵ Appearing in the Grey Magistrate's Court Semple pleaded not guilty. He alleged that an improper procedure had been carried out as, failing to ascertain his son's age from the school teacher at Runanga, the enrolment officer had taken a policeman with him and called at Semple's home to demand the information. Semple said that he recognised civil law but protested against the way the authorities had attempted to obtain the information. Semple's lawyer alleged victimisation, "Strange to say only defendants and another leading unionists lads had been singled out when requesting the age of lads attending the Runanga school". Semple said he refused to give the information, as he knew the Department had picked out his boy and Southward's boy in order to get at him personally because of his attitude to military training.²⁶ When asked by the Magistrate Semple still refused to give his son's age and was fined £4.²⁷

Semple refused to pay the fine and was arrested. When he left Runanga under police escort, a small party of sympathisers assembled and gave him three cheers as the train

²³ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 25 July 1911.

²⁴ *Maoriland Worker*, 9 June 1911.

²⁵ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 17 February 1913.

²⁶ John Southward was a Runanga socialist who worked at the State mine.

²⁷ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 23 February 1913. Semple's son Robert was born in May 1899. He would have turned 14 years of age in May 1913 and been required to register from that date.

moved off to Greymouth. However, only a day later Semple was released. The *Greymouth Evening Star* said, “It is understood that the fine and costs, £4 6s were paid by a man named Hart, a resident of Runanga”.²⁸ Semple was not unique amongst labour anti-militarists who were prosecuted for their beliefs at this time. Anti-militarists holding open-air meetings were fined for obstructing the traffic.²⁹ Paddy Webb was arrested in Christchurch for failure to pay a fine of £2 imposed upon him for speaking at the clock tower without a permit from the City Council. Two days before F. Cooke and E.J. Howard were arrested on the same grounds, but their fines were paid before they had been in custody five hours.³⁰

Semple and his eldest son, Robert Francis Semple, had very similar attitudes to CMT. When Robert Francis was killed in 1930 P.J. O’Regan attended the funeral and wrote in his diary that Robert junior had been a determined young man: “I have always admired his dogged resistance to compulsory military training. He was repeatedly fined for failing to attend parades, but he never paid a shilling and managed to dodge imprisonment”.³¹

Semple alleged he and others who opposed CMT were victimised by the government. The apparent persecution of several young men aroused the passion of many delegates, including Semple, at labour’s Unity conference in July 1913. Several boys who refused to train for military service were sent to Ripa Island which was a military barracks in Lyttelton Harbour. The conference received a letter from them alleging mistreatment. A conference deputation went to Parliament to interview Massey and James Allen, Minister of Defence. The press reported some heated discussion between members of the delegation.³² Semple detailed the circumstances of his conviction for refusing to disclose his son’s age to the military authorities and he alleged victimisation. And he claimed that two days after his family moved to Wellington the authorities were on his track again, though hundreds of Wellington youths who were eligible had not been interfered with. The Minister of Defence promised to make inquiries regarding victimisation and informed Semple that the

²⁸ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 6 May 1913. Despite searches of the electoral rolls of 1911 and 1914 the identity of the man Hart who paid Semple’s fine is not known.

²⁹ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 10 Feb 1913.

³⁰ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 3 May 1913.

³¹ Diary 1930, P.J. O’Regan Diaries, WTU.

³² Members of the delegation included E.J. Howard, H. Scott-Bennett, Professor Mills and Semple.

officer on the West Coast had been replaced. Semple retorted, "It is time you did". The Ministers promised careful treatment of the youths detained in military custody and a full inquiry into the allegations of discrimination against labour men's sons.³³ A subsequent report found that "there is no truth...that any persons connected with the labour or any other movement were prosecuted while others were allowed to evade service".³⁴

Despite being an anti-militarist, Semple occasionally used military metaphors in his language. During a dispute at the State mine in 1909 Semple threatened widespread industrial action if the miners' demands were not met. He said if the government would not take action the federation would, and

New Zealand would then see the biggest industrial upheaval ever known in the Dominion's history. The guns were all loaded and ready and it only required the pressure of a finger to fire them and if that took place Sir Joseph Ward would be knocked a complete somersault from the effects of which he would never recover.³⁵

Semple was not a pacifist. He had been a boxer in his youth and on occasion threatened to settle issues with violence. At a meeting in Christchurch during the Waihi strike of 1912 it was alleged that instead of facing strikebreakers Semple had run away. To an interjector Semple said "...and to prove to you that I am not a coward I'll fight you if you like after this meeting...I repeat after I'm finished I'm prepared to fight anyone fair".³⁶ And during the Great Strike in Wellington in 1913 Semple said, "I hope that there is no shooting, but if any is done, and Cullen (Police Commissioner) will come out, I undertake to shoot him first".³⁷ "Fighting Bob" was at war for the working class.³⁸

Semple certainly had an affinity with guns. He was a hunter all his life and later in his public career there are numerous stories of his habit of shooting rabbits, hares, hawks and other game from the fast-moving Ministerial car on his trips around the country. Many of his grandchildren recall being taken out rabbit shooting with their

³³ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 7 July 1913.

³⁴ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 14 August 1913.

³⁵ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 1 December 1909.

³⁶ *Maoriland Worker*, 22 November 1912.

³⁷ *Dominion*, 20 November 1913.

³⁸ Richardson, 'Robert Semple'.

grandfather at a very young age. Pat Dickinson recalled shooting with Semple in the school holidays “He had lots of guns...he was very careful...We had to walk behind him, if we got near him we got told off”.³⁹ She recalled her grandfather loved duck-shooting, rabbit shooting and clay-bird shooting.



Figure 30: Semple duck-shooting with friends ca the late 1940s. The place and exact date are unknown, RHSC.

Rob Semple said his grandfather was “gun mad...he had a shot-gun hand made for himself”.⁴⁰ However, Semple’s passion for recreational shooting testified to his love of the outdoors and competitive instinct rather than any military predilections.

Allied with Semple’s opposition to CMT was his opposition to conscription. This was common among others in the more militant sector of the labour movement, including numerous miners’ unions. Weitzel has described coalminers as “undoubtedly the most militant of the anti-militarist labour groups”.⁴¹ In August 1915 the government made preparations for a National Register of all males of military age. Miners’ Federation leaders, including Semple, saw the National Register as a stealthy step along the road

³⁹ Interview with Pat Dickinson, 2 February 2005.

⁴⁰ Interview with Rob Semple, 7 June 2006.

⁴¹ Weitzel, ‘Pacifists and Anti-militarists in New Zealand, 1909-1914’, p. 143.

to military conscription and warned that conscription was an “insidious effort to strike at the liberty of the people”.⁴² In the *Maoriland Worker* Semple said, “Conscription is the negation of human liberty. It means the destruction of every principle that is held sacred to the working class. It means the destruction of the democracy of the home. It is the blackest industrial hell”.⁴³

The government’s perception of Semple as a troublemaker, largely formed while he was organiser of the FOL, was enhanced by the conscription issue. Paul Baker suggested that the main reason for the delay in introducing conscription was the fear of opposition to it.⁴⁴ In September 1915 the *Maoriland Worker* warned that any attempt to enforce conscription would create “disastrous upheavals and eruptions calculated to shake the foundations of the social structure”.⁴⁵ In Parliament Paddy Webb alleged that members of the police force had received instructions to pay special attention to labour-union meetings throughout the country. He quoted from an instruction sent out to each Superintendent of Police:

Please cause careful and confidential inquiries to be made in your district as to the probability of any labour troubles...It is known that Semple and other Federationists’ agitators have been reorganising labour malcontents for some time past, and it is believed that he and others associated with him are watching and waiting for a favourable opportunity to cause further trouble.⁴⁶

The government feared that conscription would present that opportunity with Semple a prime initiator.

Conscription was a class issue for Semple - he saw it as a further attempt to impede the socialist vision for the working class. Similarly, O’Farrell argued Harry Holland believed the war was being used by the capitalists in an endeavour to suppress the forces of international socialism and argued “hostilities began because Germany was on the verge of social revolution, and to forestall this the German ruling classes had

⁴² *Maoriland Worker*, 15 September 1915.

⁴³ *Maoriland Worker*, 17 November 1915.

⁴⁴ Paul Baker, *King and Country Call: New Zealanders, Conscription and the Great War*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1988, p. 43.

⁴⁵ *Maoriland Worker*, 1 September 1915.

⁴⁶ *NZPD*, 174 (1915), p. 593.

precipitated war”.⁴⁷ At a meeting in Wellington addressed by Semple and Holland a motion was moved which viewed conscription as “the attempt to Prussianise New Zealand...and...as an endeavour to provide for the ultimate defeat of working-class and democratic ideas”. In seconding the motion Semple reiterated conscription would mean the negation of human liberty.⁴⁸

Semple, like others in the labour movement, argued that if men’s lives had to be conscripted, then surplus wealth should also be conscripted, as without it the burden of war would be on labour. The *Maoriland Worker* reported Semple delivered a very stirring address at an anti-conscription meeting at Millerton. A resolution, which included the demand of nationalisation of capital as the most effective method of providing for the situation created by the war, was sent to the Prime Minister.⁴⁹ Addressing a public meeting at Denniston, Semple stressed his purpose was not to incite any individual from enlisting or not enlisting. He declared himself a representative of the working class movement, a body which was entirely opposed to any form of conscription in New Zealand without first making provisions for the maintenance of soldiers and their dependants. Semple argued “if you are going to ask a man to sacrifice all he has got...why not give him some guarantee that his wife and family will get all they desire in his absence?”.⁵⁰ He said the only feasible solution was the nationalisation of wealth – producing resources instead of allowing huge war profits by which the working class are exploited.⁵¹

When a conference was convened in January 1916 to discuss labour’s attitude to conscription Semple was one of seven members elected to a committee that drew up a manifesto, which listed all arguments against conscription. The conference opposed conscription and its definition of conscription of wealth bore the imprint of militant labour personnel such as Semple. The entire means of production were to be seized and operated for the collective benefit of the people during the war and remain the property of the people after the war. Conscription of men should not be seriously considered until this had been fully tried, “As against the other side’s demand for

⁴⁷ O’Farrell, *Harry Holland: Militant Socialist*, p. 66.

⁴⁸ *Evening Post*, 15 November 1915.

⁴⁹ *Maoriland Worker*, 22 December 1915.

⁵⁰ Semple cited in Gustafson, *Labour’s Path to Political Independence*, p. 112.

⁵¹ *Maoriland Worker*, 6 January 1916.

confiscation of human life, they must place conscription of wealth".⁵² Massey rejected the conference call for conscription of wealth. He said he would not contemplate confiscating "the hard earned shillings of the thriftier portion of the population whom he deemed to be the creators of the greater number of industrial enterprises that provided jobs for the workers".⁵³ The *Evening Post* concurred, "There is nothing sublime in the manifesto, but there is much of the ridiculous".⁵⁴ Speaking on the decisions of the conference in the Alexandra hall Fraser rejected criticism of the manifesto, as did Semple who again urged that the man who risked his life should be paid as much as the man who did not.⁵⁵

The Military Service Bill, introduced into Parliament on 24 May, became law on 1 August 1916.⁵⁶ Semple and many sections of labour intensified their attack on conscription during the Bill's passage through the House. Semple spoke around the country - in June he spoke at a Ngaruawahia meeting which condemned conscription and called on the government to give the voluntary system every consideration. Semple also spoke at Glen Massey where conscription was condemned as aiming a blow at the civil liberty of the New Zealand people. Arriving back in Wellington from Auckland he said that the feeling against conscription in the North was intense.⁵⁷ But Massey continued to brush aside labour's protests asserting that, "The present is no time for half-hearted measures, nor for whining protests against the alleged 'Prussianisation' of the nation".⁵⁸

Semple's fight against conscription took him across the Tasman. On 30 August 1916 the Australian Prime Minister announced that a conscription referendum would take place on 28 October 1916.⁵⁹ The Miners' Federation received a request to send delegates to Australia to combat conscription. At their September conference they decided to send one delegate to Australia and asked the national executive of the

⁵² 'The Manifesto' *Maoriland Worker*, 2 February 1916. "Messers McCombs, Thorn, Holland, Fraser, Semple, Parry and E. Hunter were elected to act as a Manifesto Committee".

⁵³ Cited in Bassett & King, p. 70.

⁵⁴ *Evening Post*, 28 January 1916.

⁵⁵ *Evening Post*, 30 January 1916. The Alexandra Hall was the new SDP headquarters.

⁵⁶ Baker, *King and Country Call*, p. 177.

⁵⁷ *Maoriland Worker*, 28 June 1916. Semple spoke at Ngaruawahia on 19 June and Glen Massey on 22 June.

⁵⁸ *Evening Post*, 20 June 1916.

⁵⁹ L.C. Jauncey, *The Story of Conscription in Australia*, Melbourne: Macmillan, 1968, p. 151.

NZLP to help finance the delegate's trip.⁶⁰ Semple was selected and was granted leave of absence for two months, he arrived in Australia in early October.⁶¹

Semple was just as energetic in his Australian anti-conscription campaign as he was in New Zealand. He said, "I am using every inch of energy in my body to assist the Australian people in preventing these colonies becoming Prussianised".⁶² Semple started his tour on the Illawarra Coast and then addressed several meetings in Sydney. Reporting to the *Maoriland Worker* he said he also spent time helping to organise and co-ordinate the efforts of various committees, peace organisations and non-conscription movements into a more concerted effort. Semple toured the district where he was born.⁶³ On 9 October Semple spoke to a crowded meeting in Bathurst where the *National Advocate* reported that he delivered a stirring anti-conscription speech and received a standing ovation.⁶⁴ At Lithgow the *National Advocate* estimated that the crowd addressed by Semple at an anti-conscription rally in the town was between 10,000 and 11,000 people "On a vote being taken only five hands were held up in favour and a veritable forest of hands against".⁶⁵ Australia rejected conscription and in the aftermath Semple was praised for his efforts. The Miners' Federation received a letter from J. Curtin, secretary of the Australian Trades Union Anti-Conscription Congress who said, "Australia is thankful that in the hour of its extremity you helped so splendidly by sending Semple across".⁶⁶

In December 1916 the New Zealand government launched policies to meet the opposition to conscription - new war regulations were gazetted for sedition which had repercussions for Semple. The regulations extended the term sedition to include inciting and were designed to deter anyone interfering with recruiting and conscription. Several days later Semple addressed a packed anti-conscription meeting in the Globe Theatre in Auckland, where, similar to his opposition to CMT, his argument was on class lines. He said that,

⁶⁰ The delegates expenses were to be raised from voluntary contributions and donations.

⁶¹ A2 Miners' Federation Minute Book 1915-23, Jim Roberts Papers, Beaglehole Room Victoria University.

⁶² *Maoriland Worker*, 1 November 1916.

⁶³ *Maoriland Worker*, 1 November 1916. Semple visited Lithgow, Portland, Cullenbullen, Bathurst, Blayney, Cowra and Orange.

⁶⁴ *National Advocate*, 11 October 1916.

⁶⁵ *National Advocate*, 13 October 1916.

⁶⁶ *Maoriland Worker*, 22 November 1916.

Conscription and liberty cannot live in one country. Conscription is the negation of human liberty. It is the beginning of the servile state...conscription was not intended in this country to fight the Kaiser, but to fight trade unionism and the working classes.⁶⁷

The *New Zealand Herald* characterised the speech as permeated by “much violent language”.⁶⁸ The government also found Semple’s language unacceptable. Semple was arrested in Christchurch on 10 December and charged with making seditious utterances in Wellington and Auckland. Along with other Labour leaders who had been arrested, he was refused bail, the magistrate saying that if bail were allowed he might have the opportunity of doing mischief.⁶⁹

Richardson has argued the government erroneously cast Semple in the role of rabble-rouser and it thought that his removal, along with that of a number of other labour leaders, would end all vocal opposition to conscription. He suggested Semple had been a moderating influence on the miners, citing Semple’s persuasion of the striking Blackball miners to return to work.⁷⁰ Webb also argued in Parliament that Semple was a moderating influence, pointing out that even though Semple’s arrest might have provoked widespread strike action, Semple himself had urged against this.⁷¹ However, as Baker has argued, it may be more accurate to say that Semple exercised or tried to exercise a co-ordinating influence, opposing wildcat strikes and working towards united action.⁷² When Jack McCullough visited him in prison in May 1917 Semple appeared bitter that a major, co-ordinated strike had not occurred.⁷³ Semple as a co-ordinator rather than a moderator is a more likely argument.

On 15 December 1916 Semple appeared in the Christchurch Magistrate’s Court and on each of three charges of seditious utterances at Auckland and Wellington was

⁶⁷ *Maoriland Worker*, 20 December 1916.

⁶⁸ *New Zealand Herald*, 4 December 1916.

⁶⁹ *Evening Post*, 12 December 1916. Within days of each other Semple, James Thorn, Fred Cooke, Peter Fraser, Tim Armstrong and Tom Brindle were arrested.

⁷⁰ Richardson in May, p. 138-139.

⁷¹ Webb to Allen, 13 December 1916, AP M2/61/1, NA.

⁷² Paul Baker, ‘New Zealanders, The Great War, and Conscription’, University of Auckland, PhD thesis, 1986, p. 347.

⁷³ Melanie Nolan (ed.), *War & Class: The Diary of Jack McCullough*, Wellington: Dunmore Publishing, 2009, p. 351.

sentenced to 12 months imprisonment.⁷⁴ He conducted his own defence and argued that the Magistrate was not differentiating between advocating the repeal of the conscription act as opposed to advocating resistance to it.⁷⁵ He said he had never made any attempt to persuade any man not to enlist. As with his opposition to CMT Semple's protestations were against an immoral law. He claimed the wrong interpretation was placed on his address as he did not ask people to rebel against the government but only stated his opposition to a certain policy. But in passing sentence the Magistrate said, "You seem to have devoted your powers to attacking the position as it is and not in any way to assist voluntary recruiting... You were practically inviting prosecution... I have come to the conclusion... that your language was highly seditious...".⁷⁶

There is no doubt the government had specifically targeted Semple. Bassett and King argued the Solicitor-General, J.W. Salmon, regarded Semple as "one of the most dangerous and mischievous men in New Zealand". The purpose of his arrest, as Salmond confided to the Crown solicitor, was to obtain "as long a term of imprisonment as practicable, and there should be no question of a mere fine".⁷⁷ The Magistrate hearing Semple's case declared him to be "a dangerous man" even before he had heard his statement of defence.⁷⁸ Other labour men received similar convictions for sedition, so Semple was not unique in being targeted. Among others arrested were Fred Cooke, a Christchurch socialist, Peter Fraser and Tom Brindle from Wellington, James Thorn of the *Maoriland Worker* and in January Tim Armstrong was also imprisoned. All were charged with sedition and each received a twelve-month sentence.⁷⁹

Semple often polarised people's opinions and his 1916 imprisonment is one such example. The labour newspaper, the *Maoriland Worker* and the conservative *Evening Post* presented contrasting views of him. In the *Maoriland Worker* a Christchurch correspondent wrote, "Semple can truly be said to be the most loved and the most

⁷⁴ *Evening Post*, 15 December 1916. The convictions were secured for seditious utterances on 26 November in Wellington, 3 and 10 December in Auckland.

⁷⁵ Interview with Bruce Brown, 23 February 2005. Brown suggested that Peter Fraser made the same argument.

⁷⁶ *Evening Post*, 16 December 1916.

⁷⁷ Bassett & King, p. 72.

⁷⁸ *Maoriland Worker*, 20 December 1916.

⁷⁹ *Evening Post*, 23 December 1916, *Maoriland Worker*, 31 January 1917.

hated man in the Dominion. Like all pioneers he has been grossly misunderstood and foully libelled".⁸⁰ Although an *Evening Post* editorial acknowledged Semple's sentence was severe it also said that "we do not think that to any reasonable man who dispassionately reviews the facts the severity of the sentence will seem to be out of proportion to the gravity of the offence".⁸¹ Also referring to Semple, the *Post* concluded that "Those who belittle New Zealand's military effort are thus not only disparaging the fighting prowess of their own countrymen, but are performing very considerable disservice to the Allied cause".⁸² Semple's image was both hero and villain.

Appeals that were lodged on behalf of Semple, Brindle, Fraser and Cooke were heard in the Supreme Court in March 1917. Mr G. Hutchinson, who appeared for the Labour men, challenged the power of Parliament to pass the Military Service Act and the contention was put forward that certain War Regulations were ultra vires (beyond the legal power of a person, corporation or government). Hutchinson asserted that all the speeches had had absolutely none of the effect feared or suggested. But sitting on the bench the Chief Justice, Sir Robert Stout, said of Semple's speeches: "The government has dealt most kindly with him in bringing him before the Court under the War Regulations instead of charging him with treason". The Solicitor-General, Mr J.W. Salmond, maintained that Semple's speeches were "purely an incitement to disorder and civil war".⁸³ Sir Robert Stout declared none of the points of law raised by Hutchinson were valid and all the appeals were dismissed.⁸⁴

Although never wavering in his public support of the working class incarcerated in the Lyttelton gaol Semple expressed some doubts in a private letter to his wife. He reflected on his five months already spent in gaol, "I can assure you that it seems like five years, every week gets harder, no one knows what a charming thing liberty is till one has an experience of this kind". Semple referred to the Australian conscription referendum and questioned whether it was worth suffering for his class,

⁸⁰ *Maoriland Worker*, 20 December 1916.

⁸¹ *Evening Post*, 16 December 1916.

⁸² *Evening Post*, 21 December 1916.

⁸³ *Evening Post*, 28 March 1917.

⁸⁴ *Evening Post*, 4 April 1917.

I understand Hughes and Co secured a win, I cannot understand working men. They voted against conscription and then returned to power the very men who tried to foster the yoke of conscription on them, and turned down the men who saved them from the curse. Really the mob is a fickle lot of twisters, makes one wonder if they are worth suffering for, they would break the heart of any man.⁸⁵

Jack McCullough recorded in his diary that he visited Semple, Armstrong and Cooke in gaol also in May 1917, and

Had over an hour with them, & Im afraid found Semple & Armstrong cynical & hard. I did not like their rather savage charge that the workers were not worthy of their great sacrifice: They seem more than ever to feel that Capitalism must be overthrown root & branch before much can be done for or by the workers.⁸⁶

Still probably harbouring inner romantic notions of the working class rising up in protest on their behalf, Semple and Armstrong vented their frustration to McCullough. They may have also felt that the forces of the state had again conspired to inhibit the workers' cause as they had done in the strikes of 1912 and 1913. Both were probably a little sorry for themselves and did not hesitate to communicate their feelings to McCullough whose background was from the moderate side of the labour movement and who was no doubt concerned at their revolutionary tone.⁸⁷

In June the *Maoriland Worker* said William Parry had received a lengthy letter from Semple in which he emphasised the need for unity,

he urges that the men and women of the labour organisations should sink their minor differences and strive for working class unity for it will only be a united Labour movement that will be able to face the after war depression and save humanity from disaster.

Unity was implored, "The great need is for unity – and still more unity".⁸⁸ The NZLP had only recently formed in July 1916 - possibly Semple had been thinking over the prior schisms in the movement and was calling for unity to prevent a reoccurrence.

⁸⁵ Robert Semple to Margaret Semple 13 May 1917, RHSC.

⁸⁶ Nolan, *War & Class*, p. 351.

⁸⁷ Jack McCullough was the workers representative on the Arbitration Court from 1908-1921.

⁸⁸ *Maoriland Worker*, 20 June 1916.

And the war had again highlighted division as not all in the labour movement opposed the war effort.

The Labour community rallied in financial support of Semple and his colleagues. While in prison the Semple family received financial support from the Political Prisoners Dependents' Fund which was initiated in January 1917. By June 1917 the secretary of the Fund, E. J. Howard, reported that £1,461 15s had been received and approximately £600 had been paid out, the rate being "Married women £2 per week and 5s per week for each child". Howard said that the amount was not an extravagant wage to pay a woman whose husband was locked away on Labour's behalf.⁸⁹ When Howard reported on the Fund at the NZLP conference in July 1917 he said the amount was raised to £2 10s which was still being paid.⁹⁰

John A. Lee later claimed while Semple was in gaol he collected aid for his family from "two funds by not allowing either to know of the other". Lee also alleged that MP James O'Brien said Semple was sometimes able to receive handouts from three funds "He must have been one of the very few men to make a profit out of prison".⁹¹ The individual Funds are not named by Lee. However, Lee's recollections of Semple do hold some inaccuracies, which cast doubt on his assertions.⁹² The Political Prisoners Dependants' Fund was highly publicised in the *Maoriland Worker* with regular updates given.⁹³ If Semple was receiving money from two funds it would appear unlikely that another fund would not know about the existence of the PPDF. In her autobiography Jean Devanny, wife of Hal Devanny who had been secretary of the Puponga miners' union, said that the Miners' Federation maintained Semple's family.⁹⁴ However, the Miners' Federation contributed to the PPDF and did not appear to have a separate Fund.⁹⁵ Lee used allegations of financial indiscretions to cast doubt over Semple's character later in life – this criticism was not unique, for

⁸⁹ *Maoriland Worker*, 27 June 1916.

⁹⁰ *Maoriland Worker*, 18 July 1917.

⁹¹ John A. Lee, *Political Notebooks*, Wellington: Alister Taylor Publishing Ltd, 1973, p. 26.

⁹² For example, when discussing MPs who had been jailed Lee alleged that "Semple-who was defeated in 1922-had been one as well". But Semple never stood for Parliament in 1922. He was defeated in 1919 and 1925.

⁹³ The Fund was also discussed at the NZLP conference.

⁹⁴ Carole Ferrier (ed.), *Point of Departure: The Autobiography of Jean Devanny*, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1986, p. 75.

⁹⁵ The secretary of the Miners' Foundation acknowledged a contribution of £195 from the Australian Coal and Shale Workers' Federation which it forwarded to the PPDF. *Maoriland Worker*, 27 June 1917.

although the financial accusations particularly targeted Semple, Lee later criticised many of his early Labour colleagues.

In addition to Labour Party personnel, in April 1917 the government used the sedition laws to gaol several of the Miners' Federation leaders for their stand against conscription. During the war the miners had employed strategies such as a go-slow policy and wildcat strikes in various areas – these were protests against conscription but also encompassed contract and minimum wage issues. Richardson has argued that with the arrests “the government had effectively used the sedition laws to break up the miners' national organisation and to cripple their attempts to put the case against conscription”. He suggested the actions of the government increased the miners' sense of alienation and “the arrests and the subsequent release of their leaders from prison provided occasions for festivals of defiance, monster demonstrations...banquets and balls...and emotional expression given to the myriad grievances which together made up the collective sense of oppression”.⁹⁶ When Paddy Webb was released after three months gaol his rail journey to the Coast took place in an almost carnival atmosphere as miners enthusiastically greeted him at many stations.

Similarly, when Semple was released from prison he rode on a wave of popularity. Receptions that were held for him after his release on 14 September 1917 were immensely popular. Crowds flocked to welcome him at the Christchurch venue with many being turned away at the door.

⁹⁶ Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community*, p. 174.

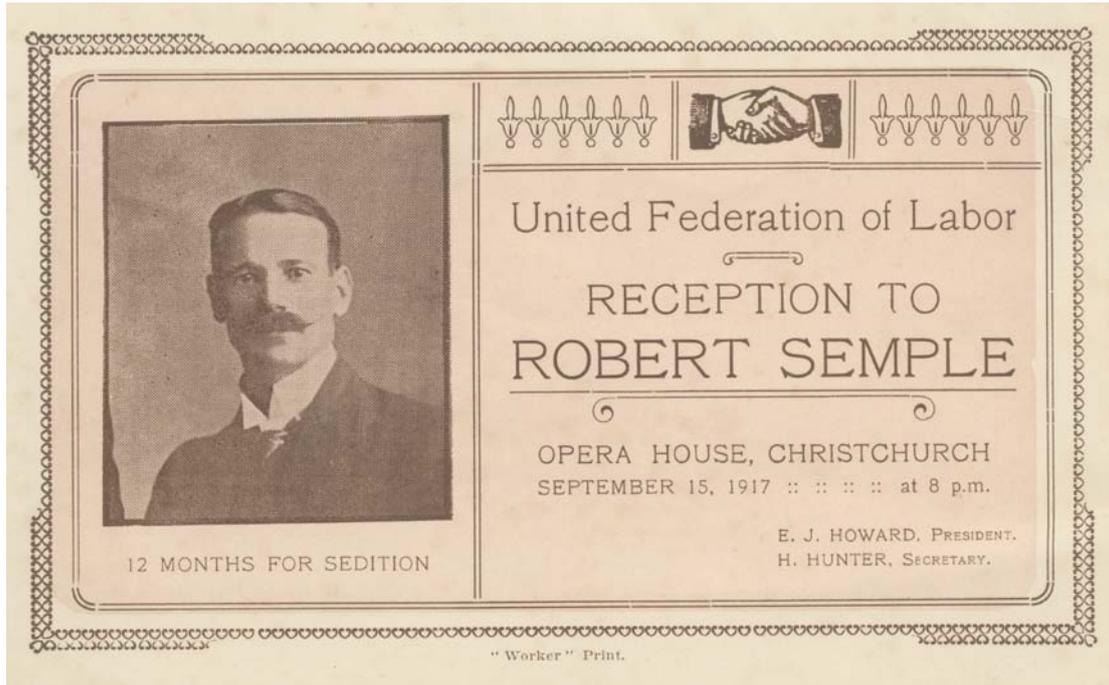


Figure 31: A printed card for Semple's official welcome in Christchurch, the day after he was released, RHSC.

Remarking on Semple's post-imprisonment popularity, the *Maoriland Worker* commented that, "There isn't a man in the present ministry that could have drawn an audience like that on Saturday evening at a bob a time".⁹⁷ On 23 September Semple was welcomed by various labour organisations in the King's Theatre, Wellington. Again, the theatre was packed and hundreds were turned away at the door. After being greeted by Harry Holland and several other labour speakers Semple thanked Labour for the welcome and for what they had done for his family while he was in gaol. Even though he had privately expressed doubts about whether the working class was worth suffering for, to this public audience he strongly reinforced his commitment:

...he wanted to assure them that he had emerged from that chamber of horrors (called his Majesty's prison) with renewed determination to fight the oppressors of his class to the bitter end.

Semple said that if rebelling against social evils, demanding equal opportunities for working men and women, and exposing criminal injustices in the commercial system

⁹⁷ *Maoriland Worker*, 26 September 1917. Semple was presented with an envelope containing £50 which had come from friends on the West Coast and the workers of the dominion.

were crimes then he would be a criminal and would continue to do so until he died.⁹⁸ At a reception in Auckland Semple was also greeted with wild enthusiasm. A *Maoriland Worker* correspondent reported that at the Lyric theatre hundreds were unable to gain admission, “while scores pleaded with the writer to ‘get us in somewhere’”.⁹⁹ As in the early days of the FOL, Semple’s popularity was fuelled by his ability to articulate a sense of grievance. Richardson has noted that, “When ‘Fighting Bob’ reminded his audiences that ‘Trial by jury was denied the Labour men, but it was extended to the murderer and sexual pervert’, he was giving voice to a widely held sense of grievance”.¹⁰⁰

The Loyalty Issue

Semple’s popularity in 1917 may have partially contributed to his success when he won the seat of Wellington South in a by-election in December 1918.¹⁰¹ However, his anti-conscription stand was a double-edged sword, which could be used by his opponents to question his loyalty – this became a reoccurring issue for both Semple and Fraser. A “Returned Soldier” was critical of the 1918 by-election results which had also put anti-conscriptionists Peter Fraser and Harry Holland into Parliament,

What right have these men to call themselves friends of men who have given their lives for their country, men who proved loyalty to their country, men who are returning scarred and maimed through the hardships they have undergone to uphold the traditions of their race. These are the real liberators and uplifters of their country.¹⁰²

This was replied to by “C.2”,

All three of the Labourites he mentioned - Messrs Fraser, Holland and Semple, MP’s recently proved their zealousness and loyalty to their working friends by being in the thick of the fight against the recent epidemic.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ *Maoriland Worker*, 26 September 1917.

⁹⁹ *Maoriland Worker*, 17 October 1917.

¹⁰⁰ Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community*, p. 175.

¹⁰¹ Semple stood as a Labour candidate. A by-election was necessary, as the sitting member had died of influenza.

¹⁰² *Evening Post*, 24 December 1918. Peter Fraser had won the seat of Wellington Central in a by-election several months previous. Harry Holland had also won the Grey seat in 1918.

¹⁰³ *Evening Post*, 27 December 1918.

The work done by Holland, Semple and Fraser during the 1919 epidemic in Wellington may have helped negate some of the disloyal tag.

Semple's anti-militarism became a feature in party politics, initially during 1919. During a debate in Parliament on soldiers' gratuities Semple confirmed his opposition to conscription. He refuted a claim by the Opposition that members of the Labour Party had said that men who went to war were fools, saying that "we were definitely opposed to conscription – but never once were we guilty of persuading men to stay at home". He personally had never advised anyone not to go to war. Semple refuted claims by the Opposition that Labour had pursued tactics that were detrimental to the welfare of the soldiers of the country generally and said he had no hesitation in supporting the 4s. a day as a gratuity allowance to the soldiers.¹⁰⁴

The general anti-militarism of the Labour Party had an international outlook, and the 1919 annual conference of the Labour Party devoted considerable time to the Treaty of Versailles.¹⁰⁵ Semple, Holland, Fraser and N. Bell were appointed a special committee to consider the Treaty. They produced a long manifesto, unanimously adopted, which "placed on record its unqualified condemnation of the terms of the Peace Treaty". The manifesto said the Treaty did not represent the voice of the people as labour had no part in making it. The reparation proposals of the Treaty and the carving up of territories without their peoples being given a voice on their future were also condemned. The manifesto said that conscription was abolished in Germany but "Militarism is more firmly established in all the Allied countries", and the machinery of the proposed League of Nations installed "a perpetual autocracy of the Foreign Ministers...of the five Great Allied Powers...nothing more or less than the existing war alliance". Finally the manifesto advocated not a league of nations but a league of peoples.¹⁰⁶

Brown has suggested that in the run-up to the 1919 general election the mainstream press and the other two parties referred to the Labour Party as "Extreme Labour" in an

¹⁰⁴ *NZPD*, 184 (1919), p. 883.

¹⁰⁵ The international policy of the Labour Party at this time included the principle of self-determination of all peoples and it condemned military occupation. In Parliament in 1920 Holland tabled a motion expressing the right of the Irish to self-determination and demanding the withdrawal of British troops from their country. *NZPD*, 186 (1920), pp. 680-86.

¹⁰⁶ *Maoriland Worker*, 16 July 1919.

effort to discredit them.¹⁰⁷ As a Labour MP Semple was targeted when he abstained from Wellington City's Peace celebrations in July 1919, claiming the expenditure was at the expense of the working class.¹⁰⁸ A carnival atmosphere enveloped the city - there was a procession, sports and many other events.¹⁰⁹ But Semple said it was a sheer waste of public money at a time when a policy of strict economy should be adopted in view of the great many problems of the working class as a result of the war. Such a policy, he suggested, was nothing short of criminal – a more humane expenditure would be to give the money to maimed or crippled soldiers and their dependents. In his opinion,

There can be no peace until the economic war between the classes is over and every man, woman and child is given an equal opportunity in life, security of tenure, a home to live in, and a place at nature's table. These are the terms of peace that I am looking forward to.¹¹⁰

An *Evening Post* editorial criticised Semple and said he had objected to the war and now appeared to object just as strongly to peace. The editorial conceded some of the events and entertainment were extravagant but argued there was value in national enthusiasm and patriotic commemoration. And even an economic value, which could not be measured in monetary terms. The *Post* portrayed Semple as an extremist - it said a reasonable protest against extravagance might have been a real public service, "But to denounce the whole process as 'a sheer waste of public money' is to go from one extreme to the other".¹¹¹

Throughout the 1919 general election campaign opposing parties continued to allege Semple and Labour's other anti-conscriptionists were disloyal.¹¹² Bassett and King have suggested a tactical campaign was waged by Semple's opponents to defeat him, as the man selected as his opposition was from a military background.¹¹³ Both the

¹⁰⁷ Brown, *The Rise of Labour*, p. 40.

¹⁰⁸ In a letter to the Clerk of the House of Representatives Semple refused the Peace Celebration invitation.

¹⁰⁹ *Evening Post*, 21 July 1919.

¹¹⁰ *Evening Post*, 22 July 1919.

¹¹¹ *Evening Post*, 23 July 1919.

¹¹² On 4 December the *New Zealand Herald* covered the Prime Minister's addresses with sub-headlines entitled 'Extreme Labour Condemned' and 'Extreme Labour, No Help during the War'. *New Zealand Herald*, 4 December 1919.

¹¹³ Bassett & King, p. 92.

Reform and Liberal parties did not stand a candidate, deferring instead to Colonel George Mitchell, an independent and a war hero with a DSO won in France.¹¹⁴ Semple claimed that Mitchell knew nothing about the political economy and that people were being called on to vote for his opponent simply because he was a soldier.¹¹⁵ Indeed, much was made of Mitchell's war service – he was often introduced as a man who had “done his bit for the country”. Mitchell was a veteran of two wars, having served in the Boer War and then saw service in Egypt and Gallipoli, where he was severely wounded.¹¹⁶

When Mitchell advocated increased pensions for soldiers, an interjector at an election meeting shouted, “Semple would fix it”. Implying that Semple was disloyal Mitchell said, “the soldiers don't want any favour from people who would have let them down in the war”.¹¹⁷ Semple countered this by saying that the Labour Party wished to fight the campaign on principles, not personalities.¹¹⁸ He disputed Mitchell's claim that Labour had let the soldiers down. He said the pages of Hansard would show that it had been the Labour Party in 1914 which had forced the government to increase its original proposal of 25s a week as the maximum pension for a totally disabled soldier, and the records of last session would show that Labour had wanted the gratuity increased to 4s a day. Semple argued it was conscription he was against and not the war itself - he had never been an enemy of the soldier¹¹⁹ and he had never advised a man not to go to the front.¹²⁰ This is consistent with his sedition defence in 1916 – he argued would not stop anyone who had made up their mind to fight.

As the campaign drew to a close an *Evening Post* editorial said in the seat of Wellington South the electors were not embarrassed by any conflict of loyalties. Regarding Mitchell the *Post* said, “A better representative at such a time as this no patriotic constituency could desire...[as against] Semple, for whom the glories of the

¹¹⁴ *Evening Post*, 4 November 1919.

¹¹⁵ *Evening Post*, 6 December 1919.

¹¹⁶ *Evening Post*, 13 December 1919.

¹¹⁷ *Evening Post*, 7 November 1919.

¹¹⁸ *Evening Post*, 12 November 1919.

¹¹⁹ *Evening Post*, 13 November 1919.

¹²⁰ *Evening Post*, 12 November 1919.

Red Flag appear to supersede all the petty distinguishing marks of national patriotism".¹²¹

Semple lost the election by 1229 votes¹²² and once again opinion was polarised on his defeat. The *Evening Post* was triumphant: "the most dramatic, more meritorious, and the most entirely satisfactory of yesterday's victories was that of Colonel Mitchell in Wellington South".¹²³ "Well in the Know" had a different view, writing (in Semple-like prose), that

Mr Semple was metaphorically dragged down by a herd of newspaper wolves. He was assailed by poisonous newspaper criticisms, gassed by a barrage of political slander and lies, drowned by murky ink squibs, and enfiladed by sectarian monsters.¹²⁴

Semple himself claimed that the result was due to the fact that wealth and influence and the forces of reaction were against him.¹²⁵ He later contended that an undue number of proxy votes were diverted to Wellington South, some "thousands of soldiers were still abroad and arrangements were made for them to vote by proxy when the troopship arrived after closing the roll".¹²⁶ However, in the official results the "Absent voters, seamen, and declarations" recorded 254 votes for Mitchell and 80 for Semple.¹²⁷ On those figures Semple's later claim is baseless.

During the 1920s Semple kept up his opposition to what he regarded as militarism in New Zealand and in the world as a whole. In keeping with Labour's official policy, he continued to advocate the repeal of the Defence Act. At the 1923 NZLP conference the following motion by Semple was adopted,

that this conference pledges itself to forthwith embark upon an active campaign demanding the repeal of the present Defence Act, as in the opinion of this conference

¹²¹ *Evening Post*, 8 December 1919.

¹²² Semple lost every one of the eight polling stations.

¹²³ *Evening Post*, 18 December 1919.

¹²⁴ *Evening Post*, 24 December 1919.

¹²⁵ For example, Semple claimed that "motor-cars galore" had come from the Wairarapa to assist his opponent. *Evening Post*, 18 December 1919.

¹²⁶ Mowbray, 'The Real Bob Semple'.

¹²⁷ Return of Polling-Places, *AJHR*, 1922 (V.III), H33A, p. 17.

it is unnecessary and useless, and has a demoralising effect upon the boyhood of our country.¹²⁸

Associated with the question of defence was Labour's international policy, Semple said at the 1923 conference he believed the spirit of internationalism inspired the conference. Although Labour interpreted internationalism as, in part, the practice of cooperation and understanding between nations, others saw it in a more sinister light. In a letter to the *Post* J. D. Sievwright viewed Semple's call for internationalism as a call for revolution.¹²⁹ He said that NZLP President Tom Brindle was pronouncing for pacifism and Semple for the spirit of internationalism. He declared it was "a pie-bald policy – one for politics and the other for industrialism...the Labour party is a strange and cunning mixture". Sievwright suggested internationalism was what

the Red Flag of the Lenins and Trotskys stands for. The Red flag stands for socialism and world-wide comradeship. This must be accomplished by revolution.... Mr Semple says the spirit of internationalism was the spirit of the Labour Party conference. Does not internationalism mean revolution?... Men like Messrs. Brindle, Semple, Holland Fraser and all the Red Flag Internationalists must be eliminated from the Party. Their policy is one of destruction.¹³⁰

However, Semple's call for internationalism was an expression of Party policy – the Party's 1922 manifesto referred to uniting the world in a federation of peoples, a reflection of the Party's dislike of the British Empire mother-complex image. To many, such as Sievwright, this was almost treason. As Brown has written, "Nowhere did the...Party more outrage the orthodox than in its expressed heresies on international affairs".¹³¹

The 1920s Campaigns

From the early 1920s Labour attacked militarism on several fronts. For example, as part of its campaign against CMT the Parliamentary Party regularly voted for a reduction of the army estimates. Another method in this general anti-militarist opposition was the organisation of "No More War" demonstrations in which Semple

¹²⁸ *Evening Post*, 5 April 1923: Report of the Annual Conference of NZLP 1923, NZLP Headquarters, Wellington.

¹²⁹ Other strands in Labour's international policy were self-determination of nations, condemnation of military occupation by foreign powers and independence in foreign policy.

¹³⁰ *Evening Post*, 6 April 1923.

¹³¹ Brown, *The Rise of Labour*, p. 109.

took part. In July 1923 Semple spoke in Christchurch; his subject was “If mankind does not end war, war will end mankind”. Semple argued that the legalised robbery or capitalism automatically produced the legalised murder of warfare and there would always be wars while capitalism lasted. Semple warned his audience against the boy scouts as a military movement, whose aim was to “catch the children as they hopped out of the cradle”. He advised all those who wanted to work for the people to get into some organisation and referred his audience to Peace organisations in Christchurch such as the National Peace Council.¹³² In 1923, the National Executive reported in the *Maoriland Worker* that the first series of “No More War” demonstrations, held in all the main centres, had proved very successful, “the secretary reported that he had letters signed by various prominent churchmen and others, saying that they were in accord with the principle of No More War”.¹³³

While Semple was a Wellington City Councillor he and his fellow Labour councillors, who almost always voted as a block, consistently opposed what they perceived as any activity encouraging or supporting militarism. In June 1925 ten ships from the American Pacific fleet visited Wellington. The finance committee of the Council recommended £2,000 be used to entertain the fleet. The Labour councillors, who strongly objected to what they called “military pomp when there were so many really urgent calls upon the council”, vigorously opposed this.¹³⁴ Semple said he strongly objected to such a large amount of money being thrown away, “They could vote £2,000 away but they would object to adding 6d a day to the wages of men who did the hard work of the city”.¹³⁵ The recommendation was approved by majority vote. In February 1927 the Duke and Duchess of York visited New Zealand and the Wellington City Council drafted an address of welcome to the visitors. Semple and his two colleagues issued a public statement wherein they said while not wishing to be discourteous they were “entirely opposed to the militaristic sections of the address, which extolled the agencies of force and war”.¹³⁶ In council they recorded their dissent against the purchase of twenty-six copies of the Address and Reply to their royal highnesses at a cost of £46 and sixty photos of the civic reception at a cost of

¹³² *Maoriland Worker*, 8 August 1923.

¹³³ *Maoriland Worker*, 29 August 1923.

¹³⁴ *Evening Post*, 19 June 1925.

¹³⁵ *Evening Post*, 19 June 1925.

¹³⁶ *Evening Post*, 25 February 1927.

£54. This attitude was consistent with the policy of the Labour Party. Semple's and his colleagues' actions were endorsed by the Wellington Labour Representation Committee as being in accordance with working class principles.

As President of the Labour Party Semple devoted a significant portion of his 1928 Presidential address to attacking rearmament and compulsory military training in New Zealand. During the 1920s the Party opposed the British government building a major naval base at Singapore to strengthen imperial defence. Their opposition was mainly on the grounds that it was unnecessary in the existing international scene and might actually worsen the situation by gratuitously alarming Japan.¹³⁷ In 1927 the government decided that New Zealand should contribute a gift of £1,000,000 to help with its cost. Labour strenuously opposed the contribution when so many government services were being cut back and unemployment increasing. Semple told the 1928 Conference, "Yet we can spend £1,000,000 on the swamps of Singapore to assist in creating a military machine that can serve no other purpose than to create racial antagonism and assist in promoting future wars". Regarding CMT, Semple suggested that in the light of modern military warfare, "We have wasted eight million pounds in our junior conscription policy in this country since the inception of the Act...our method of juvenile conscription is as ridiculous as it is unjust and even from a military point of view, farcical". He rejected "as a fallacy the basis of argument for military preparedness, the idea that if you wish for peace prepare for war". Semple said that in the modern age of science, compulsory military training was useless and a waste of money.¹³⁸

Semple's anti-militarism permeated his union activities. While he was secretary of the Wellington General Labourers' union he instigated an anti-war campaign. There was no particular context or prior discussion to Semple's proposal recorded in the union's minute book. At a meeting in December 1927 the union approved his proposal to give a series of lanternslide lectures which would "expose the horrors of war". The union's minute book records Semple claiming that war was again threatening and "every labour organisation should use every effort to propagate the principles of international

¹³⁷ Brown, *The Rise of Labour*, p. 119.

¹³⁸ Presidential Address, Report of the Annual Conference of NZLP 1928, NZLP Headquarters, Wellington.

peace and to particularly endeavour to engender into the minds of the young a detestation of war with all its horrors". The President of the union commended the proposal and said civilisation could not advance unless war ended. The proposal was adopted unanimously and it was also suggested by Fred Freeman that the slides should be lent to any other organisation that wanted to use them for peace propaganda.¹³⁹

Semple spread his message far and wide. His first lecture was in Palmerston North in March 1928. In May the union approved a written invitation from the West Coast miners for Semple to give a series of anti-war lectures on the Coast.¹⁴⁰ Semple gave six lectures which he said were all successful, "The action of the union in launching the anti-war campaign which is unique in character and which has attracted so much attention and favourable comments, has been a thousand times justified". He continued the campaign in the North Island delivering his lecture "The Ghastly Horrors of War" with the lanternslides in Napier several months later. Semple said there was one choice – civilisation will either put down war, or war will put down civilisation.¹⁴¹

Under the Labour Party banner Semple continued to give lectures against war up until 1935. In 1930, in the King Country, he gave three speeches on militarism and war – the *New Zealand Worker* headline read "Labour Propaganda for World Peace". And "With scores of lantern slides giving authentic pictures of the 'glories' of the late war Mr Semple illustrated a powerful indictment of the murderous methods of jingo and imperialist diplomacy". The *Worker* said at all his meetings Semple advocated the repeal of compulsory military training in New Zealand.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ 19 December 1927 Minute Book Wellington General Labourers' Union, Peter Butler Papers, 2004-204-2/1, WTU.

¹⁴⁰ 28 May 1928 Minute Book Wellington General Labourers' Union, Peter Butler Papers, 2004-204-2/1, WTU.

¹⁴¹ *New Zealand Worker*, 1 August 1928.

¹⁴² *New Zealand Worker*, 18 June 1930.



Lantern **Lecture**

THE REJECTED OF THE AGES
This impressive picture was painted by the French artist, Debat-Poisson, and was hung in the Paris Salon in 1899. Had the picture been painted 20 years later, it would have been necessary to add a representation of the most disastrous denial of the teaching of Christ in all history. And to-day the Governments of the world are preparing for an even more terrible war.

Entitled
**“THE GHASTLY
 HORRORS OF
 WAR”**

Will be delivered by
MR. ROBERT SEMPLE

at MUNICIPAL CONCERT HALL
CHRISTCHURCH

on SUNDAY, MAY 13, 7.30 p.m.

Another World's War will, according to eminent authorities, end our civilization. The People only can prevent it.

COME IN YOUR THOUSANDS

New Zealand Worker, 129 Wakefield Street, Wellington

Figure 12: A flyer advertising one of Semple's anti-war lectures, Eph-C-PEACE-1934-01, WTU.

Semple's attitude was again consistent with Labour's general opposition to CMT. In the three consecutive years, 1927 to 1929, unsuccessful motions for the repeal of compulsory military training were moved in Parliament by Semple's colleagues, John A. Lee and William Jordan.¹⁴³ Semple was re-elected to Parliament in 1928 and in 1929 spoke in support of Jordan's motion. The MP for Gisborne, Mr Waite, said it was necessary for the nations to prepare for war in order to avoid war – this was strongly refuted by Semple who said “Surely it would be better to prevent the race in armaments, the tremendous cost of preparation for war, and the great loss of life...when war comes, and to utilise the money in creating useful employment for the millions of men used as ‘cannon fodder’”. He reiterated the argument contained in his lantern lectures, that “war has reached the stage where unless it ceases it will end civilisation”.¹⁴⁴ Semple's message was also Labour's message in the run-up to the 1935 general election: “The Labour Party stands four-square for peace and good will. We believe in the law of live and let live. We don't believe people killing one another should settle a dispute. War is the enemy of mankind”.¹⁴⁵

Changing Attitudes in Government

However, once Labour became the government and stepped over the threshold of power Semple and many of his government colleagues found they had to adjust their thinking regarding war – their idealism had to be modified in many ways. This was largely the result of the deteriorating international situation in Europe. In WWI Semple had linked war to capitalism and believed the working class were merely pawns in an imperialistic war. But in 1936 there was real alarm at the rise of fascism in Europe. The National Executive Report presented to the 1936 Labour Party annual conference said that, “The march of the dictators continues in Europe, and the peace of the World is threatened on all sides...vast changes are going on in the world...Governments must adapt themselves to these new conditions”.¹⁴⁶ Semple and his colleagues perceived fascism as an even greater threat to the working class - they felt they had to protect the gains made by their own class now that they were the

¹⁴³ W. David McIntyre, *New Zealand Prepares for War*, Christchurch: University of Canterbury Press, 1988, p. 110.

¹⁴⁴ *NZPD*, 221 (1929), pp. 807-808.

¹⁴⁵ *Evening Post*, 27 August 1935.

¹⁴⁶ National Executive Report, Report of the Annual Conference of NZLP 1936, NZLP Headquarters, Wellington. The report did not specify how governments would have to adapt to these new conditions.

government. Neil Smith, who was a Christian pacifist, appealed for exemption from the armed services in WWII. Before his appeal he met with Semple (in his role as Minister of National Service) to suggest an alternative course of action. Smith said Semple told him

that during the First World War the working man had nothing to gain but now that the Labour Party was in power New Zealand's new 'heritage' had to be defended at all costs, especially against the fascists.¹⁴⁷

Labour was also concerned about the Japanese threat from the Pacific, which was not present in WWI, realising that the British presence in Singapore would be of little use to New Zealand, especially if the British were preoccupied elsewhere on the globe.¹⁴⁸ In addition, Semple's opposition to WWI had included the call for equality of sacrifice or the conscription of wealth. In 1939 the Labour government enforced the Emergency Regulations Act which generally regulated, controlled or prohibited activities deemed "injurious to the public interest".¹⁴⁹ Their aim was to guard against wartime speculation and was in the government's eyes, conscription of wealth. Thus, a myriad of altered circumstances contributed to Semple's changed attitude to war.

In opposition to the emerging fascist dictatorships in Spain, Italy and Germany Semple advocated democracy. In 1936 this was combined with promoting the British monarchy – a change from his earlier perspective. When King Edward died in 1910 Semple said he was loyal to his class and humanity as a whole, and he was not going to glorify and mourn one old man.¹⁵⁰ But at a 1936 farewell function for William Jordan, Labour's newly appointed High Commissioner to London, Semple proclaimed:

¹⁴⁷ Semple cited in David Grant, *Out In The Cold: Pacifists and Conscientious Objectors in New Zealand during World War II*, Auckland: Reed Methuen, 1986, p. 119.

¹⁴⁸ Bassett & King, p. 167.

¹⁴⁹ Altogether there were 68 sets of war regulations between 1 September and the end of 1939.

¹⁵⁰ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 25 May 1910.

...it should be everyone's aim to perpetuate democracy and the monarchy, since the combination of those elements have ensured the progress of the British Empire, while other countries are coming under dictatorships. It should be ensured that the King of England shall rule for all time rather than any other form of government involving a dictatorship, whether from the bottom or the top, should emerge.¹⁵¹

This changed perspective can also be attributed to Semple's world view of class warfare now receding into the background. He and his working class colleagues were in power and the democratic government, which was friendly to the workers, was the institution to be preserved. In 1939 his loyalty to the British Empire was emphatic. Several days after war was declared Semple said that, "now the step had been taken our duty is to make a vow that if England goes down we go down with her... We must do all we can to perpetuate British institutions and British liberty".¹⁵²

The Labour Party was a party of peace but not peace at any price. When Prime Minister Savage signed the Memorandum to the League of Nations in 1936 its contents read: "we are prepared, to the extent of our power, to join in the collective application of force against any future aggressor".¹⁵³ Similarly, speaking in Waimate in 1936 Semple said "I am not a militarist, but I would forfeit my own life to protect our Empire from any sort of invasion that threatened to take away our democratic form of government...I would do it as readily as drink a cup of tea".¹⁵⁴ When work on the new aerodrome at Nelson started in early 1937 Semple repeated that he was not a militarist or anything of that sort but he had sense enough to see that they were living in a troubled world. They would never take war to others but the fact was that war might come to them and they would be prepared to protect their country.¹⁵⁵

In May 1939, as part of its search for volunteers, Prime Minister Savage announced a national register of men from 20 to 55.¹⁵⁶ When something similar had been announced in 1915, the National Federation of Miners, of which Semple was the

¹⁵¹ *New Zealand Herald*, 11 July 1936.

¹⁵² *New Zealand Herald*, 5 September 1939.

¹⁵³ Paul, p. 103.

¹⁵⁴ *New Zealand Herald*, 2 March 1936.

¹⁵⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, 8 February 1937.

¹⁵⁶ *New Zealand Herald*, 23 May 1939. Savage said, "We must prepare ourselves one and all to be able at a moments notice to concentrate our energies on the business of the nations defence".

national organiser, warned the register was a stealthy step along the road to military conscription, an “insidious effort to strike at the liberty of the people”.¹⁵⁷ However, in 1939 Semple actively recruited for the register on behalf of the government – he visited public works camps to drum up enlistments. He said the force was for home defence and said it was not a question of taking part in wars the world over “I only ask for a pledge that New Zealand will be defended, not that we shall fight for the interests of groups like the shipping companies and the wool kings, but that we shall defend our liberty”.¹⁵⁸ He went further at a recruiting meeting at a works camp at Oaro saying that, “If it were necessary to send men overseas to stand by the Mother country the government would not be found inactive. Most probably an appeal for volunteers would be made...but the man who is not ready to defend New Zealand and the heritage of his children is a coward”.¹⁵⁹

Although Semple often articulated the feelings of many in the Labour Party, he was considered by some to be occasionally tactless in his delivery. Labour still had a deep-seated distrust of military organisations not under government control. Prior to 1939 Defence Leagues were formed, aimed at educating public opinion towards defence measures. They soon criticised the government for its lack of preparedness. Labour distrusted the League, the labour newspaper the *Standard* warning against the League “as the possible germ of a fascist force”. In May 1939, campaigning in the Christchurch South electorate, Semple attacked Defence League personnel who he claimed were the associates in war of the men who plundered the nation in 1914-18.¹⁶⁰ He personally attacked some of the returned soldiers in the Defence Leagues, saying that the developing Leagues were composed of a gang of scaremongers who wanted to create a psychology of fear.¹⁶¹ A *Herald* editorial said Semple’s vicious attack was unwarranted,

It is unfortunate for Mr Semple that he should be sheltering in a house of glass while he throws his stones of stupid vituperation. During the years he mentions the men whom he now condemns were playing their part in New Zealand’s war effort...There is...cause for apology now to be made to New Zealanders whose names are honoured by the

¹⁵⁷ *Evening Post*, 1 September 1915. Semple was national organiser for the Miners’ Federation.

¹⁵⁸ *Evening Post*, 5 June 1939.

¹⁵⁹ *New Zealand Herald*, 6 June 1939.

¹⁶⁰ There was a by-election in Christchurch following the death of Labour MP E.J. Howard.

¹⁶¹ *New Zealand Herald*, 19 May 1939.

majority of citizens.¹⁶²

The Auckland organiser for the New Zealand Defence League, Mr Marryatt, said Semple should have attacked the policy of the League rather than the personnel. “Hal Ford” in a letter to the editor said Semple’s remarks against the League’s personnel were “calculated impertinence”.¹⁶³ The Labour Party nonetheless expressed real concern about the Defence League. In her history of the Second World War home front, Nancy Taylor said although the League was not named it was clearly referred to in a remit from the 1937 NZLP conference which urged that the government “disband and prevent the formation of armed forces not directly under the control of government, to prevent the wearing of party uniforms, and to legislate to ensure that the manufacture of arms and munitions is clearly under government control”.¹⁶⁴ Semple often gave voice to wider Labour concerns, on this occasion highlighting the possible rise of a local form of fascism.

Following the commencement of WWII Semple’s fiery rhetoric was directed at anti-war propagators including Communists. Speaking to workers at the Otahuhu railway workshops in November 1939, where some pamphlets containing Communist anti-war propaganda had been circulated, Semple condemned Communists saying they were “cowardly, dishonest curs...with the souls of vipers...and are not fit to live in the country or any others”.¹⁶⁵ An editorial in the conservative *New Zealand Herald* praised Semple’s language saying although invective was not a polite or precise weapon it was apt, given the nature of the Communist propaganda:

Using his tongue as a thong, the Minister fought in the open with an exuberance, honesty and frankness that atoned for verbal extravagance....Mr Semple flung the epithets of vultures, burglars and vipers calling up the appropriate associations of carrion, theft and poison.¹⁶⁶

When it came to Communism, Semple, the Opposition and the mainstream press were largely in accord.

¹⁶² *New Zealand Herald*, 20 May 1938.

¹⁶³ *New Zealand Herald*, 20 May 1938.

¹⁶⁴ Nancy M. Taylor, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: The Home Front Volume I*, Wellington: Government Print, 1986, pp. 26-27.

¹⁶⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, 29 November 1939.

¹⁶⁶ *New Zealand Herald*, 29 November 1939.

Semple now argued that many who opposed the present war were enemies of the state. In 1940 he described the “other side” as “a conglomeration of political enemies of the State, Communists, pacifists and direct agents of foreign powers”.¹⁶⁷

Communist pamphlets were circulated at the Addington railway workshops allegedly justifying the Russian invasion of Finland. Semple visited the workshops and speaking to the men vigorously attacked the activities of the Communist Party.¹⁶⁸

Then speaking in Christchurch he said, “I can understand the honest and sincere pacifist who objects to war on religious grounds but I cannot understand him associating himself with other sections which adopt the guise of pacifism and the same time glorify the red murderer, Stalin”.¹⁶⁹ He was critical, in general, of people who objected to New Zealand doing anything to defend the Commonwealth but then glorified aggression with support for Stalin. During the 1920s Semple had encouraged membership of peace organisations, but now believed many pacifists were Communists and categorised them, as a whole, as political opposition.

Some more vocal opponents pointed out the difference between Semple’s and Fraser’s early and later views and alleged the two men had betrayed their political principles. At the Labour Party conference in 1940 Alex Galbraith, chairman of the Wellington Communist Party, distributed a pamphlet which said,

Many of us remember Peter Fraser and Bob Semple of the Red Federation days when they denounced the war, made seditious utterances against crowned heads of Europe and went to gaol. Times indeed have changed to find these men hobnobbing with the enemies of labour assisting the very class that gaoled them in 1916.¹⁷⁰

Another pamphlet called on members of the Labour Party who were loyal to the principles of socialism to join in a common struggle against the imperialistic war.¹⁷¹

Semple alleged that Communists were responsible for many anonymous letters he had received threatening his life and threatening to burn his house down. He also said his car had been sabotaged with substances put in the petrol tank.¹⁷² The Communist accusations can be seen within the context of a lengthy and sustained antagonism

¹⁶⁷ *New Zealand Herald*, 8 February 1940.

¹⁶⁸ *New Zealand Herald*, 5 March 1940.

¹⁶⁹ *Press*, 8 February 1940.

¹⁷⁰ *New Zealand Herald*, 26 March 1940.

¹⁷¹ *New Zealand Herald*, 26 March 1940.

¹⁷² *New Zealand Herald*, 8 December 1939.

between not only Semple and the Communists but the Labour Party and the Communists. In this particular instance the Communists used the perceived anomaly in Semple's and Fraser's view of war as ammunition against two of their most vocal opponents.

Semple, Fraser and the government itself also had a different view of incitement to violence at this time. So concerned by Communist and other perceived subversive activity that the government issued the Public Safety Emergency Regulations in early 1940. Contained in them was authority for the Commissioner of Police to prohibit processions or meetings he considered likely to be injurious to public safety by impeding the effective conduct of the war.¹⁷³ Fraser gave an assurance that the people's freedom would not be injured but said that speech-giving inducement to violence would not be tolerated.¹⁷⁴ This was ironic as the government of 1913 had arrested Semple and Fraser and charged them with inciting people to commit a breach of the peace.¹⁷⁵ Semple had said in an Auckland speech in 1913 "These people have batons to club you...I ask you for the defence of your characters...to be ready to club them back".¹⁷⁶ It could be argued Semple and Fraser were now the makers of the same law they were accused of breaking in earlier days however, both would justifiably argue, that the circumstances were now entirely different.

Throughout Semple's public career criticism of his earlier attitude to war and conscription constantly plagued him. In an effort to combat this he focussed on his opposition to the non-conscription of wealth rather than the conscription of men. Campaigning in Christchurch prior to the 1938 general election Semple was asked to define his attitude during 1914-1918. He denied he had opposed the war and the British Empire and said he had fallen foul of the then government because he was opposed

not to war, but to the conscription of flesh and blood without the conscription of profits from the wealthy. I was opposed to the ruthless profiteering of 1914 and exposed it. I was imprisoned for things I said

¹⁷³ *New Zealand Herald*, 23 February 1940

¹⁷⁴ *New Zealand Herald*, 26 February 1940.

¹⁷⁵ Semple was charged with inciting people to resist constables as well as to commit a breach of the peace. Fraser was charged with inciting persons to commit a breach of the peace.

¹⁷⁶ *Greymouth Evening Star*, 6 December 1913.

in exposing it on the grounds that my attack brought the government to ridicule...Under the Labour government no one will be bled white while their sons are bleeding at the front.¹⁷⁷

The cartoonist Minhinnick implied that Semple was similar to Hitler who had written a book called *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle) during a brief imprisonment. Semple took exception to the cartoon – no doubt due to Minhinnick’s synonymous portrayal of himself and Hitler.

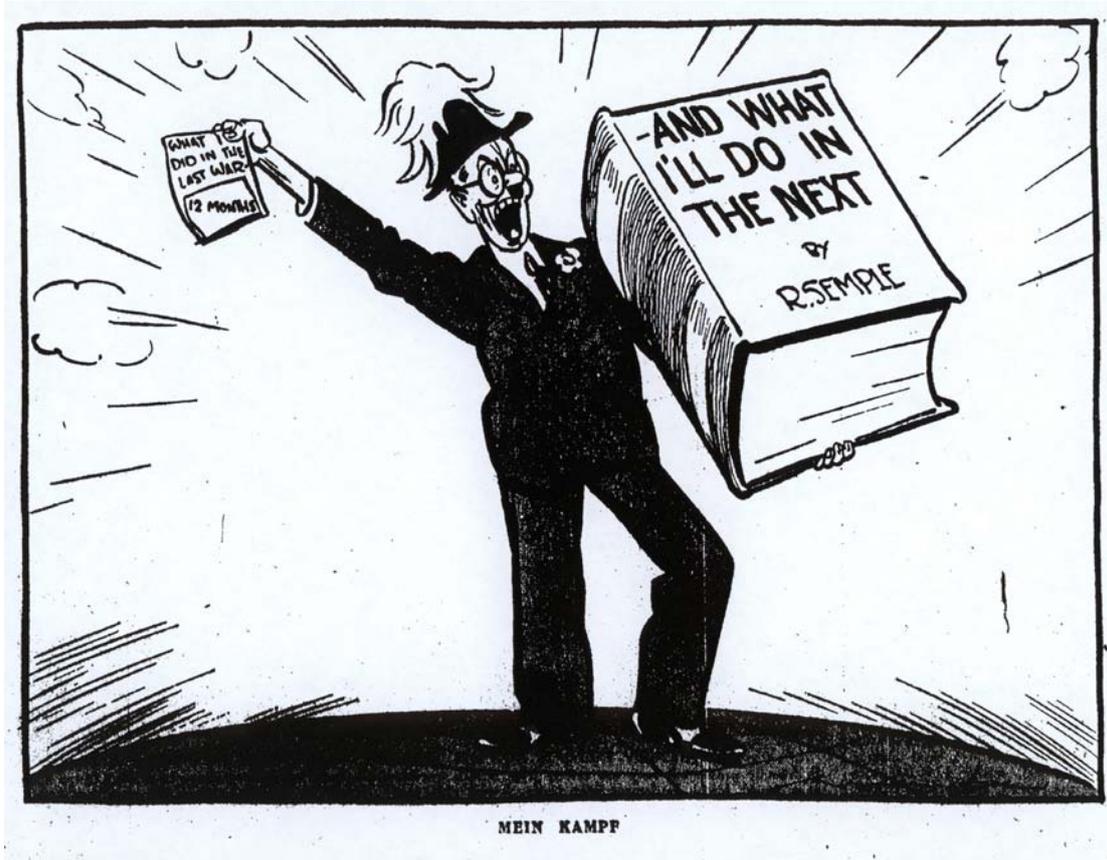


Figure 33: *New Zealand Herald*, 20 May 1938.

In a letter to the editor he said the men he represented were opposed to the conscription of human flesh and blood while the war profiteer was allowed an open run, “For that, and for that reason alone, I was imprisoned”. He said he committed no crime, “If war broke out tomorrow and the same profiteering were committed I would take up precisely the same stand”.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ *New Zealand Herald*, 28 September 1938.

¹⁷⁸ *New Zealand Herald*, 27 May 1938.

This avenue of criticism continued during WWII. After the call-up of married men without children Semple alleged that poisonous circulars making personal attacks on him had been distributed to those men who had been called up. He said the circulars attempted to give people the impression that he was a conscientious objector in the last war.¹⁷⁹ Speaking at a public meeting in Westport in 1940 Semple said he had always preached peace, but never the folded arms policy. It was not his nature to be a pacifist. And he had said in 1916 that he had never stopped anyone from actually going to war. In Westport an interjector asked why Semple did not fight.¹⁸⁰ He replied he had not refused to fight in the last war and in this war he had twice volunteered for construction work. When asked why wasn't wealth conscripted at present he said it was "Companies with 10,000 profit are paying 6,500 in taxation, ten times more than in the last war".¹⁸¹ In 1940 Semple, then aged 67 years old, wrote a letter to Major-General J. Duigan offering to serve in the Army, preferably in a constructional company without a commission or any special privileges. He said, "I feel I can stand up to any hardship that I may be called upon to encounter...I have had a lifetime of experience in constructional work of all kinds, both underground and on the surface".¹⁸² The letter was published in the daily newspapers and was no doubt a deliberate effort by Semple to counter criticism of his stand during WWI.

Many individuals and organisations expressed opposition when it was mooted that the Labour government would introduce conscription, some quoting Semple's early speeches in support of their position. The Anti-Conscription League in Christchurch sent Fraser, the acting Prime Minister, a resolution opposing the re-introduction of conscription or any form of compulsory militarism. The League said the arguments used during WWI were "still as true today as in the past". They quoted Semple who they argued had spoken in the Civic Theatre in Christchurch in 1924 and said, "The next war will end civilisation".¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ *New Zealand Herald*, 17 February 1942.

¹⁸⁰ Semple had never been called on to serve in WWI, probably as he had five children. If Semple had been called to serve it is likely he would have been excused on medical grounds due to the injury to his hand suffered in an early mining accident.

¹⁸¹ *New Zealand Herald*, 5 December 1940.

¹⁸² *New Zealand Herald*, 20 March 1940.

¹⁸³ W. Berryman secretary Anti-conscription League, Christchurch to P.Fraser 10 October 1939, Labour Party Papers, MS-Papers-0270-005 Conscription, WTU.

In 1940 conscription was introduced in New Zealand by the Labour government and Semple, who had said in 1915 that conscription would mean the negation of human liberty, drew the first ball in the conscription ballot in WWII.¹⁸⁴ For many, Semple's and the Labour government's attitude was a betrayal of the labour movements' abhorrence of war and militarism. In 1939 the Kilbernie branch of the Labour Party sent a resolution to the Prime Minister stating, "this branch urges the government to stand by the principles of the labour movement and refuse to introduce conscription in this country for the purpose of sending troops overseas".¹⁸⁵ However, now in power and holding the belief that their government was a workers' government which would continue to instigate further social progress, Semple and Fraser viewed the two World Wars differently. Bassett and King have said that to Fraser's mind WWI had been a conflict between imperial powers; its only relevance for workers had been that they had provided the cannon fodder; "WWII, on the other hand, had been started by right-wing reactionary forces out to smash the legitimate organisational and political expression of workers' rights".¹⁸⁶ And Semple certainly spoke of WWII in terms of the struggle to uphold democratic rights. Semple's real fear of fascist aggression now replaced his earlier argument that war was a capitalist device. For Semple, the war had to be won to protect the labour movement and the gains of wider social advancement it had made and ensure its future. It could be argued that Semple's ultimate aim during both WWI and WWII was the protection of the working class – in WWI, it was from an imperialist war with no relevance for the workers but in WWII the protection was from a different angle – the working class's government had to be protected. Conscription was a means to achieve that end.

In the May 1940 Parliamentary debate on the implementation of the Emergency Regulations, which would introduce conscription, Semple and Labour's other long-term anti-militarists were silent. Fraser argued that discussion about conscription was merely academic in view of the growing menace that faced the British Commonwealth. Similarly, Semple said during the debate the war was "the greatest crises the British Commonwealth has ever had to face".¹⁸⁷ Fraser said the country felt

¹⁸⁴ *Maoriland Worker*, 1 September 1915.

¹⁸⁵ G. Stott Secretary Kilbernie branch NZLP to Prime Minister, 14 September 1939, Labour Party Papers, MS-Papers-0270-005 Conscription, WTU.

¹⁸⁶ Bassett & King, p. 186-187.

¹⁸⁷ *NZPD*, 257 (1940), p. 59.

the voluntary system did not embody the spirit of service that the country demands, “There is that feeling – a feeling that must be shared by all, including some of us who were strong anti-conscriptionists under ordinary conditions; for it is the life of the Commonwealth for which we are fighting at the present time”.¹⁸⁸ John A. Lee moved an amendment requiring a national referendum on conscription but this lapsed for want of a seconder. Semple’s only significant contribution to the debate was to deny accusations by the Opposition that the government had not reduced the number of men on public works to the extent they should have done. The Conscription Bill passed without division – as stated by Grant, “Party loyalty, parliamentary discipline demanded by Fraser, and the war clouds blowing all over Europe were enough to persuade these M.P.s that the move was necessary”.¹⁸⁹

If Semple did have any lingering doubts about introducing conscription he did not express them publicly and never demurred from Party policy. Semple was very loyal to the Party, Bruce Brown concluding that, “I would have thought he was 100% loyal and probably had a few scars to show for it”.¹⁹⁰ Also Semple was not a man for delicacy or compromise. Regarding New Zealand’s part in the war he said in 1941, that “There was no other road we could take... There are only two sides of the fence – Hitler’s and ours. The doors of mercy and the gates of reason were slammed in the face of Britain and other parts of the Empire. For myself, I would rather perish on the hillsides of New Zealand than yield to the forces that are seeking to enslave free peoples”. Conscription was a means to protect New Zealand from enslavement, and his support was unequivocal.¹⁹¹

In 1940 Semple’s role as a key publicist and propagandist in the Labour Party was called on again. The government created the new portfolio of National Service and Semple was given the responsibility as Minister. Nancy Taylor has suggested that Semple’s appointment was due to his reputation for getting things done and when Fraser announced the appointment he said, “Mr Semple could be relied upon to handle the many problems associated with national service with his customary vigour

¹⁸⁸ *NZPD*, 257 (1940), p. 21.

¹⁸⁹ Grant, p. 52.

¹⁹⁰ Interview with Bruce Brown, 23 February 2005.

¹⁹¹ *New Zealand Herald*, 8 April 1941.

and efficiency”.¹⁹² In August 1940 Semple announced plans to organise a Home Guard, and in his recruiting drive he emphasised New Zealand was in the danger zone. Fran Shor examined the gendering of early working class protest in New Zealand and said, “Red Fed agitator/organisers articulated their own sense of oppositional masculinity”.¹⁹³ As an example he said Semple expressed this in 1911 when he said, “It’s about time we stood on our feet like men and demanded what we want”.¹⁹⁴ In 1940 Semple still framed his call for solidarity (now on a national level) with a gender dimension, emphasising masculinity. In Auckland he said he had found it difficult to convince people that the enemy was right at the back door “There are some who have said that if the enemy comes to New Zealand we will not be able to stop them. Such a man is not built in the mould of the average man, I am inclined to think he is built on the biological basis of a whitebait”.¹⁹⁵ And the enemy was close, as evidenced by the mining of the *Niagara* in North Auckland waters in June 1940 followed by the presumed loss of the *Turakina* 300 miles off the West Coast in August. Addressing meetings of local bodies in the Auckland town hall, Semple said he was amazed at the apathy and indifference of the people to the realities of the present situation “I do not want to create a panic or scare people, but we have either to take the threats on our safety lying down or stand up and fight”.¹⁹⁶

Semple’s main task as propagandist was to gain recruits rather than developing the organisational details of the Home Guard.¹⁹⁷ As a consequence there was criticism of a lack of details. In a letter to the editor “10/1165” said nothing definite had been given to people regarding the composition of the Home Guard “More action and less oratory is needed. A little definite and substantial information would without doubt attract thousands of experienced soldiers to the Home guard”.¹⁹⁸ “Another R.S” said regarding some apathy to the Home Guard “Much of this would be dispelled if the authorities would publish a clear statement of the terms of enlistment, duration and

¹⁹² *New Zealand Herald*, 14 June 1940.

¹⁹³ Fran Shor, ‘Syndicalist Counterpublics and the Industrial Workers, 1908-14’, in Pat Moloney & Kerry Taylor (eds.), *On The Left: Essays on Socialism in New Zealand*, Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2002, pp. 59-72.

¹⁹⁴ Semple cited in Shor, ‘Syndicalist Counterpublics and the Industrial Workers, 1908-14’.

¹⁹⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, 28 November 1940.

¹⁹⁶ *New Zealand Herald*, 30 November 1940

¹⁹⁷ During several of the Home Guard meetings Semple said, “they (Semple and his lieutenant David Wilson) had not come here to give details, you can get them from your committees that function for the guard”.

¹⁹⁸ *New Zealand Herald*, 2 December 1940

extent of obligations...the whole movement seems to lack clarity and inspiration”.¹⁹⁹ Semple acknowledged the criticism but said, “My job is not to give details but to tell the country of the position...I say definitely that this country is in danger and I am asking the people to get together to be prepared to defend it”.²⁰⁰

In 1941 Semple was again given the responsibility for a new Ministry becoming the first Minister of Rehabilitation. Nancy Taylor also attributed this appointment to Semple’s reputation for getting things done.²⁰¹ Although initially Opposition leader Sid Holland, leader since November 1940, had suggested that a Minister of Rehabilitation have no other responsibilities, he also mooted that he be a practical man and used Semple as an example, “...the former Minister of Public Works the Hon. R Semple was an illustration of how a practical man who got round the job made a success of it by knowing what was going on”.²⁰² Semple, his supervisory board and advisory council, developed policy – in January 1943 he released a comprehensive statement on the government’s rehabilitation plans.²⁰³ But Rehabilitation needed a returned services man. In July 1943 Major C. F. Skinner arrived back in the country and was appointed Minister after a long period of active service with the Second NZEF in the Middle East.²⁰⁴ Commenting on the appointment historian Jane Thomson said Skinner “had served the Union Jack more conspicuously than the red flag”.²⁰⁵ But Semple had again done his job – he had set up an organisation for others to build on.

In a capacity that he may not have thought conceivable for himself in 1916, Semple visited Australia in 1941, trying to expedite New Zealand’s orders for munitions and iron and steel supplies for the war effort. Nash impressed upon Semple that without the delivery of these essential supplies New Zealand would be unable to continue its maximum war effort.²⁰⁶ On his arrival home Semple said he had travelled thousands

¹⁹⁹ *New Zealand Herald*, 20 January 1941.

²⁰⁰ *New Zealand Herald*, 30 November 1940

²⁰¹ Nancy M. Taylor, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45: The Home Front Volume II*, Wellington: Government Print, 1986, p. 1274-1275.

²⁰² *New Zealand Herald*, 15 October 1941.

²⁰³ In the gigantic problem of post-war economic and social construction was farm settlement measures for farmers, plans for a vast state housing scheme totalling involving nearly 16,000 houses, also plans for the manufacture of furniture to equip the dwellings. *New Zealand Herald*, 29 January 1943.

²⁰⁴ *New Zealand Herald*, 23 July 1943

²⁰⁵ Jane Thomson, ‘The Rehabilitation of Servicemen of World War II in New Zealand 1940-1954’, PhD thesis, Victoria University, 1983, p. 85.

²⁰⁶ Nash to Semple 16 May 1941, EA 59/2/14 Part 1 Visits R. Semple, NA.

of miles and had inspected every munition works and all prospective developments for the production of materials of war. He outlined the main points in his negotiations, which included the equality of treatment with the Australian states for war requirements, continuity of supply, and expedition of supply for items including rifles, guns and zinc. In conclusion he said “I tried to get from the Australian authorities, not a promise, but a definite understanding that they would treat us on the same basis as if we were an integral part of the Commonwealth”.²⁰⁷ He said Australia’s defence was New Zealand’s defence and vice-versa and the two countries should pool their resources, “I set out to try and get them to agree to that and I have succeeded, I am delighted with my mission”.²⁰⁸

While in Australia Semple acknowledged his changed attitude to war. Addressing the Millions Club in Sydney Semple said the New Zealand Labour government was composed of men who all their lives had been implacable foes of war, “They now realised that they had been living in a fools’ paradise. Now they were out to fight this war with all the resources at their disposal. They would sacrifice everything rather than submit to the tyranny of that monster of iniquity called Hitler”.²⁰⁹ Semple’s attitude was similar to many of his colleagues. Sinclair noted Nash was criticised for abandoning his principles, “but he was scarcely alone in concluding that Hitler and Mussolini could not be defeated by Christian passive resistance”. He argued that the fear of a world dominated by militarism and Fascism led Nash to abandon pacifism and “he [Nash] was now in favour of New Zealand going to war to enforce peace”.²¹⁰ Gustafson said Savage, although repelled by the idea of asking New Zealanders to fight and possibly die in foreign countries, reluctantly spearheaded a campaign to recruit volunteers for WWII. He argues Savage considered there was no alternative and “all New Zealanders had to forget ‘what might have been’ and face up to ‘what

²⁰⁷ Semple to the Acting Prime Minister 27 June 1941, EA 59/2/14 Part 1 Visits R. Semple, NA.

²⁰⁸ *New Zealand Herald*, 24 June 1941. Semple was part of a concerted effort by the New Zealand government to gain continuity of war supplies from Australia as several Ministers made visits across the Tasman. When Nash went to Australia in October 1941 the *Herald* said “It is understood New Zealand’s request is for the automatic allocation of one-sixth of the Australian production of certain specified items”. *New Zealand Herald*, 25 October 1941. In March 1942 the Minister of Supply, Dan Sullivan and ex Prime Minister Coates (now in the War Cabinet) were in Australia. Their discussions included the conduct of the Allied operations in the Pacific zone and supply matters. *New Zealand Herald*, 12 March 1942.

²⁰⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 June 1941

²¹⁰ Sinclair, *Walter Nash*, pp. 198-199.

is’’.²¹¹ For Savage, Semple and their colleagues realism modified their previous anti-militarism.

Now with a somewhat different propagandist agenda Semple, who had once showed lantern slides on the horrors of war, now showed films of New Zealand’s war efforts. A photograph in the *Sydney Morning Herald* depicts Semple, the guest of honour, attending a cocktail party held by the New Zealand Association. Other guests included Semple’s sister, Mr W. Burton, his nephew Hamilton and his niece Mrs G. Taylor (Hamilton’s sister). The newspaper reported Semple screened films during the evening showing the extent of war activities in New Zealand.²¹²

Semple’s two surviving sons shared their father’s later rather than his early views on war. John and Vic Semple both volunteered for service in WWII. John volunteered in April 1940.²¹³ He entered Trentham training camp in Wellington in May and left New Zealand in December 1940. He served largely in Egypt but also in Greece, Palestine and Syria rising to the rank of Captain. Prior to enlisting he had had three years in the Territorials forces and was a traffic inspector. His previous experiences could partially account for his steady rise in the ranks. He was a temporary Lieutenant for the voyage to England in 1940, promoted to Lieutenant in 1941 and then to Captain in 1943. He returned to New Zealand in April 1944. John served in the 19th Wellington Battalion as part of the second New Zealand Expeditionary Force.²¹⁴ Vic Semple also volunteered but because of an injury to his hand was rejected by the Army on medical grounds. Vic then volunteered for the Air Force in 1941 as a mechanic and was accepted. He served in Singapore but was hurriedly evacuated when the Japanese invaded, returning to New Zealand in March 1942. He was medically discharged on 21 February 1943.²¹⁵

Semple was proud of his sons’ participation in the war. In answer to a prior enquiry, Semple received a letter in 1941 from General Freyberg, who was commanding the

²¹¹ Gustafson, *From the Cradle to the Grave*, p. 252.

²¹² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 June 1941.

²¹³ John (Jack) Semple was a married man with two children in 1940.

²¹⁴ ‘History Sheet’, John Hector Ronald Semple No. 31662, Personnel Records (Archives), New Zealand Defence Force, Upper Hutt.

²¹⁵ ‘Certificate of the Service and Discharge’ Leonard Victor Semple No. 414100, Personnel Records (Archives), New Zealand Defence Force, Upper Hutt. Vic was discharged due to the injury to his hand that occurred in a pre-enlistment accident in 1938.

New Zealand Division in the Middle East where John was serving. Freyberg said John was in good health and that his commanding officer had “a good opinion of him”. In a reply to Freyberg Semple said, “I felt confident when he enlisted in the early part of the war that he would keep his end up. My other son enlisted in the Air Force and we are proud of them both”.²¹⁶ Semple had refused in 1913 to give his eldest son’s age to the authorities rather than have him attend CMT. Although many years had passed and the circumstances were entirely different, this example demonstrates how far Semple had moved.



Figure 34: Semple with his two sons, Vic (wearing glasses) on the left of the photograph and John on the right. The occasion and date are unknown but it is probably in the late 1940s due to the age of the three men, RHSC.

After the end of WWII and as the Cold War escalated, debate again flared in New Zealand about compulsory military training. There were many calls for its introduction, the Opposition pressed for its inauguration in Parliament. The Wellington Chamber of Commerce said military training was essential if New Zealand was to achieve requisite strength and a state of preparedness.²¹⁷ Bassett and King suggested Fraser’s appreciation of the Russian menace was much more finely developed than that of any of his colleagues, let alone the wider public. And when he

²¹⁶ Semple to Major-General B.C. Freyberg, General Officer Commanding NZ Division Middle East Forces 23 September 1941, RHSC.

²¹⁷ *New Zealand Herald*, 9 October 1948.

returned from overseas in January 1949 after being away for three months, everything he had learned overseas led him to the conclusion that compulsory military training should be introduced in New Zealand.²¹⁸ At the 1949 Labour Party Conference, although the issue threatened to split the Party as it was traditionally anti-militarist, an agreement was reached to hold a referendum on the issue on 3 August 1949. In another shift of political perspective, and once more as a propagandist for the Party, Semple stumped the country addressing meetings in favour of compulsory military training.

In Parliament in July 1949 Semple said he thoroughly supported the referendum. In a debate over the acute shortage of steel in New Zealand Semple attributed sole blame to Communist disruption in the large Newcastle steel works in Australia. He said the Communists were the “implacable foes of the Labour movement in every country in the world”. Referring to the upcoming referendum he said,

I hope the referendum is carried by a 100-per-cent majority. I am satisfied that democracy is threatened...I stand four-square for the defence of this little country against the ambassadors of a foreign power and a system of slavery that is in conflict with every principle for which the British people lived, have fought and perished. I stand four-square for the referendum.²¹⁹

Thus, his support for the referendum was grounded in his opposition to Communism and protecting New Zealand from the threat he believed it posed. Similarly, at an address at the Addington workshops in late July the *Press* reported, “Mr Semple’s address was ostensibly in support of compulsory military training but most of his remarks concerned communism”. Semple said the choice was between despotism and democracy, “Compulsory military training would make it possible to defend the country if danger ever came”.²²⁰

It has been suggested later by some Labour contemporaries that Semple did not agree with compulsory military training but compromised his own position in favour of

²¹⁸ Bassett & King, p. 337-338. Fraser attended the General assembly of the United Nations in Paris and the conference of British Commonwealth Prime Ministers in London. Bassett also said that Fraser’s brief trip to the Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference in April 1949 further strengthened his belief in the need for compulsory military training.

²¹⁹ *NZPD*, 285 (1949), p. 337.

²²⁰ *Press*, 26 July 1949.

party policy. Tom Skinner, a Labour MP from 1946-49, said he knew Semple had a deep-seated antipathy towards military training. Skinner said Semple confided in him that he was not in favour of compulsory military training but he had been asked by the Prime Minister to undertake the assignment “Above all, he was a good party man”.²²¹ Regarding the peacetime military training John A. Lee said “Semple went along”. He claimed that Semple had said to the daughter of Frank Langstone (who had resigned from NZLP and was defeated in 1949 after standing as an independent Labour and anti-compulsory military training candidate) “Frank was a fool. I didn’t believe in peacetime conscription either. I went along. Frank should have”.²²² Lee’s claim suggests Semple was not prepared to go outside the Party confines. Semple was fiercely loyal to the Party, as Hobbs argued, “Few men served the Labour Party more faithfully”.²²³ A lack of primary source material from both Fraser and Semple inhibits the exploration of the relationship between the two men which could have shed more light on the remarks quoted by Skinner. However, it is probable that Fraser did ask Semple to campaign in the referendum – this would not have been unusual, as Semple had been given previous tasks such as the inauguration of the new portfolios of National Service and Rehabilitation. And many other government members also campaigned for the referendum. But it is more likely Semple now firmly believed that Communism was a real threat to New Zealand and although he probably did harbour a dislike for CMT, if that was going to be instrumental in protecting New Zealand then that was what needed to be done.

Semple’s anti-militarist image was perceived by many as having undergone a significant change throughout his lifetime. Certainly on face value there was a change – Semple had opposed CMT and conscription early in his public career but later supported the introduction of both. Brown said in a summation of the Labour leaders that they displayed overall political realism, quoting Peter Fraser who said in 1937 that “Realism must be merged with the idealism of the movement”.²²⁴ Also, Semple and the Labour leaders were not doctrinaire theorists; they responded to the conditions they saw around them. And in their attitude to CMT, conscription and war in general, Semple and Labour’s leaders did exactly that – they responded to the threats of the

²²¹ Skinner, p. 73.

²²² Lee, *Political Notebooks*, p. 23.

²²³ Hobbs, *The Thirty-Year Wonders*, p. 81.

²²⁴ Brown, *The Rise of Labour*, p. 222.

fascism of WWII and Communism during the Cold War. CMT and conscription, which had once been the enemies of the working class, now became the protectors of nation and class which were now linked in general national terms. For Semple, there had been no change in his mind to the principle of protecting the working class – only a change in the methods employed. The altered world situations justified a changed response. While many have seen this later period as a betrayal of labour principles by Semple and the Labour men, the men themselves never acknowledged any inconsistency and in the ultimate protection of New Zealand, believed there was none.

Conclusion

The most reproduced image of Semple may be that of the soap-box orator, but a less well-known, more poignant and equally symbolic one is from the last months of his life.¹ The image below shows Semple leaving Parliament for the last time in 1954.



Figure 35: Semple leaving Parliament in October 1954, photograph courtesy of the *Dominion Post*.

Erect as ever, he carried his miners' helmet in one hand and his political hat, his homburg, in the other. The two 'hats' representing his mining life and his political life are featured in the title of this thesis "From Coal Pit to Leather Pit".

¹ Semple is featured on the cover of Erik Olssen's, *The Red Feds* and Gustafson's *Labour's Path to Political Independence*.

The end of Semple's life followed soon after the end of his political career. He died on 31 January 1955 in the New Plymouth Public Hospital. The causes of death were listed as prostate enlargement and heart failure.² The funeral was held at St. John's Presbyterian Church in Willis Street, Wellington and later at the Karori Crematorium. Rev. W. J. Pellow conducted the service as he did for Peter Fraser. Shops and offices closed their doors and crowds stood in tribute lining the main streets of Wellington as the funeral procession moved along from the church to the crematorium.



Figure 36: Robert Semple's funeral cortege winding down Willis Street, Wellington, EP/1955/0234, WTU.

² Certified Copy of Death Certificate dated 12 April 2005, www.bdm.govt.nz

While there are features of Semple's life that he held close to his heart there was little attempt to express any of these in a permanent way when he died. Semple was cremated at the Karori Cemetery in Wellington and his ashes were scattered on the rose garden. There is no stone or plaque to commemorate his life, it is not clear whether this was his own wishes or those of his family. When searching for a memorial, the Karori cemetery attendant said at the time of Semple's death it was standard practice to simply scatter ashes. Cremation plaques had yet to be instigated as a system of remembrance. In Semple's last will, dated 1948, there is no stated preference for either burial or cremation.³ When his eldest son died in 1930 Semple purchased his son's Karori cemetery plot – it has a small-enclosed wall around the grave and an inscription.⁴ Semple does not appear to have expressed any preference to be buried near or with his son.

There has also been no personal monument erected to Semple by the Labour movement. In an obituary on Semple in the *New Zealand Listener* F.L. Combs recalled Semple's public works ministry and said, "To those who have an historical eye, these works will be his monument. But maybe too there will be a personal monument. If so, I hope we will break with conventions for this most unconventional man". Combs speculated on what Semple's personal monument should be and suggested a figure on a bull-dozer, "I hope that Mr. Semple's sculptor will also be a humourist".⁵ Traditionally monuments were for elites, and the labour movement had an ambivalent attitude to such memorials. When monuments to Labour leaders Harry Holland and Michael Joseph Savage were erected, there was much discussion of whether an ostentatious monument was appropriate for a Labour leader. Jock Phillips has suggested that, "Some members of the Labour Party...had opposed the erection of war memorials after the Great War on the grounds that the money would be better spent in caring for the living".⁶ Phillips argued that monuments represent "very deliberate attempts to make permanent in stone a group's judgement about a person or an event". He notes that Holland's monument represented Labour ideals while

³ Will of Robert Semple ABAJ, W4079, p. 81/1955, NA.

⁴ Karori Cemetery Management Records Plot Karori 529 Y Public2, Wellington City Council.

⁵ F.L. Combs, 'Ever a Fighter', *New Zealand Listener*, 11 February 1955.

⁶ No evidence has been found of Semple objecting to a 1919 monument.

Savage’s monument focussed on Savage, the man.⁷ Although Semple was never a Labour Prime Minister or leader of the Labour Party he was a founding father of the modern labour movement, arguably his early participation surpassed Peter Fraser, Michael Joseph Savage and Harry Holland. There is also a monument to Peter Fraser in the Karori cemetery where Semple was cremated. Fraser is buried with his wife Janet, the inscription reads, “They loved freedom and the people”.



Figure 37: Memorial to Peter Fraser, Karori cemetery, 2008, author's photograph.

Fraser’s monument lends weight to the argument that it is only leaders and Prime Ministers who are memorialised.⁸ Semple was a complex figure - a tribute to him could have many vagaries such as which of his principles to represent – socialism, the class struggle or even his humorous language. Would the focus be on the cause or the man? Notwithstanding the above, a tribute to the major role Semple played in the history of the Labour Party is perhaps overdue.

⁷ Jock Phillips, ‘Remembering the Labour Dead: The Memorials to Harry Holland and Mickey Savage’, in Kerry Taylor and John E. Martin (eds.), *Culture and the Labour Movement: Essays in New Zealand Labour History*, Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1991, pp. 244-261.

⁸ There is also a statue of Peter Fraser outside the old government building near Parliament in Wellington.

One somewhat surprising memorial to Semple is a multi-unit residential apartment building in Oriental Bay, Wellington. The Semple House Apartments stand on the site of the General Labourers' union headquarters, which was built in 1955 and named "Semple House". Semple's name has been carried forward to the present day on the new building. The 5-story 7-unit complex was built in 2005, its luxurious apartments enjoying stunning views of the harbour and city.⁹ It is ironic that Semple's name was associated at the start of the twentieth century with a battle to improve conditions for the working class, whereas at the start of the twenty-first century his name is associated with grandiose apartments which can only be afforded by the more affluent.



Figure 38: Semple House in Oriental Bay, Wellington, 2008, author's photograph.

Many tributes to Semple after his death perceived the various public works (roads and bridges) constructed when he was Minister as monuments in themselves. When Semple died Walter Nash said, "No greater memorial could be made to Mr. Semple's name than the roading system his mind conceived".¹⁰ Tributes in both the Australian and New Zealand newspapers highlighted Semple's public works accomplishments.

⁹ <http://www.ltmcguinness.co.nz>. L.T. McGuinness were the contractors for the Semple House Apartments. Website accessed 11 August 2009.

¹⁰ *Press*, 1 February 1955.

The Christchurch *Press* said he was the man who revolutionised the Public Works department.¹¹ The *Sydney Morning Herald* had previously paid tribute to Semple when he retired. In an article headed, “Man from Sofala: Words and Works” the newspaper said his contribution could be measured in both those categories.¹² The public echoed these sentiments; Nash received numerous condolence letters from various sectors of the community when Semple died. Mr and Mrs E. Selby from Wanganui wrote that Semple was “a man who knew his job, a man who called a spade a spade...we shall always remember him as we drive over his roads and bridges”.¹³

Tributes in the press at the time of his death also highlighted Semple’s language. The *Sydney Morning Herald* published an obituary on Semple and, while acknowledging his New South Wales birthplace, described him as a “Famed New Zealand Labour Man”, and highlighted his Red Fed days and his language.¹⁴ The *Press* said he was, “the most colourful and expressive personality in politics in New Zealand for many years”.¹⁵ The labour newspaper the *Standard*, while outlining his career, remarked on his language: “Probably the most famous of all ‘Sempleisms’ is the celebrated crack about running shoes”.¹⁶ The public also recalled Semple’s language in letters to Nash. Harold Innes from Hamilton said, “His unique personality can never be repeated”. And Reverend Long from St. Patrick’s Presbytery in Greymouth expressed admiration for Semple’s “sympathy for those in difficulty, his love of justice, his tremendous energy and his enviable command of language”.¹⁷

In many ways Semple’s legacy has been ‘language itself’ and this has potentially detracted from his significance in other areas. For example, acknowledgement of the contribution he made to New Zealand’s transport industry is sadly lacking. Some authors have defined his contribution by language alone, and there is a danger of reducing the more complex Semple to the colourful quote. Labour stalwart Peter

¹¹ *Press*, 1 February 1955.

¹² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 October 1954.

¹³ Mr & Mrs E. Selby to W. Nash 1 February 1955, 2395 Nash Papers, NA.

¹⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 February 1955.

¹⁵ *Press*, 1 February 1955.

¹⁶ *Standard*, 9 February 1955.

¹⁷ Mr Harold Innes to W. Nash 7 February 1955, Reverend J. Long to W. Nash 7 February 1955, 2395 Nash Papers, NA.

Butler considered the focus on his language a purposeful act by some analysts. He recalled Semple as an arresting speaker,

He was fluent and witty, interspersing his speeches with spontaneous allusions and original descriptions. In some quarters his statements have been preserved as ‘Sempleisms’ thus giving Bob the image of a ‘character’. In my opinion this image of Bob Semple was deliberately manufactured by certain writers to detract from the worthwhile contributions he made to the social and economic progress of New Zealand and its people.¹⁸

Semple’s substantial contributions in other areas have been outlined in the chapters of this thesis; it was as an Australian, a socialist, a unionist, a politician and an anti-militarist that Semple applied his remarkable ability and did indeed vastly contribute, as Butler said, to the social and economic progress of New Zealand and its citizens.

Although this thesis has, in part, perpetuated the focus on Semple’s language. The anecdotes were included as they revealed aspects of Semple’s character, often illuminating his ideals and also some of his weaknesses, such as his ego. But Semple had a sharpness of wit, an acuteness of vision, a spontaneity and a penchant for word pictures and memorable phrases which did make him one of New Zealand’s best natural orators. This thesis has recorded Semple’s remarkable gift of language but has also acknowledged his other significant contributions across a wide-ranging field.

And it was language that accentuated Semple’s two images of radical organiser and flamboyant Minister of Public Works as his dominant characterisations in New Zealand history. Semple became well-known in those two phrases of his life as he was the figurehead and spokesperson for both the FOL and the Ministry of Public Works, spearheading the organisation and the government department. As O’Farrell said of Semple during the FOL period, “he was the figure who most captured the public eye”.¹⁹ There is no doubt Semple was a radical during the FOL period. However, the image was also constructed by others, such as the mainstream press, and to a large extent by Semple himself and it was hugely successful. So successful in fact that when Semple, later in life, tried to change his image it was hard to discard. It has

¹⁸ Peter Butler Draft Autobiography pp. 122-123, Peter Butler Papers, 89-119-1/1/1, WTU.

¹⁹ O’Farrell, ‘Politics and Coal’, p. 104.

been carried through in New Zealand history, aided and abetted by no full-length analysis of Semple himself (to provide a counter-balance) or ‘moderate’ labour history into which he may also have been categorised, particularly later in his life. The image of the “character” is linked to his Public Works Ministry and again Semple constructed it just as much as others did. Contributing factors were his love of the limelight, he thrived on the enthusiasm of a crowd and his speeches were on many occasions theatrical performances. He had learnt early to vigorously promote himself and his causes and that was also significant - he continued this pattern throughout his lifetime, publicising and promoting the Labour Party in the process. In both these images the cornerstones were his colourful language which elevated them to a higher plane and were consequently recorded by historians.

Semple, as an example, personifies the political realism which Brown argued the Labour Party displayed overall.²⁰ The Labour movement had to first modify its socialist policy to appeal to the centre voter, then while in office the government policy became increasingly determined by the maintenance of power through electoral success. Arguably the greatest modification took place in the attitude to anti-militarism – traditionally anti-war from its inception the Labour government later introduced conscription and CMT. Semple, in the five images in this thesis, illustrates the movement of Labour ideals. The flexibility in Semple’s and the Party’s political perspectives was aided by their elastic conception of principles and it was their receptivity to new ideas and their adaptability to change that allowed them to succeed – this is arguably the nature of the political beast as adapting principles and policies to maintain power is not uncommon among politicians of any decade.

Robert Semple lived a remarkable life in terms of its political trajectory and its contribution to New Zealand history. However, other authors may interpret Semple’s life in different ways – an interesting interpretation of him could be ‘Hero or Villian’ as he often polarised people’s opinions. As New Zealand biographer Michael King stated, in this sense, subjects deserving of biography never die: they go on growing and changing with the interests and interpretations of consecutive generations of

²⁰ Brown, *The Rise of the Labour Party*, p. 222.

readers.²¹ Possibly biographies of major figures need to be rewritten for each generation. Biography could then be a continuous process, for Semple, with successive authors adding to the narrative and analytical spaces left by the last author.

Semple may have considered biography himself but, like many other public figures, he may have wanted it written on his own terms. In 1954 the *Sydney Morning Herald* said Semple's life story had not yet been recorded, "He had hoped that an old journalistic crony, Robert Riley, also a former miner and gifted beyond the ordinary as a phrase-maker, would have attempted the task. But Riley died a few years ago before the idea had been much more than tentatively discussed".²² The choice of Riley may have been significant – he has been described (by John A. Lee) as a modern day spin-doctor, but he also drafted many speeches for Peter Fraser when he was Prime Minister.²³ If Semple had wanted Riley to write his biography it may indicate that Semple wanted it written by someone with political savvy who would present a favourable picture of him. It is not unusual, of course, for politicians to want to control their biographies.

The absence of a collection of personal source or self-reflexive material gave little clue to Semple's private life – there was scant sense of Semple as a father or a husband, or even his life outside work. But it must be noted that much of Semple's life was spent working (he entered the work force at age 10 and left at aged 81). And it could be argued that 'work' was in fact, Semple's life. The material which was available reflected a very real subordination of the personal to the public and to Semple working for external causes for almost all of his life. As previously noted by Gustafson, "the militants had always been, on the whole, more willing to subordinate their occupations, social life, and even families to their political activities and ambitions".²⁴ Consequently, Semple's private life and his family do not appear greatly in this study. However, his wife Margaret was no cipher – when she retired

²¹ Michael King, *Tread Softly For You Tread On My Life: New and Collected Writings*, Auckland: Cape Catley Ltd, 2001.

²² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 October 1954. Gustafson identified Riley as Savage's press officer after 1935 and described him as a gifted but alcoholic journalist. Gustafson, *From the Cradle to the Grave*, p. 168.

²³ John A. Lee, *Simple on a Soapbox*, Auckland: Collins, 1963, p. 70. Martyn Finlay, 'Opening Recollections', in Margaret Clark (ed.), *Peter Fraser: Master Politician*, Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1998, p. 11.

²⁴ Gustafson, *Labour's Path to Political Independence*, p. 94.

from the Wellington Women's branch of the Labour Party in 1943 she had been President, vice-president and secretary over many years.²⁵ She was a member of the National Executive of the Labour Party and a Wellington LRC committee member. She was on the Wellington Hospital Board from 1933 to 1941, and was a Wellington City Councillor.²⁶ Margaret Semple was also a J.P. and was active in many volunteer organisations. Semple never acknowledged any of his wife's work in depth – he fleetingly acknowledged her contribution when he retired saying, “She has lived with me for 50 years...and deserves a V.C. as big as the anchor on a battleship”.²⁷ Historian Hilary Stace argued that Margaret Semple was among “a number of politically active women...from the 1910s to the 1940s (both in and out of the Labour Party) who, although invisible in much recorded history, were very significant”.²⁸ Margaret Semple deserves her own study and this thesis has avoided including her as a mere appendage of her husband.

What would Semple, the practical man with little formal education, have thought of an academic biography written by someone who could not possibly understand the hardships he had endured and how these had shaped his later political attitudes? Would he have been flattered or dismissive? At the height of his career he may have said about historians, (using one of his memorable phrases), “You could write [what they know] on the back of a postage stamp with a carpenter's pencil”.²⁹ Although there would have been real merit for any biographer to have had access to Semple while he was alive if only to observe his gestures and mannerisms. However, it is over fifty years since Semple died and Rollyson argues that when a biography is delayed “there is a subtle relaxing of attitudes, a subsidence of tension that accompanies the biographical subject's demise”.³⁰ For Semple, time and distance has resulted in a less impassioned but more objective and complex interpretation as history and biography have combined to broaden our understanding of him.

²⁵ *Standard*, 17 June 1943.

²⁶ L.H. Barber & R.J. Towers, *Wellington Hospital 1847-1976*, Wellington: Wright & Carman, 1976, Appendix 1 Board Members – Past and Present.

²⁷ *Evening Post*, 12 July 1954.

²⁸ Hilary Stace, ‘Janet Fraser – Making Policy as Well as Tea’ in Margaret Clark (ed.), *Peter Fraser: Master Politician*, Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1998, pp. 57-66.

²⁹ Semple quoted in *New Zealand Free Lance*, 9 February 1955.

³⁰ Rollyson, p. 64.

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