

South Australia's 'German' MPs in World War I – the limits of tolerance

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One of the best indications of acceptance of migrants into the host community and dominant culture is their election to its parliament. By this measure, German settlers to SA had done well, initially chosen as individuals in the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth preselected by political parties as such bodies took more permanent shape. Ten had served in parliament in the pre-war period, starting early in 1857 with Friedrich Krichauff (1824-1904), followed by Emil Wentzel (1817-1892), Martin Basedow (1829-1902), Rudolph Henning (1834-1884), Robert Homburg (1848-1912), Johann Scherk (1836-1923), Johann Sudholz (1821-1903), Louis von Doussa (1850-1932) and Hugo Muecke (1842-1929). By 1899 the first of the second-generation members, Friedrich Paech (1861-1908), had begun his term.¹ All but Paech, and the two who had arrived as young children (Homburg and Muecke), would have spoken accented English, though this was no handicap. The ability of all these men also to communicate in their native tongue was a distinct advantage among the significant clusters of primarily German speakers in their electorates.

This paper deals with the seven MPs of identifiably German descent who were in parliament at the time war with their homeland was declared. All seven (five Liberal and two Labor) came under scrutiny, especially the most visible, Attorney-General in the Liberal Government of the time, Herman Homburg, and the three who had been born overseas. Liberal Premier Archibald Henry Peake valued his conservative German constituents and MPs, and initially summoned up British concepts of fair play to shield them. But, as atrocity stories filtered through from overseas and locals searched for scapegoats, even the most respected and high-profile German citizens began to feel the pressure.

Peake's government fell at the elections of March 1915, having lost support mainly over its handling of the terrible drought and its imposition of a new electoral system, labelled by its many critics as a 'gerrymander'. In the humiliating loss not only of government, but also the premier's own seat, it was too easy to see voter antipathy to the two sitting Liberal members Herman Homburg and Friedrich Pflaum as having made the crucial difference to the election result. German MPs had proved to be an electoral handicap, and there were precious few to stand up for SA's German population as both sides of politics cooperated to reduce their influence. Mistrust only intensified once it became apparent that voters in German districts had contributed significantly to the defeat in South Australia of the September 1916 referendum that sought to authorise conscription for overseas service.

By the end of the war, as a result, only one of the seven MPs was still in parliament, although another did later revive his political career. As will become evident, their fate was dependent on combinations of three factors – chance (when in the electoral cycle they came up for re-election), their parties' willingness to back them and, finally, their own tenacity.

The stories of the two Legislative Councillors are the easiest to tell.

1 Coxon, H., J. Playford & R. Reid, 1985, *Biographical Register of the South Australian Parliament 1857-1957*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide.

Ernest Leopold William KLAUER (1868-1915), whose immigrant father owned the White Hart hotel in Hindley Street for 40 years, was a city boy who acquired his engineering skills at Islington Railway Workshops, served on Thebarton Council and had held senior posts in several unions and in the Labor Party by the time he entered parliament in 1910, aged 42.² A member of the Labor team that took all five positions in the Central District seat, and valued for his contributions to inquiries into the railways and liquor industries, and as an 'ardent municipalist',³ he would have faced re-election in 1915. But in April 1913 he fell seriously ill, never entirely recovered, and died at home in August 1915, just as his only son went into camp.⁴ Thus, he was spared, by ill-health, absence from the chamber and premature death, from the sort of scrutiny endured by the other six MPs. His son, by then a Lance-Corporal, was killed in action in France in the last days of the war.⁵

Albert Alfred VON DOUSSA (1848-1926), was also spared the worst, but for different reasons. Although raised in the German enclave of Hahndorf, like Klauer he was locally born, had finished his education at an elite school, married an Australian girl, and listed himself as Anglican. When his father retired to Germany, Alfred carried on the family pharmacy Gunther & von Doussa, and worked as clerk to the Echunga Council, in all for 55 years. A sportsman, he was Secretary to the Onkaparinga Racing Club from its inception in 1875, and his half-century of service there is commemorated in the annual von Doussa Steeplechase.

Also interested in politics (his brother Louis had a more distinguished but shorter career in parliament), Alfred entered the upper house as a conservative in the seat of Southern in 1901, where he worked particularly on railway inquiries and was known for his liberal views. He faced re-election only once, before the war, in 1912. Relatively unmolested thereafter in the haven of propertied Liberal privilege that was the Legislative Council, he saw the war end, but made the mistake of running again when his term finally expired in 1921. At nearly 73, and not in the Liberal team, he lost, dying five years later.⁶

Now we turn to the five men whose political careers patently were blighted by the war, the first being the only other Labor man, SA's sole German in the Federal Parliament, George Dankel.

George Caspar Adolf Maria Prosper DANKEL (1864-1926) was born in Brunswick, but left at 15 for Australia, mainly to escape military service. For several years he worked in country areas before settling in suburban Kensington and opening a butcher's shop. A foundation member of the new Labor party, and with much local government experience under his belt, he was returned as a member for Torrens in 1905, 1906 and 1910 (by which time he had dispensed with the final four of his given names).⁷ Having just missed out in 1912 as the new Liberal Union Government took office, he nominated for his local federal seat of Boothby (which took in most of Adelaide's eastern suburbs and southern foothills), and was popular enough to defeat the sitting member, senior Liberal David Gordon, at the June 1913

2 Smeaton, T.H., (1914), *The People in Politics: a short history of the Labor movement in South Australia*, Cooperative Printing and Publishing, Adelaide, pp. 13, 50.

3 *South Australian Parliamentary Debates (SAPD)*, 7 August 1915, p. 398.

4 *Advertiser*, 7 August 1915, p.15; *Observer*, 14 August 1915, p. 46.

5 *Mail*, 20 September 1918, p. 5.

6 Vamplew, Wray, 'Von Doussa, Heinrich Albert Alfred (1848-1926)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, online edition, at <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A120327b.htm>

7 For all details of candidates and election results, see Jaensch, Dean, (2007), *History of South Australian Elections 1857-2006*, History Trust of SA & State Electoral Office, Adelaide.

election. When the Cooke Government fell, Dankel had to go again to the polls in the double dissolution of September 1914, and was swept back in on the wave of patriotism that saw Labor returned with Andrew Fisher as Prime Minister.



Figure 1 - George Caspar Adolf Maria Prosper Dankel in 1905
(Image courtesy State Library of South Australia, SLSA: B 21757/5).

But early in 1915 anti-German forces began to marshal against him, led by the 'All-British League' and a 'Dankel petition committee' which eventually produced a document with some 17,000 names calling for his resignation or dismissal. In September 1916 he faced a huge and largely hostile public meeting in the Unley Town Hall, although he was allowed to speak in his own defence. The least insubstantial of the charges against him seemed to be that, as a 'born and bred German', he could not represent his British constituents. Dankel claimed that he had twice offered to resign, but on both occasions senior Labor officials declined to accept, probably unwilling to risk losing the seat in a by-election.⁸ Their opponents were, in any case, constrained by the fact that across the chamber sat the only other German-born federal MP, Liberal Jacob Stumm, also elected in 1913 for the Queensland seat of Lilley.

Dankel went on attending Federal Parliament in Melbourne, more assiduously than he had in his first year there, and missed only two days in the 147 sitting days between October 1914 and March 1917.⁹ But, and here's the curious thing, he spoke briefly on only two occasions in all that time. Metaphorically unable to speak for his largely British constituents, he was silent through all the great debates of that time, including those on defence and the several punitive measures taken against German-Australians. By then an enthusiast for compulsory military service,

⁸ For the most detailed contemporary account of this meeting, see the *Mail*, 16 September 1916, p. 5

⁹ *Votes and Proceedings*, **41**, Session 1914-17, p. 609.

¹⁰ he was also among the 23 who left the Labor Party with Hughes over conscription in November 1916 to form the Nationalist Party. Needless to say, and still only 53, Dankel (and Stumm) retired at the next election.

Dankel then turned his hand to several business enterprises, and was credited with being a pioneer in sugar-beet production. When he died, survived by a daughter and five sons, two of whom had enlisted,¹¹ his obituary passed over the war period, stating blandly that 'there were many expressions of regret in the Labor Party when he announced his determination to retire'.¹²

Returning to the state scene, **Oscar Herman DUHST** (1872-1942) was another member who had his (very short) political career terminated, rather more abruptly, for his 'alien' origins. Born in Hamburg, and spurning a commercial career, he had come to Australia aged 17 and worked on the land for several years before joining and later owning the firm of Duhst & Biven, tobacconists in establishments that also served as barbershops in Rundle Street and King William Street.¹³ An enthusiastic member of the city's German Club, he wooed and later married Hans Heysen's younger sister, Valeska. In fact, it was Duhst who persuaded the unknown artist to display his landscapes to the captive audiences in the barbershop chairs, thereby alerting a wider and influential public to his talent and getting his career off the ground.¹⁴

Well-known in Adelaide's business circles and in local government, and holding office in the Liberal Union, Duhst was in 1911 preselected for the rural seat of Wooroora. A recent visit to Germany had taught him 'to appreciate more fully his adopted country', he told his friends on his return.¹⁵ Wooroora was a suitably German district, and he was reported as giving a vigorous and wide-ranging speech to the Brownlow Liberal branch entirely in German.¹⁶ Elected as the Liberals swept into office in February 1912, and a conscientious local member, pre-selection for the next election should have been a formality.

But, with atrocity stories now filtering in, a whispering campaign against him began. He and his running mates, the two other sitting members, professed themselves shocked when the plebiscite (pre-selection vote of local party members) in January 1915 gave him too few votes. Instead, the third member of the Liberal team was to be Richard Layton Butler, son of an earlier premier and himself a future premier. Duhst apparently bore his loss 'manfully', regretting that 'feeling should run so high in a mixed community like South Australia's', and urging everyone to get behind the Liberals.¹⁷

The unprecedented rejection of a sitting member was something the Labor Party was happy to deplore, airing tales of underhand vote soliciting and other dubious practices leaked to them by dissident Liberals. Officially, all was above board, the editor of the local paper even suggesting that Duhst's loss had as much to do with mistrust of 'city businessmen' and the desire for a younger local as with 'racial

¹⁰ *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 21 April 1914, p. 177.

¹¹ The website of the national Archives of Australia shows the service record of eldest son George Emil, and mentions the younger, Oscar. I could find there no record of Klauer's son.

¹² *Advertiser*, 1 June 1926, p. 12.

¹³ *Register*, 12 February 1912, p. 5.

¹⁴ Thiele, C., 1968 & 2001; *Heysen of Hahndorf*, David Heysen Productions, Rigby, Adelaide, pp. 29, 30, 33, 37.

¹⁵ *Advertiser*, 28 August 1911, p. 8.

¹⁶ *Register*, 7 September 1911, p. 5.

¹⁷ *Kapunda Herald*, 22 January 1915, p. 2.

prejudice'.¹⁸ (Duhst was then only in his early 40s and Butler, a well-connected farmer, about to turn 30). Whatever the reason, a disappointed Duhst did not entirely give up on politics. The formation of the Country Party at the end of the war allowed him a moment of *schadenfreude* when he was chosen to run in its (unsuccessful) team for his old seat of Wooroora in 1924; this three-cornered contest helped to split the non-Labor vote and deprive the Liberals of the third seat there, as Labor returned to power.¹⁹

With the sale of Duhst & Biven's, the landmark building on the corner of King William and Rundle Streets in 1921, Duhst had concentrated on hotel ownership and management, becoming a hotel-broker in the firm of Duhst & Linehan. In 1937 Valeska died suddenly aged 56 of bronchopneumonia,²⁰ leaving a married daughter, and when Oscar died in 1942 (not a good year for German-Australians), there was a minimal three-line death notice, and I could find no obituary for him.

Friedrich Jacob Theodor (Fritz) PFLAUM (1846-1923) is the third and last of the German-born MPs under consideration. Born in Holstein, then part of Denmark, he had come to SA aged 23, becoming a store-keeper in Lyndoch and later Blumberg; there he and his brother engaged in extracting tannin from wattlebark, an industry allied to their father's trade as a tanner. Turning to the milling of flour, and using the latest technology and processes, F. Pflaum & Co's Peerless superfine flour became an award-winning product, and Pflaum travelled extensively to cultivate overseas markets.²¹ In an Anglican ceremony, he had married Margaret Wilcke, also of Blumberg,²² prelude to a long and happy marriage.

Having retired from the business in 1897, and after more time abroad, Pflaum essayed a political career. A talented debater with more knowledge of the world than most, he was elected to the seat of Murray, his local electorate, in 1902 and again in 1905, 1906 and 1910 (by then the 'senior member' of the Liberal team), and finally in 1912. By late 1914, at 68, he could have retired with honour; but neither he nor Hermann Homburg, nor the local Liberal Union, saw any reason why these two could not continue to represent Murray, a very German part of the state, whose voters had always staunchly supported the conservative parties. At this time, early in the War, Liberal Premier Peake and some of his ministers were defending the German community, but Labor, with a few honourable exceptions, began taunting their opponents for their reliance on 'the German vote'.

When, however, Homburg and Pflaum were so decisively rejected at the March state election by the 'British' element, a rejection that outweighed the votes of German voters who naturally did stick with them,²³ the die was cast. Despite displaying their loyalty in so many ways (Pflaum's only child, a daughter, had died young, but all five of his brother Theodor's eligible sons volunteered, and two of the four accepted were killed),²⁴ the Pflaum name was politically unacceptable, as was the name of his town, Blumberg, changed to Birdwood in the purge of German

18 *Daily Herald*, 22, 26, 27, 28 January 1915, p. 4; 6 February, p.4; *Register*, 22 January 1915, p. 2. (*Wooroora*) *Producer*, 28 January 1915, p. 2.

19 *Register*, 9 October 1923, p.8; 7 April 1924, p. 11.

20 Thiele, *op.cit.*, p.241; *Advertiser*, 18 January 1937, p. 12.

21 Cashen, J., 'Pflaum, Friedrich Jacob Theodor (Fritz) (1846-1923)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography* online edition at <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A110218b.htm>

22 *Register*, 15 March 1871, p. 4.

23 Stock, J.M., 1982, 'South Australia's German vote in World War I', *Australian Journal of History and Politics*, **28**(2), pp. 250-65.

24 *South Australian*, 6 January 1927, p. 7.

place-names in 1917. The Pflaums moved to the city, where Friedrich remained active in many civic bodies, including the Adelaide City Council, where he pursued slum clearance.



Figure 2 - Friedrich Jacob Theodor Pflaum c1912
(Image courtesy State Library of South Australia, SLSA: B 45299).

Finally, we consider the Homburg brothers, whose father Robert (1848-1912) had had a distinguished career in politics and the law (20 years in parliament, five as Attorney-General, and later a Justice in the Supreme Court, the first non-British-born man to reach such legal heights).²⁵ Both were also lawyers, but they reacted very differently to the trials of wartime unpopularity and their political careers diverged widely.

Robert HOMBURG (1875-1948) was the younger of the two, winning a seat in Burra Burra in 1912, the same month that their father died. After admission to the bar, Robert had practised in the district at Orroroo for five years, before returning to Adelaide to joint his brother in the family firm upon their father's appointment to the Bench in 1905. Yet, despite his standing in the district, after only one term, he announced his retirement in a letter to local Liberal Union officials, significantly just after the declaration of war. He pleaded pressure of work in his busy city practice, much due to 'the Ministerial duties which take up a great amount of the time of one of my partners'.²⁶ During the election campaign, he told a public meeting in Booleroo Centre that that his decision had nothing to do with anti-German feeling

25 Harmstorff, Ian, 'Homburg, Hermann Robert' (1874-1964)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography* online edition, at <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A090709b.htm>

26 *Burra Record*, 28 October 1914, p. 5.

and that he had alerted Liberal officials of his intentions as early as May 1914. But he also spoke feelingly of 'gross slanders' spoken against him, and the pain of having his loyalty questioned.²⁷ However mixed his motives, he did not further test public opinion. An Anglican, married to Edna and the father of three daughters, he appears to have led a quiet life thereafter, dying at home in Medindie aged 72.

Hermann Robert HOMBURG (1874-1964) was older and made of sterner stuff. Of all the politicians under consideration here, he had advanced furthest, had the most to lose and fought the hardest to keep his political career and standing. A barrister in his father's firm of Homburg & Melrose, he had joined Pflaum in Murray in 1906 aged only 32, topping the poll in 1910 and 1912. Attorney-General and Industry Minister in Peake's government when war broke out, his offices were raided by bayonet-wielding soldiers, and his high profile ensured that he came under immense pressure to resign. In January 1915, Peake accepted his second offer to step down as the state's top law officer, but apparently shared Homburg's belief that his long record of achievements and 'ability to straddle naturally German-Australian culture',²⁸ would see him through. When this manifestly did not happen, a humiliated Liberal Union effectively abandoned its German supporters.



Figure 3 - Hermann Robert Homburg c1904
(Image courtesy State Library of South Australia, SLSA: B 36689/28).

²⁷ *Register*, 12 March 1915, p.6g.

²⁸ Harmstorf, *op cit*.

Although beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that this Homburg did make a come-back, representing Murray 1927-30 and again being Attorney-General and Industry Minister in the Butler Government. When war broke out in 1939 he had been a Legislative Councillor for six years. After four weeks of internment, he was exiled to Victoria for nearly two years, thus obliged to resign from parliament in January 1941, aged 66. He vented his grievances in the pamphlet *Lutherans and Wartime Rumours*, published six years later. He continued to practise law until his death at 90, survived by a son and two daughters.

The chilling effects of the Great War on potential political candidates from SA's substantial German population was evident, although basically the Liberals could not do without their electoral support. Between the wars, only three men with German names were elected – Homburg, Percy Blesing (1879-1949) and Herbert Basedow (1881-1933). Son of immigrant Ernst Gotthilf, Blesing was long-serving Country Party and later LCL member for Northern in the Legislative Council, and Agriculture Minister 1933-44, while Basedow, a son of the distinguished Martin Basedow and educated for long periods in Germany, took time out from his far more eminent careers in anthropology, geology and medicine to represent Barossa 1927-30. World War II, while ending Homburg's revived career, nevertheless saw the beginning of the long parliamentary career of another son of the Barossa – Bert Teusner, elected in June 1944 for Angas. Some things were changing.